Encounters with the Neighbour in 1970s' British Multicultural Comedy

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"If you don't shut up, I'll come and move in next door to you!" Such was the frequent response to audience heckles made by Britain's first well-known black comedian, Charlie Williams (Leigh 2006). Williams's response appropriated racist rhetoric of the time, in which the black neighbour was frequently mobilised as an object of fear, threatening the imagined homogeneity of formerly white communities. Having frequently been on the receiving end of racist taunts such as "Get back to Africa" as a professional footballer for Doncaster Rovers in the 1940s and '50s, Williams was able to claim some

of the power of the Teller of the joke through such put-downs, rather than solely occupying the position of the Butt of racist jokes and slurs. However, the fact was that Williams was forced to rely on self-deprecation and the reiteration of racial stereotype gestures to his need to find favour with the predominantly white audiences of the northern working men's clubs that he toured and the mainstream audiences of ITV's prime time hit, *The Comedians* (ITV, 1971-93), on which he was showcased alongside notable racists such as Bernard Manning. Despite lamenting the "very stupid and very immature" tone of Williams's self-mocking jokes, comedian Lenny Henry – who lived with the unfortunate legacy of what was expected of black comedians, particularly in the North – acknowledged that Williams did "what you've got to do if it's a predominantly white audience – you've got to put yourself, and other people, down" (qtd. in Thomas 2015). What Williams's response to heckles exemplifies is a negotiation of a complex set of power relations informed both by the mechanics of the triadic relationship between Teller, Audience and Butt of a joke and by the social context shaping relationships between blacks and whites in a systemically racist society.

It is against this context that I propose to explore the mobilisation of the figure of the black neighbour in 1970s' comedy as a means of commenting upon and critiquing British multicultural discourse of the time through a consideration of popular and mainstream

sitcoms *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV, 1972—76) and *Rising Damp* (ITV, 1974—78). I argue that whilst these comedies might seem radical for their time in normalising black neighbours, poking jokes at white bigots, and engaging with social taboo head-on, they ultimately serve to confirm the status quo by appeasing mainstream audiences and letting them off the hook for ongoing racism, whilst placing the burden for the happy functioning of a culturally and ethnically diverse nation in the hands of individuals without reference to cultural, political, historical or economic contexts that have combined to disenfranchise, alienate and subordinate black Britons.

It is essential not to decouple the politics of representation from the politics of production; to do so is to downplay the considerable effects of the social and political climate and consumer-driven market in demarcating what can be said, when, how, and by whom. As Sarita Malik states in her influential book *Representing Black Britain*, "Since images don't simply operate in a social or political vacuum, the context in which they are seen and the timing of their production is just as important as the types of images which are produced" (Malik 2002, 12). The 1970s were a volatile period in terms of race relations in Britain, as both anti-black and anti-racist action came to a head. Following Enoch Powell's notorious and inflammatory "Rivers of Blood" speech to the Conservative Party in 1968, in which he incited racial hatred and apocalyptically foretold that "In this coun-

try in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man" (noting without irony that for this reason he would not be happy until he had seen all of his children "settled overseas"), there was a resurgent nationalism premised on the curtailing of immigration and the "repatriation" of Commonwealth immigrants, in which black people were constructed as the threat to national sovereignty, identity and prosperity, in a manner that was to set the terms of debate for decades to come (Powell 1968). Popular nationalist and xenophobic thought was partly legitimated by the Immigration Act of 1971, which made Commonwealth citizens subject to the same restrictions as those from elsewhere, losing their automatic right to remain in the UK. The framing and regularity of public and political debate around immigration and so-called "black crime" (see Hall 1978) fuelled nationalist groups such as the National Front and the British National Party, who in turn whipped up popular anti-black sentiment. At the same time, as a response to the extent of British racism and often drawing on the language and tactics of US Black Power politics, there was increased anti-racist struggle, often led by second generation black Britons. In 1979, one such anti-racist protest in the form of a counter-demonstration against the National Front in Southall ended in riot as police attacked the counter-demonstrators, injuring dozens and killing a teacher named Blair Peach. The decade culminated in Margaret Thatcher's ascendency to British Prime Ministership on the back of

promises to curb immigration, following speeches that drew on imagery popularised by Powell a decade earlier.

Responses to the racism of the period varied from anti-racist activism to multicultural policies enacted in the public sphere. Though well-meaning in its aspiration to celebrate cultural and ethnic diversity, critics such as Malik have argued that multicultural approaches effectively functioned to paper over extant racism and "served to re-emphasize the purity and homogeneity of 'White culture' when not interfaced with exotic 'multicultures'" (Malik 2002, 16). Whilst the power of the media to shape attitudes regarding race was emphasized as a strategy for celebrating multiculturalism, there was a sense that "radical struggles to tackle active racism had now been co-opted to 'manage racism' in inconsequential ways under the official banner of 'multiculturalism'" (Malik 2002, 16). It is thus the work of postcolonial criticism to look beyond the celebration of multiculture to return what is repressed or swept under the carpet in the service of such celebration. Sara Ahmed additionally indicates the necessity of the future-oriented project of postcolonial criticism in exposing lingering imperialist legacies, highlighting the importance of moments of encounter as structuring relationships:

> If we are to think of post-coloniality as that which is yet to come (we need to think the impossibility

> of the "post" if we are to make the "post" possible), then we need to pay attention to *how* and *where* colonialism persists after so-called decolonisation. That is, we need to pay attention to the *shifting conditions* in which encounters between others, and between other others, take place. (Ahmed 2000, 13)

As such, this article uses the figure of the neighbour in multicultural comedy as a means of unearthing the ways in which imperial ideologies persist in insidious ways through a set-up ostensibly concerned with tackling bigotry.

The medium through which I explore the representation of black neighbours is the sitcom. Vince Powell and Harry Driver's *Love Thy Neighbour* was produced by Thames Television for ITV and ran for eight series from 1972—76. Set in the London suburb of Twickenham, it starred Kate Williams and Jack Smethurst as white Joan and Eddie Booth, and Rudolph Walker and Nina Baden-Semper as Bill and Barbie Reynolds, their black next-door neighbours. Eddie's pronounced bigotry and hypocrisy ensure that trouble is promised from the outset. *Rising Damp*, created by Eric Chappell and produced by Yorkshire TV for ITV, ran for four series from 1974—78. Based on Chappell's 1973 play, *The Banana Box,* its TV adaptation starred Leonard Rossiter as the miserly, seedy and bigoted Rigsby, live-in landlord of a shabby Victorian townhouse located in an unidentified northern university town. The pilot introduces Rigsby as

a prejudiced character through his interactions with his white student tenant, Alan (Richard Beckinsdale), whose combination of laziness and well-coiffed hair ensures that he fails to match up to Rigsby's ideals of military masculinity. On the recommendation of his love interest and tenant Ruth (Frances de la Tour), Rigsby agrees to let the vacant room to Philip (Don Warrington), whom he believes to be a "better class of tenant," and indeed Philip's RP accent, conservative dress, hard work and financial security are all traits that Rigsby would appear to value. What studio audience laughter signifies, when Philip turns out to be black, is that Rigsby is unlikely to find his new tenant of a "better class" given his ethnicity. Both shows follow the tried and tested medium of the situation comedy, whose familiarity, repeatability and stability of characters and situations mean that it has rarely been the object of serious academic study. As one critic strongly puts it, the sitcom has been viewed as "unworthy certainly of serious intellectual pursuit, unworthy as a source of ideas or of stimulation, unworthy of critical evaluation, unworthy even as a pastime" (Attallah 1984, 223-24). Yet I would suggest that it is the nature of the sitcom formula – "Episode = Familiar Status Quo ? Ritual error made ? Ritual lesson learned ? Familiar Status Quo" (Marc 1989, 190-91) – that is central to its conservative function in resisting the change promised by exposure to difference. The sitcom formula is the means by which bigotry is normalised and black characters confirmed in their exceptionality, as racist world-

views ultimately remain unchanged. Given the stability of the format, I focus primarily on the pilot episodes of each series as representative of the characters and worldviews established therein, as subsequent episodes serve for the most part to repeat with little variation.

The habitual nature of the sitcom, and its prioritisation of domestic settings, also renders it the ideal medium for exploring the construction of the everyday – that which often escapes critical attention and allows for particular practices, attitudes and representations to become naturalised. By critically interrogating the representation of the neighbour in the sitcom I appropriate for a postcolonial agenda what feminist critic Rita Felski terms a "hermeneutics of suspicion vis-à-vis the everyday" that both challenges the illusion of fixity and questions the ways in which particular terms and practices are naturalised. Following Felski (2000, 79), I argue that it is the perceived "authenticity" and "taken-for-grantedness" of the everyday (as constructed through a medium like the sitcom and represented through the mundane figure of the neighbour) that is potentially pernicious from the perspective of postcolonial critique: in the case of representations of black characters in everyday settings (the home, the workplace), it allows for the entrenchment of stereotype rooted in colonial desires and fears. While multicultural discourse has frequently relied on the more exceptional figures of the terrorist, the gangster, or the mugger as a means of indexing mul-

ticulturalism's failures, I want to suggest that the mobilisation of the quotidian figure of the neighbour may even be more insidious in its function to naturalise and thereby foreclose critique. As Felski argues, "the everyday ceases to be everyday when it is subject to critical scrutiny", and as such it is crucial to analyse critically representations of the everyday as a means of exposing what is taken for granted and can then be popularly mobilised to detrimental effect (Felski 2002, 78).

There is a case to made – as notable postcolonial scholars including Ato Quayson, James Proctor and Paul Gilroy have – for centralising depictions of the everyday in postcolonial studies. For Proctor "the everyday tends to form the constitutive outside of postcolonial thinking" that is typically more concerned with the exotic, the exceptional, the pivotal or the heroic: the inclusion of the everyday in postcolonial critique then poses an implicit challenge to the commonplaces and omissions of the field of postcolonial studies (Proctor 2002, 62). For Quayson, it "is clear that a critical analysis of the everyday must be central to any ethical 'postcolonializing practice'" (Quayson 2000, 46). Gilroy describes the possibility of a "liberating ordinariness" of more complex narratives that are "faithful to the everyday dimension of racial difference" thereby rendering race "nothing special, a virtual reality given meaning only by the fact that racism endures" (Gilroy 2004, 131). I follow the thinking of these critics in insisting upon the study of the habitu-

al and mundane figure of the black neighbour as central to a postcolonial reading practice, with the qualification that *representations* of the everyday lives of black folk – as in the sitcoms considered here – can just as easily serve to confirm dominant attitudes and stereotypes through their very representation as natural, authentic, unexceptional. Without wishing to place the burden of representation solely upon BAME writers and producers, it is noteworthy that the sitcoms engaged here are written and directed by white men, and targeted at mainstream [read: majority white] audiences. Indeed, the underlying rationale for these sitcoms is that the black neighbour is a problem to be solved. It is therefore Malik's just assertion regarding such 1970s' shows, that "many of the comedies 'about race', were actually about Blacks signifying *trouble* […] so that if the White characters did display prejudice, this was deemed funny or understandable given the 'difficulty of the situation' (Malik 2002, 97). What we see, then, is not (or at least, not only) the normalisation of black neighbours that we might expect to follow from their frequent and habitual representation in these sitcoms, but the normalisation of bigotry and the reification of difference as the routine catalyst for conflict. Yet an examination of such comedy is nevertheless fruitful, as comedy allows for the critical defamiliarisation of moments in which the quotidian figure of the neighbour is made strange by finding humour in the incongruous. As critics, this allows us not to transcend the quotidian nature of the represented, but to re-engage with the everyday in a newly politicised manner.

A dominant concern of postcolonial criticism has been to challenge the ways in which imperial ideology has constructed and reified the figure of the Other as paradoxically knowable through their unknowability and oppositional difference to the Self. The figure of the neighbour in multicultural Britain, however, opens up a different set of possibilities and discourses for engaging with racial difference. For Sara Ahmed in *Strange Encounters* (2000, 12), "Others become strangers […] and 'other cultures' become 'strange cultures' […] only through coming *too close to home*, that is, through the proximity of the encounter […] itself." The figure of the black neighbour, by coming "too close to home" (quite literally) provides the moment of encounter with alterity, and is made strange through that encounter. The encounter, Ahmed goes on to suggest, is a meeting that "involves surprise and conflict", shifting the "boundaries of the familiar" (Ahmed 2000, 6-7). It is, as such, a moment of potential transformation in which relationships between us and them, here and there, then and now are redrawn or consolidated.

In terms of British multicultural politics, the figure of the neighbour and the trope of neighbourliness have played crucial functions. Oral history interviews with Caribbean and Irish migrants attest to the proliferation of the infamous "no blacks, no Irish, no dogs" signs well into the 1960s, speaking to attempts to maintain the cultural and ethnic homogeneity of neighbourhoods. In 1964, Peter Griffiths ran an incendiary racist campaign

that successfully exploited anti-immigrant sentiment, winning a Conservative seat in Smethwick against the national trend by trading on the assumed threat of having a black person live next door with the slogan "If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour" (see Jeffries 2014). Notions of "home" became central to this election as Conservative desires for expediated repatriation processes were contrasted with the implicit threat to white homes presented by immigrants. The neighbourhood as such becomes a microcosm for the nation, which makes sense in the context of Benedict Anderson's ideas about nations as "imagined political communities," in which he sensibly points out that ideas of collectivity and common ideals in relation to the national community can only ever be constructed via the imagination, as the national body is simply too big to account for all of the individuals collected there (Anderson 1991, 4). Imagining the neighbourhood as a microcosm for the nation is then powerful, as it allows individuals to extrapolate from lived realities. When the neighbourhood becomes the locus of debates about national belonging and identity, the figure of the black neighbour becomes a shorthand for various debates around multicultural policy.

Legitimising the Assumption of Conflict

Echoing the racism of Griffiths' 1964 campaign, *Love Thy Neighbour* is premised on the assumption that having a black neighbour inevitably spells trouble for the white residents. This is carefully set up through the various uses

of humour in the opening scene. The framing of the opening scene positions audiences to align themselves with the black couple – Bill and Barbie Reynolds – who are shown exiting the house they have bought with an estate agent. The problem that they might present to their white neighbours is acknowledged through Bill's knowing comment to the estate agent that "perhaps when they [the white neighbours] find out who has bought the house it will be more of a shock, eh?" Barbie's laughter confirms the humour of this comment, and through this sleight of hand the Reynolds are positioned as being "in" on the joke that their presence might pose a problem, their laughter condoning that of the audience. The camera then pulls back and up to show the row of terraced housing that makes up the street as Joan and Eddie Booth's white car pulls into the space just vacated by the Reynolds' estate agent, whose red car is notably at odds with the otherwise monochrome vehicles lining the street. The use of humour involved in the audience's introduction to the Booths is quite different to that framing the Reynolds. Whilst the Reynolds' shared laughter indicates their collusion and includes the audience, Joan's expression throughout her husband's monologue signifies her unspoken disagreement with her husband, her eye rolls framing him as the butt of the joke: audiences are positioned to laugh with Joan at Eddie. The topic of Eddie's opening monologue quickly paints his character as a bigot and hypocrite. His attitude towards immigrants is conveyed through his pejorative reference to an Italian waiter they have encountered on holiday as

a "wop" (without papers), and his own sense of affront that the Italian was offended, saying "they shouldn't be so touchy if they're gonna come over here." The monologue – delivered whilst dressed incongruously in a sombrero – signifies his attitudes to ethnic or national difference: it is to be tolerated as long as familiar hierarchies are maintained through monetary exchange that distinguishes consumer from consumed, served from server. Immediately following this diatribe Joan notes that they have new neighbours and expresses her hopes that they will get along. Eddie demonstrates a considerable lack of self-awareness in describing himself and his wife as "easy going enough," reminding Joan of his motto: "love thy neighbour" (cue theme tune). The comic timing of this series of incongruous statements immediately inculcates in the audience the idea that the coexistence of the neighbours is bound to lead to trouble, and that this will form the backbone of the show's tension and humour.

The show attempts to have its cake and eat it by presenting Eddie's prejudice (of which there is ample portrayed in the pilot episode alone) whilst also making him the butt of the joke through his lack of self-awareness and hypocrisy. Though it goes some way to representing and thereby acknowledging the racism of the period, the show nevertheless falls foul of what Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer have termed the "Alf Garnett syndrome, through which what is being satirised becomes the cause of celebration among at least a section of the

audience" (Pickering and Lockyer 2009, 18). The term references the central character of the incredibly popular TV sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC 1965—75), in which the comedy was ostensibly at the expense of the central bigoted character, Alf Garnett, his racist views represented as ridiculous. However, as research by critics such as Dennis Howitt and Kwame Owusu-Bempah has shown, "Bigots appreciate the rantings of the bigoted characters as the truth, whereas non-bigots see them as bigotry" (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah 2009, 63). As such, playing bigotry for laughs is not a useful vehicle for change. Furthermore, it is the joke work itself that allows for prejudice to be simultaneously aired and repressed. Following a series of awkward encounters between the central couples during which the women quickly make friends whilst the men insult, deliberately misunderstand and provoke each other, the episode ends when Eddie returns home from work, having found out that Bill has also been placed on his team there. He embarks on a rant about Bill that has all the hallmarks of racist vitriol: they've got nothing in common and never will have, he's always been against him and his kind, they're the enemy, it's either them or us, and if he had his way he'd deport the lot. Eddie, the hypocritical socialist, delivers his punchline: "I'm not talking about his colour: he's a bloody conservative!" The joke, working through what is implied but left unsaid, means that the racist taboo can be tacitly expressed and verbally repressed, confirmed and denied through the laughter that comes as a mo-

ment of release or relief. Establishing a pattern that the series will repeat with regularity, the series justifies the status quo in which neighbourly proximity across cultural or ethnic divides is constructed as the catalyst for conflict. It is therefore left to individuals to overcome a situation of conflict constructed as inevitable. Laughter between characters and echoed by the studio audience functions to appease mainstream audiences, to sympathise with prejudices, and to downplay the effects of racism by making Bill and Barbie complicit in the jokes.

Foreshadowing the Neighbourhood Watch Ethos

In 1982 the National Neighbourhood Watch Association (NNWA) was established to bring the police and community together ostensibly for the purpose of crime prevention and creating "communities that care," associating a fear of crime with a fear of strangers (see Ahmed 2000, 33). As Sara Ahmed notes, the surveillance and policing advocated by Neighbourhood Watch takes a common-sense approach to the identification of strangers, which can easily slip into racial profiling as black bodies are perceived to be "out of place" in predominantly white neighbourhoods (Ahmed 2000, 29-30). Writing a couple of years after the establishment of the NNWA, Howard Hallman described the success of communities in which people lived with "like people," the ideal neighbourhood being analogous to the healthy body, with

"wounds healed, illness cured, and wellness maintained" (Hallman in Ahmed 2000, 25). Ahmed draws this analogy to its logical conclusion, summarising that the ideal neighbourhood is thus conceived as "fully integrated, homogeneous, and sealed" – it is one in which outsiders, or foreign bodies, are not admitted (Ahmed 2000, 25). The "neighbour who is also a stranger" – or the neighbour who cannot be recognised as alike – is thereby rendered a fifth columnist, threatening the community from within (Ahmed 2000, 26). Though the NNWA was established after the sitcoms and representations of the black neighbour examined here, I argue that its official establishment only served to legitimise behaviours that were already nascent in the 1970s as regards the treatment of "stranger neighbours." Through analysis of these comedies it will become apparent that the social anxieties expressed through the comedies were later sanctioned through the establishment of the NNWA and the increased powers of eviction devolved to local authorities in pursuit of the protection of imaginary communities.

I share with Ahmed her concern for the ways in which "contemporary modes of proximity r*eopen prior histories of encounter*" (Ahmed 2000, 13). Mary Louise Pratt's discussion of the "contact zone" is useful in this sense. For Pratt, the contact zone is "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequal-

ity, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 2002, 6). The contact zone is, to an extent, coterminous with the colonial frontier, but it denies the privilege of the Eurocentric perspective (Pratt 2002, 6). The contact zone is a space in which individuals from different cultures are confronted with the often-alienating experience of having ideas about their cultures discussed and objectified. By discussing the communal or domestic spaces depicted in these television series as contact zones, I do not intend to conflate the power differentials inherent in the very different contexts of colonial frontier and suburban British neighbourhoods. Rather, I wish to highlight the imperialist impulse of what I would term a burgeoning "Neighbourhood Watch Ethos" exemplified in these sitcoms.

The suburban British neighbourhood as such becomes a *re-contact zone* in these sitcoms, as familiar anxieties about colonial subjects are transposed onto the bodies of the black neighbours, the new fears finding a vocabulary for expression in the old. As Ahmed notes with reference to the NNWA, "The discourse of vulnerability allows self-policing to be readable as the protection of others: the risk posed by suspects and strangers is a risk posed to the vulnerable bodies of children, the elderly and women" (Ahmed 2000, 30-31). This is clearly reminiscent of colonial rhetoric in which anxieties about the threat posed by colonised subjects were transposed onto the bodies of white women, in need of protection from savage or lascivious men. Such logic drives the pilot episode

of *Rising Damp* (and many thereafter). That the shared townhouse that provides the sitcom's setting functions as a re-contact zone, always haunted by prior histories of prejudicial encounter drawn from the British colonies, is made particularly evident in the assumptions about Philip's hypermasculine threat as a black man. Always on the lookout for ways to seduce Philip, Ruth comes to his room in a nightdress, the physicality of her performance and tone of voice making her intentions towards him all too clear. Seductively, she pulls the bedclothes back and is startled to find a skeleton (previously hidden by Alan) lurking amidst the sheets. Rigsby is brought running by her screams, hastily misreading the scene and challenging Philip: "Now then Monolulu[1], what's your little game, eh? Do you think you can start that sort of thing round here? This happens to be a respectable house!" Rigsby is positioned as the butt of the joke due to the dramatic irony that means studio and home audiences are aware of character details and plot points of which he is unaware (namely Ruth's persistently unrequited desire for Philip). However, the nature of the accusation positions audiences to read Philip as familiar, as knowable via stereotype, the reference to one of the most famous black men in Britain at the time (Prince Monolulu) attempting to offer confirmation of audiences' knowledge of the likely behaviours of black men. As such, Rigsby's own awkwardness and prejudice around his new black tenant, Philip, is frequently expressed through a desire to protect the white woman, Ruth, from Philip's imagined sex-

ual predation (when the reverse is in fact true), which to an extent legitimises it as a selfless and honourable act.

The tendency to react to new situations in familiar ways ensures that power dynamics established during the period of British colonialism are maintained. The following dialogue warrants quoting at length:

> Rigsby: I suppose being the son of a chief you can have your pick?
> Philip: What?
> Rigsby: You know, women.
> Philip: Oh yes.
> Rigbsy: Yeah. Is it true, your women are much more, you know?
> Philip: Oh yes. Much more.
> Rigsby: Yes I've heard that.
> Philip: It's a medical fact, they get far more excited.
> Rigsby: Ours are always getting headaches. Do yours get headaches?
> Philip: No, I don't think so.
> Rigsby: Miss Jones gets headaches, terrible ones, she has to wear her blue glasses. Course, you're very hard on your women, aren't you?
> Philip: What do you mean?
> Rigsby: Well you know, you make them walk for miles in the hot sun with pots on their heads.
> Philip: Oh yes.
> Rigsby: To keep them in their place.

Rigsby's assumptions about Philip's relations with women, and about black women, are drawn directly from colonial stereotype, and the nature of the taboo joke (about black women being "much more… you know…" for example) means that for the humour to make sense, stereotypes about black hypersexuality must first be tacitly acknowledged. As Sigmund Freud asserts in relation to such jokes, the audience "must be able as a matter of habit to erect in himself [sic] the same inhibition which the first person's joke has overcome, so that, as soon as he hears the joke, the readiness for this inhibition will compulsively or automatically awaken" (Freud 1960, 151). Though Rigsby's bigotry is poked fun at, as signified through Philip's knowing comments that function to mock his views, it nevertheless similarly falls foul of the "Alf Garnett syndrome," whilst providing an internal logic for the bigotry related to the necessity to protect the white woman. The joke work functions to activate any latent prejudice and allow for its sanctioned airing through the unspoken implications of the humorous lines. In the far less subtle humour of *Love Thy Neighbour*, Eddie warns that his wife "could get raped in the night", her reply of "promises, promises" providing a weak attempt at poking fun at Eddie's failure to sexually satisfy her before Eddie (unnecessarily) asserts "not by me, by him". As such the white neighbours' bigotry is somewhat justified through recourse to the old colonial rhetoric that established fears of black hypersexuality.

The Individualising Function of the Neighbour Comedy

Though there are moments of subversion and critique in the sitcoms considered here in their various challenges to bigotry, I would argue that they have a broadly conservative and assimilative function in placing the happy operation of a multicultural society in the hands of individuals in a way that fails to question the socio-political backdrop against which these interactions take place. Indeed, it is frequently the power, class and economic equality implied by the residents of adjacent terraced houses or bedsits in a shared house that allows for the satirisation of self-aggrandising perceptions of superiority. In another 1970s' sitcom, *The Good Life* (BBC 1975—78), the neighbourly status of social climbing Margo (Penelope Keith) and Jerry Leadbetter (Paul Eddington) and self-sufficient Tom (Richard Briers) and Barbara Good (Felicity Kendal) was what allowed for the comparison and critique of both the Leadbetters' aspirational middle-class snobbery and the Goods' excessively stubborn and self-righteous approach to self-sufficiency. In terms of humour, the apparent equality of the neighbours in sitcoms modelled in this manner allows for what John Clement Ball might call a form of "satirical multidirectionality" that "works against the binary model of norm and deviation and offers one in which oppositions may be set up without either side being endorsed" (Ball 2003, 21). Yet as I have demonstrated,

the implied equality of neighbours in these 1970s' sitcoms functions as a screen for more serious inequalities.

These sitcoms get away with the airing of prejudice by positioning the black characters as having the upper hand. Whilst a focus on the neighbour allows for associations of belonging and ownership absent from xenophobic discourse that situates migrants and their descendants as temporary guests, urged intermittently to "go home" by white British "hosts" whose hospitality has been abused, the assumption of material and social equality between neighbours belies structural inequality and systemic violence that multicultural policy has failed to address[2]. This creates situations in which the airing of prejudice is paralleled in *Love Thy Neighbour,* as if anti-black and anti-white sentiments had the same history and power. White Eddie's frequent use of terms such as "Nig nog" and "Sambo" to describe his black neighbour are internally justified through the inclusion of Bill's construction of Eddie as a "white honky" and a "snowflake". As Malik reports, a Thames Television spokesperson suggested that the reciprocity of the racism in *Love Thy Neighbour* would "take the heat out of the race question", which was a widely used defence (Malik 2002, 98). Yet it begs the question as to whose end it serves to "take the heat out" of said "race question" (or what we might otherwise term ongoing racism). During a period that witnessed serious structural and systemic prejudice and violence against black

Britons, it only serves to comfort those already in a position of privilege to suggest that equality has already been achieved, and that racist slurs have an easy counterpart in anti-white prejudice. Furthermore, the individualising function of such comedy allows individuals off the hook for structural or political reform, provided that they can learn to tolerate those close to them.

Set in the 1970s but produced in 2002, Metin Hüseyin's adaptation of *Anita and Me* uses the benefit of hindsight to comment on the way that exceptional status was granted to individuals whilst racism was otherwise allowed to march on uninterrupted by representing relationships between neighbours in this way. In this film, British Asian Meena is constructed as an honorary insider by her white neighbour Anita and her posse. The exceptional status granted to Meena is highlighted as other characters freely vent their racial prejudice in front of her, calling a dog "Nigger," discussing going "Paki bashing," or advocating "no more African babies" in a bid to keep the church collection focussed on the local area. It is only at the end of the film that Meena confronts Anita with the uncomfortable truth: "I am the Others". Meena here bears the burden common to minority groups of educating her ignorant white neighbours, and by extension audiences, providing a timely reminder that it is not enough to grant exceptional status to a black neighbour if that does not translate to a challenge to lingering prejudice.

The final episodes of the two series confirm that while individual relationships between black and white neighbours may become more companionable, this does not represent a more significant attitude change, let alone any promise of serious social reform. The repeatability and familiarity of the sitcom format that prioritises stability over change ensures that the bigoted white characters introduced in the pilots emerge unscathed, their worldviews unchallenged by what Ahmed might term their "strange encounters." As *Rising Damp*'s Rigsby explains to Philip his plans to propose to Ruth, the framing of the scene and respective tones of voice signify a greater element of friendship than was present at the outset of the show, but Rigsby's insistence that "we're not like your lot – don't give them a light tap over the head with a war club and drag them over to the bushes" draws on stereotypes by now all-too-familiar. Similarly, the final episode of *Love Thy Neighbour* depicts Eddie and Bill united in a comradely drink at the pub that would have seemed improbable following the pilot. Yet the dialogue treads familiar territory as Eddie warns Bill to "stick to your own colour" when Bill admits to fancying the white barmaid. All that seems to have changed in the intervening years is that remarks such as this are taken in better humour, marking the neighbours' familiarity and grudging tolerance for each other whilst insisting that power hierarchies and structures defining wider British society and ensuring that black Britons are unequal recipients of wealth, power and status are nevertheless maintained.

In sum, the popular mainstream appeal of the 1970s sitcoms explored here attests to their appeasement of white viewers, an ability to make them feel good about themselves. As Malik has argued in relation to the kind of collusion that comedians like Charlie Williams exemplified, "because the black comedian would actively collude with this racist humour, it would avoid criticisms of racism" (Malik 2002, 98). What is at stake is at such not the racism present within society, but the ability to frame it more palatably on the screen. This exposes oppositions between the ideological work of multiculturalism, which aims to manage diversity, and the activist work of anti-racist struggle, which engages more directly with inequality and racism, rather than trying to paper it over. In these comedies, we might then read loving the non-white neighbour as a socially conservative manoeuvre, a form of self-love that ensures conviviality at home without the necessary radical critique of systemic violence and inequality.

Notes:

1. "Prince Monolulu" (b. 1881 Peter Carl McKay) was an early twentieth-century horse racing tipster who styled himself as an African Prince and was one of the best-known black men in Britain at the time, having appeared in a handful of films and a couple of times on Groucho Marx's quiz show *You Bet Your Life* (NBC 1950—61).

2. A notorious recent example of calls to "go home" were reflected on advertising vans deployed during Operation Vaken, designed to increase the uptake of "voluntary departures," in 2013. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operation-vaken-evaluation-report.

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