The Postcolonial Midlands

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by

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Abstract

This thesis aims to demonstrate the advantages of shifting the focus of literary criticism about postcolonial and post-war British writing towards regional literary cultures. London has long hosted dominant creative narratives and is also the centre of the UK’s publishing industry. In recent years, the North of England has arguably begun to catch up, with sustained critical attention — most notably Pearce, Fowler and Crashaw’s *Postcolonial Manchester* (2013) — being devoted to the region’s literary output. Perhaps in part due to its landlocked geography, the Midlands region is too often overlooked and caught in the middle of a critical landscape that tends to reify, and thereby reinforce, the reductive notion of a North-South divide. This thesis therefore heralds the recognition of the Midlands as a fertile site of academic enquiry. With the reassessment of Midlands writing, I hope to offer a richer understanding of how the dynamics of space and place result in distinctive regional literatures. This thesis affords a unique regional optic as the first major study to position the Midlands at the forefront of debates emanating from devolution of literary cultures, literary economy, diaspora and cosmopolitanism. The relationship between region and writer, and the role which literature plays in defining the character of an area, are central to this thesis. My source material is primarily fiction and poetry from the post-war period, supplemented by original interviews and readings of the historical and social sources which provide necessary context. My thesis therefore emerges alongside new critical and creative work which demonstrates the Midlands’ literary abundance.
Acknowledgements

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# Regional Literary Cultures of the Midlands

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Introduction: ‘A so what? sort of place’

He turned back here. Anyone would. After
The long romantic journey from the North
To be faced with this. A so what? sort of place,
A place that, like a mirror, makes you see.

A scrubby ridge, impassive river, and beyond,
The flats of Middle England. History waited
To absorb him. Parliaments, dynasties, empires
Lay beyond these turnip fields. Not what he wanted.

from U.A. Fanthorpe, ‘At Swarkestone’

The Midlands: so what? A region portrayed by Fanthorpe as the epicentre of nothing and epitomising parochialism. A flat, ‘scrubby’ land of ‘turnip fields’ positioned in stark opposition to the ‘parliaments’, ‘dynasties’ and ‘empires’ represented by the South of England. When Bonnie Prince Charlie made his daring raid towards the capital, he didn’t make it much further than Derby. Fanthorpe writes, ‘nobody could have stopped him… but this place did.’

Although certainly penned with a humorous touch by Fanthorpe, this poem is one of only four representing the Midlands out of 202 poems published in the 2009 anthology A Poet’s Guide to Great Britain, less than two percent of the total content. While this is only one anthology, it became a major BBC Television series and is representative of a much wider problem. Elsewhere in the Penguin anthology Larkin drily reflects on returning to his childhood home of Coventry: ‘Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.’

MacNeice observes the ‘fickle norms’ of Birmingham residents, who ‘endeavour to find God and score one over the neighbour’.

Meanwhile, Duffy’s ‘Stafford Afternoons’ recalls an unwanted sexual encounter with a predatory old man and reflects, ‘in a cul-de-sac, a strange boy threw a stone.’ The cul-de-sac location seems an apposite setting, representative of nowhere. Owen Sheers, the editor of A Poet’s Guide

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2 Ibid.
to Great Britain, wants his readership to imagine the collection as a ‘stroll around one large garden’ and a ‘shared conversation’. These are admirable aims but both highlight a fundamental oversight. If Britain is the garden around which the poets stroll, the middle is very much circumnavigated, leaving its creative voices out of the ‘shared conversation’ of canonical British writing. I outline below the cultural contexts that provide starting points for my research, before highlighting some of the key theoretical texts and finally mapping out the structure of the thesis.

The Everyday and the Exotic

The devolution of literary cultures has its origins in the 1960s and signifies not only a shift away from London but also, in the context of this thesis, a shift away from more well-trodden textual selections and theoretical approaches. The first strategy I deploy to enact this shift within my thesis is to give sustained critical attention to contemporary Midlands literature. While the non-commercial literary form of poetry enjoys good regional distribution of poetry presses, the commercially viable novel form is still dominated by London-based publishers. In Marketing Literature (2007), Claire Squires identifies the ‘big five’ prose publishers as Bertelsmann, Pearson, HarperCollins, Hodder Headline and Hachette. This thesis not only questions the dominance of these publishers but also takes a refreshing detour from their blockbusters, which tend to receive the most critical attention. While the critical foundations of postcolonial studies were laid by Gayatri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said — whom Graham Huggan (2001) has dubbed the field’s ‘three celebrity critics’ — the work of Avtar Brah, Huggan, Dave Gunning, James Procter and Paul Gilroy is more applicable to my readings of Midlands literature because it speaks directly to the demotic themes and aesthetics deployed by Midlands writers. Their devolved theoretical sensibilities accord with the devolved

7 Pearce, Fowler and Crawshaw, p. 16.
literary cultures under scrutiny here. My analysis elucidates these local characteristics and places them in the broader context of recent debates about literary devolution. Huggan’s assertion that ‘locally produced theories and methods might prove in the end to be more productive than the reliance on Euro-American philosophical trends and habits of thought’ informs much of the theoretical remit of this thesis, except, I would argue, his timeframe of ‘in the end’. The local theoretical angle has always been a productive approach to textual analysis and is more urgent than ever given the ongoing devolution of literary culture. In the Midlands, Brah is a prime example. Brah spent much of her life in Highfields, Leicester and coined the invaluable critical term ‘diaspora space’ which acknowledges that diasporic regions are complex spaces of negotiation, encompassing resident ‘indigenous’ populations as much as those who have migrated more recently. This complicates assumptions about immigration changing otherwise white British areas and frames it as a two-way process, which Brah articulates as ‘the homing of diaspora, the diasporising of home’. This idea is central to my understanding of Midlands literature. This thesis challenges the notion that so-called indigenous, white literatures and black British and British Asian literatures are mutually exclusive. I demonstrate how diverse literary cultures are in fact intertwined in the Midlands, working co-operatively as ‘compatriots in craft’, to use Fred D’Aguiar’s terminology and indeed the application of this phrase to regional literatures as first demonstrated by Fowler in Postcolonial Manchester. This is not to suggest a naively utopian vision of the region’s literary cultures, but rather to set in motion localised debates which challenge literary categorisation along racial lines.

This thesis therefore favours ways of reading texts using alternative theoretical models emerging after the period of postcolonial studies typified by theorists such as

10 Huggan, p. 3.
12 Brah, p. 190.
Spivak, Bhabha and Said during its late twentieth-century heyday. While it would be inaccurate — not to mention cumbersome — to therefore call my chosen critics post-postcolonial, there is certainly a unifying trait within their work which speaks to ongoing debates about the devolution of literary cultures. In this vein, my research articulates the Midlands nuances of what James Procter (2006) calls ‘the postcolonial everyday’, an aesthetic mode found in literature which not only privileges everyday people and situations but in doing so demonstrates how absolutely compatible these quotidian frames of reference are with writing of black British and Asian origin.¹⁴ To clarify, my approach to textual selection and analysis can be understood as the antithesis of what Huggan calls ‘The Postcolonial Exotic’. Huggan flags up the reductive yet widespread literary-economic practice whereby diversity ‘is manipulated for the purpose of channeling difference into areas where it can be attractively packaged and, at the same time, safely contained.’¹⁵ Exoticism then, can be profitably disseminated to audiences who want a taste of diversity, while stopping short of absolute immersion. It is a major contention of this thesis that Midlands writing has no lack of diversity but — in keeping with the region’s underprivileged position both in relation to the national sense of geographical hierarchy and the economic realities of literary cultures outside of London — frequently deploys representational modes relating to the ordinary, the domestic and the everyday. These literary aesthetics are not the expression of a downtrodden literary community but rather the proud manifestation on paper of what it means to be a Midlander. Regional literary sensibility in Midlands literature is often expressed in the everyday dialects and languages of the region, and in describing the everyday lives of Midlands people from many different walks of life. ‘Proud Midlander’ may sound like a pretentious appellation, but would the connotations be the same if this claim were made of London writers? I assert that Midlands texts not only express regional sensibility but are also every bit as relevant to discussions of contemporary literary culture as more

¹⁵ Huggan, p. 24.
frequently discussed, commercially prominent and better-known writing. This is not to
detract from the merit of London literature by suggesting the attribution of literary
prestige to be a mere postcode lottery, but rather to challenge the cultural dominance of
literature with London connections and the ‘exoticising’ discourses which are often used
by publishers and marketing agencies to sell self-consciously multicultural, London-
centric fiction. This challenge to London’s critical and economic literary hegemony is
achieved by two methods; by comparison with London texts but predominantly through
close reading of Midlands texts and their cultural contexts. In this manner the thesis
seeks to challenge, and provide robust alternatives to what Fowler has identified as ‘the
commercial and cultural logic by which novels are coded as worthy of national and
international readerships by corporate publishers and high street retail outlets.’

**Literary Value**

In developing Procter’s notion of ‘the postcolonial everyday’, my approach to textual
selection and analysis does not involve seeking out the mundane but rather challenging
assumptions that have been made about Midlands literature. Fundamentally this involves
questioning the means by which the contentious notion of value is ascribed to literary
texts. John Frow’s 1995 work on cultural value is extremely useful here. Frow
interrogates the means by which value is attributed to cultural products as they move
through society. When the traditional channels through which literary value flows — the
publishing industry, reviewers, critics — become obstructed by misconceptions about the
region from which a work emanates, or which the work represents and even celebrates,
it becomes necessary to rethink what constitutes value and who exactly has the power
to validate literary texts or the ‘power to consecrate’ them, as Bourdieu puts it.

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16 Corinne Fowler, ‘A Tale of Two Novels: Developing a Devolved Approach to Black
British Writing’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43.75 (2008), 75-94 (p. 76).
18 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New
I have touched already upon the devolution of literary cultures but, in relation to literary value, this notion requires further elucidation. Many of the primary texts under consideration in this study do not receive validation through the traditional mediums of literary value: broadsheet newspaper reviews, literary prizes and academic articles. Writing at the end of the twentieth century, Frow identifies a ‘disrupted and uncertain universe of value’. Frow’s image of a ‘universe’ is highly apposite as it emphasises the complexities of the myriad cultural constellations within which value is exchanged. It is within this universe that we find the optimum conditions for a radical reappraisal of how value is attributed, and by whom. The ‘disruption’ and ‘uncertainty’ which Frow describes have been accentuated throughout the first years of the twenty-first century. As social media replaces traditional print forms of communication, the authority of traditional industry gatekeepers — reviewers, critics, journalists — diminishes, while the influence of informal ‘valuing communities’ who ascribe their own notions of value on cultural products increases. This has proved to be particularly relevant in Nottingham, with informal ‘valuing communities’ being the lifeblood of the performance poetry scene and digital technologies galvanizing new forms of literary tourism in the city. By unlocking alternative conceptions of value attribution, this thesis is well-positioned to demonstrate that Midlands literary cultures not only produce output which is worthy of critical attention but furthermore that these cultures are innovating to increase the reach and impact of their literary output.

**Antiracism, Multiculturalism and Demotic Cosmopolitanism**

In outlining the central tenets of this project above, I have suggested that Midlands literature is granted relatively little economic value from a London-centric publishing industry and receives little cultural value within what Fowler, amongst others, has identified as the powerful ‘Oxbridge network’ of writers, critics, agents and publishers. I

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19 Frow, p. 1.
20 Frow, p. 1.
21 Ibid., p. 154.
22 Fowler, (79).
have suggested through reference to Huggan’s *Postcolonial Exotic* that an ‘exotic’
marketing aesthetic has commercialised postcolonial literature and associated academic
disciplines, a phenomenon which in my Midlands remit works in parallel with the nation’s
low estimation of the Midlands and other regions to ensure that London retains cultural
hegemony.

While the work of Procter, Huggan and Frow will activate within this thesis an
alternative conception of literary value and reposition Midlands literature within a
national context, theoretical work by Gilroy, Brah and Huggan will enable a more
nuanced reading of the ethnic diversity so prevalent in Midlands writing. These theorists
also facilitate critical dialogue between accounts of diversity as represented in Midlands
writing and those presented at the official level by local government. Such official
narratives of multiculturalism have, in some senses, replaced previous forms of antiracist
rhetoric. In *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature* (2010),
Gunning explores the role which literature can play in articulating resistance to racism.
Reading the novels of Meera Syal, Gunning highlights how the author is able to ‘disturb
received notions of the geography of black Britain’ by setting her debut *Anita and Me*
(1997) in a rural Midlands locale.23 In doing so, Gunning pinpoints geographical setting
as a key mode of literary resistance to the stereotype that black Britain resides
exclusively in London’s inner-city regions. Although not a central concern developed in
*Race and Antiracism*, this notion of geographical ‘disruption’ provides a key starting point
for my research.

The decision to use literary texts in the exploration of black British and Asian
culture is necessarily one which literary studies must defend. Responding to Stuart Hall’s
call for a critical mode which ‘locates itself inside a continuous struggle and politics
around black representation’ while simultaneously being ‘able to open up a continuous

23 Dave Gunning, *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature*
critical discourse’, Gunning suggests that literature may well prove a valuable site of
enquiry:

Hall looks for the creation of a method of analysis that is able to examine its own
conditions of existence, while simultaneously maintaining the capacity for resistance
and transformation. The diverse subject positions that are staged in literature allow
for just such self-reflective criticism; literary texts are able to participate within the
construction of antiracist discourse and the experiential categories of race, but at the
same time to adopt a position of distance from the automatic and possibly restrictive
assumptions of antiracist practice.24

The ‘self-reflective’ dimensions of black British and Asian fiction take on a new
significance when read from the perspective of their geographical setting. This placed
reading enables us to consider in parallel the voices of black and Asian Britons as both
national and regional expressions of identity. In highlighting the ‘diverse subject
positions’ found within black British and Asian literature, Gunning touches on a common
thread within much Midlands writing. Regional texts offer up wildly differing stances on
multicultural issues and place themselves at varying degrees of distance from the
stances taken at the official level by local authorities. As Leicester poet Carol Leeming
has expressed in interview, there is a disaffection within regional literary cultures
directed at fetishised, idealised narratives of multiculturalism. Leeming states ‘we
constantly hear that Leicester is this hunky dory, homogenous, happy clappy,
multicultural city — right — that’s one story.’25 This thesis sets out not to mount a
critique of multiculturalism, either as a concept or as lived experience, but rather to
emphasise the Midlands narratives which are obscured by the dominant discourses of
successful multiculturalism. As Leeming asserts, ‘the other story of Leicester that I’m
trying to highlight in that poem is that actually, the ethnic minority communities have
prescribed expressions.’26 In other words, cultural output from minority communities
must correlate with stereotyped norms expected by local authorities and funding bodies.
In challenging the notion of multiculturalism as a revered, monolithic entity, Leeming is

25 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
26 Ibid.
not alone among her Midlands literary peers. In his poem ‘I have a Scheme’ Benjamin Zephaniah likens the doctrine of multiculturalism to a religious entity:

Le me hear you say
Multiculture
Amen
Let me hear you say
Roti, Roti
A women.27

Here, the humble roti bread becomes a metonym for the tokenistic symbolism of a multicultural aesthetic which has elsewhere been characterised by ‘steelbands, saris and samosas’.28 With trademark humour, Midlands writers such as the ironically self-professed ‘equal opportunities poet’ Zephaniah, are challenging ‘prescribed expressions’ and the ways in which their region is represented in official government narratives, which Zephaniah cheekily calls the ‘the great book of multiculturalism’.29 Midlands writers draw from lived experience of multiculture to produce incisive critical commentaries on mainstream discourses of multiculturalism. The officially endorsed — and as Zephaniah would have it, worshipped — strain of multiculturalism is not a productive means of approaching Midlands texts. As a working alternative method of reading diversity in literature, Gilroy’s notion of ‘vulgar’ or ‘demotic’ cosmopolitanism is highly instructive here:

This cosmopolitan attachment finds civic and ethical value in the process of exposure to otherness. It glories in the ordinary virtues and ironies — listening, looking, discretion, friendship — that can be cultivated when mundane encounters with difference become rewarding.30

I would argue that the prevalence of this mode within Midlands literature is one of its greatest assets, and yet ‘demotic’ literary voices are obscured by the metanarratives as typified in comments such as Manjula Sood, assistant mayor and chairman of Leicester

Council of Faiths, stating ‘globally we are known as the best multicultural city on earth.’\textsuperscript{31} The kinds of ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ espoused by best-selling authors such as Sue Townsend and Bali Rai are perhaps considered too ordinary, too parochial, to warrant sustained critical attention. This reifies the stereotype of diversity within Midlands cities such as Leicester, Birmingham and Nottingham being reducible to an official ‘saris and samosas’ type literary aesthetic.

The Midlands as a Cultural Void

At the time of the 2011 census, the population of the Midlands region was approximately 10.14 million, around one sixth of the UK’s 64 million population.\textsuperscript{32} I will argue that this fact is not reflected by the attention which the region’s cultural output receives. Through their processes of selection and omission, critical accounts of English literature tend to mirror popular opinion in that they assume the Midlands to be something of a cultural void. This stance is all the more bemusing considering its relatively recent genesis. Historically, the work of Midlands authors such as Shakespeare, George Eliot and Arnold Bennett has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. Why then, is contemporary writing from the region not afforded equal significance? The problem appears to lie in the reputation — or lack thereof — of the region itself, rather than the literature it produces. My thesis will explore the complexities of the literary landscape. The Midlands have become a critical blind spot. Recently, small steps have been made towards redressing this balance, through anthologies such as Celebrate Wha? (2011) and Out of Bounds (2013), both of which provide a Midlands angle on black and Asian British writing.\textsuperscript{33} In the early 2010s these anthologies represented a tidemark in the critical appraisal and public dissemination of black British writing. These are influential

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{33} Eric Doumerc and Roy McFarlane (eds.), Celebrate Wha? Ten Black British Poets from the Midlands (Middlesborough: Smokestack, 2011); Kay, Procter and Robinson (eds.).
\end{flushleft}
anthologies which map a new geography of literature, taking readers on imagined journeys which show a breadth of material beyond London. The editors of Out of Bounds make the following claim for the originality of their collection:

... it is by moving beyond the bounds of London that this collection stakes its claim to occupy new ground. An earlier generation of settlers and visitors (from McKay to Bennett) strayed only rarely from the English metropolis in their poetry, but recent decades have seen a proliferation of poetry presented from the point of view of the national, regional and local realms beyond London.\textsuperscript{34}

As I argue below, such a claim is powerful when considering the breadth of the nation’s poetic output but it can equally be applied to regional fiction. One potential pitfall when embarking on a study which privileges the ‘loco specific’ is the danger of specialising beyond the point of wider relevance.\textsuperscript{35} When considering this delicate balance, recourse to Out of Bounds provides a strong defence of regional literary sensibility: ‘this does not amount to a narrowing of vision, the regional as parochial; on the contrary it opens up the counties and countries of Britain to their postcolonial heritage.’\textsuperscript{36} This is a timely and progressive endeavour and one which appears to be slowly gaining traction in British culture. David Olusoga’s historical book and documentary series Black and British: A Forgotten History which aired on BBC in 2016, presents a highly devolved postcolonial perspective on mainstream British history.\textsuperscript{37} This notion of ‘opening up’ can have a liberating effect on approaches to textual selection and appraisal; as the critical lens zooms in geographically, the wider optic simultaneously broadens as we become less fixated upon the hive of literary production and economy which can be found in London.

These anthologies are not the only recent developments towards a more holistic sense of the nation’s regional literary cultures. At the University of Leicester, the Grassroutes: Contemporary Leicestershire Writing project afforded regional writers a platform to raise awareness of their existing output while also commissioning new work,

\textsuperscript{34} Kay, Procter and Robinson (eds.), p. 15.
\textsuperscript{35} Peter Barry’s term denotes poetry which refers to geographically specific locations. Peter Barry, Contemporary British Poetry and the City (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{36} Kay, Procter and Robinson (eds.), p. 15.
\textsuperscript{37} David Olusoga, Black and British: A Forgotten History (London: BBC/ MacMillan, 2016).
‘Five Leicester Poems’, by Anita Sivakumaran. Looking to the North of England, the ‘Devolving Diasporas’ and ‘Moving Manchester: Mediating Marginalities’ projects conveyed a new spirit of the importance of regional literary culture and therefore provided an invaluable starting point for this research project.38

The North–South Divide

As stated above, this thesis sets out to cast regional literature in a new light. The challenge of this reappraisal of Midlands culture is exacerbated by a North–South divide. England is often (mis)understood as comprising two vast, adjacent regions; the North and the South. These regions have no distinct geographical or administrative borders but are defined in fluid ways within popular culture and folk wisdom.39 The perceived differences between North and South are sometimes understood in economic terms, sometimes political, cultural or literary. David Law’s thesis “Guddling for Words”: Representing the North and Northernness in Post-1950 South Pennine Literature’ is particularly instructive here as it represents a sensitive, non-partisan attempt to get to the core of Northern values as represented in the region’s literature.40 As Law’s thesis elucidates, perceptions of the North–South divide vary wildly from humour to bitter feelings of segregation.

Within the conceptual framework of the North–South divide, the Midlands are conspicuous only through their absence. Robert Shore has referred to the Midlands as the ‘hyphen’ within the nation’s ‘North–South’ understanding of its constituent regions.41 While this positions the Midlands as unfavourably ‘stuck in the middle’ of postcolonial Britain, the human impulse to separate out north and south is perhaps more automatic

than it is malicious. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel published ‘The Bridge and the Door’ which suggested that humans instinctively ‘separate what is related’ and ‘relate what is separate.’ With such absolute — and, as I will argue, intellectually and critically distorting — categories as North and South, this separation is of course problematic. It is however, as Simmel argues, an entirely natural and enduring human trait:

> Things must first be separate in order to be together. Practically and logically, it would be senseless to relate that which was not separate, or to relate that which in some sense does not remain separate.

Simmel is careful to take his argument above the relatively abstract plane of philosophy and refer to logic and practicality; separation is here suggested to be necessary and even desirable. Although this thesis uses literature as its primary source material, it consistently contextualises the debate within real life contexts. To test Simmel’s assertion in one such ‘logical’ and ‘practical’ application, I look to the UK’s road network. Traversing the country’s motorways from north to south (or vice versa) will reinforce the notion that the Midlands do not exist, with huge signs declaring ‘THE NORTH’ or ‘THE SOUTH’ up ahead. Rarely is the Midlands referred to as its own discrete entity, running contrary to Simmel’s convincing theory that we as humans frequently separate things apart in order to understand them. If Simmel’s assertion were true, surely Britain would welcome a third, central region to separate out and further understand their nation? Part of the denial of the Midlands’ autonomy seems to lie in the etymology. The English language often employs constructions which frame the ‘middle’ as average, nondescript or unappealing. For example, the idiom ‘fair to middling’ is defined by the Oxford dictionary as ‘slightly above average.’ Although not a disastrous assessment, this is surely a state which most people would aspire beyond. Then there is the ultimate

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43 Ibid.
44 Simmel in Briganti and Mezei (eds.), p. 249.
expression of mediocrity, ‘middle of the road’, and the humiliating childhood game, and associated adult dilemma, of being ‘piggy in the middle’. Few people aspire to peak at ‘middle management’ in their career progression. Linguistically, the nation seems to denigrate the middle through its use of idiom. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the binary opposition of North–South is so appealing; it cuts out the ‘middle man’ whom we have learnt to distrust through language and cultural discourse. As Robert Shore asserts, ‘the connections made at the verbal level are nothing short of lethal.’

Verbal organisation has real-world effects.

A team of researchers at the University of Sheffield have compiled a major study, ‘Changing UK: The way we live now’, which not only reinforces the North–South divide but actualises it along a geographical line and actively denies the validity of the Midlands. The study states that ‘the country is best typified as being divided regionally between the North and the South... the idea of a Midlands region adds more confusion than light.’ This dividing line is based on factors such as standardised mortality rates, income and house prices and is drawn diagonally from the Severn Estuary, splitting the Midlands en route to the Humber. By the logic of Dorling, Vickers, Thomas, Pritchard and Ballas, Birmingham is in the North, while Leicester is in the South. Geographically however, the reverse is true — Leicester is actually further north than Birmingham.

Culturally, both these statements are false. Birmingham and Leicester are uniquely Midlands cities. They have their own diverse populations and distinct identities of their own. While statistics are being used at the national level to demonstrate a polarised country, writers in the Midlands are quietly working away with little regard for the purported sovereignty of the South. I had the good fortune to interview Leicester author Leeming, who echoes this assertion when speaking about cultural practitioners from the

46 Shore, p. 12.
48 Dorling, Vickers, Thomas, Pritchard and Ballas.
Midlands: ‘They’re from here. And what they write about, or make films about, what shapes them, is from here. Yeah — up the Midlands!’ This kind of belief in the creative potential of the region is one of the key influences behind my research, and I use Frow’s alternative models of cultural value to draw attention to the hegemony of the South and the false binary of the North–South divide. One of my aims is therefore to amplify these Midlands voices for critical ears.

**Midlands Geography**

Perhaps one of the reasons why the Midlands tends to be overlooked culturally is the landlocked and relatively flat character of its geography. The novelist Ferdinand Dennis’s 1988 travelogue *Behind the Front Lines: Journey into Afro Britain* offers a postcolonial and post-industrial optic on this landscape. In the chapter on Birmingham, Dennis recalls the geographical shifts as he approaches on the train:

> The uniform flatness of the Midlands landscape contributed to my drowsiness… consequently, much of the journey passed in a nether-world: unexciting blurred images… It was the sight of old, disused engine workshops in Derby which brought me back to the real world. As the countryside resumed, I realised I was feeling apprehensive about my next stop. Birmingham and I were no strangers. I had lived and worked there for almost a year. It had been a profoundly disturbing experience.

The sharp contrast which Dennis draws between the otherworldliness of the Midlands countryside and its decidedly ‘real’ sites of post-industrial decay, is telling of a cognitive dissonance expressed in the region’s literature. This is a part of the country that is often understood as a liminal space, neither rural picturesque, nor — since the late twentieth century — excelling as an industrial centre. Dennis’ anthropological study delves into the inner city of 1980s Handsworth, examining issues of industrial legacy, youth crime and unemployment and the impact of Rastafarianism. *Behind the Frontlines* is the book based on a BBC Radio 4 series of the same name, and is just one node in a network of resources which explore how the Midlands has been represented in the public

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50 Dennis, p. 90.
While *Behind the Frontlines* does achieve a more nuanced appraisal of the post-industrial Midlands than the above excerpt suggests, geography is however a recurring theme in negative appraisals of the Midlands and therefore within this thesis. Interviewing a woman from Chesterfield, Robert Shore highlights how even someone born and raised in Derbyshire, a region dependent on funding from the East Midlands Development Agency, can spurn the notion of belonging to the Midlands and pledge allegiance to the North. Perceptions of Midlands geography are at the heart of this belief:

‘I’m sorry, Robert, but Chesterfield is in the hills, and hills are Northern.’
‘All of them? Exclusively?’
‘All the proper ones, yes. I’m not including those slopes you go up and down when you’re coming into Nottingham, obviously. Sherwood Rise, ha!’

Here the terrain of Nottingham becomes the subject of ridicule. The optic afforded by travel, presumably by car here, gives commentators an opportunity to observe geographical changes as they traverse the region. Just like Ferdinand Dennis above, Shore’s interviewee understands crossing the Midlands to be an intensely negative experience: ‘I took a train from Birmingham to Nottingham a few weeks ago and it nearly undermined my will to live.’ This is all very Larkinesque. Geography is here understood in terms of the dramatic geographical shifts which transport reveals; particularly in a region as geographically diverse as the Midlands. In looking at literary accounts of Midlands travel and the cultural significance of its train stations, this thesis obtains a travellers’ perspective on the region, which oscillates between the familiar perspective of the ‘native’ Midlander and the ‘othering’ gaze of newcomers to the landscape, for example Ferdinand Dennis quoted above. The Midlands transport network is deeply connected to its industrial heritage and consequently its regional identity. Even before the Second World War, literary accounts of the Midlands have fixated on the regions’ transport networks. As far back as 1929, author Josephine Tey was drawing links between the identity of the Midlands and its public transport:

Grant came out of the station into the drone and clamour of trams. If he had

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52 Ibid., p. 38.
been asked what represented the Midlands in his mind, he would unhesitatingly have said trams... Grant never heard the far-away peculiar sing of an approaching tramcar without finding himself back in the dead, airless atmosphere of the Midland town where he had been born. The Midlanders did not hide away their trams in back streets; they trailed them proudly through their chiefest thoroughfares, partly from braggadocio, partly from a misplaced idea of utility.\textsuperscript{53}

From the ‘dead atmosphere’ of the Midlands, the ‘misplaced utility’ of its transport, the ‘slopes’ masquerading as hills and as a ‘nether-world’ of ‘unexciting blurred images’, both fictional and non-fictional accounts of the region are often far from flattering. In his poem ‘Birmingham’, Louis MacNeice turned equally critical attention on Midlands trams, which ‘like vast sarcophagi move’.\textsuperscript{54} The lexis pertaining to death appears in some way a commentary on a slower pace of life but resoundingly carries negative connotations for the Midlands region. It is my intention to demonstrate that such misconceptions are not solely inspired by actual empirical observations but rather that they demonstrate a cultural bias which makes commentators see the worst in the Midlands. The firm self-identity of the North — although much-derided and parochialised — and the metonymic capabilities of London can be held partly accountable for this denigration of the Midlands.

\textbf{London: Synecdoche for England?}

Having suggested that creative writing from London has dominated critical discussions about postcolonial and post-war English literature, I now survey some of the canonical texts which have cemented this hierarchy. A starting point for London is the wonderfully hyperbolic statement that ‘London has the greatest literary tradition of any city in the world.’\textsuperscript{55} These words adorn the Everyman anthology \textit{London Stories}, opening a blurb which imaginatively claims Shakespeare as a London writer.\textsuperscript{56} In such elevated prose seldom used to describe Birmingham or Leicester, we are told that London is ‘a city of

\textsuperscript{55} Jerry White (ed.), \textit{London Stories} (London: Everyman’s Pocket Classics, 2014), back cover.
\textsuperscript{56} The bard is of course from Stratford-Upon-Avon, in the Midlands.
boundless wealth and ragged squalor, of moving tragedy and riotous joy’. These words epitomise the superlative tone with which critics and anthologisers tend to describe London. A combination of nostalgia and an unquestioned belief in the absolute supremacy of the capital have led to a disproportionate quantity of written material on the subject. It is my contention that this privileging of London writing should not be conflated with a quality of output superior to other regions. This conflation does however occur, even in assessments of contemporary fiction. London is often seen as the postcolonial city in England. Its huge scale, vastly diverse population and all-important port location make this position understandable, yet its prolific literary output threatens to overshadow regional writing in England.

As counter-intuitive as this may sound, a text concerning itself solely with London literature was crucial in influencing the Midlands focus of this project. John McLeod’s Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis (2004) is an authoritative examination of the literary cultures of migrant communities in the capital. In this loosely chronological monograph, McLeod surveys poetry, prose fiction and sociological texts from the 1950s to the present day. The reason Postcolonial London was of such importance when initiating this research project is that it seems to suggest the Midlands — and indeed anywhere outside of London — to be of secondary importance, if only through its conspicuous absence. This is implicit in the introduction, where McLeod expounds upon the nexus which London and England share, which he calls ‘the vexed relationship between city and nation’.

As the capital of the British Isles and seat of state authority, London is imagined to possess a particularly important relationship with the nation. The slippage between London, England and Britain as corresponding terms can be unhelpful, perplexing and extremely difficult to resist, but it is worth questioning in order to lay bare the disjunctive relationship between capital city and nation which informs many representations of postcolonial London – and which makes the study of postcolonial London resolutely not the equivalent study of postcolonial England or Britain.

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57 White (ed.), back cover.
58 John McLeod, Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis.
59 McLeod, p. 16.
60 Ibid.
Anyone wishing to test out this ‘slippage’ in action might be advised to visit the USA and observe how quickly the phrase ‘London England’ is conjured by Americans in connection with any English location. Nottingham stands slightly more chance of evoking a relevant response due to the myth of Robin Hood, but generally London is the sole cultural reference point. Sumara Ray understands London as a ‘synecdoche for Britain’ and relates this to its history by highlighting its reputation as ‘the acme of empire, global capitalism and world culture.’\(^{61}\) This is somewhat hyperbolic. As manufacturers of weapons and shackles, the Midlands too played their own regrettable role in empire but now are championed as truly postcolonial and multicultural.\(^{62}\) Leicester in particular has been described as the ‘premier multicultural city in Europe’.\(^{63}\) Responding to McLeod’s call for clarity on the distinction between postcolonial London and postcolonial England or Britain, much of my analysis on Leicester addresses claims about the resounding success of the city’s diversity and integration. Weighing up the official narratives of Leicester against the alternative narratives articulated by the city’s diverse literary cultures enables a continuation of McLeod’s theoretical approach.

McLeod’s *Postcolonial London* suggests a methodology and framework for close reading with applications well beyond the borders of the M25. His use of theorists such as Michel De Certeau and Henri Lefebvre offers a grounded perspective on the city, enabling the author to make important distinctions between the geographically absolute ‘place’ and its more elusive counterpart of ‘space’: an ongoing production performed by individuals and communities.\(^{64}\) The theoretical angle of this text has provided a starting point for my own research. McLeod’s transposition of French theory onto English soil

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\(^{62}\) The value of a slave was often said to be the same as ‘one Birmingham gun’, Ian Grosvenor, Rita McLean and Siân Roberts (eds.), *Making Connections: Birmingham Black International History* (Birmingham: Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures, 2002), p. 48.


provides an impressively flexible model for reading postcolonial literature and one which I frequently adopt below.

This Anglo-French nexus is crucial to the theoretical dimension of my work. I am indebted to critics such as McLeod and James Procter who, in turn, are indebted to French theoretical texts including De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) and Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991).65 These theories have gone on to spawn distinctly British variants which are invaluable to this thesis. James Procter’s 2003 monograph *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* and his 2006 essay ‘The Postcolonial Everyday’ provide a critical optic for reading the minutiae of Midlands life which enables it to transcend the reductive model of parochial writing and connect with a wider readership.66 A prime example of this is Townsend’s best-selling Adrian Mole series, now approaching Adrian’s 50th birthday. A theoretical counterpoint to this notion of the ‘postcolonial everyday’ comes from Graham Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001). This model has allowed me to make fruitful comparisons between more prestigious forms of so-called ‘exotic’ cultural products and the typically more ‘everyday’ aesthetic espoused by Midlands writers.

If, as McLeod claims, the ‘city [London] and nation [England] are set at odds’, this leaves a gap in the field for the study of other postcolonial cities.67 Emerging almost a decade after McLeod’s seminal work, Lynne Pearce, Corinne Fowler and Robert Crawshaw’s *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora space and the devolution of literary culture* (2013) develops a number of the concerns which McLeod addressed in 2004 and opens up new topics of discussion.68 The result is an engaging examination of Manchester’s black and Asian British literature and literary cultures. Postcolonial

67 McLeod, p. 19.
68 Pearce, Fowler and Crawshaw.
Manchester presents the North of England as quintessential “diaspora space” with the intention to 'contribute positively to a better understanding of the region in social, cultural and aesthetic terms.' The authors of Postcolonial Manchester also challenge readers’ and critics’ expectations of what black and Asian British writing should be about. Their selection process for textual analysis is not confined to material directly concerning what Mike Phillips has called ‘the drama of difference’. In this manner, the text has influenced this study by informing — and most importantly broadening — my processes of textual selection and analysis.

Structure of the Thesis
This project engages with numerous, overlapping themes within Midlands literature and literary cultures. Arranging my research geographically therefore gives a strong sense of the unique characteristics of each of the major cities within the Midlands region: Nottingham, Leicester and Birmingham. I divide the thesis into these three main ‘parts’ (for Birmingham, Nottingham and Leicester), each of which contain three chapters, which themselves are divided up into sections. These three cities were chosen in order to represent a wide cross-section of the Midlands literary output. In order to produce a thesis which shows Midlands literary cultures to be of equal value to those found in London, I have opted to study the major cities of the Midlands. While the rural Midlands harbour their own rich and varied literary cultures, this project takes the modern city as its site of study. There is, however, a distinct East-Midlands bias within the textual selection of this thesis. Even while arguing for wider recognition of the overlooked Midlands as a whole, this study is guilty of favouring one part of the country over another. Of the three parts of this thesis, only Birmingham represents the West Midlands. While Birmingham is undeniably the largest conurbation of the West Midlands, its presence here as the region’s sole representative does a disservice to literary cities

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69 Ibid., p. 2.
such as Wolverhampton and Coventry. The creative output of these cities is prolific and
diverse. It is therefore necessary to expand this study for a future published iteration
with a more balanced East/West distribution. Adding a fourth part on Wolverhampton is
my preferred means of accomplishing this, due to this particular city’s wealth of high
quality fiction, particularly by British Asian authors. Perhaps the most notable exponent
here is Meer Syal. While her fiction demonstrates some influence on the case studies
here, it is important that it receives the thorough attention which only a further,
separate study could achieve.

The process of textual selection is inevitably tethered to a more difficult
parallel process; that of omission. Consequently, one of the key areas in which I would
like to develop this thesis is Islamic fiction from the Midlands. Indeed, the Midlands have
produced Islamic writers who have gone on to achieve acclaim at national and
international levels. But what are Midlands Muslim writers actually writing about?
Perhaps the recent apogee for this creative mode in the Midlands was the Muslim
Writer’s awards held in Birmingham in 2012. While the list of prize winners only
reinforces the sheer wealth of talent amongst British Muslim writers, it also highlights
the reason for their omission from this project. I found that the two Midlands writers on
the list — Moazzam Begg, from Birmingham and Kashif Choudry from Solihull — both
omit regional concerns from their writing. With the internationalisation of Islamic
consciousness in a post-9/11 world, this is completely understandable. Begg’s 2007
memoirs document his Birmingham upbringing in vivid detail, yet this Midlands material
is designed only to foreground a text, and indeed a life, devoted to international travel,
activism and subsequent detainment.\footnote{Moazzam Begg, \textit{Enemy Combatant: The Terrifying True Story of a Briton in
Guantánamo} (London: Simon & Schuster, 2007).} In contrast to Begg’s highly detailed
autobiographical work, Choudry produces fiction which is distinctly \textit{placeless}. His short
story ‘Bedtime Story’ (2008), for example, published by the (now defunct) Leicester-
based Dahlia publishing, is set in a mythic anyplace:
Once upon a time there was a little boy. He lived in a great old house perched on the top of a hill. From afar, the house seemed to balance precariously right on the tip of the hill, held up by a gentle breeze.\footnote{Kashif Choudry, ‘Bedtime Story’, The Asian Writer \url{http://theasianwriter.co.uk/2008/05/a-bedtime-story-by-kashif-choudry/} [Accessed 9 October 2017]}

The nameless location provides Choudry with a backdrop for broad-brush, non-regional storytelling. His use of symbolism and morality lends a fable-like quality to the fiction. This setting is used effectively in that it conveys messages with the potential to connect globally, unburdened by the concerns of place. For Choudry, this makes for an effective means of communicating, yet the regional Midlands colour is absent. This mode equally defines Dahlia’s output; they are a regional press who publish mostly non-regional writing. It is indeed writing of a very high standard but it does not align with the loco-specific research aims of this project.\footnote{Barry, p. 3.}

The first part of the thesis concerns Nottingham and approaches its literary cultures from a broadly socio-economic perspective. Chapter one is entitled ‘Nottingham’s “Blackdrop” Group and the Economics of Performance Poetry’. It concerns itself with the performative, experiential nature of performance poetry, placing the art form within debates about the stage and the page. I look in depth at the ways in which performance poetry is funded at the regional level and the degree to which grassroots strategies propel the genre forward. In depth interviews with Michelle ‘Mother’ Hubbard afford insights into the ethics of funding for the arts and the ways in which race and ethnicity influence both the creative and economic aspects of the ‘Blackdrop’ performance group in Nottingham.

Chapter two ‘#rebelnotts: Literary Tourism in Alan Sillitoe’s Nottingham’ further examines the economic aspects of Midlands literary cultures and questions what value — both in the sense of financial capital and cultural prestige — a rich literary heritage can bring to a location. Nottingham is celebrating the rebellious character of some of its most famous literary exponents such as Sillitoe, Byron and Lawrence. Digital technologies are being used to bring literary tourism to life in the East Midlands and I
examine how this plays out against a series of ‘space and place’ readings of Sillitoe’s fiction.

Chapter three ‘Nottingham: Poetry in Print’ is the story of an endangered species: the professional poet. Once again, the economics of literary production are evaluated against the backdrop of technological change. Is print still a viable mode of literary transmission in the age of mass digital communication? I examine the innovative ways in which Nottingham poets and publishers continue to make themselves relevant in the twenty-first century.

The second part of this thesis concerns Leicester and draws attention to diversity and everyday life as represented in literary texts from the city. Chapter four of the thesis is ‘Piri Piri Chicken: ‘Demotic Cosmopolitanism’ in Contemporary Leicester’. As the name suggests, the remit of textual selection goes beyond the literary and reads the narrative and physical markers of Leicester’s multicultural demographics. I challenge official narratives of straightforwardly successful multiculturalism by invoking Gilroy’s notion of ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ as a means of understanding the everyday unity present within the city and its literary output.74

The theme of diversity is developed in chapter five, ‘#WeNeedDiverseBooks: Diversity in Leicester’s Young Adult Fiction’. The genre of YA is often overlooked by literary critics but I demonstrate that it is an important area of study when looking at diversity. Young readers are particularly malleable with regards to self-image and I question who is represented within the pages of YA books, how these titles are marketed and how diversity is articulated in a Leicester-specific context in the fiction of Rai.

Arguably Leicester’s most famous literary character is Adrian Mole and his literary world is explored in chapter six, ‘Leicester Leicester/ Fester fester’: The Secret Diary of a Regional Writer’. Townsend left behind a wealth of archival material held by the University of Leicester and the study of her manuscript drafts for the Adrian Mole novels reveals a complex relationship with her home city. Many of the negative conceptions of

74 Paul Gilroy, After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture? (London: Routledge, 2004).
the Midlands outlined above are articulated via Townsend’s novels, although the region is often anonymised by the author who, in her first novel, avoids ‘loco specific’ markers.\(^75\) I consider the implications of such a commercially successful writer for the city’s literary heritage.

The third and final part of this thesis concerns Birmingham and develops the thread of diversity established in both the Leicester and Nottingham parts. Chapter seven deals with the concentrated Caribbean migration to an inner-city region of Birmingham and is entitled ‘Handsworth Revolution: ‘Double Vision’ in Birmingham’s Inner City’. It uses Peter Barry’s idea of seeing the city as simultaneously both here and elsewhere to explore the pan-African consciousness of Birmingham poets such as Zephaniah and Moqapi Selassie and the reggae band Steel Pulse.\(^76\) Links are drawn between the Caribbean and the Midlands as I close read texts which articulate disaffection but also solidarity with the ‘concrete jungle’ of inner-city Birmingham.

Chapter eight, ‘What was Lost’: Post-war and Post-Industrial Birmingham in Catherine O’Flynn’s Novels’ takes its cues from the physical fabric of the city. It intersects the narrative of Birmingham’s post-war development with the fiction of Birmingham author O’flynn. I attempt to understand the ideologies of a city fixated by renewal and an insatiable urge to move ‘Forward!’

The final chapter, ‘No coloured; no Irish’: The Caribbean Connection in Post-war Irish Birmingham Literature’ draws literary links between two postcolonial communities whose histories have frequently overlapped in twentieth century Birmingham. I use the theoretical work of James Procter and Graham Huggan to consider how notions of the ‘exotic’ and the ‘everyday’ inform the dissemination and reception of texts, attempting to understand why certain authors are applauded in the arena of literary criticism and the global marketplace for fiction, while others are not.

It is not the intention of this thesis to offer conclusive or authoritative statements as to the exact nature and characteristics of each constituent city’s literary culture, let

\(^{75}\) Barry, p. 3.
\(^{76}\) Barry, p. 46.
alone the entire Midlands region as a cultural entity. However, in selecting three distinct case studies for each major city, I offer nine insights into the cultural, social, economic and historical facets of an overlooked part of the world. In doing so, I position my work alongside new creative anthologies outlined above and aim to make a contribution to the critical reassessment of a denigrated region which in fact produces a wealth of valuable cultural output.
Nottingham: A Literary City in Transition

Keywords
Nottingham, literary economy, literary tourism, cultural value, independent publishing, performance poetry, digital publishing, black British writing

Nottingham Introduction
This chapter aims to give a broad overview of Nottingham’s modern literary economy. It does so by careful attention to regional nuances of the city’s literary cultures and through readings of selected Nottingham texts. The idiosyncrasies of Nottingham’s literature cannot be claimed to exist in isolation from regional, national and global forces of economic change and so this chapter will place in context modes of cultural expression including performance poetry, DIY magazines, ‘pulp’ paperbacks, poetry anthologies, digital media and literary tourism.

In the case studies explored in the chapter, technology is the pre-eminent stimulus of transition in contemporary literary cultures. Literary practices which might appear to flourish outside of the Web 2.0 framework, for example a Nottingham performance poet engaging with an audience in an intimate café setting, are ultimately shaped by wider technological and economic concerns and resources. This chapter observes and unpicks instances where technology, economy and literature intersect. The read:write report calls this intersection a ‘convergence’ of the type best exemplified by the interactive new forms of internet media branded Web 2.0.¹ This term references the second phase of the internet’s development and specifically the interactive, user-orientated characteristics which distinguish this contemporary epoch from the static, didactic nature of the early World Wide Web. The new possibilities for mass communication are widely held to be a ‘levelling force’ which ‘disrupts established critical

The egalitarian qualities of Web 2.0 mean that readers and writers are placed in dialogue in ways which previously would have been logistically impossible. Despite the liberating effects of technology, it could be argued that digital literary content is still considered a poor substitute for print. The pleasingly tactile qualities of print and the necessary investment of capital to publish a writer mean that the prestige traditionally bestowed upon published literature still holds considerable status in Nottingham’s regional literary cultures.

Using shifting technology as a social backdrop, this chapter analyses alternative conceptions of literary value which my research identifies to be a cohesive aspect of the city’s literary cultures. The models of literary value explored may not be unique to Nottingham but they are part of a wider picture of literary devolution. Critical attention is here afforded to literary cultures which do not enjoy the backing of value-attributing bodies and networks which tend to be based in London. This chapter interrogates the privileged standpoint from which recognised national agents of value operate. Publishers, reviewers, prize judges and promoters have traditionally made London the centre of their professional networks and consequently, the centre of what John Frow calls the ‘disrupted and uncertain universe of value.’

A straightforward critique of this London-centric universe would downplay the undeniably valuable literary endeavours which emanate from that metropolitan centre and threaten to position my own defence of Nottingham’s literary cultures within the unacademic realm of ‘sour grapes’. Instead, I set out to observe which alternative frameworks of literary value are in place in Nottingham and understand how these correlate with wider moves towards literary devolution nationally.

Frow’s 1995 work on cultural value is invaluable for the insight it can provide within the context of my Nottingham case studies. Furthermore it has generated subsequent debate within the field which prominent critics have developed further. In

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2 read:write, p. 7.
3 Frow, p. 1.
The Postcolonial Exotic (2001), Graham Huggan responds to Frow, unpicking the geographical dimensions of the theory which are so essential to my study:

Audiences, says Frow, arguing in part against Bourdieu, are never fixed; ‘valuing communities’, similarly, cannot be conceptualised ‘in terms of self-contained positional identities’ (Frow 1995:154) — the value ascribed to a literary work is never the more or less direct expression of a social group. This labile view of audience suggests that the attempt to locate and affix the social positions of ‘valuing communities’ is always likely to be chimerical [...] I would argue that in the case of Nottingham’s regional literary cultures, audiences are not as ‘labile’ as Huggan suggests. In a city which by necessity must operate outside of the valuing communities emanating from London, audiences do become relatively fixed and distinctly ‘local’. Expanding these networks beyond the immediate regions is the challenge of cultural practitioners from diverse corners of the Midlands’ creative economy. It will be my task then to demonstrate the vitality of Nottingham’s valuing communities and assert the scholarly importance of reading works which are too often dismissed as parochial simply based on their place of production and regional affiliations. It is not my intention to argue that Nottingham is exceptional in literary, economic or technological terms, although having absorbed and studied its literary cultures over several years, the city feels a vibrant and prolific location with which to demonstrate some of the innovative and dramatic changes which literature faces globally.

The first chapter, ‘Nottingham’s ‘Blackdrop’ Group and the Economics of Performance Poetry’, will explore the current state of the art form at the local level and position this within wider debates about literary value. I use the work of Michelle ‘Mother’ Hubbard — a Nottingham poet of dual Irish and Jamaican heritage — to explore how various forms of literary value are ascribed across the ‘page/stage’ divide; to examine the relationships between economic viability and literary form and to explore the complex networks of gatekeepers and valuing communities which constitute contemporary performance poetry cultures in Nottingham.

Chapter two, '#rebelnotts: Literary Tourism in Alan Sillitoe’s Nottingham’, interrogates the ways in which digital technology is being creatively deployed to augment Sillitoe’s fiction and reposition his oeuvre as a body of interactive travel writing
in which the reader actualises the text in real time, on the streets of Nottingham. It examines the innovative ways in which Nottingham literature is marketed as rebellious in a bid to strengthen support for the city’s literary heritage, attract visitors and generate much-needed revenue. Literary tourism is a travel phenomenon that needs scholarly attention. Many academics are quick to dismiss the practice in public, while indulging in it privately.\(^4\) In Nottingham however, literary tourism is mapping exciting new routes through the city, using innovative technologies. This timely chapter coincides with Nottingham’s newly designated UNESCO City of Literature status and public efforts to celebrate the tradition of rebellion within Nottingham’s literary cultures, as galvanised by the hashtag #rebelnotts.

The final chapter ‘Nottingham: Poetry in Print’ considers the relevance of print in a multimedia age, looking at the mechanics of the poetry publishing industry and how they impact on regional literary culture. The prestige afforded to print publications is interrogated as I examine the infancy of digital publishing in an epoch which Striphas calls the ‘late age of print’.\(^5\) While many traditional poetry presses survive in Nottingham, others are innovating and using late print culture to their commercial advantage, for example Candlestick Press who disseminate poetry pamphlets in place of greetings cards. Local case studies will demonstrate the interplay between print culture and wider literary devolution, examining the means by which Nottingham poets and presses reach their audiences without the marketing prowess of the ‘big five’ poetry presses: Bloodaxe, Cape, Carcanet, Faber and Picador.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Fiona Moore, ‘Poetry prizes: the elephant on stage’, [http://displacement-poetry.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/poetry-prizes-elephant-on-stage.html](http://displacement-poetry.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/poetry-prizes-elephant-on-stage.html) [Accessed 11 August 2014]
Chapter One

Nottingham’s ‘Blackdrop’ Group and the Economics of Performance Poetry

I’m of Nottingham, camouflaged in Robin Hood Green.
Making my way through the mighty Sherwood Forest,
Loving the smell of fresh pine needles.
Bow becomes paper, arrow becomes pen.

I am known as ‘The Mother’ –
Jamaican girl with Irish eyes.
I am the urban Maid Marian, waiting for a surprise,
Avoiding the sheriff and his axe:
I can’t afford my council tax!7

Michelle Hubbard’s poetry often focuses on the craft of writing, using the finished product to draw the reader’s attention to the creative process, here transposing the Robin Hood myth to the role of the contemporary poet, ‘Bow becomes paper, arrow becomes pen.’ In emphasising the tools of her craft, Hubbard evokes a tradition of page-based poets, showing her process to be far more than a mere transcription of a performance. Here the mythology of the region is both adopted and yet subverted for the modern climate. Her black consciousness emerges in the second stanza, sitting comfortably alongside East Midlands folklore. The economic realities of Nottingham life are equally prevalent in Hubbard’s output. Their inclusion breaks down the illusion of poetry as a transcendent art form and serves as a reminder of the practical challenges of maintaining creative endeavours despite a dwindling economy for poetry.

Hubbard is the founder of Nottingham’s Blackdrop performance poetry group. She is also a published author in her own right but refuses to favour one side of the ‘stage or page’ divide.8 Hubbard’s own volumes include The Tapestry of a Black Woman and The Irish Jamaican and she has also appeared in recent anthologies featuring regional writing such as Celebrate Wha?: Ten Black British Poets from the Midlands and Out of Bounds:

7 Michelle Hubbard, ‘Take the girl out of Notts, but you can’t take Notts out of the girl!’, in Kay, Procter and Robinson (eds.), p. 178.
British Black and Asian Poets. Hubbard’s achievements are all the more significant, given her apparent marginalisation at the hands of literary ‘gatekeepers’ in Nottingham, a process which appears to reinforce the development of an enduring performance poetry scene offering an alternative to more traditional poetry readings. These traditional readings are typically organised by universities or publishing houses, with audiences relatively small in size and polite in their applause. The performance scene not only gives the literary consumers of Nottingham an alternative, it furthermore activates alternative systems of literary value which provide the performers with feedback, contacts, professional opportunities and most importantly, a platform for creative expression which might otherwise be out of reach.

This chapter provides a micro history of the development of a poet and programmer for whom ‘jumping through hoops’ to attain council funding raises a number of ethical issues. I place her story within wider debates around literary economy, devolution and literary value. However, within a literary mode as sensory, as momentary and experiential as performance poetry, critical analysis can be challenging. How best then, to contextualise activity in Nottingham within a national debate? A seminal 1999 roundtable discussion between some of performance poetry’s most esteemed figures provides a national context as the practicalities of developing a radical, stage-based literary culture are analysed. These kinds of cultural reference points are vital when making an argument around something as subjective as the quality of Nottingham’s performance poetry output. This is clearly a problematic issue, which Fowler calls the ‘vexed issue of quality’, as recourse to traditional channels of literary validation — book sales, press reviews, critical attention — has little or no relevance within performance poetry. This is not to say, in the case of Hubbard, that her work exists in isolation from the literary establishment and is somehow exempt from qualitative review. Zephaniah

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9 Michelle Hubbard, The Tapestry of a Black Woman (Self-published: no date); Michelle Hubbard, The Irish Jamaican (Self-published: 2007); Doumerc and McFarlane (eds.); Kay, Procter and Robinson (eds.).
10 Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
11 Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram.
12 Pearce, Fowler and Crawshaw, p. 83.
said of her volume *Tapestry of a Black Woman*, ‘these poems... are honest, they are
direct, they go from the page to the stage, and from beneath to the street.’
Zephaniah’s spatial metaphor encapsulates the loco-specific qualities of Blackdrop’s
literary output, which is perhaps simultaneously a barrier to recognition within a London
and Oxbridge-centric literary establishment.

In spite of economic challenges, Blackdrop has been running since October 2003.
It is a voluntary organisation which started with a Black History Month grant of just £75
from Nottingham City Council. This meagre seed capital demonstrates the
resourcefulness of the group. Black History month has taken place in the UK every
October since 1987 and still proves to be a controversial celebration. Many black British
poets have spoken of their frustration at the spike in demand for their services at this
time. In the USA, author and activist bell hooks has adopted a strategy of refusing offers
of work which come solely in Black History month: ‘If they want me in [Black History
Month],’ she says, ‘they should want me the rest of the year, too.’ The funding
strategies at play in the UK are equally susceptible to such tokenism, with public
expectations of councils to deliver a highly visible black arts programme throughout
October.

The £75 grant during black History Month was to be the full extent of the financial
aid which the Blackdrop collective would receive. In spite of this, they host successful
monthly events, showcasing local and international poets in small Nottingham venues.
Blackdrop was formed out of artistic necessity: Hubbard felt that ‘grammatically
incorrect’ poetry deserved to have a platform for exposure. Hubbard’s poetry was
perceived as ‘wishy washy’ by more traditional literary promoters, whose smaller events

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13 Michelle Hubbard, *Tapestry of a Black Woman*.
14 Barry, p. 3.
15 'Event Marks Black History Month’, Nottingham Evening Post, Saturday October 4th,
2008, p. 4.
16 The JBHE Foundation, ‘Black History Month: Education or Tokenism?’, *The Journal of
17 This is a concept which Michelle returns to throughout our conversation. It refers not
only to grammar, but is also tied up with ideas of snobbery about regional accents, and
the divide between ‘high’ and ‘middle brow’ culture. Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by
Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
have a more subdued approach to audience participation. In Nottingham, performance poetry became marginalised and was forced to achieve its aims through local networks of supportive performers and programmers.\textsuperscript{18} Hubbard offers her interpretation as to why numerous funding applications were turned down:

\begin{quote}
It’s because the application isn’t worded properly — not because we’re not doing what we say we’re doing. We are reaching audiences that other people can’t reach. We are attracting artists that other people can’t programme. That frustration makes me think ‘stuff it — keep your money.’ There is a pride in being independent and still surviving... We’ve been running for 11 years without funding, and we will be running for another 11 years without funding.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

This defiance towards external assistance is a stance that perhaps prepared Blackdrop for the austerity which would follow the economic downturn around 2009. Cuts targeted arts and culture first, for example by removing roles such as Literature Development Officers (LDOs).\textsuperscript{20} These officers were vital in the development of the region’s literary cultures, because they knew what was happening on the ground, and they recognised literary activity in gestation, indicating where seed funding could be helpful. Their loss has meant that those wishing to succeed have had to self-promote at grassroots level.

As Steve Dearden asserts, ‘[t]he lack of a literature infrastructure in the East Midlands also means there are few opportunities for future promoters, publishers, producers and the kind of people who set up literature projects within community groups, to gain experience. They might get the odd project grant, but most gain their experience unpaid.’\textsuperscript{21} Writing in 2008, Dearden’s assessment represents a strong argument in favour of the LDO programme in place at the time. The removal of these roles has left an even sparser infrastructure and disempowered the aforementioned promoters, publishers and producers who once received strong support towards funding applications from their LDOs. These officers served as a bridge between the creative and commercial components of the local literary economy, and their suspension risks widening the gulf between these often disparate worlds.

\textsuperscript{18} Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Dearden, p. 34.
Arts Development UK defines LDOs as ‘animateurs whose role is to support writers, readers and others involved in Literature Development.’\(^\text{22}\) Without this enlivening presence, the onus is now on individuals to achieve their literary aims unaided, a transition which seems likely to reinforce the economic bias which Hubbard observes, towards those already conversant with the language of funding applications. Although funding was never a major source of income for the Blackdrop collective, LDO-led initiatives such as the bi-monthly pamphlet ‘On the Write Lines’ gave them invaluable exposure and crystallized their efforts into physical representation on paper.\(^\text{23}\)

Technological and environmental, as well as economic factors, explain the disappearance of the publication in favour of ‘more efficient and cost-effective email newsletters’.\(^\text{24}\) Evidently within regional literary cultures, delicate balances are often disrupted by changes in funding at both local and national levels. The balance was particularly delicate during the economic downturn of the 2000s. However, having learned to stand alone since its inception, the Blackdrop team were able to maintain their audience figures throughout the recession. One method that they used was a rudimentary form of crowdsourcing, whereby admission fees are collected over 2 or 3 Blackdrop events and pooled to bring in a headline performer for the next event. This in turn creates a boost in numbers and enables the programmers to offer their audiences a balance of national and local performers. In the absence of support from funding bodies, entrepreneurialism becomes an integral part of survival within Nottingham’s literary economy.

Part of the problem regarding funding for performance poetry may lie in the ways in which it has been interpreted and defined at government level. The nametag is often associated with black poets, as Patience Agbabi stipulates, ‘I do think there’s often an assumption, with performance poetry, that the person’s got to be black, or of colour, or

\(^{23}\) For example, the publication (subtitled ‘Literature Events in City and County’) devoted the entire front cover to Michelle and the Black Drop collective in March 2007. Linking with the bias of Black History Month discussed above, the issue commemorates 200 years since the abolition of the slave trade. On the Write Lines: Literature Events in City and County, 33 (March–May 2007).  
\(^{24}\) Dearden, p. 15.
certainly not white English. There's this perception that we do it better, because we're more 'natural performers.' The racial assumptions at play here may be deeply ingrained but there is evidence to suggest a sea change. The Poetry Society have identified the white British poet Kate Tempest as a major figure for the future of British poetry. Tempest has published widely in both poetry and prose but is known primarily as a performance poet. I would argue however that Tempest’s easy acceptance into the ‘performance’ category is due to the multi-racial associations of the urban London accent. On record, one notices many similarities between Tempest’s intonation and that of contemporary black spoken word artists such as George the Poet. This is not to suggest that Tempest is in any way ‘putting it on’ — she was born and raised in South London and naturally speaks with the local inflection — but rather to say that London dialects function as a quickly recognisable marker of cosmopolitan identity for poets who event programmers and publishers might describe as ‘urban.’ The Midlands accent has a different brand altogether and, compared to the London accent, does not offer such quickly identifiable markers of cultural belonging. Midlands dialect does feature in many regional poems, a prime example being Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze’s comforting refrain of ‘I know mi duck, I know mi duck, I know mi duck, I know’ but it is more frequently associated with the rural, the domestic and mundane than the edge of London life.

This potential regional barrier to wider recognition is just one part of a complex problem which limits the reach and funding potential of Nottingham’s performance poetry cultures.

Perhaps wishing to avoid demarcation along racial lines, some commentators at local government level have struggled to categorise performance poetry and perhaps, in

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25 Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram, p. 42.
27 Ben Rampton, ‘From “multi-ethnic urban heteroglossia” to “contemporary urban vernaculars”’, Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies (King’s College London, 2010).
doing so, exacerbated the problem of access to funding for regional spoken word artists such as Hubbard. Experienced poetry programmer Ruth Harrison, who has worked for the long-established Apples and Snakes organisation, offers an insight into how the medium is perceived at government level:

I came across a document from a Regional Arts Board recently, in which, for the Performance Poetry Award, the definition of performance poetry is comedy and cabaret. Now, where the hell they’ve got that from, I’ve no idea. I just cringed when I read it. And I thought, ‘Well, this has obviously been written by a bureaucrat somewhere in an Arts Board, who has never actually seen it, and has just heard certain people talk about it’, I and you just think, well, 'No, that isn't what it's about'.

Although the Blackdrop collective does incorporate subtle hints of comedy and cabaret into their programming, understanding performance poetry in these terms does not give a representative view. The terminology of the Regional Arts Board (cited above) does however highlight a shift in popular and critical perception of performance poetry (Harrison is speaking in 1999), away from the more overtly political aesthetic of the 1980s. In this vein, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze takes issue with some critics’ reductive assessments of performance poetry: ‘it is accepted that it is enough to make a right-on black statement, or a right-on political statement, to rhyme, and you repeat it as often as possible.’ Patience Agbabi’s retort of ‘That was in the eighties!’ reveals a frustration that critics and programmers have failed to keep abreast of the evolving characteristics of the medium. Reception from literary critics and local authorities can impose on poetry a false dichotomy whereby it is deemed to be either ‘page’ or ‘stage’ poetry exclusively. Each of these polar interpretations comes charged with racial connotation, with page poetry deemed a white art form and performance poetry stereotypically

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30 According to their website, ‘Apples and Snakes is the leading organisation for performance poetry in England, with a national reputation for producing exciting and innovative participation and performance work in spoken word.’ [http://www.applesandsnakes.co.uk/page/8/About+us] [Accessed 15 April 2014]
31 Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram, p. 43.
32 Ibid., (47.)
33 Ibid.
black. This is a recurrent phenomenon which Leicester writer Leeming condemned during our 2014 interview:

I don’t have any truck with [the page-stage divide] at all. All of the people I hear are able to be on the page, and like any other poet, might need a bit of editing, support, mentoring, to get it to the point where it’s ready to go into print. Often what we are seeing is incredible innovation in terms of the creative ideas behind what they’re doing. But I think also it’s convenient to hive off of performance poetry, and it’s ghettoised.

Reductive assumptions about performance poetry are challenged by one of the regions’ most prolific exponents of the art form. Leeming’s statement does however also contain the assumption that spoken word poetry is less edited or polished. She asserts that if the appropriate support were available to stage-based performers, their work could be developed for print — a vehicle for the elevation of their craft and that of their peers. Whether understood in terms of a novelty ‘cabaret’ or else an exclusively black expression of radical political sensibility, as a genre performance poetry needs to alert funding bodies and a culture-consuming public to the breadth of output and size of the talent pool in the Midlands. One way in which this might be achieved is by developing a strong page presence alongside performance output.

The reality of the modern performance scene in the Midlands is that labels such as ‘comedy’, ‘cabaret’, ‘political’ or ‘radical’ are insufficient to convey the breadth of subject matter and styles being presented. When asked to define her own style of poetry, Hubbard answers ‘I’d like to think I don’t have one’. Contemporary black British poets are increasingly reluctant to limit themselves to the ‘right on’ sentiments more typical of performance poetry in the 1980s. Black poets often feel external pressures to write exclusively of the black British experience, a literary mode which Mike Phillips has called ‘the drama of difference’. The racially and thematically diverse poetry heard at any given Blackdrop event will not sit comfortably at either end of the spectrum outlined

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34 Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram, p. 42.
35 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
36 Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
37 Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram, p. 47.
by Harrison and Breeze: it is neither exclusively political nor comedic and often seeks to challenge pre-determined forms. This freedom might not be possible were they to follow the public funding route as economic influence can often prove restrictive to literary form.

In her role as programmer, as in her creative writing, Hubbard is cautious about the restrictions of form. It is a term the poet uses to describe both the formal elements of poetry itself, and the formal procedures (e.g. funding applications) associated with the literary economy. Hubbard believes that in the long term her refusal to adhere to form has benefitted the collective: ‘Everything about Blackdrop has never had a formal structure, but we believe that’s our success.’39 Perhaps contact with literary circles for whom form is a primary concern has helped to shape Blackdrop’s own independent stance. Hubbard’s poetry has often caught the attention of prestigious poetry organisations, yet her refusal to label her craft has in turn come to exclude her. She recalls one particular encounter with a literary ‘gatekeeper’ whom she did not want to name:

Once upon a time in Nottingham, somebody asked me to perform at an event as he’d heard a particular piece that I’d done at the time, and I said ‘Yeah, I’ll do that, OK’... He’d asked me because he liked this piece, but then got on this high poetry horse. He said to me ‘Is it a ballad? Is it a sonnet? Is it...’, so I said ‘It’s this’ and I recited it to him. He replied ‘Yes, but would you call it...’, so I told him ‘I wouldn’t call it anything, it’s a poem. It was written for Brendon Lawrence that got killed at the time, and I’d been asked to perform it and have it published in a lot of things. It was that sort of, playing games with it, and thinking that it must be called something. He (the promoter) said, ‘Well, I’m afraid if you can’t tell me what it is, then I won’t be able to feature it’, so I said ‘Well that’s fine. If you want to call it a sonnet, you can call it that. If you want to call it a ballad, if you want to call it poetry... but if you are struggling with what to call it, and you don’t want me because of that, then I’m happy not to turn up. And he never got back to me because of that.’40

Here a clash of literary values results in the rejection of Hubbard’s performance. Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of Taste* (1984) is instructive here as it traces such a clash back to uneven distribution of cultural capital; ‘there are relationships between groups maintaining different, even antagonistic, relations to culture, depending

39 Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
40 Ibid.
on the conditions in which they acquired their cultural capital and the markets in which they can derive most profit from it’. So while the profit may not be large in relative economic terms, programmers such as the one in Hubbard’s case above gain value in terms of the approval of ‘valuing communities’ within Nottingham’s poetry scene. These communities may overlap, but they are divided as to which types of events they choose to frequent. Above, ‘form’ is an identifiable marker of taste on what Daniels and Rycroft call ‘the vertical axis of culture’. This spatial metaphor describes the hierarchical ranking of culture into high, middle and lowbrow forms. In this Nottingham case study, collectives who privilege page-based literature and traditional forms tend to aspire to high culture credentials and therefore see performance poetry as distinctly middle/low brow. That Hubbard resists ascribing form to her poem does show an admirable artistic integrity but threatens to exacerbate what Leeming calls the ‘ghettoisation’ of performance poetry within Midlands literary cultures.

This refusal to categorise her work is by no means an act of personal egotism on behalf of the poet: rather it is testament to the power of the subject matter. The poem described above is a tribute to one of the victims of Nottingham’s gun crime problem, a teenager from the St. Ann’s neighbourhood who was killed. In Hubbard’s view, the fact that her poetry has been stifled by those concerned with form is almost irrelevant. It is the content which matters. Hubbard writes out of a compulsion, not just to gain recognition: ‘I write poetry because I love it. It’s just something I have to do, whether anyone likes it or not!’ Although perhaps typical of the poetic medium, this assertion nonetheless shows the primacy of literary expression over economic concerns in the Midlands’ performance culture. This approach restricts the economic value which publishers and funding bodies can place on the work but it opens up the collective to

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42 Frow, p. 154.
44 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
45 Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
creative freedom, eschewing the neoliberal conception of art as ideally producing revenue.

Ideologically, there are rifts within Nottingham’s literary cultures — and those of other cities — along such fault lines as the controversial poetic form and the page/stage divide. This raises questions as to whether form is necessarily restrictive to performance poetry more generally. Patience Agbabi seems to suggest not. Her volume *Transformatrix* (2000), celebrates poetic form. In her poem ‘The Word’, Agbabi subverts the page/stage divide and demonstrates her category-defying versatility, ‘Give me a stage and I’ll cut form on it / give me a page and I’ll perform on it.’ 46 What unites the — perhaps falsely separated — page and stage categories is the primacy of the word: ‘Give me a word / any word’ asserts Agbabi. 47 The British Council of Literature recognises Agbabi, describing her as ‘a formalist, often adapting traditional forms such as sonnets and sestinas to her own gender-bending sexual politics’. 48 This is a great example of a poet receiving recognition on both sides of the page/stage divide. Although Hubbard sees form as restrictive and bound up in elitist conceptions of cultural value in Nottingham, clearly form per se is not antithetical to freedom of expression in performance poetry.

As an analogue to the UK scene, there are lessons to be learnt from the current resurgence of performance poetry in the USA. 49 The American poet Dana Gioia stipulates that ‘Form is how oral verse announces its special status as art’, 50 a process enacted not only by the poet but also by those spectating, ‘oral poetry understands — as does all popular art — that much of its power comes from the audience understanding exactly

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47 Agbabi, p. 11.
50 Ibid., 36.
the rules which the artist follows.”\textsuperscript{51} Poetry, whether intended for page, stage or both, cannot realistically be as unburdened by form as Hubbard states. Form is a means by which the audience’s expectations are met: the poetry can be experimental and innovative but is ultimately bound by the conventions of heightened speech.

Although strict poetic form (for example the sonnet or villanelle) might feel incompatible with the rebellious ethos of Blackdrop’s performance poetry, the usefulness of publishing on the page in order to sustain a stage career cannot be underestimated. The Maori poet Jillian Tipene explains how the tension of form (as experienced by Hubbard and her collective) can drive writers to achieve something concrete and thus advance their economic prospects:

> When you impose form, it creates tension, and sometimes when you’re asked to write something, I find, it’s quite difficult, and you strain a little bit, and it pushes you into areas that you wouldn't normally go. And then, later, you look at it, and you think, ‘Well!’ Because it has that constraint of having an end in sight.\textsuperscript{52}

Perhaps then, form is compatible with the performance medium only when pre-emptively applied. Tipene refers to commission work where form is integral for the piece to fit into its intended platform: whether an event, a pamphlet or an anthology. The nexus between relative commercial viability and poetic form is an important one, in that it goes some way to explaining the independent ethos of ‘underground’ enterprises such as Blackdrop. It must be stressed however, that poetry is not generally a medium which is commercially viable: the distinction here is between a performance piece which rejects literary form, and one which is ready for publication in a printed volume.\textsuperscript{53} The latter may in turn lead to live bookings and therefore professional advancement for a poet. There is a clear link between following ‘the rules’ of the genre and achieving recognition.

Hubbard’s aversion to formal structures predates her professional encounters with staunch formalists: even at school she experienced form as a tyranny. Hubbard recalls how the transition from primary to secondary school English literature was an

\textsuperscript{51} Gioia., 36.  
\textsuperscript{52} Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram, (37-38).  
unpleasant one. Her childhood love of poetry had been nurtured at primary level, to the extent that she adopted a poetic medium to ‘code’ her secret diary, protecting the contents from her brother’s prying eyes. Her own intimate bond with poetry was tainted by her literary education at secondary school, ‘where poetry became more formal and less fun, less exploratory and less experimental.’ Her trope of not being ‘grammatically correct’ perhaps originates from this time, when her teacher tried to prevent her from taking ‘O level’ English. Only when Hubbard’s mother came into the school and argued her case was Hubbard allowed to proceed with the vital qualification. Despite this small victory, the overall effect was to dull the young poet’s interest in her medium: ‘I went off it, or went off what they were telling me was poetry.’

A great deal of Hubbard’s professional work since becoming a freelance poet and cultural arts practitioner has been in schools, an experience shared by Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze and the female poets in Feminist Review’s roundtable discussion:

Poets who work in schools amaze me, because what they’ve done is taken poetry from kids’ ‘Hate Department’, with mushy peas on the menu in the lunch canteen and all the things that people hate about school: poetry was in that list! But performance poetry has changed all that, and several generations of people will now buy a book of poems, because of performance poets, who have not been published.

Breeze’s analogy of the ‘Hate Department’ is telling of tensions between perceived ‘old’ and ‘new’ pedagogical styles of teaching literature. Learning and reciting by rote does not engage pupils in the performative aspects of poetry, despite ex-laureate Andrew Motion’s claims that the poetry needs ‘courage’ to teach and popularise. As a cultural arts practitioner, Hubbard involves pupils in interactive poetry sessions, incorporating storytelling and play to keep their attention rapt. The National Curriculum of 2013 actively encourages the use of performance poetry as an educational method, however this recommendation has not been universally well received. The English Association at the University of Leicester acknowledges the importance of performance poetry in

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54 Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
55 Ibid.
56 Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram, p. 50.
schools, but takes issue on the grounds of its deviation from the central function of talk: ‘we find the notion of 'performing...poetry' to be an odd one and one that does not, perhaps, offer the best means of exploring language use.’ In their 2013 review of the Curriculum, the English Association advise a change of wording to emphasise ‘reading poetry aloud’ rather than performing it. The exaggerated movement implied by the verb performing (in contrast with reading) is something that Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze is careful to disassociate herself from. She recalls the disappointment of one programmer at a ‘very English event’ when she turned down an extra-long microphone cable intended for her to leap around the stage with. The promoter had a set of expectations as to what a poetry performance entailed, yet these were incongruent with the artist’s own style. This small example is telling of a wider ignorance as to the nuances of the genre, which, when extrapolated to the national level, fails to convert the validation of small-scale valuing communities into wider critical recognition.

Several major proponents of poetry on the stage reject the terminology of ‘performance poetry’. Adrian Mitchell states, ‘I don’t like the line between “performance poet” and “poet” by the way. I really don’t. Any good poem is possible to perform well.’ Many within the poetry scene hold this assertion and the confusion over terminology may hinder progress when it comes to public opinion and funding. With little accord on what actually constitutes performance poetry, mixed reactions to the art form from the wider public are partially explained. It is perhaps its very suitability for engaging young readers which acts as a barrier to acceptance by a critical literary elite. As a major performance poetry agency, Apples and Snakes offer their own definition of the genre:

Performance poetry means reading or declaiming poetry in a way that acknowledges the presence of an audience. This can be anything from a bit of eye-contact to fully blown histrionics. That is it, basically. There are no rules.

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61 Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram, p. 40.
The breadth of this definition is empowering to performers, however from a funding perspective the remit may be too broad and difficult to quantify. The Arts Council has a current success rate of 44% for small grant applications, which suggests that either the Blackdrop collective has not been persistent enough in their quest for financial aid, or rather that the available funding is not proportionately allotted to performance poetry as packaged for adult audiences. That funding is reluctantly, if at all, directed to performance poetry outside of schools, is perhaps also due to its stigmatism as a 'comedy', 'cabaret', or even 'childish' art form. While engaging children with performance is clearly essential for the future of the medium, there is a need to more clearly define the genre at funding level in order for it to survive.

Emerging from Hubbard’s observations about the way poetry was taught in school and later how it was performed in Nottingham, is an apparent case of two linguistically diverse versions of the art form. The accent of the East Midlands has a stigma attached to it by more prestigious literary circles. Its flattened vowel sounds and clipped consonants are far removed from Received Pronunciation. This in turn, appears to have separated the accent (along with many others) from popular perception of how poetry should sound. In 'The Rise of English', Terry Eagleton offers an explanation as to how in the early twentieth century spoken poetry came to develop the somewhat pompous reputation it can suffer from:

The language of commercial society was abstract and anaemic: it had lost touch with the living roots of sensuous experience. In really 'English' writing, however, language ‘concretely enacted’ such felt experience: true English literature was verbally rich, complex, sensuous and particular, and the best poem, to caricature the case a little, was one which read aloud sounded rather like chewing an apple.

Those poetic ‘gatekeepers’ who privilege non-regional accent in the recitation of poetry would do well to remember that their own style of recital was once marginalised. Just as

65 Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram, (43).
the 'Leavisite' literary aficionados rebelled against commercial language, using one's own regional vernacular is equally an expression of identity: of being true to one's region. Poetry publishing is by its nature more regionally devolved than novel publishing. As Hubbard states in her poetry, ‘Nottingham flows through my veins and through my accent,/ Like water down the murky blood of the River Trent’. Her connection to the region is presented as ancestral, biological. The murkiness of the waters eschews an idealised representation in favour of honest realism. When the dialect of the Midlands combines in the inner cities with transnational dialects such as Jamaican patois, the result is unique, distinct and expressive. On account of its associations with working-class areas, however, the local hybrid dialect has caused Hubbard to feel excluded from literary events:

There were some poetry events, which were called poetry readings, where it was about the way they were spoken… you felt that if your voice wasn’t clear enough, wasn’t ‘proper’ enough then you didn’t fit. You find yourself slipping into that (mentality) because you want to get yourself out there, but it feels a bit fake, like this wasn’t how it was supposed to sound.

The divide between page and stage is becoming apparent in the micro histories of Nottingham’s literary cultures. Poems to be read are considered by many as distinct from — and superior to — those written to be performed. Indeed, this is how Hubbard structures her collection The Tapestry of a Black Woman: ‘some for the page’ followed by ‘some for the stage.’ That Hubbard places equal emphasis on both categories goes some way to explaining her initial desire to be accepted at poetry readings, as well as being successful at exclusively oral events such as slams. There is a necessary challenge of code-switching between these two polar categories of event, as artistic expression acceptable at one may alienate a poet to the audience of the other. One of the chief indicators of the type of event appears to be the accents heard there. I asked Hubbard about this: ‘Did you ever change the way that you speak?’ ‘Yes. You felt that you had to.

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68 Michelle Hubbard, ‘Take the girl out of Notts, but you can’t take Notts out of the girl’ in Kay, Procter and Robinson (eds.), p. 178.
69 Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
70 Hubbard, Tapestry of a Black Woman.
Otherwise you wouldn’t get asked back.’\textsuperscript{71} From initially being penalised for her accent, Hubbard has since gone on to host successful workshops which celebrate it, such as ‘Voicing the voice, asserting the accent’.\textsuperscript{72}

Having established that there are linguistic and ideological disconnects between discrete Midlands literary cultures, I now wish to emphasise the strong collaborative networks that exist in the region. Indeed, connecting is something that drives everything Blackdrop does as an organisation. When I asked Hubbard if ties with other performance groups were key to their mutual longevity, she stressed that this was the case \textit{artistically}, not financially: ‘We connect, but just because we want to — not because of funding.’ The connections form a network across the UK, with Blackdrop events taking place in cities including Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester and Liverpool. For the promoters and performers involved, this network is not an access point to funding. It does not represent a flow of capital but rather an informal literary infrastructure composed of human collaboration and networking. Each shares work which conveys the unique socioeconomic nuances of their region. In defending this \textit{pro bono} approach, Hubbard explained to me how funding was not always directly linked with success:

\begin{quote}
You can say the right things, fill out applications and get lots of money and then not deliver, or just deliver something to say you’ve put it on. But if people connect, if people feel something and come back to it, if the artist get as much out of it as the audience did, that’s what counts.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

Hubbard outlines the strength of the communities which gather around regional literary cultures and ascribe literary value through their endorsement and support. The importance placed on connection is evocative of E.M. Forster’s mantra of ‘Only Connect’ and suggests poetry to be a means of cultural unity.\textsuperscript{74} At the grassroots level, connections which begin as purely creative can often flourish into viable working relationships. The audience are often poets, and the poets are often promoters, with a clear progression through these roles as people’s passion and commitment increase.

\textsuperscript{71}Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
\textsuperscript{72}‘Voicing the voice, asserting the accent’, Workers’ Educational Association Course, New Art Exchange, Gregory Boulevard, Nottingham, 17 September 2008
\textsuperscript{73}Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
\textsuperscript{74}E.M. Forster, \textit{Howard’s End} (London: Edward Arnold, 1910).
People travel from across the Midlands to attend Blackdrop events, and as a result, the literary network grows. I wish to use the example of ‘Blackdrop in The Pool’, a special Liverpool edition of the popular poetry event. Hubbard explains how Leicester’s Mainstream Partnership initiative helped establish a chain of connections which would lead her and the team to Liverpool:

The Freedom Showcase led to the fantastic ‘Go-See’ trip to Liverpool where I developed Spoken Word links, created new work as part of of the group Blackdrop and ran a prominent event ‘Blackdrop in ‘The Pool” which was hailed as an enormous success.75

Mainstream Partnership’s manager was Carol Leeming, herself a published Midlands poet who appears alongside Hubbard in Bloodaxe’s Out of Bounds anthology.76 Although Mainstream Partnership has since lost its funding, creative exchanges between Midlands poets can lead to the formation of national networks and help to disseminate the region’s unique literary culture. As Hubbard states, ‘I think our local, national and even international links are part of our strength and help us secure and interest feature artists from far and wide.’77 There is a synergy between the Midlands’ grassroots performance scene and its ability to attract figures more typically associated with high profile publications and concerts, such as Zephaniah and Linton Kwesi Johnson. Through this process, regional literary cultures encompass national talent; in turn catalysing interest at local level. Tales of security concerns about the capacity at performance poetry events, and eager fans attempting to sneak in to hear poetry — in the Midlands — are suggestive of an appeal reaching far beyond that of traditional page-based forms.

That Blackdrop has successfully hosted events across England is testament to the strength of connection felt between audience and performer. Indeed there is often a very fine line between these two categories, with large numbers of the crowd being performers in their own right, or being encouraged to speak in ‘open mic’ sessions and share their words with a receptive and supportive audience. Many poets have made their

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76 Kay, Procter and Robinson (eds.)
77 Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
first public appearance at Blackdrop events: an asset of the collective which may well have been impossible with the responsibility of ‘jumping through hoops to get funding.’

Progressing into its second decade, Blackdrop shows no signs of slowing down. Its poetic emphasis on local themes and identity is redolent of wider trends in the global poetry scene. As Gioia observes, ‘[s]ince there is no mass media coverage for poetry, the art has not only become highly regional but even local.’ As the collective expands and welcomes members from increasingly diverse sections of the local community, Blackdrop continues to retain a strong sense of black identity. Sessions incorporate chanting, drum circles and traditional drum calls: activities designed not to exclude white audience members but to share and celebrate the oral traditions of Africa and the Caribbean which are very much alive today in the regional literary cultures of the Midlands.

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78 Michelle Hubbard, interviewed by Tom Kew, 19 February 2014.
Chapter Two

#rebelnotts: Literary Tourism in Alan Sillitoe’s Nottingham

Within the wide gamut of creative writing, sometimes deeply buried, sometimes just below the surface, lie the seams for writers of tourist brochures to mine.\(^8\)

Nottinghamshire was once famed for its mining industry and later, the controversial rebel ideology of its miners who resisted the National Union of Mineworkers.\(^1\) In the post-industrial age, gold may no longer lie in the earth but in the pages of Nottingham’s rebellious literary creations. By examining how the city’s historical literary legacies are intertwined with digital technologies in the contemporary literary tourism market, I offer a new way of reading Sillitoe’s texts, uniquely situating them as interactive works of travel writing and a vital linkage between the city’s industrial heyday and its contemporary service economy. Stepping outside Nottingham train station reveals a colourful banner stretched across a large building on Station Street. Travellers to the city are met with portraits of Lord Byron, D.H. Lawrence and Sillitoe, arranged under the heading of ‘Our Rebel Writers’. In an era of only limited funding for literary culture, the display represents the combined vision of two independent organisations; The Alan Sillitoe Committee and the Howie Smith Project. Besides its function of promoting literary tourism, the banner acknowledges the importance of these writers to the city’s heritage. In doing so, it reclaims figures — ‘our writers’ — previously denigrated for homosexuality, pornography and vulgarity.\(^2\) This chapter will examine how literary tourism functions in the modern city of Nottingham, with specific reference to ‘The Sillitoe Trail’, an interactive multimedia form of literary tourism. I will then focus on two

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82 Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2002); Perhaps the most notorious example being D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (Florence: Private Publisher, 1928). The novel was not sanctioned for general UK release until 1960.
of Sillitoe’s ‘loco specific’ literary manifestations of his home city, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) and *The Death of William Posters* (1965).83

This study of Nottingham’s literary tourism industry comes at a crucial time of renewed interest in the city as a cultural destination. In December 2015 Nottingham became a UNESCO City of Literature, joining Norwich, Edinburgh, Dublin, Reykjavik, Iowa City, Krakow and Melbourne to become the eighth city of the UNESCO Creative Cities network.84 The bid towards this accolade set out to increase recognition of past literary achievements, but more importantly to encourage the next generation of Nottingham writers. Local playwright Stephen Lowe is one of the bid’s patrons and has highlighted a lack of literary awareness in the city. He states in an interview, ‘I don’t think that Nottingham recognises how extraordinary a place it really is for literature’.85

This forgotten, submerged literary heritage has perhaps necessitated recent investments in literary tourism. If Nottingham people are not aware of their own literary heritage, how can the city expect to attract literary tourists from further afield? Moves towards the development and commodification of Nottingham’s literary cultures can be seen as part of a wider approach at the national level developed by the New Labour government of the late 1990s, in Brouillette’s terms ‘the imagining of the arts as an offshoot of a branded heritage and tourism product’.86 Within this model, the arts must not only be self-sustaining financially but also profitable to wider society. Is there a dissonance between the ‘rebel’ creative output of Nottingham and the type of ‘heritage and tourism product’ suitable to fulfil the New Labour ideal? In questioning the compatibility of counterculture and commerce within a specifically Nottingham context, I transpose from the realm of postcolonial studies to post-war British writing, a debate articulated in

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83 Barry, p. 3.
85 Ibid.
Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001):

What happens when marginal products, explicitly valued for their properties of ‘resistance’, are seconded to the mainstream as a means of reinvigorating mainstream culture? These questions are at the heart of postcolonial cultural politics; they also help us understand the dialectical processes of estrangement and familiarisation that are embedded in the valorised discourses of cultural otherness and difference today.87

Certainly ‘resistance’ is a key trope not only within Sillitoe’s fiction but in the subsequent narratives used to market his legacy. The ‘Rebel Writers’ banner on Station Street provides one key quote for each named author, with Sillitoe’s including the aphoristic ‘Once a rebel, always a rebel.’ This statement can be read as representative of the author’s — and indeed his protagonists’ — ‘estrangement’ from the values of a post-war industrial society which rewarded hard work with material betterment.88 The dominance of materialist discourse is outwardly tempered by the ‘valorisation’ of rebellion in public discourse.89 It is not the intention of this thesis to deny Sillitoe’s rebel credentials nor to diminish the admirable combined efforts of the Alan Sillitoe Committee and the Howie Smith Project, but rather to call into question the relationship which Nottingham’s deceased ‘Rebel Writers’ share with the modern city. I unpick these modern connections between commerce and counterculture in Sillitoe’s fiction and the subsequent legacy of multimedia literary tourism he has inspired, today galvanised under the social media hashtag of #rebelnotts.

A reading of Sillitoe’s fiction in light of Nottingham’s literary tourism economy requires some foregrounding of this particular approach to textual analysis. The practice of literary tourism is not a new one, although its recognition within academia is both recent and divisive. In *The Literary Tourist* (2006) Watson observes how ‘the embarrassment palpable among professional literary scholars over the practice of literary pilgrimage co-exists within a marked willingness to indulge in it as a private or even communal vice’.90 Whether we admit to partaking or not, the literary pilgrimage has a

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87 Huggan, p. 20.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Watson, p. 5.
well-documented history going back to the fifteenth century, when enthusiasts journeyed to Southern Europe to feel a greater connection with the poetry of Petrarch.\textsuperscript{91} British examples include Wordsworth’s Dove Cottage, Jane Austen’s Chawton home and Mary Arden’s house in Stratford.\textsuperscript{92} Writings on the subject of literary tourism have traditionally been instructional in their purpose, rather than analytical. However, the twenty-first century has seen a proliferation of monographs that open up the potential for geographical sites themselves to be read as texts, with significant contributions to the field made by Herbert (2001), Anderson and Robinson (2002), Watson and Saunders (2004), Watson (2006) and Mintel (2010). These diverse studies mine sites of literary tourism for cultural significance, attempting to understand the behaviours of literary tourists and relate these back to the primary texts. This modern strand of research deviates from more traditional didactic volumes designed to instruct would-be tourists where to go and what to see, for example Drabble (1979), Ousby (1999), Struthers and Coe (2005) and Hahn and Robins (2008). In order to understand the multimedia forms of literary tourism gaining traction in contemporary Nottingham, it is necessary to look beyond the didactic and consider the wider impact of technological developments for the study of the city, its economy and literary heritage.

Of course, the primary texts and the raison d’être of literary tourism are the works of fiction or poetry which lend the author, and associated geographical sites, their appeal. Without the mystique afforded by immortalisation on paper, literary tourism would not exist. The imbrication of fictional world and actual landscape entices the visitor, who wishes to explore how these two worlds collide. The primary text takes on new significance as the tourist retrospectively assigns the actualities of the landscape, the birthplace, the tombstone, and superimposes a newfound intimacy on the text previously understood as a standalone entity. The geographical text — the site of literary

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tourism — is equally afforded an intimacy. This comes in the form of the prior knowledge brought to the sight, gleaned by the reader in their own private dialogue with literary texts.

If esteemed primary texts are the reason people make literary pilgrimages, the secondary texts of the tourist experience might be understood as the guidebooks and leaflets written to chaperone the visitor to their destination and illuminate the sights on offer. These texts can take on the tertiary function of indulging the vicarious literary tourist who wishes to experience some cultural heritage from the comfort of home. In addition to these secondary texts, the tourist may encounter a number of paratexts at the site itself, in the form of signs, maps, memorial engravings, inscriptions and plaques. The multiple strata of texts shape the literary tourist experience. While space and place certainly do inform literature, there is a symbiosis at play as literary works bring global audiences to sites that adapt — with varying degrees of subtlety — to being read ‘by the light of a book’. Digital technologies are increasingly becoming a mediator between the geographical site, the primary text and the literary tourist. As demonstrated by ‘The Sillitoe Trail’ in Nottingham, or ‘Discover Ian Rankin’s Edinburgh’ and ‘Edinburgh Literary Pub Tour App’ one key way in which this occurs is through a curated trail of geographical sites delivered by mobile phone app technology. While this might seem at first an activity with appeal only to the dedicated literary enthusiast, it does in fact sit in line with more commercially accepted forms of tourism. As Anderson and Robinson argue, ‘trails encapsulate the packaging ideology that is at the heart of contemporary tourism and that we, as tourists, now innately recognize and come to expect’. If new technologies can further enhance this touristic ‘package’ by offering an immersive sensory experience, there is great potential to connect digital consumers to literary heritage. There is further exciting potential here to use digitally enhanced tourism as

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93 Watson, p. 7.
94 Anderson and Robinson (eds.), p. 22.
‘market mechanisms’ to bring to life sites of non-canonical literary significance. As Andersen and Robison state:

Literary tourism is based on a dynamically evolving complex of sites, responding to and interacting with market demand, in line with fashion and with the ‘accepted’ canon. In the main one expects literary tourism to fall in line with that canon, providing an additional means of accumulating Bourdieusque literary cultural capital, but there is clear evidence that the market mechanisms can carve a space for literary heritage lying outside the (bourgeois) canon.95

This paper is concerned with the ‘carving’ of space for non-canonical literary tourism. In Nottingham, the challenge for the curators of ‘The Sillitoe Trail’ is twofold; firstly the relatively non-canonical status of their author might repel traditional literary tourists. Secondly, the sites covered are distinctly post-industrial. They have history, integrity and literary appeal but they are certainly not pretty. How then can tourists be drawn to inner-city regions, to view buildings often derelict or renovated beyond recognition? The answer lies in what Andersen and Robinson call the ‘literary hook’, where association with popular fiction transcends the physicality of the destination. This marketing device has been implemented ‘with varying degrees of success’ and will be considered below alongside attempts to modernise the branding of more canonical writers such as Byron and Lawrence.96

Nottingham is of course not the only city in the UK with an active approach to generating literary tourism; as aforementioned, Edinburgh is another UNESCO City of Literature which is embracing mobile app technology to market its literary heritage. As a point of reference however, the City of London has no pressing need to advertise the existence of attractions such as Poets’ Corner, as its status as a global tourist destination is well established.97 As Watson states, ‘this is the national literary canon sculpted in stone for the benefit of posterity’.98 Amusingly, when Byron died in 1823, minster Abbey refused his burial in Poet’s Corner, claiming his scandalous reputation would bring shame

95 Anderson and Robinson (eds.), p. 31.
96 Ibid., p. 30.
97 Although, eerily, Poets’ Corner now operates a Twitter account: @PoetsCornerUK
98 Watson, p. 23.
on the cemetery. Evidently there is a long and antagonistic relationship between Nottingham’s rebellious literary figureheads and the gatekeepers of the canon.

Nottingham’s literary cultures operate on a far smaller scale than those based in London. In 2013, Nottingham received 247,000 overseas visitors, who spent a total of £95 million. This may not compare too favourably with London’s 16.8m visitors, spending £11.3bn, but it provided an invaluable boost to the local economy.

Comparison to London casts very few major cities in a positive light, with the second most visited city in the UK, Edinburgh, receiving less than 8% of the visitors that London counted in 2013. As cultural geographer Doreen Massey states, ‘In the United Kingdom, London increasingly overshadows everywhere else’. Within a wider Midlands context, Nottingham’s tourist numbers sit well below the median, trailing far behind Birmingham and Oxford but ahead of Leicester and Derby. Although the statistics do not delineate general and literary tourists, the ‘Rebel Writers’ and ‘Sillitoe Trail’ projects have the potential to create correlation between the former and the latter. The huge size of the ‘Rebel Writers’ banner on Station Street makes it difficult for visitors to miss: a fact of particular significance in light of Network Rail’s current £100m investment to turn Nottingham train station into a ‘gateway to Europe’.


Ibid.


2013 Midlands Tourism Statistics
Birmingham 941,000 visitors; spent £363m.
Nottingham – 247,000 visitors; spent £95m.
Leicester – 146,000 visitors; spent £86m.
Derby – 98,000 visitors; spent £27m.


regeneration can only have a positive effect on the city’s literary tourism, strengthening the pull of the ‘literary hook’ with ease of access for visitors.\textsuperscript{105}

Outside the city centre, one of Nottingham’s key tourist destinations is Newstead Abbey, a stately home which was once housed the ‘notorious’ Lord Byron.\textsuperscript{106} Amidst the ‘romance and mystery’ of the abbey, there are moral implications to visiting this seemingly benign literary tourism destination.\textsuperscript{107} Historical records reveal that Colonel Thomas Wildman — Napoleonic War officer and Nottingham landowner — restored the abbey using monies granted to him as compensation for the release of slaves. Wildman owned 241 slaves on his Quebec estate in St. Mary, Jamaica. Their mandatory emancipation earned him the modern equivalent of £227,000.\textsuperscript{108} Although Wildman’s occupation is not representative of Byron’s own ideologies, the historical connection to slavery serves as a stark reminder of how creativity is bound up in economics, often at the cost of morality. This problematises not only the Newstead experience as a ‘branded heritage and tourism product’, but also the marketing of Byron as a ‘rebel writer’.\textsuperscript{109} As with any brand, there is a clear impetus to represent selectively the most favourable assets. The danger here is that other important regional histories — in this case of displaced Africans — become submerged beneath the glamourised ideal of the independent, rebellious wordsmith.

Once inside Newstead Abbey, Byron’s persona becomes the primary focus, narrated through his prized possessions. Guests can view the poet’s gilt bed, imported from his student quarters at Cambridge, witness the desk where the bulk of his work was composed and read his private correspondence. The grandeur of the stately home may not suit the tastes of all literary tourists to the region. Those wishing to taste the

\textsuperscript{105} Anderson and Robinson (eds.), p. 30.
\textsuperscript{106} Nottingham City Council, ‘Newstead Abbey’ <http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/article/22179/Newstead-Abbey> [Accessed 30 May 2014]
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Brouillette, p. 3.
salt of the earth and feel a geographical connection with the works of Lawrence can head to the former mining village of Eastwood, 10 miles north of the City Centre. Here, they can visit the D.H. Lawrence Birthplace Museum or walk the blue line trail which highlights points of literary significance. Up until April 2016, the D.H. Lawrence Heritage Centre was located at Durban House, historically the office of the local coal owners, Barber, Walker & Co., where the young Lawrence would go to pick up his father’s wages, the building now houses a conference centre.\textsuperscript{110} According to Broxtowe Council, ‘there is no finer place for business meetings, conferences and special functions than Durban House — a magnificent setting, steeped in a wealth of history’.\textsuperscript{111} The physical attractiveness of the site is here recognised but the literary heritage has been reduced to a footnote on a conference centre’s website. I raise this point to demonstrate that conventionally picturesque Nottinghamshire sites with strong claims to literary heritage are no longer popular tourist destinations. The adoption of new technologies and a shift in public preference is rendering more archaic forms of literary tourism obsolete and making way for more innovative experiences.

All of the traditional attractions discussed above demonstrate for their visitors the connections between the geography of Nottinghamshire and the literary works its authors have produced. They utilise the terrain as a means of offering some tangible focus for those who come to the city or county on literary pilgrimages. Both Newstead Abbey and Eastwood offer an aesthetically pleasing visitor experience, which the streets of Sillitoe’s Radford and Lenton arguably do not. Aesthetics are not the only factor which might deter tourists; 383 crimes were reported in these two adjacent policing districts during June 2016 alone.\textsuperscript{112} The NG7 postal district is largely residential and therefore not an obvious choice for leisure visits when compared to the scenic vistas of the


\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.

Nottinghamshire countryside. However, in 2011 the visitor figures for Newstead Abbey dropped by 16.6% from the previous year, prompting demands for Nottingham City Council to ‘think big’ with regards to its tourist attractions.¹¹³ This same period saw enormous drops in total footfall at Durban House and The Birthplace Museum, previously the two component attractions of the D.H. Lawrence Experience. Visitor figures for 2011 show a decrease of almost two thirds on the previous year. It would seem that in a crowded, multimedia literary economy, Lawrence no longer possess the cultural cachet he once did. As Emerson and Jackson argue, ‘today his name is well known but his books are not fashionable’.¹¹⁴ Austerity measures in the form of funding cuts are also blamed for an inability to market effectively D.H. Lawrence heritage attractions.¹¹⁵ Concurrently, perhaps the ways in which consumers engage with tourism are changing not only in line with technological advances but also with a dwindling local heritage economy. Traditional attractions such as listed historic buildings require constant staffing, specialist maintenance and costly utilities. A mobile phone app that guides tourists around residential streets is, by contrast, relatively inexpensive to maintain. This faintly countercultural approach to heritage consumption is being aligned with the city’s history of literary rebellion, while its more outwardly conservative outposts of culture are experiencing decline and even closure. Lawrence might have had strong words to say about a conference centre in Durban House, even if ‘there is no finer place for business meetings’.¹¹⁶

The ‘Sillitoe Trail’ could provide a means to reverse the fortunes of a dwindling literary tourism industry. In light of the aforementioned tourism statistics, editor James

¹¹⁵ ‘Visitor-numbers plummet at star tourist attraction’, The Hucknall Dispatch.
Walker’s comments during a BBC *Inside Out* special on the project are timely: ‘We want to use this literary walk as a means of generating tourism to Nottingham. Nottingham should be incredibly proud at the moment, there’s more to life than London’. Indeed, within the platform of The Space collaboration, this is the only literary endeavour to feature from outside the capital. This may sound like a real boon for the city’s tourist industry, but the mechanics of how this will engage readers and tourists alike require elucidation. Paul Fillingham of the Alan Sillitoe Committee tells the BBC:

> The app enables you to visit the locations and when you’re on location, because you’re using a mobile device, you’ll be able to read the text, you’ll be able to look at vintage photographs, and you’ll also be able to listen to contemporary Nottingham writers, who are revisiting the themes that were covered in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

This hands-on format places absolute control with the user. Perhaps those drawn to the rebellious writings of Sillitoe would feel less inclined to enter a didactic visitor experience as offered at Newstead Abbey or Lawrence’s Easton. In the process of walking the city, the user is able to feel a sense of connection perhaps unattainable by viewing artefacts behind a glass screen or velvet rope. Whether or not this is the case, the mode of interaction proffered by the app certainly mirrors the behaviour of Arthur Seaton, trudging the inner-city streets in search of stimulation. Moreover, the autonomy and agency of the rebel is granted to the tourist. The perceived edginess of urban exploration combines with the reputation of the postcodes covered by Sillitoe’s fiction to create a user experience which feels both structured and remotely subversive at the same time.

With an influx of outside interest in Nottinghamshire’s literary assets, there arises a need to curate and manage the sites and experiences on offer. Some quarter of a million international visitors each year places Nottingham in the category which Doreen Massey calls the ‘Global City’ or ‘World City’. Massey poses a question fundamental in representing any city to its residents and visitors:

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119 Ibid.
120 Massey, p. 1.
'What does this place stand for?' is a question that can and should be asked of any place. Its import and urgency will vary between places (global cities may have more possibility in the sense of room for manoeuvre, and more possibility in the sense of the magnitude of their effects), but it is a question that makes each and every place a potential arena for political contest about its answer.¹²¹

The Rebel Writers campaign aims to emphasise a tradition of non-conformist creativity. Through their campaign banner on Station Street, the project’s visibility to tourists positions Nottingham as a city defined by rebellion. As its presence as a global city increases (for example the new ‘gateway to Europe’ status) perhaps Rebel Writers will become a way of asserting difference, of utilising the local penchant for literary dissent as a unique selling point in a crowded marketplace of visitor destinations.¹²² In the colloquial register of local cultural magazine *Left Lion*, the ‘Rebel Writers’ installation is described as ‘a whacking great banner down on Station Street that’s celebrating our gobbiness’.¹²³ Despite its crude phrasing, the magazine goes some way towards capturing the common thread in a great deal of Nottingham history: that of being outspoken and rebelling against the status quo. This sits in accordance with Massey’s notion of ‘political contest’ over what defines the city. Legendary figures from Robin Hood to Ned Ludd have achieved their notoriety through acts of rebellion. The ‘Rebel Writers’ campaign self-consciously attempts to extend the tradition of rebellion into the canonisation of Nottingham writers and the subsequent marketing of their cultural legacies.

The rebellious nature of Sillitoe’s protagonists, such as Arthur Seaton and Frank Dawley and his alter ego William Posters has often been read in a Marxist context.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Massey, p. 10.
¹²³ The name *Left Lion* is derived from the left of the two stone lions which sit either side of the entrance to Nottingham’s Council House. The statue has long been a landmark meeting point for social engagements in the city. Mark Shotter interviewed by Neil Fullwood, ‘Our Rebel Writers Trail’, *Left Lion*, 30 March 2014 <http://www.leftlion.co.uk/articles.cfm/title/newsletter/id/5523> [Accessed 30 May 2014]
reality, politics are not a central concern in Sillitoe’s hedonistic working-class narratives. As Gindin asserts, ‘no Sillitoe characters talk of Brotherhood or United Action; they simply recognise others are caught the same way they are.’\(^{125}\) The claustrophobic sense of being ‘caught’ in the city helps to inform an understanding of Sillitoe’s Nottingham, a world in which many feel trapped by a repetitive cycle of working, drinking, fighting and fornicating. A space and place reading of the novels Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1958) and The Death of William Posters (1965) will enable Sillitoe’s work to be placed in a Nottingham tradition of rebellion which has its roots in medieval history and extends into contemporary society as represented by the hashtag #rebelnotts [primary texts hereafter referred to parenthetically by initials SNSM/DOWP, page number].

William Posters is a figment of the imagination of Frank Dawley, the central protagonist of Sillitoe’s 1965 novel. The alias ‘represents the archetype of the man killed by the inhumanity of modern industrialism, yet who becomes responsible for the resurgence of someone far greater than himself’ (DOWP, 1).\(^{126}\) Understanding the ‘greatness’ of the protagonist means reading his delusions of grandeur within a colourful history of Nottingham rebels:

Bill Posters has been infamous in these streets for generations, bandit Posters, as well known or maybe scorned and scoffed at as Robin Hood, justly celebrated in that hundred verse ‘Ballad of Bill Posters’ recited for generations in Nottingham streets and pubs. His existence explains many puzzles. Who was General Ludd? None other than the shadowy William Posters, stockinger, leading on his gallant companies of Nottingham lads to smash all that machinery. In any case didn’t Lord Byron make a stirring speech in the House of Lords about a certain William Posters sentenced to death in his absence for urging a crowd to resist the yeomanry? Who set fire to Nottingham Castle during the Chartist riots? Later, who spat in Lord Roberts’ face when he led the victory parade in Nottingham after the Boer War? Who looted those shops in the General Strike?

(DOWP, 18)

Posters is eager to assert his place in the history of his city, which he achieves by superimposing his alter ego onto some of the major historical figures Nottingham has produced. In Sillitoe’s fiction more generally, as in Poster’s rant above, the city appears

\(^{126}\) The Death of William Posters, p.1. Subsequent references given in parentheses within the main body text.
as a palimpsest, revealing traces of its former inscriptions.\textsuperscript{127} The green of Sherwood Forest and Robin Hood, for example, are the chosen livery for Nottingham’s buses and lampposts (\textit{SNSM}, 108) and in the names of the city’s public houses, Robin Hood, Lord Roberts, Ned Ludd and Lord Byron all live on. These traces re-emerge through different generations of the city, for example both the Robin Hood colour and ethos were apparent in 1950s Radford. It was apparent which areas were occupied by Raleigh Bicycle employees as the fences and guttering were painted with stolen tins of the company’s trademark Robin Hood green.\textsuperscript{128} Aside from such light-hearted forms of ‘casual’ rebellion, Poster’s monologue above raises urgent questions about loyalty to one’s city. Is rebellion a valid means of promoting literary tourism when it represents the destruction of the very city it purports to represent?

The themes of violence, burning and looting are recurrent throughout \textit{DOWP} and \textit{SNSM} and reveal a resentment towards the city which sits uncomfortably with the ‘Queen of the Midlands’ branding that was prevalent at the time of writing and equally incongruent with the modern #rebelnotts campaign.\textsuperscript{129} These concerns within the novels problematise not only the spatial politics of official representations of Nottingham, they equally assail the aesthetics of rebellion. Nottingham writers are posthumously being coerced into an uneasy solidarity with the city. Their rebellion was often against the region itself but is now used as a marketing tool to boost Nottingham’s reputation as a literary tourist destination. The literary depiction of Arthur Seaton blowing up Nottingham Castle with dynamite (\textit{SNSM}, 72) is an extreme expression of anti-authoritarian ideology, manifest as terrorism, yet since 2012 tourists to the city have been guided to the very site of his literary deviance by an Arts Council-funded mobile phone app. The marketing of rebellion is evidently a contradictory endeavour, and one

\textsuperscript{127} Barry, p. 165.
\textsuperscript{128} Walker and Fillingham, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{129} This branding exercise was led by the local authorities and propagated through pamphlets such as \textit{Nottingham 'The Queen City of the Midlands' Guide} (6th edn., 1921) cited in Daniels and Rycroft, p. 468.
which may spark divergent responses to Massey’s question of ‘What does this place stand for?’

Frequent references in SNSM to the violent destruction of sites of Nottingham authority, such as the Castle and Council House, appear to stem from the protagonist’s feeling of claustrophobia. Castle Rock, the mount on which Nottingham Castle sits, is anthropomorphised by Sillitoe, lending it a disturbing sense of agency over Nottingham’s residents: ‘Castle Rock, a crowned brownstone shaggy lion-head slouching its big snout out of the city, poised as if to gobble up uncouth suburbs hemmed in by an elbow of the turgid Trent’ (SNSM, 71). The dichotomy of man-made developments (‘uncouth suburbs’) versus natural geological features is suggestive of the terrain actively resisting its own urban development, in parallel with the protagonist’s denigration of urban expansion. The aggressive power of the rock is manifest as elastic energy, working conspiratorially with the hard alliteration of ‘turgid Trent’; ‘poised’ to threaten suburbia. Arthur Seaton appears to have an intrinsic sense of connection with the Midlands’ landscape, although it is rarely expressed in positive terms:

...he turned around and saw the squat front-end of the castle still sneering at him.
I hate that castle, he said to himself, more than I’ve ever hated owt in my life before, and I’d like to plant a thousand tons of bone-dry TNT in the tunnel called Mortimer’s Hole and send it to Kingdom Cum, so’s nob’dy ‘ud ever see it again. (SNSM, 72)

There is a sense within the novel of anger but also fear directed at these architectural monuments of authority. A contemporary of Sillitoe, author and poet Derrick Buttress recalls his own personal relationship with Nottingham’s Council House: ‘I found it intimidating too. This was where authority lived and most children were taught, by parents and teachers, to be scared of it’. While there are enormous internal imbalances of power within Sillitoe’s Nottingham, these are not detrimental to the literary economy. Far from it, in fact, when a counter-cultural text is able to generate tourism revenue via the means of an Arts Council-funded project. It would seem that contradiction lies at the very heart of disseminating rebellious writing to a commercial

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130 Massey, p. 10.
131 Walker and Fillingham, p. 6.
audience. Texts which critique the city from within are being marketed as representative and even celebratory of the city. Having placed my selected texts within a popular folk history of the city, I now wish to explore the ways in which the novels self-consciously place themselves within a literary tradition, before going on to discuss their wider dissemination in the literary marketplace. In doing so, I hope to address the relative rarity of a Nottingham novel achieving international acclaim and the controversial nature of its ascent.

The characters of Arthur Seaton (SNSM) and Frank Dawley (DOWP) both are young and impulsive working-class men from Nottingham. They share the same disdain for authority and love for bawdy culture. Indeed for the first hundred pages of DOWP’s genesis, Sillitoe did not have a name for his protagonist; he simply called him Arthur Seaton.132 Within the confines of his Radford terraced house, Frank Dawley offers the reader a glimpse into his own library, and in doing so places DOWP within Nottingham’s literary canon:

He looked along his row of books: Camp on Blood Island, Schweik, Sons and Lovers, War of the Worlds, Dr Zhivago – to pick out the best, books he had read and enjoyed but finally didn’t trust. Lady Chatterley’s Lover should have been there, but he’d thrown it on the fire in anger and disappointment. (DOWP, 12)

The author here stereotypes his protagonist, making a sly jibe at those readers who would have been lured towards Lawrence’s controversial title by the promise of lurid entertainment. SNSM was re-issued by the Macmillan imprint Great Pan in 1960, to coincide with the success of the film adaptation directed by Karel Reisz that same year. The new edition became the first Pan title to sell a million copies; by an imprint which was, according to Daniels and Rycroft, ‘regarded in contrast to Penguin, as a distinctly low-brow publisher, marketed in the lurid ‘sex and violence’ style associated with American pulp fiction and sold largely from the racks of newsagents’.133 In this context, Sillitoe was explicitly marketed as the descendant of Lawrence, another rebel writer who

133 Walker and Fillingham, p. 16.
Daniels and Rycroft, p. 471.
'shook the bookshops'. Pan’s blurb states, ‘from the Lawrence country comes a new author, with a hero that might have startled Lawrence himself.’ Whether shaking or startling, Nottingham writers are here being represented as rebellious figures, for the sole purpose of increasing sales. The depiction of cramped terraced houses on the front cover, coupled with the sexually provocative imagery from Reisz’s film which adorned the back, represented a distinctly seedy vision of ‘the Queen of the Midlands’ to a global audience.

Sillitoe is highly conscious of his controversial success, and delights in courting controversy through his protagonist Dawley in DOWP. On discovering a copy of William Boroughs’ Naked Lunch, he muses: ‘I hope they banned it. It’ll make the bloke who wrote it a lot of money. I reckon they should ban every book that comes out so that more people would read’ (DOWP, 60). Herewithin lies partial explanation of the success of marketing rebellious art. The facetious remarks of Dawley speak volumes about not only the #rebelnotts campaign but also the much wider trend for commercial consumption of countercultural goods such as hip hop music or Che Guevara iconography. In Scandalous Fictions (2006), Morrison and Watkins identify ‘the proliferating myth of banned texts’, a marketplace phenomenon which they observe with controversial novels such as Lady Chatterley’s Lover. Audiences invest heavily in forbidden titles, their curiosity piqued by material fit to offend the censors. Instances such as these, involving financially stable authors with access to strong legal and PR support, threaten to obscure the majority of censorship cases which are extremely harmful to the careers of less established authors. This point is raised to highlight how rebellious literature can be perceived as the natural expression of a writer’s opposition to the oppressive regulation of art. In positioning Nottingham as a city of ‘Rebel Writers’, the Howie-Smith project is not only celebrating the literature as subversive, but also as a bastion of freedom of speech.

135 Ibid.
At the time of its 1958 release, one Nottingham councillor did appeal for *SNSM* to be banned, fearing that it would tarnish his city’s reputation.\(^{138}\) This may have helped sales figures once the ban was lifted, but the success of the Pan edition alone is testament to the public appetite for salacious content. From a literary tourism perspective, there are long-term rewards to be reaped from this controversy. Sites on the ‘Sillitoe Trail’ include the pubs where Arthur Seaton binge drank, brawled and womanised, in Seaton’s words ‘a cosy world of pubs and noisy tarts’ (*SNSM*, 39). The gradual demise of the British pub as community centre has rendered this vision obsolete, so it remains to be seen whether future visitors to the city will continue to seek out the fragmented remains of a misogynistic working-class Midlands culture.\(^{139}\) There are limitations in the wholesale endorsement of Sillitoe’s message; for all its well-intentioned political content, it is still very much a product of its time and cannot be claimed to give fair representation to its female characters, the phrase ‘noisy tarts’ for example being offensive in the extreme. As with Byron and the legacies of slavery, any tourism product has to be carefully branded to entice potential customers. Some of the misogynist aspects of Sillitoe’s protagonists are swept under the rug in a favour of a more marketable ‘rebel with a cause’ type persona.

Historically, Sillitoe’s fiction has defied, and continues to defy, categorisation on what Daniels and Rycroft call the ‘vertical axis’ of culture, reaching audiences for whom the newsagent was a valuable source of literary material as well as those who would favour the bookshop.\(^{140}\) Sillitoe made major inroads into the Soviet Union’s literary marketplace and, most recently, has been adapted for the modern digital consumer in the UK.\(^{141}\) The global reach of his oeuvre is fitting for an author obsessed with geography, his success demonstrates that the regional concerns of his ‘locus specific’

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\(^{138}\) Walker and Fillingham, p. 8.


\(^{140}\) The spatial metaphor of ‘vertical axis’ describes the hierarchical ranking of culture into high/ middle/ low brow forms. Daniels and Rycroft, p. 467.

texts translate to audiences well beyond the geographical settings of the novels.\textsuperscript{142} Global recognition is testament to the universality of Sillitoe’s characters, whose appeal the young author could not have predicted, poring over maps and aerial photographs as he plotted out the Nottingham streets for an audience of unimagined size. Sillitoe states that he ‘latched onto maps in order to pull [himself] into the more rarefied and satisfying air of education and expansion of spirit’.\textsuperscript{143} For all his attachment to Nottingham, he confesses that ‘the first time I saw a map I wanted to leave home’.\textsuperscript{144} One might ask whether Sillitoe’s subsequent emigration to the Mediterranean calls into question his loyalty to his home city. In fact, the geographical remove from Nottingham at which \textit{SNSM} was written, enabled Sillitoe to gain the same vantage point proffered by his beloved maps; ‘The factory and its surrounding area ascended with a clarity that might not have been so intense had I not looked out over olive groves, lemons and orange orchards... under a clear Mediterranean sky’.\textsuperscript{145} Regardless of his love for travel in later life, the lived experience of childhood and young adulthood left an indelible impression on the mature author. As a result of the ‘Sillitoe Trail’, his legacy is neither confined to a static literary oeuvre, nor an oscillating debate between critics. His fiction will continue to be read, reinterpreted and \textit{relived} by his readers in the spaces of the city which shaped his entire world view.

To draw together the threads of this argument concerning Nottingham’s literary tourism industry, a broader look at the relationship between art and economics is helpful. In her recent work \textit{Literature and the Creative Economy}, Sarah Brouillette states that ‘the social world has been shaped by the split between art and commerce that bohemia solidified and valorized’.\textsuperscript{146} This apparent divide has narrowed in the literary case studies presented above. The anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian working-class ethos epitomised by the iconic phrase ‘don’t let the bastards grind you down’ is today

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Barry} Barry, p. 3.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid.
\bibitem{SillitoeArticle} Alan Sillitoe, ‘Alan Sillitoe’, in \textit{Author} (Autumn 1983), 28–30 (p. 30).
\bibitem{Brouillette} Brouillette, p. 17.
\end{thebibliography}
reimagined and reclaimed by a relatively liberal cultural elite and packaged for digital consumption. In the New Labour vision of the creative industries, art and commerce are interdependent but in this case the very nonconformist ideologies which would have enforced that historical 'split between art and commerce' are the catalyst for their reunion under the banner of #rebelnotts.\textsuperscript{147} This is not to say that the cause is not a noble one — any campaign which raises awareness of Nottingham and its literature is worthwhile indeed — however the irony inherent in marketing rebellion is worthy of note. It would be false to claim Sillitoe as a bohemian writer, and his no-nonsense protagonist Arthur Seaton may have reacted violently to such a label. What is more difficult to deny however is the correlation between the spirit of the bohemian movement and the way in which rebellion is being marketed in the city today. As Hans Abbing states, 'Anti-market behaviour can be profitable. Sometimes, the more anti-commercial artists and intermediaries present themselves, the higher their status and incomes are.'\textsuperscript{148} This may appear a cynical reading — and I certainly do not wish to imply Sillitoe was motivated solely by money — but at some level the ‘rebel writers’ and the present day intermediaries who market their legacy are aware of this profitability.

The most important point about the #rebelnotts campaign and the innovation around Sillitoe’s legacy is perhaps not about whose cultural property his ideologies become but rather how they can collectively benefit Nottingham and its people. Travel was a major influence on Sillitoe’s fiction so it is apposite that generations of new, digital readers map their own routes through his city and in turn, place Nottingham on the cultural map. In a wider geographical context of the Midlands, cultural anonymity is a very real danger. Critics are too quick to dismiss the region as a void at the heart of the country, focusing instead on the polarised notion of a country split along a North–South divide and the highly visible cultural activities of cities such as London and Edinburgh. The Midlands disappears in this imaginary axis. However, by identifying a common

\textsuperscript{147} Brouillette, p. 17.
thread which unites the legacies of some of Nottingham’s great writers, the #rebelnotts campaign under the direction of the Howie Smith Project is forging a solid literary identity for Nottingham. In parallel with the UNESCO accreditation as a City of Literature and the emergence of interactive literary attractions, the passion and dedication of a small number of individuals is demonstrating the potential to stand out in a crowded literary tourism marketplace while still retaining a strong rebellious ethos.
Chapter Three

Nottingham: Poetry in Print

If you know how a poet can make a fortune out of poetry please write to me without delay. Poetry and money are mutually exclusive. Almost.\textsuperscript{149}

Having focussed on performance poetry, novels and literary tourism, the final chapter within this part of my thesis examines the status of printed poetry in Nottingham and places this in a national context. As the above quotation suggests, the primary focus here will be poetry’s literary economy. This will be explored by looking at the shifts in how poetry is produced and consumed and how cultural value is ascribed, before considering case studies of selected Nottingham poetry collectives and publishing houses. My analysis will appraise the printed medium as a vital constituent of a modern, multimedia expression of regional sensibility in poetry. Performance, online and print culture are interdependent components which together create the Nottingham poetry scene.

This chapter analyses the multimedia offering of contemporary poetry by first considering the valorisation of poetry in print, in terms of the medium’s prestige and the potential financial benefits it might bestow upon the author. The focus then shifts to the relatively new platform of digital poetry publishing, understanding the medium to be complimentary to the printed volume in the wider consumption of poetry. These analyses aim to demonstrate the artificiality of two dichotomies: page versus stage poetry and print versus digital formats. Within the multiplatform poetry scene, these components complement each other to enhance the audience experience.\textsuperscript{150}

The prevalence of digital media might look like a major threat to print. In the poetry world however, print is still utilised; not as a sole means of dissemination but as a strategic component of a multi-platform offering. According to Patience Agbabi, print can


\textsuperscript{150} In this study, ‘audience’ is not limited to a traditional understanding of a crowd of seated spectators. It also covers readers of printed material, listeners of audio recordings, viewers of video and attendees at live events. I use the term to encompass the diverse groups who ‘consume’ and ultimately ‘value’ the contemporary multimedia expression of poetry.
elevate the status of poets whose primary medium is the live performance. The prestige of the printed volume projects success and may in turn help to secure audience numbers and future bookings. While it would be reductive to claim that the purpose of printing modern poetry is solely to promote live performance, there is for poets a correlation between having a single author collection published and being on the radar of live promoters. Agbabi states: ‘it's very important to have a book, it's very important to have something concrete and solid [...] I remember being aware that all the performance poets who I thought had made it, had all got books, and I thought that wasn't a coincidence.’

Live performances in turn drive book sales and generate interest in poets’ online platforms, where exclusive content and more in-depth information may be available.

Having surveyed many poets’ websites, it is apparent that for some this platform is not yet a priority. The number one best seller Carol Ann Duffy, for example, has a very basic site with just a single static page of information. By contrast, the sites of Lemn Sissay and Daljit Nagra both offer poetry, audio and video to engage the visitor.

Website visits may increase traffic to the poet’s online shop and future event listings. No matter how small the numbers involved in the above processes may currently be, the cumulative effect of all this activity could in time achieve the momentum to reverse printed poetry’s fortunes. The market for printed poetry has lately been in decline: from £8.4m in 2009 to £6.7m in 2012. These figures do not account for digital poetry, self-published works or sales at events, and it is not yet clear whether the uptake of new media equals the deficit in print formats. What is increasingly apparent however, is the symbiotic relationship between print and digital poetry.

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151 Breeze, Agbabi, Tipene, Harrison and Bertram, p. 28.
152 Having surveyed many poets’ websites, it is apparent that for some this platform is not yet a priority. The number one best seller Carol Ann Duffy, for example, has a very basic site with just a single static page of information <http://www.carolannduffy.co.uk/>. By contrast, the sites of Lemn Sissay <http://lemnsissay.com/> and Daljit Nagra <http://www.daljitrnagra.com/> both offer poetry, audio and video to engage the visitor. [All accessed 19 August 2014]
153 Ibid.
Any decline in print sales which digital may have prompted is unlikely to be accrued in digital sales by online publishers. An entire generation of online users have come to expect digital content for free. Perhaps this is due to an assumption that all costs for printed volumes are to pay for the materials, processing and distribution, rather than the intellectual property of the author. As a result, authors and publishers alike are increasingly using free content as a means of raising their profiles and reaching wider audiences than the select few who value their content enough to pay for it. As discouraging as this might sound, it is a concept that many Web 2.0 businesses have adopted in recent years. This approach has been identified by economist Nicholas Lovell as ‘the curve’, whereby a large audience of ‘freeloaders’ will consume free content and a small core of ‘super fans’ will seek out paid content as a result.\textsuperscript{155} Facilitated by the internet, this is a business model which would have been impossible in previous eras dependent upon print. Without ‘the tyranny of the physical’, poets can distribute their work widely at no cost, in the hope of seeing a financial return from their most loyal readers.\textsuperscript{156} The phenomenon of free poetry is by no means unique to the internet. There are immediate similarities between what the ‘curve’ model achieves digitally and the countless free magazines historically distributed by poetry enthusiasts, a Nottingham example being that of the DIY poets. What is significant however is the potential scale of online distribution. According to Wade, in 1960s Liverpool, ‘a proliferation of small magazines produced by students or coteries’ helped to galvanize a globally recognised movement.\textsuperscript{157} The reach of these magazines was limited by the physicality of the format yet still a regional poetry scene flourished and spread nationally via publications and tours. The scope of such a movement today is enormous, with a possible audience reaching into the millions through viral online distribution. As outlined in the \textit{Thrive!}
report, regional poetic movements are beginning to adapt to Web 2.0 but the full scale of this potential has yet to be realised.\textsuperscript{158}

In 1994, before the internet began to make a significant impact on publishing, Peter Finch, a Welsh poet and author, published \textit{The Poetry Business}. Within the slim volume, he outlines the mechanics of the industry in the early 1990s, giving practical pointers for success yet constantly cautioning the aspiring poet against getting their hopes up. Finch states of poetry magazines that ´[c]irculations are painfully small and initial readers are almost always the writers themselves.´\textsuperscript{159} This is a disheartening situation, yet Finch’s lexical choice of ‘painfully’ is telling of wider concerns within studies of literary markets. Why should a small readership be a source of pain for the creative writer? Poet Stephen Wade satirises the elitist mind-set of some within the poetic community, ‘in England, poets are not supposed to be too popular. Even more sinful is being popular and mentioned in critical surveys.’\textsuperscript{160} Despite the sardonic tone, Wade astutely summarises the value placed on the idea of a ´select few´ readers who will exalt poetry more than a supposedly undeserving majority. This correlates directly with Frow’s research on valuing communities. But is being ´locally valid´ enough?\textsuperscript{161} Surely every writer wants a large readership, but in the largely non-commercial realm of poetry, quality has traditionally been valued above quantity when it comes to audiences.

Frow conceptualises the constituent groups of a cultural market as ´valuing communities´ who ascribe cultural value through their consumption — and ideally their endorsement — of a cultural product.\textsuperscript{162} In terms of poetry, these communities could be editors, prize panels, publishing houses, readers, audience members and, according to Finch, often fellow poets. When cultural producers and consumers become one and the same, as in the case of small poetry magazines, there is perhaps little ´value´ to be attained for the poet. One could argue that the approval of those Fred D’Aguiar terms

\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Thrive! poetry project: strategic development} report, Bop Consulting, 16 March 2009.
\textsuperscript{159} Peter Finch, \textit{The Poetry Business} (Bridgend, Wales: Seren, 1994), p. 11.
\textsuperscript{160} Stephen Wade and Paul Munden (eds.), \textit{reading the applause: reflections on performance poetry by various artists} (York: Talking Shop, 1999), p. 35.
\textsuperscript{161} Frow, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., p. 154.
'compatriots in craft' is one of the most valuable forms of reader response. In this vein, experienced poets might be technically the best equipped to ascribe value to their peers’ work. What is lacking from this evaluation however, is the importance of the reach of the work. Intrinsic poetic merit seems insufficient if only very few people will experience it. In order to reach those ‘valuing communities’ which wield the power to elevate the medium’s status, poetry needs to reach beyond its autarky and connect. In isolation, the printed format can no longer be considered a valid means of achieving this aim. Only in conjunction with live performances and digital content can regional poetry hope to reach beyond the parochial and make an impact at the national and international level.

On the national level, the dominance of London-based publishers may give the false impression that authors from the regions deal only in local issues and would therefore appeal only to a local readership. This is simply not the case of Midlands poets such as Banjoko, Hubbard and Leeming, who address themes of global importance. To describe the Midlands’ regional literary cultures as parochial is to overlook the importance of transnational trajectories in the literature. As was the case in 1960s Liverpool, international concerns are a fundamental catalyst to the development of a nuanced regional sensibility. As Stephen Wade asserts, ‘the local lies beside the cosmopolitan, and the evolution of a city’s literary identity can be detected, alongside a sense of imminent achievement.’ Globalisation may seem to render this nexus less relevant in the twenty-first century, although perhaps the proliferation of digital content and rapid mass-communication will afford greater exposure to local literary cultures and allow them to more effectively exert their own influence on much broader cultural movements.

To take an example from the wider Midlands region, Leeming’s choreopoem ‘The Loneliness of the Long Distance Diva’ fuses local (Sillitoe’s Nottingham novel is a major

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163 D’Aguiar in Hampson and Barry (eds.), p. 70.
164 Frow, p. 154.
influence) and global concerns to great effect. Leeming states, ‘This new choreopoem will focus on a specific geographical area and its key buildings in Leicester and span a number of decades.’ By exploring micro histories of the local area, Leeming is able to draw out the transnational diversity of the East Midlands region. Her work utilises digital multimedia and performance to create a multi-sensory experience for audiences. This progressive approach to poetry is a strong counteraction to the lack of a fully devolved publishing infrastructure in the UK. As Wade asserts, ‘in England, we have never attained that solid regional base for the publication and dissemination of poetry that is to be found for instance in Wales.’ A multi-platform poetry culture is stronger in the face of such challenges, as it is not dependent upon any one format for its evolution. There are many good, ‘strong’ publishing houses in Nottingham such as Five Leaves, Shoestring and Candlestick but Wade’s assertion above refers to the sheer volume of output by the major London publishers. This is again an issue of literary value, as a press such as Five Leaves could never compete in terms of prizes awarded, units sold or even column inches gained. Instead such endeavours persist through the value which their founders and readers place upon the physical object of quality, single-author collections and anthologies. The ‘vexed issue of quality’ can lead to a narrowing of vision in terms of poetic output, with particularly harmful effects on the cultural diversity of material. The expediencies of the literary economy shape the form of the poetry which actually gets published. While independent presses may have relative freedom in their publication choices, this freedom tends to be exercised primarily within familiar territory. This tends to favour white poets, with classical influences and recognisable obeisance to traditional page-based forms. As Kwame Dawes argues,

The problem, of course, lies in the totalising dichotomies often created between ‘book poetry’ and ‘performance poetry.’ They are false dichotomies grounded in

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166 The term ‘choreopoem’ refers to a mode of dramatic expression which combines poetry, dance, music and song. It was first coined by Ntozake Shange to refer to her 1975 work *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (London: Simon & Schuster; repr. 2010).

167 <http://carolleeming.blogspot.co.uk> [Accessed 29 September 2014]

168 Wade, p. xvii.

169 Pearce, Fowler and Crawshaw, p. 83.
rather lazy acts of analysis. The poem is the thing. Its value can be tested on the page and in performance.¹⁷⁰

Many Black British poets are denied publication opportunities because their work is not easily understood as purely page-based expression. The expectation for poets of any background to write in accordance with notions of accepted taste can lead to a lack of experimentation in terms of poetic form. The egalitarian potential of Web 2.0 may help to alleviate this issue for future generations of writers. The presence of online poetry and the internet’s capacity to advance physical print and performance culture, are redemptive factors which may allow poetry to persist even without a large market for traditional printed forms. This is a phenomenon which Striphas calls ‘the tense interplay of persistence and change endemic to today’s everyday book culture’.¹⁷¹ The tension comes through the potential of digital to eradicate print culture, but evidently this is not an inevitable process. Statistics issued by the Publishers’ Association state that in 2012, digital counted for only 12% of total sales.¹⁷² Although this percentage cannot account for the wealth of free literary content viewed online, the printed format is too deeply ingrained into our literary cultures to face immediate obsolescence.

Literature reaches well beyond literary cultures in the extent to which it defines our social worlds. The complex ties between our status as social beings and our status as readers are articulated in D.T. Max’s article ‘The Last Book’. Here, Max positions e-books as a threat to print culture and — by extension — a threat to the ‘accidentalness’ of reading:

It is the end of informal information dissemination — pressing a book on a friend, picking up a paperback at a rummage sale, handing a dollar to the guy on the sidewalk who’s selling books off a blanket. This is one way ideas move through the culture. There’s an accidentalness to reading — one of its pleasures — that the computer world doesn’t think much about.¹⁷³

There is a sense of finality in Max’s assertion which is unrealistically fatalistic. He paints a bleak image of the book’s extinction, yet concedes that the mechanisms outlined within the excerpt are just ‘one way’ in which ideas are transmitted. Alternative modes of information exchange are increasingly influential and popular, and very often informal in their own right. Max designates the printed document as the only vessel of ‘informal information dissemination’ and in the process he ignores the multitude of digital exchanges which happen every second in the modern world; each one no more or less ‘accidental’ than ‘pressing a book on a friend.’ If issues of editorial taste in publishing can restrict poetic form, digital text can propagate the experimental, ‘accidental’ qualities of language and literature, leading to greater diversity of poetic output. For poetry to remain a component of our modern literary landscape, it must embrace new media and establish how they can bring out regional poetic voices overlooked by the big presses.

Rather than ‘the end’ of book culture, the early twenty-first century can more accurately be described as ‘the late age of print’, to quote Striphas.\(^\text{174}\) In contrast to Max, Striphas acknowledges the vitality and vigour of print in its ‘late age’; ‘[j]ust as late capitalism is still vigorous capitalism’.\(^\text{175}\) Eschewing a fatalistic reading, it is still necessary to acknowledge that when it comes to the threat of extinction, poetry books are at greater risk than novels or non-fiction.\(^\text{176}\) As Kwame Dawes asserts, ‘poetry is said to pay very little and to generate such miniscule revenues that for any press to survive it must turn to fiction.’\(^\text{177}\) If this is the case, poetry must adapt to what Striphas calls ‘a more densely mediated landscape than ever before,’ if it is to survive.\(^\text{178}\) Only through pro-actively utilising this density of information, through linking and cross-promoting between formats, can Nottingham poetry survive in print form.

\(^{174}\) Striphas, p. 1.
\(^{175}\) Ibid., p. 3.
\(^{177}\) Dawes in Sesay, p. 291.
\(^{178}\) Striphas, p. 3.
Just like in other regions, the modern literary economy in Nottingham functions on a ‘survival of the fittest’ basis. In my previous discussion of the Blackdrop poetry collective, the trope of grassroots activism was recurrent. There is an organic quality to much of the literary activism in Nottingham which correlates more directly with the tactile printed format than the digital. In Max’s dystopian vision of a bookless world, the demise of hard copy would appear to threaten the ‘informal information exchange’, which characterises many of Nottingham’s literary cultures.¹⁷⁹ The DIY Poets collective actively utilise the ‘accidentalness’ of small poetry pamphlets by strategically placing them in cinemas, bars and cafés; spaces whose primary function is not literary but which attract an artistically-inclined audience in Nottingham’s creative quarter. This heavily subsidised area in Nottingham’s historical lace market is a hive of independent business and creative endeavours, such as the Nottingham Writer’s Studio, ‘The Corner’ set up by the Howie-Smith Project (Rebel Writers) and the world’s smallest cinema, Screen 22. These are places where people might go to while away some time, stumble across a poetry pamphlet and peruse it. I interviewed founder Frank McMahon who explained his rationale for continuing this tradition of informal publishing:

I was inspired to distribute the mag freely around the city as I felt that people were no longer reading poetry, especially modern poetry. It seemed that even people who were into literature did not read poetry and people read poetry only if they had to revise it for an English lit exam. We wanted to make poetry relevant. We felt that a free mag with nice images placed in bars and cafes would encourage people to read poetry and maybe be inspired to submit their own work.¹⁸⁰

The work of the DIY Poets collective can be placed in what Mills calls the ‘DIY tradition that runs back through the Gestetner and Xerox revolution of the 60s and 70s back to William Blake and earlier.’¹⁸¹ Certainly the DIY project is not breaking new ground, with distinct echoes of 1960s Liverpool in their guerilla approach. What is perhaps more significant is the physicality of the hand-stapled magazine in an era where free content is

¹⁷⁹ D. T. Max, p. 75.
¹⁸⁰ Frank McMahon, interviewed by Tom Kew, 3 August 2014.
predominantly digital. DIY’s placement of poetry in public spaces not only makes an assertive move towards its readership, it also sidesteps the gatekeepers of the publishing industry. This is active dissemination of poetry in that the audience is not required to seek out the art. Poet Ian McMillan has long favoured this democratising approach to poetry, advocating ‘no more split between writer and reader, performer and audience’. McMillan has himself undertaken a poetry residency with Northern Spirit Rail, acting as ‘mobile bard’ to bring poetry to those least expecting it. When funds are injected from the commercial sector, the possibilities for poetry are seemingly endless, but the DIY collective and many of their Nottingham contemporaries favour an organic and distinctly lo-fi approach to poetry dissemination.

In this vein there are parallels to be drawn between the Howie-Smith Project’s ‘Rebel Writers’ campaign and the work of contemporary poetry collectives. DIY poets are not restrained by the financial imperatives of publishing houses. As Schiffrin states, ‘in recent years, as the ownership of publishing has changed [...] the only interest is in making money and as much of it as possible.’ In light of the niche appeal of regional poetry, the DIY distribution chain is not only a practical solution, it is an ideological survival strategy. Those who select and publish poetry on a large scale are inevitably ‘valuing communities’ of a different sort to the aforementioned grassroots organisations. If it is not possible to achieve the validation of the publishing industry then those wishing for their poetic voices to be heard must take their product directly to places where it will be valued by Nottingham’s reading public. Financial imperatives are by no means the only motivation to publish locally, and such activity has at its core the development of regional literary cultures, communities of readers and writers who share a passion for poetry.

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183 <http://www.literaryfestivals.co.uk/poets/ianmcmillan.html> [accessed 8 August 2014]
185 Frow, p. 154.
Such passion for poetry shares a complex relationship with our childhood exposure to the medium here in the UK. In DIY founder McMahon’s evocation of exams, there are echoes of Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze’s assertion that poetry has tended to rank highly on pupils’ ‘hate list’, along with ‘mushy peas in the school canteen’. In his 1995 guide to the poetry industry, Paul Hyland furthers the notion of poetry as something to be digested and processed, in referring to ‘helpings of the poetry puree dished up at school’. There are many within the Nottingham poetry culture, for example Hubbard, who share the widely held concern that poetry is too often yoked to purely academic contexts. The Arts Council strategic development report Thrive! (2009) acknowledges the consensus that school can impact our enjoyment of poetry: ‘[e]veryone believes that positive experiences at school are believed to be important to laying the foundation for lifetime engagement with poetry.’ In terms of the printed format, the classroom is perhaps one of the sites in which there is the most potential for initiating change. Practices such as rote learning and recitation look outmoded next to the dynamism of performance poetry, particularly if a visiting poet delivers the performance through an interactive workshop. Consistently engaging young people with the poetic medium is fundamental if it is to survive. The Thrive! report adds ‘that current teaching of poetry at school yields too few such positive experiences’. There is an apparent identity crisis whereby poetry is widely perceived as an elitist art form, which requires expert training to ‘decode’ and deduce meaning. Consistently engaging young people with the poetic medium, allowing them to feel that it is theirs and not the preserve of an intellectual elite, is key to its longevity.

When talking about the image problem which poetry faces in contemporary society, Stephen Wade refers to ‘the stigma of daffodils and greetings cards’. He evokes Wordsworth but also the doggerel which is put to functional effect inside
commercial greetings cards. In Nottingham however, this ‘stigma’ is being subverted to great effect. The Candlestick Press is a Nottingham success story: at once conservative and innovative. Their poetry pamphlets are sold as alternatives to traditional greetings cards, complete with an envelope and a bookmark for the sender’s message. This is poetry as giftware, repackaging established works into themed collections, a marketing technique apparent in UK branches of Waterstones. With titles such as *10 Poems About Tea*, *10 Poems for Bedtime* or *10 Poems about Gardens*, Candlestick’s output may sound twee and distinctly middlebrow, however the press has found a way to profit from poetry. *The Guardian* considers the pamphlets a ‘credit crunch essential’, while Robert McCrum of *The Observer* states they are ‘one of the most charming innovations to have crossed my desk in these difficult times.’

Candlestick manages to present very slim volumes at almost the same price as most single-author collections (approx. £5 as opposed to £6–7) yet their perceived value is much higher. This falls down to the simple logic of *function*. The dimension of practical functionality sets Candlestick apart from the majority of the UK’s poetry presses. Those who primarily publish single-author collections are struggling to stay afloat, for example Salt, who ceased such publication in 2013. Public feedback on *The Guardian* coverage of Salt’s crisis cites high cover prices as one of the primary reasons for consumers not buying poetry pamphlets. Price-per-page is something of which the book-buying public are acutely aware, with large novels representing better value for money in the eyes of many retailers and their customers. The Salt case renders Candlestick’s success all the more remarkable. Priced at £4.95 for 10 poems, the ‘Poetry, instead of a card’ range has a significantly higher price-per-page yet achieves commercial viability. Perhaps here

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195 Price correct as of August 2014.
lies the exception to Hyland's assertion — widely accepted within the industry — that
'[p]oetry and money are mutually exclusive. Almost.'

By replacing the function of a greetings card, catering for Christmas, Valentine’s,
Day, Aunts, Mothers, Children and so on, Candlestick Press is able to reach audiences
who might not typically buy poetry. As one reader states:

There's great charm in small, beautifully produced anthology-booklets of poetry,
and the Candlestick Press of Beeston, Nottingham has several delightful themed
offerings.... They're ideal for gifts, and for converting reluctant prosy types and
ebook junkies into strokable paper and fine-printing aficionados.

In 'the late age of print', converting readers back to hard copy from
digital media is an
impressive achievement: a triumph for the tactile and pass-on-able, over the
 technological. The press enjoys the firm endorsement of laureate Carol Ann Duffy who
etits their annual Christmas pamphlet and describes Candlestick as 'scrumptious and
innovative'. Duffy’s endorsement affords commercial value, considering that the top
three best-selling poetry books between 2011 and 2013 were all written by her. Whether
Candlestick's products are 'charming', 'strokable' or even 'scrumptious'; the driving force
behind their commercial viability lies in the poetry book as object of fetish. The
attachment of an e-card to an email is unlikely to convey the same sense of affection as
the traditional card, and Candlestick’s offering expands on this with the sentiment of its
poetry. Although the poets published are usually canonical, there is genuine variety in
Candlestick’s offering, incorporating John Agard, Benjamin Zephaniah, Fleur Adcock,
Jackie Kay and local author D.H. Lawrence. While the company’s releases could be
dismissed as novelty, they are an effective means of bringing poetry to new audiences

196 Hyland, p. 39.
197 Marge Clouts, The Guardian Online, 'Readers recommend their favourite books of
2010', 1 January 2011 <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/01/readers-
books-year-2010-roundup> [Accessed 30 July 2014]
198 Striphas, p. 3.
199 An endorsement of immense commercial value, considering that the top 3 best selling
poetry books between 2011 and 2013 were all written by Duffy
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/24/salt-poetry-market-slump>,
[Accessed 24 June 2014];
<http://www.candlestickpress.co.uk/reviews/> [accessed 24 June 2014]
and an integral part of the ‘diversity of activity’ which constitutes the modern poetry industry.

The Shoestring Press are an independent Nottingham publisher whose very name satirises the economic state of the industry. They exist outside of the ‘big five’ of poetry publishing (Bloodaxe, Cape, Carcanet, Faber and Picador) yet have existed for 30 years as one of the larger and most consistent ‘small presses’. Their survival is all the more commendable given the dominance which ‘the big five’ possess at major poetry competitions such as the T.S. Eliot or Forward prizes. Research undertaken by poet and reviewer Fiona Moore reveals that ‘the big five’ publishers held an 82% and 83% majority of shortlisted titles at the 2014 T.S. Eliot and Forward prizes respectively. This places presses such as Shoestring in a minority of ‘other’ publishers, constituting 2% and 14% respectively. For Shoestring, there is a stasis enforced by such prizes as their marketing budget, rather than the quality of their lists — which include talented poets not only from Nottingham but across the UK, Greece and Australia — that prevents access to the most prestigious awards. These awards could also stimulate a spike in sales, as Moore recalls of the 2014 T.S. Eliot prize, ‘the bookstall was mobbed in what must be the highest-selling moment of the year for poetry books’. In this small-scale frenzy for poetry, we see in action the intense actualisation of what Frow calls ‘regimes of value’. The value bestowed by judges is interpreted by an educated readership as the ultimate endorsement and therefore incitement to part with their money.

Beyond these immediate sales, the publicity afforded by such prizes would give a huge boost to a small Nottingham press and enable a Midlands publisher to compete on a national level. In the Shoestring anthology of Nottingham poets, Henry Normal

200 Thrive! poetry project: strategic development report, p. 3.
201 Fiona Moore, ‘Poetry prizes: the elephant on stage’, [http://displacement-poetry.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/poetry-prizes-elephant-on-stage.html] [Accessed 11 August 2014]
202 Ibid.
204 Moore, ‘Poetry prizes: the elephant on stage’.
205 Frow, p. 152.
satirises how slender the odds are for a regional poet of achieving success in a major prize:

The last poem I ever wrote was entered into a poetry competition by a lifelong enemy. The judges having been certified dead were suitably appointed as their names were unknown to each other let alone to anyone else. My poem came 63rd out of 7 million entries and won a year’s subscription to the Crumpsall Poetry Appreciation Society Crochet Circle and Glee Club Gazette.206

This tongue-in-cheek perspective from the lower echelons of the poetry world actually makes serious points about the way in which literary value is ascribed in an over-saturated literary economy. Prizes can be a way of generating income for the organisers, but rarely bear fruit for the multitude of hopeful poets who enter. That only the poet’s enemy would take the time to enter his work emphasises the pain of scrutiny under a panel of judges. Functioning as industry gatekeepers, judges form one of the harshest incarnations of the valuing community for poets. The fact of the 63rd prize being a subscription to an absurdly niche regional publication simultaneously parodies print magazine culture as parochial, obscure and irrelevant.

Putting aside Normal’s humorous vision of a parochial regional contest, poetry prize judges are usually critically acclaimed poets in their own right, and Moore’s research reveals that they are overwhelmingly published by ‘the big five’ themselves.207 Beyond the visibility which prizes afford, cultural value is ascribed to the poetry by the judges. These panels are perhaps some of the most authoritative ‘valuing communities’ as they wield the power to ascribe not only cultural value, but the subsequent streams of revenue which come from the prestige.208 James English conceives the correlation between cultural and economic value inherent in prize giving as *intraconversion*:

[Prizes] are the single best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital - which is to say that they are our most effective institutional agents of *capital intraconversion*.209

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207 Moore, ‘Poetry prizes: the elephant on stage’.
208 Frow, p. 154.
This reality of our cultural industry channels the nation’s seemingly limited attention span for poetry towards a select few presses, sidelining the likes of Shoestring, with their policy of publishing ‘established but unfashionable poets’. Without the ‘negotiating’ capabilities afforded by prizes, small presses such as Shoestring depend upon the ‘cultural capital’ of their poetic offering to engage their small yet loyal followings who ascribe cultural capital with their applause at events, their engagement in digital networking and ultimately their patronage which sustains the press. There is a very real danger that neoliberal models of understanding literary value — such as James English’s concept of ‘capital intraconversion’ — will have negative implications for future funding of the arts. Whether in physical or digital format, literary endeavours hoping to receive the support of public funding bodies are increasingly scrutinised through the neoliberal logic which reduces the moment of artistic creation moment to nothing more than the economic value is added. Just as the freedom of the stage performance temporarily liberated a generation of black British poets from a seemingly closed publishing industry, digital media now has the democratising potential to supplement existing print cultures and, at relatively little cost, crystallise communities of talented writers and enthusiastic readers.

I have aimed to demonstrate a small cross section of the diverse poetic activity which characterises Nottingham’s printed poetry landscape in the early twenty-first Century. There are concerns from readers and critics about the popularity and longevity of printed poetry in isolation, yet in the current multimedia literary economy, the strength of any one medium is tethered to that of its counterparts. What the region’s literary economy needs is a growth stimulus across all platforms, a cohesive movement of the kind seen in 1960s Liverpool, to attract readers and literary tourists who want to experience a unique regional literary culture.

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Nottingham Conclusion: ‘I can’t afford my council tax!’

In this part I have referenced wider debates about cultural value, the page/stage divide, literary devolution, heritage tourism and the decline of print culture, applying these to a number of case studies to provide a snapshot of Nottingham’s literary cultures during a time of economic and technological transition. Having focussed in-depth on performance poetry, literary tourism and print culture, I wish to conclude by placing these threads in a broader regional context. In terms of the city’s wider economy, the creative sector constitutes approximately 2.6% (5,100 jobs) of the Nottingham City district, and 3.3% (10,100 jobs) of Greater Nottingham. The Creative Industries were defined in the Government’s 2001 Creative Industries Mapping Document as ‘those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property’, a definition which was then applied to the ONS Business Register and Employment Survey.\(^{211}\)

As a proportion of Nottingham’s economy, these figures look insignificant. However, there are several problems with this data. Firstly, it classifies the industry of companies rather than individuals. This appears to give misleading high results; for example, an accountant working for a firm of architects would count as a creative job. However, the survey does not take account of small businesses, particularly if they fall below the VAT threshold. This is an economic reality that many in the creative sector face. Finally, the data makes no attempt to take account of people doing creative work informally or for no pay, which can provide significant numbers of people in a sector where the lines between business and hobby can blur, for example the Blackdrop

\(^{211}\) Department for Culture, Media and Sport, ‘Transparency data: Creative Industries Mapping Document’, April 2001
Department for Culture, Media and Sport ‘Creative Industries Economic Estimates’, January 2014;
collective. In the late twentieth century New Labour ideal which Brouillette calls ‘an inclusive society of active cultural consumers’, there is a danger that the cultural producers, particularly those whose economic presence is too small to be detected by the radar of official statistics, may disappear off the map altogether.  

I have attempted to show how, at the regional level, valuing communities rally round creative endeavours which may not have the support of funding organisations or industry gatekeepers. These tight-knit communities endow regional literary cultures with value in their show of enthusiasm and support for their art forms.

This is not to say that cultural value alone can pay the bills. The ‘bohemian’ split between art and commerce means that the value ascribed to a work of literature by society may in no tangible way benefit the author. This situation is parodied by cultural theorist Hans Abbing, who states, ‘even though artists may suffer from poverty, lack of recognition, and other drawbacks, they are compensated by the fact that they receive endless satisfaction from their work.’ Here the theorist sends up a widely held misconception that artists thrive in poverty, using hardship to fuel their creativity. In the context of his book Why Are Artists Poor? Abbing mocks the perpetuation of this myth and frames it as one of the great misconceptions of the creative industry. Poverty is obviously not motivational. In the Nottingham examples cited above, it does appear to be one of many preconditions for acts of literary rebellion. If one shared concern comes close to uniting the diverse output of contemporary Nottingham writers, it is this rebellious streak of fierce independence. The city’s literary scene thrives below the lines of economic viability, below the VAT threshold but endowed with self-possession and a strong, uniquely Midlands, sense of humour. As author Robert Shore states, ‘It’s a very distinctive, self-deprecating humour’ and a distinctive literary trait that I have consistently observed in the regional literary cultures of the Midlands.

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212 Brouillette, p. 2.
213 Ibid., p. 17.
214 Abbing, p. 30.
As a final literary example, Nottingham-born poet Henry Normal writes with an ascorbic wit and is self-reflexive on the status of his work. In ‘The Last Poem I Ever Wrote’, Normal deploys a ramshackle free verse to satirise his own aspirations as a writer:

The last poem I ever wrote I had such high hopes for.
The last poem I ever wrote was to have been so powerful it would make war obsolete and nuclear fusion as vital as trainspotting. It was to have been so cleverly constructed it would hold the key to the very universe itself, make Arthur C. Clarke look redundant and James Burke intelligible; so full of life it would be strapped onto wounds, and made into tablets and ointment. The Olympic committee would disqualify competitors found to have read it. Laid over the face of a child’s corpse it would bring the dead back to life.216

The unrealistic ambitions of some budding writers are here deconstructed by reference to the sciences, juxtaposing physical processes with the process of composition. Small circulations for poetry magazines are placed in contrast with the billions reached by Arthur C. Clarke’s satellite systems.217 The poem pastiches stereotypes of self-importance and insularity which seems to linger on poetry more than other forms of literary expression. Ultimately, the butt of the joke is the poet himself. Normal makes light of the ambitions held by his former self, naïve to the machinations of a publishing industry in which poetry is not a commercially viable form.

As seen in the excerpt relating to poetry prizes in the ‘Poetry in Print’ chapter, Normal’s poem goes on to document in extreme and ludicrous detail, the various measures of his own poetry’s failure. Here the self-deprecating Midlands wit is at the forefront of the work. The poem ends on a redemptive note which speaks to the importance of family and loved ones but also the strength of the valuing communities within Nottingham’s regional literary cultures.

The last poem I ever wrote was cremated along with my body, unread.
The last poem I ever wrote was carried in the hearts of those I loved.218

Eschewing the validation of literary gatekeepers, Normal here makes an assertion about his own perception of literary value. Despite fears of a small reach for poetry, the writer

is here acknowledging the importance of the depth, rather than the breadth, of his work’s impact. In a literary economy isolated from the powerhouses of the London publishing industry, this approach is perhaps idealistic but also sincere and pragmatic. It ensures that literature is produced without a commercial agenda in mind, a rebel approach that will perhaps in time lure the major publishers to Nottingham.
Leicester: Literature in the ‘Model’ Multicultural City

Keywords

Leicester, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, postcolonialism, diaspora space, regional literary cultures, literary economy, regional publishing, black British literature, British Asian literature, genre writing, young adult fiction, literary geography, everyday life.

Leicester Introduction

This chapter explores Leicester through its literature, from the early 1980s to the present day. It takes its initial cues equally from positive and negative stereotypes of the city, both in popular and official discourses, with the ultimate aim of exploring the character of Leicester, its creative communities and global reputation.

A major Leicester stereotype is its status as a multicultural utopia. When Leicester lost its ‘City of Culture’ bid in 2013, Manjula Sood, Leicester’s assistant mayor and chairman of the Council of Faiths, was in a ‘state of disbelief’, because ‘globally we are known as the best multicultural city on earth.’¹ Leicester has also been dubbed the ‘premier multicultural city in Europe’.² There are undeniable triumphs for multiculturalism in Leicester, and it is not my intention to deny the success stories of the city. However, this chapter will evaluate critically the interplay between official discourses of multiculturalism and those articulated in Leicester’s literature.

Another pervasive stereotype is that of Leicester as a cultural backwater. Its unsuccessful ‘City of Culture’ bid has been interpreted in popular discourse as evidence of a city lacking its own unique character.³ An online spoof newspaper, The Daily Mash, recently targeted Leicester as the subject of one of its notoriously — and deliberately — offensive articles: ‘Leicester named 2016 City of No Culture’. The article begins,

² Singh and Tatla, p. 143
‘Leicester has been named as next year’s UK anti-arts city’. ⁴ In a claim that, at first, appears only to recapitulate the article’s title, there is in fact an intensification of the charges levelled against Leicester. From ‘no culture’ to ‘anti-arts’, the city is framed not only as apathetic but antithetical towards creativity. This is an assertion which the Grassroutes project has shown to be false: Leicester has stronger literary networks than larger cities such as Manchester.⁵ Going on to define their parodic ‘City of No Culture’ award, the article states, ‘The aim of the designation is to promote scepticism, ridicule and hatred of any from [sic] of art that is not obviously popular.’ The language here is deliberately provocative and to respond directly to these mischievous satirists would be to play into their hands. There is one claim made in the article with direct relevance — that is not to say accuracy — with regards to Leicester’s regional literary cultures. The satire claims:

Meanwhile Leicester city hall will host a series of readings entitled ‘Books People Actually Buy’, featuring excerpts from the latest Top Gear Annual and Sharon Osbourne’s autobiography.⁶

The facetious tone suggests existing arts programs are failing to engage a wide demographic, catering instead for those with niche interests in books which no one would ‘actually buy’. It is making an elitist claim about how these kinds of books are not true literary texts. There is also a link being drawn between Leicester and the kind of unquestioning consumerism which leads to spikes in ghost-written autobiographies of minor celebrities in the lead up to Christmas. While Leicester may be as culpable as any other UK city in these kinds of consumption practices, there is a false correlation being drawn here between the Midlands and bland mainstream culture. The Daily Mash article would have us believe that Leicester — and by extension the Midlands — can function as a metonym for the mundane.

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⁶ Leicester named 2016 City of No Culture, The Daily Mash, 28 August 2015.
This notion of the Midlands, and specifically Leicester, as mundane and generic seems to permeate not only the world of satire, filled with incendiary statements and throwaway comments, but even the broadsheet press. The Guardian recently ran an article entitled ‘Let’s Move to Ashby-de-la-Zouch.’ At first glance this might sound like a piece of good publicity for the Leicestershire market town. However, on closer inspection, the article overlooks nuance in favour of generalisation. The following statement represents The Guardian’s ‘case against’ moving to Ashby-de-la-Zouch; ‘Ordinary. A good or bad thing, depending. Like so many Midlands towns, it tends to double in culture as a kind of Everywhere/Anywhere.’ As Robert Shore would write in the same newspaper a year later, ‘Even in this great age of identity politics, coming from the Midlands is tantamount to coming from nowhere in particular.’ Notions of ‘everywhere’, ‘anywhere’ and ‘nowhere’ seem to cling to the Midlands’ reputation despite having little grounding in reality. Representations of Leicester’s purported lack of literary culture illustrate the same challenges identified in Nottingham, that the commercial literary landscape defines itself assertively with its marketing budget and obscures — in the minds of even local readers and commentators — the wealth of regional writing. To provide a fuller picture of Leicester’s literary culture than the stereotypes outlined above, my analysis emphasises the vitality and relevance of the city’s literary output, exploring literary cultures from alternative to mainstream.

Chapter four, ‘Piri Piri Chicken: “Demotic Cosmopolitanism” in Contemporary Leicester’ looks closely at Leicester poetry and examines the extent to which it accords with official representations of multiculturalism broadcast to the world. As regional poet Leeming states, ‘we constantly hear that Leicester is this hunky dory, homogenous, happy clappy, multicultural city… that’s one story.’ The stereotyped tropes of

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9 Gilroy, p. 75.
10 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
‘steelbands, saris and samosas’\textsuperscript{11} are challenged as I read Leicester texts in light of theoretical alternatives to multiculturalism.

Chapter five, ‘\#WeNeedDiverseBooks: Diversity in Leicester’s Young Adult Fiction’, develops the critique of official discourses of multicultural Leicester and applies them to the genre of Young Adult fiction. The writer Bali Rai is from the city and has a global reputation. He is signed to Penguin Random House and his debut novel has been translated into 11 languages worldwide. My interviews with Rai and close reading of his novels feed into broader debates about representations of diversity — whether in terms of race, gender or socioeconomic status — in books for young people. Rai’s fiction directly concerns the lived experience of young people living in different parts of Leicester and reflects upon how some of the challenges associated with multiculturalism impact on their lives.

Leicester author Townsend’s \textit{The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole aged 13\textsuperscript{3/4}} (1982) was the best-selling novel of the 1980s and forms the basis of my sixth chapter, ‘Leicester Leicester/ Fester fester’: The Secret Diary of a Regional Writer.\textsuperscript{12} Through close reading of Townsend’s debut novel, I demonstrate that Leicester’s apparent ‘image problem’ has been both an obstacle and a boon for regional writers.

Throughout this part of the thesis I utilise a methodology based around original interviews and close reading of regional literature. Relevant critical theories illuminate how texts written by Leicester authors, and often about the city itself, tie into global debates on multiculturalism, diversity, everyday life and cultural geography. In undertaking these readings I intend to demonstrate that Leicester is a site of complex and nuanced literary production with a global profile which transcends stereotypes.

\textsuperscript{11} Modood, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{12} Early typescript material related to the \textit{Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4}, ST/1/1/2, University of Leicester Special Collections.
Chapter Four

Piri Piri Chicken: ‘Demotic Cosmopolitanism’ in Contemporary Leicester

In the words of Tara Mukherjee, Chairman of the European Multicultural Foundation: ‘Leicester epitomises what Multiculturalism is all about.’\(^{13}\) This would seem a fantastic accolade for the city, and for the most part, it is. But what effect does this have on the city’s literature? Can the official narratives of multiculturalism become a representative burden for those who work in its creative industries?

In any multicultural society, there is a danger that in order to access funding, publication or critical attention, writers might feel compelled to emphasise themes of multiculturalism in their work. Lucie Gillet explores this in her 2008 paper ‘Literature in a Multicultural Society: The ‘Burden of Representation’ vs. Artistic Freedom’, where she outlines how stifling prescribed forms of expression can be to writers.\(^{14}\) The burden threatens to limit what writers are expected to write about, with reference to their ethnicity or faith communities. In reality, Leicester writers take their influence from all kinds of sources, not least the city itself. Gilroy’s concept of ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ might therefore be a more useful critical mode than ‘multiculturalism’ in the study of Leicester and its literature.\(^{15}\) Gilroy’s concept concerns everyday modes of interaction, ‘when mundane encounters with difference become rewarding’ and therefore speaks directly to many of the Leicester literary examples in this part of the thesis.\(^{17}\)

Throughout my analysis below, ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ provides a focal point for alternative readings of Leicester’s diversity, as expressed through its literary output. They are alternative ways of reading in that they provide working alternatives to the official narratives which seek to frame Leicester in singular terms: as the ‘premier’, the

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\(^{13}\) ‘University of Leicester hosts international multiculturalism celebration’ <http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/press/press-releases/2014/february/university-of-leicester-hosts-international-multiculturalism-celebration> [accessed 8 September 2015]


\(^{15}\) Gilroy, p. 75.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
‘greatest’ multicultural city, which ‘epitomises what Multiculturalism is all about.’ Multiculturalism has become Leicester’s unique selling point. Taken in isolation, this appears to be a highly desirable aspect of the city. As Gunning states in 2010, ‘the dominant mode of antiracism in Britain continues to be multiculturalism, even if it has been contested in recent years.’ I would argue that this still holds true. Leicester’s official discourses of multiculturalism are undoubtedly celebratory and largely positive narratives. However the rhetoric of public representation must be divorced from the realities of urban Leicester life if any serious academic enquiry is to probe into the region’s literary cultures. As a way of understanding texts, ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ assists this line of enquiry, whereas ‘multiculturalism’ tends only to obfuscate.

Some commentators such as Tariq Modood suggest that the problem with the term ‘multiculturalism’ is its conflation of race, religion and nationality:

The ‘multi’ does not merely refer to the fact that a number of minority groups are within the frame but also to the fact that different kinds of groups are being referred to. Some groups are defined by ‘race’ or ‘colour’ (e.g. black or Asian), some by national origins (e.g. Indian or Pakistani), some by religion (e.g. Sikh or Muslim) and so on.

The need for clarity is apparent when terminology has the power to group together, or divide, huge numbers of people. There is often a focus on commonality in the Leicester literature which this chapter explores. Of relevance here is Modood’s concept of ‘multicultural citizenship’ that emphasises shared traits rather than insularity. This celebratory model stands in opposition to the insular, segregated vision of multiculturalism identified by Amartya Sen as ‘plural monoculturalism’. Citizenship demands active participation from all communities, for it is antithetical to the notion of insular, closed hubs which are separate from each other. With recourse to a unified

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19 Gunning, p. 150.
20 Modood, pp. 8–9.
22 Modood, p. 5.
'Leicester citizenship’ comes a way of imagining a diverse city with shared aims and aspirations. As Modood states, ‘where there is “difference” there must also be commonality. That commonality is citizenship, a citizenship that is seen in a plural and dispersed way.’ Along with the privileges of citizenship come responsibilities. Mutual engagement with problems at the grassroots level is the ultimate expression of demotic cosmopolitanism, a goal-focused approach to everyday belonging. John Thompson emphasises the contrast between cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism:

There are profound differences between a multicultural and a cosmopolitan society. For a start, multiculturalism is based on preserving inherent differences while cosmopolitanism is based on bridging them. Multiculturalism implies separate and real (or assumed) status based on collectivism – groups of people having power because of their background and associations.

The idea of power is relevant in terms of cultural representation — whose culture is put forward as the official representation of multicultural Leicester? This debate will be picked up later on through interviews with Leicester poet Leeming. My intention now is to explore, at ground level, how this notion of cosmopolitanism manifests itself in Leicester literature, and how this relates to public discourses of the ‘premier multicultural city in Europe’.

This examination of demotic cosmopolitanism in Leicester’s literary cultures begins on London Road. Stretching south from the city centre, it lies at the heart of cosmopolitan Leicester. Once a major national transport route, the A6 runs from Carlisle down to Luton, passing through Leicester where it provides access to both the city’s universities, the train station and Highfields. The stretch closest to the city centre is a nucleus where divergent demographics intersect. This space and place analysis uses Gilroy’s theory to consider whether the ‘demotic’ or ‘vulgar’ cosmopolitanism represented in Leeming’s poem ‘Valley Dreamers’ espouses a ‘convivial’ account of contemporary

23 Ibid.
25 Singh and Tatla, p. 143.
Leicester.\textsuperscript{26} In doing so, it seeks to challenge the metanarrative of Leicester as the ‘model’ multicultural city and explore alternative narratives.\textsuperscript{27}

“\textit{You’ve Tried The Cowboys… Now Try the Indians}”

On London Road, traditional British bakers sit alongside a post office, dry cleaners, family-run chemists and a variety of eateries. There is a wealth of Indian restaurants although these cannot be said to cater exclusively for Leicester’s British Asian demographic; they are often upmarket and seemingly ‘ernised’ establishments savvy to the wants of various consumers. One takeaway named ‘McIndians’ pastiches ern fast food culture with its name and playful invitation in the window: ‘you’ve tried the cowboys now come and try the Indians.’ McIndians’ approach brings to mind Prince Phillip’s gaffe, while touring a factory in Edinburgh in 1999. Peering at a fuse box he remarked, ‘this looks like it was put in by Indians’. He later backtracked, claiming, ‘I meant to say cowboys’ but his antiquated colonial connotations were embarrassingly clear.\textsuperscript{28} The context on London Road is very different. The ‘cowboys versus Indians’ invocation by Leicester’s modern Asian businesspeople is a light-hearted example of what Gilroy calls ‘vulgar’ or ‘demotic’ cosmopolitanism. The humour is rooted in colonial histories but also the quotidian practices of contemporary Britain; ‘[i]t glories in the ordinary virtues and ironies’.\textsuperscript{29}

In the case of McIndians, one of these ‘ordinary ironies’ is the origin of the cuisine on offer: the venue claims to be ‘the home’ of ‘the authentic African Piri Piri chicken’… ‘often imitated never matched.’\textsuperscript{30} Fully aware that their cuisine bears a complex colonial history, the proprietors offer visitors to their website a condensed version:

\textsuperscript{26} Gilroy, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{29} Gilroy, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{30} [Accessed 28 October 2014]
The origins of our Piri Piri chicken date back from Mozambique. Our ancestors passed through Beira on their travels through Southern Africa a long, long time ago and discovered the Piri Piri chicken. The recipe was refined and brought to life with a blend of eastern spices and this is the same recipe used by us.\(^{31}\)

This looks very similar to the narrative offered by the chain Nando’s, which also sells Piri Piri chicken.\(^{32}\) It seems McIndians have adapted the Nando’s narrative as a way of marketing their food, albeit with a South Asian twist. This has proved highly successful, with multiple outlets in the city and a new ‘pop up’ retail unit in the University of Leicester’s student union, alongside corporate giants such as Starbucks.

This success story can be traced back to the continent of Africa. Following the expulsion of people of Asian descent from Uganda in 1972, Leicester has been home to large Ugandan Asian population. Idi Amin, as part of his Africanisation policies, declared that Asian migrants had 90 days to evacuate Uganda.\(^{33}\) The numbers of South Asian migrants arriving in Leicester from East Africa exceeded those arriving from India by the 1981 census, having been a close second since the 1960s.\(^{34}\) Indentured workers from the South Asian subcontinent migrated to East Africa en masse during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of them to work on the Ugandan–Kenyan railway, and often experiencing living conditions only slightly better than slavery. These undeniably dark chapters of colonial history are formative stages of the ‘convivial culture’ espoused by Gilroy.\(^{35}\) The Piri Piri chicken so proudly retailed by McIndians is at once ancient and modern. As experienced ‘twice migrants’, Asians who migrated to Leicester via Africa brought with them a great deal of social capital. They may have lost assets at the hands of Amin’s ruthless Africanisation policy, but they retained skills and business acumen which would inject new life into Leicester even if the administration and local residents could not see it in the early 1970s.\(^{36}\) It is estimated that Ugandan Asians

\(^{31}\) <www.mcindians.com> [Accessed 28 October 2014]
\(^{34}\) Virdee, p. 4
\(^{35}\) Gilroy, p. 75.
\(^{36}\) McLoughlin, p. 3.
generated some 30,000 new jobs in Leicester between 1972 and 2002, proving their contribution to the city to be economic as well as cultural.\(^{37}\)

At the administrative level, Leicester has not always been receptive to migration. A notice posted by Leicester City Council in the *Uganda Argus* in 1972 sent a clear message to expellees who might have heard the city was a welcome new home.\(^{38}\) This advertisement used stretched facilities as a veil for racial discrimination and City councillor Sundip Meghani recently called it ‘foolish and crude.’\(^{39}\) Ultimately, the advert had the opposite effect to that intended. It served only to plant the name Leicester — a place with large migrant communities to provide support networks — in the minds of the forced migrants. The colonial histories of Leicester help us to understand the sheer breadth and complexity of its diverse twenty-first century population. The geographical spread of multi-stage South Asian migration alone is evidence of the diverse cultural influences that ‘twice’ and ‘thrice’ migrants bring to a city such as Leicester. As Gilroy states, ‘racial and ethnic identities have been nowhere near as stable or fixed as their accompanying rhetoric would have us believe.’\(^{40}\) The McIndians example demonstrates this fluidity of cultural identity, particular when subjected to the destabilising forces of colonialism, yet it also deploys the kind of ‘fixed’ racial rhetoric which Gilroy critiques. The role-playing ‘cowboys and Indians’ game enacted by small children is here transposed into an adult business enterprise; it is the very slogan by which they successfully trade. How then can this be said to represent a ‘convivial’ cosmopolitan aesthetic?

The McIndians tongue-in-cheek approach to cosmopolitanism is an example of the ‘attractive vernacular style’, which Gilroy identifies in contemporary Britain.\(^{41}\) But

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38 See appendix figure 1.
40 Gilroy, p. 31.
41 Ibid., p. 75.
what makes it attractive? In this instance the appropriation of racial rhetoric by migrant communities removes some of its power to shock. By evoking the cowboys and Indians game, McIndians suggest racial rhetoric to be ridiculous. Seemingly everyday, ‘vulgar’ manifestations of colonial histories expose the fundamental ignorance of the Imperial project. Through close reading of Leeming’s ‘Valley Dreamers’ I now intend to demonstrate how this ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ breathes life into contemporary literary representations of the city.

Valley Dreamers

Leeming is a Leicester-born poet and playwright of African and Caribbean heritage. She has a successful career in writing for performance and radio and in 2012 two of her poems were included in Bloodaxe’s Out of Bounds anthology. From a Midlands perspective, the publication was ground breaking. Poetry from this overlooked region was published alongside established writers from the North and South of England, as well as Wales, Ireland and Scotland. As Leeming states, ‘one of the great things about Out of Bounds — it put us on the map!’ The anthologised poem ‘Valley Dreamers’ provides a key access point to the demotic cosmopolitanism of Leicester literature and is conspicuously centred on the aforementioned major thoroughfare of London Road. ‘Valley Dreamers’ is therefore a modern example of what Barry calls ‘loco specific’ poetry. The mode is not a new poetic phenomenon — the Romantic poets for instance revelled in naming their geographical muses — but it is being deployed to entirely different ends in twenty-first century Midlands poetry. Before close reading ‘Valley Dreamers’, Wordsworth’s ‘Upon minster Bridge’ is a useful frame of reference for ‘loco-specific’ poetry set in London. Wordsworth’s poem opens with the kind of hyperbole the capital city so frequently inspires; ‘Earth has not anything to show more fair’ and the

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42 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
43 Barry, p. 3.
44 Ibid.
subsequent description of his vista follows suit. In parallel with the practicalities of literary production and dissemination outside of London, representations of the Midlands in the region’s literature are characteristically understated. Leeming’s focus on Leicester’s ‘dreamers’ who are ‘sunk deep’ reveals a quotidian mode more fascinated with the everyday interactions of ordinary people than grand exclamations of civic pride.

Prosopopoeia provides Wordsworth with a means to convey London’s elegance and supposedly effortless affinity with nature, ‘This City now doth, like a garment, wear/The beauty of the morning’. For Leeming, this rhetorical device communicates a completely different set of characteristics: ‘below, a city/ glowers on with neon/ prickly pollen beams/ awhirl.’ The gulf of two centuries between the two depictions is inescapable, yet there is something timeless about the enduring ‘personalities’ of the two conurbations. London’s port location facilitates a sense of transnational possibility, from the merchant ships which inspired Wordsworth, to the capital’s status as the contemporary home of the modern postcolonial British novel. It is my intention in this chapter to demonstrate that Leicester’s own contribution to contemporary British fiction and poetry is equally significant and worthy of sustained critical and commercial attention. The region’s literature ties into the same national and global concerns as anything coming out of London — postcolonialism, multiculturalism, nationhood — and were it not for the commercial limitations of provincial publishing houses, would receive the same treatment.

Landlocked Leicester may not be able to compete with the ‘Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples’ of Wordsworth’s London but it has more than its fair share of

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48 Carol Leeming, ‘Valley Dreamers’.
cultural amenities and an abundance of temples serving numerous faiths. Leicester author Amy Bell takes inspiration from the mundane aspects of her city: ‘the situations are not fantastical, the settings not exotic. Once you delve deeper, however, their uniqueness becomes apparent. I like to bring out the extraordinary in the everyday.’

Perhaps Bell’s emphasis on exploration and persistence is the key to understanding Leicester’s literary output and could serve as a guiding principle for examining all regional writing outside London. Bell suggests a process of literary alchemy: forging imaginative gold from the base metals of the Midlands’ reputation. Despite Leicester authors being outnumbered by London-based writers on the lists of major publishers, the city has an incredibly prolific and diverse output. It is also no stranger to commercial literary success, as Townsend’s much-loved Adrian Mole novels have shown. As Bell states: ‘if you care to ask it, Leicester has many great tales to tell.’

Both as a component of the city’s grand narratives of harmonious multiculturalism and as a mirror of local attitudes and aesthetics, Leicester’s literary output champions the ‘demotic’, ‘vernacular’ forms of cosmopolitanism that are manifest every day in the city.

Returning to ‘Valley Dreamers’ reveals that one way to bring out ‘the extraordinary in the everyday’ is to look at it in a different way. The poem places the reader up high, ‘fly eyed’, to take in the sights below:

On London Road
fly eyed to view
Old John’s ruins
distant in braggy peak
below, a city
glowers on with neon
prickly pollen beams
awhirl [...]

The choice of insectoid viewpoint lends the poem a unique sense of perspective: the fly is elevated physically despite traditionally being considered a low-status creature. There is consequently a feeling of detachment from social belonging perhaps unattainable via

50 Ibid.
51 Amy Bell, ‘Reflection’.
the use of a more recognisably human persona. Furthermore, the compound eyes of a fly do not generate an image in the manner of the lens of a mammalian eye, but rather a ‘neural picture’ is amalgamated from the numerous inputs.\textsuperscript{52} This optic is redolent of the multiplicity of the poem and indeed the city, where a ‘vibrant mix of cultures’ constitute a shifting composite image of modern Leicester.\textsuperscript{53} Scientific lexis lends ‘Valley Dreamers’ the feel of a technological dystopia, ‘gasps of traffic’ suggesting malaise. These technological tropes jostle alongside vernacular evocations of historic Leicester with the reference to ‘braggy peak’. This is explicitly ‘loco-specific’ poetry which the reader can enact and experience, further enhancing their interaction with the poem.\textsuperscript{54} If one walks or drives down London Road, there is a natural high point near Victoria Park, where the University of Leicester is situated. Looking down London Road in the direction of the city centre, one can actually see the hills of Bradgate Park in the distance. From this standpoint, the different parts of Leicester and its different kinds of landscape — both urban and rural — form a visible juxtaposition. In Leeming’s poem, this is not necessarily framed as a harmonious relationship but is rather suggested to be antagonistic. This antagonism is complicated by the controlling spatial metaphor: Leicester is sunk in the valley bowl with ‘neon/ prickly pollen beams/ awhirl’. This compound vision of the built environment reveals the organic elements that constitute even the rush hour traffic. The alliterative ‘prickly pollen’ is — in the natural world — barbed for effective reproduction yet also irritates modern city dwellers for whom pollen is a common allergen.\textsuperscript{55} There is a sense of malaise as the technological ‘whirl’ of the city advances but Leeming is also commenting on the metanarratives of the city. Progress evidently comes at a social cost as economic advancement moves quickly but unevenly over Leicester.


\textsuperscript{53} Amy Bell, ‘Reflection’.

\textsuperscript{54} Barry, p. 3.

Corporeal lexis is deployed to anthropomorphise the built environment with as much life as the ancient oaks in Charnwood forest. In place of the calm temperament of the trees, however, is the distinctly ‘peaky’ body of the city; one which ‘glowers’ and ‘gasps’ but cannot ‘swallow.’ Bradgate Park counterpoints the high tech imagery of city traffic in the valley of Leeming’s controlling spatial metaphor. With the elevation and historical context afforded by ‘braggy peak’ — the colloquial Leicester name for the 850 acres of parkland to the north of the city — the hollow bowl of the valley appears claustrophobic and even dystopian by contrast. 56

The poet’s decision to use the vernacular term ‘braggy peak’ demonstrates both her sense of belonging and desire to propagate the region’s idiosyncrasies: ‘I champion Leicester dialect.’ 57 Much in the way that regional cuisine evokes strong feelings of identity, demotic language carries the same weight of implication. Used freely in a poem elsewhere deploying terms such as ‘glossolalia’ and ‘gesticulations’, the flattened vowel sounds of the ‘Lestar’ dialect allow Leeming to express herself in terms shared between many Leicester residents of diverse heritage. The vernacular mode allows access to ideas of multicultural citizenship without tacit recourse to racial categorisation. 58 As Leeming states: ‘I know I belong here. I know how I like my tea. I know what football I like.’ 59 Demotic expressions of culture such as these carry their own inherent sets of problems but do provide a platform for intercultural exchange, as opposed to the pluralism suggested by multiculturalism. Exchange is a key component of Leicester’s literary cultures. Within both the working practices and the literary output of these creative communities can be observed the actualisation of Brah’s ‘diaspora space’ concept. 60 Leicester’s literary landscape is profoundly shaped by cultural exchange which influences writers descended from migrants and their white British peers alike.

56 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
57 Ibid.
58 Modood, p. 5.
59 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
60 Brah, p. 181.
The ‘rising glossolalia’ of the city evokes a multitude of tongues competing for dominance. Herein lie Leeming’s reservations about the way in which multicultural Leicester has been ‘written’ by local government agencies. Certainly many voices can be heard in the city but do they complement each other or drown one another out? As a member of Leicester’s African Caribbean community, Leeming questions the credibility of her own community’s voices amongst a ‘rising’ chorus of others:

The ‘rising glossolalia’ is that we are the United Nations here, but actually we are funnelled in. There’s a dominant narrative about the city and a particular mindset about which minorities are represented. It tends to be the Asians because they are the majority. Because the African and Caribbean communities (and all the other BME communities) are smaller, we are quite muted and not part of the bigger story that’s always rolled out.  

This perceived competition for representation is suggestive of postcolonial ‘melancholia’ rather than the ‘convivial culture’ portrayed in official accounts of the city. This invariably has a trickle-down effect to the level of literary cultures. Opportunities for writers to develop and publish their work are severely limited by austerity measures. This appears to be the case especially for BME writers. Leeming acknowledges that the proliferation of diverse voices heard in Leicester is inevitable: “‘rising glossolalia’ just states that this is going to carry on and we’re just going to have to get over it.” Beyond this base level of acceptance, she identifies positive attributes to linguistic diversification which are more in line with the metanarrative of ‘the premier multicultural city in Europe’: ‘I also think it’s quite a beautiful thing; a loquaciousness of communication.’ ‘Valley Dreamers’ positions this virtue as part of the upward rise out of the valley, a powerful momentum which cannot be ‘swallowed’ by cynicism or separatism.

The ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ depicted in Leeming’s poem does not comply uncritically however with official discourses. Her representation of the city captures the

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61 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
62 Gilroy, p. 75.
63 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
65 Singh and Tatla, cited in McLoughlin, p. 3.
67 Gilroy, p. 75.
'ordinary virtues and ironies' of modern Leicester.\textsuperscript{68} She says of the ubiquitous metanarratives: 'we constantly hear that Leicester is this hunky dory, homogenous, happy clappy, multicultural city... right... that’s one story.'\textsuperscript{69} At this level of representation the quotidian interactions of ordinary Leicester people are obscured. This is a fairy tale narrative which cannot accommodate the tongue-in-cheek humour of the McIndians Restaurant or the overt drug references in the music of the British Asian band Cornershop.\textsuperscript{70} At the level of metanarrative, Leicester’s multiculturalism becomes detached from the demotic mode which gives it vitality and is reduced to the symbolism of ‘steelbands, saris and samosas’.\textsuperscript{71} So while Leeming paints a city of ‘loquacious’ cultural expression, she makes certain that this expression does not appear to exist in a vacuum: ‘the other story of Leicester that I’m trying to highlight in Valley Dreamers is that actually, the ethnic minority communities have prescribed expressions.’\textsuperscript{72} If cultures are being represented in this manner, can Leicester truly be a site of fluid, vernacular modes of cultural expression?

There appears to be a contradiction here. Whether ‘wild gesticulations’ or ‘rude music’, the creative expressions depicted in ‘Valley Dreamers’ appear spontaneous rather than ‘prescribed’. Indeed, if Leeming’s poem states that no one can ‘hamper’ or ‘temper’ these phenomena, surely they exist outside of the constraints of the grand narratives of ‘official’ multiculturalism? The terminology is perhaps part of the burden. As soon as a cultural product, whether it be bhangra dancing (‘wild gesticulations’), dhol drumming, ‘rude boy’ fashion, or Jamaican Ska (‘rude music’), is adopted by agencies wishing to propagate multiculturalism not for the benefit of the city’s population, but for commercial or touristic ends, it loses its demotic, organic qualities. It becomes less about everyday citizenship and more about the rhetoric of representation, removed from those it purports to represent.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69} Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
\textsuperscript{70} Cornershop’s When I was Born for the 7th Time features tracks such as ‘Coming Up’, ‘Good Shit’ and ‘It's Indian Tobacco My Friend’ (London: Wiiija Records, 1997).
\textsuperscript{71} Modood, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{72} Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
Demotic cosmopolitanism then, as opposed to multiculturalism, can be closely tied with the idea of citizenship and the rights and responsibilities that accompany it. The official line of multiculturalism has faced recent challenges, as Leeming observes: ‘There are different strands of multiculturalism, and that’s got worse with cuts and rising anxiety about new arrivals.’ Cosmopolitanism as a means of bridging, not reifying difference, could prove an effective antidote to the ‘silos’ which Leeming observes in her home city, weaving together the disparate strands of multiculturalism.\(^73\) The final lines of ‘Valley Dreamers’ position the discussions of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and citizenship within a broader Midlands context. The spatial metaphor opens up, the valley bowl becoming a launch pad of potential success for all its inhabitants: ‘a world’s there/ ready to launch/ its valley dreamers/ long sunk deep/ in a curve of earth/ unbound from “middle lands”’. In a poem elsewhere alive with the whirring mechanics of the modern city, this coda harks back to the ancient aesthetic evoked by ‘braggy peak’, with echoes of Tolkien — another Midlands writer — in the archaic ‘middle lands’. The wider positioning of the Midlands as a cultural void is challenged, with the region’s diversity — ‘a world’s there’ — framed as an engine of opportunity. The implied stagnation of ‘sunk deep’ is counterbalanced by this explosive energy, just waiting for the right combination of factors to set it off. Leeming suggests the climate in which this might occur: ‘for me the key word going into the twenty-first century is ‘intercultural’ working. Britain shouldn’t just be about multiculturalism, that pluralism thing, it should be about inter and intra working.’\(^74\) A great deal of empathy and patience may well be required to ease into a process as seemingly challenging as the one outlined by Leeming. The real transformative power lies in the everyday exchanges of ordinary Leicester people. The seemingly throwaway example of the Piri Piri chicken vendors is redolent here. A sense of pride and knowledge of one’s postcolonial heritage is handled with a light touch to invite others to share in the ordinary encounters which constitute demotic, devolved cosmopolitanism in Leicester today.

\(^{73}\) Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
\(^{74}\) Ibid.
Chapter Five

#WeNeedDiverseBooks: Diversity in Leicester’s Young Adult Fiction

This chapter reads Young Adult fiction (hereon referred to as YA) in light of critical theories of diversity.\(^{75}\) I examine texts from Leicester authors marketed at teenagers and set in a city hailed for its diversity, to consider how these narratives fit into global concerns about representation in YA. Developing my central theme of multicultural Leicester from the beginning of this chapter, I place particular emphasis on Rai; perhaps the best known and most widely read YA author from Leicester. The analysis will extend past the concerns of multiculturalism to consider the diversity of YA written in, and written about, Leicester. I argue that Leicester YA offers a literary expression of what Brah calls ‘diaspora space.’\(^{76}\) Spaces in which migrant communities settle create unique processes of interaction which may affect so-called ‘native’ or white British citizens as profoundly as the migrants. For this reason, Leicester is a fertile region for YA which does not always conform to national and international literary trends.

The demand for diverse books does not simply mean a demand for more characters and authors of colour; it is a much broader call for children’s and YA stories to actually represent the world as experienced by their readers. In this analysis, literary representations of class; of heteronormativity; of gender roles; and differing levels of physical and mental ability, will all be held up to scrutiny. In order to interrogate the popular representation of Leicester as the ‘premier multicultural city’, this section looks at a range of YA titles through the lens of critical approaches to diversity, multiculturalism, race and gender.\(^{77}\)

Some historical foregrounding of the YA genre is essential before considering its diversity in contemporary Leicester. My aim is not to offer a comprehensive chronology

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\(^{75}\) There are no strict criteria for inclusion in this genre, which is increasingly read by adults as well as the traditional teenage market. In my study, I use YA to reference material with teenagers and young adults as its central concern. As Rai states, “I just write about teenagers, I don’t write for them.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUjOMGu1mko> [accessed 10 June 2015]

\(^{76}\) Brah, p. 181.

\(^{77}\) Singh and Tatla, p. 143.
of YA but rather to foreground my study of diversity in the genre. Although a relatively recent category, YA’s origins lie in an era when popular culture in the UK and USA was arguably much less diverse than today:

When the term first found common usage in the late 1960s, it referred to realistic fiction that was set in the real (as opposed to imagined), contemporary world and addressed problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to young readers aged approximately 12–18.\(^{78}\)

YALSA is the Young Adult Library Services Association, and their assignment of an age range is at once helpful and restrictive to our understanding of YA. Certainly there is a sizeable adult market for YA. One only has to think of the re-packaged ‘grown up’ editions of JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series to realise the commercial potential. Equally, there are children’s books — for the purposes of this study I use this term to denote books aimed primarily at under 12s — which appeal to teens and adults as well. To proceed into this analysis with clear parameters however, it is necessary to understand YA, and Rai’s fiction especially, in terms of a core readership aged 12–18. This demographic forms Rai’s largest market. While touring the secondary schools of the UK and internationally Rai talks about diversity to young people of similar age to his fictional characters.

YALSA identify the late 1960s as the period when the term YA entered into common usage. The genre has its roots in fiction which may originally have been received as adults’, or even children’s literature. JRR Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937), for example, was initially branded as ‘juvenile fiction’, with Tolkien awarded the Carnegie Medal of that denomination.\(^{79}\) More realist texts such as JD Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and SE Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967) are now all considered seminal YA texts but were understood as adult fiction at the time of their release, despite their ‘coming of age’ narratives. These texts predated ‘the golden age’ of YA in the 1970s, when authors began to write with that 12–18


demographic in mind and a global industry began to grow. This growth continued into the 1990s, when critics state that the genre became tired and formulaic, ‘consisting of little more than problem novels and romances.’ A second ‘golden age’ came just before the turn of the millennium, which Cart defines in terms of ‘artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking.’ The global success of JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997) launched one of the world’s largest literary franchises, with Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005) and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008) achieving similar acclaim. Meanwhile in Leicester, Rai’s fiction came to public attention in 2001 with the publication of *Unarranged Marriage*. Unlike the YA titles listed above, Rai favoured a social realist style from the outset of his literary career and uses his fiction to discuss issues relating to diversity in the UK. He connects with his audience first hand and while many of the trademark features of YA are present — problems, the coming of age trope and romance — he tackles these issues with a gritty realism that portrays multicultural England with accuracy and sensitivity.

Due to the affinity many young readers have with digital texts and media, my analysis of contemporary YA literature necessitates looking beyond the printed word. Much in the way that the digital #rebelnotts campaign provided a useful signpost to understand Nottingham’s published output, I draw on the online activism galvanised by the hash tag #WeNeedDiverseBooks which has transcended its American origins to become a worldwide movement. In the words of the campaign organisers, ‘We Need Diverse Books is a grassroots organisation created to address the lack of diverse, non-majority narratives in children’s literature. Our mission is to promote or amplify diversification efforts and increase visibility for diverse books and authors with a goal of empowering a wide range of readers in the process.’ My own goal here is to examine

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81 Ibid.
82 Miranda Paul, #WeNeedDiverseBooks Slideshow <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8-X66KcwTY> [Accessed 8 August 2015]
how literature from a multicultural Midlands city conveys multiple and divergent forms of identity in selected YA texts, and in turn to reflect on how these represent Leicester.

The age-old wisdom on judging a book by its cover is perhaps even more problematic in YA than in adult fiction. As the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign highlights, ‘kids might not judge a book by its cover, but they will judge themselves by a book’s cover’. An abundance of white, heteronormative images greet the prospective reader from the shelves of book shops or the best seller lists of online retailers. By stark contrast, Rai’s The Whisper features a hooded, shadowed figure of indeterminate race, stalking a graffiti-covered alleyway at night. The subtitle declares the novel ‘as tough and uncompromising as the city streets it depicts’ but Rai achieves this aim with a sense of duty and respect for his subject matter. As he states in interview, ‘I wanted to represent those inner-city kids that I grew up with — the ones that are negatively stereotyped and ignored by the media until they do something illegal.’

Rai’s characters are sensitive and intelligent, often forming meaningful friendships across lines of race and gender. The Whisper is set in Highfields and North Evington, two inner-city regions of Leicester with multicultural populations and relatively low socio-economic positioning. Protagonist Billy offers an insight into Leicester’s social geography which also speaks to global debates about diversity in YA:

The library was being refurbished, and was due to re-open in a year — not that many of the youths in the area ever used it for anything other than stealing the CDs. For some reason I had a flashback to when I was eight, holding Nanny’s hand as he led me into the children’s book section and sat with me as I read from the pages of books that always seemed to be about the same things.

The area’s young population is not cast in a positive light here, but the effect is to demonstrate by contrast the protagonist’s early passion for reading and the support of

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83 Miranda Paul, #WeNeedDiverseBooks Slideshow
84 The notion of racial ambiguity is prevalent throughout the novel, suggesting the irrelevance of racial categories in the diverse inner-city environment. One particular exchange between two youths highlights this: “‘You see whether dem Asian or black or what?’ I tried to picture them. I could see the caps on their heads and the sportswear but I couldn’t really make out the faces.’ Bali Rai, The Whisper (London: Random House Children’s Books, 2005), p. 37.
85 Bali Rai interviewed by Tom Kew, 11 March 2015.
his stepfather, Nanny. In this regard, they are cast as a minority of library users, with the wider ‘youths in the area’ presented as ‘reluctant readers’.\(^87\) This terminology is often used to describe teenage boys, but more specifically it has been used to indicate a lack of interest in reading amongst young BME males.\(^88\) The #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign both recognises and challenges this disparity, featuring in its campaign materials a group portrait of black students holding up a banner which states, ‘We are NOT reluctant readers!’\(^89\) Alongside frequent allusions to socially-conscious, Garveyite reggae music, Rai adorns his novels with references to cultural products and practices which challenge negative stereotypes about inner-city residents.

With the example of the local library, the importance of strong parenting becomes foregrounded in the novel’s discussion of young adult literacy. Nanny is Billy’s stepfather, a devout Rastafarian and pillar of the local community; ‘He’s like the ghetto professor and everyone knows him. Sometimes me and the rest of the Crew listen to him for hours.’\(^90\) When describing his stepfather’s way of life, Billy is careful to position him as a ‘true Rasta’: ‘[n]ot like the ones that you see stereotyped in Hollywood films, all high on crack and shooting people and shit.’\(^91\) Instead, Nanny is portrayed as a supportive parental figure, not just to the crew, but to ‘the youths in the area’ as well; ‘…one time he took about sixteen young lads up to Victoria park with a football and got them to settle their differences over an eight-a-side game.’\(^92\) With the encouragement of Nanny, Billy develops a life-long passion for reading which influences the way he perceives his lived experience and the vocabulary with which he describes it. Rai has created a protagonist who subverts the ‘reluctant reader’ stereotype, and through which he can critique the lack of diversity in children’s and YA fiction. In his childhood flashback, Billy recalls the barriers he experienced when engaging with the books in the local library:

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\(^87\) Miranda Paul, #WeNeedDiverseBooks Slideshow <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8-X66KCwTY> [Accessed 8 August 2015]
\(^88\) Ibid.
\(^89\) Ibid.
\(^90\) Ibid., p. 19.
\(^91\) Ibid., p. 19.
\(^92\) Ibid., p. 17.
The kids in them lived in country villages or visited family in big old houses and there was never anything in their lives that they had to worry about. They got into scrapes with smugglers and villains but things were always fine by the end.  

Antero Garcia is an educator who has written extensively on YA from a variety of critical perspectives. He highlights a problem with YA that speaks directly to Billy’s concerns above: ‘I suspect that the resistance many of my students initially met reading in my classroom with was a response to the ways they were required to read about someone else’s culture in the young adult books they were offered.’ Billy cannot relate to the idyllic settings he finds in the library books. The mono-cultural tales of pirates and country houses seem to deny his own experience as a young boy of mixed Asian and African Caribbean heritage living in inner-city Leicester. It is a problem of unequal representation that is not detrimental solely to BME readers. As Bishop states, 'children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others.' The success of Rai’s fiction is an indicator of small, incremental steps towards progress.

Rai’s title Rani and Sukh is featured on GCSE syllabi and he speaks at schools and events all over Europe. He is unafraid of exposing racism in his fiction and, in person, he is an outspoken critic of intolerance. Scholars of children’s literature such as Bishop are wary of diversity for its own sake, but for Rai representing the ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ of multiracial Leicester is about communicating truth. As Rai states, ‘any story set in Highfields would have to deal with the reality of life for the local people, otherwise it would be dishonest.’ So there is a dual functionality to Rai’s fiction when

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96 Rai states on his website, ‘In 2010 Rani & Sukh became a set-text for GCSE, something that I never thought would happen. My aim has always been to write the sort of books me and my mates (many of whom didn’t read) would have loved at school’ <http://www.balirai.co.uk/page3.htm> [Accessed 1 September 2015]
97 Gilroy, p. 75.
98 Bali Rai interviewed by Tom Kew, 11 March 2015.
aligned with the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign. His YA books serve to demonstrate to readers from other areas and cultural backgrounds what inner-city life entails — an optic which Bishop terms a ‘window’ to those outside that culture — and also to provide inner-city readers with a ‘mirror’ to reflect their own lives.\(^9\) Rai personally feels that the situation developing for a younger audience was one from which he was excluded as a young reader. His own views on this echo those of Billy in *The Whisper*:

> As a teen, there was so little fiction that dealt with the lives of ordinary, everyday people, that I got frustrated searching for it. Nearly every character was middle class and white, and my city was the complete opposite. So when I started to write, it was always going to be based in the city, and about the people that I saw around me. I wanted to represent real multiculturalism as opposed to the media version.\(^{10}\)

In all of his novels, Asian and black British characters feature heavily, nearly always in leading roles. However, the ‘real’ multiculturalism depicted in Rai’s fiction contradicts official narratives of a harmonious Leicester. There are often tensions depicted between various faiths and ethnic groups but there are also frequent instances of friendship and loyalty across these lines. The YA fiction of Rai complicates the diversity debate in that it depicts the lived, everyday experiences of teenagers in a modern, multicultural city. In this way, Rai’s fiction can be said to fulfil a demand for social realist writing amongst young adults; as his profile in the Grassroutes Writer’s Gallery states, ‘Bali hopes his novels capture Britain’s unique multi-racial mix in a range of provincial settings.’\(^{11}\) Rai’s fiction is born out of a need, a personal desire, to fill a gap in the market for young readers. The difference between diversity in Rai’s writing and diversity for its own sake, is that Rai’s representations of race are incidental; the characters just happen to be ethnically diverse, they are not engineered that way for tokenistic or narratological purposes. This unobtrusive narrative approach to race makes an important statement

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\(^{10}\) Bali Rai interviewed by Tom Kew, 11th March 2015.

\(^{11}\) Bali Rai Profile, Grassroutes Writer’s Gallery [http://www.transculturalwriting.com/Grassroutes/content/Bali_Rai.htm] [Accessed 8 September 2015]
about the ‘diaspora space’ of Highfields, Leicester. The diversity of the region has shaped all kinds of communities, with influences spreading out across complex networks.

Rai writes challenging novels which prompt young people to think hard about their own views and behaviours and those of their peers. *The Last Taboo* is set in modern day Leicester. It is the story of a British Asian schoolgirl who falls in love with a black boy. Deep-rooted prejudice is exposed as the wrath of the Asian family unfolds, leading to shame, exclusion and extreme violence against the young lovers. This is problematic ‘multiculturalism’ as Gilroy understands it, far removed from the ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’, which he espouses as a workable alternative. The streets of Leicester are represented as a contradictory space where Gilroy’s ‘convivial’ culture sits alongside ‘melancholia’ as ethnic groups fail to co-operate.102 The following example from *The Last Taboo* demonstrates how racial and linguistic categories become blurred in a heated exchange between liberal and conservative British Asian cousins:

‘He [a black boy]’s my best mate from when we was yout’s — you unnerstan’?’
‘The bwoi even chats like him black,’ shouted Inderjit from behind me.
‘An what accent was that you were putting on, you knob?’ I said, turning to glare at him.103

Here, racial identity is hotly contested and desperately clung to in an inner-city environment which facilitates cultural hybridity. From Caribbean renderings of English words ‘bwoi’ and ‘youts’ to syntax borrowed from Jamaican patois (‘chats like him black’), Inderjit demonstrates hypocrisy, or perhaps unselfconscious approaches to racial identity. After the exchange of stylised speech designed to intimidate and provoke, there is a note of bathos in the italicised, distinctly British colloquialism, ‘knob’. As crude as it may at times be, English is the primary shared language here and it reduces the discussion to the lo common denominator.

The lead female protagonist Simran says of Inderjit and his friends, ‘They’re what I call ”typical bhangra-muffins” — all macho, and thick with it and, to be honest, I don’t really speak to them if I can help it.’104 The portmanteau ‘bhangra-muffins’ references...

102 Gilroy, p. 75.
104 Ibid., p. 13.
the hybrid identity where Asian Bhangra culture meets Jamaican ‘raggamuffin’; the stereotyped bad boys of the X-rated dancehall music scene. So while aesthetic and linguistic styles are borrowed from Jamaican culture, the separatist Asian youths in Rai’s fiction deny a hybrid identity, defining themselves as ‘Indian’ rather than ‘British Asian’. This in effect denies their birthplace in favour of ancestral identity. Simran and her brother David — note his distinctly English name — are born of liberal Punjabi parents, who are themselves shunned within their community for their ‘love marriage’, a union which they chose over arranged marriages to the dismay of their families. For the more conservative, ‘Indian’ family members, the bonds of blood are considered sacred. This is a point of difference which leads to conflict:

I laughed. ‘His father’s sister… how many times removed is that?’ I asked. ‘That’s some white boy shit you’re chattin’, he told me. ‘Indian man don’t see it that way.’ ‘Good job I’m English then,’ I replied, knowing that it would wind him up.\textsuperscript{105}

While the racism is here directed at white people, there is still the inflection of Jamaican syntax, ‘you’re chattin.’ The concept of family bonds being ‘twice removed’ is deemed a Caucasian concept, alien to the automatic loyalty which a blood bond inspires in the ‘Indian man’. As explored in The Whisper, there is no Punjabi word for ‘cousin’, only ‘brother’, a linguistic fact which is used to emphasise the loyalty between family members.\textsuperscript{106} David’s identification as English does ‘wind his cousin up’, out of a dual sense of perceived disloyalty to the ancestral homeland of India but also the polluting or corrupting influence of ern/English morality. David here declares himself to be English in order to agitate his cousin’s sense of Indian nationalism. In making this claim to Englishness, David threatens his cousin’s claim to an Indian identity, reminding him that they were both born and raised in the East Midlands.

As the above example suggests, diversity in Rai’s YA is never a two-dimensional component of the narrative. Rai reveals the full complexity of interactions between different racial groups and also the divides that can occur within them. His protagonists

\textsuperscript{105} Bali Rai, The Last Taboo, p. 132

are always progressive, while conservative, traditional characters and ideologies provide the obstacles which the lead characters must overcome. If there is one connecting thread in Rai’s YA novels, it is that of a motivated, conscientious central protagonist fighting for what they believe to be morally right, against a backdrop of conservative opposition. As with a great deal of YA, love interests are also central to narrative development, the twist in Rai’s fiction being the complicating factor of inter-racial and inter-faith partnerships. ‘Tradition’ is often used to excuse or mask racism in such situations. Racist characters refer to the values inherited from parents and grandparents, using the longevity of their views as a form of validation.

I turn now to *Killing Honour* (2011) to consider briefly how Rai addresses issues of inter-faith prejudice, before moving on to a gendered reading of the novel and other works by Rai.\(^{107}\) *Killing Honour* revolves around the murder of a young British Asian bride who is unhappily and forcedly married to an abusive, criminal husband. The novel concerns *izzat* (honour, dignity or prestige) and its role in the acceptance of a feigned disappearance. The abusive husband and his conniving brother produce fake correspondence to suggest that the Sikh bride had run away with a Muslim lover. She had in fact been murdered by her husband but the cover story stirs the emotions of family and community in such a way as to stifle discussion or investigation of the real crime. The liberal protagonist seeks to rescue his sister but finds he has to justify the beliefs of his family to white British outsiders:

> ‘It’s not racist or anything,’ I said quickly. ‘It’s just that Sikhs don’t go out with Muslims and vice versa — not in my family, anyway. There’s this stupid prejudice between the two communities ‘cos of India and Pakistan and all that stuff.’ \(^{108}\)

The harmonious discourses of official multiculturalism are distant ideals in the face of this enduring historical antagonism. Internecine conflict enforces what Leeming calls the ‘silos’ of contemporary Leicester, and is therefore a primary target for Rai’s critical pen.\(^{109}\) Fellow YA author James Dawson has said of children’s and YA fiction: ‘not only do

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\(^{108}\) Ibid., p. 110.  
\(^{109}\) Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
all young readers deserve to see themselves in stories but we also have to remind small-minded people that this planet we share is a diverse one.'\(^{110}\) Rai’s take on this worthwhile aim goes one step further and exposes that even within ‘diverse’ fiction there is a responsibility to represent multiculturalism as the complex entity that it is. There is no space in his work for the ‘happy clappy’ brand of PR-friendly diversity.\(^{111}\)

Gender is the next critical angle from which I approach Rai’s work. Using textual examples from \textit{Killing Honour}, I will first of all examine the gender politics at play in the fictional Sikh communities of Leicester with regards to expectations of female behaviour and honour-based violence against them. \textit{The Crew} and its sequel \textit{The Whisper} will be read through the lens of what Judith Halberstam calls ‘female masculinity: masculinity without men.’\(^{112}\) In examining two divergent aspects of gender representation, I demonstrate Rai’s commitment to diversity in YA, even when it is complex and problematic. My central assertion is that diversity in these examples of YA is never diversity for its own sake, rather an exploration of often contradictory and even disturbing aspects of multicultural Leicester.

In the novel \textit{Killing Honour}, female characters are denied their most basic human rights. This piece of fiction is informed by honour-based violence and the author includes an interview at the end of the novel to explain the concept: ‘I’ve always been shocked and amazed by the idea that family members can commit or collude in honour-based violence and, in many cases, remain quiet as it occurs. This was the angle I wanted to explore.’\(^{113}\) The author breaks the ‘great wall of silence’\(^{114}\) stifling discussion of violence against women in British Asian communities. In breaking this silence, Rai gives a voice to British Asian women which might not otherwise be heard by young readers in the UK.


\(^{111}\) Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.


The central trope of *izzat* in the novel functions to suppress the rights of the female victims, due in part to ideologies which have migrated with diasporic peoples from the Indian subcontinent. As Rai explains, ‘male domination is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and, by default, in parts of British Asian culture too. Husbands are regularly supported over wives, and the community as a whole just seems to accept that. It is something that angers me greatly.’ It is important to stress that this is one anecdotal account and is not intended to be representative of the wider British Asian experience. However, it is certainly an emotive issue and one with far-reaching impact.

In the case of Jas in *Killing Honour*, Jas’s only supposed ‘crime’ is to request a divorce from a husband who frequently beats and rapes her. When she disappears, her devoted brother causes immense controversy and risks his life to expose the truth about his sister, against the wishes of his family. Patriarchal society justifies the subordination of women by deference to tradition:

> Despite being born and raised in Leicester, Jas had to be an Indian girl. The British thing — going out, living with boyfriends, sex before marriage — went against my parents’ traditions. They would never have accepted it.

Rai’s characters are sometimes motivated by reductive, binary understandings of ‘gender essentialism’. By exposing the violent punishment which can occur as a response to perceived gender deviance, Rai explores intersections between overlapping issues of patriarchy, gender performativity and diaspora. In an interview, Rai explains how three female members of his family have faced honour-based violence and how the subsequent suicide of one forms part of a much wider problem of high suicide rates amongst British Asian women. Surveys estimate that British Asian women are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than the national averages for both men and women alike; this is significant considering suicide rates for men are generally much higher. The mistreatment of British Asian women at the hands of men is often cited as

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121 Ibid.
a contributing factor.\textsuperscript{123} Raising awareness of these issues amongst young readers from diverse backgrounds is a key mission of Rai’s fiction. It is important to stress that these problems affect all kinds of communities — honour-based violence is by no means an exclusively Asian problem — but Rai’s work bravely exposes one area of injustice which is particularly close to the heart of the author and many in Leicester’s British Asian population.\textsuperscript{124}

Having observed how Rai’s fiction explores the subordination of women, the focus of this gender analysis will now turn to female agency in Rai’s novel \textit{The Crew} and its sequel \textit{The Whisper}, two gritty teenage crime thrillers set in the inner-city regions of Highfields and North Evington. I examine these YA novels using Judith Halberstam’s notion of ‘female masculinity: masculinity without men’.\textsuperscript{125} Antero Garcia states that ‘Female identity in YA texts can be constructed subtly or overtly. Notions of beauty, attraction, and expected behaviour of girls in books define for readers what is considered normal.’\textsuperscript{126} The success of the \textit{Sweet Valley High} series in 1980s America is a prime example of this, as the microcosm of the high school social hierarchy is enacted on the page. YA literature has, in the past, been a repository for ‘gender essentialism’.\textsuperscript{127} YA can be said to respond to the same commercial pressures as advertisements and magazines and has therefore not always been the vehicle for positive social change which it wields the potential to be. This position provides a starting point from which Rai’s novels make radical departures. Leicester’s inner-city streets are depicted as hostile environments in which females need to be as streetwise, imposing and often aggressive as their male counterparts in order to survive. It is significant to note that the inner-city ‘ghetto’ is not gendered as a male space in Rai’s fiction. From the ever-present prostitutes, through to the strong mother figures and outgoing young women, the female presence in the neighbourhood is strong. The ubiquitous gangs do not express

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} Bali Rai, interview in \textit{Killing Honour}, p. 318.
\textsuperscript{126} Garcia, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{127} Judith Butler, p. 528.
the social dominance of any perceivable social group over another. Instead, Rai presents a world of ‘Young crews, old crews. Male gangs, female gangs.’ The eponymous ‘crew’ are self-proclaimed anti-racists and practise gender equality in a way which many larger and more structured organisations should envy.

This analysis necessarily intersects a gender reading with concerns of race. It is impossible to completely separate these categories when reading fiction that is so self-consciously concerned with both. The reader is never left in any doubt as to the ethnicity of a given character. When the strong female character Della is introduced, we are told that ‘her hair was braided and her legs were a polished caramel colour.’ Della has many traditionally feminine characteristics, but I argue that she represents ‘female masculinity’ as a self-defence mechanism in her urban environment. Halbersam’s concept of female masculinity works on the premise that as a society, we often think of masculinity as inexorably linked to the male body. However, Halberstam argues that masculinity can exist without being tethered to the male, or even lesbian physical form, and that understanding the trait in these terms is essential in order to avoid prescriptive binary models of gender identity. In Rai’s fiction, Della provides an excellent study for these character traits. The reader’s first impression of Della is a childhood memory recalled by the narrator:

Della is fifteen — sixteen next month — and she’s wild. I met her years back when she was only nine, taxing some boys down the end of my street. One of her victims knew her and made a comment about her dad. He paid for it. Trainers, gold chain and two loose front teeth.

Della’s dominance over men is immediate and frightening. A pre-pubescent girl capable of mugging and injuring multiple males is a serious threat to patriarchal behaviour norms. There is something particularly emasculating, and perhaps humorous, about Della removing her victim’s footwear, leaving him barefoot in the street. Della’s gender deviance earns her respect amongst her peers and her character may also be highly desirable to young readers, both male and female, whose consumption of YA has helped

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129 Ibid., p. 3.
them to conceptualise females as empowered individuals. This is an evolved position from the gossipy *Sweet Valley High* model outlined above. Using that 1980s teen series as a point of contrast to 2008’s *The Hunger Games*, enormous progress can be observed in terms of gender representation. Katniss Everdeen is the heroine of that novel and, in the crudest literal rendering of girl power, systematically kills her male opponents in a dystopian fight to the death. As Garcia states, ‘in YA texts, women are fighting, leading, and generally kicking a lot more ass than traditional readers might expect in today’s books.’

Encouragingly, this trend can be observed as clearly in the Leicester fiction of Rai as in the international best-sellers of the YA genre.

Ultimately, Rai’s ability to reach audiences with his diverse fiction is dependent upon a select number of industry gatekeepers. The diversity that characterises Rai’s fiction is not a defining characteristic of the publishers who disseminate it:

> The people who write, edit, publish, sell, loan, market, blog and review books come, predominantly, from the same social background. They have the same culture - a middle-class way of life that doesn't exist in the inner cities, or the poorer towns and suburbs. Thus, anything written by and/or about people who aren’t part of this culture is seen as niche or simply ignored. And even when it is published, like mine has been, it is because someone from the predominant cultural group has deigned that it is acceptable.

This is by no means to say that the publishers Rai works with are not doing an excellent job. They are actively championing his work and helping it to reach a wide audience. These middle-class professionals are no less qualified or equipped for the task because of their background but it is vital to challenge the power structure of an industry that has continued to produce predominantly white, middle-class oriented titles in the UK despite rapidly changing demographics. Rai’s black and Asian characters are by no means tokenistic, but there is a danger that the inclusion of BME writers on the lists of major publishers will remain so until the industry diversifies.

Hybridity of culture, the rise of ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ and broadening definitions of ‘Britishness’ all lead to the increasing relevance of BME narratives to the

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131 Garcia, p. 77.
132 Bali Rai in Interview with Tom Kew, 11 March 2015.
reading population at large.\textsuperscript{133} Literature which might once have been considered ‘niche’ is of increasingly global relevance but the rigid class structure of the publishing industry works to stifle diverse voices. In interview, Rai recounts an experience which speaks to the issues of social class, assumption and privilege:

I’ve been in the ludicrous position where I’ve had to defend my choice of inner-city idioms against a public-school educated, white, Surrey-based editor, who seemed to think her grasp of ‘street’ was more authentic than mine.\textsuperscript{134}

This is a clear example of what Gunning has flagged up as ‘the dangers of ethnic cultures becoming defined externally in the service of national improvement through cultural diversity.’\textsuperscript{135} The sense of entitlement felt by the editor seeks to over-ride the authentic lived experience of the author, which is itself a thorny issue, as being a professional author necessitates a degree of remove from the inner-city street culture. The patronising exchange above is about more than a clash of egos; it is a telling example of how far the publishing industry has to go before it reaches a state of equality. Even as someone who has grown up in Highfields and North Evington, Rai is assumed to have less grasp of his subject matter than a highly educated outsider. Gunning demonstrates that this is not an isolated incident. Meera Syal’s \textit{Life isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee} contains a similarly awkward scene:

she had sat tight-lipped and buttocks clenched as Rupert or Donald or Angus nibbled on ciabatta and explained to her what it meant to be Asian and British, at least for the purposes of television.\textsuperscript{136}

Here, the young British Asian protagonist Tania struggles to keep silent when faced with the entitlement and privilege she witnesses in a professional television environment. If editors and producers continue to be disproportionately pooled from white, middle-class communities it remains probable that published output will parallel this. This situation is not acceptable for the diverse readers across the UK who will continue to be denied self-validation and identity confirmation through their reading.

\textsuperscript{133} Gilroy, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{134} Bali Rai in Interview with Tom Kew, 11 March 2015.
\textsuperscript{135} Gunning, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{136} Meera Syal, \textit{Life isn’t all Ha Ha Hee Hee} (London: Black Swan, 2000), p. 63.
I have demonstrated the ways in which Rai champions diversity through his fiction, and in doing so have come to two major conclusions. Firstly, that as a product of multicultural Leicester, the content of Rai’s fiction goes against the national trend of homogeneity in YA which sparked the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign. His success as an author is an encouraging sign of the genre’s diversification, but publishers need to do more to redress the balance of representation for BME people.

Secondly, Rai depicts diversity as a problematic issue. As I have shown, inter and intra-ethnic tensions and violence are depicted in a refreshingly open and frank manner. Rai frequently breaks the ‘wall of silence’ which sometimes stifles discussions about issues of race, faith and gender in Leicester’s British Asian communities. \(^{137}\) Rai’s commitment to creating convincing diverse characters is perhaps one of the major driving forces behind his international success. His novels give readers around the world an insight into the lived experience of young people in Leicester which challenge official representations of a harmonious, multicultural city.

Chapter Six

‘Leicester Leicester/ Fester fester’: The Secret Diary of a Regional Writer

Adrian Mole is a Leicester lad. He’s just 13 and three quarters and though he has literary pretensions and spots, he’s going to be a big success.

This chapter concerns a best-selling author of the 1980s, Sue Townsend, her debut novel The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole aged 13 ¾ (1982) [hereafter TSDAM] and the ‘Leicester lad’ who became an enduring literary icon. In the above local newspaper quotation, the sense of regional pride is immediate. The affirmative, punchy opening line leaves the reader in no doubt as to Mole’s geographical allegiances. TSDAM is regionally distinctive, although reference to the Townsend archive at the University of Leicester’s Special Collections reveals a body of critical response to Townsend which overlooks the regional dimensions. The following chapter of my thesis interrogates Townsend’s representation of regional everyday life. Despite hints of geographical setting, Leicester is conspicuous in its absence from TSDAM and, when present, is constructed largely through negative representations of everyday life inexorably linked with the Midlands’ reputation as a mundane region that typifies suburban monotony.

Brah’s concept of ‘diaspora space’ is directly applicable to Townsend’s work and Leicester. It refers to space which is “‘inhabited” not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous’. This concept was first applied to regional fiction in Pearce, Fowler and Crawshaw’s Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora space and the devolution of literary culture (2013), a text to which I am deeply indebted for thus aligning these critical concepts and therefore facilitating my own reading of Midlands texts. 'Diaspora space’ is

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138 Early typescript material related to the Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾, ST/1/1/2, University of Leicester Special Collections.
139 ‘Adrian is Pure Delight’, The Leicester Mercury, 7 October 1982, The Leicester Mercury Archive, University of Leicester Special Collections.
140 ‘Adrian Mole is Tops for Author’, The Leicester Mercury, 10 July 1989, The Leicester Mercury Archive, University of Leicester Special Collections.
141 Various newspaper reviews, ST/25, University of Leicester Special Collections.
142 Brah, p. 181.
often the site of what James Procter has called the ‘postcolonial everyday’, a term he uses to describe a literary aesthetic which rejects the marketable ‘postcolonial exotic’ in favour of ‘the mundane, the clichéd, the everyday.’ 143 As a ‘diaspora space’ and increasingly prominent site of the ‘postcolonial everyday’, Leicester specifically, and the Midlands generally, were important cultural pre-conditions for the novel’s creation, as will be shown below. Ironically, however, the novel’s commercial appeal relied on Townsend retrospectively excising conspicuous regional markers from the novel to construct a ‘middling’ figure of the obscure, parochial everyday. This effacement of Leicester took place in the drafting process of Townsend’s debut novel, a decision evidenced in manuscripts held in Special Collections and Archives at the University of Leicester, as I will go on to demonstrate.144

What is the effect of this effacement? This chapter explores the connections between regionalism and the everyday, working on the hypothesis that although removing Leicester from TSDAM broadens its appeal to a national and global audience, the mundane everyday life which the novel depicts has a specific regional quality. Erasing local colour from her writing appears uncharacteristic from an author known in Leicester for her civic pride and extensive charity work, suggesting that Townsend’s relationship with the city in her fiction is a complex one.145 The vision of Leicester revealed in TSDAM must be understood in its 1980s context, prior to the commercial and cultural valorisation of Leicester as a hub of vibrant multiculturalism. In Townsend’s 1980s novels, Leicester is portrayed as a stagnant outlying region, detached from the nucleus of London. Perhaps the positive shift in Leicester’s image in the 1990s and beyond is the reason why Townsend sets her later novels outside of Leicester, with Ashby-de-la-Zouch appearing suitably parochial to a national readership who have come

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144 Holograph manuscript of ‘The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4’, ST/1/1/1, University of Leicester Special Collections.
145 Sue was committed to Leicester social causes throughout her life, redistributing some of her literary earnings into the local community via charitable organisations. For example, ‘Sue picks hospice as such a worthy cause’, The Leicester Mercury, 8 June 1987, The Leicester Mercury Archive, University of Leicester Special Collections.
to understand Leicester as a multicultural city, a representation aided by official marketing strategies. Through tying into the broader concerns of this thesis around the London-centric nature of British literary industries, I will show ways in which Townsend handles the Midlands’ reputation in both draft and published versions of *TSDAM*.

My analysis requires a holistic approach to the reading of Adrian Mole’s literary debut, moving beyond the text to the places and people who shaped its development. I am chiefly concerned with two parallel everyday lives in the city’s literary history: one actual and one fictional. Townsend’s story is initially one of poverty, followed by gradual alleviation and ultimately a commercially successful literary life. Adrian Mole is her fictional brainchild, the ‘everyman’ teenager whose neurotic introspections on adolescence in *TSDAM* captured the imaginations of a global readership. Rarely do author and character share such a close relationship as Townsend and Mole, with serialisations appearing in newspapers accredited as ‘Adrian Mole aka Sue Townsend’ and the author signing off letters as Sue Townsend aged xx and x/x in the style of her famous debut novel. In postcolonial literary studies, contemporary critics such as Sarah Brouillette and Claire Chambers are invoking the author in their readings of texts, reasserting the importance of the text’s origins. Concurrent with wider critical trends towards the accreditation of authorial intention and biography, I read the parallel stories of Mole and Townsend using theories of everyday life. These will be considered alongside archival evidence which reveals the textual traces, as artistic and commercial forces negotiate their way towards the published edition.

I demonstrate that the success of *TSDAM* was dependent upon two conflicting positions within the novel. Firstly, I suggest that the interchangeability of the novel’s setting appeals to a large London-based publishing house who take a risk on a relatively...
unknown Midlands writer yet are able to confidently market her debut novel to a broad public who, in turn, appreciate the relative geographical anonymity and substitute their own experiences for those of its eponymous diarist. Secondly, I argue that the Midlands, specifically Leicester, are imperative pre-conditions for *TSDAM*’s creation. The interplay between the specific and the generic for any commercially viable piece of fiction is a delicate balance and, while many of the finer details could place the novel in any regional suburb, Leicester is absolutely instrumental in the development and dissemination of *TSDAM*.

**The Regional Everyday**

In this section I will explore a fundamental characteristic of perceptions of Leicester and the Midlands more generally. It is seen by many to epitomise the humdrum, mundane aspects of British culture. There is an established tendency — almost an automatic reflex — to prematurely parochialise the Midlands. Geographically removed from coast and mountains, extreme in neither longitude not latitude, even the name of the Midlands tends to evoke an image of indeterminacy. There have been attempts to resist this, such as the naming of the Birmingham Heartlands Hospital, but as of yet such measures do not seem to have gained cultural traction. As a Midlands resident states of their regional identity in Robert Shore’s recent survey, ‘I suppose it means we’re neither one thing nor the other — not Northern, not Southern. We’re just a bit middling.’

I argue that this ‘middling’ identity has, in an ironic and apparently counter-intuitive way, achieved widespread commercial and literary appeal. With *TSDAM* achieving global sales figures in excess of 5 million, this appeal can be commercially evidenced.

The parochial nature of the novel’s setting is entwined with the circumstances of its creation. Despite her eventual (and reluctant) rise to celebrity status, Townsend’s own writing background and the genesis of *TSDAM* are deeply rooted in the mundane,

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149 Shore, p. 5.
everyday aspects of the Midlands and can be said to correlate with the trope of the rags to riches narrative. As the national press said, ‘it is the fable of a literary Cinderella who suddenly found herself at the ball.’

This success has often been framed against Townsend’s Midlands background, as if that very fact made her achievement remarkable. In an interview, one reviewer commented on Townsend’s ‘inner-city Midlands pessimism’, suggesting this character trait to be regionally unique and culturally established.

Pessimism aside, the novel’s development is rooted in Leicester’s inner-city district of Highfields, the neighbourhood which would later inspire Rai’s The Crew (2003) and The Whisper (2005). Highfields was also the home of the theorist Brah, whose notion of ‘diaspora space’ is inspired by the region. When Townsend began her writing career, the literary centre of London entered into a commercial correspondence with an unlikely literary figure on the geographical periphery. The author’s archive reveals her to cut a refreshingly ordinary figure in contrast with the archives of more canonical men and women of letters. Townsend wrote her shopping lists on the back of letters from her publisher Methuen. Misspelt items such as ‘toilet roles’ sit amongst the most mundane items of everyday domesticity. Here is a working-class Leicester woman just beginning to find her feet on a path which would lead to financial security and global literary acclaim. In her archive conversations with Methuen appear one sided. We only see the correspondence that Townsend received, but Geoffrey Strachan’s lively responses animate Townsend and give readers a feel for her style; direct, warm and personable. As the thread develops, we see the genesis of a multi-million selling novel. The name of the protagonist changes from Nigel, to Malcolm and finally Adrian Mole. There is a clear sense that despite these revisions, Townsend is writing with intensity and purpose. Within a few months the novel takes shape, each new section receiving praise from the London-based publishers. Townsend juggles her writing commitments with a play of

151 Sue Townsend Scrap Book 1, ST/25, Sue Townsend Archive, University of Leicester Special Collections.
Adrian Mole staged at the Royal Court Theatre, London, for which she insists on bringing a cast of Leicester actors with her. The machinations of PR and marketing kick in, the demand having been raised in advance by previous morning broadcasts as ‘Nigel Mole’ on Radio 4, and the national press offer significant cash advances for serialisation rights. Townsend’s train journeys to the capital become more frequent and are arranged at shorter notice. Within a space of months, Townsend is in high demand. She is asked to keep whole weeks of her diary clear for press interviews. In an intense 10 months between January and October 1982, Adrian Mole morphs from a series of radio plays and notes into a fully-fledged novel. In March 1983, only 5 months after the release of *TSDAM*, Townsend receives significant royalties from her literary agents. Her postal address is no longer in Highfields, but in the leafier suburb of Stoneygate with its ‘tree-lined streets of bulbous Victorian semis, corduroyed lecturers in cafés, dusty bookshops and curry houses.’

Whereas for many provincial writers, the first dividends of successful collaboration with the centre of the literary industry might inspire relocation to London, Townsend preferred to stay in Leicester where her money could go further and she could remain surrounded by her friends and family.

Although in later life Adrian will move to Ashby-de-la-Zouch, a small market town in north Leicestershire, he spends his formative years in suburban Leicester. For Townsend the setting is a natural extension of her Leicester identity, as a lifelong resident and as a youth worker prior to writing full time, taking inspiration for her characters from young people in the city. As Townsend’s archival correspondence reveals, she was inspired by studying her own everyday life in Leicester in the 1980s, ‘I wrote the book for myself, from my own observations of when I’ve worked in youth clubs and on adventure playgrounds.’ Perhaps part of the widespread appeal of *TSDAM* is the muted, partially-effaced nature of its geographical setting. Although Leicester is an

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154 ‘Adrian is Pure Delight’, *The Leicester Mercury*, 7 October 1982, The Leicester Mercury Archive, University of Leicester Special Collections.
essential and distinctive precondition for the novel, this is not made explicit. Instead the reader is presented with a generic vision of provincial life. While these are Leicester(shire) texts, the geographical detail never disrupts a non-regional understanding of their contexts. A recent newspaper article helps to put this into a national picture, 'life in suburban Leicester can safely be assumed to be like that in pretty much any British town - but Sue Townsend’s Adrian Mole summed it up the best. This notion of a ‘safe assumption’ is telling of a general lack of willingness to dig deeper into the nuances of the region. Contemporary reviewers resist reading TSDAM as a Leicester novel. Perhaps with an eye on marketability, Townsend plays into this geographical ignorance by pastiching her suburban setting, rather than making her novels an earnest expression of civic pride. In Townsend’s fiction, the suburbs are a place of naivety, as if sheltered from some of the realities of the ‘real world’ beyond. As Adrian states in The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole, ‘I have never seen a dead body or a female nipple. This is what comes from living in a cul de sac.’ In the context of Adrian’s inexperience, both of these sights are on a par, both dangerous and unknown, both alien to everyday life.

It could be argued that Townsend offers a negative portrayal of the region, but her lightness of touch and the humour of her prose mean that Leicester remains a neutral, and often absent, entity in the novels. This relative geographical anonymity serves not to ‘eradicate’ the Midlands from books intended from a global audience, but for Townsend this is a necessary marketing strategy to reach beyond the regional. As Rita Felski states in ‘The Invention of Everyday Life’:

> While everyday life expresses a specific sense of time, it does not convey a particular sense of space. In fact, everyday life is usually distinguished by an absence of boundaries, and thus a lack of clear spatial differentiation.

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156 Sue Townsend Scrap Book, ST/25, University of Leicester Special Collections.
With regards to Felski’s assertion about time, the Mole diaries exemplify this perfectly, with dates and days of the week for all of Mole’s diary entries. The mundane details of his teenage jottings are juxtaposed with the global and historical events printed in his diary (e.g. ‘Lincoln’s birthday’ (16) or ‘Septuagesima’, (18)). When there is an entry missing, Mole writes to apologise for this in advance and so readers retains a very concrete sense of how his life moves in a linear progression. This same clarity cannot be attributed to the geographical aspect of the novel. An ‘absence of boundaries’ not only succinctly summarises the contested geographical reach of the Midlands, it also captures the region’s liminal positioning in Townsend’s work. There are hints at it, as I will show, yet interestingly these rarely reference Leicester but rather suggest the city in relation to its surroundings.

*TSDAM*’s identity as a Midlands text is constructed subtly. In the sequel, *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole* (1986), the diarist signs off a passionate letter as ‘The poet of the Midlands,’ revealing a distinct regional sensibility but also a sense that Townsend is highlighting the apparent incongruity of ‘poetry’ and ‘Midlands’. 159 As a peritext to *TSDAM*, Townsend includes as an epigraph a quotation from D.H. Lawrence. Immediately the novel is placed in a Midlands literary tradition, while pastiching the notion of literary prestige by juxtaposing supposedly ‘high’ art with the popular, comic literature which follows. When Mole is returning home on a train from Scotland, there is a subtle sense of the Midlands boundaries. An undesirable travel companion talks to Mole against his wishes but thankfully does not continue her journey into the heart of the Midlands: ‘It was nag, nag, nag. But thank God she got off at Chesterfield’ (44). When Mole gets a new bike for Christmas, he is made to feel inferior by his friend Nigel, whose own bike was ‘made by a craftsman in Nottingham’ (118). The allusion here is to Nottingham’s famous Raleigh Bicycle company. When he gets his bike Mole boasts about riding to nearby Leicestershire market town Melton Mowbray, claiming he ‘did it in 5 hours’ (116). This is a Midlands ‘in joke’ at Mole’s expense. The journey is just under 20 miles, which

would mean that Mole averaged 4 miles an hour on his bike, roughly equivalent to a walking pace. In all of these examples, Leicester is only suggested, never named explicitly. In this way, Townsend enables readers to sense the environs while retaining a generic British, suburban, post-war setting. The author addresses both a regional and a broader readership, thus creating the perfect literary marketing strategy.

Townsend is a rare success story for the Midlands. This sense of Midlands accomplishment cannot be claimed for the publication and distribution of *TSDAM*, which were undertaken by Methuen and later Penguin, both big London publishing houses. Townsend made regular visits to the capital to facilitate the publication of her work but chose to remain living in Leicester all her life, earning a very good living from royalties accrued. Her fictional hero does not have the same fortunes with his own literary endeavours. Adrian’s aspirations to disseminate his poetry are thwarted by industry gatekeepers at the BBC, and his dialogue with the institution frames an important, overlooked dichotomy of geographical centre (London) and periphery (the provinces) in *TSDAM*. London is afforded prestige by the admiration of the young writer, with even a rejection letter from the BBC becoming an object of near-sacred importance, fawned over by his parents and passed around at school. This letter humorously symbolises the marginalisation of Midlands writing in opposition to the ‘centre’ of London, where the cultural gatekeepers are concentrated.

In having Adrian sign off letters as ‘The poet of the Midlands,’ and later writing an unpublished — and indeed unpublishable — novel entitled *Lo! The Flat Hills of My Homeland*, Townsend may be complicit in undermining the prestige of writers from the region. There is an intentional juxtaposition set up between the words ‘poet’ and ‘Midlands’, as if the landscape of the region could negate the value of poetry written within it. Just as De Certeau frames the everyman as ‘niemand – nobody’, the Midlands is here being framed as nowhere; a literary wasteland. In early hand-written

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162 De Certeau, p. 2.
manuscript drafts, Mole says ‘I have been asking around but nobody knows where intellectuals go in Leicester.’ The implication here is that they are scarce on the ground. This perception appears to be one held about the Midlands more generally, with Townsend’s barbed humour echoing comments made by novelist Graham Greene after a brief stint living in Nottingham; ‘an educated person in Nottingham is as precious and rare a find as jam in a wartime doughnut!’ Born into an influential family in the Home Counties and educated at Oxford, Greene’s sense of superiority is here palpable. The novelist lived and worked in Nottingham for only four months, making his lack of intellectual connection to the place perhaps understandable. Townsend’s connection to the Midlands is however undeniable but was it really her intention to belittle her hometown in the public eye? Reference to early Manuscript drafts reveals Nigel Mole (pre-Adrian) writing a regional poem for the local Leicester publication Magazine:

Leicester, Leicester
Fester, Fester
Nigel Mole
is no court jester.

Even in the drafting stage, this material is perhaps deemed too inflammatory and is immediately crossed out. The purported cultural stagnation and dearth of intellectuality is enacted in the juvenile rhyme of ‘Leicester’ and ‘Fester’. The amateur poet then distances himself from this uninspiring milieu with ‘no court jester’, suggesting that he perceives his fellow inhabitants as such, whereas he himself is destined for greater things. This poem is nowhere to be seen in the published version of TSDAM. In this instance, neutralising regional colour was perhaps a wise move to avoid the wrath of

163 Early typescript material related to the ‘Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4’, ST/1/1/2, University of Leicester Special Collections.
165 Ibid.
166 Early typescript material related to the ‘Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4’, ST/1/1/2, University of Leicester Special Collections.
Leicester’s population; being immortalised in print is not always a compliment. Having crossed out the ‘Leicester/Fester’ poem, Mole drafts an alternative:

I stand by the clock tower
wondering, wondering.
Which path to take.
I showed it to my father who said ‘I was old enough to find my way around town by now.’ Am I really the fruit of that this mans [sic] loins?

The clock tower is the iconic central marker of Leicester city centre. In Rai’s fiction, the narrator calls the tower by name as teenage characters walk past it on their way to the Haymarket shopping centre. Yet in Townsend’s fiction this geographical clue is erased. Unlike the ‘festering’, negative representations of Leicester, the clock tower poem locates the Mole diaries subtly and in an affirmative manner, appealing to Leicester readers without excluding the wider public. Was the city’s reputation embarrassing to the author? If so, would this have not assisted her in creating an intentionally awkward character? The effacement of the city is undertaken wholesale, whether the representations are flattering or otherwise. In the early manuscripts, the primary critique of Leicester seems to be its status as a non-intellectual environment:

Went to the museum in the Newarke after school today. There were two bearded men with long hair and corduroy trousers in there looking at Daniel Lambert’s chair. I listened to their conversation but it wasn’t about the meaning of life or stuff like that. It was about a bet they had in the pub about how much Daniel Lambert weighed. One of them saw me listening and told me to ‘bugger off.’ Am I condemned to live amongst philistines?

The corduroy fabric which a modern journalist attributed to lecturers in the Stoneygate area of Leicester is here a false friend to the young intellectual Mole. The reference to Daniel Lambert is highly regional, since he is one of Leicester’s most famous sons. Lambert was considered a national treasure, his huge size making him a symbol of hearty British strength and he was rendered in cartoon form in anti-Napoleonic

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167 It is quite possible that Townsend intended the deleted poem to be left in the novel, showing to the reader Mole’s process of self-censorship and revision.
168 Early typescript material related to the ‘Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4’, ST/1/1/2, University of Leicester Special Collections.
169 Early typescript material related to the ‘Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4’, ST/1/1/2, University of Leicester Special Collections.
propaganda. His disappearance from Townsend’s published text meant the loss of an opportunity to disseminate Leicester history to a wider reading public. Perhaps the larger-than-life hero was considered too niche for a novel published by a major London publishing house. As Leicester author Amy Bell states of Lambert and Leicester, ‘even our celebrities are a rum bunch’.

Leicester can be understood in a more generic sense as a provincial or marginal region in TSDAM. In corresponding with the BBC, Mole believes he is transcending the Leicester people around him and aligning himself with an intellectual elite in London. He considers his art to be visionary and its dissemination an absolute priority: ‘I have sent [my poem] to the BBC. I marked the envelope “Urgent”’ (30). To Adrian, the lack of a response could not possibly be an indictment of the quality of his poetry, but merely another marker of intellectual solidarity with Malcolm Muggeridge at the BBC: ‘Perhaps he is in a bad mood. Intellectuals like him and me often have bad moods. Ordinary people don’t understand us and say we are sulking, but we’re not (10).’ For the young poet, the bonds of intellectuality transcend regional boundaries. In reality, these boundaries are closely regulated by industry gatekeepers. Interestingly, the 2015 musical adaptation of TSDAM received very mixed reviews, with one reviewer reinforcing these regional boundaries:

They recently dug up Richard III in Leicester. Now they have done the same to Adrian Mole, the spotty Leicester schoolboy, aged 13 and three quarters, created by the late Sue Townsend. A musical version of that 1982 novel opened last night in Mole's home town. Catch it there if you must. The show may be unlikely to trouble the End or flourish beyond the East Midlands.

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172 Amy Bell, ‘Reflection’ in Grassroutes Writers Gallery <http://www.transculturalwriting.com/Grassroutes/content/Amy_Bell.htm> [Accessed 7 July 2015]
The centre/periphery divide is outlined here very clearly by the elitist Daily Mail reviewer Quentin Letts. The patronising ‘if you must’ suggests that a visit to Leicester — denied city status as ‘Mole’s home town’ — is beyond the pale for his readership. London’s End is portrayed here as a monolithic cultural establishment, its gates firmly closed to Midlands productions, which are ‘unlikely to trouble’ it. The reviewer wishes to highlight the exclusivity of the capital’s cultural infrastructure, clearly oblivious to the fact that Mole debuted at London’s Royal Court Theatre, with an all-Leicester cast, long before TSDAM was even published.\(^{174}\) As another, admittedly gentler, reviewer pithily said of the new musical adaptation of TSDAM, ‘Would Adrian’s poem-rejecting “man from the BBC” have let this through? I doubt it.’\(^{175}\) In the fawning eyes of the young Mole and the more world-weary adult observer alike, the elite cultural centres of the capital are not open to all and it is testament to Townsend’s skill that she was accepted within that rarefied world.

This chapter on Leicester’s regional literary cultures has elsewhere addressed multiculturalism, particularly modes of interaction which Gilroy has called ‘convivial cosmopolitanism’.\(^ {176}\) I now look briefly at the ways in which Townsend’s fiction can be seen to address ‘the postcolonial everyday’, drawing on James Procter’s essay of the same name, alongside Gilroy’s After Empire in my reading of TSDAM. Procter looks at the ways in which British Asian cinema of the late 1990s to early 2000s can be seen to reject the ‘exoticisation’ of racial and cultural difference. He argues that this is achieved through a shift in focus towards the ‘everydayness’ rather than the ‘otherness’ of British Asian culture around the turn of the Millennium. In relation to Gilroy’s thesis of ‘conviviality’, Procter is a little more reluctant to read his chosen texts as straightforward documents of a modern, multicultural idyll. Procter problematises films such as Bend it Like Beckham and Billy Elliot, by highlighting the ways in which they draw on negative

\(^{174}\) Sue Townsend Scrap Book 1, ST/25, Sue Townsend Archive, University of Leicester Special Collections.


\(^{176}\) Gilroy, p. 154.
stereotypes to craft their narratives. At the core of his analysis, however, Procter observes how the humdrum, everyday details of life in provincial towns and cities are the prominent artistic representation of postcolonial life at the start of the twenty-first century. The relevance of this theoretical work to TSDAM becomes apparent when observing Townsend’s literary representations of multiculturalism in 1980s Leicester. These depictions are not immediately ‘convivial’, with Townsend representing openly racist characters as a means to evoke and critique the less desirable traits of everyday life in Leicester. James Procter observes how films such as East is East present the struggles of young British Asians to overcome the outmoded views of their parents. In the case of Adrian Mole, it is his grandmother who represents a cantankerous and outspokenly prejudiced older generation:

Grandma and I were just settling down to watch the happy couple’s [Charles and Diana’s] ride back to the palace when there was a loud banging on the front door. We ignored it so my father was forced to get out of bed and open the door. Bert and Mr. and Mrs. Singh and all the little Singhs came in asking for sanctuary. Their telly had broken down! My Grandma tightened her lips, she is not keen on black, brown, yellow, Irish, Jewish or foreign people. My father let them all in, then took Grandma home in the car. The Singhs and Bert gathered round the television talking in Hindi. (72)

In this humorous scene, expectations about migrant behaviours and demands are subverted. The Singhs are seeking ‘sanctuary’ but their needs are stereotypically British: they must watch the royal wedding. There is a moment of neighbourly solidarity which cements a shared sense of Britishness and community. There is an implication that Grandma is being taken away from the gathering because her views are considered politically incorrect by consensus. Her opinions are perhaps not challenged verbally because they are rationalised by the younger generations of the Mole family as an out-of-date, product-of-the-time ideology. This is humorously undermined however when Bert Baxter, a white British OAP of similar age to Grandma Mole, casually and fluently converses in Hindi with the Singhs. Not only is he accepting of the migrant family, he is educated and truly cosmopolitan. This is in sharp contrast to the overall impression of his character as a drunken, surly pensioner. The scene relates closely to Procter’s notion of the postcolonial everyday due to the ordinary, casual nature of the bilingual discourse.
In multicultural Leicester there is nothing unusual about inter-cultural exchange, as evidenced by Townsend’s own ethnically diverse family. Accounts of her funeral reveal that Townsend’s immediate family and friends were representative of Leicester’s diversity.\(^{178}\)

Bert’s casual conversation in Hindi might be considered an example of Gilroy’s theory of ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ in action, in that it is one of those automatic actions of daily life which are hardly thought through. Implicit in Gilroy’s idea here is a ‘conviviality’ which is not always at play in TS\(DAM.\)^{179} The new arrivals on the street, the Singh, need as much time to adjust to their new neighbours as the Moles do. Food is often a useful focus for exploring everyday concerns in Townsend’s fiction. In the following example, it provides a humorous point of difference between Asian and British residents as the notion of cultural appropriation is raised:

Had Vesta curry and rice for dinner, during which Mrs Singh came round and talked Hindi to Bert. She seemed to find our curry very funny, she kept pointing to it and laughing. Sometimes I think I am the only person in the world who still has manners. (92–93)

The Moles’ dinner is to Adrian a source of prestige, worthy of special mention in a diary entry, but to Mrs Singh this attempt at South Asian cuisine is laughable. Food critic Brandon Robshaw recalls his experience of Vesta curries; ‘Made of powdered chemicals, they taste of powdered chemicals.’\(^ {180}\) The geographical and colonial connotations suggested by real Asian spices, along with the ancestral memory of selecting and preparing them, makes the pre-packaged Vesta curry seem ridiculous to Mrs Singh. This is because it is a ernised, artificial version of her national dish. As I have established in my study of Piri Piri chicken, food is a powerful signifier of cultural identity, one of the chief sites where the notion of ‘authenticity’ is defined and contested. The Moles have

\(^{178}\) Sue Townsend Scrap Book 1, ST/25, Sue Townsend Archive, University of Leicester Special Collections.

\(^{179}\) Gilroy, p. 154.

been found guilty of possessing inauthentic Indian cuisine. A 2002 newspaper survey of British food and drink history sheds some light on the contested authenticity of the Vesta curry: ‘They may have been the height of exoticism in the 1960s, but this suspiciously shiny brown goo tasted more of Worcestershire sauce than anything from the Indian subcontinent. Then again, we didn't know any better.'\textsuperscript{181} As in this recollection, the Moles’ ignorance appears to be the source of Mrs Singh’s amusement, with the processed curry being outmoded even by British standards twenty years after its heyday. Although the materiality of this scene is remarkable, with a single consumer product evoking such a strong reaction, it is the regional nuances which are predominant. The Vesta curry is here an icon of the suburbs, safe, processed and bland yet it represents aspirational consumption for the Moles. The interlocutor of Mrs Singh, an ‘authentic’ ambassador of South Asian cuisine and culture, is powerfully evocative of Leicester’s geographical history. South Asian families have long had the socioeconomic prowess to purchase property in the Leicester suburbs and their interaction with white British Leicester people and practices has shaped the shared culture of the region. This interaction forms the basis of Brah’s concept of ‘diaspora space’, which is “‘inhabited” not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous.’\textsuperscript{182} In her early 1980s novel \textit{TSDAM} Townsend manifests diaspora space a decade before it had been theorised as such in the 1990s. In this regard her novel is also emblematic of the postcolonial everyday that Procter theorised in the 2000s. Townsend’s depiction of the ‘middling’, everyday, ordinary milieu of Leicester is in some regards visionary, pre-empting the commercial success of postcolonial/multicultural literature around the turn of the millennium.

Elsewhere in \textit{TSDAM}, geographical divisions in Leicester mirror racial segregation and reveal the prejudices of the diarist. In contrast to the ‘cul de sacs’ of the suburbs,


\textsuperscript{182} Brah, p. 181.
Adrian others the terraced houses of the inner-city parts of Leicester, which in his mind are analogous with crime. Referring to his school teacher, we are told that ‘Miss Elf lives with a Indian in a terraced house in the town’ (112). Clearly the ethnicity of Miss Elf’s partner is of significance, as it is mentioned explicitly. We can assume through this (along with the casting of the televised edition), that Miss Elf is white. Her interracial relationship is noteworthy, and possibly controversial to Mole. Although Adrian still admires his teacher, the implications of her lifestyle are considered dangerous: ‘I have made a Blue Peter oven glove for Miss Elf, but in order to give it to her in time for Christmas I will have to go into the ghetto and risk getting mugged’ (113). The idea of mugging as a crime perpetrated almost exclusively by young black men has been perpetuated by the right wing press. This is explored by Stuart Hall et al. in the influential work of cultural theory, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. Mole appears to have absorbed the media’s representation of black males as inherently violent, and low-income, culturally diverse areas (‘the ghetto’) as automatically dangerous. Mole’s suburban upbringing in a cul-de-sac appears to have left him with a sense of superiority, an acute sensitivity to his own perceived hardship and an apparent intolerance of difference. The diary entries of *TSDAM* suggest that everyday life in 1980s Leicester is a very uneven experience, and one which dramatically alters between postcodes. However, cosmopolitanism is the norm in Leicester, encompassing the lived experiences of people across a vast range of socioeconomic conditions. For Mole, the inner city and Indians are frightening prospects because they are beyond the reaches of his own quotidian experience. Fear of the unknown is here a powerful factor, rooting Mole into the repetition of his comfortable daily activities.

It is vital to note that while the first person narrator often gives a skewed perspective of everyday life; for example, when Mole is expressing intolerance as above, Townsend frequently subverts the opinions of her diarist. Readers can often ‘see through’ Mole’s neuroses to comprehend Townsend’s parodying of his utterances.

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Mikhael Bakhtin’s theories of discourse in the novel help to identify this as a form of hybridization, ‘a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance’.\textsuperscript{184} The language of Mole’s diary, confessional, melodramatic and at times conceited, is manipulated by Townsend to gently ‘poke fun’ at the hurdles of teenage emotional development. In this way, TSDAM is host to ‘two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor’.\textsuperscript{185} A prime example of this relates again to the social geography of Leicester:

School was closed this morning because the teachers couldn’t manage to get in on time because of the snow. That will teach them to live in old mill houses and windmills out in the country! (112)

The idea that the teachers will be ‘taught a lesson’ by their day off work, cosy in their luxurious homes, is laughable to readers because of Mole’s blinkered perspective, yet the studious, naïve diarist writes with an earnestness that is sharply undercut by the author’s lexical choices. Using the ‘double’ or ‘hybrid’ narrative style, Townsend is able to make the minutiae appeal to the masses. She conveys the mundane and everyday with humour and is able to use hybridization of voice to put Adrian’s jottings in the contexts of broader debates such as integration of migrants within the social geography of Leicester.

In summary, Procter’s theory of the postcolonial everyday illuminates a reading of \textit{TSDAM} because it helps to demonstrate that Leicester was a necessary precondition for the novel. The multicultural city, with its relatively successful integration of diverse communities, is the perfect milieu for the postcolonial to become everyday, because, on most levels, it simply \textit{works}. Leicester author Lydia Towsey has said of Leicester’s geography that it becomes ‘new, dynamic and specific by virtue of being in a number of places at the same time.’\textsuperscript{186} So for Bert Baxter happily conversing with Mrs Singh in

\textsuperscript{185} Bakhtin, p. 358.
Hindi, the postcolonial everyday is the creation of a new lived experience from the multiple geographies of diaspora. Leicester — although it became gradually less geographically recognisable as the work was edited — was an important precondition for the novel because the region’s postcolonialism was then and remains very much part of the mundane, everyday experience, as epitomised by the Moles’ beloved Vesta curry.

In exploring the everyday characteristics of Adrian Mole’s Midlands setting I have demonstrated some of the reasons why a text written by a previously unknown ‘working class’ Leicester woman became the best-selling novel of the 1980s. Perhaps it is the sheer mediocrity of Adrian’s life which is so refreshing, in contrast to some of the elevated tropes of classic ‘highbrow’ literature. The text invokes the collective laughter of the implied readership at the young everyman’s misappropriation of intellectual culture. There is evidently a commercial demand, and I would argue a fundamental human need, for readers to laugh at themselves on occasion. Townsend’s diarist gave young adult readers a caricature of themselves in their least flattering moments as well as an empathic voice to assist in negotiating their own teenage years. For adults the world over, Adrian was just distant enough to be ‘other’ to them. He was the ‘self-pitying’ teenager whom, as fully-fledged adults, they could define themselves in opposition to. Yet at the same time, his anxieties and eccentricities still speak to the inner teenager in many adults.
Leicester Conclusion: ‘A Woolworth Life’

This part of the thesis has analysed the ‘demotic’ cultural expressions of Leeming’s poetry; the diverse nature of Rai’s YA fiction and the regional everyday aesthetic espoused by Townsend, the city’s best-selling author. Although the degree to which their representations of Leicester are ‘loco-specific’ is debatable, Leicester informs their production and provides the context — albeit undeclared at times — for their content. Leicester is present in these texts even when it is not explicitly named. Its juxtaposition of Victorian grandeur and post-war concrete is perhaps heightened by the geographical situation within a valley. Leicester is surrounded by green spaces such as Bradgate Park which overlook the city. From the vantage point afforded by such rural spaces, it is difficult to imagine the sheer breadth of human diversity which thrives in the city below. Despite the global importance which official narratives may attach to Leicester’s diversity, walking the streets is a reassuringly ordinary experience. Everyday encounters between people of all faiths and ethnicities are as mundane and commonplace as any detail lifted from Adrian Mole’s diary.

I would like to use one final example from TSDAM which I feel epitomises the everyday life of Adrian Mole and perhaps, by extension, the Midlands. In this excerpt, Adrian wants to express his affection for Pandora with an extra-special Christmas present: ‘I went to Woolworth’s to buy Pandora’s Chanel No. 5. They hadn’t got any so I bought her an underarm deodorant instead (114).’ The failed retail chain is the perfect site for Mole’s romantic errand. For me this brand name will always evoke childhood memories of being dragged along the concrete-clad high street of a ‘historic’ Midlands market town on a grey, rainy Saturday. The chain was beloved of George Orwell, who wrote an article in praise of their rose bushes and fondly recalled ‘the good days when nothing in Woolworth’s cost over sixpence’.187 The store always emphasised practicality and value over glamour, as is evident in Townsend’s example by their lack of Chanel stock. The Woolworth’s brand became a byword for ordinariness, which seeped into the

consciousness of the literary world. Nigel Nicolson conveys his parents’ fear that World War Two would reduce their life of luxury to a mundane existence; ‘we shall have to walk and live a Woolworth life hereafter... I hate the destruction of elegance.’ In this excerpt, all the chic evoked by the expensive French perfume is dragged painfully into the utilitarian retail unit at the inexpert hands of Mole, where any elegance is destroyed. The bathos of the transition from Chanel perfume to underarm deodorant is immediate and effective, presenting readers with an armpit as the corporeal manifestation of Mole’s romantic imagination.

On the regional level, this correlates with former Midlands MP Joe Ashton’s comments about his constituency as ‘the armpit of the universe’. This mentality, even espoused by those charged with governing parts of the region, perhaps trickles down to affect the self-worth of the Midlands. The effacement of loco-specific detail from TSDAM may be a textual manifestation of views held nationally, and locally, about the cultural prowess of the region. While her second novel The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole begins to identify specific regional markers (such as ‘the poet of the Midlands’), these serve to ridicule the aspiring regional writer, establishing a popular juxtaposition between the Midlands and creativity. This dichotomy is enforced by the cultural centre of London, and Adrian’s correspondence with the BBC manifests this centre/periphery binary in TSDAM. In order for a Midlands writer to be endorsed by the big London publishing houses, perhaps it is a necessary precondition that the material must not embrace its origins too enthusiastically. To borrow a comparison from the world of popular music, Amy Winehouse celebrated her 2008 Grammy Award by holding the trophy aloft and exclaiming to a rapturous audience ‘this is for London!’ It is very difficult to imagine these same words being spoken of Leicester or the Midlands. When a

190 Barry, p. 3.
192 Amy, dir. by Asif Kapadia (Universal, 2015).
Midlands cultural product achieves commercial success, the national press must find some other way of reading it to make sense; as a diary novel; a work of Young Adult fiction; as a feminist text; a left wing text; anything but a regional one. This process of de-regionalisation must be understood as a symptom of the imbalance of cultural capital between the literary centre that it is London and the peripheral Midlands.

193 Various newspaper reviews, ST/25, University of Leicester Special Collections.
Birmingham: Writers’ Workshop of the World

Keywords

Birmingham, Handsworth, post-war history, urban redevelopment, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, regional literary cultures, literary economy, regional publishing, black British literature, Irish Birmingham, architecture, brutalism, reggae, Rastafarianism.

Birmingham: Introduction

Birmingham, ‘The City of a Thousand Trades’, has historically been defined by its manufacturing prowess rather than its literary and cultural output.¹ Since the industrial revolution, Birmingham was a key component of the world’s infrastructure. Producing finely-crafted goods such as buttons, glass and guns, Birmingham became known as ‘the workshop of the world.’² In 1868, historian Willey portrays Birmingham as a ‘hive of industry’ with its busy workers occupied in all kinds of skilled trades:

The manufactures of Birmingham are almost infinite in their variety. Almost all articles of utility or ornament are manufactured in the town. From a pin to a steam engine, from pens to swords and guns, from ‘cheap and nasty’ wares sold at country fairs by ‘cheap Johns’ to the exquisitely beautiful and elaborate gold and silver services which adorn mansions of the rich... all things are made in this hive of industry, and give employment to its thousands of men, women, and children.³

Willey’s depiction hints at a cultural dimension to the city — suggested by ‘exquisitely beautiful’ articles of ‘ornament’ — but this appears to be the preserve of the very wealthy. The cultural is here obscured by the commercial in this narrative of a city in the grip of modernity. The bees within the ‘industrial hive’ connote individual subservience to the city as a whole: a recurring observation in my analysis of Birmingham literature. It is perhaps most bluntly articulated by Birmingham novelist O’flynn, who described

³ William Willey, Willey’s History and Guide to Birmingham (Birmingham: 1868).
Birmingham as having an ‘oppressive top-down culture’ during the late twentieth century. My literary analysis suggests that a ‘top-down culture’ prevails well into twenty-first century Birmingham. Despite the frailty of the city’s publishing infrastructure, the ‘top down’ nature of Birmingham has generated a number of imaginative, often rebellious, literary responses to place. 

Contemporary tourist spiel boasts that Birmingham has more miles of canal than Venice. Many people would argue that this is where the comparison with Venice ends. Yet critics have looked to Europe to better understand Birmingham’s defining characteristics. As Edward Glaeser states, ‘The streets of Florence gave us the Renaissance and the streets of Birmingham gave us the Industrial Revolution ... wandering these cities ... is to study nothing less than human progress.’ This perspective aligns Birmingham aspirationally with Florence and suggests that the city and its literature are invaluable sites for accessing the historical trajectory of cultural development. Despite their commonalities on paper however, it is important to stress that there are major differences between cities such as Florence, Venice and Birmingham. The modest geographical and architectural offering of Birmingham seems to have filtered down to the way Brummies — and indeed the world beyond — see the city’s cultural output. One might ask, does this matter to Birmingham? The city does not necessarily shout the loudest about its cultural assets but it quietly hosts some of Britain’s most respected art galleries such as the Barber Institute of Fine Art at the University of Birmingham or the Ikon, Halcyon and Waterhall galleries in the city centre. Many Brummies would argue that their self-effacing outlook is a defining characteristic.

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4 Catherine O’Flynn interviewed by Tom Kew, 27 May 2016.
5 An example of this frailty is the recent demise of Tindall Street press, a once-renowned independent publisher who supported Birmingham writers.
9 Jonathan Meades explores this in the documentary Birmingham: Heart Bypass but it has consistently come up in discussions towards this thesis, including in interview with
But how does this this self-conscious nonchalance translate to literature? Surely no reader wants to immerse themselves in a book solely concerned with self-effacement. In fact, in the twenty-first century, Birmingham writers are earning international recognition and collecting — even turning down — major prizes. The national and global ‘valuing communities’ which bestow prestige upon literary figures have acknowledged Birmingham authors such as Zephaniah, O’flynn and Bennett. Zephaniah in particular has been celebrated as a defining national figure who has popularised performance poetry in the UK and went on to become Professor of Poetry and Creative Writing at Brunel University. Birmingham produces valuable literary output, yet it is too often overlooked. It is therefore the purpose of this chapter to provide a sustained critical commentary on some of Birmingham’s key literary figures.

Birmingham’s motto is ‘Forward’ and in terms of industry, architecture and infrastructure, the local authorities attempt to use this as a guiding principle. With such focus at the civic level on progress, the city’s personal narratives are often shaped, and yet also obscured by, the bigger picture. In a ‘top-down culture’ it can be difficult to see the bees for the hive, to return to Willey’s analogy. This is not an issue unique to the city of Birmingham. When I looked in depth at Leicester, I found that hyperbolic labels such as ‘the best multicultural city on earth’ were in fact obscuring the issue of segregated

10 I am referring here to Benjamin Zephaniah who rejected the OBE. His refusal of the prize had specifically postcolonial connotations. The poet specifically rejected an award which he felt represented the oppressive regime of the British Empire. See ‘Black poet spurns OBE’, *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3242154.stm> [Accessed 6 June 2016]
11 Frow, p. 154.
13 The motto was not officially granted to the City but was merely assumed at the local level. Although the exact date of its usage is contested, historians estimate that the ‘Forward’ motto was assumed around 1838. <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/cs/Satellite?c=Page&childpagename=Lib-SpringHill%2FPageLayout&cid=1223092595177&pagename=BCC%2FCommon%2FWrapper%2FWrapper> [Accessed 6 June 2016]
literary ‘silos’ from critical attention. In Leicester, the stereotype of ‘steelbands, saris and samosas’ often predominates at the expense of alternative narratives. The kind of Birmingham stories I bring to light in this chapter are sometimes shaped by ethnicity, sometimes by creative renderings of an ‘elsewhere’ homeland, but more often by the physical fabric of Birmingham itself. If Nottingham conjures images of Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest and Leicester has its historic King and famous Golden Mile, one of this chapter’s research aims is to ask ‘what about Birmingham?’ How is Britain’s second city represented on the page and how does this feed into public perceptions of Birmingham?

One key way in which I assess how writers represent Birmingham is through reference to ‘non-places’, a term which Marc Augé coined in 1992. Whether or not it is named explicitly as a ‘non-place’, this trope is recurrent throughout academic and journalistic discourse about Birmingham. Augé states that ‘the place/ non-place pairing is an instrument for measuring the degree of sociality and symbolization of a given space.’ Critics cannot seem to help but deny Birmingham its power to symbolise, dismissing the city as inconsequential, obsolete or even non-existent. This phenomenon is so pervasive as to almost become that very ‘symbolisation’ such critiques are based upon. Without immediately identifiable cultural icons, Birmingham becomes known as a ‘non-place’ and this crystallises in the popular and critical imagination as its defining feature. Birmingham is the national butt of regionalist jokes. O’flynn outlines the

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15 Modood, p. 1.
16 Meanwhile, in Birmingham, multiculturalism has flourished in its own way and this is a theme developed further in this chapter where I look at Birmingham’s Irish, Asian and Caribbean communities.
17 Marc Augé, Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity (London: Verso, 1992; repr. 2008). Further references to ‘non-place’ are all from this source and will not be individually cited.
18 Augé, p. viii.
19 One notable exception perhaps too recent to have made a significant impact at the national level, is the Selfridges building in the Bullring, completed in 2003 by Future Systems. Liam Kennedy (ed.), Remaking Birmingham: The Visual Culture of Urban Regeneration (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.
limitations which authors face in resolving this image crisis but suggests ultimately it is the critics who need to reassess their position:

Obviously you don’t want your fiction to become this civic tourist information board going ‘Ooh! Look at that area!’ but I think when people criticise Birmingham it always reflects badly on them. It’s such an easy target. It’s like making jokes about your mother in law, it both dates people and is embarrassing really. It’s just lame, if you’re going to make offensive comments about a target, choose somewhere original.\(^{20}\)

Regardless of the embarrassing nature of such critiques, I feel it is important to understand where their origins lie and how literature fits into, or even shapes, public perceptions of the city. According to journalist Jonathan Meades, ‘other than the car, there is no short-hand for Brum, no archetype’.\(^{21}\) This is of course an over-simplification but Meades does tap into a defining feature of Birmingham’s post-war development and concurrently, how popular discourse has characterised the second city as a ‘non-place’.

The Midlands location is crucial here. Unlike the historic capital, pretty coastal towns or attractive historic cities, Birmingham is often understood as a tangled mass of ‘urban filaments’, to use Le Bras’s phrase.\(^{22}\) These filaments are by definition not attractive central locations — they are not destinations — but rather the functional strands that join the dots between settlements. They are home to huge swathes of both the residential population and the nation’s industry. Perhaps the scale of Birmingham’s road networks, its motorways, flyovers and underpasses contribute to the misconception in the public imagination that it is a ‘non-place’ and this informs how Birmingham’s writers document and re-imagine their city. For many, Birmingham is a place to pass through in order to reach somewhere else. Its central location in the heart of England however, should facilitate more than just a transitory engagement with the city. Why then, is this central second city so often perceived as a place to merely bypass? Why is it denied an identity of its own? As Meades states, ‘It’s an ignored void at the heart of the

\(^{20}\) Catherine O’Flynn interviewed by Tom Kew, 27 May 2016.
\(^{21}\) Meades, 1998.
\(^{22}\) Hervé Le Bras, La Planete au Village (La Tour d’Aigues, France: L’Aube, 1997).
county’. Delaney calls it one of ‘the anonymous industrial centres of Britain.’ This is not intended to be flattering. However a site of anonymity might be a productive starting point for a work of literature.

Chapter seven interrogates the notion of Birmingham as a ‘non-place’. It achieves this by closely reading O’flynn’s Costa prize-winning debut novel What Was Lost (2007), published by the now-defunct Tindall Street press. I look also at the follow up novel, The News Where You Are (2010) which was published by Penguin. These fictional representations of Birmingham are considered in parallel with the ‘grand narratives’ of the city as it developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, in order to understand how the personal sub-narratives of the city are both critical of, and informed by, the bigger vision.

Chapter eight, ‘Handsworth Revolution: “Double Vision” in Birmingham’s Inner City’, explores how Caribbean and black British writers have viewed Birmingham’s inner city in original, political and often surreal ways. One creative response to dissatisfaction with one’s surroundings is to see within them an ‘elsewhere’ place of ancestral belonging. This chapter will explore poetry, dub and reggae lyrics to offer a pan-African perspective on the Midlands, exploring alternative spatial conceptions of the city and demonstrating that Birmingham is a central hub with links extending beyond the UK to sites of colonial history.

Finally, ‘“No coloured; no Irish”’: The Caribbean Connection in Post-war Irish Birmingham Literature’ draws together themes from the previous two chapters. With a literary-historical approach, this section considers the parallel experiences and productive interactions of Birmingham’s black and Irish communities. It reads Irish-Brummie authors in order to understand the contribution they have made to the city’s

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literary identity and place their development within the wider story of post-war Birmingham.
Chapter Seven

Is Birmingham a 'Non-Place'?

This chapter reads the novels of O’flynn to understand how literature responds creatively to the (mis)conception of Birmingham as a ‘non-place’. The British film industry has long been aware Birmingham’s post-war, post-industrial landscapes, frequently using them as filming locations which could be anywhere. As Edgar states, ‘it is easy to see this robust concrete city in cinematic terms; it lends itself to a cinematic imagination.’ On the screen, as well as in Birmingham literature, the urban generic brings to the fore unglamorous yet honest human stories. These stories are important because they reflect a dimension of Birmingham — and by extension the Midlands — often obscured by the second city’s very public quest for architectural and economic advancement. This impulse is perhaps most explicitly exemplified by the city’s motto of ‘Forward!’ and provides an overarching narrative of the city against which countercultural literature makes small yet significant statements of Midlands identity.

At the administrative level, the city’s emphasis on progress, renewal and urban regeneration could be responsible for the surface appearance of Birmingham as a ‘non-place’. Its conference centres and shopping malls might appear the epitome of a modern, globalised city, yet they cast long, figurative shadows over huge swathes of Birmingham. The public metanarratives obscure highly personal sub-narratives and it is the latter which will provide cultural access points to the city for the purpose of this analysis. What are the stories of Birmingham and how are they told by the city’s own literary output?

O’flynn’s debut novel What Was Lost was published in 2007 by the not-for-profit, Birmingham-based Tindall Street press. The now-defunct press depended on support from the Arts Council. The dedication of Tindall Street set O’Flynn’s career in motion and

26 For example, Brassed Off (1996) is set in Yorkshire but uses Birmingham locations. Even when the band appear to perform in London’s Albert Hall, it is actually Birmingham Town Hall. <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/whats-on/film-news/18-movies-filmed-in-birmingham-9418666> [Accessed 10 June 2016]

she has gone on to achieve international success, with her debut novel translated into 25 languages. In this regard O'Flynn's fiction has achieved some of the impact of Townsend's *Adrian Mole* series, albeit on a smaller scale. Whereas Townsend edited out any specific reference to Leicester, O'Flynn’s novels are distinctly of the Midlands. Yet both novelists draw on the idea of their respective cities as 'non-places'. I examine two of O'Flynn’s novels and consider what light they can shed on Birmingham from 1950 to the present day. *What Was Lost* (2007) and *The News Where You Are* (2010) offer readers two distinct versions of the city, the former focussing on post-industrial retail and consumerism and the latter on Birmingham’s post-war architectural development. The first sub-section, 'Forward! Birmingham’, considers how literature responds to the ever-changing architecture of Birmingham which seems to tear down and rebuild ‘with a zeal unwitnessed in any other British city.’ The second section ‘Retail Birmingham’ explores the dramatic expansion of the retail and service sectors onto brownfield sites of former Midlands industry. In applying Augé’s concept of ‘non-place’ to these two very different sites of reinvention and renewal, I aim to demonstrate how Midlands literature actively engages with, and challenges assumptions about, the development of the region.

**Forward! Birmingham**

Before developing the notion of ‘non-place’ I wish to emphasise the architectural diversity which stems from Birmingham’s rich history of manufacturing. Historic relics of industrialisation include buildings such as Aston Hall, Sarehole Mill, Bournville, the Jewish jewellery quarter and more parks than any city in Europe. None of this features

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28 Barry, p. 3.
29 These two in particular are relevant because of their Birmingham setting. O'Flynn's second novel *Mr Lynch's Holiday* is set in Spain but offers many useful insights into Irish-Brummmie identity, to be explored in the next section of this thesis.
prominently in Birmingham literature, which tends to emphasise and also promote the
dramatic dichotomy of Victorian houses versus concrete jungle.

I have made the claim that the overarching narratives of Birmingham’s
development tend to obscure the individual narratives that they ultimately shape.
Birmingham’s grand narrative is in one sense uniquely its own. Viewed through a
broader lens however, we see in Birmingham the story of Britain’s modernity actualised
in the urban fabric, a concrete palimpsest revealing traces of history, some erased more
completely than others. Barry’s notion of the city as palimpsest has proved consistently
useful in reading contemporary urban literature.\textsuperscript{33} Jean Starobinski’s analogy of
modernity as a musical bass line also finds relevance in the Birmingham literature under
review here:

the possibility of a polyphony in which the virtually infinite interlacing of destinies,
actions, thoughts and reminiscences would rest on a bass line that chimed the
hours of the terrestrial day, and marked the position that used to be (and could
still be) occupied there by ancient ritual.\textsuperscript{34}

This ‘bass line’ is the temporal rhythm which connects the private narratives of
Birmingham people with the grand narrative of their city. From the ‘ancient rituals’ of the
Beorma people who first inhabited the settlement of Brummagem in Medieval times to
the rhythms of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean which have been brought to the city from
overseas, there is a continuity which is threatened and sometimes disrupted by the
physical upheaval of Birmingham’s built environment.\textsuperscript{35} Commenting on Starobinski’s
musical analogy, Augé observes how ‘the expression Starobinski employs [bass line] to
evoke ancient places and rhythms is significant; modernity does not obliterate them but
pushes them into the background.’\textsuperscript{36} In reading Birmingham’s civic narratives in parallel
with O’Flynn’s I observe how the public discourse of modernity is prominent and the

\textsuperscript{33} Barry, p. 165.
\textsuperscript{34} Jean Starobinski, ‘Les Cheminees et les Clochers’, \textit{Magazine Litteraire}, 280 (1990),
translated in Augé, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{35} Steven Bassett, ‘Birmingham Before The Bull Ring’ (unpublished, Birmingham
[Accessed 26 November 2015]
\textsuperscript{36} Augé, p. 62.
‘ancient’ rhythms of the city’s ordinary people are ‘pushed into the background’. This public dimension of O’Flynn’s writing demonstrates the connectivity between the small and the grand narratives of the city. We see the characters clinging on to their own personal visions of Birmingham as the authorities continue to lurch towards a vision of what Augé calls ‘supermodernity’, defined by ‘excessive information and excessive space’. When small and grand narratives are considered in parallel, we gain a more holistic understanding of how Birmingham and Brummies have developed since World War Two and how they are represented in literature.

Birmingham’s architecture presents a visible continuum of overlapping aesthetics. These can roughly be understood as the practical, functional rebuilding of the immediate post-war years which focussed on housing as many people as possible; the more adventurous move towards modernism; the raw expression of brutalism and the contemporary emphasis on glass and unusual shapes which some critics have branded ‘blobitechture’. The key example of blobitechture is of course the Selfridges store built in 2003. Before close reading the literature of the city, I give a brief historical overview of the post-war years which were so vital in shaping Birmingham as we know it today, with particular emphasis on the role the Brutalist movement played in the development of the city.

The roots of Birmingham’s late twentieth century evolution lie in the domestic policy of the Second World War, where centralised administration was seen as a necessary catalyst for rebuilding the nation. Despite the destruction, the immediate post-war years gave Birmingham the opportunity to clearly define its identity as a built environment. The man perhaps more responsible than any other for this urban development was Herbert Manzoni, Civil Engineer from 1935 to 1963. An accomplished architect and powerful visionary for Birmingham, Manzoni nonetheless has attracted

37 Ibid.
38 Augé, pp. 24–25.
widespread derision for his unsentimental approach. In a famous quotation he outlines his ethos,

> I have never been very certain as to the value of tangible links with the past. They are often more sentimental than valuable... As to Birmingham’s buildings, there is little of real worth in our architecture. Its replacement should be an improvement... As for future generations, I think they will be better occupied in applying their thoughts and energies to forging ahead, rather than looking backward.\(^40\)

In the immediate post-war years, Manzoni’s priority was residential properties and he executed rapid building programmes which demolished Victorian housing stock in favour of both low and high-rise new builds.\(^41\)

The 1960s were the decade in which Birmingham cemented its reputation as a true ‘concrete jungle.’\(^42\) 1964 saw the development of the Bullring shopping centre, a vast concrete structure served by a gyratory road system. The city was trying to cater for the ‘motorised middle class’ but in doing so had caused irreparable damage to the vision of Birmingham which nineteenth century industrialists had strived towards, a controversial act of historical vandalism.\(^43\) As Flatman states, ‘the city’s robust Victorian urban fabric had been carved up and replaced not by a utopia, but by a dysfunctional terrain of urban motorways, concrete underpasses and undistinguished architectural tat.’\(^44\) This dismissive rendering of the process might be more constructively expressed as the modernist phase of Birmingham’s architectural development. Buildings such as the Alpha Tower are defining landmarks of this historic period, due to their angular outlines, uniform facades and bold impact on the skyline.

In evoking the ‘bass line’ of everyday life in the city, Starobinski draws links between the ancient and the modern.\(^45\) In the 1960s and 1970s, the ancient was given a voice in Birmingham’s city centre through brutalist architecture, with architect John


\(^{43}\) Bullock, p. 7.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., p. 28.

Madin championing this aesthetic.\textsuperscript{46} It is the controversial and ephemeral nature of Birmingham’s brutalist structures which inspire O’flynn’s second novel \textit{The News Where You Are} (hereafter \textit{NWYA}). The Royal Society of British Architects state that they ‘[c]onsider Brutalism as architecture in the raw’ yet this rawness often offends.\textsuperscript{47} It is a style with its origins in the work of French architect Le Corbusier and can be defined by the prominent use of concrete, straight lines and bold proportions.\textsuperscript{48} In a twenty-first century cityscape dominated by the glass and mixed materials of modern retail developments, brutalist structures appear primitive and monolithic by contrast, evoking ancient stone structures.

Prince Charles once said of one of John Madin’s iconic building, Birmingham’s recently demolished Central Library, that ‘it looks more like a place for \textit{burning} books than keeping them.’\textsuperscript{49} The vast, inverted ziggurat structure of raw concrete was torn down in 2016. The BBC has released footage of the demolition captured by drone. The clouds of dust, torn concrete and steel make the video immediately reminiscent of distressing 2016 drone footage showing bomb-damaged Syria.\textsuperscript{50} The video provides a glimpse of failed supermodernity characterised by rubble, drones and destruction.\textsuperscript{51} The disconcerting, panning optic of the airborne camera lens renders the disfigured brutalist structure vulnerable. Seemingly Birmingham is a city with little sentimentality for its

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} It is not my intention to directly compare Birmingham’s war on Brutalism with the destructive attacks on Syria. This point of comparison is about how we consume the modern city, whether as remote as the Middle East or as near as the East Midlands, the recent — and controversial — phenomenon of drone footage will have a significant impact for years to come.
recent history. Mason asserts that ‘the Central Library no longer has a place in Birmingham’s vision of itself.’ The problem is that this vision changes so frequently that the city, perhaps like many others in the UK, gives out mixed signals as to its latest identity and the results can be discordant. If a place cannot achieve the ‘symbolisation’ that comes with a strong identity or brand, it risks being known as a ‘non-place’ to cultural commentators outside the city.

O’Flynn weaves the urban fabric of Birmingham into her second novel NWYA. She compares urban renewal to ‘wiping clean’, as if the city centre were a kitchen worktop. According to O’Flynn’s narrator, this desire for civic reinvention is a defining characteristic of Birmingham:

the craving to wipe clean and start again wouldn’t die; it was too deeply ingrained in the city’s character. The target had merely shifted. Now it was the turn of the post-war buildings, the clean lines and concrete which had replaced the Victorian ornamentation. The future that Frank’s father had spent his life building was being shown as little sentimentality as the Victorian past he had tried to replace.

NWYA 53

This excerpt links the quest for modernity with a necessary callousness on behalf of the city planners. The choice of ‘target’ here suggests a hunt for any structure perceived to be antiquated, once isolated to be bulldozed with impunity. The short-sightedness of this approach is evident in its cyclical nature. Here is a city which makes very public mistakes, erasing and rewriting its history on a regular basis. Or as Jeffries puts it, ‘all-too-visibly, in an eternal struggle with itself.’ From the ‘targeting’ of old buildings, the ‘wiping clean’ of the past and the ‘struggle’ with self-identity, Birmingham’s post-war development is characterised by various commentators as an on-going conflict. In the excerpt above, one of the victims of this conflict is Frank’s father. His personal narrative of pride and progress is cut short by the grand narrative enacted by city planners.

53 Augé, p. viii.
O’Flynn applies the lexis of aggression not only to demolition but equally to the creation of new structures which rise up and shape the skyline. One of her fictional architects’ designs is described in terms which posit the building itself as a combatant:

Built in 1971, it was an uncompromising, thuggish-looking block, clad in pre-cast concrete panels and devoid of all exterior decoration. Despite its height it appeared squat and defensive, occupying a large plot on the corner of Carlton Street and Newman Row, glowering down on the few Georgian blocks still remaining in the centre. (NYWA 5)

Although the street names have been fictionalised, NWYA gives a true-to-life representation of the architectural juxtaposition to be found in contemporary Birmingham. ‘Uncompromising’ defines not only the block but equally the ethos of renewal at any cost which inspired it. There is a sense that the building ‘glowering’ at the Georgian blocks is at once a symbol of jealousy at their ornamentation and a predatory gaze, as if to say ‘you’re next.’ In a structure which is ‘devoid of all exterior decoration’ there is a sense that the brutalist style, with its propensity to alienate the landscape with unworldly forms, contributes to a sense of Birmingham as a ‘non-place’. The Brutalists’ material of choice was always concrete, a signature look referenced in the very name ‘brutalism’. Le Corbusier’s original name for the style was béton brut (raw concrete).55

The utilitarian and uniform qualities of concrete do not, to use Augé’s phrase, ‘symbolise’ and therefore further reinforce the notion of Birmingham as ‘non-place’.56 As brutalist architecture is being rediscovered and revalued in the late 2010s, brutalist buildings are now being demolished across central Birmingham. The cyclical nature of architectural fashion and the irony inherent in destroying that which was once revered is apparent in the constant redevelopment of Birmingham.

Concrete defines Birmingham’s post-war development. The inner ring road was known as the ‘the concrete collar’ and was controversial because it required demolition of Victorian housing; delineated pedestrian and motorcar space and because it ‘choked’

the development of the city by restricting its outward growth. The absolute supremacy of the car at this time, evidenced not only by the investment in roads but the vast scale of the motorcar industry, gave Birmingham an icon by which to be recognised nationally.

Retail Birmingham

‘Meet the Midlands city with a £1bn annual retail spend!’

There is a cognitive dissonance between the Birmingham which many know and remember, the ‘city of a thousand trades’, ‘the workshop of the world’, and the unsettling quotation above. It comes from an estate agent’s sales pitch, designed to lure traders to the new LinkStreet development, which is essentially an elevated tunnel between the Bullring shopping centre and New Street station. The shift from producer to consumer city has done more perhaps than any other initiative to push Birmingham towards ‘supermodernity’, which Augé defines in terms of excessive information and space. Certainly in the heavily branded retail environments of the Midlands, information is ubiquitous. While space may seem to be at a premium in city centre sites such as Bullring and Grand Central, it is much more widely available in the outlying regions of Birmingham, where the sites of former industry are converted into highly synthetic retail developments, for example the Merry Hill complex near Dudley. Focusing initially on the Green Oaks shopping centre which dominates O’Flynn’s debut novel, I then look back to unearth the industrial past of the developed land and consider how this transition has played out within a Birmingham literary context.

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In novels such as *WWL* and *NWYA*, O’flynn writes about the physical, economic and cultural impact which the decline of Birmingham’s industries has had on the city. *WWL* reinscribes the Midlands’ reputation for being a ‘non-place’ by setting the story in one of its shopping centres. This accords with my research on Townsend in the East Midlands. Townsend used the anonymous Midlands suburbs to add humorous bathos to Mole’s stories and O’Flynn too is aware of the power of the Midlands symbolism, even if the thing it symbolises is nothingness, or ‘non-place’. Green Oaks is the monolithic centre of O’Flynn’s debut novel. The reader is informed that ‘the centre was built at a time when the idea of turning a shopping centre into some larger leisure experience was just beginning to gain currency in Europe’ (*WWL* 89). This positions construction of Green Oaks at the fulcrum of Birmingham’s rapid transition from a producer to a consumer city in the 1980s. While it could be argued that this transition benefits only a select few, public discourse is obliged to paint this as a progressive, positive force. As Steven Miles states, ‘The city of production is a city of the past. The city of consumption is an aspirational city: a city of the present and of the future.’ In order to become ‘supermodern’, cities turn to consumption and retail, yet in doing so they risk losing their unique character and becoming a ‘non-place’.

Although never explicitly named, the ‘Green Oaks’ shopping centre which is the setting for *WWL* is inspired by Merry Hill near Dudley where O’Flynn worked as a record store manager in her early professional life. The complex is colloquially referred to as ‘Merry Hell’ by some locals and its history is directly linked to the demise of manufacturing in Birmingham in the 1980s. Although the impact was enormous,

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62 Flatman, p. 27.
64 ‘Catherine O’Flynn’s Top five Brum shopping experiences’, *Birmingham: It’s Not Shit* [http://www.birminghamitsnotshit.co.uk/articles/catherine-oflynns-top-five-brum-shopping-experiences] [Accessed 22 January 2016]
65 ‘User review, Merry Hill Shopping Centre’, *Trip Advisor* [http://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g187065-d2460349-r169993612-Merry_Hill-Dudley_West_Midlands_England.html] [Accessed 26 December 2015]
Birmingham was able to delay the collapse of its traditional industries until long after its Northern counterparts:

Unlike the North of England, the Midlands continued as an economic and industrial powerhouse well into the 1970s and Birmingham remained relatively wealthy and successful. Throughout the 1970s the city continued to see itself as much closer to the more affluent Southeast than the declining North of England, but by the early 1980s the collapse in manufacturing had begun to necessitate a fundamental change of direction.\footnote{Flatman, p. 27.}

Having argued elsewhere in this thesis for the acknowledgement of the Midlands as a discrete cultural entity, it is interesting to note how the author here, Ben Flatman, proudly links Birmingham with the South in this Birmingham City Council funded publication. The ‘change of direction’ Flatman refers to here encompasses a huge spectrum of civic regeneration and a widespread shift to the service and retail sectors which is, in many ways, still ongoing across the Midlands conurbation. Thatcherite entrepreneurial policies enabled Urban Enterprise Zones to irreversibly change the character of Greater Birmingham and great swathes of the UK, on the one hand providing viable alternatives to declining heavy industry but, on the other, extending the feel of ‘non-place’ beyond the city centre and into once-rural neighbourhoods.

In \textit{WWL}, the reader learns about Green Oaks’ encroachment of industrial space via the security guard Kurt. As a boy, Kurt used to play truant and explore the post-industrial sites in his area, before they were bought up and developed: ‘his secret places and all his silent industrial playgrounds were going’ (\textit{WWL} 106). In sharp contrast to the surveillance of huge crowds at the shopping centre, these sites fulfil a spiritual need for isolation, prompting fantasies of survival in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, where Kurt ‘loved how he felt he was the last person alive on earth, shouting strange words at the peeling walls’ (\textit{WWL} 105). In one nostalgic scene, Kurt recalls exploring down a deep, abandoned shaft and finding himself in complete darkness, deep under the earth, an experience he understands as death and the most extreme rendering of ‘non-place’. For the young boy, the industry which sustained his father and many generations before is a
site of curiosity and intrigue because it is barren and has ceased to function. Like the modern Green Oaks development, the landscape exerts a kind of magnetic pull on Kurt:

the silent remnants of industry that surrounded his estate: the gas holders of the old gas works, the cooling towers, the empty factories, the strange-coloured pools, the black brick huts, the canal, the embankment without a railway line...These were the places where Kurt’s father and the other men from the estate had grown up and worked; their absence imbued the landscape with a melancholy that Kurt was drawn to (WWL 104)

The absence of human activity lends this scene an uncanny quality. The silence is intensified in an area which would once have been loud and bustling and the incomplete demolition and clearance of the site suggests an abandoned project, cut short by market forces beyond the control of the workers. Recalled through the childhood memories of the security guard, the site seems to exude the supernatural, as if some emotional trace of the past remains in the soil beneath Green Oaks. By weaving together fact and fiction, O’Flynn’s literature unearths the hidden personal narratives of the Midlands.

In real life Brierley Hill, the Round Oak Steelworks, which are a likely source of inspiration for O’Flynn’s novel, saw a sharp decline in demand for their product during the 1970s. From its peak of 3,000 employees, the workforce fell by more than half by the time of its closure in 1982. This closure was perhaps expedited when the surrounding farmland was designated an Enterprise Zone a year earlier.67 This designation was typical of an era in which public-private partnerships were being heavily incentivised by Thatcher’s government. The aim was to create a climate of easy economic growth for private investors, in ‘areas with problems of marked economic decline and physical decay.’68 While the physical decay is appealing to the young explorer Kurt, his own private narrative of happy isolation is disrupted by the dominant narrative of commercial development. For ambitious business people of the 1980s, the appeal of developing post-industrial wasteland was an attractive package of tax breaks,

68 Tallon, p. 49.
reduced legislative responsibility and a ten-year exemption from paying business rates.\textsuperscript{69} Thatcher essentially created havens for the kind of hasty developments typified by Merry Hill shopping centre. Quick-return retail and service investment was the chosen antidote to the frighteningly fast decline of Britain’s manufacturing sector. As Tallon states, ‘it took over 100 years from 1851 to 1951 for technology and foreign competition to halve the numbers employed in agriculture, but it took only 13 years from 1971 to 1983 to cut manufacturing jobs by a third.’\textsuperscript{70} Clearly such rapid decline called for extreme measures to reverse the economic fortunes of Birmingham. In terms of the direction of travel for the city, this economic downturn necessitated drastic action, resulting in what Arnot calls ‘the last major change of direction’ for Birmingham.\textsuperscript{71} This economic jump-start is as old as myself, pinpointed by Arnot to ‘the late 1980s when the decision was made to build a sustainable service economy to offset all those lost jobs in manufacturing.’\textsuperscript{72} Perhaps the expediency of this matter necessitated a hasty approach. If the service economy had been afforded the luxury of time to grow organically, it may not have had the ‘oppressive, top-down culture’ which O’Flynn identifies.\textsuperscript{73} A socioeconomic environment developed so quickly will inevitably lack attention to detail, lack character and history. To build up a place with character takes generations, but a ‘non-place’ can be erected relatively quickly with the help of a little outside investment.

While government policy makers and overseas investors may have considered the incentives of Enterprise Zones to create a win-win situation, the local people of Brierley Hill did not always accord. There were protests against the development on the farmland adjacent to the brownfield site (both of which are now developed as the centre expands) and local poet A. Billingham wrote a poem in Black Country dialect to express his community’s sense of loss. The following stanza speaks directly to the unsettling scene of abandonment which O’Flynn captures in her novel:

\begin{quote}
Ibid.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Ibid., p. 12.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Ibid.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Catherine O’Flynn interviewed by Tom Kew, 27 May 2016.
\end{quote}
Iss like a graveyard, quiet an’ still
Ther’s no sparks a flyin’ in the mill,
Iss another piece uv Bri’ley ‘Ill
As woe be used no moower.\textsuperscript{74}

Billingham’s poem expresses the collective anger of the workers and the local community, challenging ‘the powers that be’ and suggesting reasons of local authority debt for the selling off of the land. For the working class poet, literature offers a voice with which to challenge the commercial rhetoric of developers who would attempt to frame the construction of sites like Merry Hill as a utopian actualisation of Birmingham’s ‘Forward’ motto.

\textit{‘Inheritors of Victorian Birmingham’}\textsuperscript{75}

It feels somehow inappropriate attempting to ‘conclude’ a discussion of a city’s development which seems forever in process, constantly evolving under the mantra of ‘forward!’ on which the city was built. The Victorian industrialists, who built the ‘city of a thousand trades’, however, do offer a means of connecting the city’s wealthy past as producer with its contemporary status as consumer.\textsuperscript{76} I now look briefly at the imaginative ways in which Victorian and twenty-first century Birmingham are now being amalgamated by contemporary architects, and place this within the broader debates of the thesis by considering the vital role of Birmingham’s postcolonial citizens in this reimagined contemporary version of Victorian architecture.

So how exactly is modern Birmingham mourning the loss of the ‘industry that had given the city its identity and self-confidence’ while still looking forward?\textsuperscript{77} Looking back to the Victorian aesthetics of sturdy red-brick construction, imposing facades and ornate detailing, Birmingham seems to realise it has made a dreadful mistake in the mass demolition of the 1960s and 70s. Unable to un-bulldoze the ‘hundreds of acres of

\textsuperscript{75} Meades, 1998.
\textsuperscript{77} Flatman, p. 28.
Victorian housing’ which were destroyed to create the now-defunct inner ring road, the ‘serial rebrander’ has come up with an imaginative new way to preserve those rare Victorian buildings which survived the cull. Ever observant of the changing environment around her, O’Flynn weaves upcycled Victoriana into her novel NWYA:

Birmingham was trying to change its reputation for the way it treated its architectural heritage: the famous lack of sensibility that bordered on self-harm. The city now adopted a more sensitive approach to its Victorian past. Those notable examples that had managed to survive the post-war purges were protected and cherished... Now private development companies with names like Urban Heritage, Regeneris and New Concept were funding new ways to use old spaces. (NWYA 68)

True to form, O’Flynn handles this process with a healthy dose of humorous cynicism, juxtaposing the architect-speak of ‘an exciting new leisure development’ with the reality of ‘a casino with a gym on top’ (NWYA 68). At the launch party, we see scantily-clad ‘bunny girls to add glamour to the occasion’ (NWYA 68). The low morals of the developers are aligned here with the ethics of a city which has ‘more gentlemen’s clubs per capita than anywhere else in Europe’ (NWYA 71). Although rendered sleazy by the attempted ‘glamour’ of the launch, there is still a redemptive aspect here as precious historical buildings are being kept intact.

The Victorian buildings themselves seem to represent the values of hard work on which the city — and indeed satellite towns such as Dudley — were built. As the speaker of Billingham’s poem expresses, ‘Men round ‘eer am bred ter werk’. This applies equally to the female workforce of the Midlands. It was the chain-making women of the Black Country who formed the country’s first ever trade union over pay and conditions during The Cradley Heath Chain Makers’ Strike of 1910. The Midlands is steeped in proud industrial history but also has to face up to its complicity in colonialism. For centuries, Birmingham-made guns and chains played their ugly role in wars and

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Ibid., p. 23.
“Rouse, Ye Women”: The Cradley Heath Chain Makers' Strike, 1910’, Warwick University, Modern Records Centre <https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/images/cradleyheath> [Accessed 9 November 2016]
slavery. Although such Birmingham industries are now defunct, the descendants of those colonised or enslaved are now prevalent in modern Birmingham. How does de-industrialisation impact upon these postcolonial subjects?

There is an argument to suggest that whether by choice or otherwise, it is not the white working class component of the city which is today most active in continuing the Birmingham legacy of enterprise and industry. At the turn of the millennium, Meades makes a bold claim of Birmingham’s residents of Asian descent:

these are the inheritors of Victorian Birmingham. The Birmingham which invented civic pride. The Birmingham that was characterised by a thousand trades. By vitality, hard work, self-help, and a collective sense of community… the successors of Victoria’s imperial subjects.

Often considered ‘new’ arrivals or somehow culturally alien, Birmingham’s British Asian citizens are revealed to be part of a longer history which has since been discontinued by some of their white British counterparts. This theory refreshingly reactivates the connections between British Asians and the values held in such esteem by the Victorians. In emphasising the continuity of the grand industrial narratives of the nineteenth century and the British Asian communities of the twenty-first, Birmingham starts to look far less like a ‘non-place’ and more like a global city which has built on its past in a modern, postcolonial success story. In describing a cityscape defined by ‘excessive information and excessive space’, Augé’s concept of ‘supermodernity’ goes some way to providing a convincing model for Birmingham’s early twenty-first century phase. Acknowledging the global connectivity of the city is an essential first step to overcoming the ‘non-place’ designation which critics have been eager to assign Birmingham. Of equal importance is the literary output which rebuts critics in an alternative manner: by demonstrating the real, lived experiences of people in a city with a long history of making things.

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83 Augé, pp. 24–25.
Chapter Eight

Handsworth Revolution: ‘Double Vision’ in Birmingham’s Inner City

And it must be known
That all scientific studies have shown that
Brummies are at home with new horizons
And a multi-layered concept of place. 84

Introduction

This chapter concerns Handsworth — an inner-city region of Birmingham — and the imaginative ways in which its black British citizens have rendered their area in poetry and music. The colonial histories entwined with Handsworth’s heritage mean that the perspectives adopted by poets such as Zephaniah and Moqapi Selassie, photographer Vanley Burke, or the reggae band Steel Pulse are often marked by duality of vision: seeing at once in the present and the past. This poetic process of ‘double visioning’ is described by Barry in Contemporary British Poetry and the City (2000):

What I am calling ‘double visioning’ is the attainment of a multi-layered chronological perspective which typically superimposes one historical period onto another, so that the viewed entity becomes radically trans-historical.86

‘Double visioning’ can be understood as infusing the present moment with history. Barry’s lexical choice ‘chronological’ could be misleading in that it implies a linear sequence of events. However I interpret ‘double visioning’ to refer to any number of historically-informed poetic visions which amalgamate to form a composite image. In this chapter I consider the radically different ways in which the ‘energy laden creators’ of Handsworth have looked to ancestral memory of Africa and colonial histories to understand their present environs in terms of ‘double visioning.’ 87

Barry provides a useful model for reading the creative amalgamation of past and present in terms of the city as a ‘palimpsest’, whereby physical traces of the past, such as the damage caused by civil unrest, occupy the present environment.88 For example,

86 Barry, p. 46.
88 Barry, p. 46.
in Ferdinand Dennis’s 1988 travelogue *Behind the Front Lines: Journey into Afro Britain*, the author states that ‘Handsworth still bears the scars of September ’85 when that conflict exploded, when the mutual resentment of blacks was given violent expression.’

This is the most literal expression of ‘double visioning’, where the traces of the past are actual and physical. However, Dennis’ work, like much literature written about Handsworth, takes as its cues the real built environment and actual historical events. This example is particularly apposite, as the conflicts of 1981 and in particular 1985 have shaped the subsequent creative output of the region. The creativity that surges from Handsworth, however, requires a broader, more figurative understanding of how past and present, here and elsewhere, can interact. There is far more to Handsworth literature than riot poems and expressions of anti-authoritarian sentiment.

For the purposes of my analysis, I broaden Barry’s notion of ‘double visioning’ as the attainment of a ‘multi-layered chronological perspective’, to incorporate what Handsworth poet Zephaniah calls ‘a multi-layered concept of place.’ This optic is relevant not only to those whose families migrated to the city in living memory, but also the more direct descendants of the Beorma people, the white British inhabitants of the city. For those who identify their heritage as African or African Caribbean, the layering of place can evoke a ‘double vision’ of two seemingly disparate ‘layers’, where the Midlands meets the African continent. In the discourse of Jamaican political leader Marcus Garvey, the trope of repatriation ‘back to Africa’ is fundamental, and this filters down to the Handsworth poets and songwriters whose ‘double vision’ of their immediate surroundings incorporates idealised notions of Africa. These idealised visions often look back in time to make sense of the present. As Gunning asserts, ‘the Afrocentric viewpoint relies on the beliefs that the individuals must understand their experiences

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89 Dennis, p. 98.
through reference to models inherited from an ancestral past’. In this way, ‘double visioning’ can superimpose historically, as well as geographically, remote scenes onto present day Handsworth. The result is a surreal, impressionistic trans-geographic, trans-historical vision.

Before considering the literary output of the area, it is necessary to contextualise this material by examining in more depth the history of Handsworth, with particular focus on how it became a hub for migration in the twentieth century. The recorded history of Handsworth goes back to the Domesday book. It has not always been the bustling and diverse region it is today, ‘its population in 1086 was “14 villains and 4 bordars”’. Handsworth remained largely rural until 1800 when the influence of industrialisation began to noticeably exert its presence on the region. In the 1790s Matthew Boulton opened a steam engine factory in the locale, employing 1,000 people. Throughout the nineteenth century, Handsworth ‘remained a better-off and fashionable suburb’. With Birmingham’s famous Jewellery quarter just to the South, Victorian Handsworth was home to the wealthy jewellers who wanted a leafy suburb removed from their place of business yet still within easy travelling distance. In the late 1800s public transport began to shape Handsworth’s demographic makeup, with the introduction of the tram bringing 10,000 artisans by 1890. The turn of the twentieth century saw huge population growth in the region and by 1911 Handsworth was incorporated into Birmingham. In the post-war period, whereas neighbouring areas were scheduled for ‘redevelopment’ (otherwise known as demolition) Handsworth was set for ‘improvement’. Clearly the mercantile investment in Handsworth had left a legacy of high quality housing stock deemed worthy of repair. This period also saw economic demand for the unprecedented levels of migration from Commonwealth nations:

The war was a major factor stimulating migration. In Britain the mobilisation of people in the armed forces, the expansion of the Merchant Navy and the

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93 Gunning, p. 20.
95 Ibid. These terms denote ranks in the hierarchy of a medieval manor.
96 Rex and Tomlinson, p. 72.
97 Rex and Tomlinson, p. 72.
harnessing of industry and agriculture for the war quickly caused serious labour shortages. These were only partly met by the recruitment of women, young people and Irish workers. Colonial workers were therefore recruited and brought to Britain, and others came voluntarily.\textsuperscript{98}

This influx of ‘colonial workers’ was not evenly absorbed across Britain. Instead, word-of-mouth networks established certain areas as suitable for housing the new arrivals, usually areas with a relative abundance of low-income housing. In Handsworth, the large, dilapidated merchant homes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were no longer economically viable to upkeep as single-occupancy dwellings and became home to large groups of migrants. Buildings were carved up into properties which were inhabited beyond their intended capacity.\textsuperscript{99} This practice was concurrent with a period of ‘white flight’ in which the mansion houses’ earlier occupants moved to wealthier suburbs. Between 1950 and 1970, the Soho ward of Handsworth saw a 95% turnover of occupants in the lodging houses.\textsuperscript{100}

This short-term tenancy, close-quarters living soon became associated with migrants, particularly of Irish, African Caribbean and Asian occupancy. In the period 1961–1971 ‘Handsworth became regarded as a problem area’, ‘suddenly, then, “Handsworth” (meaning the four wards) had become a ‘black’ area in the eyes of Birmingham and the terms “black” or “immigrant” came to mean “undesirable”, combining all the characteristics of both Indian and Asian areas considered to be problematic.’\textsuperscript{101} It is worth noting that despite the negative implications of this historical assessment of Handsworth as a ‘problem area’, it has also been identified as a central location in the development of early official strategies designed to counteract racial inequity and injustice; as John Rex and Sally Tomlinson note, ‘Handsworth’s importance has increased in the race relations field since the early 1960s.’\textsuperscript{102} Rex and Tomlinson

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} Rex and Tomlinson, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{102} Rex and Tomlinson, p. 72.
assert that ‘outside London, Handsworth is one of Britain’s race relations capitals.’\textsuperscript{103} The connotations of the dubious badge ‘race relations capital’ are that Handsworth has had a public, visible history of civil unrest and that it remains one of the most diverse areas in the country. Although not the primary focus of my argument, understanding the public and political conception of Handsworth as a ‘race relations capital’ plays an important role in understanding how the area has been depicted in literature.\textsuperscript{104} Put simply, Handsworth’s reputation precedes it, and so my intention is to focus in depth on the area’s literary output and understand how Commonwealth migrants and their descendants have represented Handsworth in their creative output.

\textit{Rastafarian Visions of a Concrete Jungle}

This section concerns a mode of poetic ‘double visioning’ whereby the inner city is understood as a concrete jungle, often as the antithesis of idealised notions of Africa.\textsuperscript{105} The prevalence of Rastafari in 1970s and 1980s Handsworth is a direct result of the numbers of young people of African Caribbean descent in the area at a time when the practise of Rastafari was becoming a global phenomenon. Unequal employment policies made it difficult for non-whites to obtain work and so maintained a status quo in which young blacks tended to be concentrated in inner-city areas such as Handsworth and became dissatisfied with the ‘system’ as they saw it, thus creating the conditions necessary for the widespread adoption of the Rastafarian lifestyle. The popularity of reggae and sound systems helped to galvanise the black Rastafarian community and swell its ranks throughout the 1970s. A generation of black Britons with little or no direct experience of Rastafari’s birthplace, Jamaica, or its spiritual homeland, Africa, felt a transcontinental solidarity with the African diaspora globally and some of its major public figures: Marcus Garvey, Haile Selassie and Bob Marley.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid. p. 70.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Barry, p. 46.
The mapping of the broader influences of Afrocentric thought on black Britain is a vital starting point before considering specifically the development of a black Handsworth aesthetic. Gunning’s work on race and antiracism is highly instructive here:

The presence of Africa within the formation of black political cultures has exercised continuing influence on the individual and communal identities developed within black British political communities as they articulate a response to structural, institutional and individual racisms.106

Via the rhetoric of Afrocentric cultural practitioners, global concerns were funnelled back to British diasporic subjects and adapted in response to place, hence ‘communal identities’ (my emphasis) existing within the perceived black British nation. The pluralisation in Gunning’s ‘identities’ allows for the multiplicity of responses to Afrocentric ideals on British soil. The specific conditions of Handsworth were therefore a pre-condition for the development of a black Handsworth aesthetic.

As with much of Marcus Garvey’s rhetoric, which was subsequently adopted by the Rastafarian movement, a major trope of Handsworth art is the prophesy of deep unrest and conflict in the , leading ultimately to a mass exodus and glorious repatriation to Africa.107 One example is Steel Pulse’s ‘Handsworth Revolution’ (1978) where the biblical notion of judgment day achieves a sense of future ‘double visioning.’108 The crumbling of the inner city is linked to the eventual demise of ‘Babylon’ (the colonial and capitalist ideological structures of the ) and juxtaposed the with the image of Handsworth ‘standing firm’;

Babylon is falling
It was foolish to build It on the sand
Handsworth shall stand, firm - like Jah rock
- fighting back
We once beggars are now choosers
No intention to be losers
Striving forward with ambition
And if it takes ammunition
We rebel in Handsworth revolution
Dread town, dread town, dread town109

106 Gunning, p. 23.
108 Barry, p. 46.
This verse seems eerily prophetic considering the civil disturbances which would follow in 1981 and 1985. For many Rastafarians, the city is no different from the rest of 'Babylon': a hostile and transitory space inhabited only in the interim between birth and liberation to 'Zion', the mother land of Africa. The cover art adorning the 1978 album is an explicit visual rendering of the 'double visioning' optic. The wreckage of concrete tower blocks, shells of houses and burnt-out cars frame the image. At its centre though, is a crop of luscious vegetation pushing through the rubble. A group of young black children, some naked, some in tribal garments and some in ern clothing, stand as if looking directly at the viewer. In their hands are djembe drums and an African stringed instrument. The goat skin stretched across one drum bears the inscription 'Rev 17'. This appears to reference The Bible, Revelations 17, which speaks of 'Mystery Babylon'. This allusion is heightened by the echoes of the Tower of Babel in the accentuated wide base and tapered structure of the tower blocks. Despite the implicit condemnation of Babylon, there is a redemptive image of new growth breaking through the concrete. This is not an apocalyptic vision of Babylon burning, but an artistic expression of the creative possibilities unleashed through rebellion.

Understanding urban space as a concrete jungle has become a mainstream turn of phrase. The phrase was ingrained into the Rastafarian lexicon via Bob Marley’s 1973 track of the same name. For Marley, ‘Concrete Jungle’ evoked the conditions of life ‘downtown’ in socially deprived Kingston. The comparison to a ‘jungle’ denotes a tangle of rudimentary structures but also connotes the political climate of the Jamaican inner city. As Colin Clarke states, ‘a major problem for all Kingstonians, not simply those who live there, has been the deep politicization — indeed the word “tribalization” is not too

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110 Ferdinand Dennis, Behind the Front Lines: Journey into Afro Britain (London: Victor Gollancz, 1988).
111 See appendix figure 2.
112 See appendix figure 3.
extreme — of the ghetto.’116 The ‘tribalization’ is caused, in part, by a system of political clientalism whereby votes are ‘bought’ with the promise of protection from politically endorsed violence and dissent is punished with violence, ‘a vicious circle of gangs, guns and ganja evolved in downtown Kingston that, [as we have seen...] was appropriated by party politics.’117 Although perhaps relatively harmonious by comparison, Handsworth nonetheless enters the global Rastafarian consciousness via poets such as Zephaniah and the reggae band Steel Pulse. A pan-African nexus has enabled cultural output from Handsworth to be disseminated worldwide.

The longing for a return to rural Africa is echoed in the lyrical content of *Handsworth Revolution*, with vocalist David Hinds singing ‘give I back I witch doctor/ give I back I black ruler.’118 This lyrical protest against colonialism calls for a return to the practices of rural Africa, a trope recurrent throughout Rastafari discourse globally. During a 1969 interview, one Rasta spokesperson in Kingston states, ‘We object to White medicine... The white man invade Africa and bring in their white medicine and white disease’.119 The semantic field of impurity is here linked with ern intrusion, suggesting the protruding vegetation of the *Handsworth Revolution* artwork to be at once progressive in that it elevates the living conditions of the Rastafarians but also marking a return to something ancient and since lost. In Rastafarian lexicon the pronoun ‘forward’ is always favoured for this kind of situation. Linguistically, Rastafari and the city authorities of Birmingham may have more in common than one might think. Never wishing to express regression, a Rastafarian may state a desire to move ‘forward to basics’ instead of ‘back to basics’, or state that they must depart momentarily but will ‘soon forward’, meaning to return to the original location.120 This linguistic creativity is one of the many tactics used by adherents of the Rastafarian lifestyle to detach language

117 Colin Clarke, p. 218.
from some of the apparently oppressive, negative connotations it has accrued over
time.\textsuperscript{121} In the same vein, the rejection of ern medicine and government parallels the
way in which the phrase ‘concrete jungle’ defines the ern city as a polar opposite of the
original, natural jungle habitat. In attempting to advance ‘forward’, Babylon city has
regressed as a result of modernity. The positive connotations of nature are inverted to
convey a chaotic, hostile environment.

The phrase ‘concrete jungle’ is believed to originate in Desmond Morris’ 1969
book \textit{The Human Zoo}, which contains the quote ‘the city is not a concrete jungle, it is a
human zoo.’\textsuperscript{122} Representations of Handsworth as a concrete jungle have their origins in
the 1970s but have been sustained into the twenty-first century through the works of
dub poets such as Moqapi Selassie. In his poem ‘Tellin de stori’, the poet riffs on the
theme of the concrete jungle and, as with Steel Pulse’s lyrics, posits a mythic alternative
to the grey reality:

\begin{verbatim}
Natty Dread
wi livin
innah concrete jungle
’igh rise ghettoes
houses in di skies
no one cyan tell I
dat dis is paradise
mi get up in di marnin
wot ah bam bam
guh fi ketch a lif
5
di lif outtah hackshan
di way dem bill deze
playsiz
its like a pris’n
10
Coz Natty
Handsworth
Aston
Ladywood
Edgbaston
Kings Heath
Balsall Heath
Sparkbrook
Small Heath
Evvrywheh Iman guh
All Isee is concrete
20
Cum mek wi step it
25
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{121} Pollard.
\textsuperscript{122} Cited in James A. Clapp, \textit{The City, Second Edition: A Dictionary of Quotable Thoughts
Just like the teetering concrete Tower of Babel on the sleeve of *Handsworth Revolution*, there are negative correlations drawn here between housing and oppressive governmental authority. In stating that ‘no one cyan tell I/ dat dis is paradise’ (lines 6-7), Selassie appears to be indirectly addressing an external figure of authority, perhaps Manzoni and his city planners for whom the concrete blocks were an idealised vision of socialist modernity, if never a lived reality. ‘Double visioning’ is at play here, although the super-imposing of ‘paradise’ is negated by the poet’s critical tone. As Cedric Hugh asserts, ‘a high-rise block is represented by architects and professionals as a “technological masterpiece” of the Twentieth Century.’ Selassie here offers the contrasting view, as his direct address to an unnamed, or collective, ‘Natty’ (15) — meaning a ‘natural’ haired, dreadlocked person — undercuts the detached perspective of the town planners.

Local authorities and architects are reduced to the collective pronoun ‘dem’, an othering device with which likens these professionals to jailors: ‘di way dem bill deze / playsiz / its like a pris’n’ (lines 12–14). The dichotomy of ‘us and them’ recurs throughout oral accounts of the causes of social unrest in 1985. As one Handsworth youth worker states:

> The housing is terrible — this is one of the major things. Ever since birth Black people have been put into bad areas. Our preferences are ignored. They put all the troublesome families in Tower Blocks — they are always putting women with children in tower blocks. Two women with children (over three years) have jumped with their children.’

The passive mood of ‘have been put’ conveys the lack of agency felt by black residents of Handsworth at this time. The sense of claustrophobia in tower blocks is palpable, both in the quotation above and in the poem ‘Tellin de stori’. Extending the metaphor of the

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concrete jungle, the tower blocks enforce a reverse vertical hierarchy, with those deemed ‘troublesome’ placed highest in the blocks. A 1985 review corroborates this assertion, stating that ‘Black people [...] are more likely to occupy older flats, terraced houses and upper stories of high rise blocks, and ‘Indians’ more frequently live in Council or Housing Association property’. The poetic expressions of ‘elsewhere’ which Barry calls ‘double visioning’ can be linked to the relative dearth of home owners within the Handsworth black community at this time. When the fundamentals of daily life are regulated by agencies with a bias against black families, the escapism of Selassie’s ‘freeman street’ (line 27) seems an appealing alternative.

The nexus between poor housing conditions and unrest in the Handsworth region can be historically evidenced. Housing was listed as the foremost indicator of deprivation in the Chief Constable of the Midlands Police’s report on the causes of civil unrest in Handsworth/Lozells, September 1985. At a time when deprivation was deemed to affect 70% of the Handsworth population, versus 50% city wide, feelings of isolation and resentment would seem inescapable. Selassie’s poem was written thirty years later, suggesting that in some regards the situation had not improved. In order for commentators such as the Chief Constable of the Midlands Police and the media to construct easily-comprehensible, homogenous groups within Handsworth, it is necessary to omit individual accomplishments and qualities in favour of a broad-brush approach which is largely superficial.

The ‘double visioning’ employed by Rastafarian poets and writers is, to some degree, symptomatic of the tense relationship which adherents of the faith share, or have historically shared, with local authorities. The way in which the Chief Constable Midlands Police wrote about the situation in 1985 is indicative of this tension:

The black section of the community and in particular the Rastafarian cult, complains of increased police activity amounting to harassment in the weeks leading up to the disturbances.

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127 Barry, p. 46.
128 Dear, p. 2.
129 Ibid., p. 54.
The term ‘cult’ here is highly contentious. It has previously been used to describe Rastafari in a 1969 anthropological study, ‘Protest and Mysticism: The Rastafari Cult of Jamaica’. The nomenclature ‘cult’ suggests a negative bias towards the text’s subject matter and this same bias can be detected in the 1985 police report. The Chief Constable’s observations in the above excerpt frame the ‘cult’ as a nuisance rather than a section of the community with a valid grievance. The grounds on which the report identifies and classifies adherents of ‘the Rastafarian cult’ are equally dubious.

As Fazakarley asserts, ‘It is notable that many stories in the popular press concerning Rastafarians and their beliefs focus extensively on physical appearance.’\(^{130}\) To briefly illustrate this assertion, the following 1983 excerpt from the *Daily Mail* is apposite:

> The Queen Mother swayed in a gentle dance when one of three steel bands began playing a lilting reggae tune. Five yards away, swaying with her, were a group of Rastafarians wearing the red, yellow and green tea cosy hats which are the badge of their pot-smoking set.\(^{131}\)

The juxtaposition in this scene suggests an underlying sense of danger for the Queen Mother. The elderly Caucasian woman becomes not only a beacon of tolerance, her ‘gentle dance’ suggesting a dignified acceptance of the cultural product of the Caribbean; she is also made to appear vulnerable. The close proximity of the Rastafarians is suggested to be a danger through the journalists’ reading of their cultural signifiers. The seemingly harmless ‘tea cosy hats’, deliberately likened to a soft, domestic item with quintessentially British connotations, are used to reveal the wearers’ status as drug users. This is the cultural climate of mid 1980s Britain in which not only the right-wing press, but also the elected authorities, express openly racist opinions in public. Looking north of Birmingham to a city equally troubled by racial unrest, Bradford’s Detective Superintendent Dick Holland said in 1981 that targeting those of ‘typical Rastafarian


appearance’ is ‘the sort of discrimination and prejudice we want from police officers. That is what clears up the crime.’ The link between Rastafarian cultural dress and crime was at the time made explicit by senior officials entrusted with the maintenance of law and order.

Only one positive representation of a Rastafarian appears in the Chief Constable’s report of the 1985 Handsworth disturbances. Dear writes, ‘a spokesman for the Rastafarian factions offered to tour the district in cars requesting groups of marauding black youths to leave the streets.’ This image suggests the ‘spokesman’ to be a community leader for the youths, who are dehumanised by the term ‘marauding.’

Looking beyond official reports, reference to contemporary local press can unearth some surprisingly even-handed reportage. The Birmingham Mail wrote, ‘Local Rastafarian Nigel Heath appealed for calm and walked up and down the streets pleading through a loud hailer for people to “cool it” and return to their homes.’ This glimmer of empathy within media discourse can be seen as prototypical of the role which some Rastafarians would go on to play as peacekeepers in twenty-first century Handsworth, patrolling alongside police officers to maintain peaceful relations under the banner of the Haile Selassie Peace Foundation.

Benjamin Zephaniah: Handsworth was a ‘cold suburb of Kingston Jamaica’

My attention now shifts to a poetic optic equally informed by the legacy of colonialism, defined not by detachment from but investment in Handsworth. Zephaniah was born in Handsworth and spent time growing up in Jamaica before coming of age in Birmingham and going on to travel all over the world as a writer. He combines his Rastafarian beliefs with a sense of connectedness to Birmingham. He uses the city’s early history in ‘The Big

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132 Wolverhampton Express & Star, September 14, 1981.
133 Dear, p. 65.
Bang’ to locate his own origins within a longer Anglo-Saxon tradition, interwoven with colonial images and personal recollections:

I was born where the Beorma people made home,
Handsworth, in Brummagem.
For many of my early years
I thought of this town to be a cold suburb
Of Kingston, Jamaica.
My then girlfriend Jasvinder Basra
Thought it to be a cold suburb of Jullunder, India,
And we were both right.
We, in our puppy love innocence
Knew that it was only a matter of time and space,
We Dark Matter grew up holding hands
Listening to Reggae and Bhangra
Eating channa and ackee,
And playing doctors and nurses somewhere in the future.

This stanza perfectly illustrates Barry’s trope of ‘double visioning’. Zephaniah’s opening statement about his birthplace does not at first glance appear to be ‘radically trans-historical’, yet there is a self-conscious interplay of colonial and Anglo Saxon histories. As a Rastafarian and poet who turned down the offer of an OBE, one might expect Zephaniah to distance his own roots from those of the Anglo-Saxon people.

Birmingham is, however, the ‘centre of the universe’ for Zephaniah. The mundane image of the ‘suburbs’ (4), when applied to Jamaica or India, has the effect of satirising the British Empire. The grandeur of an Empire on which the sun never sets is skewered by the bathos inherent in annexing inner-city Birmingham as a ‘suburb’ (4) of tropical climes. This is the creativity of expression afforded to Zephaniah’s characters. If they choose to ‘double vision’ Handsworth and imaginatively super-impose their own realities onto it, those realities can be just as valid as the geographical ‘fact’ of actual inner-city Birmingham: ‘we were both right’ (8). More importantly, the poem situates Birmingham

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136 Barry, p. 46.
137 Ibid.
at the heart of an imperial nexus, evoking an era when the price of an African slave was popularly said to be ‘one Birmingham gun’.\footnote{Ian Grosvenor, Rita McLean and Sián Roberts (eds.), \textit{Making Connections: Birmingham Black International History} (Birmingham: Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures, 2002), p. 48.} Zephaniah’s representation of Birmingham is expansive and its diasporic vision reaches in many directions. Diametrically opposed to the idea of parochialism, Zephaniah borrows cosmological terms to create the backdrop against which his characters can connect despite racial difference, stating it was ‘only a matter of time and space’ (10). An international, interplanetary optic allows Zephaniah to convey the depth of his conviction in universal human empathy and love.

The first stanza of ‘The Big Bang’ closes with a triplet of paired images, ‘Reggae and Bhangra’ (12); ‘channa and ackee (13)’; ‘doctors and nurses’ (14). The first two pairs are designed to convey a shared postcolonial identity. African Caribbean and Asian people were often collectively referred to as ‘black’ in late twentieth century Britain, not always as a derogatory term but also as a self-determined statement of collective ‘non-white’ solidarity, as evident in community resistance pamphlets such as \textit{A Different Reality}. Zephaniah alludes to juvenile sexual experimentation with the phrase ‘playing doctors and nurses’, but perhaps also to the induction of many black British and Asian migrants into the medical professions, including the poet’s own mother who worked as a nurse.\footnote{Interview by Nikki Spencer, ‘My family values: Benjamin Zephaniah, poet’, \textit{The Guardian}, 4 July 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/jul/04/benjamin-zephaniah-family-values> [Accessed 10 November 2016]} ‘Doctors and nurses’ positions the two youngsters as medics for postcolonial Britain; healing divisions through their natural and non-sectarian affection.

‘African heart deep in my Brummie chest’

Thus far, Barry’s concept of ‘double visioning’ and archival materials on Handsworth have informed my close reading of poems, songs and visual arts from the region. I have shown how the Rastafarian ideology enables poetic perspectives which simultaneously see visions of Africa and ‘Babylon’; or amalgamations of various inner-city regions into

one homogenous concrete jungle. In looking at Zephaniah’s poetry, I have demonstrated how colonial histories can change the way in which the first generation offspring of Commonwealth migrants see their British birthplace, often with imaginative and creative results. Envisioning Africa or the Caribbean projected onto the Midlands is a literary response to a cultural and socio-economic climate which often proves hostile to its black and Asian British inhabitants and therefore sparks a sense of longing for an ancestral home.

Having examined poetry and lyrics which look outwards, to Africa, India or the Caribbean, this section will now conclude by examining a mode of *inward* ‘double visioning’. Just like the young black boy from Handsworth boy with his flared trousers and union jack, captured on camera by Vanley Burke, many black British and Asian poets celebrate the simultaneity of being at once from ‘here’ and ‘elsewhere’. There is a mode of belonging expounded by several black British writers via tropes as domestic and seemingly commonplace as loyalty to a British football team. Take, for example, Caryl Phillips talking about growing up in Leeds:

> Leeds was my city, and I slowly developed a great pride in it, a pride that was enhanced by the existence of Leeds United Football Club in their spotlessly white kit, a team who tormented their opposition with industrial efficiency and bestowed upon me, and countless tens of thousands of others, a reason to walk tall and declare, ‘We are Leeds.’

Elsewhere in Phillip’s account of Leeds, he talks about local pubs which still enforced a colour bar, racist abuse and the endless grey of Northern England. His is clearly not an idealised expression of belonging. However, the football club provides a unifying cause to rally round, expressed in the collective pronoun ‘we are Leeds’. Zephaniah communicates a similar civic sporting pride in his poem ‘Knowing Me’, while simultaneously emphasising his African and Caribbean heritage:

> At least once a week I watch television
> With my Jamaican hand on my Ethiopian heart
> The African heart deep in my Brummie chest,

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142 See appendix Figure 4.
143 ‘Northern soul: Caryl Phillips returns to Leeds to see how the city of his youth has changed’, *The Guardian*  
[Accessed 17 September 2015]
And I chant, Aston Villa, Aston Villa, Aston Villa,
Believe me I know my stuff.
I am not wandering drunk into the rootless future
Nor am I going back in time to find somewhere to live.144

Famous for his lightness of touch, Zephaniah here fuses the African oral tradition and British football chants to emphasise the ‘tribalism’ of football fandom. Many Rastafarians reject modern technology, particularly television, which they often brand ‘tell-lie-vision’ and consider a tool of Babylon.145 Zephaniah is perhaps humorously asserting that as well as being a Rasta with an African consciousness, he is also just a regular bloke, who watches television ‘at least once a week.’ The layering, or superimposing effect which Barry identifies as ‘double visioning’ is expressed quite differently in this poem. While the same geographical regions are invoked for their importance in defining the poet’s heritage, they are not imagined as literal geographical regions. Instead, their centrality to the poet’s identity is made explicit by constituting physical parts of his anatomy, layer upon layer: the hand, on the heart, in the chest. His awareness grounds him, preventing him from ‘wandering drunk into the rootless future.’ Zephaniah is rooted and comfortable with who he is, and equally who his community are, ‘we are all Brummies.’146 This excerpt also speaks to the theme of repatriation to Africa, as examined above through the lyrics of Steel Pulse. For Zephaniah, this impulse to ‘go back in time’ seems to hold no appeal. If this is the case, his views align with other prominent black Britons such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, who stated, ‘I didn’t think the wholesale repatriation to Africa was either practicable or desirable as a political project.’147 Johnson’s rejection of the literal interpretation of core Rastafarian beliefs is simultaneously an acceptance of a black British identity with multiple facets.

Multiplicity of identity (African, Ethiopian, Jamaican, Brummie) is not problematic for Zephaniah, who insists:

I am not half a poet shivering in the cold
Waiting for a culture shock to warm my long lost drum rhythm,
I am here and now, I am all that Britain is about
I’m happening as we speak.
Honestly,
I don’t have an identity crisis.\(^{148}\)

Whereas the ‘double visioning’ used by Steel Pulse or Moqapi Selassie evokes a mythic, ancestral past, Zephaniah emphasises the ‘here and now’ to express how a double, triple, or quadruple vision of his self-identity celebrates ‘all that Britain is about’. A semantic field of warmth and cold is deployed to demonstrate that the poet is not in need of a deeper cultural connection to ‘warm’ him, providing respite from the supposed ‘shivering’ of feeling incomplete or alienated in one’s environment. On the contrary, Zephaniah’s poem is optimistic. The potential it suggests is analogous to green shoots in the concrete jungle. ‘Knowing Me’ is a prime example of what Leeming has called ‘Black British writing that doesn’t apologise.’\(^ {149}\) Much like Zephaniah and Phillips, the Leicester poet has also utilised football as a metonym for Britishness: ‘I know I belong here. I know how I like my tea. I know what football I like.’\(^ {150}\) Contemporary Black and Asian British poets do not necessarily share the ‘double visioning’ optic which was prevalent in Rastafarian cultural expression in the 1970s and 1980s although the influence of these times cannot be underestimated. As I have shown with reference to the Handsworth disturbances of 1985, the disenfranchisement of Rasta cultural practitioners was perhaps inevitable in a society which marginalised and oppressed them. As values shift between the mid-twentieth century Commonwealth migrants and their British-born descendants, black and Asian British writers take their reference points from the UK rather than overseas. The emergent generation of writers from the Midlands, regardless of their

\(^{149}\) Carol Leeming in interview with Tom Kew, Curve Theatre, Leicester, November 10 2014.
\(^{150}\) Ibid.
heritage, may be more inclined to take inspiration from the nuances of their immediate surroundings to produce a uniquely regional sensibility.
Chapter Nine

‘No coloured; no Irish’: The Caribbean Connection in Post-War Irish Birmingham Literature

Introduction

The historical experience of migrating from Ireland to Birmingham, and the subsequent development of a second generation Irish Brummie identity, provide rich subject matter for contemporary Birmingham writers such as Bennett and O’flynn. Although not what might be called archetypal examples of the postcolonial genre, their Irish Birmingham novels can legitimately be considered postcolonial fiction. There are therefore many parallels which can be drawn in such works between twentieth century Irish and Caribbean migrant experiences. Looking at ‘locospecific’ Birmingham literary examples raises much broader questions about how the Midlands’ diverse communities are represented on the page. Is the Irish-British migrant experience visible on our bookshelves? How is the diasporic experience — for example scenes of arrival, the trope of the train station or the sharing of cultural foods — communicated in Midlands texts? Are African Caribbean and black British art forms more commercially viable than works by writers of Irish extraction? And are Irish writers considered too similar to the English for their stories to warrant the kind of sustained critical attention received by fiction with its origins in the ‘exotic’ Caribbean?

This chapter will attempt to address some of these important research questions. Links have been drawn in literary and cultural studies between Irish and black communities globally but never have these links been considered as part of the Midlands’

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152 This is an example of a sign appearing on the doors of rented accommodation and other amenities found across post-war Britain. Although appearing in many different variations, this particular sign was reported in Birmingham and cited in John Archer Jackson, The Irish in Britain (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 63. The term ‘coloured’ is not my own and is used here strictly within this quoted context. A full discussion of the word and its implications for black and Irish Birmingham will follow in this section.

153 Barry, p. 3.

multicultural literary output. This regional fiction is marginalised in a postcolonial fiction market which is highly London-centric, both at the industry level and in terms of literary setting, and which tends to bestow value upon just a select few black British or Asian writers.

Furthermore, it would be disingenuous to argue that Irish voices have not impacted our conception of the canon of English literature for centuries; long before the black presence made any significant commercial impact on English literature. Authors such as Jonathan Swift, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, Colm Toibín, Seamus Heaney, Samuel Beckett and George Bernard Shaw have all been hugely influential and widely celebrated. While acknowledging the influence of these canonical authors, I contend that contemporary Irish Birmingham fiction is the product of a distinctly Midlands postcolonial context and offers important insights into Birmingham’s post-war development.

I have therefore selected Irish Birmingham literary examples which reveal common experiences and also professional and personal interchange between black and Irish postcolonial subjects and their descendants. I use these fictional excerpts to interrogate how the ‘otherness’ of Irish Brummies is represented on the page and — in a wider sense — ascertain what value is placed on what Huggan calls the ‘culturally “othered” goods’ they produce, in this case literature. A literary close reading is the favoured methodology here for analysing Irish Birmingham identity, with novels by Irish Brummie authors Bennett and O’Flynn’s novels providing a unique twenty-first century viewpoint and the advantage of dual perspectives of both first and second generation Irish migrants, informed by the authors’ own Irish heritage. In this way, my argument considers literary representation in the novels themselves but also how these novels fit into the wider British tradition of post-war, postcolonial fiction.

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157 Ibid., p. 6.
I achieve this aim initially by studying Irish Birmingham literary examples which demonstrate commonality with Caribbean migrant stories. The analysis focuses initially on the romanticised moment of arrival for new migrants, then moves onto employment and solidarity between workers of diverse ethnicities. Before proceeding with this analysis, it is first necessary — in the interests of clarity — to address my key theoretical models and terminology.

Literary Value and Exoticism
As this thesis has consistently argued, regional fiction from the Midlands has historically received little in the way of literary approbation. Fiction with its roots in a markedly different elsewhere appears to be valued more highly by readers. But how is that value created? According to Huggan, ‘value is constructed through global market operations involving the exchange of cultural commodities and, particularly, culturally “othered” goods.’\(^{158}\) But just how ‘other’ are Irish Birmingham novels? Extending and testing Huggan’s focus on the global postcolonial marketplace, my analysis concentrates on a uniquely Irish Brummie brand of postcolonial fiction. This methodology has at its core the Birmingham Irish community’s long-standing links with the city’s black community and a desire to understand how this synergy makes a significant contribution to the second city’s literary identity.

Despite the geographical remove of their homelands, the black and Irish communities in Birmingham have often lived and worked side-by-side. However, their cultural products are rarely considered with equal critical attention. To my mind, the problem lies not within the literary texts themselves, nor with the wider reading public, but with those who Huggan brands ‘agents of legitimation’.\(^ {159}\) This mildly sinister-sounding appellation is in fact a broad term for the many hands through which a book might pass on its way to potential commercial success:

The writer himself/herself is only one of several ‘agents of legitimation’ — others might include booksellers, publishers, reviewers and, not least, individual readers

\(^{158}\) Huggan, p. 6.
\(^{159}\) Ibid., p. 5.
and ‘valuing communities’ (Frow 1995). These agents are all contenders in the struggle to validate particular writers; and the writers themselves vie for the right to attain and, in turn, confer recognition and prestige (Huggan 1997a).

In this regard, this chapter of my thesis picks up a thread established when discussing Nottingham’s performance poetry scene, that of value, and how and where it is attributed. While that Nottingham regional literary culture relies on personal, informal networks which Frow calls ‘valuing communities’, published works tend to accrue value when they are recognised by more formalised ‘agents’ and communities. To clarify my terminology I use ‘value’ to refer not only to the market potential — the sales revenue of a publication — but also the kind of prestige bestowed upon a book by recognition and appreciation, no matter what the scale. Reviewers, critics and — perhaps most vitally — readers, are integral to this process.

An Irish-Birmingham author who has won the validation of major publishers and many readers globally is Anne Bennett. The author was born in the Horse Fair district of Birmingham to Irish Catholic parents and grew up within a ‘tight-knit community’. As a down-to-earth author of ‘Birmingham Sagas’, Bennett maintains that value is attained through a strong reader-author connection. She likens finishing a good novel to ‘losing a friend’. For Bennett, her readers ‘are the most important people in the world’ and provide the only validation she needs. This alternative model of value attribution is recurrent throughout my analysis of Midlands literary cultures.

The Romanticised Arrival: Early Migration to Birmingham

Maeve was glad that she had a bag packed with goodies from the farm and the five pound note her mother had pressed her to take.

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160 Huggan, p. 5.
163 ‘An interview with Anne Bennett’ <http://www.annebennett.co.uk/All-about-Anne.php> [Accessed 12 March 2016]
164 Ibid.
My father is a very proud man and he always reminds us that he came to this country with a borrowed £5, which he repaid 5 months after he came. He owns his own house/hotel and industrial property and owes nobody a penny.\textsuperscript{166}

When I first came to London I was only 16/ With a fiver in my pocket and my ole dancing bag\textsuperscript{167}

The trope of the young Irish migrant leaving their simple, rural existence behind and heading to the big city with only a ‘fiver’ to their name is a classic twentieth century actualisation of the Dick Whittington narrative. Within British popular culture, Shane McGowan embodies this figure more than perhaps anyone else. The Pogues’ frontman is for many the popular voice of the Irish rebel in London and in his lyric above he is keen to emphasise that the odds were stacked against him when he emigrated: he was young and poor but armed with a sense of adventure. The comparative excerpts from Bennett and Laura Grigg show how many young Irish people arrived with little more than the provisions offered as parting gifts by family. Modest as they may seem, these items represent a great deal of sacrifice and support from the families which were separated from their offspring.

My historical remit begins in the post-war period, a time in which the economic fortunes of Birmingham made it an appealing destination for migrant workers, particularly those travelling from Ireland. As John Archer Jackson asserts, ‘since the end of the Second World War, [Irish migration to England] has been concentrated in centres of developing light industry in the Midlands.’\textsuperscript{168} Within the wider history of Irish migration to England, the concentrated period of post-war migration to Birmingham can be viewed as part of what Delaney and several of his contemporaries have considered the ‘Second great wave of Irish migrants to England in the 1940s and 50s’, as distinct from the first wave induced by the great famine of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{169} The second wave coincides with post-war Caribbean migration to Birmingham and this simultaneity

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{166} Laura Grigg in Interview with Carl Chin in Carl Chin, \textit{Birmingham Irish: Making our Mark} (Birmingham: Birmingham Library Services, 2003), p. 125.
\textsuperscript{168} Jackson, p. 21.
\end{flushright}
provides the starting point for a complex series of intertwined community narratives as black, and Irish settlers made Birmingham their home.

In their own accounts of Irish migration to England, Historians such as Jackson and Delaney have mirrored the London-centric bias of postcolonial fiction. Once again, the Midlands is under threat of being anonymised. Delaney positions the Midlands as a faceless, mechanised entity which snatches innocent young Irish from the womb-like security of their motherland:

the collective memory of post-war Irish emigration centres on poignant stories of young rural migrants displaced from their local worlds in search of work in the anonymous industrial centres of Britain.\textsuperscript{170}

When so-called factual publications resort to branding Midlands cities as ‘anonymous’, we see first-hand the power which ‘agents of legitimation’ wield in denying the value of given place.\textsuperscript{171} Here is the antithesis of an exoticist aesthetic, as the historian weighs upon the reader the sense of duty and drudgery which characterised many migrants’ new lives. Tim Pat Coogan takes this denial of value one step further. In Wherever Green is Worn: The Story of the Irish Diaspora (2000) Coogan states that ‘the dull tide of grey, rather than green, which is emblematic of so much of the Irish community in Birmingham, will not readily evaporate.’\textsuperscript{172}

In some ways young Irish migrants, just like their Caribbean peers, can be seen as pioneers, their movements foreshadowing the industrial transformation of Ireland and to some degree, the Caribbean, in the latter half of the twentieth century. Firstly, the migrants moved away to a more mechanised society, then their respective homelands began to transform themselves through technology and industry. Irish migrants left behind what Inglis calls an ‘isolated, insular, Catholic rural society revolving around

\textsuperscript{170} Delaney, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{171} Huggan, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{172} Tim Pat Coogan, Wherever Green is Worn: The Story of the Irish Diaspora (London: Random House, 2000), p. 199:
It is very important to note that for Irish commentators such as Coogan, and many in both the Irish and wider communities, the impact of the 1974 Birmingham bombings and the ‘Birmingham Six’ miscarriage of justice will forever taint the Irish-Birmingham connection. Such catastrophic events had an enormous impact which is still felt today.
agriculture’ and felt the resistance of their families as they packed their bags.\(^{173}\) They were often headed for Birmingham, a prototype of what would become the model of a globalised ern city, in Inglis’ words, ‘a more open, liberal-individualistic, secular urban society.’\(^{174}\) The point of initiation into this new society was the train station, site of my first thematic focus. Below, I look at how migrations which enacted a leap across ideological, as well as geographical borders, are symbolised through the railway station, an icon of modernity.

For young Irish people leaving home for Birmingham, separation from family often had implications beyond the emotional impact of saying goodbye. In economic terms this represented the loss of a worker and potential family income and within the family structure, the loss of a supportive helper. In Bennett’s novel *Pack Up Your Troubles*, Maeve Brannigan is reprimanded by local gossips before departing Ireland: ‘did she think she ought to go when, after all, she was such a grand help to her mother’ (*PUYT* 1). At the individual level, the decision to emigrate is a brave one as it goes against the Irish Catholic sense of collectivism which defined Irish rural life. Tom Inglis remarks how this ethos is based around self-sacrifice, ‘it is a surrender of the self to the wider group.’\(^{175}\) In migrating, it could be argued that young people were choosing an individualised society over a collectivist one and therefore rebelling against their upbringing. In Delaney’s words this is ‘an act that signified the difference between being dependent on one’s family and seeking to make one’s own way in the world.’\(^{176}\)

It is against this backdrop of individual rebellion that many migrations narratives unfold, placing high expectations upon the destination city, first encountered via its train station. The departure from Ireland was equally centred on the train station as few families could afford to travel with their young emigrants for a quayside farewell. As Delaney asserts, ‘painful scenes of separation and loss were enacted on desolate railway

\(^{174}\) Ibid.
\(^{175}\) Ibid., p. 4.
\(^{176}\) Delaney, p. 12.
platforms across post-war Ireland.' The train station trope is therefore not merely symbolic of arrival and excitement but also of sadness. Many migrants had given up everything and faced the scorn of the ‘wider group’ for their decision to emigrate. As I look at how the early stages of post-war migration have been romanticised in Irish Birmingham fiction, particular emphasis is placed on the enduring trope of the momentous arrival. Bennett is a commercially successful writer of sagas, or historical novels, who has published fifteen books with Harper Collins. The publishing house is a self-professed champion of ‘home-grown heroes’ and ‘international giants’ alike. Bennett’s 2000 novel PUYT tells the tale of Maeve, a rural Irish girl who travels to Birmingham in search of economic stability, excitement and romance. It begins by documenting the train journey to England and the excited whispers of the Irish migrants:

And as the train chugged its way southwards, they told her of Birmingham’s cinemas and dance halls, which opened all year round. They described the music halls and the Bull Ring, a huge shopping centre where great entertainment could be had, they said, on a Saturday night [...] she was sure her life would take an up-turn. (PUYT 6)

In this scene, the movement of the train enacts the growing excitement of its passengers. We can almost hear the voices synchronising with the ‘chug’ of the steam engine. Concurrent with Caribbean migration narratives, there is a significant transition for the protagonists from a rural homeland to the highly mechanised, modernised British city. The predicted social patterns of Maeve’s new life are mapped out for her against the architecture of Birmingham; dancing, potential romance and ‘great entertainment’ to be had on a Saturday night, presumably on her night off from a lucrative job. The landmarks of Birmingham take on a new sheen and significance when viewed through Maeve’s eyes — devoid of the cynicism which marks much social commentary on Birmingham’s architectural modernity — and fuelled by images which had reached them back home. According to Delaney, newspapers and radio had promised many young Irish ‘a consumer-based social scene organised around popular activities such as dancing and

177 Ibid., p. 46
178 Inglis, p. 4.
179 <https://www.harpercollins.co.uk/> [Accessed 25 March 2016]
going to the cinema and, most importantly, a vision of a future that centred on the
gift of individual aspirations." This lifestyle is a departure from the collectivism of
a rural Irish Catholic society and is based around such landmarks as the Bullring.

The modernity of England is often represented in Bennett's literature by the train
station, that checkpoint of arrival for many twentieth century migrants. Before the
advent of cheap aviation, the railway network linked migrants' epic sea voyages onward
to their new host towns and cities. Train stations were the gateway to the modernity that
was alleged to await new arrivals. For Maeve Brannigan, New Street Station epitomises a
world a million miles away from her quiet Irish village:

When Maeve and the O'Rourkes alighted at New Street Station, Maeve wondered
if she would ever find her uncle in such a loud and busy place. All around her was
the noise of people. Porters pushing laden trolleys were yelling out warnings to
anyone on their way, and at a newsstand, a vendor shouted his wares, while
beside her the gigantic train was giving little pants of steam, as if it were an
untamed animal out of breath. (PUYT 6)

The bustling environment is indifferent to the needs of the new arrivals. The chaos of the
station is the antithesis of their rural Irish origins. While the porters and vendor are
dehumanised, shouting indiscriminately, the train is anthropomorphised. This mode of
transport takes on new life as the means by which migrants enter their own new lives.

New Street here fits into a wider tradition of representing train stations in literature as
sites of modernity. E.M. Forster uses this motif in *A Passage to India* (1924) where the
train station provides the space to explore the differences, and similarities, between the
colonisers and their so-called subjects as they embark upon a fateful excursion to the
Marabar caves. The English ridicule the Indian’s decision ‘to “meet” in the caves as if
they were the clock at Charing Cross’, simultaneously suggesting their own supremacy in
terms of efficiency and establishing the London landmark as a colonial icon. In
Forster's Chandrapore, just as in Bennett’s Birmingham, the railways are a means of
initiating or terminating the many and various journeys which colonialism initiated,
whether directly or otherwise.

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180 Delaney, p. 21.
There is however, hope for Birmingham within the London-centric cultural industry. Irish Brummie author Bennett felt the perceived pressure of literary London-centricity when she drafted her first ever novel. She sent it to the London-based publisher Headline\textsuperscript{182} and received eagerly-awaited feedback. As Bennett recalls,

And the editor said when she rang, ‘it’s a lovely book, but why did you place it in London?’ So I said, ‘I thought they were all placed in London.’ She asked me where I lived and I said ‘Birmingham’. She said ‘would you like to write about Birmingham?’ and I said — to my shame — ‘no one writes about Birmingham’. She said... ‘Exactly’.\textsuperscript{183}

This appears to contradict Huggan’s argument about the appeal of the ‘postcolonial exotic’ as here a regional locale represents marketing novelty and is seen as a virtue.\textsuperscript{184} The subsequent success of Bennett’s first four novels with Headline enabled her to go on to have a long career with Harper Collins. What the editor of that first manuscript was trying to coax from the budding author was the authenticity of voice which comes with local knowledge and ‘loco-specific’ detail.\textsuperscript{185} In a recent question and answer session with poet and novelist Kate Tempest, I asked Kate why she chooses to incorporate the minutiae of her local area into her work. She replied that ‘the more particular you can be about the specific place you’re from, the more universally that depiction will be able to connect.’\textsuperscript{186} This suggests that Irish Birmingham literature is an important cultural phenomenon in the formation of a post-war, postcolonial literary aesthetic. The setting of Birmingham may not be exotic, but the exchange between Bennett and Headline above speaks volumes about the need to question the dominance of London when it comes to literary value. To hear an editor, perhaps the archetypal ‘agent of legitimation’, requesting Birmingham content suggests hope for the future of Midlands literature.\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{182} An imprint of the huge Hodder Headline Plc. \href{http://www.hodderheadline.co.uk/headline.htm}{[Accessed 12 June 2016]}

\textsuperscript{183} Anne Bennett, ‘How & Why I became a Writer’ \href{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3A1TdcKyblc}{[Accessed 13 April 2016]}

\textsuperscript{184} Huggan, 2001.

\textsuperscript{185} Barry, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{186} Kate Tempest in conversation at Rough Trade, Nottingham, 13 April 2016. Although Kate is here referring to London, her statement has broader application.

\textsuperscript{187} Huggan, p. 5.
Employment and Ethnicity

After the excitement of the often-romanticised moment of arrival in post-war England, migrants had to face the challenge of settling into an unfamiliar society and finding gainful employment. The history of racism and resistance in the workplace is a complex one, and many trade union members of colour were made to feel like ‘unequal comrades’ to use Wrench’s term. Historically black and minority ethnic workers have been excluded from some trade unions, due to white British workers’ fears that workers of colour would undercut their wages and be potential strike-breakers. However, the workplace is a particularly fruitful site of solidarity and of negotiations between post-war Birmingham’s black and Irish communities. O’Flynn’s third novel *Mr Lynch’s Holiday* (2013) explores what Irishness means to the eponymous, Irish-born Mr Lynch and his second generation son Eamonn. Set in the no man’s land of a semi-derelict British expat colony on the Spanish coast, the novel constructs its characters’ identities by weaving together Birmingham immigrant narratives which combine to offer a literary outlook on the development of a modern Irish Birmingham sensibility. Questions of belonging, assimilation, and otherness all come to the fore in O’Flynn’s writing and O’Flynn offers not only a literary understanding of a modern Irish Birmingham identity but also an understanding of how this is inextricably linked with the plight of Caribbean migrants to the city.

Throughout *MLH*, the nuances of post-war Irish Birmingham are articulated via the protagonist Dermot Lynch. His observations give the reader a uniquely positive insight. As author Kate Clanchy asserts in her review; ‘Dermot's gaze, like O'Flynn's own, is an especially thoughtful and respectful one, tuned to see the lovely in the

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189 Ibid. p. 2.

190 Catherine O'Flynn, *Mr Lynch’s Holiday* (London: Viking, 2013). Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *MLH*. 
ordinary." For Dermot and his Commonwealth co-workers, the ordinary is everyday working life on the Birmingham buses. From the trains which transported them to their new home, the buses were a natural progression for many migrants, particularly from Ireland and the Caribbean. This was no coincidence but rather a deliberate recruitment drive by the Birmingham authorities:

Birmingham had one of the largest municipally organised bus operations in the world, and set up a centre in Dublin that attracted more Irish Labour than any other transport department in Britain. Dermot finds himself happily employed on the buses for his whole career, accompanied each day by his trusty Aston Villa holdall (MLH 12). The Irish were not the only migrants attracted to such a large employer however, and Dermot forms part of a multicultural work force, working amicably alongside colleagues from the Caribbean and Asia. There is a strong history of workplace resistance on the British bus networks. Buses are a key symbolic site for black and Asian Britons because of the Bristol bus boycott of 1963. The boycott was orchestrated to protest against the racist employment policy of the Bristol Omnibus Company, who refused to employ black or Asian conductors. Birmingham chose to adopt a more progressive employment policy and the fictional accounts of Irish Birmingham authors reflect this approach.

A sense of multiracial acceptance runs throughout MLH but is conditional on a mode of belonging for the new arrivals based around hard work and assimilation. In his quiet dedication to his career, Dermot perhaps demonstrates that Irish trait which Inglis calls ‘a surrender of the self to the wider group.’ In this instance, the group is much wider and more ethnically diverse, including not only fellow Irish but migrants from all over the former Commonwealth. Dermot quickly settles amongst a multicultural work force.

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194 Ibid.
195 Inglis, p. 4.
force and forges a blissful existence within the concrete jungle, where ‘he’d sit at the
terminal each evening, watching the sun set behind the power station’ (*MLH* 39). As he
fondly recalls in his old age, ‘I worked alongside men from Pakistan and the Indies all
my life’ (*MLH* 190). O’Flynn — the Irish Birmingham champion of ‘the lovely in the
ordinary’ — deploys a literary mode far removed from what Huggan calls ‘The
Postcolonial Exotic’ and more in line with what Procter calls ‘the postcolonial
everyday’. In the context of the novel *MLH*, this is a distinctly unglamorous milieu,
yet with its emphasis on friendship, solidarity and a unified status as ‘other’ to the White
English, ‘the postcolonial everyday’ becomes a celebratory mode in O’Flynn’s fiction as
colleagues from all over the world become lifelong friends. Even when some return to
their countries of origin in retirement, the friends maintain contact, posting witty quotes
to each other from old era movies.

To address the ethnic dimension of O’Flynn’s text, the interracial solidarity among
labouring migrants to Birmingham runs contrary to Ignatiev’s theory of ‘how the Irish
became white’ in nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Ignatiev asserts that it
was not solidarity but an adopted *difference* from their black counterparts which came to
define the social status of Irish labourers in the US: ‘to become white meant at first that
they could sell themselves piecemeal instead of being sold for life, and later that they
could compete for jobs instead of being confined to certain work’. Yet the Irish,
branded by African–Irish American Michael Twitty as ‘a group for whom “whiteness” was
seriously in doubt until the early twentieth century’, still did not have access to some of
the privileges enjoyed by White English citizens in post-war Birmingham. In a
symbolic ritual of devotion to his adopted city, Dermott invites his young son Eamonn —

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196 Kate Clanchy, ‘Review: Catherine O’Flynn, Mr Lynch’s Holiday’, *The Guardian*, 16
198 Michael W Twitty, “‘Kiss me, I’m Irish’ took on a new meaning when DNA proved
that I was’, *The Guardian*, 7 March 2015
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/17/irish-african-american-dna-
tests> [Accessed 25 March 2016]
a second generation Irish Brummie — to ride with him on the circular bus route. On the
day of the big event, the boy tells a fellow primary school pupil of his excitement at
riding the bus that night with his father:

It goes around the inner circle of Birmingham. It goes up Newtown, Five Ways, Sparkbrook…’
‘Sounds boring.’
‘No. It’s not boring. It’s wicked and tonight I’ll be the first person, ever, to do the
entire route who isn’t a bus driver.’ […]
‘Anyway, bus driving’s a wog’s job.’
‘No it’s not.’
‘Yes it is. Your dad must be a wog. Are you a wog?’
‘No.’
‘You must be a Paki, then. They’re the only other people who drive buses. Are
you a Paki?’
‘No.’
Mark was doing some kind of accent now. ‘Oh bloody hell! Where’s my turban! Oh
bloody hell!’

Eamonn started to clear his tray. He didn’t want to look as if he were running
away, but he wanted to run away.
‘Yeah, piss off, Paki, before I batter you too.’ (MLH 84–85)

For the prejudiced young classmate, the ethnicity of the Lynch family is determined not
by the colour of their skins or their country of origins. There is an absolute certainty to
his assertion ‘you must be a Paki then’ (my emphasis) as his understanding of a
stratified jobs market places Asians and then blacks respectively at the bottom of the
ladder. Further to this verbal assessment of the Lynch’s ethno-social status, Mark is
ready to use violence in an attempt to reinforce its validity. These kinds of negative
encounters disrupt the young Eamonn’s identity formation as a second-generation Irish
Brummie. His father wants to share with him the job which brings him such pride and to
perhaps instil in the boy a sense of rootedness to Birmingham. The fact that Eamonn
thinks the bus route is ‘wicked’ (MLH 84) suggests that this civic pride has already been
carefully nurtured by Dermot Lynch.

The racism in the excerpt above is shocking through its use of terminology such
as ‘wog’ and ‘Paki’, yet surprisingly these words function as blanket terms for working-
class immigrant communities. In this regard MLH suggests that sections of post-war
Birmingham shared some ideologies with Victorian Britain. In the 1890s London zoo
purchased a new chimpanzee and named it ‘Paddy’ to great public amusement.¹⁹⁹ The Irish were considered not only a suitable target for fun but a physically subhuman entity and therefore deserving of scorn and even violence. In this way Britain shared common practice with America, where in the nineteenth century, ‘newly-arrived Irish immigrants, although not slaves, were often regarded as belonging to the same social, if not genetic, category as black Americans.’²⁰⁰ Indeed, there is significant evidence to suggest that many Irish were themselves enslaved after Cromwell’s invasion of Ireland in 1650 and sent to labour in the Caribbean alongside African slaves.²⁰¹ So while colonial legacies and racist ideologies lump together black and Irish people as inferior, in the Birmingham literary examples under analysis here, this denigration is subverted and turned into working-class solidarity, as I will show below.

It appears that divisive attitudes such as those of Ethan’s racist school friend were less common on the Birmingham buses themselves, which Clanchy calls ‘proper buses, those trundling, multi-cultural markers of a functioning democracy.’²⁰² While researching MLH, O’Flynn spent time at bus depots across Birmingham to interrogate the idea of workplace solidarity:

I went to spend a couple of days at the bus depot for research. I thought it would be like a seething cauldron of inter-racial and inter-cultural tension. I thought there would be all kinds of argy-bargy and hostility like ‘Oh, they’re getting the best shifts’. I was expecting the drivers to have a lot of rage. I was so shocked. It was very integrated. As I went into the canteen there were people playing cards together. The bus drivers were unified, it was the passengers who were the common enemy.²⁰³

The humorous notion of a ‘common enemy’ provides a focal point for inter-cultural solidarity here. Because these research visits took place between 2010–2013, there is a risk of ‘rose tinted spectacles’ being applied to O’Flynn’s historicisation of the post-war

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²⁰¹ Ibid.
²⁰³ Catherine O’Flynn interviewed by Tom Kew, 27 May 2016.
period which she writes about in MLH. The author is however, realistic about the past she portrays. She says of black-Irish relations in Nechelles where she grew up, that ‘It wasn’t like they were all hanging out together but I was never aware of any hostilities or any problems.’

It is not my intention to portray Birmingham as an integrated utopia but rather to examine how the city’s multicultural dimension is represented in contemporary literature.

In the literary examples above I have focused on Irish-Black solidarity on the Birmingham bus networks. This is of course not the full picture and — necessarily given the remit of this project — makes use of only a small selection of the available sources. It is, however, important to stress that the Midlands were also a place of division and disunity within the workplace. In 1949 the Jamaican migrant Henry Gunter had to leave his job in a brass rolling plant in Deritend due to workplace racism. He went on to become the first black worker elected to the Birmingham Trades Council. Inspired by his success, in 1951 Gunter co-founded the Birmingham branch of the Caribbean Labour Congress, and would also become chairman of the Birmingham Afro-Caribbean Association.

The Midlands was also the home of Enoch Powell who delivered the infamous ‘Rivers of Blood Speech’ in 1968. The right-wing backlash to Powell’s immediate dismissal found a flash-point in Birmingham’s factories. In the wake of his dismissal, Powell received almost 120,000 letters, which were predominantly supportive, and an ‘I’m backing Enoch’ campaign spread across a number of factories in Birmingham. As well as a regrettable history of industrial racism, the Midlands also has a significant record of resistance among its migrant communities. The 1960s and 70s saw many mass protests by workers of colour demanding equal pay and conditions: Coneygre Factory Strike in Coventry (1967); Newby Foundry Strike, Bromwich (1969); Qualcast Factory Strike, Smethwick (1970); Crepe Sizes Strike, Nottingham (1972); Mansfield Hosiery Mills Strike, Loughborough (1972) and the Imperial Typewriters Strike,

204 Ibid.

Leicester 1974. Significantly, these strikes were conducted by workers who faced discrimination based on overt physical and religious difference from their white colleagues. It has been suggested by commentators such as Hobsbawm (1969), and Delaney (2007) that the Irish were largely ‘invisible’ and therefore faced less discrimination than their black and Asian peers. This is not however, to suggest that the Irish consistently enjoyed white privilege in post-war Birmingham. Their accents frequently identified the Irish as other and as late as 1996 research undertaken by Birmingham City Council found that this sometimes acted as an ‘impediment’ to professional development. The report states that ‘one woman was told that she had no future in management while her accent remained’, suggesting that the post-war status quo of Irish and Caribbean migrant workers being destined for lower paid roles may have continued well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

A significant historical artefact which speaks to this debate and lends this chapter its title were the crude signs on rental properties declaring ‘No coloured; no Irish’. While the term ‘coloured’, now considered outmoded and offensive, was a lazy way for landlords to lump together all prospective ‘non-white’ people for discrimination, it is worth noting that by the mid twentieth century — in a specifically post-war Birmingham context — the term ‘coloured’ does not apply to the Irish. Even if not universally considered white, they are marked out as separate from the so-called ‘coloured’ population on the historical door signs. This controversial wording provides a sticking point — an ‘inconvenient truth’ (MLH 203) — between the Irish-born Dermot and his second-generation son Eamonn. The son corrects his father for using the word ‘coloured’ and his reaction provides an insight into Irish-black relations in post-war Birmingham:

‘It’s funny that none of my mates have ever corrected me,’ Dermot once said in a rare moment of frustration. ‘And they came from Trinidad and Jamaica and Pakistan and Bangladesh. You’re always telling me what I should call them, but I never see you with a friend that isn’t white.’

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206 Ibid.
And Eamonn had tried to brush that away, insisting it was an exaggeration and moreover an irrelevance. But it lingered between them, an inconvenient truth. (MLH 203)

Clearly there is a generational divide here over the word ‘coloured’. For Eamonn the appellation pertains only to an ideology. For his father, it is a word linked to direct, lived experience of diversity at a time when the use of the word in certain contexts was considered more acceptable. The term made headlines again recently when actor Benedict Cumberbatch used the word ‘coloured’ while trying to argue for equal opportunities for black people in the entertainment industry. The BBC stated of the controversial adjective that ‘in the UK the term is, at best, seen as old fashioned and “something your gran might say”’.209 Dermot and his colleagues — regardless of their ethnicity — can be said to belong to this generation and their archaic use of the term ‘coloured’ is a source of embarrassment to the second generation. Dermot’s hard work on the buses has bought his son a lifestyle which has enabled him to cultivate a middle-class, educated and tolerant worldview. This appears to be at the expense of actually living within the diversity that Birmingham so readily offers. The family grew up on a white majority estate, Castle Vale, then Eamonn and his partner lived in the 75% white, middle-class suburb of Moseley before emigrating to the bleak, barely-populated resort in Spain inhabited exclusively by white British expats.210

Before moving on it is necessary to draw out the significance of the term ‘coloured’ in a specifically Irish Birmingham context. The word evokes shared experiences of racism faced by prospective Irish, black and Asian tenants. The BBC move beyond their ‘embarrassing gran’ definition of ‘coloured’ to suggest that it is ‘a highly offensive racial slur which recalls a time when casual racism was a part of

everyday life.’ This appears to describe post-war Birmingham quite accurately but how does Dermot, and the Birmingham Irish community more generally, fit into this nexus? This debate reminds us that the whiteness of the Irish has not always been universally agreed. A charity called Show Racism the Red Card, state that ‘[coloured] was used to describe anybody who was not white, which may imply that to be white is “normal” or default.’ In this regard, Dermot may have felt part of a community of ‘non-white’ migrant workers, even though his own complexion was light. It could be argued that his ongoing solidarity with black and Asian friends is the antithesis of the strategies adopted by many Irish American workers who adopted a ‘white’ identity in order to separate themselves from African Americans: ‘To enter the white race was a strategy to secure an advantage in a competitive society.’ Dermot has no interest in competing, he happily worked all his life in a multicultural milieu and considered his co-workers his equals and brothers. By developing this theme throughout her novel, O’Flynn is emphasising a tradition of interracial working-class solidarity within, and beyond, the Irish Birmingham community. Dermot lives and breathes what Procter calls ‘the postcolonial everyday.’

‘The matter of whiteness’

As a final thought on the Irish in post-war Birmingham I pick up Dyer’s argument about whiteness and consider whether the young second generation of Irish Brummies feel their cultural presence is still, as Hobsbawm argued in 1969, ‘invisible’. Given Olusoga’s Black and British: A Forgotten History, this takes on new significance. The documentary tells the story of Frances Barber, black servant to Dr. Johnson. Olusoga locates the great great great great grandson of Barber, and he appears outwardly to be of white British ethnicity. So while ethnic difference may over time become hidden, the

213 Ignatiev, p. 2.
situation for Irish migrants to twentieth century Britain was very different. This is a highly contentious issue and one which may have had positive implications for new Irish arrivals in post-war Birmingham, affording them the ability to 'pass' for white or British and therefore face less discrimination in a jobs market which I have shown to be marred by prejudice. Dyer states that 'at the level of racial representation, whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race’ and this ideology seems to be at play in favour of some Irish migrants — for example Lord Mayor Mike Nangle — as they negotiated their place in Birmingham society. Conversely, looking at the postcolonial literary industry, this un-raced perception of the Irish held by the wider population seems to have excluded Irish Birmingham fiction from the ‘exotic’ fiction market.

But what about the second generation of Irish Brummies? In MLH Eamonn is Dermot’s son and a neurotic, anxious and confused young man, for reasons of his heritage and also many unrelated factors. In a moment of self-reflection, Eamonn muses upon his ethnicity and the seemingly impossible position he finds himself in:

He knew that he would never turn into his dad, never be one of those sons mistaken for their fathers on the telephone. His parents were Irish, that was what he said. Never that he was Irish. He had grown up in England, had a Birmingham accent, he was so palpably different to them that it seemed preposterous to him to describe himself as Irish. But to call himself English seemed no better. His name and indeed his physical appearance declared his otherness.’ (MLH 98)

Eamonn demonstrates a level of racial consciousness rarely displayed by those who identify as white. His feelings of being stuck in between concrete identities suggests that he does not possess the comfortable sense of self which his father enjoyed living and working amongst Birmingham’s black and Irish communities. In his anxiety, Eamonn does not fit Dyer’s conception of whiteness, whereby he states ‘being white is not an issue for most white people, not a conscious or reflected part of their sense of who they are’. As this excerpt demonstrates, Irish Birmingham literature can provide a public platform for reflecting this sense of self within the wider community. Research undertaken by Birmingham City Council worryingly reveals that ‘a significant proportion

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215 Dyer, p. 3.
217 Dyer, p. 5.
of the second generation Irish interviewees felt that their Irish background had affected the way they were treated in school, either by teachers or pupils.\(^{218}\) This speaks directly to the earlier scene where Eamonn’s school friend racialises his father’s job and threatens him with violence. Clearly assimilation has not been absolute, yet many would question the desirability of merely blending in. In denying the difference of the Irish community in Birmingham, an identity crisis arises which has potentially damaging implications for mental health. By representing their difference within Birmingham and simultaneously celebrating their productive links with its diverse communities, Irish Birmingham writers are representing their community, the city and the wider Midlands in the postcolonial fiction market. London’s stranglehold on the literary representation of migration is gradually being chipped away at by titles such as *Pack up Your Troubles* and *Mr Lynch’s Holiday* as the privilege bestowed upon the ‘exotic’ decreases with each new British-born generation descended from those pioneering post-war migrants.\(^{219}\)

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\(^{219}\) Huggan, 2001.
Birmingham Conclusion: ‘Our new layered city’

I have focussed on the ‘Forward!’ impulse of Birmingham and suggested that the process of the slogan’s enactment is highly uneven, with certain areas and demographics enjoying the benefits more than others. To conclude my Birmingham chapter, I look now at an alternative, inclusive vision of the city. There is a publicly run gallery and art space in Digbeth called Eastside Projects, who have published a number of ‘user manuals’. Their latest version is entitled ‘The Artist and the Engineer’, in reference to the two figures depicted on Birmingham’s crest. These figures appear alongside a muscular arm wielding a hammer. The manual is both illustrated and narrated with a child-like simplicity. Like much children’s fiction, the manual is highly visual, with just a few words to carry the narrative. I present below a condensed transcript for the refreshing angle from which it approaches Birmingham:

The City is shaped by the Hammer.
The Hammer’s motto is Forward!
The Hammer has two supporters.
They are the Artist and the Engineer.
Each day they put the city together.
But at the end of each day The Hammer cries ‘Forward!’
The Hammer clears away the city.
He buries and flattens.
He makes a new foundation.
The next day, The Artist and The Engineer put together a new city.
One night after The Hammer has cleared the city,
The Engineer sees something left over.
The Artist has an idea.
The Artist and The Engineer imagine a new way of building with leftovers and layers.
Can they persuade The Hammer not to flatten the city?
The Artist says, ‘We could build on top of, around, over, and through.’
The Engineer says ‘We could recycle and upcycle.’
The Engineer says ‘We could build a city with a memory.’
The artist says ‘to do this we will need a new motto.’
They talk all night with The Hammer. One thousand ideas! One hundred ideas! One idea!
The next morning they are ready to make their announcement to the city.
The new motto for the city is ‘Layered!’
Welcome to our new layered city.220

Literature is represented here by ‘the artist’ and we see a call for the urban fabric to mirror what literature has long achieved; a progressive, accumulative approach to culture. For Birmingham literature is that cultural ‘palimpsest’ which ‘layers’ up Birmingham’s ever-changing visions of itself and renders them imaginatively for posterity. When Zephaniah declares that he is ‘of Brummagem’ he evokes that Medieval settlement and reminds us that ‘Brummies are at home with new horizons/ And a multi-layered concept of place.’ When Moqapi Selassie observes in Birmingham a ‘concrete jungle’ he is layering the ancient forests of Mercia with his ancestral homeland of Africa and superimposing them upon the brutalist structures which rose out of necessity in the mid twentieth century. When Ann Bennett tells her ‘Birmingham sagas’ of nervous young Irish arriving in the city for the first time, she is layering the pre-industrial ‘Emerald Isle’ with a re-built, post-war city of the English Midlands. Writers have responded to Birmingham’s ‘hammer’ in truly imaginative and rebellious ways.

Birmingham writers continue to inscribe the literary ‘palimpsest’ of their city in ways that planners and developers could not have foreseen. If Birmingham wishes to build a supermodern shopping mall, writers will imagine what goes on in the abandoned service corridors at night. If the city tears down a tower block, writers imagine what happens to the people who might get trapped inside. This should not be understood as an antagonistic relationship of the city versus its creatives. Birmingham is beginning to see real value in the creative industries and is learning the value of supporting them. As Jonathan Davidson states, ‘in the place once known as “the city of a thousand trades”, the creative industries are becoming increasingly important’.

221 Barry, p. 165.
226 Catherine O’Flynn, What Was Lost (Birmingham: Tindall Street, 2007).
beginning to see the economic value of creativity and are beginning to ‘layer’ that dimension of the city with its commercial and industrial sectors. Although it was sadly unable to keep competing with the big London publishing houses, Tindall Street Press was helped along its way by the financial support of Birmingham City Council.229 The ‘Creative Quarter’ of Digbeth could not have flourished without the start-up grant that allowed the Custard Factory to be developed in 1993.230 Perhaps one of the reasons why Birmingham’s brutalist phase, best exemplified by the old Central Library, ‘no longer has a place in Birmingham’s vision of itself,’ is because these buildings evoke a time when creativity was not nurtured in the way it is now, the days of the ‘oppressive top-down culture.’231 Contemporary Birmingham, more than ever, seems to be ‘a writers’ city’ and a place where the arts can flourish.232

Author Jim Crace says of Birmingham that it is ‘a city where the future is being probed and practised rather than one of those scrubbed, historic tourist cities where the past is cossetted and replayed.’233 The layers where we see the failed attempts of ‘probing’ and ‘practising’ all stack up to form the vast literary ‘palimpsest’ of the contemporary Birmingham.234 O’Flynn says of the city that ‘it’s very transient, you see all the layers’. The drive for renewal attuned her awareness of place and has benefited her immensely as a writer;

Growing up here has informed a lot of my writing, my books have all started talking about place and I think that’s all down to growing up in Birmingham and

229 The Birmingham City Council logo on the book’s jacket is representative of their indirect support via a grant to Tindall Street. Catherine O’Flynn, What Was Lost (Birmingham: Tindall Street, 2007).
234 Barry, p. 165.
in Nichelles in particular that was demolished and rebuilt — I get a lot of inspiration from that which I’m not sure I would if I lived somewhere beautiful and historic.\footnote{Catherine O’Flynn interviewed by Tom Kew, 27 May 2016.}

This brings us full circle to those critiques with which I opened this chapter. Birmingham has its pretty and historic parts, for example Bourneville, but overall these quarters do not define the public image of the city. This single fact alienates and even angers outside commentators. They demand a city which is immediately accessible to them, straightforwardly pretty and highly functional without showing any of its working parts. But such a place does not, and will never, exist on the land which was christened ‘Brummagem’.\footnote{Steven Bassett, ‘Birmingham Before The Bull Ring’ (unpublished, Birmingham University) <http://www.maneyonline.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1179/mdh.2001.26.1.1> [Accessed 26 November 2015]} It is perhaps a blessing in disguise that commentators such as Dalrymple and Prince Charles have been so vocally condescending about Birmingham.

The popular (mis)conception of Birmingham as an aesthetically displeasing city helps to keep house prices down and fuels the creative economy. As Crace jokes, ‘it helps that our city values neighbourliness and the place is affordable, even for writers.’\footnote{Jim Crace, cited in ‘Introduction’, Best of Birmingham: A Guide for Teachers and Social Workers (London: The Guardian/ Birmingham City Council, 2015), p. 3.} It is important to remember that Crace and Davidson do have a commercial agenda in publicising Birmingham and that the correlation between cost of living and creativity is very difficult to evidence. However, the more competitive and individualistic nature of London, coupled with its extortionate cost of living, could never provide the sense of community which Birmingham affords to creatives. Davidson states, ‘It’s a city that actively welcomes writers. New arrivals tend to comment on how easy it is to begin to be part of the city’s writing life.’\footnote{Jonathan Davidson, ‘Birmingham: Lit City’, Best of Birmingham: A Guide for Teachers and Social Workers (London: The Guardian/ Birmingham City Council, 2015), p. 27.} Hopefully the local authorities and investors will continue to see the economic and cultural benefits of this reputation. Birmingham’s authors play a crucial role in building ‘a city with memory’ as they are not only attuned to observe, but also form an integral part of, the ‘new layered city’ of Birmingham.
Conclusion: The Midlands ‘Brand’

To conclude the thesis, I begin by summarising my key findings for each of the three Midlands cities under consideration. I then draw out the commonalities across the region before reflecting on the policy implications of these findings and the future of regional literary cultures in the Midlands.

**Nottingham**

I found that technology is the pre-eminent stimulus of transition in Nottingham’s contemporary literary cultures. Whether a smartphone application or an email digest of upcoming events, Web 2.0 infrastructure has largely replaced more traditional print forms, concurrent with global trends. Part of this shift is economically motivated: since the 2009 recession, Nottingham has witnessed a decline in local authority-funded literary infrastructure such as Literature Development Officers.¹ This scarcity of official funding and associated media exposure places particular importance on the informal ‘valuing communities’ which accumulate enthusiastically around Nottingham’s performance poetry scene.² Printed forms of poetry are not entirely obsolete however, and a grassroots DIY ethic remains strong in the city, evoking the 1960s Liverpool scene. Small presses specialising in poetry, for example The Shoestring Press, continue to operate in a devolved context, whereas the major publishing infrastructure — especially for fiction — is found in London.³

Beyond the multifarious networks which exist to promote Nottingham’s literary cultures locally, there is an outward-facing dimension equally linked to local authority funding, or a lack thereof. The nature of literary tourism is changing. Digital technology is being used in the form of the ‘Sillitoe Trail’, while more traditional heritage attractions

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² Frow, p. 154.
³ [http://www.shoestringpress.co.uk/](http://www.shoestringpress.co.uk/) [Accessed 17 January 2016]
— such as Durban house — are closing due to low footfall. With reduced public funding for literature, independent NGOs such as the Howie Smith Project are promoting Nottingham literature through campaigns such as #rebelnotts. The rebellious ethos of historical Nottingham figures such as Robin Hood and Ned Ludd is today being marketed as a defining feature of Nottingham’s literary heritage, as exemplified by Byron, Lawrence and Sillitoe. While marketing rebellion is a contradictory activity, the spirit of rebellion continues through independent literary communities in Nottingham.

The achievement of UNESCO status acknowledges the importance of the city as a literary destination; it now remains to be seen whether this will stimulate the support of local authorities and ultimately generate much-needed funding.

**Leicester**

My research suggests that the public narratives of successful multiculturalism threaten to obscure alternative narratives about diversity in the city. Gilroy’s notion of ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’ provides a more useful model for understanding Leicester literature than reference to official accounts of the ‘premier multicultural city’. According to prominent Leicester poet Leeming, there are ‘silos’ within the city’s literary cultures which suggest pluralism rather than exchange between cultures and therefore challenge the credibility of the multicultural success story. In the words of former Leicester resident Brah, the city is a ‘diaspora space’ and its writers should be considered what D’Aguiar calls ‘compatriots in craft’. These devolved literary perspectives suggest that regional nuance is a more coherent factor than ethnicity when considering the work of Midlands writers.

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5 <http://www.howie-smith.org.uk/rebelnotts.htm> [Accessed 17 January 2016]
6 Ibid.
7 Gilroy, p. 75; Singh and Tatla, p. 143.
8 Carol Leeming, interviewed by Tom Kew, 10 November 2014.
9 Brah, p. 181; Fred D’Aguiar in Hampson and Barry, p. 70.
I found that globally, people are campaigning for greater ethnic representation in books for young people, using the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks. Against this backdrop of a global Young Adult fiction market which privileges white characters, Leicester author Rai has achieved international success with his stories of everyday diversity in his home city. By conspicuously setting his novels in Leicester, Rai develops and expands the work of his mentor, the late Townsend. As a best-selling author, Townsend was an exceptional figure within the Leicester literary landscape but manuscript evidence shows that she effaced specific reference to Leicester from her debut novel.\(^\text{10}\) The Adrian Mole franchise therefore demonstrates that Leicester, Ashby-de-la-Zouch and the Midlands generally, function as a kind of anonymous ‘anyplace’ in the popular imagination.

**Birmingham**

Once famed for its manufacturing, Birmingham is now a post-industrial centre for retail with a £1bn annual spend.\(^\text{11}\) The city is a prime example of what Augé calls a site of ‘supermodernity’, characterised by an excess of space and time and typified by large-scale modern developments such as airports, motorways and shopping centres.\(^\text{12}\) The mismatched post-war architecture of Birmingham, and the city’s constant urban development, causes it to be perceived by some as a ‘non-place’ which lacks a fixed identity. Novels such as O’Flynn’s *What Was Lost* reinscribe the city’s status as a ‘non-place’ by placing the narrative in mundane retail environment.

At the administrative level, apparent mismanagement of public funds has hindered the biggest recent investment in literary infrastructure, the Library of Birmingham. Small publishing houses such as Tindall Street have been unable to survive in what O’Flynn

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\(^{10}\) Early typescript material related to the *Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4*, ST/1/1/2, University of Leicester Special Collections.

\(^{11}\) *Appear Here*, [https://www.appearhere.co.uk/spaces/bullring-linkstreet-unit-k1-available-19-sept-16] [Accessed June 8 2016]

\(^{12}\) Augé, pp. 24–25.
identifies as Birmingham’s ‘oppressive top-down culture’.\textsuperscript{13} Black British poets have depicted Birmingham as a ‘concrete jungle’, a reputation now tinged with some irony considering the large-scale demolition of mid-twentieth century concrete structures which is now taking place. Poets such as Moqapi Selassie, Zephaniah and the reggae band Steel Pulse all employ what Barry calls poetic ‘double visioning’ to understand their city as part of a global network connected to colonial histories.\textsuperscript{14}

Due in part to inequalities in housing provision in post-war Birmingham, there are many creative overlaps between the black and Irish communities in the city and authors such as Zephaniah, O’flynn and Bennett have achieved considerable commercial success. These authors reach beyond local ‘valuing communities’ to receive the opprobrium of conventional ‘agents of legitimation’ such as major publishers, critics and prizes.\textsuperscript{15} These writers share a perspective on their city which emphasises a ‘multi-layered concept of place’, both in terms of the shared histories migrant communities have brought to the city and the physical layering which urban renewal enacts.\textsuperscript{16} As Meades observes, it is perhaps Birmingham’s British Asian community who are the inheritors of Victorian Birmingham and of the values with facilitated Birmingham’s rapid expansion in the nineteenth century. Overall, Birmingham is a ‘layered city’ with an ever-changing built environment. Its diverse literary cultures provide alternatives to the very public narrative of a city ‘all-too-visibly, in an eternal struggle with itself.’\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Catherine O’Flynn in interview with Tom Kew, \textit{The Library of Birmingham}, 27 May 2016
\item \textsuperscript{15} Frow, p. 154.
\end{itemize}
The Midlands

It has become clear during my research that the dominant spatial conception of North–South Britain has shaped literary cultures in the Midlands. From the broad-brush dismissal of any literary cultures outside of London, to the ‘stuck in the middle’ effect of sitting between the giants of the North and the South, the Midlands’ geographical and cultural positioning have evidently had adverse effects on the region’s literary profile.

While binary North–South perceptions of the nation may have limited effect in terms of local authority funding, they have effectively restricted author’s access to the career opportunities which come with the support of big publishing houses. This restriction could take the practical form of fewer opportunities for writers’ development available in the area; fewer literary agencies; fewer networking events. However, the secondary form of career restriction boils down to regional sensibility and subject material. Writing from London may be perceived as more cutting edge; more universally relevant; more marketable. Monica Ali, Zadie Smith and Andrea Levy all have publications which rank in the top 100 best-selling books of all time. Almost one third of the 66 authors who penned the 100 best sellers are from the South of England, while only two were born in the Midlands. While Tolkien can fairly be claimed as a Birmingham writer, he was in fact born in South Africa. The fact that many of the names on this list belong to celebrity chefs, dieticians, comedians and sports personalities is some indicator that it should not be used as a benchmark of literary achievement, however the presence of these celebrity figures does further reinforce the South of England’s cultural hegemony.

While the picture is undeniably bleak for the Midlands at the level of multi-million unit publishing, this thesis has demonstrated an abundance of regional fiction with proven global reach. The devolution of literary cultures since the 1960s has activated new, more egalitarian, modes of understanding literary cultures in the UK.

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18 Sales data published by Nielsen Book Scan <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1dhxbJR1Vi7PbVP_mNhweA3_lfUWiF__xSODLg1W83CA/edit#gid=0> [Accessed 23 January 2017]

In this thesis, I have surveyed a wide range of diverse texts from the Midlands. The region operates at every level of literary activity, from small-scale performances in cafés, interactive literary tourism, DIY pamphlets and regional publishing through to global best sellers. Having identified a scarcity of critical and commercial validation attributed to Midlands literature, I have addressed a gap in the study of literary cultures by demonstrating that not only are there major commercial success stories for Midlands literature, but that regional valuing communities sustain the culture even in the absence of national recognition. In 1995 Frow identified a ‘disrupted and uncertain universe of value’ yet arguably, in the mid-late 2010s, this universe is more disrupted and more uncertain than ever.\(^\text{20}\) I have shown the imaginative and creative ways in which contemporary cultural practitioners are thriving in this often harsh climate and have illustrated the historical foundations on which their success was built. Midlands writers often demonstrate a cooperative spirit. For example, Townsend offered Leicester author Rai support and guidance in order to develop his own literary voice. Rai went on to publish internationally with Random House.\(^\text{21}\)

During the four years of this project’s genesis, there have been important steps taken towards the national and international recognition of the Midlands regional literary cultures. Perhaps most significant amongst these is the awarding of UNESCO City of Literature status to Nottingham. The accolade has boosted the connectivity of Nottingham’s creative communities but as the bid’s chair, David Belbin reveals, the process was as important as the outcome:

The eighteen months we spent working on our bid to become a UNESCO City of Literature made so many things happen that, in a way, we’d already won. We encouraged so much creativity and civic pride, engineered numerous events and produced several publications. The process of putting together the bid in itself helped the city’s literature scene to become more joined up. And we made a start on the biggest task of all, using Nottingham literature to improve the city’s literacy.\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{20}\) Frow, p. 1.  
\(^{21}\) Bali Rai in Interview with Tom Kew, 11 March 2015.  
Belbin’s final point touches on a key responsibility undertaken by the Nottingham bid. Their application was not intended solely to bestow praise and recognition upon the city but also to educate and inspire a future generation of Midlands readers and writers. The rhetoric deployed by the bid has often focused on ‘civic pride’ as a means of galvanising support for their collective efforts. It is noteworthy that this pride is not at odds with what Belbin calls Nottingham’s ‘independent, contrarian spirit’.\textsuperscript{23} To be proud of a Midlands identity is not to accept uncritically the narratives espoused by local authorities. Civic pride at the level of regional literary cultures owes much more to the rebel ideology of Byron, Lawrence and Sillitoe than it does to Nottingham City Council’s ubiquitous branding, which declares it is ‘PROUD’ from every bus shelter and public bin. If the Nottingham bid was, as Belbin claims, characterised by an ‘enormous outpouring of energy in this most financially challenged of times’, credit for this feat must go to the passionate individuals who achieved success from the grassroots.\textsuperscript{24} UNESCO recognition has now been achieved \textit{in perpetuum} but it remains to be seen whether the city council will invest further in Nottingham’s literary endeavours.

We hear increasingly that a city, and even a nation, can be considered a ‘brand’ to be packaged and sold to investors. As of November 2016, Nottingham appointed Brendan Moffett as the new chief executive for Marketing Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. Worryingly, and in direct opposition to the arguments for literary devolution made by this thesis, Moffett sees \textit{London} as the key to Nottingham’s success. He plans to invest a great deal of time and energy into partnerships with the capital, stating ‘to be that close to a global city offers real opportunities so we will be working that really hard’.\textsuperscript{25} Doreen Massey’s work on global cities is redolent here, although it is


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

perhaps disheartening to hear that the person tasked with promoting Nottingham does not apply this same label to the city. One positive of Moffet’s outward-facing approach is the potential for a more united Midlands infrastructure:

Working closely with Birmingham is a big part of [Nottingham’s position in the Midlands Engine]. A lot of people now think the Midlands Engine has more traction than the Northern Powerhouse because it’s based on an established economic region that’s trading globally already.  

Here the old Midlands reputation as a ‘workshop’ is invoked and Nottingham appears relatively small and inexperienced next to its giant post-industrial neighbour Birmingham. While harking back to an industrial golden age, the metaphor of an ‘engine’ for a Midlands-wide partnership is powerful and suggests real forward momentum for projects ranging from business, culture and sports. If successful, Birmingham’s bid to host the Commonwealth Games in 2026 is expected to generate a Midlands-wide revenue boost of £390 million. Sir John Peace, chairman of economic growth programme ‘the Midlands Engine’, hopes the event would be positioned as a Midlands showcase, not just a Birmingham games. What would this mean in literary terms? Can economic connectivity translate to a more unified literary culture for the Midlands region? For a start, the goal of Nottingham’s UNESCO’s bid, to improve literacy in the region, could be actualised with real financial backing to achieve results. Birmingham’s library could extend its opening hours and numerous literacy projects could be rolled out in tandem with the sporting programmes which should rightfully accompany the Commonwealth Games.

In the meantime, there remains a lot to be done for the literary cultures of the Midlands. One of the biggest challenges for literature in times of economic uncertainty is

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the stifling effect which economic hardship can have on creativity. In Leicester, the Centre for New Writing is taking steps to ensure that new and original literature continues to emanate from the Midlands. Leicester is a city which has had immense publicity for both sporting and academic achievements, with Leicester City winning the football Premier League and the discovery of Richard III’s remains by University of Leicester researchers. While literary achievement may not hit the headlines of the national press, the Centre for New Writing has awarded 70 creative writing commissions since the project’s inception in 2013.\textsuperscript{28} In an era of economic uncertainty and the prospect of losing vital European Union funding, the support of universities and businesses will become increasingly important for the survival of the arts. Providing that Midlands writers continue to produce engaging, intelligent and rebellious literature, they can also count on the support of the strong valuing communities which define the regional literary cultures of the Midlands.

\textsuperscript{28} University of Leicester, Centre for New Writing \\
<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/english/creativewriting/centre> [Accessed 11 November 2016]
Appendix

Figure 1 – Advertisement placed in the *Uganda Argus*, August 1972

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**AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF LEICESTER, ENGLAND**

The City Council of Leicester, England, believe that many families in Uganda are considering moving to Leicester. If you are thinking of doing so it is very important you should know that present conditions in the city are very different from those met by earlier settlers. They are:

**HOUSING** — several thousands of families are already on the Council’s waiting list.

**EDUCATION** — hundreds of children are awaiting places in schools.

**SOCIAL AND HEALTH SERVICES** — already stretched to the limit.

In your own interests and those of your family you should accept the advice of the Uganda Resettlement Board and not come to Leicester.
Figure 2 – Cover of Steel Pulse, *Handsworth Revolution* (Mango Records, 1978).
Figure 3 – Detail from Steel Pulse, Handsworth Revolution (Mango Records, 1978).
Figure 4 – Vanley Burke, ‘Handsworth Park’, Vanley Burke Gallery 10, Library of Birmingham Special Collections, 1970.
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