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Peter Brooker observes that during the twentieth century the alienated character of metropolitan life 'appeared to spell the end of community.' How do modern urban fictions engage with issues of community, belonging, and social relationships?

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In this essay I will discuss two novels which deal with the problematic nature of identity in relation to community: Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*, discusses the difficulties of integration into larger communities, and the questions that such integration poses for the identity of the individual, while Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* examines the detachment and isolation suffered by a society which has ceased to privilege the idea of community. Georg Simmel notes that communities by nature are defined by their boundaries, and consequently 'cannot give room to freedom and [...] the development of the individual'[1], while Peter Brooker warns of the 'speed, turmoil, anonymity and loss of human association'[2] that characterise city life, and both novels consider the difficulties of community within the chaos and diversity of the city. The concept of community is bound up in a sense of shared identity, while life in the metropolis is defined by a lack of boundaries, and the importance of identity as fluid and mutable, and the two novels that I will discuss deal with the apparently contradictory natures of city and community.

The character of the city in Kureishi's novel is developed through the perspective of its protagonist. Shahid's search for a sense of identity begins with his attempts to locate himself within a wider physical context, as in some way belonging to the city. His preconceptions of metropolitan life, coloured by the early films of Robert de Niro, are shattered as he first arrives in Kilburn. Instead of finding life there 'rough and mixed', he is instead surprised by the area's 'mundane poverty'[3], and the novel's opening pages read like a panoramic shot scanning across the neighbourhood, taking in its 'exhibitionists, gabblers and maniacs' and 'derelict young men [...] crashed out in doorways, with fluids seeping from them'.[4] He wanders around Covent Garden and Leicester Square, but is unmoved, having 'never felt more invisible[5]', and sensing that 'somehow this wasn't the "real" London'.[6] The suggestion, then, is that for Shahid, 'real' London would be somewhere that he is noticed, somewhere to which he feels a connection, and somewhere to which he belongs. Popular culture features heavily with regard to characterising the city, and also in creating a picture of youth culture in the late 1980s. It is used both as a descriptive shorthand – as when Deedee takes Shahid to a party taking place in a mansion, which is described as 'the sort of place an English Gatsby would have chosen'[7] – and, more frequently, to highlight a mood. A walk

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[1] Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds., *The Blackwell City Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 15.
[2] Peter Brooker, *Modernity and Metropolis: Writing, Film and Urban Formations*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/uon/docDetail.action?docID=10039003>, [accessed 02/05/2010], p. 18.
[3] Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 3. (Henceforth '*BA*').
[4] *BA*, p. 3.
[5] *BA*, p. 5.
[6] *BA*, p. 5.
[7] *BA*, p. 61.

around a bleak housing estate is soundtracked by Prince's 'Sign o' the Times', the lyrics of which deal with themes of drug abuse, AIDS, and gang violence, while Inspiral Carpets and the Stone Roses – both bands features of the Manchester rave scene – play as Shahid and Deedee take ecstasy together. Pop culture is bound up in ideas of community and belonging, and for Kureishi represents the basis of a common culture more accepting than the established canon, an argument which finds a voice in Deedee as she wonders, 'how many people knew a book as they knew *Blonde on Blonde*, *Annie Hall*, or Prince, even? Could literature connect a generation in the same way?'[8] Deedee's classes are based around this concept, as she uses the music of Jimi Hendrix and Marvin Gaye to bookend a lecture about segregation and the civil rights movement. Pop culture is tied to identity, with the figure of Prince – whose unreleased 1987 album lends the novel its title – of particular significance. Shahid describes him as 'half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho too'[9] – famed for his constant self-reinvention, Prince is presented as evidence that identity is fluid and mutable, and that this is to be celebrated, not censured. This is a central point in the novel, as Shahid attempts to determine his own identity in a time when others are 'insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew – brandishing whichever features they could claim, as if without a tag they wouldn't be human'.[10] A fixed identity – whether political, racial, sexual or religious – is seemingly necessary in order to belong to a community of similarly-identified people, and Shahid's craving for a sense of belonging leaves him at once keen to define himself, and reluctant to accept the consequential limitations of a static identity. This dilemma is expressed as he wonders, 'how many warring selves were there within him? Which was his real, natural self? Was there such a thing? How would he know it when he saw it?'[11] Moore-Gilbert, discussing the novel as *Bildungsroman*, notes that in this regard *The Black Album* is a departure from the conventions of the genre: 'whereas the genre usually charts the protagonist's *eventual* attainment of a stable personal and public identity, [for Kureishi's characters] maturity consists in accepting as an ethical principle the terminally polymorphous and unstable nature of selfhood'.[12]

In Deedee Osgood, Kureishi creates a character representative of this argument. Her office wall bears the images of Oscar Wilde, Prince and Madonna, alongside the slogan, 'All limitations are prisons'.[13] Deedee's attempts to discover some kind of fixed identity are as chaotic and varied as Shahid's, and similiarly metropolitan in nature: 'she liked music, clothes, men, going out. She was speeding – towards what she had no idea. Nothing would hold her; velocity was all'.[14] Georg Simmel discusses the psychological state of metropolitan indiiduals as characterised by an intensified emotional life, 'due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli'[15], and suggests that the nature of the city, defined by speed and change, causes its inhabitants to be 'dependent on differences'.[16] This is certainly true of Deedee, who, upon leaving home, shifts from visiting punk clubs to doing escort work, before discovering feminism, attending university, and becoming involved in politics. Her influence on Shahid with regard to his identity is considerable; Kenneth Kaleta points out the scene in which she makes up his face as a particular example, not only of Shahid beginning to exploring the boundaries of his own sexual identity – 'he liked the feel of his new female face. He could be demure, flirtatious, a tease, a star'[17] – but also of Kureishi

[8] *BA*, p. 134.
[9] *BA*, p. 25.
[10] *BA*, p. 92.
[11] *BA*, p. 147.
[12] Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 130.
[13] *BA*, p. 25.
[14] *BA*, p. 113.
[15] Simmel, p. 11.
[16] Simmel, p. 12.
[17] *BA*, p. 117.

questioning traditionally established gender roles[18], as Shahid considers that, dressed as a girl, ‘a burden went, a certain responsibility had been removed. He didn’t have to take the lead. He even wondered what it might be like to go out as a woman, and be looked at differently’.[19] However, despite being predominantly a liberating presence, Deedee does, in her vocal dislike of Riaz, put in place certain limitations for Shahid. Ruvani Ranasinha writes, ‘Shahid finds “belonging” or commitment on a personal level equally difficult. He rears between desire for Deedee and fear of “what this woman might want or expect from him[…]” and resents her “confining him”.[20] I would argue that while this is largely true, Shahid’s difficulty is not in committing to Deedee, but accepting that in doing so, he will be accepting tacitly the limitations that a relationship with her demands. The pressure of the expectations both of Deedee and Riaz’s group lead only to greater confusion for Shahid, as he is unable to commit to both, and reluctant to choose between them.

Shahid’s interest in Riaz’s group of fundamentalist Muslims has some foundation in Shahid’s feelings of cultural alienation as well as his reactions to the racism that he experiences in London. He has been ‘seeking interesting Asian companions’[21], and though he is not particularly religious, he is open to the group’s religious conviction, finding himself increasingly interested in their lifestyle. The scene in which Chad presents Shahid with a salwar kamiz – which parallels the scene in which he is dressed by Deedee – is interesting as an example of Shahid’s sense of belonging within both Riaz’s group and the wider Muslim community. In contrast to his feelings of invisibility in Soho and Covent Garden, he feels ‘conspicuous in the salwar’s full and comfortable folds’[22] as he travels on the London Underground. However, he finds that, while his friends’ beliefs are compelling to him while he is in their company, when away from them, ‘he [finds] the world more subtle and inexplicable’[23], and is unable to reconcile his own more liberal beliefs about art and identity with those of his friends. Indeed, there are several scenes in which Riaz’s group, and Chad in particular, attempt to change his views, and in which his attitudes and behaviours are in conflict with the group’s beliefs. Chad’s insistence that pop culture is a controlling and evil influence, from which religion is the only escape, is interesting in this regard: he perceives belonging to a world so bound up in pop culture as a life of ‘crazy slavery’[24], a line which recalls Deedee’s motto that limitations are prisons. Chad’s argument is inverted in Deedee, who is concerned by the power that religion has over free speech, but finds pop culture potentially liberating.

As Shahid’s relationships are strengthened, and his sense of himself develops, his sense of belonging increases accordingly. Even Kilburn, which he initially perceives as an ‘area of thieves, hundred-carat cunts and ruthless detritus’[25], is recalled later with a kind of affection: ‘*His manor* – that’s how he thought of it now. In London, if you found the right place, you could consider yourself a citizen the moment you went to the same local shop twice’.[26] For Kureishi, belonging is less tied up in participation within specific communities, but in concepts of familiarity and self-identification. The novel’s end – in which Deedee and Shahid leave the city together – suggests that a sense of belonging, or at least affiliation, is an unavoidable consequence of living in the metropolis. That the city’s heterogeneity increases the impulse to self-definition, as a means of establishing oneself within it, and that ultimately this search for belonging is restrictive, not freeing.

[18] Kenneth C. Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. 131.
[19] *BA*, p. 118.
[20] Ruvani Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi*, (Devon: Northcote House Publishers, Ltd., 2002), p. 86.
[21] *BA*, p. 15.
[22] *BA*, p. 131.
[23] *BA*, p. 133.
[24] *BA*, p. 79.
[25] *BA*, p. 17.
[26] *BA*, p. 193.

Jon McGregor's debut novel *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, which takes place on a single street in the North of England, draws upon the mundane realities of suburban city life, and renders them beautiful. Its opening chapter meticulously describes the sounds of the city, suggesting that, 'if you listen, you can hear it. The city, it sings', and that 'the song sings the loudest when you pick out every note'.[27] McGregor's attention to the stories of every character on the street clarifies this point: the characters as individuals are alienated from one another, but by giving each of them a voice, McGregor creates a strong sense of them existing as a community.

Anonymity is one of the novel's central themes, made clear by McGregor's decision not to name his characters, but instead refer to them using simple descriptive phrases such as 'the girl with the short blonde hair', or 'the young man with the dry eyes'[28], a technique which creates a sense of detached observation, as well as going some way to universalising the street's inhabitants. McGregor's intention to 'pick out every note', and give an identity to every anonymous stranger, is echoed in two of the novel's central characters – the pregnant girl, and the dry-eyed boy. The latter owns a postcard depicting a shrine for miscarried, stillborn and aborted babies, which contains hundreds of 'identical little six-inch Buddhas, the smooth domes of their heads like pebbles on a beach, numerous, indistinguishable', and is forced to remind himself that 'each one of them has a name', and that though they may at first glance appear homogeneous, when he looks more closely 'some of the figures are dressed up, in traditional woollen caps and shawls, or in baseball jerseys, or with tiny coloured parasols to protect them from the sun'.[29] The suggestion here is that it is important to remember that the mass is made up of distinct individuals, an idea which is repeated in the inclusion of an art exhibit of 'thousands and thousands of six-inch red clay figures […] each one almost identical, each one unique'[30] which is visited by the pregnant girl and Michael, the brother of the dry-eyed boy. The girl wants 'to count them, to give them all names, make up stories for each of them' but finds it 'impossible to even begin'[31], which parallels the dry-eyed boy's frustration when he notes that, 'there are so many people in the world […] and I want to know them all but I don't even know my next-door neighbour's name'.[32] This theme of alienation and detachment is expressed in the astonishment of one character – the man with the ruined hands – at the way a flock of birds can swarm in the sky without ever colliding, much as the street's inhabitants live so close to one another but never connect on a more than superficial level. He also says that 'there are remarkable things all the time […] and our lives are paler and poorer if we do not see them for what they are'[33] – a scene in which McGregor's voice is clear. The pregnant girl never noticed that the dry-eyed boy was in love with her, and indeed by the time that she does know, he has died. Similarly, many of her chapters are characterised by references to university friends whose names she has since forgotten, hinting at the transience of such relationships and the importance of appreciating them before it is too late. Most of her photographs, she notes, were 'taken in that last week, rushing around, trying to make up for three unrecorded years', before people started 'slipping out of the city unexpectedly, like children getting lost in a crowd, leaving nothing but temporary addresses and promises to stay in touch'.[34] Her awkward, distant telephone conversations, in which she never quite says what she means to, suggest genuine isolation and – in Brooker's terms – a loss of human association. Urban alienation, then, leads to life

[27] Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 1. (Henceforth 'RT').
[28] *RT*, p. 87.
[29] *RT*, p. 74.
[30] *RT*, p. 231.
[31] *RT*, p. 231.
[32] *RT*, p. 216.
[33] *RT*, p. 239.
[34] *RT*, p. 37.

becoming paler and poorer, unless we consciously try to overcome it. Anonymity, furthermore, at times gives way to indifferent hostility unencumbered by accountability. Perhaps the most striking example of this occurs when the street's elderly couple, dressed in their best clothes and going out to celebrate their anniversary, are spat at by a boy on a bus, and 'it's only when they have closed the front door behind them that he says what did I do? I didn't even look at them'.[35] The preceding passages featuring the couple are characterised by warmth and the couple's love for each other, and the contrast renders the incident even more poignant, clearly questioning the motivation or reasoning behind such behaviour.

McGregor's choice to emphasise the anonymity of his characters means that the recognition of identity is particularly striking. By omitting his characters' names, McGregor highlights those few occasions when names are used, most notably in the novel's final scenes. The mother of the young boy hit by the car stands by powerlessly as the paramedics do their work, repeating 'Shahid, his name is Shahid. His name is Shahid Mohammed Nawaz. His name is Shahid'.[36] The naming shakes off the character's anonymity and creates an immediate sense of empathy and importance. As the man with the ruined hands looks on, he wonders what would happen if everyone knew the boy's name, if it was transmitted across the world in 'a chorus of name-saying, a brief redemptive span of attention', but when he whispers the name, 'his voice does not even rise above the sound of a passing car'.[37] This juxtaposition of the potential instantaneity of world-wide recognition – the man suggests that the name might be 'broadcast, on BBC and CNN, satellite and terrestrial and international optic fibres'[38] – and the humble reality of the boy's significance is touching. McGregor has confirmed that his novel is set on the same day in August as the death of Princess Diana, noting that the event was the 'sparking point' for the novel. In an interview with the Guardian, he explained: 'I knew a woman whose granddad had died on the same day as Diana did, and she was very upset about how everyone was talking about Diana but nobody wanted to hear about her granddad'.[39] McGregor's novel questions the potential strength of the emotional ties within communities – the public grieving following the death of Princess Diana was remarkable given how few of the mourners could be said to know her personally. The news of Shahid's death would not have been broadcast to the world, but McGregor wonders why the emotional impact should not be equivalent – one life is worth the same as another. It also questions a society in which a sense of community requires the bond of a shared tragedy.

If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things is characterised by a wistful, slightly regretful tone, though it never becomes cynical about urban life. It seems to both confirm and subvert negative stereotypes about life in the city, at once acknowledging that it has the capacity to be an alienating and even lonely place, but at the same time reminding the reader not to take anything at face value, and that the innumerable inhabitants of every city each have individual lives and stories. Like *The Black Album*, it explores the idea that belonging to a city seems to accompany a loss of identity, but unlike Kureishi's novel, it doesn't portray that situation as hopeless. Deedee and Shahid are free only once they abandon the city and the ties of homogenising group relationships, but McGregor's characters discover that such relationships can be remarkable, supportive and hopeful. While both novels identify the metropolis as a potentially disorientating, alienating environment, they also explore the idea that in such an environment, a sense of belonging and community can be a lifeline preventing it from becoming overwhelming.

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[35] *RT*, p. 178.
[36] *RT*, p. 269.
[37] *RT*, p. 272.
[38] *RT*, p. 272.
[39] Jon McGregor, qtd. in Matt Seaton, 'New Kid on the Block', *The Guardian* (2002), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/aug/20/artsfeatures.bookerprize2002>, [accessed 02/05/2010].

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