



London Otherwise, a book review of: From Sylhet to Spitalfields. Bengali squatters in 1970s East London Shabna Begum, 2023

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Abstract

Personal and heartfelt, Begum's *From Sylhet to Spitalfields* is a triumphant example of activist archiving in at least three ways. First, as an account of the Bengali squatters in the 1970s and how they drew on their own history as part of their direct action and vigilantism, negotiating the hostility and violence of East End London. Second, as an artefact in-itself, which addresses silences in urban and radical histories, acting as a community archival source for ongoing actions today. And finally, as an archival lens which works as a powerful tool for unsettling and reshaping the streets, buildings, and spaces of the city.

Keywords

Bengali Squatters, East End London, archives

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Begum's earnest and biographical study of the 1970s Bengali squatter movement in London, *From Sylhet to Spitalfields* (Bloomsbury, 2023), demonstrates how 'for Bengali migrants in the racially hostile East London of the 1970s, squatting was [both] a claim to social housing *and* the right to be able to feel safe in the city' (p. 16 *emphasis added*). The diverse motivations behind taking direct housing action are clear from the outset. Whilst some families squatted 'out of immediate desperation,' others saw it 'as a strategy through which to fulfil the strict housing waiting list criteria,' or even 'squatted *after* getting secure tenancies but [decided] that the tenancy was not worth their lives... the insecurity of squatting was preferable to the regularised and brutal violence that they encountered in isolated flats and houses away from the Bengali community' (p. 81, *emphasis added*). The book is at its most powerful when focusing on the 'everyday' character of the movement, in the sense that many

squatters did not consider themselves ‘activists’—at least to begin with—but instead humble homemakers looking to get by in a hostile environment. The author is quite right to highlight the inherent *politics* of such actions when facing racist housing policy, scant police protection, and street violence. But Begum goes even further to expertly contextualise these ‘everyday’ actions within ‘a much longer history of empire, colonialism and migration... their squatter struggles cannot be understood outside of those complex historical geographies’ (p. 224).

History is powerful stuff, which is why archives (in their many guises) are so crucial. Nation states put great effort into shaping, preserving, and defending ‘our’ archives as authoritative narratives of ‘our’ past. They carefully guard archival institutions, textbooks, curricula, and ‘significant’ artefacts, and introduce criminal sanctions to protect monuments, memorials, and pageantry against ‘damage, disruption or distress’. Meanwhile, marginalised histories and narratives which are judged ‘unarchivable’ (Mbembe, 2002) are absent, silenced, and deemed non-significant for ‘us’ in the present. As the author sets out early on, archival narratives have long denied the very presence of Bengali people in London. To take just one example featured in the book: The brutal working conditions of the ‘lascars’ shovelling coal in ships have been largely eclipsed by exoticized figures depicted in colonial era photographs. This is why research such as *From Sylhet to Spitalfields* is so radical and should be considered a work of archival *activism* on at least three levels: (1) the historical geographies mobilised by the activists of the Bengali squatting movement; (2) the book itself as an archival intervention into radical historical geographies; and finally (3) the streets of London which become revitalised through the book’s archival lens.

First, the book demonstrates how the activists themselves explicitly drew upon and shaped their own archival narratives in order to navigate and resist the violent racism of 1970s London. Using Gilroy’s (1993) notion of ‘roots/routes,’ Begum points out that the Bengali squatters drew upon archival imaginaries as part of their fight for ‘rightful presence’ in the city (Squire & Darling, 2013). The connection between Sylhet and Spitalfields is repeatedly mobilised to empower the community and traverse an urban landscape of housing crisis, systemic racism (from housing authorities to the police), as well as racist violence stoked up by politicians which spilled from the street across the ‘threshold’ of domestic spaces. Squatting was a tool for resisting processes of ‘un-homing’ (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard & Lees, 2019), helping the community to avoid ‘no-go’ neighbourhoods dominated by the National Front.

One of the most interesting insights from the study was the role of transnational historical narratives in informing their direct housing action (squatting), as well as the activities which emerged from this, such as vigilante patrols (which sought to protect a community that was not afforded police protection). As Begum writes, many of the vigilantes ‘took inspiration from the Bangladesh liberation movement to nurture their activism here [in London]’ (p. 125), and ‘it was clear that Bengali migrants carried something of the political and cultural inheritance of this activism into the way they understood their marginalisation in 1970s Britain and their divergent responses to it’ (p. 127). For some of the participants, this history also underpinned the turning of derelict squats into domestic spaces, framing these in reference to the gendered domestic labour that supported freedom fighters in the

Liberation War of 1971. This enacting of history clearly resonates with what Michelle Caswell refers to as ‘community’ or ‘activist’ archives which allow marginalised communities to find a sense of collective empowerment and authority around three co-ordinates: ‘I am here’ (the ability to represent themselves without mediation), ‘we were here’ (a historical persistence which underpins identity construction), and ‘you belong here’ (an empowering use of history which asserts an ongoing claim to being in a space) (see Caswell, 2014, 2017; Burgum, 2022).

Second, and in addition to the squatters’ use of history, the book *itself* is now an example of archival activism. Early on, the author poses a pertinent question, ‘how does the erasure of certain historical geographies actively contribute to contemporary geographies of exclusion and marginalisation?’ (p. 19). The book then takes a critical and genealogical approach which undermines the existing archival foundations of London, unsettling mainstream narratives of urban space which overlook not just squatting, but the role of Bengali squatters in particular. There is a tendency, Begum points out, to focus on white ‘counter-cultural’ squatters which ‘dominate the popular imaginary’ (p. 116) of housing activism from this time, whilst significant movements such as the Bengali squatters (or indeed the Black Panthers in Brixton) tend to be tokenistic parts of this history, rather than seen on their own terms in resisting racialised exclusion of 1970s London. Begum points out that there is a specific intersectionality at play when Bengali families squatted empty buildings during the wave of urban squatting in the seventies, because ‘though there was resentment at white squatters jumping the housing queue, there was no fundamental objection about their right to be housed... unlike the state and street racism that denied the legitimacy of the Bengali community to be in East London in the first place’ (p. 116). This research revitalises history, providing a long overdue and detailed account of this overlooked movement, which goes some way to addressing the silences and absences in those hegemonic urban histories that shape the contemporary city.

And finally, this project is an example of activist archiving because it can now be used to reshape the city today in a very *material* sense. Through the lens of such research, the streets of London become *contingent* and this subsequently opens up radical possibilities by demonstrating how the city could be *otherwise*. There is plenty of examples of this towards the end of the text when Begum connects the histories with more recent campaigns. For instance, the successful movement to name the Altab Ali memorial park, which Begum describes as ‘part of the Bengali community’s affirmation of its place in the East End’ (p. 190). Or the *Save Brick Lane* campaign, which is fighting gentrification in the area and ‘has begun to reach into the 1970s housing struggles and squatters’ movement as inspiration for their campaign’ (p. 201). Both these examples demonstrate how archival imaginaries intervene into and unsettle existing urban spaces. They dismantle. They show the city to be multi-layered and therefore built upon *constructed* narratives about the correct or incorrect use of this or that space. These historical narratives can act, in other words, ‘as anchors in the reconstitution of social relations... urban political struggles might be repositioned in the zone of anticipation... the city-as-archive creates a lens into the emergent... intervening into and reading urban fabrics’ (Rao, 2009).

When we take the city as read, we presume its fixity and inevitability. The city appears unchangeable except for those with enough power and capital to swing a wrecking ball, erect cranes, or be at the forefront of the gentrification wave. But through an archival lens, the city becomes *malleable. Plastic*. Streets, buildings, squares become alive with counter-narratives which unsettle dominant plans and purposes. Each building becomes refigured with a history that belies its current appearance and speaks toward an alternative memory (and future) of space and place. Begum ends the book by quoting bell hooks—the act of remembering ‘serves to illuminate and transform the present’—before arguing that ‘this account of the 1970s Bengali squatters’ movement is not a glimpse into the remote past—the challenges of the hostile environment policy, the potential for austerity 2.0, and the complexities of the intersections between race and class are as pronounced now as they were nearly half a century ago’ (p. 223). Such an archival lens gives licence to repurpose the city, just as the Bengali squatters did.

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