

The conviviality of the overpoliced, detained and expelled: Refusing race and salvaging the human at the borders of Britain

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Abstract

Paul Gilroy's theorisation of conviviality has proved exceptionally generative in (urban) sociology. But any announcement of a 'convivial turn' should be approached with caution. In much of the literature on 'everyday multiculturalism', racism is insufficiently theorised, structural relations of hierarchy and inequality fade from view, and culture loses its unruly potential. This article seeks to rethink and reclaim the radical potential of conviviality, by working with the narratives of people deported from the UK to Jamaica. The article first argues that the social and political implications of conviviality can be better registered when placed in relation to state violence and state racism. The article then analyses the accounts of deported people who show that conviviality is about much more than getting along across difference, but can represent a wider ethics of 'refusing race and salvaging the human'. Indeed, when people subject to extraordinary forms of state racism – overpoliced, detained and then expelled – still reject all defensive investments in racial categories, proving themselves not only against racism but 'against race', they reassert the normative, ethical and prefigurative character of convivial cultures.

Keywords

borders, conviviality, deportation, Paul Gilroy, humanism, policing, race

Introduction

Paul Gilroy's *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004) is commonly cited as the primary inspiration for the 'convivial turn' within empirical and sociological studies of urban settings (Nayak, 2017; Neal et al., 2013). For Gilroy, conviviality refers to 'the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere' (Gilroy,

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2004, p. xi). For Back and Sinha, conviviality offers ‘an alternative understanding of culture that focuses on what people do everyday rather than always reducing them to their cultural origins’ (2016, p. 522). Conviviality points to the ‘humdrum, multi-ethnic cultural textures and interactive circuits that have become so commonplace to many low- and middle-income urban areas’ (Valluvan, 2019, p. 202), and it therefore affords scholars a language with which to think about and value such ordinary multiculturalism (Gilroy, 2004). In this way, conviviality has proved useful for scholars looking to describe and analyse the capacity of ‘diverse’ people to live together, despite the ongoing and often divisive politicisation of their ethnic, national and religious differences.

Any announcement of a ‘convivial turn’ in sociology and urban studies should, however, be approached with caution. Much of the literature that goes under the heading of the ‘convivial turn’, as well as related scholarship on ‘everyday multiculturalism’, has been marked by a kind of ‘descriptive naivety’ (Valluvan, 2016, p. 205), wherein conviviality is severed from a broader critique of the dehumanising structures of racism, and becomes little more than ‘a by-word for *saccharine diversity* fantasies’ (Back & Sinha, 2016, p. 523). In this work, racism is insufficiently theorised, structural relations of inequality fade from view, and culture loses its unruly potential (Back & Sinha, 2016; Jackson, 2019; Valluvan, 2016). The radical, anti-racist and humanistic aspirations that fuelled Gilroy’s intervention disappear, and instead we end up with a set of empirical descriptions of (super)diverse spaces and interactions – at best, inane, at worst, obfuscating. It is worth restating that conviviality only proves generative, conceptually and politically, because it points to the messy, contingent and often unremarked ways in which people live together and care about one another *against the odds*, in societies structured by racial division and hierarchy.

To usefully work with the concept of conviviality, therefore, scholars need to substantively theorise the racist cultures and practices which structure the cities and societies being studied. For example, research into specific urban locales should carefully attend to the ways in which racism is historically spatialised through urban planning and housing policies (see e.g. Back, 1996). This would necessarily factor in contemporary processes of urban regeneration, gentrification, and attendant forms of displacement in cities like London (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020; Jackson, 2019). These forms of displacement and exclusion should then be connected to the heavy policing and surveillance that overdetermine the lives of so many working-class young people – black and racialised young people in particular (Elliott-Cooper, 2021). These forms of structurally racialised inequality and violence produce bordered spaces within the city – gated communities; heavily policed (and gentrified) high streets; slick consumer spaces, purged of the homeless and the vagrant. In the context of intensified and internalised immigration control, these urban borders intersect with national borders in complex ways (Hall, 2017, 2021), and the lack of research on the relationship between conviviality and immigration control, between urban and national borders, is therefore especially striking (for exceptions, see Back & Sinha, 2018; Hall, 2021). This article explores precisely these dynamics, via an engagement with the perspectives of a varied group of young men who were rendered as disposable and deportable on racialised grounds.

More specifically, this article works with the narratives of deported people now living in Jamaica, as they reflect on their lives in Britain and recall convivial encounters in the

shadow of coercive state power, namely in relation to policing, prisons and the ‘condition of deportability’ (De Genova, 2005). By contrasting structural dynamics of coercive domination with everyday investments in multi-ethnic identifications, I demonstrate that the social and political implications of conviviality can be better registered when placed in relation to various forms of state violence and state racism. More specifically, I am concerned with how experiences of coercive state power can themselves encourage convivial connections, especially when people of different ethnicities encounter state violence *together*. I ask, how do shared experiences of heavy policing and everyday bordering create forms of ‘fellow feeling’ among differently racialised people?

Following Vigneswaran’s query in his paper on community policing in Johannesburg, we might ask ‘whether conviviality can be found in contexts where violence or the threat of violence are [most] prevalent’ (2014, p. 472)? Conviviality is typically researched in “‘micro-publics’ including workplace[s], schools, hospitals, colleges, youth centres, sports clubs and other contact zones of association including public transport’ (Back & Sinha, 2016, p. 524). But what about police stations and prisons? What about migrant detention centres? These too are micro-publics of a kind, where people share space, and where ‘prosaic negotiations with difference through intimate proximity take place and are often compulsory and necessary’ (Back & Sinha, 2016, p. 524).

I go on to argue that the deported people I interviewed were not only at ease with difference, they actually evinced a marked discomfort with naming and reifying racial categories in the first instance. With this in mind, I suggest that conviviality should be about much more than describing everyday encounters across lines of difference. As Valluvan explains, conviviality does not simply allow us to name everyday practices of multi-ethnic interaction, it is a concept that ‘speaks specifically to an ability to invoke difference whilst avoiding communitarian, groupist precepts’ (2016, p. 218). As such, conviviality might point to vernacular modes of ‘refusing race and salvaging the human’ (Gilroy, 2019). Indeed, the narratives of deported men cited here suggest a rejection of racial thinking and thus a potential for cultivating alternative political imaginaries that might allow broader collective formations to take shape. The key contribution of this article therefore lies in positing a more explicitly political and ethical theory of conviviality, via an analysis of the quiet refusal of communitarian conceits among a handful of individuals who were overpoliced, detained and expelled. When people who have been subject to the most brutal forms of state racism – criminalisation, illegalisation, expulsion – still reject all defensive investments in racial categories, proving themselves not only against racism but ‘against race’ (Gilroy, 2000), they reassert the normative, ethical and prefigurative character of convivial cultures, offering glimmers of the ‘cosmopolitan hope’ required to contend with the damage of racism and nationalism in the 21st century (Gilroy, 2018).

Gilroy’s intervention – conviviality against ‘race’

Paul Gilroy’s work is characterised by a restless critique of all forms of racial and national closure (Gilroy, 1993, 2000, 2002, 2004). His discipline-bending and deeply political arguments on ‘race’ and nation were first fully elaborated in *Ain’t No Black*

in the *Union Jack*, published in 1987, a book which remains arguably the best diagnosis of cultures of racism and nationalism in (postwar) Britain. And though it is rightly seen as a book that firmly denounces the racisms and nationalisms that deform British political culture, *Ain't No Black* also explores cultural formations in a way that anticipates his later writing on conviviality. Towards the end of the book, in Chapter 5, Gilroy argues that the lives of black people in Britain are not defined solely by racial subordination: racist images of black alterity 'lack the capacity to suppress the whole historical process of which they are part' (2002, p. 201). He argues that the richness of oppositional cultural struggles around 'race' is not reducible to anti-racism, and traces the ways in which cultural forms from the US and the Caribbean have been adopted and reworked in Britain. He shows that these expressive cultures exceed and reject 'constricting national boundaries' (2002, p. 207), which nicely prefaces his arguments in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Here, Gilroy pursues 'diaspora' as an alternative framework to the ethnic absolutisms 'which would confine culture in "racial", ethnic or national essences', and 'looks at aspects of the organic relationship between blacks and whites which has developed, unevenly, over a considerable period of time in the leisure institutions of urban Britain' (Gilroy, 2002, p. 203). Already, we can identify here the dual focus on local convivial multi-culture and diaspora/planetarity which characterises his subsequent writings (1993, 2000, 2004).

Importantly, while Gilroy might well be a (self-described) 'anatomist of racial subordination, governmentality and conflict' (Gilroy, 2018, p. 10), he is also always engaged in the affirmation of something else, something beyond, something after, celebrating the already available cultural forms and processes where 'race' is overcome and undone, however partially, within alternative public spheres, most often in music. These cultures suggest alternatives to the continued allure and illusory clarity of ethnic absolutism and race thinking, and Gilroy wants to counterpose these convivial cultures and potentialities with the defensive, nationalistic and essentialist philosophies of difference that characterise several resurgent forms of black and anti-racist politics, as well as what he calls (university) 'campus antihumanism' (Gilroy, 2014, p. 74). His formulation of conviviality should be read with these concerns and commitments in mind. In other words, conviviality nourishes Gilroy's broader critique of the false promises of identity and the deadly certainties of 'race'. As Gilroy puts it in *After Empire*: 'The radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification' (2004, p. xi).

As with many of Gilroy's key concepts, conviviality has been widely cited and incorporated into various research programmes and publications. The concept has afforded scholars new analytical tools for the study of urban life, hence the 'convivial turn'. But as this article argues, much of this sociological literature relies on a thinned out, conceptually bland and politically muted reading of conviviality, where racism, power and the state fade from view. Before developing these critical comments, however, I first examine how and why conviviality has been picked up by those engaged in empirical studies of ethnically diverse urban locales.

The 'convivial turn'

There are a range of scholars who research everyday multicultural (see e.g. Neal et al., 2013; Wessendorf, 2014; Wise & Velayutham, 2009), and it is not possible to review this broad corpus here. But it might be useful to focus on two Special Issues on 'conviviality' that have most fully outlined the framework and debates within the field. In Nowicka and Vertovec's introductory framing article to their 2014 'Convivialities' issue of *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, they suggest that 'conviviality has a conceptual family resemblance to several other notions currently in public and academic circulation, including cosmopolitanism, civility, trust, multicultural and multiculturalism, diversity, integration, cohesion and social capital' (p. 342). Making these connections can be fruitful, and the authors do recognise that conviviality retains a conceptual distinctiveness, but even so, these associations with terms like diversity, integration, cohesion and social capital – concepts which seem at once both too innocuous and too amenable to nativist policy framings in this context – risk obscuring and erasing what is most critical about Gilroy's formulation.

Wise and Noble, in the introduction to their 2016 special issue 'Conviviality', in the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, follow Nowicka and Vertovec by positioning Gilroy's work in relation to a wider set of sociological concerns. They suggest that 'this recent manifestation is part of an older and broader concern with the ongoing question of how communities/cultures/societies/nations "stick together"' (p. 423). They cite Durkheim's work 'positive solidarity', and argue that conviviality 'is one among several zeitgeist terms aimed at conceptualising aspects of lived multicultural: everyday multiculturalism, everyday cosmopolitanism, everyday racism, superdiversity, migrant urbanisms' (pp. 427–428). Again, while discussing cognate terms is hardly problematic – words and concepts are not discrete and nor should they be – something vital is lost when conviviality, as Gilroy formulates it, blurs into other terms that lack the same analytical depth and political bite. As I have argued, conviviality is only important because it plays out in the context of racism, ultra-nationalism, perpetual war, widening social inequality and deepening social insecurity. *After Empire* is filled with references to Guantanamo Bay, the failures of the left, and problems with neoliberalism, consumerism and securitocracy, none of which find their way into the 'everyday multicultural' literature which so easily translates conviviality into its synonyms.

Wise and Noble (2016) explain that conviviality allows for a more open-ended approach to studies of racism and 'diversity' in the city, and they recognise that racism and conviviality interact and coexist in complex ways in specific places (see Back, 1996 on the 'metropolitan paradox'). However, their tone becomes somewhat more spiky when they appraise 'critical race' approaches (which I would term anti-racist approaches). They argue that the 'convivial turn' seeks to move beyond that 'tradition of scholarship on race and ethnicity that has always taken friction and racism as the problem and starting point, and the reproduction of relations of social power as the end point' (2016, p. 425). They go on to describe Back and Sinha's contribution to the issue – which focuses on racism, hierarchy and division, and provides a damning critique of 'superdiversity' – as 'combative', and they appeal to scholars from different traditions to avoid 'camp making' (2016, p. 428). However, in my view Wise and Noble are here identifying substantive differences of theory and method that are not so easily reconciled.

Challenging racism, celebrating unruly multiculturalism

This body of work on the ‘convivial turn’ and ‘everyday multiculturalism’ has been critiqued from several angles. Some have argued that early iterations of this work were based on a naïve ‘contact hypothesis’, which imagined that interaction between groups reduces prejudice (Valentine, 2008). As Anoop Nayak remarks, ‘it is important not to . . . overlook the friction that accompanies what are often unsettling encounters’ (2017, p. 290). However, it seems that everyone writing about conviviality agrees that the concept should not be reduced to ‘happy togetherness’, and conviviality is usually defined in terms of negotiation across lines of difference in the context of inequality and division. In my view, then, the problem is not that there is no account of friction, but that the friction is insufficiently theorised.

Valluvan develops this critique, arguing that ‘there is a risk that the sociology of multiculturalism tends towards a certain descriptive naivety’ (2016, p. 205). Emma Jackson describes this as ‘zoning in on particular spaces and identifying these as examples of everyday multiculturalism while abstracting this from their location in wider urban social processes’ (2019, p. 83). Much of the work on everyday multiculturalism seems content with simply describing very specific and localised dynamics of conviviality (and to some extent everyday racism), without really connecting these observations to a wider set of structural and political determinants. Too often in this work, the critique of dominant political discourses on segregation and integration is restricted to the introductory rationale, falling away when it comes to the analysis of the empirical material. Claire Alexander articulates this critique in broad terms, arguing that the “politics of difference” has become focused more on the detailed elaboration of “difference” than on the “politics” which shape and contest it’ (Alexander, 2018, p. 1045). In my view, this ‘descriptive naivety’ might be an effect of a kind of fetishisation of ‘the everyday’, where the analysis is not only in and of the everyday, but contained by it.

There is a problem when the obverse of conviviality becomes ‘everyday racism’, too easily reduced to the interactional and the micro. State racism (policing, immigration enforcement, the punitive welfare state) or matters regarding housing, urban displacement and precarious work fall out of the picture. Put simply, when the dynamic between racism and conviviality is sited wholly at the scale of ‘the everyday’, there is very little room for an account of structural and legal forces. It then becomes satisfactory to pick a particular place – a neighbourhood, a workplace, or a park – and then proceed to describe in great detail how people interact there, the interplay of conviviality and friction. Expounding this specificity and complexity might be interesting, but it is not clear why it is important. Or perhaps more precisely, it is not clear why Gilroy figures so centrally in the citational practices within this body of scholarship.

This body of scholarship seems to operate within what we might call the ‘diversity problematic’, rather than a racism problematic. In this work, the fact of (super)diversity and ‘ethnic plurality’ is naturalised as an objective descriptor of certain societies, and this ‘diversity’ then sets the stage for convivial encounters (see e.g. Heil, 2014; Nowicka & Vertovec, 2014). This obscures the question of how particular ethnic/racial distinctions and divisions get made and remade (de Noronha, 2019; Hall, 2017). Indeed, it is the very production of some differences as the differences that matter which forms the most

urgent political and intellectual question. As Gilroy makes clear in the last few pages of *After Empire* (2004, pp. 165–166):

I prefer to say that if there has to be one single concept, a solitary unifying idea around which the history of postcolonial settlement in twentieth-century Europe should revolve, that place of glory should be given not to migrancy but to racism. The racisms of Europe's colonial and imperial phase preceded the appearance of migrants inside the European citadel. It was racism and not diversity that made their arrival into a problem.

Les Back and Shamser Sinha build on this argument in their 'combative' contribution to the 2016 special issue in the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. Importantly, they stage their ethnographic descriptions against a backdrop of structural racism, state power and inequality, thereby critiquing Steven Vertovec's concept of superdiversity, arguing that it makes very little sense to focus on the so-called 'diversification of diversity' without discussing the central role of racism and nativism in framing how and whose diversity is made to matter. Especially important to Back and Sinha's broader research is the question of immigration control. They show that borders produce 'new hierarchies of belonging' (Back & Sinha, 2018), in 'the brutal migration milieu in which we are located' (Hall, 2017, p. 1564), arguing that accounts of racism and multiculturalism need to better factor in the violent force of immigration control.

Importantly, the critical scholarship epitomised by Back and Sinha is not only more explicitly concerned with (anti-)racism, but also with mining cultural processes and expressions for their radical insights. Culture, here, is seen as a radically open, complex and dynamic terrain of struggle, and lived culture is contrasted with dominant notions of culture as ethnic property (i.e. culturalism). Thus, this tradition writes against race *and* against culture (Gilroy, 2000). This complex view of lived culture is not always amenable to the flattening analyses of social interactions and interview excerpts that characterise the everyday multicultural literature. Within that literature, ethnically defined groups interact in shared spaces, but their ethnic and racial differences remain largely intact. In Gilroy's formulation, on the other hand, conviviality gestures towards the utopian possibility that racial and national differences might one day become meaningless, undone via the cultivation of alternative, outernational forms of identification and collectivity. Without being oriented by this critical set of hopes for a world without 'race' and nation, the extant sociological literature offers little more than descriptions of multi-ethnic spatial formations. It is good at granular empirical detail, less so at exploring the political and ethical implications of what actually happens to identity and culture amid such multi-ethnic, convivial formations.

It is worth pausing here to reflect on Gilroy's description of multiculturalism as 'unruly' (2004, p. x), one of several words he enlists to underline the radical openness of lived culture. Of particular relevance to my concerns here, I want to suggest that unruly mobilities are in fact central to the forging of unruly (multi)culture, and this is not only about contemporary processes of migration. Whether looking at histories of slavery (Camp, 2004), vagrancy (Anderson, 2013, pp. 12–28), or policing (Neocleous, 2000), it is clear that desires to control the mobilities of poor and degraded humanity have been central to the development of state repression. And yet, unruly human mobilities always seem to

have radical political and cultural potential. As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2012) have convincingly shown in relation to histories of the Atlantic, the movement of people spurs forms of interaction and intermixture that often stoke the flames of revolution. In this way, unruly mobilities and unruly (multi)culture are both signs of freedom, where unruliness refers to an ungovernability in relation to the territorialising and exclusionary force of national and colonial state power (see also Scott, 2009). Transposing these historical insights to the present, I would argue that by thinking about the unruliness of human movement *and* culture, always in relation, we can register the central role that might be played by those labelled ‘migrants’, especially illegalised migrants, in the development of vibrant, open and anti-essentialist forms of anti-racism and emancipatory politics. Perhaps this is what is meant by the critical border scholars who argue that ‘migrants’ struggles unsettle the space of the political’ (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015, p. 83).

Admittedly, not everyone using the concept of conviviality need share these theoretical and political preoccupations. However, it remains instructive to ask what transpires when scholars read *After Empire* (or not, as some of the front-loaded citations might suggest), and then selectively bracket the concept of conviviality, while leaving the book’s other foundational and concomitant concerns untouched: melancholia, empire, colonialism, securitocracy, overdevelopment, marketisation, the evacuation of public good, anti-racism, humanism, planetarity? Of course, all scholarship involves lifting selectively from other people’s work, taking choice quotes and ideas and repurposing them. But the danger with *After Empire* is that by taking a single term, partially read, one ends up missing the point, and conviviality becomes an end in itself, as opposed to part of a wider challenge to all identitarian and ethnically absolutist closure.

Additionally, the ‘convivial turn’ can be critiqued for its overwhelming focus on cities in the global North, and there is much to be gained from a wider dialogue with anthropologists, geographers and urbanists working outside the North Atlantic and Australia/New Zealand. Take Abdoumalig Simone’s vast corpus of exciting work on urban life in the ‘global South’ (2004, 2009, 2018). Arjun Appadurai’s fascinating work on ‘cosmopolitanism from below’ in Mumbai/Bombay (2013), or the series of Mecila working papers on conviviality and inequality in Latin America (<http://mecila.net/working-papers/>). There is much to be gained from thinking about conviviality outside Europe and Australia, and it is therefore no surprise that the most interesting paper in Nowicka and Vertovec’s 2014 special issue was Vigneswaran’s paper on conviviality, policing and violence in Johannesburg (Vigneswaran, 2014).

Further, if, as I have argued, conviviality has been thinned out theoretically, then it might be rejuvenated by a more substantive engagement with writing on (often more philosophically difficult) cognate terms, especially those that Gilroy enlists himself in *After Empire*: cosmopolitanism (Jazeel, 2011; Rogaly, 2020), planetarity (Spivak, 2014), humanism (Gilroy, 2014). More broadly, if conviviality is about cultural politics and intermixture amid ongoing histories of racialised violence, then scholars of conviviality would do well to engage with theorisations of black culture in the new world more broadly (e.g. Gilroy, 1993; Glissant, 1997; Mintz, 1989). Finally, and of most significance to what follows, empirical studies of conviviality would benefit from a more careful and theoretical discussion of the value of ethnography, not least because so much of this work is ostensibly based on ethnographic approaches.

Methods – why ethnography?

There is no better way to strip difference of its mystique than to deal directly with practices of everyday life on their own terms while also linking them to the wider world. (Dlamini, 2009, p. 113)

As noted already, the ‘convivial turn’ involves putting the concept of conviviality to work within empirical studies of urban life. Part of how urban ethnographers justify the need for empirical methods is by identifying the limitations of textual methodologies and ‘philosophical ruminations’ (Wise & Noble, 2016, p. 426). As Wise and Noble argue: ‘In abstraction, these [convivial formations] become attributes rather than the outcomes of particular practices: to see them, we must examine the practices themselves’ (2016, p. 426).

Such appeals to the virtues of ethnography are of course important – there is always something that can be gained from speaking to people, getting to know them, thinking deeply about their conceptions of the world, and then writing about them. There is however a danger here that ‘the real’ and the ‘local’ become fetishised in particular ways, as though the granular and highly specific are worthy of analysis in and of themselves, rather than for what they reveal about the wider conjuncture. It also sets up some false oppositions between ethnographic and textual methods, and between empirical research and theory. In my reading, Gilroy has an ethnographic sensibility, and is interested in culture, in the vernacular, and in everyday spaces of the city, even if he and others are not inclined towards directly interviewing research participants. Equally, while *After Empire* is theoretically expansive, there are many ethnographic monographs that develop theory just as complex, abstract and oblique. The suggestion that there is a need for empirical work because it is less abstract is not in itself a compelling or sufficient rationale.

With this in mind, it is worth restating why ethnographic approaches are valuable. Most simply, ethnography is based on the idea that ‘hanging out’ with people in ‘natural’ environments yields very different findings than straightforward interview studies might, and ethnographers are interested in the contradictions between what people say and what they do. At a more fundamental level, ethnographers think that how people understand and narrate their own lives is important and interesting. I would take this a step further and say that ethnographers hope to learn something from the people they speak to. Like Yarimar Bonilla, I engage with the reflections of my interlocutors ‘not just as anecdotal evidence but as sources of analytic insight’ (2015, p. xiv, see also Beckett, 2019). Indeed, the value of anthropology is its ongoing reminder that humans can and have lived in such varied ways. For some anthropologists, spending time with people different from ourselves can help us cultivate alternative and radical political imaginaries (Hage, 2012), and this chimes with the ethical and normative compulsions within Gilroy’s formulation of conviviality.

The radical political imagination and deep ethical reflection that characterise the best anthropological work appear notably lacking among ethnographies of ‘everyday multi-culture’. More accusatorily, this becomes especially questionable when the field involves (mostly white) academics studying ‘diverse’, working class neighbourhoods – without a sufficient account of racism, power and the ethics of cosmopolitanism in their analysis.

This begs the question, what *is* so interesting about these neighbourhoods? Arguably, studies of everyday multiculturalism participate, albeit inadvertently, in the aestheticisation of difference, in ways that echo the commodification of ‘diverse’ urban locales as sites for (colourful, edgy) consumption. Against this, my argument is that ethnographic approaches to the study of convivial cultures become much more compelling when they foreground the utopian aspirations for outernational forms of identification and collectivity, beyond and against ‘race’ and nation. This article is written with such aspirations at heart.

The analysis which follows is based on a larger ethnographic project on deportation, which involved long-term immersive research with people deported from the UK to Jamaica, as well as with their family members and friends who remain in Britain (de Noronha, 2020). Research was conducted over a period of roughly three years (although contact with interlocutors remains ongoing). The quoted excerpts are lifted from life-story interviews, in which I asked deported people to reflect on their experiences in the UK, with a particular focus on their interactions with coercive state power (police, prisons and immigration control). Importantly, my approach to ethnography is not about representing ‘a culture’, but about using ethnographic methods to critique the UK’s border regime and its central role in processes of race-making (see De Genova, 2005). This critique of the nation-state project can be nourished by ‘ethnographic techniques’ that involve listening to and learning from those most violated by the forces of racism and nationalism. In this case, ethnographic methods mean paying attention to the stubborn persistence of ‘cosmopolitan hope’ among those not only excluded but quite literally expelled from the national polity (Gilroy, 2018, p. 19).

Bringing the (racial/racist) state back in

This research, into the lives of a particular group of young men, who were rendered deportable through processes of racialised criminalisation, offers a particular reading of conviviality. Their multi-ethnic identifications were sustained in the context of subjection to racist state violence, in under-resourced and over-bordered urban settings. As such, theorising from their perspective can, without abandoning conviviality altogether, respond to the concerns of critics like Kapoor and Kalra, who argue that: ‘academic discourse caught in the necessity of producing innovation and novelty, at times of an ever-irrelevant kind, has been unable to catch up with the rampant exertion of state intervention in its punitive and coercive capacities that has come to mark the contemporary period’ (2013, p. 7). More specifically, my concern is with how experiences of coercive state power can themselves encourage convivial connections, especially when people of different ethnicities encounter state violence *together*. I am interested in how shared experiences of heavy policing and everyday bordering create forms of ‘fellow feeling’ among differently racialised people. It was in conversations with Ricardo that this question surfaced most insistently.

Ricardo moved to the UK from Jamaica when he was 10 years old, and he lived in the West Midlands. From the age of 14, he experienced intense forms of police harassment: whenever he left his house, he was constantly surveilled, stopped, searched and detained by the police. Between the ages of 14 and 18 he was arrested over 100 times, and each

time released without being charged. The police repeatedly accused him of committing robberies, deciding that he was part of a ‘problem family’ based on offences committed by his older brothers. Ricardo was effectively denied the right to freedom of association, the presumption of innocence, and the protections of childhood. While perhaps extreme, this violation will be familiar to those who have thought seriously about anti-black racism (Browne, 2015). Indeed, this is how I made sense of the encounters Ricardo described to me. Interestingly, however, Ricardo’s own understanding diverged from mine in interesting ways:

- Luke: But why do you think the police bothered you so much?
 Ricardo: They’re saying because of my brothers basically innit. They think I’m following in their footsteps. . . .
 Luke: And where do you think racism comes into this?
 Ricardo: All my friends, they got the same. I had white friends [mostly Albanian], I had Asian friends, they all got the same. It was just –
 Luke: But they can’t have been arrested as much as you?
 Ricardo: I mean, the black – nah, not the same as me but they all got like arrests as well innit. So, police used to knock on their doors with the same procedure so, like, I didn’t feel like it was just me.
 Luke: So you think it’s not just about race, you think it’s about the area or. . . ?
 Ricardo: And the way we dress and all them stuff innit.

For Ricardo, ‘race’ was lived through class, age, gender and place and as such racism was both unremarkable (just part of life), and hard to isolate and name. As importantly, Ricardo’s friendship group was multi-ethnic. He described his best friend, who also faced heavy policing, as ‘half Pakistani, half white’. Importantly, Ricardo was not arguing that being racialised as black had nothing to do with it, but rather explaining that his encounters with the police occurred alongside friends who were racialised differently. As I go on to show, these experiences of shared violation instilled in Ricardo an overall wariness about reifying racial distinctions.

Like racist policing practices in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, British immigration removal centres actively throw diverse people together under shared conditions. When I have visited immigration removal centres, I have always been struck by the convivial dynamics and potentialities. People racialised and nationalised in very different ways all share a condition of incarceration, uncertainty and the impending threat of removal. This, unsurprisingly, creates forms of affinity, anchored by the shared ‘condition of deportability’ (De Genova, 2005). While people often ‘hang around’ with their co-nationals in detention, they also connect, care for and resist with people of many different nationalities. Kemoy, a deported man I met in Jamaica in 2016, recalled his 12 months in Dungavel Immigration Removal Centre in Scotland:

- Kemoy: I was working in the kitchen and I went to the gym. At first I trained this Vietnamese woman, Van, beautiful woman, then I trained some other Vietnamese bredda [brother]. And then trained some Albanians and all that, with the gym ting. But after a while . . . because you haven’t got a leave date, like in jail, to look forward to, and you don’t really know when you’re getting out, you’re stuck in purgatory.

Kemoy, like many other deported people I met, described making friends with people of different nationalities in detention, people he said he would have never met on the outside. Many people described the problems faced by Vietnamese and Eastern European nationals in detention, due to a lack of English literacy, and the ways in which other detainees helped them to understand and fill in their immigration forms. Often those assisting Vietnamese and Eastern Europeans were individuals from Britain's former colonies, and/or those who grew up in the UK (like the men in my research). More than this, groups of detainees of various nationalities have protested, made demands, and gone on hunger strike several times in recent years, and in this way, the banal practices of conviviality in the gym can become the preliminary ground for more direct political action against coercive state power.

That said, Kemoy's description of detention as 'purgatory' reminds us that conviviality in detention should not be romanticised. Indeed, theorising detention in terms of conviviality might appear somewhat glib. When people are being indefinitely detained while the Home Office pursues their deportation, it can feel off-key to pontificate on convivial potentialities. However, if conviviality is a source of cosmopolitan hope, then its persistence in the context of detention and deportation matters. In the cages built to detain and deport 'foreigners', we are reminded, again, that difference is not always the site of danger and threat, but can be one of exchange, affinity and care. Indeed, the task of resistance and shared resilience in a detention centre is itself intrinsically dependent on acting and identifying across difference. It is in such institutions that prefigurative commonalities forged across disparate racial and ethnic backgrounds obtain an acute sociopolitical intensity and urgency – when contrasted with the habits of sharing space captured in the neighbourhood cafe, public street, playground or workplace canteen that is otherwise the mainstay of sociological research on multiculturalism and conviviality. Put most simply, theorising conviviality in the context of state violence – whether in relation to policing, prisons, or immigration detention – helps underline why it is useful conceptually and why it matters politically.

Importantly, borders are present not only at the edge of territories, in spaces of exception, encampment and expulsion. Borders have been 'transported to the middle of political space'; borders are now 'implosive, infinitely elastic, and, in effect, truly everywhere within the space of the nation-state' (Balibar, 2004, p. 104). Borders get between people and follow them around; they have been internalised, and they are everyday and everywhere. Under the UK's hostile environment, for example, everyone is checking and being checked, and doctors, teachers and landlords have been turned into border guards. Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy have researched everyday bordering in this context, arguing that 'convivial encounters . . . are threatened by the encroachment of the border further into everyday life in pluralist society' (2019, p. 27). While this observation is crucial – reminding us that the bordering/conviviality tension is present in the schools, workplaces and leisure spaces studied by urban ethnographers – what remains vital here is the fuller political and ethical charge of these convivial practices when they do transpire.

Anti-racism, humanism and shared violation

Ivan Illich, the original theorist of conviviality, conceptualised conviviality in terms of *tools* (Illich, 1973/2009). This avoids reducing conviviality to a question of 'identity' and sidesteps the claim that there is a kind of underlying 'cultural ecology' that explains

convivial life. Illich focused on the ‘structure of the tools, not on the character of the users’ (1973/2009, p. 15). Back and Sinha build on Illich’s formulation to question what kinds of convivial tools and capacities help people ‘make space to live within a city that remains divided by racism’ (Back & Sinha, 2016, p. 523). Through ethnographic research with young migrants living in London, they identify five broad convivial tools and capacities, which can be summarised as: fostering attentiveness and curiosity; care for the city and a capacity to put yourself in another’s place; worldliness and making connections beyond local confines; developing an aversion to the pleasures of hating; making connections and building home.

For Back and Sinha, these tools and capacities represent an openness to the future, which helps young migrants navigate ‘the barriers and limits that racism places upon them’ (2016, p. 530), not least in terms of their legal precarity. Importantly, the authors define these convivial tools as forms of everyday wisdom grounded in ethical care. As such, they move beyond simply describing everyday multiculturalism, and advance instead a set of openly normative claims about the skills/dispositions we should all embrace so that we can better live together. In this section I build on these arguments, but my key concern is less with specifying or typologising convivial tools. Instead, I want to zoom out and situate the convivial impulses of the deported people I met in relation to Gilroy’s wider critique of all forms of ‘ethnic absolutism’, and his steadfast defence of humanism – whether qualified as planetary, radical or reparative (Gilroy, 2014). It is in this more expansive analytic context that I turn to some of the discussions I had with deported people explicitly on issues surrounding ‘race’ and racism, conversations that draw attention to their often liberating rejection of generic racial identities.

Denico told me that in the area where he lived before being deported, in South Birmingham, residents were ‘predominantly white people’, before then asking, nervously, ‘wait, can I say that?’ He was worried that describing an area as populated by ‘predominantly white people’ might be construed as racist. At first glance, this is no doubt related to the fact that whiteness is the invisible norm and is therefore difficult to name – especially for someone racialised as black in a white nation. Denico’s concerns about being racist to white people reveal a ‘culture of racial equivalence’, in which racism, as construed in ‘post-racial terms’, is imagined to ‘work both ways’ (Song, 2014). Denico’s cautiousness around invoking ‘race’, then, is a reflection of the postracial silences, equivalences and anxieties that are produced in our profoundly racist and yet ostensibly postracial moment (Goldberg, 2015) – a context where racism is publicly and rhetorically disavowed even as it is allowed to flourish through euphemised and sublimated forms.

But there is something else going on too. It is too easy to say that Denico’s discomfort around naming ‘race’ must simply be an effect of racism – even if this too was my own initial reaction. Indeed, my intuitive response to both Denico and Ricardo (who was also uncomfortable talking about ‘race’) was to say: ‘you cannot be racist to white people . . . that is not how it works’. But it is important to pause here and reflect on what is elided by this closure. Put simply, stating that black people cannot be racist to white people might shut down other, more productive, questions – as ever, questioning what is and is not racist is not the most fruitful line of enquiry – and it might represent a failure to really listen to what people like Denico and Ricardo are saying.

In my view, Denico and Ricardo are trying to think beyond and outside of racial categories, even as these categories enclose and delimit them. In other words, they are demonstrating a vernacular anti-*race*-ism (Bhatt, 2016). Despite his experiences of police racism, Ricardo did not want to reduce all ‘white people’ to the actions of *those* police officers. Ricardo did not want to invoke ‘white people’ as a category of abuse, and my suggestion that even if he did, it would not be racist, fails to appreciate his attempts to avoid *any* resentments on the basis of ‘race’. Meanwhile, Denico was nervous about even uttering the words ‘white people’. Again, this might be seen to be a reflection of his racialised subjugation and submissiveness, but also of relevance is the fact that the mother of Denico’s partner in the UK was white, and he spoke often about how kind and supportive she had been to him during his time in the UK. Perhaps his discomfort with saying ‘white people’ represents a general aversion to reinvesting in the logic of racial difference and its lazy Manicheisms.

It is worth turning to Ricardo again here, who elaborates upon this politics of an anti-*race*ism with particular care and detail:

Ricardo: I don’t like talking about race and stuff like that, I just try not to make it brainwash me, basically I don’t want to fall to their level and be racist back towards them . . . it’s a powerful thing you know. Because they build it into us from when we was young. But it’s something that I don’t wanna feel. I don’t think everyone is the same. Not all white people are the same. Not all black people. And being racist just creates problems. That’s why I don’t wanna fall to their level, even though sometimes it’s so powerful you can’t control the way you feel.

Ricardo expresses a discomfort even talking about ‘race’. He recognises that black people too can be ‘brainwashed’ by racial thinking, and wants to avoid nurturing any resentments against white people in general. He echoes Du Bois, who writes: ‘all my life I have had continually to haul my soul back and say, “all white folk are not scoundrels nor murderers. They are, even as I am, painfully human”’ (Du Bois, 2017, pp. 131–132). Ricardo is not only against racism, then, but ‘against race’, and he recognises that the racial categories of white and black do not correspond to absolute or even coherent differences. Despite his subjection to extreme forms of police racism as a teenager, and his subsequent banishment to Jamaica, where he had no friends or family, Ricardo was still at pains to avoid ‘being racist to white people’. This suggests that the retreat into racial essentialisms is not the only response available to those violated by racism. Importantly, Ricardo’s convivial impulses, rooted in his humanistic rejection of ethnic closure, encouraged him to look sideways and to connect his experiences with others experiencing similar forms of state violence, even as they were racialised in very different, perhaps opposing, ways. Researchers and anti-racists would do well to learn from Ricardo’s ‘everyday wisdom’.

In December 2016, Ondrej Suha, a 19-year-old who moved to the West Midlands from Slovakia aged four, received a letter from the Home Office telling him that he would be deported post-sentence. He then hanged himself in his cell in HMP Brinsford. Ondrej Suha grew up a few miles from Ricardo and spent time in HMP Brinsford for burglary: the same offence, in the same prison, at the same age. The connections

between Ondrej Suha and Ricardo might escape us if we remain permanently restricted in our analytic gaze by phenotypical assignments and racial particularity. In prison and detention, people who are racialised differently are incarcerated under the same regime, and this produces a set of shared experiences and affinities. Ricardo, again, speaks to these issues:

Ricardo: There wasn't that much racism in prison, it was more from the screws [prison guards]. Everyone is in it together in jail, it doesn't matter what colour of your skin, you're all the same, it's not about race, it wasn't like that, it was more the officers that would try and be racist. We're all under the same thing, all in prison, all have a release date, all having the same food, all sharing the same water, all doing everything the same.

Ricardo's reference to sharing food, water and a daily routine speaks poetically to inmates' shared humanity and their shared, bodily vulnerability. Meanwhile, his emphasis on the central antagonism between guards and prisoners, between agents of the state and young men held in cages, demonstrates that he is under no illusions as to which differences really matter. Making connections between Ricardo and Ondrej Suha matters in the British context, as the UK further extricates itself from the European Union and thousands of EU nationals become vulnerable to the 'hostile environment' in new ways. Already, in 2017, the top three nationalities of 'enforced returns' were Romanian, Albanian and Polish nationals, and this raises complicated questions about the relationship between racism and immigration control (see e.g. Fox et al., 2012). Ricardo's ability to look sideways is an essential convivial tool; it represents an ethics of cosmopolitanism that must be honed if migrants and their advocates are to build multi-racial constituencies capable of resisting the nativist, authoritarian turn that is defining contemporary British politics.

Conclusion

The value of conviviality is not that ethnic and racial(ised) differences disappear altogether – although this might be the utopian horizon – but that they no longer become the site of danger, suspicion and withdrawal. The question then becomes, *what are the sites of danger?* Here, we would do well to return to the programme of anti-racist scholarship that takes 'racism as the problem and starting point, and the reproduction of relations of social power as the end point' (Wise & Noble, 2016, p. 425). In an earlier time, this meant studying racism in education, employment, policing and to a lesser extent the immigration system (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies [CCCS], 1982; Cohen & Bains, 1988; Wilson, 1978). The sites of danger were structural and institutional, not wholly reducible to the everyday, and yet scholars recognised that (young) people still found ways to negotiate, rub along and make friends across lines of difference (Hewitt, 1986). This is all there in Gilroy's *Ain't No Black*, and further elaborated in seminal ethnographic studies of racism and multiculturalism published in the mid-1990s (Alexander, 1996; Back, 1996). This article builds on that earlier tradition while specifically centring the border. Doing so brings the state back into the analysis – especially relevant given the 21st century's pronounced

anti-immigrant nativisms – thereby better situating convivial cultures in direct relation to the structuring force of racism.

But this article is not only a plea to re-centre the state, or for an avowedly anti-racist approach to empirical studies of multiculturalism. More than this, it underlines the specifically politico-ethical and humanistic implications of conviviality in anti-immigrant times, which become especially intense when approached from the perspective of deported ‘Black Britons’. Just as Gilroy’s writing on conviviality forms part of his wider critique of all forms of race thinking, so might the multi-ethnic associations of deported people form part of their wider anti-racism. Even if this everyday wisdom is partial, contingent and temporary, it is precisely what is necessary if we are to find alternative resources of hope in the struggle against the most dangerous forms of ‘camp-making’ which have become so constitutive of contemporary statecraft.

Ultimately, this article is not intended to censure scholars who have written under the banner of (super)diversity or the ‘convivial turn’; papers are written, conferences are held, and not all sociologists self-identify as insurgent anti-racists. But this article does raise important questions about why we find particular concepts illuminating and important. What is it about particular social settings that makes everyday multiculturalism valuable and interesting? How should the existence of fairly banal forms of multiculturalism be weighted and interpreted in relation to analysis of economic conditions, state practices, and racist cultures – all of which appear to be becoming more brutalising as we speak and write? More pointedly, what is the place of scholarship on racism and multiculturalism in the context of mass political mobilisations against racism, particularly against the police (Elliott-Cooper, 2021)? Developing compelling answers to these questions will prove especially urgent for a new generation of scholars trying to make sense of societies structured by racism, nativism and violent bordering.

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