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Review Article: Hearing Difference, Writing Difference

Histories and Memories. Migrants and their History in Britain

KATHY BURRELL and PANIKOS PANAYI

London and New York, Tauris Academic Studies, 2006

272pp., ISBN 9781845110420 (£59.50)

The Irish in Post-War Britain

ENDA DELANEY

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007

ix+232pp., ISBN 9780199276677 (£58)

Negotiating Boundaries in the City. Migration, Ethnicity and Gender in Britain

JOANNA HERBERT

Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008

ix+ 230pp., ISBN 9780754646778 (£55)

We Europeans? Mass Observation, 'Race' and British Identity in the Twentieth Century

TONY KUSHNER

Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004

xi+ 281pp., ISBN 9780754602064 (£54)

Perhaps the central question at the heart of all these books can be summed up by Tony Kushner's opening sentence, 'How do we deal with difference?' These volumes together show that while this difficult question remains at the heart of a troubled contemporary Britain, we must be wary of looking to history for easy answers. Delaney's work focuses on how Irish migrants experienced and adapted to life in Britain and life as a migrant in post-war society, themes also explored for various migrant groups in the collection edited by Burrell and Panayi. Kushner's own work considers this question from the opposite perspective and assesses how the British dealt with issues of difference and 'race' in the mid-twentieth century. This is also something that is very much at the heart of Herbert's contemporary study of Leicester, where she sets the opinions and experiences of 'white' working class residents alongside those of south Asian migrants, to reveal how residents have variously responded to living in what is commonly billed as Britain's most successfully

multicultural city. Significantly, a strong theme across all the works is an insistence on the importance of revealing differences *within* minority and migrant groups – of class, origin, gender – as well as what are often seen by outsiders as the more obvious divisions between migrants and majority society.

Equally, this question of difference is one with which all the scholars in these volumes engage, in relation to themselves and their own methodologies. Although the individual answers to the question of how historians reach into the experience of migrants and minority populations are varied, the broad consensus is that scholars need to be willing to embrace different, and sometimes innovative, methodologies. While Delaney's work goes some way to show the usefulness of traditional archives in charting migration and the experience of the Irish in Britain, he also flags up the importance of using personal testimonies to get to the heart of the 'inner history of immigration'.¹ Taking this a step further, the importance of oral history and life stories - and hence raising the issue of the relationship between history and memory - is something that is central to both Herbert's study of Leicester and *Histories and Memories*. Pieces in this latter book also broaden our understanding of what historians might think of as being evidence to include the importance of analysing material objects, language, food and religion as well as visual cultures. And Kushner's book demonstrates how attempts to produce innovative methodologies are not simply a contemporary concern but how it was a live issue in the 1930s and 1940s. His consideration of Mass Observation as a project sees him exploring in depth the relative merits of fieldwork, surveys, directives and personal diaries as a means of unpicking Britons' complex responses to 'difference'.

¹ R. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* 2nd edition, New Haven, 2002.

If the idea of difference is at the heart of these works, so too are the themes of continuity: the links and threads which tie migrants across nations and to the past (as well as often imagined futures). So at the heart of Delaney's *Irish in Post-War Britain* is consideration of transnationalism and how this is central to migrant experiences. This is part of a number of new historical studies which take on board theoretical developments in the field of transnationalism,² and also builds on the work such as Robert Orsi's study of Italian migrants in New York, which depicts migration as 'a story of complex needs: for success, stability, participation, autonomy, faithfulness to tradition and an openness to the new ways, the need to recreate the familiar while in the midst of change'.³ One of Delaney's aims is to grips with the lived and embodied experience of Irish migrants in Britain, and consequently throughout the book he argues that 'a convincing interpretation ... must take account of both elements of the society that they left and the landscape that they now inhabited'.⁴

In the first two chapters, using personal testimonies of migrants, he pieces together the decision making processes behind migration, the physical journey, commonly from rural parts of Ireland, through Dublin, across the sea, the rail journey across Britain and arrival in a busy city, often London. He sensitively reconstructs the accounts of migrants' personal decision making processes, bleak journeys from rural railway stations, humiliation at the hands of British officials and confusion at the sight and sound of Euston and its 'grim vista of modernity'.⁵ At later points in the book he also shows how migrants constructed and sustained their connections with 'home' and

² See for example: E. Bauer and P. Thompson, *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic*, Kingston, 2006; M. Chamberlain, *Family Love in the Caribbean: Migration and the Anglo-Caribbean Experience*, New Brunswick and London, 2006; A. McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, and Hawaii 1900-1936*, Chicago, 2001; K. Fog Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys: an Ethnography of Migration and Home in Three Family Networks*, Durham, NC, 2007.

³ Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, p.9.

⁴ Enda Delaney, *The Irish in Post-War Britain*, Oxford, 2007, pp.6-7.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.53.

also their sense of identity in Britain through migrant social networks and social spaces, often centring around the Catholic Church, but also dance halls, sport, pubs and (to a more limited extent) political activity.

As is increasingly common in considerations of migration, neither decision making nor the actual process of migration are seen by Delaney as acting in isolation, but rather the complex product of economic and social opportunities, constraints, networks and intimate decisions. Consequently, this study challenges contemporary depictions of the Irish family as being broken or undermined by migration. In fact, in common with other work looking at transnational families,⁶ Delaney sees it as being stretched over space, and being reconfigured and perhaps even strengthened owing to the ongoing importance of family and community networks and the role of remittances in sustaining family homes.⁷ He stresses how the ‘social landscape of this generation was truly transnational’, stating that ‘networks lessened the obvious dislocation of emigration... informal networks were built on obligations towards kinsfolk and friends, in essence the product of personal relationships, and enabled those with relatively little resources or indeed initiative to depart for Britain’.⁸ More than this, for young people, often migration was the only way of staying close to friends and siblings. This is something that was recognised by contemporaries, who understood that the ‘girls find work along the path of their brothers and neighbours, and much of the social life of home is preserved ... Donegal girls who go into domestic service in Dublin fly to Glasgow from the loneliness’.⁹

If migration was understood by some, it was also something much criticised within the Irish elite, and particular politicians such as de Valera who denounced

⁶ See for example E. Zontini, ‘Immigrant women in Barcelona: coping with the consequences of transnational lives’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30 (6), 2004, pp.1113-1144.

⁷ Delaney, *Irish in Post-War Britain*, p.38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁹ P. O’Donnell, ‘Migration is a way of keeping a grip’, *The Bell*, Nov. 1941.

migration, believing that the rural poor in particular should be sustained by little more than the ‘the simple pure pleasures of communal rural life’ and reject materialistic and secular values represented by migration and Britain¹⁰ One of the great strengths of this book is to thrust into the foreground the importance of class and the divisions within Irish society. Delaney stresses that while migration was not simply the preserve of certain groups within Ireland and was common across society, the reasons for leaving differed: ‘[g]eographical location, occupations, levels of education, length of time in Britain, gender, and most importantly social class shaped the divergent and often radically different experiences of the generation who left post-war Ireland’.¹¹ Like Bronwen Walter, he notes the importance of women in post-war migration, particularly in relation to nursing and other caring professions, but also shows how the middle classes more generally moved in order to further their careers.¹²

While Delaney rightly insists on the importance of understanding Irish society in order to comprehend, not just the scale, but also the individual experiences of migration to Britain, he also understands the importance of looking at Irish migration in the context of the other main migrations to Britain during the post-war period. As with migrants from other parts of the Commonwealth, through a range of media including cinema and radio, and in the letters and stories of neighbours and family, ‘[e]xpectations of the place of destination were part of the mental map that migrants brought with them on the journey’.¹³ He uses Chamberlain’s work to talk about the ‘mythological territory’ that was the imagined ‘Mother Country’.¹⁴ While for those coming from Caribbean, Britain was a ‘land of milk and honey’, it was far more complicated for Irish migrants. Delaney argues convincingly that they held a far less

¹⁰ Delaney, *Irish in Post-War Britain*, p.201.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.6.

¹² B. Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women*, London, 2001.

¹³ Delaney, *Irish in Post-War Britain*, p.29.

¹⁴ Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return*, new edition, New Brunswick, 2005.

positive mental picture of the UK, owing to the Free State's educational emphasis on Irish language and patriotism, reinforced through popular ballads and the culture of the Catholic Church, which was virulently anti-British and saw the secularism of British society going hand-in-hand with its materialism. Consequently Delaney uses the phrase 'intimate enemy' to typify the relationship between UK and Ireland, which differs significantly from Herbert's findings (below) on the feeling of south Asians she recorded in relation to Britain.¹⁵

A consideration of the ambiguous citizenship status of the Irish, as well as the dominant role of the Catholic Church in many migrants' identities, allows Delaney to question the narrative of Irish 'whiteness' protecting them from the racism experienced by 'New' Commonwealth migrants. He suggests that the pre-war IRA bombing campaign together with Irish neutrality during the war (widely misunderstood in Britain) 'cast a long shadow over the Irish', and the 'visceral anti-Irish prejudices' from the early 1970s challenges any idea that the Irish were 'honorary Anglo-Saxons'. He believes this 'overstates the degree of acceptance, since older latent prejudices continued to linger and encounters with the Irish still provoked hostile responses'.¹⁶ Equally, such a lazy assumption conveniently hides the extent to which Irish migrants often continue to articulate themselves as being 'different' to the 'English', with religion and a rural background often cited as important markers.

While Delaney's book, particularly the first chapters, go a long way to unpicking migrants' inner worlds, later chapters are far more reliant on Catholic archives. Although he has undoubtedly uncovered a rich source, has used it meticulously, and reveals how the Catholic Church operated as a transnational body in this context, inevitably using such sources gives huge weight to the preoccupations

¹⁵ Delaney, *Irish in Post-War Britain*, pp.55-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.125.

of the church hierarchy rather than those of the migrants themselves. If we are sometimes left wondering what life was actually like for Irish migrants in Britain, outside the realm of the religious, Herbert's work on the impact of the different south Asian migrations to Leicester shows us just how far the lived experience of migrants can be revealed through the extensive use of oral histories.

Setting Herbert's and Delaney's books side by side allows us to see migrant experiences more broadly, making rich comparisons across groups, rather than becoming trapped into seeing phenomena as being particular to a specific nationality. Like Delaney, Herbert insists on the importance of understanding the place from which migrants have come – in terms of their personal experiences as well as the physical geography – in order to understand their lives, and feelings about this, in Britain.¹⁷ And like Delaney, she reveals the importance of differences between migrants, which among 'south Asians' in the city are most starkly demonstrated in the divisions between those 'twice migrants' from East Africa – often forced into leaving a life of relative prosperity at very short notice, and moving with only what they could carry to the UK – and those migrating directly from the Indian sub-continent. These latter often initially consisted of men migrating alone, being later joined by brides or wives and children, and were motivated with the aim of improving their (understood in the widest sense to include their extended family's) economic position. Drawing other migrant populations into the story of the city, Herbert observes that public opinion towards different groups also varied, with the Irish and African Caribbean populations at different times experiencing discrimination and attacks, but the city's

¹⁷ Although B. Rogaly and B. Taylor, *Moving Histories of Class and community: Identity, place and belonging in contemporary England*, Basingstoke, 2009, chapter 2, reminds us that this isn't something specific to international migrant experiences.

Jewish population appearing to have ‘settled without much difficulty’¹⁸ As Herbert is at pains to note, broader distinctions between those seen as ‘south Asian’ were also themselves sub-divided into further differences based primarily on caste and state of origin. And further, within households, significant differences of experience were signalled by gender and individual stage in a lifecycle.

The richness of Herbert’s findings is tied to her use of life histories as a means of getting behind individual experiences, weaving them together to produce a convincing account of different generations of migrants and their interaction with the city. So, as with Delaney’s work with personal testimonies, Herbert’s collection of oral histories allows us to understand how migration was embodied in feelings of cold, dark, alienation with the landscape, the ‘multiple meanings embedded in narratives of food’ (something she explores in more depth in her chapter in *Histories and Memories*) and alien smells.¹⁹ This methodology is also central to a perspective which sees migration as one part of an individual’s, or even multiple generations of a family’s, broader history. Understanding it this way allows us to understand how meta-processes were experienced and understood at the micro-level. Herbert found that men’s narratives in particular insisted on revealing how ‘personal histories cannot be disentangled from colonial history’: through family stories, education, film and literature as well as more formal citizenship status, the sense of Britain as ‘home’ and familiar was in place well before a migratory journey was initiated (chapter 3). Reflecting on the telling of these stories to her, as an outsider, she suggests that they were also a means of participants asserting themselves in relation to ‘their contested experiences of citizenship, in which their Britishness was not only undermined by

¹⁸ Joanna Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries in the City: Migration, Ethnicity and Gender in Britain*, Aldershot, 2008, p.19.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.73.

immigration controls but by their daily experiences as a citizen'.²⁰ Consequently, these stories insist on the place of empire in the ongoing experience of migration, and demonstrate how history and the present are simultaneously embedded within the idea of the post-colonial.

As her approach might suggest, gender is a key theme cutting across the chapters of the book. So, while men's narratives of migration and settling in Britain often centre around stories of hard work outside the home, for women they often centred on the household and experiences of isolation. However, Herbert does not slip into the easy trap of equating this with female passivity within the migratory experience, but rather uses women's life histories as a way into locating and unpicking the complex paths of agency, resistance and negotiated constraints used by them over the course of their lives. This embeds women's experiences within their position in their lifecycle, allowing Herbert to move away from the 'snap shot picture' which, she argues, limits many studies of south Asian women's lives. Life histories reveal how certain problems were viewed by women on reflection as 'transient' and particular to a specific stage in their lives.²¹ So the position of a daughter-in-law early on in her married life, particularly if she had come straight from India, could be equally contrasted with both her mother-in-law and with herself thirty years on. Herbert also shows how woman at all stages in their adult lives often wielded far more power within their nuclear household than in the extended household, and how restrictions were contingent on caste and family background. Crucially her work also shows how women themselves repeatedly emphasised their own hidden work which had gone into ensuring the success of the family (and which was often publicly

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.64.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.99.

claimed by men) and their own forms of resistance, which spanned a range of tactics including divorce, learning to drive or find paid work outside the home.

Both Herbert (chapter 4) and Delaney (chapter 3) tell the story of how, within cities, the pattern of concentration of migrants initially in poorer inner city areas, in houses of multiple occupancy, alongside friends and relatives, was followed by more established migrants moving to their own house in the suburbs or being allocated council housing. And again, this will be a familiar story for anyone who has looked at patterns of settlement in particular locations such as the East End (revealed in Kershen's chapter on the area in *Histories and Memories*). Not only does this provide us with an insight into the changing meanings of space within cities over time, but also show how this might be enacted at the micro-level. Both argue that migrant experiences and notions of 'home' could conflict with dominant (often middle class) ideas of home as a quiet, ordered, private space. Consequently houses of multiple occupancy, or houses ill-suited for holding extended families might both become the focus of hostility from neighbours and be drawn into narratives concerning the 'decline' of a particular neighbourhood.

Interestingly, neighbourhood is shown by Herbert as both as a site of inclusion and exclusion, which again proves to be a powerfully gendered experience, and one also mediated by a migrant's former life (chapter 5). While isolation might have been experienced within the immediate neighbourhood, this could over time be mitigated by friendly interactions with white neighbours and with growing social networks between migrants. As south Asian migrants have become more embedded in Leicester this took on a physical form, being signalled through shops, places of worship and cultural activities such as public celebrations of Diwali. Although racism was experienced directly from neighbours and within the home locality, this was generally

seen by informants as generated on an individual level, and contrasted with broader ‘geographies of fear’ which governed many people relationship with the wider city.²² Pubs (for men), parks and certain parts of Leicester were seen as places to avoid, although Herbert stresses how this changed over time and affected different south Asian communities differently. The starkest example provided was how by a number of Muslim women, all of whom wore the *hijab*, experienced an increase in hostility in the city centre after the attacks on 11 September 2001. As with Delaney’s findings in relation to the Irish during the peaks periods of activity by the IRA, acceptance and ‘multiculturalism’ is shown to be partial and brittle in the face of genuine challenges to hegemonic positions.

Crucial to the book’s success is the way in which Herbert draws in the stories and outlooks of members of Leicester’s white population. Not only does this interrogate the official construction of the city as a ‘multicultural success’ but it also allows us a way into understanding the ambivalences and hesitations embedded in ‘white’ responses to Leicester’s position as one of Britain’s main Asian cities. Herbert points out that that the ‘current discourse about Leicester can be seen as a narrative: a constructed story’ and that, crucially, while this is not to say that it is untrue, it is also important to recognise that ‘there may be competing discourses about a place at particular times and as one discourse becomes dominant other stories and histories are silenced’.²³ In constructing a story of multicultural success – often in order to juxtapose Leicester with Burnley or other towns with more problematic ‘race’ relations – official stories have silenced not only the tales of casual and institutional racism experienced by south Asians, but also how the ‘local’ population had

²² *Ibid*, p.121.

²³ *Ibid*, p.2.

constantly attempted to reconstitute a 'white' identity, often in dynamic opposition to the presence of south Asian migrants. Herbert's interviews revealed that while whites:

did not universally harbour racist feelings they were all in a process of defining and excluding South Asians and constructing a white identity... Whites saw themselves as disciplined and domesticated, whilst South Asians were marked as corrupt and unworthy. These discourses bore little resemblance to the tangible reality of South Asians, but connected to the subjective lived experiences of white individuals...[which] stemmed from the anxiety they felt regarding their position in society.²⁴

Herbert argues that equal opportunities policies and south Asians' access to state resources challenged white privilege, which was often seen as 'natural'. And yet, particularly those who lived in predominantly south Asian areas, revealed 'a more humanistic perspective'. On a day-to-day basis, although not totally superseding racial discourses, this meant that their 'neighbourhood roles provided a basis for commonality and was a group based identity which effectively superseded racial boundaries'.²⁵

If Herbert's work shows how contemporary discourses have deep historical roots, Kushner's book on mid-twentieth century attitudes towards difference demonstrates how historical British responses have strong contemporary resonances. Kushner's preoccupation in *We Europeans?* – flagged, in fact, in his contribution to *Histories and Memories*, which highlights the divide between national memory and

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp.46-7.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.57.

immigration history – is with simultaneously revealing the presence of minority populations in Britain before the late 1940s, and demonstrating the varied and ambivalent responses of the British to their presence. Using this title – interrogating Huxley and Haddon’s seminal *We Europeans* (1936)²⁶ - not only suggests a direct link to mid-century debates over race and belonging, but also signals something of a challenge to the dominance of post-colonialism. Kushner argues that much writing on Britain and race has focused on the ongoing importance of empire which, he suggests, can offer only a partial take on the matter. Instead *We Europeans?* argues that ‘the dynamic relationship between Britain, Britishness and concepts of Europe is crucial for any understanding of the construction of Britishness and/or Englishness’.²⁷

Reinforcing Delaney’s observation that the Irish in post-war Britain continued to be seen, and often saw themselves, as different, Kushner supports Miles’ argument that analyses ‘grounded solely in the analysis of colonial history and which prioritise the single somatic characteristic of skin colour have a specific and limited explanatory power’.²⁸ Kushner does not wish to remove colonialism from the debate, but rather suggests that it has been over-emphasised ‘in analyses that marginalize other influences and histories’.²⁹ He argues that academics ‘have been slow to recognize the significance of ‘race’ thinking in Britain before the post-Second World War era. It has been assumed that only with the arrival of New Commonwealth migrants have ‘race’ and questions of cultural diversity become issues of national importance’.³⁰ In fact Kushner’s convincing reading of Mass Observation’s archives demonstrates how ‘constructions of racialized minorities, at home or abroad, real or imagined, played a

²⁶ G. Schaffer *Race Science and British Society, 1930-62*, Basingstoke, 2008 gives one of the best overviews of the importance of this work.

²⁷ Tony Kushner, *We Europeans? Mass Observation, ‘Race’ and British Identity in the Twentieth Century*, Aldershot, 2004, p.31.

²⁸ R. Miles, *Racism after ‘Race Relations’*, London, 1993, p.148.

²⁹ Kushner, *We Europeans*, p.32.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.247.

crucial role in the making and re-making of individual and collective identities in pre-1945 Britain',³¹

Given Mass Observation's chequered past and early reputation it is unsurprising that perhaps more than the other authors covered here, Kushner engages intensely with the methodological strengths, weaknesses and implications of Mass Observation's various materials. Consequently, this book uses each specific genre of the material produced by Mass Observation – diary, report, directive response and detailed survey work within specific key places – not only to explore the presence of minorities and attitudes towards them, but also the relative success of different materials in revealing this.

He begins with considering the various pieces of fieldwork which were conducted in 'Worktown' (Bolton), 'Holidaytown' (Blackpool), 'Dockland' (a combination of Liverpool and Tiger Bay, Cardiff) and the East End in the later 1930s. He tackles head-on the criticisms levelled at Mass Observation's work in this area, which was compared (negatively) to the work of nineteenth century social investigators, and asks whether what was generated were 'patronizing images by southern bourgeois artists that represent their northern working class subjects through a quasi-colonial gaze?'³² Kushner concedes that Mass Observation fieldwork findings were evidently limited by and were the product of Tom Harrison's anthropological background, contemporary expectations of the need to produce 'scientific' evidence, as well as certain classed attitudes.

What his meticulous work in the archives also uncovered, however, was how the raw data (rather than the finished outputs) simultaneously reveal the often historically embedded presence of minority groups and their marginal position, not

³¹ *Ibid*, p.248.

³² *Ibid*, p.59.

necessarily locally, but certainly in the minds of the investigators. While the ‘lasting image of Mass Observation’s ‘Worktown’ is of a place dominated by sameness’, Kushner suggests that there are alternative readings of the material: ‘Harrison’s post-war denial of pre-war heterogeneity reflected a wider assumption in Britain that it was only after 1945, that the country... was in any way cosmopolitan’.³³ Thus, although the field work data was relatively successful in capturing the diversity of the places covered, this was marginalised in the final report, in order to conform to certain preconceived notions. So for example, although it received no space in the final depiction of ‘Worktown’, Bolton in fact contained an orphanage housing Basque refugee children and a synagogue; despite being billed otherwise the ‘exotic’ performers on Blackpool’s pleasure beach were evidently recruited from major British seaports such as Cardiff; and contrary to fieldworkers’ attempts to create a clear distinction between ‘Jews’ and ‘Cockneys’, it is clear that the East End, as much as the dock areas of Britain, had long been home to and birthplace of minority populations:

The fact that there were Indian pedlars based in Bolton and... the chance to buy ‘Juju, the mystic bean of Africa’ from a ‘Negroid’s stall in the market-place’ was ignored in their generalizations about the town. There was a place for those who were different, and that was what Mass Observation perceived to be the untypically cosmopolitan seaports of Britain.³⁴

³³ *Ibid*, p.64.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.76.

If we can feel Kushner's frustration at how preconceptions about the existence and place of minorities in pre-*Windrush* Britain limited the full usefulness of Mass Observation's fieldwork, we can also appreciate his enthusiasm at the way in which the organisation's directives, and more particularly diaries, allowed 'ordinary people' to reveal their own feelings on minorities. Like Herbert's interviews, Mass Observation allows us to reach into the ambivalences and contradictions expressed by participants around issues of 'race' and minorities in the mid-twentieth century. Responses to directives (which at the time were developed in contradistinction to the Gallup mass surveys) on 'race' and anti-semitism and 'foreigners' between 1939 and the mid-1940s allowed respondents not only to reveal their attitudes, but also to provide some context and justification for them. And crucially, the inclusion of 'half and half' or 'mixed' for directive responses, rather than a simple yes/no answer, captured the complex and ambivalent feelings of the majority of respondents to issues of difference.

While the directives were often limited by their confused construction (attitudes to Jews, for example, were included in the directive on 'foreigners') they are uniquely illuminating in revealing how racial stereotypes were generated. Respondents mentioned the role of cultural artefacts – dolls, 'chocolate dolls', 'the ten little nigger boys', Lyon's 'grinning flat-nosed black creature called "Kaffey"' – as well as rhymes, popular myths (such as that fact that 'negroes smell') and popular interpretations of social Darwinism, alongside the impact of cinema, music and well-known books in shaping people's attitudes. Crucially, many respondents stressed how their attitudes were rarely based on personal experience. One woman's mental picture of a 'negro' was 'a black shining figure of fine physique wearing only a loin-cloth and with a wide smile...remember this is a mind picture, not reality. As I have never

met... a negro'.³⁵ Respondents also revealed the importance of the USA in the formation of attitudes, far more in fact than the influence of empire or the actual presence of black people in Britain – indeed, one of the key differences between responses to the 1939 and 1943 directives were reflections prompted by increased presence of African American GIs in the country upon the entry of America to the war.

But it is clear that it was at the level of the personal diaries that Kushner really believes the strength of the Mass Observation project lies. Part three of the book is devoted to exploring in some depth the various ways in which attitudes towards minorities, 'race' and difference were written about by Mass Observation's diarists. The archive provides a unique collection of 'autobiographical accounts of ordinary people'³⁶ and it was these diaries which 'came closest to fulfilling the self-reflexive anthropological ambitions of Mass Observation'.³⁷ They were kept throughout the war and offer an insight into personal responses to difference at a seminal moment in British history. Like Herbert's findings they show the difficulty in trying to pin down individual's ambiguous responses as 'racist': so that 'diaries show both irritation and empathy with refugees, often from the same person'.³⁸ Such complexity was one of the things which made Mass Observation unpopular with researchers for so long. Kushner admits it is not easy material to dip into and plunder, but when academics take the time to use its material systematically and with an understanding of its generation and context, he shows us just how important a resource Mass Observation can be.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.117.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.243.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.250.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p.203.

Kushner observes how, albeit haltingly and sometimes accidentally, Mass Observation preceded the methodological innovations of recent decades by some fifty years. Indeed, some of Mass Observations' techniques would not be out of place set alongside the methodologies deployed by the authors contained in Burrell and Panayi's *Histories and Memories* collection, and outlined in the comprehensive introduction. Common to all in this volume is a willingness to engage in the methodological challenges that are necessarily raised by using the diverse range of sources now seen as appropriate by academics attempting to gain insight into the lives of migrants and minority groups in Britain. So Ryan's piece (chapter 11) engages explicitly in the growing literature dealing with the intersections between history, memory and nostalgia. She draws on Katy Gardner's excellent study of Bengali elders in London, to suggest that '[n]arratives of home tell us more about a person's experiences of life in Britain than about the reality of life at home'.³⁹ Accepting that people's narratives, as told in an interview, are not necessarily 'memories', as we can never know what a person is remembering, simply what they are telling, she believes that '[r]eflective nostalgia can be a powerful tool that allows us to engage critically with the past. In remembering and re-telling the past we seek to reconcile our past and present selves through an interconnectedness of then and now'.⁴⁰ So using the stories told by a number of elderly women from Ireland, she suggests that women deployed functional economic narratives of migration in order to allow them to reconcile their long absence from Ireland with 'happy memories of childhood and loving, self-sacrificing parents'.⁴¹

³⁹ Ryan 'Passing Time: Irish Women Remembering and Re-telling Stories', in Kathy Burrell and Panikos Panayi (eds), *Histories and Memories. Migrants and their History in Britain*, London and New York, 2006, p.198; Gardner, *Age, Narrative and Migration*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.207.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.205.

If some of the chapters in this volume exemplify an understanding of the importance of developing a sophisticated approach to life histories, Myers' incisive piece (chapter 3) reminds us of the importance of grounding developments in history in their social, economic and political contexts, including current debates around Englishness/Britishness and identity. He suggests that while the upsurge in popular history and community histories superficially might be seen as 'a good thing', he reveals instead the multiple dangers. He argues that in 'the increasing number of affirmative narratives that more or less implicitly set out to describe 'who we are', the story-telling capacity of history has come to dominate over its explanatory potential'.⁴² In order to make sense of a multicultural Britain, history's function becomes that of giving people 'a narrative in which to live their lives', and what is then created is 'a naturalised history that insists on the continuity of past with present'.⁴³ Myers believes that not only does this promote the 'development of discrete and historically determined cultural identities' but also bars the way to developing critical understandings of history.⁴⁴ Dangerously, rather than being a sign of a successful pluralist nation, he argues there is no 'recognition or discussion of how these identities have come to be constructed in a society characterised by racism and inequality'.⁴⁵

Seen in this light, Herbert's *Negotiating Boundaries* serves as a comprehensive deconstruction of the much-vaunted official multiculturalism of Leicester. Similarly the partial nature of the 'acceptance' of minorities in Britain – already flagged by Delaney and Herbert – is also revealed in Sponza's contribution to *Histories and Memories* (chapter 4), and affirms the danger of accepting hegemonic discourses of

⁴² Myers, 'Historical Practice in the Age of Pluralism: Educating and Celebrating Identities', in Burrell and Panayi (eds), *Histories and Memories*, p.36.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.45, p.47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.51.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.52.

British tolerance and national identity. And yet the complex and unpredictable responses of the majority populations recorded by both Kushner and Herbert suggest that what is produced at the level of public history and official narrative does not automatically filter down into relationships and encounters at the street level. Further they suggest that the kind of contemporary discourses analysed by Haylett, of the positioning of the middle classes as multicultural sophisticates in opposition to poor whites who have been categorised as irredeemably racist, demand urgent interrogation.⁴⁶

Overall, the chapters in this collection, especially when put alongside the other works cited here, show how academics are moving towards developing a critical understanding of the complexities of migration and its ongoing impact on migrants. Taken together they show, for example, the multiple ways in which ideas of ‘home’ are maintained and carried by individuals and across generations, as well as how home is experienced and reconstructed at different scales. So, at the micro-level, household objects provide a physical connection across time and place to other remembered homes, with kept but hidden objects also providing links with painful pasts, as Attan shows (chapter 10). Similarly, language and food not only embody links with a past and an idea of ‘home’, but are also living things, adapting to new contexts and being passed on in new forms (often by women) to younger generations. This reinforces our understanding that the ‘lives of migrants do not simply begin when they reach the British mainland’, and nor does the process of migration end with arrival.⁴⁷

Taking it up a scale, interactions with neighbours, the choice of neighbourhood and the implications of deciding to buy a home rather than renting are simultaneously

⁴⁶ C. Haylett, ‘Illegitimate subjects?: Abject Whites, Neoliberal Modernisation and Middle Class Multiculturalism’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 19, 2001, pp.351-370.

⁴⁷ Burrell and Panayi (eds), *Histories and Memories*, p.15.

informed by everyday realities and meta-narratives of the ‘myth of return’. Many Irish migrants considered by Delaney consequently did not buy a house, even when in a position to do so, as they were sustained by a belief that they would return ‘home’. And yet, we must be wary of making easy assumptions: a majority of the Ukrainians in Weber-Newth’s study (chapter 5) worked overtime specifically in order to buy their homes, while at the same time resolutely maintaining their separate identity as political exiles and resisting assimilation. All this speaks to the importance of locating myths of belonging, experiences of exclusion and questions of identity within disparate national histories as well as individual immigrant experiences.

The insight that ‘white’ migrant populations, such as Eastern Europeans, Italians and the Irish, can continue to feel very different, and be treated as such by the majority population are only partly destabilised by Herson’s discovery of the ‘lost memories’ of an Irish heritage in Stafford (chapter 12). His finding of the ease with which those who chose to do so could ‘forget’ Irish roots certainly suggests the possibility of individuals using ‘whiteness’ to hide other forms of difference, something which is also recorded for sedentary members of Britain’s Gypsy and Traveller populations.⁴⁸ This is not to imply automatic and easy assimilation, but rather to be alive to the multiple and individual reactions to ‘outsider’ status, particularly in the context of ongoing racism and the structural disadvantage of most minorities.

In fact the multiple and sometimes contradictory findings of researchers is in part the result of an increasingly wide and sophisticated field, developing depth and nuance in our understanding and portrayal of ‘difference’. The answer then, to Kushner’s opening question, is that lived experience and scholarship both

⁴⁸ B. Taylor, *A Minority and the State: Travellers in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, Manchester, 2008; see also Rogaly and Taylor, *Moving Histories*, chapter 6.

demonstrate the extent to which we have moved from simplistic ideas of ‘assimilation’ and a dichotomous ‘host’ and ‘migrant’.⁴⁹ All these works take on the challenge implicitly raised by Chamberlain, that it is still ‘commonplace to assume that migration... is the atypical condition, as it has become just as commonplace to talk of migrant/diasporic lives in terms of disruptions and dislocations, discontinuities and disconnections’.⁵⁰ Instead what new scholarship shows is how migration is rooted in the everyday, is something which is an ongoing process for migrants, with reverberations across and between places and generations. We are shown how the experience of being a migrant, or indeed responding to the presence of minorities, is embedded with ambiguity, emotion and complicated feelings of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’. And we see how researchers have risen to the challenge of doing justice to difference by using different sources and adopting new perspectives.

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⁴⁹ Although of course K. Lunn (ed.), *Hosts, Immigrants and Minorities. Historical Responses to Newcomers in British Society, 1870-1914*, Folkestone, 1980 remains a key text.

⁵⁰ M. Chamberlain, ‘Migrant myths and memories’, *History Workshop Journal*, 67 (1), 2009, p.246.