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Expanding heritage horizons through the Cheltenham: Diaspora project.

Abstract

This article considers the *Cheltenham: Diaspora* project, an exploration and promotion of migration heritage narratives in Cheltenham (UK). Cheltenham has a diverse history, but heritage provision in the locality has been consistently concentrated on 18th and 19th century Regency architecture. This has led to a marginalisation of non-elite heritage narratives, with no permanent platform for culturally diverse heritage themes in the region. In addition, informal, online history themed social media groups have, rather than expand heritage narratives, ultimately further narrowed heritage discussions. The Diaspora project looked to challenge the lack of diversity in the authorised heritage discourse, and informal online discourses of Cheltenham's heritage, while enhancing the democratic nature of research projects coming out of the University of Gloucestershire. This paper considers the difficulties encountered in attempting to democratise heritage research, in a cultural climate that is rigid in its perception of what counts as 'heritage' and what is deemed as relevant by more 'vocal' local stakeholder groups. Ultimately the project reveals that while social media provides a useful avenue through which diverse heritage narratives can be pursued and promoted, ingrained attitudes regarding authorised forms of heritage are robust and resistant to the introduction of the unfamiliar.

Introduction

The heritage sector routinely claims to want to give voice to diverse communities, yet frequently falls short in efforts to represent and include minority voices in the processes of research, interpretation and participation (Dodd, Picton & Sandall 2003). Indeed, many heritage institutions continue to fail to place minority narratives into their core collections and, in turn, fail to foster participation opportunities with those same community members (Atkinson 2013). Migration themes might be considered as challenging for a range of practical and political factors, both of which link back to social stigmas surrounding the theme. Be it through fear of upsetting 'traditional' audiences through the embracing and presentation of 'outsider' migration narratives, or due to those within migrant communities not being comfortable coming forward to share their stories due to anxieties regarding the attracting of negative attention, the place of migration within community histories is often sidelined. This process can be considered in the context of Dearborn and Stallmeyers' 'inconvenient heritage' (2016), where efforts to secure World Heritage Site status for the community of Levuka (Fiji) were severely hindered by a failure to resolve conflicting narratives of ethnicity within the historical interpretation of the community. A failure to engage with narratives of inconvenience, those which challenge accepted norms, can ultimately hinder community integration, and undermine efforts to strengthen the status of community heritage. Further, in Shackel's consideration of the heritage process in the United States, and efforts to reconcile interpretive efforts with underrepresented voices in the context of the American Civil War, he warns that while 'subordinate' groups might challenge heritage interpretations, there is a strong possibility that they will simply 'subscribe to the dominant interpretation' (2003: 209). In communities where migration is a valid, present part

of the historical narrative, the risk of invisibility remains high as authorities cautiously avoid that which might be seen as contentious. Meanwhile communities themselves come to accept their own absence in 'their' own histories.

In the town of Cheltenham, located in the south-west of England, this issue is particularly prevalent. Here, a consistent overemphasis placed on the importance of 18-19th century Regency architecture and predominantly white, middle to upper class social and political narratives linked to this period. The heritagization of a particularly narrow aspect of local and national forms is a relatively common element of the heritage process. In Ireland, similar emphasis on architectural forms has been seen to narrow community perception on wider forms of heritage value (Parkinson, Scott and Redmond 2016), Welsh industrial heritage narratives were left unvoiced until the 1980s due to nationalist bias against rural communities and traditions in the telling of Welsh history (Mason 2007), while in Pingyao, China, community heritage has been reshaped to cater to tourist demands, rather than engaging with the priorities and narratives of local communities (Su 2018). This process is often built around the identification and acceptance of a singular heritage trend, upon which wider community or national tellings of history are pinned upon. A consequence of this process, in Cheltenham, is that working class and/or black, minority, ethnic (hereafter referred to as BME) communities are generally lacking in representation. A brief evaluation of the local museum in Cheltenham, The Wilson (Art Gallery and Museum), reinforces the notion that such stories are either not relevant, or not important, to the telling of the history of Cheltenham. Since 2016, however, and following the establishment of the Cotswold Centre for History and Heritage, the history team at the University of Gloucestershire has looked to address this imbalance,[1] and explore ways in which underrepresented community narratives might be centered in the team's research outputs. In turn, emphasis has also been placed on the display and enhanced accessibility of these research outputs for both source communities, and wider audiences within Cheltenham and the surrounding area.

Underpinning this motivation is a desire to democratise the heritage process. Extensive efforts have been made to create, and significant literature has been produced, to consider the purpose and merits of, a democratised heritage environment (Carpentier 2007). To address the communities that have been overlooked by the "authorised heritage discourse" or "AHD" (Smith 2006) of Cheltenham, an important step in providing a sense of parity in local heritage narratives has been taken. Yet in order to successfully democratise the process, significant challenges were faced in terms of audience engagement. Concerns, for instance, were raised over the deliberate introduction of 'new' narratives into established arenas of community discourse in Cheltenham (discussed further below), and reservations noted regarding the way in which community heritage groups are shaped and controlled, and subject to many of the same, traditional barriers of accessibility seen in formalised/state heritage centres of communication.

This article outlines approaches taken towards confronting the underdeveloped community heritage narratives of Cheltenham. In particular, we consider the challenges faced in working with social media groups focused on local histories in an effort to place university-led research in physically and digitally accessible environments, while adhering to the democratic principles aspired to above. This approach draws on King's theoretical considerations on heritage in Thailand, specifically the "intersections of socially produced memory with socially produced uneven development" (2017: 4). Ultimately, the work

considered here reveals that while efforts to contest the elite driven practice of AHD are valid pursuits, the systems of AHD are actually reconceived at local, non-elite levels, with diminishing but no less potent spheres of narrative control manifesting at hyper-local levels, making the promotion of migration themed heritage narratives considered here, a particular challenge. While an acute issue in the context of Cheltenham's heritage narratives, this is by no means a geographically unique issue. Arguably any community which is home to migrant voices faces the same challenges regarding representation, participation and marginalisation, and it is hoped that this project will contribute positively to the wider literature offering guidance on the methods and mechanisms by which these issues can be confronted.

The *Diaspora* project

The *Cheltenham: Diaspora* project is part of a wider programme of local historical research activities, led by the history team at the University of Gloucestershire. Previously, the team had focused on the modern history of the oldest urban area within Cheltenham, as part of the 2016-17 *Cheltenham Lower High Street Project* (O'Connell forthcoming). Both projects, while distinct in content, shared a key theme, that being the importance of promoting and celebrating local historical narratives. Following internal reflections, it was acknowledged that the history team had achieved only limited engagement with local audiences. In response, a commitment was made within the history department to dedicate staff and student research activities towards annual community research projects.

The *Cheltenham Lower High Street Project* served as an encouraging opening to the programme, with significant local media attention afforded to the project outputs (Brooks 2017),[2] namely a pop-up exhibition and short video, based on the reflections of community members regarding the oldest part of Cheltenham. The exhibition element, hosted by the Chapel Arts Gallery on the outskirts of the Lower High Street area of Cheltenham, attracted over 1000 visitors in the ten days in which it was open to the public (O'Connell, Howell & Kidd 2017). Such levels of community engagement provided encouragement that there was a clear demand for such research outputs.

Cheltenham: Diaspora was launched in 2018, with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund (CC4HH 2018). The project places emphasis on engagement with diverse community voices, focusing on a bottom-up methodology, in an effort to create an archive of materials exploring both historic and contemporary migration into Cheltenham. In addition, high priority was placed on the importance of exploring and safeguarding narratives of intangible cultural heritage. This priority acknowledged the importance of distinct cultural practices and identity expression that have travelled with people as they made Cheltenham their new home, practices and expressions that are among those most vulnerable to change in the context of migration (Bonn, Kendall & McDonough 2016, Lenzerini 2011). Equally, while subject to natural and forced adaptation, intangible forms of heritage are frequently the most viable forms of heritage for individuals and communities to travel with in episodes or periods of migration. While the movement of physical evidence of a place or community of origin might prove challenging for factors relating to logistics, cost or circumstance (e.g. fleeing conflict zones), intangible forms of heritage survive in memory and in practice and, as such, often require only knowledge for a tradition or practice to be maintained (Naguib 2013a & b).

Given the respective emphases of *Diaspora*, it was possible for the history team to address two problematic areas. The first of these was the relative lack of a platform for multicultural narratives in the telling of the history of Cheltenham. Earlier efforts had been made to engage with multicultural narratives in the area, most notably through the iRespect digital platform, a Gloucestershire wide educational resource exploring multiculturalism in the wider region (including considerations of Cheltenham), though that project was concluded in the early 2000s.[3] Following this, the 2016 *My Jewish Story Book* community storytelling project, developed with the Hebrew community in Cheltenham, provided the first significant academic platform for multicultural narratives in the area (Gardner 2016). The *Lower High Street Project* also produced limited engagement with multicultural narratives, in part a reflection on the reliance of community members to approach the research team (discussed further below); *Diaspora* presented an opportunity to directly target voices missed in earlier outputs. The second problematic area was the theme of "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH). In the context of the United Kingdom, the field of ICH remains in a relative state of infancy. This reflects a continued reticence on the part of the UK Government to ratify the 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Howell 2013). As a consequence, comparatively little attention has been placed on the importance of UK ICH, with relatively few institutions committing resources towards related research activities.[4] In developing *Diaspora*, the history team at UoG would be in a lead position to develop and advise on future ICH projects in the area, while assisting much needed efforts to raise awareness of the significance of ICH forms found in Cheltenham related to migration (Skår & Larsen 2019, Jones 2016).[5]

Finding voices

In acknowledging that earlier research projects, such as the 2017 *Lower High Street Project*, did not reflect the multi-cultural complexities of community narratives in Cheltenham, *Diaspora* placed significant emphasis on addressing this imbalance. The *Diaspora* approach was multi-faceted, and drew on both staff and student contributions. Historical migration narratives initially focused on the former Cheltenham Training College (the institution which provided the foundations for the later University of Gloucestershire), considering the earliest international students to have spent time at the college, followed by an exploration of their life stories following graduation. Other historical elements included considerations of the growth of distinct cultural groups in Cheltenham, namely Chinese, Irish and Polish communities; an exploration of the connections between Cheltenham and the East India Company and the inward migration associated with this enterprise (Markland 2018), and the pursuit of named Cheltenham based individuals with stated international connections, such as the Welsh international footballer, with Barbadian heritage, Eddie Parris (Johnes 2019), and the German composer Augustus Voigt.

Contemporary migration narratives in Cheltenham are also broad in scope, looking to connect with any participants who might be willing to contribute their personal narratives to the project archive. The project ultimately completed oral history recordings with Brazilian, Chinese, French, Italian, Polish, South African and Zimbabwean participants, in addition to broader cultural narratives being recorded with the religious communities of the Cheltenham Hindu Temple, Mosque, Synagogue, and Syro-Malabar branch of the Catholic Church in

Cheltenham. These environments of cultural practice were of particular value in the identification of 'diaspora spaces' (see Jackson 2011, Scott 1999 and Sigona, Gamlen, Liberatore, and Kringelbach 2015), environments in which diasporic heritage narratives could be engaged with, and shaped by those communities, but not answerable to or visible within the controlling influences of the local AHD.

The identification of potential participants to contribute to the contemporary element of *Diaspora* was a significant challenge. In sourcing participants for the *Lower High Street Project (LHSP)*, the research team found that an exclusively white, working to middle class set of voices reached out to contribute. Many participants came forward for the *LHSP* following an advert placed in a local newspaper (O'Connell, forthcoming). Such was the level of a great number of responses to relatively small scale local media coverage, that the project team focused on responding to and then interviewing all members of the community who had made contact. A consequence of this was that the project team did not pursue other members of the community who may have been more appropriate participants to help enhance the research narrative, but had not found out about it through the local newspaper. For whatever external factors, a clear bias emerged.

Waterton and Smith have identified this pattern as part of a wider trend in western community heritage projects, observing a 'tendency for white middle/elite classes to be granted a fuller status within the management process than other socioeconomic or ethnic groups' (Waterton & Smith 2010). Further, they acknowledged that 'communities of expertise have been placed in a position that regulates and assesses the relative worth of other communities of interest'. In such scenarios, it becomes easy for select community narratives to be ignored by heritage practitioners, but also for those communities, while having no formal voice in the heritage discourse, to conclude that their narratives are not of significance or do not 'fit' expectations. Furthermore, these communities may have simply come to distrust institutions positioned to record or present local historical narratives (Bonacchi et al 2019). Where such participants did contribute, it was not uncommon for interviews to beginwith statements such as 'I don't know that you will find this interesting', or 'I don't know why you want to talk to me'. Such observations tend to confirm the perception of a lack of value tied to personal narratives, especially among ethnic minority groups in Cheltenham. If heritage can be considered as 'a relative concept which depends on the cultural consensus of the particular group of people who cherish it' (Den 2014), then a community in which there is a lack of value attributed to personal narratives, compounded by institutional shortcomings in the prioritising of such themes, may be condemned to being forgotten.

Digital Communities

In the development of the *LHSP*, extensive use was made of both local media connections, and existing social media groups, in order to contact and identify potential participants. Local newspaper, the *Gloucestershire Echo*, introduced the project via its 'Memories of Lower Dockem' article, which stimulated a significant response from community members. In this instance, it was clear that a particular demographic, within the target area, did indeed place a sense of value on their home street, regarding the area with significant layers of nostalgia. At this point, it was acknowledged by participants that the Lower High Street was a part of Cheltenham that had largely been overlooked, and considered to be of little significance to

those who have not lived in the immediate area. This further connects to Waterton and Smith's assertion that 'heritage associated with the 'great' and the 'good'; of white British history is prioritised over histories that deal with the more repugnant characteristics of empire' (Waterton and Smith 2010). While a lack of interest by cultural organisations in regard to the Lower High Street area is somewhat removed from a failure to engage with 'repugnant characteristics of empire', it is indicative of an elitism which offers preferential emphasis to celebratory narratives, the Lower High Street being more recently associated with social decline, high crime rates and general neglect. In spite of this systematic disinterest by cultural organisations, be it from the University or the Wilson Gallery,[6] it became clear that both an enthusiasm and a high level of retention of information regarding the history of the Lower High Street was being sustained by members of the local community.

This level of interest was further illustrated by the "Days Gone By in Cheltenham" (DGBC) Facebook group.[7] Established in 2013, the group has a membership in excess of 18,000 at time of writing, and serves as an online forum in which daily reflections on the history of Cheltenham are posted. Both *LHS* and *Diaspora* projects made liberal use of this group, sharing research requests and project updates via their page. This proved to be an essential conduit through which the project teams could reach target audiences, while expanding interaction with and impact levels of the respective projects. Social media groups are increasingly adding significant depth to community heritage projects. They have also been identified as a useful and cheap research tool, especially in relation to gaining access to and enhancing participation levels of social groups which are otherwise challenging to engage with (Hesse-Biber and Griffin 2012, Postill and Pink 2012). DGBC is essentially a user generated archive of local memories and social history resources. In a heritage climate where an increased emphasis is placed on the principle that it is 'reasonable to let the people who own that heritage decide what they want to cherish and keep for future generations, but not as judged by the external standard of outside experts' (Den 2014), such groups are essential to the process of democratising heritage and local history (Besser 1997). Gauld (2017) sees this as "the ability of individuals to by-pass traditional information portals, seen as encapsulating establishment networks of control, so as to become personally empowered to create, locate or upload content that is not reliant upon gatekeepers". Moving beyond traditional 'power centres' of heritage management or 'ownership' creates 'safe' spaces in which community research can be conducted without fear of critique or loss of control, while a sense of ownership can be maintained by content creators throughout. Further, if we accept that 'community histories or community archives are the grassroots activities of documenting, recording and exploring community heritage in which community participation, control and ownership of the project is essential' (Beel et al 2017), then digital forums operating outside of the jurisdiction of academia and professional heritage and/or museums services, such as DGBC, are of paramount importance.

That is not to say that such groups are unproblematic. Indeed, a challenge to both projects when engaging with the DGBC group, was the propensity of use and distribution of historical images without permission or citations. For instance, in exploring the social significance of the former cinema and bingo hall on the Lower High Street, requests were made for photographs of the interiors of the structure when in use. While several historical exterior photographs were posted in response to the initial request, none of the contributors were able to offer any details as to the sources of the images. Concern for copyright and ownership

issues appeared to be limited, requiring project leaders to apply caution when accepting assistance. Such practical concerns might better be conceived as professional problems, and not something volunteers/enthusiasts/amateurs should be expected to demonstrate an awareness of. A secondary danger within the process of democratising heritage is that community participants are 'invited' to conduct the work of paid researchers for free, without actually empowering users in any meaningful way (Harald Fredheim 2018). Such contributions were not sought from the DGBC group. Indeed, no efforts were made to change what the group was doing, how it was doing it, or indeed to ask group members to conduct any specific research. This was an exercise in exploring what the group had prioritised as 'their' heritage, and assessing ways in which other aspects of Cheltenham's heritage could be introduced into their considerations.

A more problematic issue is concerned with the demographics of the DGBC group. While it is not the intention in this paper to present a breakdown of the demographics of a social media group with over 18,000 members, an overview of the five hundred most recent members (with visible/accessible Facebook profiles) to join the group revealed that only four of those new members were from BME groups. Of the most recent one hundred posts to be shared on the group message board,[8] not a single entry or response had been posted from a BME member. It has been suggested that, while social media platforms have the potential to aid in the process of democratizing heritage, "digital literacy tends to be socially and culturally determined, meaning that the Internet cannot be an inherently neutral and democratic space for sharing knowledge and accessing heritage on equal terms" (Taylor and Gibson 2017; also Witcomb 2007). That there is a clear lack of representation in the group demographics, may be compounded by wider social factors which may negatively impact on digital literacy. Equally, this may be a manifestation of the long standing consequence of elite control over heritage interpretation, which has traditionally placed white voices in positions of authority, marginalising and disenfranchising others from the heritage process (Littler 2005). Group demographics may well reflect wider societal imbalances in heritage representation where minority groups do not 'feel' that they belong, and in turn choose not to participate. There are clear issues with the representative nature of these online communities. While user generated content platforms, such as the DGBC, clearly give voice to aspects of heritage overlooked by formal institutions (most notably in the form of the Lower High Street), certain biases in, or omissions from, heritage representation, seem to be reinforced.

This trend was observed during research phases of the earlier *LHS* and *Diaspora* projects. In both cases, community members in Cheltenham were reached out to by the respective research teams. While positive responses were generated in both instances, there was a significantly higher level of response and engagement with the *LHS* narrative, rather than the broader migration theme. This was in spite of the Lower High Street being one of the most visible areas for multiculturalism and, as demonstrated through the results of the *Diaspora* project, migration in Cheltenham. There is a danger, therefore, that rather than offering a digital environment which challenges the authorised heritage discourse, such groups can instead serve to reinforce accepted narratives, and continue to marginalise wider voices. There is nothing to suggest that marginalisation is intentional, yet the impact of narrowing the scope of discussion is apparent.

This is not to say that the DGBC group completely ignores multicultural themes. The one consistent cultural reference point that does appear in posts refers to the Chinese restaurants

that are found in Cheltenham. Mentions are made of Ah Chow, the first Chinese restaurant to be opened in the town. Incidentally, and unrelated to the Facebook group, one of the grandchildren of the family to establish Ah Chow was interviewed as part of the *Diaspora* project. Several other Chinese restaurants and laundromats are mentioned as well, but in total, no more than thirty posts have been shared to the page, referencing the Chinese presence in Cheltenham. Where posts are made, they tend to offer no reflections beyond these places being where individuals had had their 'first Chinese', with no commentary regarding the people who maintained the places of business, or from the proprietors themselves. As with the AHD, such posts serve to remind group users of stereotypical ideas regarding the contribution of Chinese immigrants in the context of Cheltenham. This one particular association, of the Chinese community running take-away restaurants and laundromats, appeared to be particularly popular. While this may well be part of the story, it is far from the only one; yet in this group, discussions do not extend beyond the time of food available. In a broader reflection, this is a group with tens of thousands of posts, where the multicultural narrative is striking by its relative absence.

Having established the limitations of such 'community heritage social media groups', it became apparent that in order to democratize the heritage process, specific cultural groups would need to be targeted directly. This was achieved through a combination of site visits, and stratified searches of local, online community groups. Previous stages of both *Diaspora* and *LHS* projects were structured around individuals within the community reaching out to researchers. This approach was valued in terms of ensuring a community led element to the projects, whilst minimising any researcher led bias. However, the objectives of *Diaspora* demanded a more direct approach.

For certain community groups, accessing willing partners was relatively simple. Religious communities, in particular those with set venues for worship, and regular (in addition to well publicized) times of social gathering, meant first contact could generally be initiated in relation to these established public occasions. With the Cheltenham Mosque and St. Gregory the Great Roman Catholic Church, contact was easily established, and community leaders within these groups extended invitations to visit their respective places of worship after initial written inquiries. The Cheltenham Hindu community proved more challenging to contact, with no digital footprint to engage with, and a phone number provided in local literature which failed to generate a response when called. In this instance, the *Diaspora* project focused on identifying key dates in the Hindu calendar where it might be expected that the Hindu Temple would be open to the public. It was during festivities held to celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi that contact was successfully made, and interviews were conducted with several community leaders on the same day as the festival. Other groups, including the Polish Catholic and Syro-Malabar Catholic communities, proved more difficult to contact, with less regular meeting points (for instance, once monthly services, rather than weekly), and no fixed place of worship.

Developing links with cultural groups, which were not religiously focused, proved to be more challenging, and benefited from further exploration of social media groups. A stratified search of Facebook pages and/or groups, starting with the keyword 'Cheltenham', then with the addition of words such as 'Italian', or 'Portuguese', began to generate useful results. Many of the groups to be identified initially were language learner groups, and not necessarily representative of individuals to have migrated into the area. Yet, within such groups, it was

often possible to identify one or two individuals who had migration stories. In such cases, people had joined language groups to either practice their own language, or offer language classes as a means of additional revenue generation while settling into Cheltenham. It was often the case though that language groups failed to reveal significant numbers of individuals or any diasporas of a particular cultural group. While the *Diaspora* project was not so arbitrary as to reject the offer of individuals who wished to share their migration experiences, as the core focus of the project fell on identifying and engaging with diasporas, such singular narratives would not go on to be a point of significance for the project.

Beyond worship: The South African Diaspora

Outside of language associations, a small number of groups were identified which were specifically targeted towards migrants moving into the Cheltenham area. One of the more successful partnerships developed by the *Diaspora* project, while using social media Facebook groups, was with the South African diaspora in Cheltenham. For migrants, social media platforms can offer an important form of community, through which co-operation, job opportunities and kinship can all be fostered (Blumenstock, Chi and Tan 2019, also Komito 2011). The 'South African ladies in Cheltenham' page,[9] itself an offshoot of the 'South Africans in Gloucestershire' group,[10] was a relatively recently established social media platform, with a small but growing user base. Of particular value to the project was the highly focused female narrative. Many migration narratives are biased towards the male perspective, be it as a result of the position afforded to male voices in specific cultural groups, or through researcher bias; the consequence is often the "tendency to invisibilize or dismiss female mobilities" (Mata-Codesal 2017; also Curran et al 2006, Donato et al 2006, Mahler and Pessar 2006, and Schwenken and Eberhardt 2008). This trend has been seen in other elements of the *Diaspora* project, notably at the Hindu Temple where four community leaders engaged in interviews, and each of the participants were male. At time of writing, the only members of the Muslim community to have participated in the project have been male, while within the Syro-Malabar community, though many female voices shared their enthusiasm for the concept of the project, no male engagement was successfully achieved during outreach events and, in turn, no community members at all were forthcoming for further participation. Therefore the importance of finding and engaging with a predominantly female South African diaspora, cannot be overstressed. Similar breakthroughs of gender balance were also reached through community focused Facebook groups with Brazilian/Portuguese, Italian, Irish and Polish diasporas.

Incidentally, the 'South African ladies in Cheltenham' group had, roughly a week before the *Diaspora* project reached out to them, held the first of what would be several social gatherings in Cheltenham. These meetings were seen as an opportunity to meet people to have shared a similar cultural background, and to provide a sense of stability and 'home' for other South Africans moving into the area. In addition, a smaller number of the Zimbabwean diaspora in Cheltenham have also participated in this group, and are represented within this research project. Migration periods stemmed from the immediate post-apartheid years through to the near present, though the most representative window in which South Africans had travelled to Cheltenham was between 1995 and 2000.

Once a connection had been established with the South African group, the number of project participants quickly grew, as friends and family members of participants learnt about the project through word of mouth, and asked to become involved. Though female participants were, perhaps unsurprisingly, most prominent, several male contributions were also recorded, providing some sense of balance to this particular tranche of the research project. A notable distinction emerged within the interviews, which indicated a significant shift in focus when reflecting on life in South Africa, between female and male participants. Among male participants it was clear and consistent that reflections on the evolving political landscape in South Africa were of a primary concern. Certain participants criticized the speed of change in South Africa, describing the transition as a 'Marxist coup', while more detailed analysis of the composition and motivation of the ANC political party were offered without prompting. This contrasts notably with the majority of female responses, which tended to reflect only briefly, at most, on the political changes seen since the mid-1990s, or not refer to them directly at all. Perhaps in association with more forthright commentaries on South African politics, were offers to interview (and contribute to the project) on the premise of either the retention of anonymity, or for interview material to only be released or archived publicly after review by the participant. No such requests were made by any female participants.

While political commentary dominated male reflections, female contributions tended to reflect in far greater detail on life experience, and the cultural distinctions between growing up in South Africa, and lives subsequently led in the UK. In this respect, these interviews were of greater value to the project in terms of capturing commentary on personal life changes and trajectories, as opposed to the somewhat more abstract and disconnected male political reflections. Female participants tended to share reflections on aspects of life including the homestead, family cooking traditions, schooling experiences and the role of language in their upbringing. Of these themes, male participants only drew reference to cooking traditions in their reflections. The importance of the braai (a style of southern African barbecuing), and the potjie (a three-legged cooking pot used for slow stewing meals) were consistently mentioned by almost all participants, and this extended to all Zimbabwean contributors.

Another important observation noted in relation to cooking was the almost universally positive commentaries on such traditions from female contributors, and a more cynical or critical outlook from male participants. There was a distinct sense of nostalgia in the more positive reflections, with participants citing the value of communal cooking. Both the braai and potjie traditions are as much social occasions as they are to do with the preparation of food. These respective meals are concentrated on either the slow braising or stewing of foodstuffs, a process which can take several hours. During this time, several members of the neighbouring community would arrive, partaking of drinks and conversation, activities which would continue through to a point at which the food was ready. Many participants indicated that they missed the communal nature of food preparation, and the wider associated trends of dropping in on neighbours without forewarning.

> 'People say they miss that, the informal gatherings that happen in people's homes. This is often focused on sport, around rugby and cricket, and the braai and the potjie goes with that. Here (UK) you can't go to someone's house without them knowing, it's not done, and the South Africans don't like that.'

> *'In South Africa, we love our barbecues, and a potjie...so in December, instead of cooking a Sunday roast, my kids were outside in the rain and the wind, cooking a potjie...the cast iron pot gives it a completely different taste.'*

However, male comments on this theme suggested a more problematic relationship between those who embraced the potjie tradition in a British context, arguing that the continuation of the practice served as an indication of a failure to integrate.

> *'You know you'll hear of South Africans, when it's snowing...and they go up to the roof of their building and they'll have a braai, cook boerewors, drink beer, brilliant, which I think is great, but it shouldn't be what defines you...*
>
> *If I had to categorise those Saffers who have integrated well, or those who are not so happy, those who are less happy are very attached to their potjie.'*

 In this instance, the continuation of the intangible cultural practice is regarded as a negative. The theme is one which requires further consideration within a larger survey sample (if possible), yet a male emphasis on 'successful' integration, over any sense of importance placed on the retention of former cultural norms, is distinct, and perhaps reveals a gender bias when considering social attitudes towards the concept of 'integration', how it should be pursued, and now 'successful integration' might be measured. In addition, it is clear that securing a more balanced gender sample for the South African narrative was critical towards the development of a representative overview of opinions within the diaspora. Without the female narrative, key information regarding cultural norms within the pre-migration homestead setting would have been lost, while the absence of the more critical male narratives, would have allowed for an overly nostalgic summary to develop.

Perhaps the most important point to take from reflecting on the contributions of the South African diaspora in Cheltenham, is their emphasis on what might be described as the 'mundane'. All of the South Africans interviewed for the project had personal experiences of the end of apartheid, indeed the majority cited the changing and at times challenging political evolution of South Africa as a primary factor for leaving the country. Yet the focal points of their reflections consistently returned to the everyday aspects of life in South Africa, and how those everyday elements had been retained or replaced since moving into Cheltenham and the surrounding areas. Consideration of this theme, in relation to British local history groups on social media platforms such as DGBC, provides useful insights as to why those groups are less receptive to migration themes. For the South African community, that which seemed to matter most, or held the most resonance when being asked to reflect on their past, was those 'regular' aspects, including food preparation, family gatherings, church and school practices. Custom and tradition held greater weight than major political events. This is consistent with themes appearing in postings within the DGBC group. In this user led forum, the sharing of images of places of custom is also the norm. This might include schools, places of recreation and leisure such as swimming pools and pubs, or shopping scenes. It is in this context that multiculturalism, in its most superficial form, is engaged with, as members reflect on eating Chinese or Indian cuisine as part of a night out. Some of the more popular images to be shared in the group archive the changing nature of shop fronts, with related discussion focusing on individuals who ran specific shops, or the type of produce sold within. As a consequence, such groups do not tend to facilitate the posting of historical information pertinent to migration and migrants. The combined factors of a dominant and established

practice of sharing images and observations derived from people's youth within Cheltenham, in relation to a lack of value placed by diasporic communities on their own heritage, result in those migration narratives being isolated and left at risk of being lost.

Efforts had been made to safeguard and record such narratives in Cheltenham and the surrounding areas. The aforementioned 'iRespect' project provided an important starting point for the *Diaspora* project, where migration stories from BME groups had been recorded during the 1990s. However, while preparing this article in early 2019, the 'iRespect' materials ceased to be available online.[11] No specific reason has been provided for this, though conversations with the former project director in 2018 revealed that server support for the website was likely to be withdrawn, some years after specific funding for the project ended. While the resource did reappear online for a time, the website and related materials have gone offline at random points during the year, and indicate an unstable server for these materials. In such scenarios, where project funding is finite and runs for a number of years, the role of social media can provide a critical, free and much longer term hosting option. Freely sharing research materials through platforms such as Facebook allows researchers to avoid concerns over whether host websites, and domain names, are updated, maintained and paid for. Still, finding ways of placing migration themes into the dynamic discussion of local digital history groups remains a challenge.

A strategy employed by both the *LHS* and *Diaspora* projects, has been to give voice to those elements of personal histories which were relatable; day to day narratives which are most familiar. This has been echoed in a series of public 'pop-up' exhibitions, hosted by partner cultural centres throughout Cheltenham. The *Diaspora* exhibition, displayed in early September as part of the Gloucester History Festival, looked to utilise everyday narratives, as a platform upon which less familiar themes could be explored. Text panels for the *Diaspora* element included consideration of cooking and religious practices, and the importance of education, drawing heavily on those narratives focused upon by participants, while being relatable themes for wider audiences. For instance, Francis Close Hall university campus in Cheltenham played an important role in providing education for international students from the later part of the nineteenth century. During this period, international links were established between Cheltenham and western Africa (specifically Nigeria), the Caribbean and Thailand. The relatively little known migration stories that took place during this period feel relatable in a local (Cheltenham) context, as the teaching institution remains a dominant presence in the town. As a point of reference, it is familiar to potential audiences. The same might be said of religious practice and cooking culture. Whether or not people engage with a particular religion, or type of cuisine, these are elements of the cultural landscape which have a strong visual presence; they are unavoidable. By 'hanging' the exhibition around familiar themes, it was then possible to introduce less obvious narratives, such as reflections on the way in which migration facilitates the movement of broader examples of intangible cultural heritage, beyond food and religion. This allowed for the introduction of narratives reflecting on French and Italian family practices tied to seasonal events, the role of Chinese martial arts in the act of self defence and in the preservation of culture, and the challenges faced in transmitting knowledge within the Jewish community. As a consequence, the exhibition was able to provide a platform for the unfamiliar through the familiar. In addition, the *Diaspora* exhibition was framed by two other research projects produced by students from the University of Gloucestershire, exploring the role of the workhouse in Cheltenham, and the

history of the Pittville area. As a consequence, the exhibition space was weighted towards narratives which were overtly historical in theme, and emphasized aspects of the history of Cheltenham that many local users would be more familiar with (notably, the descendant of one woman to have died in the Cheltenham workhouse visited the exhibition). This ensured greater footfall into the exhibition, in part building on the enthusiasm for that which was regarded as 'local history' by groups such as DGBC. Even though migration themes might not fit into this authorised heritage discourse, as shaped by group users, by engaging with the exhibition they would come into contact with the migration themed content.

The exhibition was also made available in a digital format. While an archive of exhibition materials would be hosted on the university archives, text panels relating to the Diaspora exhibition were also shared on the project Facebook and Twitter feeds. This allowed for exhibition content to be easily accessed by and shared with group members from the DGBC group, and other local, digital history groups. The democratic nature of the digital exhibition is ensured by the nature of the platform. No one is forced to access the materials, however those resources will be freely available, without having to migrate to or explore an alternative official website.

By virtue of utilising social media as a means of communicating exhibition materials, it has also been possible to build international connections much more efficiently. Notably, the *Diaspora* project has successfully established a working relationship with the Center for Research, Information Management and Media Development (CRIMMD), home to the Nigeria Museum of Photographic History. Researching the earliest international students to study at the Francis Close Hall campus revealed links with Oyo, Nigeria. One former student, Moses Craig Akinpelumi Adeyemi, who attended the teacher training college in 1911, went on to play a major role in the establishment of educational institutions in the Yoruba Mission area of the city of Oyo. In addition, the project identified evidence that Elizabeth Modupeola Okuseinde, who married Adeyemi, studied at the Cheltenham School of Domestic Science at roughly the same time. Their descendants are still active in the Oyo area. By making research materials freely available on social media platforms, members of the CRIMMD research centre reached out to the *Diaspora* project, and have begun the process of engaging with, and conducting oral history recordings of members of the Adeyemi family, which will also contribute to the overall project. Again, by adopting a more democratic approach to the research model, making results freely available at the earliest point possible has led to a strengthening of the research project through the participation of other researchers which might otherwise have been missed. It is anticipated that such an approach will generate similar responses from within the DGBC group, and related communities.

Figure 1. Canon Moses Craig Akinpelumi Adeyemi, who studied at what would become the University of Gloucestershire Campus, in 1911. Reproduced courtesy of University of Gloucestershire Special Collections and Archives.

Figure 2. Cheltenham Teaching College Records for M. C. Adeyemi. Records for international students were usually partial when compared to British born students. M. C. Adeyemi was only registered as 'West African Student', with no further formal record kept relating to his time at the institution. Reproduced courtesy of University of Gloucestershire Special Collections and Archives.
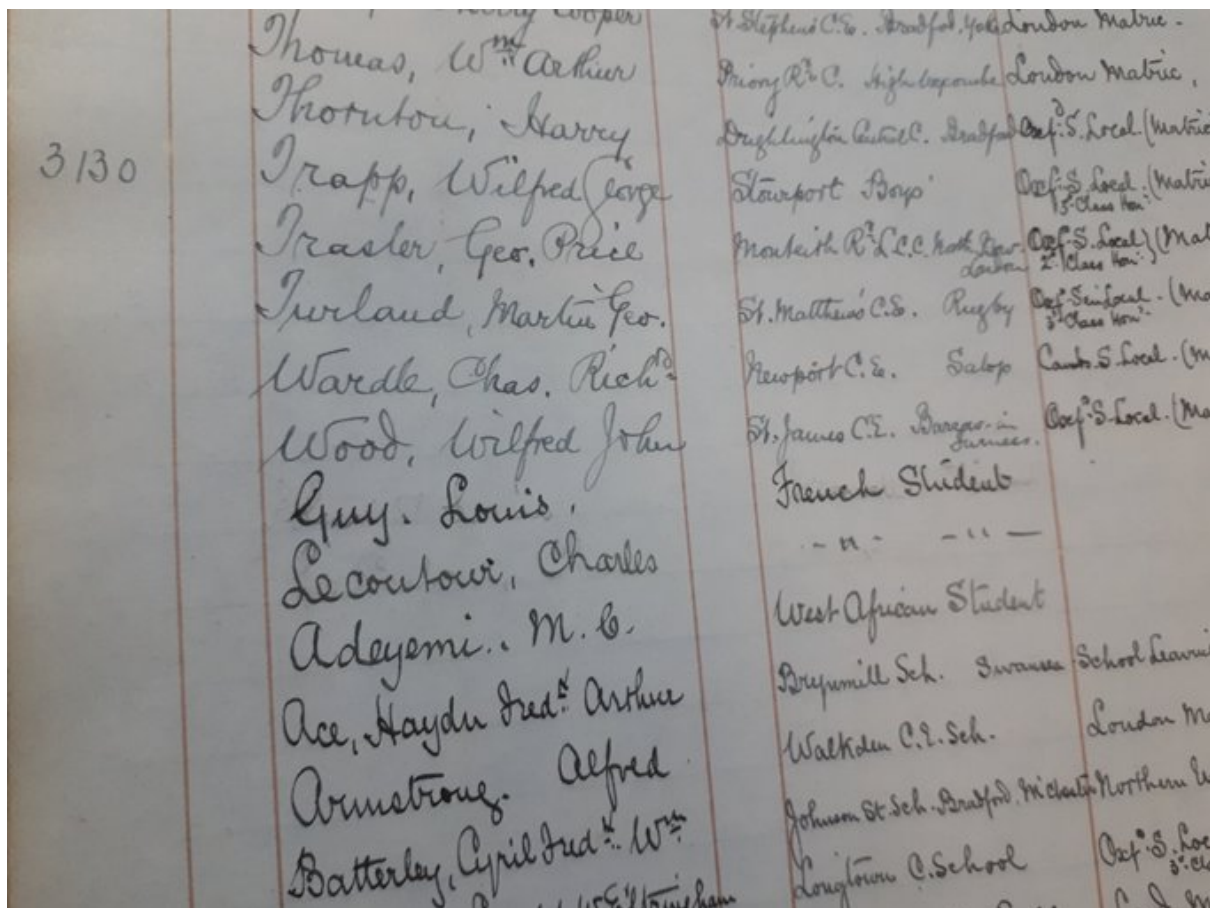
Conclusions

The *Cheltenham: Diaspora* project allowed the history team at the University of Gloucestershire to challenge several important issues concerning local heritage narratives and audience engagement. The project serves as a model by which diverse community voices can be engaged with, and are given a platform for self expression where 'traditional' methods of heritage communication have ultimately failed. Primarily, the project began as an exercise in exploring and giving voice to underrepresented demographic groups living in Cheltenham. The range of diasporas found in Cheltenham is extensive, and the project team sought to continue the process of recording oral histories from those voices who lack a presence in the current range of heritage provision in Cheltenham. Were the project to have considered migration as a focal point, in a broader sense, the range of interviews conducted might have been much greater. However, a desire to explore the ongoing importance and practice of intangible cultural heritage forms within migrating communities meant that diasporas, rather than individuals, were critical for this project. In this respect, the *Diaspora* project was highly successful, and several new partnerships have been established with community groups, religious communities and international partners, which will be built upon in the coming years.

In addition, efforts to democratize the heritage process have raised specific challenges. The role of local, community focused, history 'groups' on Facebook, have proven to be essential in

the development of both *Diaspora* and the earlier *Lower High Street* projects. By engaging with, and distributing research materials through these groups, an important step has been taken towards strengthening the democratic nature of the university's heritage engagements. Yet the notion of democratization can prove to be superficial. Local history Facebook groups, while seeming to embrace democratic principles, suffer in the respect of representative demographics, preconceived ideas about what constitutes local history/heritage, and are ultimately subject to moderation by a relatively small number of users within such groups. In turn, an exploration of historical themes overlooked by such groups, in this case, migration and the history of diasporas in Cheltenham, are external injections - an agenda set by an outside institution, 'encouraging' the notionally democratic group to look in another direction and at other materials. This very action undermines the democratic process. Yet it has been acknowledged above that there is no forced consumption of the diaspora narrative; as with any other post in the group, it can be liked, disliked, loved or ignored. What has instead taken place is the expansion of access to research materials and outputs. Local audiences can freely access resources generated by the project, and make informed decisions as to whether they will pursue such narratives in their own future considerations, or in discussion via the Facebook group discussion pages. An ongoing element of the project will be to monitor the nature of discussion and posts on the local group page to measure what impact the *Diaspora* project and exhibition has had.

The *Diaspora* project has certainly provided revealing insights regarding the nature of migrant demographics in Cheltenham, unexpected gender themes, and a broad range of intangible forms of heritage which are now safeguarded to some extent, by virtue of their recording as part of this project, and the raised status such forms of heritage now have due to their inclusion in the related exhibition. The next challenge for the project team is in exploring and identifying further ways in which these heritage narratives can become normalised and grounded in the cultural landscape of Cheltenham. Utilising the potential of social media is one such method to achieve this objective, but needs to be pursued as part of a broader strategy of community involvement and promotion, enhancing the democratic nature of the heritage process, without undermining those same principles of community-led heritage engagement. Though the project remains ongoing, *Diaspora* has outlined positive ways in which diasporas, and migrant communities more generally, can be effectively engaged with to successfully safeguard local knowledge, custom and tradition, and to begin the process of transmitting those narratives into communities where the migrant voice has always been present, though is more often than not kept invisible.

Notes

1. Research projects had been developed through working in partnership with other community stakeholders in the locality, including Cheltenham Borough Council, Cheltenham Civic Society and the West End Partnership.
2. See also the 'Cheltenham Lower High Street Project'
https://www.facebook.com/CheltenhamLowerHighStreetProject/.
3. Dee Russell Thomas (lead researcher on the iRespect project), pers comm. September 17, 2018.

4. Edinburgh Napier University, for instance, stands out as one of the few UK institutions to have positioned themselves as a lead authority on ICH in a British context, see McCleery et al, 2008 and 2010.

5. In addition, in late 2019, Dr. Abigail Gardner (University of Gloucestershire), jointly launched the Mapping the Music of Migration (MAMUMI) project, celebrating and promoting intangible musical traditions linked to migration, which would include reflections on musical traditions in Gloucestershire. In a broader geographical context, Dr. Demelza Jones (2016) has considered migration narratives concerning Tamil migrants currently based in the south west of England.

6. Despite the Wilson Gallery being within a five minute walk from the upper end of the Lower High Street, there is only a very limited display of material culture relating to this part of Cheltenham. The majority of the core displays relate to the arts and crafts movement in the town, and the Scott Antarctic expedition.

7. See https://www.facebook.com/groups/243104989178394/, accessed September 16, 2019.

8. As of 10th June 2019.

9. https://www.facebook.com/groups/233006943701906/ accessed September 16, 2019.

10. https://www.facebook.com/groups/404981589644765/ accessed September 16, 2019. While there is diversity within the group, the predominant demographic is white, post-aparthaid migrants.

11. The resource, available at http://www.irespect.net, was, at various points during the preparation of this article, offline. At time of writing (December 2019), the site's online status had been restored. However, it is unclear where many of the oral history materials available on this platform might be accessed should the website go offline again.

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