Remembering the Alum Rock Road:
Reputational Geographies and Spatial Biographies

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> As traditional memory has vanished, we have felt called upon to accumulate fragments, reports, documents, images and speeches – any tangible sign of what was – as if this expanding dossier might some day be subpoenaed as evidence before who knows what tribunal of history (Nora 1996).

If the recent General Election campaign is Britain's 'tribunal of history' then multiculturalism has already been tried and found guilty of dislocating the body politic and disrupting settled communities. The ease with which politicians of all parties adopted stances on immigration echoing Margaret Thatcher's voicing of concerns about Britain being 'swamped' in the 1970s demands serious reflection.

Our starting point in this paper is the image below. This photograph was taken in Birmingham during that period of intense social transformation in the late 1970s.

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What kind of window on wider social history does a shop window like this provide? What does a photograph like this evoke? How can reflecting on this image and others like it contribute to contemporary debates about the consequences of immigration?

The grocery store in question was located just off the Alum Rock Road in the Saltley area of Birmingham. The Alum Rock Road has today become a front-line in debates about multiculturalism as viewed through the prism of 'parallel lives' (Cantle 2008). The 2001 census identified the main ethnic groups living near the Alum Rock Road as 70 percent Pakistani, 13 percent White, 5 percent Bangladeshi, 4 percent Caribbean. The area is amongst the most deprived in Britain, it is part of the Birmingham Hodge Hill constituency which at 30% has the fourth highest proportion of people with no academic qualifications (UCU 2009).

The Alum Rock Road was the focus of intense international interest at the time of nine terror-related arrests in January 2007 (*Daily Mail* 31 January 2007). The following year Alum Rock was labelled as a 'no-go area' in national media when two Christian preachers were allegedly threatened with arrest for proselytising (Liddle 2008).

Since 2006 we have been exploring an alternative spatial biography of the locality around the Alum Rock Road. Through over 50 interviews with local residents, business-owners and activists we have documented the practices and sentiments of residents whose lives are all too often assumed rather than explored. A recurrent theme has been the intense, often ambivalent emotions bound up with the experience of life on the Alum Rock Road. Residents are keenly aware of the area's adverse reputation as a locality with severe problems of crime, drugs and social deprivation. Yet at the same time the road is a vibrant commercial artery housing over 50 Asian fabric stores within a few hundred yards, drawing shoppers from all over Britain.

In this short document we start with just one from a selection of representations of Alum Rock we have found ranging from the 1970s to the present day. In the larger study we use interviews with some of the creators of these representations, and those appearing in them, to explore the meaning of the locality to its residents. It is only by engaging with the deeply felt experiences of those who lived through the social transformations

of multiculturalism that we can counter the currently hegemonic dismissal of several decades of British history as a mistake. Our work is part of a wider concern to appreciate the overlooked "power of place" (Hayden 1995) in the construction of complex identities that mix local, national and transnational affiliations.

Why archives matter

The stimulus for this paper was a postcard of the above photograph picked up at a June 2009 meeting in Birmingham to launch the Friends of Birmingham Archives. The image was reproduced as part of the Connecting Histories project; a Heritage Lottery funded collaboration between Birmingham City Council and local universities to make resources from the city archives available online to support the study of local history (see www.connectinghistories.org.uk).

The photograph was one of over 300 taken in early 1976 by the documentary photographer Nick Hedges for the Community Development Programme (CDP) then based in Saltley. The Community Development Programme was a government-funded initiative in twelve British cities to fund local regeneration activities and undertake extensive research on the socio-economic problems of inner city areas like East Birmingham.

As Stuart Hall argues such images of post-war settlement "contain a rich store of what we can only call 'indirect evidence' (…) They are not illustrations to an already-completed narrative but part of a contested story whose full meaning is only now coming to light" (Hall 2007: 8-9). Resources like this are essential elements in the development of a historical ethnography of multiculturalism.

The notion of historical ethnography draws on the 'archival turn' in recent cultural and anthropological studies (Derrida 1996; Papailias 2006; Stoler 2009). For these authors technologies of documentation are not simply historical records but material embodiments of the politics of historical representation. What counts as the archive provides rhetorical resources for the formation of identities and shapes the future construction of historical narratives. A historical ethnography of multiculturalism requires "archival activism" (Papailias 2006: 51) to gather the documents, images and

testimonies of several generations of migration and resettlement that currently elude the public record.

The resultant documentary assemblages are not unproblematic experiential bedrock to be viewed uncritically. Their meanings are unsettled and can evoke surprisingly emotional responses. As part of our research we were able to trace the shopkeeper of the grocery store, still living near the Alum Rock Road. My arrival unannounced on the doorstep brandishing the postcard (which none of the family had seen) lead to scenes of amused disbelief – one young family member proclaiming "This is sick!". Other local Asian residents when shown the image responded with knowing smiles, naming the family and recalling the pivotal role of that store as one of the first halal butchers in the area. By contrast we interviewed an elderly white resident who'd lived in the area since 1947 who on seeing the photograph recoiled in disgust at the meat in the window display, "I daren't look at it, it turns me, it does, really".

Such varied responses underline how representations of the past, even as direct as this photograph, do not 'speak for themselves'. As Stuart Hall states, "What signifies is not the photographic text in isolation but the way it is caught up in a network of chains of signification which 'overprint' it, its inscription into the currency of other discourses, which bring out other meanings. Its meaning can only be completed by the ways we interrogate it" (Hall 2007: 9).

Also worthy of interrogation is another aspect of the affective response to the images of the late 1970s we showed to respondents in Alum Rock. Most of those who were alive at that time spoke unprompted about how things were better then. The nostalgic tropes that historical analysis can depend on and create, the sense of anteriority (Axel 2002) that invests a 'time before' with the warm glow of community, were both reproduced and reinflected by interviewees we spoke with.

The harsh labour market conditions and public expenditure cuts of the 1970s threw people together for a time. This was a post-1968 moment of community politics, bottom-up initiatives and in the words of one participant, "revolutionary potential" (Soady 1985). In 1972 a group of radical young people came to Saltley to set up a free school. After listening to local residents they abandoned that idea and instead rehabilitated a disused building, Norton Hall, to provide a summer adventure playground.

From this initiative they helped establish Saltley Community Association, Saltley Action Centre, and the community newspaper *Saltley Gas*. Produced by local people on a shoestring budget for several years in the 1970s, *Saltley Gas* was sold in local newsagents and door to door around the neighbourhood by enthusiastic teenagers. Reflecting on their experiences in 2010 one of the key protagonists recalled:

> What we had…we had a vision, but we didn't have well-defined goals. The vision was one of a fairer society where control of what was important would be in the hands of people in their area, in their lives. The Action Centre was a way of supporting people taking control (…) we were saying, "Knowledge is power". And that's one of the reasons *Saltley Gas* was there (…) What was happening in Saltley was part of a movement, maybe you can call it movement…there was optimism, Black people were organising…we had the SCARF, Saltley Community Against Racism and Fascism. (Interview with 'Anna', April 2010)

A further image on the Connecting Histories website records a demonstration organised by the Indian Workers' Association in Saltley in 1978:

www.connectinghistories.org.uk

As another local activist from the 1970s recalled:

> One of the other things that we were quite actively involved in was the whole anti-fascist thing, Rock against Racism, we had UB40 and people like that around in those days. And UB40 actually used to use Norton Hall for practice for some time. We had some quite good gigs (Interview with 'John', April 2010).

One of the few remaining traces of these initiatives on the local landscape is the sign above the now empty premises of the Saltley Print and Media Workshop and Saltley Unemployed Workers Centre.

Whatever the long-term physical legacy of such movements, current debates on community cohesion and participation would be enriched by according due recognition to a previous generation's attempts to work across ethnic boundaries and mobilise local social action.

Conclusion

The history of Britain's urban social diversity has yet to be archived, let alone understood. A prerequisite for this vital task is the construction of multidimensional spatial biographies which recognise the intertwined histories of places and people, roads and their residents. These spatial biographies must tell the stories of locations beyond London, be sensitive to the wide repertoire of affiliations that defy reduction to simplistic ethnic or religious categories, and recognise the long-standing history of intercultural co-existence and conflict in Britain's cities.

Any account of how a locality both makes sense of itself and is made sense of must encompass traditional archival sources such as local newspapers and photographs like the one which opened this paper. Yet to be explored in real depth is the human archive, people who have lived through profound social change, and whose voices have largely gone unheard. Their children and grandchildren are using new media such as YouTube and urban graffiti to create what might become new archives, posing fresh interpretive challenges.

To return to Nora's opening quotation, the 'dossier' on Britain's history of cultural diversity has only just opened, and many more hitherto ignored images and voices must be brought before the ongoing tribunal of history if multiculturalism is to be judged fairly.

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