



Deconstructing the Narrative of Dehumanisation: The Exhibition Humanising 'All Our Stories' of British Migration

Shafi Musaddique visits the Migration Museum to explore its latest exhibition aiming to provide a different lens on how immigration, and emigration, has shaped the country – and how it has been a consistent feature of the need for human development

NESTLED AWAY INSIDE Lewisham Shopping Centre in south-east London, the Migration Museum is easy to miss, among the shopfronts displaying clothes and homeware. But, once spotted, it's like a lighthouse with its inviting, bright, warm colours. The same could be said about the stories of migration to and from Britain, sitting below the surface of the people we pass every day in the street, not immediately visible.

The Migration Museum's latest exhibition – its last major show, before its planned move to a permanent home in the City of London in 2027 – is *All Our Stories*, a culmination of more than a decade's work showcasing the immigrant and emigrant stories of Britain.

Migration is movement, and the exhibition effortlessly provokes emotions, questions, and sometimes answers.

Migration discs, multi-coloured circle cutouts hanging on the wall panned with the scribbles of visitors relaying their own migration stories, which were first exhibited in 2015 at London's Southbank Centre, have been collected by the Migration Museum ever since – with some 7,000 currently archived. A vulnerability struck me when reading the short stories written on these discs.

Some said their parents or grandparents had come to Britain because of colonialism or war. Others were striking for their

display of agency, with one visitor writing that they came to the UK for “fun, adventures and opportunities”, originally for a short stint but only to stay and grow a multinational family. Some of the notes touched on people having family members who emigrated from the UK and the complete lack of contact with relatives in America, Ireland, or Australia. A British person from Croydon wrote of having moved to Switzerland: “I miss home all the time. Now I have a son with dual nationality.”

In many ways, *All Our Stories* is a riposte

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against the way migration is viewed through a one-sided lens.

The inclusion of *all* stories – European, Australian, and American, along with African, Asian, and Latin American – cleverly makes visitors reflect on how much of the ‘immigration debate’ in this country has become racialised. The exhibition deftly, softly, shows that migration is as much about those

moving *away* from Britain as it is about those moving here. It humanises the conversation in a way that is desperately needed.

IMPORTANTLY, THE Migration Museum doesn't shirk away from the way in which Britain's media has routinely dehumanised migrants and helped radically shape the parameters of the narrative around them.

Liz Gerard's ‘Chart of Shame’ is a month-by-month bar chart consisting of 267 front-page headlines of hostility in 2016. Flashbacks of the lead-up to the EU Referendum and Brexit show the snowball effect of deeply uncomfortable and shameful headlines targeting EU nationals. One wonders whether a 2024 collection of newspapers would indicate more or less hate.

This summer's race riots, and the backlash these sparked from community-led anti-racist groups, come to mind in a section titled ‘Unsettling’. A 1970s National Front pamphlet typed in bold red print font speaks of making Britain “great again” by leaving the then European Common Market, stopping all migration and starting repatriation, repealing the Abortion Act, and housing British people before immigrants.

Though the National Front as a political party has ceased to exist and the skinheads have gone, its ideas appear to live on in suited and booted political



figures. History, it seems, continues to live and breathe in the present moment.

As does bravery.

Paul Trevor's powerful black-and-white 1978 image shows three Bangladeshi men, hand-in-hand, determination etched on their faces, as they spearheaded an anti-racist march in the East End after the racist murder of Altab Ali, a young Bangladeshi leather garments worker. Young white men and women are seen behind them, their presence as supporters quietly depicted.

ALL OUR STORIES' ISN'T just about previous generations – it showcases the experiences of newcomers and those still in limbo, on the brink of a better life.

A section dedicated to the Calais 'jungle camp' evokes scenes from the quiet moments: a man with his head to the ground in prayer, a tent made by Ethiopian Christians as their makeshift church, a crowd charging their phones. The camp, now dismantled by French authorities, was long described by politicians and journalists as a dysfunctional outpost in northern France.

A recreation of a lifesize tent, with bedding, a lamp, and few personal items, gives some sense that perhaps, amid the despair, there is a sense of agency and resourcefulness.

Elsewhere, the exhibition flows from makeshift to remaking.

Angela Hui's reconstruction of her parents' Chinese takeaway in Wales is a playful space conveying how central migrant entrepreneurs have been in shaping British cultural life – literally reshaping our high streets and businesses for decades.

Signage and memorabilia rekindle memories for all Brits. And small details reveal what life was like, not just for struggling parents, but for their children too. School textbooks under the takeaway's front desk recreates Hui's life both living and working in the restaurant; home and work blurred. A telephone over the counter with a nearby stool recreates past idiosyncrasies perhaps only lived by children of immigrants – despite being a young child, Hui's grasp of English gave her the responsibility of taking orders over the phone.

The success of second and third generations of British Chinese moving into new industries, powerful and privileged enough to shape their own narratives, has meant a dwindling number of Chinese takeaways. There is a sad irony at play that such places could soon be the preserve of nothing more than a memory.

THROUGHOUT, THE exhibition explores the question: what does it mean to be British? The idea of 'Britishness' is presented as a blank canvas, never quite static.

Andy Barter's photographs, 'Mixed', showcase portraits of Britain's growing mixed heritage population.

In 2021, Census data showed that people from a mixed or multi-ethnic group stood at 1.7 million, and 36% of school pupils were from an ethnic minority background.

Angélica Dass, a mixed heritage artist, tackles the absurdity of using simplistic 'colour' labels to talk about race, using portraits of individuals matched with a Pantone skin colour. Stepping back, one sees how despite the range of people, skin tones are but a smaller range of colours. Unity in diversity on display.

All Our Stories is, on paper, a difficult exhibition to compress into one, solid, digestible brief. That's what makes it so thrilling for a museum making its own migration journey.

What's intriguing is that the exhibition touches on the British-born children of immigrants, with new-found agency, upping sticks for a new life back in their ancestral homes or elsewhere. In many ways, this is nothing new.

Migration is a cycle, a continuation of a deeply human need since the beginning of humankind.

