Notes on Queering Immigration History

Dr Somak Biswas

Immigration histories are distressingly straight. Diasporic stories are often built on carefully curated mythologies. Particularly so if these communities have a formidable contingent of upwardly mobile middle classes. The problem is compounded when it comes to working on immigrant communities of colour. Facing marginalisation and erasure on almost all sides, all that is left is the rather restrictive category of victimisation that reinforces a recurrent invisibility. While different queer demographics are indeed becoming popular subjects of study in recent times, histories of immigration and queerness remain generally unintegrated as disciplinary sub-fields. The predominance of cultural studies and formidable theoretical frameworks that underpin modern queer studies deter many historians, especially those trained in a more empiricist British historical tradition; while on the other, the dense lexicon of queer studies require a degree of familiarity that is not easily accessible to those not themselves queer or specialists in queer studies. This is not to deny the lack of sufficient engagements with queer historical topics in most British history centres; very recently the Royal Historical Society's 'LGBT+ Histories & Historians Report' (2020) has only confirmed what a lot of us already knew. LGBT staff, students and studies are yet to be mainstreamed within standard pedagogic practice; they remain uneasily situated.

Fields such as sociology, literary studies or anthropology has done far more to consolidate the burgeoning field of queer studies in Britain; history is far behind. More generally, the mass-migration of such scholars – often themselves queer – and working at the intersections of queer history and theory, to north America, or to gender studies centres, has meant a slower uptake in institutionalising major changes within Britain. Despite 'queer' seemingly being everywhere, it is often not in the very places it should be.

Given this state of the field, taking up a project on queer immigrants of colour that sought to integrate the scale and scope of migration history with key theoretical insights from queer studies felt like a welcome challenge. We hoped to cull archival and oral resources

around LGBTQ immigrants of colour in Coventry to tell a larger story about immigration and diaspora, labour discourse and the ways in which queer mobilities were folded thereof.

Coventry provided an excellent test case. Unlike London or Birmingham, it does not have a thriving queer scene. But it has a vibrant non-white community of students, immigrants, refugees and residents that make it extremely diverse. Thanks to successive immigration influxes since the 1950s, Asian and African immigrants make up a considerable percentage of the city's population today. Much of this influx was absorbed into the industrial labour complex that Coventry became after the war. A much-depleted scene, it still provided significant employment to immigrants coming from Commonwealth countries to meet Britain's demand for cheap labour to service many of its essential sectors. This non-white immigrant community has historically sought to integrate in the post-war city in the face of intense resistance and racism, notably from earlier generations of Irish immigrants, who came to seek work and settled thereafter, forming the current white population of the city.

Yet, despite this mix of industrial labour and immigrant influx, Coventry is not the city you go to 'come out'. Queer strands within immigrant cultural spaces are extremely limited if not underground. Non-white immigrants, especially from South Asian, Middle eastern and Afro-Caribbean countries have carefully sought to present a hetero-narrative around the 'good immigrant' tale – of struggle and success in the face of intense adversity. The curating of such 'respectable' narratives generally steered clear of any overt queer telling, for fear of loss and degradation of the very limited masculinity they may have managed to gain. A repeated story that emerged from our interviews with queer members was how brutally community borders were policed and surveilled for any possible transgression. Sexuality and religion, two of the most intimate domains in immigrant communities, became sites of constant vigilance within these diasporic formations. It does not come as a surprise then that major events such as Stonewall or the Sexual Rights movement more or less eluded the scope of such communities. Their struggles against the exclusions foisted by the Commonwealth Immigration Act (1962), or more generally Powellism and later Thatcherism, exhausted the limited resources such communities had or possessed in establishing their presence in Britain. Multiculturalism made space for cultural diversity, but this rarely extended to embracing sexual diversity within ethnic minority groups.

No wonder then that the majority of queer residents of colour in Coventry did not, and do not, seek visibility. The most outspoken members were, perhaps unsurprisingly, university students and graduates, given that these spaces encouraged such visibility (if within a politically correct definition of diversity). Tellingly, it also highlighted the larger disconnect between the city and the hierarchies within different immigrant populations. Apart from the narrow activist circles within the universities of Warwick and Coventry, 'queer of colour' identities or spaces are almost invisible. This is often a very deliberate choice. Many of them are refugees from Asian and African countries, fleeing persecution or seeking asylum. Indexing their experiences are important in grappling with the scale and specificities of queer migrant experience. Yet, the academic desire for access is regularly foiled by unexpected contingencies. After several attempts to fix a virtual meeting with a queer Pakistani immigrant in Coventry, he bailed on us at the very last minute, afraid of his life, despite every assurance of anonymity. A relentless post 9/11 regime has hardened borders in almost every community; queer Muslims know and feel this keenly. To risk exposure could spell a loss of the insurance that various diasporic enclaves provided, howsoever tenuous, around shared identities of race and/or religion. These are moments that seriously made us question our desire for recovery against recluse. Many of these immigrants are undocumented, and our efforts at 'documenting' them militate against their efforts at remaining 'invisible'. Even as well-meaning academics, trust was not necessarily adduced. Used to being ferreted out by government agents and agencies and made to go through excruciating asylum applications or failing that, deportation and jail, our affiliation with a public university did not necessarily inspire confidence in all.

Border regimes structure our lives ever so subtly, but its harshest effects generally fall on those most unprivileged. Queer immigrants of colour form one such community, falling continuously through the cracks of race, nation, gender and community. Perpetually subject to the majoritarian white (queer) gaze, they remain 'impossible subjects', variously over or under sexualised, even asexualised. Queering immigration history is only a modest start to what will invariably be a fascinating outcome.

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Image: Queers of Colour; Courtesy: Matteo.