How English Am I?

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How English am I?[1]

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Introduction

> I see myself as British, um because, even though I was born here, society has shown me, has led me to believe that I'm British. Not that I'm *English*, that I'm British. The way that I look at it, just because of what I've seen, just through working, going to school and working in, you know, in England, you *are* British, you're not English. English people are white, that's how we see English people, they're white.
> (Dawn, emphasis Dawn's)

> .. if I said English, I think I'd feel very pedantic about it. I would be saying, you know, I live in this country, but in this bit of the country. [....] I mean, my mother-in-law gets so sort of, I mean, I can understand her wanting to keep her identity, especially in a place like Scotland which gets swamped by central power and the government and everything, or has done in the past. I can see that one can become very sensitive about it. But it does irritate me slightly because a part of me thinks, well, yes, okay, I can see that you've got to have your identity like any kind of minority, this is really important, that you're heard and you're understood and you're not trampled over and taxed too much and all this kind of thing. But you know, come on. Can't we just all be British, and do we even have to be that? You know, really. Isn't it all just a waste of time really?
> (Deborah)

These two extracts show different experiences of national identity. For Deborah, a white middle-class woman, national identity is an issue of minor importance and occasional irritation caused particularly by the minority and secessionist claims of those in the 'Celtic fringe'. 'Race' is not at issue for Deborah, because there is an underlying assumption that all concerned are white. However, for Dawn, a black woman, born in England whose parents came from the Caribbean, national identity and 'race' are inextricable. To be English means you are white, at least in Dawn's experience, and to be black in England means that how you

[1]This title is adapted from the title of an article by James Donald, which is in turn an adaptation of the title of the novel *How German is it?* By Walder Abish (Donald 1993).

define yourself is at least partially dictated by others, by "society".[2] These two accounts clearly illustrate the ways in which the content of identity, such as national identity, is determined by the positionality of the individuals engaged in constructing the identity and how identities can also be imposed upon – or denied to – an individual or group.

These experiences illustrate the contested and racialised nature of national identity and belonging to a imagined collectivity. The contrast between Deborah and Dawn's responses to the question of national identity point to the different significance of claiming a national identity in different contexts. What for a middle-class white woman is a minor irritation may, for a working-class Black woman, be a highly charged political issue. National identity is one modality through which 'race', class and gender are constructed. Therefore to be positioned or to position oneself as English has different implications according to how one is raced, classed or gendered. Englishness can act, like whiteness, as an unacknowledged norm or position of privilege which structures identity and experience. While there are few public discourses which explicitly focus on whiteness, in contrast national identity and belonging (and therefore also exclusion) are widely debated in Britain, as I shall discuss below.[3]

But what does it mean to position oneself within a national community? How does one imagine one's self to be part of a larger collectivity? National identity involves much more than the simple possession of a passport or residence in a particular place. It involves ways of being, a sense of place and belonging, myth-making and narrative construction. Homi K. Bhabha describes the western nation as:

> an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the *locality* of culture [...] a form of living that is more complex than 'community'; more symbolic than 'society'; more connotative than 'country'; less patriotic than *patrie*; more rhetorical than the reason of state; more mythological than ideology; less homogeneous than hegemony; less centred than the citizen; more collective than 'the subject'; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural references and identifications - gender, race or class - than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism. (Bhabha 1990, p292).

[2] See (Phoenix 1995, p30) and (Ifekwunigwe 1999, p85) for similar findings.
[3] For whiteness as unacknowledged norm or privilege, see (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1995).

Bhabha is concerned with how the nation and 'the people' are narrated in western culture. This paper is concerned with how nation-ness is imagined, but also how it is lived. It is based on qualitative interviews with white women living in South London who all had young children. The semi-structured interviews covered a range of topics concerned with race, class and gender but largely focusing on the women's experiences of being mothers.[4] However, I also raised questions about their attitudes to national identity and in this paper, I want to ask: How can we understand the ways in which the complexity and collectivity of the national is understood by the interviewees? What processes of subjection are involved in the construction of selfhood which is tied in with nationality? Through what forms of living is nationhood lived? How is the self imagined in relation to others - both those within the nation and outside of it? Who is not English, who is more English, who is less English? Is it possible to construct spaces outside of nationness?

There is no simple relationship between Englishness and citizenship or holding a passport (particularly as the passport in fact attests that the holder is a 'British subject'). Englishness is not a legal status, but an construction of belonging, an ethnicity. This, however, is sometimes difficult for the English to acknowledge as Catherine Hall points out: "In England, the recognition that Englishness is an ethnicity, just like any other, demands a decentring of the English imagination. For ethnicities have been constructed as belonging to 'others', not to the norm which is English" (Hall 1992, p205). Nations, therefore, are based on insecure and ambivalent imaginings that are undergoing continuous transition and mutation.

The interviews undertaken for this research took place at a time when debates about nationhood and the meaning of Britishness and Englishness were particularly alive. In the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a flood of books on the origins of Britain and or England.[5] In the immediate context of the interviews (conducted between June 1997-March 1998), the new Blair Labour government had just come into power in an election in which national identity had played a prominent role. The Conservative Party was riven by debates about Europe with the ascendant voices those who believed in the need to protect 'British

[4] For a full description of the fieldwork see (Byrne, 2001)

sovereignty' against the threat of Europe. The 'New Labour' government had the devolution of both Scotland and Wales in its manifesto. As it came into power, the government was keen to promote the idea that 'new' Labour was associated with a new view of Britain, as modern and chic. There was an attempt to 'rebrand' Britain as 'Cool Britannia'. The Union Jack was reclaimed from the Far Right as pop stars sported it on their clothes or guitars, 'brit pop' was born and with it the idea that Britain could be 'hip'. Yet there had also been a re-signifying of the St George Cross with the Euro '96 Football Cup based in Britain. This was marked by a resurgence of fans sporting the flag of England - the St George's Cross (rather than simply wearing the Union Jack and ignoring its Scottish and Welsh elements). John Gabriel discusses the media representation of this football championship and "its significant role in the confirmation and reworking of English national identities" (Gabriel 1998).[6] Gabriel points out how the championship was staged as a battle and took place while the Conservative government was struggling with the European Union over the banning of beef: "The scene was set for the media to frame both the football championships and the beef war as twin European battlefronts" (ibid., p26). The death of Diana and the popular response to this in ways which were deemed 'unBritish' or 'unEnglish' also prompted discussions of whether Englishness or Britishness was changing. There were challenges to notions of the restraint and reserve of the English as crowds flocked to places of mourning with flowers and candles and their response was compared with popular Argentinean expressions of grief at the death of Eva Peron. Were the English/British becoming 'Latin'? These debates were accompanied with press coverage that strove to emphasise the multi-racial nature of the public mourning, in particular with many close-ups and interviews with Asian and Black members of the crowd. Presented as the quintessential English princess at the time of her wedding, Diana was being repackaged as a representative of multiculturalism in Britain as she died. These events were not necessarily mentioned in the interviews but they nonetheless provide one backdrop to the discussions, which show the different positionalities adopted by white women in response to considerations of national identity.

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[5]See for example (Cohen 1994; Colley 1992; Colls and Dodd 1986; Crick 1991; Jones 1998; Kearney 1991; Nairn 1981; Paxman 1998; Wright 1985).

[6] This analysis would need to be updated in the summer of 2002 with the interplay of displays of the Union Jack and St George's Cross which resulted from the conjunction of England playing in the World Cup and the Queen's Jubilee.

Individuals who negotiate with the idea of nation in their own identifications, are also constantly imagining and figuring the collective - what it is and how it relates to them. This is an ongoing and uncertain process. Bhabha's constant repetition of 'more than' in the quotation above powerfully suggests the over-reaching ambitions of national narration. Nation is 'more than' but perhaps 'never quite' as well. For Bhabha, in the narration of the nation, and in particular the construction of 'the people', there is an ambivalence and doubling – a split between the pedagogical and the performative.

> We then have a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in a double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process. The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects.
> (Bhabha 1990, p297).

This paper examines different ways in which national identity was constructed by the interviewees. It shows some of the tensions in living in the gap between the pedagogical and the performative. It also shows how this doubling effect is experienced as gendered and classed as well as raced. Ambivalence may be experienced as loss, or the threat of loss and this can be both classed and raced. In addition, for the women interviewed, the 'scraps, patches, and rags of daily life' are often lived through the rhythms of and concerns of the domestic which may or may not be available to be turned into the 'signs of national culture'.

England's Green and Pleasant Land

I will start with the two women who saw national identity, and in particular Englishness, as a particularly positive identity to hold. For both Emma and Heather, to different extents, Englishness is about myths of history, of civility and honour. Their England is rooted in the past and in particular class and gender relations. Both realise that the place in which they live, and the ways they live, are very different from their imagined England and they

experience this difference with a sense of loss, although again to differing extents. This loss is expressed as hostility to those seen as threatening this image of England. The boundary markers of Englishness here are in one case 'Britishness' and in the other America. Whilst 'race' clearly plays into both these frameworks, class is also central to both their accounts of Englishness. To some extent, for both Heather and Emma, the loss they feel about the perceived changes in Englishness is mirrored by a loss in their own class position. Both women came from middle- or upper-class provincial families. Emma was in her late 20s and Heather in her early 30s. A change in material and social status had occurred for Heather at an early age following the death of her father. In contrast Emma's loss of social status came with marriage to a man who was perceived as working-class by both herself and her family, despite his professional status, and it also involved living in what she regarded as an undesirable area. For these women, to a certain extent, diagnosis of the state of the nation provides a route for articulating personal experiences and concerns. Collective identity and individual subjectivity intersect at this point.

Emma

> BB: So I'm trying to look at what is understood by being English or being British. I mean, if you were asked to put your nationality on forms, what do you put?
> Emma: Um, English. Yes, it's about being English rather than being British I think. [...] But I'm actually very proud of being English. It's interesting though, because you know this thing about the gypsies.[7] That's been a point of conversation with lots of people really. And, you know that thing of them coming into, it feels like an invasion to some people, and it's mostly to do with money. They're thinking, you know, all this money is being spent when there's not enough, you know they're not giving students enough money, they're not giving the NHS enough money. My purse was stolen from my workplace last week and the woman who stole it was on police bail and she's now in Holloway. And for her to be in Holloway for a year is the same as sending someone to Eton for a year. And she wasn't English, she was Portuguese. But I guess because of this new European thing, you don't just push her back to Portugal. But I don't know really how it works. I was sort of saying to my husband, you know 'what about the money and everything' and he was saying 'yes but they're people and they've been harassed, they've been maltreated'. So it's very difficult, but I think that when you're struggling, when the nation is struggling, it sort of gets annoying

[7]This reference to 'the gypsies' is prompted by reports in the newspapers in the week of the interview about Roma asylum seekers fleeing discrimination in Eastern Europe - or coming as 'economic migrants' and seeking benefit payments, depending on which interpretation was followed.

> when people that you might consider as foreign, when perhaps it's not politically correct to call them foreign.

Emma has a strong desire *not* to be 'British'. The idea of nationhood and belonging is something that clearly exercises Emma. She uses a rhetoric familiar from the tabloid (and other) press and media. Nonetheless, her statement "I'm actually quite proud of being English" suggests that she has an awareness of a discourse which might see this as an unusual or even objectionable position to take. Yet when Emma thinks of her pride at being English a racialised other is immediately called to mind and the supposed threats posed by 'aliens' or foreigners, who she associates with crime and the unfair burden they place on English taxpayers. To imagine Englishness seems almost impossible for Emma without also summoning up the abject - those excluded from the category who at once threaten Englishness, yet also are crucial to defining what it is. The cost of imprisoning a 'foreign' pickpocket can then be contrasted with that of producing the epitome of upper-class Englishness, the Etonian schoolboy.

At the same time, Emma is aware that what she is saying is contentious. She does not say that she *herself* sees the arrival of the 'gypsies' as an invasion, but that this is what it 'feels like' to 'some people'. She also worries whether it is 'politically correct' to call people 'foreign' particularly when they might have been harassed and maltreated. Here the liberal values of justice and sanctuary, ascribed to her husband, are competing with her sense of threat from foreigners. Emma also evokes a powerful sense of 'we' the nation struggling financially in the face of external threats. Her personal experience is read through the nation's experience: "when you're struggling, when the nation is struggling".

Englishness is represented by upper-middle-class manners and traditions: "Well, I sort of consider English and things sort of like *Howard's End* and that kind of thing. And I think there's something, I mean I know it's 200 years ago or whatever, but I think there's something wonderful about all that." Emma is aware that her idealisation is based on a fictionalised account. She emphasises this by exaggerating how long ago the books were written. Nonetheless at one time it did almost have a lived reality for her. For Emma, Englishness is a romantic and nostalgic vision which is in the past in two senses. Firstly because it is based on

a representation from a novel, a fictional world rather than a reality. And secondly because, in terms of her own life, it represents something that is in the past, set in her childhood. Emma describes her childhood, particularly at boarding school as having fitted in with this proposed idyll of manners and civility:

> And perhaps I'm being swept away on a story, and perhaps it's because I spent seven years of my life in a church, all girls' boarding school. And spent my time singing hymns and going to church and it's very special thing to be patriotic. And you know, going to balls and always being treated very nicely by boys. Who actually on the one hand weren't treating you very nicely, but they'd always hold the door open for you and always pay for your taxi. So it's kind of weird really. But there's something that I'd hate to lose over that. and I think, for me, because where I come from that's about being English.

Emma has had something approximating this novelised experience. She describes seven years of processes of subjection, producing classed, gendered and racialised identifications which are wrapped up in a sense of nation. Being patriotic, something that holds special value for her, is also associated with particular performances of gender: "you know, going to balls and always being treated very nicely by boys." However Emma immediately complicates this experience. Although it is "a special thing to be patriotic", in this specifically classed context, there is also the suggestion of disturbing gendered power relations. The boys were not "treating you very nicely", yet Emma suggests that she was compelled to accept it and keep silent as the boys continued to hold open the door and pay for the taxi. The complex interplay of gender, nation and class are encapsulated in this contradiction. Nevertheless, despite the ambiguities, for Emma, there remains "something that I'd hate to lose over that".

Nonetheless, this world is far from the reality of Emma's life in an unfashionable and relatively deprived part of London. Her mother disapproved of her choice of husband and told Emma that, as far as she was concerned they no longer shared the same class status:

> My mother once said to me "Oh Emma, you're working-class now" and I know that that's something that she'd look down on, something she'd prefer not to be. And in fact, I know that I'm not working-class, I'm probably don't have class. Or if anything I'm middle-class.

So, for Emma, Englishness is framed by nostalgia and a sense of loss. Loss because it never actually existed in the first place and because what she had of it was tied to a particular class position and social life which she feels she no longer has. This loss is expressed in her hostility to things British which represent the opposite of her rural middle-class English idyll which is constantly described as
being under threat. If, following Paul Gilroy (1992), we read ‘culture’ as ‘race’, the threat is also to the whiteness of England:

> Emma: Living in London is much more about culture, about different cultures. And it’s really, it’s very stimulating. I guess, I mean I would like to live in New York and I would like that kind of thing, but I’d never want to destroy England and its grassy plains [laugh]. But where I suppose British means what we are now with all our multi-cultural mix, with all our, Ireland and Scotland and all of that kind of stuff. And I mean, there’s been so many things that have happened to try and destroy England. All the problems with the monarchy and all of that kind of stuff and it’s all kind of sour, or it feels sour. I’d put that under the bracket of British [big laugh]
> BB: Which under the bracket of British?
> Emma: all that nastiness [laugh]
> BB: That’s your dumping ground!
> Emma: The dumping ground.

The contrast here is clear. England is a rural place of “grassy plains” with order, hierarchy and tradition as represented by the monarchy. It is also suggested to be a ‘pure’ ethnicity which is threatened with destruction by “all our multicultural mix” which is represented by Britishness. Britishness, according to Emma, had disrupted the order of England and turned things “nasty” and “sour”. By associating Britishness with all the things that she is uncomfortable with, Emma is able to preserve Englishness as a ‘pure’ white and middle-class concept, headed by the unsullied monarchy. In talking about the area in which she lives, which she describes as ‘probably more black than white’, Emma communicates a sense of pollution:

> I mean, there are not many parts of Peckham that I’d live in. ... and we live here because this house was very cheap. And it’s a nice road, vaguely... lots of light ... um. But I wouldn’t go shopping in some of the shops. Have you walked round here at all? ... if you go round the back there are some, in the market place you get all this halal meat and all sorts of stuff. I wouldn’t touch that with a barge pole. Not because

> it's different, or because of anything. But just because I think it smells funny. They're not, they're probably not very educated black people. Because otherwise they would have got out. Because everyone's trying to get out really. Everyone's trying to move on. It's not like having a little village shop in the country, it's not as quaint as that. I don't think people want necessarily to be doing it.

Emma's versions of Englishness and Britishness are stereotyped and lived mostly in her imagination. Englishness is somehow truly what England should be - refined, rural, white and middle-class (albeit with troubling gender relations), whilst Britishness is a category which can absorb all that disturbs this notion and which disturbs Emma herself. This makes it all the more clear for her that the multiracial scenes she witnesses on the streets in which she live are 'alien' and certainly not 'English'. This contrast, between Englishness and Britishness is finally represented by the juxtaposition of the local halal butcher and "a little village shop in the country". The latter is "quaint" in contrast to the unsettling market shops which "smell funny". The threat that Emma perceives is profound and is here expressed as a threat to the domestic. How can she reproduce Englishness if she has to negotiate these alien shops and foodstuffs?

Emma's frequent laughter at what she is saying reveals a certain nervousness about the subject, or recognition that her particular constructions of Englishness and Britishness may be seen as ridiculous or objectionable. She followed the previous quotation with an uncertain question to me "But do you know what I am [saying]?" She also recognises that her own life does not live up to the Englishness of her imagination, or her past, and that this is not something that her daughters will necessarily grow up with. Englishness is almost dead and buried in the following account:

> Emma: I guess they'll [her children] grow up British won't they? Probably. Because that's what we live in now. I mean that's not a bad thing really. [...] if one of them was to grow up to become an artist, I couldn't ask for more, or a painter, or a politician, I see that as quite interesting. And I'd love them to have the same sense of English culture that I have. But I can't give that to them because I no longer live in those circles really.
> BB: So it is quite class-bound, that sense of English?
> Emma: I think it is, but I'm sure it's just in my mind. ...yeah...

Englishness for Emma is about a way of being, a certain "form of living" in Bhabha's phrase which she cannot reproduce for her daughters. The performative can never match the pedagogical accounts of the nation, particularly when class intervenes. They will inevitably be different from her. For Emma, Englishness and Britishness seem to be mutually incompatible. Emma reflects on her daughter's identity "if she has that [Britishness] and doesn't have Englishness, well then one of the two. Perhaps you can't perhaps - I had both and therefore fall between two stoolls." Whilst she does not say so explicitly, it would seem clear that for Emma, Englishness and blackness are mutually incompatible. Furthermore, Englishness (and forms of class and gender relations which are imagined as part of this idea of nation) cannot survive in the face of 'multi-cultural' Britain. Emma's anxieties about national identity appear to be a means to express anxiety about her own sense of self. The narratives of her self and of Englishness are interwoven.

Heather

Heather does not share with Emma such a clear distinction between British and English. Her rendition of the two identities is perhaps more complex and sophisticated. She says she would put British on a form asking her nationality, but this does not express exactly how she feels. It remains an empty category which she uses because that is what feels more acceptable:

> [I would put 'British' on a form] probably because I am trying to be politically correct. I would say I am absolutely English. You know, I am not Scottish or Irish. They are very different. Very different. there is no point in pretending that I am other than Southern English. I am quintessentially English in a lot of those things but I would be British because I would feel that that was a politically correct thing to do.

There is an ambiguity in Heather's feelings towards the category 'British'. Whilst it may be the 'politically correct' position to take, it nonetheless involves hiding her 'quintessential' Englishness. Britishness is not an identification that Heather feels emotionally. One cannot be 'quintessentially' British. This has no meaning for her as an identity of deep-rooted belonging. Nonetheless, in the interview, Heather refers to things English and British interchangeably and generally meaning 'English'. She has a strong sense of her British/English identity

which, like Emma, involves harking back to distant and not so distant pasts and is also illustrated by contrasting it to cultural and racial others. Heather is interested in what she calls "earlier British history" of the Middle Ages and the Tudors and Stuarts. She is less interested in "getting into Victoria and the Empire". This may be a means of side-stepping some of the more difficult and contentious aspects of British history. Being British is rooted in the domestic and everyday, for example in drinking tea. Heather joked: "My mother always says, you know, that she is sure I cannot really be British because I don't like tea." Britishness is also represented by:

> classic British costume drama series, things like that as well as things like stuff like *The Good Life* that when I was young, was on telly and I used to really enjoy, and was quintessentially British and, you know, and *Monty Python* again could never have come from another country. It is very British humour.

Heather's reference to the G*ood Life* as being 'quintessentially British' is a good example of 'British' used to mean 'English'. This situation comedy was based on the cultural clash produced in the encounters between suburban neighbours living two different forms of middle-class white Englishness. It is hard to think of a more characteristically white, English and middle-class programme. Heather contrasts this British humour to that of black adolescents and Germans who she says both have very different senses of humour. Thus, in this account, 'foreignness' and blackness provide boundaries or points of demarcation to Britishness.

Although Heather does not share Emma's dislike and distrust of 'Britishness', she also worries about the break up of Britain. Britain is threatened from without and within. Englishness is an empty or unmarked cultural category that can only be sustained by the culture of others. Heritage here (as we shall see again later in the paper) is something that only others have:

> Heather: we are trying to say that we are altogether as one country and devolution slightly worries me in some sense but in other senses I think that devolution is a very good idea because they are culturally again quite different. They have their own identity and there is very strong sense of their heritage. And this is what I wonder

about, that we then become four very, very tiny and very insignificant countries whereas together somehow together we have a little bit more strength.
BB: Strength vis-à-vis ...?
Heather: Strength vis-à-vis relationship to the rest of the European countries. To America. I think that England in particular falls prey to just becoming, you know, an island state off America if we are not careful. Whereas if we cling onto Scotland, Ireland, Wales they have a much stronger sense of what their cultural heritage is. They fight for it far more fiercely. And that means they are never going to let themselves get dragged into the whole kind of American system and hopefully that would mean that we would then, you know, unite with them to fight more closely for what things are English and British.

Whilst on the one hand stressing the importance of their cultural difference, at the same time the peoples of Scotland, Ireland and Wales are treated as an unruly 'Celtic fringe' - undifferentiated and unexplained, represented only by a vague 'they' as in: "they are culturally quite different" or "they are never going to let themselves get dragged into the whole kind of American system". Thus England, and Britain which remain synonymous in this account are represented as culturally weak, diminished, and threatened entities which need protection. However, some of this diminution, Heather believes was inevitable and to the good. Britain has had to withdraw from the "ridiculous idea of Empire" and change its view of its position in the world:

I feel we have had far too inflated a view of our own importance within the world markets and political groups and that maybe has been changed and now actually we are becoming more aware that we are a very, very small country that is not that economically well-off. And that maybe we need to try and be a little bit more careful about how we proceed with things. I think that is a good thing. I think we had a very inflated idea of our own importance which was left over from Victoria. So I suppose that *has* changed, and that's meant that we've changed culture.

The evaluation in the extract above was in response to a direct question about how British identity has changed. She responded to this solely in terms of Britain's view of itself in the global context. Britain had been forced in effect to face up to its own lack of size and importance. She saw this change emerging only in the last thirty years, despite references to Queen Victoria. It is interesting that Heather does not consider how Britain itself may have changed, particularly in terms of the social, economic and cultural impact of migration from the former empire. In another part of the interview, Heather shows that she is however

sensitive to claims for cultural difference to be respected and that British culture is characterised by its whiteness which excludes some others.

> You know, there are on the surface - you can say yes, everything's fine and yes, it's great. It is not an issue for me, but, to say it is not an issue for me is not fair because it is an issue for a lot of different racial groups because of the way other members of society treat them. So it is not really fair to say if everyone was like me it would be fine because it would not, because they have things they want from society. They want their cultural heritage recognised, they want that reflected in their children and quite rightly so, so you just say okay, that's fine, let's all be white Europeans. That is not what the people want. I would not want to move to an African country and have everybody ignore what my cultural past was.

Yet at the same time as acknowledging the need for accommodation and change, Heather is suggesting an equivalence between black people in Britain and how she would feel as a white person in 'an African country'. There is little sense of the impact of colonialism, racism and differential power relations in this analogy. Interestingly she also introduces at this point another form of identification that of 'white Europeans' which seems to be a strategy for avoiding qualifying English or British with the prefix 'white'. Africa again emerges in this account as the ultimate form of difference or otherness.

Heather and Emma both have an image of Englishness that they are unable to achieve. Their lived experience falls short of their imagining. Englishness is maintained as white and middle-class, but as such is unlikely to survive. It is threatened by those outside, by others figured, in the case of Emma, as the pollution of the urban, and in the case of Heather, as the economic, social and political domination of America.

Empty Englishness

> But I think I was brought up *really* looking at things through white eyes. I think it was quite, in some ways it was quite a racist kind of up-bringing. There was a *lot of* suspicion, a lot of, in a way, yeah, there was kind of outright derogatory remarks. And it was very much seen as something which was *totally* alien to us. We were really *white* English, you know in terms of our food and everything I think […]
> There was just this feeling that there wasn't really anything else. I don't think we were particularly patriotic, if you see what I mean, in our family. But I don't think there was

> any kind of open-mindedness. Or *any* questioning of the fact that people had really racist views. Or any questioning of the fact that the media might present people in a certain way. There was none of that. So in a way, I suppose what I'm saying is that I feel that I grew up until the age of 18 in this vacuum of 'it just was what it was'. There wasn't any sort of...it was more ignorance rather than sort of an aggressive racism. But in terms of the whole British thing, I suppose I just wasn't aware that there was anything else. I was, that's just how we were. […] It was almost like a bit of a vacuum like that.
> (Jane).

In contrast to a defence of Englishness, Jane in the above extract describes an Englishness that is at once closed and narrow-minded and at the same time empty and lacking, a 'vacuum'. This was a theme that emerged in different ways in several accounts. For Beverley, being patriotic also suggests a closed and narrow outlook:

> Yeah, my husband, he's a bit more patriotic, I think. He is, you know, he is English or British. He would *never* go abroad, as in America, *none of that* interests him. He says, you know, there's no point. Whereas I would be a bit adventurous like that. But he's still very, he's very patriotic, John is. But then […] he doesn't sit there preaching saying [to his son] 'you shouldn't go here, you shouldn't go there because you're British'. He's just, John is that way, you know? And because he's been brought up in South London, he thinks South London is the world [laugh], you know! Full stop, type of thing. Yeah, he is very patriotic in that way. Yes I would be a bit more adventurous. I don't think 'oh I'm English, I shouldn't , I don't sort of think like that. I think you should be adventurous, you should dabble kind of thing, you know?

So here, 'patriotic' Englishness is presented as something that is closed off from, and even in fear of, difference. In contrast with other countries and cultures, Englishness is both 'unadventurous' and dull or empty. Whereas for Heather in the above section, much of what she says about Englishness or Britishness is placed in a defensive relationship to the United States, for others, Englishness was defined by its contrast with continental European countries. Thus national identities and Englishness in particular are shown to be fluid and dynamic concepts, the content of which varies according to the boundaries which are drawn around it. Helen, a woman in her early 30s, had an elaborated view of identity and cultural difference. For Helen, difference was marked more by cultural norms and the domestic than global power relations. Whilst she has a sense that 'English' cultural practices have more or less disappeared, this is not so associated with a sense of loss. Helen remembers herself as a child being fascinated with cultural differences on school trips to France and Germany.

French toilets and different ways of eating marked out the Englishness of some of her family's habits and rituals. But Helen now doubts that there is so much that is distinctively English about the way she now lives. What she has to pass on to her children was different from the Englishness that she experienced as a child. Most importantly, it is an attitude that difference is not something to be alarmed by, as it had been for her:

> One of the first things, was French toilets, it's all changed now but, first of all the ones which were just holes in the ground, which just..., you know really freaked you out when you were 11 and you went on a school trip. And I remember the ones in Paris which turned upside down, which we have now. And I remember thinking this is really really odd. And also the way the French ate their meals, one plate that the meat comes on then the vegetables come and just thinking this is so strange. And we were, I suppose, very, just a nuclear family, you know two parents, kids [...] We always ate round a table, we always had Sunday lunch. You know I think in the last 20 years since that was the case for me, I think England has changed a lot, but that was very English then, very sort of middle of the road, ordinary, probably no longer is. So I suppose, yes, I think I probably did, and it probably came from things like diet,... and just routines, rituals that are very English, like Sunday lunch, the way we ate, um... but they only became noticeable to me when I had something to compare them with.

The example of the toilets is an ambiguous one. At first France is portrayed as backward and then as modern and in advance of England (if toilets that turn up-side-down are taken as signifiers of modernity). This is an interesting play around difference because of the way in which hygiene, sanitation and the scatological has historically been a way of defining whiteness and marking the other.[8]

Helen suggests that her sense of Englishness, or at least the ways in which it shapes her 'form of living' is different from the experience of her parents. For Helen these changes are connected to class and locational changes as well as altered relationships with Europe. Talking of ways of living identity, of changes in domestic attitudes and arrangement becomes, for Helen, a way of marking her separation from her parents and, to a certain extent, her past. In contrast to her parents, Helen had become "more" middle-class having gone to university and having a career (unlike her mother). She had moved from Northumberland to London

[8] See Anne McClintock's (1995) analysis of Victorian adverts for soap and other cleaning products; Roger Hewitt's (1996) accounts of racist jokes and Dyer 1997, p75-6.

and was creating new modes of living for her children in a “more homogenised Europe-wide” context. It is also in a much more racially mixed context compared to the village in which she grew up:

> It’s all about travel isn’t it. People have more money, it’s easier to go abroad, you pick up different customs and ways of living that you like and then you sort of make a patchwork quilt of what appeals to you, you just sort of make it up as you go along, do your own thing, so, And anyway, how can you be, *how can Englishness survive*, say in this area where you’re surrounded by, people have brought with them all sorts of... um customs from, gosh a *huge* variety of places? And we have a lot of mixed-marriages around here as well, so you’ve got the mix of the two. (Italics added).

In the face of these new ways of being - what ‘English’ people have brought from abroad and what has been brought by those who have moved to England bring, Englishness will not survive. This statement shows a sense of Englishness that is closed, fixed and white. It cannot include new things and move on to other modes of being, but is faced with extinction. Englishness cannot survive in the face of ‘mixed marriages’. Here Englishness is constructed less as a nationality than as an ethnicity or cultural identity which is bound to be disrupted by cultural influences.

Whilst at some stages in her life, Helen felt that England clearly informed the ways she saw herself, she has a range of other collective identities to fall back on - such as those of Europe and London. In the following extract Helen describes her sense of belonging in London. This is a constructed identification, built slowly over time, once she had ‘wafted’ in to London:

> BB: So, do you think you now have quite a kind of London identity? Do you see yourself as a ... I mean, you say you’ll never move.
> Helen: It feels like home, but it’s taken a long time for that to happen. But it does feel like home.
> BB: So, why? How ...
> Helen: I know because when ... because I love going away, I love going to visit relatives in the country and ... especially in the summer when it’s hot and horrible. But when I get on that motorway to come back, I have that home tug. You can’t describe it with words, but, you know ... people feel it when they’re coming home, don’t they?
> BB: Which you don’t feel when you go near [old home town]?
> Helen: No, no, not at all.
> BB: And so does it ... why do you think it takes a long time for that to happen?

> Helen: Roots. Putting roots down, feeling comfortable and feeling that you've not just got a shifting base of friends, which is when you first start out, anybody could go anywhere 'cos ... the wind wafted you down here, you've got no commitments, it could just as easily waft you somewhere else, but after all this time, people are starting to buy places now, and a few have started to have children. Life just becomes more static, and so you know that these people are going to be around, they know you're going to be around, so it all starts to feel more homey. [...] It's about friends, it's about feeling comfortable in a place, and I mean, I moan about London, who doesn't? But then I guess you'd moan about wherever you were. If I lived in a small village, I'd moan about it being boring. I live in London, I moan about it being big and dirty and not having enough space, but, you know, that's just human nature. At the end of the day, this is where my root has grown.

Here Helen provides an interesting model of performativity, of identity is created in the 'doing'. She has become a Londoner through the repetition of both actions and identifications. Yet the metaphor of putting roots down has both genealogical and organic or natural associations, suggesting an alternative model of construction. Helen needs roots to feed her self.

The view that Englishness was empty or contentless, or that it was losing its meaning was shared by several of the interviewees. Like Helen, and unlike Heather and Emma, they did not express acute concern about this although a sense of loss remains. This sense of loss or absence is heightened in the context of other 'minority' cultures proclaiming their presence more confidently, as Rosalind explains in the following extract:

> At school, you know, they learn about lots of different cultures. In a sense, *it almost feels we haven't got one*. 'Cos they're doing the black history month this year ... at school ... and that's kind of ... I was talking to the parent who's running it and she said it's been kind of really important to her to find out about role models of ... that come from black history, that have really kind of achieved lots of things 'cos she always felt at school she got no ... she had nothing to feel proud of. So, in a sense there's ... you know, the English bit is always a bit lacking. And whether that's ... because lots of Welsh and Scottish friends I have are quite passionate about their origins. […] English is still the kind of majority way, so I suppose it's something we never have to think about. But I'm not sure what kind of amount of culture we do pass on. 'Cos I don't feel any great tradition to pass on to Anna and Joe really. I've never really thought about it, but I'm not sure you'd know how much to talk about where you come from, and who you are, because I think living in London, it is sort of quite a European ... certainly living here, there's a lot of ... we've got quite a lot of friends who live in

> mainland Europe now. And in a lot of circumstances, it's always *the English who haven't got a kind of interesting cultural thing [to] do*
> (Rosalind, emphasis added)

Liz also said she had little sense of Englishness or Britishness (terms she used interchangeably). It was only when she had spent some time in America that she got a sense of being culturally different "And I just knew I wasn't part of that culture. I was there for about two years and the longer I was there, the more of a foreigner I felt". But she expressed her cultural difference as feeling "European more than British". Nonetheless, she does recognise an albeit nebulous sense of culture "as far as feeling English, ... I mean obviously I am, in terms of values and cultural life is deeply rooted here. But it's not something that I really think about that much [laugh] you know". Liz also complicates the question of Englishness and culture by referring to her husband's Jewishness. Whilst he is English, he also has a different set of cultural resources which come from being brought up in Jewish family. In Liz's account, this Jewishness is racialised in that it is ascribed to both genes and phenotypic features. The daughter who looks most like her husband, is also the one who has inherited his 'racial memory':

> It's quite interesting, David for example is *English*, is third generation Jewish immigrant. But culturally he's got - he's not a practising Jew and neither is his family, but culturally he's quite *Jewish*. You know, he sort of believes in things like racial memory. And certainly I can see in Rachel for example, it's *very peculiar*, because she resembles him most physically in that she's got a dark appearance and an olive skin that are obviously not part of my gene heritage and you know, she's got quite an imaginative melancholic streak in her which is what her *father* has, you know. And that's a *cultural* inheritance if you like, rather than a national one.
> (Emphasis Liz's).

Jewishness is here about something other than Englishness. Although for Liz, Englishness can also contain Jewishness - her husband can be Jewish and English. This is perhaps a reflection of the different trajectories of assimilation and acceptance for Jewish and Black people. [9] Liz makes a distinction between cultural and national inheritance to distinguish between what is Jewish and what is English, but this construction leaves Englishness and her identity to be something outside of culture. When I went on to ask whether her children were

[9]See Cohen 1988.

brought up with much Jewish culture, Liz went on to detail their contact with their grandparents “who come up once a week and their grandma feeds them chicken soup [laugh]” and occasional participation in religious events and parties. She went on to explain “but they’ve never, I mean I think David will at some time, they’ve *never* really been to a synagogue, simply because *David* doesn't go to a synagogue. That part of his cultural heritage is dying out because his grandparents kept the religious observances [...] and his parents don’t do it any more and obviously we don’t do it.” It is interesting however, that when I pose a question, echoing her own use of the word “heritage” it meets with incomprehension. White, Protestant, working or middle-class Englishness does not have a ‘culture’ or a ‘heritage’ in the same way.

BB: So do they see your side of the family as well?
Liz: Yeah, yeah
BB: And is that, kind of, you know, heritage, how important is the kind of family heritage idea to you, do you think...
Liz: ... um, what do you mean by heritage?
BB: Well, I don't know, whether you have any sense of giving them a family ...
Liz: Um, I don't, it's not a term I've ever given any thought to, quite honestly. I mean if you say to me heritage, I think of national trust properties and things like that.

For Liz, heritage is something that belongs to others, to cultural others who may have Jewish or some other ‘exotic’ heritage, or to class others. Again, Englishness is bound up both with whiteness and with middle/upper classness and heritage can only be represented by stately homes and national trust properties. It is not something to which Liz has a particularly strong identification, beyond remarking, in a similar way to that used by Helen above, that she is “rooted” in this country.

Evading Englishness

The ambiguity about being English may come not so much from a feeling that it is an empty identity with little heritage or tradition to offer, but from a negative response to what is regarded as Englishness. In this construction of Englishness, there is a rejection, and perhaps an attempt to be something other than what you are. Both Les Back and Ann

Phoenix in their separate research found young people who were attempting to vacate Englishness. Les Back found that in some areas of his research: “young whites vacate whiteness and Englishness as appropriate identities in favour of an encoded identification with blackness and black people” (Back 1996, p135). This particular form of trying to find identities which are not “laced with racism” is located within a specific classed, and often gendered youth culture and is not necessarily open to all. It may also be difficult to sustain. Ann Phoenix found that “[d]iscomfort on the part of white young people could be warded off by viewing ethnicity and nationality as optional and voluntary. From this perspective, young black people were perceived as having more choice than young white people about opting into or out of Englishness” (Phoenix 1995, p35). I would argue that, for the women I interviewed, options such as ‘encoded identification with blackness and black people’ were not so available as such codes are generally rooted in youth cultures. However, some of the interviewees did express negative associations with Englishness and their own reservations about holding such an identity.

Liz’s vagueness about what Englishness contains was at least party because she feels that it is not so much an empty category, but one with negative connotations which is to be evaded or avoided. In the following extract, Liz shows how she understands Englishness to be embedded with racism (as well as possibly hypocrisy), something that she would like to distance herself from:

> Liz: No, well, Englishness, ... I do think that race is *there*, absolutely *there*. And I do think that people that say they're not conscious of it are deceiving themselves quite hugely, that's my feeling anyway.
> BB: But then that deception is quite interesting in itself
> Liz: Um [affirmative] There's a lady, um, not a million miles away from here who's a very sort of middle-class liberal [slight laugh] woman with four children. And I always remember her saying she doesn't like taking the children to the swimming pool at Brixton. And I know *perfectly* well that she doesn't like going in swimming pools with 'black' people. And she's you know, very sort of liberal and would be *absolutely* horrified if you were to sort of suggest it to her. But it's *true*! I swear it's true! [laugh] .... It's dreadful, isn't it? really appalling.
> (emphasis Liz’s).

Liz was not alone in suggesting that Englishness had a problematic positioning. Jan, a white middle-class woman who had worked as a teacher, prefers to think of herself as British rather than English. She was also very dubious about the whole endeavour of national identity "I want to be part of a United Kingdom, I suppose. You know, with Scotland, Wales and things as well, I don't just want to be .... I do have friends who *insist* that they're *English*, not just British. And it's all to do with things like English beef and I don't know. I don't know really. I don't have a very strong feeling of nationality at all to be honest". Despite the fact that Jan "can't imagine ever wanting to live anywhere else", she is suspicious of the feeling of national belonging and identification. England may not be something to be particularly proud of, or somewhere which has positive identifications for her, but it is at least familiar in contrast to unknown and potentially more unpleasant places. Yet at the same time Jan points out

> I've no really kind of national identity. I'm quite ashamed of, you know, whenever I see the Union Jack, I don't personally have any feeling of great pride, I have associations of it with, you know, I associate it with football hooligans, British beef and the royal family, really. None of whom I have any particular desire to be associated with [half laugh] really.

When I asked Jan whether her preferring to say British rather than English was an indication that there was something in the English identity that she was rejecting, she replied "I think so, yes. Just a kind of, I think I have, I think I associate English with being a class thing, I think". Jan was interested enough in the question of identity to ask her elder (eight year-old) daughter whether she thought that she was English or British. Her daughter confidently stated that she was English, to which Jan laughed.

Madeleine, in her early 30s believed that growing up with Margaret Thatcher in power framed her view of national identity "um... I've never really liked the idea of being British to be honest. It's always been a bit of a 'oh, God do I have to be? I'd really rather not'". Madeleine went on to explain:

> I think that ..um...it's obviously partly to do with having been brought up somewhere else, and having travelled quite a lot - when I was a kid and then again when I left school. And having, you know, been to other places. But I think it's also because I've been interested in other cultures and had close friends from other cultures and been

> interested in the history of other cultures. And every time you read the history of anybody else, there are the British, do you know what I mean? Enslaving people and shooting people [laugh] and it just gets to the point where you think I can't *bear* it, it's just hideous. It feels like, sometimes it feels like a weight that you carry around with you. And I know times when I've been travelling. I was in East Africa, when I was about 19 and it was when the Americans bombed Libya and they'd refuelled here. And I'd been having a really nice, I was travelling on my own and everyone had been *really* friendly. And suddenly people would stop you and say 'Are you English' or 'Are you American' and I'd have to go [putting on accent] 'No Dutch' [laugh]. Yeah because suddenly it was actually quite, I felt quite threatened, you know because people were genuinely very angry about it.

Madeleine gives a powerful description of empire, in which the British presence is ubiquitous and an oppressive force: "everytime you read the history of anybody else, there are the British .... enslaving people and shooting people." She also has, through her experience of travel, an understanding of what it might mean to occupy thoughtlessly a dominant position.

Madeleine makes little distinction between being British or English and uses the two interchangeably. She was the only interviewee to put British or Englishness in a truly global frame, rather than one which was restricted to considerations of Britain's relationship with Europe and America, or England's relationship with Scotland, Wales and Ireland. For the first time, links are made between Englishness and empire. Being English means in some sense having to bear responsibility for the collective actions of its people and politicians. This is a 'weight' to be carried around. Nonetheless it is something that cannot necessarily be avoided, even if Madeleine would "really rather not" be British. Madeleine also was one of the few to question her *own* sense of belonging - she sees identification with a nation as something that is not inevitable but which is influenced by different social and political contexts:

> I don't know this feels a bit cliched, a bit sad. But the first time I thought 'I feel really proud to be British' is when Blair got in on the first of May, [laugh] it was the first time I thought 'right I feel good now, I'm part of the country, I don't feel like an excluded majority who have no voice any more' .... although I don't know if I still feel that, but I was excited in May [laugh] [...] And you can actually read about the things that the government is doing and think 'Yes that's a good idea' I mean not as many as I'd like but it is there, which is just *amazing* really. To actually feel like you're part of a community somehow.

Madeleine's membership of Englishness is not contested, at least by others, only herself. Nonetheless, she does have a sense of being in a collectivity - she is constructing alternative identities, for instance that of the 'majority' excluded by political processes. She has also had recourse to other locational and cultural identities. Like Helen discussed above, Madeleine has a strongly urban identity which contrasts with the idyll of rural Englishness portrayed by Emma:

> Madeleine: um.... Well, I suppose I've always, I see myself as much more of a *Londoner* than *English* perhaps so I suppose I have that kind of identity.
> BB: And that's a more positive one?
> Madeleine: Yeah. In lots of ways definitely.
> BB: Because?
> Madeleine: Because, um, because although, you know London has lots of ... downsides to it, it's also, I don't know, it's lively, it's very very multicultural and you can just be part of .... I went to live in Wales for a little while and it was just like [horrified expression], it wasn't even *Welsh*, do you know what I mean, there wasn't even any *Welsh* culture there at all. Whereas I think in London people are very vocal about their cultures and what they're doing. And I'm sure people like, even more so in some of the Northern cities, you know because at heart even us Londoners are quite repressed and don't like to talk to each other. ... I like, I really like the mix of people here and I like the fact that there's different things, there's different colours and cultures and, you know, I like the fact that there's different, you know you can go and sit in Kensington gardens and then come back to Peckham. You have access to all sorts of different places, which is nice.

Whereas for Madeleine, British or English identities are loaded with negative historical associations (and interestingly Wales is, in contrast with other interviewees, not seen romantically or positively), London has more positive associations with it. Madeleine embraces the 'liveliness' and multicultural aspects of London. However it is interesting how her description is racialised and classed. Part of the liveliness of London comes from differences, the way in which it offers the experience of spaces which are classed and raced in different ways. Kensington Gardens and Peckham offer very different experiences of London life which Madeleine can move between. Yet at the same time, she is positioned as white and middle-class by this account - it is not one that a black person or working-class person could give. The ability to move as easily between Peckham and Kensington Gardens is not available to all equally. Nonetheless for Madeleine, people living in London - "us Londoners" - have a collective identity and share patterns of behaviour and attitude much like

people might talk about ‘the British’. Unlike Englishness, which in some constructions is threatened by otherness, for Madeleine, difference is contained within the category of Londoner, constructed as a positive and constitutive attribute.

Conclusion

> I think for black people who live in Britain this question of finding some way in which the white British can learn to live with us and the rest of the world is almost as important as discovering our own identity. I think they are in more trouble than we are. So we, in a curious way, have to rescue them from themselves - from their own past. We have to allow them to see that England is a quite interesting place with quite an interesting history that has bossed us around for 300 years [but] that has finished. Who are they now?
> (Stuart Hall, 1989 cited in Back 1996, p127-8).

Stuart Hall sets out a clear challenge: not only does Englishness or Britishness have to be re-imagined (particularly by the white British and white English) in relation to changing social and political contexts, but also it must be acknowledged that ‘race’ lies at the heart of Englishness. This paper has indicated some of the different ways in which England and Britain are imagined and the way national identities are felt and lived. One result of living the gap between the pedagogical and performative – between the nationalist construction of a continuous and seamless connection with the past and the recursive demands of living nation-ness in everyday life – is an uncertainty about what Englishness contains. A theme which emerges through the interviews is a sense of narrowness and/or emptiness in Englishness. This is in part perhaps a reflection of the gap created in the doubling of the pedagogical and performative. Some accounts produced classic renditions of England as a ‘green and pleasant land’ populated by historical figures and perhaps even John Major’s spinsters cycling to church around village greens. This imagining was at least partially built on juxtapositions between England and others, with Africa serving as the ultimate ‘other’. The interviews also showed the insecure basis of the imaginings. They are disrupted by urban life, by the presence of differently raced subjects and by the individuals’ own sense of a loss of class position.

There is an inflexibility in the formal narration of Englishness which makes it impossible to sustain in the everyday. The everyday, and in particular the domestic, do not necessarily provide a sense of difference to Englishness which is demanded by the nationalist rhetoric. So Englishness was experienced by some as an empty or unmarked norm which appeared to lack content in the face of what was seen as the cultural richness of other identities and forms of living. For example, Helen did not feel that she lived Englishness through her consumption of food or in the rituals of life. It was in the domestic, she suggested, that culture might have real meaning, through which 'roots' are established.

For others, Englishness was seen as a negative, rather than merely empty, identity. It was associated with class and 'race' prejudice. In this response to collective identity, all national identities were seen as potentially negative, particularly if "deep-rooted", but Britain's imperial history made it particularly unattractive and sometimes oppressive. What we see emerging in some interviews, and in particular Madeleine's account, is a rejection of pedagogical accounts of nationhood and a turn to more fluid and temporary identifications, for example as 'Londoners'. This enables difference to be embraced as a positive and integral part of a collective identity, rather than as a threat.

Through the course of the interviews, it emerged that 'narrating the nation' can be a means of narrating the self. As such, it is equally gendered, raced and classed. When Emma and Heather look back nostalgically to a 'glorious' English past, they also appear to be expressing a sense of loss in their own lives. This loss is based on sometimes contradictory classed and gendered experiences. Equally Helen's narrative of the disruption in Englishness marks a point of rupture from her family. To say Englishness is changing or fading, also marks her difference from her family. The collective is read through the individual and personal. James Donald writes of how the nation is the effect of "the apparatus of discourses, technologies and institutions (print capitalism, education, mass media, and so forth) which *produces* what is generally recognised as 'the national culture'" (Donald 1993, p167). What is interesting in these interviews is how there is relatively little mention of these public discourses and technologies. Rather, the nation is constructed and imagined through forms of living, through personal histories and everyday routines and consumption. As such, it is fluid and multiple.

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