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Narratives of migration and artefacts of identity: new imaginings and new generations

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This paper will describe an AHRC-funded research project, from the Diasporas, Migration and Identities small grants programme, (website www.diasporas.ac.uk) working with the Pakistani/Kashmiri community in Rotherham in partnership with a school and a Sure Start, to develop an exhibition of artefacts and narratives of migration, together with Zahir Rafiq, visual artist and the Clifton Park Museum, Rotherham. The exhibition will take two forms, that of a web site and a museum exhibition, scheduled to be held at the Clifton Park Museum in 2007. The project sought to explore ways in which museum practices, and the collection of artefacts within a museum were both upheld and disrupted through the presentation of an exhibition of identity narratives.

The paper seeks to address the following questions:

- What is the relationship between identity narratives of families of Pakistani/Kashmiri origin and the museum's practices and discourses?
- How do digitised practices, particularly web-based visual practices, support, or develop these identity narratives?
- How does place, space and identity construct the project, and are constructed by the project?

We started with a question about the relationship between the museum, identity narratives and the settled Pakistani/Kashmiri community of Ferham. The project intended to focus on particular relationships between homes, and their artefacts, and these narratives, which could be represented in an actual exhibition and within a web site. The project involved a visual artist, Zahir Rafiq, whose work was to interpret these identity narratives and artefacts in the web site. We then wanted to look at the website he created as a site of representation for identity narratives. Finally, we wanted to explore the ways in which the museum could act as a space where these identities could be represented as artefacts and narratives. A space was booked for the exhibition, which is to be staged in February 2007 at Clifton Park Museum, in Rotherham.

Clifton Park Museum itself is an ex-stately home, sited in a park with extensive grounds. It contains a variety of miscellaneous objects including a two-headed kitten, some artefacts from colonial encounters, including Indian artefacts, and a large collection of ceramics from the nearby potteries. More recent galleries include an exhibition of stories and images from the miners' strike and a small but significant exhibition of photographs from one family who came from the Pakistani/Kashmiri region in the 1960s to work for the

steel industry in Rotherham. Through repeated ethnographic visits to the museum, we established that while it did have occasional visitors from the Pakistani/Kashmiri community, this group were less in evidence as visitors to the museum.

Museums and identity

In this paper we identify three typologies which describe ways in which museums can be described in relation to post colonial cultural identities. In recent years, there has been a keen debate about ways in which museums can become more responsive to specific communities and, particularly, reflect changing identity narratives in response to new migrations and experiences of people moving across diasporas in post-colonial contexts.

Typology 1: Museums as contact zones

James Clifford's work has focused on the relationship between identities and museums, in particular, as played out when particular community groups encounter museum practices. When describing a consultation process by the Portland Art Museum with a group of Tlingit elders, and the processes of discussion and negotiation that arose in this context, Clifford devised the concept of "contact zones" from Pratt, who described them as,

The space of colonial encounters, 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 inequality, and intractable conflict. (Pratt 1992:6-7)

Pratt continues to describe contact zones in relation to,

The interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters (Pratt 1992: 6-7)

Clifford suggests that when museums are seen as contact zones,

Their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship – a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull. (Clifford 1999:438).

Clifford's main point is that museums are about negotiation; that by re-conceptualising their practices as being complex, and multiple, open to negotiation and contestation, a new kind of museum practice can be considered. His conceptualisation of museums as contact zones was both descriptive and prescriptive, but related particularly to the processes and practices of displaying identity in relation to objects in spaces.

This is what Clifton Park Museum (under pressure to fulfil central and local government policy agendas) aspires to be: a new kind of museum that changes its practices to become meaningful to non-gallery visitors, especially from the town's diverse communities. During a £3m refurbishment two years

ago, little was done to effect such changes in museum practices. However, through recent initiatives which have included this project, a Creative Partnerships-funded project involving an artist in residence who considered issues around provenance and fixity in his work, and a new web-based exhibition called Rotherham Voices, an oral history website (rotherhamsvoices.tripod.com), Clifton Park Museum hoped to attract a more diverse audience. The project we describe fitted into this new agenda and has now been taken on by the museum.

Typology 2 Museums as civic laboratories

Bennett has long considered the relationship between museums and civic society, adopting a structure/agency approach to museums as spaces which both reflect the concerns of the nation state and might be spaces where cultural identity is shifted and developed. His work has focused on ways in which current concerns to refashion museums so that they might function as instruments for the promotion of cultural diversity do, or do not succeed, in practice (Bennett 1995, 2004, 2005). Bennett draws on the work of Bruno Latour in trying to re conceptualise the relationship between objects, practices and places, and focused on the idea of the experimental arrangements of objects in a laboratory as a way of considering the space of the museum. Because museums take objects out of their context, and as it were, recontextualise them, severing the objects from the social context, processes and practices that produce them, a construction of a new kind of cultural politics around identity and artefacts becomes possible. His key point is that,

Museums, like laboratories 'create new configurations of objects that they match with an appropriately altered social order'. (Bennett 2005:534)

Bennett asks us to consider the relation between objects and different museum practices, and problematize them in the process. He is particularly interested in the relationship between these practices and different epistemological configurations. His ideas focus on the loop back into the social and civic society, and his work asks us to consider museum practices as constructed within a specific socio-cultural context.

However, Bennett is resistant to what he sees as the 'contested' relationship between community and museum that is painted by Clifford (1999: 449-51) and Witcomb (2003:79), whose work we describe below. Instead, Bennett sees museums as pedagogical institutions which 'produce' the very notion of community and culture, stating that current attempts to promote the concept of cultural diversity are merely the latest in a 250-year legacy of national and regional museum involvement in social reform.

'It would be better, he (Bennett) suggests, to understand their (museums) role as producing a culture that supports the political principles underpinning the very notion of representation.' (Witcomb, 2003:80)

We drew on the work of Witcomb, who curated an exhibition of narratives of artefacts from the Portuguese community in Australia. Witcomb explains how 'community galleries' in Australian museums, where specific communities are given the space to represent themselves, sprang not from community pressure but from governmental discourses on civic reform:

'The aim is not just to achieve equal representation in museums. It is also to instruct the community on the value of cultural diversity. (Witcomb 2003:82)

This would appear to confirm Bennett's view that museums are state tools that shape civic identities and shift identities. However, Witcomb argues that in her experience providing the space for communities to represent themselves, inevitably flags up their shared desire to reflect issues of civic reform:

'Despite the rhetorical separation of the act of representation from the activity of producing the representation, the Museum and its client groups are co-producers in the imagining of the community.' (Witcomb 2003:83)

This corresponds with visual artist Zahir Rafiq's aspirations for the Ferham Families exhibition and website which he sees as providing the platform for the community to challenge the representation of themselves portrayed in the media and to construct a new public identity which celebrates the achievements of the community during the past 50 years. Part of the process of constructing the exhibition has been to research Zahir's own perception of identity as realised within the exhibition and the website. In an interview, he described this process:

'As an Asian person myself I thought it was a good idea to get positive messages across to the general public in Rotherham, to show that, you know, immigrants contribute to this town and work really hard and to this day, the present day, they still contribute in certain ways, positive images of Asians, in today's political climate, there is a stereotype of how Asian families, they just think about arranged marriages. I'm not saying that doesn't go on but the majority of people are just normal, law abiding, not boring, but to just get that normal view of Asian families, common view of Asian families, common something that the white population can relate to, because at the moment they can't relate to Asian families, at the moment, but there is so much that they can, and I hope that will come out of this project, that's why I wanted to do it, it's a great cause.' (Zahir Rafiq interview, 19/07/06)

We found Bennett's perception valuable in articulating what the exhibition was doing in civic terms, and in terms of a shift in understandings of the museum as cultural space, re-shaping identities. We also drew on Witcomb's vision as a place where community identities could be re-cast and re-visited.

Typology 3 Museums as polysemic

Our exhibition was web-based and based on an exhibition. A vision of the museum as a site for multiple representations is one which we found immediately useful. Witcomb (2003) and Hooper-Greenhill (2000) understand museums as *polysemic* spaces where a number of different texts, objects and practices are configured and re-configured. They acknowledge also the effect that web-based multimedia artefacts have had on museum practices, opening up different kinds of spaces and practices, which lead to different kinds of textual practices. Our example below, of Zahir's template for the web space being taken from the Barbie website, has the polysemic quality, moving beyond a settled notion of what an exhibition of artefacts and narratives from a particular community might look like and into a world where web design is heavily informed by the design teams from popular culture sites like Barbie.

Such a space encourages a post-colonial sense of hybridity, breaking down the institutional barriers presented by traditional museum structures: (the clearly defined) building, collection, display, all of which contribute to present an intimidating, institutional, monosemic place/space in which there is little room for negotiation, contestation, difference or the forging of new identities.

The project team have identified that the construction of the website offers a polysemic space, which can be used as a constructed 'third space' where identities can be reconfigured and re-cast. Here we draw on Homi Bhabha's third space theory, where he highlights the need to reconsider the perceived homogenous nature of culture identity, arguing instead for the recognition of a third space which could provide a space where cultural difference can be reconfigured and articulated (Bhabha 1994). By seeing the web site as a constructed third space in which to transform cultural identities, and seeing this website as a polysemic, multi-voiced artefact, we could begin to develop a theoretical framework that understood how the museum and the web site could re-configure identity narratives in the way Zahir described.

It is by inviting Ferham families of different generations to curate their own exhibition and to create their own website that our project hopes to establish *contact zones*, polysemic third spaces that will allow communities to contest fixed identity practices and negotiate new ones.

Witcomb conceptualises museums as communities, which also can be understood differently by different communities outside the museum. Her experience in constructing an exhibition of objects from the Portuguese community in Australia described a process of negotiation and dialogue more suited to Clifford's notion of 'contact zones'. Witcomb argues from Hooper-Greenhill (2000) that,

In order to produce polysemic exhibitions curators need to recognise the existence of multiple 'interpretative communities'. (Witcomb 2003: 91).

This is the configuration that we took forward in our project, but we are working with all three typologies as we construct the exhibition.

The process of creating the website and exhibition will refashion the 'museum as laboratory' analogy in that the relationship between government (via museum) and civic society (Ferham families) where power is firmly with the former (which, via artefacts removed from their context, attempts to shape minority identities) will be interrupted. Instead, artefacts within the museum collection and those belonging to individuals will be brought together in the shared, neutral space of the website / exhibition space (contact zone), which will act as a laboratory space where objects can shift their meanings and identity narratives can be explored, leading to new kinds of museum space and practice . . . ones that allow for polysemic interpretations and will ultimately impact upon communities by freeing up the museum space for them . . . and will in turn help the museum to attract culturally diverse audiences.

The process of creating the exhibition

The process of developing the exhibition was heavily influenced by a number of key partners in the project. These partners both shaped the project and had different aims for the project. One of our tasks as project managers was to juggle the different aims of each partner, within our overarching aim, which was to look at the interaction between identity narratives, artefacts and the Clifton Park Museum in Rotherham.

Part of the complexity of the project was the way in which it has been shaped by the different partners and stakeholders. The multiple stakeholders and partners were the families, the school, the Sure Start Centre, the visual artist and the museum. As we have worked on the project, our chief task has been to navigate our path through the different agendas of each of our stakeholders and partners. We identified that the families wanted to overcome culturally stereotyped perceptions of them, thereby changing the community's attitudes and in addition, wanted to confirm and construct an exhibition in order to promote a more positive, 'true' identity. They also wanted to create an archive documenting the contribution of Ferham families to Rotherham life. We identified that the school wanted to increase involvement of fathers in their children's learning and to strengthen their Creative Partnerships work, the chief aim of which is to produce a sustainable creative curriculum that creates positive learning experiences for all children. In addition, the school wanted to forge closer links between school's teachers / staff and those at the adjoining Rotherham Central Sure Start. We identified that the museum needed to meet policy targets set by central and local government and professional museum bodies. The museum's funding was dependent upon improving access to collections; tackling social exclusion and promoting social cohesion; providing a stronger focus on developing and retaining culturally diverse audiences. We identified that Rotherham Central Sure Start wanted to forge closer links with the school in order to meet shared community goals and to work with project artist Zahir Rafiq to develop creative family learning sessions and to increase involvement of fathers in children's learning. Finally, we recognised through repeated discussions that Zahir was concerned to show his community in a positive light: focus on socially and professionally successful third generation individuals (who usually fail to attract media attention) as role models, to contest embedded, white host community stereotyped notions of Ferham

community and other ethnic minority groups, as well as to provide a user-friendly, inspiring website that can be accessed by local schools and, most important, to provide a lasting archive documenting the contributions of different generations of Ferham families to the life of Rotherham.

Some interpretation

When we analysed the data we already had, these concerns became apparent and their intermingling and co-existence produced the developing web site, along with the shaping of the exhibition. One of the interesting aspects of the project has been collecting a record of the voices that have shaped the making of the exhibition and seeing it realised as a digital artefact. Through detailed field notes describing meetings with community partners we have been able to track and trace this process, and locate where meanings have shifted and developed. Coding was done using a system of co-constructing shared codes drawing on the interpretative framework. One key shift has been from looking at the project as being one which is reflecting the relationship between artefacts in the homes and narratives, to being a project which is about the relationship between space, place and identity. When we conducted an interview with one of our key informants, the son of one of the earliest men to come from the Pakistani/Kashmiri community to settle in Rotherham, and an influential local community figure, space became salient as a point from which identity narratives could be developed:

'My father came in 1970. Then the majority were white English. It was a stable community, not much crime, a safe area. When he came back (from Pakistan) everything changed, there were more drugs, a transient population. There was a difficulty with housing. A younger generation. No interest in communities. There was an exodus from Ferham and you could see the difference in the housing, people had less pride in their houses.'

(interview key informant July 2006)

In this interview, the informant constantly described the community he had grown up in, in relation to salient places and his account of his father's experience was prefaced by accounts of how the neighbourhood had changed in character. This change was expressed through the way the houses were described. The housing stock in Ferham reflected, then, the changing identities or perceived identities of the inhabitants.

Concluding thoughts

Space and place have now become integral to our theoretical framework. In the last part of this paper we attempt to theorise this re-cast aspect of the project. One of our ideas is that the web site offers a 'third space', or a polysemic space where identities can be re-cast and re-configured. We also argue that the museum itself offers the opportunity to change and to develop notions of identity. The museum space becomes a place where this is possible and we saw this space as 'polysemic' (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). We are also interested in what kinds of new spaces are opening up as a result of

the project. In our work on place and space, we are beginning to use the work of Lefebvre to understand the museum curating process spatially.

Lefebvre identified three different aspects of space:

- Perceived space, produced in social practices, associated with daily routine: everyday life
- Conceived space is planned space, also called representations of space, dominated by ideology:
- Lived space, is in trialectical relation to perceived and conceived space.
Is passively experienced but is space that imagination seeks to change.

Representations of conceived space are experienced – and changed in lived space.

(Sheehy and Leander 2004)

We see the work we are doing in the museum as being that of constructing 'conceived space', creating new configurations and new ways of constructing objects. We recognise that we are also working with lived space, which is the space that imagination seeks to change. The website is such a space, one which is imaginatively constructed by Zahir, drawing on the Barbie website as a template. In his words,

One of the ideas I talked about in the project is having an aerial view of Ferham . . . doing a patchwork with all materials, with sewing, colourful materials, this would be done by the children . . . to identify the place where they live . . . it might look a bit chaotic in the final website but that's the whole point, individual identities, isn't it?

(Interview Zahir July 2006)

As we progress through the project, we hope to join up the different voices, and re-produce them in polysemic forms, in the developing website. We are interested in the effect of the different visual and narrative voices as represented in this way and in the affordances the web-based medium offers. We argue that its affordances, giving a multi layered, interactive site with multiple points of entry and different discursive voices, enable a spatial representation of identity narratives, which is constantly changing, and subject to continual re-casting and re-formulations.

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