‘The Invisible Empire and the Phoney War against Multiculturalism’

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In the context of the recent ‘backlash against multiculturalism’ this paper explores how a pivotal element of the dominant discourse about Britishness, the ‘Invisible Empire’ works to exclude local Bengalis from fully ‘belonging’ to east London and national collectivities. The ‘Invisible Empire’ refers to the various discursive omissions of the violence and oppression of the British Empire and the parallel processes of rigid categorisations of the subjects of Empire past and present. Based on ethnographic research, I use Trouillot’s notion of historical narrative as a particular ‘bundle of silences’ to explore how silences about histories of Bengali people in Britain and Bengal support the ethnicization of the category ‘white working class’ and the homogenization of the category ‘Muslim’ as well as the discourses of ‘parallel lives’ and ‘community cohesion’. I argue that the ‘Invisible Empire’ discourse remains central to recent government criticisms of ‘multiculturalism’, working to deny the complexities of people’s lives.

Biography
Georgie Wemyss studied Geography and Anthropology at UCL and worked as a youth worker in Brick Lane during the 1980s. Since the 1990s she has taught in Tower Hamlets College whilst working on her MA and D.Phil in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex followed by an ESRC Post Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Surrey. She is a Visiting Fellow at Goldsmiths. She is the author of The Invisible Empire: White Discourse, Tolerance and Belonging (Ashgate 2009). http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754673477

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3.00pm-5.00pm
B18, School of Sociology and Social Policy
L&SS Building

Refreshments, Cheese and Biscuits served after the seminar
ALL WELCOME
Series Organiser: Dr Davide Però