3 No place like Birmingham? The politics of immobility, invisibility, and resentment

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Introduction: autobiography in/of the city

My title takes its cue from an old song by Randy Newman which eulogizes the American city of Birmingham, disavowing its image as an unsophisticated, provincial kind of place. The song comes from his 1974 album *Good Old Boys* featuring the populist discourses (and prejudices) of a series of unsavoury characters from the American South. One of the other songs on the album, “Rednecks”, reports that when a Birmingham politician (Lester Maddox) went on television in metropolitan New York, the people there treated him as a fool – to which the song’s narrator objects that, despite Maddox’s evident foolishness, the people of Birmingham nonetheless feel considerable loyalty to him, as their “fool”. The narrator insists that despite Maddox’s lack of metropolitan “cool”, the residents of New York are conceited to think that they are “better” than him (Hart, 2014). My own concern is not with that American city but with its namesake in the United Kingdom, the Birmingham in the English Midlands. However, I do want to invoke some of the things that the two cities have in common, and the populist politics at stake in all this are rather murky, as metropolitan sophisticates do tend to look down on both cities, disdainfully – especially with respect to their “funny” provincial accents.

My other starting point is how we should understand questions of place in the contemporary era, when we are so often told that geography is “dead”, having become a victim of the time-space compression of experience produced by various new communications technologies. In this situation, we are said to live, virtually, in a mediated world of the “generalised elsewhere” (Meyrowitz, 1986). The anthropologist Marc Auge argues that in this condition of what he calls hyper-modernity, we increasingly live in a world of “non-place” – where all the shopping centres, road systems, and airports are increasingly the same everywhere (Auge, 1995). Thus, architecturally, wherever we go, it seems that there is no distinctive place “there” when we finally arrive. In this respect, Birmingham has become, in the popular imagination of the United Kingdom, the emblematic case of just such a “non-place” (to speak oxymoronically – in so far as any non-place can have something distinctive about it).

As Charlotte Brunson (2008) explains in her introduction to the work of the Midlands Television Research Group, the whole area has a dismal set of connotations in the United Kingdom. Having been heavily bombed during the Second World War, it was subsequently rebuilt in concrete, in a particularly brutal architectural style of modernism which imitated North American “motor cities”. Its principal visual emblem has long been “Spaghetti Junction”, the nightmarish motorway intersection featured in Atom Egoyan’s (1999) film *Felicia’s Journey*.

I should probably confess, at this stage, that there is an autobiographical dimension to all this, as I grew up in Birmingham. As a result, I was witness to the first phase of Birmingham’s post-war town planning with its new brutalist architecture in the early 60s. I well remember my own grandfather refusing to go into the city centre any more once the pedestrians had been consigned to a series of badly lit underpasses in order to make way for the more “efficient” circulation of the cars through the city. I then spent my teenage years desperate to escape from what I experienced as Birmingham’s provincialism, desperate to get to London, where I believed the future to be located. Physical escape being impossible at that stage, the next best thing was visiting the newly installed icons of 60s modernism in the city centre. Despite my grandfather’s abhorrence of the city’s redesign, the 1960s Bull Ring shopping plaza became the Mecca of my own teenage years, as I and my friends faithfully made our pilgrimage there by bus every Saturday afternoon from the outer suburbs where we lived to gawp at the latest fashionable commodities in the shops. Of course, modernity is always relative, and over the following half-century, the Bull Ring plaza then gradually lost its shiny patina and was itself knocked down to make way for the more ambitiously titled Grand Central shopping centre.

Having spent my early teenage years desperate to escape the city, it was only with reluctance that I returned for my post-graduate education, in what later became known internationally as the Birmingham School of cultural studies. One could, in fact, reasonably regard the garnering of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’ (CCCS) international reputation as itself an academic (if inadvertent) form of the “place-making” strategies which have played a large part in Birmingham’s recent reinvention of itself. Indeed, it was only its strong international reputation that enabled Stuart Hall to save CCCS when it was originally threatened with closure by Birmingham University management in the early 1970s as a thorn in their side. These days, although CCCS was finally closed down by the university almost 20 years ago, it has become part of the city’s “heritage” strategy, with a commemorative blue plaque marking the otherwise undistinguished tower block in which the Centre was once housed. But my own relation to the city is even more complicated: in the 1980s, working at that time in the Comedia consultancy, I returned there as part of the team responsible for the strategy which transformed Broad Street (in the west of the city) into the heart of the new cultural tourism and entertainment district. Thus, in producing the subsequent

analysis, I write as one who has been, at different times, a victim, a bystander, a critic, and a participant in the city's reinvention of itself.

Geographies of circulation: material and virtual tourisms

I take as my starting point a newspaper report from early 2017 about an increase in tourism in the city, headlined “Birmingham shrugs off grimy image, as city enjoys . . . boom”, announcing that Birmingham hotels reported 2016 as their most successful year ever, as it had featured a doubling in the proportion of visitors from overseas (Wood, 2017). The immediate academic context for my reflections on this news item concerns debates about media, ritual, and forms of pilgrimage – and in particular tourism to mediated sites. Here I reference Lauren Berlant’s comments on how the construction of a community can often best be seen as an effect of both the virtual circulation of key symbolic imageries from centre to periphery, in combination with the physical circulation of the population around the sites whence these images originate. Thus, we have to deal with the two simultaneous modes of circulation “one in which . . . the symbolic goods circulate among the viewers, and another in which the viewers circulate among the symbolic sites of the built environment” (Berlant, 1991; Lash & Friedmann, 1992: 20). That, then, is to suggest that we need to approach media tourism as a particular subcategory of mobility, largely engaged in only by the relatively affluent citizens of the richer parts of the world but one which may nonetheless offer useful insights into a set of broader questions concerning the changing patterns of other modes of mobility, both virtual and actual.

The larger theoretical framework of my argument concerns some recent “materialist” interventions in new mobilities theory designed to redefine our idea of communications so as to include physical mobility and transport infrastructures within it rather than thinking of communications as only a matter of rhetoric and signs. Here I return to the classical 19th-century definition of communications as involving the mobility of bodies and things, as well as information and images (cf. Morley, 2017; Parks & Starosielski, 2015; Packer & Crofts Wiley, 2012; see also *Mobilities* journal 2006–present).

In this context, we also have to address the shifting balance between virtual and material geographies, as well as the role of transport networks in changing the significance of distance between places. Thus, to take one example, we might usefully consider the ambivalent role of TGV rail systems in redrawing the map of Europe. On the one hand, the TGV system intensifies “connectivity” between the affluent cities of Northern Europe which are served by this network while, at the same time, often making transport to and from their intermediate localities more difficult than before. In this connection, we might also consider how enhanced rail connections with Northern Europe have had the effect of seeming to pulling the whole continent further away, as seen from the perspective of the coast of North

Africa. Correspondingly, to address my own principal area of geographical interest, the fact that the UK government has now chosen to make a massive investment in extending Britain's high-speed rail system ("HiSpeed2") so as to include Birmingham has itself played an important rhetorical part in transforming the city's confidence in its own future.

We could also usefully turn to the work of scholars such as Ginette Verstraete (2010) to help us understand the virtual and material dimensions of the strategies in play in the constitution of Europe's borders. These boundaries are not only enshrined in laws but also, as Tim Cresswell shows, in the architecture of places such as Amsterdam's Schiphol airport (Cresswell, 2012). At a cultural level, the reconstitution of Europe also involves the role of media strategies like "Euro-Images" and other forms of transnational co-ordination of media production and distribution. However, to return to the question of personal mobility, there are also questions of demography and population management at stake here – for instance, in educational strategies such as the "Erasmus" schemes. As Umberto Eco predicted, right at their inception, those schemes have effectively subsidized the creation of a whole new section of the European marriage market. The result has been a significant increase in the number of children born to parents of different European nationalities who met while one of them was studying abroad on Erasmus funding and who have now produced a new generation of transnational Europeans (Green, 2014).

Technologies, demographics, and geographies: people and parcels

Having evoked the EU's mobilization of the audiovisual industries for cultural purposes, let me now turn to questions of media consumption and how audience practices can articulate with particular demographic patterns of *either* sedentarist *or* mobile lifestyles. In this connection, Arjun Appadurai claims that, nowadays, we live in a world where "transnational media messages often meet audiences who are themselves in motion", and his emphasis on the role of the media in "writing the scripts of the migrant imagination" certainly opens up a productive perspective on the changing nature of contemporary media consumption (Appadurai, 1996: 4; Mai, 2001; Sabry, 2005). Equally, Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy emphasize the complexity of transnational communications and transport patterns in the lives of the Turkish migrants in Europe that they have studied (Robins & Aksoy, 2016). However, we are not by any means all equally mobile, and conversely, one must also pay attention to situations where media systems are buttressed by – and themselves support – relatively sedentarist lifestyles. In all of this, I also want to insist on the need to avoid "new media" fantasies of disembodiment and de-territorialization.

We do need to be sceptical of models which say that everybody is becoming a nomad: *some* categories of people may have increasing access to both

virtual and actual forms of mobility, but others are now consigned even more to the localities in which they were born. Here it is also useful to recall Harm de Blij's insistence that the majority of the world's population (living as they do in the mega-slums of the poorest cities of the Third World) have neither the money nor the political entitlements for legitimate travel (de Blij, 2009). They can only access illegal forms of mobility, many of which are so potentially expensive as to leave the would-be migrant's family in debt to the people-smugglers for a generation. The issues here concern the extent of the control people have over their mobility – and the politics of how much waiting a person has to do – which is a key index of their position in the hierarchies of power and “connexity”.

It is also instructive to consider not only the relative ease of transport as between different categories of persons but also as between things and people; for nowadays it is things that travel most easily. Today we see an overall tendency towards increased mobility for things alongside an ever greater scrutiny and supervision of personal mobility – except for those with the appropriate visa and a good credit rating (cf. Bauman, 1998). If, in the late 19th century, John Ruskin bemoaned the fact that the new modes of rail transport transformed the passenger into the equivalent of a (passive) parcel, conversely, the Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun recounts the story of a contemporary North African migrant wishing he *were* a parcel, as that would make his desire to access European territory so much smoother (Ruskin quoted in Schivelbusch, 1977: 38; Ben Jelloun, 2009).

Having put this theoretical framework in play as a way of understanding the changing geographies of our era, in both its virtual and material dimensions, let us now turn our attention to Birmingham itself as a place.

From industrial workshop of the world to rust belt . . . and after

The media reports of a boom in tourism in Birmingham mentioned earlier claimed that the city was now shaking off its image of industrial decline and motorway strangulation to become a budding centre for financial services, new technology, and architectural showpieces, with a range of glitzy bars, Michelin-starred restaurants, and smart shops. To this extent, various local government spokesmen have claimed that the city is becoming one of the great cultural powerhouses of Europe. A few years previously, the local authority's “Birmingham Forward” campaign had reported (amidst much public hilarity and scepticism) that new “quality of life” surveys placed Birmingham ahead of Barcelona, Milan, and Rome.

This tourist boom has been widely regarded as newsworthy in the United Kingdom, not least because it has been widely perceived as counterintuitive (“Why on earth would you want to go to *Birmingham*?” most metropolitan types would ask, in a tone of scornful incredulity). This is, in part, because historically, while the city once played a crucial role in

Britain's industrial revolution, it has long had a very negative image. By the mid 20th century, it had come to be connotatively associated with a particularly brutalist architecture, enshrined in concrete ring roads and the dismal pedestrian subways which so disturbed my grandfather's sense of access to the city. It has also long been connotatively associated with a brash, commercial provincialism and an "uncultured" (if not downright stupid) population. All this is symbolized by the fact that, in a country in which class and status are deeply encoded in patterns of speech, "Brummies" speak in a nasally inflected accent with a despondent downward intonation at the end of each sentence, which is deemed extremely unattractive to the metropolitan ear (just as noted earlier, in relation to Randy Newman's observations on how New Yorkers react snobbishly to the "funny" speech of those from the American South). As David Parker and Paul Long noted some years ago, "by the 1980's, Birmingham had a uniquely abjured place within Britain's national imaginary . . . associated with failing automated and engineering factories (and) shoddy, inhuman landscapes of discredited post-war development" (Parker & Long, 2005: 159). However, this is best seen as merely one phase in Birmingham's longer history, and this negative imagery has quite a long history, into which we need to delve a little.

When Queen Victoria passed through Birmingham in 1832, she wrote in her diary of a town where you see "the fire glimmer . . . (from) the engines. . . . The men, women and children, country and houses are all black. . . . It is very desolate everywhere . . . smoking and burning coal heaps are intermingled with wretched huts and carts and little ragged children" (Sandbrook, 2015: 12). Similarly, Charles Dickens' character Little Nell finds herself wondering through Birmingham in 1841, where "as far as the eye could see . . . tall chimneys . . . poured out (a) plague of smoke which obscured the light and made foul the melancholy air. . . . Strange engines spun and writhed like tortured creatures . . . clanking their iron chains . . . making the ground tremble" (in Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* [1841], quoted in Sandbrook, 2015: 13). A decade later, in *Hard Times*, Dickens offers a description of the place he calls "Coketown" for which it has been suggested that Birmingham offered the model:

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.

(Dickens, 1854; Lodge, 1975)

In the mid-19th century, Birmingham was widely known as the industrial “workshop of the world” and the surrounding “Black Country” (black by day with the smoke of the iron foundry chimneys and red by night with the flames of their furnaces) was the most heavily industrialized few square miles on the planet. Even now remnants of these trades remain, and some of them are well captured in Brian Griffin’s evocative photographs of what he calls the “Black Kingdom” (Griffin, 2013). Perhaps most famous of all were the chain-makers who banged out the cables and anchors for the ships of the British empire. Indeed, it was in the Black Country foundries that the anchor for the ill-fated ship the *Titanic* was made, from what was then known world-wide as Netherton Crown Special Best Iron, and a replica of this anchor still stands in Netherton Town Square today (Cartwright, 2016).

Visiting the area in 1861, one commentator was struck not simply by the infernal spectacle of the roaring furnaces of the ironworks, but even more by the *sound* of it all: especially the industrial batteries, where the large hammers “moved by machinery smiting at the rate of 500 strokes a minute . . . with a tremendous din” (Royal Society Librarian Walter White, quoted in Sandbrook, 2015: 12). Many years later, of course, this industry of “heavy metal” became the literal source of a genre of music which emerged from the Black Country to become world famous, as personified by bands such as Black Sabbath and Judas Priest – whose lyrics are saturated with references to the industrial past of the battering ram, the hammering anvil, and the furnace. As Sandbrook notes, the link is rather more than metaphorical – Black Sabbath’s guitarist, Tony Iommi, only developed his distinctive guitar playing style because he had lost the ends of his two middle fingers in an industrial accident on the steel press in the foundry where he worked as a teenager (Sandbrook, 2015: 14).

If looking for a contemporary analogy, one might say that in the mid-19th century, Birmingham represented the same kind of seemingly irresistible (indeed, awesome) symbol of industrial dynamism which Western visitors may find so troubling today when visiting some of the fast-booming new cities of East Asia. However, the city’s key role in the first phase of heavy manufacturing industries turned very much to its disadvantage in the later 20th century. Then Birmingham’s established industries (especially in the motor trade) suffered badly from competition from imported cars and other manufactured goods coming from the increasingly automated factories of Europe and the Far East. Thus, Birmingham, just like places such as Detroit in the United States, became part of an economically depressed rust belt, with very high levels of long-term unemployment. The city still struggles to escape those negative legacies, and my argument will attempt to explore some of the contradictions involved in this process.

From “non-place” to the politics of heritage tourism

As noted earlier, the city suffered a brutal phase of early modernization in the late 1950s and early 60s, when its chief architect, Henry Manzoni,

supervised the knocking down of many of its slums and built a circuit of highways through the middle of the city, designed to make it a paradise for the motorcar. This particularly brutalist form of concreted-over modernization led it to function, as I noted earlier, as the epitome of a non-place in the popular imagination, and the desolation of the period is well characterized in Catherine O'Flynn's novel *What Was Lost* (O'Flynn, 2007) and Honor Gavin's *Midland: A Novel in Time* (Gavin, 2014).

The recent tourist boom which I noted in my introduction has been attributed to a number of factors – virtual, material, and political – which are together held to have greatly enhanced the image of the city. These factors include the success of the City Council's recent strategy of reorienting the city's economy around leisure services, up-market hotels, and restaurants. Further high-profile architectural initiatives have included the building of flagship department stores and of a spectacular new city centre library designed by the prestigious architect Zara Hadid, along with the current Paradise Circus redevelopment. All of these have undoubtedly helped attract tourism, trade, and employment to the city, even if its residents sometimes weary of trudging through the various building sites which always seem to dominate the city centre. This new "acculturation" of the city has also helped make the city more attractive to some young professional couples who, priced out of the London property market (now so inflated by the deeper pockets of the international super-rich), are now relocating to large houses in Birmingham's leafier suburbs.

Nowadays, the remnants of Birmingham's industrial past are repackaged as a form of industrial heritage for tourist purposes – in the refurbished buildings of the old Jewellery Quarter, in the mock-Victorian Coffin Factory, and the re-enactment of the "old trades" in the Black Country Living Museum. In the same spirit, Birmingham's extensive but long dilapidated network of canals – which were a key resource in establishing the city as a hub of economic activity in the early period of industrialization – has been cleaned to allow tourists to better admire the sights of what has been re-described in some of the city's marketing literature as the "Venice of the North". A further dimension of this PR strategy has involved the attempt to revive the positive legacy of the 18th-century inventors among the city's "Lunar Men" Society (who are now often described as part of a "Midlands Enlightenment" [cf. Uglow, 2003]). These elements of the city's cultural history sit alongside memories of Birmingham's days of Victorian greatness and of earlier political/intellectual traditions in the city – such as that of Neville Chamberlain and his civic liberalism. However, "heritage", while usually presented as an uncontroversially good thing, always requires a specific definition – and that inevitably raises contentious questions as to exactly which – and indeed whose – heritages are to be commemorated and celebrated (Hall, 1999).

In this respect, alongside all these top-down re-branding strategies, there have also been a whole series of initiatives aiming to reinvent the image of

the city from the bottom up. Thus, the Tindall Street Press, a publishing project featuring local authors, has played a very important role in giving a public voice to perspectives and identities previously silenced or marginalized – but now re-articulated in the work of authors such as Catherine O’Flynn and Anthony Cartwright (O’Flynn, 2007; Cartwright, 2009, 2013). Similarly, recent years have also seen a whole series of cultural strategies such as the Birmingham Film and Television Festival (itself an outgrowth of the earlier Channel 4-funded Birmingham Film and Television Workshop) and the annual Flatpack festival, all serving both to increase the visibility of the city’s audiovisual industries and to enhance the diversity of representation of the city’s many different cultures and communities.

Perhaps most notably, this period has also featured a number of highly successful fine art-based projects, including John Myers’ photos of the lower middle class of this part of “Middle England”, Richard Billingham’s photos of his own family in their semi-derelict Birmingham housing estate, and George Shaw’s paintings of the streets of the depressed urban area where he grew up. The surprising thing here has been that the extremely low cultural status of the subject matter of this work – the lives of poor, often long-term unemployed Midlandsers living in depressing domestic circumstances – did not, as would previously have been expected, preclude either Billingham or Shaw from being nominated for the British contemporary art world’s most prestigious award, the Turner Prize (Shaw, 2001, 2003, 2012; Billingham, 2000, 2004; Myers, 2012).

Questions of place and visibility: race, ethnicity, and belonging

In relation to the politics of place and of visibility, the key questions concern the relationship between physical and mediated forms of “real estate” in relation to the politics of absence, presence, and identity. The issues here are who can occupy which kinds of physical locations and who is to be represented within which kinds of virtual or broadcast spaces. There are many versions of this problem – in which being disadvantaged is not only a matter of material poverty or social exclusion but also of exclusion from positive forms of representation. Perhaps the best known concerns the extent to which the poor Arab populations of France have not only been long confined physically to outlying *banlieux* but also excluded, on the whole, from representation in what Hargreaves calls the “genres of conviviality” in the French media sphere (Hargreaves, 2001). The corresponding exception has, of course, been their hyper-visibility in the genres concerned with social problems. The role of films such as *La Haine* (Vincendeau, 2009) in bringing the world of the *banlieux* to some wider representation has been crucial – but to this day, a group of young people from one of those areas travelling into central Paris can still expect to be made to feel thoroughly out of place by metropolitan policing practices designed to limit access for “undesirables” who might distress the tourists in the city.

In relation to these issues, Parker and Long rightly note that, at a moment in which Birmingham is being rebranded and a new set of large-scale public narratives are being constructed, there is an urgent question concerning “What does an urban population faced with the imperatives of change choose to remember? Which social groups’ contributions to the city are to be commemorated?” The temptation here is simply to escape into fond, sepia-toned memories of a highly selective past. In such a vision, the golden years of “Old Brumajem” are all too easy to reconstruct in a soft-focus rendition of an urban Arcadia (Parker & Long, 2005: 160, 162–164). Here we also must confront difficult questions of racism, because that picture often then displays what Stuart Hall once described as “white amnesia” (Hall, 1978) insofar as the “we” who constitute the remembered community characteristically excludes the large proportions of the city’s population who are the descendents of those who arrived as immigrants in the post-war period. It is not only the well-established cottage industry of nostalgic local histories with titles such as *The Golden Years of Birmingham* which construct a racialized vision of communal harmony implicitly set in an era before immigration. Despite the fact that more than 30% of the city’s residents are from minority ethnic backgrounds, even recent publications such as *Positively Birmingham* (Berg, 2015) largely omit any black or Asian faces from their portraits of community, except as a kind of exotic window-dressing at carnival or festival occasions.

The area does have an unhappy history of anti-immigrant racism, dating back to the days of Enoch Powell in the 1960s, with his poisonous appeals to the prejudices of the “forgotten minority” of authentic (white) Brummies. The disavowals continue – 30 years after John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Collective made their path-breaking film *Handsworth Songs* about the 1981 riots in what was already a major area of black immigration, the Birmingham press was still featuring nostalgic accounts of “Paradise Lost”, recounting the sad story of how multiethnic Handsworth “swallowed up” the bucolic rural hamlet of Birchfield (Parker & Long, 2005: 165). However, the racialized dynamics of these political conflicts are not so easily wished away. The book that subsequently became the classic study of the rise of Thatcherite authoritarian populism in the United Kingdom, *Policing the Crisis*, produced at the Birmingham CCCS in the 1980s, had its origins in a small-scale study of police overreaction to a particular street robbery in the same Handsworth streets in which Akomfrah’s film was later shot. The reporting of this local event gave rise to the deployment of the North American terminology of “mugging” to highlight a specific form of black-on-white street crime throughout the national British news media. All of this played a crucial role in the development of the law-and-order rhetoric which subsequently came to dominate British politics for the next 30 years (Hall et al., 1979).

The question of representation – and of which communities are rendered visible (to themselves or others) remains crucial here, and in the absence of

effective public provision, the preservation of the visual history of the city's ethnic communities has fallen, by default, to private individuals. Thus, the photographer Vanley Burke effectively took on the role of being the private curator of the city's black culture until the belated recognition offered by the retrospective exhibition of his own private collection held in the city's Ikon Gallery in 2016 and even more recently (April 2018) of his photographs in Birmingham Art Gallery (Burke, 2012, 2015).

Birmingham on TV: *Peaky Blinders* and the return of cosmopolitics

In all of this, televisual representations of the city are clearly a crucial issue. However, despite the long-term presence of both BBC and commercial television production facilities in the region, the city has been more noticeable by its televisual absence than its presence. The best-known imagery of the city is still probably that provided by the self-deprecating humour of regional TV comedians such as Jasper Carrot, Lenny Henry, and Frank Skinner. Alongside this, we still find the rather negative stereotypes of “Brummies” provided by the long-running, down-market soap opera *Crossroads* (1964–1988) set in a Midlands motel and classically parodied by comedienne Victoria Wood's skit on the programme, featuring an uneducated working-class Birmingham cleaner known as Mrs Overall. As Brunsdon has argued, if *Crossroads* came to be a key symbol of the dismal nature of life in the Midlands, the program itself also long stood as a shorthand for bad television – thus producing a “Midlands of the Mind” which was thoroughly deficient in both substantive and formal qualities (Brunsdon, 2008)

Questions of race and ethnicity have been almost entirely absent from these modes of televisual representation. There have been but a few honourable exceptions, such as the innovative 1970s BBC TV drama *Gangsters* and the black-focussed soap opera *Empire Rd* (Newton, 2013) and, more recently, the popular BBC TV series *Citizen Kahn* set among the city's Muslim community in Sparkhill. However, we must also consider the contribution to the more positive image of the city made recently by the impact (both in Britain and abroad) of a rather different television show – *Peaky Blinders*. It was first produced by BBC2 in 2013 and has now run to six series, becoming a major international success. It is set among the early 20th-century criminal gangs of the city and might be loosely described as a sort of soap-opera style version of Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York*. In particular, I want here to address the positive contribution the series might be seen to have made to discourses concerning race and ethnicity, even if it could be said to present the issues at stake in a rather exoticized manner.

In contrast to the nostalgic amnesia described earlier, which would present a vision of Birmingham as an essentially white city, the series reintroduces the question of race and ethnicity right from the start. Early on, we are introduced to the flamboyant figure of Jeremiah Jesus, complete with flowing

dreadlocks, as played by the well-known black Birmingham poet Benjamin Zephaniah. It is also made clear that the city once had a strong Italian subculture, manifested by the presence of the Mafia-style gangsters from whose vengeance the hero, Tommy Shelby (played by the Hollywood star Cillian Murphy), has to save his brother. The fact that Shelby has come back from the First World War with a drug addiction also necessitates representation of the city's Chinese quarter in portraying his use of its basement opium dens. Having this charismatic hero played by a famously Irish actor serves to provide further echoes of another of the city's long-submerged ethnic subcultures. Indeed, the contentious question of Irish ethnicity and politics is central to the narrative of the series, with the initial storyline depending on the theft of British Army guns (which it is feared, may have got into the hands of the IRA) being investigated by a belligerent Northern Irish policeman who brings a particularly brutal style of policing to the city. It may, in some ways, be the Irish question (and its policing) which is most consequential here – to this day, Birmingham's culture is still haunted by the unresolved nature of the IRA bombings of two city centre pubs in 1974. Overall, as Brunsdon notes, *Peaky Blinders*, with its heritage aesthetic, dynamic violence, and rock soundtrack, has been mobilized by the city to market itself as distinctive – simultaneously modern and historical (Brunsdon, *forthcoming*).

After globalization? From Brum to Brexit . . .

As indicated earlier, since the 1960s, one of the main effects of globalization in Birmingham has been the destruction of manufacturing industry by cheap imports. The consequent high level of unemployment among the city's indigenous white working-class population certainly paved the way for Enoch Powell and other racist politicians to exploit the anxieties the local working classes have long felt about their declining position in the world. To return to the general questions about relative rates of mobility which I discussed earlier, these are people who are largely consigned to the immobility referenced in my title. Far from engaging in any sort of tourism (whether media-related or not), even the annual package holidays to Spanish coastal resorts which some of them had enjoyed in earlier, more affluent times, before the factories closed down, are now largely a thing of the past. These days, they are stuck in their fast-declining local communities with little prospect of any escape at all, whether on a temporary or permanent basis, and for them, locality is increasingly destiny.

In this context, I want to try to articulate these local issues about race, ethnicity, and identity in Birmingham to the more general question of the emerging backlash in Britain against Europe. This can perhaps be understood to represent a kind of political revenge on the part of a group of people who have come to regard themselves as a forgotten minority who feel left behind by globalization (Goodhart, 2017; Mishra, 2017; Seidler, 2017; Jefferson, 2017). In the particular case of Birmingham, they also feel neglected

by the political strategies of those who, rather than attempting to reinvigorate the city's manufacturing traditions, seem to them to be attempting to turn it into a service industry-based shopping emporium and leisure centre designed for the affluent, mobile middle classes of the world.

We can perhaps best understand these forms of particularist and reactionary localism as an understandable set of reactions to the destabilizing forces of globalization. These demands for some sense of control over their own communities and the resurgent desires for some more rooted sense of place represent a felt need for a consolatory and reassuring counterweight which can provide people with some sense of security in what Baumann called this newly "liquid" world of flux, threat, and instability. All those forces impact most sharply those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, who are least able to defend themselves against these pressures (Bauman, 2000). There we find people who feel that their voices have long been unheard and their identities invisible or undervalued – and when the media have paid them attention, it has only been in the exploitative form of making what have been called "poverty porn" documentaries about them (as in the case of Channel 4's notorious series about welfare recipients in one poor area of Birmingham called *Benefits Street* which caused a great deal of bad feeling among the city's residents when shown on Channel Four in 2014).

These are exactly the people whose lives the Tindall Street Press authors, along with the previously mentioned photographers and artists like Myers, Billingham, and Shaw, have been trying to make visible. This likewise has been the project of social commentators such as Lynsey Hanley (2016), who writes movingly about the devastation of the previously "respectable" "social housing" in the working-class areas of the city where she grew up. She also addresses the key ideological struggle over "respectability" and the invidious Thatcherite return to questions of how to distinguish between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. In considering the politics of how these different groups are to be given more visibility – and access to the media on their own account – I would suggest that here we might usefully return to some of Raymond Williams' comments on the importance of democratic inclusivity in the matter of representation (Williams, 1989).

For many years, having felt alienated by all the mainstream political parties, most of these people haven't voted at all and thus have long been politically invisible. The moment when it became clear to me just how much political trouble was looming over the horizon was on the evening before the European Referendum in 2016. The local Midlands television station that evening was doing *vox pop* interviews in the streets of a very depressed part of the Black Country called Rowley Regis, where my family still lives. The poor women being interviewed announced that they were planning to vote Brexit because they felt they'd "had nothing" for years and so felt – in a spirit of more or less nihilist resentment – that things simply couldn't get any worse for them, so they might as well just make a "protest vote" – without knowing or even seeming to care where that might lead. This is the politics

of the disenfranchised, which, rather than being guided by rational calculations of the relative advantage to be gained by supporting this or that political party, functions more in the spirit of 19th-century Russian nihilism in wanting to simply exact some form of painful revenge on whatever victims are available for the wrongs which have blighted the lives of those to whom no one has been listening (cf. Mishra, 2017).

It is for all these reasons that the West Midlands region had the largest percentage of voters in the country (59%) in favour of leaving the EU. In that sense, Birmingham and its intensely regional culture not only stand at the heart of the Brexit problem but also perhaps function as a harbinger of the dilemmas currently being experienced in many other parts of Europe. However heartening Birmingham's recent tourist boom may have been, both for the local hoteliers and for the politicians who have invested in what is now a clearly successful place-making strategy for the city, these are not problems that can be solved by increasing rates of hotel occupancy.

Birmingham's hotel beds and restaurants may well now be better occupied by the mobile middle classes, whom the forces of globalization increasingly bring to the city, in large numbers, from Europe, America, and East Asia. But the problem which increasingly demands attention concerns those who are less mobile. Until now, they have largely been not only immobile but also invisible – but the Brexit protest vote serves to “call time” on that scenario. We now perhaps enter, as Mishra has it, an “age of anger”, where in the “swamp of fear and insecurity” in which the inhabitants of the de-industrialized regions of Birmingham and the Black Country live, we see what Hannah Arendt once called a “tremendous increase in mutual hatred . . . a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else”. This is perhaps best understood as a kind of “negative solidarity”, as she puts it, of the type of which Nietzsche spoke when describing “the tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable” of the *ressentiment* of the dispossessed (Arendt & Nietzsche, quoted in Mishra, 2017: 19, 13, 14, 9). This, in the parlance which has come to function as a kind of political shorthand to describe this situation, is the problem of the “left behind”. If Birmingham as a city perhaps now feels less “left behind” by the rest of the country than it used to be, nonetheless, there remain, within and around it, many people who feel that the world is leaving them behind. They have all the corresponding anxieties that come with the chilling recognition inscribed in the old Soviet phrase which militantly announced – if in a different context – that “not everyone will be taken into the future” (cf. Kabakov & Kabakov, 2018). To return to the terminology of Randy Newman's “Rednecks” with which I began, their disruptive potential may consist precisely of the fact that, feeling they have nothing left to lose, they have no specific political objective other than to try to make sure that others will now experience various forms of “hurt” in precisely the ways that they themselves have long suffered.

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