BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Gidley, Ben (2022) Locality, spatiality and contingency In East London: an interview with Michael Keith. In: Everett, S. and Gidley, Ben (eds.) Jews and Muslims in Europe: Between Discourse and Experience. Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion 13 13. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill. ISBN 9789004514324. (In Press)

CHAPTER 12

LOCALITY, SPATIALITY AND CONTINGENCY IN EAST LONDON: AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL KEITH

Ben Gidley and Michael Keith

As noted in the introduction above (Gidley and Everett 2022), researching Muslim-Jewish encounters always risks the reification of the two categories "Muslim" and "Jewish", and by foregrounding faith-based identities over other – for instance, ethnic, sectarian or class – identities. The "diversity turn" in ethnic and racial scholarship provides one way to address this, by highlighting multiple and intersecting lines of identity, but, as argued in the interview below, risks erasing the dynamic role of the power geometries of racialisation and of the state in shaping emic identifications. The interview is with urban scholar Michael Keith, focusing on his research in the municipal borough of Tower Hamlets in East London, a site conventionally narrated as the point of arrival for Eastern European Jewish and later South Asian Muslim migration to the UK, and now represented in some sensationalist media and pseudo-scholarly discourses as an "Islamised" area and "no-go zone" for Jews, an example of the "lachrymose" narrative of Jewish-Muslim encounter described in the introduction above. In the interview, Keith argues that a rigorous commitment to the empirical, granular attention to the productivity of space, and openness to the fragility and contingency of all categories of identity can help us avoid such lachrymose caricatures as well as de-politicised versions of the "diversity" frame.

Spatialising race

BG: This special issue focuses on Jewish-Muslim encounters in European urban spaces. Your work seems to me vital in helping us explore this issue, because of the way you have insisted

on the fact that social questions must always be addressed from the standpoint of specific, concrete, local sites and spaces, particularly urban sites and spaces, but also that local space is always threaded through with myriad transnational connections and that sites and spaces are always imagined, dreamed, represented and curated as much as they are concrete. While your research is dizzyingly global in its scope – your most recent books focus on China, Africa and India for example – a lot of it has been written from the very particular perspective of the East End of London, a site that is relevant to this collection not least because it is iconically associated with Britain's Muslim and Jewish populations.

I want to start, though, with the scholarly landscape that you entered at the start of your research career. I believe your PhD was supervised by Ceri Peach, who was then working on the long-term project of exploring the cartography of settlement of "ethnic" groups in Britain, working with ideas such as an "Irish" and a "Jewish" model of residential integration, in a way that showed that US American ideas of segregation and integration didn't work in Europe (see e.g. Peach 1999). Although this sort of work has the danger of essentialising "ethnic" categories (an issue to which we'll return later), it was important in showing that "race" and space need to be analysed together, and helped open up the possibility of a critical geography of "race" in the UK, which I think is an essential starting point for thinking about the urban encounters between different minoritized communities. Is it fair to say that this thinking of the relationship between race and space has been a central strand of your research agenda?

MK: The first thing to say about Ceri Peach is that on the one hand he did have a fairly deterministic sense of space and a fairly reified sense of "race" and ethnicity, but also he was committed to a very strong sense of the empirical and the notion of empirical investigation. And what that meant is that ironically in the in 1960s and early 1970s his work was taken on

board by left critiques of the way in which "race" and migration came together. So his work

is cited by Sivanadan, a key Marxist anti-racist activist-scholar in that period, who makes the

point that, through his empirical investigations, Peach's work actually demonstrated the

hypocrisy of the (post)imperial UK importing labour from the Caribbean for residual forms

of employment, but completely failing to address the housing needs of the populations that

that implied (Sivanadan 1976, 1978).

But of course, over time a critique developed of precisely the essentialising of race

that was at the heart of *some* of the ways of measuring things like residential segregation,

which was normalised in a lot of the geographical literatures in the USA and UK in the

1970s. I think that what's interesting, though, is the tension between Peach's commitment to

the empirical, on the one hand, and the problems with thinking about "race" through such

fixed categories and thinking about space in quite such a deterministic fashion. Certainly in

my own research, one of the things I found inspiring is the work of people that began to think

about the multiplicity of spatialities that were at the heart of a city in particular, but also space

in general, and the way that that meant that you could think also about the mutability of both

"race" and ethnicity as forms of identity, as forms of categorization of people. The readings

of Lebebvre that emerged as I was formed as a geographer were really influential here:

Lebebvre's insistence on the productivity of space that was picked up, particularly, by David

Harvey and Ed Soja in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as they began to translate his works

from French.

And so if you think about space as more mutable in this sense, and of "race" and

ethnicity as much more contingent, then I think you get a much more dynamic sense of the

spatialisation of "race" than in Peach's work – but at the same time not losing the

commitment to *thinking empirically* that you get in his work. This meant that space becomes

important because of its productivity, because of the sheer multiplicity of threads that you find in any kind of weave of the city at any particular time.

So I was committed to a scholarship that takes a slightly different route from Chicago, in the sense that what Peach does is take the deterministic route out of Robert Park, that leads to so much American sociology today, which is highly quantified, whereas other people have taken a more ethnographic route from the same course. I think of someone like WI Thomas, who gave Park his first job to Chicago, who, along with Dorothy Swaine Thomas, had this very nice phrase that I use quite often, which is that *when situations are defined as real, they are real in their consequences* (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 571–572). And Thomas made that point in the same sentence, saying that *researchers are not allowed to choose their own facts.* So there's something, I think, about simultaneously recognizing the contingency of the categories we're working with, but also actually tying them to an empirical engagement with the city. That's become really important for me through time: making sense of the flux of "race", ethnicity, forms of exclusion, forms of intolerance, and urban transformation.

Quddus Ali and Jack the Ripper

BG: An anecdote I've heard you relate, which found its way into your book After the Cosmopolitan (2005), concerns a night of street tension between Bangladeshi East Enders and the police in 1993 in the wake of the violent racist attack in East London on a local Bangladeshi teenager, Quddus Ali, leaving him in a coma, and the subsequent criminalisation of the Bangladeshi community's self-defence against far right activists. You describe being in a pub with local activists, and a white man in a Sherlock Holmes deerstalker comes in, oblivious to what's going on: he's a Jack the Ripper walking tour guide. This is a beautiful image of the way the city acts as a kind of palimpsest. Can you say something about the way you have found the East End good to think with?

MK: The East End is a classically paradoxical space: it is it is characterized by moments of horrific intolerance and also social movements of solidarity that actually work against intolerance. But most of all, because it has been the site of such flux for such a long period of time, it is somewhere where you find the city exemplified as a sense of multiplicity: this sense of many, many different threads coming together in one place. The notion that this is where Lenin met Trotsky for the first time in 1902, or where you'd should find Stalin in a dosshouse on Fieldgate Street just off the Whitechapel Road, and you may have been sitting in a tearoom next to these folk and not even aware they're there. And the notion that the threads of *time* also run through space at different paces, along different routes, juxtaposing alongside each other at any one moment multiple histories and multiple geographies that just happen to run through a single site. And I suppose that does create the notion of the city as a palimpsest, but it also demands a certain kind of responsibility about how you then read that, which goes back to that insistence on an empirical engagement that is theoretically sophisticated.

There are multiple caricatures of the East End that are present today. But there have been multiple caricatures of the East End at every point in the last 30 or 40 years in which I've been living and working there. The fact that the caricatures exist *demands* a project of disrupting those caricatures, but also understanding how those changes have moved on. And obviously those changes imply different valorisations of property, different valorisations of citizenship rights, different valorizations of particular communities of faith, ethnicity and "race" at different times.

So the one caution I always have about using the East End is that, precisely *because* of the multiplicity of temporalities at stake and the rapidity of change, there's always this worry that in those moments of observation you capture a snapshot. And academic

production is actually quite slow at times. So there's always a sense of innate failure in that you try to represent but by the time you've actually done the work, interpreted your own empirical engagement in a particular place, and then thought about it for a while, and then tried to write about it, it's three or four years on, and it's already out of date. So there's a sense – in my own work, but also with other people's work – that you're always writing a misrepresentation, because by the time it appears on the page in the public domain it's already out of date, which I think is an interesting challenge to the way academic work *works*.

Finding the Way Home

BG: Thinking about that sense of the changing East End, I first encountered your work, when I was a graduate student, as you were starting the project "Finding the Way Home" with Phil Cohen and Les Back in the 1990s (Back 1999; Rathzel et al 2008), a project that seems to me still to have been very much before its time, both in its innovative methodologies and in its concerns that foreshadow the "diversity" turn (another issue to which we'll return later) and also the psychosocial turn in social research. The project focused on young people, and one of the two sites for this project was the East End, especially the Isle of Dogs. The period you were doing that research was also the time of the growth of the fascist BNP in East London and its shift from street politics to community and electoral politics, and I guess it was also the time of the flourishing of the "Asian underground" scene in the area (Everett and Gidley 2018), which subsequently drew scholarly attention to the East End and also its Bangladeshi residents. It's often suggested that the subsequent decade saw a generational shift among Bangladeshi East Londoners from "ethnic" identification to "Islamic" identification, but my reading of your research from that time is that those categories are too simple to capture what was going on in East London's youth cultures. Can you say something about this?

It's interesting you mention the *Finding the Way Home Project*, because this was an incredibly interesting collaboration between Les Back and Phil Cohen and myself, each coming from complementary but different intellectual backgrounds and geographical locations: Les' work obviously largely in south London, Phil's significantly in east London, and I had moved between East London and South London, in research but also professionally in moving to Goldsmiths in the early 1990s. And one of the things that was characteristic of that time was the rise of the far right in some places, but not in others.

There's a long history of far right support in the East End of London. But in a more contemporary context in 1970s and 1980s, while was there was an articulation of a very poisonous fascist politics in the area around Deptford closest to Goldsmiths, fascism had not seen the same *political* success there as in East London – or even in more vernacular terms, Deptford wasn't seen as "as racist" as the East End in folk discussions of how the geographies of race and danger in London were thought about. The area around Deptford in particular was seen to be less characterized by forms of extreme racism, whereas the East End, at least in the caricatures of the time, was seen as the heartland of racism. There was a clipping from *The Guardian* newspaper that I used to use in teaching, a map that focused on the Isle of Dogs, that highlighted Tower Hamlets in particular and the East End in general as the "heart" of British racism. And, of course, in part this was true and there *were* horrific racist attacks in East London. There was a history of racist murders and very violent racist attacks. And there had been success for the National Front in the 1970s and 1980s, but in particular the British National Party (BNP) in the 1990s. The BNP won its first election victory in 1993 on the Isle of Dogs, and that prompted national headlines. Of course those sorts of results were normalized later in the decade, but this was the first time that the BNP actually won a council seat in the UK.

So one of the things we did in *Finding the Way Home* was think about how place structures cultures of racism and cultures of local identity politics. Hopefully one of the things that we captured in that project was the multiplicity of different ways of seeing the city for our participants in East and South London, which is why we tried to use several forms of more artistic or creative approaches and methodologies in thinking about the cities; we used films and affective maps for example. We used affective maps to chart how young people saw safety and danger, particularly around gangs and particularly around those parts of neighborhoods, the kind of "micro public" spaces we talked about at the time (Back 1999; Keith, 1999), right the way down to the ways in which young women in South London often saw something like the balcony on an estate as particularly safe, but also a productive interstitial space, because it wasn't the domestic space that was regulated by the family, nor the open public spaces where – in parts of south London, particularly – some of the young people worried about the territorialisation of gang violence at the time in the 1990s: so something like a balcony could be seen as an alternative interstitial site in which people met each other and discussed issues of importance. And researchers wouldn't pick that up unless you actually work with people on the ground.

And similarly, when we were thinking about the East End north of the river, one of the things that in some ways in hindsight you might have thought was predictable, but the landscapes of security, identity and identification were much more nuanced than the simple caricatures in the public imagination of the time. In the 1990s the municipality of Tower Hamlets had been split up into seven administrative "neighborhoods" that were run by seven different neighbourhood councils under a scheme promoted by the Liberal Democrats who governed the borough at the time. What that created was seven different local housing authorities, and in the west of the borough – mostly through forms of self-defense from the Bangladeshi community, but also through forms of anti-racism as well – housing was seen to

be more secure for Bangladeshi residents. Whereas by the mid-1990s, people were afraid to take homes in the east of the borough: the south and east of the borough were subject to considerable racist violence. And you see this in the jump between the 1991 and 2001 census results: the west of Tower Hamlets borough becomes increasingly Bangladeshi while the east of the borough remains white, but Newham further east becomes more diverse, as people begin to leave the borough. Bangladeshi outmigration, shaped by perceptions of danger, create a banding, with a very strong multicultural presence in the west of the borough, a much whiter east of the borough, and a Bangladeshi movement to Newham and Stratford in particular. This does begin to break up from the late 1990s onwards, as the housing system tries to make at least the east more secure. And it was genuinely the case – I was a councillor at the time – that minoritized people were afraid to take housing on the Isle of Dogs or parts of Bow, as quite often there'd be racist graffiti or implicit or covert – and sometimes very overt – forms of extreme abuse and intolerance that would meet anybody who went to see any property on the east of borough. And those legacies carry on because they become ossified in the built environment itself. So that sense of the whiter east of the borough, around Bow and the Isle of Dogs, versus a more Bangladeshi and therefore safer area around Brick Lane in particular, where the two large mosques (the Brick Lane mosque and East London mosque) but also a growing number of smaller mosques were creating a kind of community dynamic that separated out in everyday talk the two parts of the borough.

But what immediately became obvious, working empirically with young people through that research, was that the pattern was much more complicated. Young people, and in particular young women, often found leisure time useful, important and valuable for escaping the communitarian gaze of Brick Lane for the more open, interstitial, penumbral space of the Isle of Dogs and other eastern areas, where there was quite a lot of open space which could used for socializing and for movement, not fixed to communitarian lines or regulated by the

parental gaze. So *mobility through space* becomes as important as *fixed cultures in place*. And the young people used this very creatively, so as researchers we gave them cameras, asked them to make movies of where they spent time, and quite often Bangladeshi young people would move out from the west of the borough to the east, quite often in order to meet with more mixed-race groups, or certainly peer groups that were not exclusively of one ethnicity. But also at that time, there was a clear generational change. Among the youth clubs in particular, there was a long-standing generational difference in the rooted politics in the Bangladeshi community.

Whilst the first generation of migrant settlers in East London from Bangladesh date back a very long way, the of bulk of migration was in the late 1960s, mostly men who were then joined by partners in more mixed-gender migration flows in the 1970s as families unified. So you had effectively a baby boom in the 1970s, which then you see translating through sixteen to 25 years later into a demographic that begins to become much more numerous. People as always tend to have large families in the first generation that moves, and the Bangladeshi population follows the same pattern as everyone else: with the second generation much smaller and the third smaller again. Effectively, then, the bulk of people that made a life in the East End in the late 1960s, who were just trying to get by, is followed by a generation that grew up facing the strongest manifestations of street racism. This generation was still practising Muslim, but it was tied into politics of the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. And so the identities of the people that were involved in the politics of anti-racism in Brick Lane in 1978 – and then became involved in mainstream electoral politics – were largely Awami League, defined against the explicitly Muslim project of West Pakistan. So it was largely "secular" in one sense of the word – but not in others. The "secular" is not a helpful term here, because pretty much everybody went to the mosque.

But this politics sat alongside the rise of other more explicitly Islamic politics at the time, tied to alternative social movements among those people who weren't so supportive of the Bangladeshi liberation movement. This created always two strands of community activity in the East End. And those two strands themselves are simplifications of much more complex patterns of Islamic faith. So, many of the people involved in working in mainstream politics, for instance in the Labour Party, came out of the youth movements of the 1980s and early 1990s, and were shaped by battles over street racism around Brick Lane. But then their children by the 1990s (who were sometimes talked about as a third generation, although that language is empirically contestable and problematic in other ways), oriented to a very different politics. The young people we were working with in the late 1990s were already a generation on from the folks who actually had to combat the most extreme forms of racism. The landmark moment was then obviously the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but there was also a sense of some kind of generational change that you could see on the ground. This registered in terms of dress codes, and in terms of practice. For instance, a lot of political meetings between white folk and Bangladeshi folk around the anti-racist movement had taken place in pubs, but that diminishes in the early 2000s as it becomes seen as not appropriate to be informally meeting in pubs. Activists used to meet in pubs because there weren't other places, but now other sites become more important. Youth clubs became sometimes linked to more religious movements, and you see the rise of the Respect Party outside Labour. In short, the practice of Islam becomes more central for the newer generation. The mosques become more important – and also more secure, because they had earlier been under some threat from the crudest forms of racist violence. Religious faith becomes more significant in structuring political behaviours in the late 1990s then.

But this shift gets essentialised and frozen in a lot of the literature. What I would say at all times to those trying to capture this is to hold on to the fragility of these things. The

shift was amplified by the invasion of Iraq and the reaction to the wars that followed, the politics of the anti-war movement, but it had already begun earlier in the generational dynamics of the community. The new generation growing up were coming of age with a Labour government in power, so Labour had become the establishment, not the radical option. So young people who fight against the establishment, as every young generation does, they're fighting against the Blair/Brown regime that runs from 1997 through 2010. So people who are fighting to secure their social needs on the ground – more money for youth services, more money for the things that are necessary for young people who are in trouble – becomes articulated through opposition to Labour and partly through religion, and those things get tangled up. So there is a nuanced change, but it is always contingent; it's always slightly more fragile than the caricatures suggest.

After the Cosmopolitan in Tower Hamlets

BG: Migration and diaspora – but thinking about them as entangled with the local - have become central issues from your research, including your book After the Cosmopolitan. You were also active in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets at that time, in which national policy agendas under the Blair government around "faith communities" and very local faith-based movements were re-writing municipal politics. In that book your write: "Locally, the city… realises transnational (or global) politics in its streets and neighbourhoods, and reveals the contested and limited nature of the national settlement in its schoolrooms and town halls. Likewise, the nature of the local settlement of the multicultural highlights the limits of various sovereignties that stretch from the domestic arrangements of marriage through the public arenas of education to the welfare state rights of migrant minorities and the relatives of second- and third-generation diaspora communities" (Keith 2005:3). I

wonder if you can say more about how "the local", and your experiences in Tower Hamlets, should make us think about "faith communities"?

MK: I think that whilst all *social* realities are fragile and mutable, *political* realities demand a sense of reification, ossification and simplification. Politics can make some things stand still, so they are identifiable, but once identified change them. And as American politician Tip O'Neill said, politics is always local. And I became involved in local politics almost by accident, by being involved in a number of voluntary sector organizations: my participant observation became slightly more participation and slightly less observation. With the anti-racist movements of the 1990s against the rise of the BNP, I became a local councillor and remained so for over a decade.

The categories through which local government works almost demand to be frozen. Marilyn Strathern (1966), the anthropologist, talks about *cutting the network* in order to make the object stand still enough for us to analyze it. In a sense, in any local government - when talking about forms of welfare need, around disability, education, or housing - all of these categories have to stand still long enough to be frozen, in order to be turned into policy that actually makes a difference to people on the ground.

Being involved locally gave me sense of how within political systems religious faith was represented. There is a long-standing rhetoric in British local government policy (and arguably a legal reality) that local government did not fund religious activity. But that was one of the true lies of British constitutional behaviour. So you had school networks in the East End of London that were disproportionately Roman Catholic because there this odd relationship between church-supported schools and state schools in the United Kingdom. You had also Protestant church schools as well, but the Catholic Church schools were a legacy of the Irish labour that has moved to the East London docks in the 19th century. And both

Catholic and Protestant church schools became ways in which white communities separated themselves out, from non-white communities in general, and Bangladeshi and Islamic communities in particular, so that by the 1990s quite often the Catholic schools were a mix of white kids and very often actually African and sometimes Caribbean kids. The segregation at school level was much higher than the segregation at residential level within East London throughout the 1990s and 2000s, probably through to the present day. So faith was something that actually implicitly ran through the way public institutions operated, even if local government pretended it was not.

Much of the discussion that begins to emerge in the late 1990s and early 2000s in East London is around a new demographic that needs some basic resources. And this included some basic resources that are normally catalogued through religious faith: somewhere to pray five times a day, somewhere through which you might support various conventions and practices and needs that have a faith-based root. Just as many of the welfare traditions in East London emerged from religious groups of the past: the traditions of support for vulnerable children, of support for education, or provision of housing often have Christian or sometimes Jewish roots. If you look at some of the Housing associations and certainly the schools, they emerge from faith-based activity in the years before the welfare state. A good example of this would be the work of Jewish philanthropist Bernhard Baron and the subsequent Bernhard Baron Trust, which played a major role in sustaining education, housing and other social provision – including alongside Christian congregational communities, as with the Bow Mission (Ahmed et al 2016).

And you find something similar coming from the Bangladeshi community as the welfare state rolls back. There's a slow growth of faith-based schools and a debate about whether Islamic schools should be recognized. But there are also very basic needs, like where do you bury your dead, where do you pray, and what the local state should do about it. So in

the sense that politics is about change, faith becomes unremarkably part of the everyday discussion about what local government can do to help a growing and maturing Bangladeshi community in East London. I think I think it would be dangerous to represent those demands, though, as "Islamic" *rather than* Bangladeshi, as if there is a trade-off between the two. They are simultaneously class-based, space-based, race-based, ethnicity-based. We're talking about the multiplicity of the intersectional in the sense that they were demands for the basic needs of complex people. But it was also the case that what the state could do was limited at times, and so it was being challenged. This is why it's important to think of community-like social movements as always in interaction with the state. The boundary between state and civil society is always a transactional one rather than a sharp border. As the anthropologist Veena Das says, *the state is in the people and the people are in the state.* It's always important to understand what's going on within the state in order to understand what's going on in the street or mosque: in the relationship between faith communities and the state, they're mutually implicated rather than separate.

Iteration and The Shahid Minar

BG: Keeping with After the Cosmopolitan, a concept that I've found helpful is "the process of iteration, a notion that ethnic specificity and cultural difference are invariably on the move. What is seen at the heart of processes of race making and race thinking is the process of mimesis, a process that in principle has no beginning and no end. It involves an endless iteration between identification and categorisation, commonalities casting themselves as differences, different trajectories becoming visible and then disappearing." (Keith 2005:5) One site in the East End that you've returned to repeatedly in your writing is the Shahid Minar in Altab Ali Park in Whitechapel. Can you tell me why you've returned to this site so

often, and how the changing politics around it which you've documented reflect how the process of iteration has constantly moved?

MK: I think the Shahid Minar in Altab Ali Park exemplifies some things that I'm trying to suggest about urban space and identity. The park itself, alongside Whitechapel Road in Tower Hamlets, across from Brick Lane, was named after Altab Ali, a Bangladeshi garment worker who was killed in a horrific racist attack. One of the things I did over a decade was take photographs of the fact that the park sign named for Altab Ali was always painted up each year by the council – and then repeatedly blacked out, covered in black paint, to erase the naming of the park. That lasted over well over a decade before people stopped. And it was because of the importance of the symbolism of the park, as a site of recognition of the Bangladeshi community's hard struggle to make space in the area, that some of the groups locally saw it as an appropriate space to establish some recognition of the Bangladeshi community.

They wanted to erect a Shahid Minar, which means martyrs' monument, designed after the monument in Dhaka in Bangladesh memorialising the people known as the Language Martyrs. After the Indian Partition in 1947, when West Pakistan and East Pakistan were a single federal state ruled from West Pakistan, people in East Pakistan argued that Bangla should be recognised as an official language of Pakistan alongside Urdu. A number of protestors were killed by the Pakistani police in 1952, which is often seen as the start of the Bangladeshi independence movement, and they were subsequently memorialized in the Shahid Minar memorial in Dhaka in Bangladesh, after independence in 1971. So 1971 and Independence becomes a major thing for the diasporic community, and people who want to memorialize that were very in favour of creating the Shahid Minar, which was supported very

strongly within the Bangladeshi community at the time and by some of the white politicians, including most but not all Labour politicians at the time.[1]

But also, at the time, it was opposed by some of the diasporic Bangladeshi groups who thought it essentially took one side of the civil war and valorized that. So some of the protests against it came from within the Bangladeshi community, particularly those more associated with regret for Bangladeshi independence or who had sided against the post-independence Awami League government, especially those affiliated to the Jamaat-e-Islami opposition, a party whose political legitimacy was based in the invocation of Muslim unity rather than Bangladeshi nationhood. That fight went on within the Bangladeshi community throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, *alongside* the racist attempts to erase the naming of the park I mentioned earlier. So one would find at different times, protests staged at the Shaid Minar that were more Awami League-based – and counterprotests involving those who were closer to Jamaat, or whose politics were more faith-based or, rather, claimed politics *in the name of* religious faith. And then later the monument becomes a site in which Bangladeshi national politics are re-staged in the diaspora, as solidarity demonstrations are held there with the occupation Shahbag neighbourhood of Dhaka in February and March 2013 when forces sympathetic to Sheik Hasina in Bangladesh demonstrated against the putative Islamisation of Bangladeshi politics (Garnett and Keith; 2014).

The built form of the monument and the space of the park itself exemplified, over this period, the contingency of some of the categories we're talking about, the fact that they are much more permeable: one can't simply talk about displacement of "Bangladeshi" politics for "Islamic" politics or any nonsense like that. There is something much more specifically local about what is happening. We have generic trends that are locally realised, and the

---

[1] See Alexander 2013, Garnett and Keith 2014

productivity of space makes visible the complexities of faith, ethnicity, class, diasporic identification: multiplicity runs through space.[2]

The diversity turn

BG: I earlier mentioned that your work could be seen as part of what Berg and Sigona (2013) have called the "diversity turn". This turn has focused on the increasingly fractally complex nature of identification and subjectification in the contemporary metropolis. For instance, in After the Cosmopolitan you write: "[The] category of blackness – even in the eyes of the powerful institutions – is seen to map uneasily into the ethnic pluralities of the contact zones of the cities. It both works and does not work to explain the experiences of other migrant minorities in the United Kingdom – Irish, Jewish, Maltese, Chinese, Italian, Punjabi, Sylheti" (2005:8). How do you situate yourself in relation to the diversity turn?

MK: I think, like all turns, there are positives and negatives to what sometimes described as the diversity turn. There is a sense, I think, in which some of the scholarship about race and ethnicity almost isolates itself from religious faith and other markers. There's an important critique of the 1980s race scholarship that it underplayed the importance of religious faith; that is significantly valid and true. I also think, though, that there's a danger that one approach replaces one form of ossification for another form of ossification. At its best, to highlight the intersectionality of multiple forms of identity and identification is incredibly important. But there's also a danger that some of the diversity scholarship comes out of an emphasis on migration that echoes a mainland European refusal to talk about "race" in particular and a reticence in talking about the importance of intolerance and power relations being at the heart of all forms of intersectional identity. And so the fact that these forms of multiplicity emerge

---

[2] See also Keith (2017) on re-conceptualising Bengali diaspora.

in crucibles of very unequal power relations has to be at the heart of a sense of the contingency of the identities we're talking about. Diversity, at its worst, deflects attention from issues of race-making, racialization, racism, and tends to box everything into conversations about certain implicitly privileged markers of identity, most notably markers such as migration histories or faith histories. And so I think we need a certain caution about how one should think about the language of diversity and its uses.

Diaspora

One of your recent projects is "Religious faith, space and diasporic communities in East London", which you developed with the historian Jane Garnett, and which Alana Harris and I also worked on, along with Nazneen Ahmed and Gil Toffell, as part of the Oxford Diasporas Programme sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust. Can you say something about what this project tried to capture?

This project was particularly interesting because it gave us a chance to work across the disciplines of sociology, geography and history. One of the themes that runs through our conversation already is that we cannot escape our histories, that the history is not finished; it's with us. In a site such as East London, there are legacies of those histories. But at the same time, those legacies are as complicated as our present. And so actually making the historical complex is as important as understanding the contingency of the present. I think that at times through thinking spatially, we erase the temporal, and that that is itself problematic, so the *Religious faith, space and diasporic communities in East London* project has spent quite a lot of time really trying to think through not just the iconography of religious space works in the East End of London, but also how very particular micro spaces and sites were in the past – and continue to be – characterized by different kinds of faith-

oriented behaviors, but also forms of engagement that actually transcend single faith categories. So we are interested in exactly how particular spaces are appropriated at times, or how spaces are shared at times. When you look at these processes of appropriation and sharing, you see that the simple Chicago school narrative used for the migrant East End of invasion and succession – first come the Huguenots, then come the Jewish, and then come the Muslims, and one displaces another one after the other – is a kind of gross oversimplification, of both historical truths and contemporary realities. Whereas if we think historically and geographically simultaneously, I think we can begin to actually speak about the contingency of – but also the importance of – categories of religious faith alongside these other markers of race, ethnicity, class, gender and so on, and actually speak through a much more nuanced language about social change rather than the more deterministic sense of either the geographical or the historical.

As exemplified by the Shahid Minar in Altab Ali discussed earlier, by the nearby Fieldgate Street synagogue which exists more or less inside the East London mosque, or by the traces of the former synagogue inside the Brick Lane mosque, we argued that "a focus on the rich detail of the built form might provide a useful corrective to the fallacies of 'groupism'. We see material forms assuming an agency of their own but also becoming appropriated and reappropriated by social practice" (Ahmed et al 2016).

Nostalgia

BG: *You've written: "Nostalgia sits in that space after history ends and biography begins" (2008:2.4). You were critiquing sociological fantasies of the East End's "white working class", but it seems to me your critique of nostalgia also applies to fantasies of the Jewish East End and perhaps now also romanticising ideas of the Bangladeshi East End?*

MK: I think there's always a problem that nostalgia isn't quite what it used to be. We very rapidly move on over the decades from something that is highly contentious to something that is romanticized. One example would be Banglatown, the branding of the area around Brick Lane as a destination linked to Bangladeshi culture, after the model of Chinatown. This was highly contentious in the 1980s but became an accepted fact: we see the recognition of the Bangladeshi community but also a way of capturing culture. So it also becomes a caricature, exoticized and orientalised. So there is always a potential for romanticization of the Bangladeshi East End, in a way that forgets that the history is a history of contest, a history of struggle, a history of power relations and of power relations being disrupted. We know that power corrupts and we know straightforwardly, sociologically, that when power corrupts, the struggle for power corrupts – and that becomes the case for every single instance of political change through time.

So I think that I think, yes, there is a danger of romanticizing the East End of London, but I think that's always been much closer to the present day than we might imagine. Halima Begum, now in charge at the Runnymede Trust, wrote a very good PhD (Begum 2004) cautioning against romanticizing Banglatown right at the very beginning, precisely because she saw the danger of it entrenching a certain communitarian conservative voice against the needs and wishes of young people at the time. And these things accumulate a strategic value. At the moment, Brick Lane may be facing major retail development plans, and in that context Banglatown becomes a political umbrella under which other things may hide in the struggles over different uses of space.

Methodological groupism

BG: Part of the diversity turn has been to develop a critique of methodological groupism. With Ahmed et al, you've written: "Generalisation in social analysis always potentially

generates an illusion of uniformity when reality might be more uneven. There is an easy metonymic slippage between empirically-observed phenomenon and its meaning. The particular may come to stand for the group in a way that reifies and in turn 'proves' the existence of predetermined categories of ethnicity, race or faith" (2016). How, then, should researchers approach categories such as "Jews" or "Muslims" in urban space without falling into these traps, or is it in fact impossible?

MK: I think it *is* possible – if we engage empirically with the lives of people on the ground. It is perfectly reasonable for people to unproblematically work through a multiplicity of identities. The moment of freezing comes *in the text*. It comes in the writing. It comes in the gaze that sees through particular categorical imperatives. And so groupism, I think, is a real danger.

It is valid to think about how religious faith structures behaviours in place, and I think it is valid to then think about what that means for "Muslims in Britain" or "Jews in London" or any other faith group, but *only* as long as in that writing there is a sense of the contingencies of the categories at stake, and as long as there is an awareness that the truly secular is always present as a counterweight to forms of faith. What I mean is that some people are *of* a particular faith background – Muslims, Jews, whatever – but may not hold to that faith: people who are avowedly secular but who are placed in positions where their faith background is fundamental, who might identify culturally with those groups while quite consciously actually not professing religious faith at the same time. Those tensions always exist within any description of a demographic – about who is Jewish, who is Muslim, who is Christian - and we need to recognize that. But also we need to think about the complexities *within* those categories in terms of any meaningful analysis: within the Christian tradition, there are enormous differences socially between the many forms of Pentecostalist practices in

African churches in East London, alongside the legacies of the Roman Catholic church that we've already touched on. And similarly within Islamic faith, that there are multiple theologically-based or mosque-based networks but they might equally be differentiated socially or culturally as much as theologically, and these differences make a difference in some ways and they don't make a difference in other ways.

What we need, then, in terms of this issue of groupism, is be clear about what categories we're using, and when, and recognise anthropologically that there are categories that people use themselves, emic categories that they use to talk about things at a particular time – for instance if they're talking about "Christian schools" or "Muslim schools" or "Jewish schools" – but that is not always the same as the etic meaning, the outside analysis, when we think about things from a critical distance. The outside analysis only has a validity as long as it engages with the complexity, contradictions and fluidity of the empirical situation on the ground as understood emically. I think you can read in texts when claims exceed themselves. It becomes very dangerous when we reify any of these group categories. But it also becomes equally dangerous if we are unable to speak about them – and *through* them – and to *use* them: if we speak about a site like East London without any group categories, without race or ethnicity or religious faiths, then we would find ourselves once again in a caricature of social reality. For example, in some academic domains in contemporary France, the erasure of the vocabulary of groups does violence to that reality. These categories imply demographics that are grouped, but when you foreground contingency you don't need to reify the groups that are involved in these demographics.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Nazneen, Ben Gidley, Jane Garnett, Alana Harris and Michael Keith. 2016. "Shifting markers of identity in East London's diasporic religious spaces." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (2): 223-242

Alexander, Claire. 2013. "Contested memories: the Shahid Minar and the struggle for diasporic space." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(4): 590-610.

Back, Les. 1999. *Rights and Wrongs: Youth, Community and Narratives of Racial Violence,* Finding the Way Home Working Papers, London: Centre for Urban and Community Research and Centre for New Ethnicities Research.

Begum, Halima. 2004. *Urban regeneration and the politics of space in Spitalfields*. London: Queen Mary University of London.

Berg, Mette Louise, and Nando Sigona. 2013. "Ethnography, diversity and urban space." *Identities* 20(4): 347-360.

Garnett, Jane, and Michael Keith. 2014. "Interrogating Diaspora: Beyond the Ethnic Mosaic – Faith, Space and Time in London's East End." Pp.165-176 in *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Collaboration and Conflict in the Age of Diaspora*, edited by Sander Gilman, Hong Kong: HKU Press.

Keith, Michael. 1998. *Making Safe: Young people, Community Safety and Racial Danger*. London: Centre for Urban and Community Research and Centre for New Ethnicities Research Working Paper.Keith, Michael. 2005. *After the Cosmopolitan? Multicultural Cities and the Future of Racism.* London: Routledge.

Keith, Michael. 2008. "Between being and becoming? Rights, responsibilities and the politics of multiculture in the new east end." *Sociology Online* 13(5):11-23.

Keith, Michael. 2017. "Complicating the conceptual language of the Bengal diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (3): 389-395.

Rathzel, Nora, Les Back, Phil Cohen and Michael Keith. 2008 *Finding the Way Home: Young People´s Stories of Gender, Ethnicity, Class, and Places in Hamburg and London* Gottingen: V+R University Press.

Peach, Ceri. 1999. "London and New York: Contrasts in British and American models of segregation with a comment by Nathan Glazer." *International Journal of Population Geography* 5(5): 319-347.

Sivanandan, Ambalavaner. 1976. "Race, class and the state: the black experience in Britain: For Wesley Dick—poet and prisoner in some answer to his questions." *Race & Class* 17(4): 347-368.

Sivanandan, Ambalavaner. 1978. *Race, class and the state: the black experience in Britain*. London: Institute of Race Relations.

Strathern, Marilyn. 1996. "Cutting the network." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2(3): 517-535.

Thomas, W.I. and D.S. Thomas. 1928. *The child in America: Behavior problems and programs.* New York: Knopf.