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## Conviviality and its others: for a plural politics of living with difference

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### ABSTRACT

Over the past 15 years, a range of scholarship exploring how people live with difference in their everyday lives has come to mark a multi-disciplinary ‘convivial turn’. This article suggests that while such work has been generative, there has been a prevalent tendency to imagine the capacity to live with difference in relatively singular terms. This article begins by unpacking two ‘major’ themes within the convivial turn: the negotiated deconstruction of bounded identities, and the cultivation of public civilities. It suggests that despite important differences, both approaches imagine the capacity to live with difference in terms of general orientations towards a generic other. The article draws out the limits of these approaches by interweaving an ethnographic exploration of relations at a community café in the London neighbourhood of Kilburn with a review of various ‘minor’ themes within the convivial turn: boundedness, care and joint commitment, opacity, and interweaving. The article argues that each of these themes, major and minor, characterises a distinctive mode of relating, each marked by its own possibilities and limits. In doing so it argues for a more plural understanding of difference and forms of togetherness, connected to a more expansive politics.



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‘The capacity to live with difference’, Stuart Hall (1993, 361) famously declared, ‘is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century’. As the twenty-first century has progressed, scholars have increasingly come to recognise, analyse, and champion the ways in which the everyday lives of ordinary people, living in diverse places, offer powerful illustrations of this capacity. This capacity has been most prominently understood as involving a process or producing a state of ‘conviviality’ (Neal et al. 2019, 70). Meanwhile, a range of similar concepts – including ‘commonplace diversity’ (Wessendorf 2014), ‘everyday multiculturalism’ (Wise and Velayutham 2009), and ‘mundane multiculturalism’ (Watson and Saha 2013) – share with ‘conviviality’ an emphasis on how difference is rendered ordinary and unproblematic within everyday worlds. This shared emphasis marks a multi-disciplinary ‘convivial turn’ (Gidley 2013; Lapina 2016; Neal et al. 2013), whose scope extends beyond use of the term ‘conviviality’ itself.

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This work is suffused with analytical and political promise, offering an affirmative, constructive model for thinking and living otherwise. Yet, I believe there is a need to extend this constructive potential, to imagine ways of living with difference in more expansive and plural terms than we have so far. In this article, I argue that prevailing approaches within the convivial turn are united by their focus on a relatively limited set of orientations, which get presented as ways of relating to difference writ large. I suggest that we end up with a much richer, more powerful understanding of how we live with difference, when we do not think of this as a singular project but as involving plural, interconnected modes of relating, each characterised by their own possibilities and limits.

To develop this argument, I focus on work exploring relations with difference in diverse, ‘Western’ societies. I start out by exploring two major themes within the convivial turn: deconstructive negotiations, and public civilities. Although these approaches differ in important ways, I also explore how they inflect one another and converge around an understanding of conviviality as entailing broad orientations towards a generic ‘other’. In the second section, I offer an ethnographically grounded challenge to these major themes, drawing on research in the London neighbourhood of Kilburn. Moving back and forth between ethnography and other literature within and sometimes beyond the convivial turn, I elaborate a series of minor themes, which both reveal the limitations of major themes and illustrate alternative modes of relating. In contrast to deconstructive negotiation, I explore the role of bounded identities in facilitating connection and transformation; in contrast to public civility, I explore relations of care and joint commitment; and in contrast to both, I look at practices of attending to opacities. Finally, I also highlight the labour involved in weaving different modes of relating together. In the conclusion, I build on these contrasts and continuities to unpack the limits of singular understandings of the capacity to live with difference, and trace some of the analytical and political implications of taking plurality seriously.

## 1. Major themes

Scholars have frequently surveyed the wide-ranging, often contrasting meanings attached to conviviality (Lapina 2016; Nowicka and Vertovec 2014; Samanani 2022, Wise and Noble 2016). Here, rather than attempting to systematically map these meanings, I focus on two particularly influential approaches. Sarah Neal and her collaborators (Neal et al. 2018, 23) argue that ‘Early twenty-first century discussions of conviviality emphasised the ways in which multicultural populations, over time, negotiated processes of living together’, while more recent approaches ‘have associated the concept with “thin” civilities between disconnected, diverse but proximate populations’. This distinction provides a useful heuristic, pointing to recurrent themes in a range of prominent work. Here, I unpack prevailing perspectives within each side of this distinction.

### 1.1. Deconstructive negotiation

Neal et al. gesture toward a plural understanding of negotiation when speaking about ‘processes’ of living together. Nonetheless, the work they present as emblematic of this approach – particularly that of Paul Gilroy, Les Back, and Ash Amin – has tended to

imagine processes of negotiation as leading in a relatively singular direction: towards the deconstruction or transcendence of fixed identities. From this perspective, living with difference, or within environments that are open and inclusive, is understood as cultivating a (reflexive and/or habituated) understanding that identities are contingent, fluid, and dynamic, rather than given, bounded, and stable. Some scholars adopt this perspective explicitly – such as Valluvan (2016, 207) who describes conviviality as ‘a deconstructive practice of interaction’, or Lamont and Aksartova (2002, 18) who argue that ordinary cosmopolitanisms support a process ‘where the elimination of social boundaries begins with the deconstruction of symbolic ones’. Others suggest it more implicitly. For instance, Neal et al. (2018) position ‘reflexivity’ as a key component of convivial relations, thus privileging a capacity to step beyond taken-for-granted identities. Whether stated explicitly or implicitly, this deconstructive perspective represents a major theme across the convivial turn.

This perspective is apparent in Gerd Baumann’s early, landmark study of Southall, London (1996). Baumann contrasts a ‘dominant’ discourse of bounded cultural groups, with a ‘demotic’ discourse of malleable communities. Baumann stresses that he does not ‘call one discourse true and the other false’ (11), instead of exploring how different discourses emerge and circulate within different structural and interactional contexts. He attributes the continuing dominance of bounded ideas of culture to the incentives and pressures of a multicultural policy regime, which requires minorities to present themselves as members of authentic and distinct cultures, while he associates the latter discourse with everyday interactions and mixing. He thus argues that absent state-driven ‘competition predicated on ethnic or religious ... criteria ... Southallians’ definition of culture might well come to parallel anthropologists’ definitions of culture’, as something fluid, contingent, and performative (197; for Baumann’s elaboration of this anthropological definition, 11–13).

Paul Gilroy places an even greater emphasis on deconstruction. Gilroy defines conviviality as ‘the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life’ (2004, xi). Continuing an argument developed by Les Back (1996) and others, Gilroy contrasts ‘multiculture’ with ‘multiculturalism’. Whereas ‘multiculturalism’ describes a world of distinct cultural groups, ‘multiculture’ imagines both culture and difference as fluid and dynamic. Convivial relations, Gilroy argues, enact a ‘negative dialectic’ between the fluid logic of multicultural, and the fixed, hierarchical logic of racial difference. Both are present, even intertwined, within everyday life, and there can be no ‘positive resolution of the dialectical tension between racism and multicultural’ (Back and Sinha 2016, 523). Nonetheless, convivial relations cultivate ‘emancipatory possibilities’ (Gilroy 2004, 161), and point to the ‘means of racism’s overcoming’ (2006b, 40), by nurturing forms of understanding, feeling, and belonging that exceed and undermine of the logic of racism. Thus, for Gilroy, convivial relations are ‘alive’ with a ‘radical openness that [...] makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification.’ (2004, xi).

Often with a particular focus on urban environments, Ash Amin (2008; 2012) has likewise emphasised a logic of excess that works to challenges bounded notions of difference. Amin explores how urban public spaces, as well as different modes of relating to others – ranging from collaboration to fleeting encounter – can inculcate ‘a promise of plenitude’

(Amin 2008, 22), or a sense of ‘situated surplus’ (11) within everyday life. As citizens become habituated towards a sense of open-ended possibility, they develop an embodied resistance to the notion that difference is somehow threatening or diminishing. This opens up the possibility of a radically different politics, which moves away from considering political and social claims in terms of specific identities and fixed positions, and toward a more fluid ‘reign of excess’, the politics of ‘perpetual bringing into play’ (Amin and Thrift 2013, 107, quoting Rancière 2006).

These processes of deconstruction or transcendence are framed as meta-practices. They are presented not as practices for shaping specific, bounded identities, or as distinctive ways of being in the world, but as orientations towards continually reworking identity and being, in relation to a diverse and shifting environment. Nonetheless, they are also understood as enacting significant transformations, shaping new sorts of subjects, defined by fluidity and dynamism, who stand in opposition to any *strong* sense of otherness. The overarching orientations which emerge from such practices have thus been widely associated with feelings of ease, openness, and fluency in relation to difference, writ large. For instance, Ash Amin describes conviviality as a ‘vernacular’ of being ‘at ease with difference’ (2013, 5). Paul Gilroy describes conviviality as a pattern of mixing where differences ‘do not ... add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication’ (2006b, 40). And Les Back and Shamser Sinha describe conviviality as a situation where ‘racial differences become ordinary, banal, unremarkable and sometimes mundane to the point of boredom’ (2016, 522). They also identify the ‘capacity to listen to, read and be surprised by [a] complex cultural landscape’ (523) as a crucial convivial ‘tool’. These approaches acknowledge that fixed notions of identity, feelings of discomfort, processes of closure, and moments of disfluency form part of convivial landscapes. However, they identify the *political potential* of convivial relations – the thing that gives conviviality its connective or transformative force – as particularly associated with the cultivated capacity to step beyond given and bounded identities.

## 1.2. Civility

In contrast to this emphasis on negotiation, Neal et al. (2018) point to a further body of work which emphasises thinner civilities. This approach can likewise be unpacked to identify an underlying logic – where the capacity to live with difference is grounded in maintaining a distinction between public and private relations. Notably, the majority of research within the convivial turn has focused on public and semi-public settings – such as parks, cafés, festivals, sports clubs, youth centres, markets, or relatively open community groups. Such settings are defined by being widely accessible and by more fleeting or casual relations between erstwhile strangers. My intention here, however, is not simply to highlight the contexts in which conviviality is often investigated. Rather, I suggest that many understandings of conviviality also rely on a more fundamental *conceptual* distinction between the public and the private.

In contrast to deconstructive approaches, many scholars have approached the capacity to live with difference not as something which demands or generates, significant transformations in identity or subjecthood, but as a more minimal orientation. Several scholars have explicitly conceptualised the capacity to live with others as mediated by forms of ‘civility’, or public codes of conduct, that both guide specific interactions, and

demonstrate a broad ‘regard for the effects of[...] actions on others and[...] care for the space(s) we share’ (Fyfe et al. 2006, 855; see also Boyd 2006; Sennett 1977, 2013; Wessendorf 2014). Others have explored or championed an ethic of indifference as the foundation of convivial relations (e.g. Bailey 1996; Jensen and Gidley 2016; Tonkiss 2003; van Leeuwen 2015). Meanwhile, Tillman Heil and his collaborators (Heil 2015; 2020; Nowicka and Heil 2015; Meissner and Heil 2020) have argued for an understanding of conviviality as a ‘minimal consensus’ or ‘minimal sociality’.

The first two perspectives here are relatively explicit about understanding civility or indifference in relation to a public-private distinction. Yet all three are united by an understanding that convivial relations largely leave differences intact – imagining conviviality as ‘living with *maintained* difference’ (Heil 2020, 275, emphasis in original). For this to be the case, the dispositions and interactions which reproduce forms of meaningful difference, must be understood as more robust than, and relatively separate from, those which mediate everyday encounters. All three approaches ground the capacity to live with difference in shared orientations, while positioning these orientations as playing a relatively minimal role within wider social universes – where there is much else that varies. These approaches do not necessarily reproduce identical geographies of public and private. For instance, Heil (2020) explores convivial relations in the ‘open spaces’ of household courtyards and living rooms, in the Senegalese region of Casamance, while in Hackney, London, Wessendorf (2014) highlights spaces such as streets, markets, and cafés. Nonetheless, this perspective divides the world into spheres where convivial orientations are cultivated and used to navigate differences and spheres where differences are reproduced. In this case, the *political potential* of convivial relations is understood as a product of the conjunction of public practices with the separation of public and private spheres – allowing differences to be maintained.

### 1.3. Commonalities

Despite the important differences between these dominant approaches, there are also meaningful overlaps. Firstly, each perspective appears as a minor theme within the other. Approaches which focus on ‘thin’ civilities and the maintenance of difference, nonetheless often discuss processes of working through differences in public. Such negotiations incorporate a deconstructive dimension, insofar as they entail people taking reflexive or relativising stances towards their own embodied difference, or being reoriented by unfamiliar affects, in order to connect with others. Likewise, approaches centred on more transformative forms of deconstructive negotiation retain a public orientation insofar as they focus on collective experience as the primary catalyst of such transformations. In emphasising deeper transformations, such work often traces a wider range of sites where subjects are shaped – from neighbourly relations (Back 1996; 2009) to private workplaces or groups of dedicated hobbyists (Amin 2012). Nonetheless, such approaches tend to hold to the notion that ‘it is those areas of common or shared ground [...] in which bounded notions of race and culture may dissolve – or at least be downgraded as *the* line of differentiation’ (Neal et al. 2018, 24).

More significantly, however, both approaches understand conviviality as a relatively *generic* orientation toward relatively *generic* others. Scholars have emphasised both the potential and the need for convivial practices to attend to specific inequalities, shaped

by categories such as race, class, and gender. Nonetheless, the capacity to live with difference has largely been understood as grounded in general orientations which enable people to navigate all sorts of differences. Some scholars list a (relatively finite) number of encompassing orientations. Back and Sinha (2016) name five convivial ‘tools’ including an ‘attentiveness to the life of multicultural’ (523), ‘a capacity for worldliness beyond local confines’ (525), and an ‘intolerance of intolerance’ that entails ‘resisting the pleasures of hating or laying blame at the door of the new stranger’ (526). Valluvan (2016, 211) names ‘a stance towards difference as non-intrusive’ as *the* crucial convivial disposition, facilitating ‘fluent interaction across putative lines of difference’ (207). Heil names ‘interaction, translation, and negotiation as the basic practices of conviviality’ (2020, 274) – and so on. Even those who do not list specific orientations, however – alongside those who do – often discuss conviviality as a way of relating to ‘strangers’ or ‘others’, or of navigating ‘difference’ or ‘diversity’, writ large. Some even put explicit emphasis on this generalising move. Thus, for instance, Amin (2012) explores a variety of different modes of connection – in a way that seems to chime with the more plural approach I call for below. Nonetheless, his emphasis is consistently on the capacity of specific relations to generate orientations that exceed this specificity. For example, in discussing how trust might emerge through creative and practical collaborations, Amin emphasises an understanding of trust that is ‘not reducible to the quality of social ties’ (2012, 37) but which provides a more general orientation towards the figure of ‘the knowledgeable stranger’ (50). Ultimately, these framings approach both difference, and the capacity to live with difference, in relatively broad, undifferentiated terms.

## 2. Minor variations

Magdalena Nowicka (2020) has recently issued a sharp challenge to convivial-turn scholarship for reproducing several assumptions grounded in a ‘western social imaginary’. Scholars of conviviality, she argues, often uncritically treat ‘diversity’ as a generalised (i.e. undifferentiated) state, presume universal human competencies in navigating difference, reproduce public-private divides and approach society as composed of autonomous individuals in interaction. Nowicka’s characterisation resonates strongly with the dominant themes I have explored so far – highlighting their particularity. Yet, there are also a number of important (if often neglected) minor themes within the convivial turn that are not easily reducible to this ‘Western’ imaginary. Here, I explore four minor themes – boundaries, care and joint commitment, opacity and interweaving – in relation to further bodies of literature as well as my own ethnographic research. As with the major themes explored above, each of these are best understood as *particular* modes of relating, characterised by distinct possibilities and limits. In drawing out these minor themes, my intent is not to offer an alternative singular formulation of conviviality – to attempt to elevate the minor to the major – but to insist that we must understand the capacity to live with difference as something decidedly plural.

For 16 months, between 2014 and 2015, I lived and worked in the London neighbourhood of Kilburn. Kilburn teems with difference. Doreen Massey (1991, 28) once wrote that, ‘it is (or ought to be) impossible even to begin thinking about Kilburn High road without bringing into play half the world and a considerable amount of British imperialist history’. Although I chose Kilburn as an ostensibly ‘superdiverse’ (Vertovec 2007)



neighbourhood, shaped by global entanglements, I was interested in developing a perspective on everyday relations which did not presume in advance what the relevant terms of difference were, but which looked towards everyday life to ask what sorts of differences made a difference (Bateson 1972). Then, only in the second instance, I interrogated how such differences shaped local understandings and practices of belonging, and sociality. From early in, it was apparent that locals held widely varying understandings as to what constituted ‘meaningful’ difference and drew on diverse practices for navigating these.

The plurality that I discovered was closely related to my methods. I not only drew on a range of methods – from participant observation to community mapping – but also endeavoured to connect with people across different situated positions. My interlocutors ranged from committed community activists, to frustrated young people who felt fundamentally shaped by the neighbourhood but who couldn’t wait to get out, to residents leading highly mobile, connected lives with minimal attachment to the area. Long-term, daily fieldwork allowed me to connect with residents beyond open public spaces, to get to know personal biographies, and to witness intimate relations, providing a wider range of contrasting perspectives. I also made a deliberate effort to play an active role in local organisations, informal contestations, and everyday lives, taking the view that everyday life cannot be understood without committedly taking part (and an ethical stake) in the many forms of everyday labour that work to maintain or transform the world (Lenhard and Samanani 2019; and see Samanani, 2022 for greater detail on methods and their implications). I take inspiration from this multiply-sited plurality. Here, however, I look only at a single site in order to explore plurality not simply as emerging across places, but as something more fundamental, emerging from the relational constitution of place itself (Massey 1994).

Every Friday at 11, on the Caldwell estate,<sup>1</sup> in a bright but shabby church hall, an improvised community café sprang to life immediately after a mothers-and-babies group. The order of the day was cheap and cheerful. Volunteers – myself among them – cooked up toasties and soup, jacket potatoes, stews, or chips, while others took charge of childcare, entertaining and corralling their young charges in a makeshift play area, so that the adults in attendance – largely mothers – could enjoy a break from parenting duties. Here, more than anywhere else on the estate Kilburn’s diversity was on full display. At one table mothers from Ethiopia and Eritrea chatted animatedly in Tigrinya and Amharic, at another a group of Filipino women – some with their own children and others working as nannies – traded gossip. Women in hijabs and niqabs, hailing from across the world, bonded over shared faith, while parents from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh discussed overlapping experiences of being ‘Asian’ to British eyes. People largely kept to familiar groups, but the shared exigencies of parenting – sudden tears, a squabble over a toy, story time or a group game, a familiar sense of exhaustion – and the café’s bustling atmosphere could also spark new exchanges and even new friendships. Emma, who ran the centre alongside her husband Jacob, would tell me stories. Of the Caribbean woman who would book their hall each year for birthday parties, which grew increasingly diverse as she built new friendships through the café. Of the two close friends starting school – one white-British one black-British – who, when their parents brought them to the café in their new uniforms appeared genuinely distressed, convinced that their matching uniforms would make them totally



indistinguishable. Of Christian baptisms attended by Muslims, and of mothers experimenting with parenting tips, gleaned from different cultural repertoires.

The café was an unquestionably convivial space – one which illustrated both major themes traced in the previous section. Tuned into the rhythm of the space, parents routinely and comfortably bridged differences in small, everyday ways. Such interactions reflected a publicly-oriented civility, which also enabled the maintenance of difference. Meanwhile, a more transformative ‘deconstructive pattern of interaction’ played out overtime, as repeated interactions could not only forge new friendships – but new constellations of identity and belonging, as illustrated by Emma’s stories. Yet these were not the only sorts of stories that played out at the café.

### 2.1. Boundaries

During my time as a volunteer, I met Klara, a German mother in her 30s, married to a Congolese man. The first time I met her, I spent much of the conversation flustered and blushing. Among the café’s regulars I was one of the few men around. While my presence as an ethnographer elicited curiosity, my gender made me genuinely conspicuous – and a regular target of jokes. That afternoon, Klara’s friends had invited me to join their table, but when talk turned to parenting, and when I confessed to not having children myself, a game quickly developed. As conversation bounced from diaper mishaps, to childbirth, to sex, to attractive men and ‘useless’ husbands, members of the group would trade glances, or fix me with grins or mock-stares, playfully testing to see what might faze me. Over time, I witnessed other male visitors encounter similar treatment.

In both subtle and overt ways, attendees continually positioned the café as a mothers’ space. Yet this bounding also played a key role in facilitating new understandings. When Klara and her husband had kids, they agreed that she would stay home to raise them – informed by different cultural ‘traditions’ but converging on the belief that this was the best option. Now, with both children at school, she was growing restless and was hoping to return to work, but was unsure how to discuss this with her husband, or how to reconcile this with her understanding of what it meant to be a good mother. Over a string of lunchtime chats, Klara worked through these dilemmas bit by bit. One of her closest friends, Jenny, from a mixed Caribbean and African background, spoke about the weight and challenges of inheriting different ‘traditional’ expectations – cracking irreverent jokes, but also showing appreciation for what ‘tradition’ could offer. Other mothers shared their own experiences of grappling with the meanings of motherhood and family, exploring and inflecting but never fully discarding these categories. Towards the end of my time in Kilburn, Klara had come to a conclusion and had begun to apply for jobs, confident that this choice made sense within both her and her husband’s understandings of family and parenthood.

For Klara, the varied perspectives shared by her friends became legible and compelling because she was able to parse these through familiar, personally compelling categories such as ‘motherhood’ or ‘tradition’. More generally, presuming a shared maternal identity helped attune attendees of the café towards possible overlaps in experience and understanding – characterised by statements like ‘you know what they’re like at that age’, or ‘how do you deal with yours?’ Such statements, alongside knowing glances, helping hands, and winking, gendered humour, helped spark initial connections, but

also kept participants oriented towards one another over time. These connections and transformations, big and small, were facilitated by taking certain bounded identities for granted – by assuming mothers knew what they were doing if they handled someone else's child, that jokes and glances indexed shared knowledge, that discussions of family, tradition, or motherhood all referred to more or less the same thing.

Despite the major theme of deconstruction, boundedness forms an important minor theme within the convivial turn. In his influential ethnography of two South London neighbourhoods Back (1996) describes 'neighbourhood nationalism', as an important frame for cultivating multiculturalism. The mediating role of attachments to specific places is likewise emphasised by Karner and Parker (2011) and Neal et al. (2018). Ethnographically, though not analytically, the latter also note the importance of a shared sense of 'traditional values' (34) in bringing together Oadby's older white residents and Asian newcomers – while ostensibly excluding younger, white working-class youth, who are presented as failing to embody such values. In Casamance, Heil (2020) notes how practices of greeting, hospitality, negotiation and gathering among different religious and ethnic groups are grounded in and reinforce distinctive regional and Senegalese identities and histories. In Singapore, Wise and Velayutham (2014, 419) discuss how the ability to navigate difference is grounded in specific knowledge of 'cultural and religious norms and practices' of the country's three primary 'racial' groups, alongside a shared 'overlaying "Singaporeanness"'. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Bell (2016) explores the possibilities for decolonial conviviality through shared participation in Māori tikanga (traditional protocols of belief and practice). And in Overing's much-cited but rarely unpacked work on Amazonian conviviality, the capacity for bridging differences is derived from, and works to sustain, a distinctive indigenous cosmology and mode of social organisation (2003; Overing and Passes 2002).

In all these instances, boundaries are generative, playing a crucial role in facilitating convivial connections. Yet, even when boundaries are downplayed, they are never wholly escapable. Deconstructive approaches attempt to move beyond reified notions of identity by privileging meta-practices – overarching orientations towards the very notions of identity and difference that render these fluid and unstable. Yet in this regard they continue a distinctively liberal, universalist tradition of thought. The liberal political tradition is grounded in the search for universal qualities and frameworks – such as rationality or secularism, respectively – capable of mediating political relations between diverse citizens (Tronto 1993). Critics have frequently scrutinised how such 'universal' images of humanity or of political life inevitably privilege certain subjects over others. In this regard, anthropologists have analysed the ways in which the post-modern championing of deconstruction, reflexivity and fluidity extends this liberal tradition, challenging 'the Other's right to a distinctive *raison d'être*' (Alvi 2020, 158; Povinelli 2002; 2011). While champions of fluidity may defend the right to maintain distinctive forms of belief, knowledge and practice, their insistence on recognising these ways of being as contingent necessarily constricts the ways in which they can be inhabited. As Talal Asad (2003, 15) asks pointedly: 'What practical options are opened up or closed by the notion that the world has no significant binary features, that it is, on the contrary, divided into overlapping, fragmented cultures, hybrid selves, continuously dissolving and emerging social states?'

One useful illustration of these different ‘practical options’ comes from Wise and Velayutham (2014) who contrast Singapore and Sydney. They suggest that in Singapore, the categorical framing of difference enables ‘more conscious forms of religious and cultural recognition’ (424), facilitating more substantial forms of understanding and support between neighbours. This same framing, however, does less to cultivate a more general acceptance of difference, beyond dominant ‘racial’ groups. Meanwhile in Sydney, they suggest that ‘the sheer scale of diversity’ (424) fosters a general sense of openness. This generic orientation, however, can be less effective in challenging certain specific discourses of non-belonging, meaning that negative characterisations of difference can re-emerge in ‘in situations of conflict or tension’ (424). In a similar way, at the Caldwell’s community café, certain relationships rely on reproducing certain distinctions, such as those of gender or between ‘tradition’ and modernity. The relatively naturalised status of these categories facilitates short-term connections as well as longer-term transformations, where mothers collectively work through weighty questions of how to inhabit the world – and, in the process, transform categories such as motherhood or tradition *from within*. In this regard, what varies is the relative salience of boundaries across various modes of relating. Deconstructive orientations may de-emphasise boundedness, but in doing so they offer a specific – not a universal – template for relating; other orientations may put different emphasis on boundaries to open up different possibilities.

## 2.2. Care and joint commitment

Those relationships involving processes of transformation over time, point to a second minor theme, that of ‘care’ and joint commitment. Not long after I began volunteering at the café, in the relative lull after most people had left and the tables had been cleared away, Emma introduced me to Nazreen, who trained as an architect in Syria, qualifying just before war forced her and her newborn daughter to flee as refugees. Gradually, through conversations over lunch, or as they each kept a half-eye on the playing children, Emma got to know Nazreen’s story: of arriving in the UK; of struggling to learn English and map her future while navigating the asylum process and raising a young child; and of struggling with despondency. Language barriers made conversation halting and slow, but talking face to face helped Emma grasp both how much Nazreen was struggling, and the dignity she held onto – her sense of what she could do, what she wanted to do. Later Emma told me that she had invited Nazreen to help her redesign the centre’s main hall, which had grown rundown and was ill-suited for its shifting uses. She recalled Nazreen’s animated response, and the sophisticated, thoughtful designs she produced, even as they still struggled to converse.

In elaborating his understanding of conviviality as a ‘minimal consensus’ Heil (2020) identifies ‘translation’ as a key practice for convivial life. However, Heil approaches translation as a practice oriented towards “‘knowing just enough’ of each other’ (291). Emma’s relationship with Nazreen illustrates a different approach to translation – one which does not assume meaning can be fully translated (Gal 2015) or selves rendered transparent (Young 1990), but which nonetheless strives to form deep interpersonal understandings. In this process, Emma and Nazreen attempt to navigate not only linguistic barriers, but the weight and rupture of Nazreen’s experience as a refugee. In afternoons at the café, Nazreen was very much a part of the general sense of convivial ease which presided,

interacting comfortably with others. Yet her sense of loss and stasis, her frustrations with the asylum and welfare system, and her desire to reclaim a sense of self-worth all came out only in much more intimate, slow and committed interactions with Emma.

In contrast to an emphasis on public civilities, this commitment can be understood in terms of an ethic of care and joint commitment. Annmarie Mol and her colleagues define care as a practice of ‘persistent tinkering in a world full of complex ambivalence and shifting tensions’ (Mol et al., 2010, p. 14). Rather than assuming that others, or their experiences and challenges, can be apprehended in a straightforward way, practices of care involve an ongoing attentiveness, that generate situated forms of responsiveness, commitment and skill (cf. Tronto 1993; Sevenhuijsen 1998). This orientation flows from, and further cultivates a recognition of interdependency, where the possibilities of life unfold through reliance on (both human and non-human) others, who are similarly reliant themselves. Consequently, care produces what the philosopher Margaret Gilbert (2015) calls ‘joint commitments’. Joint commitments emerge when one’s capacity to navigate the world is co-dependent on this same capacity within others – and so where practices of attending to the self are inextricably also practices of attending to others, and vice versa. For Gilbert, joint commitments are the basic ‘stuff’ of social life. Yet this view of sociality also challenges any notion that subjects can meaningfully precede their relating. Thin civilities may facilitate inclusion in the public sphere and guarantee a private right to differ but they also avoid this more personal politics, whereby both subjecthood and sociality are collectively remade.

For Emma and Nazreen, the cultivation of joint commitments can be seen through shifts in both women’s lives. Nazreen’s relationship with Emma provided a chance to re-inhabit, and re-inflect a former, valued self in a new context, disrupting the protracted condition of waiting that so often characterises the migrant and refugee experience (Pardy 2020). Meanwhile, for Emma, the relationship helped transform her sense of vocation and community. Alongside the community café, Emma and her husband Jacob ran a bustling schedule of offerings at their church centre, providing everything from debt advice, to parenting groups, to fitness classes for elders. Yet, Emma was often driven by a desire to serve – to do things *for* others. In later conversations, Emma would talk about how Nazreen taught her that building personal connections could be a mutually-transformative process, making it possible to think and act *with* others, instead.

Such relations of care and joint commitment form another minor theme throughout the convivial turn. In their research on ways of living with difference in Leeds, Valentine and Sadgrove (2014) emphasise the importance of tracing how encounters and relations with others impact upon entangled processes of subject-formation across personal biographies. Amanda Wise (2016), Greg Noble (2009) and Ben Rogaly (2020) stress the deeper solidarities and commitments that can emerge through shared experiences of inequality and labour. Others have challenged the public/private dichotomy prevalent within the convivial turn, while highlighting the distinctive relations that emerge from close, sustained interactions in contexts such as homes (Tyler 2020) and schools (Vincent et al. 2018). And Yasmin Gunaratnam (2013) provides a powerful account of later life care among migrants in the UK, revealing the importance of careful, situated attentiveness in enabling carers to navigate various forms of difference. Taking account of everyday practices of care and the cultivation of joint commitments allow us to recognise forms of conviviality, even within a ‘western’ context, that challenge

assumptions of a public/private divide, and a concomitant ideology of autonomous individuals. These practices reveal the political potential of committed, highly situated ways of knowing others and of thick forms of interdependency.

### 2.3. Opacity

Earlier, I highlighted how the major themes of deconstruction and civility within the convivial turn both address themselves towards a generic other. The discussion of boundaries, above, has already attempted to highlight some of the particularity and limits characterising these supposedly encompassing orientations. These limits become even more apparent when we consider a third minor theme – opacity.

One afternoon, as we were tidying up after the café, Emma offered to introduce me to Selam, who had come to Kilburn from Eritrea, along with her son Dawit. A small, wide-eyed six-year-old, Dawit had recently been expelled from school for hitting a teacher, and Emma was struggling to figure out how best to help. Since arriving from Eritrea, Selam found herself having to navigate codes and systems that she struggled to master: the English language, asylum, housing, and now, school. Selam and Emma knew Dawit as a quiet, caring child, but they also knew he had moments where he became unresponsive or uncontrollable. Perplexed themselves, they had hoped Dawit's teachers could help shed light on what triggered these moments. By the time he was in year one, however, his teachers had settled into treating him primarily as a disruption, sending him back to the nursery class whenever he acted out. This helped manage his mood but hindered his learning, making each return to his regular class increasingly fraught.

The school had discussed involving a mental health professional, but did little to progress this. Meanwhile, they made some progress by separating Dawit from a particular teacher who seemed especially prone to triggering his outbursts – until some careless scheduling brought Dawit and this teacher back together, leading to the incident which got him expelled. The school then closed ranks, laying the blame on Dawit. In a local authority where black students face rates of school exclusion several times that of their white peers, the incident seemed to reflect an institutional pattern. Emma and Selam were left to contest the process alone, going through the difficult, disorienting work of obtaining records, assessing support plans against actual provision, appealing to school governors, and exploring alternative schools – all the while with Selam anxiously questioning whether any of this was really worth it, whether more involvement with the school system would just lead to more hurt and unfairness.

Emma once admitted to me that she suspected that Dawit had a mental health disorder, and that she would like to see him and Selam meet with a counselor. When she and I later spoke with Selam, however, Selam was sceptical and standoffish. The unfamiliarity of the British school system and the medical vocabulary of mental health, coupled with her trying experience thus far, had clearly left her wary. Despite her personal conviction, Emma listened carefully, and did not insist. When Selam angrily declared that she – not some professional – knew Dawit best, Emma echoed this sentiment back, clearly moved. At the same time, Selam began to entertain the suggestion – recognising Emma's suggestion that if nothing else, having a counselor involved could help demonstrate that the school had failed its duty of care.

The impasse between Emma and Selam, and its partial resolution, can be seen as a moment of relating across, and ultimately through opacities. Emma's vocabulary of mental health is unfamiliar, even frightening to Selam, just as Selam's embodied anxiety was not fully apprehensible to Emma. Both seem to recognise they understand one another – and are understood – in some ways but not in others. Rather than trying to overcome these gaps, they act in response to them, each placing tentative trust in the other's partly-inaccessible perspective.

In recent years, indigenous leaders and scholars have explored practices of 'refusal', as ways of insisting on their own opacity or non-participation in certain relations, but also as a generative break that can open up new possibilities (Simpson 2014, 2017). Likewise, indigenous thinkers have called for 'an ethic of incommensurability', as a way of resisting attempts to understand or feel at ease with others that can easily reinforce ongoing forms of injustice and absolve dominant groups of guilt. (Tuck and Yang 2012). In a similar vein, scholars exploring conviviality in post-colonial contexts have taken up Édouard Glissant's notion of 'opacity', as an important corrective (Bystrom 2020; Steiner 2021). Meanwhile, Gidley (2013, 368) identifies the multiplying of 'parallel perspectives, often utterly incommensurate' as an inevitable result of diversification in London – recognising that such perspectives can only ever be partly translated. These approaches collectively identify forms of illegibility as part of the human condition – where personal subjectivity is never wholly accessible –, as products of diversification, as outcomes of colonial and post-colonial ruptures, and as emerging from situated efforts to inhabit or transform the world, on particular terms. At the same time, they recognise how moments of asserted or everyday illegibility can enact moral and political claims, and thus generate new forms of connection.

Within the major themes of deconstructive negotiation and public civility, differences which are not easily translatable, accessible, or commensurate with a more generally open world view, appear, at best, to lack potential for generating convivial relations. They may be part of a landscape of difference, where one feels comfortable and at home, but they are also not likely to contribute to cultivating a sense of fluidity, openness, commonality or plenitude, or to facilitate public interactions. Yet as Gidley (2013) demonstrates, what qualifies as an incomprehensible or incommensurable difference will vary from perspective to perspective. Insofar as convivial politics revolve around what a range of differently-situated actors can engage in common, the sorts of political possibilities it generates are likely to remain much narrower and more fragmentary than they otherwise could be. The recognition of opacity as a political and moral stance, however, offers a way of pursuing collective political projects which incorporate incommensurable differences without requiring incommensurability to be overcome. Opacity can cultivate understanding and connection without commonality – nor, indeed legibility, ease, or a sense of surplus potential – by insisting on difference as something disjunctive and irreducible, in order to interrupt and reconfigure patterns of relation.

#### **2.4. Interweaving**

Out of the lively and varied schedule of events and services at the church hall, Emma once described the café to me as their most important offering. At the time, in the midst of a national programme of austerity in the UK, which involved deep cuts to local services



and the household budgets of the poorest, Emma and Jacob were providing a range of support services. They ran a debt advice service, helped people navigate welfare claims, provided classes and support for new parents, and even supported residents in navigating immensely tricky situations such as the involvement of partners in organised crime. The two of them had a clear sense of both the value and necessity of this support, which made Emma's statement at about the café all the more surprising. Yet she explained to me that she believed that the café, and the sorts of relations it produced, made all their other work possible.

Emma illustrated this in relation to the debt advice they offered – where debt could often be a stressful issue, surrounded by stigma and frustration. Debt was hard to discuss, and harder to be honest about. This meant that most debt-advice services struggled to attract clients, and tended to dispense more generic advice, which often felt ill-fitting. In contrast, Emma once told me that 'you find once you have a connection and trust with people, they became more open to you helping with the critical problems in their life'. She went on to explain that this sense of trust was a collective accomplishment – made possible by how the café wove different relations together, to create the sense of a safe, welcoming space. People could sit alone, or mingle casually, they could forge relationships of friendship or care, they turned to Emma and Jacob with their hopes and dilemmas but also to one another. These different ways of relating at the café inflected one another, creating a broader sense of trust.

Emma recalled a conversation she had with the director of another charity, who had been impressed with their success in helping locals tackle debt. Many of the people Emma and Jacob worked with – poor minorities, sometimes with limited English or insecure legal status – were seen both as the priority targets for such services, and as the hardest to reach. The director had wanted to learn what they were doing right. As Emma explained her philosophy of building relations, however, she saw the other woman grow increasingly frustrated, until she finally snapped: 'We can't possibly compete with you! ... the problem is it's not a job to you lot, is it?' Recalling the conversation to me, Emma remarked: 'I think that's huge because that's really true. I don't get paid. I get a living stipend that allows me to be here and do what I do, but that's very different, isn't it?'

Where state policy and other support services addressed residents of the Caldwell through demographic boxes that framed them as poor, precarious, or minorities, Emma and Jacob created a space where people were able to collaboratively cultivate other modes of address. These alternative possibilities were often characterised by multiple, distinctive modes of relating, which inflected and enriched one another. Relations at the café came to spill over and inflect other contexts – so that café patrons could go from interacting with friends to feeling more comfortable around strangers, or from jolly, intimate conversations in public to sharing personal tribulations with Emma in private. This spilling over could help cultivate general orientations of openness and ease towards difference, writ-large. Arguably, however, the strongest connections and transformations cultivated at the café emerged not as general orientations but as new *situated* possibilities. Experiences at the café enabled people to open up to Emma *in particular* about debt; to feel at ease around a *particular* group of strangers or within a *particular* atmosphere; to rework identities and values in relation to *specific* biographies. Importantly, both these general and specific capacities add something to the capacity



to live with difference: they transform lives and build connections in distinct and consequential ways. And both capacities are expanded by the work done to weave together different relational possibilities – to stage openness *in relation* to care, to leave space for opacity *within* support, to enfold transformation *within* familiar identities, and so on – meaning that even general orientations incorporate a specific, situated dimension. This work was done actively by Emma, Jacob, the volunteers and their patrons to varying degrees, and more passively by the workings of shared space, a welcoming atmosphere and certain bounded categories.

### 3. For a plural politics of togetherness

The convivial turn took shape at over a period where ‘public and policy debate’ in many diversifying democracies was dominated by ‘notions of ethnic segregation, cultural withdrawal, and multicultural crisis’ (Neal et al. 2013, 319). Simultaneously, scholars were beginning to feel confined by ‘a tradition of scholarship on race and ethnicity that has always taken friction and racism as the problem and starting point, and the reproduction of relations of social power as the end point’ (Wise and Noble 2016, 425). Where both these perspectives, in different ways, saw intergroup tensions as inevitable, scholars sought to counter this pessimism by giving the ‘creative and intuitive capacity among ordinary people, who manage those tensions, some sort of significance.’ (Gilroy 2006a, 6). Many were also drawn towards notions of conviviality out of a further dissatisfaction with the concept of multiculturalism. Critics challenged the image of bounded cultural groups, implied by multiculturalism, both for contributing to the reproduction of ethnic or racial hierarchies and for offering an increasingly untenable model of identity under conditions of globalisation and late-modern fluidity (Lash and Featherstone 2001). Instead, they turned towards notions of ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2007) or multiculturalism, to reimagine difference not as a matter of specific intergroup relations but as a more general social state, where differences blended, blurred, multiplied, and shifted across the terrain of everyday life.

The convivial turn is best understood as a situated response to these particular scholarly dilemmas, trends, and social conditions. Although the concept has been applied worldwide, its use remains most prominently grounded in ‘western’ (i.e. minority-world anglophone and West-European) contexts – and, as Nowicka (2020) notes, often tacitly relies on a ‘western social imaginary’. Here, I have tried to flesh out this critique in relation to major themes within the convivial turn, while also exploring a range of minor themes that reach beyond this social imaginary.

That certain ways of relating have been relegated to the status of minor themes – such as the situated working through of meaning, under the surface of established categories, or processes of care and joint commitment – is perhaps no surprise. I have highlighted how dominant approaches to imagining conviviality, despite their important differences, emphasise general orientations towards a generic other. Of course, generalisation remains the bread and butter of social science. Yet, as feminist scholars have long highlighted (Haraway 1988) the process of generalisation necessarily obscures and diminishes the value and political potential of more situated ways of knowing. In this regard, the move towards generalisation is never simply analytical, but also normative.

Within the convivial turn, the generalised approach to understanding both difference and the capacity to live with difference derives its analytical and normative importance in relation to a specific intellectual and political background. Accounts of the everyday capacity to live with difference, writ large, offered a powerful rejoinder to entrenched narratives which held migrants and minorities responsible for social breakdown, and to teleological theories which critiqued such narratives but struggled to identify constructive alternatives. Yet in doing so, much of the scholarship across the convivial turn has addressed itself to the question of *whether* it is possible to live with difference – offering a forceful affirmative answer, but at the same time reaffirming the salience of this implicitly pessimistic question in framing our agendas.

Zooming back in enables us to shift the frame and advance the conversation – putting focus on the question of *how best* to live together, while nonetheless continuing to refute those who associate difference with social breakdown or who treat the reproduction of inequality as inevitable. This further question, however, only comes into focus when we attend to a plurality of different modes of relating, each marked by their own distinctive possibilities and limits. These possibilities are irreducible to, and have often been obscured by, the more dominant ways in which conviviality has been characterised. For instance, it becomes harder to recognise the value of thick, situated relations of care within Heil's framing of conviviality as 'minimal consensus', or to recognise the force of ethically compelling opacity within Amin's emphasis on plenitude and ease. Although these characterisations of conviviality can be productive, we ought not to take them – or any other mode of relating – as exhaustively defining the political project of living with difference.

Several important implications follow from recognising this plurality. The first is that every mode of relating has its others. Every vision of conviviality incorporates a particular theory of what selfhood and connection are or ought to be. There will always be those who cannot easily embody such modes of relating, or who feel that their sense of self or cherished values are diminished by doing so. Taking this seriously requires a move away from theorising universalising models of conviviality towards exploring how different capacities to live with difference might be productively cultivated and expanded from within particular, situated ways of being.

Secondly, then, we need to pay much more attention to the distinct possibilities and limits within different modes of relating. Here, I have tried to illustrate some of these distinctive affordances: I have shown how bounded identities are caught up with issues of gender equality and intercultural intimacy in far-from-straightforward ways; how relations of care and joint commitment can challenge the protracted waitness of an immigration system oriented towards hostility; how the opacities and uncertainties of migration and institutional racism can generate new ethical commitments through moments of impasse. But the major and minor themes I have surveyed here illustrate only a few possible ways in which convivial relations might take shape. Different modes of relating are tied to distinct notions of justice and the good life, which demand further attention. What, for instance, are the possibilities for decolonial justice, cross-cutting solidarity, or ecological responsibility embedded in different relations? Exploring these specific potentials, I would suggest, will prove more intellectually and politically generative than simply describing or theorising the capacity to live with difference, writ large.

Third, as I have again highlighted, we must likewise be attentive to how different modes of relating do or do not hold together – recognising the work of weaving-together or holding-apart as part of how the possibilities of togetherness are cultivated and contested.

Fourth, this then emphasises the importance of place – understood as an uneven geography of intersecting relations and flows (Massey 1995). The possibilities associated with the community café I described emerged through such intersections: its rhythms, materiality and atmosphere; its clientele, their experiences, needs, and hopes; and, especially, its intentional cultivation by Emma and Jacob as a thicker social resource. As Berg et al. (2019, 2738) note, studies of conviviality frequently reify neighbourhood character, ‘whereby communities are assigned characteristics of conviviality, cohesion, or hostility in a way that obscures the multiplicity of possibilities within an area at a smaller scale’. There is a greater need to attend to the unevenness of convivial geographies, plural publics, and the more-situated possibilities of particular places.

Fifth, all this creates a conceptual challenge. ‘Conviviality’ works well to name a fertile field of inquiry, but poses challenges in its current usage as an analytical term. Fraught with contradictory interpretations (Samanani 2022), the concept nonetheless retains an ostensible singularity that suggests that different discussions of ‘conviviality’ are somehow about the same thing. This risks continually re-orienting analysis towards higher levels of generality, impeding our ability to interrogate more specific possibilities, and how these are patterned.

Difference is always relational – it entails a form of non-equivalence within the context of particular relationships. Forms of difference emerge within relations of power – such as those between states, or nativist narratives, and migrant or racialised populations – but they also do so across everyday life, in countless, endlessly shifting ways. Difference, in this sense, is an inescapable facet of the world and is deeply generative – of friendship, conflict, creativity, care, opacity, and countless other possibilities. Rather than asking whether we can live with difference, we would do well to explore questions of what we might become, together.

## Note

1. Proper names have been anonymized. I borrow the name of ‘the Caldwell’ from Zadie Smith’s novel *NW*, which is also set in North-West London.

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