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## **Migrant Infrastructure: transaction economies in Birmingham and Leicester**

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### **Abstract**

Infrastructure convenes social relations, thereby revealing how city dwellers access shared resources in the context of growing inequality. Our exploration of migrant infrastructure engages with how highly variegated migrant groups develop a 'transaction economy' (Simone, 2004) within marginalised city streets, exchanging goods and services, and information and care. In the context of ethnically diverse and deprived urban places, where state resources are increasingly diminished, we explore how a precarious yet skilled resourcefulness emerges through the street. Our empirical exploration of migrant infrastructure is located on Rookery Road in Birmingham and on Narborough Road in Leicester, and draws on qualitative surveys with 195 self-employed proprietors from many countries of origin. The streets reveal transaction economies that intersect local and migratory resources, eluding the categorisation of cities associated with either a global North or a global South. Further, the lively nature of street transactions decentres western-centric measures of economic value. From the street, we develop a postcolonial analysis of infrastructure that relates properties of historic depth (power), socio-spatial texture (materiality) and locality (place).

**Key words:** migrant infrastructure, transaction economies, socio-spatial resources, streets, postcolonial analysis, Birmingham, Leicester

## **Introduction: framing migrant infrastructure**

How do shared urban resources become active in the everyday life of diverse and marginal urban places? We are particularly interested in pursuing this question through how high streets are operationalised by individuals and groups in the city who are caste outside of a dominant national register. Our case focuses on an array of urban migrants who have come, via another country or countries, to Birmingham and Leicester, and through their protracted border crossings, have set up shop in historically deprived parts of the city. Part of our story engages with the enduring mechanisms of social sorting that are inscribed in space – certain migrants are assigned certain parts of cities, and available urban infrastructures are therefore embedded and neither static nor neutral in their affects (Björkman, 2015). Another part of our story relates to structural constraints beyond the limits of the city that nonetheless influence practices of livelihood in the city. The migrant proprietors on Rookery Road in Birmingham and Narborough Road in Leicester have travelled across different border systems and contend with differential regulatory regimes. Some have made comparatively direct journeys from India, Jamaica, Pakistan and Turkey, while others from Kurdistan and Somalia have followed routes lengthened by asylum processes. Others still arrive having previously settled in two or more countries, including East African Asians from Uganda, Malawi and Kenya. Their routes have required the acquisition of transnational networks and multilingual proficiencies, all of which are embodied in the ways migrants come to reconfigure city space. Migrant infrastructure, while grounded in a city neighbourhood, is shaped through a global sense of local space (Massey, 2007).

Through the activation of shared urban resources, Angelo and Hentschel (2015: 308) suggest that infrastructure convenes socio-spatial relations providing 'tools through which people interpret large-scale change'. By extension, we explore how infrastructure reveals (new) ways that marginalised city dwellers access and reconfigure resources in the context of growing inequality and a receding state. The making of urban livelihoods on the street by an array of migrants emerges from the complex interplay of constraints and circumventions. Both dimensions are crucial to our understanding of infrastructure and the avoidance of overtly celebratory accounts of street livelihoods. Ethnic minority groups in the UK are structurally pre-disposed - frequently through highly racialised employment opportunities - to forms of self-employment, with retail featuring as a primary arena for migrant livelihoods. Jones *et al.* reveal that 'much immigrant enterprise exists rather precariously on the fringes of the economy', lacking access to

funding, accounting and legal expertise, marketing and training (2012: 3-14). Central to our exploration is the underlying question of how the street highlights the precarious yet frequently skilled participation of migrants in increasingly under-resourced and discriminatory urban contexts (Simone, 2006). We ask what kinds of infrastructure are available to urban migrants - particularly migrants who have become self-employed - and how the material and situated configuration of multi-ethnic city streets might assist in participating in the city. In turn, we ask how street infrastructures that are in some way receptive to migrant city-making, are altered by practices of interdependence and friction amongst diverse migrant groups. Our purpose in this paper is to focus on the dynamic nature of economic and social relations on the street as integral to the capricious formation of infrastructure. From the street, we develop an analysis of infrastructure that relates constitutive properties of power, materiality and place.

Our exploration of cross-cultural economic and social exchange, or 'transaction economies' (Simone, 2004), is grounded in the dynamic terrain of the urban high street. Our streets are situated in parts of UK Cities that are officially represented as having high levels of diversity by country of birth, as well as high levels of deprivation, where household incomes are significantly lower than the city as a whole. The everyday exchange elemental to Rookery Road and Narborough Road disrupts these somewhat static articulations of diversity and deprivation. On the street, vast quantities of convenience goods are bought and sold. Welfare forms, language tests and preparations for visa applications are processed through street transactions that respond to the increase in stringent anti-migration regulations in the UK following the Immigration Act of 2014. Betting shops and massage parlours sit in proximity to libraries, and churches and Gujwaras expand their counselling and the provision of meals to fill gaps in social welfare left by a receding state. Rather than the definitive frame of the urban ghetto (itself an arguably western-centric conceptualisation), the activation of urban infrastructure serves to capture the interplay of subordination and resistance, an energetic making of 'cityness' (Simone, 2009) of and from the marginalised city.

Transactions on Rookery Road and Narborough Road are actively shaped through the presence of increasingly diverse migrant groups. We explore what kind of migrant infrastructure is produced in the intersection of energies from across the world, where affinities, assets and modus operandi from the 'global South' overlap with those of the

'global North'. This begs the question of whether we are evidencing a relational versus a geographic spatial reordering (Werner, 2012), in which a more hybrid urbanism and a more hybrid knowledge of the city emerge out of an era of increasing international urban migration. Here, the comparative urbanism emphasis encouraged by Robinson (2016) is advanced not explicitly through contrasting Birmingham with Leicester *per se*, but rather through how urbanisms from Islamabad, Erbil, Istanbul and Mogadishu, are re-appropriated by migrants in their inhabitations of Rookery Road and Narborough Road. The interface between a global North and South, between familiar and unfamiliar terrains, provides the potential for highly adaptive transactions. McFarlane and Vasudevan (2014) highlight the possibilities of infrastructure within an incremental or trial-and-error urbanism, while Silver (2015) emphasises the necessity of street-level experimentations within the reality of limited state resources. In the 2011 Census, Birmingham, a city of 1,074,300 people, had 22.9% of its population born outside of the UK, with an 'ethnic minority' population of 36.74%. Leicester, a city of 333,800 people, had 33.6% born outside of the UK, and a 49.4% 'ethnic minority' population, more recently acquiring the paradoxical status of UK's first 'majority-minority' city. Long histories of migration in these cities allow us to engage with what ethnicity, race and citizenship status might mean in the unpredictable formations of mobility in everyday life, as well as the role of migrants in shaping the economic and cultural vitality of cities.

### **A methodology following a postcolonial sensibility**

While migrant infrastructure surfaces within a locality, it is subject to a multitude of interpretations and events well beyond the confines of the neighbourhood. A primary methodological consideration is how to connect the histories of empire, war, political turbulence and economic crises that register on Rookery Road and Narborough Road, through the tracings of who arrived on the street at what point in time, what is sold and by whom, and what is and isn't shared, and why. Each street has a place in the world in which it is grounded, as well as a consortium of aesthetics, affinities, goods and ideas connected to wider geographies. The linking of fragments from the street to its related geographies and historic formations, is what Quayson refers to as 'horizontal archeology' in his study of Oxford Street in Ghana (2014). Further, the loose infrastructure of the street continually emerges through a lively intersection of histories and geographies, what Simone reveals as a 'transaction economy' on the streets of inner Johannesburg as a crossover of traders, squatters, syndicates, religion, Internet

cafes, beauty parlours, abandoned properties, prostitution and narcotics (2004: 411-414). Across inner Johannesburg's streets are infrastructures in which Nigerians, Congolese, Zimbabweans, Senegalese and established residents recalibrate the city.

To connect transaction economies to historic processes and highly situated and experimental practices in cities, is to engage with economic difference within and beyond the logic of advanced capitalism. There are several post-colonial and feminist vantage points from which to develop an understanding of transaction beyond "the" economy. Gibson-Graham (2008:1) seek to recognise 'diverse economies' as 'the exciting proliferation of economic experiments occurring worldwide'. They identify the varied forms of transaction and enterprise that range from care and unpaid labour, to cooperatives, to social wellbeing, to international networks that transmit small-scale and translocal remittances. Such economies of care are certainly evident on Rookery and Narborough Roads, but in the two empirical sections that follow, we show these transactions to be pragmatic and often provisional. Social and economic experiments frequently emerge out of the pressing realities, such as reductions in social welfare, and advances in the regulatory hoops associated with stringent migration regulation. We gained insights into the growth of 'form-filling economies' on the streets, which became apparent through extended conversations beyond standardised vocabularies of retail activities, number of employees or live-work proximities.

Pollard *et al.* (2009) elaborate on the possibilities of a 'postcolonial economic geography', focusing on the practices and values of emerging economies outside of a western-centric frame of analysis: 'Relatively few economic geographers have examined flows that emanate from non-western and other subaltern settings, or from regions not defined as "advanced capitalist economies."' (2009: 137). Transaction economies on Rookery and Narborough Roads challenge the idea of cities of the global North as essentially regulated entities within coherent state structures of distribution. They also decenter the notion that advanced urban economies emanate largely from the west. Following Pollard's terminology, transaction economies are comprised of intersections of non-western and western flows of economies and people; of diverse forms of self-interest, labour and cooperation; and of active modes of transaction that imply forms of exchange well beyond 'the economic'. We therefore locate our analysis outside of the strictures of conventional models and measures of "the" economy, or in our case of the narrow confines of retail viability and town centre planning. We shift away from established debates around high street turnover and

vacancy, shopping centres versus streets, chains versus independents, and online versus offline. There is little room for engaging with either economic and cultural diversity in these established frames of reference, or with more itinerant forms of city-making that emerge on the street. Similarly, although we engage with the important research field of 'ethnic minority entrepreneurialism', we aim to challenge its more essentialised orientation of ethnicity as well as its categorisation of economic activity along sectorial lines.

In exploring the economic and civic life of transaction economies, we are further interested in engaging with how turbulence - both everyday and extraordinary - is experienced and mediated through the street. Our research on Rookery and Narborough Roads occurred in 2015, intersecting with the UK National Elections (in which migration was a core issue). The cumulative impact of five years of 'austerity governance' was also apparent, where resources to local governments continue to be significantly reduced. Jones *et al.* (2015: 17) specifically highlight the negative impact on 'marginal entrepreneurial communities' stating that, 'since the arrival of the Coalition Government a bad situation has deteriorated with the drastic culling of the existing support system'. Our analysis of the transaction economies of the street included face-to-face surveys in 2015 with 195 proprietors along Rookery and Narborough Roads, followed by a series of interviews with traders and local leaders.

From these street perspectives, it is apparent that transaction economies emerge from repertoires of resourcefulness in the context of marginalisation. Economies are also sustained by the preservation of group ideologies and interests and the partial yet crucial acts of care and counsel beyond self or group. Multi-ethnic high streets in tough urban neighbourhoods are therefore variegated and unstable resources, what Amin (2014) describes as a 'lively infrastructure' of the commons, remote from an ideological or 'symbolic infrastructure' of cultural assimilation. In the two sections of the paper that follow, we provide an ethnographic perspective of the migrant infrastructures of Rookery Road and Narborough Road. We explore what forms of migrant infrastructure are deployed in moments of crisis, and how cross-cultural reserves are developed to provide care in the context of austerity. In each case, we analyse how to connect fragments from the street to planetary processes of migration and city-making. Our methodology of migrant infrastructure expands through the analysis of three interrelated properties including *historic depth (power)*, *socio-spatial texture (materiality)* and *locality (place)*:

- i) *Historic depth* encourages the analysis of how global systems of power and regulation endure in the formation of infrastructure. The presence of proprietors on the street are connected to the reaches of the former British Empire and the Commonwealth, and more recent migratory propulsions including the global financial crisis of 2008 and political re-orderings in Africa and the Middle East.
- ii) *Socio-spatial* texture provides the cues for why certain migrants 'land' in certain parts of the city, connecting racialised and ethnicised patterns of distribution, to enduring spatial morphologies of marginalisation. This dimension of urban analysis prompts us to recognise how the material aspects of infrastructure co-constitute social relations (Barry, 2013). In Birmingham and Leicester, rows of low-income terraced housing, historically built for factory workers and integral to the once industrial landscapes of the UK, provide a dense and overcrowded fabric to the high street.
- iii) *Locality* situates Rookery Road and Narborough Road as streets outside the city centre within marginal but not explicitly enclaved neighbourhoods. The two streets emerge within localities where official scrutiny of entrepreneurial practices is not particularly high, land values remain generally low, and formal regeneration efforts, where they exist, are lacklustre. Such streets, we suggest, are infrastructures of foothold, steppingstone or stopgap - a newcomer's provisional purchase into the city.

### **Rookery Road: the long durée of migrant sedimentation**

Rookery Road is located off the much more widely acclaimed Soho Road. Two miles west of Birmingham City Centre, Soho Road is crammed with high densities of gold jewellery, saris and suits for weddings, and assortments of food for religious and family celebrations. While Soho Road is a street one goes out of the way to visit, Rookery Road is absorbed within its mundane residential landscape of tightly packed terraced-houses. High residential densities are achieved both from the repetitive rows of narrow frontages of pre-war terraced-housing, built for the labour force that sustained Birmingham's industry. Occupancy rates per house are typically high, sustaining a dense socio-spatial texture generally occupied by the city's poorer residents (Census, 2011). According to the 2011 Census, two thirds of those living in the surrounding Lozells and East Handsworth Ward primarily represent four ascribed ethnic groups:



Pakistani (25.8%), Indian (14.7%), Bangladeshi (14.4%) and Black/Caribbean (12.2%). Over the decades the area has sustained a number of riots and race-related violence, described by Kehinde Andrews (2015) as simmering socio-economic tensions, underscored by an area actively disinvested in by the state.

With historically inexpensive land values, the area increasingly accommodates more recent migrant groups, but current residential occupancies also continue to reflect 'actively regulated and racialised' migratory patterns from the 1950s and '60s that are linked to Commonwealth ties to the former British Empire (Schuster and Solomos, 2004: 268). Historically, the recruitment and exploitation of a Black and Asian labour force is traced to the routes into the UK that were orchestrated by the Labour and Conservative Governments in an effort to rebuild the depressed post-war economy. In industrial cities like Birmingham, 'working-class' migrants were positioned in working class neighbourhoods. Rana, who describes himself as 'a political animal' and who has a leadership role at a Temple in Handsworth, states:

My parents came to Birmingham from the Punjab in the 1960s. They were invited by the British Government. [...] We came as working-class labourers. We were the so-called low caste – the leather merchants. They worked in the foundries and textile industries, and they lived in areas like Handsworth that was cheap [sic]. My father bought a three-bedroom terrace house for £3,000.00. At that time, caste-based issues were put aside to rally against discrimination here. They were work-focused, with a strongly indoctrinated family ethos. (Fieldwork Interview 2015)

Rana further described the enduring layers of migrant sedimentation in Handsworth, where ties to the area are still maintained by the 1960s wave of migrants, either as residents, users of local resources such as the temples, Gurdwaras and mosques, or as landlords of both residential and retail properties. Although Rana subsequently described how some of the 1960s migrants 'made good' and moved out of Handsworth, discriminatory effects remain inculcated in the socio-spatial texture of the area, as suggested by the comparatively high levels of deprivation in the ward, where 48% of children are recorded as living in poverty and unemployment rates are high (Census, 2011).

While the transaction economies of the street partly arise within an historic and urban context of deprivation, our analysis of Rookery Road suggests the need for comprehending the resourcefulness within the lived realities of this multi-ethnic street. England, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Kurdistan, Kenya, Poland Vietnam, Bangladesh,

Cameroon, Jamaica, Ghana, Ireland: these are the surveyed countries of origin, in order of prevalence, amongst the 157 retail and services units on Rookery Road. Rookery Road is lived as a "local" street, responding to the daily practices of its surrounding residents, and street retail is composed of a high percentage of food-oriented goods and services (29%). The mile long street that is fronted by as much residential as retail use, is composed of clinics, pharmacies, laundromats, hardware stores, car repair garages, estate agencies, betting shops, Internet cafes, nail bars, hair salons, money transfer facilities and solicitors' and accountants' offices. Amongst these more rudimentary features of the street, is a growing presence of one-stop immigration 'shops' – places to charge and process access to forms of citizenship ranging from security guard accreditations, to preparations for the 'Life in the UK' test. As if a former employee of the Birmingham City Council reflects on these new street spaces, drawing connections to the receding role of the local state in the provision of resources for migrant needs:

The City Council has had a hand in courting votes and supporting projects. Since 2010, the funding is no longer there. 'ESOL' courses [English as a second language], and 'Learn Direct' programmes, which were free, have been outsourced to training and certifying agencies. These charge people to train for 'European Computer Driving Licence' courses or to become security guards. (Fieldwork interview, 2015).

Some 86% of the shops on the street are independent, reflecting a high proportion of self-employed proprietors. The primary presence of independent retail activity can be interpreted in a number of ways, and in the first instance signifies the on-going tendency that ethnic minorities are more likely to be self-employed than their white British counterparts. Following the perspective of 'historic depth' it is also possible to draw links to more established employment and unemployment trajectories in Birmingham. In explaining the emergence of a South Asian restaurant 'Balti-Quarter' in Birmingham, Ram *et al.* (2002: 26) define Birmingham historically as the 'quintessential industrial city' within a major regional manufacturing hub that, up until the 1960s, employed two thirds of the West-Midlands labour force. However, job loss following deindustrialisation fell disproportionately not only on unqualified individuals, but more specifically on immigrant origin workers:

In Britain this elimination of many of the very jobs for which migrant workers had been recruited directly affects the supply of South Asian entrepreneurs, since many from this displaced mass of surplus workers have sought survival in self-employment (ibid: 31).

While this structural approach provides a crucial historic perspective, it omits significant variations in detail, and it is here that the analysis of migrant infrastructure fills some gaps (Figure 1). First, traders on the street have, on average, been on Rookery Road for many years, suggesting fairly high levels of resilience within a context of low-entry property prices. Approximately a third of traders have been on the street for twenty years or more, yet a third have been on the same street for five years or less, indicating a mix of relatively stable and emergent retail energies. Together these materialise as an apparently banal assortment of day-to-day shops, each filling out their regular portions of terraced housing aligned to form the street. What is known colloquially as the 'Kurdish Barber', is open six days a week and is always full, all three of its seats in the small sub-divided shop occupied by men who regularly partake in the routine of hair and beard trims. A few doors down, the second-hand furniture shop – one of the longstanding enterprises on the street - struggles to make ends meet. A shop that appears to sell balloons and greeting cards is more explicitly the front room presence for a business that has grown from its diminutive base on the street, to provide two generations with work related to large-scale corporate events and family celebrations.

The apparent down-at-heel materiality of Rookery Road belies its economic role. In an area with high levels of unemployment, the stretch of tightly packed business frontages form a linear hive of consequential employment activity. Of the 66 traders that responded to the 'number of employees' section in the survey, we extrapolated 456 jobs from the average of 3.4 jobs per 157 units. While 40% of these jobs were respectively held by family members of the proprietor, 60% were held by non-family employees (Figure 1). Similarly, on Narborough Road we extrapolated a total of approximately 811 jobs. How are we to interpret the significant numbers of livelihoods sustained within these street interiors? The structural reality of inequality and discrimination across the UK is such that Jones *et al.* legitimately articulate the 'downbeat reality' of migrant entrepreneurial performance (2012: 2), and the compromised work conditions associated with the absence of employment contracts, long working hours and the use of family labour. However, Rookery Road and Narborough Road are also multifarious systems of employment for migrants excluded from more formalised sectors of employment. Urban street trade remains a difficult yet productive *modus operandi* for migrants living in marginalised conditions. We were aware over the year-long period of our research of the cheek-by-jowl range of stable and itinerant work practices. On street pavements or in store fronts phone-card

operators worked from rudimentary cubicles the size of a table dealing in the smallest and most highly competitive dimensions of cards to call abroad. Alongside their precarious presence, large-scale family businesses with multiple employees and shelves stacked full with products assert a robust street economy. Such varied street livelihoods will invariably become more significant in deindustrialised urban landscapes, and urban researchers will need to be better versed in comprehending the interrelationships between its stable and itinerant, and its legal and illicit, dimensions.

<b>Total units (excluding residential) - 157</b> <b>Total retail - 102</b> <b>Total surveyed - 87</b> <b>Total vacant units - 23</b>							
<b>Countries of birth amongst proprietors:</b> Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ghana, India, Iraq, Jamaica, Kenya, Kurdistan, Pakistan, Poland, UK, Vietnam							
Types of Businesses/Services		Employment Figures		Number of Languages Spoken		Duration of Businesses/Services	
Food	29%	Independent Retail	86%	More than 1	88%	5 years or less	35%
Miscellaneous	25%		246				
Commercial Services	20%	Family	40%	3-4	48%	6-19 years	33%
Beauty	14%		60%				
Civic	4%	Average jobs per unit	3.4	5 +	11%	20+ Years	32%
Clothing	4%		456				
Technology	4%	Estimated total number of Jobs					
Total	100%						

**Figure 1. Features of Transaction Economies: Rookery Road, Birmingham based on 2015 survey data (Hall, King and Finlay (2015a))**

Analysing the complexity of street infrastructure further extends to an understanding of how the economic, civic and spatial intersect. Amongst the terraced houses adjacent to Rookery Road are a number of institutional and public spaces that provide various forms of care and association. Spaces formally constituted by religious membership simultaneously provide outreach beyond the prescriptions of faith or persuasion. Rana informed us that the large Gujwara temple off Soho Road, specifically constructed by and for his caste in 1971, has a congregation that has grown to 20,000 people. The temple is effectively under construction, as it has been since its inception, its incremental materiality reflecting its adaptive social capacity. Rana commented that the Gujwara used to provide approximately 80 meals a day, but that an increase in needs associated with growing poverty in the area is reflected in the Gujwara now serving 2,000 meals per week to 'every Tom, Dick and Harry'.

At the northern end of Rookery Road a charity renting space from the Methodist church fills in the gaps in care left by a receding state. Within the church grounds a women's charity has been running for 27 years. With two full time and two part-time staff, the centre reportedly caters for over 5,000 women a month, offering services ranging from a crèche to free meals. Avantika describes:

The centre caters to women from all age groups and is super diverse in all aspects. [...] With the closure of council neighbourhood offices people come to the centre to read letters and fill in basic forms. Residents will travel from other cities to come here and talk to trusted staff. (Fieldwork Interview, 2015).

Despite the continuous withdrawal of the state from local acts of public provision, the socio-spatial infrastructure of care are kept in place by ethics and programmes highly sensitive to the needs of a diverse community. Their endurance is sustained primarily by formal systems of membership, religious obligations, and volunteerism. They also are initiated, grown and sustained in a comparatively flat urban land market that concedes to the construction and longevity of large community-oriented buildings that are often incrementally built as resources are acquired.

In analysing locality as a rhythmic dimension of place, it is important to engage with the dynamic aspects of infrastructure, and how shared resources are deployed in turbulent circumstances. What happens when the loose infrastructures of the street are exposed to extreme and explosive crises? Who depends on whom, where is blame caste, and how are the composite fragments of diversity fractured or bridged? In our discussion with Rana, he outlined at least four 'riots' in Handsworth within his memory, but

reflected on the most recent crisis that was associated with the August 2011 upheavals. Protests and rioting erupted in towns and cities across the UK, provoked by the alleged racist killing of Mark Duggan by the police. While five deaths occurred across the six days of unrest, this included three young Asian men who were reportedly guarding shops and who were ran over by a car and killed on Dudley Street in Birmingham's city centre. Ajmal Hussain, Birmingham resident writes:

When the riots came to Birmingham, things soon turned ugly. Overnight, the focus shifted from rioting youth and police inefficacy to three deaths and the prospect of inter-ethnic violence. If the issue of race was pushed to the background in Tottenham and Brixton, in Birmingham it became central. The tragic deaths of three Asian men immediately ignited fears of a reprisal: though no one yet knew who was responsible for the incident on Dudley Road, we were told to brace ourselves for a repeat of the conflict that hit Lozells during Ramadan 2005. Inter-ethnic violence between the city's black and Asian populations seemed to be on the horizon. (Hussain, 2011).

Rana referred to the rioting on Soho Road that preceded the deaths as a relatively manageable crisis where 'business owners – from all groups – came together'. However, his narrative altered significantly with respect to the deaths, 'I can't express how angry the South Asian community was against the Afro-Caribbean community. It was a very scary time...I still don't think that's healed.' Although it is apparent that the anger endures, the potential for inter-ethnic reprisal attacks was subdued: parents of the victims expressly called for restraint and a loose consortium of leaders reiterated that message. Ajmal Hussain (2011) reflects:

More than "race", what shapes relations within different groups in this area of Birmingham is a complex mix of socio-economic, historical and political factors. This is most apparent in the way black and Asian people, young and old, feel their interests are represented. The potential for conflict is as apparent as a desire to fashion a better future. The default position for community leaders has been to stress the former. It could be that the tragic deaths of those three men on 10 August become a turning point. At their funeral they were spoken of as the ultimate sacrifice for peace. Knowing Birmingham, however, what will matter is who comes to own the narrative.

In exploring the migrant infrastructure of Rookery Road, we have engaged with the analytic dimensions of *historic depth*, *socio-spatial texture* and *locality*. *Historic depth* on Rookery Road is expressed through the long durée of highly discriminatory processes through which migrants are displaced and then emplaced in deprived parts of Birmingham. *Socio-spatial* texture helps to recognise the structural and material conditions of marginalisation, shaped by the tightly packed terraced-houses in peripheral urban areas that once housed the labour force for Birmingham's manufacturing industries, and which subsequently provides the dense and

overcrowded thresholds to sustain the convenience retail on Rookery Road. *Locality* grounds spatial practices and in our particular analysis, we focused on how street infrastructures are activated in times of state withdrawals of resources, increasingly limited employment opportunities, and periods of social unrest.

### **Narborough Road: accelerated flows and migrant churn**

The stretches of Narborough and Rookery Roads that we have focused on for our face-to-face survey are more or less the same length of a mile, but they are composed of distinctly different compositions of retail density and migrant variegation. We recorded twenty-two countries of origin amongst the 204 proprietors on Narborough Road including: England, India, Turkey, Kurdistan, Kenya, Malawi, Poland, Iran, Iraq, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Canada, Jamaica, Lithuania, Somalia, Tanzania, Thailand and Zambia. Why this dense convergence of migrant diversity on this street? The manager of the Labour Party Member of Parliament office on Narborough Road referred to the high levels of population 'churn' in the area. Internally, churn is driven by the access to comparatively cheap urban land. A variety of urban 'prospectors' use the area as a foothold into urban opportunities, including a symbiotic relationship between international migrants and students who have come to Leicester to study at Del Montfort University and University of Leicester to the north of the street.

Externally, migrant churn is largely driven by histories of global economic and political instability. The historic depth of Narborough Road is connected to the number of migrants to Leicester who are 'twice migrants' undertaking more than one enforced or voluntary migratory journey in a lifetime. This includes a large population of 'Ugandan Asians' who were expelled from Uganda in 1972, 11 000 of whom currently live in Leicester (Census, 2011). Churn is also driven by stringent regulatory regimes not simply at the national border but within the city bye-laws that determine who is able to set up shop, and under what conditions. A sizeable population of 'British-based Somali entrepreneurs' came to Leicester via the Netherlands and Denmark from the 2000s onwards. These twice migrants had already claimed asylum in the EU, but were subsequently unable to start up businesses in their country of asylum due to highly vetted restrictions of entrepreneurial activity at the city scale (Jones *et al*, 2010: 576).

The trajectories of multiple migratory journeys, as well as histories of strong regional systems of exchange, is apparent in the language proficiencies of proprietors on Narborough Road: 79% of the proprietors we surveyed spoke more than one language, while 49% spoke three to four languages (Figure 2). These streets host and are configured by forms and practices of 'multilingual citizenship' (Hall, 2013) where high levels of language proficiency suggest the precarity of being displaced and on the move. It further reveals a fluency to share, transmit and express ideas and goods. Through our surveys it was apparent that diverse language proficiency was necessary to engage with an increasingly varied customer base, most notably in the provision of health and market-based housing. The staff in the dentist unit on Narborough Road could collectively converse in six languages, while local estate agents on both Narborough and Rookery Roads actively made use of translation services as part of their business remit, claiming to reach up to eight language groups as part of their service. The socio-spatial texture of multilingual citizenship similarly translated into the material configuration of shop signs and layouts. Within shop interiors a range of food and products from a global market is displayed. Interiors often have the feel of being gradually shaped, as proprietors change the range within their shops in accordance with customer needs and/or acquire access to capital. Tauya who is from Zimbabwe and runs a hair salon comments, 'I've seen the guy opposite build his shop over ten years, slowly extending. It's so diverse – his business is catering to everyone – that's why it works. He's understood the market'.



<b>Total units (excluding residential) – 204</b> <b>Total surveyed – 108</b> <b>Total retail - 151</b> <b>Total vacant units – 19</b>							
<b>Countries of birth amongst proprietors</b> Afghanistan, Cameroon, Canada, India, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Kenya, Kurdistan, Lithuania, Malawi, Pakistan, Poland, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, UK, Zambia, Zimbabwe							
Types of Businesses/Services		Employment Figures		Number of Languages Spoken		Duration of Businesses/Services	
Food	44%	Independent Retail	68%	More than 1	79%	5 years or less	43%
Miscellaneous	19%						
Commercial Services	15%	Surveyed number of Jobs	366	3-4	49%	6-19 years	33%
Beauty	9%						
Civic	3%	Family	46%	5 +	14%	20+ Years	24%
Clothing	5%	Non-Family	54%				
Technology	5%	Average jobs per unit	4.4				
Total	100%	Estimated total number of Jobs	814				

**Figure 2. Features of Transaction Economies: Narborough Road, Leicester based on 2015 survey data** (Hall, King and Finlay, 2015b)

However, there are some modes of communication that defeat the language proficiencies on the street. The ‘filling in of forms’ was repeatedly raised in fieldwork conversations, as an intimidating bureaucratic procedure that overwhelms many migrants who feel ill-equipped to communicate in the context of elaborate official procedures. Every aspect of a “new” life needs to be initiated, vetted and processed, from bank accounts, to mobile phone contracts, to tenancy agreements, to National Insurance Number applications, to registering for health care and school places. A new life can be overwhelmed with a density of procedure, which requires not only skill and determination, but also the appropriate cultural fluency to productively engage in official speak. As a result, proprietors on Narborough Road have developed many varied venues in which form filling is undertaken with assistance. The independent bookstore is one such place, where the proprietors Jane and Mike have had both shop and a home above it for over twenty years. One of the many community-orientated initiatives they have been involved with was the creation of ‘West End Traders’, a platform for a unified voice composed of residents and proprietors along Narborough Road to engage with the council on issues ranging from parking to opposition to large-scale redevelopment projects. Jane has established links over a period of time with some of the Kurdish traders on the street, and has become something of a ‘language broker’

assisting migrants and refugees, most particularly in the early years of settlement. Jane describes:

There are a lot of people who don't know how to get their welfare and are actually being really badly treated [...] but what has mainly been happening around here recently is getting people citizenship. (Fieldwork Interview, 2015)

In return for assisting in form-filling, John and his son have their hair cut for free by Ansar, whose shop is just a few doors down from the bookstore. Ansar regularly pops in to tell John it's time for a trim. This reciprocal labour permits the complement between need and social interaction to be sustained. Form filling is the bread-and-butter of the local Labour Member of Parliament's office on Narborough Road. In a ramshackle interior directly off the street, surfaced with photocopy machines, piles of paper and pin boards covered with maps of the local area, Jack, the office manager meets with us. He describes the core activity of the office:

As an MP's office we have a significant caseload. That is our primary form of engagement, certainly with new arrivals. Key issues that come up include the quality of private sector housing in the area, the rights around work, and support in child tax credits. When you've helped one person, it is common for a number of people from the same community to come [...] What's really significant here is the churn – it's a very, very transient population. In the run up to an election cycle, we knock on a lot of doors. Within a parliamentary cycle, at least 50% of the people we have spoken to before, have moved on. (Fieldwork interview, 2015).

Much of the ephemeral materiality of the street reflects John's description of churn, including the bed and mattress shops, second-hand shops and shops filled with items to kit out the plethora of small residences on small budgets. The rhythm of the street is also punctuated with the abundance of fast food and take-away places. Unlike Rookery Road, a higher turnover of shops is suggested by the 46% of traders who had been on the street for five years or less, many of whom use the fast-food format as an entry into street retail. Fast food proprietors on Narborough Road reported to be significantly affected by the fluctuation in the student population when the universities are closed. The precarity of this retail sector is further highlighted by over-supply and fast turnaround: half of the fast-food businesses have been established in under a year or are closed, whilst a third have been on the street for between two to five years old (refer to Figure 2). This fits with Jones *et al.*'s (2010: 577) observation that when entry barriers are low, competition is frequently high, leading to a saturation of the market.

However, comparatively cheap land values associated with locality also allows for the endurance of other activities - a quarter of traders had been on the street for twenty years or more, and the independent bookshop has an enduring presence, as do the massage parlours/brothels towards the southern end of the street. Incremental forms of experimentation have time to emerge over extended periods. It is not only spaces and goods that are incrementally adapted, but also adult capacities. In both Narborough and Rookery Roads, the more than half of our respondents stated that they had been in some form of work other than retail before they started their shops. The migrants' agility on the street emerges from the force of circumstance and change. Some proprietors reflected on how they had altered their jobs with each move to a new country, while others referred to having to leave the formal job market (usually jobs in the public sector) after the 2008 financial crisis.

Transaction economies therefore operate with high levels of constraint and high levels of resourcefulness that is expressed in 'regularity and provisionality' (Simone, 2004: 308). Much activity is defined by its marginal locality, yet the peripheralisation of the street also permits a camouflage for a range of transactions that are able to flourish without being overtly visible to the lens of power. This in part is why official attempts to normalise the activities and aesthetics of diverse and irregular urban spaces often seem out of place, lacking the more ethnographic tools to comprehend the density of street economies. Planning officials resort to branding exercises that aim to supplant the actual life of the street with an identity from elsewhere: Narborough Road is marketed as Leicester's 'West End' heralded on demure flags attached to lamp posts. The prosaic strip of Rookery Road is assigned with the misnomer of 'Rookery Road Shopping Centre' the only evidence of which is a Birmingham City Council sign on which the misplaced grandeur of the street is proclaimed, and endorsed by EU funding.

The dynamic nature of transaction economies, both in their economic and civic intersections, continues to proliferate across Leicester and Birmingham's streets. However, the 'official' representation of ethnic diversity at street level is either ascribed an ethnic brand such as Birmingham's thematic Chinese Quarter (McEwan, Pollard and Henry, 2005), or it is given an aspirational elsewhere (Leicester's 'West End'). Conversely, when land values rise, diverse retail practices risk being overwritten by more powerful speculative interests, prompting the need for tabula rasa regeneration in the mode of a Western-centric model of highly curated public space and retail oriented to chains. In engaging with 'diverse economies' brought from across the planet that

converge on streets, and that are constituted by far more 'postcolonial economic geographies' it is evident that we need to develop more varied measures of economic value (Mitchell, 2008). Start-up costs and annual profits for individual businesses offer one lens on the success or demise of ethnic minority entrepreneurialism. However, in exploring the transaction economies of the street through tracing practices of resourcefulness in contexts of resource constraints, other significant measures emerge. In our paper, we have explored duration, language proficiencies, incremental adaptation and forms of reciprocal labour, in order to broaden our scope of economic value.

### **Migrant infrastructure: alternative narratives of urban micro-economies**

We reflect on how to interpret the lively and unpredictable configurations of variegated people, spaces and resources in the city constituted by mobility and exchange. Our research of the dynamic intersections of cultures and economies on Rookery and Narborough Roads doesn't readily correspond with well-established paradigms of economic value established by western perspectives. Yet neither does the 'cityness' of these streets fall into an urbanism distinctly attributable to a global North versus a global South, but rather a related overlap across the two. Certainly, the infrastructures of our two streets within two post-industrial Midlands cities of the UK emerge out of connections to the hierarchies of empire and the re-ignition of the post-war manufacturing economy sustained in part by migrant labour. Street life is also configured by particular instances of political and economic turbulence over the past four decades that results in the widespread displacement of people, and their subsequent emplacement and reconfiguration within a city elsewhere. But the 'crisis of migration' that so readily overrides the western political imagination fails to observe and therefore comprehend the complex compositions and on-going renewals intrinsic to increased mobility and its inevitable urban *modus operandi* – exchange.

What is the analytic work then, of 'infrastructure' as a loose configuration of highly social and spatial forms of exchange? How might an understanding of migrant infrastructure pursued through the interrelated properties of historic depth, socio-spatial texture, and locality, assist us to engage with global mobility, urban reconfiguration and epistemological border crossings?

- i) The notable array of migrants on Rookery and Narborough Roads, intersects the translocation of dispositions and spaces brought from across the planet. We evidence economic and indeed civic combinations of multiple geographies in a located urban infrastructure, constantly remade by migrant transactions. Here, the related work on 'diverse economies' and 'postcolonial economic geography' is of substantial epistemological benefit to our analysis, in its attention to border crossings across both established domains of knowledge, and the geographies they inscribe. These scholars encourage paying careful attention to the historic endurance of inequalities such as racism and ethnic essentialism, but their analytic frame is not subordinate to the totalising analytic of neoliberal subjugation. Also of substantive significance, is their regard for a far more varied comprehension of economic geography, and the need to engage in the transactions across subaltern and advanced capitalist geographies. City streets like Rookery and Narborough Roads are edge spaces in which planetary flows intersect. These crossovers sustain transactions from mercantile practices for profit, acts of community provision in the context of dire needs, and reciprocal social exchange for mutual gain.
  
- ii) In exploring transaction economies on the street, it is not tenable to separate out the economic, the social and the spatial, as separate processes or categories of analysis. Rather, the everyday life of 'migrant infrastructure' suggests that our comprehension of what it means to be 'civic', or to participate in matters of shared public concern, needs to substantially diversify. In tracing how everyday and momentous troubles are faced through the street, a variety of resources are activated. Resources are at times secular at times religious, while some require specific and even segregated forms of membership to gain access, and others are in-off-the street. There is no reality of a singular or ideological "meeting place", but rather a 'fractured and multiple' consortium of spaces of friction and experimentation (Massey, 2007: 89). On our streets individuals often effectively engage in a wide spectrum of memberships, participating in both spaces of sameness and difference at different points in time. This resonates with Werbner's understanding of diasporas as both 'ethnic parochial and cosmopolitan' (2002: 120), oscillating between moments of ethnic boundary maintenance and moments of destabilising hegemonic constructions of homogeneity. However, explicit forms of discrimination are built into the urban fabric, and it is likely that the continued retraction of public resources from

marginalised urban neighbourhoods will exacerbate inequalities and tensions. Simultaneous to deep structural inequalities, are important forms of transaction that require alternative ways of seeing and systems of valuing.

- iii. Finally, the migrant infrastructure of the street offers a partial promise to the newcomer, a space of relative autonomy and invisibility, to obtain a foothold in the city. In this strange space of ambiguity, adjacent to formal employment strictures, visa restrictions and expected cultural norms, the city is reimaged and reconfigured by the migrant. This is an incremental or bit-by-bit reconstruction of the urban, a gradual recalibration of spaces and textures in order to make livelihoods. It is also a gradual reconfiguration of self, with migrants having to converse in a number of languages, as well as adopt a number of occupations or professions over time. The incremental property of migrant infrastructure is deployed and developed to accommodate basic needs and struggles, and occasionally more explicit forms of transformation (McFarlane and Vasudevan, 2014; Hall, 2015). On Narborough and Rookery Roads we observed the practices of a precarious yet persistent resourcefulness sustained through the overlap of bodies and geographies. These inventive urban repertoires exist in the context of a state that diminishes public resources while elaborating its systems of auditing and constraining the migrant. The peripheral spaces of the city street remain available to the migrant, while land values and speculative interests remain low. Nevertheless, these are crucial urban infrastructures that sustain an emerging spectrum of economic and civic diversities.

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