



# Trafalgar Square and the Narration of Britishness, 1900–2012

Imagining the Nation



Shanti Sumartojo

Peter Lang

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## BRITISH IDENTITIES SINCE 1707

London's Trafalgar Square is one of the world's best known public places, and during its relatively short history has seen violent protest, imperial and royal spectacle and wild national celebration. This book draws together scholarship on national identity, cultural geography, and the histories of Britain and London to ask what role the Square has played in narrating British national identity through its many uses. The author focuses on a series of examples to draw out her arguments, ranging from the Suffragettes' use of the site in the early twentieth century to the Fourth Plinth contemporary art scheme in the early twenty-first. The book explores how different users of the Square have understood national identity, and how the site itself has shaped this narrative through its built elements and history of use. Ultimately, *Trafalgar Square and the Narration of Britishness, 1900–2012* uses the Square to explore the processes by which urban public place can help to construct, maintain or transform national identity.



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# BRITISH IDENTITIES SINCE 1707

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*For Adiyono and Riyana*



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## Introduction

In August 2007, the Taj Mahal materialised in Trafalgar Square. This iconic Indian building featured as part of the Trafalgar Square festival, a project of the London Mayor, Ken Livingstone. This architectural juxtaposition was part of a festival intended to celebrate the creative relationship that London enjoyed with India, and in addition to the reproduction of the Taj Mahal, the three week festival also featured dance and musical performances, and a giant canvas at the foot of Nelson's column that was designed to 're-imagine London as an Indian city'.<sup>1</sup> This festival took place right under the nose of the statue of Sir Henry Havelock, an imperial hero of Victorian Britain whose muscular Christianity was evident in his relief of besieged British women and children in Lucknow during the Indian Uprising of 1857 and its brutality against local civilians.<sup>2</sup> While the relationship between Havelock's London and India was very different from Livingstone's, in choosing to re-imagine London in this way, London's government drew upon a rich history of contact and interaction with Asia, which remains a vital part of the identity of contemporary Britain.

The arranged marriage of these two structures in Trafalgar Square – the Taj Mahal and Nelson's Column – created a spatial juxtaposition of London and India, but also juxtapositions of imperial past and globalised present, nation and individual, and a representation of history and use

- 1 Greater London Authority, 'The Trafalgar Square Festival 2007 – new commissions and international collaborations, inspired by India'. Press release, 1 August 2007. <[http://www.london.gov.uk/view\\_press\\_release.jsp?releaseid=13154](http://www.london.gov.uk/view_press_release.jsp?releaseid=13154)> accessed 25 November 2009.
- 2 Simon Schama, *A History of Britain: The Fate of Empire 1776–2000* (London: BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2002), 252.

of place that points to a wide range of questions that this book explores. At the most general level, it asks what Trafalgar Square can tell us about national identity, and explores how the Square has contributed to the construction, maintenance or transformation of British national identity, as well as the potential for the Square to help various national groups resist or alter dominant narratives of Britishness. It also considers the ways that the use of the Square has helped to reframe the national meanings implied by its built forms. The spatial reality of a reproduction of an Indian building in the centre of London is a good place to start this discussion, because it foregrounds how local geographies help to map national identity in ways that are common in urban spaces in London and other cities throughout the world. If London can be reimagined as an Indian city through the use of Trafalgar Square, how else can it be imagined? And what effect does this have on the nation that it represents?

These are important questions because many of us use our cities in different ways. Urban landscapes, even those with the appearance of permanence, are mutable, and many buildings or neighbourhoods have been completely altered over the twentieth century, roughly the period that this book discusses. In London alone, the suburbs mushroomed in the fifty years before World War Two;<sup>3</sup> some areas were completely rebuilt following the war, and tower blocks for low-income housing that were considered the pinnacle of modernity in the 1960s had begun to be dynamited in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> The year 2012 saw the completion of a new and controversial skyscraper in the Shard, London, and the European Union's tallest building, which commentators contextualised by pointing out that London's landscape is a dynamic and changing one, always in flux.<sup>5</sup>

This was certainly the case during the creation of Trafalgar Square, which began in 1840. The Victorians changed London's landscape drastically, with major infrastructure, transport and housing projects intended

3 Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001).

4 Jerry White, *London in the 20th Century* (London: Vintage, 2001).

5 Steve Rose, *The Shard: Renzo Piano's great glass elevator* <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2012/jun/13/shard-renzo-piano/print>> accessed 10 July 2012.

to accommodate and support the capital city's growing population. From 1817 to 1823, John Nash's redesign of Regent Street took form, intended both to improve the area and to separate the wealthy homes to the west and north from the poor and working-class people to the east in 'confused Soho'.<sup>6</sup> Trafalgar Square was very much a part of a larger landscape of power, domestic as well as international. Victorian and Edwardian visitors to the Square lived in a period when London was the wealthy, busy and diverse centre of an extensive empire, and this global reach was reflected in many aspects of material life, not least the built environment. In 1900, the approximate starting point of this book, London's landscape was, as Jonathan Schneer has shown, an imperial one:

The public art and architecture of London together reflected and reinforced an impression, an atmosphere, celebrating British heroism on the battlefield, British sovereignty over foreign lands, British wealth and power, in short, British imperialism.<sup>7</sup>

Even as this history is identifiable in central London's layout, it is not simple or static. Many authors have identified the variety, multiplicity and non-hegemonic aspects of London's landscape, and this book shows how the flux and flexibility of national narratives have been played out in London's central urban spaces. In 2012, for example, evidence of this process appeared in Yinka Shonibare MBE's 2012 work for the Square's Fourth Plinth, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*. This work presented a modern and multi-cultural exploration of the enduring effect of imperialism on London and the UK, drawing on a history of imperial trade and commerce, while gently reminding viewers of the exploitative nature of many imperial exchanges.

Shonibare's interpretation of London's relations with the British Empire presented it as part of a fluid, contingent national history. This points to one of the central conceptual approaches that this book takes to Trafalgar Square: that the relationship between the national past and its present is best understood as how the past is reconstructed for the purposes

6 See Porter, *London*, 126–130.

7 Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 19.

of the present.<sup>8</sup> Shonibare's work was a strong reminder both of London's history and the evidence of this history in its buildings, places and layout. By installing his work in Trafalgar Square, he used the larger built environment surrounding the Fourth Plinth to amplify the meaning of his artwork.

Trafalgar Square's prominence for visitors to London, as well as its proximity to Westminster Palace and the Houses of Parliament, government offices along Whitehall, Buckingham Palace and the shops, clubs and cafes of the West End, make it a valuable subject of study. The Square's location in the centre of London is constitutive of its meaning and its value as a nationally visible site. Not least, its imperial symbolism and the implicit link this provides to the highest levels of official power and control have made it highly attractive to groups wishing to challenge this power. As Dennis argues:

[...] despite, perhaps because of, these attempts to keep Trafalgar Square under state control, it has always been associated more with acts of popular protest than official ceremonial. The attempt to reserve the square for official and approved occasions could even have been a stimulus to protest. The square became a prize of enormous symbolic value.<sup>9</sup>

What makes the contested space of the Square valuable in terms of investigating national identity, however, are the many different types of uses to which it has been put. Alongside Trafalgar Square's well-known history as a protest site is its role in state rituals, such as royal weddings, coronations or jubilees, its importance at moments of national celebration, such as VE Day or victory in football, and its quotidian uses as a meeting point, transit hub or lunch spot for Londoners and visitors for the length of its history. This multiplicity of uses and meanings for different users, as well as its national iconography and official oversight of events there, make it not only a fitting central place for London, but a site in which the meaning of the nation itself can be explored, celebrated or contested.

8 Jeffrey Olick, *States of Memory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.

9 Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 163–164.

Overall, this book argues that Trafalgar Square has acted as a proxy for the nation, providing a site in which groups have sought national visibility through visibility in the space of the Square. The Square has also helped groups to imagine and construct British national identity in a way that draws on national history while still remaining flexible in its interpretation.<sup>10</sup> The chapters below will show how protesters using the Square have repeatedly framed their temporary spatial occupation of the site as a means by which to demand national recognition of their causes, and will touch on categories of gender, race, age and urban and imperial identities along the way. Parallel to its history as a protest site is the site's use for official state or metropolitan purposes. Officials have used the Square, often as part of a larger central London landscape, as shorthand for a national space, in events such as Royal celebrations, VE Day, and the 2005 winning of the Olympic Games for London. This mix of uses – Trafalgar Square's symbolic role as a site of national history, its ongoing use for both the everyday and the spectacular, as well as its location at the centre of a larger 'landscape of power' that takes in government, finance and cultural institutions – has made it a powerful site in which national identity is contested, imagined and reproduced. This does not mean, however, that the political changes demanded by protesters have necessarily occurred. For example, 140,000 protesters against the Industrial Relations Bill in 1971, one of the biggest demonstrations ever held in the Square, did not prevent the Bill's enactment (see Chapter 5). While it may be a platform from which to demand social or political change, the Square does not offer these demands a guarantee of success.

The book takes examples from the Square's history to explore how its use draws together national history, social power and the built environment, in a discursive and flexible process of national identity creation. However, this process is not without its boundaries, and the book will also discuss how the construction of national identity within the Square is linked to events of the past as well as being engaged with the specific symbolic language of the space. This approach is grounded in scholarship on national identity.

10 See Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

## National identity and the uses of history

Anderson's seminal notion of the nation as an 'imagined community' proposed some of the specific ways in which the national imaginary is generated and promulgated, identifying the systemic processes of 'print-capitalism' that use strategies such as maps to define territory, cultural institutions such as museums to make certain aspects of cultures official, and ways of counting and categorising people through the census to create unitary national identities.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, his main focus rested on the 'top-down' processes that built a coherent national narrative out of a set of colonial bureaucratic and economic structures. Hobsbawm's discussion of the 'invention of tradition' highlights a related process, in which powerful groups work through national social and political structures to serve their own interests by developing ideologies and symbols to create unified nations from diverse language and ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> They identify the important role of the numerous public monuments, including war memorials, towering statues and public buildings that reflect narratives of national power.

These ways of approaching national identity appear to help explain the ongoing significance of Trafalgar Square. Its name, its Victorian statuary, its layout – with fountains designed in part to help control the numbers of people who could gather there – and its position in a larger central London landscape of imperial power all point to a monolithic and powerful version of the British nation (and Empire).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Trafalgar Square also hints at the importance of a process of 'imagining', the role of mass cultures, and some of the mechanisms by which national narratives are created and reproduced. These approaches, however, concentrate on structure and emphasise an objective cultural form of national identity,

11 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991 [1983]).

12 See Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction' in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

13 Felix Driver and David Gilbert 'Heart of Empire? Landscape, space and performance in imperial London', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (16) 1998, 11–28.

thus implying that such identities are fixed and agreed by all members of the political community. As Graham Day and Andrew Thompson put it, these theories treat 'the nation as a sociological reality [...] a real and unified group', thus side-stepping the possibility of fluidity, contest or multiplicity.<sup>14</sup>

The analysis in this book is framed by an understanding of national identity as a discursive process encompassing many different modes of belonging. This is based on ways of understanding the nation as a framing discourse;<sup>15</sup> a cultural matrix;<sup>16</sup> a set of conflicting narratives;<sup>17</sup> and 'an everyday plebiscite' in which the nation is constantly renegotiated.<sup>18</sup> For example, Özkırımlı's reaction to the notion of the 'invention of tradition' is to acknowledge the constructed nature of specific cultural attributes, or traditions, of nations, while pointing out that nationalism is constructed in many different ways.<sup>19</sup> He argues that while nations hold real and deeply-felt meaning for people, they are dynamic, changing and self-reinventing, based on 'culture [...] that is not a passive inheritance but an active process of creating meaning, not given but constantly defined and reconstituted'.<sup>20</sup> Bhabha similarly suggests that flexible and multiple narratives comprise national identity, and claims that membership of the nation 'must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new "people" in relation to the body politic [and] generating other sites of meaning'.<sup>21</sup>

Other work has addressed the extent to which national identities can be multiple or flexible by focusing on issues of cultural reproduction,

14 Graham Day and Andrew Thompson, *Theorizing Nationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 12.

15 Umut Özkırımlı, *Contemporary Debates on Nationalism: A Critical Engagement* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

16 Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

17 John Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict* (London: Sage, 2005).

18 Ernst Renan, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?' (1882) in John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith, eds, *Nationalism* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), 17.

19 Özkırımlı, *Contemporary Debates*, 170.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Homi Bhabha, 'Introduction' in Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

discourse and narrative, including non-elite groups' relationship with the nation.<sup>22</sup> While this scholarship still links the production of national symbolism to the processes of modernity (such as industrialisation), its main concern is how and by whom this symbolism is constructed and reproduced. These accounts also recognise the 'fluid and dynamic nature'<sup>23</sup> of national identity, and stress the contests and tensions that define it. Calhoun, for example, turns to Foucault's notion of a 'discursive formation' to help capture nationalism's complexity and dynamism, explaining that nationalism is: 'a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness, but also is problematic enough that it keeps generating more issues and questions, keeps propelling us into further talk, keeps producing debates over how to think about it.'<sup>24</sup>

Implicit in this formulation of national identity is the quotidian nature of the process by which it is reproduced. Like a flag hanging limply outside a government building, symbols of the nation are around us all the time, but can easily pass almost unnoticed in everyday life.<sup>25</sup> Other approaches recognise the quotidian as more active, arguing that popular conceptualisations of the nation are significant in reproducing it:

[National culture] is constantly in a process of becoming, of emerging out of the dynamism of popular culture and everyday life whereby people make and remake connections between the local and the national, between the national and the global, between the everyday and the extraordinary.<sup>26</sup>

Drawing these two points together, Cohen's notion of 'personal nationalism' argues that any study of national identity must take into account the intentions of the producers of national symbolism and ritual, as well as how their audiences read these rituals.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the actions of individuals must be considered in studies of national identity, not least because

22 Anthony Smith, 'The limits of everyday nationhood', *Ethnicities* 8 (2008), 564.

23 Montserrat Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 11.

24 Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), 3.

25 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

26 Edensor, *National Identity*, vii.

27 Anthony Cohen, 'personal nationalism – a Scottish view of some rites, rights, and wrongs', *American ethnologist* 23/4 (1996), 802–815.

'nations and national identity are used by people to position themselves in relation to others.'<sup>28</sup> This framework, then, is built on the relationship between the institutional and official on the one hand, and the vernacular, personal and quotidian on the other. National identity relies on both perspectives to reproduce itself, in a process that includes contingent histories and memories that undergo constant reframing and reimagining.

Having said this, national identity cannot be anything, at any time. While it may be flexible in the long run, able, for example, to incorporate new immigrant populations, reformulations of gender relationships or major, structural economic changes, the discourse is a bounded one. One of the strongest forces in shaping this discourse lies in national histories, which can be reinterpreted and redeployed, with some aspects emphasised or even forgotten, but which cannot be changed altogether. Scholarship on the contingent quality of national histories resonates with ways of thinking about national identity as discursive, progressive and multiple, while still alluding to the limits of reinterpretation. Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* is useful here: broadly defined sites, rituals or artefacts of national memory where the past is explicitly, if selectively, evoked and represented.<sup>29</sup> However, *lieux de mémoire* foreground only some aspects of the past, demonstrating a tension between official history, a 'representation of the past', with vernacular or popular memory, 'a perpetually acting phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present.'<sup>30</sup> Nora's identification of these two aspects speaks to the power of institutions to shape national narratives, as well as the resistance, adherence or even indifference to these narratives by the public. As in the discussion of the quotidian, the figure of the individual is ascribed some autonomy to engage with narratives of national identity, even when much more powerful processes are at play.

The uncertain relationship between the nation and its past means that these narratives can both include and exclude, and that nations must

28 Andrew Thompson, 'Nations, national identities and human agency: putting people back into nations', *The Sociological Review* 49/1 (2001), 20.

29 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 7–24.

30 *Ibid.*

tread carefully through history, 'draw[ing] sustenance from their past, yet to be fully themselves must also put it away from them'.<sup>31</sup> History here is fluid, a process of remembering that reconstructs and reproduces the past in light of the aims of the present,<sup>32</sup> and this process includes sites that are 'spaces explicitly designed to impart certain elements of the past – and, by definition, to forget others'.<sup>33</sup> Geographer Tim Cresswell uses the idea of place memory, or 'the ability of place to make the past come to life in the present and thus contribute to the production and reproduction of social meaning'.<sup>34</sup> It follows that by adopting alternative histories of place, its significance can be changed; in other words, the meaning of place changes with different versions of history.<sup>35</sup>

The example of the Taj Mahal in Trafalgar Square that I began with demonstrates the sometimes difficult relationship between the nation and its history, one in which national groups recognise the flexibility, utility and narrative power of history while still being bound by its constraints. We may be able to reimagine London as an Indian city, but this is only possible in the context of a history of interaction that includes violence and exploitation as well as creative cross-fertilisation. If the past provides models of inspiration and a 'lifeline' for the present, it must be 'malleable as well as generously preserved', providing us with 'a heritage with which we continually interact, and which fuses past with present'.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the relationship between the nation and its past provides the symbolism for national identity, and therefore some boundaries to its discourse, without being rigid in how this history is interpreted.

31 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 72.

32 Maurice Halbwachs (trans. by Lewis A. Coser), *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

33 Steven Hoelscher and Derek Alderman, 'Memory and place: geographies of a critical relationship', *Social and Cultural Geography* 5/3 (2004), 350.

34 Tim Cresswell, *Place: A short introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 85–86.

35 Doreen Massey, 'Places and their Pasts', *History Workshop Journal* 39 (1995), 182–192.

36 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 410–411.