

# Identity in the 21st Century

**New Trends in Changing Times**

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# 6

## 'Con-viviality' and Beyond: Identity Dynamics in a Young Men's Prison

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### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the configuration of identity, social relations and ethnicity within the confines of a young men's prison. The site of intense deprivations, referred to by Sykes (1958) as the 'pains of imprisonment', prisons gather together many of those people also bearing the pains of structural disenfranchisement and marginalisation which characterise deprived neighbourhoods (Wacquant, 2007).

England and Wales have the highest per capita incarceration rate of Northern Europe after the Baltic states (Walmsley, 2007). Twelve per cent of this prison population comprises young men aged 18–21 years held in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs). Like adult prisons, YOIs are characterised by ethnic, national and religious diversity (Ministry of Justice, 2007), which is partially fuelled by the long-standing over-representation of black people in the prison population compared to the general population (see Phillips and Bowling, 2007). Within the exceptional conditions of prison life an institutional prisoner identity is sometimes assumed to take precedence (Sykes, 1958), delivering what Foucault (1979: 236) describes as 'a recoding of existence'. Other perspectives see prisoners maintaining racialised identities imported from wider society (Jacobs, 1979).

The work we present here considers how young men's identities are shaped through the encounter with the austere routines of prison life and each other's ethnicity. Despite the multiplicity of ethnic identities among prisoners of England and Wales – in 2006, for example, 27 per cent of male prisoners were of minority ethnic origin and 15 per cent were foreign nationals (Ministry of Justice, 2007) – prison ethnographies

in England and Wales have tended to neglect issues of ethnicity and race relations (Phillips, 2008). As a result relatively little is known about the way prisoners' ethnicities influence their social relations.

The site of our study, HMYOI Rochester in Kent, was selected for having an ethnically mixed population of young male prisoners from both urban and semi-rural settings. Young men arrive at HMYOI Rochester from London, where Black and minority ethnic youth are over-represented in the criminal justice system, and from courts, or other prisons, in the neighbouring counties of Kent, Essex and Sussex where white ethnicities predominate. The prison accommodates up to 400 convicted young men, of which approximately 56 per cent were White British, White European or White Other. Black/Black Caribbean/Black African young men comprised 30 per cent of the population, while 7 per cent were of Mixed Heritage and 6 per cent Asian.

The authors attended the prison for up to 3–4 days each week over a period of eight months in 2006/2007 and conducted 60 in-depth interviews. A relatively long-term period of access allowed us to encounter something of the rhythms and routines of prison life. Prisoners spend anything from 15 to 22 hours a day locked in their cells, depending on the availability of workshops and other activities. We spent as much time as we could engaging with prisoners through conversation, presence and interaction during their out-of-cell time; before and after meals, on the wings, in workshops and during times of evening 'association'.

### **Affirmation and disavowal of ethnic identities**

Many of the prisoners who contributed to the study demonstrated an understanding of ethnicity that equated it with culture. Their narratives revealed a Barthian (1969) sense of an ethnic and bounded self, historically embedded in a shared culture, but not grounded in essentialist characteristics, thus allowing permeation from, or penetration into, the cultures of other ethnic groups.

In the main it was minority ethnic prisoners who described investing in dynamic cultural practices and symbols which united them with others similarly ascribed. Various kinds of plaited or twisted hairstyles (corn row, chiney bumps, two strand twists), as well as longer afros, loxed hair and shaved styles offered black prisoners some expression of individuality and collective presentation. Most white prisoners lavished considerably less attention on their hair and distinctive stylings were less in evidence. However, other emulations of black prisoner's urban

expressions, tone and dress style were not uncommon among white prisoners. Rochester prisoners, both black and white, often went 'backsy' with their emerald green prison-issue trousers or grey jogging bottoms worn well below their hips showing their undershorts. Talking 'slangs' on the wing, 'rude boy' or 'street' talk was also a source of connection and a means of performing identity for many black prisoners of British nationality.

For some white prisoners familiarity with the vernacular associated with urban black youth not only established a prisoner's provenance but also helped to transcend the boundaries of sub-cultural affiliation. The cultural currency of black stylistic forms has long been observed in studies of urban youth cultures (Back, 1996; Frosh et al., 2002; Nayak, 2003; Sharma et al., 1996) and the current study indicated their prevalence in the social world of the prison too.

Though these emulations continue to have a contested viability among the young men, largely based on a register of their supposed authenticity, they appear to have escaped, at least in part, some of the essentialised loading in which the use of language, and specifically patois, reifies racialised difference. Fanon referred to the ways in which the assumption by white people of a black vernacular signified an attack on the black person in an effort to 'attach him to his image, to lime him, to imprison him, to make him the eternal victim of an essence, of an appearance for which he is not responsible' (Fanon, 1975: 27). As Fanon pointed out, however, there is more than one level of agency at work in this relationship for while '[I]t is the white man who creates the 'negre' ... it is the black man who created negritude' (Fanon, 1968: 29). The implied and offensive essentialism of race has been thoroughly diffused through the common experiences many of the young men from London talked about: of growing up on the same estates, attending the same schools, living on the same streets and, in some cases, the same households. One bi-lingual young white man from West London described himself as White Asian and talked proudly of a mixed heritage derived from his Asian step-father:

My boys call me ['Switch'<sup>1</sup>] cos I'm half white, half Asian so they say it was a [switch] of personality, so they call me ['Switch'], so I got that name ... everyone that knows me will say that I'm the only white Asian who knows more about the Asian culture than Asians themselves.

(White, British National, Christian – R41)

Racial logic has been unpicked by these young men as a result of the durable insistence of black presence that Fanon identified as a consequence of diaspora: 'You come to terms with me, I'm not coming to terms with anyone' (Fanon, 1975: 106). As Paul Gilroy (2004) has explored recently there is emerging evidence of a new urban post-colonial conviviality that generates possibilities hitherto only imagined at the utopian fringe of progressive politics; the collapse of racial categorisation.

Although some of the fundamental problematics of racialisation remain far from absent in the prison we also discerned evidence of new forms of convivial living whose viability was contested and constructed on a regular basis in the 'thrown together' (Serge, 1967/1937) collections of young men in the prison. Nothing exemplified this better than when the (young, white, female) writer-in-residence at Rochester organised a small in-house Performance Poetry event. In a prison workshop over a dozen contestants performed their prepared lyrics to a small audience of their peers. With musical backing tracks the styles ranged from fast-chat rhymes to slower paced reflections on prison, life, romance, crime and cops. Some were awkward and inept, though the crowd was, somewhat 'officially', supportive. There were two white contestants and a few more in the audience. One of them won the contest by a country mile and by popular acclaim. His ultra-fast-chat stylings drew from his itinerant immersion in a criminal life-world that extended from the ports of Kent to the suburbs of London and beyond. The stumbling efforts of one black foreign national prisoner to achieve the required speed and expressive virtuosity were received with the same mixture of gentle ridicule, good-humoured disdain and harsh encouragement as the efforts of another, equally faltering and unsuccessful, white contestant.

In another part of the spectrum was a multitude of prisoners for whom ethnicity had a dormant or undeveloped sense lacking personal, social or political meaning. Regarded as something suspiciously prescriptive, ethnicity was actively disavowed and considered irrelevant to the young men's sense of self both inside and outside prison. This was particularly true in many of the accounts of White British prisoners. This is consistent with much of the empirical and theoretical work on the perceived normative character of whiteness where white ethnicities are invisible, denied or regarded as devoid of ethnic content (Garner, 2007; Nayak, 2003). White British ethnicities had an evacuated, vacant quality as if emptied of the imperial glory that once stood for a whiteness they might claim. They stand in stark contrast to 'culture-rich' black and

Asian ethnicities (see Gilroy, 2005; Ray et al., 2004). Many responses from White British National prisoners to questions about ethnicity in this study were consistent with this and chimed with Nayak's (2003: 173) view of whiteness as '*the ethnicity that is not one*'.

Several of the white young men found our enquiries about ethnic identity, and the existence of standard ethnic categories, perplexing: 'It's just what you say isn't it when you tick an application form and that, that's what it means to me ... I've never really thought about it to tell the truth' (R47 White, British). As Macey (1999) notes it is quite possible, and probably not uncommon, to grow up in a largely white community in England without knowing in any real sense that you are white – there is simply no need to know, just as a fish would have no sense of wetness. By contrast national categorisations appeared far more intelligible with prisoners offering varied national or ethnic family lineages subsumed within the British national category. For others, though, this hybridity was emerging as problematically inclusive. According to this young white respondent (R4):

The reason why I say that [White English] is because, like, British, you don't know what British is. You know what I mean, there's just so many ethnic minorities, not even minorities now, majorities should I say, do you know what I mean. They're everywhere and to me, and I mean they never say, the African minorities never say they're English, they say they're British, so I'd like to be separated from that. I don't wish to be too close to that. I know it's a bit controversial, but that's what I believe, you know what I mean.

As this account suggests although 'Whiteness' may appear vacant it is not undefended and the axis of defence often turns on notions of exclusive national belonging as a cipher for race.

Ethnicity had a latent quality for many minority ethnic prisoners too, portrayed simply as a formal descriptor rather than being at the forefront of lived experience. Here a black prisoner resists the cultural boundedness of his own official and social ethnic ascription:

I don't really see the point of that [HMPS ethnic monitoring codes] ... I say it's where I'm from but I don't really talk about it as much as if it's something special ... The most thing that I've seen is like Irish men, they're proper proud of being Irish. But ... [CP: Can you understand that?] No, not one bit.

(Black, British National, Christian – R48)

Prisoners' reluctance to engage with ethnicity seemed to mask a lack of willingness to actively engage with difference, perhaps because race and ethnicity occupy particularly difficult terrain in the late modern prison (Phillips, 2008). Prisons are, at several levels, an attempt to shape and categorise 'the self' of the convicted young men. They are inherently authoritarian regimes that in both popular and practical consciousness involve the erasure of a personal identity, symbolised by the substitution of a prison number for the individual's name (Sykes, 1958). Though the practice of referring to prisoners exclusively by their number is now officially discouraged the legacy remains vivid. This prison context intensifies the ways in which talk of ethnicity conveys a sense of oneself as constructed by others, of being objectified and being seen as 'something' rather than 'someone'. More and more, as the explicit parameters of whiteness enter the structured domain of ethnicity, white people are beginning to encounter this exteriority (Macey, 1999). Resisting the implicit invitation to occupy a pre-prepared template of the self was expressed, with some vigour and frustration, by this young White British national (R41):

What do you mean? I'm not an ethnic group, I'm just [Dimitri], I don't class myself as any ethnic group. If someone want to ask me where do I come from, I come from Cyprus and I don't class myself as any ethnic group. I'm just [Dimitri] and I don't feel this little communities with ethnic groups and whatnot, I don't care, I'm not interested. I don't get involved in that.

The sentiments expressed by many white and some minority ethnic prisoners reflected a desire to see themselves and others simply as human beings, not defined by their race or ethnicity. An Asian Muslim prisoner (R51) remarked, for example: 'Ethnicity is not really a big thing. Obviously it is a big thing but nobody takes it as a main mark. It's more on the lines of who you are personally. Not your race as an individual, exactly'. A white prisoner (R6) put it like this:

No, I don't feel white, I don't feel white, you know. I know I'm white and all that, but the thing is, though, I'm still the same person as a Black and Asian, Chinese people, you know, I'm still, they're still the same person as me. You know, we all growed up from the apes and everything you know.

In these accounts from the young men in prison there might be something of the 'wise passivity' associated with Keats' notion of



'negative capabilities'.<sup>2</sup> This refers to a kind of intuitive awareness of powerful affective forces in the face of which it is wise to be passive. Prisoners' responses to our enquiries about ethnicity and identity suggest varying degrees of recognition, or fit with something of which they have a lived knowledge, but also a wariness that it also 'lives' as something else, such as racism, coercive categorisation or even anti-racism, which is not entirely coterminous with their own experience or readily intelligible to them. Negative capability is a frame of mind to let things be in whatever state of uncertainty they might be in, an incapacity or unwillingness to impose a schema of knowing on a phenomena, such as 'their identity'.

### **Living diversity under constraint – conviviality**

Prisoners' narratives acknowledged the reality of diversity, and racial and ethnic difference was, on the surface, rendered banal and unremarkable, something that prisoners were at ease with, as this extract indicates:

Yeah like servery, I mean back in the day there were like me, there was all different, there was a white person, there was a Caribbean person, there was like a Jamaican person, and there was a Mediterranean person and there was me, mixed race persons, so it was always different, yeah... When you're in jail it's all mixed you know what I'm saying, it doesn't matter.

(Mixed Race, British National, Muslim – R15)

At play in the struggle for hegemony in the prison, it seemed, was the 'harmony discourse' detected by Back (1996) in South London, and promising, perhaps, what Gilroy (2004) has described as the possibilities of 'anti-racist solidarity' brought through a 'liberating ordinariness' which dispenses with a focus on racial differences, division and conflict.

This impression was reinforced by an unexpected but consistent feature of our fieldwork in which there were repeated references to the relative absence of racism between prisoners. Here an Asian Muslim prisoner (R51) remarks:

my present experience, I've never found anyone to be racist or just 'I'm a Christian so I'm staying with my Christians', or 'I'm a Muslim and I'm staying with my Muslims'. For me, and for everyone on this wing that I know, it's not like that at all.

In fact, explicit racism was so highly stigmatised that a self declared racist, a swastika-tattoo bearing member of the National Front from the West Country, had frequently to be segregated for his own protection in the prison. Incidents were revealed to us in which groups of black prisoners responded violently to expressions of racism by other prisoners, with news of their response rapidly spreading around the wing and across the prison. Such retaliatory actions were rare but viewed as entirely legitimate by prisoners and as morally appropriate.

For some white prisoners the difficulties of navigating everyday contact with black prisoners led to a resigned withdrawal in which they opted to nurse their bewilderment and resentment behind closed doors and closed minds. With the risks of being labelled racist having such serious consequences, and their difficulty in finding any compensatory refuge in 'whiteness' some white prisoners attempted to avoid contact with black people altogether. We found evidence in some of our interviews of the way in which expressions of racism had become thoroughly privatised as conventional affirmations of racial superiority could only be safely shared in exclusive white company, which the crowded, enclosed and structured prison environment tended to frustrate. These prisoners described how an active effort of separation was required, and the resentment expending this effort fostered. As this young man (R13) indicates this could sometimes also be an extension of earlier habits of 'white flight', social withdrawal and avoidance:

I don't really talk to Black people . . . It's like I say, I don't really interact with Black, Black community in here, or Asian community. It just, it's about the same on road,<sup>3</sup> I don't really mix with them on road either.

As Phillips (2008) notes the fragmented terrain occupied by ideas about race and ethnicity in Late Modernity generate confusion, anxiety and ambiguity for white prisoners. Familiar and reassuring privileges of racial hierarchy are manifestly not what they were, or where they were; the comforting fantasies of racialised power appear withered by the persistence of lived contradiction, they are less stable and heavily, openly and constantly contested. The interpretive framework for the signification of race has none of the clarity or simplicity it formerly rested on. It is certainly feasible that the difficult and potent mix of social isolation, continual surveillance and enforced proximal living in the prison promoted a desire among many prisoners to simply

make life more bearable for each other and themselves. Making prison life liveable meant 'learning to live together' (see Goffman, 1961) in semi-permanent, semi-public space even if this meant suspending or suppressing privately held prejudices. It is also consistent, however, with the social psychological insight of Allport's (1954) 'contact hypothesis' where exchanges with different racial and ethnic groups is assumed to reduce prejudice and increase tolerance. One white prisoner (R6) from a rural area remarked on such a process by referring to his, outsider, impression of a racially segregated and dangerous London that contrasted with his, insider, prison experience of multicultural conviviality:

In here it seems to be going quite well. But if you live round London or something, white lad walks down the black country, mate, Bang! You're dead. You know, if a black lad's walking down the white country in London, Bang! You're dead, you know. You get that out on the up but in here it's different, you know. Blacks are mixing with White, the Whites are mixing with Asians, Blacks, the lot.

At the same time, however, our fieldwork suggested that friendship groups and other informal groupings were frequently same-ethnicity, based on shared cultural understandings rather than racial or ethnic exclusion. Fieldwork notes pointed to the relatively relaxed inter-ethnic interactions between prisoners during leisure activities in 'soash' (evening association) and during freeflow.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while friendship groups and informal gathering indicated a strong ethnic component, this was low-key and did not appear to reflect rigid or harshly conflicted boundaries between prisoners of different ethnicities, faiths and nationalities.

Prisoners remarked frequently that the opportunities for informal and elective mixing were seriously constrained by the regime timetable. The removal of choice in movement, location and co-presence was identified as central to the ensuing social relations:

And like, yeah, people like, see when you live in one place together, yeah, you get along, you're forced to live together in one place... On the outside you have choice; if you don't want to get along with someone then you won't see them the next day if you don't want to.

(Black, British National, Muslim – R3)

You have to [mix] in here though don't you because there's no choice about it is there? Because on road you can avoid that mixing with people but in here like you're all here, aint you.

(White, British National, Christian – R39)

Racialised antagonism between prisoners were not entirely absent but appeared to be mostly suppressed in everyday social relations in the prison. They were liable to surface in specific instances as tensions rose or relations became more stressed. For white prisoners, racism had become a resource to be drawn upon more privately than publicly, as an affirmation of self in company where it was unlikely to be ill-regarded. Its open expression was contingent on some element of collective power being present to maintain its assertion in the face of such widespread hostility, and these opportunities were few. The result was a convict-conviviality (i.e. prison specific) composed of slightly wary social relations in which racism was present but manifestly unstable, inconsistent and contradictory. This conviviality was conditioned by the specific, structural, modalities of prison life; the enforced proximity of 'lightly engaged strangers', its impermanence and the imminence of moving onward elsewhere in the prison system on reaching 21 years of age or out of it altogether on release.

### **Religious identities, practices and collectivities**

Just as the assertion of Muslim identities in the wider world has thrown into sharp relief some of the unseen assumptions and prejudices of the 'The West' their presence in the prison system has prompted new lines of enquiry into the dynamics of prison regimes and prison life (Beckford et al., 2005). There is a tendency in the resurgent interest in Islam and the forms of identification that accompany it, to neglect questions concerning the hegemonic position of Christianity, the prevailing religious faith on which the foundations of the prison as a social institution were built. During fieldwork prisoners and prison staff frequently commented on the Muslim presence in the prison. Both saw Islam as a point of connection, an identity marker, and, to varying degrees, a source of tension. Neither prisoners nor officers identified any corresponding function for, or effect of, Christianity. The two major faiths occupy very different positions in the lives of prisoners and their social relations with each other, with Christianity assuming for the most part 'an invisible habit of mind' (Webster, 1990).

Despite lower overall numbers in the prison, attendance at Friday Muslim prayers attracted a similar quantity of prisoners as the main Christian service (40–70), with the fewer white members of the congregation drawn largely from the prison's foreign national population. There was far less evidence of the mischief, expectancy of disorder and subversive humour than characterised attendance at Anglican services.

Several Muslim prisoners identified the routines of devout observance as assuming greater consequence in prison:

Obviously I'm more focused ain't it. I try to pray five times a day when I can. Read the Qur'an more, I read the Qur'an now and again. I practice my faith more now than I did on road, innit, because well, mostly all, I've got is, got more time innit, so you know, it's something constructive innit.

(Black, British National, Muslim – R50)

The routines of Islamic observance provided Muslim prisoners with a countervailing timetable to that of the routines of the prison regime. The disciplines of Islam co-exist alongside the notionally secular disciplinary regime of the prison. They are actively taken up as an ontological resource by Muslim prisoners in ways that sometimes ironically recall Foucault's citation of the idealised Christian 'penitent' in 17th century France (Foucault, 1979: 283). They stem from the recognition that Islam is institutionally exterior to the prison and Islam may thus have an additional appeal to prisoners which draws from this autonomy. Because it can represent the possibility of social solidarity, and hence some degree of resistance to the monad order of the prison, it is regarded with considerable ambivalence by other, non-Muslim, prisoners. The concerns of some prisoners, like that of some officers, focused on the sense of a delimited collective presence in prison, potentially operating with hidden agendas and unknown boundaries.

The seductive legend of a unitary, cohesive Muslim Brotherhood was widespread among non-Muslim prisoners but did not correspond with the diverse accounts of our representative sample of Muslim respondents who indicated a variety of forms of identification and observance. Despite this, the idea that many weak or vulnerable prisoners converted to Islam to avail themselves of protection, or were coerced into the faith, had considerable currency. Comments from non-Muslim prisoners such as 'if I turn Muslim half the population of the jail can't touch me because I've got half of the jail which are Muslim on my side' (White, British – R30) were common. Some Muslim respondents were quick to

express scepticism and disdain at Islam's notoriety and prominence. One remarked: 'They just do it because they think it's cool and it's the new phase that's going round London. It's a fast fame religion.' (Mixed race, British, Muslim – R15)

The accounts provided to us by prisoners, supplemented by our observational fieldwork, suggest that religious practice and identity in HMYOI Rochester are animated by the emergence of an Islamic presence. Islam in prison, as elsewhere, creates a conceptual space and experience of encounter in which different cultures may find different political vocabularies to address the constraints they face (Sayyid, 1997). White prisoners' relative absence from Christian congregations in the prison indicates the limited capacity of conventional Anglican practice to provide such vocabularies for them. Those 'invisible habits of mind' that continue to structure a great deal of prison thinking are rendered more visible by Islam's presence, and in many respects, found wanting.

### **'Area zones': local identifications beyond and within the prison**

Among the most striking features of the fieldwork in HMYOI Rochester was the apparent unanimity among the young men of the importance of a sense of local belonging. A sense of local rootedness and attachment was frequently and powerfully expressed. In their interview accounts and interactions with us they conveyed their primary identification was with the localised spaces in which their lives had been lived before prison – the streets, shops, parks, schools, colleges and clubs. These zones operated at the level of particular estates, streets or neighbourhoods, and at town level (particularly the latter for prisoners from Kent and Essex). They established for prisoners an ontological anchor to a known and owned space.

Among the young men there was much talk of who belonged to a particular area, and how they were known by their locality. Powerful sentiments of territorialism or 'postcode pride'<sup>5</sup> were commonly expressed and referred to in our interviews. Below a prisoner from London E8 (Hackney) describes the strictly delineated streets in a part of East London where area boundaries were actively policed. Some of the gendered dynamics of these territorial claims (see JRF, 2008: 26) are suggested by his account:

Like me, I got rushed on Valentines Day in E9 by some people that I was just hating because I went out with some girl from their area that

they all wanted, but she didn't go out with them because they were low lifes and they were broke. So I was going out with her so they rushed me on Valentines Day just so I couldn't go out with her.

(Black, British National, Christian – R48)

Other prisoners' narratives echoed what Robins and Cohen (1978) claimed is integral to masculine working-class cultures – participation in the symbolic process of 'owning' a material locality. For young people, mainly but not exclusively young men, this is typically managed through 'gangs' or 'fighting crews' which are pitted against rivals who engage in ritualistic displays of aggression. In this account a prisoner from Kent describes a fervent estate-based territorialism:

... there's Quinten Estate where I live, then you've Kemsley, Middleton and Murston and like, probably they're the four main estates known in [the town of] Sittingbourne. And like we're at more at war with them sort of thing, we don't get on with them if you know what I mean ... we all go out on a weekend tooled up or whatever because we know we're going to bump into them ...

(White, British National, Christian – R28)

Prisoners' local affiliations sometimes resulted in local disputes, or 'area beefs', crossing over into the prison. Rival groupings from 'on road' were imported and sustained in the prison. Quite commonly, however, it seemed that these disputes were 'squashed' or mediated by the inevitability of individual interactions that the proximities of prison life imposed. One black prisoner (R12) from Brixton described long-standing disputes with the nearby 'Peckham boys' being put to one side in prison.

These spatialised identities were of central significance in the young men's lives both inside and outside prison with area-based solidarities often usurping or overlaying identities organised through race or ethnicity. This is from one prisoner, for example:

... on my estate we don't care who you are, what colour you are, if you don't double cross, don't cause trouble then you're okay, you can do stuff then you're basically good with us. And then if like if you can fight, you'll back us then we'll get your back.

(White, British National, Christian – R45)

Implicit in such commentaries is a masculine working-class experience which resonates strongly with Robins and Cohen's (1978) earlier work. It was similarly reported by Back (1996) in his South London study of urban youth cultures, where 'neighbourhood nationalism' prevailed amidst notions of inclusion and racial harmony, at least between white and black people. Most recently territoriality has been identified as central to the lives of the young in many British cities (JRF, 2008). It may be that these local identifications link with the convergence among the accounts of many white *and* minority ethnic prisoners in describing the emptiness and latent quality of ethnicity for their self-identities. As Gilroy (2004: 132) has suggested, 'factors of identity and solidarity that derive from class, gender, sexuality and *region* [authors' emphasis] have made a strong sense of racial difference unthinkable to the point of absurdity.' Whilst prisoners' accounts at Rochester support such a contention, albeit centred around locality rather than regional identity, it is worth remembering that the residential clustering of ethnic groups within the UK (Simpson, 2007) mean that a local or neighbourhood identification is often synonymous with an ethnic one. One prisoner describes this overlap in how a small group of Asian prisoners collected together on the wing:

...and surprise, surprise, these seven Asian lads, they're all from – what is it called – in East London, not Brick Lane, the other one, Bethnal Green, an Asian community there, majority Asian community. And if they're all from Bethnal Green they're all going to be bound to be hanging around together. If you got a bunch of lads all from Chatham [dock area of north Kent, implicitly white] they're all going to be together.

(Black, Foreign National, Muslim – R47)

Significantly, however, even when this overlap has been the case for the young men their identification is primarily articulated through a sense of locality rather than ethnicity, the mechanisms of shared local knowledge appear to take precedence over shared experiences of ethnicity, as if the former is considered more viable than the latter.

Bauman's (2004) work on insecurity and uncertainty also sheds light on the young men's postcode pride. Bauman sees fervent territorialism as a means for individuals to claim safety and ontological security by defining and policing boundaries of belonging and exclusion. Symbolic 'ownership' of these 'area zones' enables these young men to demonstrate status and dominion among their contemporaries: the young



people whose lives are lived on and among the streets of London, Essex or Kent. This largely masculine, unruly, working-class claim over public but local spaces stands in contradistinction to more orderly middle-class claims to a life lived 'quietly', in well-resourced, spacious private properties, funded by jobs that ensure a greater degree of comfort, security and global mobility.

Postcode pride's narrower, inverted, local ambition appears to act as an antidote to the stigma and blame which dogs the socially, politically and economically marginalised men of late modern society. Young men's localised, martial masculinities recall medieval, seemingly pre-modern, models of manhood (see Rose, 1993) and are quickly demonised. They do not conform to the features demanded of workers in the low-wage service economy that have replaced traditional working class male manufacturing job prospects. As Kenway and Kraak (2004) argue the key features of the desirable 'First World' worker now include mobility, i.e. they should not be rooted in place, and flexibility, i.e. they must be prepared to work in any mode, at any time, for any pay. Similar observations on a masculine working-class disenfranchisement from traditional labour process are noted in McDowell's (2003) account of marginalised white young men. Her respondents struggle to fit in with the docility, deference and neat embodied performance demanded by the low-wage service economy that hails them as their formal education ends. For many working-class men conventional masculine possibilities have become largely disconnected from such forms of labour. However, contrary to Bauman's vision of a new underclass lacking in identity and position within mainstream society, young prisoners' local identifications are firmly agentic and defiant, asserting male working-class claims to an identity through claiming space as property and value otherwise denied to them (see JRF, 2008).

The young men's accounts of postcode pride operate as a 'transcript of resistance' (Scott, 1998). Their claim to be of their area is an assertion about how they want to know themselves as opposed to how they might be known by others in authority. The accounts of the young men in HMYOI Rochester that reveal the primacy of their identification with their immediate locality, the pride they take in their knowledge of its contours, flavours and opportunities, are consistent with Scott's account of *metis*. *Metis* is localised knowledge, a kind of folk knowledge that is not particularly useful to processes of distant government. The young men's accounts of local identification can be read as a resistance to other forms of knowing them and their lives, particularly a knowledge that seeks to rule them. In their references and claims to a postcode and local

area the young men generate a short-hand for potent social networks. In de Certeau's (1984) terms they deploy the tactics of the weak in the face of strategies of the powerful.

## Conclusion

The prison environment is in many ways institutionally antithetical to most of what we might associate with that which makes life liveable. Prisons are places for lives to be reduced. They are places which expend enormous effort to suppress spontaneity, extinguish vitality, condition individuality and deny collectivity. They are intensely 'masculine' but institutionally, officially, purged of sexuality. Prisons are deliberately austere environments burdened with restraints that consciously seek to exclude 'the plasticity of space, its modelling and appropriation by groups and individuals of the conditions of their existence' (Lefebvre, 1968: 79). They are quasi-urban places where the struggle against monotony and boredom, the effort to *inhabit*, as Lefebvre suggests, becomes elevated. This tends to foster among the young men in prison, we suggest here, a kind of resistant but constrained and deliberately instrumental conviviality as an assertion of their humanity in an institution infamous for diminishing it.

Contemporary prisons, such as HMYOI Rochester, are readily identifiable as institutions exemplifying those dimensions of post-colonial melancholia that so concern Gilroy. Prison's after all are deeply implicated in the colonial project, quintessential objects of the colonial imagination. Post colonial melancholia, suggests Gilroy, neurotically diverts the vitality of multi-culture into the 'pleasures of a morbid militia'. There is considerable tension in reconciling the modern prison's founding obsession with order, hierarchy and discipline with the emancipatory promise of an egalitarian multi-culture. Beneath the superficial equanimity of conviviality in HMYOI Rochester we found familiar anxieties about race lingered obstinately and obscurely in the social relations of prisoners and the regime itself.

Paul Gilroy's (2004) work is challenging in this penal context for framing European possibilities specifically against all too real American neo-liberal legacies and penal nightmares. He seeks a counter-history of cultural relations and influences from which new understandings of multicultural Europe can emerge. He talks of the liberating possibilities in recognising the proliferating hybrids that convivial culture can produce – those that celebrate ordinary, spontaneous anti-racism, that generate the little triumphs that bring real pleasure (p. 161), that foster

the small arts and crafts of living-with-others that can make a life viable. In our study of prisoner's social relations inside HMYOI Rochester we were surprised by the extent of such habits and they give us hope that even in the bleak and unforgiving landscape of prison a convivial imagination is actively fostered by prisoners and refuses to be extinguished by the enormous morbid and melancholic force of imprisonment.

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## Notes

1. The name has been adjusted to preserve anonymity but hopefully retains some of the original nominative qualities.
2. Although the term is conventionally associated with 'the artist/poet' struggling to achieve creative empathy and is controversial for lack analytical specificity or rigour it is, nonetheless helpful here.
3. 'On Road' is prisoner's evocative term for life outside prison.
4. Where prisoners are unescorted by officers between the wings and place of work, education, gym, etc. It is a time of informal congregation in the rigid schedule of the prison day, allowing prisoners from different wings to chat, organise trade or engage in illegitimate activities.
5. This term was first used by Rod Earle in a co-presented conference paper (Earle and Phillips, 2007).

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