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Goldsmiths Anthropology Research Papers



Perilous Ideas: anthropological
debates in cross-cultural arts projects

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Abstract

My essay is concerned with the nature of cross-cultural exchanges and representation in arts projects which work with other cultures. I am using this exploration as a way of grounding some of the more abstract debates in anthropology around the politics of representation, and contemporary understandings of 'community', 'identity' and 'locality' within urban cultures. My analysis is based on personal experience of three different projects which worked with the South Asian community in London – a London-wide arts festival about Bangladesh, the 'community arts' projects which formed a strand of it, and an exhibition of young British-Asian artists at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

My first section, 'Regimes of representation', sets up the discursive contexts within which each project approached their task of representing 'the other'. I am concerned to subject these discourses to rigorous critiques, especially in relation to questions of power and authority. However, I am also concerned

to maintain a sense of the practical considerations involved in such projects, and not to simply 'de-construct' the projects in an over-simplistic manner. I want to show how the workings of power and authority are never straightforward.

My second section, 'Keywords', focuses more specifically on the issues and problems which arose when producing these projects. I suggest that these arose in part from different understandings of concepts of 'community', 'identity' and 'locality' on the part of the arts producers and the populations they were seeking to represent. I suggest that the arts producers failed to understand the complexity of at least the first two of these concepts when approaching a diasporic community like the Bengali population of Tower Hamlets. I try to suggest some alternative ways of thinking about them. I am chiefly interested in the problems associated with such projects, although I also want to point to some ways in which they were successful.

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2 Regimes of Representation

2.1 Discourse and text in anthropology

Drawing on the broad directions suggested by deconstructionist analysis, terms such as 'discourse', 'representation', 'genre' and 'text' have become keywords in anthropology over the last two decades, brought especially to our attention by the *Writing Culture* collection (1986). There has been some subsequent criticism of this movement as focusing too narrowly on textual analysis in approaching issues of authority and authenticity in anthropology. Marie Gillespie (1995) writes that within the so-called 'post-modern turn'

... (problems of validation)... are subsumed under the rubric of 'authority', which is itself portrayed as a literary rather than a practical issue. But any attempt at a literary analysis of ethnographic writing is doomed to failure unless it goes beyond the formal analysis and comparison of texts to include a consideration of the contexts and the fieldwork involved in their production (75).

However, such criticisms misunderstand the emphasis placed on textual analysis. It is precisely intended as a way of exploring political and ethical issues in 'the contexts and fieldwork involved in their production' which have previously been glossed over, at least partly through the construction of apparently 'transparent' or 'objective' texts. George Marcus argues (1994) that this critique calls for a radical re-appraisal of methodology and its ways of constructing

the 'observed' and 'observer'. This involves understanding the ways in which ethnography as a cultural practice is situated in relation to global political and economic forces. In particular, the textual critiques of anthropology have been concerned to implicate it within the ongoing 'colonial encounter' (Asad, 1973) and problematise the power relations between the anthropologist and his or her subjects. In tandem with the growing body of 'post-colonial' cultural theory, anthropologists have sought to find new ways to do fieldwork with, and represent, 'the other', ways which instigate more equal power relations.

It is with this background in mind that I will discuss the 'regimes of representation' which were involved in the construction of these arts projects. I am using this as one way into thinking about the sets of personal, social, political and economic relationships which make up projects like these, just as thinking about ethnographic writing is one way into thinking about issues of ethnographic practice.

I would not want to suggest that we are entirely positioned by discursive regimes, and that these cannot be manipulated or subverted through use. At the same time, conversely, I want to point out the impossibility of stepping outside of constructed discourses, of finding an 'authentic' voice. This is a philosophical but also a practical impossibility. In terms of arts projects, a funding proposal or press release which does not conform in some ways to generic expectations will fail in its purpose. I hope to retain a sense of this commonplace, but crucial point, in all my analysis of the projects.

I will now move on to examine the three different strands of the project in terms of discursive regimes, and their social, historical and political contexts. I am drawing here to some extent on Lisa Lowe's analysis of the Los Angeles Festival of the Arts (1996: 85) in which she analyses 'narratives' of authenticity, lineage, variety and opposition, as constructing the particular version of 'multiculturalism' produced by the festival. However, I should also point out that all my 'narratives' overlapped and infected each other throughout the production of the festival, and I would not want to set up a rigid schema.

2.2 Bangladesh Festival and multiculturalism

Examining 'multiculturalism'

It is the first ever international event to explore the realities of such a misunderstood country. It should certainly destroy many clichés. May it make your next curry more meaningful!
– *What's On*, July 7 1997

The Bangladesh Festival did not operate within particularly sophisticated political and cultural discourses in approaching the task of representing 'Bangladesh' for a London audience. The festival organisers see themselves as 'presenters of international and multi-cultural arts', and the dominant rhetoric in framing their (re)presentations is one of celebrating diversity and difference, promoting art-forms from 'outside the Western canon', in particular forms which

have not been seen in Europe before. I believe that they see their project as extending or diversifying the range of art-forms presented in this country, probably mostly for an established arts audience. This is not made into an overtly political or historical issue.

As such, the organisers open themselves up to the kind of criticism which cultural theorists and anthropologists have made of the notion of 'multi-culturalism'. Rasheed Araeen, for example, writes that in Europe multiculturalism

... has been used as a cultural tool to ethnise its non-white population in order to administer and control its aspirations for equality. It also serves as a smokescreen to hide the contradictions of a white society unable or unwilling to relinquish its imperial legacies
(in *Fisher*, 1994: 9)

The underlying theme of such criticism is that, whilst overtly seeking to reverse the hegemonic white culture associated with European imperialism, such a discourse actually replicates power inequalities and cultural oppression. This process may take place with different degrees of intentionality and consciousness. Ashis Nandy, in relation to Western representations of other cultures, suggests that 'Human beings are capable of transforming any emancipatory idea into a new means of oppression.' (in Papastergiadis, 1998: 110).

1 Introduction

1.1 Perilous ideas?

I have taken my title from an essay by Eric Wolf (1994), in which he cautions us that we 'ignore at our peril' the uses of key anthropological terms outside of academic discourse. Whilst anthropologists congratulate themselves on their highly sophisticated understanding and use of terms such as 'race', 'culture' and 'ethnicity', they may fail to realise that, 'What anthropologists tend to relegate to the junk pile of their professional history remains live tinder in the world beyond academe' (7). Anthropologists are probably the least visible of the 'cultural practitioners', such as artists, journalists and film-makers, who mobilise key 'anthropological' terms in their work.

I am going to consider the workings of various anthropological themes and terms in three 'cross-cultural' arts projects that I have been working on, that aimed, in different ways, to represent South Asian culture. In examining themes of cross-cultural representation, community, identity and locality, I am concerned to show how 'real' and live debates around these themes are in the world beyond academia. I am hoping to open up more dialogue between anthropology and other cultural practices which share its concerns. As Wolf writes of the relationship between uses of key terms within and outside academia, 'This relation needs to be understood as part of the wider interplay between anthropology and other

Anthropology, with its conceptual arsenal, now becomes a body of thought that is external to the history of modernity, providing its adherents with a privileged position from which to criticise modernity without having to account for anthropology itself (in Wolf, 1994: 8)

I am therefore concerned that my discussion of 'anthropological' themes in a non-academic context does not simply work to show the ignorance of those outside the academy in working with 'our' ideas. Rather I want to suggest a genuine dialogue here, which both sides can learn from. At times this dialogue is a highly contentious one. Indeed, if I became increasingly aware of similarities between the arts projects and anthropology, I also found it increasingly difficult to personally make the connections which were clearly present. I knew that I was making decisions and taking up positions in a non-academic context that I would have criticised in an academic one. In this way, I became aware of some of the difficulties of being a 'participant-observer' – in both worlds – and I found that my commitment to one often tested my commitment to the other.

1.2 The projects

The organisation I was working for promotes 'non-Western' art forms through a variety of means. One of its major undertakings are annual festivals of (mostly performing) arts from the culture of a particular country or region. In 1999, this was the Bangladesh Festival, which took place across London in July, in a variety of contexts and formats. This had two different strands to it. The main focus for the festival was performances by Bangladeshi artists, transported from Bangladesh for the event. These included singers, dances, musicians, story-tellers, poets, photographers and film-makers. The various events together made up a version of Bangladeshi culture, presented for a London audience. Crucially, a major sector of the population living in the UK, and they were consulted and involved in the development of the festival in a number of ways. The festival also had a second strand of three 'community arts' projects, developed with the Bengali community of East London by a team of young Bengalis employed to do this. They produced a large-scale 'schools community musical', involving over 300 hundred school children around themes of traditional Bangladeshi folk culture. I worked mainly on a film and photography project, whereby young people produced photographs and video for exhibition, through working in

¹ The Bangladeshi population of Tower Hamlets are Bengalis; there are other ethnic groups in Bangladesh (see discussion of the Muring dancers in 'Identity' section below). They usually referred to themselves as 'Bengali', and I have therefore tended to use this term in my essay.

small groups with professional practitioners. Finally, there was a music competition for young DJs and musicians, giving them a chance to develop their own skills and play alongside professional musicians. Through co-ordinating the film and photography project I also became involved in a separate project, running concurrently. One of our exhibition sites was the Whitechapel Art Gallery, which was involved in its own project around South Asian culture, an exhibition of 'British Asian provocateurs' to highlight the talent of young British-Asian artists.

All these three elements were put together and presented through a complex and highly contested process, although the results may have appeared straightforward to an audience. This essay aims to examine and understand some of these contests and issues. One way of approaching the issues is to think of the projects as forming highly charged 'contact zones' (Pratt, 1992), where different discursive or representational regimes met. The first part of this essay, 'Regimes of representation' will examine the kinds of discourses through which the initiators of these projects approached their task of representing 'other cultures'. All three projects worked within quite different discourses, which had a variety of relationships to academic theory around representation. I am concerned to subject these discourses to the same kind of rigorous critique that ethnographic writing has undergone in recent years. At the same time, however, I want to make the reader aware that the projects were not operating within the same

social, political or discursive contexts as academic projects on similar themes, and therefore cannot be analysed in quite the same way.

I am particularly interested in the points of contact between these discourses and the frames of reference of those outside the organisation. Where the two met, certain terms and different understandings of them, became the focus for contest or change. These are also terms which anthropologists have struggled to define in their theory and practice. In my second section, 'Keywords' I am going to focus on themes of 'community', 'identity', and 'locality' in the processes and products of these projects.

1.3 Method and theory

I have chosen to begin my analysis of these projects with an analysis of discourse, 'the social process of making and reproducing sense' (O'Sullivan et al, 1994: 92), in which various different kinds of 'text' play a central role. Post-structuralist thinkers, centrally Foucault² have used discourse analysis as a powerful tool for analysing the dominant 'ways of seeing' and managing experience in the world, which often present themselves as given and beyond analysis. Such a broad

² I am drawing here on Raymond Williams' (1983) use of the term, as he discusses certain terms as 'a way of recording, investigating and presenting problems of meaning in the area in which the meanings of culture and society have formed' (15).

³ See Sturrock (1979), chapter 4, for a discussion of Foucault's concept of discourse.

methodological concept has been employed in much of the analysis of 'representations' of ethnicity over the last twenty years, beginning, perhaps with Said's *Orientalism* (1978). 'Discourse' can seem an extremely loose concept; however, as Lutz and Abu-Lughod point out, 'rather than being alarmed by its spread... it might be better to ask... what theoretical work... one wants the term to do' (quoted in Baumann, 1996: 10). I am using it to try to understand the conceptual frameworks within which these organisations approached their projects, with particular reference to the use of language and the construction of authority.

However, I have also become aware of the limitations of such an approach, which tends to privilege theory over practice, and is more effective at 'critiquing' existing power structures than suggesting alternatives. I therefore want this kind of analysis to stand only as a background to understanding the projects, not an end in itself.

Having mapped out an overall scheme of how these projects approached their aims, my second section moves away from structural and textual analysis to focus on specific issues which were important to the successes and failures of the projects. This section aims to describe the points of convergence and departure between the 'ways of seeing' of the arts organisations and those of the communities and identities that they were trying to represent. In order to think about the issues raised, I have drawn largely on my own experiences of working on the projects.

I spent most of my time working in the 'community events' office, which was staffed by a team of six young Bengalis, whom I got to know well, and often spoke to about the questions raised in my essay. My work also brought me into contact with a large number of other, mostly young people in the Bengali community, as well as the arts professionals who worked on the photography and film project. I conducted some structured interviews for this essay with a number of the people I had got to know, but mostly I have relied on recollecting my experiences and impressions.

In tackling three complex arts projects, and a range of issues within them, I realise that my study is extremely wide-ranging. I believe that the issues at stake become more meaningful when one can compare a variety of approaches. I also felt that it was important to understand the 'regimes of representation' or contexts of each project before trying to understand the more specific issues they raise. However, I realise that my discussion therefore opens up many vast subjects which I can only touch on briefly here.

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The details of such 'critiques' focus on the same issues which have been criticised in relation to ethnographic authority and discourse. Political issues can be marginalised when 'other cultures' are presented as 'static and closed traditions' (Papastergiadis, 1998: 118). Questions of the position of the curator and audience (like those of the ethnographer and reader), in relation to the culture being presented have been glossed over. In fact, Joel Kahn argues that only a certain kind of viewpoint can see a 'multi-cultural' perspective, 'the bird's eye view of someone privileged to see all that diversity without actually being part of it' (1995: 108).

'Multiculturalism' can certainly learn a lot from such reflection on its practices. However, taken to its logical extreme, such critiques make it impossible to present any kind of cultural form which could be understood as 'other'. Ashwani Sharma (1996) argues that 'to understand the other is no more than a stratagem for the containment, mastery and exploitation of cultural difference' (19). Such a political position can only lead to radical cultural separatism, whereby cross-cultural dialogues are never attempted. I want to begin from the position that, even if many 'multicultural' art presentations have not amounted to a real 'de-centering' of the cultural authority of Europe, this does not have to be the case. Concepts such as 'multi-culturalism' and 'imperialism' should not be over-generalised. Kahn points out that to unproblematically label such discourses as 'imperial' is 'to so generalise the concept of empire as to

the ways in which the festival was marketed to the public, how it was written about in the media, how it was presented to funders and sponsors, and the framework within which it was planned and evaluated within the organisation itself.

Firstly, there was a way of understanding the art-forms as spectacle, as art practices which the audience were privileged to see. Artists provided 'unparalleled opportunities', coming to Europe 'for the first time'. This discourse culminated in the presentation of a group of dancers and musicians from the Murong tribe, who had never performed outside their region, which was inaccessible by road until a year ago. One media commentator wrote,

(the Murong are)... one of the smallest and most remote tribes whose womenfolk still work the fields bare-breasted. They rarely leave the Hill Tracks (sic)- some have never visited Chittergong (sic). It would make a wonderful documentary to track their arrival into Heathrow and on into the metropolis (Louis Machrel, *What's On*, July 7 1997).

Such a way of understanding this group clearly plays into our fascination with 'first contact' narratives of the 'savage' meeting the 'civilised'. Michael Taussig (1993) analyses the thrill we experience in watching our culture re-encountered, in a paradigm which maintains cross-cultural encounters within the most simplistic and regressive stereotypes.⁶

A second strand under which the Bangladeshi art practices were presented, linked to this one, was within particular understandings of 'authenticity' and 'tradition'. Art forms are almost invariably understood to speak of Bangladeshi culture and history, rather than individual artistic expression. Tradition is at times presented within a 'salvage' paradigm of a 'dying' culture, discussed by James Clifford in his essay 'On ethnographic allegory' (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). For example, an exhibition of traditional scroll paintings is presented by informing us that

Since at least 200BC, these beautifully illuminated cloth scrolls have been used by Bengali patua or storytellers to illustrate traditional Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist stories... Shambhu Acharya's family have been painting scrolls for nine generations and he is the last custodian of this exquisite art.

Many, particularly visual, artists working outside Europe have fought back against their presentation as representative of traditions and cultural authenticity, whilst European artists are able to cross cultural boundaries and be understood as artistic individuals (Rasheed Araeen in Fisher, 1994). Such a way of seeing is itself a construct of a

⁶ There were political reasons why it may have been important to present the culture of the Chittagong Hill Tracts tribes within the festival (see discussion below in 'Identity' section), yet the dependency of the festival on support and funding from the Bangladesh government and powerful corporations meant that there was not space within it to explore this political issue explicitly.

explain everything and nothing at the same time' (1995: 133). I would argue for a more subtle analysis of these discourses, which understands the complexity of terms like 'authority' 'oppression' and 'imperialism'. We need to be aware of the different contexts and conditions of reception of representations of the 'other', and to realise that there may be more than one version of 'multiculturalism'.⁴

Presenting Bangladesh

The presentation of art-forms from Bangladesh which made up the festival did not amount to a coherent political or cultural statement. Indeed, to suggest that it was taking part in a systematic project to oppress and contain ethnic diversity would be to endow it with too much authority and control over its material. The shape of the project was contingent on a variety of practical, financial and institutional pressures, and the arts presented included tribal dancers, Sufi mystical songs, the Asian Dub Foundation, the textiles of Bangladeshi village women, fairground storytellers, and contemporary 'alternative' cinema. Each of these acquired meaning within different ways of promoting and appreciating art practices. With this in mind, however, it is possible to draw out several discourses within which the 'culture' of Bangladesh was represented.⁵ These discourses worked across, and as part of,

⁴ See Terry Turner, for example, (1992) for discussion of 'difference' versus 'critical' multiculturalism.

⁵ It is worth noting that multi-culturalism tends to interpret 'culture' as 'high cultural' art forms, as Turner (1992) points out.

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particular European way of understanding art, which, position artists outside social and historical contexts. A festival such as this will, by its very nature, position artists as cultural representatives rather than individual performers. The project then becomes caught up in the questions of 'what is Bangladesh' and the attendant difficulties in claiming to speak for a culture.

Indeed, the organisers of the festival did realise that the project of 'representing' another culture is as much about previous representations as it is about being 'true to the object'. Certain strands of the festival began with a consideration of current understandings of Bangladesh amongst a white British audience. For example, the 'Food Festival' is introduced in the programme by telling us that 'Not many people realise that over 85% of so-called 'Indian' restaurants in the UK are owned, run and staffed by people of Bangladeshi descent.' The photographic exhibition on the theme of water attempted to demonstrate the ways in which 'Water supports the way of life of the entire nation... and has been the inspiration for artists, poets and musicians'. This was presented as a counterpoint to the mass media who 'constantly portray Bangladesh as a country of cyclones, floods and famine. They emphasise how water plays havoc with people's lives'. When I spoke to Bengali people who had been involved in the festival, they emphasised these aspects of it as particularly positive or successful. However, these projects spoke very specifically to a white British audience who had little prior

2.3 Ways of seeing community arts

Theoretical approaches

Unlike discourses on 'multiculturalism' there is little theoretical writing on the representational problems involved in the cultural practices gathered under the term 'community arts'. I am going to suggest three ways of framing these practices; within the context of social work with the urban poor, within recent urban 'regeneration' initiatives, and within the history and reactions to, the conventional visual arts world.

Firstly, community arts are part of a line of state-funded measures for dealing with social deprivation and fragmentation, and indeed have a long tradition as one kind of measure provided to deal with the 'problem' of East London. In this way, community arts always becomes an issue of an encounter with 'the other'; the urban poor, as well as with the culture of ethnic minorities in this case.⁸ However, there has been a tendency to erase this gap in culture and to see the artists as 'the vehicle for the unmediated expressivity on the part of a given community' (Kestner, 1995: 6). Grant Kestner draws a direct comparison between the histories and discourses of social reform of the poor and the discourses of community art, and argues that we should see both as equally problematic:

⁸ Indeed, there has been an historical relationship between anthropology and attitudes to domestic social deprivation, as ways of encountering 'otherness'. Deborah Epstein Nord (1987) draws out the use of the trope of anthropology by nineteenth century social commentators in East London.

The position of attempting to represent the culture of a 'developing' culture therefore involved the festival producers in a series of political and ethical questions, which I shall explore in more detail in the 'Keywords' section. Simply to dismiss the festival as multiculturalism which 'obscures the ways in which aesthetic representation is not an analogue for the material positions, means, or resources of those populations' (Lowe 1996; 86), is too simplistic. Aesthetics are political, and Bengalis complained because they saw the festival as representing their country as too poor, not too rich. If the organisers had taken up the challenge of representing Bangladeshis as oppressed and marginalised, the Bengali community may have been even more alienated. The problems with the festival is that it did not fully recognise its position as a political project, and subsequently tried to do too many things for too many audiences. I believe that a better approach would have been to begin with a well-defined representational project, that acknowledged its own contingency, for a well-defined audience.

knowledge of Bangladesh. Perhaps the problems with representation for Arts Worldwide came from the fact that they also attempted to represent Bangladesh for Bangladeshi people.

Politics and power

The above example highlights the ways in which 'representing otherness' always involves taking up a political position. However, I want to stress that this is more complex than simply taking up an 'imperial' position of authority in relation to a disempowered minority. In many ways the festival organisers were disempowered in their lack of knowledge of Bangladeshi culture and the subsequent difficulties this put them in. For example, there were some complaints about the publicity material, as not portraying a 'positive image' of Bangladesh. I was told that this was because the images focused on rural, village culture rather than more sophisticated 'high' city culture or on beautiful national monuments or landscapes. It is certainly possible to accuse the festival organisers of cultural insensitivity here. However, if you accept the premise of the project, the organisers were always going to present 'their version' of Bangladesh. This notion should have been understood by both sides in such disputes. The organisers had a duty to understand Bangladeshi culture, but perhaps not necessarily to make the festival a vehicle for Bengali nationalism.⁷

⁷ I discuss such divisions in the 'Bangladeshi community' in more detail in the 'Community' section, right.

... both the artist and the social worker share a belief in the universality of the discourses that they deploy in their work with the community... Within this dynamic the reform subject (the 'poor', the 'homeless', etc), are understood as a kind of resource or raw material to be transformed. Community art is typically centered around an exchange between an 'artist' (who is understood to be 'empowered', creatively, intellectually, symbolically, expressively, financially, institutionally or otherwise), and a given subject who is defined a priori as 'in need of' empowerment, access to creative/expressive skills...(6)

I would not wish to suggest that all community development work is unethical because it involves unequal power relationships between cultures. However, community artists do need to understand this dynamic and question what versions of 'otherness' they are contributing to.

Alongside essentially liberal discourses around social work with deprived communities, urban poverty has also come to thought about within a framework of 'regeneration'. This has been described by Jon Bird (in Bird et al, 1993) as an ideology which whilst

represented as a natural process of decay, death and rebirth... masks the economic and social relations that characteristically determine a history of neighbourhood decline and abandonment, followed by rediscovery and gentrification (123).

Finally I want to signal something of the relationship between community arts practices and 'mainstream' art worlds. It is important to see the discourses of community arts as emerging out of a particular historical moment in the Western visual arts academies. As one community arts worker told me, 'Community arts as a term only makes sense when one sees it within the context of contemporary Western society. If you went to India and started talking about 'community arts' it wouldn't mean anything.' Dewdney and Lister (1988) describe how a generation of art school graduates in the late 60s emerged who were committed to breaking down some of the mystique surrounding arts practices, and indeed of using art to affect social change, although exactly how this was going to be achieved remained 'theoretically unclear' (2). Braden (1978) describes how 'they saw their departure from the petty concerns of the painting studios as an escape from authoritarian limitations on their creativity' (156).

The community projects and theory

Our projects were certainly presented as solutions to problems of urban poverty. Funding proposals began with a list of deprivation statistics for the Bengali community of Tower Hamlets. Contact with professional arts practitioners was seen as 'raising aspirations', 'developing potential for self-expression and creativity', 'giving participants a chance to speak out'. However, I saw myself as very aware of the theoretical problems involved in claiming to give voice to other cultures.

Although we constructed Bengali young people as having an 'urgent' need to speak out', it was very difficult to find participants who would put in sustained commitment. Whilst visiting youth clubs to try to recruit for the photography project, I ended up 'selling' it on the promise of free photographs and certificates. Furthermore, although I had begun imagining that the representations which emerged from the project would be very much under the control of the young people, this proved problematic. There were a huge number of curatorial decisions, and it became impossible to consult the participants at each stage. In the end, we used images to create large-scale photo-collages, a decision which one of the photographers viewed as unethical, given that the images had been created in single-image format. Furthermore, although we used hundreds of the images in the various exhibitions, many still had to be excluded because of constraints of space and funding and the need for coherence. One of the groups was very upset about not having enough of their images used, and told us that the youth club would never again take part in a 'so-called community arts project.'

I do not believe that more understanding of 'the politics of representation' would have helped us with these problems, although it might have been better to have developed the project around the needs of an existing group. Rather I think we should have been clearer about the limits of the authority of each 'stake-holder' in the project from the beginning. I came to see that some moments of 'representational violence' were inevitable, and it would have been better to have been clearer about this.

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However, questions about who the projects were for, and within whose discourses their products were presented, were always present. I became increasingly aware that the understandings of photography for the young people we were working with were very different from those held by the artists. Photographs were often valued by the participants because they depicted certain friends or family or triggered personal associations or feelings. However, in curating, the images began to move within an entirely different discourse. Where groups of participants were able to see their own work within the understandings held by the photographers, it was because of experience of previous projects. One of the photographers who was leading workshops (who had previously been involved in community photography projects as a participant) told me;

Don't worry... the kids around here won't give you any trouble – they're used to these projects. They know what's expected of them. Most summers when you're hanging out there's someone with a camera taking pictures for a community photography project.

This suggests that successful projects are seen as those where the young people learn to 'fit in' to the artists' or organiser's agendas.

Indeed, for at least the media project and the music project, a certain view of British Asian youth culture was being promoted. Through the choice of mediums, and the kind of content which was anticipated, the

projects were aiming to explore 'hybrid' and 'fusion' forms of youth culture and to celebrate these dynamics. The projects therefore run the risk of playing into recent attempts to 're-brand' British-Asian identity.⁹

Indeed, the festival organisers received 'regeneration' money from agencies which funded it to 'raise the profile' of the 'Banglatown' area. Recent regeneration initiatives have attempted to promote Brick Lane as a 'cultural quarter' which effectively sells Bengali culture as an object of consumption. Allen Miller, who runs the Vibe Bar, which has been at the centre of the changing culture of Brick Lane, explains that, 'although the area was almost undesirable, quite run down... we were drawn to the ethnic context of Brick Lane. We felt we had the perfect recipe to create a Bohemian quarter, something that people feel part of' (quoted in Aschkenasy, 1999: 27).

Young Bengali people I worked with were offended by the notion of 'Asian cool' now associated with the area. As one of them told me 'it's like someone who's never liked you suddenly saying you're cool and they want to be your friend – when in fact you're doing what you've always done'. Indeed, the cultural cache of Brick Lane as an area of 'ethnic diversity' has brought a wave of 'trendy' new artistic activity to the area, such as web-designers, and furniture makers.

⁹ I discuss the complexity of British-Asian youth identities in relation to this project in the 'identity' section, right.

Such an influx, whilst 'raising the profile' of the area, has also pushed up property prices and not effectively engaged with the existing culture of the Bangladeshi population. Sharon Zukin (1982) has explored the ironies and pitfalls of the 'gentrification' of the inner city.

The initial proposals for the community projects gave as one of their objectives:

To make a positive contribution to raising the public and Media profile of the Bangladeshi communities in London and the rest of the UK, and to raise public awareness through arts activity about the cultural identity of Bangladeshis who have settled here, and those born in the UK.

There were undoubted successes in these projects, where young people were able to feel part of something exciting and dynamic. However, if we are to think about 'community arts' theoretically, we need to think about the role that such projects have in mediating between cultural groups, instead of privileging process over product. This does not mean becoming paralysed by theory. However, it does mean considering the existing discourses within which groups are thought about, and maybe using such projects to challenge them.¹⁰

¹⁰ Our most successful group of young people was a group of young women who began by thinking about the misconceptions and stereotypes that exist about Bengali women.

2.4 Ethnicity in the gallery

Concurrently with the Bangladesh Festival, the Whitechapel Art Gallery presented a programme of 'British Asian cultural provocation'. The stated aim of this project in its outline plans was to represent second and third generation British Asian artists, at a time when British Asian cultural activity is widely recognised as cutting edge... This generation have already made its mark on contemporary culture... (this programme) will reflect what that is about.

The gallery also stressed its geographical position 'in the most diverse population in London, including the largest Bangladeshi population in the UK', and aimed for the project to engage with this population, both through exhibiting local artists and attracting local audiences.

Politics of representation in the gallery

The programme at the Whitechapel Art Gallery attempted to carve out a quite different representational space for itself than either the main Bangladesh Festival or its community arts projects. This is the project which displayed the most critical awareness of contemporary cultural theory around ethnicity and representation. The project was therefore conceived as an 'Anglo-Asian cultural fusion', which would 'focus on contemporary cultural fusion and hybrid experimentation, reflecting the complexities of plural identities and interests'.

16 Perilous Ideas: anthropological debates in cross-cultural arts projects

Such language reveals that the project had taken on board criticisms such as Nikos Papastergiadis' remarks on arts policies which 'confine black artistic practice to narrow notions of community or as an exemplification of static forms of tradition' (1998, 125), which could be applied to the Bangladesh projects. Indeed, it reflects the concerns of a generation of black and ethnic minority artists in the UK, who felt that their ethnic identity ghettoised and characterised their art within a series of assumptions. As Fanon wrote, 'the colonial subject has always been overdetermined from without' (quoted in Papastergiadis, 1998: 48). Accordingly, there was no attempt made to categorise these artists in terms of what being Asian and British might mean for their art. The emphasis was on fluidity, syncretism, and the ability of these artists to cross cultural boundaries, a reversal of assumptions that 'only Western artists could lay claim to universal aesthetic values and find global appeal... while the Western artist could freely move across borders, the passage of non-Western artists was more problematic' (Papastergiadis, 1998: 118).

Beyond these general issues affecting the representation of 'ethnic minority' art forms, the Whitechapel also had to negotiate issues specifically affecting representation, ethnicity and identity in the context of a 'high art' gallery. This is essentially a problem of recognition and access to representation within a discursive space which remains inaccessible to large sectors of the population. Anthropological discourse has had to consider

this issue,¹¹ yet perhaps not quite so urgently, as academia remains so inaccessible to the general population that subjects are very unlikely to have access to debates over their representation. Art works, however, open themselves up to more immediate (and often emotive) reactions.

Indeed, the Whitechapel had run into problems with previous attempts to represent ethnicity, particular in relation to the issue of 'engaging with the local population'. In 1992, the gallery hosted a site-specific work 'about' the local Bangladeshi community, made by Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar, entitled 'One or Two Things I Know About Them' (see Kestner 1995). Part of the installation was a series of photos of young Bangladeshi women which were then 'captioned' with racist and sexist descriptions of Bangladeshi women workers taken from an East Indian factory owner. The women themselves objected to the use of their images in this way, and after a long series of exchanges between the women, Jaar and the gallery staff, the images were eventually removed.

¹¹ Renato Rosaldo (1993: ix) begins a discussion of this theme with a quote from Adrienne Rich, 'When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.'

New ethnicities?

The discourses and contexts of the exhibition therefore sought to avoid some of the pitfalls of previous projects by the use of terms such as 'hybrid', 'fusion' and 'plural' as inclusive and non-essentialising ways to frame the representation of ethnicity. However, the framework of 'hybridity' and 'fusion' could not mask the fact that the exhibition was brought together under the sign of an ethnic identity. The fact that the curators then refused to use the space as a chance to say anything definitive about young British-Asian artists meant that such a bringing-together became somewhat meaningless, as was indeed actively intended. Yet its existence did offend and discourage a number of artists from taking part, as I learnt from speaking to Asian artists I came into contact with. Simon Tegala, who did eventually exhibit, said in an interview with the *Sunday Times*

When the Whitechapel first approached me I thought, 'Hello, this is dodgy territory', – mainly because the reason for being invited was not specifically down to my work but because of my cultural background... I don't really address issues of identity in that sense in my work. I don't want to be labelled as an Asian artist. I want to be labelled as an artist who happens to be Asian. (Marsh 1999)

Indeed very few of the static installations in the exhibition made explicit references to Asian identity. Given the auspices of the project, it might have made more sense to commission artists to work collaboratively on this theme, thus engaging more firmly with the issues inevitably being raised. Where questions of identity were signaled, these worked in a playful 'post-modern' way which did not really bring them into accessible discourse.¹² Larger questions of the political, historical and economic context of the South Asian presence in Britain were left unexamined. Obviously the curators felt trapped in a position whereby they did not want to label all Asian artists as bearing the 'burden of representation' for their political location, but as Ashwani Sharma pointed out, commenting on the project, its framework ended up advocating an 'art for art's sake' approach to culture, denying links with the social.¹³

¹² See for example Runa Islam's 'Exile', which wittily 'recorded' Exit signs in the gallery.

¹³ Sharma made these remarks during a debate at the exhibition. 'Hybridity talk' has been widely criticised for ignoring questions of politics and power in ethnicity. For example, Nicholas Thomas argues that this discourse allows critics to 'display their own capacity for acknowledging cultural difference whilst refraining from engaging with stories that emerge from elsewhere' (quoted in MacClancey 1997: 15).

Given that the (unspoken) justification for the project was presumably that Asian artists are not given enough showcases for their talent, at least this fact should have been highlighted in the discourses surrounding the project. As Stuart Hall in his essay 'New Ethnicities' (1989) suggests, we may still need to essentialise identities in certain contexts. As it was, the Whitechapel's presentation of the art suggested that there was no pressing reason for putting on the show, other than the fact that British Asian artists are currently seen as 'cutting edge'

and 'cool'. As one of the exhibiting artists told me, 'I couldn't afford to turn down the chance to exhibit at the Whitechapel because of its prestige, but I am worried about being associated with the idea of 'Asian cool'. If you go up with that movement, you'll go down with it as well'. An angry review of Jaar's exhibition (Chambers, 1992), suggests that his work asks us to look at 'this seasons coloureds', and the presentation of young British Asian artists risks falling into the same trap.

3 Keywords

The previous section has sketched out ways of thinking about and representing other cultures which were operational in these arts projects, and some of the issues these raised. Such analysis is intended to serve as a background against which to understand the more specific pitfalls and problems of the projects themselves, through an examination of central 'keywords' or concepts. In doing this I will draw on all three projects in an eclectic way. I also hope that this analysis will give a sense of how the Bengali community in London construct themselves, how their understandings of 'community', 'identity' and 'locality' are lived and experienced. However, I should point out the limited nature of my own understandings of this, and offer suggestions only as a way of disrupting some of the more crass understandings within dominant discourses.

3.1 Community

The end of community?

Community has come to be a keyword in contemporary life not because we all live in one but because most of us do not.
— Kobena Mercer 1995: 12

'Community' is one of the most symbolically and politically charged terms in contemporary life, across a range of discourses. Anthropology as a discipline has had a vested interest in the notion of self-contained, geographically bounded communities, places where the ethnographer can physically go and study a people, the 'among the so-and-so'

paradigm. However, it has also become one of the clichés of contemporary cultural theory to argue that community (and locality) as properties of social life have come under siege in the modern and post-modern eras.¹⁴ A writer like Sharon Zukin (1993) suggests that new global movements of capital, technology and information have fundamentally altered the ways in which people and places are connected. Within such a schema, 'community' as it has been conventionally understood, no longer exists.

Anthropologists and cultural theorists have therefore looked for new paradigms to describe the ways in which people are still brought together around shared identities. Paul Gilroy (1993) has suggested the notion of 'diaspora' to describe Afro-Caribbean 'communities' which move across continents, connected through cultural forms and political solidarity. A recent exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery entitled 'MayDay' (1999) examined trans-national 'communities of interest' around simulated images and technology. The Whitechapel exhibition draws on such cultural theory, by suggesting that the South Asian presence in Britain can be viewed as forming one huge, incoherent, transnational 'community', which brings together its medley of artists, singers, writers, film-makers, musicians, and photographers. The programme presents artists 'who source multiple cultural facets without being preoccupied by their ancestral

¹⁴ See, for example, discussions in Gupta and Ferguson (1997).

origins.¹⁵ However, apart from challenging preconceptions, it is unclear what does hold such a 'diasporic community' together. Indeed, hostile reactions to the exhibition from local Bangladeshis, who felt marginalised in its content, suggest that coherent 'communities' do still exist, but such a project chose to ignore them.

Bangladesh Festival and 'community'

The Bangladesh Festival committed itself to working closely with the local 'Bengali community' in the production of both its community arts events and the mainstream arts programme. However, the political complexity of this task was not fully appreciated. Throughout the production of the festival several different understandings of the term were used, none of which seemed to fit in with the understandings held by Bengali people themselves.

Grant Kestner (1995) argues that the 'community' in 'community arts' means precisely the opposite of a politically or geographically coherent community. Rather, he argues, the term refers only to subjects 'defined by difference from a white-middle-class norm... socially isolated individuals... within this dynamic the artist attempts to literally 'create' a community consciousness out of the atomized social detritus of late capitalism' (6). Those individuals chosen as beneficiaries of the 'community' projects were in no sense representative of the Bengali community as a whole. The focus was on young people and children, bringing groups of people together who would not

necessarily have interacted otherwise. For example, white schoolchildren also took part in the 'Bangladeshi' community musical, although there were objections from some white parents initially.

The festival organisers were working essentially outside of the power structures around which the Tower Hamlets Bengali community imagined itself, and they could not have been said to have been working 'with' the community. This was certainly how their position was perceived by many Bengalis. During the festival the organisers ran into a lot of difficulties with 'the community', sometimes in a surprising reversal of the power relationships that one might have expected.

Although the process of community consultation and outreach work had begun almost two and a half years before the festival took place, there was still a failure to understand that the Bengali community in East London did have a certain coherence, with power centred around key individuals, including businessmen, local politicians, and 'cultural activists'. They formed a powerful network which could mobilise opinion in the rest of the community. In effect these individuals presented themselves, and were perceived by other Bengalis as 'the community'. Relations between this group and the festival organisers deteriorated

¹⁵ Baumann (1996) suggests that an 'all-Asian' culture may be a welcome concept when it 'promises a sometimes political unity and the forging of comprehensive community convergence' (12).

rapidly in the months leading up to the festival. Around four months before the festival producers organised a series of 'community liaison' meetings because of a perceived lack of communication with these individuals. These became extremely confrontational meetings where Arts Worldwide were accused of excluding the community from decision-making, not giving the community the economic and employment benefits which arose from the project, yet crucially, of raising money in the name of the community which amounted to exploitation. Around this time hostile articles began to appear in the Bengali press, and there were threats of a mass boycott of festival events.

The festival organisers did then make a number of concessions to various demands and a series of 'advisory groups' were formed to meet on an ongoing basis to discuss aspects of the project, mostly around the main festival programme rather than the community arts events. These did diffuse tensions for a time and resulted in some constructive collaborations over various aspects of the festival. However, the balance of power between the organisers and the capacities of these groups was always an issue. As the festival got under way the relationship again broke down, resulting in the withdrawal of support of 'the community' from various aspects of the project, and even in one case the boycott and disruption of an event. Again, the central problem was a perceived exclusion from the decision-making process, centering

on the selection and treatment of artists from Bangladesh.¹⁶

The project then found itself in the position of being, at least on one level, a 'community' project which was having to actively battle against 'the community' in order to achieve what it wanted to do. 'The community' came to be viewed by the organisers as an obstructive and powerful entity which had to be 'consulted' because of the difficulties they were capable of causing and did cause. Their power and indeed intelligence had certainly been underestimated. I felt that 'the community' had an extremely good grasp of the kinds of power relations which came into play in the meeting between a white middle-class arts organisation and an ethnic minority, and were able to mobilise these issues to their advantage. The festival organisers were accused of insidious imperialist and racist attitudes in their treatment of the community, in analyses which mirrored the criticisms of recent cultural theorists.

¹⁶ Furthermore, through inviting the Bangladeshi Prime Minister to the opening, the festival organisers became implicated in the internal politics of the community, in divisions between those who supported the present political regime in Bangladesh and those who opposed it.

Imagining the Bengali community

Terry Turner argues that one of the problems with 'multiculturalism' is that it 'risks over-emphasising the internal homogeneity of cultures in terms that potentially legitimize repressive demands for communal conformity' (1992: 407). Baumann (1996) similarly argues that the 'dominant discourse' around ethnic minority groups in this country constructs them as 'communities' in an unproblematic way. The Bangladesh Festival organisers had certainly not understood the complex dynamics of the Bengali community in London and the fact that aiming to represent their culture would mean becoming caught up in these dynamics.

Bangladesh became an independent nation following the war of independence in 1971, and this war and the role of 'culture' (eg poetry, music, and crucially the Bengali language itself) within this war was still discussed on an ongoing basis by people I spoke to. Many of the 'elders', key members of the Bengali community, had played important roles in the independence movement and in actively promoting Bengali culture. I was told that it was partly ongoing respect for these figures that gave 'the community' its coherence in certain times and spaces. It also made the whole issue of 'representing Bangladeshi culture' extremely politically sensitive and problematic.

Of course, the middle-aged and older men who represented themselves as 'the community' were only one sector of the people of Bangladeshi origin who lived in Tower Hamlets. In this the festival organisers faced a classic anthropological 'methodological' problem, in that those who come forward to represent a community are those with the most power. I became aware of internal divisions and contests within 'the community'. One young Bengali woman told me 'Some people think they know who the community is but they don't. They just have their own agenda. They ignore people like young girls and elderly women.'

Such issues arose whilst putting together our photography exhibitions, when certain images were effectively 'censored' by youth workers, photographers or the young people themselves as being too 'controversial'. To an extent, such issues would have arisen over any representation of youth culture, with its various forms of 'transgressive' behaviour. However, the discussions we had over the photographic representation of older people (seen as disrespectful), of drug-taking and graffiti, signaled to me some of the conformative pressures which the young people were under. On a different note, I also became aware of class divisions within 'the community'. One artist spoke to me of the gulf in 'culture' between the educated middle-class Bengalis from Dhaka and the rural Sylheti culture which most of the Bangladeshis in London came from. Indeed, I became aware of a certain level of prejudice in operation here.

'The community' whom the festival

ultimately failed to collaborate with, were a powerful, mostly male lobby, protective of Bangladeshi culture and often commercially minded. A lot of the disputes between the festival organisers and the community focused on money. For example, the fact that a Bengali printer had not been used to print publicity became a racial issue, which essentially revolved around the business interests of one particular Bengali printer. The organisers seemed to have held the naive view that 'the community' would be grateful for what they were offered, and failed to understand the interests and culture of the Bengalis in Tower Hamlets. A better approach for them would have been to see all communities as 'communities of interest', and from there decided which communities they actually wanted to work with. In my view, their interests and approach were always going to be essentially irreconcilable with those of the 'Bengali community'.

3.2 Identity

Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western or Oriental
– Said, 1993, quoted in Back, 1996: 251

Notions and understandings of the term 'community' are intimately linked with the term 'identity'. Many of the issues and tensions around working with the Bengali community arose through certain understandings of 'Bangladeshi identity', as constructed by both the arts organisations and by the community themselves. This section attempts to draw out some of the questions at stake.

Tradition and culture in the diaspora

In bringing artists from Bangladesh to a diasporic community, the festival underestimated the difficult position they were putting themselves in, 'bringing' a culture to those who had emigrated. They perhaps assumed that the Bengalis in this country would not have retained such a clear sense of ownership over Bangladeshi culture. In fact, the Bengalis I got to know had very strong links with 'home', visiting Bangladesh regularly for extended periods and saving money to send to relatives. Their relationship with Bangladesh seemed fundamental to their ongoing identities, or at least a certain version of 'Bangladesh' as experienced in the diaspora.

I have already mentioned the importance of Bengali cultural forms in Bangladesh identity. However, they perhaps have a special place in the life of a diasporic community. Giddens argues, 'Tradition is a means of handling time and space, which inserts any activity or experience within the continuity of past, present and future' (quoted in Papastergiadis 1998: 10). However, the relationship between the community here and Bangladeshi culture was perhaps not fully considered in the choice of artists that were brought over from Bangladesh. Subsequently the choice of art forms and artists attracted criticism, and the festival organisers were accused of a lack of 'consultation' with the community here. Rather than being grateful for having their culture 'brought' to them, some people I spoke to were offended by this notion.

Indeed, if anthropologists (and arts presenters) are often accused of representing cultures as 'closed, static' traditions, it is sometimes forgotten that cultures can be kept to represent themselves in exactly these ways.¹⁷ For example, the presentation of the 'Murong' tribal group of dancers and singers was a mistake, I was told by one young Bengali woman, because this was not 'Bangladeshi culture'. Similarly, banners based on rickshaw designs were seen as 'too Hindu' in their depiction of animals. This last point also points towards an increasingly important aspect of cultural identity for the Bengali community in London, Islamic religion. This is a huge and complex subject in itself. However, what I did learn of the movement

towards more fundamentalist versions of Islam within the community fitted in with Manuel Castells' (1997) analysis of communities enacting 'an exclusion of the excluders by the excluded'. Such a community, where, some 'shoring up' of cultural identities was taking place, was perhaps never going to welcome a middle-class white organisation attempting to represent their culture.

Post-colonial identities and diaspora

Young people living in Southgate are creating cultures that are neither simply black nor simply white. These synthetic cultures promote inter-racial harmony while celebrating diversity; they defy the logic of the new racism and result in volatile cultural forms that can be simultaneously black and white.

– Back, 1996: 159

Cultural theory around notions of 'fusion' and 'hybridity' in relation to cultural identity has found its way into arts practices, clearly in a project like the Whitechapel exhibition, but also into community projects like the photography and film project which I was co-ordinating. The theme of our project was 'identity', and the young people who were participating in the project were asked to take photos, both in workshop situations and in their free time, which would illustrate

¹⁷ Rothschild (quoted in Baumann 1996), argues that 'ethnopolitics' or the political mobilisation of ethnicity, 'stresses, ideologizes, reifies, modifies and sometimes virtually re-creates the putatively distinctive and unique cultural heritages of the ethnic groups that it mobilizes' (12).

this theme for a series of exhibitions and installations. The initial proposals for the project suggested that the images should be used as a way of revealing the changing and dynamic culture of young Bengalis, celebrating notions such as hybridity and mixing cultures. This theme seemed to draw broadly on theories such as Stuart Hall's 'cultures of hybridity' (quoted in Gillespie, 1995: 19), or ethnographic analysis such as the work of Les Back (1996).

However, as my experiences of the Bengali community taught me, not all ethnic minority groups in this country are mixing cultures in liberating and celebratory ways. Many people I met in the Bangladeshi community did not appear to be interested in mixing their culture with 'British' culture, and were concerned with safe-guarding their identities against a perceived somewhat chaotic 'white' culture. Most of the young Bengalis I met had very little contact with white British people, outside of formal settings like education. Whilst working with young Bengali women we discussed issues around lifestyle, sexuality, boyfriends etc, and I became aware of the extent to which we were living in two very different cultures between which there was very little dialogue.

Of course, these young people were not growing up as they would have done in Bangladesh, and some of our photographic images did show ways in which they took on aspects of British youth culture. There was a repeated focus on trainers and designer clothes, and some of the gangs of

young men had taken on a kind of 'LA street-gang' style. There was also clearly an interest in mixing Bengali and Western pop music, in a literal rendering of this concept. However, beyond the aesthetics of someone wearing Nike trainers with a sari, this notion of mixing did not seem to me to reveal the central concerns in these young people's lives. Looking through all the images I felt that some of the young people had limited lives¹⁸ where there may have been little to celebrate. With the images which came from working with groups of young men, there was a sense of endless hours spent hanging around with the same groups of people, sitting in the corridors and on the stairwells of their estates. I felt that many of them did not have very wide horizons or aspirations, staying in their immediate vicinities.

It is important not to overlook the fact that these are also just young people, at difficult ages, living in the most deprived borough in London. However, it may be that their position of living out a particular version of Bangladeshi culture in Britain can create problems, although the 'between two cultures' paradigm has now been widely discredited in academic discourse (see Gillespie 1995). In the initial research for our community projects, some youth workers did speak of their cultural background in problematic terms.

¹⁸ See Dewdney & Lister (1998) for discussion of the role photography can play in the lives of such young people.

The young people have emerged into their own culture which is the mixture of western and eastern lifestyles, this lacks any strong direction and positive influences... in the case of young Bangladeshi girls these issues are far more confusing, as the ideal of the 'traditional Bangladeshi woman' is imposed on the girl from an early age, long before they have even started to contemplate and answer these questions for themselves.

Indeed, my experiences suggested to me that the playful, post-modern diasporic identities suggested in an exhibition like the Whitechapel one, were only available to those who were in a social and economic position that effectively allowed them to move across cultures and play with notions of cultural identity. The exhibition was intended for a middle-class audience, one which had the luxury of intellectual reflection on its own situation. This was brought out particularly in controversy surrounding a series of photo graphs which supposedly 'reclaimed' the swastika as a Hindu symbol. The Observer ran a story on these images, with the headline

'Sign of the times'
Swastikas are reappearing in Tower Hamlets – but not as a sign of skinhead hatred. Instead, the Asian community has reappropriated its ancient symbol of peace

The Observer, 11 July 1999

In fact, these photos had absolutely no connection with the so-called 'Asian community' in Tower Hamlets, taken by a single fashion photographer of South Indian descent. Inevitably, they caused a certain amount of controversy and upset, which the photographer was pleased about, creating as it did a certain 'publicity buzz' around the exhibition. This incident suggested to me that post-modern fluid identities are not very relevant if you are actually living in the reality of racial fear in a fairly confined community.

In the last two sections I have tried to signal the complexities of the 'community' and 'identity' of Bengali people in Tower Hamlets. My suggestions should certainly not be read as holding any definitive explanatory power, for subjects which demand detailed ethnographic studies in themselves. However, I have tried to show some of the deficiencies in the understandings of these terms held by the arts organisations. These understandings are not helped by the crude and simplistic definitions used in dominant discourses, which academia does little to counter.

3.3 Locality

The projects which I have discussed were, on one level, engagements with vast geographic entities, Bangladesh and the whole South Asian-British diaspora. However, they were also both engagements with a very specific and localised entity, the East end of London and the Bengali population there. I am going to end this essay with a consideration of the uses and understandings of space at work in these projects, because I believe that they suggested some positive and successful directions for such work.

Territory and locality in the East end

Just as I have argued that 'post-modern' theories of 'community' and 'identity' may not be relevant when considering the Bengali population of Tower Hamlets, so their relationship with their immediate surroundings may be more stable than some recent writing might suggest.¹⁹ This is partly a socio-economic issue. I felt that the lack of 'cultural mobility' enjoyed by some young Bengalis that I met translated into a literal lack of geographical mobility, meaning, for example, that they might not consider looking for work outside the borough.

As became clear from the photographs which arose from our project, many of the gangs of young men in the area had very clearly demarcated territories. Youth clubs could be the focus for this, as one youth worker commented,

The young people in Tower Hamlets lack the important contact activities with other people in the community, therefore they are very protective and territorial over their youth club or worker

Such understandings of locality, amongst young people but also other sections of the population, were highly racialised. Brick Lane itself played an extremely important symbolic role in the construction of community, as the visible representation of the Bengali presence, both for itself and for those outside the community. The young Bengalis I met often spoke about 'being seen' on Brick Lane as a way of displaying relationships, ways of behaving or dressing for the rest of the community, and this did impose some normative pressures. For example, I heard young people being reprimanded for having been seen behaving 'inappropriately' on Brick Lane. Whilst white people were always in evidence as consumers in the restaurants, this was basically seen as Bengali territory. One young Bengali who had volunteered at a poetry evening as part of the Festival was appalled that there were translations into English of the poetry being read. He wrote an angry letter, including the line 'BRICK LANE IS NOT A PLACE FOR READING POETRY IN ENGLISH!'

¹⁹ See, for example, Auge (1995).

However, this sense of territory and ownership was always fragile and threatened, which was probably why I encountered defensive attitudes. Buildings and places which were perceived as 'white' were avoided by the community, such as the Whitechapel Arts Gallery. During the year when I was working around the area I felt that Brick Lane was becoming more and more encroached on by the new artists studios and small businesses at the Bethnal Green end of Brick Lane. Trumans Brewery bridge was an important symbolic marker in this sense; crossing underneath it the 'culture' changed immediately, from Bengalis in Islamic dress to artists in designer trainers with courier bags. However, when I asked one friend how she felt about this, she told me that this barrier had always been perceived there, as the area above the bridge had formerly been a run-down market area with an active BNP office, signaling the ways in which urban spaces can become important sites of memory and personal histories.

Arts projects and uses of space

Although the arts projects certainly did not take on the full complexity of such uses and understandings of space, I felt that this was what gave all the projects their biggest successes. Despite points of contention (like the complaints about reading poetry in English), the projects also displayed an ability to use space in creative ways.

The Whitechapel project set out to engage with the local South Asian population, which in its content it certainly did not do effectively. However, it did understand that art galleries normally create static spaces which are inaccessible and closed to large sections of the population. Accordingly, the gallery space was used in new and surprising ways for the duration of the exhibition. For example, the lower gallery had art works only on its walls, with the rest of the space used for a changing programme of live events, including club nights, a fashion show, debates, talks and demonstrations. The gallery was thus open at night as well as during the day, and its shifting functions over the course of the four weeks opened up debates about how this kind of institutional space is normally 'produced' (Lefebvre, 1991) and maintained. This direction could certainly have been pushed a lot further and a more active outreach programme pursued. I still found it difficult to encourage the young people whose work was in the exhibition to go and visit it. I felt that this was important, not because I wanted the young people to feel proud that their work was in a 'proper art gallery', but because I wanted the space to be accessible to them, so that they could at least enter debates about its institutional value.

Indeed, our photographs were exhibited in a number of spaces which opened up questions of accessibility and ownership. We wanted to have one of our 'banner' photographs displayed outside, out of a gallery context. We originally had the agreement of the Trumans Brewery to place a banner on their bridge across Brick Lane, which seemed fine when the banner was only going to be colourful images of Bengali kids. However, the group who were working for that site produced a collage which included an image of a graffiti-style outdoor sign saying 'ISLAM'. This was clearly seen as too aggressive and up-front, and we ended up having to place the banner in an old warehouse space at the other end of Brick Lane. Whilst the Trumans' complex prided itself on promoting a 'cutting-edge' and 'alternative' arts scene, this episode demonstrated the limits of this when faced with an arts project which fell outside a middle-class, white view of 'radical' art.

Again, we could have pushed this issue further, involving participants in choosing important or symbolic sites for exhibition, although our problems with Trumans also demonstrated the logistical difficulties in this. Indeed, the sites we did choose for our projects – the Whitechapel Art Gallery, outdoors on Brick Lane, and in a community arts centre the Brady Centre off Brick Lane, demonstrated the almost impossible desire of the festival to create a project which spanned audiences and spaces across a wide spectrum. Events which formed part of the main festival were programmed right across London, and there was always an awareness

(if only from a cynical marketing point of view) of the kinds of audiences which would be drawn to different spaces. For example, an almost identical line-up of Bangladeshi artists performed in the Queen Elizabeth Hall to a predominantly white middle-class 'Guardian reader' audience, and then in an East London venue, York Hall, for a 'local' Bengali audience.

However, there were also events which achieved a more integrated and progressive social mix. The opening day of celebrations in and around Brick Lane attracted an audience of around 30,000, which was genuinely a mixture of white and Asian, from different socio-economic backgrounds and of different ages and genders. Bengali culture, as opposed to just Brick Lane 'curries' was made more visible in the area. Areas like Allen Gardens, an underused park, became a focus for performances. The programme of events went some way to breaking down the racial segregation of spaces there; 'white' spaces like the organic vegetable market in Spitalfields became filled with Bengali people. An Asian sound system started an illegal party in the courtyard opposite the Vibe Bar. This divided area, of somewhat closed communities was animated in new and surprising ways.

Of course, the temporal nature of these events meant that they did more to highlight existing symbolic uses of space, than they disrupted or changed them. However, they also highlighted some ways in which such projects can still be successful and worthwhile.

4 Conclusion

To learn our place in time, to learn to live inside a situation requires us at once to 'draw the line(s)', to acknowledge the need to live within our limits and yet, at the same time, to attend to what is gathering 'beyond the boundaries', to respond as best we can to what is gathering, to yearn responsibly across it towards the other side, 1988: 244

The problematics of representing and working cross-culturally can never be resolved. The 'cross-cultural' dialogues in this essay extend to dialogues between academic 'culture' and the culture of other kinds of institutions and organisations. I have tried to let my sense of academic anthropological thought inform my understandings of practice, but also vice versa, not placing theoretical 'demands' on projects which have to operate within certain institutional and discursive contexts. Academic thought should position itself in relation to cultural practices outside academia, not just in relation to other academic thought. To return to Eric Wolf, 'anthropology bears a special responsibility to examine the common-places of its thought and the fighting words of its speech' (1994: 1). This includes refining its own uses and understandings of terms, examining uses outside academia, and also seeing how academic uses cross over into practice, and to what effect. I hope that I have gestured towards all three areas in this essay.

Working on these projects taught me something about Bangladeshi culture, yet I became concerned 'more with the processual in cultural difference, rather than the products of cultural diversity' (Papastergiadis, 1998: 132). There should have been more awareness of these processes on the part of the arts organisations that I worked with. However, I also believe that there are no 'right answers' in projects such as these, and that in the end one can only proceed with caution, ultimately trusting your own instincts and sense of ethics. Despite the problems of such work, I still believe that we must continue to find ways to set up dialogues across cultures, to work against cultural exclusion and isolation. I hope I have shown how urgent and 'live' these issues are, and that anthropologists must collaborate in finding solutions.

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