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Seeing the city anew: asylum seeker perspectives of ‘belonging’ in Greater Manchester

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of three asylum seekers in Greater Manchester through the use of experimental auto-photographic walking tours. The paper focuses upon discussions of belonging within geography and examines how three asylum seekers constructed varied senses of belonging in Greater Manchester through specific places, objects and communities. Using walking tours designed by the research participants to visit places of meaning in their everyday lives and photography of key sites, the paper explores the ways in which those awaiting asylum decisions experienced Greater Manchester.

Key words

Asylum seeker; auto-photography; belonging; Manchester; city

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Introduction

Greater Manchester has been a metropolitan area of considerable diversity, dynamism and outward engagement since its industrial heyday (Manchester City Council 2011; Peck and Ward 2002). Immigration has played a key role in promoting and sustaining the growth and prosperity of the region throughout the 20th century and most notably in the industrial rebuilding of the post-war era. Yet within the modern day story of a post-industrial city promoting an image of cosmopolitan diversity, lie the narratives of those migrants who comprise such a diverse populous. This paper focuses on one such group: asylum seekers.

The number of asylum seekers in Greater Manchester has fallen steadily in the past ten years, reflecting attempts by various governments to increasingly restrict access to the country and to reduce the numbers of individuals eligible for support in the UK. As a result the area has seen a 40 per cent fall in the number of asylum seekers since 2003 (Welsh 2011). For those who remain, the context of negative public perceptions (Crawley 2005), government funding cuts for English language provision, moves to privatize asylum accommodation, and the increasingly prevalent use of detention and deportation measures (Gibney 2008), all directly impact and shape the ways in which Manchester as a destination is understood. It is to these experiences that this paper is directed building upon earlier work on asylum seekers and refugee experiences (e.g. Healey 2006). Drawing upon an experimental method of auto-photographic walking tours led by three asylum seekers who were dispersed to Greater Manchester under the UK Borders Agency’s dispersal programme, this research explores the participant’s narratives, experiences and personal histories through connections to sites within Greater Manchester chosen by each individual.

The paper proceeds by briefly outlining the context of current work within geography on notions of belonging in order to introduce the key themes of the research. We then discuss the auto-photographic walking methods utilized to explore everyday engagements with the city. Building on these foundations, the paper then considers how moments of belonging were discussed across the narratives of three asylum seekers during their walking tours. In doing so, we highlight the contingent, complex and at points fragile nature of belonging in the city, attached as it is to a series of both personal and social responses, relations and emotions.

Belonging – subjective feelings and inclusive politics

This research sought to explore the relationships between a number of key terms and the ways in which asylum seekers experienced Greater Manchester. Of these, the concept of belonging was central as it was this often ambiguous notion which emerged most significantly in the narratives produced. The value of a focus upon belonging is then, as Gilmartin (2008, 1842) suggests, that ‘belonging offers geographers a way to ground the relationship between migration and identity’. Belonging in this sense denotes the ways in which individuals and groups construct a sense of their place in the world through the negotiation of ‘a network of material and symbolic relationships’ (ibid). As such, work on belonging within geography has most often focused upon how migrants experience their mobility and the ways in which identity is constructed through relationships with place, mobility and transnational interconnections (Datta 2010; Lucas and Purkayastha 2007; Mee and Wright 2009). Not unsurprisingly, such considerations of belonging have highlighted how the concept is entwined with notions of the home and of being ‘at home’. Home might be understood here not simply as a secure and stable location but also as a set of relations,

connections and emotional attachments that stretch feelings of belonging beyond the bounds of a particular house, neighbourhood or even city (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Morley 2000). In this context home comes to denote the wider material, emotional and embodied elements of a place, including ‘the people we share a home with but also the material objects therein’ (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 519). It is through this kind of multi-dimensional reading of home and belonging that geographers have begun to explore how migrants experience and construct multiple senses of home in different locations, and how home and belonging are in part understood through continued links to places and emotional attachments. Belonging must thus be viewed as a process, in which feelings of attachment are constructed to different places and times, but which may also overlap and interact in different ways. These interactions of memory, materiality and everyday experiences of place are what foreground our interest in exploring how feelings of belonging were articulated in Greater Manchester.

Geographers have also explored a second reading of belonging, one interrelated to that of feeling ‘at home’. This second account is more readily associated with the politics of belonging as a collective, rather than a purely individual concern, for while ‘belonging is a subjective feeling held by individuals, it is also socially defined’ (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 523). This social element of belonging refers to processes of social inclusion and exclusion, whereby a feeling of being ‘at home’ is dictated in part by the ways in which others define who belongs where (Crowley 1999; Yuval-Davis 2006). A politics of belonging would thus be centred upon how distinctions over who has the right to belong and to feel ‘at home’ are made and on what basis, thereby reflecting attempts to expand the boundaries of social inclusion towards difference and to extend a sense of belonging, both subjective *and* political, to otherwise marginalised groups.

The value of engaging belonging as a key term in these ways is that it draws together both these subjective attachments to place and the impact of a politics of inclusion and exclusion – put simply we cannot begin to understand the feelings attached to the city by those seeking asylum without an appreciation of how these two senses of belonging interact. For example, Antonsich (2010) highlights work which ties together subjective feelings of belonging with the kinds of personal and ontological security that come through a politics of inclusion, arguing that ‘where you belong is where you are safe; and where you are safe is where you belong’ (Ignatieff 1994, 25, cited in Antonsich 2010, 648). Whilst such a claim may be an over-simplification, it is clear from a range of work on asylum status, that an insecure or precarious legal status often produces feelings of insecurity which impact the development of a sense of belonging (Darling 2011; Nelson and Hiemstra 2008; Waite 2009). Given the precarious status of those seeking asylum in the UK, such a position on the borders of inclusion will critically impact how subjective feelings of belonging are produced and expressed. It is this dual nature of belonging as both a political and a subjective positioning that we want to foreground as a means to bring together everyday experiences of the city and the politically charged contexts of those seeking asylum.

Methods

The experimental methods used in this project focused on empowering participants to narrate the story of their experience of the metropolis through a variety of mechanisms (Wiles *et al.* 2005). These included three in-depth discussion meetings built around individual auto-photographic walking tours within Greater Manchester to explore the places and pathways given meaning by the three participants.

Auto-photography refers to a set of methods focused upon photography conducted by research participants, often directed by the instructions of researchers (Dodman 2003; Latham 2003). The strength of such a method is that it allows individuals to ‘direct and tell their own stories’ (Finney and Rishbeth 2006, 44), while representing an empowering and participatory process in which participants are given a large degree of freedom to express their own experiences (Kindon *et al.* 2008). The auto-photography method was used in conjunction with walking tours around Greater Manchester. These routes were chosen and planned by the participants enabling them to engage with the city in their own way. Together the tours and photography facilitated the exploration of specific sites and routes which had value or meaning within the participants’ experiences of asylum in Greater Manchester.

The three asylum seeker participants - Irfan, Sofia and Khalid (named at their request) - responded to an invitation sent out through the Manchester Refugee Support Network (MRSN). Their direct participation began with an initial meeting between them and the three researchers (two geographers and an artist) which introduced the project and initiated a focus group discussion on notions of community and belonging. This enabled the participants to articulate their views of these terms before translating their perspectives into their walking tour routes. The planning of the routes led each participant to pair with one of the researchers. The pairs discussed what the participant felt about the city and identified specific places that had meaning or value for them. These points were then used as a basis for planning the route of the walking tour (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Khalid’s walking tour

At the beginning of the second day the three participant-researcher pairs separated to conduct the auto-photographic walking tours. Each participant guided the researcher to their specified locations taking photographs of these key places whilst explaining their decisions over the locations and images taken. The three groups came together again in the afternoon of the second day to discuss the different tours. To facilitate the discussion each participant chose three of their ‘favourite’ photographs – generally those that meant more to them – to discuss with the rest of the group. The dialogue that followed identified three key themes: belonging, aspirations and interactions.

The third meeting was four weeks after the walking tours and discussion¹. The time between the second and third meeting offered the opportunity for reflection. In preparation for this meeting the participants identified specific images from their tours under the three key themes to upload to the project website. Their choices and the relationship between these images and the key themes were analysed and discussed as a group. All of the group meetings, and as far as possible, the walking tours were recorded and then transcribed in full. We now discuss how different senses of belonging were articulated through interactions with places and people, the imagery collected and chosen, and the narratives of inclusion and exclusion articulated by the participants.

Belonging in Greater Manchester: asylum narratives

“We are only in communities like asylum seekers coming together, refugees coming together, but for me you need not only that, you need more, you need the belonging, to meet other people also”.

Sofia describes her view of the connections between people and belonging, arguing that in order to belong to a place you need to be a part of the broader community, not just spending time with other asylum seekers and refugees. This sense of connection and community was central, in different ways, to each of the participant’s ideas of belonging within Greater Manchester. In the following section we present these narratives and consider how they draw on those different facets of belonging noted above.

Sofia

Sofia is a failed asylum seeker. She arrived in the UK in November 2006 having fled from Zimbabwe after her home was burnt down and her husband beaten and murdered by members of Zimbabwean African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) because he was an active MDC member. She was unable to return to her country of birth, South Africa, as she had been warned that ZANU-PF supporters would kill her or the authorities may return her to Zimbabwe. Sofia’s church in Zimbabwe made arrangements for her to go to Britain where a church was to provide her with shelter and work. Her asylum case was refused on the grounds that the Home Office did not believe she would be at risk in South Africa or that she would be forced to go back to Zimbabwe by the authorities.

Sofia’s tour focused on what she called her ‘journey’, beginning at her point of arrival to the city – Manchester Piccadilly train station, followed by a route to key places which had significance in her everyday interactions with the city. One of her early stops involved taking photographs of the clothing stores Primark and Marks and Spencer (Figure 2). For Sofia, these stores represented powerful metaphors for her feelings of belonging.

¹This meeting was attended only by Irfan and Khalid, as Sofia had temporarily been taken into custody to await potential deportation. She was later released and continues to fight for asylum in the UK.



Figure 2: Primark and disposable lives (Source: Sofia)

Sofia discussed her sense of place in the world as a failed asylum seeker in Manchester in part through the image of Primark. She illustrated how she felt she was treated in British society:

“At this moment I can say I have been thrown away completely [like clothes from Primark], and it is like I don't exist, I make myself exist but in the system I'm no exist just they have put me there, and I was having a value when I come but then they come to me, pick me out, gives me a number, I am not Sofia I am a number in the Home Office and that is how I feel ... dehumanised, degraded, and just like some kind of piece of nothing”.

Sofia's sense of dehumanisation and exclusion powerfully express the limits of political belonging. The state has defined the boundaries of inclusion in relation to asylum. As a failed asylum seeker, Sofia has been excluded from having a right to residency in the UK and, as such, any possibility of political belonging has been refused to her. In her view she has been 'thrown away' as though she has no value. She has been 'dehumanised' and 'degraded' by the way in which the Home Office has denied her asylum and categorised her presence into a case file and a reference number. Politically she has been denied the right to feel 'at home', and has been defined as not belonging within British society and is to be treated as such, dealt with as an unwanted element within a system of sorting. Within this context, awaiting appeals for status and the right to residency, Sofia lacks that sense of security often associated with the notion of belonging, her status as a failed asylum seeker means that she may be detained, moved or deported at any moment, according to the will of that 'system' which deems her outside of the right to belong 'here'.

The significance of this opening image from Sofia is in the ways in which it grounds that sense of political belonging noted above. Belonging is, in part, socially defined. For Sofia the ability to belong in Greater Manchester was always conditioned and constrained by her position within a broader politics of inclusion and exclusion. Her place within a system of asylum ordering and decision making dictates the social possibilities of belonging afforded to her and the ways in which she views and experiences the city, from the opportunity to shop in given stores to the freedom to move around the city as she pleases. It is this positioning which is most readily at stake when we talk of a 'politics of belonging' and when we consider the

belonging of those still awaiting refugee status. For Sofia, Irfan and Khalid then, feelings of belonging have to be viewed through the lens of this positioning and its effects.

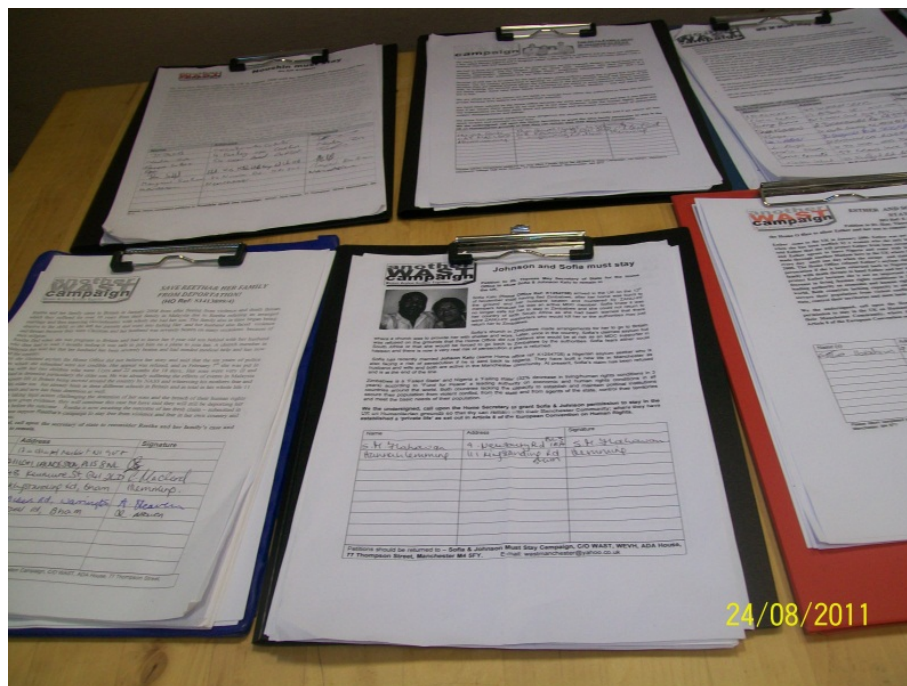


Figure 3: Sofia's asylum petition (Source: Sofia)

Yet Sofia has built a life for herself in Manchester. Most notably, she has been involved in numerous events and activities to raise awareness and support for people struggling through the asylum system in Manchester. In this sense the political exclusion she articulates has been at the forefront of her engagement with others. For example, through connections with the refugee sector, Sofia continues to seek support for her asylum claim (Figure 3). She argues that the Home Office justify deporting people because they believe that the general public do not want them there: "If you have a large number of people signing your petition it shows that you are supported by the public." At the time of the walking tour, she had collected a couple of thousand signatures. Sofia's anti-deportation campaign challenges her political lack of belonging, by engaging her with the community, enabling her to develop a greater sense of connection to the city and the people who have supported her. The signatures displayed here and the tallying up of support all manifest a sense of subjective belonging, of being wanted and needed within the city.



Figure 4: The Women Asylum Seekers Together Activity Board (Source: Sofia)

This sense of connection is demonstrated further by her photograph of the activity board at Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST) (Figure 4) illustrating the extensive array of activities she has been involved with in Manchester including a marathon, a choir and a theatre production. Sofia's voluntary work at WAST has not only helped to forge further connections with the refugee sector in the city, but has also enhanced her subjective sense of belonging through the support she provides to other women seeking asylum. Her ability to support others places her in a position of authority and with tacit knowledge of the asylum system acquired through her own experiences. In effect, the exclusions she experiences enable her to help others, to fight anti-deportation campaigns, to assert rights and claim asylum. In this way, whilst at the margins of society, Sofia's involvement in campaigning, communicating and advising others, have placed her at the heart of a community in Greater Manchester, a position which is expressed through her photographs and through the signatures of her petitions. Each of these resources, while fragile in the face of political exclusion and the threat of deportation, is nevertheless powerful in constructing a feeling of being valued, of being part of something and, as a result, of belonging to the city in some way. It is precisely this argument over belonging which is central to Sofia's anti-deportation campaign and her right to be, and to remain, 'here'.

Irfan

Irfan was born and brought up in India where he ran a restaurant business. He has a Masters degree in Business Administration (MBA) and was in the restaurant business before seeking asylum. He arrived in Manchester in 2006 after being re-located under dispersal. As an asylum seeker Irfan may not legally undertake paid work, instead he works as a volunteer to promote community cohesion and inclusion. The importance of his work within the local community provided the basis for his tour of Salford. He deliberately chose locations where he had achieved qualifications, or gained experience which supported his development as a community organiser.

Irfan articulated a sense of belonging that was heavily linked to his work in helping others and in becoming a part of his local community. Like Sofia, belonging for Irfan came through the connections he was able to establish and maintain with others. He works with a range of different groups (asylum seekers and refugees, homeless people, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual community) to address issues of exclusion, marginalisation and hate crimes through different initiatives. For example, in organising and chairing the ‘No to Homelessness, No to Cashlessness’ Conference at the University of Salford as part of Refugee Week 2011, Irfan stated that:

“It was the hard work of six months to actually prepare for this conference and organising and everything. We did it all together and then you know ... But I wasn’t expecting so many people actually. So then I enter and there’s 250 people just looking at me.”

Irfan’s involvement in organising and running this conference exemplifies the ways in which he draws moments of subjective belonging from his work for the community. In planning the conference he, like Sofia, has developed connections with different organisations and felt their support through their attendance at the event. These points of support and connection were critical to the kinds of achievement that Irfan drew upon to construct a feeling of belonging. For him, belonging was about giving something to a community, and through events such as this Irfan has developed a sense of his own worth to that community.

The centrality of Irfan’s considerable educational achievements and the success of his community work to his feelings of acceptance and belonging, are clear in the value he places on such achievements, stating that:

“I am trained to be the Outreach Trainer. I can just go out to the schools, and give trainings about the House of Parliament, how it works, all these things. I got also a certificate from the House of Parliament, signed by the Speaker of the House.”

The range of qualifications and experience he has is illustrated through his numerous certificates (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Irfan’s certificates (Source: Irfan)

For Irfan, these certificates illustrate that as an individual he has been valued for his contributions within UK society and he has evidence to support this. The recognition afforded through such objects is critical to his sense of self-worth, but also his position within the community. The display of Irfan’s certificates illustrates his hard work and contribution to his community. It is an image of a will to build a new life and all that entails, despite the uncertainty and marginality of his asylum status.

Irfan’s achievements are also strongly related to particular places. For example, Irfan’s image of the University of Salford illustrates the building: “where I got my first certificate from the University of Salford” (Figure 6).



Figure 6: The University of Salford (Source; Irfan)

In choosing his route around Salford, Irfan chose to focus on spaces of education and training, spaces which held meaning for the events that took place there. The majority of Irfan’s certificates have been presented by organisations and people in this local area. For example, it was at Swinton Town Hall where he was presented with the Steven’s Award for Community Groups: “The first time I went to that building, I got a certificate from the Salford Mayor, the Honourable Mayor of Salford.” Irfan associates specific places, and specific buildings, with his achievements situating his sense of belonging in relation to these sites. Furthermore, Irfan’s pride in this award is also notable for the fact that it was presented by the Mayor of Salford. Thus while Irfan’s right to belong as an asylum seeker remains in flux, a commendation from the Mayor emphasises how his work within the community has led to his official recognition within Salford.

Khalid

Khalid was born in Rawalpindi, Pakistan to a lower middle class family with an army background. He grew up and completed all his education in Karachi and has a Master of Arts in Islamic History. He began his career as a Computer Operator in the Pakistan Army and was promoted to Personal Assistant of Commandant (a rank of Brigadier). He claimed

political asylum with his wife and two sons and was housed in Little Hulton, Salford in 2008. Unlike Irfan, whose tour was structured around community involvement, Khalid took a different approach, exploring places of emotional importance to him.

For Khalid, feelings of belonging were attached to particular relations with place, people and the built environment itself. Khalid's tour centred on two key areas of Greater Manchester, each with its own rationale yet sharing a common thread, that of the feelings of relaxation they instilled in Khalid. The first of these was in the tightly packed streets of central Manchester, centred on Portland Street, Princess Street and Chinatown (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Princess Street (Source: Khalid)

This area, of city centre offices, Victorian architecture and urban infrastructure was noted by Khalid as a part of the city he liked to visit and walk around at times of stress, stating that:

“You know some people like to go to gardens, they see flowers and go for a walk and relax, but uh, when I stress, then I go around the city and go around these buildings ... this is a business area, not a residential area, and that's why this area attracts me. There is every time different people and different cultures and these people they work in these offices and that's why this area attracts me ... if there is no people around its very dull, you feel very dull. If there is more people, more faces and different faces, you feel very good.”

Here Khalid suggests that it is the combination of the architectural forms of this particular part of Manchester with the diversity of human encounter that makes this area valuable to him. For Khalid this part of the city became a space to escape the stresses of the asylum process simply through the act of walking, encountering ‘different faces’ and feeling a part of an occupied metropolis. The value drawn from such engagement might thus be seen to arise from an embodied and personal sense of being with others, being around the dynamism, movement and passions that are seen to mark the city as a social formation.

Khalid's second area of focus was Salford Quays, in particular areas of recent regeneration around the Lowry Outlet Mall, the Imperial War Museum North and the Lowry Centre itself (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Salford Quays (Source: Khalid)

Khalid mentioned that he and his family would visit this area less often than the centre of Manchester, but that it was one of his favourite areas and that it would form the focal point of a family day out. Speaking of the images taken here, Khalid stated that:

“I took a picture here of the water and the new building and these you know, they attract you, you feel near to the sea. If you can’t go to the sea then you can come here for the water, here there are birds and the trees and benches, I like this place so much ... it’s very relaxing and very comforting.”

Salford Quays, in some senses, contrasts greatly with his initial focus on the city centre. Here Khalid valued the interaction between nature and the built form, the connection of water and architecture and the feelings this brought to bear. Khalid described Salford Quays as a place to escape, indeed his mention of being near ‘the sea’ is reminiscent of holidays and being transported away from the daily experience of life in central Manchester. It is for these reasons that Khalid describes the Quays as a place of comfort and relaxation. His second image of Salford (Figure 9) exemplifies this further, highlighting a place that Khalid suggested he would often sit with his family to watch the water, eat lunch and relax. Here the birds, trees and benches mentioned above combine to produce an environment that Khalid both associates with his family and with the ability to take time to view and enjoy a different kind of landscape: “I like to see outside, I like views you know, I like views and then I feel comfortable”.



Figure 9: Relaxing by the Quays (Source: Khalid)

Khalid's choice of focus and the images he has chosen might be argued to highlight a set of contradictions in his account of belonging in the city. From valuing the calm reflective environment of the Quays, to valuing the bustle and occupation of the high rise offices and bus routes of Portland Street. Yet, we might also see here a common thread in his engagement with the city, a need for engagement with the materials and movements of the city itself as that which develops feelings of attachment to certain places. For Khalid, these sites of potential belonging and feelings of comfort were not dictated by achievements or political community, but by more personal relations to bricks and mortar, to his memories of family and to a feeling of what the city is like. These attachments to the 'affective materiality' of the city (Latham and McCormack 2004) suggest that Khalid valued and sought to experience those parts of Greater Manchester that made him feel if not a sense of subjective belonging, then at least provided space for thought, comfort and the opportunity to escape the pressures of asylum. In this manner, such spaces are never fully divorced from the tensions of political belonging already noted, but they may give rise to moments wherein the exclusions of such belonging are momentarily, but importantly, forgotten.

Conclusion

In examining the current state of thought on geographies of home and belonging, Ralph and Staeheli (2011, 525) surmise that:

"The syntax of belonging ... is structured by relationships and practices in a variety of locations, be they local, national, cosmopolitan or, more likely, a combination of all of those locations, as migrants move through their daily lives. The analytical task ... is to understand how they are combined and interact to construct homes and to understand how these homes are interpreted, understood and given meaning by migrants".

It is to this task that this paper has been orientated in offering an account of how three forced migrants engage with Greater Manchester and the spaces and images through which they have begun to develop attachments of belonging. In summarising such experiences we want to make three points. Firstly, through our focus on photographic and experiential methods, we would argue that research on refugee and asylum geographies needs to consider the

possibilities which experimental, visual and performative methodologies can bring to the work of exploring experiences of migration, belonging and asylum in the city. This paper has sought to make a modest contribution to this task. Secondly, it is important to note the ways in which subjective spaces and objects of belonging were in part conditioned and connected to more politically infused notions of inclusion and exclusion. In Sofia's articulation of Primark as a metaphor for her position within the asylum regime, we might see how the exclusions of political belonging are felt on a daily level. Yet at the same time it is also important to note how feelings of subjective belonging were nonetheless articulated by those seen to be in precarious and insecure social positions. The subjective senses of belonging that Irfan felt to a series of spaces of education and Khalid felt to the built environment of the inner city were centred in part upon feelings of escape, accomplishment and hope which question all too often dehumanised and impersonal accounts of asylum precarity, abjection and exclusion. In short, whilst the forms of subjective belonging displayed here were precarious, they were nonetheless evidence of personal relations of and to place that are too often overlooked within a focus on the exclusions of political belonging. Finally, it is worth noting that whilst this paper has focused on different sites of subjective belonging and political exclusion within the Manchester metropolitan area, each individual negotiated ideas of home and place differently within the city. In each case we might suggest that the ways in which belonging was understood and interpreted were centred upon relationships and connections, to other people, places or to memories of the past, which are drawn upon to make sense of the present. Such experiences highlight the diversity of ways in which belonging might be understood and felt, whilst also questioning assumed notions of how one may, or may not, belong in the city. For Manchester, a city built upon the experiences of migrants, the tensions of belonging noted here offer different insights to the image of cosmopolitan diversity.

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