

Conviviality and Multiculture: A Post-integration Sociology of Multi-ethnic Interaction

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Abstract

Revisiting Gilroy's *After Empire* alongside Amin's recently mooted ethos of 'indifference to difference', this article explores how conviviality constitutes a more radical ideal of urban interaction than ordinarily appreciated. Based on interviews and observations in two London locations, it is argued that as opposed to being a concept which simply names everyday practices of multi-ethnic interaction, conviviality speaks uniquely to a sophisticated ability to invoke difference whilst avoiding communitarian, groupist precepts. It is consequently this article's contention that sociological accounts need and can assume a bolder line in disaggregating contemporary formations of multiculturalism from the orthodoxies of integration and the normativity of communitarian belonging and identity.

Keywords

Conviviality, Paul Gilroy, indifference to difference, integration, London, multiculturalism

Introduction

In spite of the broader political retreat in Europe from ideals of multiculturalism (Back et al., 2002; Lentin and Tittley, 2011; McGhee, 2008), there has been a welcome growth in a sociological literature documenting everyday diversity, often denoted as multiculturalism. This documentation, with frequent reference to the practices of emergent youth generations, addresses ordinary forms of 'multicultural drift' (Hall, 2000), where ethnic and cultural diversities become increasingly indelible features of city life (Jones and Jackson, 2014; Neal et al., 2013; Watson and Saha, 2012; Wise and Velayutham, 2014). Often utilizing Gilroy's concept of conviviality, or what Amin calls the 'convivium', this body of work affirms how everyday inter-ethnic interaction and cultural formation is an unspectacular, extra-governmental

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aspect of today's urban experience (Smith, 2015). But whilst this work is important for countering the dystopian political rhetoric surrounding Europe's ability to live with diversity, there is a risk that the sociology of multicultural tends towards a certain descriptive naivety. Put simply, it is often seen as adequate to establish that multi-ethnic life persists without conceptually distinguishing its specific validity from orthodox conceptions of integration and the normativity of communitarian belonging and identity. There is certainly no need to arrive at a sociological consensus about what multicultural is, particularly as the term remains notoriously 'polysemic' (Hall, 2000). But this article maintains that in the course of researching young people's urban practices, it is still important to make clear what is distinctive about multicultural vis-à-vis ideals of integration and derivative conceptions of multiculturalism.

The aim to offer conceptual distinctiveness could be rendered in any number of ways: opting for an emphasis on youth cultural formation and flows (James, 2014; Kim, 2015), issues of governance and rights (Jones, 2013; Uberoi and Modood, 2013), to bottom-up practices of political mobilization (Dobbernack et al., 2014; James, 2015). These are all important sites of analysis. But, based on interview and observation material generated in London, and empirically operationalizing a particular reading of Gilroy's concept of conviviality, this article explores the distinctiveness of multicultural as it applies to the reception and performance of difference within everyday fields of interaction. Implicitly building upon the seminal 1990s accounts of an emergent and complex urban multicultural in Britain (Alexander, 1996; Back, 1996; Baumann, 1996; Brah, 1996), the core aim of this article is to empirically operationalize conviviality in a manner which captures some of its more avowedly radical currents vis-à-vis the everyday reception of difference as practised by young people. Conviviality is a concept that is often referenced in contemporary research on multicultural and young adults. But this article maintains that inadequate attention has been given to what I interpret as Gilroy's specific emphasis on how everyday multicultural practices rest on a radical and complex ability to be at ease in the presence of diversity but *without* restaging communitarian conceptions of the selfsame ethnic and racial difference.

Importantly, the analysis of convivial multicultural advanced here is not to be understood as suggesting that encounters in London are always, or even most of the time, convivial. Indeed, the very sociological inclination to weigh the prevalence of conviviality contra conflict remains unhelpful. As Karner and Parker (2012) illustrated in an important engagement of the concept, conviviality's everyday instantiation always sits adjacent to processes of ethnically construed 'conflict'—the two are proximately situated. The more interesting question, therefore, for this article's purposes is not whether conviviality characterizes most contemporary interaction (which I think unlikely); but rather, what features are constitutive of convivial multicultural when it is indeed manifest, and in turn, how is it substantively distinctive from the ideals of coexistence formalized by integration.

This argument will be empirically routed through three London research participants' reflections about their habitual interaction with both acquaintances and strangers. The interaction featured here was either witnessed during observation sessions or was invoked by the participants during the interviews. More specifically, this argument will be channelled through the presentation of three vignettes from

two London sites—one, a north-west London suburban high street and the other, a South London inner city social housing square. Attention will be given throughout to the conditions which the different participants identify as important to the facilitation of multi-ethnic interaction, including the cultivation of an ‘indifference to difference’ ethos, the negotiation of identity mixture and ambiguity, the proximity of conviviality to conflict and also the role of space in both enabling and limiting convivial interaction. And whilst these convivial formations will be read through certain interactional practices characteristic of *young adults*, the broader socio-cultural features profiled here do carry a wider analytic resonance vis-à-vis the sociologies of integration and multiculturalism writ large.

Methodological Note

The material featured here comes out of a broader project conducted from 2010 to 2012. The research consisted of interviews and participation during everyday activity with 23 ethnic minority participants, aged 22–30 and of working-class background, in London and Stockholm—although in the interests of analytic focus, only the former will feature here. Of those participants discussed in this article, I spent a minimum of three sessions with each individual during the course of 2011. These often lengthy sessions consisted of accompanying a participant during a series of mundane leisure or work (if access was feasible) activities considered ordinary to the participant’s routines. And though these sessions were carried out separately, certain spaces did recur frequently due to some participants enjoying propinquity to a shared location—not least, the South London estate complex featured in this article which was a hub of local activity and where two participants were residents and two others lived nearby.

This article does, of course, raise only a select few instances from this research process. Whilst the chosen extracts are indicative of the experiences and reflections of various research participants, these examples are also instructive in profiling the variation in contexts which underpin conviviality—ranging from a humdrum suburban high street to the inner heart of an increasingly isolated inner city estate. The vignettes discussed are also chosen by their ability to demonstrate that conviviality is not merely applicable to everyday mundanity, but also to particular negotiations of conflict and discomfort.

Conviviality and the Sociology of Ties

The term conviviality was proposed by Gilroy (2004) in *After Empire* to capture the quotidian routines of multiculturalism apparent across postcolonial European cities. The appeal of Gilroy’s argument lies not only in his rejection of integration and its emphasis on securing shared identities of national self, but also in his departure from principles of ‘respect’, ‘recognition’ and ‘culturalism’ (‘ethnic absolutism’; Gilroy, 1993) when theorizing multi-ethnic cohabitation. The uncompromising premise of Gilroy’s argument both here and in his other works is that the production and reproduction of racialized minority identities are always, in large part, ideological attributions marking out inferiority vis-à-vis European, white normativity. It is accordingly

noted that any politics of minority recognition, at the level of governance but also everyday urban negotiation, is inadequate if it does not substantially remake the ideological terms by which those identities of difference come about in the first place. In other words, the politics of minority recognition, even if conceived in terms of ‘multiple belongings’ and ‘multiple identities’ (Gilroy, quoted in Farrar, 2007), is ultimately pyrrhic—as underpinning the logic of minority inclusion is always a longer modernist project of whiteness and its implied majoritarianism.

It is consequently asserted that ethnic differences do not require accommodation, remaking or respectful recognition vis-à-vis the white majority, but should simply cease to require scrutiny and evaluation in the first place, i.e. conviviality. Failure to rework multiculturalism within a framework of conviviality—analogously defined by Amin (2013: 3) as an ethos of ‘indifference to difference’—is likely to result in epistemologies which continue to presume identities of difference to be both ontologically authentic and culturally separate. At worst, such perspectives invite amongst nationalist agitators the wholesale effacement and/or ‘expulsion’ (Bauman, 1993: 163) of minority difference i.e. orthodox integration. At best, it tends towards orthodox multiculturalism (‘multicultural integration’; Modood, 2013) and the ‘exotic’ (Gilroy, 2004: 137) identitarian politics of ‘recognition and reconciliation’ (Amin, 2012: 7) that undergird it. Moving away from these imbricated traditions involves for Gilroy a deconstructive practice of interaction whereby identity difference is rendered politically ‘unremarkable’ and ‘insignificant’ (2004: 105). In other words, it is only by dispensing with communal identity as being relevant to the regimentation of space, culture and social worth—absolutist notions historically embedded within the privileges of whiteness—that a multiculturalism that is practically sustainable and politically inclusive can emerge. And crucially, it is not that the cityscape is stripped of cultural difference; it is only that cultural difference becomes ‘unruly’ (Gilroy, 2004: xiv), less easily reduced to hierarchically indexed ethno-racial positions.

Relatedly, this orientation also maintains that it is not regularized ‘contact’ and ‘ties’ (Putnam, 2007: 143–44) that presages a fluent basis for multi-ethnic interaction. An emphasis on ‘contact’, posited as a valuable social good in its own right (Cantle, 2001; Hewstone, 2014), has increasingly skewed the imagination of a sociology still wedded to ideals of integration. What Amin (2012: 18) deplors as a troublingly resilient ‘sociology of ties’ continues to frame a range of prominent ideological positions regarding difference: non-existent (liberal universalism), subsumed (integration) or formally recognized (multiculturalism). Conviviality helps undercut this heritage, moving the emphasis beyond ‘coexistence and contact in itself’ (Williams, 2013: 50) to the anti-racist, anti-communitarian moral economy which allows for fluent interaction across putative lines of difference. Put differently, ‘neighbourly contact’ cannot be seen as of its own accord engendering the goods for productive relations across difference to manifest (Thiranagama and Kelly, 2010: 12). Rather, I read conviviality as arguing that the neutralization of conflict is realized only when multicultural norms which annul the very interrogation of difference already pre-empt the encounter. Put differently, the unspectacular breaching of already ascribed racial and ethnic boundaries emerge from alternative ‘habits’ and ‘habituations’ (Noble, 2013: 162), rather than alternative ties of belonging and/or circuits of contact.

Conviviality and Difference

Of course, what actually happens to racial and ethnic difference within interactional routines, convivial in type, requires closer conceptual clarification. Simply put, the observation that multiple ‘groups’ undertake regular interaction does not preclude them from upholding the putatively discrete, culturally indexed boundaries demarcating each ‘community’. Commonplace cross-ethnic interaction can still leave substantially intact the broader symbolism of national identity, integration and communitarianism—symbolic formations which Brubaker influentially dubbed ‘groupism’ (2004: 7–10). The social cost of groupist conceptions of self and other being retained is the likely recourse to hardened suspicion of minority difference whenever broader socio-economic circumstances realign (the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2008 global recession each tells its own sobering story) and/or when charismatic demagogues garner public platforms. This question of how ethnic and racial difference is navigated within convivial formations is, therefore, important. It is not enough to demonstrate that interaction across difference is commonplace—which I consider to be the flattening tendency of much contemporary output on multiculturalism. And it is precisely at this juncture that it becomes important to put forth a more precise interpretation of Gilroy’s theorization of conviviality vis-à-vis the remaking of difference’s everyday resonance. A more precise purposing is further necessary, given Gilroy’s complicated, but I believe often misunderstood, critique of racial and ethnic particularity when considering multiculturalism’s ‘democratic possibilities’ (2004: 140).

Gilroy’s sustained criticism of race when formulating his vision of conviviality resides, of course, in the origins of race in racism. That is to say, given that race is birthed out of structural, colonial racism, it is necessarily entangled in the operations of those discursive and institutional logics which mark out the racialized as pathological outsider—as a non-normative, culturally deficient denizen (Goldberg, 2009, Winant, 2004). Contiguously, Gilroy and like-minded critics reject the intimations of cultural fixity, homogeneity and discrete authenticity intrinsic to racial and ethnic absolutisms. They conclude that if it is ‘inescapably reified as a divisive and exclusionary concept’ (St Louis, 2002: 662), “‘race’ can have no ethically defensible place’ (Gilroy, 2000: 6).

But it is necessary to make clear that a need to think beyond racialized absolutism does not imply a visualization of conviviality that is absent of ‘racial, linguistic and religious particularities’ (Gilroy, 2006: 40). I argue that Gilroy’s framing of conviviality is not anchored in an ‘undifferentiated’ (Robotham, 2005: 565) polity premised only on a Universalist sameness, as some critics suggest (Gikandi, 2002; Roediger, 2006). His argument does not actually posit any such future without difference, and is certainly not a retreat from a critique of the material inequality and state violence wrought by global capitalism—this being the charge levelled by Collins (2002) and Carter and Virdee (2008: 669–70). On the contrary, it is the internal ‘sameness’ characteristic of appeals to ‘race and nation’ (Gilroy, 2000: 15) that engenders its futility regarding an open-ended and effective critique of inequality and thereby warranting of its ethical obsolescence. It is its imagination of self as a part of a homogenous ‘pre-political’ communal entity which limits its potential concerning political solidarities intuitively comfortable with difference. As Gilroy (2004: 8) concludes, ‘In a multicultural democracy, solidarity should be constructed on a radically non-racial humanism that

avoids the allure of automatic, pre-political uniformity.’ In this context, all claims to communitarian identity (as they emerge within the intertwined formations of nation, ethnicity and race) are troubled in the interests of *actively* negotiating *new* forms of solidarity. Conviviality is in turn interesting because it facilitates interactional practices by which racial and ethnic difference is made commonplace, but *without* rehearsing the exclusive and culturally disaggregated picturing of difference unique to a tradition of European modernity and its constitutive politics of national integration and/or group recognition (Valluvan, 2013, 2014).

It is hereby interesting that some critics seem puzzled by Gilroy’s ability to maintain a forceful anti-race claim whilst concomitantly detailing the racism which underpins the resurgence of anti-difference integrationism:

Gilroy concludes [*After Empire*] by reiterating the anti-race claim *even though* the majority of the text is about the battle to preserve the postcolonial planet amidst imperialistic [anti-difference] forces. (Roberts, 2008: 165, emphasis added)

The ‘even though’ is I think misplaced. As I read him, there is no contradiction in Gilroy’s argument against ‘race-thinking’; the argument he carves is intricate, but it is clear that his theorization of anti-communitarian conviviality does not require a habit of identification without race and ethnicity. As he writes elsewhere,

Conviviality is a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not—as the logic of ethnic absolutism suggests they must—add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication. (Gilroy, 2006: 40)

Put differently, I read Gilroy’s anti-race position as being straightforwardly pro-difference. It is specifically the neo-colonial renditions of difference which are channelled through essentialized assignments of culture and biology and formalized by the logics of integration and communitarianism that Gilroy deems untenable. It is in turn these practices of conviviality where difference circulates with a casual ease but in a manner which circumvents communitarian idioms which will be profiled in the following analysis of multicultural’s conceptual and political distinctiveness.

Conviviality and the Normalization of Difference

I open with an intentionally ‘banal’ and ‘mundane’ (Gilroy, 2004: xvi) vignette involving Farima (24), a participant of Iranian background from a northwest London borough known for its ethnic and religious diversity.

On multiple occasions, we wandered our way through the borough’s high streets with a few of Farima’s female friends (they were all either Iranian or South Asian of varied provenance). We moved at a leisurely pace between cafes (her preference being Starbucks) and shopping. As we strolled through the unglamorous commercial streets and meandered through the two humdrum shopping complexes, we would regularly chance upon various acquaintances to one or more of those women whom I was with. These acquaintances spanned a wide range of ethnic backgrounds constitutive of the area’s post-war history of settlement. On a Wednesday evening,

when making our way to Nando's for an after-work meal, we happened upon a white acquaintance (Claire) who was promptly asked to come along, which she did—leading to a long, lively dinner, rich with gossip about common acquaintances and different work situations. The most abiding impression from these sessions, apart from being generally awed by the sheer number of people they seemed to know, was the wide array of backgrounds represented in these myriad acquaintances and the very frequent, easy referencing of those backgrounds during the course of conversation.

This prosaic sketch echoes numerous observations from my research. Simply put, these routines of ambling through the suburb's high streets and navigating its multiple interfaces were generically multicultural—the spaces are *multi-ethnic* and the interactions *cross-ethnic*. Such casual routines are of course 'unremarkable' (Gilroy, 2004: 105). But Farima's reflections regarding the conditions which facilitate such mundane routines draw important attention to the ideals of 'indifference' and 'simply letting be' (Wise, 2013: 40), which make such routines fluent.

There is a difference in how people make choices about me. If I am Iranian, that's not the problem. But you can choose to see me like I am a problem or you can choose [not to]. To be treated fairly, until I mess up I guess. [...] Innocent till proven guilty. [...] The [white] people here, like Claire, they know how to behave and know they shouldn't joke about some things, [...] like not ask stupid questions about this and that.

Farima expands, contrasting her ease with her borough to other places whiter in constitution,

At Uni (Westminster) there were so many people who didn't seem used to being with other people. I found it hard kind of to be with them, but it was strange because I know loads of white people from [here]. But at Uni or over on the other side, like in [two neighbouring areas], there you have a different kind of white person...you can tell that they are unsure about what my history might be. Like [wondering about] what I do and think. I don't want to be with people like that.

Crucially, a normative multiculturalism where racialized identity, ceasing to be studied, becomes 'banal and ordinary' (Gilroy, 2006: 40) is not synonymous with it becoming trivial and/or expendable. As Solomos (2013: 20) notes, 'lived experiences of multiculturalism does not take us "beyond race"'. On the contrary, Farima is assertively clear that this normalization relies on *presupposing* the presence of subjective difference—racially and ethnically construed.

The normative criteria Farima specifies centre on a crucial a priori supposition concerning the presence of racially signalled difference, difference which Farima assumes as self-evident when going about her 'convivial' movements. Having presumed the legitimacy of racialized difference, and providing that such legitimacy is forthcoming from those others present, it is indeed likely that such difference makes less of a conspicuous impression. But this merely entails that the presence of racially and ethnically signified difference has been 'habituated' (Noble, 2013) as a 'taken for granted', 'common sense' (Robbins, 2012: 131) quality. It is an appeal to an ease with diversity which is only possible upon freeing racialized bodies of suspicion ('innocent till proven guilty', 'know how to behave, not ask stupid questions', not being concerned with 'what my history might be'), upholding the right to fashion

presentations of self unbound by the demagogic racial inscriptions of inferior status. The coda—‘I don’t want to be with people like that’—all the more forcefully rejects any ideal of everyday life where difference is to be vetted. Ultimately, Farima expounds a picture of multiculturalism which is predicated on a stance towards difference as non-intrusive (‘I am not a problem’) and thereby unremarkable, as opposed to a stance towards difference as simply non-existent (liberal universalism), subsumed (integration) or formally recognized (multiculturalism).

It is within this specific terrain as outlined by Farima that I situate Gilroy’s pivotal claim that amidst circuits of conviviality—when compared to the other ordinary pleasures and hazards alike which the cityscape has to offer—race is made ‘essentially insignificant’ (2004: 105). It is an ‘insignificance’ which emerges from a well-accustomed ‘indifference’, not ‘non-difference’, which is at the centre of the post-integrationist ideal advanced by Farima. Integrationism (Kundhani, 2007; McGhee, 2008) reads the possibility of shared life as emerging primarily from the absorption of the minority, and especially its young, into a unitary collective bond—even if some proponents do acknowledge the need for that collective identity to be reconstructed (Alba and Nee, 2003; Favell, 2001). Conviviality renders the orthodoxy of integrationism anachronistic. Interactive fluency does not rest on articulating a unitary identity field within which minority identifications are either effaced or folded in; but rather, identities of ethno-national self are made politically obsolescent in the first place—in that, they cease to operate as categories for ‘supervising’ (Hage, 2000: 228) hierarchies of belonging. As Amin (2013: 11) helpfully sums up when distilling the practices of ‘indifference to difference’ underpinning the ‘urban convivium’ (Amin, 2012: 72–74),

I see the challenge of integration less as one of changing identities and building inter-subjective empathies than as one [where] the status and visibility of particular bodies recedes as a measure of their social worth and entitlement.

The framework offered by Amin neatly captions Farima’s political philosophy. The objective is not to supplant existing identities of ethnic and racial difference with superseding identities of common national affiliation or to engender more congenial manifestations of minority difference. Instead, the aim is to blind the very gaze which looks to study difference as worthy of normative evaluation.

The Complex Negotiation of Complex Mixture

This emphasis on what might be understood as the unassuming retreat from communitarian ideals obtains an instructive analytic breadth in Gilroy’s (2004) extended discussion of those subjects who disrupt prevailing schemas of ethnic and racial order. Gilroy’s emphasis on those agents and cultural artefacts (e.g., Ali G, The Streets and Richard Reid), characteristic of an emergent youth generation that troubles existing ethnic orderings, is a helpful cue when thinking about conviviality’s ability to actualize an anti-communitarian reception of identity and/or cultural difference. By being attentive to how ambivalent ‘hybrid culture’ (ibid: 163)—those who register as in-betweens, ‘half-different’ and ‘partially familiar’ (ibid: 137)—might feature unproblematically in the multicultural actualized at those

spaces prominent to my participants' everyday interactions, it is possible to more precisely capture how convivial, indifference to difference sensibilities manifest.

I note, however, that any such emphasis on a Britain where 'intermixture is banal' (ibid: 166) and where 'cross-racial sex is no more or less meaningful than multi-racial football' (ibid: 144) does not constitute a rebuke to those ethnic formations which are not *obviously* syncretic. This brief clarification is necessary in order to avoid placing a transcendent political value on the ostensible mixture, ambiguity and syncretism often attributed to certain segments of today's younger generations. Many (Friedman, 1997; Kalra et al., 2005; A. Sharma, 1996; S. Sharma, 2007; Williams, 2013) have noted how anti-racist cultural studies orientations became too restricted by the progressive possibilities of alleged hybridity, diaspora and syncretism, inadvertently sponsoring a disregard, even hostility, towards those who appear, at the realm of signification, as 'traditional' and transparently 'ethnic'—for example, the first-generation 'housewife' or even a second-generation black grime artist.¹ In avoiding a further iteration of any such hierarchy regarding mixture and ethnicity, I read conviviality as only arguing that to refrain from treating identity ambiguity and indeterminacy as illegitimate, 'as matter out of place', serves as testimony to the anti-communitarian gaze active at a given cluster of convivial locales.

An extended reference to a field-site central to many of my observation sessions helps substantiate the possibilities of such an indifference to difference ethos that is 'confident' (Williams, 2013: 51) with the simulation of identity mixture, but is not restricted by it either: a quadrangle servicing a sprawling South London Estate—the ward being the poorest in the borough. The majority of the residents (two of whom were participants) were black, both Caribbean and African. In this square, invariably awash with activity, a staple feature was the well-attended, makeshift domino tables where older Caribbean men would sip beers and engage in lively gambling. There would also often be numerous women from East Africa seated on the benches at the heart of the square—generally dressed in a *direh* (long, black dress) and hijab or, less frequently, a full *jalabeeb* (burka). In contrast, the square also boasted numerous formations which would be readily understood by Gilroy (2004: 135) as constitutive of 'proteophobic'² identity ambivalence: for example, young multi-ethnic congregations, including an ample young white contingent, collectively engaging in a black diasporic cultural vernacular and, also, the not insignificant presence in the estate of Muslim converts/'reverts'.

I include here one snapshot of a street party held on the day of the 2011 Royal Wedding which captures the prominence in the square's life of those figures who elude monochrome racial designation.

There is a rather dilapidated mosque at the mouth of the lane which leads on to the various estate blocks from which the young men are returning—today being a Friday ensures that many have been at mosque. Their customary 'hip-hop' inflected attire is only partially perceptible as a long kameez shirt reaching down to their ankles is worn by many of the young men on top of their usual clothing. The contrast is intriguing. They swagger in a pronounced, confident manner, with all the bodily trappings of a cultivated urban machismo, yet one cannot get past the putative piety of the kameez when worn by such young, black British men. The impression is equally prominent when displayed by the young white bodies amongst the returning crowd.

One black man in his kameez seems particularly popular as he strolls past the crowd of young black and white men from whom I purchased my chicken and rice, and from where

grime music is blaring. They greet him and touch fists. He seems pressed for time though, so apologizes with a fluent knocking of his fist on his heart and continues on his way into Hawthorne Block. Behind me, where I am still seated, is a young black woman. Her gaze hovers assuredly over a multi-ethnic gaggle of kids who are scurrying about. The woman, who has a distinct South London accent, wore a black hijab as well as a slim jilbab. I was told later by Michael (a participant from the estate) that the woman, of Jamaican background, converted to Islam a few years ago.

Given this indicative instance of the square's overlapping ambiguities which disrupt culturally absolutist mappings of difference, it is instructive to simultaneously recall those enunciations that register as *less* ambivalent in terms of racial signification. Those older men who gather around the domino tables, speak with a distinctive Caribbean intonation, and listen to a dated brand of reggae and dub,³ do not garner for themselves any conspicuous markers of 'semiotic undecidability' (Bauman, 1993). Similarly, the Somali mothers and aunts in hijab—and indeed, their daughters and nieces as well—would register coherently along prevailing 'racial scripts' (Molina, 2014). Yet, their presence is equally constitutive in realizing the square's convivial grammar and signifying field. As clarified previously, a critical reading of conviviality does not consent to such a narrow position which privileges conspicuous intermixture. It is not a case of only profiling those often young people who confound ostensible boundaries. Instead, conviviality is merely a matter of normalizing any such ambiguity, whenever it does manifest.

In probing further the anti-communitarian textures which multicultural engenders, another implication of the aforementioned Royal Wedding celebrations becomes apposite. It being the Royal Wedding does of course enjoy some totemic significance concerning racialized ambivalence. The manner in which the occasion was commemorated (those responsible did have to obtain clearance from the council to arrange a 'street party', and leaflets were distributed designating the occasion as wedding-pertinent) can appear amusing, given the understated acknowledgement of the wedding during the party itself. It is, however, also evocative of the 'unruly', 'unkempt' practice of race which Gilroy (2004: xiv) places at the centre of convivial culture. The scene is replete with cultural symbols and expressions best characterized as black. For instance, given the Ghanaian and Jamaican flags (and lack of Union Jacks) and 'inappropriate' selection of music (grime, more grime followed by deep, rumbling reggae), the party seems to flirt sardonically with a narrative of imperial Britain. And in the process, the scene effortlessly reroutes the celebration towards an aesthetic of a contemporary, multi-ethnic London. It revels in only being a *partially* familiar evocation of Britain. From the external, 'melancholic' (Gilroy, 2004) gaze which fixes the occasion's pomp and pageantry as redolent of a lost Britain, this celebration is rendered incoherent, inasmuch as it trades on the same patriotic moment and yet distorts it in favour of pleasures symbolically irreconcilable with that hegemonic narration of Britain. In short, the scene does not chime with a reading of racialized ethnicity as hermetically sealed, absolutist difference. Instead, the celebration can be read as a spectacle of Black Britain, a multicultural Britain, which courts a certain element of intentional bastardization vis-à-vis dominant discourses of race and nation.

The play of such anti-absolutist cultural formations found particularly instructive reference in Michael's precise account of the estate's identity nomenclature. Michael (25), a young resident of the estate and a prominent presence in its day life

due to him working part-time at a Caribbean eatery situated along one flank of the square, commented:

You will say I am black, yeah. [...] It would be real dumb if you didn't, you know what I mean. I have no problem with that. Really, I don't think anybody does. [...] We are black and there is no doubt about it. [...] But my people are Caribbean yeah, but *now* we have here Nigerians, Ghanaians, all sorts really. Fuck man, there are more of them than us right [laughter]. [...] And also Somali youths yeah, [...] they be black too. So like, okay I'm black, but [...] it don't mean nothing much.

Michael's deployment of black as a basis for self-identification is in itself unremarkable, but such citations do not stand outside of global migration and shifting patterns of local settlement. Whilst he sees his own black identification as straightforward, he also empties it of significance as to what this might 'mean' in terms of his cultural present and future. Indeed, Michael helpfully noted to me during a passing conversation that many of the major black rap/grime stars of today, such as Tinie Tempah and Skepta, have Nigerian backgrounds, signalling a significant if underappreciated shift or blurring in what Black Britain might be in terms of its recent heritages. The sudden popularity of Afrobeats, a fascinating amalgam of genres which I encountered during the later stages of my research at the estate, further speaks to this protean remaking of urban Britain and its soundscapes. The 'now' in 'now we have' makes particularly clear Michael's awareness of contingency, of how characterizations of subjective identity change in accordance with a broader set of globalizing local realities.

I have argued that we might understand this awareness as being central to the square's convivial moments: where identificatory terms of communal difference circulate, but are not bound to the metaphysics of modernity and its move to code the world's people discretely along certain communitarian sets. It is the habituation of conviviality which allows for this elasticity with regards to iterations of migrant settlement within local spaces, migrant movement which is, of course, constitutive of the urban ground which conviviality negotiates (Keith, 2013: 25–26). More broadly, the above impressions regarding the activity conducted within the square suggest that confidence with everyday renditions of difference rests in a decidedly more radical notion than mere recognition (multiculturalism), overarching identity (integration) or post-racial transcendence (liberal universalism). It suggests, in short, a more substantive practical disengagement with ethno-national 'community' as a legitimate principle of social organization. Of course, any such instantiation of disengagement does not of its own accord entail a more comprehensive disenchantment with the broader political appeal of community. But it does constitute the prefigurative and 'ludic cosmopolitan energy' (Gilroy, 2004: 140) that can presage the more substantial multicultural 'democratic possibilities' which Gilroy's argument looks to harness.

Racializing and De-racializing Conflict

It is, however, necessary to observe that conviviality cannot be seen only through those instances where multi-ethnic interaction is fluent, but must also be considered by how it becomes pertinent to invocations of ethnically construed suspicion

(Karner and Parker, 2012). In this final section, I contrast the habitual cross-ethnic encounters detailed before against the appeal of the pervasive conflict paradigms which continue to frame discussions around the ‘increasingly complex forms of racialised and ethnicised diversities that have emerged over the past few decades’ (Solomos, 2013: 18): paradigms which trade in a toxic ‘vernacular’ which is ‘fretful and fearful for the stranger’ (Wise, 2013: 42). Indeed, what might be understood as a conflict determinism is apparent in the very conceptual tools of influential integration and social cohesion theses—indicated in the use of behaviourist terms like ‘in-group bias’, ‘out-group hostility’ and ‘stereotype threat’. But whilst these discourses of conflict exercise a considerable reach, even amidst circuits of conviviality, I profile here certain counter-practices of conflict negotiation which the ‘habituation of conviviality’ (Noble, 2013) allows individuals to call upon. To do so, I centre my discussion on one telling incident which I was witness to during the course of my research.

The incident transpired at a mid-sized convenience store located at the mouth of the aforementioned estate. The shop also sits adjacent to the increasingly gentrified areas bordering the nearest train station and riverside fronts. The store, therefore, operates at the nexus of the sharpened class contrasts which mark out many contemporary urban areas.

One evening, I was with Mehmet, a participant of Turkish background who was the owner’s nephew and was tending to the store alongside his cousin. I was reading the article by the entrance. It was late at night with only a gentle, attenuated stream of customers visiting the store. There were, as of then, only a handful of customers inside: a white woman in business attire with a similarly suited partner and an older, rather unkempt, white man who intended to buy some cans of beer. A black couple entered the store. Both of them were around 40 years old or a little younger. They purchased their goods. I glanced over. It appeared to be a customarily innocuous affair.

But then, the woman demanded to have a receipt. I heard Mehmet saying that he was only joking. Matters stiffened. The other customers looked anxiously towards me. I tried to ascertain what was happening. ‘I was only kidding. I wouldn’t cheat you man.’ The man, peering over his partner, shouted back, ‘You don’t kid with me. You don’t know who you talking to.’ ‘It was only a joke. I didn’t mean any disrespect.’ The woman interjected, ‘You don’t fucking joke with me. We’ll fuck you up. You dunno who you be fucking with.’ This seemed absurd. Mehmet was such a gentle character.

It was later revealed to me that he had merely quipped that the Lucozade would cost her five pounds (or something to that effect). He could not fathom why they deemed this a slight. The pair uttered a few expletives whilst leaving. Mehmet, behind the counter, sighed in what I deem an ill-advised, mocking fashion. As they reached the door, the man glared back ominously, blurted something else and departed. The scene was hushed.

Mehmet and his cousin spoke in Turkish. The remaining customers remained silent. After they too had left, Mehmet’s cousin claimed that if they were black themselves, the pair would not have conducted themselves in such a manner. It was only because they thought they were docile, ‘freshie’ Turks that they acted so belligerently. I suggested that the two were under the influence of drugs in order to account

for their behaviour. Mehmet did not think that it had much to do with them being black or drugs. The cousin disagreed. He claimed that they thought Turks were easy targets to act tough towards. Things had calmed. Normal service resumed.

In this incident, what was poised to be just another innocuous demonstration of convivial life—the ability to happily interact across racial lines without invoking a socio-political desire to ‘test’ each other’s difference—transformed in an instant into racially charged conflict. Race became a marker of suspicion and weariness. It is of course possible, even likely perhaps, that race was not the actual source responsible for either the ludic invitation or the resulting altercation. But it remains a narrative repertoire which can be made applicable for post-hoc rationalization of conflict—as manifested when the cousin retrospectively apportioned blame in accordance to racialized meanings.

In this example, Mehmet extended a joke which might have established a rapport between customer and worker, but also, across ethnic lines. Yet, in wanting to realize the latter, the gesture involved the risk of misfiring, of being unreciprocated. Such an incident reveals the messiness which trails conviviality, but it also brings into stark relief the variation in power relations active at different spaces. As has been commented upon by various researchers of multiculturalism, spaces are not neutral canvasses, but exert their own conditions concerning the interactions available (Hall, 2012; Wise and Velayutham, 2014). Simply, the workers in a convenience store are not afforded the kind of protection that might be expected at establishments which carry a certain branded, consumerist lustre whilst still remaining reasonably receptive to affordable/non-discerning consumption—for example, the Starbucks and Nando’s frequented by Farima. Mehmet and his cousin, by virtue of being workers at an ‘immigrant’ convenience store (which perhaps offsets their relative cultural mobility as *second-generation* minorities), might be lacking the symbolic capital which could better disarm the threats latent in certain multi-ethnic encounters. Conversely, it might be said that the store, irrespective of the workers’ own class profile and trajectory, might stand symbolically for a certain kind of Poujadist, petty bourgeois stability denied to many of the black residents who people the nearby estate. The store might, therefore, momentarily operate along a fault line, written across intersections of local readings of class and ethnicity, which engenders convivial gestures and habituations more fragile.

In clarifying this spatial asymmetry, I turn to the work of Keith. In *After the Cosmopolitan*, Keith (2005) distils the spatial register as a key mediator of different ‘urbanisms’ and, in turn, different ‘multiculturalisms’. He isolates a variety of ways in which city spaces are made, pictured, inhabited as well as lived and exceeded. Notable here is his reading of how ethnic diversity and processes of racialization are constituted differently in the ‘cultural quarter’, ‘the banlieue’, ‘the street’ and ‘the ghetto’ respectively—all four of which are ways in which diverse spaces are pictured and regimented. Whilst this article is not in a position to engage the finer vagaries of space—concerning the relationship between planning, infrastructure, patterns of governance, settlement and local use—I take from Keith the salutary observation that urban space (both diffuse areas and sites within it [e.g., the corner-shop]) is not constituted abstractly, is not lived outside of different configurations of power and status. For instance, the corner-shop might carry a different symbolic charge regarding possibilities for multicultural exchange when contrasted to how other spaces

become locally drawn—be it the estate square, or, as alluded to earlier, the decidedly unglamorous but densely peopled, bustling consumer high street.

In this context of certain spaces carrying more threat, when Mehmet was asked during the interview about his own reluctance to frame the incident racially, what becomes readily apparent is that Mehmet is continuously contending with pressures to assume as self-evident the negative traits which dominant discourses attribute to differently racialized groups. But, as seen in the following interview excerpt, it becomes equally apparent that Mehmet could call upon alternative scripts too, scripts which are ‘internalized’ and made ‘common-sensical’ through the ‘ritual and practice’ particular to certain spaces (Wise, 2013: 40–42). Wise, reflecting on her research on multiculturalism in Sydney suburbs, writes persuasively about how agents of multiculturalism are always contending with ‘competing scripts’ which jostle for pre-eminence.

Research has shown the importance of ‘scripts’ and ways of talking in shaping [people’s] perceptions of those different from themselves. [And] as much as darker discourses, [...] many such scripts are about accommodation, unfixing and loosening essentialised concepts of the other or simply ‘letting be’. (Wise, 2013: 40)

The navigation of multiple and often opposing scripts draws attention to the energies which are expended when the negativity and distrust ascribed to certain minorities are questioned. After all, meanings or scripts are not rendered relevant of themselves; but rather, need to be made contingent to the vagaries of local living and experience (in this instance, an interaction at a corner-shop). And in making this transition from the discursive to local life, numerous tensions have to be tackled by the individual.

Mehmet: ‘We hear many things like that. I hear it when at home, especially when with Turkish people. It’s really bad with some older ones, like black people are just bare trouble, can’t do anything good. But you realise bruv that this is just stupid talk. People are people. I know from my own life, just like being at this shop you know, that none of this makes any sense. Most people, if you give them a chance, are totally fine. But I guess some people hold on to beliefs even when they know so many people who are not like the prejudices. [...] You know, I love this shop we work at, ‘cus when I go off for lunch or something, I call some guys who I know in the area, or like, I’ve got to know them since I started coming here, and they are usually black yeah, and we chill and just chat. It’s not any issue. [...] The cafe next door, owned by the Ethiopians, I love chilling in there. I know the kids, the mothers who come in. It’s all good. [...] And what proper bugs me bruv, is that if you are Muslim, I think you should be more careful about saying shit like that. ‘Cus, you know, there are loads of idiots who just believe all the shit on TV that say all kinds about us. About our mothers. Like they our daddy’s slave or something.... About us, you know, young Muslim men and all that shit.... Like we wanna blow up the place, you get me.’

This comment eloquently captures the disjointedness involved when anchoring the discursive (prejudices on TV which are reinforced by some fellow Turks) in the materiality of local life (‘they know people who are not like the prejudices’). The warm familiarity with those who are different which is cultivated in the course of transient multi-ethnic encounters (go off for lunch, go to the cafe) serves to complicate the discursively established prejudices and degrading characterizations of locally relevant other figures (e.g., working-class black). In short, it is this duality which is

central in any negotiation with racial difference. Being embedded in quotidian multicultural routines, whilst, simultaneously, being exposed to the conflict paradigms which often situate discussions around race and pluralism—both privately through family and other intimate contacts amongst whom ideas circulate and at the level of general discursive engagement (e.g., news media and other racialized popular-culture images).

It is important to recentre here the role of space in mediating this negotiation. Different spaces privilege different interactive trends, leading to variation in the degrees of allowance concerning the ability to destabilize ethnically-framed conflict narratives. Various seminal urban ethnographies have demonstrated how spaces, in the process of becoming places (in the process of becoming locally demarcated and conditioned towards certain forms of engagement and social purposes), are structured by specific arrangements of power and, in turn, interaction (Back, 1996; Baumann, 1996; Hall, 2012; Puwar, 2004). But crucially, an analysis of convivial practices also allows us to move beyond an overstated spatial determinism. Namely, it is also to be noted that particular habits and dispositions cultivated at particular sites do not remain static. Rather, they can also be carried and redeployed, in turn, contesting the racialized tensions which might be encountered elsewhere. Borrowing from Anderson's (2011: 74, 93) notion of 'trial spaces' where denizens engage in 'folk ethnographies' which deconstruct normative narrations of racial pathology and danger, it might be ventured that certain spaces which Mehmet is privy to help him formulate 'narratives which make sense of the present' but also concomitantly 'challenge the intolerant naming of the stranger' (Keith, 2013: 26). It is not necessarily the relationships, or perhaps lack of them, which materialize at the corner-shop that allows Mehmet to exit ethnic explanatory frames of conflict. It is rather the interactions which he is party to elsewhere (the nearby cafe, the estate square) that primes in him a greater cautiousness whenever invited to racialize antagonism. Herein, when assessing the relationship of conviviality to conflict, it is important to situate space and its historically accrued conditions as a key mediator. But it is also important that conviviality creates possibilities beyond space. Put differently, practices of conviviality within certain urban hubs cultivate the situated substance for the writing of broader discursive scripts inclusive in character.

Conclusion

This article explored how Gilroy's original formulation of conviviality constitutes a more radical ideal regarding everyday multi-ethnic interaction than ordinarily appreciated. As opposed to being a concept which simply names everyday practices of multi-ethnic interaction, conviviality speaks specifically to an ability to invoke difference whilst avoiding communitarian, groupist precepts. The first line of analysis, via the reflections of Farima, accordingly established that convivial multiculturalism is not simply an epiphenomenal manifestation of multi-ethnic coexistence and contact, but instead, the outcome of particular normative habituations where difference becomes 'unremarkable'. This understanding of conviviality acquired further conceptual clarity through probing the play of identity and cultural mixture within a South London estate square. Prominent here was an indifference to difference ethos which easily absorbs—but does not necessitate—identity ambiguity.

It is not, however, my claim that the interactions performed are always or even generally convivial. And it is certainly not the case that interactional routines of convivial multiculture are not prone to misfiring or free of communitarian contestation. The concluding line of the analysis hereby assessed the proximity of conflict to everyday sites of convivial practice. Figurations of space were profiled as key mediators in both realizing and limiting convivial formations. However, it also became apparent that habituations of conviviality should not be subject to an overstated spatial reductionism. As expounded by Mehmet, habituations of conviviality do offer young urban denizens the resources to script a non-communitarian, anti-racist narrative for the city writ large.

In sum, this article mapped a framework of multiculture which is strongly decoupled from any residual attachment to the normative ideals of integration and communitarian belonging. It was shown that certain public formations, be they the impoverished estate square or certain consumer suburban fields, are located in wider interactional circuits that are distinctly post-communitarian in character. Of decisive analytic importance here was the identification of a unique multicultural principle where markers of racialized ethnic difference, as opposed to requiring recognition and/or dissipation, cease to be objects of normative supervision *in the first place*.

Notes

1. Mixture, far from remaining a self-explanatory anti-racist phenomenon, is often appropriated by various merchants of liberal 'post-racialism'. See, for instance, Johann Hari's (2005) emphatic claim, during the course of a broader anti-multiculturalism homily, that 'Britain has the highest rate of mixed-race partnerships anywhere in the world, largely due to sexual relationships between white and black people in London. This—not multiculturalism—is the British tradition to promote.'
2. The anxiety provoked by the ambiguity associated with certain outsiders is what Bauman (1993: 168), also cited by Gilroy, captured as 'proteophobia': anxiety about the unclassifiable and its unknown future form.
3. Entertainingly, there is playful bickering between the generations about what music to play on the sound system.

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