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**Sensory Geographies and Defamiliarisation: Migrant Women
Encounter Brighton Beach**

Sally R Munt*

Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Sussex

MFM, Silverstone Building,

University of Sussex,

Falmer Brighton

BN1 9RG

Email: s.r.munt@sussex.ac.uk

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Sensory Geographies and Defamiliarisation: Migrant Women Encounter Brighton Beach, UK

This article's starting point is a sensory, reflexive walk taken on Brighton seafront and beach, by fourteen migrant women and some of their children. It goes on to open up a wider discussion about the cultural politics and affective resonances, for refugees and migrants, of beaches. By discussing their sensory experiences of the beach, we begin to understand their 'ostranenie', or defamiliarisation, of making the familiar strange. We also see how evocative such sense-making can be, as the women compare their past lives to this, perceiving their lifeworld through a filter of migrancy.

The article goes on to discuss the broader cultural symbolism of beaches, which are a site of contestation over national values, boundaries, and belonging. As well as discussing sensory methodology in this article, and explaining the locale of Brighton Beach itself, it concludes with some wider thinking of the cultural politics of beach spaces and migrant perceptions.

Keywords: Refugees; migrants and asylum seekers; Brighton Beach; defamiliarisation; cultural values; sensory geographies.

Refugees and migrants coming to the UK often suffer from significant levels of mental and physical health problems; the trauma of forced migration is often repeated in exile as they face insecurity, isolation and social exclusion in the receiving country (Bloch and Schuster 2005; Murphy, D. et al 2002; Yuval-Davies et al 2005).

Recognition of the needs of this group has given rise to a broad range of arts and cultural interventions. There is evidence to suggest that participatory projects deliver significant social impacts, including social and community cohesion, community development and capacity building, and challenge negative representations. At an individual level, evidence suggests that such participation contributes to mental and physical wellbeing, as well as supporting the development of new skills (eg Munt 2011/2; Hutton and Lukes 2008; O'Neil and Tobolewska 2002; see also

www.refugee-action.org.uk/ourwork/projects). Research, however, by the Arts Council England (2008) found that opportunities for learning within organisations and across the sector were limited by the lack of systematic evaluation. While projects have focused on participation in arts and cultural activities broadly, there has been a notable absence of research around refugee participation in what might be termed quintessentially British artistic and cultural life, and how this is experienced and valued by refugees. (Our previous experience of working with women refugees taught us that they often express deep and vocal appreciation for British culture. This has never been properly explored.)

Immigrants face compulsory assimilation via acculturation. The UK Citizenship Test ‘Life in the UK’ foregrounds cultural knowledge and is explicitly taken up with the inculcation of values. Adopting British cultural values invokes a sign of loyalty to the Crown, according social legitimacy through norms. Assimilationist governmental agendas spring overtly from the Right through appealing to monoculturalism, or covertly from the Left, via multiculturalism. An ‘appropriate’ proto-citizen is hailed via cultural knowledge paradigms, and achieved through the correct orientations of taste, and distinction. The consumption of art/high culture is traditionally, pace Matthew Arnold, deemed ‘civilizing’ to this end. Participation in popular or folk culture is likewise seen as melding the individual to a tradition of authentic Britishness (usually Englishness), that accrues respectability. Thus, amassing cultural values from the migrant’s standpoint is a life skill, imbued systemically, and policy-driven. Yet little is known from the migrant’s perspective about how this contributes to subjectivity and identity formations. When people migrate to the UK, they do so with expectations; how are their cultural expectations

met, exceeded, or problematized once they are here, and how is cultural hybridity, or conflict, managed, maintained, or avoided?

This article's starting point is a sensory geography and auto-photographical walk on Brighton seafront and beach, by fourteen migrant women and some of their children, completed on January 22nd 2014.¹ The activity formed part of an eight-month-long funded project 'Cultural Values from the Subaltern Perspective: A Phenomenology of Refugees' experience of British Cultural Values'. We ran a course of weekly cultural activities and visits, focus group discussion and interviews, centred on exploring attitudes and experiences towards typical cultural practices, such as visiting museums, parks, historical buildings, sports and musical events. The broader aims of the project were to understand the value located in a range of local arts/cultural activities (based in or around Brighton) to refugees and migrants, a group perceived as new to British cultural life² who are often marginalised from 'mainstream' cultural activities, and to explore British cultural values from their 'outsider within' perspective.³

Fourteen women who either had refugee status themselves, or had come to the UK/EU through family formation as the wife of a refugee, or were waiting the outcome of an asylum application, participated in the project. The women came from a total of ten countries of origin (Sudan, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Jordan, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Iran, and Palestine) and had lived in the UK for between 2 months and 20 years. Their backgrounds varied from urban to rural, from those who had relatively high levels of education, including two who had university qualifications, through to those who had had limited or no primary level education and very low or no literacy skills. Four of the women had acquired British citizenship through marriage prior to the introduction of the language and citizenship tests⁴. Only one

woman, a journalist from Iraq, had acquired citizenship in her own right. Another woman had acquired Dutch citizenship and then moved to the UK. Of the remaining eight women: 6 had been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) or settlement and 2 were waiting the outcome of their asylum application; one woman had been waiting for 11 years.⁵

Everyday cultural activities can act as zones of exclusion for minoritized groups, indeed, in Wolch and Zhang's study of the urban coastal region of Los Angeles which examined the cultural diversity of beach users, they found that '[r]ecent immigrants, defined as those speaking a language other than English at home... were less likely to go to the beach at all' (2004, 431). In recent history countries have zoned beaches according to 'race', with 'whites-only' beaches being one notorious practice of such apartheid; the racial imaginary of English beaches remains distinctively (if maybe more 'benignly') white through the sedimentation of cultural norms into landscapes of nostalgia. Englishness is peculiarly distilled at the coastal fringes of this island.

Exploring the involvements of refugee and migrant women as they participated in the British seaside experience by strolling along the beach, promenade and pier, this article will integrate their own reflections upon this contested space. As well as discussing our sensory methodology in this article, and explaining the locale of Brighton beach itself, I will focus particularly on the experiences of participants, before concluding with some wider thinking of the cultural politics of beach spaces and migrant perceptions.

Participants experienced and participated in British culture (in its broadest sense being ideas, social behaviour and customs but also their physical environment) in their everyday lives, and had been doing so since they arrived in the UK. Learning

and making sense of British culture was a process that started from their point of arrival and was shaped by their pre-existing expectations. The degree to which, and ways that people are enculturated depends on many factors but there is the sense that individuals must engage with their new social world from the outset. These instantaneous and necessary navigations through culture render arbitrary and disembodied, the Living in the UK Test.⁶ Quite simply, people are always already living in the UK and engaging with British culture, whatever their knowledge of formal institutional rules and customs.

Classroom discussions found that first experiences and observations of the UK were very sense oriented – feeling the coldness, seeing the green of the grass, noticing the age and shape of the buildings, the new and different smells. The circumstances of diverse migratory journeys also shaped how participants felt – who and what they left behind, how much they could communicate in English, how much they were in control of their lives in terms of gendered relationships. Additionally, participants arrived with different levels of social and cultural capital, which likely framed their engagement with British culture.⁷ The first joint activity we embarked upon was this seaside visit, to Brighton promenade, on a cold, bright winter's day in January 2014.

Methodology

By using feminist methodologies and thinking about 'outsider' perspectives (Hill Collins 1998), we gained greater purchase on the acquisition of UK cultural values, lived through social practices of consumption, and creativity. Despite the increased emphasis on the importance of shared British values and culture, there is little understanding of what this might mean to peripheral identities. Cultural participation is part of the everyday, it is simultaneously local, national, and global. Brighton and

Hove is a city promoted as cosmopolitan and culturally vibrant, yet it has its own excluded demographics with their own subaltern values. When espousing cultural values then, these are assumed to be a set of dominant and clearly defined British values (as articulated in the ‘Life in the UK’ test), set against a set of supposedly ‘suspect’ oppositional values, collapsed within the bodies of subaltern identities (in their hair, or covered face, or mutilated genitals). Our project, sought to explore more precisely how such cultural values are energized and rhetoricized in the moment, within the act of participation itself.

The project ran a six month course called ‘Life in the UK’⁸ which encouraged consumption of British culture, but also facilitated aspects of cultural exchange through inviting participants to teach and compare cultural values from their own national/ethnic traditions. ‘Britishness’, read through cultural values, is as much ‘felt’ as ‘articulated’; our evaluation was therefore attitudinal and emotional. The benefits of the cultural activities we organised include enhanced reflectiveness and improved physical and mental health outcomes. We aimed, however, to go beyond arguments preoccupied with predefined categories of instrumental benefit, such as the presumption that the arts have simplified forms of social impact. We intended to problematize this by paying attention to the negative feedback we receive from participants, listening closely to their ‘cognitive and cultural dissonances’. The refugees and migrant women were not passive receptacles of a civilizing culture – they are proficient cultural agents themselves, negotiating hybrid subjectivities via (forced and chosen) participation and critique.

We problematized other approaches, such as intercultural adaption, which argue that migrants ‘unlearn’ themselves, because their original identity is seen as functionally ‘unfit’; this is a symbolic violence model posed by ‘host cultural

conversion' (Bourdieu 1977); intracultural, co-cultural, and stranger theories (Ahmed 2000) suggests a less hierarchical process. Use of social justice approaches can be alert to symbolic power differentials that impose cultural values as normative, rather than perceiving them as relational, embedded, contested, and iterative. Each participant was given a digital camera at the beginning of the programme and encouraged to record and reflect upon meaningful places, spaces and cultural activities using a photovoice methodology (McIntyre 2003; Wang and Burris 1997). The camera provides a resource for participants to tell visual stories about their interaction and perceptions of culture in their own images, words and reflections, providing 'points of entry into seeing beneath surface issues, relations, community events, and the extent to which place informs identity' (McIntyre 2003, 48). Their photographs were mounted in a public exhibition held in Brighton Jubilee Library during May/June 2014.

Brighton Beach

If you Google 'Brighton Beach', the first page you come to is the local council sponsored website visitbrighton.com, which tempts you in with the header: 'soak up the cosmopolitan vibe on the beach at Brighton'.⁹ The site also claims that Brighton, lying on the south coast of England, is one of the top ten beach destinations in the world, an iconic site, intrinsically linked to the idea of 'cool' that the city has promoted since it became the British resort of choice for a dirty weekend. Brighton beach is the site of pilgrimage most visited by tourists to the city, it has two piers, the Palace Pier that opened in 1899, and the West Pier, now derelict due to arson, which was built in 1866. The world's oldest operating electronic railway, Volk's Railway was built in 1883, and runs along the edge of the 8-mile shingle beach to the Brighton

Marina, alongside the Undercliff Walk, which fringes the chalk cliffs, completed in the 1930s. Brighton's seafront is architecturally distinct, comprising long regency terraces and squares, with the city lying prettily behind them, rising up an incline characterised by Victorian terraced streets. The geography of Brighton is of an archetypal and popular English seaside resort. Brighton Beach became famous in the beautiful nineteenth century paintings of J.M.W. Turner and John Constable. In the twentieth century it was notorious for the 1964 battles between youth subcultures the Mods and Rockers. In July 2002 Fatboy Slim (Brighton DJ Norman Cook) put on a dance party for 250,000 people, creating mayhem throughout the city.

Brighton council's own figures, commissioned via a 'Visit England' survey from 2011-13 states that 72% of visitors will go to the beach. The demographic of current UK visitors to the resort shows that they are evenly split in age.¹⁰ Overall, an estimated 1,471,000 staying trips were spent in Brighton and Hove in 2012, of which around 1,126,000 were made by domestic visitors (79%), and 345,000 by overseas visitors (21%). Approximately 8,580,000 tourism day trips were made to Brighton and Hove (lasting more than 3 hours and taken on an irregular basis) in 2012, of which total expenditure by visitors is nearly £800,000,000.¹¹ Brighton ranks highly when compared to other English destinations, 'it is significantly more upmarket than the average seaside or city destination with 4 in 10 visitors in the AB socio-economic grouping'.¹² Thus, Brighton tourism is central to the economics of the city and is chiefly constituted of middle class consumers, and the beach is their core attraction. In terms of other demographics of people using the beach, the most recent council statistics on equality data are from 2014 and they report that there were more women than men using the beach (59% to 41%), 11% of users reported having a mental or physical health disability, and there were only small numbers of people having a non-

Western religious identity, or secularism.¹³ 93% of visitors reported their ethnicity as White, a figure unchanged since 2009. Unsurprisingly, given Brighton's reputation for being the 'gay capital' of Europe, 10% reported being non-heterosexual, which is over the national average. The 2011 census analysis of British coastal communities showed that white ethnicity was 86% in England and Wales, and in terms of migration 6.7% of the usual residents in coastal communities were both born outside the UK and had arrived in the UK in the decade 2001-2011.¹⁴ The 2014 visitor survey reports that although a higher proportion of visitors were from overseas this year compared to 2009 (up from 15% in 2009 to 23% in 2014). Western European countries continued to be the main countries generating visitors. What these statistics suggest, is that the vaunted 'cosmopolitanism' of Brighton as a destination is not based on its ethnic diversity. In this instance, cosmopolitanism seems to relate to sexual diversity, as previous work on gentrification, desirability and lesbian and gay urban subcultures has suggested. Brighton is 'on trend' therefore because of its gay symbolic capital.

A wintery walk

The walk was designed by the author as a sensory journey, influenced by the work of sensory ethnography (Pink 2009, Paterson 2007)) psychogeography (Coverley 2010; Solnit 2001) and emotional geography (Davidson et al. 2007). It was intended to draw out feelings and sensory memories linked to a particular place. Pink (2009, 76) tells us that '[t]he idea that walking with others – sharing their step, style and rhythm – creates an affinity, empathy, or sense of belonging with them has long since been acknowledged by ethnographers'. This was not to be the solitary perambulation of the male flâneur however, but the serendipity of being there together, as Safia says: 'We

are sharing experiences about how to cope with the new life.’ Walking with the senses was intended to focus on the embodiment of cultural consumption, and thus I designed various activities into the walk that encoded all five senses: touch, taste, sight, hearing, and smell. Such a methodology, commenced our engagement together on the project by mutual immersion of the senses and feeling by developing our awareness of the emotions generated on our walk (Merleau Ponty 1968). We intended bringing the women to a place that would be more or less familiar to them, but hopefully to be experienced anew, as if for the first time, through the Russian formalist mode of defamiliarisation or *ostranenie* (Shklovsky 1917). Shklovsky’s idea was to present common or familiar things in a different way, to enhance perception, enabling us to distinguish between a practical language of the familiar (which is ‘over-automatized’) and an anticipated poetic engagement with this ‘new real’. He argued that poetic speech is framed, and involves perception through sensation, which can open up new forms of aestheticisation. In our case, drawing upon the work of Foucault, this form was to be the ‘aestheticisation of the self’.¹⁵

The group gathered first at our ‘home’ point, the Brighton Ethnic and Minority Community Partnership centre in the morning, where we re-established our *communitas* (unstructured community) through greeting and gossip. With some excitement, we boarded a Brighton bus (with our complementary day passes), causing some curiosity from the white passengers already on the service as a significant band of black and Asian women, with pushchairs, crowded into the lower deck, chattering. We disembark at the orientalist Royal Pavilion, and scurry past the cenotaph memorial pool which is hectic with splashing seagulls ignored by shoppers in knitted hats, we cross the busy seafront road in a disorganised crocodile, and head toward the beach. We confront the obstacle of the many concrete steps leading down to the

promenade level, and manage as women do, carrying the pushchairs and young children down onto the lower esplanade. The winter tides have discharged mounds of salty seaweed onto the shingle; we pick up branches of the slimy weed, smell its pungency, and put our tongues on it. Then, we choose a cold, damp pebble, feel its smoothness and chilliness, and place it on our cheek. We meander together, nattering, along the promenade, breathing deeply, moving up and down the line as conversations wax and wane. We are all in thick coats, hats, gloves, muffled up against the winter breeze coming off the sea, there is a contented murmuring as women amble to and fro. We reach a café with reflective metallic tables outside, order hot chocolate, and talk and draw pictures of what the word 'beach' means to us, beaches far away and beaches close. Other customers watch us sideways, their glances seem good natured, curious. The thick, aromatic chocolate warms us up from the inside. We walk back meditatively, our movement rhythmic. Sally tries to persuade people to dip their toes in the sea, claiming it's a classic English thing to do, the women laugh and giggle and decline. We move upwards onto the gaudy Palace Pier, promenading like Victorian ladies, eating hot sugary donuts and feeding the pigeons. Then strolling onto the funfair at the end of the pier: we hit it early and it isn't open yet, so we wander aimlessly, taking the opportunity for a quick wee. Only a few muffled up tourists are about. Piped music merges with the seagull cries. A young man opens up the carousel. We pile on, laughing, and feel the circling wind on our faces and gaze out to an alternating panorama of Brighton seafront/the sea/Brighton seafront/the sea. Individual clusters of women form, disassemble and reform. Some more adventurous women get onto the Octopus, and we take pictures of them screaming in glee as the fast moving ride throws them up and down. Finally, we sit

outside peaceably in the wintry sunshine eating hot fish and chips, enjoying a meal together and feeding a hungry seagull.

Reflection – a phenomenology of Brighton Beach

Our approach was phenomenological, alert to what Merleau Ponty (1968) described as the ‘indirect ontology’, or the ontology of the ‘flesh of the world’. All our activities were selected to stimulate multiple sensations; we believe that consciousness and the body must be engaged together in the ways we encounter new experiences and appreciate their value. Our perception is actively linked to attentivity, to perceiving our *lebenswelt*¹⁶. Through such being-in-the-world, we can awaken – through activities such as walking - our bodily alertness. In their feedback interviews six months later, most of the women talked about their embodied memories of our day at the beach, particularly recalling sensory experiences such as smelling the seaweed or tasting the fish and chips. When asked what was the first thing she noticed on arriving in the UK, one respondent, Ama noted that ‘I see the sea and the beach because I saw the first time in here, because I haven't sea in my country.’ When asked which spaces the women felt happy, comfortable, confident or relaxed in, several responded by mentioning the beach; Mariam comments that ‘You know usually I don't have the time to go out and do something with a whole group and this and that. But this outing, with the Sally, they are seaside, they went to check something and they are very good.’ Vian describes how she goes to the beach with her children, and although she cannot swim, she likes to go into the sea to paddle. Tanya comments that: ‘I like Brighton, it is a vibrant city, it is full of life, I love it. I love it, and we are just by the sea front, so.’ Sirin takes her own memories of the beach trip ‘Yes, and I go to the beach a lot of times, but I didn't concentrate on a lot of things, for example Sally said,

take fresh breath and relax and these things’, which suggests a wistfulness for having this specific time to see and feel things differently, to be in a special place.

Whilst drinking our hot chocolate, sitting on the shingle, we drew coloured pictures of our responses to the seashore, and wrote down our word associations. Drawing the pictures of the beach and reflecting on the journeys they have come on, Souso says evocatively ‘I have the same seaweed in my country, in Alexandria in Egypt’. Many of the women drew pictures of the seaweed and the cold beach pebble (which we had examined, touched and tasted), making word pictures and drawings, or taking photos, that triggered memories of their home countries. After feeling the coldness and smoothness of the pebble against our face, we threw the pebbles toward the English Channel. Some described these exercises as follows:

AMA: ‘Seaweed. Green, slippery, salty. DID NOT LIKE IT. NOT HAPPY. DISGUSTING.’

VIAN: ‘Smell fish and sea. Not nice. Its softly. Stones, cold, soft, liberating’.

TANYA: ‘It was smooth. It was hard. It was heavy. It was cold when in my hand. I felt strong when holding the stone. I felt exhilarated when I threw the stone in the sea. It was liberating.’

SOUSO: ‘I am so happy. I feel in the sea. In my country I haven’t sea but I have Nile, is a good river.’

LINDA: ‘The beach is sandy in my country. I feel very cold as it is cloudy but I like the views and the smell of the sea. Its completely different, the sun and smell different, and I prefer the sea in my country.’

SIRIN: ‘Muddy (the sea in my country). Clear (in the UK).’

JOURY: ‘Being next to the sea. Relaxed. Cold. Good mood. Thinking. Sea in my country time for family to be together.’

HUMERA: ‘Taste a bit. Good mood. Relaxy.’

MARIAM: ‘Pakistan. I have big river and I feel warm and hot sunshine and it is sandy all over. Seaweed feels disgusting.’

RAZIA: ‘India. The sea makes me feel happy. Hot. Sand. Boats for fishing. I like India, little park for children and for people to sit. Fish fried in India, marsala. The Atlantic Ocean is very big.’

BUSHRA: 'I like seaweed. I feel happy for sea. My country soft sand.'

MINA: 'Jordan. Palestine. The Dead Sea. Warm. Mountains. Hot in Summer and shiny in the morning. Very very salty, you don't drown in the sea, therapy mud. Holy stories make you feel different. Hot sand must wear a slipper or a sandal on the beach, might burn your foot or stamp on a sea urchin. (Stone.) soft hard strong heavy energy. Brown with black white grays terracotta – earthy colours, natural, salty. (Stone) Remind me of my Palestinian culture. Throw it on Israeli occupation soldiers.'

These evocative word poems are full of sensory information; it is apparent that these sensory links provoked embodied memory, so that the women's response to Brighton beach is to remember, a filter in sensory recall, their countries of origin. Their present is framed by embodied recollections that enact a comparison, to stimulate a temporal split, sometimes of trauma, sometimes of nostalgia, and sometimes a mediation is required between these two realities. On one of the course's later outings, this time to Brighton Museum, we stopped to look at the museum's Brighton Beach exhibit, and that of another Muslim, Sake Dean Mahomet (1759-1851), an early Indian immigrant to Britain (descended from the Turks) who opened the first 'shampooing' baths on Brighton seafront, a seawater steam baths where he also offered therapeutic massages.¹⁷ Dean Mahomet, a symbolic portal, was commonly known as 'Dr Brighton' (coincidentally the name of a gay pub today). Many of the participants took selfies stood next to his portrait painting displayed in the museum, and connected this figure in conversation to their day at the beach. In this shared ecophenomenology we find a poetic framing of *ostranenie*, an operation that Lawrence Crawford (1984) has likened to Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* in that it is used in the sense of both to differ, and to defer (the former being spatial, the latter being temporal). Thus, difference (in this instance, the politics of ethnic difference), is rhetoricised by the reframing of the women's experience, an

experience which is phenomenological and is analogous to poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* - or 'alienation effect'. Hear the melancholy in Safia's observation:

I was turning around looking for the palm trees. So I don't feel warm, Feeling warm is not to do with the weather, it's because I miss what I am used to, the familiar... I just tightened my coat... there is no sounds, the sounds that I am used to.

The women's experience of British culture is migranticised, it is framed by their *ostranenie* of here and there, an oscillation and deferral of belonging, perhaps even a crucible that hails the self-yet-to-come, the legal citizen. When I look at Dean Mahomet's portrait, I see the Other; when the women gaze at Dr Brighton, they see the same.

The geo-social values of Brighton Beach

Brighton beach, like most global spaces, contains a matrix of identities and cultural values, some of which are in tension. Not everyone is wholeheartedly positive about Brighton beach, for example in this exchange:

LINA: The beach. I love the beach, yeah but, especially in the summer you know the people, they...

INTERVIEWER: You're making... you showing me with your hands that they take their clothes off

LINA: Yeah, they take their clothes off, yeah so we are not familiar with this and I don't like to get... I don't like the kids to go to.

INTERVIEWER: You don't like the children to see the people with their clothes off. Right OK.

LINA: So we want, there is some place I like much of family. So.

Discussing the beach in Brighton and comparing it to beaches in India with Razia

draws a sharp contrast as they repeat in the 1:1 interview a conversation that had occurred earlier in class:

INTERVIEWER: I mean it is difficult in Brighton isn't it because the last time we talked about this, somebody said about Pride and going down to the beach and that lots of people were naked, or near naked and this you wanted your children... was it you who said that?

RAZIA: Yeah

INTERVIEWER: You said to your children 'GET HOME NOW'!

RAZIA: I didn't know... I don't know about today's gay parade and this and that and then I went and very nice sun and my children said, mum lets go to the beach and I went there and then I was sitting down and then I saw there had people around me and what are they doing and then MUST GO, MUST GO!

INTERVIEWER: That's also something about, because if you think about where people are naked or near naked it is a specific place in British culture, isn't it, it's the beach.

RAZIA: Yeah you can't avoid it.

INTERVIEWER: It's the beach; it's not everywhere, it's specific places. So you raised the issue of the beach, and yet you also, it's not just gay or lesbian is it, because in summer there are lots of very young women, with lots of tiny tiny tiny things so; this is something about being clothed or unclothed and where you can be clothed or unclothed isn't it?

RAZIA: But in India, you couldn't do that!

The social morés (of gender and sexuality) of the beach demand that the seafront area is strategically zoned. Topless bathing is common on the main beaches during the summer months. During the year, there is a nudist beach to the East of the Palace Pier, near Brighton Marina, which is popular with gay men, but during Pride Weekend, which is attended by at least 160,000 festival-goers, many do go to the tourist beach between the piers which temporarily becomes a very gay, carnivalesque space. The denotation of the main Brighton beach as especially 'gay-friendly' during Pride has an exclusionary effect on the migrant women, who feel they must stick to the

dedicated family areas or leave altogether. Symbolically, here we see the spectre of the unassimilated migrant, the 'suspect immigrant' who rejects westernized gender and sexual values in favour of religious propriety. So, the process of adoption of British values through cultural participation has its limits, where it clashes with the cultural values of origin it has to be constantly renegotiated.

But it is not so simple. The subject of sexuality, nudity, or more specifically, lesbian or gay sexuality, came up frequently in classroom discussion and in more informal chats. I am visible lesbian who chose not to announce her sexual orientation to the class, thus it became the disconcerting 'open secret' in our engagements, and as participants took on this knowledge their inquisitiveness grew.¹⁸ More generally, Pride in Brighton cannot be ignored by the general population, as the town closes to traffic and the parade weaves its way along the seafront and then right through the city. The class discusses their ambivalence towards it and once again the interchange is comparative:

MINA: Because I want to watch, but not be a part of it. The interesting things last year, I have seen some Arabic flags some people have holding that, and they are just looking at Islamic, like Saudi Arabia flag, and some Arabic and Iran and blah blah blah, it was interesting photos to have...

HUMERA: For Pride you mean, the Pride March, they were showing the flags.

MINA: You know this is sometimes we don't, as an Arabic and Middle Eastern, and Islamic Community we didn't accept it and it was a shame to be showed that yourself that you're not part of me, but it is for me and interesting, as they are just like, who is taking this flag and putting it on, is it from people from my culture or Islamic culture or is it people who would like to tell everybody this is everywhere.

SALLY: Of course there are gay refugees from...

RAZIA: Yes, and Saudi Arabia, and in Gulf...

SAFIA: in the Gulf, everywhere, they are everywhere. But we are more conservative about showing this.

MINA: But we don't just like, we avoid to be because knowing this is a conservative communities and we all feel, you don't have to talk about it...

RAZIA: It is not only England; all over the world their people have the underground. Our country in India, the past news, news coming from India they say the gay are allowed to be married, they government allow it and the people going to be fight for this, they say why, why are they going to be... but they have, everywhere, it's not just England. No.

Immediately the conversation swings into another annual seafront performance, the Naked Bike Ride,¹⁹ which is a spectacular 'body-positive' event to advocate cycling and to protest about the oil economy and global warming:

RAZIA: First time I came in England, I got my daughter, she is like under 2. As she went to play group and I went to the town. First time in my life, all in the cycling, coming everywhere from London to Brighton.

JANE: Oh the London to Brighton cycle race. And they are wearing lycra, very tight?

RAZIA: No tight. Naked.

JANE: Naked?

SALLY: Oh the Naked Bike Ride, Jane.

JANE: Oh the Naked Bike Ride.

RAZIA: And I shocked! [Group laugh together].

JANE: I'll bet you were shocked! That's not very comfortable though is it to ride a bike with nothing on.

RAZIA: This is part of the culture in England huh?

SALLY: So do all of you know what the Naked Bike Ride is?

RAZIA: Woman and men, all naked, nothing. No clothes!

SAFIA: They are trying to draw attention to drive bikes, not to go for cars?

... Because we have very famous in my culture, very famous example that, what shall I do to draw your attention, shall I just here my clothes [mimes removal], so this is very close to the idea, so they are out of their clothes because you don't listen, you don't hear my shouting, so I'm going to be out of my clothes.

SALLY: Tear off your clothes,

JANE: It's a protest

SALLY: So actually in Iraqi culture that would be, the Naked Bike Ride makes sense.

SAFIA: Yeah when you don't hear, when you don't... yeah.

SALLY: When you are not listened to.

These instances of debate demonstrate clearly that the women are reaching for points of identification with British social trends. The ebb and flow of identification sees a hybrid subjectivity emerging that takes account of the complex moral environment that the women now inhabit. We see now how much Brighton seafront is a space of dialogue and contestation, and that going for a 'simple' walk on the beach entails moments of defamiliarisation that produce deep reflection. However, this is not a simple 'exchange of morals' based on equality, there are regimes of truth (Foucault 1975) being deployed with regard to western sexuality, which are being collapsed into ideas of European citizenship that cause the women anxiety, as European citizenship for most of them is an aspirational goal. We see that the women 'lean into' such moments of *ostranie*, making efforts to accommodate radically uncomfortable behaviours. This leaning shows their generosity, but it can also be construed as compulsory or imposed in their progress to citizenship. The Naked Bike Ride, and Brighton Pride, are subaltern demonstrations that simultaneously make a claim on western, liberal, democratic sovereignty whilst at the same time confronting it. Most of these women, although excluded from this claim, made attempts to shift their attitudes toward a sentiment of tolerance, a dominant cultural value that recognises the citizen's right to protest within a cosmopolitan ethos. Depending on one's political viewpoint, their reaction could be deemed 'productive anxiety', but in the British context of anti-Islamic feeling, in which Muslims are berated for their sexual intolerance, the picture is more complex. As Safia says, 'Nudity, it's not bad, I'm not against it on the beach', but she continues 'I remember Lina, what she said was 'which one is better, to walk naked, or bike naked, or to wear hijab? Why are they not

against these people, but against us?’ It’s provoking.’ She continues:

For anyone from conservative background, like Middle Eastern, like me, when we go first to the beach we can’t help but to look at [naked] people. But we think it’s odd - we do look at people, so we start to be decent, we get used to it, not to look at people and respect that even that they are doing it properly taking off their clothes. So we look away.

Migrants can ‘soak up’ some Britishness, turning into hybrid subjectivities that can critically reflect upon their journey of belonging/non-belonging; we know that migrants are unusually highly self-conscious of their personal narrative, or journey, of reflexive subjectification (Morrice 2012, Munt 2011), and by extension empathic to those of their ethnic communities. We subscribed to feminist philosopher Rosalyn Diprose’s (2012) adoption of Merleau-Ponty idea of *intercorporeity*, in which she talks about the irreducibility of generosity as a (cultural) virtue, where generosity has a dual sense of giving and being given. Our experience of working with refugees has been particularly moving precisely because of this spirit of generosity that so seems to typify refugees’ engagement with their new environment, or *lebenswelt*. Their ‘being-in-the world’ strives to accommodate western differences, as my conversation with Tanya suggests:

SALLY: You know I’m a lesbian.

TANYA: I see Jesus within you, Sally.

This generous accommodation is an example of cultural resilience (Elsass, 1992). We are co-constituted by such values.

Safety and danger

In exploring migrant and refugee women’s experiences of British Beach, I will now

focus specifically on the observations of two people: Jo is a 24 year old Christian woman from Sierra Leone, who has been in the UK for six years, who I met on a previous project working with refugees.²⁰ She told me of sitting down on Worthing beach where she was the only black person, and of being watched — or rather scrutinized — from a distance by an old woman. Worthing is a largely white small coastal town just west of Brighton:

JO: When I came first I was living in a hostel. So after one time I went to the seafront sitting down in the seafront then, I saw this old woman. She was looking at me for some while. Then I was thinking what's going on, there is something not clear about this lady, she is looking at me. Then all of a sudden for her to come and meet me said so excuse me, can you forgive me. I said for what? She said did you see me when I was looking at you? I said yeah, I saw you staring at me for over half an hour. She said I was thinking to do bad to you. She said I was thinking to do something very bad to you. She said but something just came to me and I say oh I should confess to you. Then I said oh really. Then I said okay, *God forgives you*. So I think when I was in Worthing I never went to the seafront because I feel frightened. Like being in the seafront, I'm different. Look at me with my skin, my colour, like I'm different... Even when I came here [to Brighton] I never felt good to go to the seafront because it had happened to me on the seafront. ...So ever since it's like I've avoided to go to the seafront. Like I just think differently, you know, in my head, like people will just do something to me, because it happened to me once.

... I can't go to the seafront even with my children. They wanted to go to the seafront, because it happened [Unclear – 00:24:19], so I think it will happen to them again. So I don't go to the seafront. Yeah. I'm just scared.

INTERVIEWER: And do you think it's likely to happen again?

JO: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And do you think it's about being at the seafront or is it about just being anywhere?

JO: It can be anywhere, but it just happen when it's in the seafront, you have many people in the seafront like and she was holding a bag and you don't know what will be in that bag. Maybe there will be a gun in the bag...

INTERVIEWER: Well that must be really scary.

Despite Jo's chilling experience, her spirit of generosity is evident ('God forgives you.'). This threatening example resonates with the more casual racism that can also take place on Brighton beach, such as when Ama was subjected to a passing remark from a stranger challenging her right to be there at all, 'because *you* don't need a tan'.

Safia is a 34 year old Muslim woman from Iraq who came to the UK six years ago and married a British Sudanese man. Both of them met in Baghdad whilst working for the MBC national television station, the building in which Safia was car bombed in 2005. I asked Safia what did she do on the beach and she explained it as a place of refuge where she goes to contemplate when she is feeling sad or overwhelmed:

Reflecting on my life, there is nothing I like more to do. It's the point [where] I always remember my life. Sometimes I forget about the life I used to have, but by the sea I have something to compare it to. To think about my country. There are some things that I really er take for granted. Once you leave your country you start to negotiate a number of things... the smell there is completely different, there in Baghdad, it's a smell of the mud of the river, fertile, and kind of desert, thirsty land, beautiful amazing smell like a perfume. It is the *missk*, the smell of our land, when it's touched by the water of the river, it's reed water, like the Nile, the taste of the water is sweet... Brighton beach smells like fish and birds, I hear the sounds of the seagulls, this is Brighton identity... Whenever I take a picture with my camera [from the pier] it doesn't look the way it looks from my eye so I try to take as much photos as I can but when I go back to it it's never the way it looks - maybe my eyes are wider than the camera.

Perhaps the lens of migrancy is necessarily far-reaching, requiring a wider view,

perhaps the enormity of her experience eludes capture. Pleasure and danger meld together on the beach in somatic tension:

The sea is something very powerful, something you can't conquer, it has a power, it's stronger than you, it's defeating. It's beautiful but something you have no power against and for me it makes me touch my fears more, or see my fears (because it has no end, unlike the river in Iraq which has two banks). When I look at the same time at the pier, it's beautiful, it looks fun, something cheers you, so you have this mix of feeling, it has a contradiction between the sea and the pier and together it's something very nice, it's tickly. [laughs]

The semiotics of beaches

Beaches, to me (as a typical westerner and a keen scuba diver) are symbolic spaces in which sensory behaviours have greater freedom, they are zones of liberty and nonconformity if you will. The easeful possibilities of beaches have a powerful iconicity in western discourses of leisure, they are utopic places of desire, and heterotopic (Foucault 1986) - that is to say they are other-, or non- places of juxtaposition, liminality and eroticism. Of course, beaches are transitional spaces, people visit, but rarely live there. Urbain (2003, 196) has written of how beaches allow the acting out of 'primitive' scenes of topophilia; people cathect to beaches in intense ways. Yet at the same time beaches are also microcosms of morality, as manners dictate what can and cannot be done in the name of freedom, and tourists, with their picnics, deck chairs, and mobile music create simulcra of home. The 'dewilding' of the beach can lead to a domestication of values, resentment, and retrenchment: 125 miles East of Brighton on the Kent coast, is Clacton-on-Sea, site of a by-election for a parliamentary seat in October 2014, which was won by the anti-immigration United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Ten days beforehand, the famous street artist Banksy painted a mural on a Clacton wall showing five grey

pigeons brandishing three placards saying ‘go back to Africa’, ‘migrants not welcome’ and ‘keep off our worms’ toward a more colourful single swallow perched further along the wire. Regional BBC television news that week had locals drawing percentages in the beach sand as to how many immigrants they thought lived in Clacton – numbers like 87% were sketched out with a stick, giving a new meaning to ‘drawing a line in the sand’.²¹

Beaches, with their cosmopolitan tourist mix, are also sites of anxiously heightened performances of national cultural stereotypes – the bare Germans fling their towels over loungers, sleek Italians play loud music, elated Egyptians talk loudly on the mobile phones, Russians and Brits getting drunk in their football shirts, et cetera. Defensive clusters of ethnic similitude can form, and cultural values hotly compete over such embodied signifiers. Geographically, beaches seethe with national values, however they also serve as national borders - Brighton Beach was mined during the war to prevent ingress by foreigners, and to protect the supposed purity of British culture from invasion. The regional television company, BBC South East Today, has regular nightly broadcasts that stir up the current threat of invasion to Sussex and Kent beaches from Sangatte - a French beach port lying across the English Channel, and location of a notorious migrant camp. Seeing South East Today’s footage of migrants trying to row to England in children’s plastic dinghys in Summer 2014 jars the viewer, causing their defamiliarisation as everyday seaside paraphernalia is harnessed to the supposed immigration menace. To be ‘beached’ must come as a comfort to these travellers, plus those migrants drifting on currents around the Mediterranean, hopeful to enter the West.

The English seaside appears at first to be a place of transparent simplicity whose sirens call to us, to relax. After the project ended I met with Safia and her

children on a hot August afternoon, on the beach in Hove. Around us were a large family from Tunisia, who carried their daughter with cerebral palsy into the waves, in her wheelchair. To our right was a lone German woman with her wistful child. Below us were European language students, sunbathing. Behind us, some local secretaries snatched a few quick moments for lunch. Whilst amongst this cosmopolitan providence, Safia tells me in a bittersweet moment over our lunch of Foulles Mesdames, that all the women on the project figured I was gay ‘and loved you anyway’. The beach occupies a special place in our imaginary because it offers such moments of sensory transcendence, of temporary kinship and conviviality (Gilroy, 2004). To some, it offers such metaphors of escape. To others, it is a place to escape from, as Jo, some of the women in the project, and the asylum seekers in Sangatte, would also attest. The beach is a *lebenswelt* that offers a further dimension for cultural organisation. Routine perception of the beach often consists of looking but not seeing, and we would do well to defamiliarise ourselves from that initial ‘over-automatized’ and perhaps filmic response – the totemic beach as paradise/utopia. Instead, by perceiving deeply with all the senses and using processes of aestheticisation, we might see and feel a different kind of beach. As Safia once remarked: ‘maybe my eyes are wider than the camera’. This ‘new real’ of the beach might be more alert to the memories, disaffections, and cathections (and cultural politics) that populate our place in the sun.

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Notes

- 1 A series of reflective photographs taken by the women themselves on the beach walk accompanies this article and can be found online at <http://www.lifeintheukproject.co.uk/a-day-on-brighton-beach/>
- NOTE TO COPY EDITOR – CAN YOU CHECK THIS LINK IS WORKING PLEASE?
- 2 Although some migrants do come from former British colonies, where a version of postcolonial Britishness exists.
- 3 I was the Principal Investigator of this project, which was run with Linda Morrice. Project partners included the UK Refugee Council, and Refugee Action.
- 4 Prior to the Act of 2002 (Home Office 2002) a spouse obtaining British citizenship automatically made a citizen of the other. The law now requires individual applications for citizenship.
- 5 Thank you to Linda Morrice for this summary.
- 6 See Morrice “Anxious spaces of belonging: Lifelong learning and precariousness in British citizenship”, forthcoming in *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 2016.
- 7 Thanks to Elizabeth McDonnell for these observations.
- 8 Not to be confused with the UK Government ‘Living in the UK’ citizenship test.
- 9 <http://www.visitbrighton.com/things-to-do/beach-life> accessed 21 November 2014.
- 10 Figures have been taken from the council’s own information sources supplied by the Beach Office, Brighton and Hove City Council, personal communication.
- 11 The Economic Impact of Tourism in Brighton & Hove 2012. Council report prepared by: Tourism South East Research Unit, 40 Chamberlayne Road Eastleigh Hampshire SO50 5JH p.6.
- 12 Brighton Visitor Satisfaction and Growth Potential. Visit Brighton/Visit England report. TNS August 2013, p.6.
- 13 Equalities Data from Visitor Survey 2014. Courtesy of Brighton and Hove City Council.
- 14 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/coastal-communities/rpt-coastal-communities.html> Accessed 24 November 2014.
- 15 See Lois McNay (1992 & 1994) for works which study Foucault's late aesthetics of the self from the feminist perspective. This is the idea that the self is a ‘work of art’ that is aestheticized through continual ‘improvement’.
- 16 Lebenswelt (German) or “lifeworld” is a concept from philosophy, specifically phenomenology, meaning “the world as experienced” (Husserl, Edmund *The Crisis of the European Sciences* 1936/1970). Husserl was influenced by Martin Heidegger’s

concept of “being in the world” and the concept has also been used by other philosophers of the senses such as Merleau-Ponty.

17 Dean Mahomet also opened the first curry house in the UK, the Hindoostanee Coffee House in George Street, London.

18 See Morrice, Linda and Munt, Sally R. ‘Gender and Sexuality in Migrant Women’s Cultural Values’. Forthcoming.

19 The Naked Bike Ride is a global protest/creative performance, begun in 2003 by Artists for Peace, in which people decorate their bodies and ride through city centres, see <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Brighton-Naked-Bike-Ride/116674705198> and http://www.pbase.com/brianmicky/london_world_naked_bike_ride

20 The Journeys of Resilience project, funded by HEFCE, South East Coastal Communities Project, and the University of Brighton Community & University Partnerships, ran for 6 months during 2009. This research was later published in Munt Sally R. “Resilient journeys: the emotional geographies of refugee women” (Trans. “Viajes de resiliencia: las geografías emocionales de las mujeres refugiadas” *Gender Place and Culture* Vol. 19 (5), 2012 pp. 555-577.

21 The actual figure is 4.3%.

Notes on contributor

Sally R Munt is Professor of Gender and Cultural Studies, and Director of the Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies, at the University of Sussex, Brighton UK. Her research on cultural politics has focussed on sexuality, gender, race and class, with particular interests in asylum seekers and refugees, and LGBTQ. She is the author of *Queer Attachments: the Cultural Politics of Shame* (Ashgate 2007). Her most recent book, with Andrew Yip and Sharon Smith, is *Cosmopolitan Dharma: The Cultural Politics of Western Buddhism* The Numen Series Studies in the History of Religions. Brill Publishing: Leiden, (The Netherlands) & Boston, Massachusetts (USA) (forthcoming 2015). Sally is also an accredited Cognitive Behavioural Therapist.

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