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‘Central London under siege’: Diaspora, ‘race’ and the right to the (global) city

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon an ethnography of recent Congolese diasporic protests in central London, this article pays attention to the traversal histories of ‘race’ and the postcolonial dynamics that precede the emergence of a contemporary diasporic ‘right to the city’ movement. The authors critically engage with Henri Lefebvre’s ‘right to the city’ as a way of explaining how the urban is not only the site but also, increasingly, a stake in urban protests. In doing so the authors relocate urban centrality – its meaning, symbolic power and heuristic status in protests – in a context where activists’ claims are not restricted to one city or, simply, the political present. Rather, protestors talk about making geopolitical connections between local and global scales and contemporary and historical injustices. Drawing upon Simone’s notion of ‘black urbanism’, the authors claim to enrich Lefebvre’s original formulation by unpacking the complex performative dimensions of protest as they intersect with race and, more specifically, blackness and postcolonialism. It is concluded that activists’ experience is fundamentally ambivalent; they are at once enchanted and disenchanted with protest in central London.

‘Central London under siege’: Diaspora, ‘race’ and the right to the (global) city

We marched all over central London! Central London was under siege by the Congolese. 5000 people were marching in central London at one point! How many times did we protest in London? Yet nothing in the media... Our story is not told.

(British Congolese activist, public meeting, SOAS, London, 2013)

Introduction

Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the ‘right to the city’ is evoked routinely in discussions about protests and contemporary urban social movements, ranging from Occupy, the 15-M /indignados anti-austerity movement in Spain, the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul to even the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Arab Spring. The revolutionary spirit conjured by Lefebvre has also been identified in the 2005 uprising in the Parisian *banlieues* and the 2011 London riots (Garbin and Millington, 2012; Millington, 2016). The imaginary of the right to the city implies a transurban connection between centres of political resistance and also infers a transtemporal dimension, linking the contemporary mood for insurrection with foundational urban political *moments* such as The Paris Communes and *les évènements* of May 1968. The attraction of the right to the city as an organising concept for critical urbanists is that goes further than explaining how the city has become the principal site for myriads of protests against neoliberalism and stresses how the city and urban life are very much stakes in these struggles (Harvey 2012). The aim of the article is to extend and advance discussions of urban protest and the right to the city by paying greater attention to the traversal histories of ‘race’ and the multi-scalar postcolonial dynamics that provide the context for the emergence of contemporary, diasporic movements. More specifically, our analysis draws upon an ethnography of urban demonstrations organised by the Congolese

diaspora in London – the type of political protests and performances that have, thus far, remained at the periphery of urban enquiry and ‘right to the city’ sociological debates in particular. Data were collected during participant observation of demonstrations in Central London and through fifteen semi-structured interviews conducted with young British Congolese activists and protestors in their 20s and their 30s¹. Many interviewees are members of a youth platform which, through websites, blogs, YouTube channels and email lists reaches beyond the UK. While data collection took place between 2011 and 2016, it was during the winter of 2011-2012 that the ethnographic work was at its most intense. This period saw a large and at times spectacular² mobilisation of the Congolese diaspora in the context of an electoral campaign which led to the contested re-election of Joseph Kabila as President of the DRC (Garbin and Godin 2013). Moreover, in the US, Canada, France, Belgium, Germany, Holland and many other countries, demonstrators opposed to the government of Joseph Kabila also organised public demonstrations and pickets in front of Congolese embassies or iconic sites of power. Protestors also denounced the neo-colonial involvement of western governments in Africa, the role of Congo’s neighbours in fuelling the regional conflict, the exploitation of minerals by armed groups and multinationals, the widespread sexual violence in the East and the relative silence of mainstream media about the situation of the DRC. In public demonstrations and global online campaigns, activists stressed the link between items such as mobile phones or laptops and the plunder of natural resources in Eastern Congo.

The specific contribution of the paper is an acknowledgement—empirically and theoretically—of the ‘rhetorical force of a constellation of historical and political experiences

² see Vice online article for instance: http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/congo-election-protests-london-saturday-10-december

inherent in black urban experiences to bring into existence a transurban domain that both includes and goes beyond the prevalent notions of the Black Diaspora' (Simone 2010: 279). Such an intervention necessitates conceiving of a right to urban life beyond the *city singular* that is inscribed within transnational social (and urban) fields (see also Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Not only do 'racial', black and colonial histories and dynamics determine why and how oppositional movements must take up different strategic positions from each other within the city (Mayer 2012: 78), but an awareness of these forces allows for a nuanced understanding of how black, African and diasporic claims on the city are imagined, articulated, strategized and publically received. Moreover, understanding the complex politics intertwined with these claims enables a greater critical sensitivity towards the potentialities and constraints of the global and, some would say 'post-political' city (see also Brenner 2009; Davidson and Iveson, 2014; Harvey, 2012; Madden, 2012; Marcuse, 2012; Merrifield, 2011; 2013; 2014; Pinder, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2014). And yet, it is crucial that blackness and diaspora are not conflated. For example, it is often the diasporic aspects that distinguish Congolese protests from other urban social movements; but, we suggest, these transurban and transnational actions—and their responses—are always shaped by historical and contemporary framings of race; or rather, by competing but always highly contextualised understandings of blackness.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins with a discussion of the right to the city and how, for Lefebvre, this also necessitates the right to centrality. There follows a brief review of relevant literature on the 'global city', protest and post-politics. Our analysis of ethnographic material commences with a discussion of the continued attraction of the 'enchanted' democratic centre of London before considering the politics of performance and finally

emphasising the ambivalent experience of young Congolese demonstrators *vis-à-vis* the idea of what Simone (2010) calls ‘black urbanism’ by examining their growing disenchantment with urban-based protest and political coalition.

Centrality and the right to the city

For Lefebvre, the right to the city denotes a ‘superior right’ concerned with inhabiting the city in the fullest possible manner. This implies more than owning or renting a place in the city, or being allowed to work or contribute to decisions made there. It is, he suggests, a ‘cry and demand’ rather than a right that is formally granted (Lefebvre 1996: 158). In the spirit of Lefebvre’s formulation the right to produce and enjoy the city are integrally linked (Marcuse 2012: 36). Full and profound participation in urban life opposes technocratic and capitalist control, freeing the city to flourish as a work of art, an *oeuvre* that is accomplished by individual and collective actors under historical conditions. Indeed, the *right to urban life* (Lefebvre 1996: 158) is often suppressed by a combination of markets and government. Many city inhabitants are disqualified from participation in the *oeuvre* (Purcell 2008: 95); they are excluded—in terms of say, housing, culture or politics—from the centre. And, for Lefebvre (1996: 208), ‘there is no urbanity without a centre’. In a pessimistic tone, he mourns how:

[t]he historic centre has disappeared [...] All that remains are, on the one hand, centres for power and decision making and, on the other, fake and artificial spaces. It is true, of course, that the city endures, but only as museum and as spectacle. The urban, conceived and lived as social practice, is in the process of deteriorating and perhaps disappearing. (Lefebvre 2014: 204)

Lefebvre’s point is that the right to the city is unlikely to be realised in our inherited urban centres (Lefebvre 1996: 170). As Huyssen (2008: 15) argues, the historic democratic centre is

an 'urban formation that really belonged to [an] earlier stage of heroic modernity, rather than to our own time'. On one hand, it is perplexing that Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city has become so vital at the moment when the historical reality of the democratic urban centre is in decline. The puzzle, as Harvey (2012: xv) puts it, is that: 'to claim the right to the city is, in effect, to claim a right to something that no longer exists'. On the other hand, the right to the city feels so pressing because we have never required the democratic opportunities of the city so urgently.

Protest, post-politics and the *global city*?

As Sassen (2000; 2001; 2006) argues, the 'global city' offers a distinctive kind of centrality (on London as a global city see Imrie *et al* 2009). Transformed since the 1980s from a major city and former metropole into a command point for the organization of the global economy, London is now one of the leading 'transnational market spaces' or 'nodes of accumulation' on the planet (Sassen, 2000: xii). The role of the state in this accumulation strategy is to promote global city regions as favourable locations for transnational capital investment. The state must also manage political opposition and resistance to the uncoupling of global cities from their national economies as well as the growing separation from the social interests of their own inhabitants (Brenner 1998; Sassen 2001).

The global city concept has faced scrutiny from many sources. For example, Marcuse and Van Kempen have (2000) have suggested that *all* cities participate in globalization and thus all cities, rather than just a select few, are globalizing. Rather than posit a hierarchy of cities or suggest that cities are differently positioned within flows of capital and communications,

others have suggested instead that all cities be considered ‘ordinary’ (Amin and Graham 1997; Robinson 2006). This article is in agreement with Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011: 75) that this critique tends to flatten the unevenness of globalization. It is important to recognise how ‘the spatialization of capital is uneven and unequal’ (ibid: 78) and also that some cities are more implicated in histories of globalization, colonialism and postcolonial than others. London is not simply a convenient stage for protests by young Congolese. The type of centrality that London symbolises is important; the central city is constitutive of the meanings of the protests.

However, the notion of the global city does infer globality in too limited a sense. If a truly global city is imagined—where the social is given priority over the economic and technological—it should be possible for movements to coalesce in opposition to *global* inequalities and perceived shared risks. It should be possible for right to the city movements of the first world to connect with struggles in cities of the global South, where the fight against privatization, dispossession, evictions, and displacement is even more existential (Mayer 2012: 72). Such a process of subjectivation is akin to the process Nancy (2007) refers to as *mondialisation*, an alternate or contrary form of globalization that concerns the ‘world as a globality of sense’ and the emergence of a world as subject (Madden 2012: 43). In later work, Lefebvre (2014: 204) similarly recognised that, ‘we are currently in a transitory period of mutations in which the urban and the global crosscut and reciprocally disrupt each other’. Adopting a similar line, Merrifield (2013: 43) reflects how a radical urban citizenship might be formed, where ‘a citizen of the block, of the neighbourhood, becomes a citizen of the world, a universal citizen rooted in place [...]’. Here, citizenship extends from the city, not only because of migration but also because of ‘the multiplicity of communication

technologies’ and ‘the becoming worldwide (*mondialisation*) of knowledge’ (Lefebvre 2014: 205). Such an urban citizenship traverses frontiers and engenders a subjectivity that exceeds the borders that confine bodies and acts (Isin 2012: 174).

The global city paradox is that as inequalities widen and the injustices of austerity urbanism become more apparent, there is greater demand—often from poor and minority residents—for the city to perform a democratic function. The historic symbolic resonance of the central city means it is still understood as *the* place from which to claim recognition. Yet, as Swyngedouw (2011: 11) argues, the polis is retreating as a space of dissent, disagreement and democracy. Elsewhere, he writes there has been a ‘reduction, accelerating rapidly over the past few decades, of the political terrain to a post-democratic arrangement of oligarchic policing’ (Swyngedouw 2014: 124). Iveson (2011) also points to how protest in the city has become increasingly regulated and rule-governed. In these accounts, politics and/or democracy becomes concerned merely about the management of agreed-upon ‘problems’ by an administrative and economic elite. And so, as Mayer (2012: 70) argues, demands for the ‘right to the city’ are not simply about inclusion in a structurally unequal city—such as London—but about democratizing cities and their decision-making processes more radically.

Contemporary claims upon the city (and centrality) include the gestures of Occupy and appropriation of highly symbolic central sites such as Wall Street (Zuccotti Park) and LSX (St. Pauls, London). Occupy appears in mimesis of events such as the Paris Commune of 1871 and the 1968 occupation of the Sorbonne. Indeed, recent urban movements are abound with nostalgia for the revolutionary, yet decidedly ethnocentric history of ‘spectacular Paris’

(Lawrie Van de Ven 2010). But Occupy is not all there is. There are also oppositional movements comprised out of those whom Mayer (2012) refers to as the ‘outcast groups’ of the city. The 2011 London riots are an example of this (see Millington 2016a), but there are also organised protests, such as those led by young, diasporic Congolese, who campaign vigorously in postcolonial Western cities like London against historical and contemporary injustices. Simone (2010) uses the notion of ‘black urbanism’ to capture the particular situations and spaces where black people in cities have tended to operate. Placing emphasis upon this is, for Simone, a ‘tactical manoeuvre’ that brings certain dimensions of urban life from the periphery into clearer view. Black urbanism gives credence to the importance, *still*, of transforming ‘the objectifying and alienating spatial arrangements that racialized encounters produce in urban life’ (ibid: 290). The exclusion of ‘blackness’ from dominant accounts of the city, including critical urban theory, ‘implies the existence of undocumented worlds of limited visibility [...] or posits radically different ways of being in the city’ (ibid: 285). Because black urbanism brings practices and experiences that are not given their analytical due into focus, a critical understanding of the city *as a whole* is also advanced, while a conception of the right to the city is enriched. This involves, as Simone (2016: 200) suggests, a respect for ‘the complexity of things’—in this case, diasporic urban protests—and a willingness to accept a lack of clarity when it comes to agreeing upon what a right to the city looks and feels like.

Diasporic, black urban social movements raise questions for critical urban theory. How can it be that through claiming their right to one city (London), protestors seek also to challenge injustice in other urban centres (e.g. Brussels, Paris, Kinshasa). How do Congolese protestors use blackness as a tool to materialise ‘connections among all the disparate things black

people across the world have experience' (Simone 2010: 297)? How does 'race' constrain protestors' actions (or limit how their actions are interpreted)? Does the introduction of 'black urbanism' fundamentally challenge the class basis upon which the right to the city was originally conceived? Whilst these are theoretical puzzles for scholars, protestors themselves have a more intuitive sense of what they are doing; they already have a respect for *complexity*:

That doesn't mean that you being here, you cannot get involved, it means that you being here have to do *what someone over there cannot do*: being the voice of the people, being a media person, being the person that brings that issue forward to the government [...] someone in Kinshasa cannot tell Downing Street what's going on, *but you can*. It's a case of really understanding what is your role within this complex structure [...]. (British Congolese activist, male, 27)

'Banging on the door of Downing Street': The enchanted centre

What can be seen, among Congolese youth, is the continued draw of London's historic centre and locations such as Downing Street, Houses of Parliament and the West End. These sites represent a 'bank of symbolic capital' (Wacquant, 2005: 17) or, as Lefebvre (2003: 21) puts it, they are 'monuments' that are repressive in how they signify power, but also vital in symbolising democracy and possibility. Assembling in the centre of London remains a thrilling, even transcendent experience. For the Congolese diaspora, London has an added meaning; it is the 'unexpected' postcolonial centre from which to 'speak from'. In comparison to Brussels (or even Paris), London promises to enable you to be seen and heard. As one interviewee says, 'London is like the "It" place out of all the European cities' (British Congolese female, 25).

Adopting a multi-layered citizenship of Londoner, British and Congolese gives protestors a ‘particular right to speak out, an upper hand’, as one protester put it, to denounce, in front of Downing Street, the role of the British government in the Congolese crisis³ :

Downing Street. That’s where the Prime Minister is. To the Congolese community this is where the Prime Minister lives. This is his home... *Our* home is being disturbed... So we’re going to disturb *your* home. It’s like being that annoying child... I’m going to keep banging on your door until you let me in. If the Prime Minister is the man who has the final say, who decides on these things and if he’s working with Rwanda and so forth—if that’s the case—then that’s the person we want to deal with. (British Congolese activist, female, 24)

Here we encounter the image of ‘banging on the door’ to disturb the Prime Minister in *his* home, implying both domestic and nation-state setting. It is also a relational sense of home in that it is compared to ‘our’ home, in this instance referring to the DRC. There is an acknowledgement of lacking power, but also of using this status to act as an irritant, as a child that cannot be pacified or ignored. Also, this quote effortlessly reveals a transnational claim to the right to the city. Protests in London are about British policy but also concern injustices in other cities and other continents thereby linking perceived responsibilities as a citizen across geopolitical scales: ‘our tax money is funding the war in the Congo’, as one youth put it. Such protests bring a dispersed chain of citizens, places and experiences closer together in acts of ‘world forming’ or *mondialisation*. The central city (still) makes such gatherings (and processes) possible.

One female activist described participating in a central London demonstration as being ‘moved by a purpose’ and not feeling inhibited because ‘everybody’s growing from

³ The UK being an important bilateral donor to Kagame’s government in Rwanda, accused of fuelling proxy wars in mineral-rich Eastern Congo

everybody's strength'. And yet, despite this 'enjoyment' of protest (Isin 2012), we should not ignore the courage it takes for young black people to enter such a stage or underestimate the risks of exposure.

There was 130 people that got arrested outside Leicester Square, I was at that march. What happened was, a lot of young people, not just young people but a lot of people got arrested. [...] (British Congolese activist, male, 27)

Central London is not, for Congolese protestors, a neutral space; rather, it is a space *charged* with meaning. This is especially the case for Black British groups who, for historical reasons, have learnt they cannot afford to adopt the *blasé* attitude of the (white, male) *flâneur* when it comes to laying claim to the centre of the city. While there has been a recent ideological shift towards an 'anti-racialism' that pulls a veil over the colonial past and post-colonial present (Kapoor 2013); and whilst various political and promotional strategies now communicate the Western metropolis is somehow 'post-race' (Millington 2016b), it is important to acknowledge the risks that young Congolese face in attending demonstrations.

The politics of performance and the performance of politics

In contrast to the many positive feelings voiced by interviewees, it was also expressed how rivalries among first generation Congolese 'community leaders'⁴ are a source of factionalism and discontent. These conflicts were discussed during youth activist meetings and on social media and even led some to question the extent to which they would continue to take part in demonstrations organised by elders. While all the youth expressed dissatisfaction with the current government of the DRC, some criticized members of the Congolese opposition party

⁴ These older activists are members or affiliated with Congolese opposition parties such as UDPS or APARECO

for pursuing what they believed to be a limited agenda⁵ that minimizes the globalized and postcolonial dimensions of the crisis in the DRC. In their eyes, the tensions between different political factions of the Congolese opposition—played out during demonstrations and across the online diasporic public sphere—threatened to demoralize the movement.

Demonstrations in London are performed with the aim of communicating beyond the city. Pastors leading prayer groups in front of 10 Downing Street (Garbin 2014), activists delivering memos addressed to the Prime Minister and outspoken elders in military outfits filmed for YouTube clips are embodied enactments of opposition that help constitute a diasporic economy of images (and sounds). These performances are given credence by their staging in central locations rich in historically accumulated symbolic capital. In Bourdieu's (1998: 102) terms, symbolic capital describes how domination is transformed into charisma; or, how power, via symbolic alchemy, is able to evoke affective enchantment. These performances—with central London performing the role of an 'enchanted' stage and set—are attempts to convert the prestige of a central city location into political capital; a process made possible by mediatization and transnational circulation. Being visible and vocal in London protests endows diasporic, transurban actors (mostly male, first generation) with esteem beyond the local and the immediate. The symbolic value of sites in central London is therefore pivotal to the 'success' of political performances that are transmitted across the diaspora via social media, popular diasporic websites or Congolese satellite TV channels. Often dismissed by youth as 'YouTube resistance', these performances, measured by 'likes', 'shares' and 'comments' and archived for repeated consumption, are perceived to be motivated by a quest to accumulate personal political capital, not only in a context of

⁵ Supporting the opposition candidate during the presidential campaign and then contesting their electoral defeat.

competition between those seeking to represent the Congolese community in the UK, but also the internal struggle for leadership within transnationally located opposition parties. As one 25-year-old male activist who believes protests should address a broader geopolitical agenda put it, ‘For some of our leaders, it’s all about leadership—being filmed so that they can be noticed by people in Kinshasa’.

It is important therefore to qualify the simple equation drawn between urban protest and the ‘use value’ of urban space that is often a feature of neo-Lefebvrian readings of the right to the city and/ or the act of ‘reclaiming commons’ (Harvey 2012). Protest does not simply recover the use value of the central city. The predominance too of exchange value—derived from equivalences between symbolic and political capital—warns against pitting the appropriation and fetishization of space against each other. The representational value of the image of the central city plays an important role in Congolese demonstrations.

Another important aspect of diasporic urban protest concerns the politics of representation (and objectivation). Young Congolese are acutely aware of how their presence in the central city may be interpreted. Interviewees talked about what their urban, masculine, blackness signifies in the eyes of the police and public, especially in confrontational situations. In the context of British citizenship becoming more exclusive or embounded (Tyler 2013), Congolese protestors are aware of the limitations that being black imposes on their rights as citizens. There are also debates about the objectivation of their performance as protesters. Youth are concerned, for instance, about how using drums, chanting and singing in Lingala creates the impression of a ‘joyful carnival’ that could be misconstrued through a white lens

of exoticisation. Language is also deliberated. Using English in slogans, placards and leaflets was justified by young protestors in many ways: to reach a wider audience, to be efficient and legible in the public sphere, and for the protest to connect with social groups and political causes outside the diaspora, to achieve more than ‘just chanting in Lingala against Kabila [Congo’s president] like the elders do’ as one interviewee put it.

‘Blood mobiles’ and emergent *mondialisation*: Traversal politics in the postcolonial city

Some people even said “well you guys weren't colonised by the British, you were colonised by Belgium, why don't you go and do something over there?” (British Congolese activist, female, 22)

Congolese activists attempt to ‘repostcolonize’ London. In other words, they seek to relocate the city within a postcolonial framework of intertwining places, spaces, relations and histories that are not limited to the DRC-Belgium binary⁶. In doing so they are engaging with the multidimensionality of the postcolonial city in a revised context of neo-liberal (and post-political) globalization, re-establishing connections between old and new forms of domination, between historic and emerging centres and peripheries. Engaging with the excavation and recovery of a postcolonial reality means challenging the ‘bundle of silences’ (Trouillot 1995, Wemyss 2009) inherent in Britain’s post-imperial identity. Congolese youth react angrily when told that since Congo is not a former British colony, their claims and protest had no place in London. This double Othering—combining a temporal dimension (‘your diasporic history is not part of our national history’) with its spatial corollary (‘your protests don’t belong here’)—is vigorously contested. As one interviewee put it, ‘British

⁶ See the ‘Memory Matters’ project for more on Congolese postcolonial spatiality in Brussels (<http://www.memory-matters.net/>)

have always had their hands in Congo since the colonial period, but then that's not talked about'.

The most important aspect of repostcolonizing London is highlighting continuities between colonial exploitation and the contemporary plunder of minerals in the DRC for the electronic industry. One participant in a 'flash mob' in Piccadilly Circus—organised to raise awareness of this connection—expressed this explicitly:

Many people are blind to the fact that we are carrying blood in our laptops and mobile phones; that Coltan is being plundered in the Congo...Hundred years ago, Congo produced 60% of the total production of rubber before Latin America and Asia took over the production. Congolese people were massively killed during that period of mass production, for financial reasons. [...] So we have decided that we are not letting our history be erased... (British Congolese activist, male, 32)

Rejecting the idea that conflict in the Congo/Great Lakes region was driven by ethnicity or 'tribalism', activists are concerned with establishing new political spatial and temporal linkages, using slogans such as "the real cost of your iPhone is genocide in the Congo"; or through the symbolic resonance of protest sites such as the Apple Store in Regent Street. Raising awareness of how consumers fetishize 'blood mobiles' and 'blood laptops' reflects a diasporic engagement; and represents, at the same time, a way of locating and connecting London and the DRC on a global map of injustice and human rights abuses.

Some young activists participated in the 2012 'Carnival of Dirt' alongside anti-capitalist campaigners, global environmental organisations and other migrant activists. The Carnival of Dirt was a parody of funeral procession, staged across the City of London, during which protesters commemorated victims of human rights abuses in regions such as Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Pacific that are exploited for their natural resources. Dressed in black,

with ash covering their faces and carrying coffins, the protesters picketed the discrete and little known headquarters of mining companies and trading institutions, such as the London Metal Exchange. These inconspicuous buildings host global organisations whose activities negatively impact developing countries such as the Congo. These symbolic, but not immediately recognised locations are used to ground expressions of a transversal citizenship, which might also be seen as evidence of an emergent *mondialisation*. And, as Lefebvre (1996) points out, the right to the city itself includes the right to appropriate time and space. This is what is attempted here by Congolese activists; to ‘make’ and make heard (and visible) a geopolitical past and present that too often is inaudible and/or hidden:

We protest against those who have their hands everywhere but who don't leave their fingerprints anywhere. London is the best place to protest against capitalism. Globalisation is a good idea but it's in the hands of the wrong people. Globalisation is attached to racism and capitalism and what's going on in the Congo today is unacceptable. (British Congolese activist, male, 29)

Contact was made between Congolese and Occupy London (LSX). This assertion of political identity promised to allow young Congolese to carve out an autonomous, extra-diasporic space of political engagement apart from the ‘narrow’ or self-serving concerns of first generation leaders. As one male activist claims, ‘the exploitation is global and that’s why we need to explore ways of working with people outside our community’. Yet while many Congolese are enthusiastic about bridging with Occupy, some questioned the willingness of such movements to engage across ethnic/race boundaries. In their eyes Occupy movement was class-based and consequently did not value or understand attempts to link the injustices of global capitalism with its imperial roots:

We are happy to build alliances with Occupy [...] but we can't wait for them... Marx says that the proletarians of the world should unite but it's the white working class really that he was talking about (British Congolese activist, male, 25)

If we occupy we will be criminalised even more. It is not a good strategy for us... We have done stuff with Occupy but we are not middle-class whites with lawyers advising us. If we occupy, we'll just be seen as black immigrants causing problems and we'll become easy targets for racists and the media... like during the riots it was like: "Black youths again!" (British Congolese activist, male, 27)

In addition, the act of *occupying*—appropriating symbolic public space in a durable and visible manner—was felt to run an unnecessary risk of criminalisation (the Congolese always make sure they have official authorization, even for small-scale pickets and demonstrations). In the second quote, an activist comments on the vulnerability that arises from sharing in ‘a politics of those who do not move’ (Isin 2012: 181). Racism and potential media stigmatization must also be negotiated. His comparison with the 2011 riots reveals how Congolese protestors may feel their urban experience—of being black and perceived by authorities and the media as an ‘immigrant’ and/or a threat to law and order—is closer to the thousands of black and minority ethnic youth who were arrested and imprisoned during these disturbances than it is to those ‘middle-class whites with lawyers’ who camped outside St Pauls. In Congolese claims on the city, time and space are—out of necessity—appropriated differently to mainstream right to the city movements.

Disenchantment and the spatial politics of race

Despite the attraction of central London there is also considerable disenchantment with protesting in such settings. Much disillusionment stems from how demonstrations outside Downing Street are policed and ‘rationalised’ in accordance with a bureaucratic booking system that allocates times and spaces to any group wishing to protest. Consequently, this space is used by a variety of groups, including extreme right-wing organisations such as the

English Defence League. Creating ‘equality’ between social movements devalues the symbolic value of the space in the eyes of some Congolese. At 6pm the police follow strict instructions to disperse protestors:

[...] Doing that protest there, everything started fine, it was again in Downing Street, and then the police started pushing for people to go home because obviously it was past six, and people did not want to go home [...] (British Congolese activist, male, 29)

As well as anger, doubt was expressed as to whether the centre of London really does offer a forum where recognition can be gained, or whether this is just an illusion, an *effect* of London’s ‘monuments’ to democracy. As testified earlier, the central city remains the obvious place to ‘speak from’ and, undoubtedly, it can be an exhilarating experience to amass there. But, it can feel difficult to be seen or heard amidst the cacophony of ‘noise’ (Dikeç 2004) created by daily protests and the routinized form in which these are permitted to occur.

These two accounts convey this frustration:

I really wanted to understand why it was always during the winter season we would protest, why it's *just November*, and then one guy told me, he goes “you've got to understand, we applied for them to allow us to protest during the warm season but they wouldn't allow us”. (British Congolese activist, male, 32)

It is like you are wasting your time, and I started to see that after I got nicked. I just thought, you know what, it is bullshit. Why am I going to these protests? (British Congolese protestor, male, 20)

The first quote reveals how the Downing Street protests are far from spontaneous events and are planned well in advance. Groups *apply* to demonstrate, with some ‘slots’ proving more popular than others. The second points to how the police attention that accompanies protest in central London—especially on occasions when demonstrations exceed allotted times and

spaces—can make activists question their commitment to further events (though not necessarily to politics itself).

Although the intended audience of protests for most is transnational, a common complaint is the lack of mainstream political, media (and therefore public) recognition for the Congolese plight; this, despite the sheer size of their demonstrations. One banner held by protestor during a 2012 protest in Whitehall claimed the BBC ignored the Congolese demonstrations because the participants ‘were black’⁷. This was understood as a deliberate slight or snub:

[...] There was no headline coverage, there was no mainstream coverage. And can you imagine, this is happening in the centre of London you have 500, maybe 1000 people gathered in one place to demonstrate and to make a whole lot of noise. [...] The coverage was terrible... To me it was not surprising but people felt that they were let down by the BBC for not covering... Not only not covering it but avoiding it purposely altogether.... (British Congolese activist, male, 32)

This demonstrates a paradox that gets to the heart of the restrictions on democracy found in the post-political global city. Although Congolese protestors found themselves ignored by domestic politicians and media they were not ignored by police or authorities. The contradiction is between being *visible*, in the sense of being identified and policed as ‘black youth’; and frustration with being *invisible* in relation to the lack of media, political and public recognition of their activities. Again, the 2011 riots are raised as a point of comparison, making a connection with London’s postcolonial history of so-called ‘race relations’ into which young Congolese are inserted:

The police arrested 149 kids during one of the marches, they took them to the police station telling them if they come back anywhere near Downing Street, they can get arrested. The police had the [2011] riots in mind. (British Congolese activist, male, 25)

⁷ The banner read: ‘The BBC has turned its back on the Congolese because we are black’

Race, I mean the darker you are, when you are dealing with the police, it is gonna be a tough time. We are unconsciously conditioned to know that, growing up as a young black man in London... you just know that the police don't like you and you don't like the police... you don't really know why, you don't really know the history of it...(British Congolese activist, male, 32)

The tension between managerial post-politics and increased demands for London to continue offering spaces of democracy is articulated through the ambivalent syntax of black urbanism. This is why, as Simone (2010: 304) explains, black residents of the city tend to modulate between two strategies. The first concerns adherence to conventional narratives of 'efficacy, propriety and citizenship', more as a residual form of social anchorage than a sign of true conviction. The second strategy—usually in response to disappointment with the first—concerns a mix of inventiveness and a 'complicated elaboration of relations' in response to manifold constraints. This would include the deliberated visions of purpose and contested criteria for the success of protests (discussed earlier). The risk of both strategies, as evidence suggests, is growing disenchantment with politics *and* the city.

In light of Stuart Hall's (2004) argument that there are no pure or essential forms of black culture, it is important to caution against using 'black urbanism' to infer a singular black urban experience, or to use it as a political trope in and of itself. To reveal the distinctive experiences of black residents of the city—forged against the context of institutional and public racisms—is a critical and tactical intervention; but, Simone (2010: 264) is adamant that black urbanism is not a claim for 'some kind of overarching identity or authenticity', but rather about recovering the claims for solidarity or 'being together'—in this case, the proliferation of multiple, overlapping public spheres—that are ignored but refuse to disappear from cities. One interviewee discusses such issues at length, comparing the political potency

of blackness in different contexts, before discussing his own recent experience of a Black Lives Matters demonstration in London:

When it's white and black in terms of power relation, it's much easier for people to understand. That's why American race politics is so popular around the world, because it's really simple for people to understand...Race simplifies the narrative...But Congo is more complicated...So we know that the UK was involved in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. That UK have consistently supported dictators, Mobutu, Kagame, Kabila. Even now the Congolese police force and the military are trained by the US. So when police brutality happens in Congo, US imperialism is directly involved in that. Race can allow connections with non-African black activists but also hinders it because there's again essentialised notions about what blackness is...But the direct assumption of blackness is not Africa, it's Caribbean-ness or black American-ness...It's too narrow, in the sense that they hear black and they relate to American-ness.... The first Pan-African congress was in London. In the 1960s there was a strong connection between blackness and Africa, but from the 1990s onwards it became more narrow. So race doesn't always operate the same way, it's a different kind of reaction when it's about Black Africans I'd say. American Blackness has a lot of aura. People feel concerned, it's like...If something happens to black people in the States, black people here, they feel...as if it's happening to them, there is a strong culture. The Black Lives Matters demo in London, I was there, it was big, very big. But a young Somali prisoner was killed in Pentonville – I went to that demo too, that was in London.... and hardly anyone was there, 20 people max...(British Congolese activist, male, 32)

The Congolese movement is grounded in diasporic politics and imperial/ neo-imperial relations between Africa and the West. But race—or rather racism—becomes indivisible from how young activists understand and project themselves, especially in the context of London and its enduring structures of racism (see Keith 1993; 2005). Racialised interpretations are used to explain the presence of the Congolese in the heart of the city, often in ways that are limiting and that, in part, constitute a misrecognition, implying more often than not African American or British African Caribbean notions of blackness. A 'generic blackness' (Simone 2016) can be a unifying and mobilising resource, consolidating prior recognition claims and gains, but can also be a hindrance in that the meaning of the

Congolese struggle and the specificity of an African experience of blackness in London becomes obfuscated. On such occasions, as our interviewee states, ‘race simplifies the narrative’. If it is anything at all, black urbanism refers to *contending with* a semantic and transurban complexity ‘that is both a resource for the imagination and an impediment to action’ (Simone 2016: 6).

Conclusion

This article uses a contemporary diasporic urban movement to expand the vision of critical urban enquiry and place under scrutiny the concept (and rallying cry) of the right to the city. It is suggested here that Lefebvre was right to attempt to reconfigure this notion in later work, as a form of ‘revolutionary citizenship’ based upon the *mondialisation* of knowledge and praxis (Lefebvre 2014). It also seems that ‘[t]he specificity of the city seems to be that there’s no longer any specificity; the right to the city is a global struggle for citizenship that needs to be *grounded* in the city’ (Merrifield 2011: 476 added emphasis). The city—in this case London—is a pivot for claims that are transurban and transnational. The city is used to ground and unify, rather than contain, political action that operates across a variety of scales. A further point, in relation to Congolese protests in London, is how ‘[b]y following the various dispersions, displacements, and diasporas of black people, architectures of urbanity emerge which connect disparate cities and regions to each other’ (Simone 2010: 305). The diasporic urban subject is transfigured by participation in such protests. Against the delimited ‘globality’ of twenty-first century London they participate in a contradictory process of *mondialisation*. As Isin (2012: 10) puts it, ‘[c]itizens without frontiers [...] traverse frontiers and produce political subjectivities that are creative, inventive and autonomous despite limits imposed upon them’. Young Congolese in London are claiming rights that do not formally

exist, that are not granted to them and whose possibilities remain, as yet, unbounded. They are reconfiguring the right to the city for their own times and circumstances.

There are, however, two ways in which Congolese protests in London are concerned with *more* than the right to the city, as it is has usually been conceived. First, this analysis warns against prioritising use value in understanding contemporary claims to the right to the city. As Lefebvre (2003: 58) intimates, in an era of unrestrained urbanization it is the image or ideology of the city that persists rather than the actuality of ‘the city’ itself. Indeed, it is the thrill of being in the historic urban centre—and all that this continues to connote—that draws protestors to central London. But, images of these sites are prized also for their (symbolic) exchange value in circuits of diasporic struggle. As important as use value is how bodies, political performance and architecture are captured digitally and circulated in novel visual and aural forms. Attention to symbolic and moral (political) economies is crucial to understanding the kinds of transurban citizenship being claimed by protestors. Second, whilst *being* in central London is of enormous symbolic significance for Congolese protestors, their claims extend way beyond the times and spaces of the present city. It is for such reasons that Simone’s notion of black urbanism is useful in terms of understanding the creativity and constraints of protest, aspects which must be considered central (rather than peripheral) to how the right to the city is understood in the future:

Black urbanism thus concerns how such platforms of engagement can be built. It concerns how connections are built across cities in ways that circumvent the dominant histories, frameworks, and policies [...] It concerns the inextricable experience of possibility and precariousness [...] It concerns the willingness to leap forward into new affiliations, new versions of what had been familiar and comforting, and new ways of expressing the refusal to disappear in provisional new friendships and collaboration that could easily disappear. (Simone 2010: 331)

The above encapsulates the inventiveness, thought, energy that goes into the claims on London made by young Congolese protestors, as well as the divisions and jeopardy that impede their involvement. The experience of protest for young Congolese is ambivalent because of the tension between visibility (as black youth in the city) and invisibility (how black diasporic political concerns are ignored or marginalised). Black urbanism appears fated to operate between incessantly shifting lines of inclusion/ exclusion and overregulation/ autonomy (ibid: 281).

The affiliations that are created and/ or threatened as a result of situated urban protest by young Congolese in London are manifold and have a diasporic reach that calls to, while at the same time *deconstructs* the 'present pasts' (Huysen 2003) of other postcolonial centres such as Brussels and Paris, as well as addressing political struggles in Kinshasa and the DRC (and examples of 'new imperialism' in Africa more generally). Race is always implicated in the struggles of protestors but it can also mystify the conflicts or injustices they seek to bring attention to. What is also apparent is the decline of, or restrictions placed upon the democratic function of the city, constraints that nullify dissent by managing protest, a process that is intensified for black citizens. The price of neither protecting nor enhancing the fragile and/or retreating political spaces of the global city is further disenchantment with the act of protest and with the city itself. Drawing upon an ethnographic study of young British Congolese protestors in central London this paper suggests ways we might understand contemporary claims for the right to the city that are attuned to the complexities and ambivalence of 'black urbanism'.

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