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Crossing divides: Ethnicity and rurality

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A B S T R A C T

This paper draws on research with people from African, Caribbean and Asian backgrounds regarding perceptions and use of the English countryside. I explore the complex ways in which the category 'rural' was constructed as both essentialised *and* relational: how the countryside was understood most definitely as 'not-city' but also, at the same time, the English countryside was conceived as part of a range of networks: one site in a web of 'nature places' across the country, as well as one rural in an international chain of rurals – specifically via embodied and emotional connections with 'nature'. I argue that alongside sensed/sensual embodiment (the non-representational intuitive work of the body), we need also to consider reflective embodiment as a *desire to* space/place in order to address the structural socio-spatial exclusions endemic in (rural) England and how they are challenged. I suggest that a more progressive conceptualisation of rurality – a 'transrural' open to issues of mobility and desire – can help us disrupt dominant notions of rural England as only an exclusionary white space, and reposition it as a site within multicultural, multiethnic, transnational and mobile social Imaginaries.

1. On positioning

I am feeling somewhat ambivalent about this special issue. On the one hand, I'm excitedly anticipating sustained engagement with issues surrounding ethnic identity construction, rurality, and social and spatial in/exclusion – on the other, I'm regretting that such an issue wasn't compiled a few years ago when I was researching my PhD, concerning these issues. The case that ethnicity has been under-examined within rural studies will, no doubt, have been made in the 'Introduction' to this volume. While I repeat it here, I'd like to do so by positioning myself in/through some of the relevant academic literature, mindful of feminist debates regarding the part that we, as individuals, play in our academic endeavours and the need to excavate and hold central those lived experiences and 'situated knowledges': the need to reflectively examine the ways in which we *are positioned and position ourselves* in a variety of contexts, recognising the inseparability of consciousness and embodied experiences, and how these subjectivities are caught up with a 'politics of position' (e.g. Bondi, 2002; Kobayashi, 1994; Rose, 1997).

My PhD journey took place between 2000 and 2004, and focussed on the perceptions and use of the English national parks[1] among people from Asian, African and Caribbean backgrounds. More broadly, I explored issues regarding ethnicity, rurality and national belonging in contemporary England, and was tasked with writing a policy report alongside the thesis.[2] As I read the academic work around my research, I increasingly became aware of a dichotomy. There was a rich body of literature around ethnic identity, diversity, hybridity, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, etc., including critical perspectives problematising these concepts and how they play out in society, but always and only embedded in the urban sphere (e.g. Alexander, 2000; Amin, 2002; Back and Solomos, 2003; Brah, et al., 1999; Hesse, 2000; Mirza, 1997; Parekh, 2000a,b). At the same time, especially within geography, there was interest in the ways in which rurality/rural space is implicated within national identity construction, notions of belonging and spatial practices.[3] In the English context, the national imagery of rural space appeared to exclude ethnic minorities, among other groups, from accessing the countryside, both physically and emotionally (Cloke and Little, 1997; Milbourne, 1997). The connection between the rural as the 'genuine' England *and not* multicultural was highlighted in the literature as replayed and

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[1] The National Park Authorities use capital letters for themselves; I have never capitalised 'national parks' in my writing/work because many respondents/participants in the research had never heard of national parks in the sense of organised/legitimised places governed by official bodies … rather as fairly nebulous areas of countryside, if at all.

[2] The PhD was an ESRC CASE funded project, with the North York Moors national park as CASE partner. The policy document is available at <http://www.visitnorthyorkshiremoors.co.uk/content.php?nID=675>.

[3] I am writing here from a generalised Western and European position – debate regarding rurality, ethnicity and spatial in/exclusions from an elsewhere perspective has its own specificities.

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reiterated throughout representations of Englishness (Matless, 1998; Scruton, 2001).

Certainly, academic work relating such racialisation of the countryside to the absence of ethnic minorities in rural areas had been central in opening up debates about racism and social exclusion in the countryside. For example, Neal (2002) outlines a policy impotence and even arrogance in rural areas regarding the (non)-relevancy of ethnicity as a rural concern. Unpacking the 'rural idyll', then, was crucial in disrupting the stereotyped homogeneous, white countryside being folded into constructions of Englishness, heritage and cultural 'norms' (Agyeman, 1995; Agyeman and Spooner, 1997; Henderson and Kaur, 1999; Kinsman, 1995; Malik, 1992). However, there had been a lack of empirical work at that time to examine these issues further: ethnic minorities were perhaps too easily theorised and written *as* excluded 'rural others'. Indeed, Little (1999: 438) voiced concern regarding the use of the term 'rural others' in general, "the lack of theoretical discussion around 'the other' and 'the same'", the paucity of recognition of the power relations complicit in such a categorisation, and the "static treatment of both individual and group identity".

This urban-as-multicultural and rural-as-monocultural dialectic was paralleled in conference and seminar settings: if I wanted to engage with debates on 'race' and ethnicity, I went to sessions on 'cities' or 'urbanism' or 'everyday urban life', otherwise I explored conceptual work regarding 'the rural' in rural sessions/events that were largely devoid of any mention of ethnicity. My fieldwork, however, was problematising such categorisation. To talk with people from Asian, African and Caribbean backgrounds, much of my empirical research was certainly conducted in urban areas, but these groups were also visitors to national parks, independent of those visits organised as part of the research itself (see methodological outline below); I was also talking with national park staff and 'countryside/heritage experts' (not quite all of whom were white) often in urban settings. It seemed that I was continually crossing spatial and social divides. This was mirrored in my personal life. I'm a white woman, who ticks 'British' on monitoring forms but would describe myself as Anglo-Irish – and who I am/how I am perceived 'had a relation to what 'truths' and accounts' I was told by my respondents (Neal and Walters, 2006). But also my extended family includes Native American Indian and African ethnicities, and over the period I was researching the PhD I spent time with family members from different backgrounds in different UK settings, rural and urban. Notions of any easy separation, then, between a white rural and diverse ethnic urban in contemporary England were challenged in a range of ways and places.

And so I want to offer some reflections here on the understandings and use of rural space among people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, paying close attention to what emerged from the research as the need to think the category 'rural' in more open/inclusive ways. Towards the end of the paper, I suggest the concept of ***transrurality*** as a more progressive conceptualisation of rurality, one that *both* encapsulates the specificities of place *and* is open to mobility and desire – in order to displace rural England as only an exclusionary white space and reposition it as a site within multicultural, multiethnic, transnational and mobile social Imaginaries. Such thinking stems from the complex ways in which the category 'rural' was constructed by research participants as essentialised *and* relational: how it was understood most definitely as 'not-city' but also, at the same time, how the English countryside was conceived as part of a range of networks – one 'nature site' in a web of national 'nature places', as well as one rural in an international chain of rurals – specifically via values attached to notions of nature.

Indeed, the paper begins by considering the role of 'nature' in visible community perceptions and use of rural spaces. For many participants, positive attachments to 'nature' challenged the dominant construction among countryside organisation staff, which tied visible community absence from rural areas to a non-appreciation of nature fixed to ethnic difference. However, diffidence and other negative responses were suggestive of more diverse opinions among visible communities, disrupting any essentialism regarding ethnic readings of nature. Such complexities, I propose, can be understood through paying attention to materiality, the embodied experiences it affords in place and space, and its attendant role in social Imaginaries and spatial practices. I suggest that alongside corporeal, sensual embodiment (the non-representational intuitive work of the body), we need also to consider reflective embodiment as a *desire to* space/place in order to address the structural socio-spatial exclusions endemic in (rural) England and how they are challenged. As such, the paper builds an argument for greater focus on the 'transrural' as a perspective which helps us move beyond an urban-as-multicultural and rural-as-monocultural paradigm.

Of course, study and debate on these issues continually develops. Exciting work on 'ethnicity' and 'rurality' is emerging that problematises the urban-as-multicultural and rural-as-monocultural dichotomy (see Bressey, 2009; Panelli et al., 2008; Tolia-Kelly, 2004, 2006a, 2007), and challenges singular notions of and experiences in 'the rural' (Neal and Agyeman, 2006). There are also new approaches to 'landscape' and space/place in terms of embodiment and affect (Macpherson, 2009; Massey, 2006; Probyn, 2005; Rose, 2006; Tolia-Kelly, 2006b; Wylie, 2005). I draw on these literatures in revisiting my PhD work. I too have moved on. I'm now a lecturer in geography in an urban university, doing ethnographic research with refugees and asylum seekers in an inner city area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (northern England), which has included going on day trips to nearby countryside. These more recent experiences are also, inevitably, being folded through reflections on previous research.

2. On methodology and 're-presentation'

The paper draws on a range of empirical methodologies undertaken for my PhD. Case study sites were the cities of Middlesbrough and Sheffield and the respectively adjacent North York Moors (NYM) and Peak District (PD) national parks (see Fig. 1). Quantitative data was collected via face-to-face questionnaires with people from Asian, African and Caribbean backgrounds, referred to as 'the urban survey' (310 responses in Middlesbrough, 296 in Sheffield[4]), and with visitors in the national parks, referred to as 'the visitor survey' (295 responses in the NYM, 300 in the PD, 8% identified as non-white[5]). A postal questionnaire survey was also carried out with residents in the national parks, 'the resident survey' (988 responses, 65% response rate, over 99% identified as white).

Qualitative work comprised six focus group interviews and twenty individual in-depth interviews with 'visible communities' (see below) in Middlesbrough and Sheffield.[6] In addition, six focus group interviews with national park staff were completed, three each in the NYM and PD, at senior management and operational

[4] 24% and 30% of respondents in Middlesbrough and Sheffield respectively stated that they ***had*** visited the English countryside on at least one occasion.

[5] There are methodological concerns regarding this statistic, though, in that 'random sampling' was skewed by potential respondents' dis/interest in the survey themes: many white visitors declined to participate, while the majority of visible community visitors approached agreed to take part.

[6] Interviewees were all British citizens, roughly one third first generation immigrants, the rest second and third generation. Everyone was asked to describe their ethnicity without a given list, and these self-selected definitions are used with quotes throughout this paper.