

Connecting the racial to the spatial; migration, identity and educational settings as a third space

Kaur, Bally

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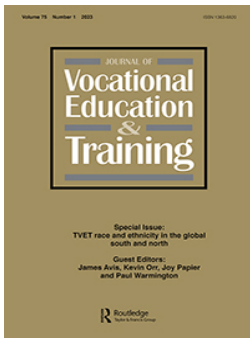
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Balwant Kaur

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Connecting the racial to the spatial; migration, identity and educational settings as a third space

Balwant Kaur 

University of Derby, College of Arts, Humanities and Education, Derby, UK

ABSTRACT

The VET sector can be located as one that sits within the intersections of the racial and spatial in addition to the classed; the traditional focus of research concerns. There is a direct correlation between towns and cities with high levels of deprivation and the recruitment of racialised and other marginalised groups into general further education colleges. This paper considers the intertwined nature of the racial and spatial and its implications for South Asian Muslim women students in VET spaces in terms of identity construction and possible futures. This paper critiques how geographical location and educational settings highlight the complex factors encountered by diasporic communities; patterns of historical migration; the educational space as a third space; the role of teachers as mentors. These factors contributed to students developing fluid and dynamic identities rooted in a critical self-awareness whilst resisting Western-centric notions of success. Whilst this created a self-realised agency in the narratives of South Asian Muslim women, it also created a cultural hauntology in the absence of a third space. This has various implications for future VET research in terms of how students from ethnically diverse groups, create or engage with a third space.

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Introduction and context

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the contextual factors that frame vocational educational and training (VET) settings; namely the relationship between racialised spaces (Neely and Samura 2011), hybrid identities (Bhabha 1994) and the third space (Takhar 2016; Soja 1996).

Whilst the VET sector can be located as one that sits within the intersections of the racial and spatial, social class has retained a prominent area of research focus. The problem that this paper attends to is the oversight of the relationships between geographical location, identity construction and the role of the educational space in this. Whilst geographical location has quite rightly, a materiality about it, Black Geographies reconceptualises this by attending to

CONTACT Balwant Kaur  b.kaur@derby.ac.uk  University of Derby

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how ‘the production of space is tied to the production of difference.’ (Hawthorne 2019, 3)

In addition to this, there is an absence of the complexities and contextual narratives that sit behind the experiences of ethnically diverse students as Avis, Orr, and Warmington (2017) identify. Avis, Orr, and Warmington (2017) contend with the ‘warehousing’ effect of Black students in further education and in a later paper (2022) draw attention to the conflation of race and migration, particularly the notion of migration as a site of ‘political anxiety’ (Avis, Orr, and Warmington 2022). There are several themes here that resonate with the central argument of this paper which is the absence in acknowledging the connection between racialised neighbourhoods and the VET space, whether in formal educational or work-based settings.

There are further bodies of work that form an important basis here for understanding the premise of this paper in particular. Skeggs (Skeggs 2019) for instance, reflects on the intersections of gender, race and class, arguing that

There is a sustained absence of sociological analysis of the state in creating and legitimising racism
(Skeggs 2019, 31).

This has implications of course, for how this system plays out in the VET sector and is echoed by an earlier study by Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (1998) which comments on the legitimisation of institutional racism in GFE colleges. Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (1998) argue that competition between colleges to some extent, legitimises institutional racism. Furthermore, they state that:

‘The interplay of ‘race’ and space is also important in making sense of the organisation of this market.
(Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 1998, 180)

Exploring the presence of Black students in GFE colleges which at that time, were stereotypically seen with as having ‘outgoing dispositions’ and as low-achievers; Asians as being more hard-working; as being at odds particularly in suburban colleges which for some white middle-class parents (and teachers) was problematic. Despite being written in the 1990s, the paper itself sits within a much wider conversation about belonging and visibility; about a) students’ own urban spatial imaginations about where is considered more or less dangerous and b) the potential disruption caused from the urban to suburban for Black students. The paper attends to staff attitudes; to initiatives relating to anti-racism and decolonisation; and the extent to which these remain a moral obligation or more so a marketised incentive.

Mhow ethnically diverse students in VET navigate the liminality of educational settings and their contribute to the production of space within it. This does however, come with a cautionary note to acknowledge that this reference to ethnically diverse students risks presenting a generalised and homogenised group which actually sits in opposition to the argument of this paper. Charlotte Chadderton’s application of Judith Butler’s work brings to

the fore issues relating to power, subjectification and of particular interest here, race as a performative which is the ‘... witting or unwitting repetition or citation of norms, which serve to shape reality.’ Chadderton (2018), 5). Arguably, this is perhaps why taking the third space into account, is important.

The location of racialised groups and communities within a geographical context, are often less attended to in TVET research despite their close proximity to the work of VET providers like general further education colleges. Providers like general further education colleges are sites that have historically had a community presence or more certainly, a central or city visibility positioned to serve local communities. The notion of ‘communities’ is significant here given the commitment many providers express in relation to discourses associated with opportunity, social mobility and even transformation. Whilst this is often endorsed with a social justice intention, there are two specific inferences that are made; firstly, that there is a deficit and secondly, who these communities might be is often unclear despite the undertones of either a classed or Black and ethnically diverse population, or indeed both. There is often an oversight of the nuances and intersections that exist within racialised groups which run the risk of a homogenised perception. Adding to this complexity are particular geographical spaces and neighbourhoods that are often conceptualised as landscapes of spatial anxiety (Kaur 2021).

Black lives are necessarily geographic, but also struggle with discourses that erase and despatialise their sense of place
(McKittrick 2006 p.xiii)

Hawthorne (2019) concurs with the stance taken by McKittrick and proceeds to both explore and position the urgency of Black Geography, proposing that ‘although the discipline of geography has bequeathed to us a grammar of racial difference, contemporary geographers have more often than not tended to sweep this history under the rug.’ (p3) Similarly, it could be argued that there is a history – be it migratory or generational – that is often dismissed or indeed, omitted.

This paper is based on empirical research conducted for doctoral research. It involves the educational narratives of three South Asian Muslim women who grew up in inner-city Birmingham. There are a number of key theoretical concepts which underpin this paper and form an important part of the empirical context here.

The geographical location that is being considered specifically in this paper is Aston, an inner city area that sits on the periphery to the north of Birmingham; a city situated in the West Midlands region of the UK. In terms of its location and demographics, Aston is characterised as an economically deprived neighbourhood. Whilst it has clear similarities with wards around the UK with a high percentage of low-income ethnic minority residents, there are equally specificities that make Aston distinct.

The Aston area is well known for its famous football club; a site which commands a powerful position as a symbol of status, capital and whiteness. Its presence and the subsequent representation is significant in the midst of what has become home to diverse migrant communities from ex-commonwealth countries since the second world war. There is a curious juxtaposition of the superiority and centring of the football club whilst othering the dominant populations that reside in the area. The waves of migration into the area are known and visible in the shops and businesses which fill the high street, forming an integral part of the local economy. A distinct politics of representation prevails; one which is often overlooked in such instances. Policies often have an impact on the subsequent documentation that is produced by local government, reinforcing divisions of poverty and prosperity (Ledwith 2015). The result is an othering and problematising of areas like this given the framing of its economic participation and output. Such framings are shaped by the local council data which has significant power to shape places like this, echoing the notion of uneven geographies (Phillips, Davis, and Ratcliffe 2006; Peck, Brenner, and Theodore 2018). Furthermore, the narrative that this data tells is reductionist. It tells a story of deficit; of high levels of joblessness in a racialised neighbourhood. The result is one of a spatialised anxiety rooted in stigma (Tyler 2020) which alerts us to a troubling sense about the geographies of power. This area – like many others that it is comparable to – has been subject to interventions with limited success. There is a coloniality and ‘correction’ inferred in such approaches which again, forms an important part of the context for the area. This correction assumes

An ‘underclass’ ... of people who are constituted as lazy, feckless and irresponsible ...
a racialising discourse. (Chadderton 2018, 9)

A history of intervention seeking to ‘upgrade’ the area, signals various attempts to bring the area into alignment with what might be seen as a more desirable or *successful* place to live. One way of addressing the deprivation and stigma it would seem, is to make it more like other – more desirable – places. This notion of correction resonates with Neely and Samura’s (2011) framework exploring the racial and spatial connections; Aston is *contested* because neither the space or the racialised processes are fully understood; there is a marked dissonance of lived experience and external perception.

More specifically however, this paper explores how different spaces were conceptualised and occupied by the participants and the backdrop which informed these.

Brooke Neely and Samura’s (2011) offer a framework outlining explicit connections between spatial and racial processes. At the heart of this framework, there are four central characteristics of *space* which are 1) contested, 2) fluid and historical, 3) relational and interactional, and 4) infused with difference and

inequality (Neely and Samura 2011, 1938). These characteristics they maintain, are also applicable to race – hence the intersection of space and race.

The social links between race and space are not new phenomena. Most notably, there are long-standing historical roots of the race-space connection in the process of imperialism racialising bodies and groups has always been linked to the theft of land and the control of space. *(Neely and Samura 2011, 1934)*

This intersection has implications for students in vocational education and training spaces in terms of their identity construction and subsequently, for possible futures.

Identity construction in this paper refers to Homi Bhabha's (1994) conceptualisation of culturally hybrid identities. Bhabha's is a postcolonial perspective and he maintains that cultural hybridity is based on an interdependent relationship between the coloniser and colonised. From this emerges a culturally hybrid identity. Although this begins as a space of contradiction, Bhabha's argument is that this is the space in between – or the third space – which has the potential to reverse structures of domination. Therefore, this third space, that which is seemingly on the margins or peripheries, holds the potential to be more profound. It is the construction of a hybrid identity within a third space – in this case, an educational space – that could offer a transformative moment to create a self that has the potential to sit amidst contradictory cultural practices. Shaminder Takhar offers a different interpretation of the third space which significantly for this paper, acknowledges a place-based backdrop. She identifies it as

a type of disruption and coming together of history and identity. *(Takhar 2016, 49)*

Hauntology addresses the appearance of the unresolved past; that which lingers and remains open-ended. It holds significance for what is remembered given that it is about the acknowledgement and subversion of time. Gordon (2008) identifies the experiencing of non-linear time as the unresolved past which continues to appear in the present and the future. Although it has its roots in psychoanalysis, hauntology has notable relevance for social research particularly when considering the inclusion or presence of some narratives and conversely what does not appear.

Methodology and methods

This paper considers perspectives from three of the four participants that were part of the study; Mashkura, Fozia and Sara. I met the participants through working as a volunteer at Birmingham Settlement, a local and long-established charity based in the centre of Aston. This charity worked to support its local communities on a range of matters; money, job-seeking, crafts-based workshops, parenting and fitness. A weekly coffee morning received up to 30 women

from the area with the majority of Muslim faith. Some were recent migrants from countries such as Yemen and Turkey whilst others were from Pakistan or Bangladesh. All had been living in Aston from a few weeks to many years. A much smaller number had always lived in Aston and it was this group specifically that could offer insights into their relationship to the area and post school education during a particular historical time.

Sara attended some of the sessions here and we became familiar through informal conversations on motherhood. Fozia, a drama practitioner, ran several workshops at the charity eliciting personal and shared reflections whilst Mashkura, a well known community leader in the city, was later introduced to me by Fozia. These participants mentioned came to the UK in their early years during the 1970s. This was a significant historical and political moment; a significant time for migrant settlement from South Asian countries arriving in to Aston in a post World War 2 period in response to the labour shortage.

A participatory approach was favoured to provide participants with the opportunity to co-construct meaning and to promote the sense of freedom this might bring (Sallah 2014; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2017). The co-constructing of meaning was significant given that the geographical location represented communities who are often seen and assumed but not necessarily heard. This was an area which had historically been subjected to and haunted by many policy initiatives and interventions such as a regeneration scheme between 2001 and 2011. This was a history that raised questions about the politics and ethics involved in firstly, the appearance of this project as one that was anti-interventionist and secondly, to centre an ethics of care for the participants and a respect for the area.

Underpinning the participatory approach was a hauntological (Gordon 2008) lens which sought to explore that which was unspoken but surfaced as unresolved. This was identified through the methods deployed though more so by *being with* the participants and listening to their (un)spoken accounts.

Using hauntology as part of both the methodological approach played a central role in dismantling some of the subjectivity and tendency to only tell the self-affirming accounts. Whilst this approach relied on remembering, reminiscing and revisiting, these were all significant in contributing to a hauntological perspective. The accounts given by participants were spoken memories and already mediated. Whilst this transgressed any singular or concretised truth, it also highlighted what appeared in its absence or indeed, what remained unresolved. In line with decolonial feminist hauntology, Jeung-eun Rhee (2020) argues that hauntology or *rememory*, is a feminist practice in that it 'opens up an enclosed (Western) notion of individual and self' (p5).

Hauntology worked not only as a theoretical framework in this study, but a methodological one also. Hauntology as an ontology – as a way of seeing and being – informed the methodology here. Given my concerns about capturing how and what participants remembered in relation to space and education, it

was important to move beyond narrative inquiry. Hauntology in this instance is anti-storification given that it remains open-ended. It is also something which is present and not necessarily voiced.

The research process involved three meetings; a preliminary discussion where participants talked through their educational experiences after secondary school; a walking tour of the neighbourhood; and reflections on the photographs taken during the walk. The focus on the walk is more poignant given its demonstration of an act that is embodying, relational and sensory (O'Neill, 2017; Springgay and Truman 2018) and as much about *affect*. The decision to use walking tour interviews as a primary research method was to enable the mapping of spatial relations between places of significance including sites of educational encounter – whether formal or informal. Walking together was rooted in an intention to create collaborative and embodied knowledge which surfaced through the mobilisation of the body; the voice along with the visual; the spatial and the re-membered stories that came through. The notion of embodiment was key for the study and as a research method, movement had significance as a mechanism for de-conditioning the body and in identifying hauntological aspects; notifications of a lingering unresolved social past (Gordon 2008) and how the unspoken surfaced. Most notably, walking transgressed to some extent, the expectations of the traditional interview. Here, it was about noticing; how, where or when the unresolved surfaced in the spatial; in the neighbourhoods and buildings crossed and encountered; its effect on the human body as a site of unsettlement; what had been locked into its crevices and subsequently presented itself through its absence. The subjectivities and sensibilities of the body then, became a rich 'data' set for interpretation by including the sensory system; rejecting the senses as 'neutral recorders of experience' (Osgood et al., 2020).

The audio recordings from each of the meetings was transcribed and shared with participants for approval and further comment. Ethics approval was gained through a formal university ethics process.

The transcriptions were used as an important basis for considering absence; what was *not* said and the points at which there remained some residual haunting. Transcriptions alone could not attend to the other significant information that was communicated through body language, gestures and the *unspoken* without a hauntological lens. This was an important part of the ways in which the theoretical and methodological concepts began to mobilise and direct the analysis of the narratives.

Migration: a catalyst for the historical, racial and spatial intersection

In a report connected to the 2008 'Muslims and Community Cohesion in Britain' project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Abbas (2008) provides insights into the placement of groups of people to different postcode areas and settled into affordable but less desirable housing. Vacated by "more mobile Britons in 'white

flight” (Abbas, 2008: 1) there is a sense of abandonment by the indigenous population in response to the incoming migrant population, marking the beginnings of a space vulnerable to becoming racialised. This framing is significant for providing further context to the area though it sits in contradiction with the participants’ accounts. Whilst the participants’ narratives provided rich insights into the different lives of each, there was a comfort and rootedness that emerged in their relationships to the spatial. Walking through the area with participants revealed for instance, a temporal or rather hauntological dimension where an enmeshing of the historical and present moment was evident:

Mashkura: This road I’m walking you up now, this was a very different world, really. This is where I felt safe and I spent a lot of my childhood here. I knew most of the people on this street and they knew me so there was a sense of community growing up. I would walk through here saying hello, Salaam, Sat-Sri-Akaal, Namaste because it was so diverse and I knew everybody and really, that road summarises growing up.

Mashkura’s rememory normalises being amongst different migrant communities and the linguistic as well as cultural richness this brought.

Fozia’s commentaries often reflected a collision of past, present and future which signalled a re-framing and future focused approach. Both belonging and community were important factors, particularly in terms of raising her own children in the area:

Fozia: I wouldn’t want to go and live in what you would call a middle class suburb – no way. It’s not what I want for my kids or myself. I think you do have a feel of community, you know you can walk down the high street and still say hello to people and have a chat. I think that connection really matters and knowing people will help you out if you need it.

Mashkura and Fozia’s accounts demonstrate a rootedness and fondness for the area in which they grew up and continued to live in. Their stories of settling in Birmingham gave way to draw on how their families became part of a diasporic community. It added various nuances to what might have been captured as being typical of an educational narrative. In particular, participants had lived experience of being the daughters of economic migrants with an astute awareness of the differences within the South Asian community. These differences were inferred in relation to resisting stereotypes because of the stigma attached to these. Fozia became conscious of stereotypical assumptions about the lives and futures of Muslim women whilst she was in school. She described how an Indian teacher had mocked her and her friends for their efforts:

I remember Mr Lal who was our Chemistry teacher – he was Hindu obviously – and he was saying to us ‘Why are you all studying for? You’re all going to get married and stay at home!’ and we were like ‘Oh my gosh!’ Because actually, our friend Zeenat was amazing and she wanted to become a doctor. But he’d make comments like that and we were proper offended and we’d tell our English teacher who would just tell us to ignore him.

Fozia's identification of his Indian heritage makes an implicit reference to specific stereotypes within the South Asian community that intersected with social class as well as a notable hierarchy within minority groups. It also casts a judgement on which communities were more likely to assimilate; resonant with the notion of 'model minorities' where Indian students – as opposed to those from Bangladeshi or Pakistani backgrounds – were expected to be higher achievers with teachers and parents who had much higher aspirations for them (Abbas, 2002; Archer & Francis, 2007). This became significant as a factor which stigmatised the identities of young Muslim girls like Fozia who were ambitious. Fozia recognised the stigma attached to getting married young and associated this with a removal of agency. Education then, became a route to not only independence, but challenging the stigma attached to the expected futures of young Muslim women as demonstrated by the comments made by her teacher, Mr Lal. This teacher represents an ideology which anticipates the performance of a particular identity from these girls; an anticipation that assumes an unintelligible fixed or homogeneous identity (Chadderton 2018) with a particular future trajectory.

Whilst the focus on schooling may appear insignificant for VET, its importance lies in the foundations that were set for who participants continued to become. Whilst compulsory schooling provided a space for participants to observe and to some extent, mimic identities and ways of being, post school education offered opportunities to more actively construct identity. Informal spaces such as theatre workshops and community initiatives enabled this.

A question that arises as a result of migratory settlement, is how young people make sense of, relate to and navigate spaces outside of the home. In the case of the participants of this project, educational settings had a crucial role to play, particularly in terms of the role played by their teachers.

Connected to these findings were Yosso's (2005) framework of community cultural wealth. This is an important framework for shifting the attention away from the often deficit narratives which underpin assumptions about students from diverse communities. The framework identifies six cultural capitals that ethnically diverse students bring to the classroom: aspirational; linguistic; familial, social, navigational and resistance. These capitals have a weighting in terms of their located-ness in complex and intersecting identities. Whilst a powerful alternative to the normative culture is created by the framework, Yosso's (2005) provides a necessary insight and urgency to consider the potency of a third space (Takhar 2016; Soja 1996).

The participants' accounts revealed agency in terms of the more traditional markers of educational success such as graduate status. However, there was equally an agency and a commitment to use particular social capitals as tools; familial and navigational as mobilisers and enablers of identity (Yosso 2005). Familial capital refers to cultural knowledge that is nurtured primarily, within

families. Within the educational settings, participants could draw on values and stories from their home communities to add to what was being taught. Often this was done more informally in friendship groups. Nonetheless, it created an environment that honoured some of the elders' stories and wisdom as well as evoking participation. Navigational capital refers to the ability to navigate institutions and systems that are hostile of the differences of Black and ethnically diverse students. This was highlighted as a strength which came from integrating different encounters from formal and informal settings, relationships with teachers and mentors and a strong sense of who and what was predominantly represented without it being either a deterrent or indeed, to their detriment.

Yosso's capitals allowed an active construction of identity as a result of being in the third space and the frequenting and variety of educational spaces including the formal and informal such as the community space.

The role of teachers and mentors

Another prevalent theme that emerged from the participants' encounters of both **formal and informal settings including post-schooling**, centred on the relationships with their teachers. The participants indicated the critical role in cultivating environments that welcomed and supported their overall educational experience. Participants mentioned the role played by their teachers in going beyond the teaching of a curriculum. They were described and inferred to be moral agents and figures who assisted their navigation of a space, often embodying a more mentor-like disposition. Teachers proved to embody a practical wisdom, (Hooks 2003; Heilbrohn 2008) acting as anchors for offering and at times, facilitating spaces in and outside of the classroom that invited occupation and construction. Such spaces enabled the encountering of difference through recognising firstly, the similarities with peers. Whether these commonalities were cultural or otherwise, it provided a firm foundation from which to imagine and push the parameters of the space and identity; and so school was likely another crucial space for hybridity. This marks again, the relationship between space and race – as interactional and relational (Neely and Samura 2011). For some of the participants, this continuation was evident in further education though the attention here shifted from teachers to peers and friendship groups.

Fozia implied that her teachers had been at the school for a long time which suggests that along with their experience, they may have understood the particularities of the migratory moment and its implications for the settlement and schooling of South Asian communities. Mashkura attributed her engagement in formal education as a responsibility to her teachers, which suggests a relational pedagogy that is facilitated by hybridity. This would also indicate that the educational space was more than a colonising process; it was a space

that began to feature more meaningful connectivity with student identities which affected how they thought and related to their environments.

Whilst secondary school teachers received more attention in the participants' narratives, many of these remained as their sixth form teachers. This could of course, be attributed to the memory attached to the school buildings which were identified during the walks and in closer proximity to where they lived. Equally, it suggested that for the participants, the adolescent years were a crucial time when spaces for hybridity were sought out. The focus on teachers could signify that they were noticed for creating a sense of community in the classroom, creating a culture of reflexivity and dialogue that would become a more normative basis for conversations (Hooks 2003). The role of the teacher as a facilitator of a purposeful educational environment together with the spaces that the participants actively produced, is resonant with Hook's work titled *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope* (Hooks 2003) where she argues that cultivating an inclusive community is key to creating hope through pedagogy. This pedagogy of hope is built on how aware students and teachers are of themselves in their respective roles (teachers or students) *and* as human beings. There is an emphasis on interpersonal relationships between teachers and students – and amongst students – that allow for critical conversations that are underpinned by reflexivity and dialogue. The value of formal settings was therefore, as much as about learning to be as it was about passing exams to achieve qualifications. Essentially, the participants' experiences of their teachers point to pedagogical philosophies that were embodied, responsive and flexible. It was as much about what the teachers taught as how they facilitated the space. Whilst it was important that they understood their local communities and families, the culture and space that teachers created in the classroom contributed to who the participants became and how that time was remembered.

Fozia participated frequently in theatre projects during the holidays, in a youth club during term time as well as in a community-based space for migrant families; Saathi House. Certainly, these may have been what Jeffs and Smith (2005) refer to as enlarged experiences (Jeff and Smith, 2005: 58) which refer to those incidents which are magnified and deepened, for closer attention. The exploration of these experiences may or not have occurred either instantly or simultaneously. What they did offer for Fozia was the freedom to allow additional ways of being, doing and knowing to create and shape the different layers of who she was and indeed, became. For Bhabha's (1994), this describes the power of a third space; that despite the many contradictions that are inherent in its very nature, it offers transformation. For the participants in this study, these contradictions will have involved the entanglement of speaking and thinking in English and Bengali, for instance. For Fozia this was the managing of a prevailing hybrid identity with the practice and skill of theatre techniques, interacting with peers and mentors; those of her own community

and outside, re-framing her responses as well as navigating her individual and collective roles within the activities and experiences at home and school.

Mashkura and Fozia's connection to Saathi House provided opportunities to meet with others within the diaspora as well as understanding their own positions within it. This happened on a regular basis; a back and forth relationality allowed for a gradual integration and consolidation of the identities that came into fruition through being in a third space. Both mentioned for example, the need to carefully explore and understand what it meant to be British and Bangladeshi girls with the aim of forming future selves that were independent and agentic. To acknowledge and recognise their position was a key part of the process towards for consolidating a critical consciousness (Freire 1974), particularly as women living in Britain that came from a Bangladeshi community and heritage.

Educational settings as third spaces

According to the participants' narratives, educational spaces represented the encountering of a world often in contrast to the one they knew. The participants' accounts conveyed that crucially, formal education offered something more than qualifications. These were places in which they became accustomed to the organisation of routines and protocols as well as opportunities to form relationships with their peers and teachers. This was undeniably, a liminal space; a space which like cultural hybridity (Bhabha 1994) brought together knowledges and practices that might have seemed jarring. However, because it was a place that was frequented often, it resulted in bridging any sense of alienation.

The participants' accounts highlighted the spatial significance of educational settings for enabling both the construction and negotiation of identity (Takhar 2016).

Mashkura: We used to put the world to rights in that common room. We were having these intellectual conversations about race, you know – multiculturalism – without even realising. Back then we didn't know those terms – they weren't in fashion. So we were having these conversations *then*.

Mashkura's emphasis on when these conversations took place is critical in that it alludes to a time when she and her friends had a more personal awareness of their difference in racial and cultural terms. These conversations took place in an unsupervised capacity, signifying a freedom to produce an informal space for exploring thoughts and observations that were outside of the taught curriculum but bound these girls together. Although it was connected to the formal educational space, it was peripheral and incidental, adding to the formation of a hybrid identity. Underlying this, is something about power, inclusion and access as the girls engaged in conversations that were perhaps less explicitly attended to.

Having the freedom to create and interact in a space, echoed Fozia's experiences of having the permission to use the staffroom with her friends on weekends and during holidays as somewhere to study. Despite being on the school site, this became a space that hosted occasions for talk and imaginings. Bhabha's notion of the 'third space' however, is perhaps not such an easy 'fit' for the women's interactions. To remain anchored in the familiar was a priority for the participants during school. School could have been a site of difference that deterred them from further study. The reasons why it wasn't was because in the formation of their hybrid identities, they moved between home and school. This has some potential implications for Black and ethnically diverse students when they come to college for instance; their experiences of spaces to explore their histories, identities and managing the home/school difference is a factor which might be more pertinent than is realised. This is possibly even more urgent in more recent times following the lockdowns incurred by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sara's recollection of starting her childcare course as a young mother was positive and particularly memorable. Travelling to an unknown place on public transport for this first time, Sara was accompanied by her young daughter who stayed in the creche whilst she attended her course.

SARA: Catching buses was all new and then picking my daughter up and going home. It was very fulfilling. I loved it! And do you know, on that course there were girls younger than me and my age as well. I felt old studying what should have happened at 17, after school.

Here, Sara alludes to a time when she was navigating a new identity and terrain. There was an independence here that gave Sara a sense of autonomy because she felt part of the wider world and not limited to the fringes of it as an observer might. Although childcare may not have been Sara's choice given that it had been suggested by her brother, it was a course that Sara enjoyed. Allowing herself to be fully immersed in it allowed her to belong and be part of a community.

Sara encountered other short courses as an adult which brought her into the fold of a collective; the company of other women. Again, Sara had encountered an empowering feminised space. Beside the qualification or course content, these occasions offered a gratifying expansion. Sara was understanding how she operated in a group context and accepted her observational disposition not as a passivity but as informed and reflective.

Sara's narrative represents the re-turn to education as an adult in terms of offering a third space for those that might not have had a linear or indeed comfortable, schooling experience. Sara voiced education as a rite of passage that had been denied to her on several occasions which give her accounts a particular significance.

The participants' encounters of informal education brought to the fore how space was conceptualised and produced within a context outside of the formal. I refer to the work of Bhabha here who identifies the prominence of a third space, asserting its function as follows:

'We should remember that it is the "inter" – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the "people". And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.'

(Bhabha 1994, 56)

Whilst this may appear to be more applicable to informal education, it is arguably also on the peripheries of formal education and training. Here, Bhabha suggests a burden and polarity within the 'in between' space which awaits translation and subsequently, a negotiation that transcends the polarities that might be involved in questions about *which* culture or the *right* culture. This is possibly the point of liminality and discomfort which through an encounter of difference, makes the emergence of another self possible. However, despite an alternative self, the question of whether this alleviates the haunting of what was, remains. Various educational settings and the approaches adopted within these, offered spaces for constructing hybrid identities for the participants Fozia and Mashkura's accounts for instance, highlight the prominent role of social pedagogy in their overall educational experiences. This was a pedagogy that centred young people as having autonomy and decision-making faculties which elicited a conscious participation in spaces. It was the encounters with informal education that enriched this sense of agency and confidence further. Having navigational capital (Yosso 2005) meant that both of these participants were able to navigate their way through the landscape that they encountered outside and after formal educational space as a result of having criticality which was developed through informal education; the knowing and awareness, for example of the systems and structures that upheld and centred certain groups.

The participants involved in this project, drew heavily on their secondary schooling as well as informal settings such as community space and adult education. There are several implications here for Black students in VET including the schooling experience which is often assumed to be negatively laden with behavioural issues or low ability. It is important to point out that the participants' accounts go back two decades at the very least and youth provision since has been heavily cut, particularly in more racialised neighbourhoods.

The educational space as a third space has the potential to shift what is deemed to be worthy and credible as both knowing and being. The *third space* – according to Bhabha's (1994) has the potential to reverse structures of domination which has significance for students from marginalised groups. Rather than a stringent reversal however, the third space suggests a shift in *whose* presence –

or indeed *perspective* – dominates and more importantly, what students of different backgrounds bring to this space. This has particular implications about developing pedagogies of trust and relationality as there is a risk here of further othering and thereby silencing groups because of their ‘difference.’

The third space is also where identities are negotiated and continuously re-negotiated as the narratives of the research participants revealed. For an educational context, the third space that I am advocating for here is one that is co-created through a co-labouring by students as much as teachers. Whilst the third space may appear peripheral, in reality it has the potential to be much more profound. It is the construction of a hybrid identity within this space that offers a possibility of transformation through seemingly insignificant moments to create a self that sits amidst contradictory cultural practices. For the participants of this project, their relationship to and frequenting of different educational spaces, opened up an access to observe, try out and construct identities and enact possible future selves.

Takhar (2016) alludes to the third space as one that inhabits the margin and conceptualises this further as ‘a type of disruption and coming together of history and identity’ which does two things. Firstly, it acknowledges and situates the intersection of the socio-historical and geopolitical moment which is a key factor in contextualising the nuances of identity. Secondly, it frames the possibility of a third space as a site of resistance; a resistance to a fixed identity; the binaries of coloniality and the diasporic culture. There is a politics about this marginality which requires attention. In this context, being on the periphery is an empowered and liberating position. It may well contradict traditional ideas about agency as being situated at the core and understood as necessarily occupying a centralised and visible space.

This has several implications for VET in terms of the ‘possible futures’ that might open for students. Firstly, the pedagogical practices adopted by teachers and those in mentoring roles play a crucial part in consolidating a recognition of students’ biographies, capitals (Yosso 2005) and these might shift and evolve through encountering difference. With this, there is a need for acknowledging how the third space might manifest or indeed, be created; through informal friendship groups or buddying systems. Secondly, the nature of the third space is especially significant within an educational or training setting, which reframes power relations and as a result, what becomes *possible*. Thirdly, there is an occupation of the third space for VET students which may prompt an embodied response to ‘Who am I in this space and who am I becoming?’ This is a powerful exploration which prompts possibility through an active (re)negotiation of identity and with it or through it, a self-realised agency (Takhar 2016).

Cultural hauntology

Whilst there are aspects of both hybridity and hauntology that underpin the empirical findings of this study, neither can quite attend to what the participants' narratives have shown. In response to this, my proposition is that a cultural hauntology is at play. Cultural hauntology is a condition which draws on both hybridity and hauntology to illuminate unsettlement long after colonisation. The native culture is never fully banished or forgotten. It exists behind the closed doors of homes, within communities and perhaps even within the demarcation lines of a given geographical area. Cultural hauntology comes about as a deep-seated internal colonisation as traces, marks and murmurs that cannot be deleted. Regardless of whether individuals resist and have agency, this cultural hauntology flags up that which has been pushed out of sight. It manifests itself in a spectral sense and its protest is the colonised self that demanded assimilation as part of the migration deal.

Cultural hauntology provides a useful insight into acknowledging that despite a successful formal education that has given participants graduate status, there are familial and cultural expectations that haunt and create a marked tension. The participants' narratives reveal the masking of a deep unsettlement that surfaces through implicit and subtle moments. This unsettlement is about an incessant cultural hauntology whereby religio-cultural patterns within a neoliberal social world, dictate behaviours that are replicable and well-rehearsed. Graduate status and encounters of the world beyond the space of Aston may well enhance individuals' experiences. However, social mobility and the accumulation of desired and respected and *expected* capitals continue to result in more displacement and consequently, a masking of the authentic self. There are hints of a 'disidentification' (Hall and Schwarz 2017) that presents itself in the absence of its very declaration.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a critique of the how the racial and spatial intersect with educational encounter through exploring some of the experiences of three South Asian Muslim women. Most prominently for this project, several key ideas have emerged through attending to the contextual factors as well as the potential for an active construction of fluid hybrid identities in the third space (Takhar 2016; Soja 1996) encountered within educational settings. Whilst the participants demonstrated agency and a rootedness as a result of being critically conscious of their positionalities, the commitment to stay in a geographical location presents a resistance. The study raises important questions about several areas that have been overlooked in VET research; namely the third space where formal and informal educational settings intersect to facilitate the construction of culturally hybrid identities.

In addition, this research has a notable contribution to make to wider debates in the field of VET in terms of exploring connections with Black Geographies and hauntology. This is particularly central in terms of the geopolitical factors involved in historical and current migratory settlement. Black Geographies have an important contribution to make to conversations about damaging policy discourses about disadvantage by shifting the focus to lived experience. By doing so, there is scope to explore the subtleties and nuances of various groups to avoid a homogenised lens and where the VET sector sits within this. A hauntological approach mobilises a much richer understanding of the absence of spatial identity. A crucial point is that such spatial hybridity alleviates potential cultural hauntology; a condition of unsettlement that contributes to displaced dispositions. This has implications for mentoring, for teaching and training. How students from Black and ethnically diverse backgrounds construct and consequently participate in the VET space is an area that necessitates further empirical research. It presents the possibility of understanding and exploring spatial hybridity as well as other factors which may reveal how the VET space translates and interacts with their presence and the implications this has for future forming.

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ORCID

Balwant Kaur  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6897-5205>

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