The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few metres; the evident
division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance
which is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical
contour on the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain places - all this
seems to be neglected. ¹

Contact zones [are] social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with
each other. Often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination - like
colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today. ²

Contact Zone

Coronation Mount. A wide road dissecting a post-war council estate of boxy, pebble-dashed houses
pockmarking the moor. A bleak roundabout punctuates this arterial route. A local store and off-license
with shutters half-open; a fish and chip shop; a Chinese take-away; a battered bus stop. This scruffy
cluster of defended shops - alongside potholed roads and unkempt grass - contributes to the neglected,
unloved feel of this area. Walking away from this roundabout you approach a primary entry/exit point
into/out of Braithwaite. Zones of distinct psychic atmosphere meet. There are abrupt changes in the
moods and atmospheres of the street. Crossing West Lane - just two hundred metres up the road from
the Reservoir Tavern, the pub in which Nick Griffin was secretly filmed by a BBC documentary telling
British National Party sympathisers that the Qur’an sanctioned the drugging and raping of white girls³
- you leave behind the working class council estate. A space charged by assemblages of mini motorbikes;
offensive kids; vandalised playgrounds; boarded up houses; notorious pubs; flags bearing the cross of St
George; BNP posters adorning some windows; NF, C18, BNP - far-right graffiti etched into walls, fences,
bus stops, shop shutters operating, perhaps, as a ‘temperature chart’ for tensions in the town; neighbours
talking and smoking at adjacent front doors as they look out across the street; tales of kids hurling stones
at taxis driven by British Pakistani men as they penetrate the estate; stories and gossip about drug abuse,
about teenage pregnancy, about welfare cheats; and so much more. A space vibrating with distinct
resonances, forces and intensities as arrangements of, and connections between, bodies, things,
architecture and surroundings generate unwelcoming, diffusely intimidating moods (through the incessant
buzz of mini motorbikes, extended gazes thrown at unrecognised faces passing by, and manifest support
for the BNP) and induce frictions and tendencies to repulsion. Brown skin is abjected. White middle class
bodies steer clear. But as you cross West Lane, you traverse an invisible, but tangible frontier. Contact
zone. A fissure in the microclimates of multiculture.

Heterogeneous elements - architecture, sounds, faces, smells, language, clothes, shops, etc. - produce
intensive differences and within a few short paces the atmosphere is jarringly different. Highfields. A
South Asian area. No-go? Encounters with white faces become less frequent. And white bodies are not
only marked out in this space by conjunctions of skin and clothing, but also by their speed as they cut
through this neighbourhood on their way elsewhere. The contrast between this speed, and the slowness
of South Asian women standing in doorways, arms folded, watching over children playing in back alleys
or clusters of teenagers leaning lethargically on a wall, admiring a black Lexus parked on the other side of
the street that pulses with a deep rhythmic bass beat, produce a quite different ambiance. And raced
differences do not only surface through the relative speeds of differently raced bodies. Race emerges
continuously, but ephemerally, through conversations that fuse English, Urdu and gangsta speak; through the uncanny architecture of a mosque that used to be a Methodist chapel; through the smell of Kashmiri cooking; through the dormer windows that crown Victorian terraces and betray the extension of homes into the roof-space that seem to automatically summon Orientalist imaginaries of ‘the South Asian family’; through a halal butcher’s shop; through salwar kameez hanging on washing lines; through the beautified streetscape funded by a Single Regeneration Budget gentrification project that has stirred resentments in the town; through the noise of Urdu and Punjabi satellite television spilling out into the street; and so on. Race materialises fleetingly as stories about drug dealing, grooming, misogyny, areas ‘taken over’, bodies being abused and abjected, are summoned in encounters with street signs, a particular car, the relative slowness of South Asian bodies and so on. And so the intensities through which Highfields is encountered are shaped and modulated by gossip, lurid newspaper headlines, urban myth, biographical events, hearsay and prejudices, but also through the very materialities of the streetscape in ways that bleed into perceptions (a ‘South Asian area’), fashion judgements (‘no-go’, ‘taken over’, scary, etc) and guide action (moving out, walking briskly, taking a detour…). For some - at particular times, or under certain intensities of sunlight - connections between particular bodies, things and spaces stir swirling intensities of terror, hate, fear and loathing. For others these temporary fixings of race inspire curiosity and engagement. Then again these assemblages might constitute an affective depression, laden with routine, banality and indifference. For race also takes form in surprising and unexpected ways, disrupting - fleetingly at least - the feel of this neighbourhood. In a newsagents at the junction of Belgrave Road and Highfield Lane a white man hands a small bottle of whisky over the counter and his customer - wearing salwar kameez and a kufi cap - briskly secretes it into a hidden pocket before returning to the street; a friendly conversation between Italian and Kashmiri neighbours; the clustering of mums at the gates of a Sure Start nursery. And tracking the emergence of race through these assemblages underscores that race is never only about discourses, representations, or images, nor is it something that is simply attached to human bodies. Focussing on the emergence of race through these arrangements involves thinking about what race does in moments of encounter; how race modulates the affective registers through which bodies, things and spaces are encountered, increasing or decreasing a body’s capacity to act, to feel at home or comfortable.

Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed.

Our intention, first, is to consider the city as a field of movements; a swirl of forces and intensities, which traverse and bring into relation all kinds of actors, human and non-human, in all manner of combinations of agency. The city becomes a kind of weather system, a rapidly varying distribution of intensities.

**Encounter**

A walk. A purposeful drift. An imaginative reconstruction weaving a set of stories together. An exercise in what Marc Augé (2002) would call ethno-fiction. This narrative of passing through and feeling contact zones and the fleeting emergence of race enrolls go-along interviews, urban myth, photoethnography, interview material, participant observation, newspaper archives, gossip, walking, and philosophy to evoke something of the life, intensity and passion of multiculturalism in Keighley, West Yorkshire. It begins to animate a particular encounter with a northern mill town. An encounter that is necessarily partial. An encounter constructed through the intensely embodied practices of fieldwork (complexly marked by my body’s whiteness; its inquisitiveness; my clothes; my satchel, notebook and camera; my accent, my outsider status; the absence of obvious employment; the convivial, but often awkward and ultimately superficial ways my body related to other bodies in Keighley; etc.) and the multiple research practices I employed to encounter this space with others. This encounter was also shaped by a simultaneous encounter with a minor tradition of philosophy through Deleuze and Guattari, that provided a line of flight
from the social constructionism that dominates academic talk of race by encouraging an attentiveness to the turbulent socialities of multiculture and the emergent, momentary ways in which race takes form.

Through these encounters I developed particular modes of inhabiting, researching and animating multicultures in Keighley that play on specific understandings of space. In addition to acting as a provocation to thinking, encounters are a vital concept to my analysis of the spatialities of race and the dynamic socialities of urban multiculture. By thinking of places less as sites than ‘moments of encounter’9 multicultures can be fashioned as accumulations of ‘billions of happy and unhappy moments of encounter’ in ways that foreground the practised, emergent nature of places.10 This ontology of encounter envelops a disparate set of sensibilities. First, encounters are not confined to face-to-face interactions and face-work11 but also include encounters with things, architecture, vegetation, minerals, sounds, tastes, smells and so on. An ontology of encounter embraces what Kracauer called ‘surface level expressions’12, what Jane Bennett would recognise as the ‘force of things’13, or what for Georges Perec was the art of noticing ‘what’s happening when nothing’s happening’14, in a materialism that sorts through the mundane materialities of everyday spaces and is alive to ways in which raced affects and memories might be distributed across particular arrangements of bodies, bricks, things and settings. And the work of tracing materialisations of race focuses attention on the processes through which human bodies are sorted and sifted in interaction, but also opens possibilities for thinking about how race is also trapped in particular times and spaces, particular geographies and histories, and particular urban materialities. Second an ontology of encounter enables us to trace the affective contours, the moods and the atmospheres of urban multiculture. For me, thinking through encounters opens up spaces in which we can turn both to psychogeographical tactics of the Situationists (or more recently Iain Sinclair and film-maker Patrick Keiller) to grasp the distinct atmospheric zones, currents and vortices that constitute experiences of multiculture in Keighley, and a theoretical language developed through Deleuze and Guattari in which we can begin to understand the interplay of forces, intensities and resonances that charge spaces, generate frictions and induce tendencies to attraction or repulsion.15 Third, and finally here, an ontology of encounter emphasises the event-fulness of place. Place as always becoming. Here, I play on recent emphasis on the excessive potential of encounters16, where the promise of encounter is excess and endless novelty. These observations are crucial, but they also need to tempered with the recognition that so many encounters fall into fairly stable repetitions (of anxiety, suspicion, resentment, indifference, curiosity…). And so I emphasise that encounters are never just a point in time, but occupy a duration that prolongs the past into the present .17 And here Bergson helps us develop a concept of encounter with history, where the weight of tacit reaction, micropolitical technique, past experience and repetition come to mediate and shape perception, judgement and action in the here and now of an encounter.

Through these sensibilities an ontology of encounter enables a rigorous grasping of the hybridity and confusion of urban multicultures, and heterogeneous processes of racial differentiation on the ground. Foregrounding encounters in my storying of the contact zones that arc through Braithwaite and Highfields directs attention to the coming together and collision of multiple bodies, things, ideas and spaces through intensities of hatred, indifference, mutuality, fear, love, suspicion and excitement. And to end, I want to suggest that my encounters with these contact zones in Keighley provide momentum to at least two lines of argument.

**Race/matter**

The first line of argument calls for a materialist engagement with race. Echoing, and responding to, recent criticisms that presenting race as a social construct tends to restrict social scientific engagements with race to questions of epistemology and interpretation,18 my account of contact zones in Keighley carefully traces the material processes of racial differentiation in interaction. Constructionist accounts dwell on how we know race, in ways that distil race to a problem of language19 and narrow an empirical focus to discourses, narratives and images, at best downplaying and at worst disavowing the materialities of race.20 But by animating these contact zones in Keighley I constantly try to move beyond questions of interpretation by focussing on more practical questions of what Deleuze and Guattari call experimentality that ask: What does race do? How does it function?21 These practical questions work towards an assertively non-essentialist, non-determinist conception of race that nevertheless takes seriously the materialities through which race comes to matter immanently in moments of encounter. This concept of
race is absolutely not about imposing grids that arrange human bodies into groups, divisions or hierarchies. Experimenting with race involves thinking in terms of the formation - or becoming - of race in a field of emergence. Race is plastic, dynamic and immanent to the processes it expresses and any ontology of race needs to grasp both the multiplicity and rhizomatic nature of race. It involves grasping the promiscuity with which drug dealing, exoticism, Islam, sexual predation, terrorism, misogyny, segregation, etc. sticks to, arranges, and connects all kinds of bodies - both human and non-human - in a new form of racism where loose racial summaries ground heterogeneous processes of differentiation becoming the basis for rapid judgments that mediate encounters, align bodies, infuse dispositions, stir suspicions, inspire resentments and so on.

Encountering and feeling contact zones in Keighley is part of an empirical project that is beginning to trace the materialities through which race operates. Politically, this work has two ends.

First, it encourages new materialist lines of inquiry that focus on how race works. The task is neither deconstruction nor the transcendence of race, but to trace how race emerges, how it acquires force, how it aligns bodies. Lines of inquiry might include diagramming the transversal, extensive and connective capacities of race. Sketching assemblages of race in specific situations - like the contact zones presented here - emphasise how race is creative and capricious, and how the wildness of race opens lines of flight from oppressive and hierarchical forms of race thinking by proliferating or multiplying racial differences, that also never escape the danger microfascisms that threaten to make oppressions anew through these lines of flight. Alternatively, a materialist engagement with race can open up new conceptual languages to apprehend processes of racial differentiation on the ground. For example, Arun Saldanha has developed a concept of viscosity to grasp the immanent and temporary formation of racial aggregates out of the turbulence of interaction between the bodies, object, architecture and sunlight that constitute social spaces. I would extend viscosity through a related concept of stickiness that asks, for example, how moral panics about drug trafficking, violence or grooming stick to, and becoming distributed across, particular assemblages of bodies, things and spaces (crumbling wall + brown skin + dusk + black Lexus = becoming-dealer) transforming the capacities of these bodies to affect and be affected, exposes how the force of race and racial difference accumulate not only through repetitions of discourses, representations and image but also through the intensity of encounters with the everyday materiality of multiculture.

Second, engaging materially with the everyday, habitual operations of race in places like Keighley has important implications for how we think about racisms. In contact zones racisms are less about enactments of racist beliefs and ideologies (Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown (1989), Racism (London: Routledge); David Theo Goldberg (1993), Racist Cultures (Oxford: Blackwell).)) that remake racism a problem of epistemology, and more about considering the practical questions of how the force of race - always multiple and emergent, but also repetitive - comes to mediate, infuse and shape judgements, disposition and action in moments of encounter. This concept of racism involves a slow-fused notion of power that is diffuse and mobile, but nevertheless one that gathers force through repetition in moments of encounter, and becomes sedimented through the formatting of perceptions. And so by flattening an account of what race does, we do not arrive at an ever-more sophisticated theory of what racism might be, but begin to understand the enduring force of race and racisms in everyday lives as they surface through accumulations of indifference, incivility, rejection, antagonism, avoidance, discrimination or fear.

Beyond segregation

Drifting through contact zones in Keighley also seeks to provide momentum to - and exemplify - alternative modes of thinking about and approaching multiculture in northern mill towns. In my narrative the work of evocation summons a sense of the multicultural city that is quite different from academic talk of the segregated city, of anxious urbanisms and the dystopian spaces of urban terror, of the city as theatre of identity and community politics; or the site where state-led multiculturalism plays out through urban governance. My emphasis on embodied and sensuous inhabitations of multiculture is driven by a frustration with a resurgent 'white assimilationism' and confused debates about race, segregation and parallel lives. And these have been aggravated in particular by urban disturbances in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford during 2001 and the London bombings in July 2005. 

In Keighley white
assimilationism, masquerading as concerns about segregation, parallel lives and cultural difference, surfaces routinely in responses to drug trafficking, the activities of racist organisations like the British National Party, stories of South Asian men grooming under-age white girls for sex that refuse to be laid to rest, neighbourhood change, forced marriage, talk of no-go areas, terror alerts and inter-ethnic resentments about the allocation of government monies for regeneration and community infrastructure. But here, I am not interested in enrolling distributions and densities of census categories as transparent indicators of ‘parallel lives’ and intercultural interaction in a manoeuvre that worryingly resurrects Robert Park’s equivalence of social distance with geographical space to argue that civil unrest, suicide bombings, or indeed drug dealing and paedophilia, can be explained simply by segregation and cultural insularity, and remedied therefore by ‘community cohesion’ and more interaction. Neither do I want to rely on more nuanced talk of the spatial construction of race that tends to sort urban spaces into patchworks of go and no-go areas, strange and familiar spaces, white and South Asian neighbourhoods, zones of safety and danger. (Les Back (2005), ‘Home from Home’: Youths, Belonging and Place’, in Claire Alexander and Caroline Knowles (eds) Making Race Matter: Bodies, Spaces and Identity (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan); Keith, After the Cosmopolitan?). Both talk of parallel lives and racially coded landscapes of Otherness neglect so many of the modalities, intensities and registers of ongoing intercultural interaction, and the visceral, elusive and fragmentary ways in which multicultures are inhabited in places like Keighley.

Encountering the contact zones of Braithwaite and Highfields offers one attempt to feel towards an apprehension of how multicultures are practised and felt. Passing through and feeling contact zones immerses you in the turbulent socialities of multiculture. It evokes the messy and challenging underside of inter-ethnic and moves us beyond talk of segregation. In particular, it emphasises an emergent, eventful notion of space, through which race materialises fleetingly through arrangements of bodies, things and surroundings. This notion leaves behind the stiff invocations of space accompanying talk of segregation or an A-Z of racist geographies, emphasising that even apparently stable configurations of race are constantly performed in moments of encounter. By mapping the emergent, transversal geographies of race through the precise modalities and intensities of intercultural encounter (where what is encountered is never just other human bodies, but also sounds, things, architecture, vegetation, intensities of sunlight, smells, etc.) it becomes evident that the tangle of race in northern mill towns can never only be a question of where people wake up in the morning. It is about the screened encounters in rush hour traffic; the ill-tempered rub and indifferent contact of the street, over newsagent counters, in parks, at pedestrian crossings; the coming together of bodies in cafes, taxis, supermarkets and schools; the distribution of bodies in gyms, playgrounds, pavements, and shopping centres; encounters with street signs, calls for prayer, souped-up cars, graffiti, pubs, rucksacks and veils, all of which stir raced memories and affects; and the distinct atmospheres and moods encountered as you pass through particular neighbourhoods, parks, or back alleys. And gathering just a few of the moments of encounter that make up urban multicultures forces us to register the multiple intensities - love, hate, fear, suspicion, terror, abjection, curiosity, indifference, suspicion, generosity, etc. - through which human and non-human bodies come together in places like Keighley. Acknowledging the swirling intensities that modulate encounters compels a questioning of the rush of appeals for more face-to-face interaction between strangers and for mixed neighbourhoods enshrined, for example, in the impulse to ‘build cohesive communities’. Such appeals rely on the uncontested assumption that more human interaction is necessarily a good thing, failing to recognise that an encounter’s promise for intercultural exchange, dialogue and mutuality that might form the basis for an agonistic politics of living with difference and getting along, always already holds the potentiality to confirm ingrained suspicions and resentments, entrench petty prejudices or spiral into violence and abuse.

Notes

1. Guy Debord (1955), Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography, 2. [↩]
2. Mary Louise Pratt (1992), Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London: Routledge), 4. [↩]
3. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3896213.stm [↩]
4. And this emotive talk of areas being ‘taken over’ or ‘colonised’ in Keighley quickly slide into discourses of ‘self-segregation’ that elide the complex and confusing dynamics of neighbourhood change that are the effects of chain migrations from Azad Kashmir, racist practices in both public and private housing economies, efforts to produce homelessness through varied cultural and religious practices, alongside white flight and avoidance of areas perceived to be South Asian. [↩]
5. Gilles Deleuze (2004), Difference and Repetition (London: Continuum), 176. [↩]
7. My reconstruction of this walk is inspired in part by the Situationist International and their spatial
practices of dérive. Alongside other psychogeographic practices the dérive was never intended a merely neutral description of urban life. Rather it intended to scandalise and provoke a crisis in happiness by producing subversive spaces that might liberate people from what Debord would call the ‘Spectacle’ and constraining roles and values (like family, community, church and ideology).

While acknowledging some commentators are disturbed at how academic engagements with psychogeography have evacuated the Situationist’s original political project (Bennett, 1991), here I argue that the techniques and tactics of psychogeography offer productive modes of investigating and intervening in the life of urban multicultures. [8]

12. Seigfried Kracauer (1930), The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). 29-30. Kracauer suggests: ‘Every typical space is created by typical social relations which are expressed in such a space without the disturbing intervention of consciousness. Everything that consciousness ignores, everything that is usually just overlooks, is involved in the construction of spaces. Spatial structures are the dreams of society. Whenever the hieroglyph of any such spatial structure is decoded the foundation of social reality is revealed.’ [9]
13. Jane Bennett (2004), ‘The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter’, Political Theory 32:3, 347-372; Jane Bennett (2005), ‘The Agency of Assemblages in the North American Blackout’, Public Culture 17:3, 445-465. In particular Bennett (2005, 463) emphasises how the force of things might be thought of more accurately as the ‘agency of assemblages’, arguing: ‘To be clear: the agency of assemblages of which I speak is not the strong kind of agency traditionally attributed exclusively to humans. To make such a claim would be simply to anthropomorphise. The contention, rather, is that if one looks closely enough, the productive power behind effects is always a collectivity. Not only is human agency already always already distributed in tools, microbes, minerals and sounds, it only emerges as agentic by way of a distribution into the ‘foreign materialities its bearers are eager to exclude’. [9]
19. ibid [9]
20. For example in Bodies that Matter Judith Butler (1993) asserts that presenting race as a social construct ‘in no way deprives the term of its force in life’ and social constructionist routinely emphasise the material effects of the idea of race these arguments rely on wiping out material differences between bodies, for example, to avoid descending into essentialism. Here, I argue for an alternative conception of race that draws on a dynamic, non-determinist understandings of its materiality. [9]
24. Saldanha, Reontologising Race; Saldanha, Psychedelic White. [9]
25. Saldanha, Psychedelic White [9]