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Stories from 'The World in One City': Migrant Lives in Liverpool

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Abstract:

This is an article about migrant biographies in Liverpool, initially inspired by the famous tagline used for the 2008 Capital of Culture bid representing Liverpool as 'the world in one city'. Based on in-depth interviews with relatively recent migrants, the paper uses the stories they shared to explore different experiences of migrating to and living in this 'world in one city'. By focusing on three people specifically – an EU migrant, a former international student and a refugee – the article finds interesting parallels with the 'sojourners' of the nineteenth century, reveals varying manifestations of mobility and homemaking, but finds that ultimately the 'world in one city' is not as welcoming a place for all newcomers as the city's brand projected.

Keywords:

Liverpool, 'the world in one city', migration, storytelling, sojourner

Introduction: Migration and the question of Liverpool as a 'world in one city'

This article arises from a project collecting stories with first generation migrants in Liverpool. The research was initially inspired by the Liverpool tag line 'The World in One City', used in strategic marketing in the run up to the city's successful bid for the European Capital of Culture in 2008, and maintained since to denote its contemporary urban diversity. This grand and beguiling label promoted a city which was thriving on the contributions of newcomers and a place which was comfortable to celebrate difference.¹ Having migrated to Liverpool myself, moving from Leicester, an East Midlands city which recorded a non-white British population of 55% in the 2011 Census (Jivraj and Finney 2013), I was curious about this promoted identity, about how accurately it did represent the city now, and about just who was being invoked in this title. The 2011 Census results for Liverpool (Liverpool City Council 2013), enumerating a non-white British population of around 15%, suggested a city which was well past its late nineteenth century heyday of new immigration, and while it has seen greater diversification and immigration in the past decade, in line with national trends, it remains one of the least ethnically

diverse large conurbations in the country. As Pooley noted in 2006 (187), 'the distinctive characteristics of Liverpool's population were very much determined by mid-nineteenth century population change'. And according to Belchem (2014, 1), this 'strapline ... drew upon Liverpool's historical legacy rather than its contemporary complexion in 2008'.

Liverpool's historic diversity has been well documented. As a port city and the 'second city of Empire', Liverpool drew in people through internal migration (see Pooley 2006), and from all over the world – Irish, Chinese, Scandinavian, Yemeni, West African. Indeed, the presence of the oldest black community in the country is integral to the quintessential history of the city and its imperial reach and wealth generating slave trading past (see Belchem 2014; Brown 2005; Frost 1999), as well as being fundamental to the later shaping and conserving of local heritage in the 'Liverpool 8' area (Brown 2005). As many commentators point out too, 'Scouse' itself, as both an accent and a local dish, are the products of the merging of different newcomers' cadences and the cuisine of Scandinavian sailors respectively (see Boland 2010a; Belchem 2006). But as most accounts underline, this apparent embracing of migration and diversity and projected urban 'cosmopolitanism'² has

1. How cities choose to represent themselves vis a vis migration is an important point in itself – see Darling (2010) on the branding of Sheffield as a City of Sanctuary.
2. Belchem and MacRaild use the term 'cosmopolitan Liverpool' in their 2006 essay. There is an enormous literature defining and critiquing cosmopolitanism which there is no space to consider here, but Datta (2009, 353) offers a good starting point, straightforwardly defining the term as 'an openness to difference', and stressing the multiple and classed manifestations of cosmopolitan experiences and connections beyond societal 'elites'. Nevertheless, the term is used here with caution.

not protected newcomers, past and present, from hostility and open and often violent racism (Belchem 2014; Jenkinson 2009; Brown 2005). Migration, race and ethnicity in Liverpool have to be understood in the context of colonial, and postcolonial, discourse and power. There is also an interesting debate in the literature about the extent to which Liverpool was ever genuinely a 'cosmopolitan' world in one city. Notwithstanding the issue that the intensity of this urban diversity was not set to last far into the twentieth century, the intermingling of newcomers was also spatially delineated in that different parts of the city were involved in different activities and attracted different settlements – it is difficult to talk of the city as a homogenous space in terms of cosmopolitan influence. And, crucially here, while new populations did settle and reconfigure the demographic profile of the city, many of the people in the middle of this cosmopolitan hub were sojourners rather than stayers, a fleeting rather than permanent presence (see Belchem and MacRaild 2006). This in itself, though, suggests something about how essential openness is to any claim on being global. What is interesting here is how the waterfront especially was clearly, and by necessity, a particularly open kind of place, but that over time the 'localness' of Liverpool identity has become its defining feature (see Brown 2005, 16). Milne (2006, 308) wonders whether Liverpool's 'tolerance and inclusiveness in fluid, mobile multicultural communities ... can be more limited in space and time than we would like to believe'. The cosmopolitan impulse has perhaps given way to a local discourse which equates belonging in the city with roots over routes. However, as Bunnell (2016, 9) notes, a loss of world city status "should not be taken to mean that urban places and practices within the city ceased to be constituted with relations with far-flung 'elsewheres'". A certain openness is still there on the ground, in people's lives, if you look for it.

'The World in One City' claim has other contemporary limitations too, and has been cautioned especially for glossing over social inequalities, divisions and tensions (see Boland 2010b). Writing in 2004, Jones and Wilks-Reeg (2004, 353) argued that "The lived reality of Liverpool as 'The World in One City' includes large degrees of inequality and poverty that, while not in keeping with the re-branded image of the city, powerfully shape the social and cultural milieu of many people in Liverpool". This is a truth experienced as much through race and ethnicity as class. Perhaps though, for all its faults, a tagline such as this does present an opportunity to reclaim an element of pride in the fluidity which was clearly vital to the city's port status. If Liverpool was a world in one city, and the city's 'localness' so globally inflected, it was so

as much through the perennial movement of people and goods as their settlement. This is the most useful history on offer, and could be harnessed to keep the contemporary city genuinely open to newcomers.

Collecting migration stories

To investigate this possibility I went in search of fellow migrants, keen to hear about different experiences of migrating to Liverpool. I wanted to know how people found the city, how were they making it home, was there anything special about their migration experience which could be attributed to Liverpool itself? The project is ongoing, but I have, so far, undertaken ten interviews with men and women from a variety of countries – from across Europe, western and southern Africa, China, a former Soviet Republic. These people have come to the city at different points in the last sixty years, although at the moment mostly in the last fifteen years, and have come as refugees seeking safety, as workers looking for new opportunities, as students, as friends and lovers, and as fun seekers, looking to experience something new. I interviewed people mainly in public places such as cafes, asking them about their lives before migrating, and then about Liverpool directly. My only criteria for the selection of participants were that people had to be first generation migrants themselves, and they had to be happy to share their migration stories. This collection is therefore not a representative snapshot of Liverpool's migration demographics. What it is instead is a catalogue of humanity, of the hopes and fears and trials and tribulations of moving.

I was struck by how easy it was to find people – just through initial contacts and snowballing efforts – who wanted to talk, who wanted to imprint their experiences into the wider fabric of the city, and who wanted to be heard. As Fanta, a refugee from West Africa, said, 'I want to tell my story to someone who can listen to me'. I had originally anticipated that the main focus of the interviews would rest naturally on discussions of what Liverpool is like as a city of arrival and encounter. While this was an important part of our conversations, in assuming this, and expecting the predominance of Liverpool as a biographical theme, I had forgotten something I had already come to realise years earlier when working on my first research project into migration – that migrants' lives cannot so easily be fitted into ready narratives in this way (Burrell 2006). Liverpool was key for some of the discussions, but not for all – more time was spent talking about people's biographies more broadly, spatially and temporally. Conceptually this is significant because it forces us to immediately recalibrate what 'the

world in one city' means through the perspective of these interviews. Spatially it means accepting that Liverpool itself is interwoven with the places migrants have come from, through their experiences, stories, memories and things. It is not just about who is in the city, but the connections reaching outwards too. It also has interesting temporal dimensions, because some of the participants had only been in the city for a couple of years, and some intended to move on soon too. As discussed, any aspirational 'world in one city' would need to be a place which is comfortable with such ebb and flow, that is able to embrace the presence of those who are there more transiently, as well as those with longer developed roots. This point is important because for this tagline to go beyond offering a commercialised city identity this is some of the work it could help take up – acknowledging more explicitly the importance of the 'sojourner' in urban life.

There is a rich pedigree of work which already demonstrates how well storytelling and narrative enliven and deepen migration research. In 1993, for example, Halfacree and Boyle promoted the use of biographical methods for teasing out the more everyday and embedded contextualisations of migration motivations and hinterlands. Similarly, Thompson (1999) highlights the greater complexities, connections and networks which are revealed through personal testimony when investigating migration, while Findlay and Li (1997) underline the significance of auto-biographical research for asserting autonomy and agency in migration experiences. It is not just these kinds of complexities which are foregrounded through biographical methods though. As the absorbing work of scholars like Gardner (2002) and Chamberlain (1997) show, migration testimonies are replete with emotional intensity and human experience. Stories and narratives don't just draw out motivations and cultural contexts – they are about people.

Arguably, it is this emotional drive behind people and their narratives, and the political possibilities they present, which has helped to bring biographical work (see McGeachan 2016) and storytelling back into focus within geography once again. As Cameron (2012, 574) argues, "Stories express something irreducibly particular and personal, and yet they can be received as expressions of broader social and political context, and their telling can move, affect, and produce collectivities". Stories do not just offer us wider contexts but generate new emotion, pull people in and elicit imagination and solidarity, and as a result stake out political ground. While the extent to which stories can actively bring about meaningful change is debated (Cameron 2012, 581-2), in certain fields storytelling offers crucial opportunities to contest assumptions and mis-

understandings. Eastmond (2007, 253) for example, writes about the power of stories for challenging the homogenous impetus behind representations of 'the refugee experience'. There is obvious scope for stories relating to migration to confront prejudice and counteract populist scripts. With re-telling migration stories of any form however, comes a particular responsibility and care. Price (2010, 204) warns of 'the colonizing gesture with respect to stories'; there is always a delicate negotiation to be had in the way migrant voices, through these kinds of testimonies, are listened to and exhibited.

In this paper, as with previous work, I have shaped the way these stories are presented. I found and interviewed the people involved, transcriptions were then produced, and here I offer selected quotes from wider testimonies, and summaries of whole life experiences. I can never fully communicate what has been told to me in these interviews – there is no word limit generous enough to allow me to repeat every word, and explain in any meaning the wider affects, interactions and body languages at play in the interviews. And I would be doing so through my own lens – as a white, English, southern, middle class, female academic. And just as I am stymied in my ability to share the stories I was told, the participants had the difficult task of distilling their lives as migrants into an interview exchange. The limits of these methods, and subsequent disseminations, are clear, and need to be acknowledged.

This article takes the stories of three of these migrants, coincidentally all women, and charts their contrasting lives before and since moving to Liverpool. Different experiences are presented here – EU migrant, former international student, refugee – and it is through these stories we can get a better understanding of what the world in one city really means in Liverpool now.

'Kristen'

Kristen is from western Germany, and her story is both one of European Union mobility and of newly experienced, and unexpected, topophilia. Having already migrated to Berlin from her home town, she found herself out of work as the project she was working on stopped. The unemployment support available to her, in the early 2010s, not only helped her in improving her English skills, but also enabled her to temporarily take her unemployment allowance abroad, within the EU, as she extended her job search:

When I was self-employed I paid into unemployment insurance, so I got Jobseeker's Allowance, or the equivalent of that in Germany, and that was pretty amazing in a way. It's not a happy situation but again it was something that led to where

I am now. Because the first time I went to the job centre, the person I spoke to said, "is there anything that you think can help you find a job again?" And I said, yeah, maybe I should improve my English! So they sent me on a course ... And there was, I don't know if that still exists, but at the time there was an opportunity EU-wide that you could, when you were on Jobseeker's Allowance, that you could take the money with you – that you could still get jobseekers allowance in a different country. So you could go abroad and still get paid by the German job centre for three months. You could do that. To see if you can find a job there, and otherwise come back, or not get Jobseeker's Allowance. So I thought, OK.

Kristen ended up coming to Liverpool purely through the recommendations and contacts of people she met on her English course. As an EU migrant she was able to settle, find housing and work, and while she mixed with people from a wide range of places, living in shared houses for example with people from France, Russia, Spain, and working with people from all over the world, she also made close friendships with 'local' people very quickly and easily. In fact, much of her interview was spent talking about how much she loves the city, how open and friendly she finds it and how well she feels she fits in. From her vantage point too, seeing different people making their way in the city around her, she identified how her experience felt distinct:

I fell in love with this place pretty much immediately. It was really love at first sight with this city. And I love living and I love the people in this place ... I met lots of people from different countries. And it was really interesting to see how different people live in the city. Some people only came for the job, and for me it was the other way round: I got the job because I wanted to be here.

As one of the most easily mobile people I interviewed I was really struck by the depth of Kristen's attachment to Liverpool. Perhaps it was this mobility, this ability to choose, which allowed her to commit to the city so fully emotionally. Her experience seemed extremely positive – she did not seem to have some of the problems other EU, and especially A8, migrants have faced of poor housing, exploitation at work, local hostility (see Anderson 2010; McGhee et al. 2013), and she was embracing her life in Liverpool as something which was meant to be, part of her lifecourse and something which was defining who she was. I have not been in touch with Kristen for a while now, and I wonder how she is feeling about Brexit, whether she is now having to reassess her plans, whether she still loves living in Liverpool as much. Her experience is both an assertion of the liberating aspects of migration, but also of the temporal and spatial contingencies all migration regimes work in. Her mobility was of a specific time and place and I worry how these changes will affect her, along with the thousands of other European migrants who live, and love, in the city. Her story

suggests that with the aftermath of Brexit we might come to realise the extent to which Liverpool, which was after all a European capital of culture, and, as enumerated in the 2011 Census (Liverpool City Council 2013), has a non-Irish EU population of over 10,500, or 2.3% of the metropolitan population, has been a 'continent in a city' over the past decade.

'Michelle'

Michelle is from China and at the time of meeting, in 2015, had lived in Liverpool for twelve years. She originally came to the UK to study, and after a few years ended up moving to Liverpool with her husband who had a PhD offer from one of the universities in the city. In a sign of how much the interview process is shaped by the chemistry of the relationship between the researcher and participant, a lot of time was spent talking about Michelle's childhood in China; having discovered that we were born just two months apart we were fascinated by the fact that we had been growing up at the same time in different places, but were both here now. Somehow this connection brought the idea of the world in a city to life – through Michelle's biography I was, while sitting in a cafe in Liverpool, learning a little about China – the local and the global were effortlessly all tied up together. The China of her interview, moreover, was markedly different to the polluted and repressive China we are shown in news and documentaries. Her background was clearly quite privileged in terms of class and education, but most interestingly of all, she chose to talk about the beauty of the landscape of Shenzhen and the fun and freedoms of her young life there:

My life in Shenzhen, those eleven years, were really, really good. I really enjoyed ... first, because the weather was nice which enabled me to do a lot of things, and second, because the location is by the seaside. I remember, we still go to the beach, we'd try to find some crabs, you know the little crabs, and we found some shrimp, and we'd go swimming in the sea in the play sand, a barbecue by the beach, and there's also a small mountain just next to the beach. We went there often, up the mountain, we folded some paper aeroplanes and flew them from the top to the sea. It was a lot of a fun. It's a massive mountain as well, next to the sea, so that city has a mountain and a sea, it's really nice. We climbed the mountain as well, it was a lot of fun, with a group of friends. Also, next to our secondary school there's a massive grass land, so we went there and played football games and chatted, even picnics. And there's a swimming pool at our school as well, so we spent lots of the summer holiday in the pool swimming ... It's always blue skies, fresh air, because it's by the seaside, and also there are a lot of trees and gardens in Shenzhen ... To me, my life was always pretty bright and happy. And a lot of fun, I had my freedom, I could do what I liked and had a lot of hobbies.

When I asked her what she missed about China she talked about the food and shopping cultures there, the late night snack places, the huge range of foods there and the amazing tastes that she couldn't reproduce here, and the enormous supermarkets. By the time we got on to talking about Liverpool we seemed to speak about her life here in this wider framework – how she tried to recreate some of these things here, what her freedoms and fun were in the city. We talked about her love of Liverpool's parks, karaoke nights out with her friends and Chinese food in the city. She had not really joined the city's existing Chinese community, but was making use of the cultural infrastructure which already created:

And lots of nice food, and the Chinese community is big. I didn't take part in that community because they were older generation. Or the younger kids were just born in Liverpool and we couldn't find anything in common either. So we are kind of sat in the middle. I only know there's lots of Chinese food and nice Chinese restaurants ... supermarkets.

Michelle has since moved back to China with her husband and children, but her testimony is important for understanding the openness and flexibility that being a world in one city demands. Her story, for example, confounds the more familiar and established narratives of Chinese Liverpool – she was neither a 'Chinese-Liverpudlian' and part of the old community and its long and often difficult history in the city (see Wong 1989), nor was she a current international student. She found footholds in the city through some of these connections, but they did not necessarily define her life here – she spoke about school choices for her son, and house buying, too. She made Liverpool home, but not forever. Through this life though, and the many and diverse ties she has forged, she has been part of Liverpool's ongoing Chinese connection and made her own history part of the city's history too. This experience, like Kristen's, also underlines the wider politics of her mobility. At the time of writing there has been a sustained hardening of rhetoric on international student visas. For a city with three universities, and one in which international students could be understood as modern day sojourners, being so significant for the city's educational, cultural, social and economic life but at the same time essentially transient, this new migration regime signals another threat to Liverpool's claim for its human-centred global connections.³

'Fanta'

Fanta is from West Africa and came to the UK as a refugee a few years ago. We did not talk a lot about the circumstances which led her to leave her home, and I did not want to ask her to recount traumatic memories during our time together. Through various family difficulties and links she initially lived in France, but came to the UK when she found herself stateless. While Fanta had immersed herself in a new life in the city, and spoke about what she liked about the UK, and Liverpool, especially in comparison to the experiences she had in France, I was really struck in her interview by how much the process of asylum had been shaping her life here. Liverpool is an initial assessment centre, as well as dispersal destination, for new asylum seekers, and according to a Liverpool City Council (2014, 6) report, in 2013 was a temporary refuge for 1350 'dispersed people seeking asylum', men, women and children from all over the world. Asylum, therefore, is another important dynamic in the city's global links. Fanta's story is significant here because it shifts our perspective of what the world in one city means again – a place where people who form part of this 'world city' are left in a painful, stressful and, as Darling (2014, 488) suggests, deliberately drawn out bureaucratic limbo. Nothing can be taken for granted in this experience, and there is little sense of how long people will be able to be part of the city for – a different kind of transience again – and how, without the right to work, this 'being' in the city even evolves. In Fanta's words:

And when I sought asylum, my first claim failed, so you have to go back. It was an error of judgement, something like that. I waited eleven months to do a fresh claim, review, judicial review or something like that, and we went back to Manchester court and I was granted three years and that is a new life as well, you are not asylum any more, you are like a British resident, so I got my three years residency. So in that time my children went to nursery and they were doing well. And I was happy. Despite asylum, because it's really stressful, being involved with the Home Office. You get stressed every time because you have to sign every week and if you don't sign, or sometimes they make mistakes, if you don't sign you don't get your weekly money. You depend on that money if you've got kids. And also your asylum claim fails. You say, oh maybe tomorrow they're going to deport me. You don't know when they are coming, so you've got all that stress ... And when you are in the asylum system, you are not allowed to work.

I do not want to define Fanta by her struggles here – she has been back to college and university, raised two children, partly on her own, and volunteered at refugee organisa-

3. A good overview of debates about international student migration in the UK can be found in King and Raghuram (2013).

tions, helping other people going through what she has experienced. She is proud of her achievements, that she is living and not just surviving. But there is no getting away from the racism she, as a black woman, has faced in the city:

It wasn't till the beginning, before I started speak ... maybe average English, it wasn't easy for me, it was so hard ... my partner wanted to live in Anfield because it's not far from the ground, all those things, so we went there and it was so racist in that area. Oh my god, they used to call my children baby monkey, all those things, I was burgled there, everything ... I used to live in Speke ... and in Speke at that time there weren't that many black people. Every time we used to phone the police, the police used to tell them, you know why, because they are not used to black people, so that's why you got in trouble with these things. And I stayed there, my partner went, and I claimed asylum, they took me and put me in Anfield. It was worse as well. Now, I'm alone with these two kids, and one day I was burgled where I was sleeping with these kids at home ... So it was a nightmare in Speke and Anfield. And after, when I was granted asylum ... because I stayed there until I'd been granted, and afterward I went to Wavertree. And Wavertree was very good, honestly, until now, this is the only place I want to live now.

The world in one city is such a seductive, aspirational tagline, but Fanta's story underlines what has long been known in the city; that there is an enormous and deeply racialised dissonance between the image of the cosmopolitan waterfront and what life can really feel like for people of colour, newcomers or not, in Liverpool.

Conclusions

So, how do these stories bring us closer to understanding what the world in one city might mean, and indeed, what value it may have at all? First, these stories are powerful in the Liverpool context because they explore these different facets of mobility and fluidity that were so key to the city's port heritage but are less fashionable to stress now. They emphasise, without trying, that a city can only be genuinely global if it can handle what this means in practical terms – that people come and go and that populations change, and that, as Massey (1991) confirmed so well, the city will be changing too. This offers a hopeful interpretation of this urban identity and offers a political possibility in the resurrection of the historical and contemporary significance of the sojourner. But this point simultaneously highlights the problem that this hopefulness obscures. Being a sojourner is not always comfortable – temporariness can be less about choice and more about wider political and bureaucratic regimes, and newness itself brings with it the ongoing burden of being a stranger. Perhaps what these stories show more than anything is that, yes, through these people Liverpool is clearly connected to 'the world', but there is still a marked disjuncture between how the city wants to be seen to imagine these global connections, and how they are lived on the ground.

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