

Migration, Arts and the Negotiation of Belonging: An analysis of creative practices within British Asian communities in London and Loughborough

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This article offers a comparative analysis of the engagement in cultural and creative practices of people of South Asian heritage in the market town of Loughborough, East Midlands, and in the borough of Tower Hamlets in London. Taking the potential of the arts as a means to reinforce social identities, challenge social exclusion and promote intercultural dialogue (McGregor and Ragab 2016: 7-8) as the starting point of our analysis, we argue that creative arts represent, for British Asian communities, an effective means for the preservation of cultural heritage and the negotiation of a diasporic identity in the British context.

Loughborough and Tower Hamlets are the two sites where we are conducting [the Migrant Memory and the Post-colonial Imagination \(MMPI\)](#) research project, which investigates the cultural memories of the Partition of British India circulating within South Asian diasporic communities in the UK. Launched in 2017, this is an interdisciplinary project located at the crossroads of memory studies, diaspora, cultural and postcolonial studies, for which we adopt a mixed creative research method which is grounded in ethnography and includes different participatory arts methodologies to elicit and evoke memories of Partition and migration with South Asian groups.¹ Following Tolia-Kelly, we posit that using visual and material culture and objects, rather than abstract ideas, is an effective way of triggering memories and can help researchers understand the role of memory in everyday life (2004: 679). We thus work in collaboration with local arts and community groups with whom we organise cultural and creative activities (spanning from photography classes to cooking workshops, fashion, music activities and films screenings), using creative arts as a platform to start conversations around the research themes. The research also includes intensive participant observation, as in the past three years we have immersed ourselves in the social and cultural contexts of Tower Hamlets and Loughborough. With the help of our research partners, Tower Hamlets Council in London and Charnwood Arts and Equality Action in Loughborough, we have participated in a range of community events and made first contact with many of the groups that we now work with. This extensive participant observation is a crucial “tool” of our research (Fitzgerald 2006: 5), as it allows us not only to understand the social, cultural and political context within which we work, but especially to build meaningful relationships with gate keepers and with community groups, with whom we still collaborate.

Our fieldwork has thus provided us with the opportunity to closely observe how arts and/or community groups engage in creative activities as a way to address questions related to cultural heritage, “tradition”, identity and belonging in the diasporic space. Drawing upon data collected during the first three years of the research, in this article we specifically examine the cultural landscape of Tower Hamlets and Loughborough, and, through selected case studies, we interrogate the ways in which the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage intervenes in the process of negotiation of diasporic identities which are located at the intersection of roots and routes (Gilroy 1993). The first case study introduces the cultural scene of Tower Hamlets in relation to its large British Bengali population and analyses the creative outputs of one specific British Bengali cultural organisation in relation to issues of diasporic identity and intercultural dialogue. The second case study explores the multiple contexts of the performance of Gujarati dance forms in Loughborough, from religious festivals to intercultural public events in relation

¹ See Hornabrook, Clini and Keightley, forthcoming, for more information about this creative methodological approach.

to the overlapping concepts of 'community' and the perpetuation of multicultural ideals and identities.

While our analysis is necessarily limited to a few case studies and does not aim to be representative of the whole, indeed diverse, South Asian experience in Britain, we propose that it nevertheless sheds some light on the public dimension of cultural practices as an expression of people's experiences of, and engagement with, issues of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and intercultural understanding.

Tower Hamlets, Loughborough and South Asian migration

Migration from South Asia to the UK emerged out of colonial relations: the connections between East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) and East London, for example, was part and parcel of the East India Company shipping route. The East India Company employed Bengali men to work in their ships, many of them Sylhetis who would go to Calcutta looking for employment. Bengali seamen, or *lascars*, as they were called, thus began their trips to East London with the Company (Adams 1987: 15-30). Although there is evidence of Bengalis living, if temporarily, in East London as early as the eighteenth century (Adams 1987: 17), Bengali settlement began in the late 1950s in what had been a Jewish neighbourhood since the late nineteenth century. Migrants were employed, especially in the garment and textile industries (Gavron 2005:1; Kabeer 2000).² This is because Britain, experiencing a labour shortage in the post-war period, turned to its former colonies and actively recruited unskilled and semi-skilled workers, who, under the Nationality Act of 1948, "were entitled to UK citizenship since they were members of Britain's colonies or former colonies" (Malik 2002: 12).

Like the rest of the UK, Loughborough too experienced a significant wave of migration from South Asia in the second half of the twentieth century, especially from areas such as Indian Punjab and Sylhet in Bangladesh, which had been particularly disturbed by the Partition of British India (Peach 2006: 134). With its industrial economy, Loughborough's numerous factories offered unskilled work and the town became a hub for many male South Asian migrants seeking work from the 1940s (Chowdhury et al. 1999). From the 1950s and 1960s, Bangladeshi men, in particular, left Sylhet and settled in Loughborough and in London, many of them later joined by their spouses. At the time, South Asian migration to the UK was a 'gendered phenomenon', with men arriving with work permits under the 1948 Act (Anitha et al. 2012: 755). However, with the closing of primary migration through the Commonwealth Act in 1962 and its amendments in 1968, patterns of migration shifted to the female spouses and the families of those already settled in the UK (ibid). Matrimonial migration in Loughborough and London has been ongoing ever since, with families joining male migrants working in the UK.

Migration from South Asia continued throughout the 1960s to 1980s. Increasing restrictions on immigration, rising levels of societal and institutional racism - (in)famously highlighted by Enoch Powell's 'River of Blood' speech (1968) - the rise in anti-immigration movements and the political far right, targeted racist attacks on South Asians in the UK, and the vast unemployment of the 1970s and 1980s did not stop arrivals from South Asia (Brah 1996: 49 - 53). At the time, the East End of London, in particular, became a favourite destination from what had in 1971 become Bangladesh, while Loughborough's factories and growing South Asian population continued to attract economic migrants from Gujarat and Punjab, India. London and Loughborough still continue to attract students and economic migrants from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Moreover, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw another flow of migration into the

²It would be worth noting that Tower Hamlets at the time was, and still is, one of the poorest boroughs of London, despite its close proximity to the financial heart of the city and its current gentrification: according to data updated on February 2019 by the charity Trust for London, Tower Hamlets is the borough with the highest rate of poverty in London (see Trust For London, 2019).

United Kingdom from East Africa, following the direct expulsion of Indians from Uganda under Idi Amin and the Africanisation policies in other East African countries (see Taylor 2018). The resettlement of East African Indians, who arrived as refugees with British citizenship, largely took place in London and Leicester (see David 2014) and, given Loughborough’s proximity to Leicester (approximately 18 km), a significant number of people of Gujarati heritage arrived following their expulsion from East Africa.

As a consequence of this ongoing wave of migration from South Asia, both Tower Hamlets and Loughborough are, at present, home to numerous communities of South Asian heritage. Data collected for the 2011 Census show that Charnwood, the borough within which the town of Loughborough is located, has a population of 166,100 people, 12,675 of whom are of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage (respectively 6.2%, 0.3% and 1.2% of the population) (Nomis 2011). In the case of the borough of Tower Hamlets, in the East End of London, data collected for the same census show that of a population of 254,100 people, 90,606 people are of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, respectively 3%, 1% and 32% of the total population (Tower Hamlets Council 2013). In both places, British Asian communities are engaged in creative activities (for example, theatre, dance, and poetry) that are embedded in the cultural and political ecologies of their areas, and which are often organised by, or in collaboration with, established cultural or community organisations and/or the local councils.

Even though creative and cultural practices are central to the experience of diasporic communities in both locations, these are two very distinct places. Moreover, as the Census data show, their ethnic composition is considerably different. It is the difference between the two places that makes for such an interesting comparison and demonstrates the heterogeneity of South Asian diasporas, the multiplicity of migratory and diasporic experience and the variety of experience in places of resettlement in the United Kingdom. These case studies also demonstrate the multiple ways creative and cultural practices are performed, (re)presented and utilised with regards to constructions of identity and intercultural understanding.

Migration, the arts and British Bangladeshi identities in Tower Hamlets

Connections between Bengal and London began during the colonial period and, over time, Tower Hamlets became a favourite destination for people of Bangladeshi heritage, so much so that the area around Whitechapel, Brick Lane and Bethnal Green, has been renamed “Banglatown” (Gavron 2005: 4). In order to understand the role of arts and culture in the integration of people of Bengali heritage³ in Tower Hamlets, it is imperative to frame migration into this area within the wider political context of Britain as well as South Asia, especially as Bangladesh declared its independence from Pakistan in 1971. The Bengalis who settled in East London in the 1960s-1970s maintained a strong relationship with their country of origin, and many interviewees told us of how their families retained a strong commitment to the politics of the homeland, especially contributing to the struggle against Pakistan during the Liberation War. As Alexander et al. noted, “UK migrants mobilised in support of the freedom fighters and the Awami League through fundraising, public protests and lobbying of the British government and media” (2010: 12). This activism promoted “a strongly nationalist and secular identity amongst British migrants, asserting a collective and authentic Bengali identity that transcended class, caste and religious boundaries” (Alexander et al. 2010: 12). The connections between the diaspora and Bangladeshi politics survives to this date, and the major political parties of Bangladesh, Awami League and BNP, still have representatives in East London (Eade and Garbin 2006: 184).

The social and political context within which Bengalis settled in London, i.e. the pervasive racism and unemployment, together with their engagement with the politics of the homeland,

³ The term “Bengali” is used here to indicate people who had migrated from Bengal from British colonial times, through the East Pakistani period up until the creation of Bangladesh.

had a profound effect on the political and cultural organisations which emerged in the area. In the 1970s, as the community in the East End of London acquired a more settled character, a young generation of British Bangladeshi emerged who began to challenge the widespread racism of the times. Their antiracist struggle reached a particularly significant moment after the racist murder of Altab Ali, a young textile worker killed on his way home from work on 4th May 1978. The murder of Altab Ali is considered a landmark moment in the British Bengali struggle against racism for, in the wake of the attack, the Bengali community organised a protest march from Bricklane to Westminster, with thousands of people taking part to protest against racism and to demand justice for Altab Ali (see Alexander et al. 2015: 109-113).

The political activism of the time was also inspired by the struggle for independence from Pakistan in 1971 – with comparisons being drawn between the anti-racist struggle in Britain and the Liberation War against Pakistan – but it was also very much grounded in the British context, and engaged in the broader black British struggle against racism,⁴ social discrimination and exclusion (Alexander et al. 2010: 12; Eade and Garbin 2006: 184-185). Importantly, this struggle against racism incorporated a struggle for representation that challenged British ethnocentric conventions of representing minorities, and campaigners asserted the right to difference and, more importantly, to exist, in difference, as British citizens (Hall 1993). This political activism paved the way for the emergence of community organisations working on cultural heritage and involved in “multicultural projects around identity, culture and community” (Alexander et al. 2010: 13). Meanwhile, the social, economic and cultural landscape of Tower Hamlets rapidly changed with the creation of Banglatown, an area “designed to provide a sense of multicultural identity which would attract tourists and visitors from outside the area, following the successful model of Chinatown” (Eade and Garbin 2002: 142). The 1990s also saw the introduction of multicultural initiatives such as the [Boishakhi Mela](#), the annual celebration of the Bengali new year, launched in 1998, while in 2003 the council launched the first edition of its annual theatre festival “A Season of Bangladrama”. Both events, currently organised by Tower Hamlets Council, are a celebration of the Bengali diaspora and of Bengali cultural heritage while, at the same time, representing a way for the British Bengali community to claim space in the British context.⁵

At present, Tower Hamlets is home to a variety of arts and cultural organisations, theatre companies, literary organisations, poetry clubs, local history groups and storytelling groups, which bear testimony to a very vibrant British Bangladeshi cultural scene. This is a very dynamic form of cultural activism, which is based around the connections between London, Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi diaspora (in Tower Hamlets as well other diasporic locations). Of course, the social composition of the British Bangladeshi community is multi-layered and it includes a variety of economic, political and religious positions. The socio-cultural landscape of Bengali Britain in Tower Hamlets also includes different understandings of cultural heritage which tap into different perspectives on Bangladesh and Bangladeshi identity, and which are also often related to differing views on the relationship between religion and a British Bangladeshi cultural identity. If the second-generation activists of the 1970s-1980s (still active in local cultural and political initiatives in Tower Hamlets) were strong secularists, since the late 1980s and through the 1990s, a third generation emerged who “rejected the nationalist and secular stance of earlier activists in

⁴ Note that the term “black” was used not as a racial signifier, but rather a political one, as it referenced “the common experience of marginalization in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities” (Hall 1996: 163).

⁵ See Alexander 2019 for an in-depth analysis of the Mela as a diasporic performance.

favour of a denationalised and religious/Islamist interest” (Alexander et al. 2010: 11).⁶ While the British Bangladeshi approach to religion differs to various degrees and cannot be reduced to a “secularist versus Islamist” narrative, this development led to the emergence of new tensions over the public performance of Bangladeshi culture in Tower Hamlets. Initiatives such as the Boishakhi Mela, for example, have been criticised by some for “encouraging unrespectable behaviour influenced by western secular values and Sikh/Hindu practices” (Eade and Garbin 2002: 143) with defenders of a secular Bangladeshi culture praising it precisely for its multicultural character (it should be noted that Islam is the dominant religion in Bangladesh, but not the only one).

This example testifies the heterogeneous character of the British Bangladeshi community, a point which is directly addressed by BSK London. An organisation at the forefront of championing a secularist national identity through the arts, BSK London uses the arts to promote Bengali/Bangladeshi cultural heritage while also pushing the boundaries of a Bangladeshi identity in the UK. BSK London is the London branch of Bishwo Shahitto Kendro (literally: World Literature Centre), a non-profit Dhaka-based cultural institution which promotes reading habits among Bangladeshi youth with the aim of enlightening society through literature. The London branch of the organisation is run by volunteers who organise and coordinate activities in close contact with their Bangladeshi counterpart, in particular with BSK founder, scholar and writer Abdullah Abu Sayeed. BSK London’s activities span from reading circles, to theatre, music and poetry, as they use the arts to promote community cohesion and to put forward a reflection on cultural heritage as well as on politics of identity in diaspora, integration and multiculturalism. Every November BSK London takes part in the *Season of Bangladrama*, with original plays scripted and directed by members of the group.

BSK London also holds an annual Boi-Lit Festival, a cultural event which sees the participation of poets, writers, musicians, and academics, devoted to the exploration of Bengali heritage in Britain. As explained on its website, the question of cultural heritage in the diasporic space is central to the activity of BSK London: “BSK London has been engaged in creating 'home away from home' for Bengali/Bangladeshi community so together we can cherish the rich Bengali tradition and vibrant ethnic memoirs of our native land in the heart of this cosmopolitan city [...] We are determined to promote nationalism and cultural awareness through the cultivation of Bengali literature and cultural values for the British Bangladeshi community.” It is relevant to note how, in its presentation, the group draws a connection between Bengali traditions and nationalism. This is because their understanding of British Bangladeshi identity is firmly anchored to a rather secular Bangladeshi cultural heritage which finds its roots in the Language Movement and the 1971 Liberation War against Pakistan. Moreover, while emphasising the relationship between culture and nationalism (again, at the root of the independence movement), BSK London emphasises the common roots of west and east Bengali culture, actively staking a claim to the cultural production of the Bengal region before the 1947 Partition of British India.

The preservation and promotion of Bengali culture is thus at the heart of the activities of BSK London, and yet, while they treasure a Bengali/Bangladeshi cultural heritage, to borrow Stuart Hall’s words, they are not “contained” by it (1996: 169). Rather than proposing an uncritical and monolithic version of Bangladeshi culture, they do not refrain from pushing its boundaries, and they actively address the complexity of the process of negotiation of a Bengali identity in the diasporic space. Their cultural production in fact, while actively championing a secularist Bangladeshi culture, also stakes a claim to Britishness. This approach was seen clearly in their 2017 play *The Café*, which offered a satirised representation of the British Bangladeshi

⁶ The emergence of a third generation of British Bangladeshis who embrace a more religious version of cultural identity is very complex phenomenon, whose discussion goes beyond the scope of this article. For an in-depth analysis see Hoque 2015.

community. The play, in Bengali, revolved around a number of clients regularly meeting in a London café and who, in a mixture of banter, gossip and more serious discussions, address issues spanning from the role of women within society and gender relations, Bangladeshi internal politics, as well as Brexit, the 2017 Westminster terror attacks and social policies such as benefits cuts. Given its satirical nature, the play caught the attention of many people in Tower Hamlets, and caused some raised eyebrows, but it succeeded in raising the issue of hybrid identities as a consequence of migration. By showing British Bangladeshi characters addressing this variety of issues, the play in fact conveys the complexity of the question of identity for people who are in-between cultures and offers a glimpse on the constant effort which the negotiation of a diasporic identity entails. Moreover, *The Café* challenged stereotypes on diasporic communities as homogeneous social formations, challenging stereotypical assumptions of fixed cultural identities (Hall 1990: 225).

BSK London’s willingness to address difficult topics was confirmed by the play that they took the following year to the *Season of Bangladrama* (2018) which dealt with LGBT issues and was centred on the drama of a father who has to come to terms with the homosexuality of his daughter (homosexuality is a criminal offence in Bangladesh). Indeed, by touching upon such sensitive themes, the aim of BSK is to get members of the British Bangladeshi community talking, and to reflect on the legacy of Bangladeshi culture in the diasporic space of London. Another instance in which the group can be seen engaging with these concerns is their literary circle, called “Moulik”. [Moulik](#) sessions are generally organised around a specific theme and participants are encouraged to prepare their reflections ahead of every meeting. In this case, poetry and literary texts are used by the group as the means not only to preserve cultural heritage, but also to discuss the role of cultural heritage in the diasporic space. Moulik thus emerges as a space of collective reflection and debate, facilitated by literature and poetry. As one of BSK members shared with us: “Poetry is that one form of that above all the other brings multiple people of different perspective to the same table. Conversation begin and then we built up this craft and for some it can be a vehicle of life”. Apart from discussing poetry and literature, members are encouraged to use this space to share their own poems with the rest of the group, some of them dealing precisely with the topic of displacement.

It emerges clearly that, for BSK London, arts and culture play a key role in the negotiation of a diasporic identity, as in BSK’s work “traditions coexist with the emergence of new, hybrid and crossover cultural forms of tremendous vitality and innovation” (Hall 1999: 9). It is not a coincidence then that another member of BSK London described the group as “a bridge: it is not mutually exclusive, rather, it is inclusive [...] Bangladesh and UK, all the stuff, we just include”. The cultural production of BSK London, while not representative of the entire Bangladeshi experience in Tower Hamlets, is nevertheless the expression of a dynamic British Bangladeshi identity which is never static, but it is constantly evolving and is informed by the complex interplay between the country of origin, the country of settlement and by specific positions regarding nationalism, religion and historical ties between west and east Bengal. As Avtar Brah observed when discussing diasporic forms of political culture: “These art forms simultaneously interpret, translate and interrogate the subtleties and intricacies of South Asian life worlds in and outside Britain, drawing out their global interconnections as well as what is distinctive about each” (Brah 1996: 48).

While they independently organise events and performances all year round, their visibility is decisively heightened when they participate at the annual [A Season of Bangladrama](#). This is a British Bengali theatre festival (although it also incorporates a larger variety of fringe events, including arts exhibitions and talks) organised by the local Council, which sees the participation of productions from Britain, as well as Bangladesh and West Bengal. Showcasing only original plays or new adaptations of old ones the festival celebrates the creative production of what we might call “Bengali Britain”, as its stated aim is to offer “a diverse range of plays with

Bengali sensibilities from the UK, Bangladesh and West Bengal” (*A Season of Bangladrama* Facebook page). Now approaching its 18th year, *A Season of Bangladrama* has considerably grown throughout the years: as the producer of the festival, Ruksana Kazi Begum, told us, from having four shows in 2003, the festival went on to host thirty-four events in 2019, including sixteen plays (nine of which were original pieces). The festival virtually builds a bridge between Bangladesh and Britain – for on the one hand it acknowledges the link that the local community maintains with Bangladesh, incorporating what might appear as “purely Bangladeshi” political and cultural concerns into the texture of the social composition of Tower Hamlets, while at the same time it recognises British Bengalis as part and parcel of British society and culture.

The festival is a key event in the cultural landscape of Tower Hamlets, as it bears testimony to the richness and, indeed, the diverse nature of the Bangladeshi community and especially it offers invaluable support to local cultural and community groups like BSK London, providing them with a public platform and the possibility of reaching a wider audience. Moreover, its significance is heightened by the fact that public performances and cultural activities enable spaces of encounter between the diasporic community and the non-diasporic social components of the borough (as well as of the city) offering the possibility to promote mutual understanding and reduce cultural conflict. As Netto remarks: “Indeed, it might be argued that to confine minority ethnic artistic activity to the private domain would be to deny both the majority and the minority ethnic population opportunities for increasing understanding of the latter’s cultural heritage and reducing cultural conflict” (2008: 60). While the majority of the audience still belongs to the British Bangladeshi community, the location of the festival (around the trendy area of Shoreditch in London), and its growing popularity throughout the years, make *A Season of Bangladrama* an event which actively seeks to promote a dialogue between residents of Tower Hamlets.

Dance, multiculturalism and British Gujarati identities in Loughborough

Loughborough is distinct to the cultural scene in Tower Hamlets. While Tower Hamlets is dominated by a British Bangladeshi cultural scene and is a national hub of British Bangladeshi arts and political activism, South Asian arts in Loughborough are performed at a much smaller scale and function as everyday creative and cultural activities. Loughborough’s demographic also contrasts with Tower Hamlets, with the majority of British Asians living in the area being of Indian Gujarati and Punjabi heritage, followed by significant Bangladeshi and small Pakistani communities. As a result, Loughborough’s Indian population account for a significant part of the South Asian community’s engagement in local arts and culture, but they do not dominate it. This is due to the different context within which South Asian immigrants settled since the mid-20th century and impacts on both the constructions of identity and community and on South Asian public performances and intercultural engagement in Loughborough. In what follows we briefly introduce the intercultural organisations and events in the town, with the performance of Gujarati dance forms (as one of the most prevalent practices) highlighted within these events. These dance forms are used to explore a sustained multicultural ethos and the multi-layered and overlapping community identities asserted through performance.

Creative and cultural practices are embedded within the local cultural landscape of Loughborough and have become a key means to both maintain cultural heritage and to establish connections between and across South Asian communities and with non-South Asian residents in the town. With a diverse South Asian population, local organisations have been key in fostering intercultural engagement. An increase in the settlement of South Asian families in Loughborough and the area of Charnwood took place in the post-war period, and with it, Charnwood Community Relations Council was established in 1969, with the objective of eliminating racial discrimination, campaigning for equality and opportunity and promoting good relations between people of different racial groups (Equality Action 2019: 6). This is now Equality Action, made

up of South Asian and white British local community members, which continues to work with communities on matters of equality, providing advice on immigration and running various projects aimed at ethnic minority residents. The establishment of such an organisation was particularly significant given the escalating racism of the 1970s and 1980s, which was palpable in the town. In particular, the Mansfield Hosiery strike in 1972 highlighted the everyday lived experiences of racial discrimination in the workplace from factory management and the union (see Wrench 1986). Charnwood Community Relations Council, along with community organisations and individuals stood in opposition to racial discrimination in the town, particularly with the later development of the National Front. During that time, sporting events, various exhibitions and the intercultural event, 'Picnic in the Park', were established, with an emphasis on the inclusion of the growing South Asian community and promoting interracial relations (Equality Action 2019: 7). Thus, a lineage of key intercultural organisations and individuals confronting racial discrimination with inclusive practices and events in the town was established and continue to this day.

Within this cultural landscape and amid countering histories of racial discrimination, there is a persistent emphasis on multiculturalism and inclusivity in the town, demonstrated through intercultural celebrations of Eid, Diwali and Christmas, and with an emphasis on passing down cultural heritage to second and subsequent generations. The Loughborough Council of Faiths (established 1995) and other community associations have been significant in the development and discourse of inclusivity and inter-faith respect in the town. Loughborough's proximity to Leicester is also significant to the promotion of ideals of multiculturalism, inclusion and community cohesion by many individuals and organisations. A city with just under 50% ethnic minority residents, including a very large and diverse South Asian population, Leicester has been "lauded in central government reports as a model of 'community cohesion' (Cantle 2001) and has projected itself as the 'premier multicultural city in Europe' (Singh and Tatla 2006: 143)" (McLoughlin 2014: 89). However, recent data shows that Charnwood borough council has reported a general trend in the decline of community cohesion (Uddin and Chen 2017: 19-20).

Public performances and festivals continue to be viewed as a means of education and engagement with the town's different cultures in order to build intercultural understanding, leading on from the interventions by key organisations and individuals to tackle racial discrimination in Loughborough since the 1970s. In addition to Equality Action, Charnwood Arts is an independent community arts and media organisation facilitating intercultural understanding in Loughborough by working cross-culturally with community groups. There are a number of cultural organisations affiliated with religious and community institutions, such as the Bangladeshi Social Association, the (Gujarati) Shree Ram Krishna Community Project, (Punjabi) Geeta Bhawan temple and community centre, and Loughborough Gurudwara, but little in the way of arts organisations like the BSK in London. The different social composition of the two sites supports differing emphases in community arts activity: BSK London is more concerned with specific social, cultural and political British Bangladeshi issues, whereas in Loughborough community activity is focused on intercultural dialogue and cross-community interaction.

Public 'multicultural' performances are a means of asserting intergenerational concepts of South Asian heritage and sharing culture through artistic, cultural and religious practice. Most of the groups in Loughborough participate in distinct cultural and religious activities, often organised by their religious and linguistic community and/or associated community centres. For instance, we have been working with Anand Mangal, a well-established, predominantly Gujarati women's community group, which also includes members from Punjabi Hindu and Sikh, and white Euro-American backgrounds. Many members of the group, but not all, arrived in the UK as refugees and as British citizens following the expulsion of Indians from East Africa. This is a significant factor in terms of questions of belonging in the UK and conflicting experiences of

inclusion and exclusion. While most of the women in the group are Gujarati speaking, they have diverse migratory experiences and different trajectories of migration, with many arriving as ‘twice migrants’ from East Africa and others as a result of matrimonial migration from India and other parts of the Indian diaspora. Despite these multiple trajectories, the group connects through cultural, linguistic and religious practices and through imaginaries of ‘Gujarat’ and/or ‘India’.

Gujarati cultural practices are both significant in harbouring a sense of solidarity and inclusion as well as in revealing multiple layers within and between this, and other, community groups in Loughborough. In particular, dance forms such as *garba* and *dandiya raas* accompanied by singing and music represent a form of embodied knowledge that is famously associated with the state of Gujarat in India (Falcone 2016: 51). This knowledge has accompanied the first-generation on their migration from India and East Africa and has become key in asserting Gujarati-ness, and specifically Gujarati Hindu identities, in its diasporic performance. Unlike classical dance forms, such as Kathak and Bharatanatyam, and choreographed Bollywood dance routines, *garba* and *dandiya raas* are intergenerational - these dances are performed by first-, second- and third-generations - and “wholly participatory” (David 2014: 18) cultural-religious practices performed at weddings, Hindu festivals and intercultural events in Loughborough.⁷ Despite this, we and other non-Gujaratis and non-South Asians are frequently invited to participate. The performance of these forms is significant in connecting individuals and groups in Loughborough to India and the Gujarati diasporic imaginaries, in the expression of migrant identity, and in transmitting cultural beliefs and values (David 2014: 14) and in staking a claim to belonging in Loughborough.

These dance forms are performed across a variety of different contexts in Loughborough, which highlight the multiple layers on which ‘community’ and ‘identity’ operate within South Asian diasporic groups in the town. As a devotional act, performed extensively during the Hindu festival of [Navratri](#), these dance practices are significant in the adherence of religious faith. Navratri “is the locus for the transmission of Gujarati religious and socio-cultural practices and a powerful confirmation of caste identity” (David 2014: 22). While Navratri events originally took place in one venue, there are now approximately seven different events in halls around Loughborough according to caste community. In an interview, a first-generation Gujarati participant recalled that the Navratri event was “for the Gujaratis and anybody and everybody, all the other castes were welcome ... but nowadays you see every different caste has their own [dance event] so the people are now scattered here”. This not only reflects the growth of the Gujarati population in Loughborough - which enables different caste communities to have separate events - but it also reflects the persisting social complexities within the Gujarati linguistic group in Loughborough.⁸ Avtar Brah nevertheless suggests that such cultural expression is “crucial in affirming or contesting” identities and caste equalities may both be reinforced and challenged via caste-based organisations (1996: 47).

These dance practices are not limited to caste-based organisations, however, and they can assert both caste community and broader community identities. As an assertion of a wider Gujarati Hindu collective identity, these dances, along with other South Asian regional dance, music and drama performances, are frequently performed by mixed Gujarati groups at South Asian intercultural events in Loughborough. Events such as the Diwali Lights Switch On and the Loughborough Mela provide opportunities to demonstrate the presence of the broader Gujarati-Hindu community, as well as (re)present other South Asian populations in Loughborough,

⁷ We refer to these practices as ‘dance forms’ with caution as Gujarati communities do not usually refer to ‘dancing’ *garba* and *dandiya raas*, but instead ‘playing’ *garba* and *dandiya raas* (see David 2014: 14-15).

⁸ This is despite literature that suggests such social categories dissipate in diasporic contexts, but to a lesser degree in the UK (see Kumar 2012).

through diasporic cultural practice. For instance, the Diwali event in the Town Hall includes the switch-on of the town's outdoor Diwali lights and a showcase of performances by members from the town's South Asian communities. Gujarati dances, along with songs and music, Bollywood dancing and dramas are performed by members of Loughborough's Gujarati and Punjabi Hindu and Sikh community organisations to an audience largely from the town's British Indian population. The event is organised by Charnwood Borough Council and the town's three Hindu temples (two Gujarati and one Punjabi) and the Sikh Gurudwara as a means of celebrating the festival and enabling intercultural education in Loughborough. For instance, one of the event's organisers, Rajesh Karsanji, said:

Diwali is not just celebrated by Hindus and Sikhs here in the UK, we want all communities to be together and to learn to respect each other's cultures and not segregate each other. ... We all want to live in harmony and this is a way to do it. Those who do not belong to a religion or community, can learn about them at Diwali. The more we learn about different cultures, the more we can understand each other (cited in Cox, *Loughborough Echo*, 20th October 2016).

Participation in such events simultaneously asserts multicultural values of the town's diverse Indian heritage community groups and, through public performance, stakes a claim to Gujarati, Hindu and the British Indian communities in Loughborough.

Finally, Gujarati dance forms are also performed at the town's Mela. The Loughborough Mela is a one-day town-wide event that is similarly regarded as a significant annual multicultural event, that originally started in 2001 as a means to celebrate the town's cultural and ethnic diversity, bringing together "South Asian arts and culture in all its diverse and colourful forms, from spectacular Bollywood and traditional dancing to storytelling, music, poetry and henna painting. The aim of the event is to both celebrate the performers' ancestral heritage as well as their more recent history as British citizens" ([Loughborough Mela 2012](#): 43). The Mela is primarily organised by Charnwood Arts, Equality Action, John Storer Charnwood, with support from Charnwood Borough Council and Arts Council England, with participation by community groups and individuals. The event is described by its organisers as "a great example of harmony in our community, where people from diverse cultural backgrounds come together to celebrate" (Equality Action 2018), and "to showcase Asian culture and heritage, and link it back to its roots whilst strengthening community and supporting local artists, businesses and community groups" (cited in Cox, *Loughborough Echo*, 9th August 2017). Held in the town's central marketplace - attributed as a social space of belonging within Gujarati and other groups - with a main stage and market stalls, the Mela attracts a broad audience of members of Loughborough's South Asian - Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani - communities, non-South Asian residents and passers-by.

As an annual event that specifically promotes intercultural engagement, the Mela creates audibility and visibility of certain artistic and cultural practices and fosters cultural citizenship (O'Neill 2013). The Mela showcases creative practices that reflect many, but not all, regional and national affiliations of the town's population. In the last couple of years, the line-ups at the Mela include Gujarati [dandiya raas](#), Punjabi Bhangra and Dhol drumming, Rajasthani [brass band](#), Chinese [silk and bamboo music](#), Hip Hop, Grime, Bangladeshi semi-classical singers, Bollywood music and dance and European classical and popular music. Unity is thus sought in diversity by participating community groups and organisers. However, the emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism in the discourse surrounding the Mela, linked with Loughborough's ethnic groups, and the programmed cultural performances could be considered as problematic. For instance, Tina K. Ramnarine points out that multicultural ideologies that promote cultural diversity - viewing separate groups inhabiting the same space - rests on the assumption of difference (2007: 87). With strategies for inclusion and exclusion competing and co-existing,

there is the risk that "[d]iversity becomes both a 'diversity of expression' and a 'diversity of cultures', to the extent that differences between groups are over-emphasised, groups are rendered homogeneous, and the contributions made by members of one group to the cultural expressions of other groups are rendered invisible" (Ramnarine 2007: 87-88; see also Lundberg, Malm and Ronström 2003: 43). However, the public performance of multiple cultural practices, many of which are associated with expressions of identity, provide opportunities for shared cultural experiences and interactions in the town. While emphasis on culture and identity in the public sphere could also lead to the neglect of structural inequalities and of lived everyday experiences of discrimination (Anitha et al. 2012: 756), cultural performances, such as music and dance, have been powerful in creating bonds of understanding, solidarity and diasporic assertion in Loughborough within and between South Asian ethno-linguistic-religious groups and with the white British majority. Even though the emphasis on diversity in such events, and in the town itself, can act as a site of othering, Anand Mangal and other Gujarati community groups simultaneously stake transnational claims to India and the Gujarati diaspora and locally to Loughborough through public performance. Given the histories of tackling racial discrimination through intercultural engagement in the town, such events and performances provide moments of intercultural solidarity. With a rise in racism and a declining trend in the sense of community cohesion, events such as the Mela and other forms of intercultural engagement become all the more significant.

The performance of cultural practices, such as the Gujarati dance forms, in multiple contexts in the town also demonstrates the multiple layers of identity and community, where porous ethnic boundaries speak against ideas of "reified culture" (Baumann 1996) in which lived, everyday experience overlaps not one but many diasporas (Shukla 2001: 563). The performance and participation across the different contexts in Loughborough and the communities to which they are targeted – from the Navratri religious festival, broader South Asian events, such as Diwali Lights, and town-wide intercultural events, such as the Mela – reveal multiple claims of belonging to caste, mixed Gujarati, Hindu, and Indian communities, as well belonging in Loughborough itself. These multiple claims reflect the overlap of diasporic communities in everyday life and reveal the porous boundaries between cultural practices and the overlapping concepts of 'community' - Gujarati, Indian, South Asia and British - in Loughborough. Caste, linguistic, regional, religious and national identities are similarly asserted across these performance contexts and through the ongoing transmission of such practices down the generations.

South Asian diaspora and the arts

Even though Tower Hamlets and Loughborough represent two distinct sites, the ways in which local South Asian communities engage in cultural and creative activities to preserve cultural heritage as well as negotiating cultural identity in the diasporic context present significant overlaps. The case studies that we discussed speak of the power of the arts to challenge social exclusion and to promote the integration of diasporic groups. This is in line with the findings of a 2016 study commissioned by the European Union which reported that creative activities, such as:

Painting, drama, dance, music, literature, photography, film and other art forms provide immigrants and refugees a creative space for exploration and expression of identities, for challenging discrimination and social exclusion and for fostering intercultural dialogue" (McGregor and Ragab 2016: 7-8).

The possibility to explore and express identities through the arts, as the study suggests, is important because it serves the purpose, on the one hand, to reinforce group identities and on the other to promote intercultural dialogue while challenging discrimination. This is clearly the case for an organisation such as BSK London, which uses different art forms as a way to explore

a British Bangladeshi identity, as well as to promote a dialogue within the Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets and with the wider local community in East London. Similarly, for Gujarati community groups in Loughborough, whose members have gone through multiple trajectories of migration, the preservation of cultural heritage through dance represents a means to assert multi-layered identities, promote social inclusion and foster intercultural solidarity. This reflects the findings of a study conducted by Netto in Scotland (2008), which stresses the importance of providing ethnic minorities with the opportunity to preserve their cultural heritage in order to challenge social exclusion, reinforce self-esteem and to promote their integration into the country of settlement. As she observes: "To learn about their heritage and traditions, transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to the next [...] is viewed as an important means of increasing self-esteem and enabling individuals to 'operate from a position of cultural strength' as a bulwark in a society often perceived to be racist" (2008: 55).

Moreover, having the opportunity to access, and to perform in, public spaces, like the ones afforded by the Diwali Lights Switch On event and the Mela in Loughborough, as well as the Season of Bangladrama and the Boishakhi Mela in London, is especially relevant for the promotion of intercultural dialogue. As we have seen in both cases, these public events offer local South Asian groups the possibility to implement their visibility and to show them as part and parcel of the local community, while also allowing them to reach out to a wider audience. This is essential in the promotion of intercultural dialogue because performing in public spaces offers people the chance to socialise and to counter negative stereotypes while also providing "opportunities for widening national culture to take account of diverse cultural trends and traditions" (Netto 2008: 60). This way, migrants' engagement in arts practices in the public sphere can actively promote social cohesion (see also Delhay 2008, Kidd et al. 2008).

These are important reflections because they directly point to the "political significance of cultural practices" (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008: 1193) and to the radical potential of the arts to promote social change. Indeed, both in Loughborough and in Tower Hamlets, South Asian cultural practices, be they British Gujarati or British Bangladeshi, are intimately linked to the anti-racist political struggle for visibility and inclusion and/or the implementation of multicultural politics. Through the examples we discussed in this article, the political significance of cultural practices is seen not only in terms of the local councils' efforts to use the arts to promote social cohesion, but especially in the ways in which individual groups approach creative practices as a way to preserve cultural heritage while at the same time staking a claim to belonging.

Conclusion

Engagement in the arts for groups of South Asian heritage in Loughborough and in Tower Hamlets is intimately connected to the social, cultural and political conditions of settlement in the two areas, as well as to the different (ethnic, caste and class, regional, linguistic, cultural and religious) backgrounds of the groups that we considered in the analysis. While in Tower Hamlets the cultural landscape is dominated by grassroots Bengali organisations, often with direct connections to Bangladesh (as in the case of BSK London), in Loughborough arts-based community activities are in continuous negotiation with the predominantly white British local culture. Engagement in cultural and artistic activities in London is directly related to the struggle against racism and to a process of claiming the right to space in the area, as well as varying degrees of nationalist and secularist perspectives on Bangladeshi cultural heritage. On the other hand, in Loughborough, artistic and cultural activities are expressions of pride in cultural and religious heritage as well as enactments of a multicultural ethos that has been retained within the town's community organisations. The politics of identity expressed through cultural practices in Loughborough are not so explicitly informed, as it has been in the case of London, by concerns about the (racist) marginalisation of minorities in the public arena. However, the public events in which these practices are performed were developed by key individuals and intercultural

organisations that challenged racial discrimination, and given the size of the town and the context of the recent decline in a sense of community cohesion in the Loughborough area, retain their significance.

Artistic activities in both cases though represent a way to address questions of identity in the diaspora through self-representation - including reflections on questions of belonging, inclusion/exclusion and intercultural relations. In the case of London, engagement in cultural activities on the one hand allows members of the British Bangladeshi community to articulate concerns proper of the community (both of its internal struggles as well as the struggle with the wider British society and culture) while on the other, the very act of performing in a public space, on a platform offered by a local institution, allows the same organisation to stake their claim to belong, and to belong as British Bangladeshi, not just the one or the other. Public initiatives such as the Boishakhi Mela and the Season of Bangladrama emerge thus as crucial events for the promotion of intercultural dialogue in Tower Hamlets. And yet, even though the arts represent a valuable resource for the articulation of a British Bangladeshi identity in Tower Hamlets, this is not readily available to everyone. The multi-layered character of the British Bangladeshi community, and the varying degrees of religious and secularist perspectives on Bangladeshi culture, make arts-based performances a terrain of contestation, as seen in Eade and Garbin's analysis of the Boishakhi Mela (2002). In Loughborough, with the Mela as a platform for the distinct cultural practices representing the diverse Asian population of the town and in this 'celebrating diversity', intra- and inter-community differences, internal struggles and experiences of racism are less explicit, however, solidarity and the assertion of belonging to overlapping communities is claimed. Events such as the Mela provide an important platform for cultural practices such as Gujarati dance forms and other South Asian arts, as it is the audibility and visibility of these performances that "take us beyond the subjectivities of diasporic experience into the realms of political struggle and activism, interacting with the political work of diasporic assertion" (Ramnarine 2007: 13).

The comparison between the two sites reveals how the identity work produced by engaging in arts and creative activities performs very differently in line with the different political circumstances within which it takes place. However, in both case studies, cultural and artistic activities of British Asian communities, and their embeddedness within the local life of both Loughborough and East London, speak of a "de-marginalisation" (Julien and Mercer 1988) of minorities' cultural practices, which actively call for an understanding of national identity as inclusive and has the potential of promoting political solidarity. As O'Neill in fact posits:

Arts and culture are profoundly important in processes of inclusion, including the creative regeneration of identities, communities, and subjectivities. Additionally, arts and culture ... are integral to socio-cultural regeneration and important in fostering cultural citizenship and social justice. Cultural citizenship is understood here as: the right to presence and visibility, not marginalization; the right to dignity and maintenance of lifestyle, not assimilation to the dominant culture; and the right to dignifying representation, not stigmatization (2013: 53).

And yet, while in both locations the cultural activities and political activism (against racism or in defence of multiculturalism) of South Asian groups, be it British Bangladeshis or Gujaratis, seem well established, their significance cannot be stressed enough, given the current resurgence of narrow white-ethnic nationalism and racism, which, according to recent reports, currently represents the fastest-growing terrorist threat in the UK (Dodd and Grierson 2019).

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