This innovative study presents an account of the interaction of people from different ethnic backgrounds who live in Southall, the most densely populated multi-ethnic ghetto of London. Breaking with the tradition of studying a single ethnic community, Gerd Baumann treats Southall as a single social field in which various immigrant groups come to terms both with one another and with the dominant culture of England. The people of Southall affirm ethnic distinctiveness in some contexts, but they are also engaged in rethinking their identities and in debating the meanings of their cultural heritage. This book is at once a vivid ethnographic account of an aspect of contemporary British life, and a challenge to the conventional discourse of community studies.
CONTESTING CULTURE
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Acknowledgements

'Doing ethnography', as it is sometimes called, is not, of course, one process, but at least two. Fieldwork one lives, ethnographies are written. I re-state the obvious here, both to remark on its strange absence in some literary critiques of ethnographic texts, and to help me pull out at least some threads from a fabric of favours so dense that it resists narrative ordering.

First, one settles on a place, and it was Adam Kuper who, knowing my intention to 'work among (other) immigrants', pointed me to Southall and suggested that I move there. I might have settled for something less complicated and quicker without him. Throughout the next seven years, Adam Kuper has encouraged my research with a commitment, trust, and critical support that defy any written expression of thanks.

Then, one settles into the place. It was Southallians like Narinder Ghattoura and 'Uncle Syd', Balbir Nandra and Floyd Wilson, my neighbours Shiv and Ram Singhji and their families, who made me feel at home and involved in Southall. Along with Kirpal Marwaha, Graham Jimpson, David Baldwin, and many of their friends, they made the difference between living fieldwork and doing some piece of research. The research, however, needed more time than I initially had, and it was the Leverhulme Trust that bailed me out. After two years of fieldwork alongside work, the Leverhulme Trust awarded me a nine months' grant that, effectively, took me out of teaching for fifteen months, and allowed three final-year students to supplement my fieldwork with their own. Hazel Yabsley, Barbara Hawkes, and Teresa McGarry are quoted as ethnographic authorities in this book, for that is what they became. So is Richard Hundleby, a student and friend who had worked with me before, when the going was toughest. Their contributions, and the ways in which I have drawn on them, are detailed in the Introduction on 'the process of research'.

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At about the same time, I met Marie Gillespie, then engaged in her own research about Southallians' uses of the media (Gillespie 1995). To acknowledge academic co-operation would, in this case, be a private joke. Between the synergy of sharing fieldworks and the love of friends, I can think of nothing that has not, then or since, enhanced our lives. One of our joint madnesses, a qualitatively conceived mass survey among young Southallians, came near to spelling disaster: 350 young people volunteered 5 million bytes of data. What little of this untapped resource the book can present, I owe to the tireless exertions of Lynette Clarke and Mozzy Hajian. We would have given up on the data without them.

When it came to writing, it was again Adam Kuper who arranged an almost care-free year for me through a reciprocal teaching exchange with the University of New Mexico. The resulting first draft was read closely by colleagues and friends. I thank especially Marie and Tom Cheesman, Rick Hundleby, and Hazel Yabsley. The second draft, written when back in Southall again, was improved with the generous and painstaking help of Peter Seglow and Charles Stewart. Steven Vertovec, who also read this second draft, continued to point me to crucial further reading. An incisive revision was inspired by Chris Fuller and produced a third draft, followed by a fourth which took account of further criticisms by Readers for the Press. This last stage was the hardest, and I could not have coped with it but for the reassuring support of my new colleagues at Amsterdam, Peter van der Veer, Patricia Spyer, and Peter van Rooden. Finally, I owe thanks to Rick Hundleby who put enormous effort and skill into a last round of editing the text, and to Peter Seglow who went out of his way to take the photographs for all the plates.

I dedicate the book to my three teachers: John Blacking who made me an anthropologist; Godfrey Lienhardt, who taught me that data can argue; and Adam Kuper who has made this possible, and made it a thrill to try.
Note on the text

As usual in ethnographies, vernacular terms are printed in *italics*. This applies not only to words taken from Punjabi, Urdu or Hindi, but, more importantly, to two English key words.

The terms *culture* and *community* form part of the Southall vernacular. Wherever they are cited to reflect local meanings and usages, they thus appear *italicized*.

In other places, they appear in quotation marks or with qualifiers such as 'putative', 'assumed', or 'ascribed'. This is when they are quoted or paraphrased from what I have called the dominant discourse about 'ethnic' minorities. This discourse envisages minorities as forming homogeneous 'communities' defined by an inherited 'culture' thought, in a circular fashion, to be based on their 'ethnic' identity. Since 'ethnic' is the crucial cipher of the dominant discourse, it, too, should appear in quotation marks throughout. In order not to annoy the reader with unnecessary 'stumbling blocks', however, I have used quotation marks only in cases of possible doubt.

A distinction between the dominant discourse and the vernacular usages, which in some contexts endorse it and in others deny it, is essential to the argument that the book puts forth.
Introduction: the process of research

The ethnographic data presented in this book are arranged in the form of an argument that might be called theoretical. But my involvement and interest in the research were driven by personal motives. After twelve years of study and work as an Africanist anthropologist, I was faced with the choice between a teaching job in New York and another at Brunel, The University of West London. To stay in Britain would make sense, I thought, if I could engage in research among so-called immigrants. Having myself migrated to Britain at the age of twenty-one, I had been puzzled for a long time by the way in which immigrants were portrayed in the British media, in political rhetoric, and, not least, in the academic literature. Among Africanist anthropologists, it had become a commonplace that it was wrong to 'tribalize' people. It was wrong both politically and academically to say that what Africans did, they did because they were Maasai or Kikuyu, Luo or some other ethnic group. 'An African miner is a miner' was a neat phrase that, lifted from the work of Max Gluckman, served as a slogan against reducing people's culture to their tribal or ethnic identity. Yet, in Britain this ethnic reductionism seemed to reign supreme, and the greater number even of academic community studies I read seemed to echo it. Whatever any 'Asian' informant was reported to have said or done was interpreted with stunning regularity as a consequence of their 'Asianness', their 'ethnic identity', or the 'culture' of their 'community'. All agency seemed to be absent, and culture an imprisoning cocoon or a determining force. Even their children, born, raised, and educated in Britain, appeared in print as 'second-generation immigrants' or 'second-generation Asians', and, unlike the children of white migrants like me, were thought to be precariously suspended 'between two cultures'.
This latter commonplace in particular I failed to understand. I could not work out why they should be suspended between, rather than be seen to reach across, two cultures. More importantly, which two cultures were involved? Was there a homogeneous British culture on the one hand, perhaps regardless of class or of region, and on the other hand some other culture, perhaps one which was shared with their parents? If so, how were these parental cultures defined: was it on the basis of regional origin or religion, caste or language, migratory path or nationality? Each of these could define a community, a culture, and an ethnic identity in the same breath, it seemed. So between which two cultures was any young Southallian suspended?

The answers to my confusion could, I thought, be found only by fieldwork: I rented a house in the centre of Southall, where I lived for the next six years, and from there involved myself in the life of the suburb. My agenda, as in all fieldwork, was open: live locally, socialize locally, find local things to do, and let yourself in for whatever comes. At the same time, keep a daily research diary, write fieldwork notes, and, not least, keep a personal diary in order not to confuse private concerns with the documentation of other people’s doings and sayings. I first focused my research on youths in their teens for several reasons. All these young people had been born in the town, went to the same three schools, watched the same four television channels, and spoke the same language, a West London dialect of English interspersed with various Americanisms and Indianisms. Their shared circumstances of upbringing would allow me to abstain from tribalizing them: ‘a Southallian Sikh is a Southallian’, and whether or not I had to refer to their ‘Sikhness’ or their caste to understand what they did would be a matter of finding out, rather than knowing in advance. Their shared language would allow me to start fieldwork before attending classes in Hindi, Punjabi, or Urdu.

During the first year of living in Southall, I made myself known, and useful as far as I could. What I could draw on, and drew on with great personal pleasure, were my interests as a musician; what skills I had acquired in teaching creative writing; my ability to take minutes at meetings and deal with bureaucracies; and, most importantly, my personal desire to make friends and enjoy life to the full in a new place. Fieldwork and the curiosity for local knowledge began to imprint their own stamp on my daily routines. Gradually, the ‘Railway Tavern’ turned into a living-room away from home, and the grotty living-room of my house into a place where Narinder and Balbir, Joshua, Sukhbir, and Syd would drop in to have an illicit cigarette after school or a drink after work.
‘What do you actually do here? I mean, what’s this research thing you do for the College?’, Narinder once asked me during a get-together with his friends. By then, the first phase of research had become full-time: the Leverhulme Trust, London, had awarded me a grant which effectively relieved me from teaching duties for fifteen months. My project had a neat title now, which I explained to Narinder and his friends. ‘Cross-Community Peer Orientations in the Youth Culture of a Multi-Ethnic Suburb of London’ had become the focus of my research. That Southall was a multi-ethnic suburb of the capital was clear. That peer orientations concerned the mutual influences, cross-overs, and cultural fusions among young Southallians, was easily confirmed. But what was this ‘cross-community’ bit? The core of what I had promised the Leverhulme Trust to clarify was deconstructed by a few young Southallians that afternoon.

‘It depends what community you mean’, was their collective verdict on my research. When the cross-community orientation concerned music, clearly there was Rap, a music of the Black community eagerly taken up by the Asians. Conversely, there was Bhangra, the Punjabi dance turned disco-music which was performed best, at a recent prize contest, by a Caribbean kid who combined it with body-popping and breakdancing. When the cross-community orientation concerned the two notorious gangs that sometimes clashed on Southall’s streets and terrified local shopkeepers, the division was between young Sikhs of the Jat or farmers’ caste and, probably, everybody else, including ‘a few Blacks and whites that got themselves involved’. When it came to ‘going out’, cross-community would be the right word to describe a young Asian flirting with a young Caribbean or white, or it might apply to a young Sikh flirting with a young Hindu, or indeed a Sikh of East African Asian parentage flirting with a fellow Sikh of Punjabi parentage. Then again, some parents would not consider such a match to go across community boundaries since both were Sikh. ‘It’d also depend on how many daughters you’ve got, whether people call it “cross-community” to your face.’ If a household had four daughters to provide a dowry for, people would not gossip, I was told, if one of the daughters were to marry across one community boundary or another. But if you had four sons to bring in dowry, your only daughter would have to be ‘married off ever-so-pure’.

‘So what counts as “cross-community” depends on all sorts of stuff [read: sociological variables], including what other people actually know, or think they know?’, I enquired after three hours of debate which fulfilled every ethnographer’s dream: to see his research agenda torn to shreds and reassembled again. Yes, of course it did: but hadn’t I known
that all along, living in Southall, and didn’t the people at College know that already?

If what counted as cross-community depended on such a variety of factors, recognized as mutually independent variables even by youngsters, the same had surely to apply to what counted as community in the first place. The idea did not please me. For one thing, it made my research look stupid: what was the point of calling activities cross-community or community if Southallians half my age knew that the division depended on context and contingency? Secondly, I did not like the idea because all this awareness of shifting identities seemed to jar with Southallians’ predilection for instant categorization or ‘telling’. Just as I had learned to ‘tell’ Catholics from Protestants over seven years’ living in Belfast, so I had learned, in Southall, to tell an East African Sikh from a Punjabi one by the fold of his turban, and to deduce on sight the ‘community’ of the woman ahead of me in the greengrocer’s check-out queue. One of these young friends, who now demolished my research plan, had once brought me a list of family names and castes: a concordance he had asked his grandmother to help him with, so that I should know the caste of each kid in class when I took up auxiliary teaching in a Southall school. So community was a concept to be used and redefined contextually, but certainly it could not be written off as an irrelevancy. The same went for culture in its reified form. ‘In my culture we do’, and ‘in our culture we don’t’ were ever-available phrases to ‘explain’ why people did or did not do as had been expected of them. Young Southallians seemed at once to reify their cultures and communities, and to deny their own reifications.

During the second phase of research, I looked to adult Southallians to help throw light on my accumulated bafflements. It seemed to be they who best knew which community was which, and what culture it stood for. The shift happened gradually as young Southallians invited me to meet their parents, neighbours invited me to weddings and birthday parties, and I pursued the adult contacts I had made in community centres and temples, churches and schools, tandoori shops and pubs. I felt more confident now in talking to adults, despite the fact that my lessons in Punjabi and Urdu had borne little fruit. I had discovered that all but a few Southallians mastered English with a fluency I would never achieve in any of the ‘community languages’, and I had therefore changed my language strategy to learning extensive glossaries of vernacular key words that had no easy equivalent in English, such as kinship, religious, and various normative terms. It remained a source of constant
amazement to me how the tone of a conversation changed when, being
told of, say, an uncle who had said this or that, I enquired whether this
was the chacha, the thaia, or the mama. People would not hesitate, after
such an intervention, to use whatever other vernacular terms they
thought untranslatable; and if I did not know one at first, I made sure I
would know it next time. ‘The most important thing about the first inter­
view is the second interview’ became my motto in pursuing research with
adults who, unlike youths, often expected the researcher to interview
them, rather than to sit around waiting to see what the chat or ‘lark’
might come to focus on.

Adult Southallians were no less relativist than their children in
discussing culture and community. Even assuming that community was a
matter of birthplace, as the dominant discourse so often does, some
Southallians could, among friends, squeeze a laugh out of the absurdities
of ethnic classification. ‘See me friend Jas here’, said Phil, an
Englishman, and pointed to his drinking-mate at the Railway Tavern
bar, ‘he’s an Asian, but he’s born in Africa, so I’d say he’s an African.
And me, I was born in Burma, so I’m the Asian here, aren’t I. And
Winston here, you think he’s a West Indian: he’s the only one of us born
in this town, so he’s the Englishman born and bred!’ Attributions of
culture and community can clearly not be reduced to one factor alone.
Rather, all but the most single-minded of adult Southallians, it turned
out, regarded themselves as members of several communities at once,
each with its own culture. Making one’s life meant ranging across them.
I did find a few people who said: ‘I am a Muslim and nothing else’, ‘I
am a Christian and have no other community’, or ‘I am an African from
the Caribbean, but as African as the people born in Africa’. I have tried
not to discount their positions in the body of the book, and have
mentioned them wherever the ethnographic context allowed it.
Nevertheless, the vast majority of all adult Southallians saw themselves
as members of several communities, each with its own culture. The same
person could speak and act as a member of the Muslim community in one
context, in another take sides against other Muslims as a member of the
Pakistani community, and in a third count himself part of the Punjabi
community that excluded other Muslims but included Hindus, Sikhs, and
even Christians. In this way, they echoed the awareness of shifting iden­
tities that young Southallians had alerted me to. Matters got more
confusing, however, as fieldwork progressed. Some Hindu parents would
claim that ‘all Sikhs are Hindus’; some Sikh parents would dissociate
themselves from the Sikh community and describe their culture as
‘British-Asian, basically, whatever the religion you’re from’; and Muslim friends would argue with pride that the local mosque was in itself a *multicultural community*. Clearly, all these utterances could be discounted as if they were mere figures of speech. But when an ethnographer collects more of them by the week, should one not ask what makes these usages any less important, authentic, or truthful than the usages that equate culture with community; community with ethnic identity; and ethnic identity with the ‘cause’ of a person’s doings or sayings?

The equation of culture with community was cast in doubt by more adult Southallians as time went on. Fundamental though it was in some contexts, it seemed self-defeatingly simple in others. Sometimes, Sikh Southallians would subdivide their *community* into *communities* of caste, although at other times they would insist that Sikhism entailed a denial of caste altogether. Many Hindu Southallians, though certainly not all, could endorse a Hindu culture that encompassed not only sections of the Sikh *community*, but other *cultures* too. At other times, the same people would blame ‘Untouchables’ for taking such an ‘impure’ stance. Irish Southallians were sure that they formed part of an Irish *culture*, but denied the existence of an Irish *community*; English Southallians were unsure how to apply either term to themselves or their neighbours, unless their neighbours were ‘coloured’, that is, ‘people of ethnicity’ as certified by the dominant discourse. Afro-Caribbean Southallians spoke of a *community* that had, as yet, not ‘found its own culture’. Again, none of these further statements should be taken at face value. Yet they cannot be written off either, and what they add up to, I shall argue, is an alternative to the dominant discourse. It does not replace that dominant discourse. But in many contexts this demotic discourse counteracts the dominant one by drawing attention to the daily process of ‘making culture’, rather than ‘having a culture’.

The dominant discourse relies on equating community, culture, and ethnic identity, and its protagonists can easily reduce anybody’s behaviour to a symptom of this equation. So long as its human objects can be logged under some ethnic identity other than, say, British, German, or American, it can even claim to speak ‘for’ them, ‘represent’ them, explain them to others. The ways in which Southallians spoke about each other and about themselves added up to a very different message: *culture* and *community* could be equated in some contexts, but were not the same in others. What the word ‘identity’ might mean in any one context, was a question of context. Fortunately, I had not yet worked out these ideas when I set out, with new friends, on the third phase of research.
This was to achieve two independent aims: on the one hand, it was to check up on the qualitative insights I had gathered by pitching them against quantitative data to confirm or contradict the results. On the other hand, it was to supplement my own efforts with qualitative research done independently by trained students.

The transformation of qualitative work into quantitative research had been started already. My colleague and friend Marie Gillespie and I had devised a questionnaire which addressed both her research concerns and my own and was based on the data each of us had gathered independently. Dr Gillespie wanted to collect statistical data on young Southallians' uses and views of the media, having given the subject some five years of ethnographic attention (Gillespie 1989, 1995). I wanted to find statistical confirmation or counter-evidence for the hunches I had formulated on 'cross-community peer influences' among Southall youths. Our combined questionnaire made a point of asking locally relevant questions in local terms, language, and style. It was piloted several times, and in the end we managed to administer it to some 350 young Southallians. Portions of this bulky survey of ninety-odd detailed questions were also to serve as a means of entry into the ethnographic field for three further researchers on whose work this book draws. Each of the three went through their own process of research.

I had previously enjoyed the co-operation of two interested students who joined me in Southall to conduct their own fieldwork. Richard Hundleby had researched a subtle and insightful case-study of local stereotypes about Afro-Caribbean youth; Bryn Williams had pointed to the 'West London culture' shared among a wide variety of Southall youths observed during a drama summer school. Now, the Leverhulme Trust had generously granted me some additional funds to pay for three more fellow researchers. These researchers were outstanding final-year students at Brunel University, specializing in Anthropology and Sociology. They had three tasks. The first was to further their own academic growth by involving themselves in real-life research, pursued not as a methodological exercise, but as a full-time preoccupation for five months of fieldwork and a year's unrelenting work in writing their BSc dissertations about it. I wanted these dissertations to be of the highest quality, so as to have a secondary literature with which to compare, and by which to judge, my own results. I cannot pretend, of course, that I never influenced their approaches to the work in hand; but nor would they, or indeed I, accept that I did more than alert them to two essential caveats: firstly, social groups should be distinguished from social categories,
whether these be called tribes or communities, races, generations, castes. All of these terms designated categories that Southallians might or might not, use in one context or another. The task was to document their uses, rather than take the words at face value and then peddle them as self-evident analytical concepts. Secondly, by stereotyping informant as ‘belonging to’ or even ‘speaking for’ a pre-defined ‘community’, one runs the risk of tribalizing people, instead of listening to them, and might end up studying communities of the researcher’s own making.

Whether these caveats were an intrusion upon their independence of thinking or a precaution against commissioning three more studies that would replicate the dominant discourse, readers of their ethnographic can decide for themselves. Hazel Yabsley’s dissertation (1990) explores ‘Processes of ethnicity and community’ on the most deprived of Southall’s multi-ethnic housing estates, and drew attention to conceptions of spatial proximity, something I have not made enough of in this book. Barbara Hawkes’ (1990a) ‘Southall, An Ethnography of Change’ analysed the self-understandings and selective cross-community alliances current among ‘English’ Southallians, and Teresa McGarry (1990) examined notions of culture and community among the three cohorts of Irish Southallians she was able to discern.

Their combined work produced a body of documentation as good as any that an ethnographer of ‘communities’ in Britain could draw upon. I have therefore used Hundleby (1987) and Hawkes (1990), McGarry (1990) and Yabsley (1990) as one would use any body of secondary literature gathered by others in the same field: quoting from it where it is relevant to the argument, spelling out agreements and disagreements where they arise, and drawing on transcripts of informants’ statements where they could help to substantiate or qualify the argument. In the latter case, I have sometimes included the questions posed alongside the statements elicited. This is to allow readers to locate the context of informants’ utterances, as well as to reassure themselves of the fieldwork rapport and high ethnographic standards that all four of the authors have brought to their work. In case it needs saying, all their contributions have been acknowledged by name and my uses of their materials checked with them.

Moving the matter beyond attributional ethics, I must add that their findings have been invaluable in contextualizing, correcting, delimiting, and refining the argument put forth in the following pages. This argument will seek its strength from data, rather than deduction, but it needs first to be situated in its anthropological and political contexts.
The reification of culture
The discourse of 'community' on the basis of ethnicity
The dominant discourse in Britain
Presentation of the data

The reification of culture

No idea is as fundamental to an anthropological understanding of social life as the concept of culture. At the same time, no anthropological term has spread into public parlance and political discourse as this word has done over the past twenty years. Together with the word community, it has become the cornerstone of public discourse about ethnic minorities. Thus, whether the people concerned be immigrants in Europe, native or hyphenated Americans, or warring 'ethnic groups' in the Third World and the post-socialist Second, political discourse is couched in the language of separate communities defined by their cultures that demand collective recognition and rights. An almost global range of contestations and conflicts thus appears to rely upon a vocabulary developed by anthropologists. Yet the word culture need not mean the same in political rhetoric or informants' usages as it does in anthropological analysis. To distinguish these meanings, though also to see where they overlap, is the chief task of this book.

Its ethnographic focus is Southall, a multi-ethnic town on the outskirts of London. Southall numbers some 60,000 people of internally highly diverse South Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Irish, English, and various other ethnic or national backgrounds. The obvious starting-point for fieldwork in such an 'immigrant ghetto' would have been to concentrate on a 'community study': to select one community, preferably national, religious or ethnic, and to describe it as an autonomous culture. Some of
these community studies I had read, but the recipe seemed uncomfor-
tably predictable: page one isolated some community of culture that
the author had pre-defined, and the final page concluded that it, or they,
were ‘encapsulated’. The author’s conclusion, in other words, seemed
predetermined by the fieldworker’s starting-point. Yet in Southall there
seemed to be communities within communities, as well as cultures across
communities. The equation between community and culture, dominant
as it is in much public discourse about ethnic minorities, disintegrated the
more I got to know Southallians. As I have indicated, Southallians
indeed replicated the equation between a community and its culture in a
number of contexts. But in others, the same Southallians could dissolve
the dominant equation by statements such as: ‘In our community, we
don’t have a culture; ‘Of course we have a culture, but we’re not a
community’; or ‘That [other] community is really part of our culture.’

The words culture and community were thus used in two systematically
different ways among Southallians themselves. One range of usages
reflected the dominant discourse as emphasized by many experts in
‘community relations’, many community studies and also, remarkably,
by their political opponents who blamed ‘ethnic minorities’ and their
reified ‘cultures’ for the ‘social problems’ facing ‘the nation’. Besides
engaging this dominant discourse, however, local usages established an
alternative discourse which I have called demotic (lit. ‘of the people’),
and which denied the congruence between culture and community that
was the hallmark of the dominant discourse.

In using the word ‘discourse’ to gloss these two ranges, I am aware, of
course, that the term has assumed a bewildering vagueness as it has
spread from the humanities to the social sciences. Yet I share Lutz and
Abu-Lughod’s (1990) view that ‘rather than being alarmed by its spread ...
... it might be better to ask ... what theoretical work ... [one] want[s]
the term to do’ (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990, 7). Of the uses they delineate, I subscribe to two in particular. One is to help focus the analysis of
language and other social practices on pragmatics, rather than semantics,
and the other is to relate these ‘large-scale pragmatics’ to the efficacy of
power relations (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990, 9–10). Arrestingly, the very
spread of the term ‘discourse’ may be related to what I have here called
the reification of culture:

For many, ... the term [culture] seems to connote a certain coherence, uniformity
and timeless in the meaning systems of a given group, and to operate
rather like the earlier concept of ‘race’ in identifying fundamentally different,
essentialized, and homogenous social units (as when we speak about ‘a culture’).
Because of these associations, ... [it] falsely fixes the boundaries between groups in an absolute and artificial way. (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990, 9, my italics)

This false fixing of boundaries is a direct consequence of the reified version of culture, and this reification is the very cornerstone that holds the dominant discourse together across all political divides. In order to distance myself from this reified understanding of 'culture', I shall sometimes use quotation marks when paraphrasing its meaning in the dominant discourse. This seems preferable to sacrificing a good, if complicated, word altogether.

What the notion of culture might signify has been debated by anthropologists for over a century. Sometimes these debates have indulged in purely definitional argy-bargy. Definitions, of course, are not judged by their truth value, but by their usefulness. This should be stressed in order to prevent an otherwise fatal misreading of the argument: to point out that a word carries different meanings in different discourses is not to call one discourse true and the other one false. Southallians, after all, use both of them: engaging one, they endorse the dominant equation between culture and community, engaging the other they dissolve it. The question thus raised concerns two understandings of culture.

Ethnographers' uses of the word culture have established one essential point of consensus: culture is not a real thing, but an abstract and purely analytical notion. It does not cause behaviour, but summarizes an abstraction from it, and is thus neither normative nor predictive. As a deliberate abstraction it is there to help anthropologists conceptualize that ever-changing 'complex whole' (Tylor 1871) through which people engage in the continual process of accounting, in a mutually meaningful manner, for what they do, say, and might think. Culture thus exists only insofar as it is performed, and even then its ontological status is that of a pointedly analytical abstraction. This ethnographic insight has been clarified, and enshrined even against the Boasian heritage of American anthropology, by a new consensus against essentialist approaches to culture (Barth 1994; Keesing 1994; Sahlins 1994; Vayda 1994).

Outside anthropology, however, the word was borrowed and assigned a new, and far more concrete, meaning in the discourse of what Rothschild has described as 'ethnopolitics'. The term is used to describe the process of 'mobilizing ethnicity from a psychological or cultural or social datum into political leverage for the purpose of altering or reinforcing ... systems of structured inequality between and among ethnic categories' (Rothschild 1981, 2, my italics). In this process, ethnopolitics 'stresses, ideologizes, reifies, modifies, and sometimes virtually re-creates
the putatively distinctive and unique cultural heritages of the ethnic groups that it mobilizes' (Rothschild 1981, 3).

Ethnic categories are thus validated as forming ethnic groups, and these ‘groups’ are defined with reference to a ‘culture’ they are assumed, *ex hypothesi*, to share. An early example of this new public and political use of ‘culture’ can be seen in the Black Consciousness Movement of the United States. Whereas the Civil Rights Movement demanded equal individual rights for all citizens regardless of who they were, the Black Consciousness Movement addressed its constituents, not as citizens, but as a distinctive community with its own culture. In the new political discourse of ethnic and culture-based political rights, the anthropologist’s abstraction of a perpetually changing process of meaning-making is replaced by a reified entity that has a definite substantive content and assumes the status of a thing that people ‘have’ or ‘are members of’.

In this new context, the word culture can no longer function as a purely analytical abstract; it has to be filled with standardized meanings, that is, specified as a substantive heritage that is normative, predictive of individuals’ behaviour, and ultimately a cause of social action. Kapferer (1988) has described such processes of ‘the reification of culture, the production of culture as an object in itself’ (1988, 97) and shown how selected established patterns and traits are ‘systematically removed from their embeddedness in the flow of daily life, fashioned into symbolic things, and placed in a stable, dominant, and determinate relation to action’ (1988, 210). Keesing (1994) has suggested that this ‘conception of culture [which] almost irresistibly leads us into reification and essentialism’ (1994, 302) is based on an ethnocentric construction of ‘radical alterity – a culturally constructed Other radically different from Us’ (1994, 301). He seems to forget, though, that people may reify their own *culture* as readily as they reify ‘other’ *cultures*. Van der Veer (1994) indeed traces Indian communalist conflicts to ‘the basic … fallacy of both sociological and [non-academic] communalist versions … [This] is that it portrays Muslim and Hindu values as reified systems’ (1994, 29). In working through the Southall data, I was blissfully unaware of these recent sources on reification, and culpably forgetful even of Berger and Luckmann (1967) who so cogently theorized the term for use in the social sciences:

Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, … the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products – such as facts of nature … Man, the producer
of a world, is apprehended as its product, and human activity as an epiphenomenon of non-human processes. It must be emphasized that reification is a modality of consciousness, more precisely, a modality of man's objectification of the human world. Even while apprehending the world in reified terms, man continues to produce it. (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 106–7)

That Southallians indeed continue to produce culture, rather than being produced by it, will be obvious throughout the book. Yet they also share in what Clifford has called a ‘powerful structure of feeling’ which sees culture as:

a body that lives and dies. Culture is enduring, traditional, structural (rather than contingent, syncretic, historical). Culture is a process of ordering, not of disruption. It changes and develops like a living organism. It does not normally ‘survive’ abrupt alterations. (Clifford 1988, 235)

Such a statement would find ready endorsement among many Southallians, and not only those who have direct experience of the abrupt alterations that mark a transcontinental migration. The very process of enculturating children entails the necessity of isolating elements, traits, and norms that stick out as distinctive and which are thought, in the widest sense, proper to a cultural ‘us’. It may well seem plausible to most anthropologists that, in Rosaldo’s words, ‘the notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe no longer seems tenable, except perhaps as a “useful fiction” or a revealing distortion’ (Rosaldo 1989, 217). I shall return to this contention later. Meanwhile, the fact remains that Southallians, and probably other people elsewhere, subscribe to this useful fiction when they see fit. In tune with the dominant discourse, Southallians find it useful and plausible, in some contexts, to reify culture at the same time as making, remaking, and thus changing it.

Such a reification of culture must appear necessary, moreover, if the word is to serve in the contestation of a new kind of rights: a category of rights more collective in conception than the traditionally individualist Civil Rights, but far more exclusive in character than generally Human Rights. They are claimed, or indeed denied, on the basis of people’s membership in a collective defined by ‘its culture’. Vertovec rightly stresses the element of political contestation when he describes how ‘Trinidad Hindu culture was made an object in itself so as to articulate a shared ethnic identity in the face of potentially intensified patterns of ethnic inequality and resource competition’ (Vertovec, in press). With regard to Britain, I have already mentioned a condensed example of this
reified view of culture in the phrase ‘between two cultures’. The image it evokes is not of young people performing culture as a process of making sense of each other and of others, but of a culture-less flock lost between two immovable objects named cultures. Again, to note reification in a public discourse is not to call that discourse false. For analytical purposes, of course, reification makes no sense. In Whitehead’s well-worn phrase, it involves the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. In a discourse of political contestation, however, reification may be desirable, and even seem necessary, to effect mobilization. This mobilization of all that are deemed to ‘have the same culture’ is helped by the call, reassuring or challenging, to form part of a pre-defined community.

The discourse of ‘community’ on the basis of ethnicity
Unlike the word culture, ‘community’ has never held a privileged place in the vocabulary of social scientists. On the contrary, among academics it has had a decidedly bad press. It is usually traced to the German sociologist Tönnies (1887), who tried to use it as an analytical abstraction in an essentially evolutionist account. Hillery (1955) researched a grand total of ninety-four meanings attributed to the term by sociologists, and the word appears quite clearly as a common-sense term with no theoretical potential for analytic use. Macfarlane (1977) has forcefully advocated that it be abandoned altogether. More recently, the anthropologist Anthony Cohen (1985) has, in one brilliant short treatise, stripped away whatever substantive meaning one might have attributed to the word, and shown community to be a contextually contingent ‘symbolic construction’.

Even plain common sense would, in any case, suffice to warn one off the word as used in public rhetoric. In Northern Ireland, the ‘Catholic community’ and the ‘Protestant community’ are exhorted to make peace for the sake of ‘the community’; the BBC speaks of stockbrokers as ‘Britain’s financial community’; and a British government, during my fieldwork, labelled a poll- or head-tax as a ‘community charge’. Closer to the ethnographic concern of this book, one of Britain’s most widely read commentators on current affairs avows that ‘community’ is a dishonest word ... It is invariably a party to pious fraud. Ethnic minorities are called “communities” either because it makes them feel better, or because it makes the white majority feel more secure’ (Ignatieff 1992). Strikingly, Ignatieff goes back to a contestation that took place during my fieldwork and shows that constructions of a community may not, in fact, make people identified as minorities feel good at all:
One of the ironies of the Salman Rushdie affair was that the only thing on which anti-Islamic liberals and their fundamentalist opposite numbers agreed was that there was such a thing as a ‘Muslim community’. ‘It’ was either a threat to liberal civilisation as we know it, or ‘it’ was a resurgent faith on the march. At the height of the affair, Muslims in Britain could be forgiven for wishing no one had ever thought them a community at all.

(Ignatieff 1992)

The stylized confrontation between a seemingly monolithic Muslim community and the British political establishment may indeed have more to do with white fears about ‘British identity’ than with an all-Muslim consensus, as Asad (1990) suggests. I shall offer some local data below. Here, however, it is more important to enquire why community in general might be thought an intrinsically dishonest word. Raymond Williams (1976) included the word among his famous ‘Keywords’ precisely ‘because the problems of its meanings seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss’ (Williams 1976, 14):

It was when I suddenly realised that no-one ever used ‘community’ in a hostile sense that I saw how dangerous it was ... Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships ... What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other types of social organisation (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any ... opposing or distinguishing term. (Williams 1976, 66, my italics)

The invariably positive connotations of the word no longer apply in Britain since it has become a polite term for ‘ethnic minority’. Ignatieff implies as much. Yet the word retains connotations of interpersonal warmth, shared interests, and loyalty. To Gilroy (1987), for example, it ‘signifies ... a particular set of values and norms in everyday life: mutuality, co-operation, identification and symbiosis’ (Gilroy 1987, 234). Yet the question remains whether the word is chosen to describe a collectivity one willingly participates in oneself, or a stereotype of uniform commonality projected upon others on the sole basis of their ascribed ethnic identity. It makes a difference, after all, whether one postulates communities defined by some ethnic culture or one discerns different cultures within a community, as Pryce (1979) has so subtly done among the West Indian population of Bristol.

To make general statements about ‘the Asians’, ‘the Jews’, or ‘the Irish’ reeks of disrespect, ignorance, and even prejudice. Yet the same statements can be made to sound respectful and even solidary when uttered about the Asian, Jewish, or Irish ‘community’. The word is so
attractive, even to the detractors of ethnic minorities, because it appears to value people as members of a special collective. What is special about this collective is, in the case of ethnic minorities, that they are readily presumed to share a culture in its reified form.

In this dominant discourse, 'community' can function as the conceptual bridge that connects culture with ethnos. It can lend a spurious plausibility to the assumption that ethnic minorities must share the same culture by necessity of their ethnic bond itself. This is all the easier since culture appears as a reified entity already, and it is a general propensity of reifying thought that 'through reification, the world of institutions appears to merge with the world of nature' (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 108). Thus culture, and especially ethnic culture, can indeed appear as 'a universal mandate of natural laws, as the necessary consequence of biological ... forces' (ibid. 1967, 108). Not all public discourse about minority communities defined by their reified cultures needs to invoke this explicitly. It can be observed, nevertheless, in innumerable examples, for it offers two strategic advantages: substantively, it appeals to a popular biological reductionism; formally, it allows for discursive closure.

An appeal to biological reductionism is not surprising, of course, when examining a dominant discourse used about ethnic minorities. It is still a popular assumption, found as easily among anthropology students as in mass media across the globe, that ethnos, much like tribe, and indeed like the scientifically discredited notion of race, designates a biological fact. These purportedly natural cleavages between humans are easily and widely associated with cleavages of 'culture'. The tenacity with which even the term 'race' continues to dominate many informants' ideas of biology as the foundation of cultural diversity is evidence, if any were needed, of the persistent appeal of common-sense biologism: the expectation that cultural differences are founded in natural ones. This biologism is understandable, and the ethnographic record of pre-colonial times, too, is replete with peoples who regarded their own kinship systems, incest prohibitions, family structures, political, economic, and religious conventions as natural. It is thus not surprising that even notional collectives such as ethnic minorities should be credited with that reassuring quality of being both natural and cultural entities at once. From the stylization of ethnic categories into communities defined by a reified culture, the dominant discourse can thus progress to a portrayal of minorities as forming ethnic-cum-cultural 'communities'.

At this point of circular argument, discursive closure is complete. The
two key terms mutually reinforce each other, for those defined as ethnic minorities must form a community based on their reified culture; and their culture must appear in reified form, because they are, after all, identified as a community. In cases where a reified minority culture can be equated with a particular ethnic group, the circular discourse can seek added plausibility from popular forms of biological reductionism. It can thus reduce all social complexities, both within communities and across whole plural societies, to an astonishingly simple equation: ‘Culture = community = ethnic identity = nature = culture.’

Again, not all protagonists of the dominant discourse who turn ethnic categories into ethnic groups depict these as natural collectivities. It makes no sense, for instance, to call Muslims in Britain an ethnic group, although they are widely called a ‘community’ defined by a shared ‘Muslim culture’, as the dominant discourse would suggest. Many Muslims in Britain indeed do likewise, for the dominant discourse is not the exclusive preserve of majorities, however defined, or of politicians, activists, or mass media. Yet ethnic implications are discernible even in the dominant discourse about Muslims as observed among white Southallians: since few Muslims in Britain are white, the ‘Muslim community’ is certainly associated with being an ethnic minority, however heterogeneous on purportedly ethnic criteria, rather than simply a religious community. The same is not true, for example, of Jehovah’s Witnesses or Latter-Day Saints, either of whom would be called a religious community, but hardly a culture and certainly not an ethnic community. The example makes clear that the dominant discourse is a discourse about purportedly ethnic minorities, rather than minorities in general. It makes clear also that the word ‘ethnic’ cannot be taken at face value as a descriptive term.

The word ‘ethnic’ is inescapably a relational term in at least two respects. The first concerns the criteria of distinction that are used to tell one ethnic category from another. On the face of it, ethnic criteria appear grounded in the biological criteria sometimes called ‘descent’ or ‘race’. But this biological basis disappears as soon as it is scrutinized: anthropologists have known for a century that descent is a social construction, not a biological fact. All serious social scientists agree that differences of ‘race’ are biologistic reductions of differences which mask a plethora of non-biological criteria and would readily endorse Gilroy’s ‘reminder that “race” is a relational concept which does not have fixed referents. The naturalization of social phenomena and the suppression of the historical process which are introduced by its appeal to the biological realm can
articulate a variety of different political antagonisms’ (Gilroy 1987, 229. Biologists, too, agree that any distinction of human races is but a approximate shorthand for statistical tendencies, or clines, in the distr buation frequencies of some 4 per cent of human genes over very lar population samples. Needless to say, these genes are irrelevant in a cultural respects; even if they were not, race would still remain th weakest contender for any explanation of the criteria that ‘ethnic’ distinc tions might ‘really’ be based upon. That they are not based on biologic criteria is clear to every first-year biology student. It was already clear t Weber who wrote in the early years of this century:

All in all, the notion of ‘ethnically’ determined social action subsume phenomena that a rigorous sociological analysis ... would have to distinguish carefully ... It is certain that in this process [of examination] the collective term ‘ethnic’ would be abandoned, for it is unsuitable for a really rigorous analysis. (Weber 1978, 395.

Ethnic divisions are indeed based upon a proliferation of distinctions all of them mutually independent. Social scientists and proverbial men-on-streets speak of ethnic groups on the basis of a shared language or a common homeland; a common nationality or an, often transnational, religion; a caste, however delineated, or a political axiom as, for instance, in the pan-Africanist case. Which criterion is stressed to draw an ethnic boundary is a matter of context, and Fredrik Barth (1969) has been influential for over twenty years in drawing anthropologists’ attention to ‘the interconnection between the diacritica that are chosen for emphasis, the [ethnic] boundaries that are [thus] defined, and the differentiating values that are espoused’ in the process (Barth 1969, 35). Clyde Mitchell’s (1956) pioneering analysis of the urban creation of a Bisa ethnic boundary in Zambia remains a classic of the field, and Haaland (1969) has given a paradigmatic case-study of how, in the Western Sudan, individuals and families exchange a Fur ethnic identity for a Baggara one. In a similar vein, Kandre (1967) has described how Chinese and other strangers are incorporated into the Yao ethnic category, and Barth (1969, 117–34) himself documented the process of Southern Pathans becoming recognized as ‘ethnic’ Baluch. Van den Berghe (1975, 73), writing about Highland Peru, likewise observes how ethnic boundaries are defined ‘subjectively, relatively, and situationally, rather than objectively and absolutely ... The same [ethnic] terms can be used with a wide variety of meanings and referents.’ Studies such as these have established time and again that ethnic boundaries, far from adumbrating biological distinctions, are socially constructed on a variety of criteria. Even in pre-
Identifying a dominant discourse

industrial societies, each of them is manipulated and re-evaluated according to context. In plural societies, moreover, the very multiplicity of purportedly ethnic criteria, be they language, national loyalty, or even caste, gives almost everyone singled out as ‘ethnic’ a whole range of ‘ethnic’ labels that are declared, or can be rendered, socially relevant.

This touches upon the second reason why ‘ethnic’ is inevitably a relational term. Its use depends not only on the criteria chosen in any one definitional context, but also on the criteria that determine whether it is used at all. Living in England as a German national, I was not assigned to a German ‘ethnic group’. Most white English people would be upset if they found themselves designated as an ‘ethnic group’, rather than ‘the population’, ‘the locals’, ‘the host society’, or any such formula that sets them apart from the ‘ethnic’ character of ‘others’. In Belize or Australia, they would, of course, expect otherwise, for who is thought ethnic and who is not is relational also in this sense. Writing as an anthropologist, my use of the term ‘ethnic’ must thus always be a matter of quoting. It reflects current English distinctions between ‘ethnic’ identities and those other identities that are deemed distinctive but not ethnic. The reader is asked to ‘see’ the word in quotation marks throughout and to remember that some distinctions based on national, linguistic, religious or caste criteria are thought to mark ‘ethnic’ differences, while others of precisely the same sort are not so evaluated. Yet, irredeemably relational and thus analytically impotent as the term must be, it cannot be ignored in the ethnographic description. The widespread belief that some social distinctions are ethnic by nature can take on its own social momentum as ethnicity, too, is subjected to reification. This process must be related to structures of power and inequality, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1992, 61) have stressed: ‘in systems where “ascribed” cultural differences rationalize structures of inequality, ethnicity takes on a cogent existential reality. It is this process of reification ... that gives it the appearance of being an autonomous factor in the ordering of the social world.’ This reificatory double bind applies even to the emancipatory movements of what Rothschild (1981) termed ‘ethnopolitics’, that is, those movements that seek to counteract civil discrimination by appealing to ‘ethnic’ commonalities:

For any activity aimed at the reversal of ‘ascribed’ inequalities may reinforce the [purported] primacy of ethnicity as a principle of social differentiation: the very fact that such activity is conducted by and for groupings marked by their cultural identities confirms the perception that these identities do provide the only available basis of collective self-definition and action.

(Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 62-3)
As ethnopolitical movements turn their attention from such civil entitlements as housing, schooling or jobs to matters of 'cultural' entitlement or empowerment, the reification of ethnicity and the reification of culture can reinforce each other to the point of synonymy. Thus Turner (1993) has observed how in the United States:

*multiculturalism* tends to become a form of identity politics, in which the concept of *culture* becomes merged with that of ethnic identity. From an anthropological standpoint, this move, at least in its more simplistic ideological forms, is fraught with dangers both theoretical and practical. It risks essentializing the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or race; it risks reifying cultures as separate entities by overemphasizing their boundedness and mutual distinctness; it risks overemphasizing the internal homogeneity of cultures in terms that potentially legitimize repressive demands for communal conformity.

(Turner 1993, 411–12, italics in original)

It seems important, in this light, to recognize that so-called ethnic problems show one thing in common that reaches right across state and national boundaries: the presence, and the social efficacy, of a dominant discourse that reifies culture and traces it to ethnicity, and that reifies ethnicity and postulates 'communities' of 'culture' based on purportedly ethnic categorizations. This discourse is neither good nor bad in itself, and it is not the point of this book to censure it or its users. Southallians, after all, use it selectively, too, and it may even reflect a 'chronic anthropological tendency, born as much from the practice of intensive fieldwork as from theory, to focus on cultures as discrete units in isolation' (Turner 1993, 415). What matters for the ethnography, though, is to show that it is not the only discourse about culture that Southallians speak, and not the only discourse that anthropologists should document. Given its prevalence in many community studies, the task seems worth doing, and given its importance beyond Southall, it needs to be placed in a framework of more appropriate, in this case nation-wide, scale.

The dominant discourse in Britain

The tendencies to reify the 'cultures' of ethnic minorities, to stylize pseudo-biological categories into communities, and to appeal to popular biological conceptions of culture are not difficult to substantiate in British politics and media. Almost any copy of a daily newspaper will contain mentions of 'the Muslim community', 'the culture of Afro-Caribbeans', or 'the Asian community' and 'its culture'. There have been detailed analyses of the representation of ethnic minorities in the media (van Dijk 1991), in common parlance (Dummett 1984), and in public political discourse (Reeves 1983). Astute as these analyses are at identifying biologicist assumptions and racist stereotypes behind examples of
Identifying a dominant discourse

Brah (1987) was, to my knowledge, the first author to have remarked on the reification of culture that it involves. Speaking of the representation of women of South Asian background, she notes how ‘many of the contemporary academic, political and popular discourses ... operate within a totally reified concept of culture as some kind of baggage to be carried around’. To escape from this conceptual cage, Brah stresses culture as ‘a dynamic, and potentially oppositional, force which stands in a complex relationship with the material conditions of society’ (Brah 1987, 44). Regarding academic studies of originally Afro-Caribbean people in Britain, Phoenix (1988, 153) points in much the same direction: ‘concentration on cultural differences between black people and white people has frequently obscured the fact that ... culture itself is dynamic rather than static’. Trenchantly, her assessment draws attention to the way in which such an approach ‘frequently confuses colour and culture. White people are treated as if they were culturally homogeneous and British whatever their ancestry ... Black people are treated as similar to other black people whose ancestry lies roughly in the same region, but not as British’ (Phoenix 1988, 159). One might wonder indeed whether such translations of stereotyped ‘colour’ traits into reified ‘culture’ traits is not part of the ‘strategic discoursive deracialization of discourse’ that Reeves (1983) has observed:

Whereas a general racialisation of practice and ideology could be said to have occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ... the contrary process of general deracialisation might be regarded as characteristic of the post-Second-World-War era ... Since the Second World War, however, ... a practical racialisation within Britain has come about as black migrants have ... met with widespread discrimination and rejection. ... that animosity has failed to find much direct expression in specialist political discourse. As a result, the deracialised feature of British [public] ideology has become increasingly apparent. (Reeves 1983, 179)

This is possible, though it does not fully account, of course, for the fact that the dominant, strategically deracialized, discourse of communities defined by shared cultures is also engaged among ethnic minorities themselves in suitable contexts. Gilroy (1992) has addressed this salient overlap in his courageous critique of the 1980s ‘anti-racism’ movement. He notes the elaboration of ‘new forms of racism [which] ... are distinguished by the extent to which they identify race with the terms “culture” and “identity” ...’ (Gilroy 1992, 53). In other words, and if I understand Gilroy rightly, the terms culture and identity may function as surreptitious code words for ‘race’. Gilroy indeed pursues his argument down to
the meaning of culture. The argument is that both the New Right and
the anti-racist movement have converged on 'a belief in the absolute
nature of ethnic categories ... compounded firstly by a reductive concep­
tion of culture and secondly by a culturalist conception of race and
ethnic identity' (Gilroy 1992, 50).

In Britain, too, one can thus observe a dominant discourse that envis­
gages 'cultures supposedly sealed from one another forever by ethnic lines'
(Gilroy 1987, 55). On the other hand, Britain is not the only country
where simplistic equations between ethnic identity, culture, and commu­
nity have congealed into a hegemonic discourse about any and all 'ethnic
minorities'. To understand its dominance in British 'race relations' or
'community politics', there will thus be general reasons, related to the
discourse as such, and specific ones, relating to Britain in particular. For
a discourse to be recognized as dominant, one would expect it to show
five features that are, in practice, interdependent: its conceptual make-up
should be economical, not to say simple; its communicative resources
should border on monopoly; it should be flexible of application and
should allow for the greatest ideological plasticity; finally, it should lend
itself to established institutional purposes.

On the count of conceptual economy, the dominant discourse proposes
several equations between terms that in any creditable analysis would
have to be considered mutually independent variables: whether ethnic
categories correspond to ethnic groups; whether ethnic groups must by
necessity share the same culture; whether even a shared culture estab­
lishes community; and in what sense of the word. All these are, to a
researching anthropologist, empirical questions, not foregone conclu­
sions. Yet by equating ethnic minorities with social groups, equating
these with reified cultures, equating these in turn with communities, and,
where at all plausible, associating these with supposedly natural groups,
the dominant discourse achieves a conceptual economy that would defy
Ockham himself.

Such an economical, indeed hermetically closed, discourse is well
placed when it comes to competing for communicative monopoly. In
Britain, as perhaps elsewhere, its protagonists command communicative
resources that guarantee it unrivalled access to the general public. Its
chief protagonists are, on one side, politicians claiming to represent the
interests of 'communities'; and on the other, politicians claiming to speak
for some wider 'national' interest, or indeed 'the majority'. Multi­
plication of their dialogue is the business of the popular media, which
beside television include national and community press, national and
community radio stations, and, sometimes as importantly, national or community artists, authors, comedians, musicians, and poets. In Britain, the dominant discourse is reflected by virtually all voices that shape public opinion.

This hegemony requires a highly flexible applicability of its key terms. The range of cases that the dominant discourse is used to encompass is indeed remarkable. At its most schematic, and harking back to the idea of race as the foundation of culture, it postulates two large ‘communities’: an Afro-Caribbean and an Asian one. The latter designates people of all South Asian backgrounds and credits them with a shared ‘Asian culture’. Where race is not seen as the relevant marker of cultural difference, protagonists of the discourse may appeal to criteria of national origin. Thus, one can speak of a Jamaican as opposed to, say, a Barbadian community, or an Indian as opposed to a Pakistani, each with their reified culture.

In other contexts, this proliferation will go further still. The putative basis of culture may be sought in language, so that there are transnational ‘communities’ such as the Arab, the Armenian or the Punjabi. Cutting across ethnic, national, and linguistic criteria alike, communities with reified cultures are postulated on the basis of some religions. Thus ‘Muslim culture’ is thought to establish a community despite the greatest ethnic, national, and linguistic diversity. In yet other contexts, followers of different faiths may be stylized into communities based on regional origin or migratory history. In this way, the discourse can recognize a Gujarati community tying together Hindus and Muslims, or an East African Asian one that unites Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. It stands to reason that the same person can thus be classified as a member of half a dozen communities, each credited with its own reified culture. An individual may thus ‘have’ almost as many communities and cultures as a sociologist may distinguish roles.

The fact that different social cleavages cut across each other is constitutive, of course, of any plural society. Yet the dominant discourse thrives, rather than falters, on ascribing community status to any one cleavage that is considered relevant in any one context. Its very multiplicity of empirically overlapping communities, each credited with its distinctive culture, lends it pragmatic flexibility, and renders it applicable in virtually any contestation over collective rights.

Most remarkably, the dominant discourse can be engaged to serve the greatest range of ideological positions and interests. Ethnopolitics is a field of striking ideological variety, and the postulation of communities
Contesting culture

defined by reified cultures is as useful to right-wing as it is to liberal and left-wing political agendas. The right-wing version of the dominant discourse envisages people from the former colonies who migrated to Britain for a better life. Yet their ethnic and cultural distinctiveness sets them apart from an equally reified British or English culture. They thus live in disadvantaged communities which, viewed almost as societies within society, create 'social problems'. Classic recent examples are 'the black community' and its putatively problematic family structure and 'the Asian community' and its 'problem of arranged marriages'. Classic examples among migrants of the past are 'the Irish' and their supposed collective drinking problem. On the recent examples, I shall comment in the body of the book. The historic example should here suffice to indicate the absurdity of this right-wing version of equating migrants with communities, communities with a reified culture, and that culture with some 'social problem'.

Liberal versions of the dominant discourse shun any reference to problems in a community's culture. Instead, they envisage immigrants, or more politely migrants, who are excluded from full civic equality by social disadvantages. These handicaps, an almost natural consequence of migration, keep them living in their insulated communities, captives of their reified 'cultures', often specified as 'traditional'. The remedies envisaged are gradual, and they need to be directed at both sides in the contestation, 'host population' and migrants alike. Better social services and the eradication of mutual prejudice through education can then promise progress. They will help the processes of acculturation, accommodation, or at least generational change, which will liberate communities from the fetters of their inherited cultures.

The left-wing version of the dominant discourse replaces cultural reform with cultural revolution, yet it, too, endorses the equation between 'communities' and their reified cultures. Rather than judging community cultures as an obstacle to social mobility within the system, it validates them as a necessary and progressive form of resistance against racism and an often reified institutional racism. More radical factions pitch a newly evolving, unitary 'Black community' against the oppression thought inherent in a reified 'white culture'. This 'black community' and its culture are thought to encompass people of South Asian, as well as Afro-Caribbean and African descent. I shall later detail a number of Southallians' views on this postulate of a comprehensive, unified Black community.

The greatest richness in nuances, as well as the most serious ideolog-
Identifying a dominant discourse

Idential contestations occur between the liberal and the left-wing protagonists of the dominant discourse. Thus, communities may be credited with 'special needs' which require 'community provision'. Such 'ethnic targeting' of services and resources may be demanded, in the liberal tradition, to increase social mobility in a 'multi-ethnic society'. Alternatively, they may be demanded to allow communities to follow, maintain, or preserve their 'cultures' and claim their right to difference in a 'multi-cultural society'. Further to the political left, the doctrine of special needs is discredited as a buy-out strategy which stands in the way of black unity: the foundation of an anti-racist, rather than a multicultural stand. The multiple shades, strands, and sects within each ideological camp would warrant their own study. What matters here is the observation that the dominant discourse can easily encompass the entire political spectrum from the far-right to the far-left, and is as serviceable to minority bashers as to minority advocates.

The institutional efficacy of the dominant discourse might be documented by scores of local instances of the municipal 'politicization of ethnicity', as Kalka (1991) has described it. Studies like Kalka's are rare, however, for several reasons. For one thing, they require fieldwork among 'ethnic activists', which in turn depends upon the goodwill of these activists themselves. Few anthropologists publish accounts that might alienate or anger their one-time key informants who were indeed, in many cases, gatekeepers. Secondly, the dominant discourse has been established in institutional structures and political expectations for so long that most researchers simply take it for granted. Nor does the genre of the community study do much to help throw it into critical relief. Given this long-standing and taken-for-granted practice, it is rare to find, as Kalka has done, a local area where the dominant discourse is institutionalized, so to speak, from one year to the next. It will be helpful, therefore, to summarize and quote Kalka's observations in more detail than usual.

The London borough in question had been settled by South Asian expellees from East Africa and had, over the 1970s, seen the foundation of overlapping voluntary associations based variously on national loyalties, regional origins, religion, language, and caste. For a decade or so, only one, however, 'was active in raising issues that concerned Asians as residents of the borough of Harrow. This was also the period when these newly arrived Asians were establishing themselves financially, and this partly accounts for what appeared to be their lack of interest in the local political arena' (Kalka 1991, 219). This was to change dramatically when
the Borough Council saw itself forced to act upon new guidelines aimed at improved consultation with, representation of, and services and employment for, 'ethnic' residents. A structure of consultative committees, positions of influence, paid posts, and liaison groups was set up and cranked into motion. The consequences were dramatic in several ways:

Activists who previously had had to articulate their own tactics on how to approach the council, now had direct access to both the council and its employees. Moreover, since committee meetings were open to the public, people who were not involved in the locally based ethnic associations could now put forward their own opinions. They were not impelled first to become 'internal leaders', though this was a safer way to exert influence. That is, only participants who were delegates could claim to represent at least a certain segment of the Asian population. Nevertheless, since the majority of Asian residents in the borough were totally unaware of the struggle conducted presumably on their behalf, activists did not wish to risk their authority as representatives being challenged from within. Delegates of small associations [e.g. with ca. fifty members] could thus act with the same amount of assertiveness as those of larger ones.

(Kalka 1991, 219, my italics)

In the acrimonious debates over political analyses and local policies, and more particularly about honorary or paid positions in the Borough's budding 'race relations' field itself, overlapping regional, national, religious, and caste associations were pitched against each other in structural rivalries, factional enmities, tactical allegiances, and sometimes 'sectarian interests' (Kalka 1991, 220). This may well be as it should be, and factionalism, intrigue, and even ideologizing are of the stuff of local politics. Yet the deliberate creation of ethnic community politics in the image of the dominant discourse was a mixed blessing in several ways. Locally, it pitched Pakistani associations against their more numerous Gujarati counterparts in a battle for public resources to be fought under ethnic banners. These ethnic banners, moreover, were not nearly as distinct as the segmentary nature of roles, the multiplicity of ethnic identities an individual may claim, all these seem to have permeated the public arena, regularly leading to seemingly contradictory claims of ethnic affiliation and conflicting demands.

(Kalka 1991, 220)

Kalka's insistence on multiple ethnic identities and her reminder of Barth's well-known argument about the permeability and contextual
definition of all ethnic boundaries are fully in keeping with the intentions of this book. In attending to these, Kalka implicitly moves from describing to critiquing the dominant discourse. It was enacted institutionally to provide for ethnic minorities, yet it failed to produce the simplistic and clear-cut ethnic identities that its reificatory logic would require. Once set into motion, its institutional infrastructure kept ticking on like a perpetuum mobile. No one seems to have paused to reconsider its assumptions even when most 'ethnic' residents were 'unaware of the ongoing debate in the town hall and activists often complained about the apathy and the difficulties involved in “organising” Gujuratis. Perhaps this very apathy has allowed a new ethnic elite to emerge in such a short space of time’ (Kalka 1991, 221). The connection raises interesting questions:

This elite is composed of well-educated people who have taken it upon themselves to study subjects related to racism, colonialism, and so on. They hold numerous conferences and repeatedly debate these issues. The same people who now write speeches, manifestos, and pamphlets were, only a few years back, to use their own phrase, ‘collaborators’ with the establishment. (Kalka 1991, 221)

One might well wonder whether the new converts to the dominant discourse may not be collaborating more fully with the establishment than they had done before. But the question is too value-laden to be answerable here. Suffice it to consider Kalka's own assessment of the dominant discourse put into policy action:

In such a situation the rewards offered by the state in exchange for relegating people to ‘minority’ status will always be insufficient in two respects: they will never satisfy individual ambitions and will never contribute adequately either to welfare provisions or to institutions which are managed by ethnic residents. Presumably, if more funding became available, more contenders for power would come forward ... Activists who are incorporated into the so-called white establishment are being ‘neutralised’ in this process, only to be replaced by new activists. (Kalka 1991, 221)

Given such observations, one cannot but ask why the dominant discourse of discrete and bounded ethnic minorities should enjoy such uncritical endorsement in Britain. I have tried to establish five general reasons that would contribute to a discourse gaining such a hegemonic dominance. Yet there may also be specific historical reasons that apply more particularly to the British case. In tracing the ancestry of the dominant discourse, I have already referred to the United States and the Black Consciousness Movement. At a critical juncture, it turned from a campaign for individual Civil Rights regardless of ‘race’ to a campaign
for collective rights as a community based on a shared culture. In doing so, it inspired and helped to shape many other ethnic liberation movements. In Britain, however, the community discourse has a second line of ancestry, one that is rooted in the colonial administration of ethnic groups in East Africa. In tracing this second line of ancestry, I do not intend to prove an unbroken line of historical continuity. I suspect that it could be discerned, and I certainly agree with Bhachu’s (1985) finding that ‘the maintenance of a separate East African[-Asian] identity in Britain is also linked to the establishment of a clear-cut group status in East Africa’ (Bhachu 1985: 12). The same seems to apply among Kalka’s (1991) informants. Yet this is not the prime reason why I cite the colonial precedent. Rather, I do so in order to highlight how the dominant discourse is based upon, and reinforces, a denial of the cross-cutting social cleavages that characterize plural societies, even colonial ones.

British policy in the East African colonies entailed the recruitment of skilled manual labour from the Indian subcontinent, followed by an influx of merchant and trading families. Many of these ‘East African Asians’ came, over the first half of this century, to form a middle stratum between the British colonial rulers or settlers and the African population at large. The colonial administration of African affairs largely followed the doctrine of Indirect Rule and dealt in the currency of tribes. For the South Asian migrants, however, administration could not follow the tribal model, but had to invent a new political discourse. Its up-dated currency was the idea of South Asian communities. It is significant that, as Morris’ (1968) ethnography of ‘the Indians in Uganda’ recalls, South Asians employed the term ‘community’ with the greatest ease, but ‘usually in its English form, whatever the language actually spoken’ (1968, 25). Morris documents its emergence from three requirements of colonial government. The first concerned the need to allocate plots for worship and burial to South Asians who were legally barred from buying land. Thus from 1910, ‘any group of people who wished to ... hold property was required to incorporate itself by registration ... [and to] elect annually a committee of management with a stipulated number of officers’ (Morris 1968, 28–9). As ‘places in schools became scarce, ... members of larger [South Asian] castes and sects began to make provision for their own children and to seek assistance as separate communities’ (Morris 1968, 35). Politically, too, the unrepresentative government found that ‘Indians were needed to sit on advisory committees’ (Morris 1968, 27–8) and could best be recruited and proportioned on community lines. The requirements of the colonial administration could be met mor
easily as East African Asians themselves stood to benefit from being parcelled up into communities with officially recognized collective rights. The success of the Ismaili community in particular inspired many other religious and caste interests to seek incorporation as recognized communities. The resulting classification of overlapping social networks into discrete communities showed the same flexibility of criteria as is evident in Britain today:

In East African usage the English term 'community' was considerably overworked. It might, for example, signify people in 'racial' categories: the African, the Asian or the European communities. One also heard of the Arab community, which was not regarded as part of the Asian community. The Goan community, whose members came from the former territory of Portuguese India, even more surprisingly, was not always of the Asian community either. The Muslim community ... [however] included Arabs, Africans, Indians, and others; or [the Asian community] might be divided into smaller categories such as the Hindu or the Sikh communities, which were neither castes (varna) nor sub-castes (jati) ... Finally one also heard of such occupational categories as the 'trading community', the 'farming community', and so forth. (Morris 1968, 25, my italics)

Such semantic mayhem, or polysemy of the word community, indeed prefigures current British usages, although no historical precedent can prove a causal connection. The comparison, however, is remarkable enough, not only as a historical precedent, but also as the background to the differentiation into caste communities among Sikh Southallians which I shall discuss later. Morris traces the East African developments to the very vagueness of the word, and was admirably clear in recognizing 'community' as a colonial construct, rather than a basis of sociological analysis:

The word community ... covered almost any category of people with an easily recognised common identity ... The word community is also technically used in sociological writing for the aggregates of people within which all an individual's social relationships may be found. In this sense neither castes, nor sub-castes, nor sects, neither Hindus nor Muslims, nor the Indians as a whole constituted communities in East Africa. (Morris 1968, 26)

Three things seem important about Morris' evidence. Firstly, the division of people-to-be-governed into communities is a time-honoured colonial strategy. This may help to account for the appeal of the community discourse among those Britons who associate ethnic minorities with social problems. Secondly, what a political discourse calls communities may not be communities at all in a sociological or descriptive sense, however vague. The fact that a public discourse uses terms also current in anthropology or sociology should invite scrutiny as to whether they
are actually used to mean the same thing. Thirdly, the reason why the communities postulated in the colonial discourse did not constitute communities in any sociological sense, was that the South Asian ethnic minorities – even in East Africa – lived in a society characterized by cross-cutting cultural, economic, political, and other social cleavages. In the colonial context, the community discourse itself can be seen as a denial of these cross-cutting cleavages in the interests of a ruling elite. Those who were not meant to belong to it were conveniently parcelled up into communities, there to mind their own business under community supervision. In the context of present-day Britain, one must wonder whether the dominant discourse may not, unintentionally perhaps, follow its precursor along the same path.

The discourse about ethnic minorities as communities defined by a reified culture bears all the hallmarks of dominance: it is conceptually simple, enjoys a communicative monopoly, offers enormous flexibility of application, encompasses great ideological plasticity, and is serviceable for established institutional purposes. Yet each of these features raises doubt in its own way. The conceptual economy of the discourse relies on equations that no researching anthropologist can take at face value. In discussing its flexible applicability, it has been seen that communities may be defined on half-a-dozen mutually independent criteria that cut across each other in many ways, just as they are likely to cut across many other cleavages characteristic of a plural society. Its ideological plasticity, as indeed its serviceability to established institutional purposes, may be related, in part, to its colonial roots. The dominant discourse, in other words, needs to be questioned. Hegemonic though it may be, its reifications, its circularity, and its tell-tale ideological plasticity make it a misleading guide to understanding the culture of any ‘ethnic’ minority.

Saying this, however, does not render it any less dominant for the people whose culture one wants to understand. Southallians, too, use the dominant discourse whenever their judgements of context or purpose make it seem appropriate. It would be naive to pitch a Southall demotic discourse against the dominant one, and presumptuous to adjudicate their relative merits. The ethnography argues only one thing: the dominant discourse is not the only one that Southallians engage in, and therefore does not capture the wealth of meanings that they create and live.

Local usage and practice sometimes affirm and sometimes deny the dominant discourse. What Southallians say and do cannot simply deny the dominant reification of culture. Who indeed can claim freedom from reifications, even if such freedom were desirable or possible? Berger and
Luckmann (1967) have pointed their sociological fingers at 'the reifying propensities of theoretical thought in general and sociological thought in particular'. At the same time, they warn that 'it would be an error to limit the concept of reification to the mental constructions of intellectuals. Reification exists in the consciousness of the man in the street and, indeed, the latter presence is more practically significant' (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 107). They reason their assertion by reference to the objectivation of ‘the social world’ as a whole; in the present context, one might as plausibly replace ‘social world’ with the word ‘culture’:

as soon as a [putatively] objective social world is established, the possibility of reification is never far away. The objectivity of the social world means that it confronts man as something outside of himself. The decisive question is whether he still retains the awareness that, however objectivated, the social world was made by men – and, therefore, can be remade by them.

(Berger and Luckmann 1967, 106)

That culture is made by humans taking into account, rather than being taken over by, their ascribed or perceived ethnic identities, is obvious as soon as the word culture is allowed to signify something more than a reification of ‘ethnic’ distinctions. Cultures, however easily reified, are the products of human volition, desires, and powers.

Yet cultures, even in their most individualized practices, result also from validations of a past. Culture-making is not an *ex tempore* improvisation, but a project of social continuity placed within, and contending with, moments of social change. Southallians engage the dominant discourse as well as the demotic one. They reify *cultures* while at the same time making culture. Even when they explicitly engage the demotic discourse, the faultlines of the dominant one are effective and, moreover, empirically visible. Thus, the patterns by which, say, Sikh or Afro-Caribbean, Muslim or white Southallians re-map their *cultures* and *communities* are, and remain, distinctive from each other, not only along sociological criteria but also by their tone. The presentation of the data has had to take account of this.

**Presentation of the Data**
All the following chapters ask the same ethnographic question, namely: 'what is Southall culture?' But they do this from four different analytic angles. The first, guided by the premise that Southallians should not be tribalized, approaches their town as a whole and enquires how a ‘Southall culture’ might be described. It finds a culture based upon competition among *communities* as defined by the dominant discourse.
Chapter 4 therefore introduces these *communities* one by one. It briefly traces the dominant discourse about each and then localizes it in relation to each *community*’s migratory history and relative position in town. The descriptions raise empirical doubts about the adequacy of the dominant discourse and its equation of ‘culture’ with ‘community’. These doubts are pursued in chapter 5.

This chapter again focuses on each *community* in turn, but with a new analytical intention. It wants to show how, within each *community*, the dominant equation between culture and community is disengaged by Southallians themselves. To do this *community by community* is useful for two reasons. Methodologically, an orthodoxy like the dominant discourse can be challenged best if one sticks to its own premises, that is, ‘self-evident’ *community* divisions. Ethnographically speaking, the dominant equation is challenged differently in different *communities*. At the end of this chapter, there are thus two ways of thinking about *communities*: each could be described in the terms of the dominant discourse, yet each of them also harbours internal dynamics that question it, push it aside, or put it to unexpected uses.

The more that chapter 5 has attended to the demotic discourse within each *community*, the more questions are raised about the relationship between community and culture, as between one local *culture* and another. My submission is that the relationship of culture to community, and indeed the meanings of these words themselves, are matters of continual contestation in the culture that Southallians share. To show this, chapter 6 reviews how these contestations proceed across *community* boundaries. Cases in point can be seen in relation to ideas of an *Asian culture* across religious divides, a comprehensive *Black community* across ethnic divides, and a religious *community* across doctrinal divides. While the relevant questions tend first to be raised by the less established, such as young people or political or religious avant-gardes, the ensuing contestations involve far wider circles of people. In taking these up, and in pitching the dominant discourse against the demotic, Southallians debate and create a Southall culture which revolves around the terms *culture* and *community* themselves.

The words can thus no longer appear as self-evident analytical concepts to be applied to ethnic minorities. Rather, their meanings in different contexts are the pivotal points of Southallians’ ‘multi-cultural’ culture. In the remainder of this section I shall flesh out the general itinerary with a brief synopsis of findings and propositions.

Introducing Southall as a single town, it can be approached as a
bounded space that people of whatever community happen to share and cannot but cultivate. The cultivation of public spaces appears shaped most distinctively by South Asian Southallians; yet Southallians of all communities share a culture of privacy even in the busiest of the densely populated areas. Linguistic convergence can be seen in some adult greeting conventions and in the West London dialect of English shared among all youth. Many adults of all communities agree in their depreciation of the town as a ‘grotty’ place, and often equate moving out physically with moving up socially. An examination of data from the British National Census will help to juxtapose the ethnic variety of Southallians with their economic commonalities. Among these, unemployment figures and women’s employment patterns show the town to be worse off than the rest of the London Borough to which it belongs. The figures (given in tables 1–4) will show why the ideas of ‘moving out’ and ‘moving up’ are equated by so many Southallians of all communities.

Social mobility involves competition, as does access to the scarce public resources which, ironically, political rhetoric calls ‘community’ facilities. In this highly competitive environment, which shows a dearth of comprehensively civic institutions, appeals to the needs of communities come to be the chief resource in the competition for other resources. These communities are defined on the ethnic and religious criteria familiar from the dominant discourse. Since Southall local politics are shaped largely by the discourse of community needs, a case study will show how a municipal ‘community centre’ sparked controversy as to which particular ethnic community it was to serve. The town’s public culture, I conclude, is predicated on civic competition thought to run along community lines. Chapter 4 therefore turns from exploring the town as a whole to focusing on each community in turn.

In most general and descriptive contexts, Southallians identify five communities, and their logic reflects the dominant discourse. It is based on the ‘racial’ divisions between Asians, Caribbeans, and whites which are readily taken for granted in Britain. Among the large numbers of local Asians, however, most Southallians draw a distinction on religious criteria, and thus speak of a Sikh, a Hindu, and a Muslim community. Religion by itself is not thought sufficient, however, to forge a community of Christian Southallians. Rather, Afro-Caribbean Southallians are deemed to form a community of their own; and Irish and English Southallians are said to form a white community by others, though many of the putative members are deeply equivocal about their community status.
The delineations of communities and their cultures are pervasive and familiar even to children below the age of functional literacy. Among these, I shall speak of a veritable 'culture consciousness' (Kulturbewusstsein) that is highly articulate in stressing religious, political-sociological, or individualist conceptions of culture. Children, like adults, tend to endorse the view of cultures as the stable, collective, and distinctive possessions of communities, to think of the two as co-extensive, and indeed to equate one with the other. However, this equation between community seen as a self-evident entity and culture seen as its co-extensive, exclusive, and collective possession requires greater scrutiny. Even the summary portrayal of each community will have raised ethnographic doubts. Chapter 5 therefore re-examines each with a view to its dynamics of self-definition.

Processes of cultural and class differentiation have led to the formation of several Sikh communities based upon congregational criteria subtly articulated with the idiom of caste. Among Hindu Southallians, remarkably undivided by caste norms, it is the discourse of Hindu universalism and of encompassing other faiths that now serves to disengage the equation between Hindu culture and the Hindu community. Muslim Southallians see themselves as members of a community of the faithful that is pointedly multi-cultural not only on the global scale, but locally, too. In the newly forged Afro-Caribbean community, one can discern four different approaches to 'finding' and 'building' an Afro-Caribbean culture, which thus appears not as a given possession, but as a deliberate and highly dynamic process of creation. White Southallians, unusually equivocal about their cultures as well as their putative community or communities, often rely upon forging bonds, sharing loyalties, and even endorsing personal identification with ‘other’ communities.

The re-examination of each community in turn will thus show how Southallians disengage the equation between culture and community that underpins the dominant discourse. While culture can still be seen as the possession of an ethnic or religious community, it can also be appreciated as a dynamic process which relies upon personal agency, the renegotiation of community boundaries, and the possibility of redefining what community is to mean in any one context. Southallians thus engage not only in the dominant discourse about ethnic minorities, but also in an alternative, non-dominant or demotic, discourse about culture as a continuous process and community as a conscious creation. In this way, they command, and make use of, a dual discursive competence. Depending upon their judgements of context and purpose, they will
affirm the dominant discourse or engage the demotic, and in pitching one against the other, the very meanings of ‘culture’ and ‘community’ become the objects of social contestation. Some of the most momentous contestations indeed concern the reaffirmation or the redefinition of the meaning of ‘community’.

To illustrate how these work in practice, chapter 6 draws on three sets of evidence. Among juveniles of South Asian backgrounds, one sees a growing awareness of the commonalities of an Asian culture which reaches across the religious divides as emphasized by children. This is helped by the fact that juveniles socialize quite freely across religious community boundaries and begin to distinguish their own divisions from those pertaining among their parents. ‘Traditional’ institutions like caste and arranged marriage are thought of as ‘Asian’, and they give rise to assessments that are greatly varied and often equivocal. The idea of a new Asian culture finds enthusiastic support, however, when it promises a sometimes political unity and the forging of comprehensive cross-community convergence, as associated with the new ‘all-Asian’ music of Bhangra.

Other important contestations about the meaning and relationship of culture and community occur in the political and the religious spheres. The disputes, as well as the language in which they are debated, tend to be shaped by particular networks, even quite small ones, which are committed to special public agenda. Thus, local socialists and feminists have questioned the merits of Asian culture and proposed the political unity of all former migrants in a comprehensive Black community. Southallians at large took up this ‘Black or Asian?’ debate with a variety of approaches that did not cleave along ethnic community lines. Local and ecumenical Interfaith networks have questioned the boundaries of religious communities’ and posited an overarching community of all ‘people of faith’. Southallians were confronted with this agenda when educational reforms challenged them to discuss the future of religious instruction in schools. The negotiation of religious community boundaries will show up processes, and local ideas, of religious convergence which can be neutralized by claims of encompassment or reference to a widely shared multicultural discourse of equal respect and equal representation for each community. In all these debates, it is the contestation of culture and community, their meanings and their interrelations, that I argue lie at the heart of a shared Southall culture.

The Conclusion addresses some further general questions that the data have raised. It notes the result, strange at first sight, that the demotic
Contesting culture

discourse itself shows a patterning along *community* cleavages. To understand this, it can help to distinguish legitimacies of the past from legitimacies of the future. Southallians need and use both of these to legitimate their *communities*, be they long-standing or recent. In this way, the dominant discourse remains a part of Southallians’ discursive competence, and it can even put limits on the use of the word culture in much, though not all, of the demotic discourse. Having examined the relationship between the two discourses, I shall try to apply the findings to current policy debates. The old juxtaposition between individualist civil rights and the rights of communities has been revived in the United States and has there reshaped the public debate about social, or welfare, policy. The same has happened in Britain, but under different premises. One may thus ask, in the end, what the pursuit of ethnographic knowledge can contribute to these debates.
A shared Southall culture?

‘Town’: a cultivated space
Ethnic distinctions, economic commonalities
Some local history: migration and the ‘white backlash’,
community building and ‘The Southall Riots’
Local politics as community competition

‘Town’: a cultivated space
A densely populated area, Southall is situated amidst the more spacious western suburbs of London, not far from Heathrow Airport. Its name does not describe a culture or even a community in any established sense of the word. As a geographic area, however, it is delineated by unusually clear boundaries. To approach what shared ‘Southall culture’ there may be, the area can be surveyed as a cultivated space. This space is not neutral, since present-day Southallians have found houses, roads, amenities, and other defined spaces already laid out. The physical environment sets limits to any new cultivation of the space, yet these limits are often elusive. A description of the area as a cultivated space will introduce readers to what they are likely to see first, and in the process it shows evidence of how far the space is cultivated jointly or separately by Southallians of different communities.

Southall is called a ‘town’ by most of its 60,000 inhabitants, although it lost its status as a metropolitan borough in the 1960s. Politically and administratively, it now forms part of the London Borough of Ealing which numbers some 300,000 residents. Traffic connections to Ealing are tolerable; those to the centre of the capital are inadequate, and to ‘go to London’, as locals call it, requires at least an hour’s drive on congested roads, a train journey that may involve changing, or reliance on what must be London’s worst-run bus route: ‘the 207s always come in packs of six, just after the drivers have met for a tea-break’. Southall is
by-passed by two lines of the London Underground system, but there is no ‘Tube’ station to tie it into the capital’s infrastructure or make people feel part of the metropolis. Southallians who work in central London may spend between two and six hours each day in getting to work and back. Bus connections to work are most regular to nearby Heathrow Airport, which is a major employer, and to the light-industrial and food-processing plants strung along the arteries that connect London to the western Home Counties.

The sense of a discrete town may also owe something to the local topography. Natural boundaries surround Southall on three sides: to reach it, one will cross a hump bridge over the Brentford–Birmingham Canal if coming from the south, another hump bridge over the Grand Union Canal if coming from the west, and the meads of the River Brent if coming from London. Only the northern approach into town appears nondescript: coming from Greenford, a vast expanse of inexpensive housing, one passes the municipal rubbish tip and the deprived Golf Links Estate to join the inevitable traffic jam on the town’s Broadway. The Broadway is one of the two arteries of town, runs east to west, and was known, until the early years of this century, as the Oxford Road. Topographically, it is a continuation of London’s Oxford Street; and around the Christmas and Diwali Season it is second only to that ‘real’ Oxford Street in the turnover per square yard of its commercial premises. For Southall, ‘ghetto’ town though it may be, is a capital in its own right: the capital town of South Asians in Britain, a point to which I shall return shortly.

The other commercial thoroughfare runs from north to south and looks much like the Broadway: an unbroken double file of vegetable shops, butchers, saree shops and jewellers, virtually all owned by South Asians. The bridge spans the Great Western Railway line by which Isambard Kingdom Brunel expedited London’s nineteenth-century poor to the emigration port of Bristol and, in the process, cut the budding town in two. The railway line, and its wasteland belt of disused gas- and water-works, has come to separate ‘Old Southall’, a maze of Late Victorian terraced houses, from ‘New Southall’, a meticulously surveyed area of terraced and semi-detached houses built between the 1920s and 50s. The rivalry between the ‘Old’ and the ‘New’ part of Southall dates back to the 1920s, when the town was populated by English and Irish labourers; it lives on in the rivalry between two notorious ‘Asian gangs’, the Holy Smokes and the Tooti Nungs. The physical lay-out of the town is sketched in figure 1, which also contains ward and census boundaries that will be relevant later on.
Figure 1  Map of Southall: electoral and census wards, 1989
The inherited physical fabric of the town is adequately maintained in the public sector and widely enhanced in the private. There are some two miles of busy, bustling shopping streets and a few hundred miles’ worth of quieter streets of terraced and semi-detached houses. Three-quarters of these show signs of recent improvements, such as new roofs, extensions, or patios; continuous files of parked cars give an impression of modest but sustained prosperity.

Among the civic spaces, there is an ill-repaired former Town Hall, built around the turn of the century and now used as an advice centre, a restored Tudor manor house now owned by the local Council, and the mandatory War Memorial of every English town. Another relic of ‘Olde England’ is the country’s busiest surviving market for horses, poultry, and goats, established in 1698 and still attracting breeders’ and hobbyists’ custom on Wednesdays. On Saturdays, it sells Asian textiles to locals. Emblems of 1970s England can be found in a shopping mall converted from an Edwardian cinema designed in a quaint ‘Chinesey’ style, and in a few purpose-built estates for small and medium-sized enterprises. Opposite the ruins of pre-war industrial plants, including the one-time largest margarine factory in the world, there is a community centre, converted from a solid Edwardian ‘Workers’ Institute’, once endowed by the Danish philanthropist whose Southall margarine helped Britain win the First World War. Another community centre, conspicuous by its elegant, some say posh, 1980s design, offers adult evening classes and hires out its space for conferences and wedding receptions. A few parish halls double up as smaller community centres, each with its own programme of education, entertainment, or advice.

Among the other public spaces, there are the vast suburban pubs and churches that Edwardian planners provided for ‘their’ working class. The pubs, half of them still run by Irish landlords, half by South Asians, do not do well any longer: many Punjabi Southallians, mindful of their respectability, are reluctant to drink in public. There are pubs where Irish and Afro-Caribbeans, English and South Asians mix freely or even prop up the bar in daily cliquish companionship. Other pubs are favoured by some clienteles more than others. On the whole, an impression of segregation, or at least separateness, is inescapable in most pubs. The same applies to the few venues of Southall’s sparse night-life: the town’s two music clubs attract a clientele predominantly of Afro-Caribbean West Londoners from Southall and beyond.

The best places to encounter ‘mixed crowds’ are the churches scattered around town. Most of them serve small congregations, but St John’s, an
Anglican church of evangelical bent, and St Anselm's, the Roman Catholic church, often see large assemblies comprising white, Afro-Caribbean, and South Asian Southallians in equal numbers. The majority of Southallians, though, worship in the large, often impressive, temples and mosques. On the drive of less than two miles from the southern hump bridge to the centre of town, one passes the gilt-domed temple of the Ravidasi community of ‘untouchables’, the marble-clad minaret of the central mosque, a brick-faced gurdwara frequented mainly by Jat Sikhs, a pretty church hall converted into a Hindu mandir, a spacious disused warehouse serving as a further temple mainly for Jat Sikhs, a turret-fronted, elaborate second mandir, and a representative, purpose-built gurdwara mainly for Sikhs of the Ramgarhia castes. In sidestreets, one finds at least thirty-five further small temples, mosques, prayer halls, and private houses where Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, and other Southallians meet for regular prayer. Southall teems with religious activity, and the crowds that leave after Sunday worship pour out into the main shopping street, the Broadway. At weekends, this thoroughfare is jammed with shoppers and strollers, not only from the town but from South Asian settlements throughout the Home Counties. Then, the commonplace fabric of Southall takes on the air of a capital: England's centre of South Asian life.

Despite its marginal position in the infrastructure of Greater London, Southall is uniquely well connected to the English cities that have attracted settlers from South Asia. Express coaches owned by local South Asian entrepreneurs leave several times daily for East Ham, Barking, Catford and Gravesend in England's south-east; to Coventry, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, and Leicester in the industrial Midlands; and to Derby, Sheffield, Leeds, Huddersfield, and Bradford in the north of the country. Their fares are the most competitive in Britain, and South Asian Southallians can be seen every day at the coach stops outside the town’s football stadium and in front of several temples, waiting for kin to get off the coach, or queuing to get on it and enjoy the Hindi movies shown during the journey.

Southall is not inhabited exclusively by South Asians, yet on its central thoroughfares one could well think so. Youngsters from the neighbouring suburbs who ride through town on the top of a double-decker bus sometimes play ‘Spot the White Man’: the first to spot five Caucasians is bought a can of beer or a pack of cigarettes by his or her mates. Southall’s street culture certainly bears the imprint of its South Asian majority. Their conventions on the use of space are shared, will-
ingly or otherwise, by all. The pavements of the Broadway are not walkways, but elongated plazas: shopkeepers and freelancers open wildcat stalls; here one can buy vegetables and fresh tropical fruit at half their London prices; batteries in German and Swedish wrappers at two-thirds of the British-packed price; Indian and Pakistani spices, medicines, cosmetics, and trinkets; South Asian-styled gold jewellery from the devotional through the chic to the ostentatious; sarees in abundance and the loose-fitting salwar-kameez preferred by many women to European dress; for menswear the uncollared kurta smocks and baggy salwar preferred usually by Muslim men or, for their Sikh neighbours, pantaloons in their pleated pajami daywear or narrow pajama nightwear varieties. Groups of men, and less often women, recognize each other, shake hands in an elaborate round, and stand chatting, gossiping, or negotiating. Determined shoppers weave their way round them without much visible irritation. One is more polite on the Broadway than on Oxford Street: the throng of people on foot and in cars gives rise to little impatience or aggravation. Should it seem to, one can step aside and, from a Delhi-style counter in a Tandoori, select an East African Asian Chaat or some Punjabi somose or karhai, some sweet barfi or a green leaf of pan rolled to envelop a dozen spices and essences selected to order.

Weekend and rush-hour traffic on the Broadway is notorious; sometimes a driver can move only with the co-operation of two or three others. Yet emerging from a side street one is allowed without fail to join the gridlock. One is waved in by the most widespread gesture of indulgence, which is not of the polite ‘After you’ variety; it resembles a resigned, almost dismissive wave of the hand that says: ‘I bestow on you my right of way: you see, I can’t use it anyway.’

Outsiders dread driving through the Southall jam; yet there are insiders who like nothing more. Young men in their twenties, virtually all of South Asian parentage, get together to cruise on the Broadway. This requires the right make of car, most commonly a Ford Capri with conspicuous extras and, indispensably, a sound system which can blast music at deafening volumes. The preferred genres are the disco adaptations of a Punjabi folk dance known as Bhangra Beat and Bhangra Rock, or for those who want to project a ‘harder’ image, Reggae music of Afro-Caribbean origin or Black American Rap. The cruisers’ satisfaction grows with the number of heads that are turned and with the whispers that identify one or the other as a ‘big guy’ in one of Southall’s two well-known ‘gangs’. He who is bored on the Broadway is beyond entertainment.
Yet for a town so distinctive among London's drab Western suburbs, there is surprisingly little civic pride expressed by its adult inhabitants. Young people who have grown up there and know their way around sometimes express their affection: 'Southall is like your mother and father', one of them told me, 'you grow up with it, and it – sort of, makes you what you are.' Adults, too, will on occasion express an appreciation of the security that living in Southall brings with it. Most prejudiced neighbours have long moved out of town, and many householders have, of course, built up networks of neighbourly support and trust that they appreciate. Yet most adult Southallians I know profess a desire to move out and, in a euphemism for social advancement, move 'up the road'. To move out geographically and move up socially are synonymous in all but a few cases. The electoral ward surrounding the Broadway lost nearly 20 per cent of its residents between 1971 and 1981 (Ealing 1982, Census 1/10), and many more wish to escape its persisting high population density, the lack of parking spaces, and what they call its dirtiness.

Southallians complain that their town is 'dirty', 'grotty', or 'tatty' as other Londoners complain of the weather: as a matter of course. I still do not understand this. Having lived in a road off the Broadway often littered with packing refuse from the Broadway shops and with discarded cigarette boxes and drinks cans, I still find even the busiest parts of Southall as well-kept as any of London's commercially active areas. To understand this common deprecation of the town one lives in, one probably has to appeal to the class system that in England is applied not only to households, but to whole areas. An English Southallian, aged sixty, details the 1930s class hierarchy of London suburbs in retrospect:

You see, at one time, if you were a Southall, -- Southall was that little bit above Hanwell, a little bit above, above Hayes: 'Southall, ah well, you come from Southall, well, of course …' The next place above Southall was Ealing. I mean, at one time, if you say you come from Southall, they’d say: 'Oh!', you know, 'a posh place!' But now – you don’t mention Southall. Southall’s got a really bad name now … 'Ooh, that grotty place?' … the tattiness of it! (Hawkes 1990, 4)

Such oral memory cannot be taken as historical fact, of course. Like all oral recollection, it is made up and remade after the event, continues to be encoded and standardized, and always serves the purposes of today, much as it does in illiterate cultures (Goody and Watt 1963, Goody 1968). In the present case, the speaker is a Southall-born Englishwoman whose husband’s job took the family to Kent in the 1950s.

The provenance of the quotation does not, however, invalidate its significance. The topos of a dirty, tatty, or grotty Southall is common
among Southallians of all communities, and as widespread among the young as the old. The variables that appear to affect this judgement are related not to local or ethnic origin, but to perceived mobility. Those who can realistically consider moving out voice it more readily than those who cannot. This is partly a matter of financial resources and, in the vaguest sense, class. Thus, tenants of Ealing Council and of housing associations, who are seldom able to exchange a Southall flat for one elsewhere in the borough, may echo the criticism during their first few months, but do so less often as they get used to their lack of mobility. House owners who, by selling up, would risk higher mortgages or financial losses, are again more reluctant to voice this commonplace. Those who have greater mobility, or perhaps wish to project greater confidence, are often adamant in their distaste for ‘this grotty town’. Geographical mobility is perceived by vast numbers of Southallians as a sign of upward social mobility.

This recurring motive strikes home both to common sense and to anthropological reasoning. Using common sense, few people can be expected publicly to put down what personally they cannot escape. Anthropologically, it stands to reason that there is more to the loss of class associated with Southall’s tatty image than is contained in the Registrar General’s classification of socio-economic groups. The conceptualization of class is, in England, and not only among the English, anything but colour-blind. The pervasive connection between notions of class and ‘race’ is also acknowledged by another locally born Englishwoman, although she herself regards it as rubbish:

You get a lot of people say, ‘Oh, the Indians have overrun Southall’, when all the white families moved out. It really makes me laugh to think about them, they’re saying ‘how can you? there’s a community of Indians!’ I say, well, there wouldn’t be so many: they bought their houses off white families. They moved out because – I was talking to some security men, and they came from up North, and they were saying that – because when you get a family of a different colour, that brings down the value of the house prices. Yeah, that as well: it brings down the – it makes it a lower class area. I said rubbish – that is rubbish … So they start moving out because they want to be in a better class area! (Hawkes 1990b, 40)

The equation between moving out and moving up is widespread among Southallians. This move into a reputedly ‘better-class area’ is also a move into suburbia, be it that of Southall’s own suburbs or the neighbouring areas of Greenford, Hounslow, or Hayes. The semi-detached and detached houses there offer what is sought by many in Southall’s urban parts, but is hard to find for most: the assurance of privacy.
A shared Southall culture? 45

The terraced streets leading off the busy Broadway and King Street can indeed appear to be cultivated as if they were private spaces. In mine, ten seconds’ walk from the Broadway throng, a neighbour and I, working on my car, were passed by two young men, busily engaged in a noisy conversation. One of them used a common expletive. In an instant, my neighbour turned, raised himself, and hollered: ‘Watch your language, boys!’ Unlike the public arena of the Broadway, the sidestreets are considered a private space, the pavements almost part of the residents’ property. Such anecdotes prove nothing conclusive, of course, but they may serve to highlight the gulf between the public space of the thoroughfares and the private spaces behind them. ‘Living in India is so different, you know’, the same neighbour said to me on a hot summer’s day: ‘Here, people don’t use their gardens! In India, people would be sitting outside, and there’d be a dozen radios playing, and, you know, everybody would be perfectly happy, nobody would complain!’ ‘But why don’t people play their radios then?’ I enquired. ‘In England, it’s not done, is it?’, was the shoulder-shrugging reply. My good-humoured rejoinder that there was no Englishman in sight for a mile and a half received a curt rebuke: ‘It’s England.’ English conventions of privacy indeed influence Southallians’ cultivation of space, though they are only one influence among many. Southallians share neither the urban English convention that neighbours are nobody’s business, nor the rural conventions of good neighbourliness with anyone, no matter who they are. In the streets most familiar to me, the range of neighbours whom one would greet is, by and large, circumscribed by the trapezoid that includes one’s own house, a few to the left and right, and the fewer ones immediately facing.

Across many adjoining streets, however, there are kinship networks that go well beyond these household-centred trapezoids. Whole clusters of kin may reside in close proximity, and a great many households are connected to kin residing elsewhere in Southall or nearby. As the kinship density of a whole town is impossible to establish in such a setting, it may help to consult the results of our survey among young Southallians aged between twelve and eighteen. They were asked to number the relatives ‘in or near’ Southall whom they counted as ‘cousins’. It is immaterial here whether they would be recognized as cousins by a genealogist: what matters are the informants’ conceptions of peers, and by implication elders, as kin. Some two-thirds of Sikh youngsters (65 per cent) reported the presence of five cousins or more, and Hindu youths (51 per cent) and Muslim youths (34 per cent), too, counted more ‘cousins in or near
Southall' than their white peers (28 per cent). Asked about grandparents nearby, Sikh and Hindu youths reported these in numbers similar (36 per cent, 29 per cent) to those of their white peers (29 per cent). For the offspring of migrants this is remarkable, and the far lower figure registered by Muslim youths (19 per cent) would be much closer to expectations from a post-immigrant population.

The widespread desire to move out of 'tatty' Southall and 'live up the road' may thus be interpreted in more ways than class advancement alone. It may, of course, promise an escape from the town's low rank in the pervasive class hierarchy among whole suburbs, conditioned in part at least by racist equations of class with colour of skin. It may be an escape, further, from neighbours deemed alien by whatever difference of cultural heritage is recognized by householders themselves; but it may also promise escape from the often strict censure of those of the same categorized background. All three interpretations could easily be linked. Each could be seen as an escape from being stereotyped: be it by life in an immigrant 'ghetto', by co-residence with subjectively alien minorities, or by the social control of 'one's own folks' with whom one may share a heritage, but sometimes little more. It is possible, indeed, to surmise that the oft-desired privacy afforded by 'moving up the road' is valued as a kind of household autonomy that life in the central wards of Southall seldom affords. It is also possible that Southallians of Punjabi backgrounds may wish to move out to escape the stereotypes associated with their part of London in the Punjab. I am told that Southall's reputation among Punjabis on the subcontinent is unfavourable, and that a migrant proves success by leaving behind its 'gang warfare', its 'dirtiness', and the proximity of cultural 'others' considered unsavoury or inferior.

Such a link to an escape from being stereotyped is hypothetical; more tangible is the link between social control by one's own network of kin and cultural community and the caution advised in 'being friendly with the wrong crowd', however one's own network may define them. The denser a household's network of kin and community censure, the more cautious, on the whole, is its engagement with neighbours shunned by this network. Stereotyping and sometimes disdain of neighbours from different communities are by no means rare. Yet there is the strictest censure on declared or open enmity. The make-up of the population is varied enough for everyone, on the surface at least, to pretend to 'get on well with everyone'. The public tone is polite. It has, among men at least, developed local conventions that reflect the multi-cultural composition of town. To call neighbours 'mate', as is usual in London's working-class
districts, is rare. When greeting other men in English, some South Asians stick to the Indian-English ‘Hello Sir!’ even for next-door neighbours, while others have borrowed the Irish ‘Hello my friend!’ A few have made the Afro-American or Caribbean ‘Hi man!’ their own. Among and toward women, I am not aware of similarly easy conventions newly agreed in a process of daily cross-community exchange. Moreover, young Southallians have come to converge on a dialect of English that bears witness to a community of language in various ways. Phonetically, it is clearly recognizable as a West London accent, and its lexis integrates Americanisms (‘bad’ or ‘wicked’ for ‘good’), Afro-Caribbean usages (‘cool, man’) and Indianisms (‘innit’ for ‘isn’t it’, ‘aren’t you’, ‘aren’t they’, etc.).

To speak of a shared Southall culture, none the less, may still sound a far-fetched idea. The town, considered as a shared space, shows few signs of joint cultivation by different communities placed on equal terms. What a commonly shared Southall culture might consist of, cannot be ascertained by observing public behaviour and street life. Yet culturally shared absences, or blank spots, may be as telling as readily recognized positive agreements. The absence of any widely shared appeal to civic pride as Southallians, and the widespread desire to move out and up, are cultural facts in their own right. They are so widely shared as to be taken for granted, and they need thus to be explored. This exploration must concern two factors at once: on the one hand, it should clarify the cultural heterogeneity of Southall’s population; on the other, it should account for the equation, professed across this heterogeneity, between moving out and moving up. Southallians, internally differentiated as their cultural heritages are, must have something in common if so many of them think of moving out as social advancement.

Ethnic distinctions, economic commonalities
To begin to shed light on the ethnic heterogeneity that lies behind the still elusive shared culture of Southallians, this section will introduce some basic demographic and economic statistics. In its course, the focus will veer from ethnic differentiation to the economic commonalities shared among all ethnic minorities and indeed by many of its white people, too. The national census of 1991 counted just over 61,000 Southallians living in the five wards of town. Each ward comprised between 11,000 and 13,000 people. It was the first census in British history to ask questions about the respondents’ ethnic group, and although one may debate any such categorizations, it allows for a reason-
albly clear profile of Southall’s ethnic diversity, which is summarized in table 1. These figures must surprise anyone who has strolled along Southall Broadway and failed to see any evidence of a ‘white presence’. The reason is simple enough: the ‘ethnic spread’ of Southall’s population is decidedly uneven across its five wards. These wards, which the census takes as its base, are fixed by local politicians for electoral purposes:

When we had to redraw the [ward] boundaries, the Tories came up with this ridiculous map that showed a ‘Lady Margaret Ward’ or something like that: a huge long hose-pipe all the way up the Lady Margaret Road – sort of three miles long and 500 yards wide. They thought that’d be a safe Tory seat.

The local politician who told me this story was amused at the futility of the Conservative councillors’ attempt, rather than surprised at its party-political bias. Given that virtually all local politicians have strong party loyalties, ward boundaries tend to reflect calculations of electoral advantage at least as much as the local topography of class or ethnic profiles. To some extent, this masks the common-sense impression that there are in many ways two Southalls: an urban, post-migration, inner town and a ‘leafy’, nearly half-white suburban belt. Yet these two interact and even condition each other, much as Anderson (1990) found when his planned study of a ‘gentrifying neighborhood’ in Chicago had to be broadened into ‘a more inclusive study of the relationship between it and the adjacent black ghetto’ (Anderson 1990, x). It is useful, therefore, briefly to introduce the five wards. Their differences are traced most easily by moving from west to east, following a gradual decrease in population densities.

*Northcote* ward comprises the smallest and the most densely populated area. Its housing consists mainly of terraces built between the 1920s and

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**Table 1. Major ethnic categories among Southallians**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Indian’</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Pakistani’</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Other Asian’</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘White’</td>
<td>30, of whom one in ten was born in Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Black-Caribbean’</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other categories</td>
<td>5, which comprise ‘Black-African, Black-Other, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Other-Asian, Other-non-Asian’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calculated from: 1991 Census Local Base Statistics 02AXFC, Table L 06: Ethnic Group: Residents.
1950s. It covers the most urban part of ‘New Southall’. Glebe ward, to its south, covers almost twice as large an area and so is less densely populated. It comprises some very crowded Edwardian terraced streets with inexpensive properties, and many more streets of lower-density housing. It is not ‘leafy’, however, as much of its space is taken up by industrial estates and post-industrial ruins. Mount Pleasant ward was newly carved out in the 1970s, when the safe Labour ward of Northcote was becoming too populous for electoral purposes. It combines a densely populated part of Northcote with an adjoining suburban area in a way that has usually absorbed the ‘semi-detached vote’. The ward thus represents a half-way house between urban, and largely post-immigration, Southall and the leafier suburbs of town. Among these, Waxlow ward is Southall’s northernmost ward and offers mostly semi-detached and detached properties. By and large, it is a well-to-do and mainly white suburban area. Dormer’s Wells ward, Southall’s eastern suburb, covers twice as much ground as any other Southall ward. It comprises most of the town’s more affluent avenues, but also includes both of its major housing estates. One of these council estates, called Golf Links, comprises almost a thousand flats and a population of whom half were economically inactive in 1984 (Yabsley 1990, Appendix 5).

Even with the major housing estates counted in, the suburban wards differ markedly from the ethnic profiles of the inner wards. Thus, in the outer wards, the proportion of white residents reaches at least 45 per cent, while in all the inner wards, settlers from the New Commonwealth make for well over 75 per cent of residents. The ethnic differences between outer and inner wards are also reflected in their socio-economic profiles (see table 2).

It is remarkable how occupational class differences continue to distinguish the outer wards from the inner ones. The relative weight of the three non-manual classes and the three manual ones goes through a gradual, but complete, reversal from the central wards to the suburbs. Having started out in Glebe with its six-to-four preponderance of manual occupations, the demographic tour ends in Dormer’s Wells with a six-to-four preponderance of the non-manual occupations. The trend is not even dented by the Dormer’s Wells housing estates with their large number of unskilled residents. The question must arise, then, whether this stratificatory distinction can indeed be traced to ethnic distinctions. Table 3a details the relationship between ethnic categories and occupational class.

Now it is Black-Caribbean and Indian Southallians, as well as those
Table 2. Census ward and social class based on occupation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Glebe %</th>
<th>Northcote %</th>
<th>Mount Pleasant %</th>
<th>Waxlow %</th>
<th>Dormer’s Wells %</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Professional</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>occupations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Managerial,</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (N) Skilled</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-manual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All non-manual</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (M) Skilled</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Partly skilled</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Unskilled</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All manual</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calculated from: 1991 Census Local Base Statistics 02AXFC, Table L 93 SEG: Social class and ethnic group (10 per cent sample): Residents aged 16 and over, employees and self-employed. Percentages are calculated for totals exclusive of ‘Armed forces’ and ‘Occupation inadequately described or not stated’.

born in Ireland, who reverse the proportion of non-manual to manual occupations found among whites at large. None the less, the reversal is not as drastic as that found between wards: an indication of the presence, in the suburbs, of those who have successfully moved out and up into the once all-white suburbia. Yet the table contains troublesome indications. Its most astonishing detail must be the occupational profile of the Pakistani category which alone equals that of the white one. Since in the light of my fieldwork this puzzled me, I have detailed, in table 3b, the unemployment figures for males as reported by the census authorities, and added the best available country-wide figures for comparison. The relative placing of each ethnic category reflects the national averages calculated by the Labour Force Survey of 1988–90 (Jones 1993, 120). Thus, men categorized as Pakistani were most likely to be unemployed, and white males least. Yet the Southall figures are higher throughout than the ethnic averages across the country. Among Pakistani men the local figures amounted to almost a third, when nationally they were less than a quarter. Among white men, they amounted to 14 per cent in Southall, while the national survey had counted 8 per cent (Jones 1993, 120). These high – and in the case of Pakistani men exorbitant –
Plate 1  Punjabi dancers and London police
Plate 2  Telephone engineer at work
Plate 3  Conversation at the bus stop
Plate 4 Muslim refugee outside an 'off-licence' liquor store
Plate 5 Policeman, undertaker, and temple official leading a funeral cortège

Plate 6 Stopping for a chat on the Broadway: men
Plate 7  Stopping for a chat on the Broadway: women
Plate 8  Sikh ladies passing a public house

Plate 9  ‘Danceasia presents’: Ghazal, Bhangra, and Rap for Valentine’s Day
TABLE 3.  a. Ethnic category and social class based on occupation
b: Ethnic category and male unemployment rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White %</th>
<th>(Born in Ireland) %</th>
<th>Black-Caribbean %</th>
<th>Indian %</th>
<th>Pakistani %</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>3a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Professional occupations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Managerial, technical</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 (N) Skilled non-manual</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>All non-manual</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 (M) Skilled manual</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>4 Partly skilled</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>57</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Total)</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local male unemployment (Census 1991)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country-wide male unemployment (The Labour Force Survey, 1988–90)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calculated from: 1991 Census Local Base Statistics 02AXFC, Table L 93 SEG: Social class and ethnic group (10 per cent sample): Residents aged 16 and over, employees and self-employed, and Table L 09: Economic position and ethnic groups: Residents aged sixteen and over. Percentages are calculated for totals exclusive of ‘Armed Forces’ and ‘Occupation inadequately described or not stated’. People ‘born in Ireland’ form a sub-sample of the category ‘white’. Country-wide unemployment figures from Jones 1993, 120.

unemployment rates must beg some serious questions. Why should men of ethnic minorities be unemployed more often than white men, and why should even white men in Southall be unemployed more often than whites elsewhere?

These questions are all the more urgent because many Southallians are clearly desperate for paid jobs. For a town with one of the highest proportions of youngsters under sixteen in the country, the participation of women in paid employment is altogether staggering. Their largest single field of employment is centred on Heathrow Airport where airlines and other businesses provide some 80,000 jobs. The employment rates
Table 4. *Ethnic category and employment rates of economically active women*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White (%)</th>
<th>(Born in Black-White Ireland) %</th>
<th>Black-Caribbean (%)</th>
<th>Indian (%)</th>
<th>Pakistani (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered unemployed</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, e.g. self-employed or govt. work scheme</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calculated from: 1991 Census Local Base Statistics 02AXFC, Table L 09:

and unemployment figures for Southall women are detailed in table 4. These figures are considerably higher than anything that could have been expected even from an analysis of the country-wide patterns. Jones' (1993) country-wide analysis puts the labour force participation rates of 'all ethnic minority' women at 57 per cent. Afro-Caribbean women exceed this average to reach 76 per cent; Indian women meet it precisely; and Pakistani women remain furthest below it at 23 per cent (Jones 1993, 88). In Southall, women’s employment rates reach 80 to 90 per cent in four of the five ethnic categories; and even among Pakistani women two-thirds go to work, while their rate of registered unemployment is as exceptionally high as it is among their menfolk.

This intense participation of women in earning a family income is fully congruent not only with the high figures of local male unemployment, but also with the widely shared desire to move out and up. It appears even more intense as one puts aside the official statistics and looks around in the town. In the inner wards, the actual employment rate of women is certainly higher than the officially registered one, and households are regularly leafleted with fly-sheets such as this:

**SEWING MACHINISTS WANTED**

in Southall
Apply: ... rear of
72, Western Road.

This backstreet jeans factory turned out, on police inspection, 'to be an overcrowded Dickensian sweatshop ... and a fire and health risk' employing some 150 women in toxic conditions (*The Recorder*, 4 May
A shared Southall culture?  53

1990, 2). The case of a Southall seamstress earning just over £1 an hour was due to be brought to a High Court during my fieldwork (The Gazette, 3 July 1987, 7). Seamstresses, food packers, part-time shop assistants, and unregistered cleaners bussed every night to commercial premises and even government offices – many of these are neither officially employed nor registered unemployed. Women’s labour is drawn upon to an extraordinary degree, and the widespread wish to move out and up appears entirely credible in the light of these exertions. In an area of high dependency ratios and high unemployment, all available human resources seem to have been thrown into the struggle for economic security or upward mobility.

The argument of this brief section has progressed from a preoccupation with ethnic distinctions to an interest in economic commonalities. Local unemployment rates are high, and they are not helped by the town’s bad traffic connections to London. I have known Southallians travel three hours each way to a low-paid job in East London. A number of locals, whites as well as former migrants, have described to me their impression that a Southall address by itself is a handicap when looking for work. I have not been able to confirm this impression statistically, but should not be surprised if a better statistician did.

Certainly, most people who can will try to escape what they see as the stigma of a Southall address. Moving out is the obvious possibility, but given the intensive competition it is difficult. Many Southallians living in the Norwood Green area of the Glebe ward insist that they live ‘in Norwood Green, which isn’t really Southall’. The same is true of many households located in the no-man’s-land between Southall’s northern suburbs and the largely white, if unattractive, Greenford, and those that, just beyond Southall’s western hump bridge, reside in Hayes End. Southall indeed ‘has a bad name’, as I have heard it expressed in dozens of interviews, even by youngsters quite unaware of the niceties of British class distinctions by area. One way of exploring this reputation which influences the shared culture of Southallians in that they all have to deal with it, is a short survey of the town’s local history. I shall use this brief summary for other purposes, too: it will help to clarify aspects of migratory as well as political history which the main chapters will take for granted, and it will give a historical background to the community discourse that is so prevalent in Southallians’ thinking about their town.
Some local history: migration and the ‘white backlash’, community building and ‘the Southall riots’

The history of modern Southall begins with a railway line. In the mid-nineteenth century, Brunel’s Great Western Railway turned the thousand-year-old hamlet and manor into a Victorian shunting yard ready for industrial investment. Victorian Glebe and Edwardian Northcote grew together to form a metropolitan borough from 1905, and in the 1930s their low-wage industries and speculative housing developments attracted the first ‘wave of immigrants’ from the depressed coalfields of South Wales and northern England, as well as from Ireland.

The first noticeable influx of labour migrants from the New Commonwealth began in the mid-1950s when a local manufacturer of rubber accessories for cars began to recruit labourers overseas. One of the family owners of this firm, Woolf’s Rubber Company, had commanded a unit of Punjabi Sikhs in the previous war. The need for unskilled labour was intense throughout England at the time, and the Punjabi Sikhs so recruited found it easy and useful to spread the word among their friends and kin in India. Employers and workers alike set in motion a process of chain migration from the Punjab, and further local jobs were on offer, especially in the food-processing industries of West London. Nestle, Batchelor’s, Kraft, and Lyons were some of the well-known names in search of ‘immigrant labour’. While the national census of 1951 had counted a mere 300 Southallians born in the New Commonwealth, ten years later their numbers had risen eightfold to 2,400. Of these, three-quarters were of South Asian birth, and apart from Sikhs they included a small number of Muslims from Pakistan; of the remaining quarter, most were drawn from the smaller Caribbean islands.

By the time of the 1961 census, the erstwhile labour migrants had imperceptibly changed into settlers. The ‘myth of return’ took its first batterings for both personal and political reasons. The proverbial ‘five years abroad’ were stretched from one contingency to the next, as an Afro-Caribbean friend recalled in the most tangible way:

When I got here, we all said, it’s five years, and we’ll go home. But then the wages wasn’t ever enough, – you send money home, and then, after a year or two, you want a better place, and – well, till you’ve got another place, the five years is over, and you can just see that it’s going up, not down. And then I said, OK, I’ll stay till I’m thirty. And I turned thirty alright, but then I was with Vicky, and – you know, we both wanted to stay together, – I wasn’t going off to the West Indies without her. And then, oh well, – it’s the brats now. They go to school here, they’re British in a way, they’re not going now, are they. I mean, ‘back’?, – they’ve never been nowhere but here.
The question of girlfriends and children did not arise in the same way for the vast majority of South Asians, whose marriages were built upon arrangements concluded between the two families and had to follow elaborate norms of ‘clan’ (got) exogamy. But during the late 1950s, British politicians began in public to debate restrictions on immigration and settlement policies. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962) established a system of entry vouchers, and a 1965 Government White Paper effectively ended the granting of such vouchers to unskilled applicants. From the mid-1960s onwards, the reduced influx favoured a higher proportion of skilled people; among Sikhs, they were of the crafts castes of carpenters and builders; among Hindus and Muslims, from a wide variety of castes and social backgrounds. Their numbers, however, were exceeded tenfold by a most vigorous movement of dependants who wished to join relatives already in Britain. The publicized threats of British politicians about closing the door to further immigration had, of course, the opposite effect. As Hawkes summarizes:

Many decided to send for wives, children and dependants immediately to beat the ban. Relatives and others were also encouraged to come now before the door finally shut ... After 1962 the profile of South Asian immigration to the U.K. changed. Whilst in 1960, South Asian and Caribbean children accounted for 1 per cent of the [Southall] school population, by 1964 this was 15 per cent: 1,130 of South Asian origin, 100 West Indian (Institute of Race Relations and Southall Rights 1981, 31). In 1966, whilst only 3,840 immigrants holding Ministry of Labour vouchers entered the U.K. from South Asia, 24,368 dependants were admitted. Thus, 92 per cent of immigrants were women and children.

(Hawkes 1990a, 19-20)

With the arrival of these dependants, two conflicting processes took shape simultaneously. On the one hand, the labour migrants turned settlers began to organize and to build up community organizations. An Indian National Association, an Indo-Pakistan Cultural Society, a West Indian, later Caribbean, Association and, most importantly, from 1957 an Indian Workers’ Association provided advice, welfare, and educational services. It is important to note the community, rather than inclusively civic, basis and bias of these self-help organizations. South Asian Southallians in particular found little welcome or support from the bodies of civil society, whether they were trade unions, residents’ associations or social clubs. In 1959, the town saw the establishment of its first Sikh temple which became a focus of religious community building.

On the other hand, the local white population began to voice growing resentment at having ‘so many foreigners’ in their midst and fastened their attention on two issues in particular: the ‘overcrowding’ of homes
Contesting culture

and the ‘swamping’ of schools with ‘immigrant children’. Overcrowding had indeed been an issue of concern throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and a forgotten part of Southall’s history is a determined resettlement policy effective from 1947, well before the first South Asian settlement. It is described by Kirwan, a local historian:

After the war the most pressing problem was overcrowding. The population exceeded 56,000, and there was little room for new residents as well as those coming back from the services or evacuation ... The declared policy of the county council was to resettle in new towns as many people and industries as possible, and for a time this was in some measure successful. By 1961, after more than ten years’ operation of the scheme, the population of Southall had dropped to little more than 50,000. By that time, however, a new wave of immigrants had tended to make the policy unworkable, so in 1962 it was formally abandoned.

(Kirwan 1965, 49)

Speaking in general, this quotation makes it clear that Southall was an area of considerable urban problems, sub-standard housing, insufficient communications, and a weakening industrial infrastructure well before the arrival of its Commonwealth residents. Political rhetoric of the left sometimes blames these on the effects of racism; rhetoric of the political right on the presence of ‘immigrants’. The evidence appears clear that if Southall has changed economically, it has changed for the better. Speaking in particular, the above quotation helps to explain how migrants could find cheap, though often poorly maintained, houses in Southall: some were vacated by resettled residents; as importantly, the county authorities of the time were far more reluctant in Southall than in neighbouring parts of Middlesex to exercise their statutory right of overcrowding controls and inspections. For the local whites, on the other hand, the recent memory of their own overcrowded conditions may have contributed to their resentment of the ‘newcomers’, who often had no choice but to resort to multiple occupancies and even the sharing of beds across shifts at work.

As early as 1959, a small delegation of twenty Southallians had petitioned the Borough Council to ‘stop coloured people from buying houses in the area’, citing the overcrowding that many of them had only just left behind (Hawkes 1990a, 60). Four years later, the right-wing British National Party gained 27 per cent of Southall votes at council elections, campaigning on the slogan ‘Send them Back!’, and relegating the Conservative Party to an unprecedented third place. One of the British National candidates founded a Southall Residents’ Association which, from 1963, demanded that the Borough Council adopt a compulsory
purchase policy, buying up vacated properties and thus keeping them from ‘the undesirable elements in our midst’ (SR and IRR 1981, 25–6). Yet the British National Party continued to lose votes throughout the 1960s, dropping from 9 per cent in the General Election of 1964 to less than 5 per cent in 1966: ‘partly as many of its supporters had moved out of Southall ... and partly because the mainstream political parties had moved ‘right’ on immigration issues’ (Hawkes 1990a, 63). The racist campaigns orchestrated by 1960s extremists are well documented in a locally produced booklet, Southall: The Birth of a Black Community (SR and IRR 1981). Among Southallians, however, they are not as widely remembered as a later controversy about white and ‘immigrant’ children in Southall schools.

‘Bussing’ or ‘coaching’ are the well-remembered words for a policy of dispersal of ‘immigrant children’ to schools outside Southall. At the height of public tensions, in 1963, white residents, particularly from Old Southall, petitioned the borough authorities to prevent ‘the swamping of Southall primary schools by immigrant children’. Government guidelines were widely interpreted as recommending that all schools and classes be composed of a majority of English-born students. The local borough thereupon introduced a policy of dispersing South Asian and Afro-Caribbean children to neighbouring schools. From 1966, thousands of young Southallians were thus ‘bussed out’ every morning, and many now in their thirties and forties remember the practice as a clear sign of discrimination and racism. It was not formally phased out until 1976.

By this time, however, Southall’s economic townscape, as well as its political climate, had changed beyond recognition. Economically, it was the arrival of South Asian refugees from Kenya (after 1967) and Uganda (after 1972) which had rejuvenated and ‘Asianized’ the town’s infrastructure. As ‘white’ shops closed, ‘Asian’ shops opened to fill the gaps, using capital and business know-how gathered in the East African countries. Southall became a town of ‘Asian’ shops and three ‘Asian’ cinemas that showed nothing but Hindi movies. Politically, too, the ‘white backlash’ of the 1960s had proved ineffective, and the central wards of town had been virtually emptied of all visible white presence. The community building of the settlers had progressed at a steady pace, and the Indian Workers’ Association (IWA) had grown to be the town’s chief broker and pivot of political influence. Factional infighting, however, was rife within its ranks, and its contending leadership networks were suspected of corruption by many elders, and of collaborating with the powers that be by a younger cohort of ‘radicals’. The political polarization and the
widespread civic crisis of the late 1960s had seen the rise, also in Southall, of a new stratum of young activists who wielded enormous influence over their peers. Drawn largely from the cohort of teenage-migrants, they had grown up in England, yet they saw their life chances diminished by racial prejudice and their community politicians locked into factional skirmishes, powerless against job discrimination and even bussing. No less importantly, the ‘old guard’ seemed oblivious to the country-wide rise, from the mid-1970s, of neo-fascist ideas and racist violence. When the political and racialist polarization of the time was carried into Southall, now a fast-developing ‘Asian’ enclave amidst the largely hostile suburbs of London, the reaction was dramatic.

In 1976, a young Southallian named Gurdip Singh Chaggar was stabbed to death by a group of white youths right outside the Dominion Cinema and the headquarters of the IWA. Youth activists gathered in the recently founded Southall Youth Movement, a club mainly of young South Asian Southallians, and in Peoples Unite, its analogue among Afro-Caribbean youths. Together, the two networks marched on the police station. Local relations with the police had been in a state of crisis for years, and even the more establishment-minded community organizations had petitioned the Home Secretary to set up an independent inquiry into recurrent allegations of police brutality (Pulle 1974). The 1976 demonstrations and arrests, sit-ins and detentions were widely reported in the British press and treated in the terminology of ‘race riots’ between ‘Asian youths’ and the police. The Southall Youth Movement and Peoples Unite continued, in the aftermath of these events, to widen their support among local youths, as the Metropolitan Police continued its policies of surveillance by searching premises for stolen goods, as well as persons for the illegal possession of recreational drugs. With relations steadily worsening, the next confrontation must have seemed but a question of time, and it happened on 23 April 1979. This was the day of ‘the Southall riots’ which made the town famous or infamous in the British media.

A neo-fascist party, called the National Front, had contrived to hire a space in Southall Town Hall for one of its meetings. To hold it in Southall was an obvious affront to all local pride and sensitivity. The day being St George’s Day, the borough authorities, moreover, had followed English custom in flying the Union Jack over the building, despite the fact that the National Front had usurped it as its own partisan emblem. As anger rose, crowds gathered and converged on the Town Hall where they encountered more than 2,500 officers of the Metropolitan Police,
many in newly introduced riot gear. Police orders were to push back, cordon off, and then disperse several thousand Southallians, in order to protect the freedom of assembly of the sixty or so neo-fascists. In the attempt to clear a whole town centre of its local population, emotions brimmed over, possibly on both sides. The ensuing street battle resulted in the death of a demonstrator, intensive care for several leaders of the Southall youths, and numerous injuries. The name of the dead demonstrator, Blair Peach, would later serve a Labour-led Borough Council to name a Southall school, and would be expunged by a subsequent Conservative local administration. The memory of several hundred Southallians battered by police protecting the civil liberties of a racist group remained a potent political force. Feelings ran high, therefore, when, two years later, neo-fascists planned another local event.

In July 1981, a musical 'gig' in the Hambrough Tavern pub drew three busloads of white skinheads from London’s East End. Arriving in Southall, they had already clashed with local youths who had heard – whether rightly or wrongly is uncertain – that other youths and women had been harassed. Extra police were again drafted in to protect the peaceful conduct of a provocative gathering, though this time they knew when to withdraw. The Hambrough Tavern, already sued previously for disbarring ‘coloured’ patrons, was burnt to the ground on the same night. There was no loss of life, and it has since been rebuilt and welcomes all patrons who pay for their drinks.

Unlike bussing, one cannot say that ‘the Southall riots’ have left a deep imprint on most Southallians’ collective consciousness. While outsiders may still associate the name ‘Southall’ with ‘riots’, local people rarely mentioned them without prompting. At the time of my fieldwork they seemed, in many ways, to be battles of a distant past, overtaken by new local concerns. Yet, historically speaking, they served to galvanize a younger cohort of local political activists, and a number of their former leaders went on to achieve prominent positions in established political bodies. Some of them guide Southall’s socialist and feminist initiatives, discussed at a later stage; others have begun to exert influence on the more mainstream community organizations that shape the town’s political processes. It is to these that the account must now turn, in order to continue the search for the culture that Southallians might share.

Local politics as community competition
For the purposes of local government and municipal administration, Southall forms the western-most part of the London Borough of Ealing.
Contesting culture

A borough is London's smallest unit of local government, usually numbers between 200,000 and 300,000 people, and is run by an elected Borough Council. Southall had been a discrete London borough until 1965, when government reforms created far larger political units, and this loss of local autonomy may have contributed to the crucial lack of comprehensively civic institutions in the town. It certainly led to a fierce competition for public resources. Besides Southall and Ealing proper, the amalgamated Borough of Ealing comprises the relatively prosperous suburb of Hanwell, the suburban sprawl of Greenford and, closest to central London, Acton Town. All these areas are surrounded by vast housing estates which show clear signs of material deprivation and social need. Money is needed everywhere, and Southallians make up little more than a fifth of the borough's population. Borough funds are needed to run voluntary organizations ranging from crèches for the children of working mothers and refuges for battered women to advice centres for the unemployed, support services for handicapped people, and evening classes in music, literacy, sewing, or computer skills. All of these activities, and many more, are run by voluntary or community associations, vying with each other for annual grants from the borough's scarce funds.

Shortly before my fieldwork, this competition was exacerbated even further by a second local government reform. There had until then been an intermediate layer of provision between the national government and each London borough. This, the Greater London Council, however, was abolished by the first Thatcher government in a decision that cancelled scheduled elections. At the time, the metropolitan council's majority was formed by Labour politicians, and its policies had gained a reputation for radical approaches to provisions for minorities. The abolition of this metropolitan body had two consequences for Southallians. Firstly, competition for public resources came to focus on the Borough Council alone, and community organizations and 'community leaders' often found themselves pitched one against the other in this highly competitive arena. Secondly, the dissolution meant that the Council's policy makers and Community Relations officials needed new posts. Understandably, the more radical of these gravitated to those London boroughs that were known to endorse their ideas. Ealing was one of these, and it attracted a sizeable number of such policy makers to staff its newly established supervisory bodies concerned with equal opportunities and minority rights. Southallians' views of their Borough Council's policies and public discourse polarized considerably over the years of my fieldwork, the end of which coincided with the election of a Conservative majority.
The electoral defeat, in 1990, of the Labour majority on the Borough Council, however, was not due to the Southall vote. While the Borough of Ealing had been governed by both Labour and Conservative majorities, the Southall vote had for long been solidly and often overwhelmingly Labour. Council seats in the central wards went to Labour politicians almost inevitably, and only the leafier suburbs had been known to return the odd Conservative from time to time. Solid Labour support is not surprising among an electorate of former migrants who have come to Britain from New Commonwealth countries. Conservative policies are associated with restrictive immigration laws and, latterly, a deregulation of the labour market, while Labour policies profess the values of ensuring public welfare and serving the needs of communities.

Nor is Labour support surprising if one considers the standard of political argument proposed by the Conservative candidate in the June 1987 General Election. This pamphlet reached my letterbox after my first year of fieldwork:

Vote Conservative! Labour say No to Car Park!
For years the Labour Party have promised Southall that when they were in power they would provide a car park. Now the Labour candidate in the General Election, Syd Bidwell, is trying to STOP THE CAR PARK IN HERBERT RD BEING BUILT.

Your Conservative Candidate ... says
'This car park is vital to Southall ...'

VOTE FOR THE CAR PARK — VOTE CONSERVATIVE ON JUNE 11TH!

The text was neatly translated into Punjabi, yet one wonders whether an English-born electorate would have been offered such an offensively petty argument for electing their sole parliamentary representative for the next five years. Be that as it may, the Conservative Party in Southall had, of course, to contest local elections within the ward boundaries cut out by their Labour opponents.

So far as national, rather than borough, elections are concerned, Southall forms a constituency together with the northern parts of Ealing. This constituency returned the same Labour Member of Parliament from the mid-1960s until after my fieldwork ended. This MP was an Englishman. At first sight, the fact might seem strange, and Southall an obvious area to be represented by an MP of South Asian background. Yet Southall's political arena is characterized by a high degree of factionalism, as well as distrust between different interest groups, as one local councillor explained with some glee:
Labour here isn’t a party, you know. Labour is the name for politics. The parties are inside the Labour Party.

Q.: You mean like – factions?
A.: Yes, factions. You take seven people, and you find you’ve got eight factions.

Q.: But how do they get to decide on anything?
A.: Really, the whole thing is sewn up between five chiefs. There’s A.R., and K. of course, and S.G., and V.S., although he’s out now, he’s no longer a real force, and R.P. of course, he’s a Brahmin, you know; and really, whatever has three of them behind it, goes. That’s what goes. And whoever’s at the helm, goes with the three against the two, whatever it’s about.

The councillor was well aware that this was a simplified model; he was, after all, a successful local politician. Yet there is little doubt about the importance of certain key figures and their factions, and the processes of personal lobbying, strategic realignments, and of the forging of alliances true, deceitful or ambiguous. There is nothing new in factional politics, of course, be it in the ethnography of small towns or indeed of the rural Punjab (see Pettigrew 1975). To the conspicuously ‘foreign’ fieldworker they are hard to document, and while I had considered joining the Labour Party for some time before moving to Southall, I decided not to, as the conflicting imperatives of the researcher and the party member would have spelled duplicity sooner or later. One particular episode of factional politics is, however, worth relating here, because it sheds light on the co-existence of Southall’s communities in the public arena.

Most British constituency Labour Parties were involved in a process of reselecting their prospective parliamentary candidates in the course of 1985. Such reselections were decided in long sequences of ward and constituency meetings and on several occasions resulted in the deselection of a sitting Member of Parliament. The Ealing-Southall reselection was, however, postponed in that year amidst allegations of ballot rigging directed against ‘activist’ members who wished to select a South Asian candidate. The exercise was repeated under the supervision of the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee over the summer of 1986. The local press published furious allegations of ‘cynical manipulation’ and readers’ letters accusing politicians of racism if they did endorse the white MP and inverse racism if they did not. The powerful Indian Workers’ Association forewent its usual stance of neutrality in party-political matters, and openly endorsed the sitting MP. One by one, four of the five candidates were endorsed by one electoral ward each. In the end, the white MP was reselected at a meeting, behind closed doors, of some sixty constituency delegates. Ethnographically most telling was the published
comment of a Hindu *community leader*: ‘Syd Bidwell ... has been a Hindu MP, he has been a Muslim MP, he has been a Christian MP.’ (*The Gazette*, 26 September 1986, 5).

This list discreetly fails to mention Sikhs, the vast majority of South Asian Southallians. Representation by an English-born MP seemed to reassure local minorities that no Sikh hegemony would be established in local politics. Seen in this light, it cannot have helped one favoured contender that the local press made him out to be ‘bidding to become Britain’s first Sikh MP’ (*The Gazette*, 19 September 1986, 4, my italics). The idea that a white MP was an appropriate choice because of his neutrality was widespread among my informants; none the less it was thought certain that his successor would eventually be a Punjabi, as well as a Sikh, namely the Chairman of the Indian Workers’ Association. The prediction was proved correct by the reselection process of 1991.

The local Indian Workers’ Association, which claims a membership of 18,000, including 12,000 among Southall residents, was founded in 1957. As its name indicates, it is not a comprehensively civic institution, although Southallians of Pakistani nationality are admitted as associate members. Nonetheless, it is the only organization that could rival the Labour Party for its political influence. Its most prominent members were indeed active in the Party as well, and even the Council of Ealing Borough as a whole would think long and hard before antagonizing the organization. The extraordinary links between the local Labour Party, the Borough Council, and the IWA were well illustrated in the mid-1980s when the Borough Council used part of its own funds, as well as substantial European subsidies, to build an ostentatious new community centre for Southall. It was built on a site immediately adjoining the IWA offices and on a plot that remains the property of the IWA. This resource, known as the Dominion Centre, was completed, after much wrangling, in 1986. Below I shall give a brief case-study of ‘stories’ told about this community centre, in order to focus on the *community*-orientated discourse of Southallians’ political culture. To appreciate the context of these ‘stories’, it is useful to sketch the parameters that command most of the town’s political and civic activity. The two factors that shape it most visibly are the commitments of *community leaders* and the need to relate local requirements to wider policy concerns.

The notion of a *community leader* is no less vague in Southall than elsewhere in Britain. The vagueness of the term is connected, it appears, to the vagueness of *community* as a descriptive term for an ethnic or cultural category of people. Just as *communities* show large areas of overlap
depending on the criteria chosen to define them, so community leaders may claim to speak for a religious, a regional, a linguistic, or a putatively ethnic community depending on context. Alternatively, they may evade clarification and claim to speak for ‘the’ community at large. Some ambiguity over whom exactly one represents is indeed a political asset for many community leaders. It allows them to widen or to focus their search for community support and credibility, and it is necessary for co-optation into the mainstream political establishment in which politicians represent not notional communities, but territorially discrete constituencies.

To seek recognition as a community leader in Southall, there are, broadly speaking, two paths to be followed. The first is epitomized by the successful businessman or, usually male, professional who enhances his social status by gaining a reputation for public-spiritedness. Public service for voluntary associations can be validated by placing it in parallel to the religious duties of rendering ‘service’ (Punjabi: seva), especially when it benefits charitable institutions without an explicitly political agenda. The key resources of these, by and large liberal or conservative, community leaders are personal status and respectability; election to the management committee of one or preferably several voluntary organizations; and often also membership of the local Labour Party or the IWA. The second path to claiming recognition as a community leader is characteristic of younger men and women with explicitly political commitments. Sometimes known as ‘political activists’, these personalities may be volunteers or paid employees in a wide range of politically combative organizations. Examples could be seen in an advisory service financed by trade-union funds, and in institutions funded by grants from the borough, such as two law centres, a body to monitor racist attacks and policing practices, or organizations set up on ethnic or national criteria to provide services for one or another community. Many who pursue community leader status along this ‘politically activist’ path acquired their political commitments together in the Southall Youth Movement of the 1970s and the later ‘Southall riots’. Their political ideas and strategies have diversified since, and their sectional interests can lead to mutual suspicion and rivalry. None the less, the ‘activist’ path to legitimation as a community leader can, on occasion, be rewarded by full co-optation into the institutional bastions of the local Labour Party, the Borough Council, and various ‘community relations’ bureaucracies.

Within the borough, Southall politicians and community leaders must pursue scarce resources in competition with each other, as well as with
their counterparts from the neighbouring areas. It is easy to see that creative alliances, factional appeals, and some in-fighting are inevitable strategies in this competition. Furthermore, to make a case for any project or initiative, one must appeal both to ideas of ‘ethnic’ justice and to the current political or ideological priorities endorsed by the council, the party, or the national government. These priorities are most often prefigured at the centre of the national parties; and to hook one’s constituency’s interests on to one of these requires special skills. The effort is promising only if one finds allies who ‘know the game’ and are prepared to engage in a certain amount of the horse-trading that is necessary in such competitive circumstances. An almost ironic example of such horse-trading is the following exchange overheard in a Southall pub. One of the protagonists, here named Dave, was a council administrator, a trade union shop steward, and an active member of the Labour Party; the other, Dick, was employed to run an initiative to alleviate youth unemployment.

DICK: Tell you something: I’m looking for a space about 1,500 square feet, for doing upholstery and furniture and that. With office space as well, – with [grins] a nice office for yours sincerely …

DAVE: Yes, I could maybe do something. There’s a lot of space coming up.

DICK: Yeah, that’d be great! About 1,500 feet we’d need.

G.B.: 1,500? That’s huge!

DICK: It’s not when you think about it. This pub’s easily – what – 1,000 already!

DAVE: Has it got anything to do with unemployment?

DICK: Yeah, it’s all for training actually, training people for jobs and that. – I can also say that – it’s – at least half of them’s Asian youngsters.

DAVE: Well, that’s not so important for me …

DICK: [interrupts] No, no, I know. No, but if it’s unemployment, that’s just my concern.

DAVE: No, but if it’s unemployment, that’s just my concern.

DICK: [repeating] Yeah, I know it isn’t…

DAVE: No, if it’s unemployed people, we could maybe do something there. Though you know, it can take a bit of time. Maybe two or three months. Have I got your phone number?

DICK: Yeah, there’d also be about half Asian kids on it. Do you have a pen? I’ll give you my office number. – Ta! [writes a phone number on a paper napkin]

– Who was it they say used to sign cheques on napkins – Churchill, wasn’t it?

DAVE: [takes the napkin and folds it] Yes, I’ll see what I can do for the space. 1,500 you say.

DICK: Yep, that’d be good! Thanks a lot, Dave! [hands back the pen].

Hurrying to the toilet to take my notes, I wondered if Dick might not better try a political broker with a Council brief for ‘Asian kids’. There is, it should be said, nothing corrupt or untoward in this exchange; it
shows merely that the search for public resources must be hooked onto one or another recognized political concern, and that the activist must know both which concern might serve the purpose, and which broker of resources should be approached. Success is rarely as effortless as in this example, and I have often marvelled at the painstaking and ceaseless toil that some community leaders are prepared to shoulder beside their full-time jobs. Given that competition and scarcity often spell failure rather than success at securing resources, why do they continue; and, as importantly, why do their followers continue to rely on them?

The answer is threefold in both cases. Community leaders are often motivated by a strong moral sense of justice for, and service to, their claimed constituencies; they are able to function because the political establishment has eo-opted them as representatives of their communities; and they gain from their efforts access to more desirable social networks and the respect or gratitude of those they have served. Yet it would be quite wrong to assume that all, or perhaps even most, community leaders are representative of their communities, let alone able to mobilize them. This is also common outside Southall, as is clear from most of the discussions of ‘Black and Ethnic Leaderships’ assembled in Werbner and Anwar’s (1991) comprehensive collection. Why then do so many people continue to rely on them? The answer again involves at least three factors. People unable to secure the resources due to them on the basis of citizenship alone may follow community leaders because they are seen to have been eo-opted by the political establishment; they will do so for as long as they see no better or alternative brokerage services offered to them; and they rely on brokerage because what they want is often so strikingly simple, precisely defined, and cheap, that it seems ‘only just’ out of reach. Many Southallians cannot believe that it could take so much patience, ingenuity, bureaucracy, and rivalry for community leaders to secure what is needed.

Yet the competition for resources, and the vagaries of the political or ideological concerns that one needs to hook one’s case onto are such that most community leaders serve communities full of disappointment and grievances. This is so not only in Southall; here, however, competition between different communities is perhaps more starkly defined, and the leaders of one particular community feel especially aggrieved at the lack of their own resources and even of access to those secured by others. The marginalization of the Afro-Caribbean population appears marked in many regards and forms the background to the following case-study. It is a study of words proffered, rather than actions observed, and is thus
presented as an account of 'stories' told. What matters in re-telling them is not to adjudicate which story is 'true'. Rather, the stories are offered as an illustration, in one case, of how even a civic resource is subject to competition and claims, counterclaims, and denials, all expressed on behalf of communities.

**Case-study: stories of a community centre**

A cinema named the Dominion, one of Southall's three film theatres in the 1960s, was purchased by the Indian Workers' Association in 1967. It then provided showings of Indian films, a highly popular entertainment at the time. Over the 1970s, attendances dropped, however, as South Asian families were quicker than most others in Britain to purchase their own video recorders for the same purpose: to view Indian films and often thus to share with their children a part of their cultural heritage (Gillespie 1989). By the late 1970s, the cinema had lapsed into disuse and disrepair.

A group of young Afro-Caribbeans, named Peoples Unite, occupied the semi-derelict building in late 1981. The context of this occupation needs some explanation. Peoples Unite was part of the liberationist political culture of the late 1970s; many of its members were Afro-Caribbeans who had also participated in the formation of the Southall Youth Movement in 1976, responding to the perceived 'sell-out' of older community leaders in the face of police harassment and a lack of protection from racial attacks. In 1979, 'Peoples Unite' had leased from the Borough Council a house known as '6 Parkview' and had run in it a drop-in centre mainly used by Afro-Caribbean Southallians. Shortly after the 'Southall riots' in April of that year, this house, situated in close vicinity to Southall police station, was bulldozed without prior announcement and without compensation, in order to make room for a purpose-built old-age-pensioners' home. Finding themselves deprived of their base, the activists turned to the disused Dominion Cinema and installed on its first floor a second-hand pool table and music equipment. One of the organizers described it thus in an interview with Richard Hundleby:

The youth of Southall realised they needed a place to use, and, being pushed by myself, took over the Dominion, - not the running of it all - took over the running of what was happening there, and we fixed it up. We gave it a paint job and fumigated the place. We fixed the seats in the cinema etc., so we could use the place as a centre and as basically a place where we could also have functions ... We started off using the Dominion as a drop-in centre for the unemployed - it was not an Afro-Caribbean centre in the Caribbean sense. Those who were using the place were young people of employable age, and this varies. Also a lot
of elderly members used the centre; even though they were working, they would still use the place to meet and socialize. (Hundleby 1987, 31, italics in original)

In another activist’s account, it was not Afro-Caribbean youths that occupied the Dominion, but an ‘Asian’ organisation that cynically used the derelict building for its own ends. The story thus told serves as a charter of origin for one of Southall’s two principal Afro-Caribbean organizations, named Unity of African Caribbean Peoples or UACP:

The reason the Black Community became so outraged was because there were NO organisations in Southall that could show how it had helped the Black Community. Yet there was an Asian organisation claiming in the local paper that the ‘drop in Centre’ which they had established in a derelict cinema was about to be closed and they were looking at ways of getting more grant-aid to run another similar project for the unemployed West Indians.

On investigation into the organisation and its so-called West Indian Centre it was found to be a large empty derelict ballroom above a cinema, with two broken pool tables, one broken tennis table, no heating, drinking water etc. The fury of the Black Community was further enraged when it was discovered that this was not the only Asian Organisation in Southall which was receiving grant-aid on behalf of the Afro-Caribbean Community. Out of this fury U.A.C.P was born. (Afro-Caribbean Focus and Beyond 1987, 11, italics in original)

Accordingly, the organization lists as the first of its ‘Aims and Objectives: To obtain an Afro-Caribbean Centre in Southall and provide a channel for the voice of the Afro-Caribbean Community in Southall and its surrounding areas’ (ibid. 1987, 11). This objective was, ostensibly, to be secured by the demolition of the building and its replacement by a purpose-built community centre. The activist first quoted recalls how:

other organisations started complaining after we’d been in the place only a couple of weeks. Specifically, we got messed about by the I.W.A. who at the beginning were quite prepared to let us use the place. But once our job had been done, showing that the centre was viable to be used as somewhere by the community, they were no longer interested, and they were just looking to get us out as quickly as possible. (Hundleby 1987, 32)

The need for a new community centre was indeed endorsed both by the IWA and by the Borough Council. In the aftermath of the ‘Southall riots’, and faced with widespread fears of larger-scale ‘racial unrest’ during the economic recession and political polarization of the early 1980s, politicians of all echelons discovered the ‘needs of ethnic minorities’. With extensive financial help from the European Community’s Urban Aid programme, Ealing Council took in hand the demolition of the Dominion Cinema, leased the land from the IWA for ninety-nine years, and began with the construction of a purpose-built new community centre.
A consultation process was set in motion to solicit future users’ views and wishes. One of the preferences, championed by a number of Afro-Caribbean activists, was for the provision of musical facilities. Acknowledging the importance of music in the youth cultures of both Afro-Caribbeans and South Asians, and the intense activity of local Reggae and Bhangra musicians, the group proposed the provision of soundproofed practice rooms, instruments, equipment, and tuition. Musical provisions were integrated into the centre’s official development plan, and there were persistent and credible rumours that £40,000 had been set aside for visual and audio equipment. Yet when the centre opened in November 1986, the room originally proposed as a studio had been turned into a weightlifting gym, and no musical provisions were to be found.

From its official opening in January 1987, the centre got off to a very slow start. The building itself, architecturally by far the most sophisticated in all Southall, was such that I myself, fully initiated into the confidence tricks of a middle-class upbringing, felt intimidated for a long time whenever I entered its cool splendour past the elegant gateway spelling selectness and some reception staff eying all visitors from their haircuts to their shoes. Many others told me that they felt likewise. Its grandly elegant style and staff, however, were not the only problems.

Afro-Caribbean activists judged their community excluded on purpose and pressed the point in an anonymous pamphlet circulated in Southall from April 1988: ‘Even at this early stage [that is, soon after the opening of the centre three months before] complaints were coming in thick and fast from the Afro-Caribbean community that when they walked into the building they were made to feel unwanted by the majority of staff’ (anon. 1988, 1). Some accounts mention that not one of the seventeen places on the centre’s Management Committee was offered to an Afro-Caribbean organization or person; another, by a South Asian activist, relates that, in a gesture of solidarity, she passed her own seat to the chair of an Afro-Caribbean organization. The centre’s own Annual Report for its second year of operation lists one Afro-Caribbean Southallian among its Management Committee. The report admits that ‘the year has been a mixture of success, failure, hard work, trials and tribulations’ (Dominion 1989, 4). Among its successes, it lists adult education classes with 240 enrolments between September and April; a pensioners’ luncheon club serving food contracted from a South Asian restaurant to a grand average of ten participants; letting its space for recitals and classes of South Asian music organized by a pre-existing and independent founda-
tition; and running a crèche with an average of only five children attending (Dominion 1989, 5-7, 10-12). Among its ‘priorities for the future’, the first was identified as ‘representation from a wider network of women and women’s groups in the community’ (Dominion 1989, 16).

Laudable and politically correct as this priority must be, it fitted better into the worldview of Ealing Council policy makers than into the local discourse of separate communities vying for equal rights of access. The two had already clashed early in 1988, when the centre declared Wednesdays to be ‘Women Only’ days. As it happened, it was a Wednesday when the chair of the local ‘Age Concern’ group of pensioners tried to show the newly built centre to a score of, mostly white, retired women and men. In accordance with the new policy, the group was refused access to the building, reportedly empty at the time. The – mostly white, – Southallians concluded, in the words of their guide, that ‘this centre is not for us’. The local press carried further messages complaining of exclusion:

Old people are going to Hounslow and Greenford because they don’t get what they want at the Dominion. (The Gazette, 19 February 1988, 11)

Southall’s Caribbean Focus and Beyond say management at the Dominion Centre, The Green, are holding purely Asian events that exclude both blacks and whites. [The organisation’s] leader ... said: ‘Black youths and also the white population are made to feel unwelcome at the Dominion, as though they were treading on Asian-only territory.’ (The Gazette, 15 April 1988, 3)

The political discourse and civic culture of Southallians is shown, in this case-study, as being highly susceptible to arguments on the basis of the communities of ‘colour’, rather than cross-cutting civic ideas and ideals. Public spaces and facilities are often judged first on whether they ‘are for’ one community or another. The few exceptions I have found among public institutions are the Labour Party, the churches, and the socialist or liberationist groups and initiatives. Yet these are not civic institutions so much as alternative communities of conviction. One example of such a rare exception should be given, though, both for the sake of its local tone and because it raises an important question which will be addressed later on, namely, how far Southallians of different communities might want to see themselves as forming one solidary ‘Black’ community. Reacting to the under-use of the Dominion Centre, the chief Afro-Caribbean proponents of better musical resourcing protested their claims by looking beyond community boundaries. They invoked three exemplars that anthropologists might call Southall’s mythical ‘hero martyrs’
(McCann 1985): the youth whose stabbing sparked off the formation of the Southall Youth Movement in 1976, the socialist demonstrator who was killed during the 'Southall riots' of 1979, and a prominent local businessman who was assassinated on the orders of Khalistan activists in 1985:

Every empty room is
a slander to the memory of Gurdip Singh Chaggar.
Every unused piece of equipment is
a travesty to the memory of Blair Peach.
And every day the building is closed early,
an abomination to the memory of Tarsem Singh Toor.

(Southall Musical Enterprises 1987, 12)

Such cross-community appeals, even rhetorical ones, are so rare as to be precious in the local political culture. Southall has neither the municipal institutions of a town in its own right, nor the comprehensively civic institutions of a localized civil society that might integrate and amalgamate community-specific requirements and leaderships. In the political sphere, the notion of community has come to serve as shorthand for a category of people in need of civic resources and reliant upon the brokerage of community leaders, largely self-selected. In such a milieu, and faced with a scarcity of public resources, there is little chance for a political culture based upon individualist civil rights. Instead, rights and resources are claimed in the name of communities that must, in effect, compete with each other. What Southall culture the ethnographer can discover at first sight is a culture of people intent upon moving out and up and yet tied to the place by common economic problems, community bonds, and the recourse to community claims in the competitive public arena. To progress further in a study of Southallians, one must first study the dominant discourse as locals engage it. This is the task of the following chapter, which reviews each community one by one. So far as is useful, it will trace, for each community, the outlines of the dominant discourse, and will then explore the local migratory histories and local structural placings of each.