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Researching postcolonial memory: creativity and participation in contexts of colonialism and the British South Asian diaspora

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out methodological principles for conducting post-colonial memory studies research. Pasts associated with colonialism and their contemporary social articulation can be empirically challenging for several reasons, including their uncertain, often inarticulable, contradictory, and painful nature, which materialise in social research encounters. To navigate such challenges, we argue for the value and application of creative methodologies centring on food and cooking, textiles, music-making, and photography. Using explorations of postcolonial memories of the South Asian diaspora, including the Partition of British India, the Bangladesh War of Independence, and associated experiences of migration, we argue that such creative methodologies, which combine traditional ethnographic tools and more experimental participatory cultural activities, provide fertile entry points for research which is inclusive of diverse postcolonial perspectives and positionalities, sensitive to painful pasts, and engages with mnemonic uncertainties.

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Introduction

This article proposes a set of creative and participatory methods to respond to the methodological challenges of researching postcolonial memory, which we define here as memory and social remembering practices indivisible from the particular politics and power structures of colonialism and decolonial processes. The unique character of postcolonial memory poses various challenges to traditional memory studies methodologies. The research project *Migrant Memory and the Postcolonial Imagination (MMPI)*, has provided a platform for thinking through some of the demands that attending to postcolonial memory places on empirical designs and methodological principles. *MMPI* is a seven-year study located at the crossroads of memory studies, diaspora, cultural and postcolonial studies and uses a multi-sited ethnographic and participatory approach to

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investigate the cultural memories associated with the ‘longue durée of the Partition’ (Sengupta, 2015, p. 1). This ‘long durée’ includes multiple Partitions, and subsequent ruptures, riots, wars, and relocation, circulating throughout South Asian diasporic communities in the UK.¹ The project explored the impact of these memories on questions of community, identity, and belonging in the diaspora by working closely and long-term with community groups in the East Midlands and in London through a range of arts-based activities.

Researching postcolonial memory

In recent years, memory studies have become increasingly sensitive to the complexities of memory in a global context. Recent theoretical perspectives have, for example, sought to explore the transnational and transcultural features of contemporary remembering in the West (Bond & Rapson, 2014; De Cesari and Rigney, 2014), the diversity of memories and remembering practices (Campbell, 2009), as well as inequalities and marginalisation in and through remembering practices (Tirosh & Reading, 2023). However, this body of work has rarely adopted an explicitly postcolonial perspective. This article contributes to the field of memory studies by interpreting the global features of contemporary memory through a postcolonial lens and addressing the methodological implications of attending to the legacies of colonialism that underpin memory in a global context.

The specific nature of remembering in a postcolonial world is shaped by bodies occupying social spaces beyond the restrictions of empire, where they form new, at times, unpredictable alliances and can convert ‘memory into continuity’ (Kabir, 2014, pp. 108, 110). Kabir considered instruments, music, and dance as vehicles bringing distant pasts and locations into the here and now of former empire. Concerns for such memory and its journeys have largely been the preserve of postcolonial studies in which memory features as a central but problematic connection between the colonial past and the postcolonial present. For decades, postcolonial, decolonial, feminist, and indigenous studies have explored the dynamics of power embedded in processes of remembering. Postcolonial scholars have examined the impact of colonialism on practices of remembering or forgetting colonial pasts (Fanon, 1952), the presence of the colonial past in the present (Bhabha, 1994), and the continuous ‘symbiotic relationship between coloniser and colonised’ (Gandhi, 1998, p. 11). Similarly, decolonial scholars have questioned the dominant colonial epistemologies applied in knowledge production and our understanding of the past (Mignolo, 1992). Feminist thinkers of both schools were key in providing us today with an understanding of memories of colonialism that are complex, diverse, and intersectional (e.g. Lugones, 2016; Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 2023).

In this sense, memory has been conceived as the link between the experience of colonialism and cultural identity (Bhabha, 1994), which shapes the present positioning of diasporic identities (Brah, 2005; Hall, 1990) and their possibilities to navigate and/or challenge the making of history and hegemonic and anti-colonial nationalist narratives (Butalia, 1998; Das, 2007). Paying attention to the politics and power structures that colonialism and decolonial processes continue to produce opens opportunities to reflect on the role of memory and remembering in the perpetuation of social and cultural marginality. Such demands are frequently articulated by those who remember the complexities of colonial pasts in Britain but whose memories are often treated as other,

demonstrated, for instance, in the distancing of South Asian history from that of British history:

It should be part of our history because it's part of British history that needs to be told more fully and honestly.

Here, Kiran,² a London-based Hindu British Indian woman in her 40s, notes the complex entanglements of postcolonial remembering and hints at its implications on notions of belonging. Having moved to London from East Africa as a child, where both her parents, of Gujarati heritage, were born, Kiran is very aware of the impact of colonialism on the displacement of people and their consequent negotiation of identities between present experiences of locality and attempts to hold on to a cultural heritage that exists in inherited memories of India and Gujarat. Even though Partition was not a topic discussed at home, she told us that it constituted a sort of 'undercurrent of awareness' that she and her brother grew up with, and wondered if her parents' attachment to India was a direct consequence of Partition, in terms of her parents' willingness to express a clear allegiance to one country or the other. Reflecting on the impact of Partition and of imperialism on her family life, Kiran was adamant that it should not be treated as specifically Indian, or Pakistani, history, but it should be acknowledged as part of British history, and therefore included in the school history curriculum.

Studying postcolonial memory reveals these threads of entanglement and allows us to unpack the power structures of (post)colonial societies, which give rise to emergent and liminal subjectivities in the diasporic present. The work of postcolonial scholars has provided extensive insights into the products and processes of remembering – the unstable content of colonial memory, its features and quality, and the kinds of pasts that are connected to particular presents. Building on postcolonial studies, the transnational and transcultural turn in memory studies has been highly effective in analysing the contemporary dynamics of remembering, including diverse practices of remembering and identification across borders (Bond & Rapson, 2014; de Cesari and Rigney, 2014; Erll, 2011). However, it has been less effective in construing these dynamics in ethico-political terms, leaving us limited in our ability to account for the role of memory in reproducing, negotiating, and potentially challenging contemporary geopolitical power structures. In response, it is necessary to draw together postcolonial studies' central focus on the production of memories in and through the power structures of (post)colonialism with the sensitivity of memory studies to the practices and processes of 'doing' remembering across and between national contexts and cultures.

These concerns are not simply theoretical, they are also empirical. Memory studies need to develop better methodological strategies for researching the relationship between memory as a social process and memory as cultural production during and after colonialism, and to uncover the specific ways in which colonialism has structured not only what can be remembered in contemporary social life, but also how, with what resources, and to what ends. It is incumbent on the emerging field of postcolonial memory studies to become more empirically creative and develop methods able to explore how mnemonic technologies and experiences in and beyond European and the US-American memory ecologies shape and are shaped by the legacies of empires. In the sections below, we detail three challenges that emerged from our study of postcolonial

memory – its uncertainty, its painfulness, and its diversity – to exemplify the need to respond to them with methodological innovation, creativity and participation.

Mnemonic uncertainties

One of the first challenges encountered in conducting research on postcolonial memories among British South Asian groups in the East Midlands and London can best be described as a form of mnemonic uncertainty which was epistemological in character. Memories were composed across spatial and temporal distances due to a passage of time and migration, and were often disadvantageously positioned in what we might call a contemporary memory economy. As a result, research participants frequently perceived their memory as unreliable, incomplete, or in tension with other accounts of the past. This made memories challenging to elicit through conventional means such as in-depth interviews. Participants were hesitant to either ascribe the status of ‘memories’ to the fragmented narrations of pasts that they experienced or inherited, or, in doubting their veracity, were reluctant to rehearse these memories at all. This made collecting a corpus of what could be collectively termed ‘memories of empire’ challenging.

This challenge in collecting postcolonial memory narratives was compounded by the nature of intergenerational transmission in this context. Intergenerational communication of the past is always central to the complex, multi-layered ways in which remembering is socially experienced, practised and performed across time, space, and different social categories (Keightley & Pickering, 2013, p. 105). The shifts and ruptures that result from social processes of decolonisation make generational differences and mnemonic inheritances consistently more pronounced and challenging, exacerbating mnemonic uncertainties. The factors resulting in epistemological uncertainty were illustrated in our interactions with a British Pakistani Muslim family – Akram, his wife and his mother – who lived in the East Midlands with their children. Interviewing them in their multi-generational home in a quiet residential street in 2020, they detailed how Akram’s parents migrated to the UK in the 1960s, having hailed from the Mirpur region of Azad Kashmir and, like many British Pakistani families, migrated as a result of displacement caused by the construction of the Mangla Dam in Pakistan. The family had inherited memories and stories of Partition, though rarely spoke about it, and their links with Pakistan had started to become tenuous as most of the family was born in the UK. While interested in the history of Partition, the memories of their family and their Pakistani heritage, Akram, who was in his 50s, shares that:

Our children have got no understanding, no bearing. For them, you know, it’s basically Britain, really. Obviously, it’s the third, fourth generation, whatever it is, so you know as the generations get more and more, then it’s less and less of an impact, you have less of a memory.

Many of our participants did not directly experience key historical moments in colonial history, for example, the Partition of the sub-continent in 1947, and intergenerational mnemonic transmission, particularly as part of a collective or public process, was stifled under the conditions of structural and everyday racism in postcolonial Britain. Temporal distance is tightly interwoven with spatial detachment in the production of mnemonic uncertainty among the diaspora. Many research participants taking part in the MMPI

project are geographically removed from the physical spaces of former colonies and the nations that were created as part of the decolonisation process. Some, but not all, were born or grew up in South Asia, and many are able to maintain family ties. As the first generation can relate to a time before migration, for subsequent generations ‘the “new land” has never been new’, and their memories of the ‘homeland’ are therefore differently composed (Stock, 2010, p. 24). Under these intergenerational conditions, participants questioned the educational establishment for actively omitting legacies of British colonial pasts from school curricula and the consequences of this for cultural memory transmission. Recalling his own British education, in addition to that of his children, Akram went on to say:

You ask ‘why aren’t we taught anything in school’? Because this is the big question I used to have. I know about Britain’s history. You know, I know about what happened in World War I, World War II all that. I know what happened in worldwide history, but I don’t know nothing about my own country.

For members of the diaspora, inter-generational forgetting is shaped by social structures which continue to serve colonial interests and exert pressure to leave certain pasts behind (Connerton, 2008, p. 63). Memories which have the potential to challenge dominant narratives about colonialism upheld in Britain today are managed by ‘prescriptive’ forms of forgetting which are orchestrated, institutionalised, and considered to be in the best interest of all (Connerton, 2008, p. 60) as they allow for convivial coexistence (Gilroy, 2004). Pasts that struggle for survival through the passage of time and into a changed present are always hard to study, but their structural marginalisation not only places the burden of responsibility for mnemonic transmission with individuals, family or the wider community, but simultaneously devalues them, fostering epistemological uncertainty which further hinders their transmission.

Anna Reading (2019, p. 301) observes that remembering ‘takes time, energy and effort’, and for members of the diaspora travelling to potentially distant home(s) can be a desirable, but unattainable opportunity to navigate and manage mnemonic uncertainties. For Akram and his family these trips can be out of reach:

Wife: One ticket is like £900 and then if everybody goes, it’s £10,000 (laughs).

Husband: Yes, it’s too much. We can’t afford it.

Researcher: Was it important to take your children to Pakistan that regularly?

Husband: I think it was. I think for me, it was very important that they see where our parents had come from. I think it was important to see where, firstly, where my parents had come from and what they’d been brought up like. It was important to see that. You know, you always have these visions of how they were brought up and they will tell you stories of, you know, we did this, and you know, you can’t really understand until you’ve been there yourself.

Members of the diaspora are embedded in an economy which can hinder the making of memories due to a lack of financial means to travel. This geographic detachment prevents people from gaining experiences of the places and spaces of family pasts and can lead to a feeling of insufficient mnemonic literacy and confidence. At times, such feeling is based on these interrupted transmission processes, but, at other times, memories and

mnemonic agents experience marginalisation as their conception of the past stands in tension with other (hegemonic) forms of remembering. Mnemonic uncertainty is then also a result of how subjects themselves are disadvantageously positioned in a mnemonic economy.

Mnemonic uncertainty can also be deeply gendered. In his description of his mother's accounts of the colonial past, Akram construes these as 'hearsay, as he wants to know what "actually happened":

You probably ask them what they remember but then you want to look into the history because you don't really want hearsay. You want to see what actually happened in history, and how that formed the world, shaped the world. So, I think I probably looked at it from a historical point of view, looked in some historical book or something and read up about it.'

He finds his mother's accounts less credible than books he read when he was older, as they provided him with purportedly verifiable, authorised accounts of the colonial past. This points to epistemological hierarchies in which certain forms of remembering are considered of lesser value than others, adding to the challenge of mnemonic uncertainty. Such hierarchies negatively affect the value of memories of women in particular. While many scholars have found that cultural memory is largely shaped by men (Butalia, 1998, 2015; Das, 2007; Hirsch & Smith, 2002; Reading, 2019), the convoluted and messy intersectional dynamics of oppression and relational loyalties involving disparate geographies and regimes (Chatterji, 1989) which impact diasporic women remembering colonial times and decolonisation processes remains challenging to articulate.

Painful silences

The second challenge we encountered was that, as postcolonial memory can often be experienced as painful due to communal tensions and violence, displacement, disconnection and experiences of oppression, racism, and exclusion, empirical research must be built upon an ethical approach to the evocation of painful pasts. For people in crisis, life can cease to become narratable (Das, 1990, p. 346), leading to social processes of omitting and forgetting painful pasts. Homi Bhabha states that '[r]emembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 90). In such cases, there are certain memories and aspects of participants' lives that we should not assume we have the right to know (Enria, 2016, p. 325; Lather, 2002, p. 213), and it is important to undertake ongoing reflection on the ethics of continuing the elicitation of memory narratives. Scholars must recognise the difficulties in accessing and analysing postcolonial memories, which derive from their deeply emotionally charged nature. In our own research, Seema, a Hindu British Indian woman based in the East Midlands, was introduced to us as she experienced Partition first-hand which she had expressed through her creative writing, and shared accounts of extreme violence with us. Having migrated to the UK for higher education from Indian Punjab, she carried memories of Partition as well as pre-Partition Punjab with her which were only occasionally recalled. Later, she reflected:

Seven years old and I saw that with my own eyes. It was really, really sad and really painful. Although it didn't happen to my family, but it happened to my friends and people, we loved each other, Muslim, Hindu, Sikhs, we were all together.

While she wanted to verbalise her experiences in detail, this is not common, and many discussed the widespread silence around Partition. During an intergenerational interview with a British Pakistani family in London, participants (Nadeem, in his 80s, his wife Fatima in her 70s, and their son Babar, 38) were asked directly if they thought it was important to remember Partition. Fatima, who, unlike Nadeem, was born in Lahore after Partition and only had inherited memories of it, said:

No, not for me, because the memories are not good memories. It's very hurtful and it is very sad, very sad.

Unlike her husband who, Fatima remarked, still had good memories of pre-Partition India, where he, she said, 'had a lovely time' (although he was born on the Indian side of the border and had to move to Pakistan), for her memories of Partition centred on violence, as she had heard 'horror stories' from her father about what was happening in Lahore at the time. She remarked that even though people will never forget, they do not want to remember, as it is too painful a past to be confronted with. Some research participants preferred to silence memories that they find painful, others, however, find mnemonic transmission of complicated pasts to be silenced involuntarily by a perceived lack of interested listeners. For example, when asked if Seema, who had first-hand experience of Partition, often speaks about her memories, she answered:

As I said, with whom? There's nobody there. I'm very lucky in my life, there's some other people who are my age, there are some people. Why we do it? I don't do it because there's nobody there to discuss it with. If sometimes interested, I will talk, but then it's painful, very painful to talk.

Seema illustrates how the articulation of painful pasts can depend on who is being spoken to and in what context. She also discloses a lack of potential recipients for memories of this nature, showing that the transmission of painful memories requires a willing (first-hand) witness and an audience that agrees to listen to and engage with them. If those recounting postcolonial memories do not have an active listenership with whom to engage, partial or complete silencing of their accounts occurs. Only where empathetic listeners enter into dialogue with her account, is the difficult articulation of pain undertaken. This has significant implications for the researcher who is attempting to elicit these memories. These processes of silencing can be challenging in the research process and require particular strategies for creating the communicative conditions for the articulation of pain.

Memories of colonialism and processes of decolonisation can be painful, and some of our participants have experienced violence. This violence requires more than sympathy in the research process in order to create the conditions for participants to articulate their experiences if they wish to do so. This is the case even where violence has not been experienced first-hand. The legacy of colonial (and decolonial) acts of violence is complex and is often interpreted differently by different groups. Consequently, the reverberations of violence in inherited memories can be diverse, and, in some cases, are no less profound or formative than for those who experience violence first-hand.

Diverse pasts

The third methodological challenge arises from multiple perspectives on, diverse relationships to, and plural subjectivities created by the colonial past. Veena Das suggests in relation to events such as the 1947 Partition of British India, '[t]he narratives unfinished character meant that the event lived on in different versions in the social memory of different social groups' (Das, 1998, p. 118). Talking about Partition with British South Asian participants from diverse cultural, linguistic, religious, and national communities brought forward a whole kaleidoscope of memories, from those who had no (inherited) memory or were actively resistant to remembering Partition to having vivid (inherited) memory and strong affective relations to the processes around Partition. In this context, codifying Partition as a unitary event is problematic leading to the challenge of engaging with a research object which is itself unsettled, ontologically as well as epistemologically.

In empirically accounting for diverse perspectives in diasporic communities, it is critical not to methodologically reproduce mnemonic nationalisms, which are themselves products of colonialism and post-Partition processes of decolonisation, nor essentialise religious or ethnic communities as internally homogenous or giving more emphasis to processes of integration over transnational attachments (Levitt, 2010, p. 42; Ong, 2003, p. 171). Existing scholarship studying the cultural memory of Partition has focused largely on Punjab, marking experiences in other parts of South Asia as no more than a footnote (Chakravarty, 1999, p. vii; see Roy et al. (2024) for recent scholarship on the cultural memory of Partition in Bengal). The gravity of the violence and mass migration that took place in the region are good reasons for the extensive study of accounts stemming from Punjab, however, as our research demonstrated, the mnemonic meaning of Partition can hardly be condensed into a singular narrative. For example, many British Bangladeshi participants felt like their pasts do not find sufficient space in collective accounts of Partition as Alina, a 30-year-old British Bangladeshi woman based in London and working for a non-profit organisation, at the time of the interview, shared:

I feel like our neighbours, Indians and Pakistanis, do a better job in archiving their history. When you look at Partition, it's usually about Punjab, that side of the border, but not much about Bengal.

Her comment is particularly interesting as Alina framed it within a reflection on the internal dynamics of the South Asian community in Britain, which, she says, sees British Indians and Pakistanis doing better at school and having better jobs compared to their British Bangladeshi counterparts, so that many young British Bangladeshis lack a sense of 'self-respect' for their culture. It is this insecurity towards Bangladeshi culture which, according to Alina, determines the imbalance in the ways in which the colonial past is remembered and archived. The different ways of remembering Partition are continually being contested, with memories at times competing for attention in contemporary postcolonial social and political contexts. As Rothberg (2011, p. 524) advises, researchers should avoid feeding into mnemonic competition and zero-sum games, and instead listen to a diversity of narratives and consider their relationships.

The diversity of cultural memories of decolonisation is a methodological challenge not only because their complexity, contradictions and tensions unsettle the very meaning of

Partition as a reference, but also because they have the potential to feed into ongoing communal conflicts. Rubiya, a London-based British Pakistani woman in her late 30s told us, when we asked her if the consequences of Partition and subsequent independence of Bangladesh can be felt in Britain today:

Yes, they can be seen. My first impact of the Partition was I was dating this guy, he was Bengali and I wanted to marry him, and his granddad was against it because I was Pakistani. It was the first time I experienced that kind of level of racism within the Asian community, to say no, like the Pakistani army raped our women, so you can't be involved with a Pakistani woman. It was the first time I personally had that experience.

As observed by Rubiya, it is clear that (inherited) memories of the violence of Partition a still impact internal dynamics within the British South Asian community. Different positionalities and memories of the processes of decolonisation continue to shape community relations in Britain. Any attempt to account for mnemonic diversity must resist deepening existing lines of division, whilst providing a research encounter that affords space for the articulation of different perspectives and for varying modalities of mnemonic expression attendant on differences in religious perspective, regional and national backgrounds, generations, socio-economic backgrounds, and genders within diasporic communities.

In combination, the challenges posed by the epistemological uncertainties, mnemonic silences associated with painful pasts, and the radical diversity of postcolonial memory led us to develop a creative practice as an alternative, decentred, and more flexible mode of communication, which can accommodate the specificities of postcolonial memory. In what follows, we set out our approach to these methodological challenges.

Tackling methodological challenges

While we have characterised the uncertainties, painfulness, and diversity of postcolonial memory as challenges, our aim is not to advocate for these characteristics to be overcome or flattened out. Instead, we propose that memory studies methodologies are designed to actively engage with and respond to these features, and allow them to be navigated in the interest of creating research encounters which are culturally safe and in which the participants can access the communicative tools they need to articulate their relationship with the past on their own terms. As such, we actively reject a compensatory approach to studying postcolonial memory (Giese & Keightley, 2024). Pain, uncertainty, and diversity are not mnemonic features to be overcome through creative practice; instead, they are to be explored and understood.

Many scholars of colonial pasts and processes of decolonisation have faced similar challenges, and have also recognised the potential of creative practice as a tool for engaging with them. Ananya Kabir (2012, 2013) and Diana Taylor (2003) both call for a turn towards creative methods in memory research and reflect on the hegemony of verbal, narrative accounts of the past. As we experienced participants feeling uncertain about their complex (inherited) pasts and articulating them in the postcolonial present, and, at times, feeling uncomfortable communicating painful pasts, we realised we needed to distance ourselves from the expectation that all memories rely on their ability to be articulated and transmitted in spoken and/or

written accounts. As van der Vaart et al. (2018, p. 2) argues, painful pasts, traumatic topics, and emotional and symbolic aspects of people's experiences might and maybe should not be accessed through mainstream methods based on people's verbal or written competence. Creative activities that enable cultural practices can provide more oblique ways to remember and articulate postcolonial pasts and presents.

In the MMPI project, we used a range of creative practices as methods of data collection, including music, art, cooking, photography, dance, and fashion, in tandem with a range of interview techniques (see also Bisht, 2024; Giese, 2024). Different creative practices allowed different aspects of postcolonial memory to be articulated, depending on the different representational conventions inherent in the media or cultural form being used. For example, music, which has an associative relationship with the remembered past, allowed for often-pleasurable sensory explorations of the past being-in-place, such as foreignness, excitement, or homeliness. In contrast, using photography which visually objectifies the past as a 'moment out of time' allowed for comparative reflections between then and now, including those visual references from which remembered conditions could be incurred, such as home décor signifying aspirations or clothing as an index of class and status.

Adopting a range of creative methods does not mean difficult memories are not openly discussed (where appropriate), that conventional ethnographic interviewing and observation techniques are redundant, that postcolonial memory is always experienced as painful or uncertain by participants, or, that there are always major cleavages in understandings of empire. In our own research, we found that long-term relationships with research participants were, however, a prerequisite in allowing for comfortable verbal or non-verbal articulation of uncertain and painful pasts.

Alternating between the group contexts animated through creative activities and more intimate one-on-one settings became an important tool in allowing for safe articulations of the past. While some participants felt more secure in their interactions with others in the room, other topics and participants required more privacy. The creative workshop environment produced different iterations of the interview process, ranging from discussion groups, ethnographic interviews, focus groups and informal conversations. The interplay between the creative activities and ethnographic methods provided a unique mode of inquiry into postcolonial memory, as the creative activities allow for exploration and experimentation of relations with the past, which could then be refined, revised and reflected on through more conventional narrative interactions with interviewers. In some instances, these narrative reflections feed back into further creative explorations, some of which were pursued outwith our research project by community groups.

Using creative research methods is time-intensive and requires high levels of trust to be developed between researcher and participants, and therefore demands an underpinning co-creative approach. In this sense, community collaboration is a primary methodological requirement to undertake empirical social research on postcolonial memory and, more specifically, a prerequisite for using creative methods. Collaborative partnerships with established community organisations are vital in identifying the appropriate infrastructures to navigate the nuances of postcolonial memories and their everyday presence in diasporic lives and to prepare the ground for using creative practices to explore painful, uncertain, and diverse relationships with the colonial past.

Collaborating, co-designing, and sharing the research process and outcomes with multiple community partners was an essential feature of the MMPI research design. In the East Midlands, we worked with Charnwood Arts, an independent community arts and media organisation working with community groups in the local area. We also worked alongside Equality Action, an organisation working with communities on matters of inequality and immigration, who run projects for marginalised local communities.

In London, we collaborated extensively with the Arts and Culture Office at Tower Hamlets Council and engaged with multiple community groups through them. These partnerships were essential in identifying and engaging participants in each area and in co-designing creative activities that were culturally safe, appropriate, and relevant to participants' experiences and memories, and so afforded the communicative space for memories to be articulated on their own terms. The inclusion of a range of perspectives from across different generational, educational, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds was possible through community engagement and collaboration at various levels and enabled us to avoid privileging one form of memory or narrative over another.

By working with community organisations, we were able to identify and get to know established groups and understand the broader contours of the South Asian community in our field sites. The advantage of working with such established social groups is that potential research participants already have relationships with one another where we can build upon trusting environments that allow for the articulation of mnemonic uncertainty, painful pasts, and withstand diverse accounts of the pasts. The foundational knowledge these organisations provided helped us understand the larger community structures, practices, and community relations in the East Midlands and London, introducing us to the key actors within these networks. Undertaking this level of engagement enables the diversity of fieldwork sites to be mapped, as well as the various content and modalities of memory that are linked to different positionalities.

This provides vital entry points for the co-development of creative methods, which in itself builds the levels of trust required to explore the form and content of memory in postcolonial contexts. In our own research, our co-creative approach was enabled through our immersion into fieldwork sites, which involved spending a significant amount of time attending group meetings, cultural and religious events, celebrations, and festivals to gain familiarity with group members. It involved a blend of face-to-face and digital communication, including engaging with communities via Facebook or Twitter and, when invited, participating in community WhatsApp groups.

After community networks were formed, the research moved into a co-creative stage where we explored the kinds of activities different community groups would like to engage in. This led to co-organising preliminary activities, such as film screenings and discussions, to introduce groups to the research project and to foster relationships. In this phase, we sought to foster collective and interactive research environments co-created with multiple participants and involving multiple researchers. This allowed for the exploration of layered community relationships, a kaleidoscope of perspectives, and compound pasts. Our diverse expertise and subject positions as researchers, occupying multiple locations on the spectrum from cultural insider to outsider, brought forward different mnemonic practices and products and allowed for frequent reflection on our method of research practice.

Creativity in practice: food memories

In this case study example, we explain the use of cooking and sharing food as a creative community activity in the MMPI project, and detail how this technique allowed the exploration of mnemonic transmission across time and space with reference to memories of Partition, the 1971 War of Independence, and migration among British Bangladeshi groups in London and in the East Midlands. More specifically, the use of collective cooking and eating provided ways of recognising and managing mnemonic uncertainties through taste-based sensory connections with the past, an anchor point for narrating pain, and a framework for interpreting and bringing into dialogue different subject positions in relation to the colonial past.

The use of food as a technique for engaging with memories of 1947 and 1971 was premised on our early experience of the mnemonic uncertainties produced through the lack of explicit narration and transmission of these pasts within Bengali communities in the UK. As Hema, one of our British Bangladeshi interviewees living in Tower Hamlets says:

The legacy of having East and West Pakistan, I don't know the impact of that because I don't remember having discussions about when Bangladesh was East Pakistan because that was the legacy of the independence. I really can't remember.

Having been born and brought up in the UK in the 1980s, Hema learned about Partition predominantly through snippets in books, films and university courses, rather than hearing family stories about Partition and the creation of East and West Pakistan. Hema says the 1947 Partition and creation of East Pakistan had very little direct impact on her family as Muslims in Sylhet and therefore could not remember inherited narratives surrounding these historical events. Through our early ethnographic interviews it became clear that spontaneous recounting of relations to the (post)colonial pasts was very challenging for many interviewees. Patchy and often indirect modes of intergenerational transmission resulted in many participants claiming to have no inherited memories of this period at all. This contrasted the enthusiastic talk about food cultures that periodically arose when talking about previous generations and experiences of Bangladesh. This led us to experiment with the use of food and cooking as a non-narrative, sensory route into the exploration of relationships to the colonial past and their transmission.

We engaged participants through a local school outreach programme in East London, and an existing outreach project run by the charity *Equality Action* in the East Midlands. In East London, participants were mainly women; in the Midlands, participants were both men and women. Four sessions were run over a period of two to three months, with initial workshops focusing on the discussion of food memories and later sessions involving the collective cooking and eating of some of the key dishes discussed in the earlier workshops. Food became a sensory entry point into multiple layers of personal and cultural memory, highlighting changes in food practices and community over time and space. Sharing these memories allowed for a discussion of identity and cultural memory of Bangladesh. With a broad range of knowledge and experience of food and cooking among the participants, such an activity was able to evoke inherited and inarticulable

memories through the engagement of the senses in a way that our more formal ethnographic interviews did not allow.

For example, a group was making and eating a biryani dish, based on a fusion of recipes borrowed from Bangladeshi and Indian traditions, including many participants who worked in Bangladeshi-run 'Indian' restaurants. One Muslim British Bangladeshi respondent shared:

There is two types of biryani in Bangladesh. Sometimes one is called Kisuri. In different region is called different. In Sylhet we call it Kisuri, it's mainly without meat it's kind of vegetarian . . . My mum used to make it on a rainy day . . . [now] we follow Indian tradition (it's all mixed up now). In Bangladesh we have a big chicken and eggs and the aroma is totally different. It's become a kind of fusion. [here]

The act of collectively cooking biryani and particularly the engagement of the sense of smell, opened up a discussion about contemporary South Asian identities and how they keep commingling in the subcontinent and the diaspora. As a creative method, collective cooking and eating food provided a sensory vehicle through which to articulate relationships with the past and make connections to the postcolonial diasporic present. It allowed for reflections on the porous borders between cultural and imagined national identities. By narrating food traditions and changes in them over time, the method opened a safe discursive space for research participants to articulate the compound complexities of diverse postcolonial pasts and presents.

Homogenising the national and religious identities of South Asian diasporic groups has been particularly prevalent in the UK and across Europe and needs to be problematised. As Pnina Werbner observes, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities have been submerged as 'Muslim' and Indian identity (Hindu and Sikh) subsumed as 'South Asian' (Werbner, 2004, p. 899). However, the data produced through the collaborative mobilisation of creative practice methods demand the recognition of 'complex diasporas', with porous borders and multiple identities that intersect, are in-flux and share regional culture (Werbner, 2010, pp. 76–77), and lead towards more nuanced understandings of highly complex and multi-layered concepts of 'community' (see Baumann, 1996). It is in this sense that creative methods go some way to engaging with the empirical challenges posed by the diversity of postcolonial memory outlined above.

Cultural practices, such as eating and cooking, also provide an oblique modality for the discussion of painful pasts and ongoing communal tension. For example, Reema, a British Bangladeshi Muslim woman in her early 40s, who was born in Bangladesh but grew up in London in the 1980s, recalled how references to food and cooking practices could be used as insults:

I remember as a young kid there were Pakistani kids in our class, there were children from India, obviously myself being Bengali, and there was still a little bit of bullying amongst us. Pakistani kids would say little comments . . . about Bengalis and fish which was quite offensive.

When cooking fish with research participants, memories of communal tensions in the diaspora were shared, but in ways which contained these communal tensions within specific moments and interactions in the past. Through the act of cooking together, the pain of the remembered offence is allowed to be articulated through the direct connection with the ingredients in the dish. Ingredients can be symbolic

of aspects of national identity, which can be instrumentalised in verbal abuse and practices of differentiation and exclusion. Tensions between Bangladeshis and Pakistanis go back to Pakistani rule of East Bengal and the subsequent war in the region, which are still relevant for inter/intra-community relations in the diaspora, as evidenced in this particular postcolonial memory. Food became a tangible way to articulate issues of national borders and painful memories – not only a source of conflict, but a source of pride as fish is frequently referred to as an important symbol of Bengaliness.

Conclusion

Our experience of conducting empirical memory studies research with South Asian diasporic communities in the UK has led us to propose a combination of community collaboration, creative practices, and techniques alongside conventional ethnographic tools as a strategy for addressing and engaging with the methodological challenges inherent in researching postcolonial memory: mnemonic uncertainty, pain, and diversity of positionalities. In doing so, our aim is not to correct or mitigate these challenges, but rather to work with and alongside the character of postcolonial memory, which is irrevocably marked by the historical injustices of the colonial project and their legacies in the form of racialised social structures and cultural practices in the UK.

Instead, we developed a methodological strategy that recognises the complex ways in which experiences of the colonial past have been transmitted over time and space, as well as the silences and absences that have resulted when these memories have not been transmitted through conventional mnemonic means. We have turned to community collaboration and creativity to address this, as we have found that the communicative spaces needed for the articulation of postcolonial memories are not afforded by traditional ethnographic methods alone.

The character of postcolonial memories calls into question methods often favouring western epistemological hierarchies. It is through creative methods, such as cooking, photography, stitching and textiles, photography, music, and dance, that it is possible to develop the trust between researchers and participants needed to articulate relationships between the colonial past and the postcolonial present from diverse positionalities. Through community co-creation, creative techniques can be found, which provide culturally appropriate avenues into everyday remembering of postcolonial memory. These techniques offer alternative, and often sensory modes of engaging with those pasts, enabling the challenges posed by both pain and uncertainty to be recognised and explored, and to find new ways of connecting with lived and inherited pasts.

While this approach takes time, creative methods allow the development of mnemonic environments that are culturally appropriate and harness the pleasure of creative practices. This has the potential to provide rich and more nuanced data on postcolonial memory among British South Asian and other communities, without the need to mitigate the silences, pauses, tensions, and interruptions in their making of the past, which constitute the very texture of postcolonial memory.

Notes

1. In the context of this paper, 'South Asian diaspora' refers to people of Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi heritage only. While we acknowledge this is reductive of the heterogeneous South Asian diaspora/s, which encompass various other regions and nation-states, with regard to the *longue durée* of Partition, there are important commonalities and overlaps in the histories and experiences of people of Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi heritage.
2. All participants' names have undergone pseudonymisation.

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Ethics statement

This study received ethical approval from Loughborough University. All subjects cited have provided written informed consent.

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