

International Social Science Review


Volume 97 | Issue 1

Article 14

Book Review: Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain by Kieran Connell

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Recommended Citation

Ford, Amanda () "Book Review: Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain by Kieran Connell," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 97 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol97/iss1/14>

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Kieran Connell. *Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. ix+220 pages. Softcover, \$34.95.

At its height, the British Empire ruled over 412 million people. The country's navy stood alone as the premier fleet in the world. British industry and trade dominated world markets and *Pax Britannica* ensured peace among the nations of the world. This nostalgic image of the imperial zenith is not a wholly accurate one, but it is certainly compelling. The years following World War II were a painful period for the once great empire, as the twin forces of decline in the metropole and rising nationalism in the periphery forced Britain to release colony after colony. By the 1960s, an American statesman argued that, "Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role." In the vacuum left by the loss of empire many in the isles focused on the tradition offered by the British monarchy and the ineffable, quintessentially British—or perhaps more accurately—English character. These cold comforts offered a chance to sidestep the hard realities of decline and instead reframe the conversation around British identity. It is perhaps not surprising then that current Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote in 2002 that, "The problem is not that we were once in charge, but that we are not in charge anymore." Imperial nostalgia has become a powerful force in domestic political ideologies, as evidenced in part by the Brexit vote in 2016.

All too frequently this discourse centers the anxieties and concern of white Britons, but historian Kieran Connell's *Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain* provides a useful corrective to this whitewashed narrative. Connell's work examines Handsworth, a racially diverse suburb of Birmingham, and the specific ways in which its black population constructed a new identity by patch-working global discourses about racial justice and diasporic culture. Margaret Thatcher's imperial turn obscured the realities of post-colonial life in Britain, specifically in regard to race and power. As the British navy attempted to restore some semblance of imperial power in the

Falklands, fears about racially diverse urban spaces reached new heights. Connell is careful to situate these 1980s moments in their proper larger historical context; certainly, racial anxieties were not new in the decade, but their expression was specific to this particular moment. *Black Handsworth* is divided into thematic chapters, each analyzing a specific part of Handsworth culture. This structure gives Connell a lot of freedom to cover a myriad of loosely connected topics, everything from dread culture to cricket, all tied together by its contribution to this identity.

The construction of a black identity in Handsworth was political—many of the issues that the city’s residents faced were due to the racist structures of British political and institutional life, but Connell argues that an examination of formal political movements only provides part of the story. The politics of the everyday mattered in Handsworth. Social life, be it around the cricket pitch or at a reggae concert, was equally important in the formation of black British identity in Handsworth. Connell places Handsworth firmly in an international context as its residents borrowed from their parent’s Caribbean culture, the Black Power movement in the United States, Rastafarianism, and pan-African discourses to build something new and uniquely theirs.

Although it is easy to look at Thatcher’s Britain as one of increasing individuality, Connell argues that blackness was a shared identity in Britain. The collective nature of race, and living while black in Birmingham, meant that residents of Handsworth had to build a communal identity. This is a strong argument and Connell’s structure ably traces the many international influences that were used in Handsworth. Individual chapters can stand alone, “Visualizing Handsworth” and “Dread Culture” would be very illuminating for undergraduate students in British survey. This monograph explores both global and hyper localized movements with clarity of purpose, but at times it feels that a layer is missing. Readers will become very familiar with

the streets of Handsworth and the spread of Rastafarianism across three continents, but there are not many intra-British connections. It is not entirely clear how this global diasporic identity also spread to other cities within the United Kingdom. We see the local and global, we might like more of the regional and national. Overall *Black Handsworth* is an important addition to multiple historiographical fields, specifically those related to national identity, transnational history, and post-imperial life. Connell weaves together cultural, social, athletic, and political narratives to build a more nuanced understanding of Handsworth, one that celebrates their connections to the larger world without sacrificing the specificity of lived experiences locally.

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