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## **The new 'creative' Brick Lane**

### *A narrative study of local multicultural encounters*

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**ABSTRACT** This article is a narrative study of local multicultural encounters taking place along Brick Lane in East London, UK. Although the area has been primarily researched for its Bangladeshi community, this article focuses on the 'creative' professionals who work and/or reside within the vicinity. It is a narrative investigation into their attitudes towards difference, ethnicity and the ethnic self. A multiplicity of local multicultural tales comes to the fore. In short, the multicultural realities of the area become narrated in many different ways, which clearly manifest a narrative complexity, unfolding within the new 'creative' Brick Lane. These different local multicultural narratives could also be indicative of the ways that multicultural meaning is created within London at large.

**KEYWORDS** difference ● ethnicity ● ethnic identity ● gentrification ● multiculturalism ● London ● redevelopment

### **INTRODUCTION: THE CULTURAL OR 'CREATIVE' INDUSTRIES OF THE NEW EAST LONDON**

Since the beginning of post-industrial restructuring, East London has been a net loser in terms of economic activities and jobs. As manufacturing and other forms of production relocated to other parts of the globe, where cheaper labour costs could guarantee higher levels of profits, the 'East End' faced serious problems competing with other parts of England in attracting businesses, investment and skills. At the same time, the diminishing role of the River Thames as an economic powerhouse did not help either. East London became perceived as an area of high unemployment, low expectations and all other social ills commonly attributed to poor, post-industrial inner-city areas.

One of the most recent trends, within some parts of East London, has been to use culture and 'creativity' as the main engine of local economic revitalization. From this perspective, cultural industries become the vehicle for the revival of economic activities (Cohen, 1999a: 12). Culture transforms into a form of economy where the economics of culture can create further employment, growth, skills and income. This is the moment where the 'creative' or cultural industries of East End become the most important players within the local redevelopment game.

These local forms of 'creative' capitalism are closely associated to a notion of cultural entrepreneurship. A new term, 'creative' or 'cultural industries' (Cohen, 1999a: 10), emerges that includes any business, other than fine art, that deploys elements of creativity. In 1998, the British government founded a 'Creative Industries Task Force', announcing that these activities accounted for more than 5 percent of Britain's GDP, while providing employment to 1.5 million people (*The Observer*, 1 December 2002).

As a result of the internet revolution and the thirst of our visual civilization for more elaborated images and symbols, new sectors of the metropolitan economy have developed around the 'creative' deployment of new digitized technologies. The spread of these industries, initially in Hoxton and Brick Lane, later on reaching as far as Bethnal Green and Dalston, generated employment and substantial levels of profit. A new type of metropolitan white-collar employee was created, who personified within her/his own 'creative' labour, a very solid cultural-economic intermarriage. These 'creative' types made their presence visible in some areas of East London through a loitering army of web designers, computer engineers, art directors, music producers and any other job titles generated by this new digitized era.

From the late 1990s onwards, a whole spectrum of designer and other similar economies (see Lash and Urry, 1994: 111) emerged to cater for the needs of these new professionals. In Brick Lane, a local redeveloped brewery building provided the space for these new forms of entrepreneurial creativity to blossom. Through the passage of time, a variety of cafes, bars, exhibition spaces, etc. conglomerated around the Brewery. These new 'creative' cultures inscribed their lifestyle patterns onto the surrounding urban vernacular. Within a few years, Brick Lane's vernacular landscape transformed through the insertion of a 'creative community' and its ways of life. These new lifestyles settled side-by-side with 'native' ethnic populations, bodies, languages, cultures, etc. In short, a new 'creative' Brick Lane was born based on entrepreneurial creativity and the spread of new digital technologies.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS ALONG THE LANE

Historically, Brick Lane has functioned as a settlement area for successive waves of immigrants to London. The first influx of populations consisted of Huguenot refugees who came into the area during the end of the 17th century. Subsequently, Irish populations in the 18th century, Jewish refugees in the 19th and more recently Bangladeshi immigrants have all settled in the area (Fishman, 1979: 76). As part of this long tradition of settlement, cultural traces of all these historical migrations can still be found in the area. Most remarkably, the building at the corner of Brick Lane and Fourier St has functioned as a chapel for the Huguenots, a synagogue for the Jews, and currently, as a mosque for the local Muslim Bangladeshi population.

To continue, Brick Lane forms part of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. According to the 1991 census, 22.9 percent of all Bangladeshi people in the country lived in Tower Hamlets. It had the highest proportion of Bangladeshi people among any other London Borough or district within the UK. In relation to the 1991 deprivation index, Tower Hamlets was ranked as the fifth most deprived borough in London and as the seventh within Britain (London Research Centre, 1996: 180). The 2001 census revealed that 23 percent of all Bangladeshis in England and Wales lived in Tower Hamlets, comprising one-third of its total population. The ward with the greatest number of Bangladeshis was Bethnal Green South, while the ward with the highest percentage was Brick Lane (Spitalfields). Although the number of Bangladeshis in London has increased considerably since the 1991 census, its marginal increase in Tower Hamlets can be explained by the fact that earlier heavy patterns of concentration are giving way to processes of dispersion within the capital. Nevertheless, the economic disadvantage faced by Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets and other London boroughs appears to remain stable (Piggott, 2004).

The local Bangladeshi community has been the subject of investigation for a number of authors. Accordingly, some of them have focused on issues of community, identity and space (Eade, 1989, 1994; Fremeaux, 2000), while others on education (Tomlinson, 1992), religion (Glynn, 2002), transnationalism (Eade and Garbin, 2002; Garbin, 2005), redevelopment (Jacobs, 1996) and inclusion (Gardner, 2004). This article, rather than researching the local Bangladeshi community, proceeds into a narrative investigation of multi-cultural encounters between local Bangladeshis and their cohabiting 'creative' professionals, strictly through the accounts of the latter. By doing so, it does not intend to silence the former. Within the broader framework of this research, Bangladeshi accounts of local multicultural encounters have also been taken into consideration and it is anticipated will be

published too. Nevertheless, contemporary conditions of London's multiculturalism, unfolding within fast-transforming ethnically diverse inner-city areas under the aegis of cultural entrepreneurialism, require modes of analysis that can shed some light on the mentalities of the agents of urban change. In this sense, characteristics and tendencies of this hyped form of multicultural urbanism become exemplified, exposed and, in a way, better understood.

Before I go further, it has to be made clear how the concept of 'race' is treated within this article. First and foremost, it is approached in a deconstructed way. As Stuart Hall (1992) has claimed, two separate moments exist within the history of 'black' cultural politics in Britain. Within the first moment, 'blackness' is treated as a singular and unifying experience strictly for political reasons (Hall, 1992: 252). The second moment signifies 'the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (Hall, 1992: 254). This is the moment where 'blackness' becomes redefined as diverse in relation to ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, subjectivity, etc. A uniformed category of 'blackness' gives way to many different kinds of 'blackness'.

On the other hand, recent years have witnessed the emergence of an intellectual project to deconstruct 'whiteness' also. Under these lights, 'whiteness' should be analysed in all its complexity and different manifestations. Accordingly, 'whiteness' cannot go 'unexamined' (Chambers, 1997), but the whole array of its diversity should be brought to the fore. As Frankenberg (1997) argues: 'The result is whiteness unfrozen, whiteness viewed as ensembles of local phenomena complexly embedded in socio-economic, socio-cultural and psychic interrelations. Whiteness emerges as a process, not a thing, as plural rather than singular in nature' (Frankenberg, 1997: 1). Following these lines, some writers ask us to get 'out of' our 'whiteness' (Ware and Black, 2002) or even to abolish it (Hale, 1998; Ignatiev and Carvey, 1996; Roediger, 1994).

In terms of the particular logistics of this research, at the entrance to the local redeveloped Brewery, a bar had put out tables and benches for its loitering clientele. Many local professionals were sitting outside having lunch, a break or just a cigarette. As the writer of this article did not possess at the time any substantial contacts in the area, he chose this spot as the prime site for conducting interviews. In a similar manner, a couple of neighbouring cafes were chosen too. During this process, 14 in-depth interviews were conducted. These local interviewees are branded as the 'creatives'.

But why group together all these different individuals? Why is it appropriate to describe them as an ethnic group or a certain kind of 'people' (Eriksen, 1993)? To start with, all of them were employed within local 'creative' industries and the designer economies that had developed around them. At the same time, all of them seemed to frequent the same

micro-spaces within the vicinity and they were, more or less, of the same age group (19–40 years of age). But this is where their similarities stopped.

This group of ‘creative’ professionals was multicultural or multiethnic. Twelve of them were British, while two of them were international (South African and Norwegian). Within the British category, eight of them could be identified as ‘white’-British, two of them as ‘black’-British, while the last remaining two as Asian-British and ‘British’-other respectively. Nevertheless, these racial and ethnic categorizations were intersected by class and gender. As Cohen (1999a) has argued about the nature of cultural industries, they tend to produce a new multicultural professional middle class, but also, a new kind of low paid/low skills servant class, which does the menial jobs and caters to their tastes (Cohen, 1999a: 15). While the former enjoy considerable levels of income that can fuel their lifestyle journeys, the latter have to get by with minimum wages. Within our group, this new professional middle class did not strictly include ‘white’ males. Women and members of ethnic or ‘racial’ minorities were found within its ranks. On the other hand, within this new servant class native ‘white’ males could also be found. In this sense, different kinds of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ mutually influenced by class and gender, existed within the group. Nevertheless, their differences were perceived as less important than their ‘organization of behavior and social relations’ (Barth, 1969: 15), which created and maintained an ethnic boundary between themselves and others.

In terms of employment, five of them had ‘creative’ managerial positions, while seven of them were averagely paid art-related professionals. The last remaining three had low paid jobs, serving the rest. In terms of gender, eight of them were males, while six were females. All of the names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Narrative studies (Chase, 1995; Hollway and Jefferson, 1997; Josselson, 1995; Rosenthal, 1993; Widdershoven, 1993), which can reflect on people’s experiences and life stances by taking into account personal accumulated experience, advocate that life and experience can only become meaningful through narration and story-telling. As Widdershoven (1993: 2) states: ‘Life is both more and less than a story. It is more that it is a basis for a variety of stories, and it is less in that it is unfinished and unclear as long as there are no stories told about it.’

Following these lines, a narrative analysis of local multicultural encounters along the Lane should attempt to elicit personal narratives out of the interview material. It should describe the ways that people live their lives, make sense and narrate their local multicultural experiences. In this sense, the local multicultural life transforms into a text where people, by narrating it, create their own meanings and accordingly live their lives.

## NARRATING THE AREA

The analysis of 14 transcribed in-depth interviews revealed the emergence of the following two narrative tropes: Brick Lane becomes depicted either in terms of artistic creativity or cultural diversity. From such a perspective, the area is presented as a long-established hub of creativity, or alternatively, as a highly diverse ethnic milieu. However, this narrative of ethnic diversity in relation to the local vernacular takes mostly an aesthetic view on locally accumulated differences. An aesthetic appreciation of local conditions of ethnic diversity is mostly at work. The charm and aesthetics of differences are broadly acknowledged.

One of the most dominant representations of Brick Lane portrays it in an artistic light. It is argued that as early as the beginning of the 1960s, many artists started to settle in the area. From this perspective, the area is depicted as a long-established centre of artistic creativity. Nevertheless, it is argued that local creativity might have changed significantly during the last few years. The main reasons cited are local processes of gentrification unfolding within the vicinity. As a direct result of strong local property inflationary tendencies, a number of initially settled artists allegedly have become the victims of displacement. Such narratives of local artistic displacement closely correspond with theories of gentrification as a two-wave process (Zukin, 1992: 230). According to such a view, gentrification in its early stages is carried out by a specific socioeconomic group that alters the way that local vernacular has been traditionally seen. Nevertheless, as gentrification matures, a different, more affluent socioeconomic group of people is attracted to the area. As a result, increased levels of local demand create inflationary pressures on existing housing stock, which translate into higher rents and spiralling property prices. Accordingly, the first group of gentrifiers or the 'first wave' of gentrification becomes evicted on grounds of economic affordability.

For Brick Lane, a different version of this two-wave story of gentrification has apparently taken place. Accordingly, artists looking for cheap studio spaces comprised the first wave of gentrification. However, since then, other contemporary forms of more profitable creativity have taken their place and space. Allegedly, different forms of cultural industries started displacing earlier settled artists and their bohemian ways of life. A more corporate 'creative' culture developed locally, capable of affording medium to expensive levels of rent. In effect, entrepreneurial forms of creativity have replaced local traditional forms of fine art. Dave, a 'white'-British interior designer, commented on the topic:

Interviewer: Do you consider Brick Lane as an artistic area?

Dave: It's, well, it used to be very creative at one stage, this is where all the sort of up and coming artists lived, in the 1990s, they are

- moving out now, but they are still sort of riding on that, but all the artists, the small artists, are leaving because of the prices.
- Interviewer: So, in a way you say that the creativity is leaving the area?
- Dave: Well, it's being changed to something like, you know, the sort of, the people with the computer art and art companies and graphics, and you know all this combination, are sort of moving in and all the actual artists with the paintbrush or whatever are moving out, so although it is creative, it's been replaced by another type of creativity.

Another set of narratives construct the area as a highly ethnically diverse one. More importantly, Brick Lane's ethnic diversity is portrayed as its finest asset. Local urban heterogeneity is clearly preferred to any form of ethnic homogeneity. Jean-Paul, a 'white' Anglo-French advertiser, who recently moved into the area, comments:

- Interviewer: What do you think about Brick Lane?
- Jean-Paul: I am gonna say, what my brother said when he came here, 'you get a real sense of community with the shops and all the rest of it – it just doesn't happen to be yours', I think that is a little harsh, you know, but I know what he means, you feel like a visitor to a foreign land, not in a xenophobic or racist kind of way, but just literally, you know.

Jean-Paul portrays Brick Lane as a foreign metropolitan land within the midst of London. He is quick to suggest that this kind of statement should not be perceived as implying or denouncing any cultural swamping of Britain. It should not be considered as carrying any 'racist' or 'xenophobic' connotations. On the contrary, for Jean-Paul, Brick Lane's difference and foreignness to other parts of London is its unique asset and attraction. By the same token, Hulo, a Norwegian male cinematographer, who lives and works locally, comments:

- Interviewer: What do you think of Brick Lane?
- Hulo: It's the fact that you feel that it's a little world outside London. I mean you would be just five minutes' walk from the City and you have people on the streets and you hardly hear English spoken on the street and that has its charm.

This narrative tendency of depicting ethnically diverse areas as foreign lands or worlds apart was commonplace to representations of metropolitan spaces of migration during the 1950s and 1960s. That said, inner-city areas of intense Commonwealth migration and settlement during those years were also habitually seen as 'twilight zones'; areas of multiple migrant occupancy and lodging houses. This idea of the twilight zone conveyed a dual meaning. On one hand, through the slum clearance policies of the era, twilight zones referred to the age and condition of housing within these



areas. As Rex and Moore (1967) argued: 'Because of the age of these houses the areas are known to the planners as "twilight zones" implying that they are approaching, but have not yet reached, the night of slumdom' (Rex and Moore, 1967: 29).

On the other hand, this description also connoted the migrant character of these areas. Twilight zones were the areas that, although located within the hearts of postcolonial British cities, simulated the feeling of entering into another cultural zone. In other words, former twilight zones were considered as metropolitan windows to otherness. By just entering, one supposedly experienced feelings of national dislocation and cultural disorientation. In short, former twilight zones were spaces where other cultures and ways of life resided. More importantly, this cultural otherness appeared to contradict and oppose the established British way of life. Nevertheless, such a cultural juxtaposition was not neutral. It was informed by a former colonial legacy that used to rank cultures according to a racial hierarchy.

Through the racist 'structures of feeling' of the era,<sup>1</sup> these windows to 'otherness', these places of cultural disorientation, were habitually perceived in a negative light. Former inner-city twilight zones were portrayed through the language of new or cultural racism (Barker, 1987). This language articulated a feeling of native cultural distaste and aversion towards other cultures. As a result, any possibilities for successful multicultural urban living were denied. Allegedly, 'their ways of life' clashed and contested with traditional British culture. The only way forward was through the development of monocultural forms of living. As a result, processes of spatial segregation of other cultures and 'races' informed earlier forms of British diverse urban living.

These tropes of cultural racism became spatially manifested through an urban dialectic of cultural repulsion that led to a native or 'white' flight from inner-city areas to the outer suburbs and beyond. In a sense, the natives that failed to relocate were those that could not afford to leave the inner city behind. Consequently, earlier forms of British urban multicultural living took place between cultural others and poor natives. The urban multicultural living of the era was not a matter of choice, but of necessity.

However, a different kind of multiculturalism characterizes contemporary forms of inner-city cosmopolitan urban living. This new kind of urban multiculturalism goes along with a new narrative of difference in relation to contemporary twilight zones, like Brick Lane. In sharp contrast to the past, this new narrative perceives ethnic diversity in a positive fashion. As Hulo says, there is a 'charm' within the otherness of Brick Lane. In short, this new narrative of ethnic diversity acknowledges the charms of local ethnic vernacular; it tends to aesthetically value diversity.

Paul Gilroy's (1995) account of multiculturalism, as both possessing aesthetic and ethical dimensions, is relevant here:

I want to approach [multiculturalism] here speculatively, not a clearly delineated goal or a reified state to which one can be finally committed, but as an aesthetic and even ethical principle routed through certain distinctive historical experiences of modernity and confirmed by the special promise and hetero-cultural dynamism of contemporary metropolitan life. (Gilroy, 1995: 3)

As argued earlier, aesthetic dimensions of local multiculturalism break into the narrative fore. But what about an ethical approach to local conditions of multiculturalism – a kind of local multiculturalism viewed through ‘ethics’?<sup>2</sup>

Relevant to this, there is another narrative that acknowledges both aesthetic and ethical dimensions of local conditions of diversity. Raj, a British-Asian creative professional, comments:

Interviewer: What are the good things about Brick Lane?

Raj: You can walk down Brick Lane and you know, there are different people from different backgrounds and colours and races, different kinds of food, and different smells and noises, and this place is playing this kind of music and this place is playing thumping tunes, it’s like a canvas of sounds and smells, a spectacle, and I think there is a risk of not actually seeing what underlines it, which is [a] huge amount of deprivation, a huge amount of people living in really difficult circumstances . . . I think it’s important not to lose sight of the fact that they are both there, it’s important to constantly draw back the spectacle and all that ‘lovey-dovey’ things to the actual reality of it, it’s very hard, but it’s important to do so.

A number of authors have argued about the existence of long-established Western European tendencies of exoticizing the other (Gilroy, 1995: 11). Accordingly, otherness becomes the site of fascination, spectatorship and observance. Within such a tradition, the work of early 20th-century French writer Victor Segalen stands out:

Exoticism understood as . . . an aesthetic of diversity – is moreover the center, the essence, the justification of all the books Victor Segalen has written and no doubt of those he intends to write. (Todorov, 1994: 323)

Segalen’s way of defining exoticism or difference is a very broad one. For him, whatever is external to one’s observing subjectivity unavoidably constitutes otherness. More specifically, differences are deemed precious as they can allegedly guarantee the intensification of human life. Accordingly, exoticism as ‘an acquisition of pleasure in diversity’ (Todorov, 1994: 327) provides deeply exhilarating experiences. Those who embark on such pleasurable journeys are branded as ‘exotes’.

The ‘exote’ should not attempt to assimilate diversity, or internalize external difference. Instead, a distance, between the subject and object of exoticism, should always be maintained. For Segalen, only a constant

externality to the encountered differences can guarantee the continuation of exotic pleasures. The art of exoticism requires a fixed and unchangeable identity; a very strong sense of self. External differences should never be allowed to corrode the core of one's self. They should remain external and thus pleasurable in their otherness.

Raj's critical comments on local forms of exoticism can be taken as a critique of Western European exoticization tendencies. His solutions to such spectacular local conditions pass through a constant retrieval of underlining social realities. Accordingly, one should not just immerse oneself in differences, but instead, one should constantly 'draw back the spectacle' for social realities to be revealed. As a result, his recommendations resemble the main ideas of an epic approach to theatre.

The concept of epic theatre was formulated by Bertolt Brecht, in opposition to Aristotelian forms of dramaturgy (Benjamin, 1973: 144-5). Within an epic theatre approach, the emphasis shifts from empathizing with the characters until the point of catharsis, to the representation of social conditions that the characters find themselves in. Accordingly, the stage leaves behind any sensationalist aspirations and focuses on social circumstances. Most importantly, the audience plays a vital, almost ethical, role. First and foremost, it should have a strong 'interest in the matter' (Benjamin, 1973: 144). Second, through such theatrical dialectics, between a non-sensationalist stage and a socially engaged audience, a clear image of social reality can emerge, which can trigger revolutionary actions.

According to Raj, Brick Lane's contemporary exotes should focus less on the aesthetic qualities of differences and open their eyes to the social circumstances that local diversity finds itself in. From such a perspective, the aesthetic approach to local diversity finds its fiercest critic.

## **THE MARKING OF BOUNDARIES: REFLECTING ON GROUPS AND GROUP MEMBERSHIP**

In what follows, I cast light on processes of marking and maintaining ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1969). I investigate the ways through which these multi-cultural 'creative' professionals of different class positions and genders create their ethnic boundary that separates them from local Bangladeshis. Accordingly, I adopt Fredrik Barth's position that it is 'the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses' (Barth, 1969: 15). That said, ethnic or group membership emerges when different groups of people, who maintain a minimum contact between them, create an ethnic boundary based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness (Eriksen, 1993). Accordingly, it is not the culture of one group that defines its ethnicity, but an assumed, imagined cultural juxtaposition between themselves and others.

To start with, a local multicultural story defines Brick Lane as an area where both a loosely defined Asian or Bangladeshi and a new 'creative' category of people reside. Allegedly, these two, constructed as different ethnic groups or categories, have minimal contact with each other. As a result, a local multicultural story of separation and acute disassociation has come to the fore.

Clark, a 'white'-British freelance designer who works locally, argues as follows:

Interviewer: What do you think about Brick Lane's multiculturalism?

Clark: I think it's quite nice that you have the balance, like in the day time, you look around and, yeah, all the designers and the young agency people, and then around eight o'clock, nine o'clock at night, all the pubs fill up with these people and all the streets is just Asian people and it's quite nice, because you have this thing in London, here it's the Asian and the arty people.

In the above, Clark marks an ethnic boundary between his group of people and local 'Asian' populations. What is interesting is that he is not even capable of correctly defining the marked-as-other ethnic category. Instead of Bangladeshi, he broadly defines it as Asian. Accordingly, Clark constructs a boundary with another category that he cannot even properly identify.

The marking of ethnic boundaries 'entail[s] social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby distinct categories are maintained' (Barth, 1969: 10). In effect, Clark incorporates himself within the arty-creative group, while simultaneously excludes from it local 'Asian' (Bangladeshi) populations. As ethnic boundaries are essentially social in nature (Barth, 1969: 15; Sanders, 2002: 327), he separates the social world of his group from the one of local Bangladeshis. He perceives himself as 'playing the same game' (Barth, 1969: 15) with his fellow members, while not doing so with the other ethnic category.

By all accounts, this narrative depicts a local multicultural condition characterized by a spatial coexistence of minimal interaction. Brick Lane's multiculturalism is presented as a purely geographical form of coexistence. Forms and manifestations of a local interethnic coming together are almost denied. In short, an image of a local multicultural condition arises where a spatial regime of segregation informs the patterns of existence of these two, marked as distinct categories.

After examining the marking of ethnic boundaries between local 'creatives' and local others (strangers), I now focus on cultural explanations that supposedly create and maintain such boundaries. As mentioned earlier, ethnic categorization requires a group of people to perceive themselves and others as culturally distinct. In short, ethnic boundaries depend on an assumed cultural resonance. Following on from this, what are the main reasons cited for this supposedly minimal or nil local interethnic

interaction? What are the prime obstacles to local interethnic exchanges? Everyday culture restricted by religion provides the dominant reason behind such alleged levels of nominal interaction. Hulo, again, comments:

Interviewer: What do you think are the obstacles of communication between the two local groups?

Hulo: It depends on what life you are leading, and as we know a lot of people that move here, they are still quite young, you know mid-twenties to mid-thirties and they have their friends and they are not [going to] go out and make an effort to be friends with their Bangladeshi neighbours, just as if they move into a Jewish area, or a Greek area they are not [going to] go out and make an effort to be friends with the Greeks or Jewish, which happens in all big cities really and if you meet a nice Bangladeshi guy at the pub that's cool, but there are a lot of Muslims in this area so obviously that's slightly different, and the mosque around the corner is very orthodox, which means they don't drink, which means that they don't go to the pub.

In this extract, Hulo narrates metropolitan urbanism as one of few intimate relationships accompanied by a general feeling of strangeness to the rest of urban populations. The act of either living or working in a highly ethnically diverse area, like Brick Lane, does not necessarily guarantee that the spatial proximity of multicultural strangers will enter into one's life. When the power and influence of religion to guide one's lifestyle and everyday practices enters the picture, any points of local interethnic interaction allegedly diminish further. Accordingly, local Bangladeshis' religious practices are narrated as the main barriers to any closer coming together of the two, constructed as different, local categories. In short, ethnic boundaries become articulated in cultural terms.

To continue, I draw attention to the ways through which this 'creative' category narrates itself; I examine cosmopolitan narratives that the local 'creative' group imagines in relation to itself (Anderson, 1983). I argue that a local 'creative' cosmopolitan ethos can almost substitute for any alleged minimal interethnic interaction.

To start with, the local multicultural 'creative' group presents itself as a thriving hub of cosmopolitanism, intercultural connectivity and interdependence. What does not flourish within local interethnic conditions supposedly blossoms within the Brewery. Nicole, a 'white' South African professional, argues:

Nicole: The Brewery in general, is a huge mix, you know you have Europeans, you know, all sorts of people, I think that's always an asset, you know, different ideas, different ways of doing things.

Carl, a 'black' British-Jamaican musician from Lewisham (another area of London), expresses his opinion as follows:

Interviewer: What do you think about the Brewery?

Carl: It's very multicultural, very, very, multicultural, you see people from different backgrounds, different races, different classes and all of them treat you with respect, they treat you on *face value*, it's a learning experience.

Both narratives highlight an alleged cosmopolitan collaboration and ethos. For Sennett (1977), a cosmopolite 'is a man [or woman] who moves comfortably in diversity; he [she] is comfortable in situations which have no links or parallels to what is familiar to him [or her]' (Sennett, 1977: 17).

As mentioned earlier, members of the same ethnic group are perceived as fundamentally 'playing the same game' (Barth, 1969: 15). Accordingly, the 'creatives' become self-represented, as an army of cosmopolites feeling comfortable within differences. In short, all of them are allegedly playing the same game. Differences within the community are considered as assets, having the ability to trigger new creative ideas and visions.

Furthermore, Carl's statement about the treatment of the other (a broad definition of otherness either in terms of 'race', class or background) within the Brewery, at 'face value', evokes Emanuel Levinas's (1969, 1987) personal ethics of approaching alterity. For Levinas (1969, 1987), as for Fanon (1986), an intersubjective phenomenological captivity constitutes the context where differences are encountered and dealt with. While Fanon emphasizes the importance of skin to explain phenomenological regimes of racism, Levinas (1969: 81, 207; 1987: 79) focuses on the face and the ethical obligations that arises for any receiving human consciousness. He suggests that the face of the other (Levinas, 1987: 198) should be reduced to neither knowledge (a knowledge of the subject towards the object = racism) nor enjoyment (the subject being lost in the spectacle of the object). Instead, a 'welcoming of the face' (Levinas, 1987: 214), which immediately puts into 'question the consciousness that welcomes it' (Levinas, 1987: 207), should take place. As a result, an ethical approach to otherness finds the necessary space to become realized.

To sum up, the spaces of the Brewery provide the place for such a welcoming of alterity. The redeveloped spaces of the 'creative' community are presented as the places of a pure ethical cosmopolitan encounter. Behind its gates, different encounters of differences can thrive. Whereas the broader Brick Lane multiculturalism falls short of connecting local ethnic categories, the spaces of the Brewery provide the platform for the breeding of an in-group cosmopolitan ethos. In this sense, the latter can allegedly substitute for the failures of the former.

## ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN SPACE

In writing about contemporary societal transformations, recent decades have witnessed the proliferation of a literature on identity (see, for example, Hall, 1990, 1991; McGuigan, 1996; Raban, 1974; Touraine, 2000). In a number of cases, explorations of identity have been discussed in conjunction with space (de Certeau, 1984: 110; Harvey, 1989: 66). Accordingly, a notion of a sociospatial identity prevails, which argues that identities become constructed, enacted and performed in and through space<sup>3</sup> (Zukin, 1992: 222). This intense preoccupation with issues of identity and space acknowledges the influence of consumption in processes of constructing a self (Harvey, 1989: 289; Raban, 1974: 1). It is argued that we become what we consume within the realms of the contemporary postmodern city (Zukin, 1992: 243). As the postmodern city is all about images (Boyer, 1996: 47), urban visual consumption dominates the production of sociospatial identities (Harvey, 1989: 289). In this sense, the self becomes another in relation to external visual stimuli.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I explore the validity and relevance of such an argument in relation to ethnic identity. As in the case of the postmodern city, where forms of visual consumption allegedly influence spatial identity, could one argue the same for Brick Lane and a hypothetical transformation of the ethnic self? To put it differently, do local regimes of visual consumption of otherness have the power to penetrate the skin and result in a transformed ethnic self? Or alternatively, do local narratives of ethnic identity instead of working through difference (Bhabha, 1994: 1; Hall, 1990: 235; McGuigan, 1996: 141) fundamentally work against it (Hall, 1996: 4)?

To tackle these issues, I look more closely at the stories that these 'creative' professionals relate to themselves for themselves and others; I examine the narrative 'plots' (Ricoeur, 1992: 141) that succeed in creating a sense of an ethnic self. I embark on an investigation into the maintenance, or not, of marked ethnic boundaries in relation to oneself. Can one transgress perceived ethnic boundaries and reconstruct oneself anew?

The former story of a local multiculturalism of spatial segregation and minimum interaction leaves minimum space for the corrosion of the ethnic self. Instead, the self is constructed or even reaffirmed against a neighbouring Bangladeshi otherness (Hall, 1996: 4). In short, perceived ethnic boundaries are maintained in relation to oneself. John, a 'white'-English male who works in a local coffee shop, comments:

John: I am an outgoing person so I make an effort to meet people, I don't really think that there is a part of their culture [Bangladeshi], it is a part of their culture, *to meet people of their own kind*, I don't think they want to meet English people, I don't know if they are initially going *out of their way* to meet you. (emphasis added)

From this statement, it becomes apparent that an assumed cultural resonance characterizes the marking of ethnic boundaries within the locality. Nevertheless, culture transforms into a vehicle for other societal distinctions to be implicitly discussed. In this sense, culture can almost substitute for 'race'; local Bangladeshi culture can almost stand for an ethnicized 'race' (Cohen, 1999b: 2). Differential aspects of class and income inform the picture as well. One is led to consider that local Bangladeshis are marked as different in terms of a 'racialized' culture, income and class. Their 'way of life' does not refer only to culture but, in a way, to material conditions of existence and hidden racialized mythologies too.

John articulates his sense of self in stark opposition to a spatially co-existing Bangladeshi ethnicity. By marking and maintaining the ethnic boundaries between himself and others, he succeeds in producing a sense of an ethnic self. In effect, the macro-spaces of Brick Lane become narrated as places where two different ethnicities or ways of life reside. Each ethnic subject strictly correlates to an all-powerful defining ethnic category. In this sense, assumed ethnic boundaries become deployed in an attempt to reaffirm or reify the self; they transform into narrative devices of self-fortification.

In what follows, I articulate two other stories of the self. First, there is a narrative that argues about the existence of a fragmented, multilayered self, depending on context, while a second one suggests that oneself can become another (Ricouer, 1992) through the heterogeneous influences of Brick Lane. Raj, again, comments:

Interviewer: What are your own pleasures of Brick Lane?

Raj: I like the fact that there is actual life on the streets and [it] changes from day to day . . . and it also changes at different times of the day, very early in the morning or on a Bank [public] Holiday, Brick Lane is totally Bangladeshi, at other times, like during a launch party with a really big DJ on, and you know, it's party time, you can just *move through in and out of spaces* all in one the same geographical block, it's fascinating, I love that.

Interviewer: Do you think that you can participate in all these spaces?

Raj: Absolutely yes, I feel that I can do that.

In this extract, Raj articulates a different notion of ethnic identity. He argues that different contexts or spaces are capable of producing different kinds of selves (within oneself). The self does not appear as single, fixed or stable, but instead as multiple, depending on context (Touraine, 2000: 3); the self is performative (Bell, 1999: 1) and fragmented (Hall, 1996: 4).

Furthermore, Raj acknowledges the marked ethnic (social) boundaries that set aside his own category (creatives) from local others (Bangladeshis). Nevertheless, he suggests that in his case, he is able to transgress ethnic boundaries and participate in different social worlds. In a sense, he is playing not just the same 'game' but the other's 'game' too (Barth, 1969:



15). That said, it has been suggested by Jonathan Friedman (1999, 2000) that privileged cosmopolitan identities, characterized by mobility across ethnic boundaries, exist side by side with local, immobilized identities of marginalized populations. From this angle, Raj's cosmopolitanism and ethnic boundary crossing might result from his privileged managerial position within a 'creative' company that allows him to experience the pleasures of cosmopolitanism.

However, such a narrative construction of a fragmented self does not shed light on any ethnic configurations that might take place between these multiple selves. It does not describe any hybrid formations that might arise through the interaction of different selves. From this perspective, 'new ethnicities' and 'new cultures' remain hidden and unacknowledged under the aegis of self-fragmentation.

On the other hand, Jess narrates a different story about the ethnic self. Processes of gentrification within the media have been habitually depicted, at least in the US, as processes of 'conquering' the urban frontier (Smith, 1991: 64). A number of writers were eager to appropriate this metaphor for their own theoretical and political objectives; they argued that gentrification constitutes 'a frontier of profitability', a 'frontier' line of separation between areas of urban investment and disinvestment (Smith, 1991). On the other hand, not much has been written in relation to the ethnic frontiers of gentrification. The specific ways that voluntary forms of situating and locating your body within economic and cultural otherness can alter the self. Jess, a 'native' English creative professional, argues as follows:

Interviewer: What do you think of the area?

Jess: It's like a frontier.

Interviewer: A frontier of what?

Jess: Trying to make a new life, it's a little bit more exploratory here . . . [being] in a space, where you have another culture around, challenges you, in a sense, you start to think, who am I, or what's me in a sense, because someone looks different or somebody is doing something differently, and maybe you don't think necessarily like that at the time, but I think, there is a sense that you are in a space where anything can happen.

I read this extract as a statement about the influences of diverse urban space upon the self. Within such a narrative, ethnic identities are not perceived as fixed or stable, but, instead, as in constant 'transition' (Hall, 1990: 225). The self retains the possibility to become another. This is a narrative construction of identities as incomplete. As Sennett (1990: 148) says: 'In order to sense the other, one must do the work of accepting oneself as incomplete.'

Jess communicates these concerns by questioning 'what's me in a sense?' This is a narrative construction of identity where ethnic boundaries are eroded. Ethnic boundaries are not just transgressed, but denied altogether.

As a result, ethnic categorizations become almost irrelevant. The self is free to evolve in a world without boundaries or borders, just frontiers.

According to de Certeau, 'To practice space is thus to retreat to the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, to be other and move towards the other' (de Certeau, 1984: 110). As I argued, the first story of ethnic identity uses the other in a way of reaffirming the self. These are the workings of ethnic identity against difference or the maintenance of ethnic boundaries in relation to oneself. Through an assumed 'knowledge' of the other (Levinas, 1969: 198), we succeed in producing ourselves. On the other hand, another narrative suggests that as one passes 'in' and 'out' of spaces one becomes another depending on context. In this sense, many others might exist within oneself. Of course, these are the workings of a flexible self through multiple differences or acts of ethnic boundary crossing. Lastly, a third story argues that oneself can become another through the influences of heterogeneous space. In this sense, the old and new self can merge together for 'new societies, new people and new cultures [to] come into existence' (Park, 1950: 375). This is a world where processes of ethnic identity construction do not come face to face with marked boundaries. In short, to 'practise space' might be a very perplexing enterprise.

## **THE NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY OF THE NEW MULTICULTURAL BRICK LANE**

This article is a narrative analysis on issues of multiculturalism, ethnicity and the self along Brick Lane. Its aim has been to extract, out of the interview material, any multicultural narrative patterns, through which local 'creative' professionals make sense of their lives and their world around them. In a sense, Brick Lane transforms into a text where different 'creative' professionals produce their own multicultural meanings to it. As a result, a diverse local multicultural semiology emerges that manifests different processes of multicultural meaning construction along the Lane.

That said, the multicultural life of the new Brick Lane emerges as a narrative arena of multiple and different accounts; a diversity of antagonizing narratives exhaust the multicultural meanings of diversity, ethnicity and the ethnic self. This narrative complexity clearly perplexes any straightforward process of local multicultural signification. Any encounter between the self and the other, but also, any theorization of the self to the self and others, might simply provide a text for different narratives of ethnic boundaries and assumed cultural differences to appear. In short, Brick Lane's multiculturalism came along with many different kinds of meanings attached to it. We should start to recognize the multiplicity of multicultural meanings that characterize the ethnically diverse urban living of London.

One could argue that more research is needed, in order to exemplify the multicultural complexity of contemporary forms of inner-city cosmopolitan urbanism.

## Notes

- 1 Barnor Hesse (2000: 16) has theorized the histories of British multiculturalism as a series of ever-changing 'structures of feeling'.
- 2 It should be noted that any notion of 'ethics' fundamentally requires putting the 'other' before the 'self'. Nevertheless, the specific conceptualization of 'ethics' here stands for a socially engaging life. In this sense, the 'social' becomes constructed as highly 'ethical'.
- 3 For a relativization of such a theoretical position, see Pratt's (1998: 27–45) 'Grids of Difference'.
- 4 For a critique of such a structuralist approach on issues of spatial identity and visual consumption and a more poststructuralist reading on the topic, see Jacobs (1998: 275).

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