‘Not racist, not violent, just no longer silent’: aspirations to non-racism

The EDL is widely represented and perceived as a ‘racist organisation’; it is considered to be such by three-quarters (74 per cent) of those surveyed by Extremis/YouGov in October 2012. The EDL itself publicly claims to oppose racism, fascism and Nazism; this is encapsulated in the movement’s core slogan, ‘Not racist, not violent, just no longer silent’ (see Figure 4.1).

There is a degree of academic consensus that the EDL is not a classic far right organisation (see the Introduction). Nonetheless, existing literature suggests that racism and Islamophobia are commonplace among the EDL’s ‘rank and file’ (Garland and Treadwell, 2010: 27–30). This view appeared to be confirmed when, in October 2013, Tommy Robinson cited frustration at a long but unsuccessful struggle to rid the movement of racists and extremists as the reason for his resignation as co-leader. Thus, for Allen (2011: 294), while the EDL might be ‘more fluid and reflexive than other far-right organizations, it maintains an ideological premise that is typically discriminatory’, while Garland and Treadwell (2010: 30) argue that claims to non-racist ideology by the organisation constitute a veneer of respectability only thinly covering more commonplace racism and Islamophobia among the EDL’s ‘rank and file’.

The research conducted for this book – whose ethnographic approach allows declarative statements to be evaluated alongside observed behaviour – suggests a more diverse and complex set of understandings of ‘race’ and racism among grassroots activists in the movement. This chapter starts with a brief discussion of core debates over the contemporary meanings of ‘race’, racism and post-racialism before the understanding of what constitutes racism and what it means to be racist is explored in the narratives of EDL activists. Notwithstanding the argument that hostility towards Muslim minorities constitutes a ‘new racism’, however, the exploration of attitudes to Islam among EDL supporters is postponed until the following chapter in order to allow a detailed and discrete discussion.

‘Race’: buried alive or artificially resuscitated?

How can the EDL appear a blatantly ‘racist organisation’ to those outside it and as passionately ‘not racist’ to those on the inside? The answer lies neither in media
misrepresentation of the movement nor manipulation by the movement but in the contested status of ‘race’ and its relationship to racism and the struggle against it. The issue is how we resolve (academically and politically) the tension between three somewhat contradictory ‘givens’. The first is the consensus that ‘race’ is a constructed category with no biological foundation (St Louis, 2002: 652; Paul, 2014: 703) but constituted, rather, as ‘a practice with no solid basis outside the discursive, material, structural and embodied configurations through which it is repetitively enacted, performed and, tenuously, secured’ (Nayak, 2006: 423). The second is that racism – discrimination against those to whom ‘other’ racial characteristics are ascribed – continues to exist. It follows that, as long as the social effects of being ‘racialised’ are in evidence, then ‘race’ itself is phenomenally real (Paul, 2014: 705). The third widely accepted proposition is that racism extends beyond the biological characteristics accorded to ‘race’. This is often referred to as ‘cultural racism’ or ‘new racism’ which, according to Barker (1981: 16), functions by using the notion of ‘genuine fears’ about immigration to imply that it (or ‘difference’ more widely) constitutes a threat to our ‘way of life’ or ‘culture’. Thus ‘cultural racism’ dispenses with biological determinants and becomes rooted in frames of inclusion and exclusion (Allen, 2010: 154).

It follows from this that ‘racism’ is the most appropriate way to conceptualise discrimination and prejudice in relation to a range of ethnic and religious minority groups – whether or not they are ascribed ‘racial’ characteristics – as well as
non-ethnically or religiously specific groups such as ‘immigrants’ or ‘foreigners’. Contemporary racisms are viewed as taking plural and complex forms and are expressed not least through the coding of ‘race’ as culture (Solomos and Back, 1994: 155–56). Characteristics viewed as inherent to members of a group because of their physical or cultural traits – not limited to skin tone but also cultural traits such as language, clothing, and religious practices – emerge as ‘racial’ as an outcome of the process of racialisation (Garner and Selod, 2015: 12). The crucial property of these new elaborations of racism is that they can produce a racist effect while denying that this effect is the result of racism. The ideology of the EDL, Allen (2011: 293) argues, is one such form of ‘new racism’.

The conundrum here is that the struggle to eliminate the justification of discrimination of people by reference to biological difference (between distinct ‘races’) is predicated on the deployment of the notion of ‘race’. Academic and political argument thus turns on whether racism is best understood and combated by retaining or renunciating the discourse of ‘race’.

Lentin (2008) argues that the conception of ‘race’ is being actively removed from political discourse by political actors not because it has lost its classificatory power but in order that societies are not perceived to be racist. While culture, ethnicity, religion, nationality and (but not always) skin colour can all stand for ‘race’ at different times, she argues, replacing ‘race’ with signifiers such as culture or ethnicity would obscure how racial difference has been fundamental to the very conception of Europeanness and non-Europeanness (2008: 490). What Lentin is suggesting is that while ‘race’ is discredited in terms of any biological scientificty, its power to order social relations remains intact through its social product, that is, racism. Indeed, in this sense racism may be seen as functioning independently of ‘race’, preceding even the stereotypes and discrimination embedded in the ‘race’ projects (slavery, colonialism, eugenics, genocide) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (2008: 492).

The retention of the notion of ‘race’ is crucial, for Lentin, therefore, because it continues to be imposed upon, and experienced as racism by, non-whites and non-Europeans and thus its recognition is essential to the struggle to remove its consequences (racism). In this way ‘race’ stands not for the invocation of differences in human biology but the crimes for which it is responsible (2008: 497). Any move to replace ‘race’ with alternative signifiers, moreover, would constitute an act of dissociating Europe from the problem of ‘race’ and of ‘giving race back to its bearers’, that is, those who have been racialised in the first place as part of the process of constructing Europeanness (2008: 500). The retention of ‘race’ is, in this way, also central to exposing its role in the conception of the idea of Europe, built on the hegemony of Europeans and the subjugation of non-Europeans (2008: 491).

That the retention of the language of ‘race’ is important for resisting attempts to deny, negate or silence it is articulated most eloquently in Goldberg’s (2006: 338) claim that ‘race’ has been ‘buried alive’ in post-World War II Europe. This racial erasure, he argues, has come about in the process of making the Holocaust (the victims of which are portrayed as Jews only) the sole referent point for
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racism in Europe, while colonialism is dismissed as part of European history because it is considered to have taken place outside of Europe and thus be external to it (2006: 336). This burying of ‘race’ in the rubble of Auschwitz’, Goldberg warns, obscures its effects in violence and discrimination across a Europe itself forged in the context of ‘expansion, enslavement and colonization’: ‘Race disappears into the seams of sociality, invisibly holding the social fabric together even as it tears apart’ (2006: 338). In practice, ‘race’ is so deeply embedded in what Europe is that European values and ways cannot be accepted or adopted without being inflected with its other – non-Europeanness – and invoking the crimes committed in the name of ‘European universals’; no ‘common European future’ is possible, it follows, while Europe is divided between those with the capacity to racialise and those who must bear the badge of ‘race’ (Lentin, 2008: 500).

While morally persuasive, these arguments are caught in the theoretical bind of viewing ‘race’ as socially constituted, on the one hand, whilst imparting ontological value to it on the other (Nayak, 2006: 414). This is not to suggest that socially constructed categories do not have real social effects; they do, and their practices, enactment and consequences are open to study. However, in order to avoid reifying the very categories they seek to abolish, Nayak (2006: 415) argues, ‘race’ writers need to develop a post-‘race’ language based on ‘an anti-foundational perspective which claims that race is a fiction only ever given substance to through the illusion of performance, action and utterance, where repetition makes it appear as-if-real’. Criticising Lentin’s simple dichotomisation of racialised identities–subject positions, Nayak (2006: 417) argues that whiteness is much more complexly constructed, making it difficult to isolate white ethnicity from a ‘chequered tapestry of sustained black–white interaction’. This position draws on Gilroy’s argument that ‘race’ is a discursive arrangement emerging out of, not causing, the raciological ordering of the world (cited in Paul, 2014: 703). In this sense, ‘raciology’ – ‘the lore that brings the virtual realities of “race” to dismal and destructive life’ (Gilroy, 2000: 1) – does not bury ‘race’ alive but artificially resuscitates it. ‘Post-racialism’, in contrast, abandons what is viewed as the false category of ‘race’ in an epistemological and methodological effort to develop more accurate descriptions and analyses of social life (Paul, 2014: 710).

As noted above, however, there is a strong political argument for retaining ‘race’ as a social category, while post-racialism has yet to prove it has political teeth. The case for a vibrant post-‘race’ politics has been subjected to critique on the grounds of its abstract and theoretical nature as well as for glibly calling for the eradication of racial marking that may not be missed by those whose whiteness was not recognised as such but which, for minority ethnic groups, constitutes the erasure of an identity and the silencing of racially marked historical experiences (Nayak, 2006: 423). Indeed, not only the beneficiaries of racial hierarchy but also those who have been subordinated by ‘race’-thinking may be invested in its continuation, since ideas of racial particularity are inverted by those subordinated to them to provide racialised populations with hard-won
oppositional identities (Gilroy, 2000: 12). These groups, Gilroy recognises, will need to be persuaded that there is something worthwhile to be gained from a deliberate renunciation of ‘race’ as the basis for solidarity and community that has been created by their protracted subordination along racial lines (2000: 13). Nonetheless, Gilroy argues that racial hierarchies can be countered more effectively when the idea of ‘race’ is delegitimised (2000: 13). Recognising that his antipathy towards ‘race’ comes at the risk of being perceived as a betrayal of those groups whose oppositional claims have come to rest on identities and solidarities forged at great cost from the categories given to them by their oppressors, Gilroy insists that:

our perilous predicament, in the midst of a political and technological sea-change that somehow strengthens ethnic absolutism and primordialism, demands a radical and dramatic response. This must step away from the pious ritual in which we always agree that ‘race’ is invented but are then required to defer to its embeddedness in the world and to accept that the demand for justice requires us nevertheless innocently to enter the political arenas it helps to mark out. (2000: 52)

Nayak (2006: 423), too, makes a strong case that post-‘race’ agendas do not constitute post-political ones. Understanding how we ‘do’ ‘race’ – not least through representations of racialised excess disseminated through global media technologies – may equip us with strategies and techniques to ‘undo’ it by ‘revealing the racialized body as a highly dubious zone upon which to anchor difference’. A post-‘race’ attitude, he concludes, ‘makes evident that our bodies are thoroughly unreliable sources of “race truth”’ (2006: 423). This echoes Gilroy’s (2000: 43) argument that new technologies of spectral imaging of the body demonstrate the internal similarity (as opposed to external difference) of bodies and provide the means by which ‘we can let the old visual signatures of “race” go’.

In practice, however, marrying post-racialist thinking with anti-racist activism remains challenging and characterised by frustration on both sides. While Gilroy (2000: 51) calls for greater boldness on the part of activists in letting go of ‘basic mythologies and morphologies of racial difference’, as long as ‘race’ remains a ‘driver for decision making’ in social and political life then post-racialism often appears impractical to activists (Paul, 2014: 709). Jettisoning ‘race’, it is argued, is problematic because without reference to it, there can be no effective and meaningful talk about racism (St Louis, 2002: 65). Most damning of all is the claim that post-racialist critiques legitimate conservative post-racisms (Paul, 2014: 704–5), collude with claims that multiculturalism has failed, deny the lived experience of racism and thus imply that there is no longer a need for anti-racism (Lentin, 2014: 1279). Post-racialism, Lentin (2014: 1269) concludes, ‘is in fact the dominant mode in which racism finds discursive expression today’. These distinctions and elisions between racism, post-racism and post-racialism are central to understanding and evaluating understandings of racism and claims to non-racism encountered among EDL activists.
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Constructing the non-racist organisation: media lies or a minority within?

Racism is rejected almost universally by activists included in this study and claims to non-racism are made at both organisational and individual levels. At the organisational level, respondents concede that historic links with the BNP and the National Front mean that racist elements are encountered within the movement but remain adamant that this does not signal that the movement itself is racist. Implied that racism has become ‘stuck’ to the organisation rather than the beliefs and actions of its members, its former Chair notes that ‘until I joined the EDL, I never had to … say “I’m not racist”’ (Eddowes, 2015). EDL activists articulate their conviction that the movement is ‘not racist’ through three main narratives: the commitment to kicking out racists; the openness of the EDL to all (regardless of colour, ethnicity, faith, gender and sexuality); and its differentiation from traditional far right parties (especially the BNP).

Kicking out the racists

There is a palpable frustration among grassroots members of the EDL with what they perceive as the media and opposition organisations’ misrepresentation of it as ‘Nazi’ or ‘racist’ (see Figure 4.2). At the same time, many activists recognise the responsibility of a minority ‘within’ (Richard) for the continued public perception

4.2 ‘Racist EDL’: counter-demonstrators’ placards, Manchester demonstration
of the movement as racist. The continued presence of racists or extremists within the movement was most frequently cited as what respondents ‘disliked’ about the EDL. There is a certain resignation among activists that the movement would always attract racist ‘idiots’ (Lisa) or extremist ‘nutters’ (Chas) who ‘turn up doing Nazi salutes and Nazi tattoos’ (Ed). While this can carry a somewhat dismissive tone, respondents are also adamant that the EDL as an organisation does not tolerate neo-Nazi elements within the movement and has demonstrated this through its commitment to ‘kicking out the racists’:

> There’s been many occasions when we’ve been at demos and I did see a lad once and he did a Nazi salute and it wasn’t that far away from Tommy on stage and I heard Tommy go absolutely ballistic and in his own words ‘get that fucking arsehole out of here, we don’t want anything to do with people like that’ and they fucked him off basically, they got rid of him cause they don’t want that sort of thing. (Jack)

Such actions – alongside the presence of ‘Black and White Unite’ banners at demonstrations and the burning of a swastika flag at a press conference – have been interpreted as the strategic deployment by a media-savvy leadership of demonstrative opposition to racism, fascism and Nazism while racism and Islamophobia remain commonplace among grassroots activists (Garland and Treadwell, 2010: 27–30). Extended observation of such incidents, however, suggests this is not a wholly top-down process. Whilst waiting for the speeches to start at the Birmingham demonstration (July 2013), Tim approached me, highly agitated, and vented his outrage at someone displaying a swastika tattoo on his chest. He said that he had told this individual that he was not welcome and had reported it also to the EDL national leadership. Minutes later, Tommy Robinson began his address to the crowd with an attack on Nazi elements attending EDL demonstrations, naming suspected individuals and saying that no Nazis were welcome at any EDL event. In a comment that presaged his resignation less than three months later, he asked, angrily, how such people ‘could have not got the message in four years?’ (field diary, 20 July 2013).

Grassroots activists in this study recount personal stories of encounters with racists where they have personally intervened. Jack – in an incident that at the same time attests to the presence of racism within the ranks of the movement – recalled how, at one demonstration, ‘some of the local lads’ had verbally abused an Indian member of the EDL and he had stepped in to defend him. Ray also tells how he had ‘backed’ a Sikh member of the movement who subsequently left the EDL because of racism he had experienced:

> I can’t be doing with it. He was coming to demos and people who were new to the thing were being racist and that towards him. Well, because he travels with us lot we was giving it them back … because he’s one of us so we’re going to back him. (Ray)

Ray’s designation of those responsible for the racism as being ‘new to the thing’ is indicative of another narrative (discussed below) in which respondents
understand the EDL as a mechanism for learning not to be racist or ‘growing out of’ racism. At the same time solidarity – being ‘one of us’ – is accorded on the basis of participation in collective action (‘he travels with us’) rather than skin colour, ethnicity or faith.

Respondents and Local Organisers cite numerous incidents when racist behaviour had led to members being disciplined by being removed from the Facebook group (Matt), getting ‘a bollocking’ for racist comments (Kane) or being expelled from the movement altogether. At the same time, some members feel that the rooting out of such elements is not conducted sufficiently systematically:

They need to kick out the racists because there is a few in there and unfortunately you know I’ve seen it myself at Manchester, Nazi salutes, who’s doing anything about it? No one. I think the division ROs need to be sorting it out, not Tommy. They need to be watching what their own groups are doing and saying you know this is not right because it is putting the rest of us in a bad light. You know, I’m not a racist. Nobody I talks to is a racist. (Michelle)

As is clear from Michelle’s statement, the claims to non-racism are more complex than a non-racist ‘front stage’ screening a racist hinterland; rather the non-racist self constructed by grassroots activists is threatened by the failure of the organisation to tackle the racist minority within.

Open to all

A second narrative used to counter accusations of racism is that the movement is open to people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds: ‘they might say we’re racist but we’ve got Indian people, Chinese people, black people, and we’ve got all these different races, so how can we be racist?’ (Matt). Statements that the movement welcomes members from many different ethnic backgrounds is heard repeatedly from speakers at demonstrations (field diary, 24 May 2013) and visually demonstrated in the ‘We love Hindus and Sikhs’ placard displayed at the EDL protest camp set up outside Rotherham police station (September, 2014) (see Figure 4.3).

These claims cannot be taken at face value of course. As important as the inclusion of Hindus and Sikhs in the placard in Figure 4.3 is the exclusion of Muslims, while the notion of inclusion itself is saturated with assumptions about power, ownership and access. Such statements serve above all to fuel a particular narrative of distinction from the BNP – since the latter had to be forced to open its membership because its exclusionary rules breached anti-discrimination legislation – and substantiate the EDL’s own claims to being ‘not racist’.

Openness is institutionalised through a number of ‘divisions’ for members of different ethnic and religious groups as well as a women’s (‘Angels’) and LGBT division (see Chapter 2) and the movement prides itself on the fact that
We’ve got people from all backgrounds. Even Muslim members are in the English Defence League. If a Muslim joins the EDL they are tret [treated] just like one of, just like open arms. I’m gay. I was tret with open arms since I first joined. It does not matter who you are or where you come from. (Declan)

Other respondents also cited their own experience as confirming the declarations of the movement as open and welcoming. Lisa, who has African and Italian heritage, describes how initially she contacted the movement via the main national Facebook page and was a little uncertain as to how she might be received but had got ‘a really nice message back saying, you know, everybody’s welcome’ and within less than an hour during the first event she attended (Walsall demo), she had felt ‘comfortable’ and ‘accepted’ (Lisa). Lisa envisages the physical acceptance of her ‘not white’ body as evidence of non-racism among EDL activists and thinks those with ethnic minority backgrounds have an important role in countering media and popular perceptions of the movement as racist, which she thinks are ‘absolutely wrong’. While Ed is not an ethnic minority member himself, the greater openness of the EDL to members of all ethnic backgrounds was central to his decision to leave the BNP, which he accused of having ‘a token Sikh’ who they paraded around the circuit and contrasted to the EDL, which he saw as a more genuinely diverse organisation including ‘Jews, gays, blacks, Hindus, Sikhs’ (Ed).

Of course accusations of tokenism similar to those made by Ed in relation to the BNP have been levelled at the EDL itself. The conscious recruitment of ethnic
minority supporters might be interpreted as a cynical strategy to defend itself against allegations ‘that the EDL is a group of white supremacist, skinhead, boot boys, or the BNP in disguise’ (Copsey, 2010: 21). Indeed, the utilisation of ethnic partners, especially fringe Hindu and Sikh organisations, to construct Islam as a common enemy is a strategy that has been used also by the BNP (Allen, 2011: 288). Observation conducted for this study identified a certain ‘trophy’ status attached to ethnic minority members. On demonstrations it sometimes appeared that everyone wanted to have their photograph taken with an ethnic minority member while the presence of Abdul Rafiq, a Muslim from Glasgow who frequently attended EDL rallies in England, incited spontaneous applause and a chant ‘Abdul, Abdul, give us a song’ from EDL participants in the Manchester demonstration (video clip, 2 March 2013). According to the Hope not Hate campaign, Rafiq was so important to the EDL that under the leadership of Tommy Robinson, ‘Abdul would threaten people who questioned either his sincerity or his sanity, with a beating from the boss himself’ (Collins, M., 2013). However, they warned, under the new leadership, Rafiq (described as a ‘self-hating collaborator’) had become the target of hatred for the extreme fringe of the movement, suggesting openness to ethnic minorities was superficial only. Indeed, some ambivalence about the ethnic minority divisions was encountered in this study too; Ed complained that they ‘segregated’ people and he ridiculed the formation of a Travellers’ division as ‘stupid’.

Nonetheless, in this ethnographic study both Sikh and Muslim members of the EDL were encountered at local demonstrations (field diary, 12 January 2013) and divisional meetings (field diary, 19 October 2012; field diary, 31 August 2012). At one such meeting, one of the agenda items concerned reports of verbal abuse in relation to one of the Sikh members of the division. A number of members spoke of their anger at this and it was resolved to ensure that such abuse was not tolerated (field diary, 31 August 2012). Whether this constitutes tokenism or not, it is certainly symbolically important to EDL members to be able to counter accusations of racism through evidence of being ‘open to all’ and particular weight is attached to incidents in which respondents feel that the prejudices of others are challenged:

We done a flash in [names town]. We gone into the town doing our chanting. There was a group of about five black lads. ‘You racists. Fuck off out the town.’ So a group of us run over ‘Why are we racist? Why are we racist? You can come and join us if you want.’ ‘No, you’re racist.’ As soon as we’ve explained and then they’ve gone on the net, they’ve gone on the official EDL page, and they’ve read about it. ‘Oh, we thought you was against everyone and everything.’ … And then they come and just stand with us. A couple of them still come on demos now.

(Chris)

The significance of such narratives, it will be argued in Chapter 8, is not purely symbolic but reflects also the importance attached to ‘being heard’ or ‘getting your point across’ by movement activists.
Beyond the racist BNP

Common shorthand for expressing the non-racism of the EDL was to contrast it with the BNP. While much is made of the historical links between the EDL and the BNP, only two respondents in this study had previously been members of the party and although nine respondents said they had or would vote for the BNP, despite reservations about it, the same number said they would never vote for the party. When criticising the BNP, the party is generally dismissed as a ‘bunch of racists’ or ‘Nazis’ (Neil, Chris, Connor, Euan, Kane, Lisa, Michelle, Richard, Tim, Tina) with whom respondents do not want to be associated. Brett, when asked why he had become involved in the EDL rather than the BNP or the National Front, stated simply, ‘cause the BNP are racist’, while, for Chas,

it’s only for like the really extreme. You look at their sort of opinions like they don’t like gay people, they don’t want black people, they got forced to have multicultural people in their party. Hell I mean it says it all. I’m all for gay people. I got no problems with ‘em. I got no problem with black people so no I could never be part of them. (Chas)

This distinction, and its limitations, was observed in action during an informal conversation between an EDL member, one of a group with whom the researcher had travelled to a flash demo in a neighbouring town, and a local BNP member who had come along to the demonstration. In the course of the conversation, the BNP member noted that he thought the EDL ‘has got some things right but not the fact that they are not racist’. ‘If you’re not white’, he continued, ‘you’re not right’. This kind of slogan was never used within the EDL milieu I encountered and the EDL member present at the time responds that for him ‘this isn’t the issue’. However, he does not challenge the racism of the BNP member and responds with understanding, noting that he is ex-National Front himself (field diary, 18 May 2013).

Thus, in differentiating the movement from the BNP, respondents sought to make a general case that the EDL was not a traditional far right organisation. This is based primarily on the lack of recognition of the gamut of traditional ‘far right’ ideologies in favour of a ‘single issue’ focus. However, this only confirms the ‘non-racist’ status of the movement if Islamophobia is excluded as a form of racism. This is evident in Brett’s attempt to define the difference for him between the EDL and the BNP:

because the EDL stand for the country, they [the BNP] stand against just like generally skin colour … we stand for against religion, against their actual religion not their skin colour. I mean you’ve got Muslim, you’ve got Sikh, you’ve got just generally Indian people but it’s not like we are targeting at the skin colour, it’s at the one religion Muslim. What within the religion is wrong. (Brett)

Here the reduction of racism literally to the colour of one’s skin and the inability to recognise the relationship between prejudice on the basis of ethnicity or
religion and biological racism is self-evident. This is returned to below since it constitutes the mechanism by which Islam and Muslims are rejected as possible objects of racism as individuals construct their ‘non-racist’ selves.

**Constructing the non-racist self: understandings of racism**

Claims made (usually spontaneously) in the course of interviews and informal conversations about the non-racist nature of the movement were followed up by the interviewer with questions about how respondents, as individuals, understood ‘racism’ and why, in their view, the hostility they extended to Islam and Muslims did not constitute ‘racism’. This probing revealed that activists make sense of their own anti-Islam or anti-Muslim views within a wider perception of the individual self as not-racist. Respondents construct these non-racist selves by evidence of their own proximity and comfortableness with non-white bodies whilst excluding their sites of discomfort – with Muslims – as not a question of ‘race’. This leaves room within the movement for those who recognise racial ‘difference’ as more than socially constructed (although not grounds for prejudice or discrimination) or who uphold forms of ‘new’ or ‘cultural’ racism in which ‘difference’ is identified and articulated as presenting a threat to ‘our way of life’.

‘Some of my best mates are black … ’

The importance of physical proximity and body to the understanding of racism and non-racism is evident in the fact that this self-description is frequently, and spontaneously, substantiated by references to having closeness to non-white bodies. Thus individuals often explain that they are personally not racist by talking about family and friends from ethnic minority groups. Jack states ‘my best friend is Indian’, Michelle that she had ‘good friends that are like Caribbean and stuff like that, a good Chinese friend’. Tim, who named Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King as among those who influenced him most politically, recounts how one of his best friends – described as a ‘big black guy’ in a way that marks out the body as a site of embracing ‘otherness’ – had backed him up when he had been stopped in the street and accused of being racist because of his EDL membership. For Mike, accusations by the UAF of being a racist are undermined by his revelation that his ex-wife is Jamaican while Carlie finds the suggestion that she is racist preposterous: ‘I can’t be called racist cause I’ve got that many coloureds in my family. Try telling them that I’m racist’ (Carlie). The shared logic behind these statements is that, if you personally are not prejudiced against people of other ethnicities (evidenced by the fact that you have ‘black mates’ or family) and those same people support, and even join, the EDL, then the organisation and its members cannot be racist: ‘How can anybody be a racist today? I’ve got black mates who support the EDL. I’ve got Sikh mates, I’ve got Indian mates’ (Declan). Moreover, such statements imply that all non-white bodies are the same; lack of racism towards one group is assumed to be evidence of lack of racism towards all.
These narratives are genuine in as much as they are based on real relationships. However, public perceptions of the EDL as racist mean that demonstrating non-racism takes on a particular significance. A story told by one of the local ‘admins’ (but repeated frequently by others, indicating its significance in countering accusations of racism) was designed to illustrate the gap between perceptions and reality. The woman in question had been living at a refuge for victims of domestic abuse and, during a training course organised by the refuge, another resident – a young Muslim woman – had become upset when a video on domestic violence was shown. The EDL activist had looked after her – made her tea, got tissues, tried to console her – and, she said, this had led to an open exchange about ‘customs’ in the Muslim community around violence to women and about the EDL. Having seen the EDL activist’s response to this young woman, the course tutor was reported as saying that though she had been worried initially (when she had seen her EDL tattoo) she now knew that she ‘wasn’t any kind of racist’ (field diary, 1 December 2012). At one level this story is another example designed to demonstrate that the EDL does not conform to its public image. At another level, however, it suggests that not only friendship and kinship but also gender can be a source of solidarity that crosses racialised difference.

**Understanding racism: back to bodies?**

Neither the existence of ‘race’ nor of its consequences – racism – is refuted by respondents in this study. They recognise that racist hatred and violence exist, but their practice is universally denied in relation to self or (most) others in the movement. This rejection of any self-ascription of racism is rooted in a simple, and narrow, definition of racism: ‘to me to be a racist is to hate another race of people which I don’t’ (Mike).

Such definitions when deployed by respondents do not engage with the complexities of post-racialist arguments. They are underpinned, usually, by what respondents would think of as a ‘common-sense’ understanding of the existence of bodily inscribed differences between people – in the statement above, for example, Mike talks about ‘another race of people’ as if ‘race’ is real rather than constructed – but that these differences should not be the source of rejection, revulsion, hatred or discrimination. The following ironic exchange between two women respondents who were close friends captures this engagement with ‘race’ as Lisa explains why some people (outside the EDL) do not understand why she is a member of a movement they associate with white racists:

**Lisa:** They just don’t understand cause you know I’m not white. I’m not black but…

**Rachel:** Aren’t ya? You’re not white?

**Lisa:** No. I fucking keep scrubbing it but it’s not happening man.

Lisa sees ‘race’ as inscribed in the colour of one’s skin notwithstanding the fact that her mixed heritage means she feels herself neither white nor black and that
she can laugh at the racist imagination that black skins can be scrubbed clean to reveal white skins beneath. In this way, respondents treat ‘race’ – and its consequences in racism – as real rather than constructed. Only in the case of fringe members of the movement, who identify themselves as national socialists and are themselves highly critical of the EDL, however, is ‘race’ actively mobilised as a biologically rooted category imbued with notions of superiority and inferiority (see below). Most respondents thus, in some sense, adopt a post-‘race’ stance that imagines solidarities and social bonds overriding ‘racial’ difference. Mike describes himself as ‘colour-blind’ and prioritises loyalty over other forms of solidarity: ‘I don’t care what colour you are cause if you’ve got my back I’ll have your back’ (Mike). Declan, whilst again not challenging the existence of ‘the white race and the black race’, rejects it as a site of belonging or animosity, declaring that ‘I’m human race. Nothing to do with colour with me’ (Declan).

Of course both Mike and Declan’s whiteness affords them the privilege of feeling themselves to be unracialised or colour-free. Indeed, the position most respondents adopt is not that of critical post-racialism but closer to conservative post-racism, of the kind criticised for ignoring continued racial stratification and racist discrimination (Paul, 2014: 704–5). This is reflected also in how they define what constitutes racism. When talking about racism, respondents did not talk about institutional racism or structurally rooted discrimination but most frequently referred to individual expressions of verbal abuse or name-calling directed at those whose bodies mark them out as racially or ethnically ‘other’: ‘Why am I not a racist? Because I don’t go round saying … “You’re a fucking Paki, I don’t like you”, you know what I mean? … That, to me, is a racist’ (Jason). Tina confirms this definition of racism: ‘Racist is like if I was to go out and call a black person a racist name, do you know what I mean? Or call an Asian person a Paki.’ For some, the use of such racist language is in fact seen as a reliable indicator of someone who does not support the EDL. Discussing how you identify an infiltrator or ‘troll’ either at a demo or online, two respondents suggested that the use of racist language was indicative: ‘Then they say “Pakis” and things like that. Then you know 100 per cent that they ain’t one of us’ (Ray). As Ray resists the projection of what he considers to be racist terminology onto the EDL and excludes those using such language from ‘one of us’, the layers of reflexivity in how respondents understand ‘racism’ becomes apparent. Kane spells this distinction out further, and seeks to mobilise those ‘others’ he has personal contact with to substantiate his own understanding of what is, and is not, racist. In the following interview excerpt Kane is responding to the researcher’s probing of what being ‘racist’ means to him:

KANE: Erm, nigger, Muzzie, well Muzzie ain’t even bad, Paki, that’s bad.
INT: Why is ‘Muzzie’ okay and ‘Paki’ bad? …
KANE: They take it as alright. Cause I’ve actually spoke to them and sat down, the name was [names person], Muslim geezer and ‘what do you take as racist?’ He says ‘Paki’, Mars bar he has been called in the past. I says if I called you a Muzzie stuff like that, [he] says ‘I am Muslim though, Muzzie don’t bother me, it’s just like a short word in’t it?’ ‘What about Paki?’ ‘Aye saying that. That’s just over the
top.’ He was telling me all the different words that people have called him in the
past and he just told me he says there ain’t no point in it.

What is striking from this exchange is the naivety of this young respondent
and the failure to understand how ethnicity and religion intersect or how terms
used by different people, and in different contexts, can have different meanings.
This is identified by Nayak (2003: 149) also in young people’s confusion about
why white racial epithets are not construed as forms of racist name-calling in
the way that terms such as ‘Paki’ are saturated with racist power because of the
different structural – dominant and subordinate – positions white and black stu-
dents occupy in racialised social relations. However, it also constitutes a genuine
exchange, a way of talking, about racism. In this sense it differs, I would argue,
from the strategic dodging of the racist label whilst engaging in homogenising
and derogatory representations of groups who are both religiously and ethnically
defined. Such lip-service to being ‘not racist’ can be found also in the EDL. At a
demonstration in Rotherham in May 2014, Ian Crossland3 paused his speech in
front of massed EDL demonstrators to respond to a shout from someone in the
crowd of ‘dirty Paki bastards’ to chide the demonstrator for using the term ‘Paki’
because that is racist and ‘we are not racist’. The object of his anger is not ‘Pakistani
gangs’, he says, but ‘Muslim gangs’. Not only is this a clear example of ‘cultural
racism’ that produces a racist effect while denying that this effect is the result of
racism but within minutes, when recounting a story about a white girl ‘used’ by
a Pakistani lad and then dumped and subsequently murdered, he attributes the
problem to what is clearly inferred to be a ‘backward’ culture, in which elders will
not allow relationships with white girls. Crudely mocking a local Pakistani accent,
he says ‘they have to marry a cousin in Pakistan innit’ (field diary, 10 May, 2014).

I was not the only one to notice the gap between the declaration of non-
racism and the practice of racism. Rachel and Lisa, with whom I had travelled to
the demonstration, staged their own protest that day by not participating in the
main demo but listening to the speeches from a distance. They wanted to express
their resistance not only to the ‘piss heads’ attending the demo (a frequent object
of complaint) but, with reference to those speaking from the podium, ‘the way
people they don’t agree with are speaking for them’ (field diary, 10 May, 2014).
For Lisa this proved a turning point and she subsequently left the movement to
engage with ‘more positive’ actions (field diary, 26 June 2015).

**Understanding racism: ‘what race are Muslims’?**

EDL narratives largely exclude Islam or the Muslim community as possible
objects of racism. Accusations of racism are frequently deflected by differenti-
ating Islam – ‘It’s not a race, it’s a religion’ (Tina) – or Muslims – ‘what race are
Muslims?’ (Declan) – from ethnic minority groups towards whom prejudicial
attitudes would be wrong. Connor states this most explicitly. While he consid-
ered it unacceptable to hate people for the colour of their skin, seeking to destroy
what he perceived to be a hateful ideology (Islam) did not constitute racism: ‘It
ain’t racist to oppose like an ideology what’s based on to rape children and like based to cause hate’ (Connor). Responding to the researcher’s challenge that some anti-Muslim or anti-Islam chants used on EDL marches might be experienced as racist, Declan responds that he would find such chants unacceptable if they were ‘Something that was racist. If it said “gassing the Jews” or “kill the blacks”, if anyone ever chanted that I’d be out the EDL but it’s never against Muslims, just Islam. … Islam is not a person, it’s a belief. It’s a religion.’ This distinction between anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments is made repeatedly by respondents in this study and is explored in depth in the following chapter. Here it is worth noting that, unlike some other respondents, in this comment Declan recognises the actual or potential racialisation of religious groups – both Jews and Muslims – and their persecution or discrimination on that basis.

Growing out of racism: EDL as a learning process

The finding that EDL members express a specific hostility towards Islam does not mean that it does not co-exist alongside wider anti-Muslim prejudice that has itself a ‘generic anti-immigrant component’ (Strabac and Listhaug, 2008: 274). Indeed some respondents recognise, and reflect on, the racism, including their own, that they encounter. Kane admits that racism certainly exists in the movement but that being part of the EDL is a process of learning that the expression of racism is wrong:

My mate, he said one racist comment, I think it was at Bristol and he had a bollocking cause you ain’t meant to shout racist stuff. People am probably racist but you don’t be racist with the English Defence League cause it don’t stand for that cause any colour, any race is welcome. (Kane)

Connor, who comes from a family of active EDL members, admits freely that he had been racist and had joined because he thought the movement would reflect those racist views. In practice, he said, the EDL had brought him into contact with ethnic ‘others’ as a result of which he had changed his opinions:

CONNOR: To be honest, when I first joined the EDL and my dad told me about it, I thought it was racist. That is the reason I went. I’m being deadly honest. On the way on the train and that we met up with the Sikhs and people like that and after that got on with it like. And now I am glad that I did join it because it’s made me think about their religion and what them think. And like, I do get on with Sikhs, blacks, anything now where I used to. … When I first joined the EDL I think I was racist and now I’ve got in with them and when I got on with it I met all black and whites and it was alright man, it was good, now, ever since, I’ve stuck with black people and everything. …
INT: So do you consider yourself racist?
CONNOR: No, I’m not now, I was.

Older members talk about the process of ‘growing out of’ racism. Matt (34 years of age at the time of interview) says that, at 25, ‘I could say I was racist’.
He recognises that he retains an element of racism but thinks that those on the outside of the movement are often more racist than him. Sean too recognises that while today he keeps an open mind and, unlike others, does not think every Muslim is a potential terrorist, when he was younger, ‘I’d probably spout off about “Muslims”, “Pakis”, “Indians” and all that but that’s being younger, being stupid and naive and spouting off crap.’

Notwithstanding this it remains clear that activists in this study retain particular anxieties towards Islam and Muslims. Sean, noting that he has friends of all different ethnicities (black, Thai, South African, Polish) concludes, ‘We are all just human beings at the end of the day. But I just can’t get my head around the Muslims.’ This evokes what Back (1996: 98) describes as a ‘strategic’ racism practised in multi-ethnic urban environments whereby ethnic groups are ascribed different insider–outsider statuses by white populations. The form this takes among this group of respondents is explored in relation to wider understandings of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hostility in the following chapter.

‘Not racist’? Tracing objects of love and hate

INT: What is a racist? Would you call yourself a racist?
CONNOR: No I’d call myself like … English.

In the final section of this chapter, we consider how EDL members’ understandings of themselves as ‘not racist’ sit in relation to other ideological positions. What objects of love and hate appear in their understanding of the world and how do they relate to broader ideologies associated with the far or populist radical right? The section starts with a discussion of narratives of patriotism. In these narratives, the nation appears as an object of ‘love’ and pride – opposed, as in Connor’s statement above – to the hate-filled identity of the racist. However, narratives of patriotism also carry emotions of fear and threat, which, in some cases, turn positive affective identification with nation into a more exclusive nativism. Precisely what threatens the nation is then traced through views expressed on multiculturalism and immigration. While multiculturalism, it is suggested, is largely accepted as ‘how it is’, multiculturalism, understood as an ideology of the liberal elite, is an object of hatred. A similar pattern is found in discussions of immigration and citizenship where widespread concern with the level of immigration is expressed as anger primarily at a government unable or unwilling to see how immigration affected (threatened) them. Since discrimination and exclusion of sexual minorities are seen to be key markers of traditional far right organisations, respondents’ positions on LGBT rights are discussed. Finally, in order to illustrate the diversity and complexity of views encountered within the movement, the position on all these aspects of ideology among a fringe group of respondents (identifying as Infidels) is explored; these are compared and contrasted to views within the majority of the respondent set.
Patriotism: love without hate?

An online survey of EDL supporters found a key motivating factor in support for the EDL to be a ‘love of England, commitment to preservation of traditional national and cultural values, and representation of the interests of “real” British countrymen’; this was cited as the reason for joining the movement by 31 per cent of those surveyed and was second only to ‘views on Islam’ (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 6). This is reflected in narratives of respondents in this study. Although the object of affection is less specifically stated (as ‘England’), respondents talk of their love ‘for this country’ (Declan, Lisa, Michelle, Tina) and understand their activism as ‘fighting for’ (Declan), ‘standing up for’ (Connor, Lisa) or ‘saving’ (Connor) the country. While, in this form, patriotism expresses a positive, self-identification with nation, it can also find expression in resistance to groups and forces perceived as threatening nationhood, national identity or culture and calls to preserve the state (if not territorially then at least its resources) exclusively, or primarily, for members of the native group (nativism). Soutphommasane (2012: 19) argues that patriotism – understood as a special concern for the welfare of one’s nation and fellow citizens – does not inherently incorporate nativism. This position is expressed in some respondent narratives in this study while, in others, there is a clear drift into nativism.

Patriotism is often articulated by respondents as an emotional response to the nation that encourages activism but pre-exists it. As Matt puts it, ‘I’m just a patriotic bastard like. I always want what’s best for my country.’ In this sense patriotism is the ‘given’ that identifies ‘like minds’ and allows the development of affective bonds that sustain activism (Klatch, 2004: 491). Moreover, activism – taking part in demonstrations – provides a space for the expression of shared patriotic sentiments that generate solidarity:

…it’s nice to be around a bunch of people as patriotic as I am, you know, … it’s the only place that you can actually be patriotic. … I don’t have to be politically correct, you know. I can go there and I can sing ‘Keep St George in My Heart’, you know. I can be the patriotic person, I can love my country, you know what I mean, and be round a lot of people that love their country too. (Tina)

This like-mindedness is reinforced rhetorically by the use of the term ‘fellow patriots’ (see also Garland and Treadwell, 2011: 630; Busher, 2012) to refer to those in the movement by the leadership during speeches at demonstrations (field diary, 30 June 2012; field diary, 12 October 2013). Grassroots members also spontaneously link this subject position as ‘patriot’ with activism in the EDL – ‘I’m standing there as an English patriot’ (Connor).

For some respondents, loving ‘being English’, as Soutphommasane (2012: 19) suggests, does not mean hating others. Tim clearly differentiates between negative and positive forms of patriotism and implicitly questions claims to the ownership of ‘British values’ through a notion of indigeneity:

I just think the BNP, to me personally, is just like let ‘em carry on. No-one’s fucking listening to ‘em … they are just saying, ‘Oh we wanna protect British
values’ and all this and it’s like OK protecting British values is OK but you’ve got to have tolerance to let other people have their own values. … [I]t’s not about white power … you can love being English and your English heritage. I do. But it doesn’t mean I can’t love somebody else. To me, if you strip somebody of their skin then we are all people. (Tim)

When respondents talk of being ‘proud’ of the country (Lisa, Connor), therefore, it is not, in most cases, a racialised ‘white pride’. Differentiating her patriotism from that of the BNP and National Front, Michelle seeks to distinguish a feeling of pride from that of superiority:

… they are just pure racialists that’s all they are. It’s all white power this, and white pride that … You know I’m a white person, I’m proud to be a white person but I don’t need to stick it in other people’s face to use it as a, you know, like a ‘I’m white you’re not, I’m better than you are’ … I just think it’s absolute tosh. (Michelle)

Patriotic attitudes and actions are also ascribed to ethnic minority groups by some respondents; examples include Sikhs (who fought in the British army during the war) and Muslims who stand up against extremism within their community (Ian, Tim).

However, there is also evidence in respondent narratives of the drift from positive identification with the country, and concern for its citizens, into a defensive resistance to ‘change’. Kyle had joined an EDL flash demonstration against the conversion of a church in his home town into an Islamic prayer centre because he felt there was ‘no need to change’. In these narratives, patriotism is associated with the preservation of some imagined (but rarely specified) ‘traditional’ national and cultural values of a fixed national entity: ‘Keeping Britain Britain’ (Richard). While nobody is excluded from this mission, what, and who, constitutes the imagined nation remains unclear: ‘at the end of the day it ain’t about what colour you am, it ain’t about what race you am … It’s all about do you agree with Britain to stay as Britain’ (Kane).

In some cases this position is articulated as the continuation of a defence of Britain conducted in a more tangible way by previous generations. As Tina puts it, ‘The wars weren’t won for us … to give our country away … Them wars were won for future generations.’ Indeed, for Tim, respect for war veterans is an anti-fascist statement that distinguishes the EDL from extreme nationalist groups such as the National Front whom he describes as ‘Nazis’: ‘the whole point of the EDL is about protecting like the honour of troops and respecting like the sacrifice that was made and it’s just like for anybody to be a Nazi is an absolutely sworn enemy of Britain as far as I’m concerned’ (Tim).

However, resistance to change can slip into a more aggressive racialisation of change. This is evident in Tina’s description of her experience in what she calls ‘a white British Christian area’ in which she had grown up:

… the more I was walking around, and as the years went on, there were, they were just everywhere, you know what I mean? It was literally, ‘spot the British
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Tina’s reflections exemplify what Hage (2014: 233) calls ‘numerological racism’ in which concern is expressed through the category ‘too many’. Of course change – including a growth in ethnic diversity – is taking place. Although the White British ethnic group represents the overwhelming majority (80 per cent) of the population of England and Wales, the total ethnic group population other than White has risen from three million (or 7 per cent) in 1991 to almost eight million (14 per cent) in 2011 (Jivraj, 2012). Moreover, the residential areas with the greatest growth of ethnic minority groups are those areas – like the one Tina refers to – where they were fewest in 2001 (Jivraj, 2012). A similar aggressive racialisation of ‘others’, who are seen as responsible for disrupting the ‘English community’, is identified by Leddy-Owen (2014: 1128) in his study of English identities in an ethnically diverse area of South London.

Among EDL activists in this study, anxiety over change is articulated most frequently through a discourse of infringement (see Chapter 7). Carlie feels ‘we’ve basically got no rights in our own country any more’ and places blame at the door of the government who she sees as ‘failing to protect us British that live in the country, that have grown up in the country’. Her remedy is to ‘put us British first because it’s our country not theirs’. While Carlie’s ‘they’ remains unspecified, Connor explicitly racialises those he perceives as threatening ‘our laws and our beliefs’: ‘It’s England, not Pakistan. You know what I mean? It’s up to us what we do, not them. It’s our country, if you don’t like our laws and our beliefs [names local city] airport terminal 16. You know what I mean? Pack your bags and go.’ At demonstrations this sentiment finds expression in the chant ‘We want our country back’ and, towards the end of the fieldwork, it began to appear also in nativist statements in speeches: ‘This is our country. They are guests [my emphasis] in it and they would do well to remember that’ (Dave Russell, EDL national demonstration, Luton, recorded in field diary, 22 November 2014).4

Ahmed (2004: 117) argues that emotions, in particular of hate and love, are ‘crucial to the delineation of the bodies of individual subjects and the body of the nation’. In extreme right ideologies, she suggests, the subject (the ordinary ‘white’ man) ‘is presented as endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject’ itself. Central to this is the emotional reading of others as hateful, which ‘works to bind the imagined white subject and nation together’ (2004: 118). This is particularly important to understanding narratives of Islam among EDL respondents and is discussed in more detail in the following chapter. However, it is sometimes applied more widely, as evident
in Lisa’s confirmation of her own patriotism through the identification of ‘others’ who hate:

Muslim extremists … I don’t care if they are Muslims or fucking if you had an Eastern European party or whatever, if you are going to come over to this country and blatantly hate us, you know, hate our country, hate us as people, fuck off. (Lisa)

Can patriotism’s promotion of a special identification with one’s fellow citizens exist without an accompanying enmity or lack of sympathy towards all outsiders as Soutphommasane (2012: 38) suggests? Or is such privileging of one’s ‘own’ destined to turn into the excessive or irrational patriotism ascribed to movements like the EDL (Jackson, 2011c: 5)? On the one hand, respondents’ own understanding of their EDL activism as the attempt ‘to do something for the country’ (Casey) or ‘making the country a better place to be’ (Neil) evokes the sense of ‘collective responsibility’ and desire to ‘promote a common good’ identified as characteristic of ‘good’ (national liberal) patriotism (Soutphommasane, 2012: 17). The political demands associated with ‘putting this country first’ expressed by activists in this study, moreover, are no more extreme than those included in UKIP’s 2015 General Election manifesto. They include: withdrawal of the UK from the European Union (Declan); limiting access to NHS care and social security benefits to those from overseas (Matt); and cutting overseas aid budgets and withdrawing from commitments to military and humanitarian interventions abroad (Euan, Declan).

Notwithstanding this, the patriotism of EDL respondents differs from Soutphommasane’s (2012: 19) model of a liberal nationalist approach to citizenship and community where ‘patriotism refers to the identification with one’s political community, and a special concern for its welfare and the welfare of one’s fellow citizens’. This is, first, because of the evident slippage into nativism, and indeed into xenophobia, in the case of some individuals (discussed below). Second, it is because patriotism in the case of the EDL is developed in conditions of a profound disidentification with the political community as currently constituted, and populist distrust of liberalism (see Chapter 8). Third, although in his vision, and that of the EDL, patriotism must be ‘put into action’, for Soutphommasane liberal patriotism is accomplished through a ‘national conversation’ (2012: 7), while, for EDL activists, the emotional dimension of patriotism is crucial: ‘the older I’ve got the more patriotic I’ve got and more passionate I’ve got and I am very passionate about it now’ (Lisa). Thus, Soutphommasane’s vision of the enactment of patriotism through a ‘patriotic mode of deliberation’ (2012: 13) appears to have little room for the passions at play within the EDL.

**Anti-multiculturalism: racism by any other name?**

‘Multiculturalism’, and its entwinement with the politics of class, ‘race’ and ethnicity are discussed in detail in Chapter 6. Policies associated with multiculturalism...
have been subject to a series of ‘backlashes’ in recent decades, most recently by leading European politicians such as Angela Merkel and David Cameron, for supposedly encouraging the self-segregation of ethnic minority communities and thus contributing to a decline in social cohesion and rise in a range of social problems, including crime and terrorism. This mainstreaming of anti-multiculturalist rhetoric, Lentin (2014: 1273) argues, has enabled the new far right in Europe to appropriate arguments that opposition to multiculturalism is not racist while intolerance of immigrants is justified on the basis of cultural incompatibility rather than biological, racial hierarchy (2014: 1273). In this section the tension in the relationship between cultural diversity and political solidarity in patriotic and multicultural visions of society and community (Soutphommasane, 2012: 12) is explored, and the claims of the EDL to be both patriotic and multicultural are critically examined.

The EDL’s claim to be ‘not racist’, and in this way different from movements of the ‘far right’, rests on the argument that it is a ‘multicultural organisation made up of every community in this country’ (Tommy Robinson, cited in Allen, 2011: 287). This study identified some evidence of this broad acceptance of multiculturality. The term ‘multicultural’ for example is commonly used by respondents to describe society as they experience it: ‘we live in a multicultural society. We do, that’s a fact and that’s never gonna change’ (Jack). Lisa explains that she would never participate in actions such as vandalising mosques because ‘I think we are a multicultural country’. Tim sees the EDL as reflecting wider society and claims that it was the ‘multicultural’ nature of the EDL’s membership and orientation that had led him to attend his first demonstration:

… like looking into it … one of the main reasons … I wanted to go was cause I noticed that it wasn’t like BNP … cause it’s like I don’t know. I looked at it and there was a lot of Indian names on there and like black people and so I was thinking this is like a bit more like a multicultural thing and so it should be. (Tim)

A number of other respondents referred to the benefits of diversity. Tina, for example explicitly said that she thought multiculturalism was ‘a good thing’ arguing that ‘Britain would be a boring place without it’. The advantage of ‘multicultural’ foods and spices was discussed by younger respondents and approval was given by activists with young children to the benefits of learning different languages at school and introducing pupils to ‘different foods’ (Casey, Matt). However, the advantages of multicultural society are sometimes qualified with reference to Islam and/or Muslims. Matt resents what he perceives to be the overemphasis on Islam in multicultural education: ‘it’s always about we got to learn about Islam, it’s always Islam, Islam, Islam’ (Matt). Tina, despite her positive comments about multicultural society noted above, concludes that, nonetheless, ‘there is a really bad issue with Muslims’. This tendency to view Muslims, uniquely, as disloyal and culturally different is discussed in Chapter 5.

The general acceptance of multiculturality, however, is sharply contrasted to a broad rejection of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is understood not as a condition of society but as a ‘concept’ or ideology and, as such, ‘the enemy’:
... the Earth benefits from cultural diversity and racial diversity, it makes it more unique, it shapes what humanity is. However, multiculturalism is destroying diversity altogether, which is ironic because the liberals say we need diversity … the enemy for me is not one race specifically, it’s multiculturalism as a concept.

(Nick)

As will be seen from further contextualisation of Nick’s position below, the argument that multiculturalism ‘is destroying diversity’ is based on a biologically essentialist and anti-miscegenist position. Ollie, while sharing Nick’s national socialist views, sees multiculturalism as divisive because it emphasises difference: ‘you just have a lack of shared values now because of multiculturalism’ (Ollie). Where these extreme views overlap with those of mainstream EDL members is in the belief that multiculturalism is a ‘failure’:

**Brett:** The reason our country is in ruins is because since the Second World War we’ve tried to be multicultural. Well fuck them.

**Connor:** Multicultural is a thing of the past. Nothing will never be multicultural ever.

**Brett:** We’ve tried being multicultural and all we’ve done is fuck up the country cause we’ve tried too hard and we’ve …

**Connor:** You know this is moving onto racist stuff and multiculturalism for me shouldn’t be a thing, do you know what I mean? Don’t get me wrong it is probably something what EDL class as extreme views but I don’t think like that mixed breeding, things like that, should go on. I really don’t.

Here, Connor recognises his own position slipping from the view widely encountered in mainstream discourse that ‘multicultural is a thing of the past’ into ‘racist stuff’ – anti-miscegenism – that would not be approved within the EDL. This slippage would seem to lend weight to Lentin’s (2014) argument that anti-multiculturalism is, in fact, an expression of anti-multiculture or anti-multiculturality, and as such a form of racism.

**Immigration and citizenship**

A frequent corollary of anti-multiculturalism is the justification of intolerance of immigrants on the basis of cultural incompatibility; this allows ‘race’ to be coded as ‘culture’ and apparently stripped of its racist content (Barker, 1981: 23; Solomos and Back, 1994: 155–56). A distinguishing feature of the EDL at its inception was its lack of reference to immigration in its mission statement (see Chapter 2); at the time, an important indicator of its difference from traditional far right groups. This was reflected in the themes of campaigns and demonstrations throughout most of the fieldwork period and corroborated by respondents: ‘I ain’t seen immigration being brought up a lot. … I’ve never been out to a demo that has been involved with immigration’ (Kane). This absence began to appear more anomalous than distinctive when, in the long run up to the 2015 UK General Election, immigration emerged as a key policy debate. Reflecting also the mood of its grassroots
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membership, in February 2014 the EDL posted that a meeting of the ROs had agreed that mass immigration would be included in the movement’s mission statement as a central campaigning issue. However, at the point of writing, no such addition had been made to the mission statement and, in interview, Eddowes confirmed it was still ‘in the pipeline’ because ‘it’s not the right time to tackle that’. He goes on to note that he is ‘not against immigration’ and recognises its benefits but, echoing the UKIP position (see note 6), he was against the volume of unskilled, cheap labour coming into the country, which he sees as ‘not controlled’ and ‘changing the face of our country dramatically’ (Eddowes, 2015; my emphasis).

Cognisant of the danger of obscuring the racialisation of immigrants through the coding process, in this study attitudes to immigration and references to ‘immigrants’ were coded for analysis separately: the first under ‘political views’; and the second under ‘race and ethnicity’. From this it became clear that immigration (as a process and phenomenon) was a matter of considerable concern for respondents and that the vast majority of respondents took an anti-immigration stance. Of a total of 136 codes generated during data analysis on a diverse range of ‘political views’, ‘negative attitudes towards immigration’ was the third most populated while only two respondents (in addition to Eddowes) explicitly said they were ‘not against’ immigration (and even in these cases, the respondents voiced concerns about the capacity of the UK to handle immigration at its current rate and its impact on employment opportunities). Immigration is viewed as bad for the country by respondents primarily for economic reasons, although individual respondents also see it as being divisive in reducing ‘shared values’ (see above) or the sheer numbers threatening to ‘change’ what Britain looks like (the racialisation of this notion of change is discussed above).

Given that this chapter explores racisms, old and new, the key question addressed here is whether ‘immigrants’ are the object of a new, cultural racism. In EDL respondent narratives, ‘immigrants’ are rarely posited as a single, homogenous group. Usually a distinction is made between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants where ‘good’ immigrants are those who ‘work and pay their taxes’ and ‘bad’ immigrants are those who ‘sponge off the benefit system’. Thus when asked if immigrants who have been working in the country for a number of years should be entitled to citizenship and a permanent right to stay in the UK, Michelle responded, ‘Oh yeah, if they’ve worked to pay their taxes and everything then fair enough, absolutely fair enough.’ She goes on to qualify this with the proviso that, ‘But then if it is people moving here now, before you know it, in a couple of years’ time, the whole family is going to be here and they are going to be on benefits and I think they need to stop benefits going to other countries’ (Michelle). Complaints about abuse of the benefit system are echoed by others (Euan, Matt, Tina):

I will not stop anybody from coming here, but if you are just going to come here to sponge the benefit system … We’ve got Polish people who will work. I’ll welcome them with open arms, anyone. But if you are gonna come here just for a house, for water, for money and deprive everyone of a house and a job and all that then that’s what I’ve got the problem with. (Declan)
Richard recognises that, ‘I suppose they do come over here and work hard’, but the reality for him is that ‘they’re taking all our jobs and we’re suffering for it. That’s why there’s so much unemployment. Our country’s full enough as it is and if they just keep coming over and coming over, where are we going to be in 10, 20 years?’ Indeed respondents are often deeply conflicted about immigration; within a single narrative a respondent might suggest that the solution to improving housing and employment ‘for white people’ is to ‘get hold of all the immigrants and kick ’em out’ and that the vast majority of immigrants had earned their right to housing and other material benefits (Jason). This conflicted attitude may arise from a subconscious recognition of the clash between feelings of anger about the current social and economic situation and the realisation that immigrants themselves are not to blame, and are ‘like us’. This is captured in Tim’s statement that:

with like immigration and things like that … the way I see it there’s no problem. It’s a shame there aren’t enough jobs for everybody really … those people that come here they just wanna come here and work and kind of provide, put food on the table for their families and they accept the British laws and the British way of life and they enjoy it you know so it’s like fair play to ‘em. I wish there was enough jobs for the whole world. (Tim)

Steve Eddowes extends this sentiment, arguing that the problem is not migrants coming to the UK to work – ‘you can’t blame them for coming here to get on’ – the problem is the impact it has on others ‘because they’ll come and they’ll work, for a lot lower wage’. On the basis of his own experience working in the transport industry, he says, wages fell by 40 to 50 per cent after EU enlargement. While Eddowes recognises the underlying economic forces at play here – ‘That’s capitalism … all over’ (Eddowes, 2015) – this position exemplifies how the white working class is constructed as ‘victim’ while immigrants are seen ‘as agents of capital rather than fellow objects upon whom capitalist social relations inscribe themselves’ (Clarke and Garner, 2010: 203).

There is relatively little evidence of the racialisation of immigrants, or of cultural differences, being used as a cover for racialised prejudice. In this sense respondents are in line with a wider section of the UK population concerned primarily about the ‘entitlement’ of immigrants to state resources (social housing, benefit payments) and to which all political parties responded with proposed curtailment of entitlement during the 2015 General election campaign (see note 6). In two interviews reference was made to the failure of immigrants to ‘integrate’, although this accusation was levelled at differently labelled groups, specifically ‘Muslim’ communities and ‘East European’ migrants. This suggests a nativist presumption that recent immigrants have, naturally, less entitlement or, to put it the other way around, ‘we’ (native people) should have privileged entitlement. Such anxieties about the status of the ‘native’, ‘indigenous’ and white population, Ware (2008: 11) argues, are apparent in all European and Anglophone societies where national identities, rooted in colonial histories, are conflated with being ‘white, Anglophone and Christian’ and expressed in the perception of economic
migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as the undeserving beneficiaries of welfare entitlements at the expense of majority (‘indigenous’) populations (2008: 11).

This raises the question of who constitutes the ‘we’ assumed here. For the most part (exceptions are discussed below) respondents tend towards an inclusive notion of citizenship, even if they do not question who dictates the terms of that citizenship. When Carlie calls for greater promotion of ‘our’ rights, she includes in that anyone with a British passport. Tina states unequivocally that British means British regardless of colour and that she had no problem at all with, for example, Asian immigrants being entitled to citizenship and benefits: ‘They’ve probably been ... in Britain longer than I’ve been born, a lot of them. You know, I ain’t got a problem with that at all’ (Tina). This position is elaborated by Tim:

> How can you ... say like the Indian people shouldn’t be in Britain. Well why bloody not? Cause if it wasn’t for them Britain wouldn’t still be called Britain. They came from a different continent to fight for a country when realistically all we did was go in there and take over their country hundreds of years ago and declare that their country was part of our Empire. ... So I think for the BNP to say ‘well you know we want them to go home’, sorry I don’t believe that. (Tim)

Tim’s rejection of calls for repatriation includes a critique of British imperialism that suggests South Asian immigrant groups are not only entitled to but owed rights as British citizens.

**The extremist fringe**

There are exceptions to the main thrust of what has been argued above and they are discussed here separately as the views emanate primarily from a group of three young men, Andrew, Nick and Ollie (aged 16–23), who form part of the respondent set for this project and who attended EDL demonstrations but whose affiliation was with a regional organisation of the Infidels movement. By treating their views separately, it is not suggested that there is no continuum in some views between this extremist fringe and the majority of the respondent set and this has been indicated where relevant throughout the text. However, their interview narratives differ significantly from those of mainstream EDL members in terms of both the degree to which they invoke ideological positions and the content of those ideologies.

Andrew, Nick and Ollie’s worldviews were characterised by strong Christian beliefs, support for National Socialism, interest in Aryanist ideology and a fascination with white supremacist organisations (such as the Ku Klux Klan) and their leading figures; these are all ideas (including Christianity) that are largely rejected by mainstream members. The suspicion is mutual. All three ‘Infidels’ expressed severe reservations about the EDL and its members (because they did not follow a ‘Christian lifestyle’). Nick said the Infidels were a ‘more serious’ movement, while the EDL was ‘more interested in having a fight with the local Muslims and the pub culture’ (Nick). What they shared was ‘being against Islamic
extremism’ (Andrew). The personal ideologies of these three respondents vary, being informed by National Socialism, Christianity and Hindu nationalism. What they had in common was a fascination with Aryanism and thus the failure to live a ‘noble life’ by members of the EDL sat uneasily with them. In contrast, Ollie was a vegan and didn’t drink, smoke or use drugs, Andrew was a kick-boxer and Nick disparaged the EDL as a ‘bunch of degenerates’.

Andrew, the oldest of the three, was a former member of the National Front, although he had been ejected from the movement after his exposure in a local newspaper as a Breivik supporter and KKK sympathiser. This incident happened in August 2012, when Andrew had been posting, along with his friends, comments about Anders Breivik and, around the same time, had bought a KKK outfit and posted photos of himself wearing it on social media. The pictures had been reprinted in a local newspaper and then by anti-fascist electronic media ‘edlnews’. Andrew reflects in interview that he genuinely ‘admires’ the KKK while Nick said he was ‘attracted to’ the white hoods and had investigated their views and ‘I started to see well yeah maybe they are right’ (Nick). Andrew also expanded on his sympathy for Anders Breivik who, he said, had ‘inspired’ him. When he watched the trial, he said, ‘I could see … his love for his people and for his nation … That he truly cared about his own people. And all he wanted to do was to save his country.’ He goes on to state that ‘I see myself in him’ and to talk in stark terms about the mass killing committed by Breivik as getting ‘the job done’ without causing ‘any pain’ to the victims. When challenged about the terror victims must have experienced, he continues to rationalise the atrocity and empathise with the perpetrator as ‘a man who had little hope left for his country’ (Andrew).

In sharp contrast to the views expressed by mainstream EDL members, for the three Infidel respondents, Britishness was an ethnic category open only to those who are ‘English, Scottish, Irish, or Welsh’ and excluding, in Nick’s view, even ‘an Asian family that’s been here five generations’. It follows that, for Nick, citizenship should be ethnically rooted and, in his ideal world, immigrants would be ‘stripped of’ their citizenship and ‘repatriated’: ‘they all deserve their own rights in their own you know … in Africa, they deserve full rights there. … [I]n Britain, the ethnic British, of the white race deserve full rights here. We deserve to be put first, cause it’s our country’ (Nick).

Andrew also says he thinks that ‘multiculturalism is bad’, defining it as ‘an anti-European hate ideology designed to deconstruct Western values and traditional values of our civilisation’. In his way of seeing the world, neither equality nor cultural mixing is desirable. Thus multiculturalism is criticised for ‘teaching that all cultures are equal’ and posited as a left-wing/liberal ideology imposed on people against their will:

I think that segregation is a good thing. I think that people naturally segregate anyway. You can’t force people to mix with another people who they don’t wanna be mixed with and that’s what the Marxists, liberals are trying to force us to do, like in the schools and in the jobs and at work and everywhere. They, they’re trying to force us all together. (Andrew)
When pushed on who is responsible for imposing this ideology, Andrew blames ‘ideas of multiculturalism, of tolerance, and of political correctness’ on the Frankfurt School and ‘cultural Marxism’. Nick, however, sees multiculturalism itself as ‘the enemy’ because it promotes racial mixing, which reduces distinctiveness and risks losing the ‘spirituality, and spiritual divineness’ of the blessed race of the Israelites.

All three members of this group self-identified as national socialists and emphasise that National Socialism combines left- and right-wing ideas. Nick says his interest in National Socialism started with ‘an obsession with Hitler’ but he had since learned more about it and explains it as ‘Socialism is basically support of the working class, it’s the opposite of capitalism, it’s a left-wing economic ideology, nationalism is a right-wing political ideology and that’s why they don’t clash, cause one’s economic, and one’s political’ (Nick). He does not consider himself far right because that would imply fascist when, in fact, ‘fascism is national capitalism, and I’m a national socialist which is left-wing – but right-wing as well’ (Nick). For Ollie, who said he had identified with National Socialism since the age of 10, it was more directly linked to ‘the revival of like the Aryanist ideology’. In his personal ideology, it was combined with Hindu nationalism and veganism/animal rights activism. The Aryan ‘noble man’ was a core concept for him – which included not only healthy living but also engagement in charity work – and he tried to live by these principles. However, he recognised that ‘it’s very unrealistic that it will happen that National Socialism will be achieved in my lifetime’ (Ollie).

**Gender and sexual equality**

Nativism or anti-immigrant sentiment of the far right or newer populist extremist parties is generally seen as rooted in a broader rejection of human equality and desire for a return to traditional values and to remove ‘threatening’ groups from society (Goodwin, 2011b: 12). This, it is suggested, makes such movements an inhospitable environment for women and sexual minorities. The male-dominated composition of, but also the active female participation and presence of gay men and lesbians in, the EDL was discussed in Chapter 3. Below the movement’s ideological position on gender equality and LGBT rights is explored.

Formally women are recognised as equals in the movement and there is a women’s (Angels) division at national and many regional levels. Referencing this equality, female EDL members are said to stand ‘beside not behind’ the men in the movement (see Figure 4.4). While the designation of the division as ‘Angels’, and the iconography that accompanies the term, would appear to evoke a conservative femininity based on the ‘angelic’ virtues of purity and innocence, angels are not exclusively male or female and appear in the Bible with male names and forms. Moreover, angels are not passive but play a crucial communication role (carrying messages between heaven and earth), and while they may perform a protective role (which might be associated with a nurturing or mothering function), they are also spiritual and inspirational figures. Angel wings – which are popular tattoo symbols (see Figure 7.2) – symbolise aspiration, speed and elevation. Adopting
the title of ‘Angel’ before one’s movement name (used on Facebook and printed on their hoody), therefore, may signify gender transgression rather than conformity. Indeed, as Figure 4.4 illustrates, EDL Angels are not represented as sexually passive.

As discussed in Chapter 3, traditional notions of femininity are challenged or transgressed by women in the movement; in contrast traditional gender roles for men are generally upheld. This is usually captured in the course of observation – especially in the ‘banter’ on the coach to and from demos and in the pub before and after them – but is occasionally directly articulated. Andrew speaks proudly of coming from a ‘traditional nuclear family’ in which his mum is ‘a traditional housewife’. Jack describes himself as a traditional ‘provider’; he works hard all week, brings money home, while she manages it (field diary, 1 December, 2012). He also prides himself on being ‘the hardest guy’ in the area; this is said in the context of explaining why his partner (who had been subject to domestic violence in her previous relationship) does not have to be afraid of anyone (field diary,
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1 December, 2012). Indeed, this vision of men’s role as to protect women is the most frequently referenced attribute of masculinity and is referred to positively by both male and female respondents; a fact that sits uneasily alongside the frequent reporting of the experience of domestic violence. In addition to the childhood experiences discussed in Chapter 3, six respondents reported that they personally had experienced domestic abuse at the hands of a male partner, two reported that current or previous partners had been subject to domestic violence and one respondent said her daughter had been. While as a rule this provoked outrage by male respondents and declarations of their lack of tolerance for violence towards women, the continued sexual objectification of women in EDL images and Angels iconography compounds the undermining of women’s role that is expressed in men’s everyday talk (see Chapter 3). The same regional Angels division Facebook page that carried the image recreated in Figure 4.4, for example, also carried a photo of *Daily* and *Sunday Sport* glamour model Kelly Bell barely clad in a St George’s cross bikini in Page 3 style.

Discussion of gender equality at the ideological level was rare among respondents and confined almost exclusively to the three members of the Infidels taking part in this study (see above). These respondents bemoaned a ‘drift’ in gender roles. Mirroring the debate on multiculturalism, feminism is pitched as a negative (and imposed) force which has been allowed to go too far and has led to the deformation of ‘real’ gender equality and the rights of men. These three respondents envisage an ideal society as one in which what they believe to be the innate difference between men and women is recognised:

My better society would be where women respected men as men, as leaders, as people to be looked up to … and men respected women as like a precious creation which God has made who they will show respect to that they’ll always love and care for. Like back in the old days where men showed women respect by opening doors for them. (Andrew)

Feminists are considered to be the source of the problem since ‘they want absolute equality for men and women, they want men to become women and women to become men’ (Andrew). This is contrasted to their own understanding of men and women as ‘different but equal’: ‘men do need to have their own roles, women need to have their roles, but I don’t think either one should play a bigger part in society than the other’ (Ollie). Transgression of this – women choosing a career over children – is thus considered ‘wrong because it’s messing up society’ (Nick). For this small group of fringe activists, the biological rooting of gender difference indeed falls within a wider rejection of human equality; as Ollie put it, ‘I just completely reject that [attempts to make everyone completely equal in the Soviet Union], not everyone is equal.’

If the movement makes only a partial break with gender norms within the far right, in its creation of an active LGBT division within its structure and promotion of LGBT rights, it has marked new territory. As Allen (2011: 288) notes, ‘a far-right LGBT grouping is almost unheard of’ and thus the EDL sits among
a small number of anti-Islam parties and movements, such as Geert Wilders’ Partijvoor de Vrijheid, that incorporate gay rights platforms. Observational evidence suggests, moreover, that the LGBT division of the EDL is more than a cynical attempt by the leadership to distance itself from classic far right groups. The LGBT rainbow flag was visible at every demonstration and at the national demonstration in Newcastle in May 2013, Declan, the 19-year-old leader of the LGBT division, gave a speech, to much applause, about the importance of the division in challenging representations of the movement as ‘homophobic fascists’ and the failure of what he called the ‘far left’ to be consistent with their claim to oppose homophobia wherever they encountered it (field diary, 25 May 2013). Declan rejects suggestions of tokenism in EDL policy on LGBT rights and narrativises his own movement into the EDL (he had previously been a member of the BNP) as a conscious search for a party on the radical right that was ‘open to all’:

I came to realise that I couldn’t be gay and in the BNP and just before I left I thought to myself ‘Is there any organisations out there with the same views as me that accept people of all backgrounds?’ And that’s when I found English Defence League. (Declan)

Gay men and lesbian and bisexual women were all represented within the respondent set in this study and felt comfortable within the movement. A transsexual speaker at the Bristol demonstration was treated with respect and applauded for a speech in which she talked about being proud to be a transsexual EDL member and of the support she had received from the movement (field diary, 14 July 2012). Indeed, the Bristol Gay Pride march was staged simultaneously with the EDL march in the city that day and a number of individuals who would normally have attended the Pride March chose to march with the EDL, sporting their rainbow flags.

This is not to suggest that the EDL is free of homophobia or motivated by an impartial commitment to human rights. Homophobia is an accusation that is strategically targeted at Islamic doctrine which, according to Declan, says ‘gays should be taken to the top of a mountain and thrown off’. Moreover, homophobia continues to be demonstrated at the fringes of the movement. Declan recounted how he had left his original EDL division because individuals in it had ‘called me an embarrassment being a gay EDL member and they said that the EDL should not allow gays’. The three Infidels members in this study went further. Andrew said in his vision of a better society, he would like to see homosexuality recriminalised because ‘even behind closed doors I think that it can be harmful because it spreads disease, and it spreads immorality within communities, and it destroys families’ (Andrew). Their arguments often drew on their Christian beliefs. Nick justifies his opposition to the gay marriage bill as ‘because again it says in the Bible that homosexuality is wrong’ (Nick).

Among the mainstream movement too the researcher observed homosocial banter with elements of sexism and homophobia and Declan conceded that he still had to be ‘careful’ on demonstrations because he could attract violence from
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‘UAF bullies’, but also from EDL members. Individuals within the movement are often conflicted and uncertain about their views. With regard to the Bristol demonstration discussed above, one respondent met for the first time over a year later, commented that, on that day, he had held the ‘gay flag’ for some people marching with the EDL until they started kissing next to him; that was enough, he said, ‘nothing against ’em … but within limits’ (field diary, 7 October, 2013). I encountered a similarly conflicted reaction from one of the young respondents who said that he had a gay friend and no problem with gay members in the movement but had felt uncomfortable when a couple had kissed and cuddled in public. When I ask if it would be alright for him to kiss his girlfriend in public, though, he replied, ‘of course’ (field diary, 23 March 2013). Even such young members, still struggling to find the right expression for their own masculinity, however, were not closed to other ways of being men and were able to feel a genuine solidarity with LGBT rights campaigners. When asked what they made of the Pride March being held simultaneously in Bristol, members of the local youth division in this study empathised with the LGBT activists whom they see as defending their rights in a similar way to the EDL: ‘Respect. Them was out to do what we wanna do. … They are allowed to do what they allowed us to do’ (Ray).

**Conclusion**

The slogan ‘Not racist, not violent, just no longer silent’ reflects more than the attempts of a media-savvy leadership to strategically distance the EDL from public perceptions of it as ‘racist’. The findings of this study suggest that there is a genuine aspiration to non-racism among grassroots members of the movement. At the organisational level this is evident in a commitment to excluding racism from the EDL, making it ‘open to all’ and marking a clear line between it and those parties and movements considered to be racist. At the individual level, respondents construct subject positions, which they view as not racist, by reflecting on their own past, or even current residual racism, by referencing their own proximity and comfortableness with non-white bodies (the presence of ‘black’ people among their friends and family) and by excluding their discomfort with Muslims as not a question of ‘race’, because being ‘Muslim’ is not a racial but religious identifier. While the discussion of this has been postponed until Chapter 5, it is also evident that anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments are routinely expressed and Muslims are consciously excluded from constituting a racially defined group and thus as a possible object of their own ‘racism’.

Thus central to the non-racism claimed by EDL activists is the appeal to a simple, and narrow, definition of ‘race’ and racism. This position is rooted not in a consistently post-racialist politics but is akin to the ‘post-race’ argument which does not reject the ‘reality’ of ‘race’ but argues that it should not be grounds for prejudice and discrimination. In this sense it is in danger of banishing ‘race’ and denying the continued impacts of racisms. This is evident in the presence of a
range of ‘everyday’ racisms in EDL milieux and respondents’ almost universal failure to recognise the structural conditions and histories of domination and subordination underpinning racism that makes discrimination against one group of people ‘racist’ and against another, not. This, it is argued, emanates from the fact that the EDL ‘maintains an ideological premise that is typically discriminatory but, at the same time, appeals to the typically discriminated’ (Allen, 2011: 294). While, of course, feelings of socio-economic dispossession cannot explain participation in far right or populist radical right movements (in the same position the majority do not take this route), there is evidence from other studies that among young men who ‘drift’ in and out of right-wing politics, racism increases at particular stages of fragmentation and insecurity in both economic well-being and sense of identity (Cockburn, 2007: 551). How these feelings of social and economic exclusion (Chapter 6) and of cultural ‘othering’ (Chapter 5) are implicated in the activist routes taken by respondents in this study is explored in the following chapters.

Notes

3 Crossland had been leading the local EDL protest at the failure of Rotherham council to prosecute grooming-gang activity in the town. In December 2015 he took on leadership of the EDL when Steve Eddowes stepped down.
4 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCiBrZgP018. Accessed: 06.08.2015.
5 The first narrative is referenced by mainstream EDL members, while Nick, Ollie and Andrew, who refer to multiculturalism as a failed ideology, are members of the Infidels.
6 This debate was driven by UKIP, which promised to stop all immigration for unskilled jobs for a five-year period and end access to benefits and free NHS treatment for new immigrants until they had worked for five years (www.ukip.org/ukip_manifesto_summary). The Conservative Party also pledged to restrict access to tax credits, child benefits and social housing for EU migrants until they had worked in the country for four years (https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/manifesto2015/ConservativeManifesto2015.pdf, p. 30), while the Labour Party, although still recognising the net benefit brought to the country by immigration, said they would link access to benefits to those who had contributed to the country through paid employment and stop Child Benefit being claimed for children living abroad (www.labour.org.uk/manifesto/immigration). All online sources accessed: 26.08.2015.
8 In contrast, Tim, a mainstream EDL member, argued that organisations such as the KKK and any neo-Nazi organisation should be banned.