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John Clayton
* Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Education and Society, Priestman Building, University of Sunderland, Sunderland, UK

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Thinking spatially: towards an everyday understanding of inter-ethnic relations

John Clayton
Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Education and Society, Priestman Building, University of Sunderland, Sunderland SR1 3PZ, UK, john.clayton@sunderland.ac.uk

In the context of a shift away from municipal multiculturalism towards community cohesion, and in the light of renewed debates around difference, national identity and Britishness, this article sets out a geographically informed theoretical framework which focuses upon the spatial (re)construction of racial and ethnic identities. The article develops the idea of the everyday as a way of viewing the spatially contingent, complex and negotiated state of inter-ethnic relations in a specific UK city. Not only does this reveal the manner in which strong and stubborn boundaries between social groups are entrenched through the (re)enforcement of spatialised relations of power, but also how accommodations across, between and within difference are realised. Through the employment of empirical material from Leicester, England, the article contends that everyday solidarities emerge from a number of intersecting spatial influences which do not equate to abstract or fixed versions of national belonging.

Key words: multiculturalism, community cohesion, inter-ethnic relations, everyday geographies, identities, belonging.

Community cohesion and national belonging

The contested term of multiculturalism as public policy has historically sought to balance principles of citizenship, equality and justice alongside an acceptance of racial, cultural and religious diversity in order to meet the requirements of co-existing social groups (Kymlicka and Norman 2000). In recent decades this form of social policy and model of national belonging has been interpreted and implemented in different ways in various post-colonial nation-states (Clayton 2009). In the UK, anti-discrimination legislation introduced in the 1960s and 1970s marked the formal adoption of such an approach. With pressure and support from grassroots organisations, the 1980s saw some Labour-controlled councils in Britain, particularly in multi-ethnic urban areas, develop municipal programmes designed to meet the needs of specific minority communities in such areas as education, language services, religious worship and political representation. However, more recently many western governments, including the UK, have increasingly distanced themselves from such an official philosophy (Back et al. 2002), persuaded by the argument that multiculturalism is essentially divisive, reifying differences.
between individuals and contributing to racialised forms of resentment, mistrust and inter-ethnic conflict.¹

In the UK this has coincided with ongoing popular deliberations and anxieties around race, national identity and Britishness, in a period characterised by what Gilroy (2004) identifies as post-imperial melancholia. Mediated by a sensationalist press (Neal 2003), the damaging effects of both established and new immigrant communities on an imagined, unified and essentially white British identity have continued to be expounded (Nash 2003). Many of these concerns, questioning the allegiance of minority ethnic communities, have been expressed in the aftermath of overt inter-ethnic hostility, generating bi-partisan political support for greater social cohesion and national unity as the solution to cultural incompatibility (Phillips 2005).

The language of cohesion, one of the central doctrines of the New Labour government (Burnett 2004), gained currency in 2001 when urban areas of Lancashire and West Yorkshire in England saw brief, small-scale, but high-impact disturbances. Sporadic violence took place between young, disenfranchised British Muslims, racist groups and the police, concentrated in urban areas suffering from multiple deprivation and the growth of the far-right British National Party (BNP) (Renton 2003). The official government response to these disturbances stressed common values, social order, solidarity, interaction and a shared sense of belonging as key to more harmonious relations (Cantle 2001). The notion of similarity and a shared national identity has also been evident in growing demands for minority communities to aspire to a common, yet seemingly quite arbitrary, set of ascribed values and competencies, evident in the introduction of ‘Life in the UK’ citizenship tests.

While there have been attempts to outline alternative models of national belonging (for example Parekh 2000), the dominant approach has arguably narrowed the terms of legitimate forms of belonging. At the same time it has shifted responsibility for social problems such as inter-ethnic conflict onto marginalised communities themselves, through a denial of structural and geographical context (Amin 2005). More recently this issue has been re-visited in ‘Our Shared Future’, the work of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007). McGhee (2008) argues that, reinforced by successive government statements stressing the importance of a shared sense of Britishness, the report continues to emphasise behavioural explanations of inter-ethnic tension, a view of cohesion that ‘transmogrifies into assimilationism’ (Pilkington 2008). However, as Keith (2007) points out in defence of the report, there has been a demonstrable move towards greater conceptual sophistication through an understanding of identities variously connected to the local, the national and the global, and through a vision of the nation not as fixed, but in formation. It is within this debate that this article is situated and to which it looks to contribute.

Drawing upon fieldwork conducted with young people in the city of Leicester, England—a place often held up as exhibiting positive and progressive inter-ethnic relations—this article presents a conceptual framework which emphasises the productivity and nuances of lived identities and situated inter-ethnic relations. It is contended that a failure to move critiques of multiculturalism on from nationally framed, fixed and abstract models of identity and belonging is also a failure to recognise a range of challenges, complexities and possibilities, caught up in the everyday. This interpretation relies upon a relational reading of space and...
develops those influences which coalesce through variegated everyday experiences and position individuals as regards inter-cultural openness and closure. It is to this reading of space to which the paper briefly turns.

**Thinking geographically: space as productive**

Aside from an increasingly unpopular political discourse, multiculturalism must also be considered as an everyday phenomenon of inter-cultural co-existence (Amin 2002). This requires a shift in attention from the grand towards the more mundane yet significant relationship between space and racialised identities. While a state of shared unity is often posited as the answer to inter-ethnic tension, unity and disunity along racial, ethnic and alternative lines are recognised here as states of disorder, with patterns of solidarity not formed as an end point, but re-formed in relation to the demands, pressures and spatial ordering of everyday life. This is particularly significant for those who find themselves at the heart of inter-ethnic conflict on the basis of relative powerlessness, marginal positioning and spatial immobility. An understanding of space that is *relational*, that is constructed through connections as opposed to territorial and scalar units (Massey 2004, 2005), and *productive* of differences, rather than merely a reflection of them, is then critical to an appreciation of the power and potential of such experiences.

Responding to post-structural theories of identity, geographers have increasingly departed from approaches content with counting and mapping racial and ethnic difference (Dwyer and Bressey 2008). Such work has been particularly successful in opening up place, cities and urban sites as powerful elements within processes of racialisation, flagging up the dangers of treating space as solely an *outcome* of other processes. Accordingly, the spatial, itself a product of competing discourses, practices and power relations, has the capacity to constitute, constrain and mediate social distinctions including race (Delaney 2002; Sundstrum 2003). If then the terms of identity are not straightforwardly given, but *worked at* through language and action, and if these identities do not just take place, but also *make place*, there is a need to understand the way in which inter-ethnic relations may be the emerging outcome of ‘everyday’ spatial influences.

Despite challenges of definition (Felski 2000; Highmore 2001), the everyday is a useful conceptual tool through which to examine the spatial and temporal dynamics of identity and inter-culturalism. These elements are apparent in the work of de Certeau (1984), who brings our attention to the space-times of the everyday by opposing it to the planner’s all-encompassing view, a totalising eye removed from the bustling liveliness of the urban experience. de Certeau highlights the ways in which the life of the streets is practised and inventively re-created through the ruses and tactics of the ordinary man [*sic*]. In this way the ordinary spatial trajectories of individuals are deemed vital contributory elements to the character, use and transformation of urban space. Drawing on de Certeau’s idea of the city walker, Secor points towards the active and productive construction of identity and difference:

- City walkers traverse interlacing ‘grids of difference’ and find themselves taking up particular subject positions in relation to the various (religiously, ethnically, or class-based) communities and spaces that organize their spatial
trajectories. As their footsteps narrate urban stories—fixing, assembling, traversing, and transforming urban boundaries—urban travellers become active participants in the production of difference, identity, and citizenship. (2004: 358)

While these ‘walkers’ are situated by unequal socio-economic positions and the demands of the communities in which they are caught up, their trajectories are not inherent, nor passively restricted to a single form of identification but actively (re)created within ‘grids of difference’ (Pratt 1999).

Whilst unanticipated spaces and risky situations form a vital element of everyday urban existence, everyday life is for many a pattern constituted by key routes and limited spaces of familiarity. For Giddens (1984), the recursive and repetitious nature of social life provides a form of ontological security, which seemingly fixes and reinforces the assumed fabric of existence. In emphasising this idea of routine, Felski (2000) also shows how a variety of movements, gestures, speech acts and embodied forms become engrained and sustained. Everyday life is a form of normalisation which often unconsciously reproduces the ‘hum’ of the ordinary, a ‘process of becoming acclimatised to assumptions, behaviours and practices which come to seem self-evident and taken for granted’ (Felski 2000: 31).

However, as suggested by Secor (2004) above, a focus on the everyday also highlights the dynamic and processual relationship between the spatial and the social. As Valentine (1999: 57) puts it, we ‘constantly negotiate space, position ourselves, physically, socially, politically and metaphorically in relation to others’. While the ability to position ourselves is restricted by a range of circumstances, there is a tension between the ways in which identities and social relations become engrained and accepted but also disturbed and re-worked. The very disorder of the everyday, highlighted in the work of de Certeau, is critical to an understanding of the opportunities which that disorder brings forth, opportunities which are both ‘lethal and life-giving’ (Kinser 1992: 77).

The multicultural city of Leicester

The tensions of everyday life are demonstrated and explored in what follows with reference to empirical research conducted with young people from a range of national, racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds in the city of Leicester, England (Clayton 2006). The broader project involved a series of semi-structured interviews, group discussions, informal conversations, photo diaries and participant observation in a number of youth-based settings over the course of one year. Group discussions were initially held at five secondary schools located within different areas of the city and set within a variety of different social, economic and cultural contexts. A centrally located Further Education (FE) College campus formed the primary research site for group discussions with six different vocational classes and a series of follow-up meetings and interviews with thirty students from different ethnic backgrounds. Formal and informal discussions were also conducted with white young people in one of the most deprived outer estates in the city through the neighbourhood-based youth centre. The study examined the everyday experiences of young people in Leicester, their everyday spatial trajectories, their own emergent identities, their attitudes towards and experiences of differentiated ‘others’ as well as their relationship to the idea of Leicester as a ‘successful multicultural city’.
In contrast to other multi-ethnic urban centres in the UK, such as the North West of England (Amin 2002; Kalra 2000; Kundnani 2001; Webster 2003), the provincial, medium-sized city of Leicester\(^3\) has in recent decades established itself as a model of harmonious inter-ethnic relations. This is largely based on the relative absence of visible inter-ethnic tension and formal racist activity, despite being predicted to become the first non-white majority city in the UK (Whewell 2008). The evolution of a mixed local economy, assisted by the entrepreneurial activities of a predominantly middle-class East African Indian immigrant community from the 1970s, is particularly emphasised in this discourse of multicultural success (Clayton 2006). The local political scene can also been held in sharp relief to many other UK cities in terms of support for minority organisations and recognition of institutionalised discrimination (Lewis 1997; Malik 2002). Leicester has witnessed extensive political representation from minority ethnic communities, allowing for greater dialogue between the local authority and minority grassroots groups (Vertovec 1996). While the situation is far from stable or resolved,\(^4\) this dominant discourse of multicultural success provides a unique perspective. It indicates the importance of the dynamics of place as well as playing a significant role in framing everyday experiences of identity, difference and belonging in both progressive and more divisive ways (Clayton 2008).

Cultures of acceptance and belonging

One of the most potent vehicles for a distinction between insiders and outsiders encountered through the research is the racialised ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) and the re-formation of an exclusive ‘collective we’. The idea of a national homogenous community which has been polluted through immigration is particularly expressed by those young people identifying as white and living in some of the more marginalised and disconnected outer estates in the city.\(^5\) Defensive reactions against perceived threats to a presumed original ‘whiteness’ are pieced together in relation to ideas and practices of race and culture and through intersecting spatial communities including the nation, place, home and educational spaces. As such, notions of legitimate belonging are made material through geographies of similarity, but also through sites of interaction and encounter.

In one small-group discussion (all of whose participants identified as white and British, ages 13–14) within an ethnically ‘mixed’ secondary school in a predominantly white working-class neighbourhood, the young people discussed how well they thought those from different ethnic backgrounds got on with each other in the city.\(^6\) Recognising that within the context of the discussion, they were in a rare space constituted by those of their own racial group,\(^6\) they offered a largely negative account of inter-ethnic relations, disputing the city’s harmonious reputation. The discussion quickly moved on to expressions of exclusive notions of belonging with particular reference to experiences within the school including disputes across racial and ethnic lines and perceptions of ‘preferential treatment’, particularly for those with additional language requirements. In this way the arenas of the school and the nation are used as interchangeable references, whereby both negative and more positive inter-ethnic encounters are used as a justification for ideas of legitimate national belonging, that is, who should remain and who, in the words of Sonia below, should be ‘chucked out’.

In the following excerpt from this discussion, visible racial distinction figures as the key

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marker of difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’. However, the criteria used to distinguish those seen as acceptably different (or acceptably non-white) and those seen as ‘too different’ and thus incompatible, is principally that of shared language through which other commonalities could begin to be identified. Sonia, a 13-year-old female, states:

Sonia: But then I suppose in a way I’m wrong because we’ve to keep some of them, chucking them all out, the ones we like.

John: Which ones do you like?
Sonia: Some that we get to know in the school or whatever.

John: What is it about those…
Sonia: …they’re nice, they speak to you. They’re like, they want to be your friend or whatever … I don’t mean this in a bad way, but you know Indians that are born here and they speak English like us and I know it might sound a bit bad but I think they’re all right. Like Bhuvan.

While Sonia expresses some extreme ideas, the importance of language as a mode of social alignment provides evidence here of a limited flexibility to her rules and practices of local/national acceptance. As Pred (1998) shows, racism no longer just works through a misplaced biological logic, but also through what he terms ‘cultural incommensurability’. Other forms of distinction between minority ethnic groups in the city, such as that between more established, second- or third-generation immigrant communities and more recent arrivals further illustrate this point. Commonly employed name-calling and labels encountered through the fieldwork such as freshie mock the linguistic abilities and stylistic choices made by the newer arrivals and allow racialised individuals some sense of power over the ‘un-assimilated’ in a situation of relative powerlessness.

Sonia’s expressions of selective racism are complex given her own inter-racial experiences, not only within the school but also within the spaces of the home. Her ideas of legitimate forms of belonging are re-iterated through her close relationship with her stepfather (whom she identified as black) and through her articulation of popular racist imagery, with reference to an Islamophobic discourse and the much-cited and much-feared folk devil figure of the ‘asylum seeker’.

Sonia: Because there’s that many of them. Well there’s that many Indians and Sikhs and Islams [sic] and all asylum seekers and whatever … I’m not being racist, because my stepdad’s black and that. But fair enough blacks that like grew up here and that or whatever, but I’ve had enough of the asylum seekers.

She uses her intimate familial connection to the racialised ‘other’ here to escape being branded racist, despite her overt demonstration of animosity towards specific ethnic and religious groups. In an echo of the policy discussion at the outset of this paper, the basis upon which legitimate belonging is judged is cultural adaptation and assimilation to a more (racially coded) British way of life. Those with a more transient existence, more recent arrivals and those who follow religiously alien practices are seen as most offensive to the normalcy of whiteness, while the racial identity of Sonia’s stepfather is not seen to upset the established cultural order or pose any kind of serious ontological threat. The boundaries of acceptance for Sonia do stretch, but they do not stretch far beyond those people she has come to know.

Everyday encounters with those recognised as different-but-similar highlight the forms of negotiation at work in definitions of local/national inclusion and the ways in which
meanings of race and racism are re-configured through these experiences. As Byrne (2002: 26) shows, the nation is pieced together through ‘forms of living, through personal histories and everyday routines and consumption’. Inclusion is therefore not static but processual and performed, in constant (re)formation through ordinary practices (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002). However, this acceptance of certain ‘others’ also demonstrates that the power to draw the lines of acceptance is unequally distributed (in this case in favour of those privileged by their whiteness as a marker of their legitimate Britishness). The ‘collective we’ of the nation is an organising resource, used to locate the self and others, but one which only comes to make sense through lived experience and one which is not available to all.

Placing everyday experience/placing racisms

Forms of limited acceptance and anxieties over the threat of racial difference are both re-produced through the sensual fields of the everyday. While some experiences may facilitate inter-cultural negotiation, it is also clear that the white gaze locates danger on the black body, whereby the presence of the ‘other’ comes to stand for a difference which is always already about to do violence to the integrity of the ‘white nation’ (Butler 1993). In the following discussion two students from an all-male Further Education College class illustrate this by referring to an experience of exclusion and rejection on the basis of an embodied racial identity. This is an ethnically mixed class whose camaraderie, group identity and levels of communication are well developed. Nitin, an 18-year-old male, identifies as British Indian and lives in one of the central areas of the city, noted for its deprivation and racially coded in terms of its non-whiteness. Christopher, also male and 18 years old, identifies as white and has lived most of his life on one of the poorest outer white working-class estates in the city. Nitin here describes the experience of being identified as ‘matter out of place’ (Sibley 1995).

Nitin: I went to this pub, do you know that pub when you go to Loughborough, there’s that pub next to the roundabout?
Christopher: Yeah
Nitin: We went in there about four or five of us, all Indians, all of us Asians yeah? We went in there and there was all white people in there, all like looking at us, giving us dirty looks and stuff.
Christopher: I don’t know what it’s called but it is like that.
Nitin: Yeah, he would get in [looking at Christopher] and no one would even look at him or nothing!

The communication, co-operation and friendship demonstrated by Nitin and Christopher in the classroom and this discussion (and also to a limited extent outside of the classroom, for example, they would spend time as a group in the local pub during breaks), appears in sharp contrast to the encounter described and the significance of their racial differences marked on their bodies. It is clear to see why for some individuals and social groups the everyday is largely constructed of spaces and routes of the familiar, reducing the risk of events such as this where, in the eyes of those ‘offended’, the established racial ordering of space is transgressed. This situation demonstrates how forms of racial exclusion and inter-cultural collaboration can simultaneously co-exist in this city, but more importantly indicates how the spatial context, social dynamics and the intensity and type of inter-ethnic engagement defines performances
of racism. Significantly, this incident took place in a pub, but more importantly a particular pub on the outskirts of the city, a symbolic space and a location that in the local vernacular are understood and successively marked out as white spaces. In order to make sense of these forms of racism, it is necessary to know something more about the racialised geographies of place.

As Keith (1995) argues, there is a need to conceptualise racism and the power relations which sustain it as contextual, based around relations which intersect in and through specific places over time. The cultural dynamics of place (Sandercock 2003) and informal histories of conflict and compromise feed into, and off, prevailing socio-economic conditions and are constituted by disputes across social, economic and cultural positions (Jacobs 1996). Even in Leicester, a city which has not experienced sharp economic downturns to the same extent as other parts of the UK and heralded for its harmonious relations, it is possible to observe articulations of white defensiveness and loss (Clayton 2008).

The following excerpt is taken from an interview with Warren (male, 19 years old, identifying as white), who lives on one of the most deprived white working-class neighbourhoods in the city. His vision/version of the city is one which has been damaged by the presence of racially identifiable immigrants to the neglect of the needs of those ‘born and bred’ in Leicester, an argument which to some extent tallies with Sonia’s claims above concerning those who may have culturally adapted. Crucially such sentiments need to be considered in relation to expressions of classed marginalisation and neglect articulated in our conversations, in contrast to the vibrant and cosmopolitan city packaged and marketed to external middle-class audiences.

Warren: The government ain’t thinking about them, they’re more bothered about these people that have just come another country and getting them somewhere to live, where the people that are crammed up in a house … they’re not bothered about them, the people that live in Leicester, that are from Leicester, born in Leicester, bred in Leicester.

Warren spoke at length of his personal and family circumstances as a rationale for his opposition to the notion of Leicester as a successful multicultural city. The ‘them’ he refers to here are those young people he identifies as like himself, who have grown up in the city but are struggling to find housing and employment. Warren did not do well at school and had not achieved adequate qualifications to progress in formal education, relying on casual labour as his source of income. However, work was seen as increasingly hard to secure, as established tradesmen were seen to be undercut by new arrivals who would work for less. The blame for these problems is laid by Warren at the door of the national government for a failure in provision of resources, but also on the bodies of racialised others within the city such as ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘Somalians’ [sic]. Given his awareness of sensitivities around discussions of racism in the city, as well as the personalised context of our one-to-one discussion,7 this issue is not explicitly racialised here. The distinction made is between those accepted as ‘locals’ with associated entitlements and (racially distinguishable) newcomers.

An understanding of place emphasises that experiences between and within places differ in terms of how individuals are positioned through their racial and ethnic identities, their social class positions but also their geographic locations. These complex locations are vital in influencing the terms upon which negotiations of difference take place. The context of place
is not merely a setting against which inter-ethnic relations are played out, rather it is actively employed through articulations and practices of belonging to mark out differences and similarities and make sense of everyday circumstance.

**Encountering and imagining difference through the city**

Cities are primarily arenas of social concentration (Pile 1999) as well as stages for multiple practices of belonging, ethnic mixture and cultural diversity where encounters with difference are at their most intense. While the nature of these encounters is dependent upon situated histories of tension and accommodation, one way in which cities bring together socially distant strangers in close physical proximities is through the forced propinquity of public spaces. For young people in Leicester, this is particularly seen in those areas beyond the reach of practices of entrenched neighbourhood territoriality such as central public spaces. As Neil (male, 14 years old, identifying as white) explains in one group discussion in a secondary school, shared spaces such as the main central park in the city offer rare opportunities for inter-cultural engagement on the basis of informal and loosely organised mutual interests, such as playing football:

Neil: Yeah Victoria Park I was playing football and loads, there’s always you see these African people play football down there quite a lot and they come up and offer a game to us quite a lot of times and there’s these Japanese people come down there and they offer us matches as well.

On the basis of such experiences, some scholars have pointed towards the potential of urban living, whereby co-existence is framed as a positive precursor to more open and democratic cultures (Young 1990; Zukin 2000). However, one must be careful not to overstate the importance of such spaces as those of lasting and fruitful engagement (Amin and Thrift 2002). Given the cultural and experiential baggage brought into such encounters, including intersections of race, social class and gender (Ruddick 1996), inter-cultural contact does not always translate into progressive and long-term social relations. The above football match portrays a short moment of time and a masculine performance in which racial distinctions remain largely intact through the separation of teams into established and competitive groups of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Ali: That’s one of the main places because everyone likes to play football down there and last summer, Somalian people, black, white people, all playing together in the cage and if one Somalian people just trips one black guy up or white guy then everyone gets mouthing and they are gonna fight, it’s that simple, yeah. And then I, and now it’s like this is ours and other days it’s yours and sometimes when they both want to play.

Other young men in the study, such as Ali (17 years old, identifying as Somali, FE College) also referred to the importance of football as a way of bringing different communities together. However, again the relations established are seen as fragile, particularly due to the context of the inner-city multi-ethnic neighbourhood in which this is set. Ali describes how he, his friends and others from the neighbourhood would regularly congregate in an area identified as ‘the cage’. He explains how ownership of ‘the cage’ is up for grabs, that various groups make claims on the site as their own and that this
weakly marked-out territory is a site of contestation. When trouble flares up and relationships become fraught due to the competitive nature of the encounter, the primary point of distinction is based upon strict ethnic identities.

These distinctions may be forgotten or overlooked, but on other occasions remembered, particularly where blame is looking to be laid. Proximity and distance is key to an understanding of the dynamics of these juxtapositions (Fortier 2008), not just in terms of physical nearness and farness, but also in terms of social distances. This interplay between social differentiation and physical encounters is, as Ahmed and Stacey (2001:7) explain, a way ‘of thinking through the nearness of other others, but a nearness that involves distanciation and difference’.

Cities are also constituted by spaces of more sustained encounter which involve different intensities of engagement, such as the workplace (Estlund 2003), and more importantly for young people, places of education (Gillborn 1995). Experiences of these spaces can be both progressive and divisive, depending upon the manner in which engagement is facilitated and the weight of past experiences. The following excerpt, taken from a group discussion with a youth group from a predominantly white working-class estate, illustrates this dynamic.

Michael: People that go to [name of school], they are from Braunstone, Beaumont Leys, they can be from around different places, but if you make friends there then people come from say Beaumont Leys to come down to see people there. So all it takes is like the school to keep people together. But then there’s times when people meet it ends up in fights.

Adam: Kind of different, New Parks and Beaumont Leys because I’m Braunstone they might not accept me.
John: OK.
Adam: Down near Victoria cos I’m white and because I’ve got ginger hair.
This response came out of a discussion with a group of young people from a youth group who live on one of the most deprived outer estates in the city. They were asked about those areas of the city which were not frequently visited or openly avoided and which did not form part of their everyday trajectories. The group articulated that knowledge of who belongs in the largely white outer estates in the city is assessed by personal acquaintance, by becoming known and sometimes by ‘building up a reputation’. For Adam the colour of his skin and the colour of his hair meant that this more everyday and detailed surveillance was not necessary in those areas marked out as racially distinct. These geographies of belonging play a critical role in re-producing raced and classed distinctions and notions of belonging, because they do not remain within the realm of the imagination. They influence which areas are deemed to be safe through the association of certain neighbourhoods with danger and thus have a discernible impact on everyday routes through the city.

As with the other young people in this group Adam’s mobility across the neighbourhoods of the city was noticeably limited. This was based upon a combination of a lack of need to visit other areas beyond his own, a lack of ability and opportunity to do so in the form of economic and cultural capital, fear of neighbouring ‘white’ territories and anxieties around racial difference. Given such constraints it is clear why for some young people the neighbourhood remains a central aspect of their identity and why some arenas and opportunities for intercultural engagement remain beyond their reach.

The mobility and immobility of urban identities

For Sennett (2001) the qualities of the contemporary city enable identities to flow beyond pre-determined and fixed definitions, allowing individuals to ‘become anybody’ (see Robins 2001). In this way, cities are seen to provide a sense of freedom, enabling identities to become more flexible through the possibilities of drawing upon a diverse range of cultural resources (Eade 1997). In the case of many of the young people involved in the research, the employment of multiple cultural resources in the construction of hybrid identities is clearly apparent. Dani (male, 16 years old, FE College student) who arrived relatively recently in the UK as a student, and who lives with his sister, draws upon a number of identities which define his sense of self and his experiences. In the extract below he states that he sees himself as both Muslim and Portuguese, but on other occasions he also makes reference to significant affiliations such as his football teams (Manchester United and Portugal), his student status, his friendship with fellow English as Second Language classmates at the college, his residency in Leicester and his father’s heritage in East Africa.

Dani: A lot of people they don’t say that I’m Muslim because you know gel and everything, you don’t see like, now you can see more people with gel but, you don’t see it too much. They’re saying that you’re not Muslim, you are a Hindu or something like that. I said: ‘No! I’m from Portugal and I’m a Muslim’.

There is no clear conflict of identity demonstrated by Dani, but rather an illustration of the complexity of trans-national identities and the active resistance to fixed and ascribed categorisation, particularly in terms of what being a Muslim might entail (Mahtani 2002; McCrone 2002). As Dwyer (2000) shows, young people from minority ethnic groups in Britain actively and selectively negotiate between a variety of cultural repertoires, in the expression of assertive and emerging forms.
of identity. But it is not just racialised minorities who re-negotiate the terms of their identities in often challenging circumstances.

In sometimes heated discussions with one of the more vocationally based classes at the FE College, Stephen (male, 18 years old, FE College student) stood out as someone who was less willing to enter into a racist discourse, and on some occasions openly objected to some of the more discriminatory sentiment expressed. Stephen, who lived in one of the outer estates in the city but travelled into the centre to attend these classes, identified as ‘white British’ but spoke of close and important friendships with those from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. In his leisure time he devoted himself to constructing his own hip-hop lyrics and occasionally teamed up with friends to perform. As part of this sub-culture he also enjoyed attending music clubs in the city coded as ‘black’ – clubs that for many of his fellow white class mates were seen as strictly out of bounds.

Stephen: Some people like Castle Rock and Zoots you can’t go in there, somebody won’t let you in there unless you are into that culture.
Graham: It’s the culture again.
Stephen: It’s the stuff you’re into.
John: So it’s style and things like that?
Stephen: Yeah.
Craig: That’s racial discrimination and all!
Stephen: No, it isn’t.

Despite the objections and confusions of his classmates as to the relationship between race and culture, Stephen shows how this music scene does not relate merely to distinctions on the basis of skin colour, but to the adoption of other embodied markers such as appearance, clothing, musical taste, specific forms of language and slang, and active interest in certain musical forms, all of which Stephen embraced.

It is not only objections from classmates which Stephen has to endure, with negotiations and contestations of identity and race continuing through his experiences of home, where his outlooks, friendship groups and everyday practices clash with those of his parents.

During the night I talked to my mum. She is a racist. I don’t like her views or beliefs. But she respects mine and helps me with my problems with my black friends. (Entry from Stephen’s personal diary)

As with the situation in the class, this suggests the way in which the liminality (Bhabha 1994) of identity generates new possibilities for debate and negotiation. In this case the commonality of the mother–son relationship overrides other differences in opinion as regards race and she is, despite her reservations, able to offer some sense of empathy and help to Stephen.

However, emerging forms of identity are rarely intentional moves enacted by unconstrained individuals. Neither is the way in which individuals deviate from the contours of strictly defined racial communities representative of a purposefully open and accepting stance (Back and Nayak 1999). As Carl (male, 18 year old, FE College student, identifying as white) confirms through his experience, young people’s views and actions are never concrete but based upon the need to feel socially accepted within unique everyday contexts. Negotiations of inclusion and exclusion are seen here as a tactic used to fit in and be ‘part of the crew’, rather than representing any fixed viewpoint.

Carl: So your views are going to change on that, not necessarily for the better, but that’s how it changes, just because you want to feel socially accepted. So it’s not just about people’s views, it’s about being part of the crew.
Forms of mobility cannot be directly associated with what we might term ‘anti-racist’ positions (Valentine 2008), nor as Heibert (2002) shows, do they necessarily reflect linear processes of acculturation over time. In Carl’s own experience, he does identify a shifting attitude towards those seen as racially different, but these performances of inclusion and exclusion also crucially vary across space. Whilst in the context of his all-white and nearly all-male class he was one of those who joined in some of the racist ‘banter’, in his service job in the leisure industry he admitted to adopting very different practices of acceptance as a tactic to get by in a more multi-ethnic situation. The dynamic possibilities of urban identities are clear, but the ability to ‘become anybody’ is restricted by the strength of community boundaries (Valins 2003), the nature of intercultural encounters as well as prevailing inequalities, racisms and power relations (Skeggs 2004).

As well as the forms of white defensiveness previously outlined, this dynamism can also be seen for those at the forefront of local discourses of racism in Leicester, on the basis of race, religious affiliation and date of arrival in the city. For Sahra (female, 18 years old, FE College student), who identifies primarily as a Muslim born in Somalia, but who has lived in Kenya for fifteen years, it was the presence of a strong, visible, Muslim community in the context of rising Islamophobia which made her and her family decide to settle in Leicester. Although her friendship groups have historically been diverse, coming to this city allowed her to purposefully re-affirm her faith, re-enact religious adherence and build strong and rigid connections to those who share her beliefs.

Sahra: Because in Kenya, all my friends was Christian and I had no friends who was Muslims, so I was like, no if I wear scarf and things like that I’m gonna be different from my other friends. I didn’t wear a scarf so my parents accepted that, but when I moved here I wanted to wear because I saw many people who was wearing and it was all right with them, and they would, yeah, so I started to wear a scarf and practise Islam more then.

In line with Sahra’s account, Leicester is often portrayed as a successful multicultural city but not yet an inter-cultural city in terms of the co-existence of diverse ethnic groups who remain isolated from one another (Hussain, Haq and Law 2003). It is the case that for recent arrivals such as Sahra, more intimate relations with those identified as different are limited. For example, Sahra admitted that while she lived in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood, she had no close Asian friends, with her mosque mostly attended by those from the Somali community. However, this interpretation is to ignore both the basis of marginalisation from the mainstream and the possibility of relations with those from other backgrounds within the bounds of such tightly knit communities. In the case of Sahra this is illustrated in relation to the pan-ethnic and trans-national character of both her neighbourhood and religious community.

Sahra: You get to know more people from different countries, example, it’s more Asian people in Highfields, so when I came to the UK, I didn’t know anything about Asian people. I was used to black people in Kenya, so when I moved to Highfields I saw many people who had got the same religion as me, but different, different skin colour and everything. So I found it a bit funny at the beginning but, it was alright, now I am used to it.

As Lavie and Swedenburg (1996: 10) argue, ‘all cultures in various ways, turn out to be hybrid’. The complexity inherent within social relationships in this city and the opportunities
they afford are crucial to potential and actual progressive identity performances, although such performances as we have seen are often hampered by circumstances beyond the control of the individual.

**Conclusion: negotiating national identities**

Through this paper the significance of spaces of everyday relationality have been explored through the experiences of young people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, as the realm through which identities and solidarities are constructed, contested and negotiated. The voices and experiences of the young people illustrate the complex power relations at work and the negotiated state of identity and belonging in this specific multicultural urban area. The empirical material demonstrates how racisms and inter-cultural accommodations exist side by side, making a straightforward distinction between those places which ‘work’ in terms of positive inter-ethnic relations and those which do not, a misleading binary. Whilst these accounts are based upon co-existence within a place with unique historical developments and opportunities which may not exist in other urban contexts, interpretations and experiences vary on the basis of specific individual and collective positions and trajectories.

These trajectories which draw upon intersecting geographies from the global to the embodied, work to continually re-condition identities of the self and ‘other’. References to spatial and racial exclusivity are bound together through cultures of acceptance and rules of national/local belonging which continue to re-invigorate enduring, but malleable racisms. These expressions and practices are conditioned by the context in which they are enacted and exacerbated by positions of marginality within place. However, there is also evidence of spatial arrangements which facilitate both the practice of diverse identities and more inclusive forms of belonging. Negotiations of difference and sameness take place, in mundane but significant ways through, for example, family and neighbourhood allegiances, sites of habitual engagement and familiarity, sites of sub-cultural style, spaces of education, spaces of employment, religious adherence and shared public spaces. In particular, situations where individuals engage as equals which require a need to ‘get along’ as a coping mechanism or to achieve common ambitions and interests, is vital to more progressive forms of belonging. The terms of identity for these young people are not then based upon abstract notions removed from the spatial experiences that constitute their everyday lives.

As Gilroy (2004: 3) argues, addressing the challenges of post-colonialism requires attention to the manner in which central issues are conceived and critical reflections offered. This article argues for a need to shift attention from identities conceived in an abstract manner at the national scale, towards those experienced through the everyday and the ‘variously fluid and fortified boundaries of urban space’ (Secor 2004: 357). To argue that assimilation into the nation is the solution to damaging divisions blames those most at risk of exclusion, and requests that it is those marked by their ‘race’ who have to make the move to some ‘common ground’, defined by the norms of the ‘ethnic majority’ (Hage 1998; McGhee 2003). Given the often marginal positions from which these young people speak it is clear that the ‘common ground’ beyond race and static ideas of national identity is fragile and temporary, but it is also the ground on which hopeful possibilities stand.
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Notes

1 Contestations of multiculturalism have emerged from a number of perspectives which are not fully outlined here. For example, in terms of a distinction between multiculturalism and anti-racism see Troyna (1992).
2 The names of the young people used in this paper are all pseudonyms. All research participants were made aware of the purpose of the research and consented to use of the research material in anonymised form.
4 For example, a recent leaked document containing the membership list of the far-right BNP indicates that the county of Leicestershire is home to 380 members of the organisation with eighty of those members living in Leicester itself. Research has also shown that racist incidents are commonplace for young people in the city (Rupra 2004).
5 This is not to deny the existence of middle-class racisms, which are often more concealed and subtly presented. The research was also directly interested in considering working-class and marginalised experiences within the city.
6 This includes myself as someone who would be identified as ‘white’.
7 The importance of hiding or presenting racisms on the basis of what is seen as acceptable and appropriate within particular spaces and fieldwork situations is recognised as crucial.
8 As much as it is possible for established racial power relations not to play a role.

References


**Abstract translations**

**Réfléchir spatialement: vers une comprehension quotidienne des relations interethniques**

Dans le contexte d’un glissement du multiculturalisme municipal vers la cohésion des communautés, et à la lumière des débats renouvelés autour de la différence, de l’identité nationale et l’identité culturelle du brittanicié, cet article formule un cadre théorétique informé géographiquement en se concentrant sur la reconstruction spatiale des identités ethniques et de la race. L’article développe des idées quotidiennes comme autant de façons de voir l’état des relations interethniques conditionné spatialement, complexe et négocié dans une ville spécifique du Royaume-Uni. Non seulement cela révèle la manière dont les confins forts et défiants entre des groupes sociaux sont retraités vers la remise en vigueur des relations spatialisées du pouvoir, mais aussi comment les accommodations autour, entre, et dans les différences sont réalisées. À la lumière d’outils empiriques de Leicester, en Angleterre, l’article montre que des solidarités quotidiennes émergent d’un certain nombre d’influences spatiales entrecroisées qu’on ne peut comparer à des versions figées ou abstraites d’appartenance nationale.

**Mots-clés**: multiculturalisme, cohésion de communauté, relations interethniques, géographies quotidiennes, identités, appartenance.

**Pensando espacialmente: hacia un entendimiento cotidiano de las relaciones interétnicas**

En el contexto de un alejamiento del multiculturalismo municipal hacia cohesión comunitaria, y en
vista de debates renovados sobre diferencia, identidad nacional y Britishness, este artículo se construye una esquema teórico geográficamente informada que se enfocue en el (re)construcción espacial de identidades raciales y étnicas. El artículo se desarrolla las ideas cotidianas como una forma de ver el estado complejo, negociado y contingente espacial de las relaciones interétnicas de una ciudad específica del RU. Esto no solo revela la manera en que límites fuertes y tenaces entre grupos sociales son afianzados por el (re)fuerzo de relaciones espacializadas de poder, sino como acuerdos a través, entre y dentro de diferencia están realizados. A través el empleo de materia empírica de Leicester, Inglaterra, el artículo sostiene que solidaridades cotidianas se aparecen de una variedad de influencias espaciales cruzadas que no se compare a versiones abstractos o fijos de pertenencia nacional.

**Palabras claves:** multiculturalismo, cohesión comunitaria, relaciones interétnicas, geografías cotidianas, identidades, pertenencia.