The Multicultural Past

Neil [a first generation Canadian], Jay [a second-generation Indian], Tessa [a third-generation Scot] and me [Welsh, English and new to Newham] were in the kitchen making a cup of tea when a conversation started about the decline of the East London community. They discussed the loss of community spirit and blamed it on people not speaking English or knowing English history. They blamed the Indians and Pakistanis for the language and cited a Polish worker on the second charge. He had apparently claimed that Henry VIII had killed the Pope.

(Field Diary, November 2009)

I was out with Besa, Eva, Alma and Jeton. We interviewed a woman outside Newham market. She was from the Philippines. We asked her what she liked about the local area and she said the fresh fruit and meat. She never mentioned ‘home’, but in his video analysis of the conversation Besian assumed she associated fresh products with ‘home’. He did. For him they were associated with Albania.

(Field Diary, December 2009)

They laughed about accidents they had, and comedic situations they had found themselves in: falling down a hill or having a cow run at them. At the same time as being memories of Albania, they were also just memories of events. I participated in these memories, not on the basis that I was Albanian, or had been to Albania, but on the basis that I too had similar stories to tell.

(Field Diary, March 2009)
Over the two years I worked in Newham, I learned a lot about the memory practices of young people and youth workers. Like the quotes above, these practices drew attention to competing nostalgias of ‘home’ and post-national recollections, at the same time as they addressed exclusive memory practices tied to whiteness and national belonging. As with all aspects of social and cultural life, urban multiculture’s contemporary form references what came before. This chapter explores the memory practices of young people and youth workers to address urban multiculture’s relation to the past. As will become clear, what came before is not static but under constant revision.

This discussion is advanced through developing a dialogic and diasporic approach to collective memory practice. Memory as ‘practice’ allows the chapter to focus on the lived production of memory as creative and plural, as opposed to viewing memories as facts or essences – as history (Billig 1995). Viewing the memory practices of youth workers and young people as ‘collective’ provides the means for thinking about memory as more than an individual act (Halbwachs 1992). Young people and youth workers remembered pasts individually, but they also remembered collectively (Ricœur 2004). To move beyond the national confines of East London’s popular memory, the notion of ‘diaspora’ permits an appreciation of the field of memory practices young people practised; a field formed through the trajectories and interactions of multiple ‘homes’ (Brah 1996) and cultural flows (Gilroy 1993).

The view of collective memory taken in this chapter is also dialogic rather than phenomenological (Bakhtin 1981). Phenomenological accounts hold subjective experience as primary (Halbwachs 1992; Ricœur 2004). This occludes the plurality of the past in favour of the subjective present, thus leading to a tyranny of the now – the problem of ‘small time’ (Bakhtin 1986). So, while this chapter explores the past projections of young people and youth workers, it does so with attention to how these practices of the present were made over ‘great time’ (Bakhtin 1986). The approach allows for an appreciation of the ‘tracing’ and instability of memory (Bennett 2005; Derrida 1976; Spivak 1976). Viewed in the context of 150 years of migration from the UK, Europe and the world, this approach makes it possible to view Newham’s past as a ‘fan of history’ in which different memories are folded down one on top of the other (Benjamin 1978), and it makes it possible to understand how any of these pasts can be resurrected in the service of the present. As Bakhtin explains,