

**The struggle to belong.  
Dealing with diversity in 21<sup>st</sup> century urban settings**

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*Under siege in the London suburbs:  
Britishness and the 'loss' of national and local community*

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## Abstract

This paper examines national and local identities with reference to interview and survey findings from a research project undertaken in 'Eastside', a fringe London suburb located in Essex. The research focused on the largely white, middle-class and working-class homeowners who had moved to Eastside from London. Most of these white suburbanites subscribed to a multi-scalar and racialized discourse of being 'under siege' in the Essex suburbs. Despite their upward and outward home-owning mobility, the incomers felt that they had lost a collective sense of 'community'. This nostalgic loss was expressed at two spatial scales. The first scale was national in that Britain was considered to be a 'tolerant nation', but one threatened from within by immigrants and weakened from without by the European Union. The second scale was local encompassing two distinct times and place - the past London area where they grew up and their present suburban neighbourhood. The interviewees considered their previous London community to have declined, a decline that was often expressed in racialized terms. In relation to the present neighbourhood, Eastside offered its new residents a version of the suburban 'good life', but it was also not immune from a sense of being a community under siege, threatened from within by existing zones of quasi-urban impurity (the nearby council estate) and from without by encroaching racialized outsiders (Watt, 2007, 2009). The findings illustrate Paul Gilroy's (2005) notion of Britain's nostalgic 'postcolonial melancholia', but also, more optimistically, elements of what he regards as everyday 'conviviality' via inter-ethnic interactions in parts of the Eastside neighbourhood.

## Landscapes of Britishness and whiteness

Political and media debates about Britishness increasingly coalesce around issues of 'race', specifically notions of whiteness and its attendant complex multiple racisms (Garner, 2007). This coalescence was highlighted in the controversial BBC2 TV *White Season* that focused on migration and the white working class (BBC, 2008). The *White Season* programmes were geographically located in economically declining urban areas with an implication that 'whiteness' was only found in working-class neighbourhoods, locales in which negative reactions to migrants, as well as British BME groups, were rendered understandable in relation to deindustrialization and cultural anachronisms (e.g. Working Men's Clubs). However, the *White* series made two contradictory ontological errors. Firstly, it reduced class to 'race' by ignoring the experiences and views of the black and Asian working class whose materialist concerns over jobs, wages and affordable housing mirror those of the white working class (see Sveinsson, 2009). Secondly, the BBC *White Season* reduced 'race' to class by implying that whiteness and its attendant racisms are only found in 'backward' poor white working-class communities. It glossed over how Britishness is saturated in what Paul Gilroy (2005) calls 'postcolonial melancholia', a condition that is not limited to a few marginal people living in economically marginal places.

As Garner (2007) has argued, whiteness is a more labile and geographically dispersed set of discourses and identities than one might assume, and certainly far more so than envisioned in the *White* series. It is not only the mass media that are prone to such ontological sleights of hand. New Labour welfare policy and the liberal academy have increasingly tended to symbolically associate the white working-class poor with a

form of cultural ‘backwardness’ within a nation supposedly defined by modernization and multiculturalism (Haylett, 2001). Academic “studies of whiteness in middle-class circles, residential areas or workplaces are few and far between” (Garner, 2007: 78; see also Garner, 2009a). This paper aims to contribute towards rectifying this lacuna by drawing on research findings from a study of ‘Eastside’, a fringe London suburb located beyond the M25 orbital motorway in south Essex. The research focused on middle-class and working-class homeowners, mainly white, who had moved to Eastside from London. One of the key research aims was to understand how places are understood by incomers, both in relation to London and Essex, i.e. ‘place images’ (Shields, 1991). In addition, issues of ethnic and class identity were addressed in the research and these are also drawn upon here in relation to examining Britishness as a form of ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983).

The literature on whiteness suggests that exclusionary racist discourses and practices are powerfully mobilized around a defence of ‘the local’ (Watt, 1998; Tyler, 2003; Grillo, 2005; Millington, 2010). Phil Cohen (1988) encapsulates this in his insightful concept of ‘nationalism of the neighbourhood’. By this, Cohen means the way that white working-class east Londoners invested a fierce pride in ‘their’ area, the East End, one which drew upon a notion of an imagined community of all-white Cockneys, one symbiotically related to a certain notion of Britishness (Cohen, 1996). White working-class people from the Isle of Dogs, ‘Islanders’, had a sense “of being the backbone of the nation (as well as of the East End) but of being treated as a race apart from the powers that be” (Cohen, 1996: 193), in this case the LDDC and the council who they felt treated them “like they were scum” (ibid.). As Cohen demonstrates, the confluence of belligerent localism and imagined place in the British nation came together in a defensive racist ‘nationalism of the neighbourhood’ primarily directed against the Bangladeshi community (Dench *et al.*, 2006).

The confluence of exclusionary localism and nationalism in London’s working-class East End that Cohen highlights is not necessarily duplicated everywhere in the UK. A study of suburban racism by Grillo (2005) has suggested that anti-asylum seeker rhetoric is embedded within a localist discourse of ‘defence of community’ that does not tap into wider nationalist or racist concerns. In his study of Saltdean on the English south coast, Grillo argues that the anti-asylum seeker campaign was mobilized around a practical defence of local scarce public services that could not cope with an ‘influx’ of asylum seekers, rather than by exclusionary racism. Whether such a localist defence is always as straightforward as Grillo implies is questionable, however, given that suburban residents can have differential perspectives on and relationships to ‘the local’ (Watt, 1998; Tyler, 2003).

### **The research in Eastside**

The research reported here was undertaken in Eastside, part of Thurrock, a unitary local authority located in south Essex. Although parts of Thurrock are quite affluent, it also suffers from declining port and industrial activity as well as low skills (Thurrock Council, 2008). Several areas in the borough, including the older part of Eastside which is dominated by a sprawling modernist post-War housing estate built by the London County Council, are deprived by national standards with low income and educational levels, etc. Thurrock also suffers from a popular reputation as a

“Cockney Siberia, lacking ‘culture’, a refuge for East End gangsters, wild and lawless” (General Public Agency, 2004). In recognition of its deprivation and regeneration potential, the Thurrock Thames Gateway Development Corporation was created in 2003 and in addition the southern part of the borough is situated within the Essex Thames Gateway sub-region (Bennett and Morris, 2006; Cohen and Rustin, 2008).

Thurrock’s population has expanded rapidly, up by 16% since 1991 to nearly 150,000 in 2005 although most of this expansion is due to natural change rather than migration (Thurrock Council, 2008). The BME population of Thurrock has also increased, albeit from a very low base; at 5.4% in 2003 it is still much lower than the 9% national average (Thurrock Council, 2005). In terms of international migration, Thurrock experienced a net increase of 300 in 2004-05 with 500 migrants entering the borough, a still low level according to official figures (Thurrock Council, 2005). The known number of asylum seekers was extremely low (27 families, 98 unaccompanied young people and 45 single adults in 2003) and in fact *declined* in the period immediately preceding the research from 2002-03 (*ibid.*).

Eastside covers two local authority wards. According to the 2001 Census, it has a combined population of nearly 18,000 and is demographically typical of this part of Essex since its population is over 95% white and mainly working class. Eastside is an architectural and social hybrid. It encompasses a ‘village’ section with village green and medieval church, a ‘town’ section including the council-built estate, plus several newer private housing developments. The research involved a case study of ‘incomers’ who had moved into the latter from London, many of whom were more affluent than their surrounding Eastside neighbours.

A representative sample survey of 140 households who had moved from an address within Greater London to Eastside during the previous 10-year period was undertaken. The achieved sample is divided into two geographical areas. Seventy-four households lived in ‘Woodlands’ a large private housing estate built in the mid-1990s. It was close to the village, but physically set apart from the rest of Eastside. Described as a ‘prestigious’ location by estate agents, the Woodlands estate mainly comprises detached and semi-detached houses. By contrast, 66 households lived in several smaller housing developments that have been given the collective name ‘Newtown estates’. The latter are nearer the town section of Eastside and consist of terraced and semi-detached houses plus some low-rise flats. Forty-two follow-up semi-structured interviews were also carried out evenly divided between Woodlands and Newtown.

The survey respondents are in many ways stereotypically suburban, i.e. homeownership, white, middle-aged, married or co-habiting heterosexual couples with both partners in paid employment. This paper focuses on the 90% of survey respondents who were white, mainly English who had been brought up in London, plus a smattering of non-British whites. Neither Woodlands nor Newtown is an exclusively mono-class area, although Woodlands is more middle class in occupational (professionals and managers), income, educational, housing and identity terms (Watt, 2008, 2009).

## Asylumgration and public services in Britain

The interviewees were asked a series of questions about Britain and Europe including their views on the main issues facing Britain. While the economy, employment and housing were all relatively low-key, concerns tended to centre upon ‘deteriorating’ public services especially health and education. However, the issue that most concerned the white respondents, both in terms of frequency of response and in terms of emotional charge, was ‘too many immigrants/asylum seekers’. In fact this was the *only* issue that some people mentioned. MORI polling data indicates that at around the time the research was undertaken, race relations and immigration were at the top of the public’s concerns (Lewis, 2005: 3). “Asylumgration”, as Garner (2007: 136) has called it, featured strongly in both the Woodlands and Newtown samples and was not *solely* a poor white working-class issue, as the BBC’s *White Season* implied. Chris, a local authority manager, was concerned about a range of issues including immigration, although he phrased the latter in somewhat distanced terms: ‘immigration’s a big issue at the moment, the nationals of this country are having to put up with and tolerate things (Chris, 30s, Woodlands). A common trope was that the country was ‘too small’ relative both to its population and to other bigger ‘empty’ countries. Britain was simply ‘full up’ and hence could not support any more migrants.

Immigration appears to be a big thing. I think possibly we need to look carefully at the number of people coming into the country. More because we are not so huge that we have the space any more. And places like Canada have got huge expanses that aren’t being used but, you know, people seem to fight to get into this country, so I think they need to really look at the situation and decide how they’re going to sort that. (Rosie, 40s, clerk, Newtown).

A question was included in the survey specifically on asylum seekers: ‘some people think that there are too many asylum seekers living in Britain - do you agree or disagree with this view?’ The results are stark. Sixty two per cent strongly agreed with the ‘too many asylum seekers’ statement and a further 19% agreed; less than 10% disagreed. Looking at the white respondents only, the professionals had the smallest strongly agree percentage (33%) whereas the small employers had the largest (100%). We cannot infer too much from these findings because of the small cell counts, but they are in line with research in which opposition to immigration is most widespread amongst those in intermediate rather than the lowest occupational class positions (Cruddas, 2005).

In the interviews, the most vociferous and unreflexive responses to ‘asylumgration’ tended to be articulated by manual workers including the self-employed labour aristocracy. These white working-class respondents were also more likely to self-identify as ‘white’. However opposition to asylumgration was not monopolized by manual workers, but could also be found amongst what Gilroy (2005: 135) calls the ‘e-mail proletariat’ plus the non-graduate service-class managers and professionals. Education was more strongly correlated with asylum attitudes than occupation, since only 25% of graduates strongly agreed with the above statement whilst 31% disagreed/strongly disagreed (see also Lewis, 2005). This compares with respective figures for those with school-level qualifications of 73% and 3%. Amongst the white interviewees, six were graduates including two North Americans. Although not all the

graduates subscribed to a liberal multiculturalism discourse, it was amongst the graduate professionals that such a discourse was most prominent including the condemning of overt racism by the 'locals'.

If you go down to the local pub all you overhear is incredibly racist and derogatory comments from the locals that go there and sit at the bar and bitch about ... sorry, about immigration, 'the fact that we have all these undesirables coming into the UK and why are they letting them in and they're taking our jobs', etcetera. (Dan, 30s, senior administrator, Woodlands).

Leaving the somewhat atypical liberal graduates aside, the white Eastsiders tended to link the issue of 'asylumgration' (Garner, 2007) to additional demands being placed upon public especially welfare services. Such demands supposedly 'explained' these services' deficiencies rather than any alternatives (e.g. inadequate funding, privatization, over-frequent restructuring, etc.). For example, Vera voiced concerns about the state of the NHS.

I don't think it will ever work out for the whites, with all these foreigners coming over. Because they [elderly whites] fought in the [Second World] War, they have paid all their dues, and now they can't get in the hospitals because they are so full up with all the foreigners. They have not paid anything in have they? Things like that, and that is all you hear from all these elderly people at bus-stops and things like that, because they come over here and they get all the help possible, National Health and hospitals and all that, and look at the state it is in, the National Health hospitals. There are so many of them here, so many of them, they have let too many in. It will never be the same again now, ever. (Vera, 60s, retired factory worker, Newtown).

Linked concerns over welfare and asylumgration were not the preserve of the elderly white working class however. Shirley was a receptionist in her 20s living in Newtown and she explicitly linked health service deficits, as well as criminality, with refugees and asylum seekers.

Shirley: We seem to have quite a lot of refugees and asylum seekers everywhere you go.

Interviewer: Does that bother you?

Shirley: Yes, I am not very happy about it. I think we are overcrowded as it is. You know, I ring up my doctors, you are lucky to get an appointment in three weeks time, well you just can't get an appointment at the doctors. I can't get into the dentist unless I go private. I can't get into a National Health dentist. I just think we are so overcrowded. I feel sorry for them because a lot of them come from countries where there is war and famine and all sorts of things, but a lot of them are just coming over here for a free ride I think. They get a house or flat, they get benefits. Then there is a lot of trouble with, not all of them, but some of them, they mug people. I know every sort of class does that sort of thing but I just don't think we don't need no more of that. And a lot of people just want to come over here and still live how they lived in their country. Whereas if we visit their countries we have to abide by their rules. But when they come over here, still do

what they want to do, well why don't they go back home. If that sounds racist, it's just the way I feel.

Although Shirley expresses a degree of sympathy with asylum seekers, nevertheless most are enjoying a 'free ride' at the British taxpayers' expense. Another aspect of Shirley's comments worthy of note is how she says "if that sounds racist, it is just the way I feel". This reflects an ambivalence that most white interviewees articulated, i.e. that they simultaneously objected in quite vociferous terms to the presence of migrants ('it's the way I feel'), whilst at the same time they felt uncomfortable being labelled as racist ('if that sounds racist'). Sonia, for example, self-identified as a 'white Londoner':

They [New Labour government] spend thousands on going to war, but not on the fundamental things that used to make Britain great like the NHS. They should create more jobs for young people and they can't get teachers. There's nothing to be proud of anymore – we have to live next to Asians and Bozzos [Bosnians] – this country's really changing. Why are they shutting the fire stations? There used to be a fire station in every town. (Sonia, 30s, housewife/receptionist, Newtown).

We can see how Sonia takes aspects of national and local change associated with welfare and other public services, such as teacher shortages and fire station closures, and links these with the presence of both non-white (Asian) and 'not-quite-white' (Bosnian) minority groups in the immediate Eastside neighbourhood. At the same time, Sonia was also concerned about being seen as racist: "I don't want to be quoted out of context, they're not to be quoted out of context, what I've said ... I'm not a racist". This ambivalence has been identified in other recent studies of UK racism (Grillo, 2005; Millington, 2010). This ambivalence was overlaid with a sense of anger at not being allowed to express their opinions by 'political correctness'.

Immigration is one of the main issues [facing the country]. The problem with English people is that we're in a minority to be able to voice our opinion. If you do say anything, you get classed as racists. People get in my cab, you can see their opinions and they're quite disgusted with things – political correctness gone crazy. (Dave, 40s, taxi driver, Woodlands).

The xenophobic sentiments Dave describes are ones that he himself shared, as well as many white Eastsiders with the exception of the liberal graduate professionals. Most white Eastsiders' collective psyche is therefore underpinned by what Gilroy (2005: 90) refers to as 'postcolonial melancholia', the "guilt-ridden loathing and depression that that have come to characterize Britain's xenophobic response to the strangers who have intruded upon it" in the recent past. These resentful racisms have no natural political home, even though they are played upon by far Right political parties in a variety of UK contexts, including London and Essex, with some degree of success (Statham, 2003; Cruddas, 2005; Grillo, 2005).

## **‘British, not European’ - national and supra-national identities**

If asylumgration was a key issue for the white Eastsiders, only one spontaneously mentioned a growing and unwelcome European influence: “Europe, changing the Pound, I don’t want none of that, I don’t want to lose the Pound, I don’t want to be ruled by Europe” (Geoff). The interviews explored European and British identity further. People were asked, ‘there’s a lot of talk these days about Britain’s place in Europe - what do you think about this?’ With very few exceptions, the dominant responses were either opposition to European involvement in British affairs or to a lesser extent a lack of interest and/or knowledge. The dislike of Europe and specifically the EU took the form of a notion that in some way national identity was being subsumed within a European super-state; “I don’t think we should have anything to do with Europe and ... I think Spain should be Spanish and France should be French (Louise). A few people mentioned that they did not want to lose the Pound in favour of the Euro: “English people, we’re made of strong stuff and the pound makes us who we are – we’re not the same, we’re not the same as everybody else, we’re better than them [Europeans]” (Sonia).

A variation on the opposition to Europe theme took the more nuanced form of dislike of the way the EU was organized and in particular that in one way or another that Britain was losing out financially: “your Spains and your Portugals and your Italys, they should be contributing more and then share it out evenly” (Colin). As mentioned above, only a very white Britons were positive about Europe. One was Keith who, despite having a second home in Spain, did not exhibit the ‘Brits abroad’ stereotype:

I really do think we should be a bigger part in Europe. I love Europe, love the French Alps. I have a place in Spain, the south of Spain – there’s so much you can learn, culinary skills, French, Spanish, Italian. It’s my Dad’s place – got into the rental business. (Keith, 20s, computer engineer, Woodlands).

When asked whether they ever thought of themselves as having a European identity, the majority of white interviewees did not. Instead they proclaimed, often quite firmly, that they were either British or English or both. What exactly being British/English meant was less than clear however since a wide range of answers were given. These included sharing a place of birth (“I’ve been born and brought up in Britain therefore I’m British – that’s as far as it goes”, Elizabeth), a common language, a passport, certain foods and even bad weather! ‘Englishness’ included supposedly indigenous national characteristics such as having a sense of humour, an island independence (“bulldog spirit – stand up for our rights, English always stand united”, Gavin), but also quiescence (“the English are passive, quiet, not so dominant [as the Scots]”, Barbara). As the latter quote indicates, some people defined Englishness relative to other nations within the UK: “it means that I’m not Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Cornish” (Phil). However, Phil struggled to say what Englishness meant in positive terms beyond *not* being ‘other’ nationalities, a hollowness that Gilroy (2005) has written about.

One interesting difference between the northern white respondents in Savage et al’s (2005: 185) study and the Eastsiders was how the latter tended to be more forthright about being English unlike the latter who preferred a British identity. The notion of ‘Englishness’ coming under threat because of British multi-ethnic pluralism was a



prominent theme in the two interviews with elderly white working-class couples. Geoff was adamant both that he was not European and that he was proud to be a Londoner *and* English.

It means that this is our heritage, it is everything. To me it is something to be proud of because we are gradually, well in 50 years time ... England, I don't think, because I don't think it will be England any more. You are not going to have English people, well you are, but ... You can't have a go at the children, because they were born here, it is not their fault, but it is getting to be a multi-racial country. It is going to get worse and spread out this way. (Geoff, 60s, security guard, Newtown).

What is also interesting about this quote in terms of place images is how Geoff sees England's becoming "a multi-racial country" was "spreading out this way", in other words into Essex. The latter was therefore still recognisably English, because it was nearly all-white, whereas the rest of the country was losing its Englishness/whiteness. As the interview with Geoff and his wife indicates, this 'rest of the country' included east London where they had moved because of what they regarded as deteriorating local conditions associated with, if not blamed upon, the presence of BME groups. This anxiety regarding a multi-ethnic drift eastwards and the erosion of the 'purity' of the previously all-white Essex landscape was a constant refrain, especially from the Newtown residents, as we discuss below.

### **White flight from the city**

So far we have focused upon the Eastsiders' national perspectives on Britishness and whiteness, although these were partly bound up with local welfare service provision. The local setting is very important as Statham (2003: 173) has emphasized: "the values behind anti-immigration sentiments are different, relating to personal experiences in different localities". However, such values maybe shaped as much by *imagined* local communities of the past as by *lived* communities in the present (Watt, 2006, 2007). Arguably this especially applies in the case of mobile populations, such as the Eastsiders, who had left the city as well as their youth behind.

The in-movers had multiple reasons for leaving London for the Essex suburbs including wanting a bigger or newer house in an affordable location, getting married or divorced (Watt, 2008). Leaving the city in search of a 'better area' i.e. greater social similarity and perceived safety, was also an important factor in moving to Essex (cf. Bennett and Morris, 2006; Butler and Hamnett, 2011). East London in particular was regarded as having gone 'downhill' as a result of increased crime and anti-social behaviour, 'kids hanging around', plus the presence of a loose array of racialized 'newcomers' including immigrants, asylum seekers, Asians and blacks (see Watt, 2007). The 'native' white Londoners therefore articulated 'narratives of urban decline' in which the previous supposedly tightly-knit community of the London past was no more (Watt, 2006).

The English have long had an adverse relationship to cities, as seen in the search for suburban as well as rural idylls (Clapson, 2003; Tyler, 2003). This aversion to cities has taken a radical form during the last 30 years as cities themselves, and especially

global cities such as London, have become ever more complex places to live, as captured in Bauman's concept of 'mixophobia':

Mixophobia is a highly predictable and widespread reaction to the mind-boggling, spine-chilling and nerve-breaking variety of human types and lifestyles that rub shoulders in the streets of contemporary cities. ... Mixophobia manifests itself in the drive towards islands of similarity and sameness amidst the sea of variety and difference. (Bauman, 2003: 109-10)

Many ex-Londoners thus expressed a mixophobic reaction to the diversity and strangeness of cities. The aversion to both cities and to different 'races' is connected in the contemporary social imaginary, as Keith (2005) has argued. Mixophobia and the flight to the suburbs had either explicit or implicit racialized connotations as far as many white ex-Londoners were concerned. Sibley (1998) has emphasized the racialized distinction between the 'dangerous' multiethnic city and the 'safe' white suburbs and countryside, and this was a common binary trope amongst the Eastside incomers (cf. Savage et al., 2005). Those white people who had moved from Newham and Tower Hamlets in particular regarded the English as being in a minority in areas that had been 'taken over' by alien 'others' (Dench et al. 2006). June and Alan had previously lived in Newham and besides wanting to live in a new house, they also wanted to leave what they saw as a 'deteriorating' area, not least since they could no longer identify the area as being English: "you can't integrate, you have to move away from there because you can't buy anything in the shops that you want" (June, 50s, local authority officer, Woodlands). Geoff and his wife also left Newham for similar reasons: "we were overtaken by different races, it's become an area where English are in the minority". They ('English people') were besieged by 'others' – so they left, i.e. 'white flight'.

If the respondents did not particularly share a localist orientation in Eastside itself, as we discuss in detail in the following section, what they did have in common was a sense of loss in relation to their previous London 'community'. At a psychosocial level, this loss could have nostalgic roots in memories of childhood and youth (Watt, 2007). However, this loss is also connected to the wider political economic transformation of east London (Butler and Hamnett, 2011). Despite its multi-faceted nature in reality, many white Eastsiders used a racialized lens to interpret the felt loss of community. We can see this lens in this quote from John, one highlighting the disgust he felt about the transformation of the East End, a transformation that dovetails with a sense of loss of the imagined British/English nation.

This country needs to be shut down for a while, don't let anyone in for a while until we get our own house in order. [...] Our culture is disappearing, and it is more apparent again, going to the areas. If you go down Southall, you might as well be in Bangladesh. Brick Lane - you're in Bangladesh. It is not like an English place now. [...] Jewish people had it for years, but it was never called Halal Street, never Bar Mitzvah Road. They have changed it to Banglatown. Why? It is an English street. Why is it tolerated? It's unbelievable. I do find it so frustrating ... but you've got to move out. I should have been allowed to live in east London, if I'd wanted to. (John, 40s, carpenter, Newtown).

White flight is relatively under-examined in the British as opposed to the US context where it is a more established demographic phenomenon (Krysan, 2002). References to ‘white flight’ have, however, recently been made, in the east London context by both Dench et al. (2006) and Butler and Hamnett (2011), although these authors’ discussions remain somewhat cursory. There is not the space to develop the argument here, but the notional ‘tipping point’ at which the white Eastsiders left London was not based upon an arithmetical calibration of neighbourhood white/BME population percentages, but was rather bound up with the *symbolic* transformation of place. Place images are not static, but instead often derive their meaning from perceptions of change – hence we are dealing with what I call ‘*place image trajectories*’. As the London shops, market stalls, street names, house fronts, places of worship either changed or disappeared, so the area itself was seen to be no longer ‘English’ or ‘British’ (cf. Watson and Wells, 2005). The fact that many neighbourhood changes are due to political economic factors, for example concentration of retail capital allied to shifting patterns of consumption, or socio-cultural factors such as secularization, did not feature in the place image trajectories articulated by the white ex-Londoners. Instead such trajectories routinely took racialized forms in which the key driver of social change was said to be the arrival of immigrants and minority ethnic groups.

### **Living in a ‘spoiled suburb’**

As far as the Eastside respondents are concerned, the majority in both Woodlands and Newtown were satisfied with their housing and also with their neighbourhood as a place to live. Nearly three quarters of survey respondents thought the area was ‘about the same’ as when they moved in, 22% thought it had got better and only 5% thought it had got worse. At the same time, place images of Eastside were far from uniformly benign. It can be described as a ‘spoiled suburb’ (Watt, 2007, 2009) as far as its new residents are concerned and especially those from Woodlands, rather than as a suburban ‘landscape of privilege’ (Duncan and Duncan, 2004). It contained too many inner-city qualities, i.e. those polluting elements of dirt and disorder (e.g. the nearby council estate) that they had moved away from London to avoid. In addition, despite the very modest numbers of international migrants and asylum seekers in Thurrock (see above), their *felt* presence amongst the white Eastsiders was considerable.

In simplistic terms, the Eastsiders’ responses to their locality are dependent upon whether they lived in Woodlands or Newtown. The Woodlands’ residents considered their estate to be an ‘oasis’ located within the quasi-urban desert that was the ‘rest of Eastside’ (for details, see Watt, 2009). As such, they were not localist in orientation, but instead avoided the ‘local’, as in shops, pubs and schools even though they did use local NHS services. The Woodlanders, both white and non-white, identified the ‘rest of Eastside’ with a stigmatized place image, one rooted in the looming presence of the ‘rough’ council estate. However this image also embraced the presence of BME groups, including migrants and Travellers: “Eastside is horrible, intimidating, frightening - crime’s linked to foreigners, Eastern Europeans, I feel the only English person there” (S3). Instead of a discourse of ‘elective belonging’ involving volitional neighbourhood adoption (Savage et al. 2005), the Woodlands’ residents subscribed to a discourse of what I refer to as ‘*selective belonging*’ - a spatially uneven attachment rooted in a schizophrenic relationship to the neighbourhood, simultaneously involving embracing the Woodlands ‘oasis’ whilst abjuring the ‘other Eastside’ (Watt, 2009).

Although the Woodlanders commented on the impact of asylum seekers and migrants on 'local' public services, their own oblique relationship to the latter meant that their comments were often generalized, whilst 'problems' associated with the 'newcomers' often tended to take place elsewhere in lower-class areas in Thurrock away from Woodlands.

I mean you go to Grays, you can see Grays town centre has changed and there are lots of asylum seekers and there is increased crime because of that element. They are associated with that, you know, whether they are, but generally you feel quite safe in the [Woodlands] area and it suits our needs. (Alan, 40s, local authority manager, Woodlands).

By contrast, the Newtown residents were more likely to partake in and identify with the 'local' in terms of schools, pubs and shops, as well as employment. In this sense they demonstrated more 'elective belonging' that Savage and colleagues discuss. The Newtown residents had a more intimate relationship both to the 'local' and to ethnic difference. Although Woodlands and Newtown had similar percentages of non-white sample respondents (11% and 9% respectively), the overall impression given by *both* white and non-white interviewees was that there were far fewer BME residents in Woodlands compared to the rest of Eastside. The ethnic transformation of the rest of Eastside was not something most white Newtown residents were enthused about since it was bringing equivalent changes to those that they had left behind in London neighborhoods which had 'gone downhill'.

[In Enfield] there were Romanian women peeing outside the station, Albanians, Kosovans. There were cockroaches coming up from the flat below. It *was* a nice estate, but shopping trolleys were dumped, burnt out cars, the area went downhill and it's starting to happen here, it's following us out. (Ewan, 30s, carpenter, Newtown).

It was the 'not-quite-white' Eastern Europeans and the non-white newcomers who were seen as potentially transforming the landscape as well as putting a strain on public services, *not* the English white newcomers, i.e. people like themselves. We can see the complex nature of contemporary racisms in which white Englishness/Britishness (or being able to pass as white English/British<sup>1</sup>) trumps 'foreign' not-quite whiteness and either British or 'foreign' non-whiteness. The sense of an eastwards movement of racialized others changing the previously all-white English landscape emerged in several accounts.

My sister doesn't like what's happening and I don't like what's happening to Barking. It's like the East End coming to Barking now. It's sort of lost its character, the way I used to see it. ... there are immigrants that are coming into Barking ... and there seem to be a lot in Barking. But having said that, we've got immigrants coming to this part as well. I mean down this street, they're quite nice, we've got a South African on the end house. I keep an eye on a lady's house and she's Russian, that's the second house, the house next to it is four bed-roomed, they're Jamaican. We have, on the corner up there, they're – what I understand – West Indians as well, so I mean it's not... I'm not prejudiced, but I notice that

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<sup>1</sup> For example North American whiteness which is 'invisible' in British society.

there seem to be more of them than there is of us [laughs], if I can say that? [...]. I mean they're quite nice. I mean I talk to them and I know some of them round here, but I talk to them, and there's a house up for sale across the road, Steve's house, he was the original owner there, he's decided to move, and the first comment that somebody said to me was, 'I suppose we'll have black people moving in', but that doesn't worry me, that doesn't worry me at all. (Barbara, 60s, catering assistant, Newtown).

Barbara highlights the ethnic transformations that have occurred in east London with Barking, previously a largely white area, becoming increasingly multiethnic, and hence more 'like the 'East End', i.e. the hyper-diverse east London boroughs such as Tower Hamlets (Dench et al., 2006). The recent demographic changes in the borough of Barking and Dagenham are something that the BNP focused upon in its campaigning with a certain degree of success (Cruddas, 2005). As Barbara says, 'we've got immigrants coming to this part as well', i.e. Eastside and Thurrock.

Aspects of the shifting previously white landscape of east London and Eastside concerned Barbara as well as her sister. The place image of these areas is changing from 'white English' to 'British multicultural', a shift that Barbara finds unsettling. As mentioned above, Barbara stresses that she is not racist – "I'm not prejudiced". However, one must be careful not to dismiss the latter as mere obfuscation and concealment.<sup>2</sup> Barbara's detailed account of everyday social relations in an ethnically mixed Eastside street suggests something of the everyday rubbing along 'conviviality' that Gilroy (2005: xv) has identified as constituting "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas". In other words, postcolonial melancholia and everyday conviviality can *co-exist* in the same area, including poor working-class neighbourhoods (Watt, 2006) as well as more mixed suburban neighbourhoods such as Eastside.

Several other white Eastsiders were less sanguine than Barbara about the non-white and white Eastern European 'newcomers'. Again the Newtown residents, with their closer relationship to 'the local', were more likely to comment on such changes in detail rather than in terms of the more stereotypical and distanced place images of the 'other Eastside' on the part of the Woodlands residents. Sonia, for example, described the changes she had seen in the local shopping parade during the five years she had lived in Eastside.

When I first moved in there was some closed units in the parade. Since I've moved in, those units have opened up. One is run by Asian people, a convenience store, and the supermarket's been taken over by Asian people, nobody seems to know the language. Another shop is an African shop, selling plantains and mangos. I've never seen anybody in there. Some of the market stalls have changed, half of its Asians now. It's a different atmosphere, it's not the same, not as friendly. Everyone used to say 'hello' to you. It was like in London, like when I was a kid, when I was growing up. ... We go in the café and it's run by Bozzos [Bosnians] now.

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<sup>2</sup> Although our interpretations are somewhat different, I am grateful to Gareth Millington for drawing my attention to the subtleties of the 'I'm not racist but ...' phrase in an unpublished paper.

Sonia demonstrates the elective belonging that Savage et al (2005) discuss, i.e. a sense of adoption of a new place, in her case an adoption based upon a recreation of the London of her youth based on its open air markets. However, the transformation of the shopping parade had brought about a decline in even this recreated London community. As she went on to say, her friend was moving into Woodlands via an internal white flight process within Eastside, leaving Sonia stranded and embittered in a changing Newtown: “my friend is selling up and moving to Woodlands and in two months the only people she’s had to look at it are black Africans from London”.

## **Conclusion**

With the exception of the liberal graduate professionals, the white Woodlands and Newtown residents shared two things. Firstly was a sense of the British/English nation as being ‘under siege’, notably in relation to national welfare institutions which had to be ‘defended’ against recent migrants (cf. Garner, 2009b; Clarke, et al., 2011). As Gilroy (2005: 101) argues, such antipathy to recent UK arrivals remains governed by that long-established “structure of feeling” in which the arrival of ex-colonial migrants “was understood to be an act of invasive warfare”. A second thing that most of the white Eastsiders shared was a place image trajectory of community decline in relation to their previous London neighbourhood. The past working-class neighborhood-based community had vanished, a community that they tended to see through a nostalgic haze (Watt, 2007). Many came from east London and they often had parental and grandparental roots in the East End itself. In other words, they were socio-spatially displaced from the previous Cockney ‘nationalism of the neighbourhood’ that Cohen (1988, 1996) identified. Far from being symbolically and spatially located at the twin hearts of the British and English nations via the Blitz spirit (‘the nation’s finest hour’), the Eastsiders were relegated to the socio-spatial margins in the ‘Cockney Siberia’ of present-day south Essex.

However, although most white Eastside incomers, both middle class as well as working class, exemplified a defensive siege mentality, this was only partially rooted in a straightforward defence of the ‘local’, unlike Grillo’s (2005) study of suburban racism in Saltdean. For one thing, Saltdean is an established coastal suburb with a large elderly population, whereas the Eastside interviewees were recent incomers themselves. Furthermore, a mobilization along localist lines would be problematic for Woodlands’ residents because they only had a fleeting and often negative relationship with the ‘local’ largely because they wanted to distance themselves from lower-class people and places in the rest of Eastside (‘selective belonging’; Watt, 2009). Hence their views of the changing demography of Eastside were connected to a wider set of socio-spatial practices and discourses of distancing in which the rest of Eastside, containing asylum seekers, immigrants and lower-class white others, was a stigmatized place to avoid. The Newtown residents were more localist in orientation and elements of a discourse of elective belonging did emerge, albeit one involving racialized concerns about the transformation of the previously all-white Eastside landscape. There are class and spatial parallels with Millington’s (2010) study of white attitudes to asylum seekers in Southend-on-Sea whereby the more affluent suburban residents draw upon a more abstract narrative, while less affluent, centrally located residents were more likely to recount context-dependent stories about asylum seekers. The localism of the Newtown residents nevertheless also paradoxically

offered possibilities for developing practices of everyday conviviality, that Paul Gilroy celebrates, in the London suburbs.

In psychosocial terms, the ‘under siege’ postcolonial melancholia unearthed amongst the white Eastside residents consists of a toxic combination of loss, disgust, anger and guilt (Watt, 2007). The loss of their past imagined communities at both national and local levels is linked to disgust and frustrated anger at how such changes are, for them, associated with the abject presence of foreign bodies that cannot be expunged. Outright anger occurs as a result of feeling they are not ‘allowed’ to express their opinions by the political correctness lobby and the liberal intelligentsia. Finally, they experience guilt about harbouring opinions and feelings that they know are less than humane at best and racist at worst.

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