**The Suburban Paradox of Convivality and Racism in Postcolonial Britain**

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**Abstract**

Taking my cue from work on relations of interethnic conviviality in super-diverse cities across the globe, this paper examines the ways in which conviviality co-exists with racism as found in a suburban British town. My argument is that ethnographic attention to the proximity of interethnic relations of conviviality to racism is necessary to guard against overly celebratory accounts of conviviality that downplay everyday manifestations of racism. By situating my study of conviviality in a suburban town, my account begins to unpack the the characteristics of convivial relations formed in suburban neighbourhoods as opposed to super-diverse cities often studied by ethnographers in this area of inquiry. I examine manifestations of interethnic relations between British Asian Muslims and white British residents of this town. By contrast to the mainstream images that depict British Asian Muslims as a potential threat to neighbourhood stability and national security, some white and British Asian Muslim residents formed neighbourly relationships of trust, care and mutual recognition with each other across ethnic, racial, religious, gender, class and generational differences. Yet my analysis of these convivial relations reveals some paradoxical ways in which individuals’ experiences of interethnic relations co-exist with their xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic attitudes.

**Key words**: BrAsian; Muslims; white; conviviality; racism; suburban

**Introduction**

The general meaning of the term ‘conviviality’ is nicely captured and conveyed by Overing and Passes’ (2000, xiii cited in Neal et al. 2013, 316) return to the Latin origins of the Spanish word *convivir,* which means ‘to Live together/ to share the same life’. The concept of conviviality has increasingly been deployed by sociologists, anthropologists and geographers as an analytical tool to explore the diverse ways and conditions in which people come to live together across differences within multicultural urban settings (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014). In this regard, ethnographers have conducted in-depth fieldwork in urban and ‘super-diverse’ (Vertovec 2007) locales across the globe to examine the array of possibilities in which people live with ethnic, racial and national differences (Back 1996; Watson 2009; Wessendorf 2013; 2014; Wise and Velayutham 2009; 2014). Gilroy’s (2004) description of conviviality in British and other postcolonial cities is often taken as the starting point by scholars who want to use the concept of conviviality to explain and understand everyday interactions across ethnic differences. Gilroy defines conviviality as: ‘the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and postcolonial cities elsewhere’ (2004, xi). In this article, I deploy the concept of conviviality to explore and analyse interethnic relationships formed by white British and BrAsian Muslim residents of an ethnically diverse neighbourhood located in a suburban town (for which I use the pseudonym ‘Southtown’) situated in the South East of England that is within commuting distance from London.1;2

I was drawn to the concept of conviviality to explain interethnic relations in Southtown because it offers an analytical framework to describe the positive interactions and feelings of ‘trust’ and ‘care’ formed by some white British and BrAsian residents of this town (Wise 2005; 2010). The concept *conviviality* also opens an avenue to examine how these relations become entwined with racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia. As Gilroy (2004, xi) suggests the concept of conviviality does not entail ‘the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance’. Indeed, it is the various ways in which convivial relationships produce and co-exist with racist and xenophobic attitudes that I want to explore in this article, a point to which I shall return in a critical discussion of how sociologists, anthropologists and geographers have deployed the concept ‘conviviality’ in their work.

Moreover, my focus on the formation of interethnic relations of conviviality in a suburban town will serve to shift the overwhelming study of convivial relations in urban and global city spaces. That is to say, scholars who study the ethnographic manifestations of conviviality have usually examined how the residents of global cities that are diverse in terms of ethnic, national, linguistic and class composition - such as London, Singapore, Sydney, Johannesburg, Lisbon and Granada - form relations across difference (Wise and Velayutham 2009; Nowicka and Vertovec 2014; Padilla et al. 2015).This means that there is scope to explore some of the ways in which convivial relations are manifest in suburban locales as opposed to cities.

Furthermore, it is sociologically and politically significant that the majority of BrAsian residents living in the neighbourhood in which my study is situated self-identified as ‘Pakistani’ descent and ‘Muslim’ in terms of religious identity. In Britain, Muslims are commonly identified with people of South Asian descent, so even if BrAsians that lived in this neighbourhood did not identify themselves as ‘Pakistani’ or ‘Muslim’ they were often identified by other residents in these terms. It is against this background that my exploration of convivial relations formed between BrAsians that live in Southtown and the white British majority offers a much needed counter-perspective to the overwhelmingly negative media and social policy images of the antagonistic relations between Muslims and the non-Muslim majority at the neighbourhood level in the UK, and the rest of the world more generally. Moreover, my emphasis upon how these positive interethnic and interreligious relations come to co-exist with racism guards against romanticised and overly celebratory accounts of conviviality.

The social policy representation of BrAsian Muslims at the neighbourhood level is exemplified by the Cantle Report on the 2001 ‘riots’ involving the police and BrAsian Pakistani-descent men in the northern British towns of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, which, like Southtown, are suburban towns. Social commentators have noted that since the publication of this report, BrAsians, and especially those who are Muslims, have been increasingly depicted in social policy, political and media representations as problematic for ‘not mixing’ with and ‘self-segregating’ from the rest of British society (Phillips 2006, 25-26; Alexander 2005). The subtext of this public discourse is the idea that BrAsian Muslims are ‘cultural outsiders’ who are ‘endangering the security, ordered stability, and national identity of Britain’ (Phillips 2006, 29), an imagery that was hardened in the face of the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks whereby Muslims became depicted in both national and global discourse as ‘the enemy within’ the nation and the West more generally (Alexander 2005, 204), and every BrAsian was assumed to be a Muslim. Some of the perceived social threats thought to be posed by BrAsian Muslims’ ‘residential clustering’ (Phillips 2006, 29) in neighbourhoods are elaborated on by Fortier (2007) in her discussion of the BBC TV documentary *The Last White Kids*.

This documentary explored the lives of a white working class family living in the predominantly BrAsian ‘Pakistani’ neighbourhood of Bradford where one of the 2001 riots took place. Islam is represented in the programme as the ultimate threat and affront to British white working class people’s values and way of life. Fortier (2007, 116) shows how in the TV programme this perceived threat takes two pathways – first ‘masculine yobbery’ on the part of white youths ‘adds to the fears that unmanaged proximity [to BrAsian Muslims] can fuel violent animosity’ between white and BrAsian men (2007, 116). Second, white working class girls’ conversion to Islam, illustrated by their wearing of the hijab, is portrayed in the programme to represent the ‘Islamicisation of the nation’s unprotected daughter’s who roam the empty streets at prayer time’ (2007, 116). According to some of the press commentary on the programme these young white women signify the tragic loss of white British women to the misguided treatment of women in Islam in the face of the decline of traditional white working class values (Chalmers and Brooke 2003; Hitchens 2003; Manzoor 2003).

In the face of these overwhelmingly negative public images of animosity at the local neighbourhood and national levels, my study of convivial relations between white British and BrAsian Muslim neighbours in Southtown takes its full political force and social significance. By contrast to these popular, mainstream and ubiquitous images that depict BrAsians and especially Muslims as a potential threat to neighbourhood stability and national security, some white and BrAsian residents of Southtown formed neighbourly relationships of care, trust, reciprocity and mutual recognition, as well as deeper relationships of friendship, with each other across ethnic, racial, religious, gender, class and generational differences and which shored upneighbourhood stability. But my analysis also reveals how these interethnic relations do not automatically produce a more general attitude of openness towards ethnic diversity, especially but not exclusively in relation to newer migrants that have settled in the area.

To elaborate on the distinctiveness of convivial relations in Southtown, I now explore in detail how sociologists, anthropologists and geographers have theorised and used the term ‘conviviality’ with reference to studies of ethnic diversity and difference.

**Sociological, anthropological and geographical approaches to conviviality**

Recently, the concept of conviviality has been used by ethnographers working in and across the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and geography to identify and explain the loose, fleeting, transient and informal relations that people forge in public urban spaces (see Neal et al 2011 for an overview of this approach; Wise and Velayutham 2014; Wessendorf 2013, 2014; Padilla et al 2015 for specific examples). The focus here is upon the ‘slight and spontaneous and sometimes amicable forms of multicultural social interaction that can occur and be thrown up in the vast range of settings that are often moved through in any one day and night’ (Neal et al. 2013, 315). For instance, Wise and Velayutham (2014) note in their comparative ethnographic study of conviviality in the cities of Singapore and Sydney: ‘conviviality is not so much about “bonhomie” but about “something more fleeting, about the many small connections, we make with others that may just make us feel happier or part of a population as a citizen” ’ (Fincher 2003, 57 cited in Wise and Velayutham 2014, 407). These ephemeral encounters between strangers take place in ‘public’, ‘semi-public’ (Wise and Velayutham 2014) and ‘parochial’ spaces (Wessendorf 2014, 398) including parks, markets, restaurants, children’s playgrounds and more organised public events (Padilla et al 2015). Thus for example, Wessendorf (2013; 2014) argues that convivial interactions in public spaces in Hackney, one of the most diverse areas of London in terms of ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic diversity are relaxed, pragmatic and civil to the extent that discussion of difference is often avoided in public to negotiate possible antagonisms. No matter how pragmatic such relations are, ethnographers suggest that convivial encounters offer pathways to form positive relations across ethnic difference that represent a break from more hidebound and conventional notions of community (Neal et al 2011, 319).

Some scholars have criticised this approach to interethnic relations for downplaying or denying the structural and material realities of racism. For example, Valentine (2008) argues that the ethnographic focus on public expressions of conviviality ignores the existence of covert racist attitudes. Similarly, Ahmed (2010) suggests that social theorists and ethnographers should not assume that what they read as positive feelings are necessarily progressive but that they might lack substance. Furthermore, Alexander and Nayak (2016) have criticised the ‘conviviality studies’ approach for screening out the realities of racism and poverty that shape and structure some ethnic minorities’ lives in the UK, including for example Bengali youth that live in East London.

Whilst acknowledging the weight of these criticisms, it is noteworthy that some ethnographers have sought to deflect and avert the criticisms by exploring the co-existence of racist attitudes with convivial interethnic relations. For example, Wise (2005), in her study of older Anglo-Celtic Australian working class residents’ attitudes towards their Chinese neighbours in a suburb of Sydney, juxtaposes the ‘everyday racism’ of some research participants with others’ highly positive experiences of ‘reciprocity’ and ‘mutual recognition’ across ethnic boundaries (2005, 177). While some Anglo-Celtic residents were angry and resentful about what they felt to be the negative transformations of their place caused by Chinese migrants, other residents experienced their interactions with Chinese neighbours and shopkeepers as ‘joyous’ and ‘hopeful’ producing feelings and emotions of ‘security’ , ‘homeliness’, ‘belonging’, ‘care’, ‘trust’ and ‘gratitude’ that fostered an ‘opening up to otherness’ (2005, 183). In fact, Wise (2005, 183) intriguingly comments that some research participants shifted between positive and negative views about their Chinese neighbours in the course of the same interview. While Wise does not examine this apparent contradiction in individuals’ testimonies in any detail, it seems to me that she points us in the direction of a useful research strategy that offers a creative and poignant avenue through which to examine the conditions in which convivial relations and racist attitudes take shape and hold within specific suburban settings, and it is precisely this approach I shall pursue in my analysis of conviviality in Southtown.

Back (2009) has usefully called this tension between racism and conviviality the ‘metropolitan paradox’, a tension that Gilroy (2004, chapter 4) identifies as ‘the negative dialectics of conviviality’. To illustrate the lived realities of this paradox Back discusses the views of Charlie, a seventy-two year old white man and owner of the last family-run fishmongers in London. Charlie (2009, 202) told Back ‘London is finished’ because of the loss of traditional community which has now been replaced by the ‘Pakis’ and ‘illegal’ immigrants. Yet, Back’s observation of the jovial and warm way that Charlie interacted with his African clients on his market stall leads Back (2009, 212) to conclude that researchers must remain ‘attentive to the damage racism has done’, including the production of ‘moralising’ and nostalgic ideas of community and at the same time be attuned to the rhythms of interethnic recognition and co-existence.

In light of Back’s insights, my question becomes: how is the ‘metropolitan paradox’ expressed and enacted in a suburban British town like Southtown? In other words, what constitutes the contours and complexities of the ‘suburban paradox’ of racism and conviviality? One way to begin to address these questions is to reflect on work that explores how ethnic diversity and racism structures ‘ordinary’ suburban life.

In Britain, and America, the suburbs are defined as much by the imagination as they are by geography (Huq 2013, 29). In Britain, the suburbs are portrayed in popular culture as quintessentially British aspirational and respectable places, identified with modernity, consumerism, secularism, security and nuclear heterosexual family orientated life-styles set apart from ethnically diverse urban neighbourhoods (Watt 2009; Dwyer et al 2013; Huq 2013; see also Low 2004; Johnson and Sharpiro 2003 on similar images in the USA). To complicate this popular image of British suburbia, sociologists, geographers and anthropologists have shown that in reality British suburbs are places of migration, ethnic diversity and transnationalism, as well as sites of white racial homogeneity, classed respectability and localism. This contrast is neatly captured by Huq (2013, 53) in her observation that English suburbia is as much about the global realities of multiple identities, creativity and conflict associated with urban living as it is ideas of respectability, whiteness and neighbourliness associated with ‘the village green’.

Indeed, the global constitution of suburban life is illustrated by Dwyer et al’s (2013, 413-414) description of the spiritual and material relations that connect a London suburb to the global Islamic Ummah, rendering this a ‘multi-scalar’ ‘ethnoburb’. The latter is a term originally used by geographers to describe American suburbs that are positioned in global networks of migration (2013, 408). Nayak (2010) reminds us that the social and historical fabric of suburban British geographies is plural, global and hybrid in their incorporation of plants and buildings (e.g. the bungalow) that are imports from the British empire. Nayak (2010) also explores how postcolonial British suburbs can become sites of white territoriality and racist violence. In this regard, he analyses how white working class youth that live in a suburb in the Midlands area of England mobilise racist violence and graffiti to demarcate their place as racially white and nationally English/ British.

It is precisely the more parochial and xenophobic aspects of suburban lifestyles that scholars have explored in their ethnographies of the racialised and classed discourses of respectability mobilised by white middle class suburbanites, who associate life in the suburbs with moving up the social scale and getting out of the nearby ethnically diverse city (Watt 2009; Author 2012, chapters 2 and 3). That is to say, sociological studies of middle class white suburban residents’ place-making discourses illustrate how the values, aesthetic tastes and aspirations identified with idealised notions of the orderly and neighbourly patterns of respectable suburban life are manifest in the Othering of white working class people and places (Watt 2009), ethnic minorities (Author 2012, chapters 2 and 3) and asylum seekers and refugees (Grillo 2005) who are imagined to be not ‘like us’ and thus out of place in the leafy suburbs.

In my study of Southtown to follow, I will draw together these reflections on portrayals of the parochial and ethnically diverse constitution of British suburbia with the complementary insights into the ‘negative dialectics’ of conviviality to aid the analysis of townspeople’s encounters with ethnic difference. Following my discussion of the work of scholars within conviviality studies, I shall focus in some detail on individuals’ accounts of conviviality and racism as articulated and expressed in the same in-depth interview. Moreover, inspired by Stewart’s (2007, 5) writing on ‘ordinary affects’ in American social life, I have come to understand the pictures of individuals’ lives as revealed in interviews to form a ‘scene’ that, in this case, tells a narrative about the close proximity of racist and convivial relations, attitudes and emotions in Southtown. Stewart (2007) suggests that to write about ‘ordinary affects’ requires ‘an effort to approach the intensities of the ordinary through a close ethnographic attention’ to the specific ‘atmosphere of place’ that becomes entangled with the banal flow of emotions as well as their ‘surge’ and eruption (2007, 4, 5). In the ethnographic sections of this article to follow shortly, I will trace the everyday flow and surge of positive emotions associated with relations of ‘trust’, ‘care’ and ‘mutual recognition’ that BrAsian and white neighbours form with each other. I will show how these interethnic relations co-exist with xenophobic and racist attitudes, including expressions of disdain and resentment towards those who are deemed not to fit into the neighbourly and respectable rhythms of suburban life.

**Southtown**

The interview material with residents of Southtown that I report formed part of ten months (2008-9) of fieldwork in the most ethnically diverse region of the town. The fieldwork set out to explore residents’ ideas of belonging to the area (see also Author 2015), but did not focus specifically on convivial relations. Indeed, the usefulness of the concept of conviviality for interpreting and explaining interethnic relations in this town only became apparent to me after completion of the fieldwork. In total 63 in-depth interviews were conducted with a range of residents in terms of age, gender, religious, class and ethnic identifications. The interviews were conducted by the research team that included myself, another academic and two non-academic researchers, one of which was a resident and the other a community-worker in the neighbourhood (see footnote 2).

Southtown is in commuting distance of London and is set in one of the wealthiest counties of England. The town has a population of 99,198 people according to the 2011 Census, and the neighbourhood in which this fieldwork was based has a population of 10,574 people. According to the official government categories used in the 2011 Census, 74.94% of the total population of Southtown was classified as ‘White: British’. However, only 37.02% of the total population of the neighbourhood in which this study was based identified as ‘White: British’. Moreover, ‘Pakistanis’ constitute 34.30% of the total population of this neighbourhood, ‘White: White Other’ 7.41%; ‘Other Asian’ 6.13%; ‘Indian’ 4.16%; ‘African’ 1.99%; ‘Bangladeshi’ 1.24%; ‘Arab’ 0.96%; ‘Any other ethnic group’ 0.85% ‘Chinese’ 0.73%; ‘Caribbean’ 0.33%; ‘Other Black’ 0.19%. Muslims constitute the largest religious group in the neighbourhood at 37.74% of the total population, while 34.06% self-identified as ‘Christian’. Socio-economic indicators suggest that unemployment in the neighbourhood in 2011 was above the town’s average but lower than the national average.

People from the Mirpur area of Pakistan settled into the neighbourhood in the 1960s in the aftermath of British decolonisation of India. One of the reasons that Muslims migrated to the neighbourhood is the area’s Mosque. The neighbourhood is also home to Sicilian and Southern Italian migrants as well as white English people who migrated from London, all of whom settled in the area in the 1960s. These migrations illustrate how this suburb has long since been a site of ‘parachuted plurality’ (Peach 2000) whereby specific trajectories of migrants settled. More recently, however, the area has experienced the settlement of increasing numbers of migrants from across the world, most notably people from Poland and Nepal, rendering this suburb a global ‘ethnoburb’ to use Dwyer et al’s (2013) concept, with transnational links stretching in multiple directions across the globe.

In general terms, interethnic relationships between neighbours were characterised by the following phrase expressed by a number of research participants when referring to people of other ethnicities and nationalities: ‘they keep themselves to themselves’ (AUTHOR and Jenson 2009). While this common refrain suggests the absence of regular patterns of social interaction between neighbours across ethnic differences, more detailed analysis shows that interethnic relationships are much more frequent than indicated. BrAsian men often worked for a period of time in the same local factories as white British residents and Italian migrants. Moreover, BrAsian and white parents reported that their children had formed interethnic friendships at the local schools. BrAsian and white British people in their twenties who pursued education and/ or employment outside of the area emphasized how interethnic friendships were formed at university and in the workplace. At the neighbourhood level it was increasingly common for friends who were not Muslim to be present at significant events held at the Mosque.

My supposition is that nuance and complexity is added to this general picture of convivial sociality by exploring in detail individuals’ particular experiences of interethnic relations, and the various ways in which these relations come to co-exist with xenophobic and racist attitudes. The first scene that I shall analyse draws on an interview with a BrAsian man in his 20s, and the second scene, an interview with of a white British woman in her 80s. The third and final scene draws on interviews with a white British woman and a BrAsian woman who in their words are ‘best friends’. In keeping with ethnographic convention, all names are pseudonyms, and other steps have been taken to ensure interviewees’ confidentiality.

**Neighbourliness and conviviality in Southtown**

*Scene 1: Jamie’s experience*

Jamie is twenty-five years old and from a working class background. He grew-up in Southtown. His mother was born in Guyana and his father in Pakistan. His parents met in London, married and settled in Southtown, which is where his father’s family settled upon migration from Pakistan. His parents divorced when he was a young boy. Jamie and his siblings have a good relationship with both parents. He recently started a degree course at university, but withdrew before completing his degree. He now lives with his female partner in a rented apartment in the town, and is actively seeking employment. In the following interview extract, Jamie describes his family’s relationship with an older white British couple that used to live next door:

On Halloween when we used to dress up … it used to be the first house [i.e. next door was the first house Jamie and his siblings visited] and they used to know it. They used to wait for us to come. We used to exchange Christmas cards [and] … presents. You know a box of chocolates….

Researcher: And what about nowadays? Who are your neighbours, definitely not the same?

Jamie: No not the same at all … on one side … somebody’s bought and rented out rooms …. there’s a lot of different people in that house. And then the family on the other side, the older couple … they had both died. He actually, when the guy next door, the older guy, he actually died in my brother’s arms. He come and knocked on the door … when he was dying. When he was having his heart attack and … he was having … pains and … for someone to do that, someone wouldn’t just come and knock on anybody’s door, would they? Not a random person’s door….

Researcher: No, no unless they….

Jamie: Exactly in this day [and age] … *trusted* them [my emphasis].

Researcher: So who opened the door…?

Jamie: My brother … and my dad were there with him…. He died in their arms…. And then the ambulance come and then took him away....

Researcher: That must have been quite traumatic?

Jamie: I think it was for them…. It was for me really because we kind of missed him you know, we used to see him….

Researcher: So he was your neighbour for how many years?

Jamie: Since I’ve been there, since the age of eight … years old up until last year…. So more than ten years.

The intensity of Jamie’s neighbour’s death and his description of this unexpected and traumatic event has an impact on those directly involved and the interviewer found this a poignant exchange – that is to say it ‘literally hit(s) us or exert(s) a pull on us’ (Stewart 2007, 4). An image of interethnic ‘trust*’* and care is evoked in the picture of Jamie’s brother and father - a Muslim Pakistani migrant to the UK, and his teenage son - cradling and comforting in their arms a dying white British man. For Jamie, his neighbour’s death is ‘a jump of something coming together’ (Stewart 2007, 4), bringing to the fore the trust that the dying white man must have had in Jamie’s family.

Jamie describes how he misses the deceased neighbour. The absence of not seeing the man every day highlights the connection that they had. Convivial relations were formed between the families via the annual exchange of gifts at Christmas, visits at Halloween and each other’s daily presence. These relations and exchanges of gifts accumulated over time to form a relation of ‘trust’, mutual recognition and connection between the families. Underpinning these relations is a shared understanding of the etiquette that constitutes these interactions formed through participation in the daily routines and annual social interactions that are typical of the neighbourly relations associated with suburban living in Britain (Huq 2013; Author 2012). Indeed, it is precisely these neighbourly relations and routine practices of reciprocity that produce Jamie’s attitude of disdain towards, and desire for social distance from, some new neighbours who are thought not to fit in.

For Jamie the ‘lots of different people’ who now live next door are not the same as his former neighbours. The house next door has been bought by a landlord for whom the house is not a home but a business enterprise. The temporariness and randomness of the tenants render them distant, set apart and other from the stability that Jamie associates with previous neighbours. In short, newcomers, some of whom are migrants not only to the area but also to the UK, are thought to be un-attuned to the routines and exchanges of familiarity and homeliness that constitute neighbourly interactions in this suburban neighbourhood.

Jamie’s dismissive attitude towards his immigrant neighbours might seem surprising given that his own parents are immigrants to Britain. However, his local sense of belonging, centred on ideas of neighbourliness and reciprocity, means that he is not interested in making connections with new immigrants that for him do not fit in. In this way, then, Jamie’s account highlights the socially problematic way in which relations of interethnic conviviality can inform both a sense of connection across ethnic differences *as well as* create a sense of distance from other people who are thought not to belong.

*Scene 2: Marjorie’s experience*

Marjorie is a white middle class British woman in her 80s who has lived her whole life in a large and grand Victorian house in the neighbourhood. The house belonged to her parents and when they died she inherited it from them. Since the death of her parents, Marjorie has lived alone in the house. She was financially secure enough not to need to work. However, Marjorie sporadically took paid employment in a bookshop because she liked it. While discussing her life-story, Marjorie introduced into the conversation relationships formed over a number of years with a woman called ‘Samera’ and her family, who had migrated to the neighbourhood from Pakistan in the 1960s. The conversation went like this:

Researcher: When did she [your mother] die?

Marjorie: 1961, so I’ve spent a long time on my own. Haven’t been absolutely useless … well Samera and her family, I spent a lot of time with them when they were little…. A lot…. I thought of going to work part-time but … I had the house to look after and I had a new puppy, and I seemed to have enough to do.

Later on in the discussion Marjorie refers to her relationship with Samera and her family in the face of classed and racialised differences that she thinks demarcates herself from her ‘Pakistani’ neighbours:

Researcher: But you feel that they [i.e. BrAsians] are nice neighbours to live with, in the same neighbourhood…?

Marjorie: I thought when these people started pouring in and a lot of people left - the neighbours that side went to Canada, the neighbours that side went to Australia - I thought somebody had better stay put and keep a few standards up…. Because my *godfathers* [an old-fashioned middle class expression of surprise and shock], when the Pakistanis first came, they had no idea of how to paint anything…. Terrible! And … they obviously found English front doors rather difficult to close…. They used to buy those sort of pearlised wardrobe handles and screw them onto the doors, so you sort of pull the door shut. And they looked … absolutely *ghastly* [also a middle class word]. And of course … my main bone [of contention] with those people is they’re not gardeners. They just let things go in the most awful mess….

Researcher: Do they make good neighbours?

Marjorie: They’re alright, I mean Samera is very nice, two doors away. Her parents lived at 58, her brother lives next door to me … they’re quite a large family; they’re not very far away.

Marjorie then stopped the conversation to draw her living-room curtains. After closing the curtains, she continued:

Back about 1963/64 … one Sunday and they came to me and said “please would you help us with our English?” I think he was about seven and she [i.e. Samera] was about five at the time, so I’ve known them a long time. I knew those two very well. Samera’s English is much better than Tahir’s English…. Then her youngest sister … used to spend ooph, all her time here … doing homework and things…. And then Samera’s older daughter Zinia used to spend a lot of time here, they used me as a sort of extension … of the public library…. They’re a nice family….. I don’t really know anybody in this road these days. You just don’t you know….. Some of them I don’t think I’d want to know anyway….

Researcher: Why’s that?

Marjorie: Mm … well I don’t think I’d have anything in common with most of them.

Nested within a set of disparaging racialised and classed remarks about the supposed decline in standards brought about by the in-migration of ‘Pakistanis’ to this suburban neighbourhood is Marjorie’s description of the significant relationships that she formed with an individual neighbouring BrAsian family, and especially with generations of that family’s children. On the one hand, we have the image of this white middle class suburban woman ‘staying put’ to maintain and defend the social and aesthetic standards of the neighbourhood that she felt were threatened by the migration of ‘Pakistanis’ into the area, and on the other hand, there’s the corresponding out-migration of her white neighbours to the former British colonies of Canada and Australia. In this way, Marjorie positions herself as the defender of the respectability and charms associated with an idealised notion of the English suburbs, while her white British neighbours migrate to Britain’s former *white* empire in search of new opportunities. One consequence of this is for ‘Pakistani’ migrants to be represented as lower class people who are thought not to be equipped to cope with the etiquette, decorum and aesthetic values central to life in British suburbia.

It is similar ideals about the ‘proper’ aesthetic and social constitution of suburban places that sociologists and anthropologists have shown white middle class suburbanites draw upon in distancing themselves and their neighbourhoods from white working class people and places (Watt 2009), asylum seekers and refugees (Grillo 2005) and BrAsian ‘invaders’ (Author 2012, chapters 2 and 3). Indeed, it is also the commonplace belief that immutable racialised and classed differences demarcate white ‘modern’ values from BrAsian Muslims’ ‘culturally’ different values and ‘backward’ beliefs, and that this results in whites and BrAsian Muslims living ethnically segregated lives in British cities and towns (Alexander 2005, 202).

But yet within the flow of her conversation, Marjorie describes how, over the course of many years, she regularly helped two generations of BrAsian children to learn English as well as assisting them with their homework. It could be argued that Marjorie’s role as teacher is reminiscent of the colonial figure of the white upper-class British Memsaab who taught those colonised the English language, an activity felt by some colonialists to be fundamental to the ‘civilisation’ of the so-called ‘natives’ (see Hall and Rose 2006). However, to only portray Marjorie’s relationship with this family in this way would miss the significance of these relationships to her, and misses the ways in which her relationships with these children cultivated a space for interethnic care.

The length, depth and precious quality of these relationships unfolds and amasses in Marjorie’s outpouring of the connections that she describes with differing generations of the family’s children. She explains how some of the children ‘used to spend all their time [at her home]’, and she light-heartedly, but evidently proudly, suggests that some children came to her house as if it were ‘the public library’. In a motherly tone and fashion, she reveals how her relationships with these children kept her occupied for years.

It seems to me, then, that these relationships and ‘gifts of care’ (Wise 2009, 37) offer Marjorie what Zournazi and Hage (2002, 151-152 quoted by Wise 2005, 177) call ‘hope on the side of life’. Zournazi and Hage describe this as a feeling which ‘drives us to continue to want to live, it is the existence of something to live for’ (Zournazi and Hage 2002, 151-152 quoted by Wise 2005, 177). Attached to this state of being are feelings of ‘joy’ and ‘homeliness’ that accompany ‘connection’, ‘sharing’ and ‘mutual recognition’ across difference (Wise 2005, 177).

Echoing Jamie’s childhood memories, it is the interactions of care and the intermingling of biographies between adults and children that is central to the creation of these convivial relations between BrAsian and white British neighbours in Southtown. In other words, in these instances of interaction, children become the bridge that connect adults across ethnic, national and religious differences who live ‘not far away’ in the same street or even just next door. While Marjorie’s interethnic relationships have an inevitable impermanence about them – children grow-up - it is clear that Marjorie’s interactions with these children are not the same as the ‘cool’, ‘pragmatic’ and ‘fleeting’ convivial encounters between strangers in public spaces observed by ethnographers in cities (see Neal et al 2011 for an overview; Wessendorf 2013, 2014; Wise and Velayutham 2014 for specific examples). That is to say, Marjorie’s relations across difference are built up over time in her home with generations of children to become integral to her biography and sense of self in this particular place. In other words, in Southtown interactions are ongoing thus relations form, whereas in super-diverse cities interactions are often too ephemeral to become relations of care and trust.

However, it is an inescapable reality that Marjorie’s relationships across difference are haunted by her xenophobic and racist attitudes. Marjorie’s relationship with this particular ‘Pakistani’ family, no matter how life enhancing, does not change her views on the supposed decline in standards that she thinks was characterised by the settlement of ‘Pakistanis’ into the neighbourhood more generally. Thus, on the one hand, Marjories’ feelings of racial and class distinction and snobbery break down when she thinks of an individual family that she knows well. However, on the other hand, this does not open her up to new relationships with her more recent neighbours that also come from somewhere else. Like the ‘Pakistanis’ before them, these new migrants represent an imagined interruption to life in this supposedly once white suburban neighbourhood. It might also be said that the arrival of even more migrants, from across the UK and other parts of the world, highlights her impotence to do anything about what she perceives to be the negative changes that incomers inevitably bring to the once uniform, orderly and respectable character of this place. My main point is that at the same time that convivial relations generate feelings of interethnic connection, they also reaffirm, at least for Marjorie, deep-seated prejudices.

**Friendship and conviviality in Southtown**

*Scene 3: Sarah’s and Nureen’s experiences*

In this final empirical section my analysis shifts gear to explore the friendship of Sarah, a white British woman, and Nureen, a BrAsian woman of Pakistani descent, who both grew up in the neighbourhood and continue to live in the town. This friendship provides a different angle on the close proximity of convivial relations to xenophobic and racist attitudes. Susan’s and Nureen’s experience illustrates how the racist response from observers to their interethnic and interreligious friendship leaves them vulnerable to encounters with racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia in the town.

Each woman was interviewed separately for the project. Both are in their early thirties and are from working class backgrounds. They first met and became friends at a primary (elementary) school in the neighbourhood. They attended the same secondary (senior) school also in the area. After school, Sarah went to university but left before finishing her degree to give birth to her son. She is a single mother and currently works as a Teaching Assistant at a local school. Nureen is a university graduate and works for a charity. Like Sarah, Nureen is not married, but has no children. Sarah describes Nureen as: ‘my best friend I would say, we’ve been since primary school’, and Nureen describes her relationship with Sarah like this: ‘I don’t think it is unusual that a Pakistani girl and a white girl become friends. But … it is unusual that we have managed to stay in touch for this long’. Clearly, the longevity of Sarah’s and Nureen’s friendship forms a stark contrast to those sociological and anthropological accounts of conviviality in super-diverse urban neighbourhoods that highlight how interethnic relations tend to be cool, pragmatic, temporary and fleeting (Wessendorf 2013, 2014; Wise and Velayutham 2014). Nureen’s and Sarah’s friendship is a reminder that some convivial relations can be long-lasting and have deep, personal and transformative effects. Sarah’s and Nureen’s reflections on their school days offer insight into the conditions in which their relationship was formed.

In their respective interviews they each recall primary school as a place where ethnic and other differences were less significant than secondary school. Moreover, both Sarah and Nureen discussed what it felt like at secondary school to be part of an ‘insular’ group of BrAsian friends set apart from and observed by the rest of the class. Sarah describes the relationships she formed at primary and secondary school as follows3:

There were only three English children in my class [at primary school], and the rest were all Asian…. I hadn’t really noticed that until the … last year [of primary school]…. The children from [my primary school] went to [the same secondary school] and we were put with our friends in the tutor groups…. In my class there were four or five [Asian] girls [including Nureen] that I knew from [my primary school] … so then we really were the minority.… Well I was the minority … in my primary school [because she was white in a school with mainly Asian pupils], but I really felt the minority in the secondary school even though I wasn’t…. I think people classed me as part of the group [of Asian girls] because … I just stayed with the people that I knew [from primary school] and we were very insular and didn’t mix at all…. And that carried on all the way through the school….

Researcher: How big was that group…?

Sarah: So there was [pause] four [Asian] girls in our class and myself probably … and the Asian children that came with us, obviously we didn’t really mix with those either…. So it wasn’t as if all the Asians stuck together….

Turning now to Nureen’s thoughts, she describes her relationships at primary and secondary school like this:

I was never really aware of that kind of differences [i.e. ethnic] there [at primary school]. I never categorised people in that way. They were just … fun school days and I remember mixing with all sorts of people.

Researcher: And at secondary school?

Nureen: I became more aware of ethnicity, and started to notice differences. We were, like a group of Pakistani girls together from primary school, and Sarah was with us. I don’t remember any strong racism, and we just stuck together. It was more that kind of picking on the one that is different, same way that the fat person gets picked on…. I started realising how our upbringing was more closeted. Other kids had already been … having their first boyfriends, first cigarettes, going ice-skating.

For both women the absence of ethnic identification and difference at primary school is associated with a happy, warm and fun atmosphere filled with positive emotions that is entangled with a nostalgic image of early childhood. However, they each describe a shift in the atmosphere associated with life at their secondary school. Sarah recalls how her membership of their friendship group made her feel like part of a ‘minority’, even though she is aware that at this school she was a member of the white ethnic majority. Moreover, Sarah’s memories of her close adolescent relationships with a group of BrAsian girls become entwined with feelings of being set apart from the rest of the class. But yet, she is keen to stress that ethnic difference and distinction did not structure the group’s marginal position in any straightforward way.

Nureen’s memories of their friendship group at secondary school are interwoven with her realisation that the BrAsian Pakistani Muslim values that shaped her upbringing made her different to some other children. Nonetheless, she is also keen to make clear that this feeling of outsider-ism as an adolescent was not the consequence of racism. It is when our conversations turn to the present that the issue of commonplace racist, and specifically Islamophobic, attitudes are foregrounded, and the close proximity of the women’s interethnic friendship to racism is rendered explicit. For example, Sarah explained how her relationships with BrAsian Muslims have informed her response to Islamophobic attitudes that she encounters:

I’ve got a better understanding of the religion and the culture than a lot of my friends [i.e. her white British non-Muslim friends]. I mean I’m really shocked that people still have never met a Muslim. That’s very surprising…. It’s funny speaking to non-Muslims or non-Asians … because things that just seem natural to me are foreign completely to them.

Researcher: ….in which situations do you talk to people about that?

Sarah: I’ve got a friend … he’s an active Christian…. And you know he just thinks that everyone wants to convert me to Islam. They clearly want to be my friend just because they want to make me Muslim…. And take me back to Pakistan and get me married off….I’ve become very protective and start to voice my opinions quite loudly once he starts on that whole road…. I replaced the word ‘Muslim’ with ‘friend’, so when he says ‘Muslims’ I’m thinking people…. I’m thinking of the people that I know whereas he’s thinking of the group of … fundamental terrorists who want to blow us all up. But I guess that’s where the problem is, isn’t it?

Sarah’s friendships not only inform her vehement reaction to and rejection of commonplace racist and Islamophobic stereotypes about BrAsian Muslims, but also the way in which some non-Muslim white British people perceive and engage with her. In this regard, Sarah and Nureen’s relationship exemplifies some of the ways that their interethnic and interreligious friendship is threatening to some white British observers because it represents the potential dilution and loss of white British identities and values by BrAsian Muslims. Indeed, Sarah’s white British Christian friend’s perception of her relationships with BrAsian Muslims resonates with some media depictions of the threat thought to be posed by Islam and Muslims to white British women, especially those who live in neighbourhoods where BrAsian Muslims reside. These perceptions and fears are illustrated in the *Last White Kids* documentary by the portrayal of the supposed vulnerability of the white working class British girls who convert to Islam and who live in the predominantly BrAsian Muslim neighbourhood of Bradford. In sum, then, Sarah’s reflections exemplify the co-existence of convivial relations with racist attitudes to the extent that her relationships with BrAsian Muslims represent an affront to the commonplace idea that white British and BrAsian Muslim lifestyles and worldviews are fundamentally incompatible (Alexander 2005, 202).

**Conclusion**

My focus on the convivial interrelationships between whites and BrAsians in the suburban town of Southtown challenges what Phillips (2006, 29) describes as the idea implicit in Cantle’s ‘parallel lives’ thesis that the suburbs are ‘normalised’ white spaces set apart from BrAsian Muslim neighbourhoods that are ‘judged to be deviant or marginal’. My depiction of interethnic relations in Southtown adds to those studies that question stereotypes about the ethnically white constitution of the suburbs (Peach 2000; Nayak 2010; Dwyer et 2013; Huq 2013), as well as challenge the public perception that has become entrenched in the face of the so-called ‘war on terror’, that Muslims in Britain, and more generally across the globe, hold different values, hopes, aspirations and dreams to the rest of the nation’s and the world’s non-Muslim population (Alexander 2005).

Furthermore, my portrait of conviviality illustrates how suburban manifestations of conviviality are not straightforwardly captured and explained by the fleeting, pragmatic and positive interethnic relations documented and analysed by some sociologists, anthropologists and geographers in super-diverse global cities (see Neal et al 2011 for an overview; Wessendorf 2013; 2014 for specific examples). Rather, in this suburban neighbourhood everyday encounters with difference have a lasting consequence for white and BrAsian individuals in terms of an emotional impact on their sense of self, as well as forming a homely feeling of neighbourliness and belonging to this place based on routine exchanges and interactions that underpin deeply personal relations of trust and care. One might suggest, then, that the conviviality in super-diverse cities is deployed instrumentally to facilitate co–existence rather than seated ‘in the heart’ as for some residents of this suburb (Bellah et al 1995).

Nonetheless, my argument is that these interethnic relations of reciprocity and neighbourliness associated with respectable suburban life become entwined with and produce expressions of indifference and racism to migrants and those BrAsian ‘Pakistanis’ that are thought to intrude upon the routines and rhythms that constitute this place. It is, then, the entanglement, co-existence and production of attitudes of racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia with neighbourly, routine and respectable expressions of interethnic conviviality that constitutes what I call the ‘suburban paradox’. Understanding this paradox requires detailed critical analysis of how individuals that reside in suburban neighbourhoods articulate and live their lives through the dialectic of conviviality and racism that constitutes the rhythm of their suburban life-worlds.

**Notes**

1. Following Ali et al (2006), I use the term ‘BrAsian’ to highlight the historical relationships of empire that bind people of South Asian descent living in Britain to Britishness. The terms ‘Pakistani’ and ‘Asian’ were used by white British and BrAsian research participants, and not the technical concept ‘BrAsian’.
2. This research formed part of an ESRC funded project (RES-000-22-2796): ‘Communities within communities: a longitudinal approach to minority/majority relationships and social cohesion’. The research team included Ole Jensen (Research Fellow), and two community-based researchers that I hired. I was Principal Investigator. Each of us played a role in conducting the interviews reported in this article.
3. A shorter extract from this interview appears in Jensen (2013).

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