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NARRATING THE CITY: SPACES OF URBAN CHANGE, SOUTH LONDON

Suzanne M. Hall

Abstract

This paper explores the documentation of social and spatial transformation in the Walworth area, South London. Spatial narratives are the entry point for my exploration, where official and 'unofficial' representations of history are aligned to capture the nature of urban change. Looking at the city from street level provides a worldly view of social encounter and spaces that are expressive of how citizens experience and shape the city. A more distanced view of the city accessed from official data reveals different constructs. In overlaying near and far views and data and experience, correlations and contestations emerge. As a method of research, the narrative is the potential palimpsest, incorporating fragments of the immediate and historic without representing a comprehensive whole. In this paper Walworth is documented as a local and Inner City context where remnants and insertions are juxtaposed, where white working class culture and diverse ethnicities experience difference and change. A primary aim is to consider the diverse experiences of groups and individuals over time, through their relationship with their street, neighbourhood and city. In relating the Walworth area to London I use three spatial narratives to articulate the contemporary and historic relationship of people to place: the other side examines the physical discrimination between north and south London, the other half looks at distinctions of class and race and other histories explores the histories displaced from official accounts.

Keywords: City, Change, Narrative, South London.

CHANGING LONDON

"If indeed every society produces a space, its own space[…]any 'social existence' aspiring or claiming to be 'real', but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity, a very peculiar kind of abstraction unable to escape from the ideological or even 'cultural' realm. It would fall to the level of folklore and sooner or later disappear altogether, thereby immediately losing its identity, its denomination and its feeble degree of reality (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]:53).

Millennium London is epitomised as a Global City: simultaneously a destination and gateway for the world's privileged the world's dispossessed. London's spaces are saturated with these polarities; branded by its icons and drenched with the expressions of everyday life. Here is a City undergoing profound social and spatial change; one not only regulated by official policies and plans, but also transformed by individuals through the experience and tactics of daily life (de Certeau, M. 1984). If London is a place for opportunity and refuge, it is also a place of inequalities and frictions (Hamnett,

C. 2003). The City is constituted by an increasingly diverse array of competing cultures shaping and occupying limited urban space. The concern for this paper is how the social and spatial dimensions of diversity have been experienced and represented over time. To rephrase Lefebvre's statement as a question for London: how is contemporary urban society shaped by the inheritance of city space and how does a diverse urban society produce its own space?

This paper explores ways of researching the spaces of the city, and focuses on how narrative mediates between the official documentation and lived experiences of change. I review narratives or collections of stories from both historic and contemporary accounts of the Walworth, South London. As a contemporary Inner City area, Walworth offers various frames through which to research the persistent and transient features of spatial and social change:

- Its physical proximity to the City and its perceptual separation from it raises the question of how people have conceptualised the series of borders within London; from the first border established by the river between north and
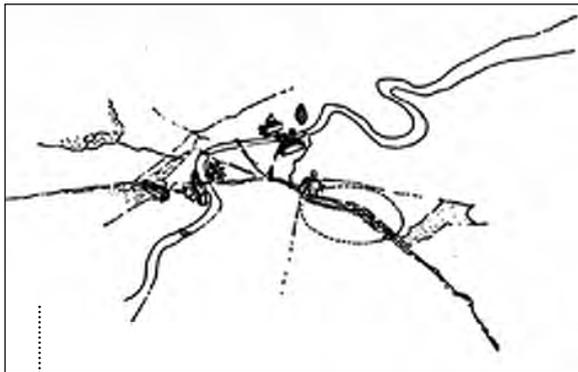
Fig 1. Walworth/London location, author's drawing 2006

south London, to the economic borders of class, to those of local mindsets and individual perceptions.
- As a transitional area, Walworth represents a zone between city and suburb, as well as an area to which newcomers arrive and from which many established residents subsequently move on.
- As an area with few formal public institutions and incorporating extensive housing estates, diverse experiences of public and social life emerge in apparently ordinary settings; places such as the local 'caffs', barbers shops and tailors shops offer different opportunities for sociability.

The review of historic material is framed by perspectives located from 'the other side'; both in terms of the physical location of Walworth to Central London as the other side of the River, and from the position of other multiple realities that prevail under the layer of a more dominant history or official record of London. More conventional references that provide a particular view of chronological time such as maps, census data and surveys are sourced alongside varied accounts including individual stories and oral histories. Much like Simmel's 'snapshots' these fragments are useful because they reveal the overlap of place, time and experience; "The paradox of the snapshot is that although it is literally like a fleeting image, it is also one that can be made to endure." (Frisby, 1981:103). I use the narrative to construct a relationship between contemporary and historic accounts, and to raise questions around how official and unofficial urban history is represented. Specifically I address the core

question;
- How can the diverse experiences and histories of the Walworth area be narrated?

SPATIAL NARRATIVES: THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE PALIMPSEST

Lefebvre contends that society and space reverberate, space producing society and society producing space. There are two prevalent methodological alternatives for exploring this social and spatial overlap. The first involves working with a physical or spatial genealogy to see what persists and what shifts over time including spaces and activities. The second involves working with social dimensions such as the formation of groups or modes of expression to understand spatial ones such as propinquity or exclusion. While these methodological distinctions are not entirely artificial, they tend to suit the emphasis shaped by professional concerns and boundaries. One way of exploring the transformation of an area like Walworth is through the narratives that reveal the relationship of space and society through representations of power, knowledge and experience. In this paper spatial narratives are used to combine 'spatial' and 'social' methods, as a way of understanding and ultimately documenting how individuals and communities transform and are transformed by their urban spaces.

Carter (1985:preface) writes on the history of Walworth that, "Much passes quickly beyond recall….So, with the passage of time one tends to write with a fuller "official" knowledge and a much depleted store of first-hand recollections of real life and actual daily events". The issue at stake then is how to document and interpret the kind of place that Walworth is today through overlaying historic products and human practice. The idea of the palimpsest accommodates a methodological stance that acknowledges the layers of past and present as concurrent. This layered view reveals the overlapping of time and place more through its wrangled complexities than a chronological or categorical order. For this reason this paper is broken into three spatial narratives rather than time periods; the 'other side' reviews the implications of the physical emergence of Walworth south of the
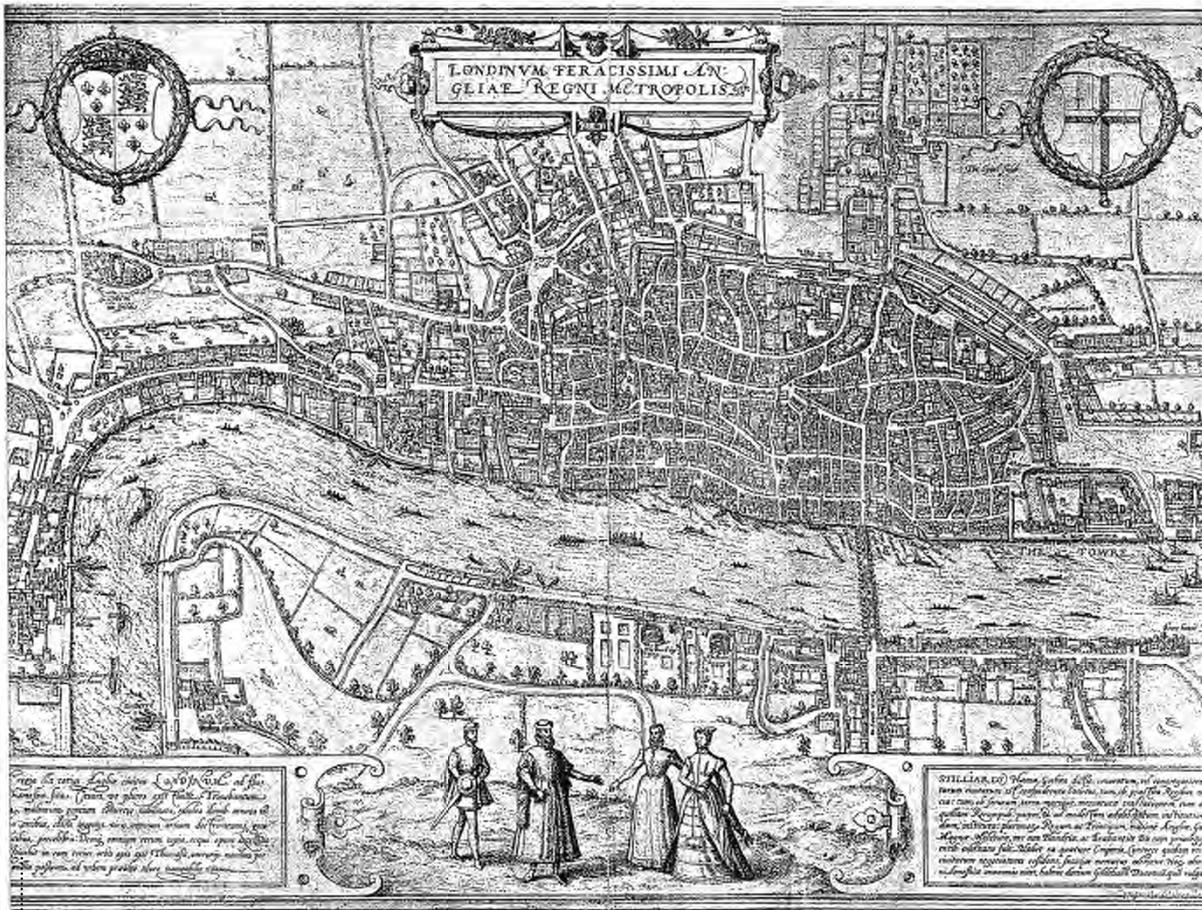
Fig 2. Hogenberg's map, 1553 - 1559 (By kind permission of the Southwark Local History Library)

Thames, as distinct from the city north of the river. The 'other half' deals with the scale of industrial growth and the emergence of the 'other' defined initially through poverty and class and subsequently through ethnicity, while 'other histories' looks at the absence of other voices from official records. The interconnections between people and place explored in this paper require three aspects of methodology to be developed:

    i) Place and time are represented through linking past and present. Partial views rather than complete pictures are developed.

    ii) The multiple, sometimes competing characteristics of different types of representation are aligned, colliding "everyday practices" (De Certeau M. 1984) with official records.

    iii) The powers behind types of representation are explored through the understanding that records are shaped by values and reflect how meanings are constructed and preserved.

Diverse experiences and official records are aligned to narrate what this juxtaposition reveals.

SPATIAL NARRATIVE: (01) THE 'OTHER SIDE'

Peter Ackroyd describes historic Southwark, the Borough in which Walworth is located, as that which is physically and perceptually distinct from the centre. He articulates an "urban discrimination" (2001:692) as the marked divisions between centre and hinterland and North and South London respectively. He attributes to the South the not entirely illustrious historic functions of are marshland, disreputable entertainment ground and industrial area containing the 'stink industries'. These distinctions are not confined to official history. In the London of the 1970's Raban describes his
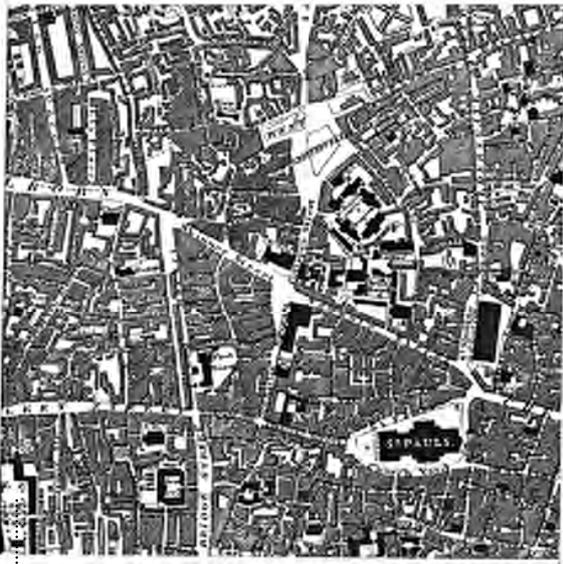
Fig 3. Extracts from Greenwood's map, 1824, North London on the left, South London on the right (By kind permission of the Southwark Local Studies Library).

experience of the river as a border, "I have friends who live in Clapham, only three miles away, but to visit them is a definite journey, for it involves crossing the river." (1974:163). In contemporary London, a local Walworth resident describes himself through affinities that directly associate identity with place, "I would describe myself as a South London person, an everyday person.". While the Thames persists as a physical distinction, perceptual distinctions emerge over time. Borders and territory assert distinction, reinforced by differential development between north and south London.

The morphology of the north-south distinction is evident in various maps of London commissioned up to the Industrial period. I select three of these maps to illustrate the chronological determination of London's north-south divide. Hogenburg's map of London (1553) (figure 02) presents the land to the north of the Thames as a city of impressive walls, great streets, public spaces and institutions. Only one bridge extends to the southwards; where London Bridge touches the south bank, a comparatively diminutive cluster of development is shown, with development rapidly petering out into countryside.

The resilience of this centre-periphery relationship remains apparent some two hundred years later. Roque's map of London (1769) reveals an expanding urban fabric to the north of the River. The intensity of the grey ink confirms the density of

the urban grain. By contrast, fields and gardens lightly speckle the cream surface of the map south of the river. Now there are three links between North and South. London Bridge, Blackfriars Bridge and Westminster Bridge reveal lines of urban development clinging onto the connections to the city and the south bank facing the city. However the South is still shown as a series of rural villages while the north has leapt into fully-fledged city status.

Although the area to the south of the River remained comparatively undeveloped until the early 1800's, the routes crossing the area to the south contained the inherent potential for growth associated with strategic urban connections. Greenwood's map (1824) (figure 03) shows development clustered around the confluence and edges of important routes. A node of public facilities had developed at the Elephant and Castle to which Dickens referred to in 'Bleak House' as, "a street of little shops lying somewhere in that ganglion of roads from Kent to Surrey…centring at the far-famed Elephant." (cited in Young, G. 1930). With the Elephant and Castle acting as the nerve centre for the south it was to be encircled by successive waves of transport technologies; from the buses (1829) and trams (1852) running down the Walworth Road, to the railway and station (1862) and tube stop (1890). With modes of transport assisting the north-south connection, the status of the Walworth Road shifted to a main road in every

sense of the word - pulsating with activity and central to the diverse communities that formed adjacent to its edges. The Post Office Directory Surveys published annually from 1841 to 1950 reveal the rapid expansion of retail streets, and an increasing variety in the types of activities and products. The directories also name the proprietors, and through this a further critical aspect is revealed - as London grew off it's industrial base, so the amount of immigrants increased. The shop-lined Walworth Road was occupied and transformed both by established English residents and by a host of 'newcomers'.

The sequence of London maps reveal two mutually reinforcing spatial characteristics that were to define Walworth's legacy embedded in the centre-periphery relationship with central London. As a substantially green area it acted as a verdant subsidiary to the centre north of the River. The relationship was extended through routes between north and south defining practical and spiritual connections to the hinterland, towards Canterbury. Essentially the maps represent the spatial structure of territory and differential development. Narratives of discrimination also emerged through other forms of representation. The following section explores some of these representations developed during the period of industrialisation

SPATIAL NARRATIVE: (02) THE 'OTHER HALF'

Despite the persistent north-south divergence, the impetus of the growth of London concurrent with industrialisation meant that pressure on the land south of the River for development was inevitable. This radical transformation of England's economic base and an unprecedented scale of urbanisation synonymous with significant social consequences, resulted in a shift in the nature of urban space. As growth and change defined modern urbanity so the need to record, order and ultimately control that change became an official imperative. The first census for the Great Britain in 1801 coincides with the period of profound urbanisation. The 1801 census for Victorian Walworth, designated then as the 'Parish of St Mary Newington', indicates a population of 14,847 people. A mere 80 years later the population figure for 1881 of 107,850 con-

firms the exponential pace of growth. Urban poverty emerged alongside this growth and was officially recorded in documents such as the Parish 'Poor Rate Book'. The entry for 1770 from the Parish of St. Mary Newington describes the parish being "burdened with numerous and expensive poor'" (Boast, 2005:6). The Victorian analogy of the urban poor as 'burden' or citizen as the passive recipient of handouts is reflected in the kinds of Victorian institutions for poverty; 'poorhouses' or 'workhouses' were scattered across Southwark, as mapped in Collins' Standard Map of London (1870).

The census figures record the scale of growth related to industrialisation and urbanisation. However the extent of poverty associated with this growth, and the structure and sentiment of class divides that grew fervently out of this industrial society lies in other sources. Disraeli (1804-1881) uses the narrative of extreme divides, "an impossible gulf divided the Rich from the Poor […]. Two Nations, governed by different laws, influenced by different manners, with no thoughts or sympathies in common; with an innate inability of mutual comprehension." Mayhew (1812-1887) provided some of the first documentations of lived experiences of poverty on the streets of Victorian London. He articulated through a range of ordinary voices, the way in which the city was changing under the impetus of industrialisation and the acute individual experience of that change. Mayhew's account, 'London Labour and the London Poor' (1985[1851]) also encapsulated the everyday public and private spaces of urban change; he took us onto the collective spaces of the street and into individual interiors. He provided an outline of the spatial narratives that constituted people's interactions with and retreat from the city. Mayhew's account of a dramatically changing London privileged the individual experience and by so doing narrates the confines of class and the trap of poverty strongly expressed through individual accounts. But why did Mayhew select this ethnographic method, which was unofficial and unquantifiable, when scientific measures such as the census were increasingly regarded as authoritative? Mayhew's (1985 [1851]:448) concern was "comprehension" or an understanding rooted in connections to place, time and experience. Adverse to "the very mummery of statistics" his

exploration of the diversity of life on the streets was irreducible to categories, and was enriched by individual expression and tone.

Some one hundred and fifty years on, Tony Parker's book 'The People of Providence' (1983) focused on individual lives on a Public Housing Estate to the west of Walworth. While Parker's 'snapshots' of life within the Housing Estate primarily reveal a diversity of experiences, the narrative of poverty emerges out of the limited sense of possibilities. Teenager 'Susie Moore' comments, "I suppose there must be thousands of girls like me all over London…Not married, having a kid, living on social security and wondering what the hell's the point. Seeing the future as a long stretch of nothing much." (cited in Parker. 1983:186). Like in Mayhew these accounts of how people experience their time and place, are immeasurable within the scientific realm of census data.

SPATIAL NARRATIVES: (03) 'OTHER HISTORIES', ERASURES, OMISSIONS AND OBSCURITY

"I have been astonished at the extent to which things, once commonplace, have now vanished…Redevelopment struck the final blow at the pre-war communities so, in just a few decades, a way of life practically vanished." (Carter,1985: preface). Carter observes that redevelopment potentially eradicates particular communities and their associated ways of life. Regeneration can be indiscriminate in its eradication; places that are valued, rituals and events that are enacted, simply disappear. The theme of large-scale regeneration in Southwark is a perpetual one. The "ganglion" and series of vital public spaces at the Elephant and Castle, as captured in Bert Hardy's black and white photographs, have been reduced to roundabouts for traffic. The post war interests of efficiency have relegated public space to the pavement. So too were rows of terraced housing demolished to make way for the sanitised modern housing systems comprised of vertical concrete slabs and vast territories of open space both formally defining and stigmatising Social Housing Estates such as the Heygate and Aylesbury. Today all three above mentioned areas are up for the next round of regeneration.

Established communities, everyday rituals, practices of hanging out and making business will be required to make way for new versions of progress.

Boast's (2005) and Bourne's (2005) books deal with the local history of Walworth and Southwark respectively. The books refer to the institutions and City destinations within Southwark that belong to bygone eras; the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens attracting a staggering 8,000 visitors a day, the Royal Surrey Music Hall and its great glass construction predating the Crystal Palace, the sturdy Metropolitan Tabernacle hosting acclaimed evangelical and musical performances. But the gardens, entertainment halls and movie houses are no longer evident on current cartography. Unlike Central London where valued places are generally preserved, many of the institutions of Southwark slowly disappeared from the maps. The exit of the newly elected Labour Party from its home at the Terraces on the Walworth Road in 1997 and the seemingly banal act of boarding off the public space in front of the old police station on Carter Street, all add to the perception of an area with few formal public spaces that attend to human needs and spirit.

Bourne's book 'Speak to me as I am: The Black presence in Southwark since 1600' points us to another form of erasure, "there had been a Black presence in Britain since at least the mid-sixteenth century. Black historical figures from the past had been made invisible, and there was a wall of silence around Britain's Black History."(2005:5). The omissions of other contributions to history has serious consequences for how we view history today, and how citizens are subsequently able to locate themselves within it or are dislocated from it. Bourne partially redresses these omissions through tracing the achievements of selected individuals that contributed to the 'Black History' of Southwark. The structure of Bourne's book indicates the lack of available historic, 'official' records on Black History and he refers to oral histories as a valuable alternative. His book collates snippets of lives that have merged into historic 'English' records, his focus is on personalities and the places of their respective distinction. Names, events and places are matched; Ira Alridge's Black performance of Othello (1833), Mary Seacole the 'Black Nightingale' of Balaklava, Dr Harold Moody a founding member and first

president of the League of Coloured People (1931), Sam King a passenger on the 'Empire Windrush' and first Black Mayor of Southwark(1983) and Rio Ferdinand and his rise in football fame from Peckham to Manchester United.

Bourne also delves into other space, sites and institutions as a form of record, identifying the theatre, evangelical church hall, T.V. screen and the film screen as sites of representation. While the practices of power persist, contemporary diverse societies in Walworth find ways of re-presenting space. Hang-outs like the hair and nail bars and barbers shops vitalise the Walworth Road attending to make-overs and conversation simultaneously. Historic institutions such as 'Clubland' and the 'Metropolitan Tabernacle' are alive with an evangelical fervour sustained by predominantly African-immigrant congregations. The Somali Social Club and Turkish Caff indicate an increasingly diverse range of social practices. With this reconstitution of space there is a need for alternative ways of recording how such diversity contributes to the sense of past and present.

The third form of erasure is revealed through the narrative of obscurity, or how accounts from ordinary or 'un-noteworthy' people fall through the cracks of the selective process of constructing history. 'Bert Weir's' comments exemplify this sense of obscurity, "I'm seventy this week, and in all my life so far no one's ever asked me for my thoughts about anything. No one's ever thought I had anything to say that was worth hearing I suppose." (cited in Parker 2005:255). Unstructured interviews and ethnographic material are valuable precisely because they document supposedly 'un-noteworthy' stories. It is through the 'ordinary' person that we achieve understandings of what everyday life may be like or might have been like - quite different from a history notched with key formal spaces, key dates, key events and key individuals.

CONCLUSION: SPATIAL NARRATIVES OF DIVERSE HISTORIES

This paper explores spatial narratives through a palimpsest of cartography, census data, lived spaces and oral histories. The narrative is used as a working method for research to incorporate diverse

representations and ways of viewing. The process of abstracting or formulating a narrative is not a factual or comprehensive process; its potential relevance emerges from the connections it draws across data, across time and across different interest groups.

Products of history are valuable not only for what they are but what they reveal about how they were made and what they have come to represent. These products serve as useful narratives when we consider the relationship of power and knowledge, particularly in terms of what selected representations privilege and omit. The value of in-situ observation and documentation of individual experiences and oral histories lies less in the fact and more in the intonation. The narrative as a method allows us to question the notion of 'authenticity' or what we know and how we come to know it. The spatial narratives presented in this paper are more about the relationships between people, place and time than about measurable truths.

In reviewing the diverse histories of Walworth several themes pervade across time through which we are able to look at the relations between records and experience. These incorporate the construction of history prejudicing the central over the peripheral, the powerful over the less powerful and the professional over the citizen. Divisions are also asserted in space, where physical and perceptual manifestations of the north-south London distinctions inscribe physical and perceptual borders. Borders between differences are also experienced through poverty, class and ethnicity. Finally, while a cycle of large -scale intervention and regeneration persists, the Walworth Road is also testimony to an incremental process of appropriation and expression on the part of its diverse citizens.

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