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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inner-city possibilities: using place and space to facilitate inter-ethnic dating and romance in 1960s–1980s Leicester

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Abstract

Applying a spatial lens to the oral histories of heterosexual women who had intercultural romantic relationships in Leicester from the 1960s to the 1980s provides an alternative perspective on their experiences. This article examines these women's movements into and around the inner city, eliciting discussion about the concept of 'safe' places and spaces and the factors that determined the transient nature of these spaces. It illustrates opportunities created for intercultural mixing, away from familial gaze and public hostility. Utilizing such spaces to develop and sustain their relationships reveals a previously unacknowledged female agency that also enabled an 'everyday multiculturalism' in the British city.

Gina, a white British woman, met Alex, her Afro-Caribbean husband, in the late 1970s.[1] Whilst discussing the subject of 'courting' she recalled,

> The black boys were quite interesting…a bit exciting…they could dance really well…We used to like to dance with them and we'd be quite excited for the last dance (laughs)…I can remember at Fusion…There'd be…one end that you'd go to, that you maybe might be lucky enough to have a dance with one of these black guys…

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[1]The oral testimony used in this article was collected as part of the author's MRes and Ph.D. research; this includes 12 topic-specific recordings and 21 new oral life histories. Individuals quoted have been given pseudonyms. Each woman was asked to define her ethnic identity and that of the male partners she referred to. These identities are used when the individuals are introduced to the reader. The use of the collective terms 'black' and 'white' in the text is not designed to homogenize the cultural heritage and distinctive experiences of individuals. The binary terms are used in keeping with their adoption in 'race' discourses during the period under review, symbolic of the 'political blackness' which emerged to counter colonialism and racism in Britain. (See for example, W. Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945–1964* (London, 1998), xvii–xviii; R. Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain 1964–1985* (Oakland, 2019), 4.) Use of the terms also helps to illustrate the historically contingent impact of black, Asian and ethnically minoritized arrivals to a predominantly white, post-war Leicester.

> So…we used to…end up going dancing…it would always be…at some sort of club. And it would be somewhere where [Alex] would be able to get in… where he would be confident of getting in…Because some of the places that I would go to with girlfriends…sometimes they [black Caribbean men] were turned away for…no apparent reason…We used to use…places that were… either run by black people or, you know, there was that sort of vibe about the place.[2]

Gina's memories draw attention to the thrill of the inter-ethnic socializing she experienced in 1970s Leicester. Her recollections illustrate the intercultural romantic possibilities that occurred in the spaces young people shaped together.[3] They show how the use of particular spaces enabled new cultural meanings and relationships, facilitating an 'everyday multiculturalism' in this British city.[4] Gina also stresses that people of colour were not always guaranteed admission to Leicester's social venues. Her testimony emphasizes the relevance of 'place' and 'space' to them as a couple and evokes a more nuanced understanding of some aspects of the historical continuities and change in prejudice and racism in British society after 1945.

The study of the use of place and space by inter-ethnic couples in the British city during the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s sits at the intersection of the histories of the inner city, race and ethnicity and urban sexualities.[5] In his article on the link between political concerns about British inner cities and the fall of 'urban modernism', Otto Saumarez Smith suggested that the 1970s inner city seemed to take on a spatial form which became synonymous with social policy failings and deterioration in post-war Britain. It was 'the physical location where many emerging anxieties that seemed so intractable in the period – about physical, social and economic decline, as well as issues ranging from race to the persistence of poverty, to deindustrialization – appeared manifest'.[6] Most academic literature on the inner city mirrors this conceptualization; it portrays a relentless impression of social and political abandonment, failure and crisis. A major area of historical enquiry has focused on the decaying fabric of the urban environment and deindustrialization.[7]

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[2]Gina, interview by author, Leicestershire, digital recording, 28 Apr. 2017.

[3]An intercultural romantic relationship is defined as one where the man's nationality or ethnicity differs from the woman's. Although the author's research covers a variety of intercultural identities, this article draws only from the experiences of inter-ethnic couples, particularly white British and Irish women and black Caribbean men.

[4]The phrase 'everyday multiculturalism' emphasizes the idea of 'lived experiences' and is credited to E. Buettner, '"Going for an Indian": South Asian restaurants and the limits of multiculturalism in Britain', *Journal of Modern History*, 80 (2008), 869.

[5]Here, the 'inner city' encompasses Belgrave and Highfields, two Victorian-terraced housing areas located adjacent to Leicester's city centre, and the city centre itself (see Figure 1). The geographically defined places represent a contemporary network of social and cultural space within which regular and intentional movement occurred.

[6]O. Saumarez Smith, 'The inner city crisis and the end of urban modernism in 1970s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 581.

[7]Recent work includes Saumarez Smith, 'The inner city crisis'; A. Kefford, 'Disruption, destruction and the creation of "the inner cities": the impact of urban renewal on industry, 1945–1980', *Urban History*, 44 (2017), 492–515; A. Andrews, 'Dereliction, decay and the problem of de-industrialization in Britain, c. 1968–1977', *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 236–56.

The social politics surrounding poverty, unemployment, the immigrant 'problem' and crime and social disorder have also been investigated over an extended period. Here, racial constructs loom large, with James Rhodes and Laurence Brown recently commenting that, '"race" has been *the* defining feature of the "inner city"'.[8] Urban sexualities over the past 200 years have been examined. Although primarily concerned with the British capital, there are examples of work relating to other cities. Historians have reinforced the idea of unstable urban spaces, moulded by the deviant, transgressive and immoral complexities and fluidity of the sexualities practised there.[9]

This intersectional historiography tends to be based on external perspectives compiled from official records, academic reports and media discourses. The lived experiences of inner-city residents and those who spent time with them are routinely hidden. As Lucy Faire and Denise McHugh suggested in their study of provincial urban behaviour in the mid-twentieth century, there is a 'need to relate dominant discourses with the actual practices of different groups of people'.[10] Also, little evidence has been put forward to challenge the existing inner-city mantra of 'crisis', albeit Kieran Connell's exploration of the archives of Janet Mendelsohn provides a useful exception.[11] Is it possible to challenge the idea that rather than being a consistent reality, the idea of crisis was exaggerated by the perceptions of those who peered into inner-city places and spaces? That for some people, these places and spaces actually evoked possibilities and opportunities? It is argued that a closer examination of how inter-ethnic couples sought out and inhabited Leicester's inner city during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s confronts these historiographical gaps and adds another, more affirmative, dimension to our understanding of the British inner city.

Studies of inter-ethnic relationships involving white British women during the first 60 years of the twentieth century show that both the idea of such relationships and the people engaged in them were considered problematic. Highly racialized and gendered animosity to them was openly vocalized. Initially based on eugenics, then social deviancy, deprecation was also riddled with colonial-inspired sexual stereotypes. Public and familial opposition to the relationships intensified in the 1950s as broader anxieties emerged about Commonwealth immigration and its effect on British national identity.[12] Existing historical literature suggests that levels of

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[8]Such as J. Solomos, *Black Youth, Racism and the State: The Politics of Ideology and Policy* (Cambridge, 1988); M. Keith, *Race, Riots and Policing* (London, 1993); J. Rhodes and L. Brown, 'The rise and fall of the "inner city": race, space and urban policy in postwar England', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45 (2019), 3243.

[9]For example, J.R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* (London, 1992); G. Swanson, *Drunk with the Glitter* (Abingdon, 2007); F. Mort, *Capital Affairs* (London, 2010).

[10]L. Faire and D. McHugh, 'The everyday usage of city-centre streets: urban behaviour in provincial Britain ca. 1930–1970', *Urban History Review*, 42 (2014), 19.

[11]K. Connell, 'Race, prostitution and the New Left: the postwar inner city through Janet Mendelsohn's "social eye"', *History Workshop Journal*, 83 (2017), 301–40.

[12]Some studies spanning the first 60 years of the twentieth century, L. Bland, 'White women and men of colour: miscegenation fears in Britain after the Great War', *Gender & History*, 17 (2005), 29–61; W. Webster, *Mixing It: Diversity in World War Two Britain* (Oxford, 2018); E. Buettner, '"Would you let your daughter marry a negro?": race and sex in 1950s Britain', in P. Levine and S.R. Grayzel (eds.), *Gender, Labour, War and Empire: Essays on Modern Britain* (Basingstoke, 2008), 219–37; A. Maguire,

concern about inter-ethnic sexualities between white women and black men then began to reduce. As more women arrived in Britain from the Caribbean, the focus of academic racial discourses shifted to matters such as black women's fecundity and the alleged structural and behavioural problems of the Caribbean family unit. Greater Asian migration from African countries and the Indian sub-continent also became a focus of public interest.[13] Some contemporary sources juxtapose the idea that anxieties about inter-ethnic sexualities were easing and local studies carried out more recently illustrate the social impact of continued degradation and misrepresentation.[14] A national opinion poll of 2,000 people in 1970 found that, when asked what one piece of advice they would give a friend 'whose daughter wanted to marry a man of different colour', 21 per cent of respondents asserted they would 'encourage their daughter to change her mind' or 'try to stop the marriage at all costs'. A further 37 per cent suggested the couple should be made aware of 'the consequences' of their union.[15] The public debate about inter-ethnic relationships, which during the 1950s and 1960s was regularly aired in the 'problem' pages of teenage girls' and women's magazines such as *Jackie* and *Woman*, also emerged in the letter pages of *Root*, 'Britain's biggest black magazine' in 1979.[16] Perhaps, as Clive Webb has argued, it was how and where opinions were expressed that was changing at this time, rather than actual attitudes *per se*.[17]

In this article, I consider how looking through a spatial lens provides a more nuanced perspective of the experiences of heterosexual couples who engaged in inter-ethnic dating and romance in Britain after the 1950s. The oral testimonies of white women and women of colour are used to provide contemporary spatial context, and demonstrate how the formation and sustenance of their relationships were affected by the couples' entry into, and utilization of, the transitional inner-city space of 1960s, 1970s and 1980s Leicester.[18] First, I summarize nineteenth-

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'"You wouldn't want your daughter marrying one": parental intervention into mixed-race relationships in post-war Britain', *Historical Research*, 92 (2019), 432–44.

[13]Webster, *Imagining Home*, 94; Buettner, 'Race and sex in 1950s Britain', 231–2.

[14]For example, F. Winddance Twine, *A White Side of Black Britain* (Durham, NC, 2010), 60–88; L. McKenzie, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* (Bristol, 2015), 66–77.

[15]North England, Private Archive, A selected abstract of inter-ethnic marriage in Britain and the United States from 1970 to 1977 by Christopher Bagley, 24–5 (see author for details).

[16]S.Z. Bishop, 'Contesting romantic norms and prejudice: women's experiences of black Caribbean and white British relationships in Leicester 1960–1985', University of Leicester Master's thesis, 2017, 28–31; Brixton, Black Cultural Archives, Periodicals collection, *Root*: Britain's biggest black magazine for men and women, Nov. 1979 – Aug. 1987, Periodicals/37, Nov. 1979 (vol. 1, no. 1), 'Pillow talk: the language of love: do black men prefer white women?', 6–8 and 10.

[17]C. Webb, 'Special relationships: mixed-race couples in post-war Britain and the United States', *Women's History Review*, 26 (2016), 15.

[18]The women's testimonies are not publicly available. Due to the intimate nature of the research topic and the emotional, social and cultural sensitivities that often emerged and have persisted alongside their relationships, interviewees were sourced by word of mouth and 'snowballing' (interviewees, who trust the researcher and the objectives of the study, pass on details to other women who fit the participation criteria). The women's narratives and subjectivities cover all aspects of the female lifecycle – growing up, adulthood, motherhood and the creation and development of new, immediate and wider family units. The author's research illustrates varied histories of intercultural familiarity and unfamiliarity, established and evolving cultural practices and the development of new forms of Britishness in the later part of the twentieth century.

and twentieth-century immigration to Leicester, highlighting the primary geographical locations where larger numbers of black, Asian and ethically minoritized groups settled. Contrasting perspectives of life in these areas expose a spatial dichotomy, where new residents experienced safety and refuge and existing ones often perceived risk and danger. One particular area, Highfields, developed and was dogged by a disparaging reputation. Women in inter-ethnic romantic relationships who visited or lived there were often similarly labelled. Consistent with Webb's study, public hostility and racism started to take on more pernicious forms. I go on to suggest, however, that emerging multicultural sites such as Highfields, and the Belgrave area, also created exciting social opportunities and a nurturing environment for white women to mix romantically with men of other ethnicities safely away from familial and public gaze. I address specifically how women came to venture into these neighbourhoods and what they found there. Examples of the use of the inner city by inter-ethnic couples generates a discussion about 'safe' space, the dynamism of this concept and the factors that affected its transiency. Initially playing to broader anxieties around the intersection of gender and race, I argue that the couples' use and innovative exploitation of inner-city space facilitated the establishment of these relationships. It was integral to the emerging ethno-demographic transformation of Leicester and, I suggest, was likely to have similarly affected other British industrial cities that experienced widespread post-war immigration. I argue that the historically rehearsed notion of a post-war inner-city crisis masks the experiential complexities of those people who lived in and visited this urban space as part of a nascent, everyday multiculturalism, and were able to use it to their advantage. I also suggest that the women's creative choices and the strategies they employed to enable the development and durability of their relationships reveals an area of female agency currently absent from scholarly debate.

Migration into Leicester and the emergence of a black, Asian and ethnically minoritized inner city

Leicester, geographically situated in the heart of England, is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in Britain. An academic study carried out in 2015 showed that on one Leicester street alone, interviewees were born in 22 different countries and 63 per cent of them spoke three or more languages.[19] Documented origins of the city's demographic diversity date back centuries. Jewish and Irish people travelled to Leicester in the first half of the 1800s, followed by small numbers of Italians in the last decade.[20] Census records of 1911 show that 1,059 people were born in Scotland and 886 in Ireland, and another 445 'non-British nationals' were resident in the city.[21] Belgian refugees found their way to Leicester as a result of World War I. Although diversity grew steadily, the breakthrough towards the achievement of a

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[19]S. Hall, J. King and R. Finlay, 'City street data profile on ethnicity, economy and migration: Narborough Road, Leicester', *LSE Cities, Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science*, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64799/, accessed 4 Sep. 2019.

[20]J. Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries in the City* (Aldershot, 2008), 19.

[21]D. Nash and D. Reeder (eds.), *Leicester in the Twentieth Century* (Stroud, 1993), 182–3.

'majority ethnic' status by 2011 came in the second half of the twentieth century. Post-war migration to Leicester mirrored that taking place in other industrial cities in Britain. European migrants from countries including Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine found themselves in the city during the 1940s and early 1950s as a result of the international political and economic fallout of World War II.[22] People from the islands of Antigua and Jamaica in particular, but also to a lesser extent from Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Montserrat, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago, came in their greatest numbers during the 1950s and early 1960s. They continued a 'modern movement' of people from the Caribbean which was started during World War II by those who served in the British Armed Forces.[23] Migration from South Asia and East Africa was most prominent in the 1960s and 1970s. The volume and ethnic diversity of immigration after 1945 resulted in significant changes to the ethno-demographic makeup of Leicester's inner city. Acknowledging that certain minority groups were often understated in census records at this time, black, Asian and ethnically minoritized groups represented at least 28.5 per cent of Leicester city's population by 1991.[24]

The new post-war arrivals tended to gravitate to areas with easy access to work and where their fellow nationals and other migrants were established. This increased their chances of securing employment and accommodation. It provided a level of cultural familiarity and access to existing support and advisory networks.[25] Although not exclusively, this pattern of settlement resulted in people converging in inner-city areas such as Highfields and Belgrave. These geographical locations are noted in Figure 1. Communities were quickly established, and the tangible presence of the newcomers had both a significant visual and psychological impact on Leicester's city centre as they ventured in to work, to shop and to socialize. By 1983, the ethnic makeup of Highfields and Belgrave had been fundamentally changed. 'People of Asian origin' had become the majority ethnic group in both areas, and although smaller in absolute numbers, about 33 per cent of the city's black Caribbean residents could be found in Highfields.[26]

Highfields and Belgrave were physically transformed. Religious and community centres sprang up, creating focal points for the new residents.[27] Shops selling culturally specific food and domestic consumables, such as hair products, literature and music, opened in response to local demand. Recalling his memories of Highfields, one resident remembered that the 'Caribbean Supermarket…across the road from where it is now', was one of the few places where his family could buy 'traditional food'. Another recalled a small shop that stocked 'swordfish…Rice,

[22]*Ibid.*, 184–6.

[23]L. Chessum, *From Immigrants to Ethnic Minority* (Aldershot, 2000), 42.

[24]*Ibid.*, 49–50; Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries in the City*, 19–22.

[25]C. Holmes, *John Bull's Island: Immigration and British Society, 1871–1971* (Basingstoke, 1980), 234–7; Nash and Reeder (eds.), *Leicester in the Twentieth Century*, 153–4; Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries in the City*, 20–1.

[26]Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council, *Survey of Leicester 1983: Initial Report of Survey* (Leicester, 1984), 17.

[27]Nash and Reeder (eds.), *Leicester in the Twentieth Century*, 185–9; Leicestershire County Council and De Montfort University, *Highfields Remembered* (Leicester, 1996), 20.
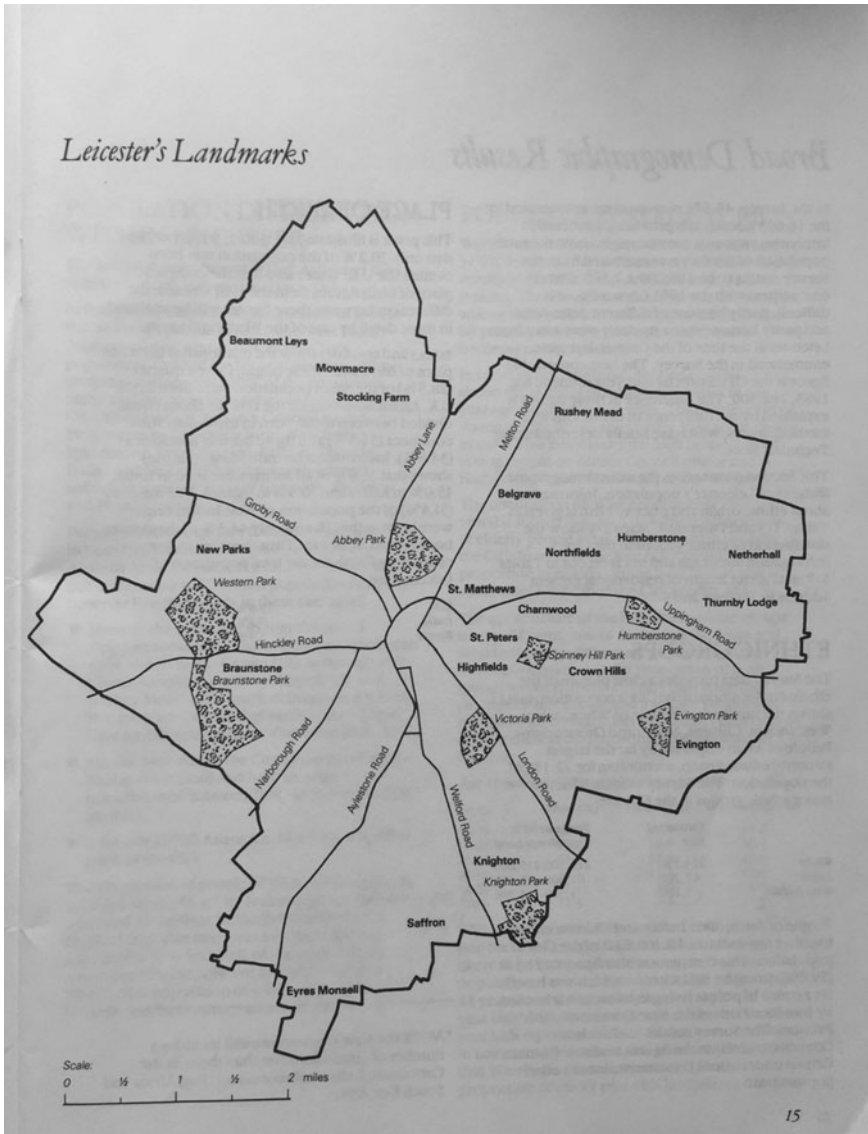
Figure 1. An outline map of Leicester in 1983 denoting some of the city's inner-city neighbourhoods and parks.
Source: Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council, *Survey of Leicester 1983: Initial Report of Survey* (Leicester, 1984), 15.

cornmeal, okras, aubergines, things like that'.[28] The significant growth of the emergent Asian community, officially recorded as over 63,000 by 1983, was more than matched by the speed at which Hindu, Sikh and Islamic places of worship, shops

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[28]Leicestershire County Council and De Montfort University, *Highfields Remembered*, 74.

and restaurants, and Asian-owned manufacturing and commercial premises opened, especially along the Melton Road (see Figure 1).[29] That part of the road that ran through the city's Belgrave area became renowned as 'one of the most striking retail and service thoroughfares in Britain'.[30] It was not just the visual appearance of these areas that changed. The ambience of local neighbourhoods evolved as people of different cultures moved in, moved out and adapted the public and private space around them. Consequently, 'feeling at home' was something that the city's black, Asian and ethnically minoritized population began to do in these spaces.[31] Linda McDowell makes reference to Stuart Hall's upending of the phrase 'the West and the rest' to 'the rest in the West' to express the demographic and cultural changes that took place in British cities during this time in her study of the lives and work of migrant women who came to Britain after World War II.[32] Highfields and Belgrave similarly reflected this inversion. They became familiar and safe environments for their new residents.

Local responses to demographic change and intercultural romance

Some existing white residents struggled to accept the new arrivals and the changes taking place in Leicester's inner-city neighbourhoods. Herbert suggested that this may have been partly due to 'the racialisation of public space', where, for example, 'South Asian clothing such as turbans and saris would often colonize the washing line and shared back yard.' White residents were intimidated by the migrants who 'disrupt[ed] the order of the neighbourhood'. Space previously considered private and belonging to them had become public and available to all.[33] Memories of growing up in Leicester shared by interviewees were consistent with Herbert's analysis. Ellen, a white British woman, remembered her father's resentment of Asian settlement in Leicester. He engaged her and her sibling in a game called 'spot the white man' as they drove along the Melton Road, even though her mother argued against the idea.[34] Priti, a British Asian woman who moved to Leicester from Kenya as a child, opined that their elderly white neighbours moved out of Highfields because it was becoming predominantly Asian.[35] Her insight also resonates with the movement of white residents out of London described by Rob Waters.[36] What Waters demonstrates was considered as a beneficial escape for some white locals created serendipitous conditions for those wishing to recreate and preserve their existing cultural lifestyles and practices.

For those who lived outside the area, Highfields developed a reputation as a dangerous and deviant urban place. Newspaper reports of alleged criminal incidents

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[29]Melton Road is an arterial road that runs from the city centre to the county town of Melton Mowbray.
[30]Nash and Reeder (eds.), *Leicester in the Twentieth Century*, 191.
[31]J. Herbert, 'Immigration and the emergence of multicultural Leicester', in R. Rodger and R. Madgin (eds.), *Leicester: A Modern History* (Lancaster, 2016), 345.
[32]L. McDowell, *Migrant Women's Voices* (London, 2016), 223.
[33]Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries in the City*, 43–4.
[34]Ellen, interview by author, Leicester, digital recording, 17 Jun. 2019.
[35]Priti, interview by author, Leicester, digital recording, 15 Dec. 2018.
[36]R. Waters, 'Respectability and race between the suburb and the city: an argument about the making of "inner-city" London' in this issue of *Urban History*.

perpetrated there, and published over a six-week period at the beginning of 1981 by the *Leicester Mercury*, illustrate how this notoriety might have developed.[37] The story of the criminal proceedings against a man who lived off 'immoral earnings', hosted Blues parties whose music 'could be heard in every house' on the street and sold 'intoxicating liquor…without a licence' was covered.[38] Two police officers were allegedly 'pelted with bricks and bottles' by 'a crowd of about 100' after they arrested a man on suspicion of damaging a police car.[39] The newspaper also featured two stories of individuals who were 'beaten and robbed' by gangs of men.[40] As argued by John Solomos, 'the very presence of black communities was seen as a potential or real threat to the "way of life" and culture of white citizens'.[41] The presence of the majority of the city's sex workers there further exaggerated the area's reputation.[42] Highfields became known as 'Leicester's most undesirable residential area' amongst white locals who lived outside the neighbourhood.[43] Prostitution was highlighted as a major issue in the Leicester City Council's Renewal Strategy of 1977. Officials considered it undermined attempts to improve the neighbourhood, deterring private investment and frustrating the 'development of a community spirit in the area'.[44] Priti remembered feeling unsafe when she walked through Highfields after she and a friend had been followed by well-dressed men in cars who thought they were 'touting for business'.[45] Her sense of respectability was challenged. Areas of Leicester's inner city were indeed racialized, but they were also gendered.

In her work on the inhabitation of urban space after 1945, Gillian Swanson suggested that the ongoing development of urban culture affects 'individual experience and perspective', exposing 'the problem of the subjective'.[46] She and Frank Mort, in his book *Capital Affairs*, argued such subjectivities subsequently manifest a link between marginalized groups and transgression. Both referred to 'interracial' relationships as an example of contemporary transgression, illustrating public anxiety about the 'depravity' of white women who used drugs and had black lovers in early 1960s London.[47] Swanson also noted the connection between this anxiety and mounting ambivalence towards post-war immigration and its effect on national identity.[48] Swanson's and Mort's assertions reinforce the existing historiography

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[37]The *Leicester Mercury* was widely read during the period: S. England, *Magnificent Mercury: History of a Regional Newspaper* (Leicester, 1999), 78, 85 and 106. Most interviewees recalled its presence in the parental home.

[38]Leicester, University of Leicester, Leicester Mercury Archive, Cuttings file entitled 'Crime Highfields Incidents 1980 →' (CHI1980), LMA/2/3/C, box 63, 'Police raid: party music heard by the whole street', 5 Jan. 1981.

[39]*Ibid.*, 'Bricks thrown at police – claim', 16 Feb. 1981; 'Highfields arrest began a "near-riot" – £200 fine', 17 Feb. 1981.

[40]*Ibid.*, 'Man robbed: police seek car gang', 6 Feb. 1981; 'Man robbed on his way to work', 17 Feb. 1981.

[41]Solomos, *Black Youth, Racism and the State*, 43.

[42]K.V. Russell, 'Prostitution in Leicester', *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles*, 52 (1979), 48.

[43]*Ibid.*, 50.

[44]*Ibid.*, 51.

[45]Priti, interview by author, Leicester, digital recording, 19 Oct. 2019.

[46]Swanson, *Drunk with the Glitter*, 5.

[47]*Ibid.*, 153–4; Mort, *Capital Affairs*, 289.

[48]Swanson, *Drunk with the Glitter*, 153–4.

and later social studies of those white heterosexual British women who formed and sustained inter-ethnic romantic relationships up to the early 1960s noted above. Inter-ethnic sexualities and romance regularly rendered the women, as well as their male partners, transgressive; they were acting outside contemporary boundaries of social acceptability.

Interviewees remembered the looks, slurs and inferences they were routinely subjected to, both in inner-city areas and beyond in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. For those who lived in or ventured into Highfields, the ongoing manipulation of its reputation, particularly by those who did not live there, seemed to add weight to the rumour and gossip circulated about them. Joyce, a white British woman, remembered her father writing to her 'mixed-race boyfriend' who lived in Highfields during the 1960s. He told Joyce's partner to stop seeing his daughter, not to take her into the neighbourhood, nor take her back to his lodgings.[49] Sandra lived in Highfields with her West Indian husband. Standing on her doorstep, she watched men going into a woman's house further down the street. She suddenly realized 'that cars were going past me…going by very slowly and looking at me, and I thought (sharp intake of breath)…'. Sandra quickly retreated into the house, concerned that kerb crawlers might mistake her for a sex worker.[50] Innuendoes were amplified when the women had children. Esther, a black British woman of Trinidadian descent, recalled how she was propositioned for sex by Asian men in the late 1970s as she walked along a boundary road alongside Highfields. The men assumed she was a prostitute because she was with her son of dual heritage.[51] The fear of being labelled as such even prompted Joan, a white English woman, to mislead two women about the parentage of her daughter of dual heritage; she led them to believe she had been adopted. Despite being married to the child's father, Joan anticipated the women would adversely judge her for having a sexual relationship with a black man.[52] Assumptions were made about the women because of where, and how, they moved across Leicester's inner city and the ethnic identity of the men they were romantically involved with. This testimony illustrates a historical continuity of denunciation which was visible both in the inter-war period, when white women in inter-ethnic relationships were considered generally to 'be prostitutes of a very low type', and in the 1950s, when such a woman was 'in certain respects a deviant from the norms of her own culture'.[53]

Whether they chose to publicly acknowledge their sexuality or tried to hide it, women in inter-ethnic relationships were required to push against the ideological and geographical boundaries of acceptability. They acquired a fluid femininity that ranged from dishonourable to respectable as they moved in, out and around this inner-city space. The neighbourhood of Highfields also took on a dynamic quality depending on who was there and when and why they were there. The area might be considered a deviant place; strangers assumed women out on the

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[49]Joyce, interview by author, Leicestershire, digital recording, 2 Oct. 2018.

[50]Sandra, interview by author, Leicestershire, digital recording, 18 May 2017.

[51]Esther, interview by author, Leicestershire, digital recording, 1 Nov. 2018.

[52]Joan, interview by author, Leicestershire, digital recording, 14 Jan. 2019.

[53]L. Tabili, 'Women "of a very low type": crossing racial boundaries in imperial Britain', in L.L. Frader and S.O. Rose (eds.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), 172; A.H. Richmond, *The Colour Problem* (Harmondsworth, 1955), 280.

streets were prostitutes ready to do business and some white locals who lived out-side the area thought the place and the people who lived there dangerous and trans-gressive. Alternatively, it was a potentially secure place for women in inter-ethnic relationships as they entered a local pub, club, or the sanctuary of their marital home with their partners and members of his support network.[54] The next section illustrates this side of the spatial dichotomy, the idea that inner-city areas were a safe environment providing women in inter-ethnic romantic relationships with actual and perceived protection from the publicly displayed disdain of outsiders.

The exploitation of Leicester's inner-city space to enable inter-ethnic dating and romance

The idea of safe space extends into public venues. During discussions about her social life as a young woman, Lorraine, a white British woman, referred to the Golf Range pub on Melton Road as an 'in' place.[55] To Lorraine, an 'in' place was 'the' place to be.[56] 'In' places were transient and kinetic spaces, momentarily at the forefront of the city's social scene and a prominent influence on night-time urban culture. Members of Leicester's new black, Asian and ethnically minoritized communities established their own 'in' places. In her study of the establishment of Leicester's Caribbean community, Lorna Chessum argued this was because 'West Indians found themselves excluded or made to feel unwelcome in public places of entertainment and social life.'[57] Gina's testimony at the beginning of the article tells the same story. Herbert went further in her assessment of why Leicester's black Caribbean and South Asian communities felt the need to establish their own 'local sports, religious and cultural activities'. She suggested it was in response to the 'hos-tile environment' that pervaded British politics and urban society during the period.[58]

A black social scene emerged and flourished in 1960s and 1970s Leicester.[59] Similarly, certain pubs along the Melton Road were increasingly used by groups of young Asian and black Caribbean men who socialized together during the 1980s.[60] Who was where, and when, was efficiently communicated by telephone and 'word of mouth'. The promotion of these 'contact zones', as Mary Pratt defined them, was highly effective.[61] Beverley, a woman of dual white British and Irish heri-tage, remembered, 'it was very much, back in those days, if you didn't go clubbing you were round somebody's house with big speakers in, a party…It was like, you went into town on a Saturday and word just got round that this house-party was going on, on that night.'[62] Characterized by the ease, enthusiasm and detail of

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[54]Feeling safe and belonging to a neighbourhood considered transgressive by others is also explored by McKenzie, *Getting By*, summarized on 148–9.

[55]Lorraine, interview by author, Leicestershire, digital recording, 2 Nov. 2018.

[56]Lorraine, interview by author, Leicestershire, digital recording, 9 Nov. 2018.

[57]Chessum, *From Immigrants to Ethnic Minority*, 234.

[58]Herbert, 'Immigration and the emergence of multicultural Leicester', 339.

[59]Bishop, 'Contesting romantic norms and prejudice', 42–7.

[60]Lorraine, 9 Nov. 2018.

[61]M.L. Pratt, 'Arts of the contact zone', *Profession* (1991), 33–40.

[62]Beverley, interview by author, Leicester, digital recording, 29 Mar. 2019.

their recollections, the memories of all the women who entered these multicultural spaces suggest that they offered new opportunities, new experiences and new consequences. For example, Priti, who grew up in a traditional Gujarati household, was asked to describe a night out in Leicester during the 1980s. The anticipation of the foray was clearly apparent as she recalled dressing up, applying her makeup and travelling into the city with her Punjabi friend. They started with cocktails at Asquith's, a city centre pub. Then the women went on to dance at a nearby nightclub, before heading home in a taxi in the early hours of the following morning. Priti's mother routinely asked her daughter to be home by 10.00 p.m., unaware of where she was going. It is not surprising that Priti's excursions caused familial conflict. Priti's mother considered her daughter's behaviour to be culturally transgressive. Despite this and acknowledging the considerable deceit they involved, Priti preferred to persist with the trips and accept the ongoing antagonism she received from her family. Gaining access to social freedoms she associated with being English helped Priti to mould a new cultural identity.[63] The lure of the potential social and romantic intercultural possibilities available to her in these 'in' places was greater than the risk of being found out and repeatedly admonished.

The white British women who were attracted to Leicester's black scene talked of it being different and exciting. Lorraine recalled how she and her friend went out of their way to visit one of the Asian 'in' pubs,

I can't honestly remember why, we started to do this…we used to walk across [an expansive green space] to get there…you'd never do that now, would you…I don't know why we didn't go in the village…everybody else went into the village…she was a bit of a rebel…I think we probably wanted to do something a bit different.[64]

White interviewees often had little daily experience of interacting with people of different ethnicities until they entered this type of black 'in' space. Les Back has argued that such environments 'became equated with black and white social mixing'.[65] Some women had been educated in schools and worked in organizations where there were few, or even no, people of colour. White interviewees found the black music played in city centre pubs such as the George and nightclubs like Il Rondo, Baileys and Fusion compelling. They described the men who frequented the venues as '"cool", confident and smartly dressed'. Julie recalled that the 'smooth "chat-up" lines' the men employed 'used to make you feel special'.[66] The women considered these black Caribbean men were more sophisticated than their white counterparts. Interviewees also made their way to Caribbean Blues parties, a significant proportion of which were held in private dwellings in Highfields. Highfields' residents recall Blues parties in contrasting ways. Denzil and Noel remember them with fondness: 'they were fabulous. You could go at any time and know they'd be

[63]Priti, interview by author, Leicester, digital recording, 5 Jan. 2019; Priti, 15 Dec. 2018.
[64]Lorraine, 2 Nov. 2018.
[65]L. Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives* (London, 1996), 191.
[66]Bishop, 'Contesting romantic norms and prejudice', 43.

going all night.'[67] Conversely, next-door neighbours or older local residents were often not so keen: 'It isn't great fun if you live next door to one…It went on for months…and as well as the OK people there were some dodgy people. We got broken into a couple of times.'[68] The experiences of Leicester residents were mirrored by those who remembered similar parties in 1950s and 1960s Brixton.[69] Back has noted that 'the emergence of a black British sound system scene is linked to the exclusive practices operated in white-working class leisure'.[70] The musical subculture sprang up in cities across Britain, including Leicester.[71] House parties, Blues parties and shebeens were a formative part of the phenomenon; safe spaces that enabled participants to socialize without the risk of antagonism and racism. Both locally and nationally, however, these spaces evoked tension and conflict between the partygoers and outsiders. Those who considered the spaces were deviant protested about noise levels, behaviours and the alleged illegal activities taking place. Such complaints resulted in police intervention and political grandstanding.[72]

The white women who attended Blues parties were either directly invited to them by their boyfriends or by other black Caribbean friends. Beverley remembers enjoying the welcoming and inclusive gatherings that happened most weekends.[73] Contrary to Beverley, Gina found some of her experimental digressions challenging. The party 'was just music, was very rammed, I felt very sick, whatever was floating in the air there, I didn't stay very long'.[74] Gina's anxieties were probably exaggerated by the unfamiliarity of the venue, even though she had felt sufficiently confident to venture into 'disreputable' Highfields. Additionally, feeling safe could be dependent on collectivity. Revelling amongst a crowd of people known to you, perhaps in a multicultural city centre nightclub, was a very different scenario to being alone in a strange, domestic space with a man who might leave you for a while to talk to his friends. Elaine Bauer has also made the connection of 'not feeling welcomed "as the only white persons there"' in her study of African-Caribbean and white British extended families in London between 1950 and 2003.[75] Perhaps for the first time in their home city, these white women felt like outsiders. They came face to face with the sort of experience black partygoers had to address head-on every day. By opening their doors to people from other cultures, Leicester's black Caribbean domestic spaces temporarily became part of the city's black social scene. Invitees were free to enter and make use of the facilities on offer, just like public venues elsewhere in the city centre. The Blues party held in an old inner-city dwelling represents the emergence of a transient multicultural space, which reverted back to a private Caribbean one when the last guest had left. Seeking out and

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[67]P. Walker (ed.), *We Are South Highfields! Life in Our Area Past and Present* (n.p., 2012), 57.

[68]*Ibid.*, 57.

[69]C. Wills, *Lovers and Strangers* (Milton Keynes, 2018), 224–7.

[70]Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture*, 187.

[71]Spectrum, *The History of Black Music in Leicester*, http://spectrumleicester.co.uk, accessed 24 Aug. 2017.

[72]*House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 998, cols. 958–66, 11 Feb. 1981.

[73]Beverley, 29 Mar. 2019.

[74]Gina, 28 Apr. 2017.

[75]E. Bauer, *The Creolisation of London Kinship* (Amsterdam, 2010), 192.

experiencing Leicester's multicultural urban night culture could result in inconsistent experiences in the short term. Familiarity came over time as the occupants of these places learnt how to navigate through a myriad of cultural difference and develop a rapport with new-found peers. As Back suggested, 'Within the alternative public spheres where black music was played and danced to collective sensibilities could be shared, and new ones forged.'[76] Alternative perspectives of Britishness were appearing.

Most inter-ethnic couples contemplated which public places they would and would not frequent. They pre-empted what might happen and tried hard to minimize unwarranted attention. Somewhere that might be classed as safe when entered as an individual became more threatening when ventured into as part of a couple. Consideration might be conscious, as in the case of Tom Murtha and his British Asian girlfriend, Vishva. During the 1970s, they agreed to meet in Abbey Park during the day so that their relationship would remain a secret.[77] In other instances, the choice was more subliminal. Carol and her boyfriend did not have conversations about where their dates might take place, but they inherently avoided visiting pubs outside the city. As a white British woman out with a British Asian man, the couple anticipated hostility from Leicestershire's predominantly white population.[78] These expectations sit within a broader contemporary context. There were certain events and areas of the city, such as Leicester's white local authority-owned housing estates, where people of colour would not go because they were fearful of the reception they would receive.[79]

Beverley's safe day-time visits to the city centre's shops with family or friends contrasted acutely with the experience she had when walking around the city's outdoor market with her black British boyfriend. Her memories reinforce the idea that inner-city spaces took on a dynamic and fugacious quality as Leicester became increasingly multicultural. The couple were seen by her mother. Both women pretended not to see each other but Beverley knew they had been spotted. Her father told her to either give up her boyfriend or leave the family home when she got home that evening.[80] Other women were less concerned about unwarranted attention. Joan liked being seen out with her West Indian boyfriend: 'I think it brought me out of the shadows…People looked at us, because I was white and he was black and I liked that attention…I quite liked being a talking point.'[81] In this instance, what Joan routinely saw as dull and anonymizing public space when she was there alone took on an exciting, showcasing quality. Although Joan's position could be considered problematic if her intentions were to objectify her partner of colour, it is argued that her motivations were complicated by her socialization. In some respects, Joan could be seen as a social pioneer. She found her boyfriend and his culture attractive, but her romantic choice challenged contemporary, racialized codes of public behaviour. As already shown, however, Joan was concerned

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[76]Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture*, 187.
[77]Leicester City Council, *Podcasts in the Park – Abbey Park*, www.mixcloud.com/LeicesterCityCouncil/podcasts-in-the-park-abbey-park/, accessed 30 Jan. 2019.
[78]Carol, interview by author, Leicester, digital recording, 10 Jan. 2019.
[79]Bishop, 'Contesting romantic norms and prejudice', 49.
[80]Beverley, 29 Mar. 2019.
[81]Joan, 14 Jan. 2019.

about public perceptions of respectability. In this instance, Joan reckoned it less likely that she would meet anybody she knew, or who recognized her, while she was out with her boyfriend. Like other white women who ventured into black spaces, she was able to take on an invisible form created by the inherent anonymity of Leicester's public geographies. This spatial concept is something explored in studies of urban homosexualities and which Matt Houlbrook called 'metropolitan anonymity' in his essay on the 'cottages' of early and mid-twentieth-century London.[82] Emboldened by this perceived invisibility, Joan felt confident to inhabit the city's established white areas as part of an inter-ethnic couple.

Temporality also affected the extent to which women considered public places to be safe. Priti reflected that it would be considered unacceptable for her to be seen with a white man by members of her family or the local Gujarati community. She felt pressure to comply with her culture's behavioural norms and uphold her family's honourable standing like many of her British Asian peers.[83] Consequently, she and her white British boyfriend also went to the city's Abbey Park when they met during daylight hours. Located between the city centre and Belgrave, Priti felt confident that they would not be seen there. As they made their way to and from the park, they would not hold hands or behave in such a way as to give the impression they were a couple. The looks that she and her boyfriend attracted made the couple feel uneasy.[84] She reflected that neither of them would have felt 'comfortable' walking along the city's Melton Road.[85] In keeping with arguments made by Swanson and Mort, Priti also remembered that meeting up in open public space at lunch time was quite a different proposition to proceeding into its transgressive privacy under the cover of darkness.[86] Groups of young people of various ethnicities and nationalities used night-time city centre space differently to those who passed through during the day. They frequented pubs and nightclubs that became places of collective, unguarded opportunity.

All interviewees found exposure to aspects of their partner's culture, whether it was food, music or customs, personally interesting and beneficial to their relationships. White women also agreed that the inner-city areas of Highfields and Belgrave presented visually and psychologically stimulating opportunities for them to experience the expanding diversity of Leicester's urban environment. Joan and Lorraine, for example, spent time in the neighbourhoods' pubs and restaurants while they were being courted.[87] These cultural experiences generated alternative perspectives to the tired and well-worn discourses about black, Asian and ethnically minoritized communities the young women were used to hearing in the parental home and popular media, and which were institutionalized in schools and at work. The women challenged the established rhetoric which often shaped their own inculcated thinking. Spaces that were familiar and welcoming to the woman's partner helped

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[82]M. Houlbrook, 'For whose convenience? Gay guides, cognitive maps and the construction of homosexual London 1917–1967', in S. Gunn and R.J. Morris (eds.), *Identities in Space: Contested Terrains in the Western City since 1850* (Aldershot, 2001), 166.

[83]Chessum, *From Immigrants to Ethnic Minority*, 93–4.

[84]Priti, 5 Jan. 2019.

[85]Priti, 19 Oct. 2019.

[86]Priti, 5 Jan. 2019.

[87]Joan, 14 Jan. 2019; Lorraine, 2 Nov. 2018.

strengthen the couple's relationship. Well known to him, the man's own spatial experience provided the woman with a degree of visceral protection not afforded to her when they were in white spaces. She was offered a personal security and anonymity when the couple entered his neighbourhood. People might look and stare at them because they did not expect to see an inter-ethnic couple, but onlookers were unlikely to know the woman, or members of her family. Any judgements made about her were not likely to be reported; her visits would remain a secret. Such perceptions of privacy and safety, albeit fleeting and insecure, are synonymous with the broader concept of the anonymity of the city. The freedom to be and to act as part of a couple was an important factor in the development and consolidation of emotional resilience in the early days of interviewees' inter-ethnic relationships.

Conclusion

The subjectivities revealed in oral history interviews add a unique perspective to women's experiences of inter-ethnic romance in 1960s, 1970s and 1980s Leicester. Ongoing familial and public hostility to the relationships surfaces through the analysis of how women moved around and navigated the transient urban environment of the inner city, contrary to other historical sources that often appear silent on the issue after the first half of the 1960s. The women's memories suggest that the formation and sustenance of their relationships were facilitated by their entry into, and utilization of, increasingly culturally diverse inner-city places and spaces. During the early, secretive days of a blossoming relationship, most couples frequented the inner-city places where they felt safe and at ease and avoided the public and private spaces where they expected people would respond adversely to them. The women perceived and determined which places were safe, when they were safe and when they should be avoided. The choices and the strategies they employed to enable the development and durability of relationships some deemed transgressive reveal an area of female agency not yet historically recognized. The women's testimony also sheds light on how ethnically minoritized women and men were establishing and asserting themselves across the inner city, entering and shaping previously white space and experimenting with their own developing Britishness. Although the existing historiography and academic work on British inner cities of the 1970s and 1980s centre on the idea of crisis, this article illustrates that this construct is not pertinent to those involved in inter-ethnic romantic relationships. The inner city was a place of opportunity and advantage. The oral histories shared show how inter-ethnic romance underpinned a nascent pattern of intercultural dynamics that has significantly impacted upon modern-day urban identities. In Leicester, this has contributed to the city's transition from a predominantly white British city to one which is characterized by ethno-demographic diversity and cultural difference.