**London – City of Paradox**

**Black and Asian Studies Association Report**

On 5th April I attend the final day of the 'London - City of Paradox' conference organised by the University of East London's Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB). The aim of the conference was to explore and assess aspects of London's history, cultural heritage, socio-economic structures, changing population demography and (its often complex and contradictory) positioning as a 'World City' within contemporary global networks.

Out of the many academics contributing to the panel presentations on that day, three sessions stood out as particularly noteworthy:

·         'Paradoxical Racial Politics in the City of Paradox', presented by Professor Michael Keith (University of Oxford)

·         'Living in (Part of) the City: Contingent Racialised Belongings in Imagined Localities', presented by Professor Ann Phoenix (Institute of Education, University of London)

·         A closing plenary on the theme of  'Glocal London', with contributions from Rob Berkeley (Director of the Runnymede Trust), Professor Paul Gilroy (LSE) and Nira Yuval-Davis (Director of the CMRB).

Michael Keith's paper focussed on the history and cultural dynamics of London and the various processes of governance, commerce and socio-political change (over time and space) that have shaped what we see and experience today. He painted a picture of the capital as a "tale of two cities" - i.e. (1) the financial heartlands of the City of London and Docklands adjacent to pockets of poverty and social deprivation towards the east; and (2) the City of Westminster as the symbolic representation of national governance and cultural heritage towards the west. Issues of identity, citizenship, belonging and cultural difference were explored through a chronological description of the numerous ways in which political elites have attempted to govern (and impose a "civilising mission") on successive migrant and working-class communities (almost always perceived as "(alien) others") who have settled in London's East End over the centuries: from the Huguenots and Eastern European Jewish émigrés through to the more recent Bangladeshi and Somali communities in areas of Tower Hamlets today. In thinking about theories of urbanism, identity, citizenship and belonging within a London context, Keith suggested that the collective agency of London's diverse communities was always fundamentally concerned with a quest for freedom - citing Hannah Arendt's work, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) as a key source. Plurality and flux were described as defining characteristics of this urban metropolis, making the social and cultural geographies of London (ultimately) unknowable and too complex to be accurately mapped and articulated.

The main content of Ann Phoenix's presentation was a summary of the key findings from a recent ESRC-funded research project, "Becoming a Mother in Tower Hamlets: Changing Patterns of Identity." Her case study analysed a series of narrative interviews conducted with 19 young mothers (from the Bangladeshi, white British and black African/Caribbean communities resident in Tower Hamlets) over the course of one year - exploring their contrasting perceptions of motherhood in the inner city, as regards sense of place, notions of belonging, identity and security - for themselves, and their newborns. Some of the overarching conclusions were:

·         A description of London as "a large city, lived locally."

·         An observation that the size and scale of London allowed for the co-existence of diverse communities (described by Phoenix as a "throwntogetherness").

·         Evidence of "informal segregation" - based on (actual and perceived) cultural and socio-economic differences - within and between the resident communities.

·         The co-existence of multiple (and seemingly contradictory) experiences, whereby - depending on factors such as ethnic and cultural background, socio-economic status and length of time resident in London - some mothers perceived Tower Hamlets (and London as a whole) as "not a very child-friendly place", whilst others felt it was a safe and protective environment in which to raise and school their children. For the most part, Ann Phoenix found that it was the first-time mothers of Bangladeshi heritage who perceived Tower Hamlets as a safe space, where their children would encounter less racism than elsewhere in the city because of its many positive manifestations of multiculturalism. In contrast, 9 out of the 19 interviewees (from both the white and black African/Caribbean cohorts) had moved away from Tower Hamlets within 6 months of childbirth (and two out of London altogether) - citing concerns about wanting their children to grow up in a less ethnically diverse area, which would also provide access to "better schools" (perhaps, euphemistically, the short-hand for preferring 'majority white' schools?)

·         London was, indeed, a city of paradox primarily because it was a city lived "psychosocially" - where racialised and ethnicised imaginings about identity and belonging strongly influenced a person's perception of "home" and sense of "Britishness," and made such notions contingent and relational.

During the closing plenary on 'Glocal London', Rob Berkeley introduced and played two short films about multiculturalism that each addressed the theme of "Secularism, Racism and the Politics of Belonging". The first  - "London is the Place for Me" (see the You Tube clip at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su6yNdw5wYo](https://uel-mail1.uel.ac.uk/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su6yNdw5wYo)<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su6yNdw5wYo](https://uel-mail1.uel.ac.uk/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su6yNdw5wYo)> ) – featured archive footage about the arrival of the SS Empire Windrush in June 1948 and a photographic narrative about the lived experiences and early aspirations of (so-called) 'first-generation' Caribbean migrants to Britain during the post-war era. The second  - taken from the wider "Project: Generations 3.0" series filmed in 2011/2012 - presented inter-generational and cross-cultural perspectives about 21st century life in the outer London borough of Croydon via residents' perspectives on living with difference, and specific 'vox pop' responses to the question, "Is Croydon Racist?". For further details, and to view all films in the series, please see the Runnymede Trust's website, [http://www.generation3-0.org/](https://uel-mail1.uel.ac.uk/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://www.generation3-0.org/) <[http://www.generation3-0.org/](https://uel-mail1.uel.ac.uk/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://www.generation3-0.org/)> .

Paul Gilroy's presentation touched on issues of governance and increasing 'securitization' in the capital - specifically in relation to changing policing policies and practices (e.g. 'Total Policing', 'Kettling', etc.) in the wake of the national education marches against the cuts in December 2010, the civil disturbances in August 2011, and the more recent 'Occupy London' protest movement. One of his key conclusions was to argue for a new vocabulary about power and knowledge though which to engage in more meaningful discourses about the politics of spectacle, the politics of violence and the politics of '(un-)freedom'.

Lastly, Nira Yuval-Davis' paper discussed the various signifiers that continue to "demarcate difference" within large, urban metropolises, like London - citing Manuel Castell's work on the "defensive ethnic community" (The Power of Identity, 2011) and her own, ongoing research on theoretical and empirical aspects of "intersected nationalisms", "racisms" (in the plural!) and the "politics of belonging". This closing session was particularly useful for situating all the localised theorizing that had taken place in relation to London (and the East End) within a wider, global context...hence the frequent use of the phrase "Glocal London" to simultaneously represent the social, economic, political, cultural and technological dynamics of the "local within the global" and the "global within the local".