12
Rethinking the photographic studio as a politicised space

Caroline Molloy

Drawing from Crang, Dwyer and Jackson (2003), who argue that commodity culture provides an alternative way of advancing our understanding of contemporary transnationality, this chapter looks at the photographic studio embedded in a diasporic community in North London as a transnational space, a place in which hybrid identities are experimented with and existing rituals are reconfigured, retold and reimagined. I investigate how the photographic studio can be understood as a politicised space in which transcultural identities are experimented with and performed.[1]

Navigating my 'local'

The research focuses on my 'local', an area known as a 'Turkish' neighbourhood, based in and around North/North East London.[2] According to Yilmaz (2005), there has been a diasporic Turkish community in England since Ottoman times. He argues, however, that it was the political unrest in Cyprus in the 1950s and 1960s that saw a large migration of Turkish people move to London, and economic problems in the 1970s and 1980s that led to an influx of immigration from mainland Turkey.[3] He explains that Turkish migrants congregate in the same areas in London as other migrants from their hometown, conspicuously settling in Stoke Newington, Manor House and Green Lanes. This is an area I call home, and refer to in this chapter as my 'local'.[4]

I moved to London more than 20 years ago for career opportunities. For the first 10 years that I lived in London, I moved around frequently, living in 12 properties in four different areas.[5] My decisions about where to live were mostly governed by economics and a desire to be in close proximity to where I worked and studied. Ten years ago, I moved to a property in North London that was near where I worked at the time. I have remained in this property for a decade now, and call it home. During the short commute between home and work, from North to East London, I cycled through a number of different neighbourhoods. Although there were no physical borders to cross during the commute, the areas through which I travelled were different from each other, and often distinct in their identities. Examples of this are the many Turkish-owned late-night kebab houses on Stoke Newington High Street and along Green Lanes, which sit alongside the Turkish-owned hairdressers, beauticians, barbers, photographic studios and general stores. In addition, within the same vicinity on and around Ridley Road market, vibrant Afro-Caribbean fabrics are sold alongside Afro hair and beauty products, and fresh Caribbean vegetables and kosher butchers are found in Stamford Hill.

When reflecting on my 'local', I am reminded of Brah's writing about England. Discussing the intellectual surveying of landscape in post-war Britain in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), she highlights the under-researched aspect of the 'diaspora space' of England. The place she writes of seems to capture the essence of my daily commute through London. She writes: 'In the diaspora space called "England" … African-Caribbean, Irish, Asian, Jewish and other diasporas intersect amongst themselves as well as with the entity constructed as "Englishness", thoroughly re-inscribing it in the process' (Brah 1996, 209).

We can understand that these intersections that Brah writes of arise through shared geographical locations. Despite there being no fixed boundaries to define and inscribe sociocultural geographic places in London, areas are often (although no longer exclusively) inhabited by people who originate from the same home country. I am curious about these patterns of diasporic intersection that flourish in the geographical locations through which I traverse, and am interested in how these cultural crossings become places of intercultural encounters. My working pattern and commute to work has since changed, but my interest in the surrounding areas remains constant. With a curiosity about the hybrid nature of my local as a starting point, I investigate my research site, the photography studio.

Thinking through the photographic studio as a research site

It may seem strange to argue that the photographic studio is a politicised space; however, if the services offered by the photographic studio and more broadly commercial photographic practices are examined, such as the marking of a milestone event or ritual by family and passport portraiture, the photographic studio seems an ideal place in which to observe and reflect on transcultural practices. Hall (2006), when writing about diasporic identities, alludes to the fluidity with which diasporic identities are formed. He writes: 'Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference' (Hall 2006, 439). But where and how do these transformations take place? When writing about reimagining diasporic identities afresh, and thinking through practices of diaspora, Sigona *et al.* (2015) argue that transnational spaces are places in which transcultural practices take place. These are places of agency, they suggest, in which diasporic communities meet and reconfigure their identities. Sigona *et al.* identify churches and schools as transnational spaces. Could we consider additional spaces such as diasporic commercial photographic studios as transnational places? If the photographic studio and more broadly commercial photographic practices are places of self-recognition in which identities are experimented with and rituals are visually memorialised, could they also be understood as transnational places in which transcultural identities are imagined?

Postcolonial theory is a beneficial way of thinking through the photographic studio as a politicised space. To commence this analysis, we can refer to Mary Louise Pratt's (2008, 7) ideas around 'contact zones'. Pratt argues that 'contact zones' are social spaces in which different cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other. For example, we can consider London as a place in which cross-cultural exchanges simultaneously take place. In encountering each other, Pratt argues, traditional ideas of cultural practices evolve. Furthermore, Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of the third space through which meaning is mobilised develops this idea further. He argues that the production of meaning requires the interaction of two things, in this case two cultures through a third space (1994, 36). Therefore, it can be reasoned that my research site, the photographic studios within the Turkish neighbourhood of London, can be conceptualised as that third space – a space in which Turkish and English culture meet and greet each other; a place in which, as discussed by Barthes (1981), the 'self' is experimented with and reconstructed, and

wherein the photograph and photographic practices become evidence of cross-cultural identity formation.

Investigating my 'local' photographic studio

I stand on my local high street, and contemplate the photographs on display in the window of one of the commercial high street photography studios. This is an unusual photograph of a young boy aged seven or eight. He is wearing a formal white outfit, inclusive of fur-trimmed white cape and cap, embellished with silver trim, and holding a decorative sceptre. In contrast to the formality of the outfit, his pose is informal. He is seated on the ground and is smiling at the camera. His portrait has been digitally repositioned in front of a waterfall in post-production. To the viewer it appears that the boy is seated in front of the waterfall. For me this is a puzzling photograph, in which there is a disjuncture between the foreground and the background. It is unclear why the background of the portrait is a waterfall. It is a fascinating phantasmagorical photograph that raises many questions around transvisual representation. I am curious to know more about the motivation and construction of this photographic image. What is the significance of the background and what story is being told?

In the reflection of the photographic studio window on the surface of the glass, I see my own face staring back at me. I can feel the wind rushing past me and hear the noise of traffic behind me. I gaze beyond my own image and see the red buses and black cabs in motion, on the busy North London street behind me. This is where the research begins, in front of this glass-fronted photographic studio, which becomes one of my research sites. It is one of the five photographic studios that sit within a four-mile stretch on the A10 in North London.[6] There are four photographic studios located on Stoke Newington High Street, and a fifth can be found next to the large banqueting hall in Tottenham.[7] There are three additional photographic studios in the same area of London sited at different points on Green Lanes, a road which runs perpendicular to the A10. The studios serve the needs of the local community, which is historically, but not exclusively, a diasporic Turkish community. The photographic studios are almost entirely surrounded by other Turkish businesses. The local bank, hairdressers, travel agents and all of the restaurants, including the restaurant inside a former mosque, are Turkish. As one participant commented, this is London but it is really a little Turkish Town.

During the research, I observe photographic practices in and outside of the photographic studio. My interactions with each studio vary; they include some recorded in-depth interviews, on-site and location participant observation and online web-based research. Undertaking this research gives me the opportunity to observe and reflect on the photographic practices taking place. Initially, I believed the practices to be Turkish practices, but it soon became apparent that the rituals and portrait practices I observed and the photographs I examined were not precisely Turkish.[8] Indeed, the Turkish photographic practices had been influenced by practices seen in the geographical locale of North London. As an example of this, I refer to a conversation with one of my participants about an event we both attended.[9]

This event was a circumcision party she attended as part of the photography and video team and I as a participant-observer.[10] It was an all-day event that started off in the photographic studio with formal portraits of the celebrant boy, who was wearing a traditional Ottoman costume, with various family members.[11] As the day progressed, another team of photographers took over the evening session to document the formal sit-down meal/party, which included Turkish music and dancing, and the ceremony of pinning money onto the young boy. What interested me in terms of rituals were the 'in-between' practices that connect the formal events. After the studio portraits had been taken, the young boy and a few of his friends were driven around London in a limousine for the afternoon. After that, he rode a white horse into his formal dinner party, which included 500 guests.

So what is unusual about this? My assumption was that it was an unusual activity for the young boy, celebrating his circumcision ritual and dressed in his Ottoman regalia, to be driven around North London for the afternoon. This is a ritual we have seen many times as part of contemporary British 'hen party' practices. Through conversation with my participant, it became apparent that indeed the practice had been adopted from British hen party practices; however, it was not an unusual activity – in fact, this is now considered a common practice in Turkish communities in London. In adopting this practice, the influence of the geographical locale of North London can be seen. The boy riding the horse into his celebration party, on the other hand, I thought to be a common 'Turkish' practice in North London. This was not the case. My participant told me that, in the seven years she had been in London, she had never seen this practice. Further research revealed that it was a traditional cultural practice from the Turkish village where the family hosting the party had been born. What can be understood from reflecting on the conversation

with my participant about these practices is that the family were trying to maintain their familial heritage and at the same time taking influences from the geographical locale of North London. The practices performed were neither exclusively English nor Turkish but a blending of the two cultures through developing transcultural practices.

The transvisual studio photograph

My second photograph is a studio portrait that is indicative of the many photographs I examined during the research. The photograph is a wedding portrait (see Figure 12.1). It is a transvisual photograph. The couple in the photograph are performing for the camera. They are wearing Western-style wedding outfits and enacting a couple 'in love'. It is a photograph that has been digitally montaged to create the narrative. For compositional reasons the couple appear twice in the photograph.[12] The background of the photograph is Tower Bridge, an easily recognisable London landmark, which is used allegorically. The photograph does not attempt to look realistic; its purpose is to send a symbolic message to the consumer of the photograph, the family back in Turkey, that the marriage took place in London. The linchpin of the photograph responsible for locating its cultural meaning is the digital background of Tower Bridge.

Figure 12.1 Transvisual studio wedding photograph. Created by Caroline Molloy. © Belda Productions.

If we understand the studio to be a place in which little theatres of the 'self', as Edwards (2004) suggests, are performed, it is logical to analyse the studio photograph to see how to speak of cultural practices. There has been extensive analysis of early studio photography, for example by Di Bello (2007), Edwards (2006), Flint (2015) and Linkman (1993), who discuss studio photography as a framework that reflects the class and cultural aspirations of the sitters in the images. To ground this research, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of the 'habitus' can be applied. He writes that our sense of place in the world is determined by our internalised structures and schemes of perception. Furthermore, these systems govern our aesthetic, social, economic and cultural tastes with which we identify. This he refers to as our 'habitus'. If the visual tropes in the studio photographs are then examined, the popularity and repetition of tropes in the images identify emblematic visual tropes that indicate cultural and social aspirations.

There is, however, limited analysis around digital studio photographic practices. The use of digital technologies has enabled a wider selection of backgrounds and *mises en scène* to add to and situate the meaning of the portrait. In doing this, there is more scope to expand the visual 'habitus' photograph. Rather than a radical break caused by digital technologies, digital photography has opened up imaginative ways in which to make studio portraits that blur the boundaries between the real and the symbolic, the imagined and the actual. Undeterred by the democratising effects of digital photography, studio photography still has a presence on the high street. However, there has been a skill shift in the making of a photographic portrait. The studio portrait is no longer limited by the physical space of the studio. The digital infrastructure enables the portrait likeness to be completed and given meaning on the computer. The wide availability of digital portrait backgrounds, props and *mises en scène* has enabled a fluidity in creating a contemporary studio portrait. With an increasingly broad range of online digital backgrounds and props available to add to the studio portrait, there are more opportunities to develop identities around the visual 'habitus' of the studio photograph. In fact, it can be argued that with a potentially limitless range available, the selection of the digital background and supporting props is more culturally specific than ever before. The visual 'habitus' of the photograph, whether in a historical analogue photograph or a digitally compiled photograph, remains integral to its reading.

Concluding comments

Using examples to support my theory, I have argued that the photographic studio, in my local, within its broadest sense, provides a suitable framework through which transcultural identities are explored. The photographic practices reflect the transcultural nature of photography and can be understood as a good indicator of the fluidity of cultural practices. I am conscious that this is reflexive research that is open-ended and ever-changing. In order to locate this perspective I draw from Massey (1994), who, when talking about the character of a place, describes it as a constructed articulation of social relations. There is fluidity in understanding this space and place that is associated with a specific historical point, which she calls an 'envelope of time'. This research, as an envelope of time, reflects my experience in contemporary North London photographic studios. However, I do not believe this is an isolated circumstance; it happens to be my local, which for me is an accessible place in which to carry out the research. I contend that it is a useful framework to look at the photographic studio as a politicised space, a transnational space in which transcultural identities can be transplanted to other established diasporic communities.

Notes

1. The content of this chapter is derived from my PhD research that looks at a broader scope of photography as a transnational practice, through which transcultural identities are formed. 'Transnational' and 'transcultural' are commonly misused terms. In order to follow the thread of this chapter, I qualify both. 'Transnational' can be understood as across nations. It commonly refers to a community of people who have migrated across borders for economic or political reasons. This could equally apply to a group of British expats living exclusively within a British community outside of Britain as it could to a group of political or economic migrants who have moved across borders. 'Transcultural' refers to cross-cultural activities/practices that have evolved through across-cultural exchanges of ideas and practices.
2. Although there is a visible sense of belonging to a diasporic Turkish community and an imagined cohesiveness of that community, it quickly becomes apparent that belonging to this 'Anglo-Turkish' community means something quite different to everyone I speak with. It is not a homogeneous community: many different identities with contradictory interests and divergent forms of identification shelter under the 'Anglo-Turkish' umbrella.
3. It should be noted that the use of the label 'Turkish' is overarching and can be misleading. It is a constructed term that infers a homogeneous group identity. In using the word 'Turkish', the multifaceted subtleties of cultural, ethnic, geographical, religious and national histories are often overlooked. For further reading around this, see Yilmaz (2005), who writes specifically about the Turkish diaspora in Britain.
4. I draw from Lippard's (1997) use of the word 'local'. She uses the word 'local' to refer to the pull of a place that operates within us, entwined with our personal memories, the known and the unknown.

5. I was brought up in North Hampshire and moved to London via the West Midlands. Neither of my parents is English (they are Irish and Welsh). They met in Wales and moved to southern England for work opportunities.
6. On this section of the A10, between Stoke Newington and Tottenham, the road changes name three times: Stoke Newington High Street becomes Stamford Hill and finally High Road.
7. Stamford Hill sits between Stoke Newington and Tottenham. This area is reputed to have the largest population of Hasidic Jews in Europe. There are no photographic studios on Stamford Hill.
8. As discussed in Note 2, the 'Anglo-Turkish' community is not a homogeneous one. Even in self-identifying as part of a diasporic Turkish community, my participants are in disagreement about what this means. They differ in self-recognition, simultaneously calling themselves Anglo-Turkish, London-Turkish/Kurdish-Turkish/Turkish-Londoners, and the London-ish community. During initial interactions everyone I spoke with identified as Turkish/Anglo-Turkish. Only through prolonged conversation did the complexities of individual identities start to emerge. This included participants who, to mention a few, distinguished themselves as Kurdish, Turkish Cypriots or Alevi Kurds as well as Turkish.
9. The interview discussed can be found at https://vimeo.com/230338763.
10. A circumcision party is commonly asynchronous to the actual circumcision ceremony. The circumcision ceremony was not documented by the photography studio.
11. There is no fixed age of circumcision for Muslim boys; the preferred age is around seven years old.
12. It seems to be common practice for the digital studio photographs to depict the sitter more than once in the same image. When questions were raised about this, there was no clear answer as to why this was the case beyond saying that it looked nice.

References

Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Brah, Avtar. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.

Crang, Philip, Claire Dwyer and Peter Jackson. 2003. 'Transnationalism and the Spaces of Commodity Culture', *Progress in Human Geography* 27 (4): 438–56.

Di Bello, Patrizia. 2007. *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Edwards, Elizabeth. 2004. 'Little Theatres of Self: Thinking about the Social'. In *We Are the People: Postcards from the Collection of Tom Phillips*, 26–37. London: National Portrait Gallery.

Edwards, Steve. 2006. *The Making of English Photography: Allegories*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Flint, Kate. 2015. 'Surround, Background, and the Overlooked', *Victorian Studies* 57 (3): 449–61.

Hall, Stuart. 2006. 'New Ethnicities'. In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, 199–202. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Linkman, Audrey. 1993. *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*. London: Tauris Parke Books.

Lippard, Lucy R. 1997. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press.

Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Pratt, Mary Louise. 2008. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. 2nd ed. New York London: Routledge.

Sigona, Nando, Alan Gamlen, Giulia Liberatore and Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, eds. 2015. *Diasporas Reimagined: Spaces, Practices and Belonging*. Oxford: Oxford Diasporas Programme.

Yilmaz, Ihsan. 2005. 'State, Law, Civil Society and Islam in Contemporary Turkey', *The Muslim World* 95 (3): 385–411.