Rural multiculturalism? Migrants, antiracism, and convivial cultures in provincial Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Migrant solidarity movements are significant political manifestations that stretch beyond Europe’s urban centres. Yet, their wider antiracist potential requires further examination. Starting with ethnographic insights in community activist groups that aim to create “welcoming” places outside the larger cities of Sweden, this article argues that conceptualizations of convivial cultures help to bridge perspectives on multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and antiracism. Community activists across racialized categories of natives and migrants aim to redefine their small towns towards greater local solidarity. They introduce multiculturalist ideals and recalibrate notions of race through everyday activism, while they also reproduce, or fail to address, dominant racism in domains of gender equality and neoliberal integration regimes. A focus on convivial cultures, which contrast to melancholic cultures where the past of the nation is represented as always more solidaric than that of the (migrant) present, contributes to a scholarship of hope for underexplored antiracism in rural regions.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 January 2021; Accepted 19 October 2021

KEYWORDS

Conviviality; antiracist social movements; everyday racism; migrant solidarity; refugees welcome; urban–rural divide

Introduction

The refugee crisis gave migrant solidarity groups an opportunity to show our support for a different kind of politics. Many of us have been protesting against SD [the Sweden Democrats] in different ways before, like on facebook or in manifestations in the town square. But this gave us a positive starting point: to be for the social support of everyone.

- Linda, in her 40s, moved from a larger city to [town] five years ago with her partner and children

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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I feel that being in this group has helped me understand how Swedes think. But also that we are all the same, if you know what I mean. The friends that I have in [the group] feel like family. It has helped me survive despite missing my own family. And I can extend that help to others.

-Neshat, in his 30s, moved to [town] in 2015. He first lived in a refugee centre, then got his own flat and was joined by his wife and child from Syria

I say this to everyone when they ask how I can put this much time into the work that we do. Being active in [this group] has integrated me. Swedish people are often distant and careful. To experience these friendships is a privilege.

-Gunilla, in her 60s, has lived in [town] since her children were small

Linda, Neshat, and Gunilla are all engaged in activist work for inclusive local communities in the provincial small towns where they live. Their quotes exemplify how their activism includes antiracist elements without explicitly promoting itself as antiracist. In our conversations, Linda discussed how the community group has enabled her to find new ways of articulating antiracism: what she describes as being for particular visions of a future society rather than against racism. As Neshat argued, being part of a community can challenge perceptions of differences. Gunilla described how her activism opposes assimilationist politics that demand that migrants adapt to the assumed superiority of Swedish values; as a Swedish-born person, she describes herself as being “integrated” into diversity.

This article sets out to understand the particular activism that aims to form “welcoming” non-metropolitan spaces and to examine what this can tell us about the possibility to imagine alternative societies beyond racism. The ethnography presented here follows everyday community activists and attempts to understand their work within the framework of Paul Gilroy’s conceptualization of conviviality as local cultures that have a radical potential for antiracist hope (Gilroy 2004, 3).

The rise of ethnonationalist and anti-immigration agendas raises questions about national geographies of racism. In the late 1980s, the small town of Sjöbo in the South of Sweden became a symbol of local racism after an initiative to stop accepting refugees received large support and attention. Since then, however, Sjöbo has also been an arena for antiracist activism to challenge the image of a parochial small town. In the industrial region of mid-Sweden and the farming areas of the South, Linda and Gunilla live in other small towns that are associated with racism and anti-immigration politics, while the town that Neshat lives in “is probably not more SD [supportive of the Sweden Democrats] than other places in Sweden, but there are still many people who don’t want immigrants here”, as he describes it. They all live in places outside the recognized multiculturalism of larger cities, and in the peripheries of how antiracist geographies are imagined. An urban–rural divide in politics, as well as academic discourse on migration, fails to
understand spatial relationality (Rogaly 2020) and risks portraying the countryside as a homogenous “White space”. The towns that feature in this study are located in regions with rural elements, with one town being surrounded by agricultural landscapes and the other two, post-industrial in character, are regions struggling with unemployment and depopulation. Yet, in an otherwise increasingly peripheral rural landscape, these towns are centres (Syssner 2018) where people work, study and shop. These are not homogenous small towns, although nostalgic discourses of a national past fail to acknowledge labour immigration and minorities as essential to these local histories. The population has furthermore changed through recent policies in Sweden, similar to many other countries, which aimed to distribute refugees across regions and small provincial municipalities. 2015, furthermore, saw an almost unparalleled number of asylum applications, which changed the scene for the reception of refugees. Around this time, Refugees Welcome initiatives were prominent in the three towns that feature in this study.

In Sweden, an intellectual field emerged around the possibilities of migrant solidarity before 2015 (Djampour 2018; Nordling, Sager, and Söderman 2017), and this research has rapidly expanded. The Refugees Welcome movement illustrates a repudiation of anti-immigrant discourses (Glick Schiller 2016), and reflects how migration is sometimes essential to local sustainability of labour and welfare (Hansen 2021). Migrant solidarity does not only build alliances but can be understood as transformative for place and community (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Bauder 2020). In a study across Sweden and Germany, Kleres (2018) shows how Refugees Welcome mobilizations were often characterized by compassion, but were politicized to a higher degree in Sweden. The community initiatives in these Swedish small towns therefore constitute an interesting scene in which to discuss the links between emerging forms of solidarity and wider antiracist politics.

Though repressive migration policies have been pointed out as a central node in European racial regimes (Fekete 2009; Anderson 2015), the connection of migrant solidarity to wider antiracist projects in Europe has not been sufficiently theorized. Antiracism includes possible contradictions (Anthias and Lloyd 2002) and creative political dimensions with local contingencies, and is therefore not the inverse of racism (Bonnett 2000). In parallel to studies of how people of colour resist racism, critical research has analysed dominant forms of antiracism endorsed by states (Lentin 2004), and shows that these tend to acknowledge racism only in its extreme forms (Gilroy 2004). Relatedly, these antiracist initiatives tend to acknowledge racism in public but not public racism (Lentin 2016) and can work to de-legitimize resistance (Ahmed 2012). When such public antiracist discourse perceives and presents racism as an exception to the overall “good intention” of the Nation, it reproduces “Whiteness” as a national characteristic and norm (Hage 2000). Whiteness is a central term in this critical examination of
antiracism and is, in a Swedish context, increasingly used to address a “colour-blind” usage of ethnicity and Swedishness (Hübinette et al. 2012). Lentin (2020) argues that, as the current understanding that race is socially constructed has been popularized, race is increasingly avoided as a topic of discussion. Studies on antiracism, as we can see, increasingly conceptualize Whiteness and ask whether society should “strive to eliminate the trope of race entirely or seek only to eliminate the adverse side-effects of racial membership?” (Paradies 2016, 2). Discussing different antiracist theories, Paradies refers to Gilroy in passing, arguing that such “calls to transcend race” lead to a growing popularity of colour-blindness (2016, 5). I will discuss these possible disagreements in more depth in the next section, as they return to the conceptual debates on conviviality.

As racism is changeable and complex, it is important to pay attention to the presence of different aspects of Swedish racial regimes (Mulinari and Neergaard 2017) in a migrant solidarity context. Activism of, and for, deportable migrants (De Genova 2017) is often represented as cosmopolitizing in its effects (Caraus and Paris 2018). Yet, race is not the centre of its politics. In a study of activism in Malmö, Sweden, Söderman (2019, 192) points out that there is a silence around race and reproduction of racism in migrant solidarity movements. Seikkula (2019) analyses this silence in the Finnish context as a failure to acknowledge how ordinary Whiteness is reproduced by activists who protest against anti-immigration racism. In this paper I want to link migrant solidarity, conviviality and antiracism to elicit discussions on different antiracist cultures. Following the call for hope in academic scholarship (Bloch 1995), which also inspired Gilroy to ask: “what, after all, are antiracists in favour of?” (2000, 53), I will present debates on conviviality and analyse these together with examples of small-town community activism. This activism runs the dual risk of being expelled from antiracist attention at the same time as it is being idealized from a migrant solidarity viewpoint that tacitly assumes antiracism.

**Convivial cultures: the coexistence of multiculturalism and racism**

Paul Gilroy hopes that “an interest in the workings of conviviality will take off from the point where multiculturalism broke down” (2004, xi). Though multiculturalism may facilitate progressive conversations of diversity, it produces paradoxes of cultural determinism (Ålund and Schierup 1991) that reduce racism to questions of culture (Lentin and Titley 2011). The concept of conviviality attempts to capture how everyday rituals and interactions in post-colonial cities today entail an unpredictability and malleability of ethnic or racial identities that run counter to top-down state approaches to multiculturalism, which dominated the late twentieth century. Gilroy, therefore,
writes in defence of multiculturalism, but from the specific critical arguments on race and nation that he has developed in his previous work. He disputes ideas of pluralism in multiculturalism because, according to him, the marking of difference in languages of race or culture is a product of racial hierarchical thinking – “raciologies” – that inevitably reproduce White majority dominance (2000). Today, Gilroy argues, racism is only discussed through absolutist notions of ethnic identities and race. The project of launching new vocabularies, of which conviviality is one example, is an attempt at unlocking how diversity is thought about. Gilroy’s arguments for conviviality also build on debates initiated in his previous works: The Black Atlantic (1993) and Against Race (2000). In the reactions to these books, Gilroy has been accused of too easily dismissing other contemporary theories of race and racism as essentialist and absolutist. Robotham, for instance, contends that Gilroy ignores the reality of national or racial identities that cannot be dissolved by an act of intellectual will (2005, 565). Chrisman (2011) argues that the rhetoric of Gilroy detaches the experiences of race from their material contexts as it favours White cosmopolitan ideals over Black identities. “In Against Race and After Empire”, Chrisman states, “Gilroy appears to regard community with suspicion” (2011, 28).

As these debates illustrate, attention to conviviality differs from analyses of how Black, White and other racial categories are politicized. In the following sections, I highlight three dimensions of conviviality that can facilitate a theorization of everyday antiracism. First, I discuss how conviviality has featured in studies on urban super-diversity. Next, I discuss how the literature has identified different tools and resources related to learning to live with differences. Lastly, I present how the negative dialectics of colonial and convivial cultures present an opportunity to analyse racism together with antiracist hope.

Multicultural interaction has been studied as conviviality in city neighbourhoods (Gidley 2013; Wessendorf 2020; Neal et al. 2015) characterized by so-called super-diversity (Vertovec 2007), to frame mixedness in local spaces. Scholars have also taken up the task of conceptualizing conviviality in a Swedish urban context (Hemer, Povranović Frykman, and Ristilammi 2020). Though several studies of urban diversity problematize conviviality in relation to racial inequality (Lapiņa 2016), using conviviality to frame empirical findings of local multicultural interaction differs from the specific notion of conviviality that I want to emphasize in this paper. Super-diversity, namely, has unclear links to antiracism. Super-diversity, Back and Sinha (2016) argue, superficially celebrates urban multicultural since it downplays the persistent role of segregation, inequality or prejudice and therefore erases a long tradition of scholarship that attempts to understand the relationship between racism and multiculturalism. Mapping conviviality as super-diversity, therefore, is connected to the risk that “the sociology of multiculture tends
towards a certain descriptive naïveté” (Valluvan 2016, 2). Conviviality defined as super-diversity lends it an element of spontaneous genesis, as something which likely cannot be socially engineered (Nowicka and Heil 2015). The community groups that feature in this study, by contrast, manifest themselves around explicit multicultural ideals. These ideals are interesting because they tell us something about a political multiculture with the potential of addressing ever-shifting racisms (Gilroy 2019).

In research, the super-diverse place is often represented as an urban neighbourhood. Though Gilroy describes urban cultures in After Empire, his empirical examples of conviviality are few and elusive. Bonnett (2010) argues that this absence is telling. As Gilroy disregards nostalgia as an always reactionary affective force, he is also vague about the process behind his own appointment of revolutionary subjects and “the ordinary creative youth upon whose shoulders Gilroy has laid such burdens” of overcoming the past (Bonnett 2010, 263). A growing number of studies in Britain have begun to extend the spatial focus of conviviality to small or suburban cities and towns (Neal and Walters 2008; Rogaly and Qureshi 2013; Tyler 2017), adding, for instance, the importance of home and neighbourliness (Tyler 2020). These studies also show how non-compulsory spaces, such as leisure groups, may be slow to introduce multicultural diversity, but the focus on shared everyday activities provide strong attachments to local places of diversity (Neal et al. 2019, 105). These findings constitute interesting points of departure for understanding the spatial aspects of small provincial towns in Sweden and the specific composition of community groups.

Ethnographic operationalizations of conviviality show how, faced with competing scripts to explain multicultural encounters, some of which are aligned with colonial or racist discourse, people often choose those scripts that seek to loosen fixed notions of difference by “letting be” (Wise 2013, 40). Thus, boundaries in racialized contexts are destabilized through the emergence of new habits (Noble 2013). To Gilroy it is imperative to discuss how this happens: “Recalibrating approaches to culture and identity so that they are less easily reified and consequently less amenable to these misappropriations seems a worthwhile short-term ambition that is compatible with the long-term aims of a reworked and politicized multiculturalism” (2004, 6). Studying conviviality, therefore, involves being interested in the unfixed markers of difference. It acknowledges the dangerous centrality of Whiteness, but without denying the possibilities of blurring its boundaries in the hope of its future undoing.

The subtitle of After Empire is Melancholia or Convivial Culture? and Gilroy contrasts the melancholic culture of yearning for past greatness, a time when the nation was imagined not to be troubled by ethnic and racial difference, to conviviality that is spontaneous and forward-looking. Gilroy’s analyses of post-colonial melancholia have inspired many studies about race and Whiteness. Lundström and Hübinette (2020), for instance, see racists and antiracists
as complicit in the political melancholic longing for a White Swedish nation of the past, which was also a ‘good’ and solidaristic nation. Gilroy’s arguments on the political potential of transcending race are, however, simultaneously criticized for leading to increasing colour-blindness (Paradies 2016, 5). In line with Back and Sinha (2016), I see Gilroy’s use of negative dialectics as central to his theory and understanding why he introduces conviviality to critical literature on racism and colonial culture. Gilroy attempts to identify a language and a practice supple enough to account for the contradictions and unresolved relationship between everyday racism (Essed 1991) and everyday togetherness. In an analysis that stands out among studies of conviviality, Nayak’s (2017) attention is, for instance, “less with celebrating the everyday multiculturalism interwoven into local-global relations and more with recognising the everyday racism that pulls at the fabric of conviviality and works to whiten the nation” (2017, 291). This is a balancing act of sociological listening (Back 2007): a task of seeing both the front and the back of complex phenomena entrenched in post-colonial existence (Jonsson 2020) and, despite the fatigue of sociological language and methods, doing our best to analyse both the optimism of living together and the embodied experiences of managing racism.

To summarize, this article is inspired by scholars who analyse the political implications of convivial capacities in societies that are not free from racism, and is less concerned with super-diversity of different places. The scene is not a general small town, but a particular political practice of migrant solidarity that has evolved in these non-metropolitan places. Conviviality offers an analytical possibility to see both hope and pain in these political initiatives around migrant solidarity and antiracism. For example, there is a tension between the academic incentive to defend cosmopolitan sociability against proclamations of its impossibility (Glick Schiller 2016) and the importance of also insisting on the persistent entanglements between nation and race that may underpin notions of asylum, human rights or even solidarity. Current expressions of migrant solidarity have provided cases in which Gilroy identifies moments to observe a new humanism (2018) and reclaim a politics of sympathy (2019). Attention to conviviality can help untangle how local migrant solidarity makes possible, or blocks, other antiracisms.

Methods of researching everyday conviviality and activism

My analysis builds on an ethnography of community groups in three Swedish small towns with 10–15,000 inhabitants. I made a total of 14 fieldtrips in 2018–2020 during which I observed events and meetings, had short conversations as well as longer interviews with people engaged in local groups and participated in their social and political initiatives. Approximately 50 people consented to participate after being informed about the research project. In total, 28 interviews between 30 and 90 minutes in length were recorded.
Many of the people I talked to, though not all, collaborate with or are part of the network “Tillsammansskapet”, which can loosely be translated as “Togetherness”, an association formed around ideas of community initiatives for social inclusion. The website presentation reads:

Through local organising we see that we have more things in common than what sets us apart. We will have a significantly better everyday life by engaging in our local community and with each other, by sharing everyday life and working for improvements in our local surroundings.

The groups that I visited emerged around refugee solidarity and some of the people I talked to were engaged in activities without being part of the association. The article does not focus on Tillsammansskapet as an organization, but on the local conditions for antiracist activism.

The community groups are diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnicity/race, and social class. Some of the interviewees started out with anti-fascist convictions, whether liberal, Christian or leftist. Approximately half of those who participated in the events and meetings I attended, arrived in Sweden with the main trajectory of escaping war in Syria or persecution in Afghanistan, and did not deliberately choose the small town as their home. About two-thirds of my recorded interviews are, however, with people who are White and born in Sweden (but rarely in the small towns where they now live). These participants were more available for interviews because of work, housing and life situations that provide continuity in their engagements, compared with recently arrived migrants who are interrupted by migration and welfare policies. Only a few people that I met during the fieldwork were born in Sweden but racialized as non-Swedish because of their skin colour or other bodily attributes, or were born outside Sweden but had lived here more than five years in 2018. Difference and race in my material is, therefore, often connected to discourses and experiences of migration. Not all of the people I interviewed would say that they identify primarily as activists for refugee solidarity or antiracism, but they all consider that promotion of a “welcoming” local migration politics is a major aspect of their activism. The interviews are ethnographic (Heyl 2001) and I have asked questions about the work that participants do rather than how they identify themselves or others. The information that I have, therefore, attempts to represent conflicts and re-configurations that happen through everyday practices, and I have analysed this material thematically.

By the description of these very different groups and individuals, it is perhaps needless to say that the communities had different ways of aspiring to “being welcoming” across the three small towns. In order to avoid generalized conclusions about the individual communities and to protect the people who have shown or described their activism for this study, I don’t name these towns in the analysis and I have masked or changed names.
and other information that can easily be associated to individuals who generously and often passionately talked about their community work.

**Everyday practices: meetings, equality conversations and language cafés**

In order to illustrate what could be understood as situations of conviviality, let me start out by quoting my notes from one of the community groups I visited in 2018:

> Approximately thirty people sit around small tables and drink tea, coffee, lemonade and eat biscuits. Six women, three wearing a hijab, laugh loudly as a young woman translates a funny story into Swedish, which an older woman in the group has just shared in Arabic. At a different table two teenage boys, originally from Afghanistan, discuss a demonstration in support of young unaccompanied minors, which this group plans to organize in the town square. One of the boys will hold a small speech and is nervous, but writes it together with a woman who helps him with his Swedish while her child watches YouTube clips on the phone. The group meets at this place once a week. There are not always as many as today, but several of the people here see each other more often. A few of them play football together and others have small projects around local gardening or crafts that they do together. One lady in her 70s needs to leave early but sets up an appointment with a family from Syria to do homework with two of their children.

The community groups I visited create places to meet without strict agendas or membership. Some participants talk about “meeting for coffee” as a political strategy to mobilize from the “bottom up” which inspires unexpected interaction and conversation. The meeting places come across as unrehearsed – like a town square – and make discourses on problematic ethnic difference that otherwise dominate public Swedish raciologies seem incoherent. The convivial potential in the multiculturalist setup of these meetings rests on everyday activities rather than explicit antiracism. The activist Daniel describes this:

> What we can show SD when they come with their demands, like shutting down opening hours at the local sports club, obviously because Afghan kids play football there, it calls them out. We can just do our thing and show that a multicultural society works.

All groups could meet in non-commercial places, such as church buildings or semi-public facilities, but access required networks and granted no long-term guarantees. Regular meeting hours, however, allowed the groups to meet around events rather than membership. When people walk to these meeting places and are recognized as someone who should be there, without committing to long-term political and social investments, a sense of conviviality and belonging seems to be established. These mundane
events reintroduced the local community to itself in this context, because of
the presence of migrants and a sense of new diversity.

Yara, who was explicit during our interviews about the difficulties of being
a Muslim woman wearing hijab, explained how the group was important to
her: “It’s like no one sets the rules here. I am allowed to be just me”. In light of
a public obsession with Muslim identities that Yara experiences otherwise,
the group illustrates a hopefulness of everyday habitual interactions. Many
of the meetings I attended accommodated all food preferences in a seamless
manner, which can be contrasted to debates that break out concerning the
general difficulty, if not impossibility, for public institutions to provide for reli-
gious diets. The groups also tried to make sure that there was always
someone there who could translate across all languages likely to be
spoken among the participants. For Yasemin, this is a radical principle:

You feel like part of the group, like you belong. We have someone in the group
who doesn’t speak Swedish at all, he has the right to belong. You and I have the
same value – you are not better than me because you speak Swedish.

Yasemin’s description of group inclusion contests a dominant integrationist
discourse according to which Swedish language skills are an absolute require-
ment for interaction. Two of the community groups offered so-called
language cafés. These were organized in very different ways between the
towns and they also changed over time, depending on the participants
and the places where they were held. One of the language cafés was spon-
sored by the municipal authorities and celebrated as a model solution to inte-
gration. Many members told me about its importance, like Hamse:

Because of this language café I could get a job. If you don’t have a job you don’t
have anything. It is what everybody needs. Without knowing Swedish, it is too
difficult.

Raciologies of today are often characterized by neoliberal individualism
(Gilroy 2000), and the structural logic of employability also defines life in com-
munity groups. Hamse described how the promise of economic integration is,
in fact, what encourages many newly arrived migrants to participate. Inga-Lill,
who is one of the organizers, said:

People feel very stressed about their situations. Can they stay, can they find a
job, can they support their families? We try to be there for them, but we are
no employment agency. So I think that many people who come here are also
disappointed.

Language, at these cafés, is an object of political multicultural that members
use in order to acknowledge the worth of people’s skills and knowledges
beyond a shared proficiency in Swedish. People find convivial value in the
small-talk and the activities that they do while learning/teaching Swedish.
Learning Swedish, however, also represents the instrumentality of language
as a tool for integration, which reproduces ethnic differences when members of the community groups treat it as an undisputed requirement for full national membership. As Lentin puts it in her examination of antiracisms, “it is easier to promote diversity than to oppose racism, especially if that racism is the racism of the state itself” (2008, 326). These dynamics and contradictions characterize group events that can be understood as extensions of state policy around (labour market) integration. Still, the collective acknowledgement of integration regimes and the effects that these have on structural racism point at potentials beyond reproducing ethnic and racial privilege. As members of the groups talk about how working to present oneself as employable demands time and resources and is not an equally distributed burden, since cultural and social integration is compulsory particularly for migrants, there is political potential in the multicultural interactions that these language cafés offer.

There are also other dimensions where convivial cultures were interrupted. Yara appreciated the non-communitarian practices of the group: “It is unexpected – the people that you meet. But people can want different things. Still, it is always respectful and it needs to be”, she said. Yara also told me about a women’s group that they started in the community:

If born in Syria you are not allowed to ask anything about sex or the body. So now we have these meetings every month, just women having parties, dancing, asking questions about anything and also closed meetings where we talk about our bodies and things like that. I have learnt more than I could ever believe and I wish men from our culture knew this too.

Birgitta explained her experiences of this group:

We started a project that almost makes me shiver with excitement when I think about it – women’s meetings where we talk about health, stress, anything. And then we have started getting into women’s history, Swedish women’s history over the last 100 years. It’s great because it makes you see that we have been in the same situation. […] I think this is the difficult part. Everything about sexuality, about the scarf, the differences of our cultures – that some don’t want to shake hands because it is too intimate. It makes us play in completely separate leagues.

Both Yara and Birgitta hope to overcome “playing in separate leagues”, as Birgitta describes it, by talking and organizing together around women’s issues. However, in these quotes they reference equality and history in relation to a Swedish standard that places Yara in the role as the student and Birgitta as the teacher. In her discussion on strategies to oppose racism, Lentin makes use of George Yancy’s notions of “whiteness as a form of ambushing” (Yancy 2008 in Lentin 2016). Ambushing is a useful concept, as both Birgitta and Yara, in other situations, talk about the general problem of portraying culture in static ways. In describing the
women’s group, however, whiteness is manifested as a collective pride over accomplishments on gender equality. “Everything about sexuality, about the scarf, the differences of our cultures”, as Birgitta says, appear as examples of what differentiates the White Swedish position from others. When community groups talk or organize explicitly around gender equality, therefore, the scripts available are structured around specific raciologies that emphasize cultural differences. Both Yara and Birgitta aspire for an intimacy in these female relationships, which perhaps prevents them from being guided by “letting differences be”. My analysis does not deny that their meetings in the women’s group may also challenge how they both think about equality. Yet, the available scripts when they explain the women’s group reinforce cultures to be talked about in a decontextualized way, which prevents racial relations of power to be acknowledged. Available scripts view gender equality as a dimension of identities thought of as Swedish. These Swedish identities are represented as connected to a specific history, which is also White.

**Solidarity work and the exhaustion of imperative integration and unrecognized racism**

The fact that not all people who are engaged in the community groups need to work on becoming integrated subjects is sometimes talked about and recognized in the groups. Birgitta has thought much about how integration is viewed in the Swedish debate:

I think that many debaters have a very negative view of integration. We don’t experience all those conflicts along the lines of culture that they present! But sometimes I also think that there is a one-sided image the other way around. I saw a tv programme [about migrants who arrived in 2015]. They all learnt Swedish in a few months, they were doctors and the children were never in trouble. That’s not the way it should have to be either – it doesn’t represent the truth about people’s lives.

The stress of performing integration is also notable as a tiredness among migrants who engage in community groups. Yara, explaining what she likes about the community group and their meetings, says:

There is a fear among us refugees that the Swedes will change us. Or at both sides. That they will change me when I spend time with them, making sure I don’t wear a veil or something. But no, it’s not like that here – there is acceptance. For me, it’s important to have a place to meet people, a place where I can relax and be myself.

Yara is invested in the community group as a regular organizer and describes their meetings as a contrast to an everyday life which is deeply affected by racism in the small town. She described several micro-aggressions: times that she had been verbally abused on the street or ignored by teachers at
her school. I asked Yara if she feels that meeting people in the community group always has a calming effect on her.

No, sometimes I don’t want to see anyone because it’s just too much. In particular when, sometimes, I feel like I belong to the country that I came from. I don’t want anyone, you see, I don’t want anyone to affect me. Sometimes I have to take it easy, sit by myself and think and feel – am I comfortable? To recharge in peace and just think things through.

Yara outlines a vulnerability within the community group, characterized by blurred boundaries between community activism and the hard work of performing integration. In After Empire, Gilroy speaks against communitarian identities, or politically emphasizing demarcated racial categories, as antiracist strategies. The small town offers fewer networks based on nationality, religion or culture, compared with larger cities. This may open up possibilities of belonging to a “mixed” small town, but also calls for an analysis of the particular struggles that this entails. Yara experiences the conviviality of the community group against the backdrop of micro-aggressions and minority stress in the surrounding local community, but she struggles to identify how her cultural identity is mis-recognized also in the community group. Yet, Yara insists on important differences. The habits of the community group illustrate, for her, how racism is overwhelming and difficult to communicate to White people in the group, but not total or absolute.

Abdi describes how the commitment to migration politics in the community group has given him a political platform:

I started coming here when I needed help to finish school; a friend told me that I could get help here. We both know one of the women who works here, she and her husband have helped us with many different things. With their help I organised a talk with people from [a group organising for the rights of unaccompanied minors] because I think it is important that people understand what it is like to be us.

Abdi’s statement illustrates how issues raised by migrant newcomers, failed asylum seekers or refugees with different economic or bureaucratic problems can guide the work of the community groups. Such work makes the community groups relevant to migrants because mobilization actively builds on knowledge about racism and its local consequences (see Mulinari et al. 2020).

Samira, who does a wide variety of community work and organizes workshops with newly arrived refugee women, has experienced racism in the small community where she has lived for many years. During some periods of her life the threat of everyday racism, such as looks and comments at the local café, made her feel unsafe. Turning to the others in the group she said:

I almost feel angry with you because I didn’t get to know about this group before. It has changed everything for me to have a place where I know people and belong. Somewhere to go when I want to go out. I can be me, people don’t ask so much because we are all different.
Samira's statement illustrates how micro-aggressions affect life in small towns and how everyday belonging contributes to new understandings of racism, conflict and safety. I have previously pointed out how gender equality is central in the Swedish racial regime and causes interactions to be ambushed by raciologies. Samira, however, argues that letting differences be, in particular concerning gender equality, is a defining characteristic of the group. In her reflections Samira illustrates how the dream of convivial culture exists alongside racial logics:

I’m an immigrant myself so people speak more freely to me. Can I get them a woman? Like I’m some kind of pimp! [People in the group] get tired of me. They think I speak like a Sweden Democrat and hate Arabs. But I just hate the sexist system that they grew up in.

Samira, who links struggles for gender equality to her experiences from her homeland, holds an in-between position regarding Swedish raciologies. She locates herself closer to “the sexist system that they grew up in”, which is why she sees it differently from Swedish people who take gender equality for granted, she explains. Samira constructs local hierarchies of belonging (Back and Sinha, 2016, 521) around gender equality when she talks about the system “that [arabs] grew up in” and, implicit in her statement, carries with them. She articulates this within a Swedish national discourse where gender equality and whiteness is linked. In such a White melancholic discourse, however, Samira’s own personal history remains unacknowledged. She is unable to move beyond the polarized notions of “a Sweden Democrat” and those who, in her view, fail to recognize cultural conflict. Cultural conflict here is, however, also an expression of asymmetry in the group. Samira’s experiences highlight more static positions between “Swedes” and “newcomers” than what I found in many of my other observations and interviews. Convivial cultures are neither just fully present nor ever fully absent and require analytical attention to processes and potential for disidentification (Muñoz 1999) within these mixed community groups. Though “newcomers” or “refugees” are sometimes de-stabilized as racial categories in these specific convivial cultures, Samira, as a person who continues to be “a migrant” after decades in Sweden, experiences racism that is not addressed in the community group. Although diversity is not the same as conviviality, Samira’s narrative illustrates how the specific composition of people who participate in the groups, including religious and political diversity of the past, affects local cultures of both conviviality and melancholy.

**Small town diversity and local contexts of antiracism**

The members of migrant solidarity groups see diversity of the group itself as important. Yasemin’s group has helped organize a flea market in the centre of
the town square and she explains that this “brings me so much good energy. When we were here in the past, we got strange looks from others who maybe don’t want us to be here”, she said. “Taking up space out here [on the square] makes me understand something about a racism that I am never the target of myself”, said Sara who joined our conversation. Yasemin and Sara express how they perform “a togetherness” to the wider community in order to affect local cultures. Gunilla, a Swedish-born woman quoted in the beginning of this article, described how she, who previously “used to walk around in [her] bubble where everyone was almost the same”, has become integrated into diversity. Asked if she can describe this diversity, she answered:

Now I meet people who work with different things, who don’t work because perhaps they are sick – and people of all ages who think about the world in ways that I can’t imagine just by being on my own or with my family.

Though migration has been a main theme in our conversations, Gunilla articulates age and work as main categories of difference. Naming difference without references to raciologies of cultural markers, a preoccupation otherwise notable in Gilroy’s UK as well as in Sweden, appears as a strategy for Gunilla and others in these groups to recalibrate the practices of living with difference.

The large number of refugees arriving in these small towns around 2015 led people to re-think their communities in ways that were not related to migration per se, which unveiled aspects of small-town life. Yara explains how refugees opened up new conversations about community:

There are people who are lonely. And others who just want more from their community. So I have always told people at the refugee centre when I lived there: look, there are all these people here who want to meet you!

Risks of loneliness were often highlighted and several activists talked about refugee solidarity as subversive to everyday life. “I haven’t worked for a long time because of my issues. I was always an active person before, and I saw that I was needed here”, said Rita, who had lived in the small town for a long time. For our interview, Yasemin took me to a small café and laughed about the limited choice of places to go: “Where I’m from we meet in the streets and talk and hang out. But here, well the streets are always empty and it’s too cold even in the summer”. The intergenerational interactions in the community group benefit both older and younger people in different life situations. “That’s something that we’re not really used to but that makes us happier”, said David, who is born in Sweden. Recognizing loneliness as a problem in Swedish small-town was an aspect of building convivial cultures.

By addressing problems of loneliness and lack of places to meet the group members countered nostalgic notions of a White local community being
more favourable. Instead, people who had lived in these towns for a long time argued that, before engaging in these groups, they lacked a sense of local identity. Marcus, for instance, described how he was inspired by the Ubuntu movement and the ideals of small towns where “everyone is seen and has value”. He understood this as a future ideal rather than a reinvention of a past version of the small town where he lives. Compared with urban settings of gentrification and neoliberalization where lifestyles are geographically separated, people in the small towns share services and infrastructure, which facilitates local encounters across differences. In a discursive divide between urban-as-multiculture and rural-as-monoculture (Askins 2009), these small towns can be imagined as being both, and they are affected by migration in ways that have so far not received enough attention. Rogaly’s (2020) analysis of stories from the British provincial city in the Brexit era, serves as an inspiring example that illustrates how non-elite cosmopolitanism can re-imagine categories of migration.

Nowicka and Heil (2015) doubt whether conviviality can, at all, be socially engineered. The sudden “thrown-togetherness” (Massey 2005) of these small towns following 2015, however, prompted new community activism and convivial practices. I asked Marcus if the group leads to unexpected friendships in the small town. Talking about the relatively newly arrived refugees in the group, Marcus responds: “We don’t become friends really. We do things together, but not friends. Because they want to get into society and I want out”. Marcus’ explanation reflects a sensitivity to the different approaches to social change that inequalities generate. This resembles processes of “commoning” observed in urban migrant solidarity activism (Nordling, Sager, and Söderman 2017) but can also speak to the antiracist potential of convivial cultures. Everyday interactions develop ways to recognize and respect differences without forcing intimacy and a colour-blind narrative of shared experiences.

In a reference to Patrick Wright, Gilroy portrays how postimperial melancholia is institutionalized in neoconservatism’s morbid clinging to heritage/ancestry (2004, 109). Theorizing White melancholia in a Swedish context, Lundström and Hübnette (2020) consider it as a longing for the time of Folkhemmet, or the building the welfare state. This is also, in their view, a longing for a period of White colour-blind solidarity. Alongside this melancholia, however, the observations of everyday activism, rather than the spoken explanations of difference, illustrate how local histories can be re-calibrated towards convivial visions. Community work and everyday solidarity in these groups illustrates how antiracisms also include struggles to articulate hope for new local futures. An interest in the history of antiracism links myriad initiatives, such as internationalist movements, institutional critique and street activism (Bhattacharyya, Virdee, and Winter 2020), which show that a shared understanding of the ontology of race is not necessarily what
connects these struggles. Practices of antiracism produce knowledge about racism, but as a method to understand racism it requires that we pay attention to struggles that also produce unexpected identities (Bojadžijev 2020). A similar case can be made for listening to the negotiations around the local meanings of newcomer, migrant, native or community in Swedish towns. Reviewing antiracist movements and how these give voice to the lived experience of racism, Lentin concludes that alliances are difficult to build (2004). These difficulties can, however, also be understood as a starting point for thinking differently about the boundaries of antiracism, what can happen at its margins and how antiracism is connected to other important aspects of people’s lives.

Concluding discussion

This article shows how migrant solidarity movements engage people with different racial, ethnic and migrant experiences. This gives way to a multiculturalism in places where it is generally not expected, though the composition of diversity differs from that of many large cities. Race, for instance, is mostly understood in relation to migration and entangled with other effects of recently arriving in Sweden. This study, therefore, does not contradict research that illustrates how colour-blind notions of racism are dominant in Sweden and contribute to melancholic cultures. This is sometimes the case also within community groups committed to local and international solidarity. Yet, I believe I have shown that conviviality disputes the sometimes monolithic claim of these arguments. It does so by proving the existence and viability of everyday practices of solidarity able at times to challenge the racial violence inherent in White melancholia. The specific diversity of these groups create specific convivial cultures where language and translation practices are freed from nationalist expectations, where a respectful and unassuming atmosphere is fostered through practical everyday togetherness and where dominant public discourses of racial or cultural difference are experienced as invalid. The groups develop strategies to re-calibrate how they think about differences and sometimes reflect on the effects that conviviality can have when it is displayed to the wider community. These results allow for new ways of thinking about the antiracist potential of migrant solidarity and local activism.

Solidarity with the newcomers de-racialized notions of integration, and helped address other social problems, such as loneliness. Still, everyday colonial convictions of the superiority of Swedish culture ambushed these new scripts when gender equality was in focus. This supports earlier studies by antiracist and feminist researchers, who importantly show how notions of gender equality are at the heart of the construction of Nordic national identity. Adding to this, the article illustrates the strength of this specific colonial
marker of difference even when activists are committed to re-calibrating their assumptions about cultural difference. Though this might not be hopeful for antiracism in its own right, these insights create room for honest and open reflections on racism in Sweden, which can serve as a foundation for stronger convivial cultures.

The article contributes to an ongoing intervention in conviviality research by exploring how spaces outside metropolitan neighbourhoods have the potential to achieve cosmopolitan cultures from below. bell hooks portrays the ambivalences of rural belongings, as a Black woman returning home to Kentucky, arguing that “the creation of meaning – the making of lives that we feel are worth living” (hooks 2009, 1) – represents a sustainability of rooted responsibility that is opposed to the mobile ideals of cosmopolitan culture. The fact that schools, cafes or people are not easily exchangeable in these small towns, is explained by several participants as opportunities for sustainable belonging. Still, micro-aggressions and the lack of networks for sharing experiences of racism in the small-town, are described as exhausting, for the very same reasons. Antiracism has no natural geographical scene if its aim is to open up for liveable lives everywhere. Different practices of antiracism therefore need to account for these ambivalences and contradictions in their local contexts.

Acknowledgements

I thank the two anonymous ERS reviewers for insightful and critical comments. I particularly want to acknowledge that the article builds on the insights of generous and committed research participants. Furthermore, Diana Mulinari, Anders Neergaard and Hansalbin Sältenberg have inspired and contributed to this project during our work in the research group. I also want to thank Stefan Jonsson and Vanna Nordling for helpful readings of earlier drafts, and Peo Hansen, Lisa Karlsson Blom, Anna Bredström and Pouran Djampour for important discussions about local migrant solidarity and antiracism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Vetenskapsrådet [grant number: 2016–05186].

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