

Dissonant belongings: The evolving spatial identities of young Muslim men in the UK

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Title:**The Evolving Spatial Identities of Young British Muslim Men in Birmingham, UK****Abstract:**

Since 2001 a number of controversial and sometimes violent events in the UK and elsewhere have raised anxieties around British Muslim male identities. The problematisation of those identities now framed around the supposed conflict between Britishness and Muslim-ness. Yet these discourses of the belonging of young Muslim identities often underplay or fail to consider the increasing importance of local, British spaces in ethnically diverse towns and cities, shaping and creating new dynamics of identification.

This study draws upon extensive ethnographic research and mobile interviews to provide a comprehensive study of these evolving spatial identities of British young Muslim men. It uses Birmingham as a case-study area, a city in which more than a fifth of the population describe themselves as holding to a Muslim faith. The study contrasts how the everyday experiences which underpin Muslim identity stand in stark contrast to less tangible notions of Britishness. The paper concludes by positing that young Muslim male identities are characterised by a dissonance, between the emotional place-belongingness that evokes for them a sense of inclusion, and the politics of belonging that marks out their exclusion.

Keywords:

Belonging, Muslim, Identity, Place-attachment, Spatiality

1. Introduction

Since 2001 a number of events in the UK and abroad have helped draw Muslims as a problematic group in North America and Western Europe (Allen 2010, Parekh 2006). Acts of terrorism including in New York in 2001, London in 2005 and Paris in 2015 have given rise to scrutiny of the lives of Muslims living in the 'West'. Additionally, as Phillips (2006) has discussed, riots in British cities in the summer of 2001 involving British-Asians have been used to construct discourses of Muslims in the UK living apparently separate, parallel lives from fellow citizens (see also Community Cohesion Review Team 2001). Furthermore, cultural conflicts between religious practice and secular ideals have led to the formation of ideological boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims (Fetzer and Soper 2003, Modood 2009, Savage 2010). The result of these episodes and discourses has been increased societal anxiety around the place of Muslims in Britain and Europe, which Parekh (2008) dubbed the 'Muslim Question'.

The political and popular discourses that draw Muslims as dangerous, segregated and disillusioned have profound implications for the identities and belonging of British Muslims. Crucially for this article, these implications for identity are also heavily spatialised and it is with this recognition that geographers have recently begun to respond to the more divisive discourses. Hopkins (2007, 2009) in his research with young Muslim men in Scotland in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks has produced a more nuanced set of discourses about their strength of belonging on different scales. These include work by Phillips (2006) and Gale (2013), who have challenged the notion that Muslims are deliberately self-segregating and thus constructing the conditions for social and civil unrest. In Birmingham, the site of this study, Mohammad (2013) has explored the fluid identities of Pakistani women and the

modes through which their identities are understood and performed. Indeed Birmingham is a significant location; Muslims comprise over 21% of the population of the second largest British city (ONS 2011), and its local authority was in 2007 given more money than any other to tackle radicalisation of Muslims as part of the 'Prevent' programme (Thomas 2010). Birmingham has also been the site of prominent counter-terrorism operations and controversial counter-terrorist surveillance schemes (Isakjee and Allen 2013).

It is within such an atmosphere of unease that this extensive research project on young Muslim identity in the city took place between 2008 and 2012. The findings suggest that the identities of young Muslim men in Birmingham were not explained by a conflict between 'Britishness' and the Muslim faith. Instead their sense of belonging was characterised by a contrast between their everyday lives which are underpinned by attachments to local spaces and emphasising their inclusion, and the divisive political discourses that they encountered, which marked out the potential for their exclusion.

This paper utilises sociological and geographical theories of belonging with an emphasis on scale and spatiality to investigate the struggle over what Yuval-Davis (2006) and Antonsich (2010) would term, the belonging and the 'politics of belonging' of young Muslim men in Birmingham. It begins by reviewing literatures of belonging and providing a methodological overview before going through the empirical data exploring the way in which the politics of belonging plays out in relation to young Muslims' feelings of Britishness. These political belongings are contrasted with the more personal sense of belonging and feeling 'at home', to uncover the importance of local neighbourhood spaces in constructing British Muslim male identities in Birmingham. The paper concludes by reflecting on the dissonance

between participants' contested politics of belonging as British Muslims, and their deepening ties to local spaces as focal points for their identity.

2. Identity and Belonging of Muslim Men

Identity is fundamentally intertwined with space and place; it is difficult to answer questions about who we are without reference to where we are from. Global migration and modernity, rather than reducing the significance of place, have provided an impetus to study the new fluid dimensions of spatial identity, as exemplified by the significant body of literatures on diasporas and place-attachment (Bloomfield 2006, Lewicka 2011). Place-attachment however, is usually utilised by researchers in dealing with singular and narrow scales. Whilst Lewicka (2011) in her review on place-attachment literature has identified seven different sites or scales of place-attachment, with some notable exceptions (Lackzo 2005. Tuan 1974), traditional studies tended not to investigate attachment to places on a range of different scales concurrently.

Yet 'belonging' can be conceptualised by these very contradictions of identities, between different places and on different scales. The word 'belonging' brings together the aforementioned feelings towards place on different scales, allowing us to look at these attachments through the same lens. Furthermore, the conceptual value of 'belonging' over 'place-attachment' is its ability to incorporate both the emotional and political dimensions of place-identity, through Yuval-Davis' (2007) conceptualisation of 'belonging' and the 'politics of belonging'. Taking the first notion, belonging is about feeling safe and 'at home' (Hedetoft and Hjort 2002, Ignatieff 1994). 'Home' is not necessarily just a physical space in

this instance; as some feminist authors have uncovered, homes in the physical sense can be spaces of violence or fear (see Blunt and Dowling 2006, Blunt and Varley 2004). Instead the sense of being 'at home' in the context of belonging to a place is to be understood as a psychological attachment, imagined and felt. Moreover, as 'belonging' is a commonly understood word in the English language (Antonsich 2010), its use allows for researchers to most directly and effectively engage participants into discussing their identities and attachments.

Antonsich (*ibid*, 647-648), in a concerted attempt to define 'belonging', identifies five factors which contribute to the emotional feeling of being 'at home'. First he cites autobiographical factors; experiences, memories, proximity to family members and the places where a person might have spent their childhood are all included in this category. Secondly, relational factors are noted as the social and personal ties that people have with others that might tie people to given places. Thirdly, are cultural factors; a familiar language, cultural traditions and expressions might all serve to imbue a person to a sense of intimacy with particular surroundings. Fourthly economic factors play a part in creating a sense of home; being tied into an economy, Antonsich claims, is necessary for place-belongingness due to the material advantages and social benefits of economic embeddedness. Lastly, legal factors are cited: the provision of security as well as access to healthcare, education and social security.

Yet the emotional attachments constitute only one component of belonging. The second component of belonging is what Yuval-Davis (2006) referred to as the 'politics of belonging'. The 'politics of belonging' refers to a set of potentially exclusionary political discourses which seek to shape notions of who does belong – and crucially who does not. Crowley thus

(1999) defined the politics of belonging as the dirty work of boundary maintenance and in this way, it can be considered to be specifically about un-belonging. It draws the focus of debate towards political struggle to influence the attachments, affection, dependency or lack thereof, felt by people towards a group. The questions that the politics of belonging seek to influence are about how we define who is 'us' and who is 'them', and what one has to do to be included in the group or excluded from it. Research into the politics of belonging typically explores the politics of migrant's belonging in the framework of diasporas (see Westwood and Phizackela 2000). The two dimensions of belonging however are also linked; the politics of belonging can be used to exclude or include groups, which in turn will have an effect on their feelings of belonging to a place. Similarly, collectively held feelings of attachment can be harnessed for political action.

Yuval-Davis (2006; 2007) emphasises that the politics of belonging are situated temporally, intersectionally and spatially. Specific agendas at any point in time, such as counter-terrorism fears around Muslims, can shift the dynamics of belonging. Intersectionality remains significant as the politics of belonging does not act evenly on members of a group (Nash 2008, Yuval-Davis 2007). For instance, a professional Muslim woman in a wealthy suburb might have a very different experience of those politics in comparison with a young Muslim man from a deprived inner-city neighbourhood. Similarly, Yuval-Davis (2006) refers to globalisation's structural forces that produce the migrations and movements and which bring issues of belonging to the fore. But as geographers often note, spaces themselves are being shaped and reshaped through the performance and actions of those who interact with it (de Certeau 1984; Bhabha 1994). For Cresswell (2003) space itself *is* process, and that being so, place is understood best as meaning being imbued onto spaces. This meaning

which is brought to bear on spaces consequently shifts behaviours within them, and attitudes towards them, including feelings of belonging. The implications are that belonging needs to be interrogated critically and politically to understand the multiple identities, conflicts, emotions and securities of those who reside within them (Jones and Jackson 2014).

In this vein, geographers and sociologists have explored complex Muslim identities through lens of politics, place and gender. Drawing in particular upon qualitative research with Pakistani Muslim women's activism in the UK, Werbner (2000) argued that pitting of nation-state and religious loyalties was insufficient to understand the complexity of evolving Muslim identities. Werbner (ibid) stresses the importance of spaces of protest and political acceptance for Muslim activists; this is also recognised by Gale and O'Toole (2009, 2010) in their studies of political engagement of young British ethnic minority activists. Although O'Toole and Gale's (2010) sampling of participants goes beyond young British Muslims, it shares this paper's interest in identities over scale; specifically they draw out how young respondents made connections and saw a continuum between community assistance in their local British neighbourhoods including Birmingham – and protests against global transgressions in Iraq or Palestine.

Other studies exploring British Muslim identities have placed gender and place at the fore. Hopkins (2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2009) has produced a comprehensive set of literatures on young Muslim masculinities in Scotland. These have produced valuable insights into how masculinities are performed in relation to ethics, femininities, sexuality and localities. Particularly relevant to this paper, drawing upon research carried out in 2001, Hopkins (2008: 190) has also suggested the possibility that experiences of stigmatisation and

discrimination may be having the effect of strengthening place-attachments in the Pollokshields area in Edinburgh. Similarly, Archer (2003) has posited that Asian masculinities were evolving into a more hardened form, relative to the soft masculinities that previously characterised Asian male identities. Dwyer et al (2008) have also written on the masculinities of rebellion and religion and class of British Pakistanis in Slough and Bradford. Specifically, their observation that religious identification of Muslim men were strong and motivated by rituals and observance are also echoed in this paper.

This study builds upon this existing scholarship, and uses the aforementioned framework of belonging and the politics of belonging, to explore how belongings are being experienced and constructed for young Muslim men in Birmingham.

3. Methodology and Positionality

The methods used for this study were a combination of ethnography and participatory walked interviews (Evans and Jones 2011) with Muslim men aged between 18 and 30. All interviews were recorded on a dictaphone; in walked interviews these were attached to a lanyard and worn by interviewees. The interviews were transcribed, and all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. All interview data and ethnographic field-notes were coded manually using a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 1990).

The research took place in inner-city suburbs of Birmingham between 2008 and 2012. The study was originally designed to collect data via traditional 'static' interviews on the subject of identity and belonging with young Muslim men in the city. However, following five pilot interviews and series of workshops on identities with fifty young British Muslims, two

problems were identified. Firstly, it became apparent through the preliminary research that many aspects of Muslim identity and belonging would be tied to local sights and spaces, important to the respondents, yet not always familiar to the researcher. Secondly it was feared that younger participants and particularly those unfamiliar with academic research, might not feel comfortable enough in a traditional interview setting, to express themselves about the sometimes deeply personal issues of identity.

For these reasons a walked interview method was devised alongside the ethnographic research, whereby participants would choose to walk through parts of Birmingham which held meaning for them, whilst discussing broader national and global issues around belonging and identity. In all, twenty such interviews were conducted with participants. All but one of the walking interviewees chose to conduct the walks in their immediate local neighbourhoods. In their typology of walking interviews Evans and Jones (2011, 850) described this particular type of method, with the route chosen by the participant as a 'participatory walking interview'. The method proved to be successful; with participants literally directing the interview, they became more confident as well as comfortable in articulating themselves, even if expressing difficult or emotional sentiments (Jones et al 2008). It also introduced a performative element to the study as the researcher and participants were able to engage in some everyday social practices, bringing the researcher closer to lived experiences that shaped the identities of participants (Kusenbach 2003). Furthermore the method allowed for the capture of what de Certeau (1984, 83) described as the intertwining of participants' movements, their memories, histories and imaginations, which may have eluded capture through relatively traditional interview methods.

A criticism of this approach might be that in ascertaining the tropes of identity and senses of belonging, by providing the stimuli of local place, the conversation would tend towards the local as opposed to national or transnational aspects of identity and belonging. I would counter this with two points; first this study's turn towards integrating local belongings was partly a response to the pilot work conducted, which suggested that Muslim identities needed to be understood beyond the British/Muslim binary. Secondly, the walked interviews were part of a wider set of methods which helped deliver a comprehensive set of qualitative data on belongings across various scales. The workshops on British and Muslim identities and the focussed explorations on Britishness and Muslim-ness in interviews and throughout the ethnographic research ensured that those facets of belonging would not be pre-emptively sidelined. Furthermore, interviews with youth workers seeking their perspectives on these issues were also used to contextualise findings.

As someone who had grown up within a Muslim family in Birmingham, living alongside largely Indian and Pakistani Muslim communities, I was able to draw upon knowledge of local Muslim communities from my own lived experiences – and I could more easily access youth clubs, mosques and community organisations from where to conduct ethnographic research or to source interviewees. As Shah and Saghera (see Dwyer et al 2008) found, being considered an 'Asian Muslim' was likely an advantage in establishing trust with interviewees and community organisations to recruit participants. Despite being non-religious, I found myself easing back into previously familiar ways of talking: my voice and my accent would change and I found myself inter-dispersing sentences with the religious linguistic ticks¹ that I hear when speaking with family members or religious friends. For

¹ Such ticks included Arabic greetings and utterances such as 'insha-allah' (God-willing) and 'alhumdulillah' (thanks to God) which are everyday phrases used regularly by many Muslims in conversation with each other.

Mohammed's research with Muslim women (2001), being seen as an outsider helped interviewees feel confident that data given to her would remain confidential. For this study however, slipping into an easy familiarity with participants generally allowed them to feel comfortable, and allowed for sensitive and emotional conversations on identity to take place.

I cannot however claim to wholly be an 'insider'. There is an extent to which younger participants in particular may have perceived me as a bit of a curiosity – someone who didn't quite sound or dress like them or their peers, someone who never talked too explicitly about their own religious views or practices and who now lived in a student-dominated part of the city that few of the younger interviewees would be familiar with. This note of my own positionality as an ethnographic researcher is not intended as an attempt to 'solve' problems of positionality but to provide an understanding of how the research and subsequent production of knowledge is situated in the context of this study (see Rose 1997).

4. Britishness, Islam and the Politics of Belonging

Binary categorisations of identity such as Islam/Britishness can often obscure the nuanced reality of hybrid identities of British Muslims. To make matters more complicated still, Britishness is not easily defined, as national identities are both imagined and constructed (Anderson 1991). Colley (1992) in a reflection of Britishness through the last 250 years suggests that the idea of the British nation has always been used to distinguish Britain from the 'Other'. He (ibid) suggests that in the post-war era, with a lack of any external threat, the 'Other' has become somewhat of an internal threat, helping to define what is not

'British'. Similarly Robins (1997) and Wallwork and Dixon (2004) detail in their studies the socially constructed, imagined and often exclusionary nature of nationhood, with specific reference to Britishness. Through their studies it is clear that 'Britishness' is a term that fits in with Yuval-Davis' (2006) notion of the politics of belonging; she argues that there is a space in between legalistic notions of citizenship and emotional components of belonging which can be used and manipulated to exclude the Other.

Given the politically loaded nature of the term then, it is perhaps unsurprising that during interviews for this project the subject of Britishness was one which would draw out the difficulties of defining nationality for our participants. Asking participants about their sense of Britishness often elicited responses characterised by ambivalence. All of the participants expressed a sense of their being British and the strength of those assertions varied. However participants also struggled to come to explain what being British meant for them:

I wouldn't say I belong to Britain. But I wouldn't see where else I belong.

(Abuzar, Interview)

I think I belong here in Britain. In Birmingham – in Sparkhill. Well I live here right?

(Idris, Interview)

The participants were mostly third-generation citizens in the UK, and when the discussions moved towards comparing belonging in Britain with any attachments they had to nations in South Asia or the Middle East, the sense of Britishness seemed to become a little more clear:

To be honest with you I'm a British Muslim Pakistani... at the end of the day I was born here, grew up here and I've been back to my old country a lot. I do love it there...it's where my parents were brought up...But I do see England as my home though. Cause its where I grew up.

(Imran, Interview)

If you ask an immigrant his home country he don't say [the UK] because his friends and all that aren't here but my friends...everybody is here. So when you go back to Pakistan you have a good time and that but my friends are here. This is it.

(Sadiq, Interview)

The references to Pakistan above are significant - although a few of the respondents spoke about some emotional attachment to their parent's homelands, such sentiment was not volunteered by all but two of the participants when discussing belonging – both of whom were migrants to the UK. The very mention of diasporal homelands had to be elicited by the interviewer. This tells us that being 'Pakistani', 'Bangladeshi' or 'Indian' may no longer be as significant a component of identity for third-generation Muslims as it may have been for their parents. Furthermore young Muslims in this study did not make clear distinctions between separate English and British identities, as exemplified in Imran's interview excerpt above. The words 'British' and 'English' were often used interchangeably to denote feelings of a Britishness; this is in stark contrast to the findings of Hopkins (2007b), where young Scottish Muslims referred to a Scottishness that was distinct and apart from British identity. However, when it came to defining what the nature of that Britishness was, rather than reflecting on romantic attachments to an imagined 'Britain', respondents pointed to the simple physical locations of their lives. When asked about identity or whether or not

respondents felt British, the answers and discussions tended to revolve around the UK as the geographical and social context for friendship and familial networks and related everyday experiences. The question evoked 'place-belongingness' as Antonsich (2010) describes it, rather than the potentially exclusionary 'politics of belonging'.

However there is an interesting caveat. Despite this rather practically and pragmatic attitude towards national identity, if the Britishness of participants was questioned or threatened, Britishness was much more strongly and emotionally asserted by them, to demonstrate that they have a *right* to belong. To demonstrate, Zaahid during his interview touched upon the spectre of racism and xenophobia he experienced as a young man walking through less diverse areas of the city, referring to being thought of not as a British person but as a 'Paki'. It is then that he makes the following observation:

When I went over to Pakistan they was friendly,...But you go there and they call you 'unglesee'² – you come here and they call you Paki. It's a bit like being hit like a tennis ball from one place to another – you don't know where you belong. People say a dog can be born in a barn but doesn't make it a horse you know. I would say though I belong in England, in Lozells.

(Zaahid, Interview)

Similarly, Anwar, is a young Yemeni interviewee who had previously defined Britishness as "only having a passport." Later in his interview he was narrating an incident he experienced whilst working in a nearby predominantly white neighbourhood as a pizza-delivery driver. He was warned by his employer for whom he delivered fast food, that his Muslim dress and appearance might not be appreciated by his customers:

² Whilst the word 'unglese' translates from urdu and punjabi literally as 'English', its use in this manner is best understood as 'White British' or English-speaking.

“...and I was thinking, what the fuck is that about! Screw you man. I don’t need to be white to be British. I’m just paying tax, and if my moneys good enough for it...I should be good enough to be called British. I am British.

(Anwar, Interview)

In the interview excerpts above, identity is called into question by outsiders but is countered with a strong passionate assertion of British identity. It is in this space that the emotional aspects of belonging and the politics of belonging collide. Britishness might be an altogether ‘woolly’ concept, but it suddenly seems more concrete when an actor moves to exclude someone who they believe does not conform. Britishness in this instance becomes an identity cemented through exclusion both for those who seek to exclude and those who resist that exclusion. Through this intersection between personal identity and the politics of location (hooks 1991; 145, Yuval-Davis 2007, Antonsich 2010), counter-hegemonic discourse begins to take form. This is something that Nasser, a youth worker from Aston is aware of, and encourages:

We’ve done many workshops and one was about the army and in World War 2. Many from the Asian subcontinent and with Bangladeshis Gujaratis and Indians (were) on the front...people don’t know that. So when people say “fuck off to your own country” – they can answer and say listen, I am part of this country, this is my history and this is the role my forefathers played - and I am part of it.

(Nasser, Interview)

As far as feelings of belonging to Britain are concerned, the participants communicated a dynamic set of emotions which adapted to suit different contexts. But what of the ‘Muslim’ aspect of identity that is potentially not constrained by citizenship, language, by physical

boundaries of land, or the imaginary boundaries drawn between nation-states? All but one of the young Muslims who were spoken to expressed some form of Muslim identity and many participants encountered during the ethnographic research went beyond that and suggested that they belong to a wider Muslim 'community', in addition to other non-faith-based communities. As Dwyer et al (2008) had suggested, the Muslim aspects of their identity were not only immersed and intertwined with other facets of identity, but crucially they were played out and practiced consciously in the realm of the 'everyday'. Eating and drinking according to the laws of their faith or fasting in Ramadan for instance demonstrated the conscious everyday performance of faith as an embodied practice which regulated the body itself. Similarly, attending the mosque with varying degrees of regularity to take part in the rituals of bowing and kneeling before God reinforced that Muslim identity through embodied ritual. Tellingly, no participant projected the idea of a conflict between their Islamic beliefs, Muslim identities and 'Britishness'. Nonetheless, Muslim identity resonated and held deep meaning for them, as typified in this statement made during an interview with Bilal:

I'm a Muslim. I'm proud of being a Muslim. It comes first. Its my religion – what I'm brought up with. We don't practice it 100% but we are still Muslims and we pray and it means something. We believe.

(Bilal, Interview)

Such sentiments were echoed by two youth workers in separate interviews who made the following claim:

(Young Muslims) couldn't hold onto nationality; they were only ever two questions away from having their Britishness questioned: Where are you from? Birmingham.

No, I mean where are you really from? But their faith is beyond question: 'I'm a Muslim.'

(Kamran, Interview)

For some youth-workers the fragility of young Muslims' Britishness in this way amounted to a crisis of identity, yet most participants throughout the ethnographic research expressed their comfort with their hybrid identities, except when they felt discrimination, unfair treatment or when the notion of Britishness was used to exclude them. As McLoughlin (1996) has suggested, not only do British Muslims have an array of different identities, but those different aspects of identity can come to the fore depending on any specific context or situation. Any 'crisis' of Muslim men in resolving dual identities of Muslim-ness and Britishness were simply not felt by most of the young Muslims interviewed for this project.

Ultimately Muslim identity might be easier to hold onto for young Muslim men than Britishness due to the fact that values and everyday behaviour are consciously influenced by religious belief. For participants of this study, it influenced how often they prayed, how and with whom they had romantic relationships, what they ate and how they socialised outside of work and the home. Their Muslim identity was constructed by and embedded in everyday action: not only ideological but also performed. However there is another dimension and location of belonging and identity which was significant for the participants yet seldom recognised; a dimension characterised by attachments to local spaces in inner-city neighbourhoods of Birmingham.

5. Emotional Belonging: Local Spaces and Everyday Life

In stark contrast to the discussions on Britishness, participants did not require prompting to elucidate upon their attachments and affinity towards the local spaces around which they had grown up. During the ethnographic and preliminary parts of the research, participants spoke passionately of attachment to local spaces - and the subsequent walked interviews allowed those voices to be amplified. The rich experiences that underpinned those feelings of local belonging have been coded into three categories: firstly, memories and narratives of belonging from personal history; secondly, the use of local spaces as sites of social interaction; and thirdly, the businesses and services that mark the economic embeddedness of Muslims in parts of inner-city Birmingham.

i. Narratives of belonging from personal history

I walked this road for many years...So it's a case of these roads (being) special to me. Every road I look at I've seen them develop. I've seen them change. It's part of my personal history.

(Naheed, Interview)

Everyday practices and routines play an important role in shaping space and attachment towards it. Over a long period of time individual experiences build up to a narrative of a resident's life: identity intertwined with space. This is why identity was often expressed by participants as if retelling a personal drama - a measured yet evolving script, being updated and adjusted in a bid to retain the thread upon which identity hangs (explored in Bauman 1996, Gubrium and Holstein 1998). And this thread inevitably involved the very physical

structures that make up their respective neighbourhoods. For those with longer histories in neighbourhoods of the city, a feeling of comfort and belonging became stronger (Lewicka 2005, 392). Corcoran (2002) posits that the physical environment can itself come to represent the very security and comfort that a person feels living within those spaces, reproducing feelings of place-attachment. But the narratives provided as part of this study also demonstrate that security and resistance are also built up through local knowledge of potential threats, and the development of tactics to be shielded from such threats. Samir gives the following story about being mugged as a teenager, but being saved by using the name of a feared 'gangster' in the neighbourhood:

[Samir disrupts the conversation to point into a passing car]...that was a local gangster named Yunus...I don't talk to him much thankfully. I remember once actually, I was on the bus [with] my brother. We were 12-13 at the time. And my brother had a Nokia [phone]...and this guy says, 'give us your phone' ... And we...got off the bus just up there [pointing to bus stop on Stratford Road] and they followed us, started chasing us.

[After catching up with us]...they started pushing us. And then we said "We know Yunus" and he was like, "You know Yunus? Ah ok". And that was it! So it kind of helps to know these people [laughs].

(Samir, Interview)

Samir cuts a slight figure, at no more than 5'6 in height, friendly and far from intimidating in his mannerisms. However, so confident is he in his use of tactics to counter threats that just seconds after narrating this story he insists that Sparkhill was the,

...kind of environment where it's relatively safe. Even though it's quite worn... You can send your 10 year old son to go down to the chippy, get some food for ya. Without any problems. Without any problems.

(Samir, Interview)

Another interviewee and participant Osman similarly described the 'cruel world' of parts of Small Heath, at one point arguing that residents needed to move out of the neighbourhood to escape social problems that he perceived to be prevalent, but he too simultaneously asserted his contentedness living in the neighbourhood. One may ask what lies behind these seeming contradictions. Billig (2006, 251-252) in a review of place-attachment and risk perception cites a number of psychological studies which show that attitudes towards risk are socially constructed rather than entirely rational.

However something else is also at play – these sorts of narratives from participants which also include being chased by dogs, being hit by a freak tornado and playing up the dangers of crime some spaces all play a part in exploring the types of experiences which can accumulate to create a knowledge and sense of place of a neighbourhood unique to residents as insiders. They can also be read as an assertion of the masculinity of these young men: their intimate knowledge of local place allows them to negotiate danger or even confront it. This observation chimes with Hopkins' (2006, 346) work on youthful Muslim masculinities in Glasgow in which he suggests some participants might have been asserting dominant masculine identities to challenge perceptions of weak Asian masculinity compared with Black-British counterparts. Whilst this study could not reach that specific conclusion, participants were clearly able to see a richness of meaning in spaces that was invisible to outsiders.

Part of this richness lies in the memories formed through the youthful and childhood use of informal social spaces, which then become significant contributors towards place identity (Fenster 2005, 221; hooks 2001). Identification with childhood experiences serve not only as markers of important events, but also as a reflection of one's life. Leach (2005, 300) compares the act of walking in a familiar place to that of a child expressing joy at seeing their own reflection in a mirror. In the series of interviews conducted there was a great emphasis placed upon the role of childhood play spaces particularly on the feelings of attachment to local areas. The following quote is a typical recollection from a participant:

We used to play near the garages. There was a lot of grass but there was a hill here – might have been soil dumped from a few places which created a small hill. It was council owned but we still played here. We played cricket on this side of the bump on the flat part and it wasn't tarred like it is now...it was bubbly but it was good fun.

(Naheed, Interview)

For other residents too such spaces held significance. For instance, few of the residents of Witton would have access to an open space in their back yards, so boys were allowed out by parents into open spaces on derelict land between rows of garages situated behind houses; here they could play football, using trees as goalposts and milk crates as wickets (Figure 1). Abdullah, a participant from Sparkhill talks nostalgically about games of football in the park after religious classes on weekday evenings. Similarly Adam from Balsall Heath talks about playing in what the young people referred to as 'Arena', a former football and basketball court along the Highgate dual-carriageway. But just as these places were sites of play for

participants as young children, similar nearby spaces continue to be the focal points of social interaction as they grow older.



Figure 1: Urban space behind Fentham Road where young Astonians would play football and cricket - now a purpose-built play area has been built (own photograph).

ii. *Belonging in spaces of social interaction*

The thing is where would you move to that gives you a community? The houses might be nicer in the suburbs, the streets cleaner, but that's not all that makes a place. It's ultimately people that make the place.

(Ahmad, Interview)

The most significant advantage of the walked interview method was in discovering how important social everyday experiences were intrinsically tied to local spaces, which then become significant sites of belonging. On average during a walked interview which would last a little under an hour, a participant would meet three people, and stop to talk to them. These incidents (rather than 'interruptions', for they play a crucial role in the interview itself), were the starkest examples of how social connections, interaction and contact was fundamental to establishing a sense of place-identity and belonging for participants.

A prime example of this occurrence is an interview which was conducted with the participant Zaahid, which lasted for a little less than an hour. Less than five minutes into the interview Zaahid received a phone-call from a friend asking if he could organise a game of football in a nearby sports centre. He agreed, and by chance less than ten minutes afterwards, some other young men passing by in a car stopped to talk to Zaahid, and were invited to play. Thirty minutes after that he met another group chatting on a street corner, from whom two agreed to take part in the game, (but not before asking what the strange device is dangling from his neck and recording the conversation). After joking that he was a spy or 'informant' he summarised who was attending the game so far:

Listen, we got football at 9[pm] – you know Asad. We're gonna play [against] some of his lads. Me you, Baja, Asad, Spektor, Chief...

(Zaahid, interview)

It was then he turned to me and reflected on this interaction and what it demonstrated:

This is the community thing – this is what brings me back here. Funny innit...I've been to Alum Rock, I've been to Aston but they haven't got that community. Next door neighbours are talking but it's not the same.

(Zaahid, interview)

However, it is not necessarily that Aston has any more or less of a strong feeling of community. It is simply that Zaahid's networks or perhaps the lack of them in Aston, would mean that cannot feel as 'at home' as he does here. Zaahid's strength of connections in Lozells is already such that through a walk along just a handful of streets he can arrange for a football team to take part in a match that very evening. As Dourish (2006, 7) has described, the bounded spaces of Lozells for the participant become legible, understandable, practical and navigable through these everyday encounters.

iii. Belonging through economy and services

Asian businesses are regarded as significant in studies of developing local economies and entrepreneurship in the UK. Existing literature tends to focus on how ethnic minority identities and social networks are utilised for economic purposes (Ram and Jones 2008; Basu and Altinay 2002). Businesses however, are not only sites of entrepreneurship but can

attain a collective critical mass which allows them to shape representations of surrounding areas. These representations too can become focal points for belonging and identity for the young Muslim participants in this study.

Most interviewees for this project were third-generation immigrants whose grandparents arrived from the Indian subcontinent. Stories of how older members of their family adapted to life in the UK have been told and re-told within families, as part of a narrative of belonging. These stories of migration were often narrated in interviews in conversation - and they typically included descriptions of how Asian businesses began to find a foothold in local communities. On walked interviews that took place near the high streets of Stratford Road in Sparkhill, Coventry Road in Small Heath, Alum Rock Road in Washwood Heath and Witton Road in Aston, interviewees elaborated upon the importance of the array of Asian businesses, including fast food outlets, sheesha cafes, dessert cafes, snooker halls, Asian fashion outlets and travel agencies. These local 'high-streets', have become representations of those neighbourhoods: to the visitor, Coventry Road *is* Small Heath, and Alum Rock Road *is* Washwood Heath.

On several of the recorded interviews the sound of Asian music, Islamic nasheeds (spiritual hymns) can be heard. You can hear passers-by conversing loudly in Punjabi, and hear stall-owners marketing international phone-cards and fried sweet-corn using urdu slogans. As Ip (2005) suggests in his study of a 'Chinatown' suburb of Brisbane in Australia, places such as these are indications of both economic capital and socio-cultural capital being imported into an area by immigrants. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the streetscape is transformed both physically and by cultural practice.



Figure 2: An Arab Restaurant, a Palestinian Charity store and Dessert café - faith-driven consumption on Coventry Road, Small Heath

Antonsich (2010) in his deconstruction of 'belonging' includes economic relationships as a key component of feelings of belonging. Whilst he talks separately about social and personal ties that bind people to place, the two can be linked; culturally-specific businesses also serve as sites of social interaction. Not only are they integral in the creation of mundane patterns of economic activity, but culturally specific businesses can also provide alternative culture and nightlife for young Muslim men whose avoidance of alcohol would make them unlikely to socialise in bars and nightclubs. These spaces in provide a potential focal point for an evening's social activities and for some participants, were integral spaces for their regular social activities:

You probably go to Alum Rock and have some food and go to play snooker in Soho Road or you go town and play snooker there. It's not as if we stay in Lozells every single day.

(Azim, Interview)

If I do go to town...you got Snow Hill snooker club. In 147 (another snooker club), more religious background going on – no smoking, no drinking. [it is] more strict. It depends where you want to go. If you want to drink or smoke, go [here], or religious brothers go elsewhere.

(Sadiq, Interview)

This last statement demonstrates the ways in which businesses can not only help focus identity and place-attachment, but in turn can reflect values. The avoidance of alcohol is usually a religious practice and for many Muslims this avoidance is also extended to establishments at which alcohol is served. Valentine et al (2010) suggested that this abstention filters Muslims from certain public spaces, and in response young can create their own oppositional leisure spaces. In Birmingham such oppositional spaces include the take-away outlets adapted with extra seating areas for those who want a cheap meal on a night out and the sheesha lounges and dessert-cafes which offer a *halal* (religiously lawful) alternative 'night out'. These establishments are often found in inner-suburbs of Birmingham with high numbers of Muslims, creating spaces which are ethnically distinct and religiously shaped. Gale (2004) has written on the ways in which mosques in Birmingham were architectural manifestation of religion – and this can be extended to new sites of

religious consumption. The character of such spaces change as Muslim stores, sounds, food and fashion appear to dominate particular parts of the city. These areas are living examples of precisely what Lewicka (2010, 218) referred to when suggesting that uses of a place can lead to them becoming a significant site of social and cultural *symbolism*, as well as social activity.

6. Conclusions: Dissonant Belongings of Politics and Place

Between the post-war period and the 1990s, the politics of belonging for Muslim migrants had pitted their allegiances to the UK against their attachments to diasporal homelands in South Asia. Since the Rushdie affair however, the identity conflict oft-assumed is that between a sense of Britishness and a Muslim identity. This binary too is a false one. This paper has demonstrated that there are indeed disparities and complexities between dimensions of belongings for young Muslim men in Birmingham. These are not characterised by a crisis between Muslim-ness and Britishness, but by the dissonance between the deeply-held and often emotional sense of belonging which ties young Muslims to local, indeed British spaces – and the potentially divisive politics of belonging around national identity which acts to polarise Muslim loyalties between their Muslim identities and British citizenship.

The everyday lives of participants in the study were based largely in inner-city Birmingham neighbourhoods, among large numbers of other second and third generation migrants, many of whom are Muslim. The very streets here are part of the process of the construction of a young Muslim male identity, they are important sites of social interactions and are the

focal point for a range of culturally and faith-specific services. All these processes lend spaces in inner-city East and South Birmingham a 'Muslim' character, projecting powerful representations which re-shape the politics of place (Creswell 2003). For Mohammad (2013) this character is what lent areas of inner-city Birmingham the moniker of 'Little Pakistan', but our participants routinely identified them as 'Muslim areas'. But they are also British spaces, and ones which for participants, evoked the place-belongingness and the ease of feeling 'at home'.

Britishness as a national identity and ideal, in contrast is seen in more practical terms as a consequence of participants' residency, their citizenship and their rights. Yet this does not mean young Muslims never strongly and emotionally espouse a sense of national identity; indeed interviewees would strongly assert their sense of belonging to Britain if it was challenged by encounters with exclusion and racism. These aggressions or challenges against belonging must then be negotiated by young Muslim's, who seek to re-assert a British national identity that hitherto such incidents can appear vague.

This paper points towards the dangers of discriminatory practice and stigmatisation, not just in relation to Muslim 'Others' but to Othered spaces which are increasingly focal-points for young Muslim male identity. Inner-city Birmingham neighbourhoods are, as Dudrah (2002) suggested, products and constructs of British post-colonial's history. The study has demonstrated how the city's Muslim inhabitants are re-making and co-constructing those spaces as part of a distinctively British geography.

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