The Gentrification of Protest: A study of governmental activism in East London

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Declaration

I, Toyin Agbetu confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Toyin Agbetu

22 March 2021
I dedicate this thesis to my father, now Ancestor,

*Ligali Ayinde Agbetu.*

You said, “Nothing is impossible, some things are just more difficult to achieve than others.”
I believed you, followed my dreams and as usual
- you were right.
   Ese Pupo.
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Abstract

Hackney Council is an inner London local authority with a reputation for political activism rooted in socialist values. As part of the legacy for the London 2012 Olympics, the borough received significant investment for large scale infrastructure developments. However, despite branding itself as a progressive ‘campaigning’ council, contentious claims of gentrification by class and racialised status have emerged from many of the borough’s residents.

This inquiry is a study of a form of institutional activism where local authority museum workers engage in cultural practices designed to invoke progressive social change. It argues that conceptualising contemporary processes of “gentrification” primarily as a tool of residential displacement is an error. The phenomenon has evolved to include a form of cultural displacement and symbolic violence perpetrated against grassroots communities. It also suggests that in adhering to the paradigm that governmental power cannot be “activist”, institutions are rendered through a similar rigid lens. This thesis proposes that state-funded insiders possess a unique form of political agency that is only realised when working in long-term, active partnership with grassroots outsiders.

This research utilises a decolonising methodological approach that co-produces knowledge with Hackney’s various communities of activist practice, especially those of African heritage. It studies the organisational culture of the Council through participant-observation based at the Hackney Museum and its Antiuniversity Now project. It examines neighbourhood conceptions of political agency and investigates how the local authority museum’s use of formal and informal coöptation enables community challenges to unpopular council policies using countercultural exhibitionary forms and practices. It concludes with a proposal based on ethnographic findings that relay how grassroot outsiders conceptualise institutionalised activism. Moreover, how such practices can result in exhibitionary praxis without being compromised by bureaucratic procedure.
Impact Statement

Throughout 2020, several large institutions and organisations received a boost to their reputational status after publicly supporting Black Lives Matter campaigns. Many temporarily presented as socially engaged in terms of their cultural output. However, when comparing the hierarchies dominating their form in 2021 with that of 2017 when this research began, little has changed. With social issues such as state violence, gentrification, socio-political inequality, structural racism and symbolic violence long casting a shadow on the world, the suggestion that grassroots activism can provide a sustainable answer to top down cultural hegemony has long been provocative.

This research which exists in both thesis and documentary form can be utilised to deliver impact through its dissemination within cultural institutions, through public engagement projects such as community screenings, as well as through forums between administrators and activists where local authorities can be encouraged to support democratic discourse through public participatory exercises. Although this research is set within a museological context, its focus on formal and informal types of organisational culture has value in applications outside its local authority setting. Moreover, it can also provide the framework for collaborations between academic and museum workers willing to engage grassroot local activists and counterpublics instead of established social movement actors from civil society on projects mirroring the approach it depicts to realise similar exhibitionary forms of praxis.

Using the ethnographic insights gained from this anthropological inquiry its offers a prototype of how cultural and educational institutions can work together and establish an organisational culture that is willing to routinely embed, fully resource or renumerate, outsider activists without engaging in formal coöptation. As such, in reducing exposure to risk while increasing the likelihood of social action with equitable outcomes, this research can also have impact in the realms of governmentality. For its themes not only address the issue of cultural representation in the public realm but also offers guidance on routes to enable counterpublics and members from urban social movements to help shape public policy on all matters of social justice requiring resolution through urgent transformation.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

2017: The Socio-Political Climate

There were three significant events and cultural phenomena underlining the political context and climate under which this research took place. The seeds of this project germinated in 2016, the year that the *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) campaign went mainstream and with it, internet-enabled ‘protest’ culture. The BLM movement, which challenged the systemic violence and racist abuse of African people, primarily in America but later across the globe by the police, became a phenomenon attracting endorsements and support from millions. Then after twelve months of intense public interest, mainstream media coverage reaching fever pitch, and soundbites from a cacophony of grassroots, academic and political figures suggesting things could change - the attention fizzled out. Interest in the movement formed in 2013, seemed to have plateaued, and yet, the underlying problems it highlighted remained. People of African heritage were still facing unjust violence and deaths at the hand of the police, while on the streets, in custody and even in their homes¹, but public interest had moved elsewhere. BLM was no longer an activist cause celebre.

I started preparation for this project in 2017. It was a year that began with millions of people involved in global protests in support of the international Women’s March. The action that occurred in the wake of the newly elected U.S President Donald Trump² headed a yearlong campaign for female rights encapsulated by a #MeToo³ movement initially designed to address sexual assault and harassment, now recalibrated to ensnare transgressions by high profile public figures.

¹ Stephon Clark, 22 shot 7 times and killed in his grandmother’s backyard on 18 March 2018, Botham Jean was murdered by off duty police officer Amber Guyger on 6 September 2018. Atatiana Jefferson, 28 was killed while playing video games at home by a Texas police officer on 12 October 2019.

² Responding in part to the fallout of Trump’s election campaign which had been marred by complaints of the candidates open displays of misogyny, racism and support of white supremacy.

³ The #MeToo hashtag was first used by social activist Tarana Burke to support survivors of sexual violence, particularly from impoverished minority ethnic communities and later popularised by actress Alyssa Milano.
Mainstream British politics had dramatically altered since the 1960s that gave birth to an era of revolutionary zeal and countercultural projects like the Anti-University. Back then educators, students, artists, philosophers, social and health workers all led a pushback against institutional forms of violence using politicised culture and art. During this time, the political definitions of left and right were broadly framed as the battle between the forces of Marxist socialism and violent capitalism. In the 21st century, mainstream British politics appeared to be rebelling from the grip of a populistic *centrism* where both left and right parties merely adjudicate the intensity of neoliberal policies. This abject lack of ideological innovation had led to political paralysis in Westminster. It was a situation furiously agitated by the unprecedented election of the parliamentary backbencher, Jeremy Corbyn, to the helm of the Labour party in 2015 and the subsequent decision of the British electorate to revoke the country’s membership of the European Union (EU) in the 2016 referendum.

After almost a decade of austerity imposed by a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, the presence of Corbyn, a long-standing, campaigner for social justice had seemingly tapped into a growing desire for change. Under his helm, Labour’s manifesto promising better investment in public services and an end to university tuition fees, declared an intent to reverse much of the neoliberal policies implemented by the Conservatives and the preceding New Labour governments. In response, Britain was rocked by a series of protests from social movements across the entire political spectrum, some, like the grassroots Momentum organisation set up in 2015 and various trade unions, were supportive of Corbyn’s radical programme for change, others opposed. In an attempt to reassert her governments’ political authority, during 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May decided to hold a snap election in which she pit her desire to secure a clear mandate for the Brexit negotiations against Corbyn’s promise of reviving democratic socialism. Her gamble failed, neither party won, and the result was another hung parliament⁴.

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⁴ The last three general elections to return a hung parliament occurred during February 1974, May 2010 and June 2017.
Grenfell

Talk of the political stalemate dominated public discourse, until, within a week of the electoral result, the UK would be in collective shock when live images were broadcast around the world of a fire in the 24-story Grenfell Tower block in West London. Grenfell Tower was situated on the Lancaster West Estate, in North Kensington, a neighbourhood of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC). “North Ken” as it is referred to by those in the region marred by areas of socioeconomic degradation, exists in stark contrast to the affluent South Kensington area which borders on the City of Westminster. The tower block inferno which claimed at least seventy-two lives left the nation in national mourning. Within hours, thousands of volunteers came from all over the country to assist the survivors and their families affected by the tragedy by offering shelter, donating food, clothes and money\(^5\) to help the recovery process. However, where the public was swift and generous in their support, the initial lack of response in the immediate aftermath by the government and RBKC, the smallest borough in London and one of the wealthiest in Europe led to mass outrage.

The morning following the disaster hundreds of people had gathered outside the RKBC town hall in protest of the revelation that the ACM cladding\(^6\) which encased Grenfell Tower was suspected of having been the prime accelerant causing the fire to spread so fast. This would have national implications as local authorities across the UK, Hackney\(^7\) included, did fire risk assessments checking their housing stock to see if, in the case of a fire, they too were potential death traps. As the “North Ken” protesters shared stories about the decision of officials to use cheaper, flammable

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\(^5\) The Charity Commission reports that £28,778,161 was raised and distributed for the Grenfell Tower charitable fund by 29 January 2019. This figure does not include funding from central and local government.

\(^6\) ACM (aluminium composite material) is a decorative, rainscreen panel used on buildings that during a fire can delaminate, exposing its polyethylene core and fuel the spread of fire. https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/grenfell-inquiry-acm-cladding-was-primary-cause-of-fire-spread-and-tower-did-not-comply-with-regulations-judge-rules-63929

\(^7\) Hackney has 181 medium to high-rise tower blocks which are five storeys and above. (https://hackney.gov.uk/fire-safety)
cladding to beautify the tower so it wouldn’t be such an eyesore for the boroughs more affluent residents, one word was repeated over and over again – “gentrification”.

Figure 1-1 - A Hackney bus shelter carries a newspaper advert in response to Grenfell
Gentrification

Ever since London won the bid to host the 2012 Olympic games, the Hackney wards of Dalston and Shoreditch have been widely perceived as battlegrounds for gentrification. Several Hackney based independent filmmakers have used a cultural lens to highlight the issue.

In Estate, a Reverie (2015), a film shot over seven years by Hackney resident Andrea Luka Zimmerman used a series of interviews, artistic performances and historical re-enactments to poetic and political effect. The film captured the sense of political disempowerment felt by residents whose homes on the Haggerston Estate was facing demolition and regeneration. Zimmerman is a tutor at Central St Martins university and cultural activist. However, after living in the borough’s social housing for seventeen years she is both critical and sympathetic towards the local authority; ‘It wasn’t like Hackney Council didn’t want to do repairs, they just couldn’t afford it.’

Similarly, Tom Hunter’s A Palace for Us (2010) and the more recent feature film The Street (2019) by Zed Nelson include an evocative focus on the social impact of the changes occurring throughout the borough. Both Hunter and Nelson are life-long Hackney residents. In The Street, which was shot over four years, Nelson attempted to reveal the gradual cultural and infrastructural changes that has occurred in Hoxton under gentrification. Nelson has since argued, that with the distractions of seismic political events of the EU referendum and Grenfell we often don’t notice the changes until the symbols we cherish have been removed (Nelson, Minton, and Rowe 2019).

The collective message shared in these works underscore the feeling of perpetual cultural metamorphosis felt by many in the area. During Living in Hackney (2017), a short documentary by the independent film maker and local resident Damien Swaby, a woman is asked her opinion about living in the borough. She replied, “What I really love is the mix of people, its not so homogenous as other parts of London... and its not been over gentrified - yet”.

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8 http://www.eastendreview.co.uk/2014/11/07/estate-a-reverie-haggerston-samuel-house/
Her “yet”, like the testimonies in the work of all the other local film makers indirectly referred to the comments of Jules Pipe, the former Hackney Mayor (2002-2016). When Hackney Council acquired access to an unprecedented amount in regeneration funds from central government the Mayor was unequivocal. Pipe outlined the local authorities strategy for social transformation, as one that would herald ‘a period of considerable change’ (LBH 2009:1).

Over a period of several years, the Mayor utilised hundreds of millions of pounds to facilitate the development of the region into a growing hotel and retail sector designed to cater for an increase in business and ‘leisure tourism’. Shoreditch, in particular, acquired a new profile as a space ‘incubating one of the most important, art, fashion, media and now technology hubs in Europe’⁹. As a result, property prices across Hackney rose in tandem with an increase in the supply of new homes purposely built to service the needs of the area’s growing jobs market.

‘[Shoreditch is] Hackney’s major employment area, providing over 40,000 jobs in over 4,000 businesses and has played a key part in the prosperity of our borough. The area boasts internationally renowned hotels and restaurants, over 150 cultural venues, an expanding hospitality sector and adaptable workspaces that house entrepreneurial start-up businesses to major global brands.’ (LBH 2017)

For some prospective newcomers to the borough, the council proclamations of creating ‘mixed communities’ and safer neighbourhoods in its literature were regarded as empty bywords. Terms that promised the transformation of Hackney’s disinvested areas into crime-free districts while reducing its ethnic diversity.

Rashan

On Saturday 22 July 2017, a little over a month after the fire at Grenfell, Hackney became the site of a tragic local incident that also drew national attention. Attracting widespread news coverage was the death of a 20-year-old named Rashan Charles in a Dalston shop on Kingsland High Road. The young man, who was unarmed, had been chased and wrestled to the ground by a police officer identified only as Officer BX47. Rashan, stopped breathing following BX47’s use of forceful and unauthorised restraint

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⁹ In the Foreword of Shoreditch: The Creative Heart in London Brochure. Source: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/517fd2fffe4b0d30b4a0b2df/1/56027c7e4b04a9439d8f7f/1443003607158/SHOREDITCH_Town-brochure.pdf
techniques. Usually, little would have been known about the details surrounding the incident. However, this time the shopkeeper shared footage of the incident with Rashan’s family from one of the security cameras the police had not managed to seize the footage from. When I asked the shopkeeper why he shared it, he told me Rashan was “a good boy and always polite” to him when in his shop.

The video’s subsequent release showing Rashan’s death went viral on social media. The circumstances were considered similar to the instigating incident for the Black Lives Matter movement in the US when in 2014, Eric Garner, an African American, lost his life after a New York police officer used an unauthorised chokehold on him. Positional asphyxia, as it is referred to in the UK is not a new phenomenon when it comes to the deaths of people racialised as “black” in police custody. Within days, many people aggrieved by what looked like the execution of an unarmed person on the streets of Hackney took to the streets. The collective mobilisation of various publics first took the form of a multi-ethnic peaceful protest, then next a ritual of memorial, and finally, two days of spontaneous insurrection led mainly by young people.

Hackney is no stranger to the issue of deaths in custody. From the 1960s up until the present time, the African Caribbean community in particular Hackney has complained about racist policing in the borough. Notably, the levels of bribery, racism, drug dealing and corruption at Stoke Newington police station were notorious at the time (Graham Smith 1999). This became far worse after the introduction of the notorious paramilitary styled Special Patrol Groups (SPG) teams, a mobile anti-crime unit which utilised a method called “saturation policing”. This is a tactic used to increase the presence and public awareness of police officers in a region to heighten anxiety amongst delinquents about the increased risk of detection and capture in an

10 https://uffcampaign.org/
11 Criminal police behaviour was exposed in the MPS’s Operation Jackpot in 1992
12 SPG teams had a reputation of targeting working class areas with large African heritage populations such as Hackney, Brixton and Notting Hill.
13 The best result is the elimination or temporary displacement of crime from an area, the worst is mass human right’s abuses as overzealous police officers use discriminatory practices like racial profiling.
area (Cid 2019). John Alderson, a former Chief Constable, described the “preventative” strategy as making the police “more akin to an occupying army” (Roach Family Support Committee 1989:189–191).

Nevertheless, despite a strategy shift in policing, towards a more ‘reactive policing’ approach in the 1970s, the violent abuse of police powers continued while ostentatiously condemned but unchecked by either central or local government. The resulting increase of assaults on local community members, led to the formation of self-help organisations like the Hackney Community Defence Association (HCDA)\textsuperscript{14}. Between 1988 and 1995, HCDA provided the victims of police violence with a formal platform to campaign for justice and released self-published titles like *Fighting The Lawmen*\textsuperscript{15}, it was a critical voice in the fight against rampant corruption in Hackney’s police stations. Fifty years on, and community responses to Rashan’s death were polarised, a situation highlighting some of the conflicting interests around the institutional racism that still blights the borough.

\textsuperscript{14} The HCDA formed in 1988 after a number of substantive allegations were made against police officers based at Stoke Newington. It was based in The Colin Roach Centre, in Dalston.

\textsuperscript{15} https://hackneyhistory.wordpress.com/hcda/fighting-the-lawmen/
2017: The Socio-Political Climate

Figure 1-3 - Family, politicians and antiracist protesters gather outside Stoke Newington Police station following the death of Rashan Charles, July 2017

Figure 1-2 - Tributes are made as young people gather around makeshift shrine to Rashan outside the shop where he passed away, July 2017
2017: The Socio-Political Climate

Figure 1-4 Young people erect a barricade to create a space to mourn the death of Rashan Charles, July 2017

Figure 1-5 Riot police deploy horses to reassert their authority on Hackney’s streets after violent clashes, July 2017
The Project

This is an inquiry into institutional activism. The sociologist David Pettinicchio who conducted a cross-national investigation into links between political institutions, efficacy, and collective action, defines this as a flexible concept based on the practice of:

‘individuals who affect change (from changing organizational norms to policy reform) within organizations and institutions’ (2012:501).

This project which considers the topic through the lens of cultural and curatorial activism offers a development of the concept by exploring the form, epistemology and behaviour of how people working within and affiliated with government institutions exercise their political agency in Hackney, East London.

The thesis working title of *The Gentrification of Protest* refers to the socio-cultural backdrop of this project. The prevalence of anti-gentrification sentiment in the area made it crucial to observe how local government institutions, through both formal and informal organisation were responding to the effects of urban regeneration projects occurring in Hackney. Although the London Olympics 2012 had led to mass redevelopment of the area, at a grassroots level various neighbourhood critiques had emerged that used cultural forms of activism to oppose related council decisions they label as “gentrification”.

In viewing these socio-political issues through the museological lens of the Hackney Museum, this project adopts a definition of cultural activism involved in place-making ‘where art, activism, performance and politics meet, mingle and interact’ to build permanent bridges between these forms (Verson 2007:172). It examines how cultural activism is practiced by the local authority by following the Council’s organisational events and curatorial processes used by the Hackney Museum to investigate its practices of institutional activism.

It also observes the local authority liaisons with disenfranchised, young people, anti-gentrification activists and counterpublics enabling insider/outsider collaborations guided by the community engagement expertise of the Hackney Museum. Moreover, by following grassroot leads to acts of cultural activism
originating outside the public sphere, we see theories of political agency that extend beyond that shared by civil society and the neighbourhood’s established social movement organisations (SMO).

Following a year of shadowing the museum team as they engaged with their social inclusion activities, I examine whether the use of local authority resources to engage in the informal coöptation of grassroots communities may constitute a new form of top-down activism. My findings suggest that while political activism can and does emerge through the production of innovative cultural messaging in Hackney it remains tethered by policies and indeed, ambitions of governmental actors.

In turn, I argue that for institutional activism to realise radical social ambitions requires a sustained commitment to partnership from organisational insiders with counterpublics. It is a difficult endeavour that this project attempts to document by engaging in participant observation of the experimental approach to localism attempted by the Antiuniversity Now (AU) project. The AU is a radical education organisation started by the museum in 2015 birthed from the anti-institutionalism movement of the late 1960s.

**Positionality**

**Becoming a Scholar-Activist**

Having framed the socio-political climate of my field site, it may be useful if I outline the personal and cultural landscape influencing the motivations behind my research and methods. To do this I offer an extract from David Graeber’s book on anarchism and *Direct Action*:

> ‘[The] initiative to create a continental anarchist network... was quite successful... After ten years, however, they found themselves stubbornly unable to expand beyond their original core of middle-class white activists or include significant numbers of people of color. Furious arguments ultimately broke out over the reasons for this: which also became theoretical debates about the nature of white privilege and ways of overcoming white supremacy.’

> From the section ‘SOME NOTES ON ‘ACTIVIST CULTURE’’ (Graeber 2009:241)

Despite my being a long-time fan of Graeber’s scholar-activism, this quote of his caught me off guard. I started thinking deeply about the impact a hegemonisation of ‘activist culture’ could have on *cultures of activism*. As a closet anarchist actively
engaged with practices of educational and direct based activism(s) through several Africentric social justice movements, I loved Graeber's work. More so, I was intrigued when he openly touched upon the problem of ‘whiteness’ and privilege invariably derailing democratic-consensus in activist circles. I was someone who sometimes partnered with such groups and was all too familiar with the objectives of the ‘black’ struggle being frequently reduced by their leaders to that of anti-racism.

However just as disturbing, was that his description was eerily familiar even within the non-anarchist, mostly mono-ethnic circles I was involved with that had radically different systems of political organisation. I became curious. Was it possible that even in spaces where the primary mode of operation involved organising against white supremacist hegemonic structures, that issues of ‘whiteness’ and privilege were somehow leading to the colonisation, or at the very least ‘gentrifying’ the most fundamental aspects of activist culture?

Critical Pedagogy

‘The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.’
Excerpt from ‘A Talk to Teachers’ in 1963, by the novelist James Baldwin (2008:17)

I was born in Hackney to Yoruba parents from the village of Ijebu-Ode in Nigeria\textsuperscript{16}. Both had emigrated to the UK in the 1960s. It was my father, who as my primary educator, unintentionally honed my instincts for participant observation throughout my childhood. In traditional Yoruba culture, most children are trained to be “seen but not heard”. As African children, my sister and I learned when such practices were appropriate and also when we had the opportunity to discuss, query and analyse what we had seen in a safe space. Many years later, it was my becoming a parent, that served as the catalyst for my foray into the activist world. Frustrated at the limited opportunities that would be available to my child by virtue of his ethnicity, I started following the British based, Pan Africanist movement. It was then that I discovered that my lack of Caribbean heritage meant for some, I was not regarded a proper

\textsuperscript{16} The colonial name given to the region by Flora Shaw, a Times columnist and wife of the British colonial administrator for the region, Frederick Lugard
“black”. Simultaneously, being born in the UK led to me not being considered African enough by the majority ethnic members of the society that I lived within.

These tensions reinforced my resolve to help bring together the African diaspora to address unjust inequalities. However, this was only one aspect of the equation that formed my scholar-activist persona. My belief that education must play a key role in the solution led to me spending two decades building my reputation as a grassroots community educator. I began using “action research” as first coined by the German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin before I even knew what it was. During that time, I organised proactive and transgressive campaigns that addressed legacy issues concerning African enslavement, racist policing and discriminatory educational practices within Hackney and beyond.

‘Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out’ (Carr and Kemmis 1986:162)

As my expertise as a community organiser grew, I noted my work started to have more influence on the policies of local and national institutions. However, it was my experiences with the consultation and collaborative processes with local museums and councils that seemed to yield the most effective response.

Hackney Museums’ commitment to community critique and sharing counter-hegemonic narratives that were frequently relegated to the side-lines of history, and occasionally in opposition to council policy was a perfect example of this. Maura Reilly, the founding curator of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art defines this use of curatorial authority to promote ‘the margins over the center, the minority over the majority’ as “curatorial activism” (2018:22).

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17 People of African heritage were officially racialised by British institutions using the labels negro, coloured, black, black British, Afro-Caribbean, ethnic minorities and people of colour.

18 In 2001 I formed a UK based, Pan African organisation named Ligali and ran it with Emma Pierre-Joseph

19 Includes Truth 2007, a national community organising campaign promoting Pan African agency, Nyansapo, an international community empowerment programme, partnering international development groups DIFN and ADAP to teach citizen-journalism in Nigeria and set up community empowerment tools in Ghana.
However, while working with and in opposition to such cultural institutions, I noted that the struggles facing people of African heritage had almost always been subsumed into a blended pot of interests categorised as antiracist.

Yes, there was an entrenched form of resistance from individuals and organisations and institutions trying to correct this lack of precision when accounting for the socio-political hybridity of African people. However, their collective opposition to the solutions proposed by cultural insiders shared a single result. Many of the projects they designed to address social justice concerns were ineffective or limited by design to delivering short term results. It became clear to me that unless this issue was resolved, progress when it came to addressing “race” related issues would remain torturously slow.

I thus started to engage in a form of decolonising practise that sought to eradicate reductive notions of “black” political agency that suggested transformative change was only possible through social movements of passivity or institutions adopting progressive antiracist policies. The 1999 Macpherson inquiry into the murder of teenage Steven Lawrence had introduced the term “Institutional Racism” into the public domain. My experiences suggested to me that organising sustainable transformative processes dedicated to social justice would require a form of “institutionalised activism”. I had long suspected that arranging such changes, although difficult, was possible.

This was because my theories on community development had been honed by the informal interdisciplinary perspectives offered to me through the mentorship of academics like the late Dr Abiola Ogunsola. It was through her work and that of other academics she worked with that I was formally introduced to the concepts of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Oyéwùmí 2003) and critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2001) during my undergraduate studies in Education and Community Development at the University of East London. Moreover, it was there that following my introduction to the theories of the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (1996) I decided to become a practitioner of a liberatory form of critical pedagogy.
Perhaps predictably, this experience of praxis embedded in non-elitist universities, colleges and supplementary schools during my Pan Africanist and undergraduate years, helped shape my scholarly approach as a postgraduate. As well as being committed to academic rigour, I now carried a decolonial lens with me during fieldwork and whenever writing up my research. The anthropologist Ruth Behar makes a compelling argument about the benefits of academics involved in witnessing, especially those engaged in producing ethnography associated with causes that are or become personal to us. Behar suggests that the resulting self-reflexivity on being a ‘vulnerable observer’ (2012:13-14,19), improves the quality of their work.

My long-term experience of living and working in Hackney has enabled me to witness the racialised dimension of the borough’s urban regeneration policies. Not only through the experiences of violent ‘stop and search’ encounters that have plagued my childhood and life as an adult, but also the political and economic exclusion that has seen my family forced to move from building to building in search of an affordable place to call home. As a result, alongside my advocacy of human rights, I have developed a specific commitment to social justice issues as they relate to people of African heritage. Moreover, I am aware of Lewin’s warning whenever I am engaged in scholarly work that ‘Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice’ (Lewin 1946, reproduced in Lewin 1948:202–3).

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20 To rent, not to buy
Figure 1-6 Toyin Agbetu protesting in Dalston against police brutality in Hackney during 2006
The Community Museum

So why a museum as a focal point for this study of governmental and institutional forms of activism? To answer that it is useful to reference Thomas Greenwood, the Hackney-based reformer who advocated for museums and free public libraries in all municipalities. In his campaign literature, Greenwood reminds us that although the term ‘Museum’ originated from the Greek word *Mouseion*\(^{21}\), its application across the times has been varied. Originating from the storage and display of items for entertainment purposes instead of sale, the institution of the museum evolved from cabinets of curiosity to purpose-built buildings loaded with artefacts collected or looted through various entrepreneurial or colonial enterprises. As Greenwood depicts this history he cites the existence of American ‘Dime Museums’ where chained in a cage with terrifying makeup ‘a harmless negro’ would be seen by the public for fivepence (1888:6–7).

Bolstered by anthropological claims of being able to rank civilisations in a hierarchy of evolution, this form of unethical, racialising practice is part of the genealogy of all modern public museums (Bennett 1995a:5). However, with the passing of the United Kingdom’s various acts for Public Libraries and Museums starting in the 1850s, a duty emerged for these heterotopias to have a systemic order imposed upon their chaotic collections with the explicit intention of public edification rather than simply furthering the interests of scientific research or private enterprise. Greenwood and the reformation movement calling for museums to be involved in social action can be considered an early form of activism. However, while their aspiration for museums as cultural institutions to ‘take a high place in the educating of the people in the duties and privileges of citizenship’ (1888:vii–viii) was noble, it ignored the oppressive manner in which systems of state, including museums, use class and racialisation as methods of discrimination.

My opinion of museums as sites of privilege remained firmly in place until on the 16th September 2004, a tragic incident occurred outside Hackney Town Hall a few metres away from Hackney Museum. An innocent, young sixteen-year-old named Robert

\(^{21}\) The name given to a temple devoted to the muses
Levy was attacked and lost his life after going to the aid of a younger boy being threatened with a knife. His assailant, a 15-year-old schoolboy, had stabbed Levy in the neck, stomach and shoulder and the teen died before reaching the hospital. It was not long after this that I observed first-hand how the close proximity of his tragic death seemed to have a sustained impact on the staff at the museum. Within months, the role and methods of the museum seemed to have changed with members of my community frequently remarking that the staff there “was on side”. In line with its social inclusion mission, the museum still catered for all of the migrant communities in the borough, but its approach towards its curatorial activities involving people of African heritage improved. The museum staff seemed to increasingly use their institutional resources and influence to champion the cause of Hackney’s most socio-politically vulnerable, minority communities.

This does not mean the museum is free from engaging in structural and ‘cultural violence’ which Galtung defines as ‘any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form’ (1990:291; Galtung 1969). In displaying objects that celebrate supporters of African enslavement like the novelist Daniel Defoe in their permanent gallery, the museum remains an institutional gatekeeper of cultural hegemony. However, it is far removed from the many anthropological museums that reduce acts of violent racism to objects silenced by their cultural displacement. It is not a “brutish” institution as the Pitt Rivers museum curator, Dan Hicks, would describe many of Britain’s national museums.

As a frequent visitor, I noted this small and under-resourced museum demonstrate its commitment to social justice matters, in projects addressing the history of resistance to African enslavement despite the government telling it to focus

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22 http://www.robertlevyfoundation.org.uk/about-us/
23 In 1709 Defoe wrote “slavery was absolutely prosperity of the colonies in America” and that the highly advantageous and deserving” (Andersen 1941:25).
24 Under the label of “Free Speech”
25 A term the author uses to label anthropological museums with founding collections acquired by illicit, violent means during the colonial era.
on Eurocentric narratives of British abolition (Donington 2016). More so, later, with its organising of the Antiuniversity festival, my ethnographic research has led me to conclude that although this was a local authority museum, capable of hijacking and “gentrifying” community issues for the Council’s political gain, it was also an activist museum in all but name.

Although not explicitly stated, Hackney Museum seemed to challenge the ideology of meritocracy as an equalising panacea to an equitable life by using its curatorial and community engagement expertise to build didactic relationships with civic and diverse social publics. Equally as interesting was the tacit support it received from local government officials when deviating from directives emanating from national government. I wanted to understand how with its bureaucratic constraints such an approach was possible, was it a regional anomaly or could it be replicated in other institutions? Therein lies the central argument about the museum in this thesis.

The historical role of museums as discursive framing tools shaping national identity and regulating the behaviour of citizenry has seen them become influential instruments of hegemony. However, as museum insiders are increasingly pooled from an ever more stratified society the results have been transformative. With the sectors inclusion of cultural workers whose advocacy interests extends to supporting grassroots community concerns, a challenging of the traditional power asymmetries within museum organisations has occurred.

Those sympathetic museum insiders who occupy a space of hybridity, that of institutional or government official and cultural activist can utilise the museums currency of culture, narratives and power to reframe designations of normality regarding objects and social practices. In confronting what Janes and Sandell refer to as the museum sector’s ‘immorality of inaction’ (2019:291) they can and do engage in uncomfortable contemporary curatorial work that redefines their visitors understanding of social responsibility. Like myself, the Hackney Museum attempts to

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26 https://lbsatucl.wordpress.com/2013/06/14/the-slave-owners-of-hackney-re-thinking-local-histories-of-abolition-and-slavery/
use a form of community based action-research that can result in its cultural outputs leading to forms of social action (Stringer 2014:25,43-44).

Of course, such social action, especially when transgressive does not occur unopposed. As the museologist Kevin Coffee reminds us, ‘Advocacy from below, or within an organization, is frequently met by coercive force from above, or from outside that organization’ (Coffee 2019:305). In particular, that coercive force which is in the role of governance of national or local authority museums is often government.

Thus, in delivering their mandated services, such cultural institutions must tread a fine line when deciding whether to partner community stakeholders through formal or informal acts of coöptation. The implications of such decisions can determine how community members perceive curatorial activism by state-funded museum workers. For whichever way they face, in serving a social purpose, museums are not neutral organisations; they are active social participants engaged in either the promotion or exploitation of grassroot issues through their cultural representations.

Figure 1-9 A memorial bench engraved in remembrance of Robert Antonio Levy is situated just outside the museum in Hackney Town Hall Square
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‘Our methodology, defined by the oxymoron “participant observation,” is split at the root: act as a participant, but don’t forget to keep your eyes open... But when the grant money runs out, or the summer vacation is over, please stand up, dust yourself off, go to your desk, and write down what you saw and heard. Relate it to something you’ve read by Marx, Weber, Gramsci, or Geertz and you’re on your way to doing anthropology.’ (Behar 2012:5)

Being a diasporic African born in the UK, my project is best classified as one of urban ethnography belonging to the field of a decolonising “anthropology-at-home”. In Bauwelt Fundamente (Sensing the City), the urban anthropologist Anja Schwanhäußer (2016:13) outlines the two distinct approaches used by urban ethnographers. The first is that of doing Anthropology ‘in’ the City as established by the Chicago School of Sociology based in the US. This is where the disciplines of anthropology and sociology provide grounding for the methodology and qualitative modes of analysis that are used. The other mode, Anthropology ‘of’ the City championed through the works of academics from Europe like Peter Jackson (1985b), Loïc Wacquant (2012; 2016) and Les Back (2016), employs an interdisciplinary mode of analysis. This method, while still drawing upon anthropological methods to locate the subjects of urban ethnographies in terms of their broader social and historical context, also traverses theories rooted in the arts, humanities, social sciences and architecture to conduct excavations of the built environment and urban landscape.

Wanting to invert the paradigm Jackson described when he wrote ‘the subjects of ethnographic research have tended to be the poor and relatively powerless residents of multi-ethnic inner-city areas’ (Jackson 1985b:170). I decided this would be best achieved with my project by adopting the compatible methodological traits of both schools although leaning towards the European practise of urban anthropology that is unashamedly political in its interdisciplinary approach.

Nevertheless, with my field site being set in a western city instead of some remote essentialised village subjected to what anthropologist the Johannes Fabian refers to as ‘the denial of coelavness’ (1983), it would be remiss not to discuss an urban study of the city without at least making reference to the ‘Chicago school’ set of ethnographers (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925). This group of urban geographers and sociologists are often referred to as the instigators of the contemporary models of
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inquiry various ethnographers-at-home have adopted. Yet while their analytical approach to morphological concerns with city growth and spatial organisation broke innovative ground, Peter Jackson in his classic text Urban Ethnography is right to critique the tacit support some of them held for Social Darwinism and laissez-faire capitalism which was frequently proselytised as universal truths of a ‘natural order’ (Jackson 1985b:158).

Smith (1999:44–50) refers to this approach as conducting ‘research through imperial eyes’, this is where evidence recovered through such ethnographic studies limit categories of social organisation to a pre-existing Western schema of classification, representation and evaluation. Where a decolonising perspective is adopted, such an approach which is bound by explicit and implicit rules of how the world works, struggles to incorporate epistemological dissent which challenges racialised and gendered discourses of power derived from colonial concepts.

I mention this, for in its formative years, American Anthropology was a bastion of white supremacist doctrine. From the late nineteenth century, anthropologists like William Edward Burghardt DuBois alongside Franz Boas in the twentieth century pushed back against racism in the social sciences. DuBois in particular became one of the first African American anthropologist conducting ethnography ‘of, for and by Afro-America’ (Lange 1983:135–138). His reputation as a vocal opponent to the racist renditions within anthropology and other institutional bodies saw the ‘Chicago schools’ refuse to declare him amongst their ranks as an ethnographer. It was a decision that also resulted in the marginalisation of his substantive contributions to the discipline, an act many today regard as lamentable (Jaynes et al. 2009:380; Morris 2015). While my research which studies cultural workers, community activists and government officials, is certainly not an exclusive study of British Africans and the various publics and counterpublics in Hackney, as with DuBois’ study of the ‘Negro Problem’27 (1898), the themes of ‘race’ and ‘white’ privilege exist in the background of all aspects of my inquiry.

27 DuBois refers to this as the social and economic issues afflicting people of African heritage.
Decolonising

The pan-Africanist philosopher, Franz Fanon defines “decolonising” as the meeting of two forces, opposed by their ethnicity or socio-political status resulting in the replacement of one ethnic group with another. Without a transition period Fanon tells us we witness an ‘absolute substitution’ (1963:35–36). This concept, which initially emerged from a movement committed to the undoing of colonial rule now has similarities with current conceptions of gentrification. Today, the term decolonising mainly refers to the removal of colonial ideology through critiques of literature considered canon and their accompanying pedagogical practices. However, within academia the term also includes critiques of Western research methodologies built upon the empirical-positivist worldview that drove “Enlightenment” assumptions.

In working partially within my community while I was in the field I was what the community organiser and educator Miguel Zavala’s defined as an “outsider-within” (2013:61). Zavala defines this outsider status as belonging to those scholars from a minority ethnic community whose education enables their integration within the academy.28

What pronounces my methodological approach as decolonising was my decision to observe, support and participate in activist29 activities while conducting research within my field site. In drawing upon a form of participatory action research that ‘honor the perspectives, voices, and interests of the communities being studied’ (Ibid 2013:66), I have sought to enable all the community30 to have co-ownership of the research process.

My choice of methodological approach has been influenced by Faye V. Harrison’s Decolonising Anthropology (1997). With most of my academic background rooted in critical pedagogy and community development, I wanted my work to remain compatible with its aims of ‘moving further toward an Anthropology for Liberation’.

28 As an African scholar-activist at University College London, an elite Russell Group institution in Britain, that describes me.
29 This involved being present at occasional moments of illicit behaviour
30 Institutional “insiders” and community “outsiders” considering themselves or work as activist
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Harrison argued that ethnographic data was ‘political capital’ capable of impacting upon the field site being investigated. Moreover, it was simultaneously capable of penetrating the core of anthropology’s ‘discourse by constructing theories premised upon alternative sets of priorities, visions and understandings’ (Faye V Harrison 1997:88–95).

To best achieve this, I believe it was critical that I would not be perceived as a privileged academic outsider while in the field. Asad asserts that to push back against the institutional forces that perpetually tended to conform cultural meanings to its hegemonic expectations, it was important that it was ‘not the personal authority of the ethnographer but the social authority of his ethnography that matters’ (1986:163). The specifics of this project demanded that I was both an outsider within, and when donning my scholar-activist cap, an insider outside. My methodology had to incorporate a reflective practice that recognised my positionality and enabled me to remain objective while attempting to empathise, analyse and synthesise multiple and often contradictory worldviews into a coherent whole.

I decided the best way to achieve this was by opting to co-produce knowledge with my interlocutors through a documentary filmmaking process. This decision to represent myself to my interlocutors as an ethnographer-documenter was crucial for the decolonising approach I adopted, and successful. During my time in the field people sang, danced, remonstrated, “cut eye” and “kissed teeth” to communicate with me in a range of cultural modalities that went beyond mere words. While it is possible to capture such data in written field notes, the kinaesthetic richness and emotional nuance of such incidents are recorded in an enhanced form with the inclusion of a camera to record the proceedings. There is more, an emotional discourse that can occur through the eyes. When writing on these visual forms of ethnography, the sociologist Les Back argues that the act of looking at someone through a viewfinder is not a one-way process. In utilising the lens to mediate a conversation, both those in front and behind it are making a connection (2016:30,51-53).

31 I was not.
I cite this as part of my decolonising methodology to explain the objective of my approach. The use of the camera was not to enhance what the multimodal anthropologist Tim Ingold refers to as the “ethnographicness” of my research. Instead, I sought to educate and facilitate an explicitly expressed commitment to the ontological development of the field site and interlocutors I observed and participated with (Ingold 2014:386). This was crucial for my methodology adopted what Linda Tuhiwai Smith advocates as a ‘community research’ process. It is an approach that builds upon similar community action research (CAR) methods.

Stringer defines CAR as a collaborative, participatory approach to solving group problems that provides ‘a model for enacting local, action-oriented approaches to inquiry, [and] applying small-scale theorizing’ (Stringer 2014:33–39). The various people I engaged with in Hackney had their own priorities, questions and theories for solutions. It was they as my participants that told me who to interview, where to go, what topics to focus on, what I could share and what to keep confidential.

I am not suggesting I lacked agency in my choices, but I am asserting that it was my methodological approach and the trust it engendered which enabled me to see and learn of progressive acts of spontaneous and organised transgression critical for my conclusions. With community research the outcome is less important than the process which according to Smith must be respectful of those involved and designed to heal, educate and facilitate progress towards self-determination (1999:129–131). During my time in the field, I found the process was received as a welcome, liberating and overall positive experience. This is despite one interlocutor jokingly referring to me at one point as the museum’s “personal stalker”!

Urbanography
My decision to incorporate a decolonising approach within my work has meant my precluding any adoption of the ‘Manchester school’ method of anthropologists working out of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Africa. This was not in opposition to the rigorous analytical constructs that emerged from their stringent attention to method and theoretical frameworks. That was one of the positives they contributed to the discipline. However, their slavish adherence to the belief that the ‘role of field
researchers must always prevail over their complete immersion in the lifeworld of a subject’ (Smith 1984:358–359) was incompatible with my approach.

I was cognisant of the fact that unlike, the alien ethnographer studying people and their communities while under colonial subjugation, my status as a city dweller engaged in participant observation within the same urban environment I live, potentially reduces the analytical separation possible when conducting ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ based ethnography. This did not mean it was impossible.

Many such projects using engaged methodologies risk the accusation of lacking objectivity. The furore that followed the sociologist Alice Goffman (2014), accusing her of lacking academic objectivity and ethics after she published On The Run, is a classic example. Goffman’s book explores the lives of young African American men struggling with institutional systems of racialised policing in Philadelphia. Aspects of her ethnography focused on accounts of her own position as some of her interlocutors engaging in criminal activity was picked up by many academics as evidence of research misconduct (Lubet 2015). Her engagement with authentic ‘black’ life was regarded a transgression – she had allegedly become too close.

However, this is a misnomer, especially if the researcher successfully adopts a workable balance between immersion in the world of their interlocutors and an academic distance akin to Malinowski’s famed social dislocation when studying the Trobriand people (1922). Indeed, one of Malinowski’s legacies was to suggest that the social “field” must give way to the antisocial “desk” which is interpreted here as the writing process. In the case of this project and as with most researchers conducting urban ethnography using the traditional methods of round the clock participation of a small bounded region, the methodology and subsequently, the theoretical framework must be adapted to ensure they are fit for purpose.

For this investigation, modern urban life refers to the activist orientated, communities affiliated with the local authority and its museum, the Antiuniversity community of artists, educators, political agitators, and social movements, and finally the various people living and working in Hackney. In most cases, the interactions between them occurred in modes that could be perceived as transitory, with contacts
that were mainly secondary as opposed to primary, focused around the working day and outside of domestic or other similar settings.

This is a consequence of the culture of urbanism which increasingly causes dependencies between groups to be limited to shared activities within shared proximity. Put simply, the links created between those who work, eat and play in the same city spaces with us, can be just as complex, valuable and enduring as those made through the familial bond of kinship and living together.

Fortunately for ethnographers, lines of interdependencies also emerge and become visible in other, albeit spontaneous manners. The unplanned uprising that organically followed the mourning ritual in the wake of Rashan Charles’ death is an example of this and runs throughout the DNA of this project. Wirth asserts that when living an urban life, ‘our acquaintances tend to stand in a relationship of utility to us in the sense that the role each of us plays in our life is overwhelmingly regarded as a means for the achievement of our own ends’ (1938:12–14). This was true of those I encountered with this project.

Community

If there was one term Hackney Council and its museum used to delineate their practice while defining the various publics in my field site it is “community”. As a catch all to encompass the various groups of people residing and working in the borough it remains a convenient, although problematic label when used to conceptualise a culturally homogenous public. Fendler (2006:303) is one of many who suggests the term is used so loosely that its meaning has become ‘vague and muddy’. It is an accurate assertion. Multiple values based on culture, ethnicity, class and neighbourhood descent are involved in the formation of community groups in a borough like Hackney, but these are simultaneously developed in tangent with bonds formed within public spaces of participation and social learning through work, recreation and agitation.

Wenger (2000) refers to groups where participants engage in activities that produce knowledge and artefacts in shared sites as ‘communities of practice’. Conceptualising it as a theory of social learning, Wenger defines such communities as engaging in a
process for ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, [to] deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (2002:9)’. Here experts and novices collaborate to stimulate policy innovation and in so doing create a collective identity. For the purpose of this research, I identify, observe and participate with communities where that identity is predicated in the form of an ‘activist’ citizenship aligned around principles of community empowerment, cultural production, mutual aid and progressive politics. As a shortcut I refer to this cooperative of Hackney based, communities of activist practice as CoAP.

Figure 1-12 - Some of the labels used to define causes supported by communities of activist practice in Hackney
The identification of those engaged in both formal and informal expressions of solidarity on social justice related matters also serves another purpose for this project. It enables the inclusion of views of those that deemphasise the importance of class as the determining factor in urban displacement. With the Hackney Museum workers mandated to engender a sense of belonging towards the boroughs ethnically diverse residents, there is a danger of them simultaneously rendering minority ethnic marginalisation and segregation solely as the by-product of policies serving the economic needs of capital. Brown forcibly warns us against such an approach which relies on a structural Marxist analysis of social interaction. According to him, such a “mechanistic interpretation of racism” ignores the agency of such groups to negotiate cultural forms of the dominant society (Brown 1981:194).

However, using the Hackney CoAP model does create a challenge. While community members agreed on shared problems, agreeing a desirable social justice outcome often varied according to the primary subgroup they belonged to. Perceptions of what constituted equitable council policy on issues such as housing, cultural representation, access to public and retail spaces and entrepreneurial opportunities for the socio-politically disadvantaged were not universal. In the same manner that the Council’s use of the term “community” to portray a culturally homogenous group has limitations, so too does the use of CoAP to encapsulate a broad band of members with varying levels of social capital and political influence.

My study, therefore, includes observing and participating with a fragmented field site whose CoAP inhabitants are not necessarily related in personal and professional domains, but instead by links forged through interconnections in an intricate web of social and cultural networks categorised by my interlocutors as “activist related”. I capture this complexity throughout this thesis by utilising various social grouping concepts. This is in recognition of the term “community” being inadequate to express the complex overlapping range of formal and informal social networks many of my interlocuters had simultaneous relationships with.

I also, considering this inquiry’s focus on a local authority museum, rely upon Bruno Latour’s definition of publics that updates the established definition offered to
us by anthropology and political science. The most common conceptualisation of the term “publics” is that of inclusive groups of people, united by a common interest or aim through intertwining modes of social interaction. It is a theory that owes a great debt to the work of Anderson (2006) and Habermas (1999). However, in developing the concept to recognise contemporary realities, Latour, Latham and Lanton redefine such assemblies of people as premised in relation to a form of ‘object-oriented democracy’ (Latour and Weibel 2005). Urban publics can be seen as the ‘assemblages of human and non-human elements - including films, images, texts,’ which emerge when the need arises to address specific matters over material issues (Latham and Layton 2019).

Situated in my CoAP model alongside publics, is the concept of a “counterpublic” (see Chapter 2). It too is a discursive space only this time hosting opposition to the theories and forms of expression emerging from civil society’s bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1999). The concept of the counterpublic sphere initially asserted the importance of a space of assembly to share ‘Lebenszusammenhang’ (proletarian interests and experiences) (Negt and Kluge 1993:6). Later Fraser formulated the existence and importance of multiple “subaltern counterpublics” where the generation of oppositional discourses, representing subordinated groups and their interest could occur (Fraser 1990).

However, with this project’s ethnographic focus on communities of activist practice and the organisational culture of a hegemonic institution, I had to be careful. Batteau acknowledges that anthropology, especially when looking at organisational culture, has a history of describing subaltern microgroups of this nature in an othering mode that divorces them from regimes of rationality. The very process of organising he suggests, ‘creates an array of contradictions among rationality, command and authority, resistance and inclusion’ (Batteau 2000:726–727).

To apply my decolonising approach to these various definitions that constitute my “communities” required actively seeking to avoid the conceptual straitjacket of earlier sociological theories on such formations. Notably, I rejected Cohen’s seminal definition of microgroups, which speaks predominantly to deviancy linking subculture
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to male, working-class traits of ‘maliciousness, nonutilitarianism, and negativism’ (1971). Instead, I noted many of the subcultural groupings in Hackney’s CoAP were linked in what Gramsci refers to as ‘cultural-social unity’. That is, they were a diverse collection of people with different backgrounds, beliefs and values who collectively opposed the existing cultural, social and political forms of hegemony (Gramsci in Crehan 2002:156).

Objectivity

‘I hoped I was more than a mere anthropologist. I believed that I belonged to a group of activist-scholars who, through writing, research, and organizing are working toward... exposing the broader racist, sexist, and classiest social structures that criminalize and demonize poor Whites and people of colour.’ (Asale Angel-Ajani, P77)

The site of East London has always served in some capacity as my base of operation giving me an insider-outsider status. I had a history of engaging with the Hackney Museum as both a visitor and during some of its previous community consultations. In 2013, this became official when I was temporarily employed to co-curate an exhibition on the history of African (black) History Month in the UK with Patrick Vernon, a former Hackney councillor. This familiarity with my site, the museum and my interlocutors own acquaintance with the world of universities and anthropological research meant I risked falling foul of what Strathern refers to as the ‘limits of auto-anthropology’ (1987). That is where there is cultural continuity between my ethnographic write-up and the accounts given by those being observed.

To help mitigate any pressure to surrender my anthropological authority I needed distance in the form of another way to frame and explore my encounters. Hence to facilitate heightened critical awareness to counter any increase in reflexivity, I engaged many of my interlocutors in a collaborative filmmaking process offering them a platform to do what Smith refers to as ‘talk back to power’ (1999:226).

Latour suggests (2000:115) that anthropology as a social science gains its objectivity credentials when it enables and exposes its findings to the largest number of possible objectors from the body being described. By using the filmmaking process to offer a 360-degree ‘streetcorner’ view, I employed an update to the approach exemplified by the second generation of urban ethnographers like Elliott Liebow
(2003) to vividly capture the urban milieu of everyday life for a group of people whose everyday experiences while familiar in part, were vastly different from my own.

This was crucial for when working with my primary participants and their various cultural partners, it became clear there were areas where those with similar knowledge practices to my own overlapped. This is a situation frequently faced by those doing anthropology at home or within institutions. When working with cultural experts, anthropologists and bureaucrats for her study of the National Museum of the American Indian, Shannon describes it as a challenge that leads to the limiting of space for reflection and analysis.

The camera enabled me to counter this. As well as pointing my lens in the direction of my primary participants and the essential contributors they guided me to interview, I simultaneously adopted a grounded theory approach to film making. This is where I also documented the relationships and opinions of those people that the museum staff and Antiuniversity team engaged with, partnered or represented in their respective institutional and countercultural forms. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall refers to this as ‘witnessing’ events on the behalf of others to reveal those important matters which have to be corrected and those which should be appreciated (Hall 1997:87).

I largely eschewed my own contacts and was introduced to new contributors to the study as a decolonising anthropologist-at-home. This did not come without hurdles. As ethnographers, our presence will always impact upon the events being witnessed. This was amplified with my carrying a camera to film participants in an era where vlogs, (short video clips) on social media platforms can have a dominant influence on political and social discourse. Invariably, it is impossible to observe the event that would have occurred had I not been there or heard ‘an account identical with that which the same narrator would give to another person’ (Behar 2012:6).

I state this for those engaged in anthropology-at-home (Strathern 1987) are often mistaken as being analytically inhibited by possessing shared concepts with their interlocutors, when instead, I believe the philosopher Terence Rajivan Edward is correct in hinting that we should not forget that what is constituted as ‘at-home’ often
perpetuates a false holism (2014:352–356). By openly declaring my decolonising credentials and anthropological toolkit to document my fieldwork, irrespective of whether I was with the museum staff in council meetings or at a protest with artists and activists, I was better equipped ‘to dismantle the circuits of legitimation that construct, of science a discrete culture’ (Helmreich and Jones 2018:108–109). More so, instead of theorising from the outside, I was able to utilise the dynamic, engaged, ‘withness’ practices leading to the ‘subsidiary awareness’ that Shotter describes as an asset when writing about understanding organisational process from within (2005:586).

Figure 1-15 Positionality: Toyin Agbetu in the field as a scholar-activist, doing ‘observant participation’ with the a local artist and activist, as riot police start their charge during a vigil for Rashan Charles, 25 July 2017
Fieldwork

‘Hi everyone, Over the next 12 months Toyin will be coming into the museum and observing how museum staff work as a team and with communities as part of his PhD on activism... whilst I will be sorting out dates and overseeing Toyin’s time with us, he is conducting research about the whole team, so please don’t feel you have to go through me before inviting him to anything... I don’t want to make it too formal and would like everyone to work alongside Toyin in an organic and natural way, building up their own relationship with him and speaking to him as openly and honestly as you would like to, so he can see the ‘nuts and bolts / warts and all’ workings of Hackney Museum’ (Winch 2017)

From May 2017 to June 2018, I spent 13 months split across different types of cultural institutions, social movement organisations, community groups and publics. Using the borough of Hackney as my geographical focus, I set its boundaries as my physical limits^32 for East London. To organise my fieldwork diary, I initially met with Niti Acharya, the museum’s Manager and Emma Winch, the Heritage Learning Manager at a local café in February 2017. There it was decided that I would primarily liaise with Emma, after which she sent an email to the other members of the museum team, Josie Stevens, Rebecca Odell, Linda Sydow and Elena Grippino.

During my time with Hackney Museum, I was given a security badge enabling me unfettered access to the office. I observed and supported the staff in its daily engagement and curatorial practices that led to the development of its various community workshops, exhibitions and the radical education project, Antiuniversity Now.

The museum’s initial six-person team would later grow to include a new interim manager named Hana Dethlefsen who provided cover while Niti left on maternity leave. The team was also joined by temporary members like freelance curator and Project Manager, Jacoba Mijnssen who was assigned the task of building a permanent exhibition in Hackney Town Hall’s 1930s vaults; the scholar-activist Janine Francois who was employed to deliver its seasonal ‘Black’ History sessions; and several collection volunteers on the museum’s apprenticeship scheme.

I use the real names of those working at the Museum in this study as anonymising the members of such a small team with clear public roles would be

^32 I only crossed this line when meetings and events with my interlocutors called for me to do so.
impossible. In situations where people have spoken to me off the record, especially council workers outside the museum, I have omitted names or used pseudonyms, but for most of my time in the field, people communicated with me on the understanding that I would not conceal their identities. This means I used the same titles and names that the staff used to address each other. In this, it is a similar method as that used by the anthropologist and museologist Sharon Macdonald who when conducting ethnography at the Science Museum had to interview well-known figures and people working in public institutions (2002:13).

To keep everyone informed as to my activities, Emma shared a calendar outlining the museum’s scheduled team meetings, reviews, guided tours, public events, community workshops and planning sessions that I would be observing. Alongside these I was also invited to witness several new and ongoing council projects. Emma copied me into all relevant emails, and in instances where I would be doing tasks like observing interviews for posts, Niti cleared my access with the council’s Human Resources department.

On a weekly basis I observed the museum’s staple of activities which included sessions around themes such as ESOL learning; a photography workshop on “race” and place; its apprentice training scheme programme, as well as a series of induction sessions for new staff members to Hackney Council called the “People’s History of Hackney”. In October 2017, I started spending a few hours on the front desk each morning, working with the staff on reception and facing the public.

Some projects involved working with the Hackney Archives team. For instances such as this, Niti collaborated with me on a more formal script to share with the museum’s partners, instructing them to contact her if they had queries about my presence at “meetings with Museum staff and partners [to] take observational notes, photos and some film footage for a documentary towards his research”. Some of the meetings took place in the museum, others, especially training sessions, annual parties and award ceremonies for the team and their council colleagues were in nearby venues. This included the Town Hall, cafes, restaurants, churches, theatres, cinemas, pubs, archives and other museums.
I also observed exhibition launches attended by the public and politicians, namely the Mayor and his cabinet members. This is a good point at which to state that while the museum is a heritage institution, as the cultural arm of Hackney Council it sits within its Neighbourhoods and Housing Directorate. With the managerial team all being employed as council officers, I was also able to observe, and with certain projects, I was formally invited to participate with the local authority in its capacity as a governmental institution.

The following are of some of the projects led by or organised with various members (typically Emma or Rebecca) of the Hackney Museum team that I observed. Most ran concurrently during the time I was doing fieldwork and there were many more. I make an explicit reference to principle, external partners and those projects where I actively collaborated in the process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Project Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2017</td>
<td>Challenging 2007: Representation and Remembrance</td>
<td>A project utilising approaches to commemorating the history of African enslavement to further understanding the historical, political and cultural dimensions of the role of representation and remembrance in the classroom. External organising participants include Lucy Capes and students (Hackney B Six college), Katie Donington and Kristy Warren the University of Nottingham and myself as an active collaborator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2017 – June 2018</td>
<td>Antiuniversity Now</td>
<td>A radical education project based on the countercultural project in 1968. Utilising anarchist principles of organisation, its annual festival features a mixture of activist and art-based workshops, talks, walks and sessions. External organising participants include the Antiuniversity organising team led by Shiri Shalmy and myself as an active collaborator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2017 – Nov 2017</td>
<td>British Red Cross Project</td>
<td>Designing a collaborative project exploring the role the British Red Cross have played in the movement of refugees in and out of Hackney over time. External organising participants were Alasdair Brooks (British Red Cross) and Dr. Sarah Rhodes (UAL Central Saint Martins). Funded by a grant from the Museum University Partnership Initiative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I was encouraged to become actively engaged in those seeking to address issues like the socio-political inequalities faced by young ‘black’ men.
### Table 1: A selection of Hackney Museum Projects that I observed during May 2017 - June 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Project Description</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| June 2017 - May 2018 | **Making Her Mark: Exhibition**  
The main exhibition for the Hackney Museum in 2017 told the 100-year story of female-led activism in Hackney from 1918. It was co-curated with the East End Women’s Museum and supported by women’s history sessions and a Women Advisory Panel drawn from women in the community to assist with the shape and direction of its development. Some of the external organising participants included Sarah Jackson (East End Women’s Museum) and Ngozi Fulani (Sistah Space). |
| June 2017 - May 2018 | **LGBT+ policy working group**  
Consultation with a young LGBT+ group, feeding into council policy and organising exhibitions “Out and About” and “From Bedroom to Battleground” at Sutton House and the Hackney Museum. External participants included the artist and activist Liv Wynter, Young people from Project Indigo (off Centre), Sutton House and Hackney Council. |
| June 2017 | **Refugee Week**  
Series of events providing resources for school and ESOL teachers. External organising partners included Dr Eithne Nightingale (Child Migrant Stories), Maurice Okechukwu Nwokeji, a local musician and child refugee, children and teachers from schools in the borough. |
| June 2017 - Nov 2017 | **Improving outcomes for Young Black Men**  
This 12-year program initiated by the Council includes a series of meetings, workshops, research symposiums and consultations with Hackney’s voluntary services and statutory bodies. It is a multi-agency project, co-led and supported by Hackney Council and designed to reduce socio-economic challenges face by young men of African heritage. External organising partners included Hackney Council, Young Hackney, staff and students from local schools, voluntary community-based youth groups, HCVS and myself as an active collaborator. |
| October 2017 - Jan 2018 | **Black History Month Season**  
This involved interviewing for a practitioner in June, hosting a teacher’s forum to ascertain what resources would be beneficial for their students and curating “Island to Island: Journeys through the Caribbean”. An exhibition exploring Hackney’s links to the Caribbean going over sixty years, through a series of photographs and personal narratives. External partners involved photographer Tim Smith, Janine Francis and the local elders consultative group. |
|  | **The Municipal Museum (Vaults)**  
This involved the construction of a new exhibition showcasing the history of Hackney Town Hall and legitimate processes of democratic participation in civic life. External partners involved Jacoba Mijnssen, volunteer Naheed Bilgrami and Hackney Council. |
During my time in the field, I recorded footage of all these projects and conducted semi-structured interviews with many of the Hackney Museum staff and their collaborative partners involved in community engagement and activist-orientated projects. This frequently took me beyond the museum world and into the domain of local government and the various communities of activist practice. Irrespective of whether I was engaging with young people on road, or politicians in their offices, most of my interviews lasted an hour and were located at a site of the interviewee’s choosing. I also spent a lot of time following and actively supporting Emma and independent curator, Shiri Shalmy as co-founders of Antiuniversity Now (AU). This involved my attending all of the informal gatherings occurring at Shiri’s home or in public spaces and following the vast majority of AU interactions that occurred online.

As well as capturing ethnographic data during my time in the field I also read through several decades worth of council minutes (1964-1987) at the Hackney Archives located at the Dalston CLR James Library. This local authority repository managed by Etienne Joseph is widely regarded as Hackney Museums’ sister organisation. The archives store the Council’s records and local literature preserving and providing access to the borough’s socio-political history. I perceived those I examined as the Council’s sacred instruments, by that I mean they came in the form of numerous original documents, meticulously preserved and bound in thick burgundy covers containing hundreds of pages. As material artefacts inscribed with semiotic structures, they are a vital historic record symbolic of the Council’s public activities, authority and identity.

In line with my decolonising approach, I was seeking not only official accounts of events, but the ‘radical recontextualizations’ (Hull 2012:24) revealing how it did its business through studying the form, framing and indexing of not only now, but the past. Recognising the conflict between the council’s public persona and the reality of those living under its authority, I also sought to identify any omissions and moral ambiguities masked within the hegemonic forms of histories I was examining. Abercrombie reminds us of the need to regard such data through a critical lens that interrogates the writing of any ‘ethnohistory’ through a colonising lens, masking
resistance and barriers to those seeking to have their indigenous voice included in state archives (1997). My routine included booking a session, requesting a particular year to study, briefly waiting as each item was pulled from the archives and made available for me to scrutinise, usually for three hours at a time.
Argument and Research Questions

In this thesis I argue there is an evolving form of cultural gentrification which is displacing cultural symbols and identities of socio-economically vulnerable minority communities. This has led to the loss of political capital of those resisting their eventual replacement by privileged civil society actors who dominate the public sphere. This has been challenged by a corresponding evolving form of cultural activism rooted in localism formulated by an inter-class, cooperative community of activist practice. As a collective they continue to challenge local authority policy through formal democratic discourse and acts of civil disobedience, however as grassroot outsiders they simultaneously employ the informal coöptation of institutions to express their agency in countercultural form throughout the public realm.

As such there are three fundamental issues this research seeks answers to about the use of governmental resources to engage in acts of cultural activism. In particular, those that seek to challenge the forms of socio-political spatial displacement that leads to ‘a state of infrastructural and institutional abandonment’ for socio-politically vulnerable, minority communities (Wacquant 2016).

Questions

1. **Gentrification**: How do processes of urban regeneration affect cultural representation and political activism as neighbourhood demographics change?

2. **Institutions**: How do museum insiders on a local government payroll practice municipal forms of cultural activism without being co-opted? Can insider/outsider participation with formal and informal modes of institutional interactions deliver change to organisational policy and culture?

3. **Activism**: How does the production of critical pedagogy in cultural form help people understand and develop their capacities as agents of social and political transformation?
Thesis Outline

This introduction has outlined the project, my positionality, methodology and time in the field. It sets out the scope and socio-political background of this inquiry and establishes the central themes of this project.

The thesis is then divided into eight chapters:

Chapter 2 provides the conceptual framework of this project alongside definitions of the key terms used throughout. It offers an overview of institutional activism and museological theory. It looks at how sociological and anthropological academic inquiry into activism is discussed in relation to local government, museums and various communities. It also reviews the relevant theories of governmental activism and curatorial activism emphasising insider and outsider cooperation and co-optation for local impacts.

Chapter 3 introduces us to activist communities living and operating within the London Borough of Hackney. It provides historical background to the recent wave of gentrification present in the neighbourhood and highlights how it is shaping the identity and practices of residents as they respond to what they regard social, economic and symbolic forms of violence. Moreover, this chapter introduces us to a variety of “outsiders” engaged in cultural activism with whom the local authority must engage with to practice its institutional activism. This includes young people who eschew the boroughs existing social movements and members of counterpublics engaged in urban social movements.

Chapter 4 provides a historical backdrop to Hackney Council, a local authority with long tradition of municipal socialism. It uses a museological lens to explore its genesis as a “campaigning borough” as it uses and institutionalises cultural forms of activism to promote its socially progressive values and agenda.

Chapter 5 details the history of the Hackney Museum, its foundation and the trajectory of its museological practices designed not only to represent neighbourhood stakeholders, but also to secure their social rights through the cultural domain. The
chapter observes the impact of council policy and financial constraints placed upon the museum’s organisational culture and structure.

Chapter 6 presents examples of the Hackney Museum as a public sphere placing activism on display. Through an engagement with its exhibitory output from 2017, it explores how the museum’s curatorial activism provides opportunities for civic and civil society to engage with countercultural perspectives. It begins with an ethnographic discussion of the museum’s formal and informal consultation process. Moreover, the curatorial teams flexible use of formal and informal space for mediated democratic discourse and institutional interactions. The chapter then presents two samples of the Hackney Museum’s contemporary cause-based collecting in the form of the Making her Mark exhibition and the From Bedroom to Battleground display exhibited in its Platform space.

Chapter 7 extends the review of the museums cultural output with an examination of the role museum insiders played in the development of the countercultural Antiuniversity Now (AU) project. It follows how an institutional collaboration between the Hackney Museum and University College London led to an act of institutional activism founding an annual, radical education festival. Through the AU, the museum sponsors and engages in various informal partnerships with grassroots community groups and individuals. It closes by introducing the concept of Exhibitionary Praxis as a form of cultural activism enabling social action to occur outside the public sphere in which the museum operates.

Finally, in Chapter 8, the conclusion, I return to the themes raised in this introduction and issues raised during my observation and participation in the project. In line with my decolonising methodology it is a reflective take on institutional forms of activism emerging via cultural activism. It discusses the risks of formal coöptation when state funded insiders partner with grassroots outsiders from socio-politically vulnerable communities. The thesis conclusion includes practical suggestions on how other institutional cultural activists can deliver effective exhibitionary praxis that prioritise the holistic development of source community relationships over the presentation of their ‘things’.
Chapter 2 Institutional Activism

This chapter discusses the literature on the history, form and practice of Institutional Activism. It will also introduce and clarify the key terms that are used throughout the thesis. This includes Activism, in its governmental, institutional and cultural forms. Museums as public institutions engaged in practices of Curatorial Activism and Institutional Critique. It investigates the concept of Cultural Confinement, Coöptation and the paradoxes of being a full-time Cultural Activist on a local government payroll.

It also introduces the authors proposal that activism is the act of perpetually instigating processes of ethical social action within unjust social environments. Moreover, the process of individuals enacting moral change and manufacturing sustained hope across their life course (Nolas, Varvantakis, and Aruldoss 2017), is rendered as important, if not more so than the immediate results.

Alongside these concepts, the chapter also contains summaries of the collective identities used to define the identities of actors belonging to the community of practice this inquiry is based on. This includes members from civic and Civil Society, Counterpublics and Urban Social Movements. In examining the characteristics of governmental and museum activism that are often closely interrelated, this chapter offers a critique of their shared use of civil society, both as a driver of and target for, participatory democratic discourses and social change.

Activism and Institutions

Activism

When in 1902 the German philosopher Rudolph Eucken (1986-1926)34, first coined the term “activism”, he defined it as a ‘a profession of faith’ (1912:xiii, 255–261) requiring an ethical character in ‘a revolt against mediocracy’ (Gibson 1907:171–173). Eucken was unequivocal. To be engaged in activism was to be involved in a process that transcended romanticism - the artistic and intellectual movement of his time that emerged to oppose the rationalism embedded in enlightenment thinking of the 18th

34 Eucken received the 1908 Nobel Prize for Literature “in recognition of his earnest search for truth...”
Activism and Institutions

century. Eucken argued it was necessary for individuals to proactively adopt activism as a form of lifestyle to secure freedom and independence. Change he argued, could not, and would not, materialise from mere existence. It required a ceaseless commitment to ethical living that ‘neither a sudden resolution nor a mere incitement of power’ could deliver (1912:255).

His was a definition with strong echoes of the German cultural critic Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) Übermensch (overman) theory which stipulated that ‘without greatness life has no point, even if greatness is beyond our reach’ (Tanner 2000). Nietzsche’s solution suggested that individually creative men should aspire to achieve an almost superhuman status through activist-like behaviour. The seeds of this Übermensch-type doctrine appears in Niccolò Machiavelli’s (1469-1527) instructions for the Prince on the acquisition of virtù (a spirit of greatness) and its institutionalisation (Skinner 2000; Dombowsky 2004). Despite the amorality underpinning these ideas, both theories which focused on the individual actions of elitist men would later give way to the collective acts of publics and indeed, governments led by economic and politically empowered elites. Several centuries later, activism would come to be defined as stated in the Encyclopaedia of Activism and Social Justice (2007) as;

‘... action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine. The action might be door-to-door canvassing, alternative radio, public meetings, rallies, or fasting. The cause might be women’s rights, opposition to a factory, or world peace.’ (Martin 2007:19)

Note, such action is no longer recognised here as a solitary pursuit. This is despite the presence of individuals, be they the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s (1891-1937) ‘organic intellectuals’ or the German sociologist Max Weber’s (1864-1920) charismatic leaders emerging to lead governmental institutions, civil society or subaltern groups in opposition to state ideology. Instead, contemporary activism is framed as people joining collectively in an overlap of interests often facilitated by political organisations or cultural institutions engaging in the representation of the symbolic and tangible manifestations of social life.
Activism and Institutions

Social Movements

‘Institutional activists are social movement participants who occupy formal statuses within the government and who pursue social movement goals through conventional bureaucratic channel’ (Santoro and McGuire 1997:504)

Ralph Nicholas’s (1973:64) annual review of social and political movements provides a useful template on the constitution of most activist movements today. Using the lens of political anthropology, he presents them as moral factions united around ideology with a form that is often structurally simple and unstable. Such movements, he theorises, function in a contradictory manner that can be considered both ‘disruptive’ of stable social order and ‘adaptive’ to changing social order. His mapping remains a useful guide illustrating the complexity of representation involved whenever groups of people organise for social reform or transformation.

Social movements also have a role in the macro-political system (Kelly, Petrow, and Soule 2010). This can be observed in the long-standing convention of scholars framing social movement organisations (SMO) as an extra-institutional means to resolve political grievances informally. However, in conceptualising the leaders, participants and organisations of those seeking social justice outcomes primarily as “outsiders” a problem arises. The presence and work of governmental, institutional and organisational insiders are masked.

Insiders

In a review calling for us to reconsider how we frame insider/outsider actors, David Pettinicchio defines the conceptual dichotomy between state and activist as being based on a narrow premise that claims institutional activists ‘cannot be both part of political institutions and also be affected by these very same political institutions’ (2012:500). To date, sociological and rational choice conceptions of institutional agency have observed an extensive collection of insiders amass their collective power base in professional, political and public roles over time. In turn, grass-roots resistance to such agency is rendered through the prism of outsiders belonging to lingering social movements that are waiting for the chance to overturn a persistent state of defeat through continuous ‘anti’ or ‘counter’ strategies (Mottl 1980).
However, academic recognition of the overlap that exists between social movements, governmental and institutional activists is growing (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Indeed, writing on the topic of institutionalised politics, ‘movement insiders’ (Banaszak 2010:63) and urban counter politics, Jack Goldstone reminds us;

‘state institutions and parties are interpenetrated by social movements, often developing out of movements, in response to movements, or in close association with movements’ (Goldstone 2003).

This thesis which has a specific focus on curatorial forms of activism partially leans upon these fluid models of institutional activists as epitomised in the works of Charles Tilly (1978:52) and Paul Pierson (1994). Tilly drawing on theories of collective action defines them as those working within social movements by mobilising governmental or institutional resources and influencing its decision making processes in their favour. Pierson, approaches the concept of institutional activism from the opposite direction. Using the model of a state engaged in ‘retrenchment initiatives’ he suggests that current decision making can be influenced by creatively utilising the structures of political institutions for resistance through obfuscation, division and compensation (Pierson 1994:9,19-26).

If we synthesise these twin approaches described by Tilly and Pierson, we could conclude that institutional activists are insiders working on outsider causes (Pettinicchio 2012:502). Indeed, such an approach supports challenges to established resource mobilization theory (Santoro and McGuire 1997:504). Furthermore, alongside these established ideas there is also more recent literature on this phenomenon. Notably, third phase institutionalism:

‘[which] is the specific combination of formal and informal mechanisms that constrain political behaviour in different settings, and which may be both the object and the subject of attempts at change (however imperfect)” (Lowndes and Roberts 2013:55).

Concepts such as these which sit within political science literature document the presence of the outsider within. More importantly, they recognise there is a cumulative element of agency and power enabling a wide variety of different actors to produce effects which cannot be foreseen by any of those involved.
Hence, When Verhoeven and Duyvendak use terms like ‘contentious governance’ (2017:565–568) they do so in the aim of broadening our understanding that there is not a rigid divide between government and SMOs actors. Indeed, this inquiry investigates forms of curatorial practice that demonstrate renditions of polity members and activists as mutually exclusive concepts is a fallacy. Activist outcomes emerge from institutional bodies because activist intentions reside within institutional bodies, even governmental ones.

It is this latter concept and not the former which is most useful for this particular project examining the activities of a local authority and its cultural institution. In observing how various key actors with a shared strategic goal can devise a strategy across formal and informal domains, we can learn how personal and organisational networks both manage to reach their objectives.

**Community of Activists**

**Civil Society**

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas explains that civil society first emerged with the depersonalisation of state authority. Referring to Arendt’s theories on the rise of “the social” he concludes that the personal became political as the vast swathes of economic power that impacted on the life course of others became seen as publicly relevant (Mayer and Schoepflin 1989; Braungart and Braungart 1986). The activities of private individuals and their families did not become irrelevant; moreover, their influence and activities in an expanding market came under more scrutiny. As the economy became increasingly dominated by conformist materialism, the need for it to come under public supervision to secure the survival of human society increased (Habermas 1999:19).

However civil society is distinct from the state. John Keane, a leading scholar of political theory, defines it as an aggregation of institutions whose members are engaged in a complex array of non-state activities designed to affirm and develop their identity by placing limits on state action (1988:14).

This usage of the term ‘non-state’ as opposed to ‘anti-state’ is a crucial distinction for it offers us a useful moment to remember that there are variants to the
concept. For example, whereas in Antonio Gramsci’s theories he considered civil society and ‘the state’ - which he referred to as political society - as distinct entities, Gramsci argued that they both served hegemony. It is a provocative assertion but not without merit. According to Gramsci, civil societies’ intellectuals were state ‘deputies’ (1971:12) assigned the role of functioning as legal enforcers of the state’s coercive power. It was through their ‘exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government’ that the state disciplined those who through active or passive means did not consent to hegemonic commands or domination (Gramsci 1971).

This may be an uncomfortable postulate for many working within institutions with aspirations to facilitate social justice, yet it does not negate the validity or sentiment that the idiom; ‘the masters tools will never dismantle the masters house’ represents (Lorde 1984). For whilst civil society is frequently conceptualised as a network of clubs and voluntary associations based on civic, professional and cultural ties, this is too simplistic a rendition to capture its political character fully.

As the size of civil society increased, Eley argues one consequence was that they began to become both a training ground and source of power for an emergent “universal class” of bourgeois men who considered themselves fit to govern. Mainly consisting of members engaged with household life, economic and cultural production through voluntary associations. Moreover, a split emerged as some members were granted the legal guarantee to self-organise, and others not.

This tendency of civil society’s to include individuals and groups yet deny them the means to self-determine mirrors critiques of inclusion practise where ‘Diversity becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations’ (Ahmed 2012:34). Nevertheless, despite this inherent weakness, one core strength of civil society is that it possesses the capability to contain a plurality of public spheres even if on inequitable terms. Indeed, it is this ability of civil society to offer transcendent forms of sovereignty that led to the development of modern publics.
Counterpublics

In Francis Cody’s survey of the literature defining “publics” they are defined as the assembly of strangers ‘who mediate between state and society’ to discuss common mutual aid interests free from coercion (Cody 2011:39). Irrespective of whether their collective aims are emancipatory, radical or nationalist, publics - unlike civil society, requires no external source to validate their existence. However, if democracy is a crucial component and condition of social justice as Iris Marion Young asserts, then any democratic exclusion based on political differences services the omission of minority concerns.

‘The problem with interest-group pluralism is not, as some critics charge, that people promote their own interests. Rather, the normative defects of interest-group politics are, first, that the privatized form of representation and decisionmaking it encourages does not require these expressions of interests to appeal to justice, and, second, that inequality of resources, organization, and power allows some interests to dominate while others have little or no voice’ (Young 1990:92).

In which case, it must be argued that the moral value of delegating authority to governmental or civil society gatekeepers, is repudiated when denying members of publics and counterpublics their legitimate right to self-determine. In Gramscian theory, counterpublics contain the ‘organic intellectuals’ driven by counterhegemonic aims existing outside civil society and originating in the subaltern. Although usually excluded from the official representation of the democratic process, Fraser (1990:67) explains that these counterpublics act as discursive spaces of assembly where such counterdiscourses are conceived and circulated in a ‘contestatory function’.

Urban Social Movements

‘[Urban social movements] tends objectively towards the structural transformation of the urban system or towards a substantial modification of the power relations in the class struggle, that is to say, in the last resort, in the power of the state’ (Castells 1979:263)

It was the Spanish sociologist, Manuel Castells who coined the term “urban social movements” in the early 1970s. Comprised of a cacophony of insider and outsider identities, it was a movement that demanded radical changes in the social structures of political power.
The unifying belief of urban social movements was that conventional political participation and protest left the underlying structural contradictions in society intact. This meant that without adopting sustainable forms of ‘contentious collective action’ (Tarrow 2011:7–12) any gains made from established practices for social change would not be universally beneficial.

The “urban” agents who Castells referred to in the movement were mainly working class or holding subordinate positions in relation to the economic, political and ideological organisation of society. Urban social movement members disagree with solutions proposed by civil society whom they charge with evaluating their problems from the viewpoint of the existing ‘social order’ rather than from the needs of those it disadvantages.

In his review of urban social movements, the sociologist and expert on state policy Chris Pickvance (2003:104) suggest many of those adopt it as a symbol. He contends that when scholars write about the urban social movement, it identifies them as being distrustful of established political parties, voluntary associations, pressure groups and NGO’s.

Since then, the term has gone through many iterations, several by Castells himself who in 1983 insisted they must be inter-class, autonomous from political parties and always tied to practice necessary for achieving results (Lowe 1986:5). It is these traits that make urban social movements inherently activist in character, for as Eucken argued, understanding activism requires conceiving it as an urgent, ethничal demand that is distinct from voluntarism and pragmatism to which it appears similar (Eucken 1912:256).

It is a postulation that suggests that at the concept’s core, remains a stable interdisciplinary conception, a progressive idea or symbol that emphasises the urban social movement as a partnership of non-institutionalised actors in collaboration with political groups working for radical structural changes ignored by existing social movements (Pickvance 2003:102–6).
Governmental Activism

Verhoeven and Duyvendak define the phenomenon of ‘governmental activism’ as:

‘politicians, civil servants and governmental players engaging with citizens, SMOs/NGOs and sometimes businesses in contentious claim-making to alter or redress policies proposed by other governmental players’ (Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2017:565).

It is a complex rendition complicated by the fact that describing a government worker as “activist” is likely to be considered heresy. However, within this broader category of institutionalised activism, it is municipal politics that typically, but not exclusively, influence the usage and distribution of power in specific localities. Moreover, in defining the role of political struggles as both a formal and informal phenomenon in public and private life, Adrian Leftwich declares that politics in institutional settings such as these embody the “transformatory” capacity of social agents, agencies and institutions; it is not about government or government alone’ (Held and Leftwich 1984:144).

His theory is one of many that forms the glue enabling us to conceptually attempt to bridge the two domains of government and “activism”. Weber’s concepts of bureaucratic rationalisation as ‘a revolutionary force of the first rank against tradition’ (Weber, 1972: 657, as cited in Tilly 1978) does the same. Both theorists use frameworks that allow them to see grassroots participation as having a real effect on institutional processes for social change. What makes the activism governmental, is that it occurs even if bottom-up perspectives are not at the centre.

Recognising this distinction is key to understanding the behaviour of Hackney Council which as I will demonstrate in Chapter 4, identifies as a “campaigning” local authority. By utilising institutional procedures, policies and creative interpretations of legislation, council officers can exercise control over the activities of other governmental actors bound by the rule of law (Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2017:575).

In Riverstone-Newell’s exploration of how local government officials use ‘local activism as a source of power to promote and defend local interests within the intergovernmental system’, Riverstone-Newell recalls the 2004 actions of San Francisco’s former mayor, Gavin Newsom. In defiance of state law, Newsom had
engaged in acts of “uncooperative federalism” to issue an executive order permitting same-sex couples to legally marry and officiate the first such marriage in the country (Riverstone-Newell 2012:401-402,407). Here, the term “uncooperative” is deployed as a neutral euphemism for political transgression.

In this example we can see that the boundaries of governmental activism are not limited by laws and constitution. Instead, those utilising the practice can actively engage in the process of resistance and reform through a pluralistic mixture of ordinary people, cultural and political institutions allied with governmental actors. It is then, as a unified collective instead of disparate groups, that they then use combative activities incorporating practices of coercion, persuasion and payment (Lowndes and Roberts 2013:10, 108–110).

These latter tactics can be seen in this case study from 2003, when the local government of Arcata, California chose to back its residents by challenging the rights violations contained within the national government’s Patriot Act. Employing active resistance, the municipal body passed legislation that criminalised local officials who enforced sections of the act. As well as that, the local authority was also able to add economic coercion to its campaign by adhering to an existing policy that meant any officials breaking its law would also be subject to $57 fine (Riverstone-Newell 2012:407).

Concerning Policy
However, it is wise to exercise caution when attempting to classify such phenomenon as activist. The mere act of a local authority working in partnership with outsiders, SMOs or political contenders does not always constitute an act of governmental activism. Indeed, there are times when sociology’s term of ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ is a more appropriate alternative (Reichman and Canan 2003:58). Instead of depicting institutional insiders that utilise their social capital to realise social change as activists, ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ refers to ‘state actor-social movement coalitions in creating positive (my emphasis) policy outcomes’ (Stearns and Almeida 2004:478).

35 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/09/abuse-patriot-act-must-end
However, the challenge here is that without both insider and outsider actors seeking the same strategic objective, such interactions can and often result in adverse effects.

When the British Government passed the Localism Act 2011, it declared its function as being to empower local authorities to creatively meet the needs of local people. To help promote the initiative, *Locality*, a state-sponsored charity referred to a partnership between Southwark Council and the Southwark Planning Network (SPN), as a positive example of local authorities being able to ‘strengthen organising capacity between local groups and activists’ (Locality 2019:19).

Laudable intentions perhaps, nevertheless, this is not governmental activism.

SPN was a local group that emerged from residents, workers and traders who had organised themselves in resistance to the effects of regeneration in the South London borough. Southwark Council had sold the Heygate Estate to the international property developer Lendlease for £50 million and as a result over three thousand council tenants were forced to evacuate their homes. These actions which disproportionately affected those living on low incomes or in precarious employment gave rise to claims of a new accumulative form of state-led “social cleansing” (Lees 2013).

In a bid to stop the disruption caused by anti-gentrification protests, the local authority engaged in formal interactions with the group. Within two years the Elephant & Castle shopping centre was closed and prepared for demolition and

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36 In its literature divulging the rationale behind the legislation, the government explained the purpose of the Localism Act was to provided councils with ‘new ways to drive down costs’.
37 The charity has received millions annually from government contracts and grants - https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/1036460/financial-history
38 The SPN is a mutual aid group and not engaged in anti-gentrification protest like other groups existing in the borough. https://www.peckhamvision.org/wiki/Southwark_Planning_Network#Southwark_Planning_Network
39 By anti-gentrification groups like the “35% campaign”, and “Latin Elephant and Southwark Defend Council Housing”
40 Of course, correlation does not mean causation, but there was an overall reduction in SPN’s SMO type actions as it became embroiled in bureaucracy
41 The process started in October 2020
where there were once 1194 council flats on the Heygate Estate\textsuperscript{42}, there are now none. This form of gentrification which pushes residents with insecure tenancies out of the borough is not unique to Southwark and as you will see in Chapter 3, is a phenomenon that features in Hackney too.

What all the literature on these governmental forms of social action reveal is that for any form of institutional activism, to not just be a creative expression of policy, it is a mandatory pre-requisite that the strategies and objectives of both insiders and outsiders align with each other. In this instance they did not, and Southwark Council’s objectives displaced that of its residents and traders. Commenting on the issue the urban geographer, Professor Loretta less writes:

‘The state, as we have shown here, plays an active role in coordinating new forms of dispossession and diminishing the power of the poor in favor of the rich.’ (Lees and White 2020:1718)

Shared Ethics
Panelli and Larner suggest this displacement of social capital approach where the political agency of outsiders is so dramatically captured en passant (in passing) is not inevitable. When an advisory group in Aotearoa New Zealand suggested that the government ‘should develop multiagency responses to cross-cutting and ‘wicked’ social policy issues’\textsuperscript{43} (2010:1354), the state responded with The Stronger Communities Action Fund (SCAF) to finance innovative community solutions to existing social issues.

While there were residual issues of distrust and divergence on the details of insider and outsider objectives, both wanted similar outcomes. Consequently, various government actors and community activists came together and agreed to seven pilot sites across New Zealand in areas blighted with high levels of unemployment, poor schooling and substandard housing. A local authority was then typically assigned the status of fund-holder as grants were allocated to existing grassroots organisations,\textit{ iwi

\textsuperscript{42} The estate was demolished between 2011-20014

\textsuperscript{43} A response to its formal Statement of Government Intentions for an Improved Community–Government Relationship
Governmental Activism

or fono\textsuperscript{44} to address issues as directed by members of the community. It is a method similar to that used by the Hackney Council for Voluntary Service (HCVS) described in Chapter 3

Panelli and Larner (2010:1358–1359) report that the resulting collaboration, which included support for counterhegemonic aspirations, enabled a different, hybrid paradigm. Working in this way provided government actors to support unfamiliar forms of community development to emerge, despite any initial resistance. A similar outcome is depicted with the Antiuniversity project in later chapters.

Morality

In closing this section on governmental forms of activism it feels only right to touch briefly upon the topic of morality and law. For despite any virtuous intent, coalitions between the powerful and powerless, always carry risks of an ethical nature. In using the resources of institutions to assert any message forcefully, for example, the concept of human rights as a universal truth, there exists the possibility of doing violence to the moral convictions of those within its domain. According to Kant, for the moral value of any doctrine to hold:

‘its law must be valid, not merely for men but for all rational creatures generally, not merely under certain contingent conditions or with exceptions... For with what right could we bring into unbounded respect as a universal precept for every rational nature that which perhaps holds only under the contingent conditions of humanity... if they were merely empirical and did not take their origin wholly a priori from pure but practical reason?’ (Kant 2009:28)

With its reliance on the inescapable nature of pure reason, Kant’s argument obliges any governmental authority ceding to his logic, the responsibility of delivering services to taxpayers that serve everyone with equality. Hence when social movements or community groups emerge advocating the unrepresented concerns of groups disadvantaged by current legislation, Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’ (2009:36) stipulates moral action is taken to eradicate the inequitable loss of others, even if felt by a minority of constituents.

\textsuperscript{44} Refers to Maori tribal organisations and Pacific community forums.
To do otherwise as occurred with European states protecting the interest of slavers in the 18th century would result in what we could term a *moral deficit*. Indeed, correctly applying this in the context of today’s local authorities, would sanction municipal actors engaging in an institutionally activist manner to use their power to oppose laws increasing social inequalities even when legislated by the central government.

“There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right.”

Martin Luther King Jr. (1991)

The existence of UK based insiders with access to the apparatus of government who wilfully misinterpret bureaucratic policy to improve the status of socially disadvantaged groups is not remarkable. As demonstrated by the examples shared in Chapter 4, Professor Paul Gilroy defines a variant of the phenomenon operating in London in the 1980s as a process of ‘Municipal anti-racism’ (2002:136–148). This makes it somewhat regrettable that the historical trajectory of similar actions today is often forgotten and perceived mainly as “woke” ultra-vires appropriation of institutional resources for ethical outcomes.

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45 During 1781-82, Kant simultaneously gave tacit support to the enslavement of African people and colonial rule; “The white race possesses all incentives and talents in itself... The race of Negroes can be educated, but only as slaves... The [indigenous] Americans cannot be educated, they care about nothing and are lazy.”

46 Refers to a state of constant awareness of matters involving social injustice, especially racism/Afrophobia
Governmentalisation of Culture

Prior to the seventeenth century, art and culture had formed part of feudal and monarchical systems designed to project representations of their authority as absolutist states. It was the development of the liberal public sphere which emerged from civil society that would see this orientation move from primarily serving the ‘educated strata’ to holding an integral role in developing and promoting the necessity of a welfare state. Habermas named this adaptation of cultural institutions for the purpose of social and cultural critique across eighteenth century European nations, repräsentative Öffentlichkeit (representative publicness) (Habermas 1999:xv, 1–26; Bennett 1995a:25).

However, this new rendition of what constituted being “public” while influential was not without limits. For those who could, the act of communicating and being present within this new “public” sphere was regarded as a mark of social status restricted to a specific class of men. Furthermore, as bourgeois culture assimilated the doctrines of humanism, representative publicness came to mean utilising the symbols and practices of high culture as an engine of racialised class production.

‘the masses are willing to submit to slavery of any kind, if only the higher-ups constantly legitimate themselves as higher, as born to command’ (Nietzsche 1974:107)

Museum Reform

The bridging of publics and public space in a progressive manner would require radical change that would develop sites like museums into components of a newly constituted public sphere. Accordingly, it was during the 19th century that Britain first started deploying cultural institutions to deliver “activist” social outcomes. Collectively Henry Cole, John Ruskin and the Smithsonian Secretary George Brown Goode recognised the utility of culture as a potential instrument of radical social change (Bennett 1995b:862). They proposed that as engines of ‘passionless reform’, museums, libraries, galleries and parks could enlighten the general public. Such cultural institutions they argued would encourage the public to avoid drunken revelry and enable them to consciously choose to live a life of moral restraint and industrious behaviour. Goode would argue that museums in particular, supplied a peerless service
only existing amongst highly enlightened people in the greatest centres of civilisation (Bennett 1995a:21; Goode 1895:7).

The British sociologist, Tony Bennet, suggests that this deliberate ‘govermentalization of culture’ as a practice of reform emerging in the early nineteenth century was not motivated by humanitarian values. Instead it was a coercive tactic to transform the morals and character of the population using the power of representation:

‘The govermentalization of culture... [was] aimed precisely at... [securing] enduring and lasting effects by using culture as a resource through which those exposed to its influence would be led to ongoingly and progressively modify their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.’ (Bennett 1995a:24)

To understand this we need to examine the historical abuse of governmental authority. The French philosopher and political activist, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) has argued that political elites had found they needed alternative methods of securing public compliance. Punishing the transgressive members of society into compliance through penal institutions was perceived as a poor economy of power. Terrorising lawbreakers through use of judicial torture not only consistently failed to produce knowledge capable of deterring the transgressions of others but also wasted human capital which could otherwise be rendered productive. Reformers, radical and otherwise sought to transform museums into public spaces capable of imprinting upon visitors what was considered acceptable models of public conduct. In this aspect museums were being refashioned as ‘positive schools’ designed to create a new form of civilisation.

One of the early attempts by museums and galleries to build a didactic relationship with social publics occurred when in 1854, Henry Cole, the first director of the South Kensington Museum wrote in the First report of the Department of Science and Art:

‘I venture to think that unless museums and galleries are made subservient to purposes of education, they dwindle into very sleepy and useless institutions’ (Saumarez Smith 1989:8–9).

While Cole’s words underscored his commitment to eradicating stagnant museological practice from seventeenth-century doctrine, they mask the fact that
throughout the breadth of its existence, the public museum has always been an institution representing a particular type of political ideology.

During the sixteenth century, the sector saw a miscellaneous mix of objects displayed in “cabinet of curiosities” that represented the worldly acquisitions of royalty, merchants and affluent members of society. However, as these private collections which included art and cultural artefacts passed into public custody, a predominant focus on their aesthetic value gave way to their pedagogical value.

By the end of the nineteenth century, cultural reformers like Thomas Greenwood saw high culture as a ‘civic engine’ capable of exerting a civilising, crime reducing influence on the working class. Beauty was regarded as democratic in character and capable of manipulating those exposed to pleasing aesthetic forms ‘to follow out the suggestiveness conveyed to our minds by the pictures’ (Greenwood 1888:10). As a result, social elites convinced of this theory, adapted museums to function as institutions of cultural indoctrination. These once selective, public institutions were refashioned into a space where the “low-other” that constituted the bulk of the general public could learn by imitation.

This was a significant shift in traditional museological approach, for up to that point, the display and organisation of valued objects in collections had been designed to transmit art and cultural artefacts as accessories of power for viewing by a small, privileged elite. Indeed, even today, the social functioning of museums and especially art galleries continue to straddle the categories of homogenisation and differentiation (Bennett 1995a:27–28). Eileen Hooper-Greenhill argues that museum’s function in a contradictory manner serving as both an ‘elite temple of the arts and that of a utilitarian instrument for democratic education’ (1989:63).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that all displayed cultural objects have a functional purpose even when it is politically at odds with the values of the site hosting it. Indeed the philosopher Jacques Rancière defines all art as being capable of articulating artistic voices to create an understanding of community concepts and identities (Rancière 2009:57–60). Moreover, it is this reality that ensures that once the pedagogical purpose of any museum has been realised, it is no longer an apolitical
Governmentalisation of Culture

entity. In his manual on museum administration Goode would define the aims of “the modern Museum idea” as the advancement of knowledge, research and preservation, curatorial arrangement, learning and public accessibility (Goode 1895:32–33). This nineteenth-century reformation of the sector is in many ways the very first “new” museology.

The New Museology

The 1960s and 70s were a traumatic time for the cultural sector. It was a turbulent era marred by swathes of social unrest challenging capitalist violence and political oppression across the globe. Although acts of civil disobedience and mass protests have made a regular appearance across time, the historians Akira Iriye and Rana Mitter (2008) place special emphasis on “1968”. They describe that particular year as a transnational phenomenon occurring across Europe, driving ‘profound political transformation’ alongside a cultural revolution. As attitudes towards public institutions turned hostile, museums had to respond to growing accusations that they were elitist and inaccessible.

‘people considered... museum collections as old-fashioned rubbish, and museum specialists as odd specimens of the human species, fossilized in their childish curiosity for strange objects’ (Engel 1962:124)

At this time, museums were funded through a collection of public fees, and various private and public sponsors. The increasing clamour about their value and hence, sustainability, often caused problematic conflicts of interests between the institution, Trustees and its other paymasters (Vergo 1989:43). Museums came under increasing pressure to market themselves as cultural marketplaces and architectural showplaces. Worse still, they adopted media grabbing strategies such as the use of infotainment branded ‘blockbuster’ shows as a funding device (Starn 2005:91). However, throughout all this, the sector continued searching for a new curatorial approach not only to survive but to affirm their relevance to society.

Museums had still not shed their reputations as sites of hegemony reinforcing existing sociocultural topologies that endorsed social inequality based on race, gender, class and power (Barrett 2011:3–4). They were also being increasingly labelled as ‘museum[s] of violence’, attracting calls for object repatriation and restitution as the
illegal traffic in cultural property, became a major threat to the cultural heritage of economically maldeveloped47 nations (Brulon Soares 2010; Varine 1996:23).

After reflections by the likes of museologists Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1988), John Kinard (1987), Nick Merriman (1989), Sue Kirby (2003), Philip Wright (1989), Gaby Porter (2003), Robert Lumley (1988), Tony Bennett (2003) and many, many others, a new practice on how to advance the visitor experience of museum-goers emerged. The “New Museology” as coined by Peter Vergo (1989) would embody a Gramscian understanding that ‘folklore’ contained a serious conception of the world and life. It would not be easy. To do this would require a museological revolt that ensured these narratives and artefacts from subaltern communities were no longer reduced to a subordinate, often romanticised, anomalous component of a rational world (Gramsci 1985:189).

Instead of relying primarily on displays of spectacle to attract visitors, the New Museology would have a focus on exhibitions that improved public education and increased accessibility. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009) describes this type of museological transformation as driving a move towards ‘the emancipated spectator’. Instead of audiences participating in modes of exhibitionary ritual as passive recipients told what to think by explanatory labels, there is a ‘creation of places where works… are no longer restrained to a specific audience or a specific function’ (Rancière et al. 2012:292–293).

This new form of practice which sought to advocate multiple ways of interpreting the world and its history, emphasised the importance of community consultation (Barrett 2011:3). Curators, now augmented by the presence of education and community liaison staff had to find new ways to help create and market exhibitions for a wider audience with diverse interests (Vergo 1989:41).

It took almost ten years for the sector to fully integrate the New Museology (Varine 1996:24) principles into its practices. However, when it did, museums

47 Through a stream of external historical interventions such as enslavement, colonisation, neocolonisation, globalisation and resource conflicts
worldwide started shifting away from the “old” practices they had been tied to. In no longer being so strictly bound to preserve cultural hegemony, many chose to liberate their purpose and collection policy from serving outcomes based on established political, ideological and aesthetic concerns.

The New Museology saw the cultural sector embrace a shift in theory and practice that included a debate about the purpose of museums and their methods. The subsequent widespread adoption of the concept saw the development of new curatorial practices and communication techniques explicitly designed to enhance and increase visitor participation (Karp and Lavine 1991; Macdonald 1998). Similarly, changes to the pedagogical approach and interpretative strategies of museums, enabled them to counter some of the repressive aspects of their social role with a more scholarly practice. To avoid the continuation of objects exhibited ex-situ as a form of intellectual censorship, the cultural historian Ivan Gaskell suggested that such institutions made their artefacts ‘amenable to philosophical, theological, poetical, critical, sociological, anthropological, and many other forms of scrutiny’ (1995:675). In seeking to shed the public image of the museum as a passive repository primarily committed to the collection of objects for aesthetic or disciplinary purposes, adherents of the New Museology successfully introduced a theoretical realignment amongst museum practitioners. Recognising museums as sites involved in the shaping of collective values and social understandings (Luke 2002), they claimed this power came with a responsibility to deliver specific, demonstrable and measurable benefit with the public as ‘authorizers’ of Public Value (Scott 2010).

This attempt to alter the traditional relationship between the museum and the public was another significant change that accompanied the New Museology phase. When the literature theorist Mary Louise Pratt first coined the “contact zone” she introduced it as those ‘social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today’ (Pratt 1991:34). The contact zone remains an important concept that the museologist James Clifford later adopted and developed in 1996 when proposing that museums be seen as sites for encounters premised on perpetual relationships of a historical,
political, moral character (Clifford 1997:192–193). Such spaces he argued, would become dialogical forums of reciprocal benefit to museums and the communities whose cultural artefacts they collect and exhibit. The results of Clifford’s influential proposal have seen a significant move towards museum insiders and community outsiders working closer together to better utilise the assets and capacities of these civic institutions within the public sphere (Barrett 2011). Combined, these museological innovations have seen objects repurposed as mediating agents between museums and source communities, although as Watson reminds us, the persistent disproportionate power dynamics between both continue to make understanding and changing these often delicate relationships fraught with challenges (2007:1–3).

Ecomuseums

Core to the New Museology’s program of rehabilitating public museums into sites of social relevance was a willingness to develop methods that answered questions about people, place and culture. In 1971, the director of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Hugues de Varine responded to this demand and coined the phrase ‘écomusée’ (ecomuseum) to conceptualise and realise a new type of museum (Boylan 1992:29).

‘An écomusée is an instrument conceived, fashioned and operated jointly by a public authority and a local population. The public authority’s involvement is through the experts, facilities and resources it provides; the local population’s involvement depends on its aspirations, knowledge and individual approach. It is a mirror in which the local population views itself to discover its own image, in which it seeks an explanation of the territory to which it is attached and of the populations that have preceded it, seen either as circumscribed in time or in terms of the continuity of generations’ (Rivière 1985:182)

Varine’s model for museums proposed a substantial change to its traditional purpose. As a cultural institution it would place less emphasis on its building site and the knowledge of experts and instead, focus on definitions of communities and place. Illustrating the concept, the museologist René Rivard provided what would become a seminal model for defining both a traditional museum and écomusée:

‘Museum = building + collections + experts + visitors’
‘Écomusée = territory + heritage + memory + population’ (Rivard 1984)
The ecomuseum ethos was to consider the collective memory of the public as its primary heritage. Those studying it would be limited to a few researchers working in collaboration with the people themselves. It was hoped that in doing this, a wider selection of a museum’s local population would not only see itself reflected in the exhibitions it visited (Bowden 2017:183) but also engender enough self-confidence it would create an actively engaged population with an expectation of having a form of permanent, curatorial control.

Within Britain, one of the first cultural organisation defining itself as an ecomuseum was what Davis (2011:178) describes a ‘regional development and interpretive strategy’ project named Avalon 2000 devised by Somerset County Council. Not every ecomuseum has local authority roots, however all work to empower their community to develop and manage its own heritage. With this example, the Ryedale Folk Museum at Hutton-le-Hole was founded by local people. The museum, a registered charity since 2011, continues to draw upon over thirty years of local volunteering to host events, exhibitions and educational sessions with schools sharing local history (Davis 2011:178).

However, while there are ecomuseum success stories, Varine informs us that the development of the New Museology also had its challenges. Some of these arose from the need for museums to seek funding for their initiatives. Unshackling unpredictable forms of community expression imbued in everyday objects was not without risk. Other problems arose from the process of selecting, listening and provoking a mixture of ‘activists, volunteers and professionals from the community’ in order to create exhibits (Davis 2011:73).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting at this point that while ecomuseums followed and in part established the New Museology path being embraced by various public museums, it is mostly in their mission of supporting communities to manage their heritage that they are similar. Yes, both sought to utilise identity and place to develop collections and exhibitions created through community participation; however, ecomuseums remained distinctive in that they mainly emerged from community
groups and not as extensions of large public institutions or state authorities. This would later emerge as an important differentiator.

Establishing the New Museology took a decade and over the time the classical social democratic values that defined it ceded political ground to a growing public willingness to link unfettered market forces to traditional institutions (Giddens 1998:9–17). This is not to suggest that those public institutions most affected by these neoliberal ideals fully adopted the New Museology, the encyclopaedic British Museum for example, maintained its claim to be a ‘universal museum’ (Yasaitis 2006:455). However, as the outlook of an ‘affluent majority’ rejected the socialist values of collectivism and solidarity across Europe after 1989, individual achievement and economic competitiveness made a return to the fore in public life and institutions (Giddens 1998:9–17).

By 1998, Varine had become frustrated with the diverse range of objectives expressed by various organisations and institutions classifying themselves as ecomuseums. Convinced the term was being misappropriated to serve unjustifiable interests, he sought to discourage its usage:

‘In France, the term écomusée covers all kinds of things, from a one-room exhibition of postcards in a small village to an open-air museum in a Nature Park and to the big community museum in Le Creusot. We should not use this word anymore... some words can create misunderstanding.’ (Varine in Davis 2011:78–79)

Varine’s intervention appears to have been influential, for emerging from those public institutions with strong local development aims came a new swathe of terminologies to define a growing sector of museums engaged in aiding socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. As a community of practice, those who adhere to the ecomuseum ethos continue to exist.

Operating under the guise of being community focused museums (Davis 2011:266–268) they uphold its core developmental characteristic where the representation of community cultural identity, issues around economic regeneration and local politics play an active role in addressing societal needs. However the

\[48\] Who also peopled the boards and trustees of prominent cultural institutions
ecomuseum label itself is almost redundant. Instead, there are alternative terms such as “people’s museum”; “local history museum”; “social history museum”; and what Fiona Candlin refers to as ‘micromuseums’49 (2016).

This cohort of public institutions are adherents of a postmodernist approach to museology that embraces values of inclusion, cooperation and political advocacy. They are typically smaller than “traditional” museums and less encumbered by bureaucracy. It is a freedom that enables many to better democratise their curatorial processes and facilitate projects rooted in social action. Keen to engage in New Museology shaped practices while seeking to avoid the label of propagandist, many curators make a moral and professional decision to investigate, interrogate and integrate community contestation around issues of injustice and reparation.

Yet, in engaging in forms of political advocacy for minority and special interest groups their public representation is likely to be labelled “activist” in tones that are equally celebratory and pejorative. For when it comes to the “politics of display”, the intimate entanglement of power with knowledge usually means ‘it has ramifications throughout social life and cultural practice (Macdonald 2002:1–3). For a sector with hegemonic roots, this ecomuseum ethos is still considered taboo among Trustees and cultural elites.

However, during a seminar in Stockholm, twenty-five years after conceptualising ecomuseums, Varine updated the idea while abandoning the term. He proposed that all cultural institutions are capable of being ‘community museums’ and progressive engines of social development when they place emphasis on sharing curatorial authority with communities.

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49 During the 1970s and 1980s, the United Kingdom saw the arrival of some 1,600 of these mainly independent museums. Their key characteristics are being ‘small’, ‘single-subject’ or ‘single person’ orientated and representing collections types that have previously been ignored (Hudson 1998:49).
Museum Activism

‘Activist museum practice explicitly challenges the immorality of inaction... It enables museum workers to be citizens and to assume agency, as well as responsibility for the consequences of their actions or inaction.’ (Janes and Sandell 2019:18).

In 2016, a collection of people with direct experience of homelessness launched The Museum of Homelessness (MoH). Working with a collection of volunteers, people affected by homelessness and artists, they researched, exhibited and discussed the history around homelessness using art, various objects and community narratives in various forms including travelling “street museums”\(^{50}\). The London-based, site agnostic, MoH describes itself as a “community-driven social justice museum”\(^{51}\) that was working to bring about changes in government policy. As such, it was actively involved with other projects including those that organised the direct delivery of food to people sleeping rough and in temporary accommodation.

Nonetheless, despite the social good it was doing, when its founders were questioned about its activist credentials they adopted an almost defensive posture. They stated:

> ‘founding a museum on the basis of a social need rather than to preserve an inherited collection of objects... to us and our colleagues, none of this is really activism. It is simply common sense. (Turtle and Turtle 2017)’.

However, like the Antiuniversity project (see Chapter 7) this is a social justice project with institutional roots. The foundation for the MoH emerged from a research proposal for a Cultural Space Programme ran by Kings College University between October and November 2014. The aim was to ‘develop a framework for working directly with socially excluded individuals to co-produce an entirely new museum space’\(^{52}\).

As with all acts of institutional activism, the museum was built through a collaboration of both insider and outsider actors. From the university was Dr Anwar Tlili, whose specialised research interests looked at issues surrounding equality and

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\(^{50}\) https://www.islingtongazette.co.uk/news/homelessness-museum-holds-islington-street-display-1-6844443

\(^{51}\) https://museumofhomelessness.org/

\(^{52}\) https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/projects/2016/building-the-museum-of-homelessness
diversity in UK museums. Co-founding the museum were Jessica Turtle, a former museum manager and cultural sector worker with experience of a homeless community in Cardiff and Matt Turtle, a Public Programmes Producer for the Design Museum. Such configurations like MoH in the risk-averse museum sector are uncommon, although challenges to the concept of museum neutrality are growing.

Moreover, in 2017, following the US President, Donald Trump issuing an executive order banning travel from countries based on racist ideology, the Discovery Museum, a science and local history museum in Newcastle upon Tyne organised a display in protest asking the question “Who is welcome in Tyneside?” The question which sat alongside various facts and provocations on the issue asserted the museums position of welcoming people of all ethnic origins and religions into the city. A call-out was made on social media for the public to donate banners and placards and although the impact was both complimentary and disparaging, Michael McHugh, the museum’s Assistant Outreach Officer stated; ‘what was good about it and the reason it was a success was that it meant we were not sitting in the fence’ (Heal 2019:217).

This increase of governmental insiders willing to engage and intervene in outsider causes that challenge museum neutrality in social justice matters is not new or limited to cultural institutions in Europe. During 2006 in Rio de Janeiro, the Museu da Maré, a new form of favela (shantytown) museum was designed and constructed around a community-based framework. While favela museums are not unique, this particular institution with its launch attended by the then minister Gilberto Gil and other MINC members, represented an uncommon collaboration between civil society, NGOs and government (Murta 2019:236–7). This was unusual for Brazilian public spaces which are known for excluding socio-politically disadvantaged groups from its public representations.

The Museu da Maré (Abreu and Chagas 2007) ended up being built in an abandoned shipyard and granted a free ten-year lease. The permanent exhibition space was divided into twelve phases represented in a calendar around the idea of “time”. Each region was themed as either Water, Housing, Resistance, Labour, Party, Fair, Faith, Daily Life, Childhood, Fear or Future. The curatorial teams then ensured
the contents of each section was derived from local life. It was a decision that led to
the museum being embraced as an authentic cultural institutionalisation of the
emotional, historical, social memory of Maré (Murta 2019:236–237). Politically, the
Museum worked not only to overcome the stigmas related to favelas but also to extend
conceptions of the contemporary museum as merely a place to store objects and
worship the past.

For example, its displays on the Tempo da Resistência (Time of Resistance)
theme did not shy away from sharing images and narratives about the communal fight
against police violence. Likewise, the Tempo da Fé (Time of Faith) section reserved a
space for religions of African heritage such as “Umbanda” in resistance to their
marginalisation across favelas in Rio. However, supporting the activist nature of the
museum, was its Tempo do Futuro (Time for Future) section. This was a space that was
reserved for temporary exhibitions enabling the community to develop rolling
collaborative partnerships with a mix of civic, civil and subaltern actors. These
installations in particular, were conceived as an engine to facilitate the construction of
new perspectives.

These three examples of museum activism offered here, demonstrate why
attempts to find a definitive definition of what curatorial activism is, remains
challenging. As a form of institutional activism it has been characterised as either an
evolution of the new museology or a project-by-project based expansion of yesteryear’s
institutional critique. A recent definition of “Museum Activism” proposed by the
museologists Robert Janes and Richard Sandell calls for the global museum
community to:

‘clearly and forcefully’ use its privileged position in society to better serve their communities
and the biosphere (Janes and Sandell 2019:18).

They build their concept on a collective rendition of disruptive museological theory
and practise striving for inclusive, non-hierarchical ways of working.
Curatorial Activism

‘Curatorial activism can be understood as attempts by individuals to engage with, represent and often contribute to social and political protest and reform movements. These actions primarily but not exclusively take the form of collecting and curating the ephemera and ‘artefacts’ of activist work and, thus, directly or indirectly support such work.’ (Message 2013:1)

In her study exploring the historical account of African American and Amerindian claims for civil rights and social reform, Kylie Message coined the term ‘cultural activism’ to explain the museological transformations that occurred at the National Museum of American History. As the curators there engaged with political stakeholders, they simultaneously advanced grassroots claims.

Lowndes and Roberts suggest we pay attention to what ‘ordinary people’ do with the capacities of government (2013:4–5). It is sound advice enabling us to redefine what is possible when institutional insiders and community outsiders collaborate.

In a case study shared by Panelli and Larner we can see another example of such state–activist relations. For many decades, the marginalisation of rural farming women in Australia had seen them excluded and politically underrepresented in agricultural history. This had led to them being trapped in a spiral of disadvantage fuelling an adversarial relationship between them and a government used to “top down” development (Scott 1999).

In 2001, a dynamic partnership began between Australia’s Museum Victoria (MV) and the Women on Farms Gathering Heritage Project (WOFGHP). This led to the creation of a participatory space for a diverse selection of state and community activists to work together. By 2003, a Cultural Partnership Agreement was agreed and signed enabling the community to advance its grassroots political claims and ‘promote a specific future that stretched across many urban, rural and State (of Victoria) spaces’ (2010:1349–1353).

What is significant in these examples of both Message, and Panelli and Larner, is by including “bottom up” perspectives when depicting these forms of governmental

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53 Museum Victoria (MV) is ‘the largest public museums organisation in Australia’ and cares for the state’s scientific and cultural collections. Its funding is primarily provided by the Victorian State Government.
activism, we are able to recognise the potential wrought by utilising more specific, active forms of community partnerships. Although both these case studies involved issues of cultural misrepresentation, the strategy could be applied to new interest groups ranging from consumer lobby organisations to single-issue associations like the anti-war movement\(^{54}\) of 2003 protesting the national government’s decision to attack and occupy Iraq.

While many in the public see local authority museums (LAM) as part of a distinct institutional sphere, in reality they are part of the government’s structure. Utilising informal platforms of government museums in partnership with local actors, some belonging to political parties, has merit. Moreover, the partnering of cultural outsiders and institutional insiders to critique and fracture established political identities has enabled such pairings to hold formal structures of power to account.

However just as the terms and objectives of the New Museology continues to evolve, so too has the scope of curatorial activism as a concept. Since Message’s (2013) work on the curatorial activism that occurred within the Smithsonian’s department of “Political Reform History” new definitions have emerged. While her theory centred the role of the museum amplifying existing outsider causes making political claims, the curator Maura Reilly’s definition (2018) offer us a different perspective.

“Curatorial Activism” is a term I use to designate the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art. It is a practice that commits itself to counter-hegemonic initiatives that give voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether—and, as such, focuses almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists. (Reilly 2018)

This time, the practice is presented as one that leans on identity politics by giving voice to the temporary and permanent insiders. Reilly who labels all those engaged in counterhegemonic initiatives through art exhibitions as “curatorial activists” is clear about its purpose. The practice is designed to cumulate in projects that amplify the

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\(^{54}\) Organised in part by the British group Globalise Resistance
voices\textsuperscript{55} of those who are typically silenced or excluded based on their gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation (Reilly 2018).

The Cultural Activist

In 1971, a group of artists, writers and other cultural workers in New York published “Cultural Activist Volume 1”. It was their first-ever journal produced under their collective name of \textit{Activists for a Democratic Culture}. Inside they declared themselves to be opposed to ‘racism, sexism, and self-serving cynicism that passes as culture by those who are only interested in raking in the profits’ (ADC 1972).

In the sections above we have spent much time reviewing definitions of the institutionalised practices that use culture, but as Reilly’s reconceptualisation of curatorial activism suggests, not so much on the practitioner. For although the terms “insider”, “institutional activist” or “curatorial activist” are useful and accurate descriptors, it is the label of “cultural activist” for those who occupy both insider and outsider identities that is often most apt.

It is ironic that following the reforming agenda of the founders of the public cultural sector, similar work today is often regarded as a threat to public trust and cohesion. When curatorial practise steps into the realms of social disruption, it is still depicted, especially by gatekeepers of hegemony and nationalist governments\textsuperscript{56}, as being antithetical of professional values\textsuperscript{57}. Such thinking does not tally with leadership development programs from government funding bodies like the \textit{Arts Council England}. Especially those designed to productively disrupt museums with an underrepresentation of minority ethnic and vulnerable practitioners in senior leadership posts.

Museum workers, Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott describe themselves as being co-opted as a ‘full-time cultural activist on a payroll’. They explain that the expectation for them to simultaneously perpetuate \textit{and} critique the colonial structures of the

\textsuperscript{55} But not necessarily outsider, socio-political, community issues although it is implied


\textsuperscript{57} https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/our-response-to-oliver-dowdens-letter/
institutions they are employed at is difficult (2019:26–32). Reflecting on this phenomenon where terms like diversity and inclusion are officially declared as embedded in core policy and practices, Sara Ahmed cites the presence of ‘institutional inertia’ as a troubling, conservative resistance to progressive change (Ahmed 2012:26).

However, locating a definitive meaning of the term “cultural activist” is just as problematic as finding one for “political activist”. As a label, the word activist is often partnered with various concepts. These include stalwarts like civil rights activists, animal rights activists, judicial activists, LGBT+ rights activists, conservative activists, human rights activists, environmental activists, and now housing activists (Polanska, Valenzuela-Fuentes, and Kaun 2019) alongside “state-sanctioned” cultural activists.

With their many overlaps, most have recourse to Rancière’s ‘aesthetics of protest’ (2009) when challenging unacceptable conditions in community life. Nonetheless, what differentiates the cultural activist is that they are more likely to ensure acts of art, culture and performance interact with their forms of direct action (Verson 2007:172).

To understand how cultural activists can use curatorial practices as a democratic means to challenge social injustice, a visit to Mansbridge’s (1994:55–56) definition of power as coercion may prove useful. Democracies rely on coercing their citizens when scenarios emerge indicating individual interests represent an irreconcilable conflict with the status quo. Before resorting to force they usually provide mechanisms of deliberation to avoid a society being paralysed by relentless, disruptive streams of collective action.

Now this clearly does not mean states surrender their monopoly on violence to maintain democratic rule (Fanon 1963; Weber 1946; Hobbes and Gaskin 1998). They do not. However, such tactics are designed to enable those minority and vulnerable groups perceived as powerless, to amplify their concerns in order to persuade the rest of society into supporting their cause. It is here that such mechanisms utilise the prominent status of museums in the world of cultural representation and interpretation as critical agents in the realm of public education and debate.
Of course, museums do not compel people to engage with them through physical force or threat of sanction, and yet, to suggest that exhibitions, street art and even place names are incapable of projecting epistemological forms of violence onto the public sphere and public realm would be inaccurate. Hence, to negate being rendered politically compliant within its exhibitionary spaces (Hooper-Greenhill 1988) some innovative cultural activists employ liberatory curatorial techniques.

Institutional Critique

‘Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called "galleries." A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral... The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society... Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society.’ (Smithson 1979b:154–155)

The first wave of institutional critique was initiated during the late 1960s amidst an international stream of protest against racialised violence, capitalism and the rise of anti-institutionalism. As an artistic practice, it presented radical challenges to the institutions that bought and exhibited their work about the narrow cultural framing of art in galleries and museums (Nowotny 2009:xiv). Robert Smithson, a leading proponent of the practice, defined this ‘Cultural Confinement’ as a form of imprisonment of art designed to neutralise any political critique of society through a fraudulent form of institutional representation (1979b:155).

Smithson’s concept shuns notions of “high art” as a form of disinterested pleasure whose primary purpose is to cultivate taste. As an idea, high art is a vestige of enlightenment philosophy by key thinkers of that era like Immanuel Kant (2009) and Edmund Burke (1757). Indeed, Burke in deciding ‘many things are very beautiful, in which it is impossible to discern any idea of use’ (Ibid. 1757:107) concludes that the aesthetic is served well when divorced from function, context or social and political considerations (Parsons and Carlson 2008:13–14; Asavei 2015). It is a theory of ‘disengaged’ appreciation that was famously opposed by the philosopher George Dickie (1964) and many others.

‘there are a number of confusions involved in the assumption of the incompatibility of aesthetic attention and the moral aspects of art but I shall not attempt to make these clear, since the root of the assumption - disinterested attention - is a confused notion’ (Dickie 1964:63)
Anthropologists like Clifford Geertz and Alfred Gell have been unequivocal in stating that examinations of art should not be restricted to an analysis of its aesthetic dimensions or symbolic values. Instead, Gell asserts such inquiries are an ‘anthropological dead end’ if the exclusion of arts’ political and economic dimensions denied its existence as a ‘cultural system’ borne from social life (Geertz 1976:147; Gell 1998:4–6). As a movement famed for its use of politically engaged art, institutional critique utilised many forms with artistic works and interventions that included critical writings and '(art-)political activism' (Sheikh 2009:32).

So how does it work? The German artist Hans Haacke who argued; 'high art is as much affected by, and influences its socio-political environment as other products of the consciousness industry' (Bois et al. 1984:44) offers a great example of this perspective. In his landmark 1971 installation, *Shapolsky et al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Haacke included the use of data visualisation as an art form capable of providing social critiques that transcend analyses of galleries and museum. Haacke's critique appropriated the privilege and power of the cultural institution to exhibit a hundred and forty-six photographs of Manhattan apartment buildings, maps of Harlem, real estate records and charts documenting the related property ownership structures in a mode that ‘chronicles the fraudulent activities of one of New York City’s largest slumlords over two decades’ (Urist 2015).

Another pioneering use of institutional critique to highlight socio-political issues occurred in John Kinard 1970’s exhibition *The Rat: Man’s Invited Affliction* at the Anacostia Museum. The exhibition which had live rats running through parts of it creatively examined the poor housing conditions in the area that had allowed the rodents to take advantage of the situation and thrive (Alexander 2000:150). Kinard was the director of the small community museum founded by the Smithsonian Institution in 1967. While not an artist he was an activist and in his role as director, Kinard curated exhibitions frequently highlighting the challenges poverty, crime and poor-quality education posed to the African American community. Kinard was unapologetic about being a curatorial activist. He believed:
‘a museum should stress social change and public service; its exhibits and educational programs ought to enable a community better to understand and work towards solving its current problems’ (Ibid. 2000).

In adopting this critical approach to community issues, Kinard and Haacke’s use of institutional critique demonstrate how politically engaged art can challenge issues of social injustice.

However, from the 1980s, a second wave of the practise emerged. This time it sought to include the role of the critiquing artist as an object of institutionalisation as well as other institutional spaces outside the gallery. A good example of this occurred during the Claremont Road protests in 1995 where activists and artists rallied against the development of the M11 Link Road in East London. In this process they utilised a critique of dominant museum culture to challenge governmental power:

‘At no. 68, the Art House, Artists Against Reckless Road Builders had created a counter-cultural collection of art and artefacts. In this space art functioned as barricade. A culture of protest inhabited Claremont Road in defiance of the British government’s National Roads Programme’ (Butler 1996:338)

In a space refashioned to host artefacts in cabinets with no labels or interpretations, the installation became a resisting ‘anti-museum’ (1996:340). Although Butler’s study was primarily focused on examining praxis of resistance, this inclusion was a challenge to the dominant museum culture where genuine expressions of outsider agency are only allowed if they yield to confinement of their political agency (Smithson 1979b:155).

As an artist-led movement, those involved in Institutional Critique typically use their work to challenge art galleries, museums and their enabling corporate or government sponsors on political issues. For artists based in Europe working within predominantly state-funded museums, these critiques predominantly became a riposte to national policy and the ideological instrumentalisation of art by various cultural institutions (Alberro and Stimson 2009:6–7).

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58 In light of this development, champions of the first wave such as Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers were expanded to include new artists such as Jörg Immendorff or Martin Kippenberger (Raunig 2009b:3; Nowotny 2009a:22)
However, during the 1990s the practice evolved yet again. Push back in the form of institutional restrictions upon how artists *should* critique, led to new interpretations and innovations of the practice. Institutional critique started occurring outside public cultural institutions. It also moved into the public realm.

In the *Heidelberg Project* Detroit artist Tyree Guyton used decaying neighbourhood properties in a political statement about residents left to live in abject poverty. Guyton drew upon various African American art traditions to create his street art installations. This included exhibiting a house covered in stuffed animals, another decorated with hundreds of records and adorning streets with brightly painted polka dots and various discarded domestic objects. Guyton explains as an artist he sought to ‘[reclaim] a neighbourhood forgotten by civil society’ (Nasar and Moffat 2004:15–16). It was a controversial approach that attracted scorn and praise alike.

Annually, the *Heidelberg Project* attracts an average of 50,000 visitors and according to a 2011 study by the *Center for Creative Community Development*, has a local economic impact of $2.8 million. Indeed, its widespread popularity led to the New York Times publishing the article “*Tyree Guyton Turned a Detroit Street Into a Museum. Why Is He Taking It Down?*” (Miller 2019) Nevertheless, as with all works of art it had its opponents and the Detroit City Council which never sanctioned or officially recognised the project demolished parts of the community focused installation in 1991 and 1999 (Morton 2013).

With the rise of cultural artists employing guerrilla tactics, subverting and transforming external spaces sometimes in the name of their often disapproving sponsoring institutions, the cultural activist keeps adapting to an often hostile landscape. Accordingly, the artist as critiquing activist has provoked calls for censorship, regulation and the return of ‘an “institution” that incorporates, co-opts, commodifies, and otherwise misappropriates once-radical—and uninstitutionalized—practices’ (Fraser 2005).

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59 https://web.williams.edu/Economics/ArtsEcon/Heidelberg.html
Institutional Coöptation

“The idea of coöptation plunges us into the field of bureaucratic behaviour as that is related to such democratic ideals as “local participation.”... [it is defined as] The process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence’ (Selznick 1949:13, 259)

Ever since emerging during the radical provocations of the late 1960’s protests framed around anti-institutionalism, the practice of institutional critique has attracted support and assault from both institutional insiders and outsiders. The most vociferous of attacks were aimed at those interacting with institutions structured around a contradictory ethos of governmentality represented by capitalist conservativism in opposition to social liberalism (Stimson 2009:30–33).

However, when seeking to confront dominant cultural institutions on the effectiveness of their production of publicness, practitioners of institutional critique have had to resist being co-opted. For just as with how the New Museology’s contemporary strategies have extended beyond its original roots, Institutional Critique’s was now in its ‘fourth wave’ employing forms of ‘instituent practice’.

Whereas in the past the main focus of the practice was to oppose the institution, now its target had spread wider to reject all forms institutionalisation (Nowotny 2009:xiv–xvii; Tello 2020). However, in adopting this stance some argued institutional critique had sacrificed its political autonomy trapping its practitioners in their field (Fraser 2005). The philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig offered a strong argument challenging such assertions:

‘[What contemporary strategies of institutional critique need]... are practices that conduct radical social criticism, yet which do not fancy themselves in an imagined distance to institutions; at the same time, practices that are self-critical and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institutions and the institution, their own being institution.’ (Raunig 2009:10–11)

Implicit in Raunig’s assertion is the urgent need for a reflexive practice championing social and organisational change through a collaboration of artistic, cultural and socio-political actors. In the process, Raunig insists artists jettison any angst they have about complicity. Their proximity to any cultural institution should not inhibit their critiques of contradictions present in its renditions of social relations (Alberro and
Stimson 2009:3–4). It is a crucial contribution to the debate asserting the necessity of a radical challenge to hegemony to cancel any adverse impacts of co-optation.

This is essential, particularly, in the context of today’s institutional and governmental activism where such forms of curatorial practices are multifaceted. Indeed, a local authority museum is just as likely to challenge national policy from central government as well as treading a thin line critiquing council policy on topics like gentrification and police brutality. In the realm of symbolic production, it is vital to take note not only of that which is being presented but also that which is excluded.

Adherence to institutional critique principles can also see artists refuse recruitment offers conditional upon them surrendering their autonomy. However, where such refusal has not occurred, it is essential to evaluate whether this has successfully resulted in the creation of critical institutions or the feigning of emancipatory practices, assimilation and co-opting of critical voices capable of mollifying counterpublics (Sheikh 2009:30–31). If so, the net result of this practice can and has often resulted in art and artists being used to regulate behaviour without demanding slavish obedience to rules.

‘The criticism took various forms including boycotting exhibitions, organizing public meetings and sit-ins, disseminating pamphlets, producing false identification cards to enable free entry into museums and performing actions and other demonstrations that sought to radically transform the dominant art institutions (Alberro and Stimson 2009:5).

When in 1949, the sociologist Philip Selznick coined the term “coöptation”, he used it to define a formal power sharing tactic used by governmental and large institutions to establish control over opposing publics. However Selznick also observed that when it was done informally, coöptation reduced the risk of undermining the legitimacy of its own authority (Selznick 1949:260–261). In the world of institutional critique the conceptual artist Adrian Piper calls this co-opting tactic – ‘aesthetic acculturation’ (Piper 1985:32). Piper defines this as the means in which institutions neutralise culturally spontaneous modes of expressive art, moreover, an attempt at institutionalising institutional critique.
Conclusion

‘the works of art inherited from the past and deposited in museums and private collections and, beyond them, all objectified cultural capital, the product of history accumulated in the form of books, articles, documents, instruments, which are the trace or materialization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics or conceptual systems... remains irreducible’ (Bourdieu 2000:228)

Irrespective of which way theorists conceptualise institutional activism, the absence of research exploring Wajid and Minott’s provocative notion of cultural workers in museums as being ‘state sponsored’ (2019:26) makes it premise worthy of study. Most conceptions of governmental forms of activism limit the scope of outsiders exclusively belonging to social movements. Indeed, it is the existence of the multitudes of contested models outlined above why I earlier stated having a partial reliance upon existing theories of governmental and institutional activism.

However, where this investigation differs is that in focusing on a local authority museum with a geographical focus, we also have the opportunity to include those marginalised actors within the community. Instead of rendering activist governmentality as the sole domain of state authority, we now also have licence to examine the practice and practitioners operating within urban municipal entities such as public cultural institutions.

This is crucial, for as much as there are outsiders championing causes for radical social change, there are still various institutional gatekeepers of hegemony for whom it remains unimaginable for the modern museum to be actively engaged in depicting history as ‘an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present’ (Anderson 2006:23). In seeking to retain their imagined community in service of nationalism, they assert that museum staff using their institutional influence to augment the ideological causes championed by outside challengers must be rendered invisible.

However cultural activists, for that is what any New Museology based museum workers are, have responsibilities as the active social researchers, critics and advocates of the communities they serve. Not all will agree, but when the lawyer and urban planning expert Peter Marcuse famously argued that to be critical is to be pragmatic,
he had a point. Moreover, when he demanded that all such critical theorists should ‘attack’ the issues they study by exposing immediate problems, proposing immediate ‘non-reformist reforms’ and politicising an agenda for immediate action, he had a plan (Marcuse 2012:215).

As Haacke reminds us, taxpayer-funded public institutions in Britain are ‘constitutionally obliged’ to display cultural objects irrespective of whether they align with any government ideology (Bois et al. 1984:45). Hence, unless the institutional exhibition of cultural artefacts represents effective interventions in the governmentality of the present, they exist, even if provocatively, in service to the institution and not the people.
Chapter 3 The Field Site

Introduction

Gentrification and Regeneration

This is a chapter about gentrification, identity and activists in Hackney. It opens by providing some context to the association of the term ‘ghetto’ with Hackney and some background on the borough’s latest phase of regeneration following mass investment from the London Olympics 2012. It includes a focus on Hackney residents that have survived being displaced from their homes. Moreover, those who have become engaged in activities contesting processes of urban regeneration while communicating with the local authority through formal and informal means.

The first half of this chapter introduces the argument that the progressive approach Hackney Council has taken towards migration and welcoming newcomers to the borough has inadvertently led to an evolving form of cultural gentrification. Through its own humanitarian brand of municipal socialism (Cohn 1910), the local authority has managed to retain the borough’s diversity by pushing back against rent-based displacement of residents on low-incomes and living in social housing. However, in seeking to increase the attractiveness of the area to potentially affluent residents, workers and investors, it has facilitated the removal of public spaces and cultural symbols that constitute the identity of the neighbourhood.

It is an approach where the remodelling of the neighbourhood has eroded the sense of belonging residents previously held and caused some of them to call them to question their own identities. It investigates whether the question of who is “authentic Hackney” has become a postulation no longer based primarily on tenure, kinship, class or ethnicity but cultural capital and lifestyle in the neighbourhood.

Community of activists

The second half of this chapter draws upon various fragments of my ethnography to explore the various activist groupings that exist in the area. It highlights those working in opposition to the cultural changes they see negatively impacting upon their lifestyle
and aspirations for the future. While most theories on governmental forms of activism focuses on the involvement of social movements, their status as civil society members with close ties to institutional authorities can cause fractures in the activist community.

To reveal this, this chapter features those activists that advocate for progressive change through formal co-optation with the council and those that through informal linkages and countercultural means push back against what they see as a form of symbolic violence being committed against them. It demonstrates that while the borough’s many activists are united in opposition to gentrification across class and ethnic boundaries at times of crisis, as a cohort they are fragmented by age and life course which bears influence on their identities and political agency.

The status of social movement members in the borough enables them to dominate the public sphere, while those with less political agency and cultural capital are under documented counterpublics engaging in democratic discourse through informal interactions that occur on the streets, at grassroots events and during unscripted urban social movements⁶⁰. To this end, this chapter closes with a specific focus on an umbrella network for grassroots groups involved in self-help organising and elevating the perspectives on urban issues of young people and their family members.

⁶⁰ Such as the counter-hegemonic uprisings led by people of African heritage that occurred on the streets of Britain during 1981 and again in 1985 in response to the shooting of the Cherry Groce and the death of Cynthia Jarrett both at the hands of the Metropolitan Police force.
Regeneration

Social Enclaves

“The neighbourhood is a crime-ridden, derelict ghetto, a cancer – a blot on the landscape,”
(Business owner Don Kemal in an interview to the Hackney Gazette, Smith 1994)

“The problems associated with dereliction – of vandalism, squatting, fly-tipping – which have bedeviled the area for years, will be arrested by the proposed development,”
(Council Leader, John McCafferty to the Hackney Gazette, Ibid 1994)

In 1995, a year after the Hackney resident and artist Tom Hunter graduated from the London College of Printing in 1994, his work61 ‘The Ghetto’ was selected to be exhibited at the Museum of London where it remains on permanent display. The 3D model accompanied by a series of 5x4 photographic transparencies depicted the life of a squatted community living in a block of houses in London Fields East during 1993–1994. Hunter, who lived in one of the Ellingford Road houses owned by Hackney Council named his work after comments made in a local newspaper characterised his home as a problematic ‘ghetto’.

The term ‘ghetto’ is loaded with pejorative connotations. Reflecting its controversial history when written about in connection with issues of gentrification, the authors of magazine and newspaper articles sometimes use provocative headlines like, “We need social housing, not gentrified ghettos” (Minton 2018) while the titles of academic journals read, “At least it’s not a ghetto anymore: Experiencing gentrification and ‘false choice urbanism’” (Doucet and Koenders 2018).

In 1965, the psychologist and social activist Kenneth Clarke’s (1914–2005) described the term ghetto as referring to a phenomenon that results from the direct consequence of ‘systemic and continuing racism and exploitation’ (Currie, Goddard, and Myers 2015:9). In ‘Dark Ghetto’, his study of African American’s living in Harlem, Clarke theorised it as a chronic form of ‘institutionalized pathology’ creating the social conditions that lead to poverty and delinquency (Clark 1989:81). Since then, twenty first century definitions of the term have emerged enabling us to link it with processes

61 Built with his friend James McKinnon
of gentrification that are capable of either eradicating or creating such enclaves, this was not always so.

In Louis Wirth’s (1897-1952) 1928 study of urban life in Chicago, his definition linked it explicitly to ethnicity,

‘[the term ghetto] applies particularly to those areas where the poorest and most backward group of the Jewish population of the towns and cities resides... The ghetto, therefore, may be regarded as a form of accommodation between divergent population groups, through which one group has effectually subordinated itself to another.’ (Wirth 1998:1–4)

Wirth (1998:6) recognised the concept as having been in existence for many centuries and stated that the term was not used exclusively to define the Jewish community\footnote{Writh writes of ‘Little Sicilies, Little Polands, Chinatowns, and Black belts’ ghettos.} citing other ethnic groups and ‘vice areas’ as likely to be given the same designation. For our study of Hackney, this designation of ‘vice’ otherwise a socio-economically deprived area, is useful, and a caveat that the American urban sociologist Robert Park (1864-1944) later expands upon.

Park agrees that the term ‘ghetto’ became an institution enshrined in both custom and law resulting in it becoming a place in which Jewish people were compelled to live. Nevertheless, he argues we should recognise the term is no longer limited to defining a specific ethnic enclave but rather any ‘segregated racial or cultural group... not to legal enactment, but to the fact that it meets a need and performs a social function’ (Robert Park in Wirth 1998:vii). The urban geographer Peter Jackson (1985b:160) agrees and it is this cultural group represented by activists determined to preserve their social identity and public spaces in the borough that form the basis of this study.

Wirth’s definition of ‘ghettos’ is limited by his insistence that they are a temporary, transitional phase for all minority ethnic groups who are inevitably assimilated into the host group. For some Hackney residents, the existence of a path leading from subaltern squatter to legitimate resident holds true. Indeed, when speaking to an East London arts and culture magazine, Hunter, the artist behind ‘The Ghetto’ installation states that two decades after the homes of his squatter community
was demolished, the community had lost its socially subordinate position, having formally been rehoused in the borough in the same area.

‘My friends are still there and they’ve got kids now that are the same age as my kids. They all go to Gayhurst so we even share the same school run.’

(Tom Hunter interviewed in the East End Review, 2016)

While this example would seem to validate the universal nature of Writh’s hypothesis, it is perceived as the exception in areas where regeneration has led to gentrification, not the norm. This is not to suggest that the assimilation of subaltern group members does not occur. However, it would be erroneous to claim that Hackney’s traveller and various visible minority groups living in the borough’s many housing estates have been seamlessly integrated into a homogenous mainstream community following their long-standing roots in the area.

As I found myself collecting testimonies from across Hackney’s community of cultural artists and activists, many affirmed Loïc Wacquant’s (2012:10) description of ghettos as a ‘Janus-faced institution’ playing opposite roles for two collectives bound in a relation of asymmetric dependency. In recognising the tragedy of the inherent symbiotic relationship, these voices were often vociferous in challenging the overstating of local authority driven regeneration as a panacea to crime and poverty eradication.

Re: Gentrification

‘I didn’t bid for the Olympics because I wanted three weeks of sport... I bid for the Olympics because it’s the only way to get the billions of pounds out of the government to develop the east end.’ Former London Mayor, Ken Livingstone (Mason 2012)

For decades, Hackney has been besmirched by its reputation of being one of the poorest boroughs in the UK with one of the highest rates of crime. However, all of this was to change when the London 2012 Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) pledged to leave a legacy of regeneration that would transform East London should it win the bid for Britain to host the 2012 summer

63 http://www.eastendreview.co.uk/2016/01/18/the-ghetto-tom-hunter/

64 This term includes the boater’s without long-term mooring that have made Hackney’s Lea Valley waterways their home for several decades
By October 2009, a regional Strategic Regeneration Framework (SRF) was published by the Olympic Park Regeneration Steering Group targeting five ‘host’ London boroughs - Greenwich, Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest. Each region, collectively home to 1.5 million residents, had been previously identified as featuring high on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). These IMD’s were key socio-economic indicators reflecting the current poor status of employment, health, income and skills in their respective districts.

The aim of the SRF was to enable the five East London borough’s to achieve socio-economic parity with their neighbours, the strategy supported by the Government and Mayor of London was labelled as the principle of ‘convergence’ (Tudor 2015). In response to the SRF, Hackney Council subsequently published its Hackney Regeneration Delivery Framework report. Key to its strategy were plans to raise living standards across the borough by actively attracting affluent residents and workers to the area.

‘[One of the key priorities of] the Council and its partners set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy… [is to] Promote mixed communities in well designed neighbourhoods, where people can access high quality, affordable housing.’ (LBH 2009:3)

‘Let’s make sure the Olympics legacy lifts East London from being one of the poorest parts of the country to one that shares fully in the capital’s growth and prosperity.’ (Cameron 2010)

With Hackney Council, the Government and the Mayor of London, all publicly committed to a twenty-year plan to raise the socio-economic indicators across the region, the local authority now had powerful allies to help it achieve this. From 2006-2008, the Council received £150 million in capital injection from the Government to build ‘affordable’ homes.

A £6.5 billion investment primarily into London’s transport infrastructure saw the borough’s transport networks undergo a major transformation, namely the expansion of the East London train line (Tudor 2015:7). Projects like the £850 million regeneration of the Woodberry Down estate were accompanied by a radical

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65 The borough of Barking and Dagenham later became the sixth host.
transformation of most of the borough’s schools into academies following a £250 million investment.

Academisation, a scheme initially introduced by the Labour government was a process where the link between schools and local authorities was severed, enabling corporate sponsorship and investment. This regeneration of schools, the Council suggested, would help attract families to the borough and address the problem of long term unemployed Hackney residents who lacked ‘skills and aspirations to improve’ (LBH 2009:10–11).

The subsequent £9.3 billion of public funds spent staging the London Olympics 2012 led to some definite improvements in East End neighbourhoods. By 2015, the London Boroughs of Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Newham and Haringey had become relatively less deprived than when their IMD’s were measured in 2010. Collectively they no longer featured on the list of 20 most deprived local authorities (Gill 2015).

Aesthetically, many of my interlocutors liked the infrastructure changes they saw as the Council implemented change around the borough. They welcomed the proliferation of well-known brands and chains like Marks & Spencer and Costa Coffee, the numerous new housing developments, improved transport links and new street furniture.

Nevertheless, despite the positive effects of investing in public infrastructure, the SRF process of developing an area through renovation, demolition, rebuilding and property rehabilitation to address urban decay had become synonymous with what residents and traders increasing labelled as a process of gentrification. Moreover, most remained unconvinced that such changes would lead to them having the same social and economic chances as their neighbours across London within twenty years (Wales 2012:318–319).
Rebranding

In the southern part of Hackney immediately to the north of the City of London is Shoreditch. Originally known as “Soersditch”, it remains a prime location for the continuous development of artistic, fashion and creative talent. From its 1990’s roots of providing inexpensive spaces for offices, galleries, and clubs, Shoreditch has now become a prime site for amongst other things, hosting tech start-ups. In 2008, at least sixteen companies that had set up a business around the Shoreditch, Hoxton and Old Street area saw the tech-savvy neighbourhood dubbed “Silicon Roundabout”\textsuperscript{66}. Within two years of this branding, David Cameron, then Prime Minister (2010 – 2016) announced a programme to boost the region’s development in the hopes of turning the area into “one of the world’s great technology centres”\textsuperscript{67}.

Jules Pipe, then Mayor of Hackney (2002 – 2016) seized the opportunity to build upon the areas newfound profile as a space ‘incubating one of the most important, art, fashion, media and now technology hubs in Europe’\textsuperscript{68}. Over the following years, he oversaw the development of the region into a growing hotel and retail sector designed to cater for an increase in business and ‘leisure tourism’. As a result, property prices in Shoreditch rose in tandem with an increase in the supply of new homes purposely built to service the needs of the area’s growing jobs market.

The Council’s embracing of the area’s rebranding saw “Silicon Roundabout” successfully attract a new wave of affluent residents working in finance or tech. The local authority which had now given this part of Hackney an official ‘Tech City’ imprint was actively cultivating a cultural shift in the area. By 2018, Dunn, a senior analyst for the estate agents and property experts, Cushman & Wakefield wrote in a report that from the initial sixteen companies, tech start-ups in the area now numbered an estimated 1,350. However, the report also revealed that ‘Grade A rents

\textsuperscript{66} The label was coined in a tweet by Matt Biddulph, the former chief technology officer (CTO) of the now defunct UK social network, Dopplr on 23rd July 2008. Source: https://www.wired.co.uk/article/birth-of-a-meme

\textsuperscript{67} https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-15088359

\textsuperscript{68} In the Foreword of Shoreditch: The Creative Heart in London Brochure. Source: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/517fd3ffe4b01d2ob4ao82pdf/t/56027e2e4b044a04395d8f7f/144300360758/SHOREDITCH_Town+brochure.pdf
have more than doubled in Shoreditch, which could see historically native creative
tenants priced out of the area’ (Dunn 2018:37).

The creep of increasing rent in Shoreditch has been opposed by members of the
local community living on low incomes. In 2017, following its Future Shoreditch
consultations on planned changes for the area, Hackney Council received over 1,400
comments from interested parties. Many expressed the need to address the availability
of affordable housing as a priority. However, an examination of the summary
published by the local authority on its consultation portal failed to indicate the ire
some directed towards the proposals, several who explicitly identify them as a
blueprint for gentrification.

“Shoreditch is quickly becoming a case study in everything that's wrong with gentrification, and
you have a chance to try and put things right. I think the council needs to do more to stop
Shoreditch’s venues, especially any queer ones from closing or being turned into flats... The
answer isn’t more expensive restaurants, posh flats and chain stores... Focus on affordable
housing, focus on creating a mix of interesting venues and stop pushing people out of the
borough.”
A public response to the Future Shoreditch Consultation 2017 - 2019

Neighbourhood demands expressing the need for affordable housing featured highly
in the consultation feedback on the council’s plans for the area. Others wanted repairs
to become a priority in the numerous ‘estates that desperately need attention so that
the residents have a nicer place to live’. Despite these and other protestations over the
council’s plans enabling the building of more office spaces over affordable housing,
there is some altruistic logic at play even if it is neo-liberal flavoured.

In 2017, the council published the Future: Shoreditch Area Action Plan Baseline
Report that it had commissioned from Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners. Its
analysis had revealed that from a population of over 12,500 residents in the Shoreditch
area, some 41% were employed in the two highest occupation groups. This was a
remarkable figure when compared to 35% for the rest of Hackney and London and

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69 https://futureshoreditch.commonplace.is/schemes/proposals/quick-feedback/details
70 https://hackney.gov.uk/media/10462/Future-Shoreditch-baseline-report-part-A-introduction-and-
71 Managers, directors, senior officials and professional occupations. Source: ONS, 2017
28% across England. Shoreditch is Hackney’s success story when it comes to employability and the Council, accordingly, likes to announce it frequently.

‘[Shoreditch is] Hackney’s major employment area, providing over 40,000 jobs in over 4,000 businesses and has played a key part in the prosperity of our borough. The area boasts internationally renowned hotels and restaurants, over 150 cultural venues, an expanding hospitality sector and adaptable workspaces that house entrepreneurial start-up businesses to major global brands.’ (LBH 2017)

However, these much-lauded statistics only tell half the story. Moreover, this employability success is not replicated in the lowest four occupation groups where only 20% of Shoreditch’s resident population are employed in comparison to 30% for London and 35% across England as a whole.

Denaming

Joined to Shoreditch by the A10 aka Kingsland High Road, is the more residential area of Dalston situated in the west of the borough. At the time of the 2011 Census, it had a population of over seven thousand people and a higher population of residents categorised as “white British” than the Hackney average. Compared to the rest of the borough, it has higher qualification levels and lower levels of unemployment. An estimated forty percent of residents in the ward rent from a private landlord.

With its reputation of hosting trendy nightclubs, restaurants, boutique shops, cinema and theatre it is a prime destination for shoppers and young partygoers. As well as being serviced by numerous bus routes, Dalston has two train stations a few minutes apart on foot. For those working and living in Shoreditch, the area is one stop away by train with a direct route running between Shoreditch High Street and Dalston Junction.

Originally opened in 1865, the multi-million pound regeneration of the Dalston Junction station and its surround area had seen this part of Hackney join the new East

72 Caring, leisure, sales and other service occupations, Process plant & machine operatives and elementary occupations. Source: ONS, 2017

73 Hackney Council’s Dalston Ward Profile 2015.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/19J95iTbttGNBoNiwtsAWaYGlrlqRULs2/view
London Line linking the borough with West Croydon, New Cross and Crystal Palace in 2010. Hackney has no Underground train station but its newly developed Overground networks has opened the region up to a larger range of workers and visitors travelling from across London.

Ngoma ‘Silver’ Bishop, founder of Hackney’s Black & Ethnic Minority Arts Network (BEMA) has doubts about the council’s regeneration strategy. I first learned of him through his presence at protests and political rallies challenging social injustice across London. Ngoma, who grew up in Brent and arrived in Hackney during the 1980s is one of many in the area that identifies as belonging to a group of the working-class people who have successfully survived being priced out of the area. He explained to me that having not been “displaced” from his home by newcomers he is appreciative of the visual improvements he has seen occurring in the public realm.

‘My only problem with knocking down cockroach-infested buildings and making the place look much better even though slightly more soulless, [while]... providing housing that was more comfortable and more hygienic, was that we didn’t get access to these [properties] to the same degree as other communities, that is the problem with gentrification, but I use the word reluctantly”

_Interview with Ngoma, April 2018_

His claim is one of many that suggests that the reconfiguration of the residential and cultural offerings within Hackney constitute a contemporary form of third-wave gentrification designed to primarily benefits others, not themselves (Watt 2013). Ngoma’s reluctance to use the term gentrification also mirrors a position that has long been adopted by governmental institutions around the world.

During the 1970s, the United States regarded the phrase gentrification a ‘dirty word’, instead choosing to adopt the term ‘homesteading’ (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008:7; Smith 2005:29–31). Obfuscation of this kind became normalised amongst city developers across the Global North. For example, when Britain’s New Labour government set up an Urban Task Force in 1999 to investigate urban decline, it deliberately chose to avoid the term ‘gentrification’ in policy documents seeking to

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74 The ethnic stratification that characterises UK homeownership means only 37% of those racialised as ‘Black Caribbean’ own their homes and 45% rent social housing while 68% of those racialised as ‘White British’ are homeowners with 16% renting in the social housing sector.
arrest such degradation, instead referring to ‘urban renaissance’, ‘urban regeneration’ and ‘urban sustainability’. It was an approach to be replicated in disinvested cities around the world with words like ‘revitalization’ and ‘renewal’ emerging in urban manifestos often to disguise neoliberal ambitions (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008:xxi).

Symbolic Representation
I had met Ngoma in Dalston one bright but bitterly cold day in April 2018. Ngoma commented on my lack of layers and I had laughed explaining cycling kept me warm. In comparison Ngoma was taking no chances. He had been wearing a combination of three shirts, a jumper and a blue parker with baseball cap worn back to front. After our customary greetings, he took me on a tour of Dalston Lane. There we discussed the topic of “activism” and the impact of “mixed neighbourhoods” on the borough. However, as we passed a building sign Ngoma became animated.

Ngoma: ‘We had to fight to get that up there, believe you me bredrin, we had to fight, fight fight hard’.

Ngoma who was pointing to the large sign that adorned the “Dalston C.L.R James Library” explained some of the building’s history to me. In 2010, Hackney Council had decided to relocate the original CLR James Library into a new £4.4 million facility being built in Dalston Square as part of its regeneration plans. However, by 2011 the local authority had made the unilateral decision to remove the ‘CLR James’ name and rebrand it with the more staid title of ‘Dalston Library and Archive’ (Barling 2010).

“We feel it’s important for the names of our libraries to reflect their location... This will also ensure consistency with the borough’s other seven libraries, which are named after the area they are located in.”
Hackney Council Spokesperson 2010, Interview Hackney Gazette (Coleman 2010)

The venue’s original name had not come about by chance but through the efforts of those who Ngoma called the ‘black’ officers of the Hackney Library Service. According to him, these were an earlier generation of cultural activists who had established a ‘Three Continents Collection’ in the borough’s libraries forty years earlier. It was

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75 Where it would amalgamate it with the Hackney Archives in a building named after Rose Lipman, a Hackney councillor.
through these and other community efforts that the library was renamed after the famous Trinidadian author and political activist, Cyril Lionel Robert James (1901-1989).

The naming of the library was one of many acts of governmental activism the Council had engaged in during the 1980s to address issues of racism and support social inclusion in the borough. Ngoma who was present at the original 1985 naming ceremony of the library had told the media, “It represented such a positive statement by the council. To drop the name now feels like a statement in the opposite direction.”

Opposed to the denaming of the library and the potential loss of cultural heritage in the area, Ngoma alongside another Hackney resident named Andrea Enisuoh who was a member of the social justice group Hackney Unites acted to preserve the neighbourhood’s symbolic identity. Like Ngoma, Andrea wasn’t born in Hackney, and moved to the borough as a young woman from Manchester after becoming the first woman of African heritage on the National Union of Students. Once in London she became involved in journalism, authoring the Artbeat column in the New Nation newspaper before later working as HCVS’s community empowerment network coordinator.

Their campaign called “Save the C.L.R. James library” included an online petition and within a week had attracted a thousand signatures. This was a remarkable feat for its time as such e-petitions were new. It was also troubling for the Council which failed to anticipate the scale of anger its decision would cause. While acts of urban activism are often reduced to being depicted as “local tantrums” opposing urban redevelopment, that misses ‘efforts made by engaged, culturally motivated groups, which aim to cooperate with city authorities around specific spatial interventions or projects’ (VanHoose and Savini 2017). This form of active citizenship which emerges to disrupt governmental processes of place making only occurs whenever there is insufficient grassroot contribution to formal policymaking processes.

76 http://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2010/09/campaign-to-save-name-of-clr-james-for-dalston-library/
77 A coalition of Hackney based trade unionists, faith groups, BME community, migrant support groups and peace activists.
In comparison to the 1980s iteration of the local authority, this Council lacked the prerequisite grassroot perspectives within its ranks of that time. As such it was incapable of responding with the same level of cultural competency that delivered the original name change. Its decision to remain steadfast in its unwillingness to compromise came to an end after councillors claimed they had the support of the James family for the removal. Ngoma told me he had received a call from Selma James, C.L.R James’s widow and activist, informing him that this was untrue. As soon as this news was made public, the Council apologised and capitulated on the issue.

Nevertheless, despite the public U-turn, the local authority had not given up on its Dalston Area Action Plan (AAP), however, to create its “Dalston Quarter” with less grassroots opposition it had decided to change strategy.

‘Integral to the successful delivery of the Quarter will be meaningful community, stakeholder and Member engagement to ensure that the delivery reflects local aspirations for the future of the area’ (McKean 2015).

In adjusting its strategy to include ‘Recognition of past and present to shape the future’ it started work on a new community engagement policy. This included consultation on the future of the Community Library Service based at Stoke Newington Town Hall in 2017. The Council was now fully aware that without working with grassroot groups and community activists, any future attempt to alter the boroughs cultural heritage was likely to face opposition. Perhaps, establishing stable links with disruptive actors through temporary, radical acts of institutional activism, would better enable the local authority to complete its long-term urban redevelopment plans?

Aestheticisation

In many of the gentrification studies based around Hackney, the topic of art often expressed in radical or illicit forms, is featured. Artists are often named as the vanguard in a distinctive type of gentrification which sees them reconfigure underused

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78 There were four sites to be marketed as the ‘Dalston Quarter’ they included part of the Eastern Curve Garden, the former Railway Tavern, the former CLR James library and the last surviving 1790 Georgian Houses on Dalston Lane.

Regeneration and derelict, typically post-industrial sites into work/live spaces and galleries. Across the literature there is consensus that irrespective of whether such works are intended as statements of transgression or acts of beautification, street art has become the typical precursor of top-down redevelopment policies (Harris 2012; Firth 2016).

The Wick, home to various artist studios, cafes and bars along the River Lee Navigation canal in Hackney is a classic example of this with its streets adorned with street art, much opposing plans for urban change. Harris suggests that after the influx of Olympic regeneration money, the Wick’s revised artworks marked the area in a ‘cultural celebration of urban debasement’ for the consumption of soon to arrive detached sophisticates (Harris 2012:227).

The anthropologist Michael Herzfeld refers to the resulting changes of urban development processes such as that which has occurred in Hackney as being responsible for an impersonal subjugation of resident lives. For them, he argues, any faux-improvements they experience have been imposed by speculators and bureaucrats on the altar of neoliberalism (Herzfeld 2010:260). However, for the newcomers to the area it could be argued that such cultural work is part of a process of aestheticisation offering camouflage to help assuage any potential anxiety.

In his book Neo-Bohemia, the sociologist Richard Lloyd (2010:12,16,83-84) offers an analysis of similar social reconstructions in urban spaces from the perspective of art and identity. His research implies that whenever local authorities tolerate the production of street art compatible with an ‘outlaw aesthetic,’ it helps prevent neighbourhood outsiders being easily identified by potentially, dangerous anti-gentrification insiders. For newcomers to Hackney moving through its newly sanitised locales, this form of urban camouflage enables them to use fashion to assist them to adapt and feign belonging.

However, the sociologist Sharon Zukin (2002:23) considers it a warning signal. She argues that the presence of artists who through their work, frame a city’s cultural space in an assertion of a continued cultural hegemony is as an indicator of a neighbourhood’s eventual gentrification. Moreover, Zukin continues to state that as some cultural activists have become ‘more self-conscious defenders of their own
interests as artists and more involved in political organizations’, they have been co-opted to art wash the gentrifying activities of corporate developers and local authorities.

It is a compelling theory that supports the assumptions of some of my interlocutors although it excludes exceptions to the rule like Theaster Gates, the self-defining ‘citizen-artist’ who uses socially engaged art installations in Chicago.

‘what I made wasn’t relevant to the market or the state: the state wouldn’t fund me, wouldn’t believe in my block, and the market didn’t know me’ (Gates and Crawford 2014:90)

Gates’ Dorchester Projects based at a neighbourhood in Chicago’s South Side purchases and then transforms decommissioned houses to drive social change. However, the artist who avoids associating the word activism or institutional critique with his practice does agree with Zukin’s assertion. He argues ‘My Labor is My Protest’ and uses community engagement, music and object-based artistic practice as a challenge to the displacement of communities that often follows gentrification.

During my time in the field, I observed numerous street artists utilising the visual language of hip-hop to adorn the streets of Hackney. Their work was displayed in mural form on the side of residential and commercial properties, on the walls and bridges that lined the canal and often provocatively on the hoarding that developers used for sites facing demolition and regeneration.

When walking through the borough early in the morning and I would see small groups of European men silently, collaboratively engaging in their craft. Some welcomed me taking photographs, others were more guarded. None wanted to engage in a conversation with me preferring their cultural messaging to speak instead. I listened through these artists choice of symbols, colours, iconography and social messaging. It was more than tagging and “graffiti”, it was work engaged in symbolic construction (Cohen 1985), capable of both reorganising social boundaries and reshaping the neighbourhood’s collective memory and identity.

80 https://whitecube.com/channel/channel/theaster_gates_in_the_auditorium_2012
Figure 3-10 Former pub, The Lord Napier Pub in Hackney Wick closed down in 1995, then becoming used as a space for street art and illegal raves.

Figure 3-1 Small group of street artists mark their territory by the canal
Changing Identity

Colonising

During February 2017, while on my way home after a meeting with the Hackney Museum team, I observed a heated discussion taking place in the Narrow Way outside a local burger store. Situated in Hackney Central, the historical heart of the borough, the Narrow Way is a pedestrianised retail hub and a popular spot for young people that lies a few minutes away from the train station and bus depot. The small multi-ethnic group of adolescents were discussing the violent mugging of a father who lived near Broadway Market, a location which every weekend hosts over a hundred stalls selling vintage clothes, street food, books and coffee which the Timeout magazine describes as “London’s hippest market”.

The controversy being highlighted by the young people was not about the vicious assault that had left the victim bleeding with a broken jaw, but instead, the comments attributed to him in the press. The Hackney Gazette, a local newspaper, had reported that Alan Munday, a broker who had moved to the East End in 1998, was warning people about Hackney’s “dark underbelly”. He had claimed, “you forget about the dangers because of the gentrification”. Furthermore, the article stated that the 46-year-old had been robbed by two “black men in their 30s” while waiting for a cab on Hackney Road at 2am.

A couple of my street trader interlocutors had been discussing the incident within earshot of the young people. Although it had not been explicitly stated, Munday’s comments were being considered proof that gentrification in Hackney was designed to address the “race” problem first, class second.

Youth 1: ‘Listen to him bruh, ‘bout everything’s trendy’
Youth 2: ‘That’s what happens when you try and take over endz (the neighbourhood)’
[Laughter]

The conversation continued with there being consensus around the idea that the stockbroker deserved his injuries. This was followed by a distinct lack of sympathy for

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Prior to Hackney’s recent wave of mass regeneration in 2006
Munday who had commented, “I turned around and one of them said ‘give me your stuff’. I told them to go f**k themselves but they attacked me and smashed my head on the pavement three or four times. Blood was streaming out of my mouth.”

I was surprised by the vitriolic tone of the exchange although some of the elders’ present, including one who is an adherent of peace, appeared to understand it. When writing about the African American experience, hooks (2009:94–95) writes that it is uncommon for them to reveal how they imagine ‘whiteness’ as a cruel, dirty terrorising force in the ghetto. From what I could observe, as far as this group of young people were concerned, the attack in Broadway Market was not just the result of Munday challenging the authority of his assailants, but also the direct consequence of the council transforming public spaces into areas they felt economically and culturally excluded from.

Butcher and Dickens (2016:810) explain that despite the tower blocks and estates that remain at the edges of Broadway Market, those who attend each week are eschewing the principle of mixing that characterises the borough’s diverse public spaces. The attack by Hackney’s roadmen was not perceived as an exploitative mugging, but instead a rejection of what Fanon described as the ‘authority complex’ (1967:61–73) believed to accompany the European as neighbourhood foreigner.

It is a reminder that any particular space not only holds multiple meanings but can also be interpreted in various ways beyond its physical attributes by those who occupy it at the same time (Massey 2005). Other than during conversations about Rashan, Grenfell or the Antiuniversity festival it was one of the few times a discussion about “race” and space offered a personalised form of hostility towards “whiteness” as a form of colonising agent in the borough.

Whiteness

While there is division over the drivers of gentrification in Hackney, irrespective of the ethnicity, age or social status of my interlocutors there was broad consensus over its result, the politicised expansion of cultural ‘whiteness’. Moreover, in modifying the territorial, urbanistic and architectural terrain, gentrification can also destroy the sense of belonging every person needs to feel that the socialist and French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1996:7) defined as their ‘right to the city’.

In Hackney, a borough with a population formed by waves of historical migrations, it is primarily those groups that have accumulated enough social capital which are able to reinforce their claim to this right through symbolic means. As a phenomenon there is no grand conspiracy involved\(^83\). The numerical supremacy that grants a social group over-representation in spaces of democratic discourse, simultaneously enables favourable political interventions on their behalf. However, when they claim their status as the borough’s primary stakeholders through cultural and aesthetic means, they often undermine the symbolic representation of other legitimate, but minority groups in the neighbourhood.

The African American community activist Kimberly Jones\(^84\) describes the historical iterations of this system as a racially biased version of the social contract, played with the rules of the Monopoly boardgame (Sanyal 2020). Nevertheless, while her rendition focuses on the effect upon people of African heritage, the system also impacts unfairly upon the identity of those Hackney residents with European heritage who as part of countercultural lifestyles, reject mainstream or hipster lifestyles despite belonging to the borough’s ethnic majority.

During the summer of 2017, one of my interlocutors invited me to join him in Dalston as he met up with a group of five friends to “chat politics and activism stuff”. He is in his early thirties, squats in the borough with a group actively engaged in activism addressing cultural, environmental, and social justice issues. He has been a

\(^{83}\) Although within majority power blocs it is the politically empowered elites within that often shapes and determines political outcomes

\(^{84}\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9_qGOa9Go
member of several social movements in the past but had left them over the past few years to join a smaller collective which he regarded less corrupt and unshackled from neocolonial interests.

We met at the popular Dalston Eastern Curve Garden\textsuperscript{85} (DECG), a local site threatened with closure because of the Council’s ongoing neighbourhood renewal schemes. The garden with its visually distinctive retro design straddles the line of gentrification politics. In some quarters its ghetto chic aesthetics is perceived as the epitome of the type of urban transformation that occurs as a prelude to an area being gentrified, yet in Hackney, the free-to-enter site, situated alongside Hackney’s famous Peace Mural and partially located in council land is popular with working-class and middle-class residents alike.

As we greeted each other and sat down at a large rustic table, I noted all of those gathered looked to be in their mid-twenties to early thirties, at least half had attended university. Everyone was local and lived either in Hackney Wick, Dalston, Clapton or Homerton. As we spoke, they passionately expressed their opposition to gentrification before explaining they had moved into the area seeking to benefit from the opportunities promised by regeneration.

“Some of the changes are good, like more places to eat and chill, but with so many people moving in with more money, the area’s changing... its good, regeneration, but I’m not sure about all the transformations.”

“Am I a gentrifier? oh god I hope not. Anyway I can’t afford some of these new developments, who the f*ck are they for anyway”

(Interview with young activists, 2017)

From what I could gather, they had all lived in the neighbourhood for a few years and worked either locally or in Islington, one of Hackney’s neighboring boroughs. Their status and occupations ranged from a university student, social enterprise worker to barista in a local café. As Lefebvre asserted, they too had the ‘right’ to belong to the city although they appeared riddled with contradictory notions of whether they were ‘authentically’ Hackney.

\textsuperscript{85} A public green space built upon the old Eastern Curve railway line in 2010.
Throughout their discussions they relished their identity as nominal ‘whites’ at the margin (Garner 2007:99), however I also noted their reticence and discomfort when talking about gentrification. Whenever one of the group members raised a point about the racialised element of the phenomenon the rest were keen to make clear that they they were anti-racists. This behaviour seemed an attempt to acknowledge and openly condemn the ‘apparent racist violations of the terms of the social contract’ as described by the philosopher Charles Mills (2011:4) author of *The Racial Contract*.

My interlocutors appeared cognisant of the fact that when using “whiteness” in any form to frame their social identities, its existence as a cultural construct relies on being perpetually framed in relation to a form of otherness.

‘whiteness without blackness, freedom without slavery, civilisation without barbarity? The former devoid of the latter becomes meaningless, and this is the key to understanding how whiteness works, by continuously redefining itself as the polar opposite of non-whiteness.’  
(Garner 2007:51)

Our conversation was a stark reminder of gentrification’s close association with whiteness⁸⁶ irrespective of the ethnic identity of those being disadvantaged. While having accepted the utility of regeneration strategies to arrest neighbourhood decline, these young activists also regarded racism as its social byproduct. Moreover, Gentrification’s signature theme of cultural renovations and destruction of social housing made most of my interlocuters uncomfortable over the privileges inherent in being racialised as ‘white’ (First Published in 1988, McIntosh 2019).

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⁸⁶ Or colourism/shadism outside the Global North
Changing Identity

As they shared tales of the anti-gentrification protests that they had participated in, I wondered whether their actions premised on egalitarian principles were being exploited. Across Europe, activism conducted in defence of migrants had been often seen as evidence of the *le grand remplacement* (the great replacement)\(^87\). This growing conspiracy theory promoted by the French author and Identitarian\(^88\) Renaud Camus (2017) claimed that social elites are using migration as a form of reverse colonisation to make European people an ethnic minority. The reality, especially in Hackney is somewhat different. According to the 2011 Census, people racialised as ‘white’ in Hackney constitute over 52% of the borough, those with African heritage make up around 20%, the Charedi Jewish community are another 7.4% and approximately 5% are of Turkish or Kurdish heritage. The remainder includes Chinese, Vietnamese, Eastern and Western Europeans, Australians and people from North and Latin America (ONS 2012). There is no erosion of “whiteness”. People of European heritage continue to constitute the ethnic majority in the borough while Hackney remains one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in London.

\(^87\) That creates discursive associations between gentrification and ‘black’ displacement, migration and ‘white’ flight

\(^88\) Follower of a European far right political ideology promoting white supremacy- https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us
### Migration and settlement into the area
(The *London Borough of Hackney* was formed in 1965)

<table>
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<th>Year of arrival</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Nationality</th>
<th>Approx. (%) population&lt;sup&gt;89&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<tr>
<td>1600s</td>
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<tr>
<td>1600s</td>
<td>African&lt;sup&gt;91&lt;/sup&gt; and Jewish&lt;sup&gt;92&lt;/sup&gt; migration</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900s</td>
<td>Huguenots (French Protestants)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Charedi Orthodox Jewish</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930, 1970s – early 1990s</td>
<td>Turkish, Turkish Cypriot and Kurdish Speaking</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s and 1950s</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960s and 1970s</td>
<td>African (Caribbean)</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s and 1960s</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s and 1980s</td>
<td>African (Continental)</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Dual heritage</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Traveller</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>European (British)</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>89</sup> As reported in 2011 Census

<sup>90</sup> https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol10/pp10-14

<sup>91</sup> Earliest record of African presence in Hackney is of “Anthony” who was buried 18 May 1630

<sup>92</sup> Earliest record of Jewish presence in Hackney is of jeweller, Issac Alvares purchasing a house in 1674
Belonging

As a concept, the notion of belonging is a useful tool to analyse ‘the fluid, unfixed, and processual nature of diverse social and spatial attachments’ (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016). For with many of the long-term residents I spoke to, the gentrification first seen in Shoreditch and rapidly spreading across the borough was regarded a form of social cleansing. They did not define it primarily through a ‘black’ and ‘white’ dichotic, but instead a local authority facilitated purge that delineates residents by income inequality and cultural lifestyle.

They depicted the concept of un-belonging in terms that challenged the concept of identity. Instead, the borough’s cultural changes were painted as foreshadowing a form of elitist place making. One that ignored social modes of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) to encourage a form of economic segregation that primarily restricted their life course opportunities and democratic freedoms, in addition to disadvantaging those on low incomes.

‘I used to see certain faces at certain shops, but now [the shops] have closed it’s like just us on the streets and dem in coffee shops with their Macbook Pros... things used to be ok between us and elders, but now everyone’s scared and we’re excluded, can’t even make money, pay rent... but them with connections [to finance and influence with the local authority] can resell us our own sh*t [music and clothes] that we made fashionable.’
[Interview with young BLM and housing activist in Dalston, 2017]

Increases in rent for an average one-bedroom dwelling in the borough are amongst the highest in London, starting at 61% of median pre-tax pay in the capital (Trust for London 2017; Cabinet Office 2019). As a result, Hackney’s rates of families in temporary accommodation at 22 per 1,000 households is one of the highest across London which averages 16.

In a region like Hackney where residential instability and housing displacement results not only from a the neighbourhood becoming too expensive to live in, but also to shop and socialise in, it is crucial to acknowledge this as ‘a form of violence that removes the sense of belonging to a particular community or home-space’ (Elliott-

93 Source: https://hackney.gov.uk/knowing-our-communities
Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2019:12). However, whenever this sense of dislocation occurs, we need to be cautious in rushing to ascribing an identity to socio-economically vulnerable residents that lean on stereotypes of race and class.

Hackney's history of welcoming migration over time has led to their being convergence over the established notions of who are the gentrified and gentrifier. While the cultural changes that has followed the borough's regeneration attracted affluent workers from wealthier neighbouring regions to settle, it has also aggravated the plight of the borough's existing squeezed middle (OECD 2019). Many who have fallen into debt due to their reduced ability to save, have taken to pushing back against the socio-economic order through activist means.

In Tim Butler's study of the gentrification that occurred in Hackney during the 1980s, he explains the phenomenon led to the emergence of an intermediate class which was 'highly educated, internally differentiated and political liberal' (Butler 1995:203). Several decades later and the lack of class self-confidence Butler referred to while describing the resulting fractions in middle class identity has remained. Moreover, it has expanded beyond the borough's children that have inherited their parents 'assets' (Savage 1992) to include some of the "old" middle-class and newcomer workers with the sufficient cultural capital to join the neighbourhood.

For those of my interlocutors living in rented accommodation, the presence of increased precarity in the employment sector, complicates their preconceptions of who amongst those that are residing in the borough, legitimately belong in the borough.

It is an insecurity that drives and shapes their activism, despite critiques that label anti-gentrification protest a barrier to poverty alleviating strategies. To those engaged in securing their home, the right of 'belonging to locality', far from being a parochial triviality, is very much more of a cultural reality than is association with gross region or nation' (Cohen 1982:10). In being related to social and spatial attachments, the fight to belong transcends isolated issues of class and to a lesser degree, ethnicity. In defining 'belonging' as being more about the search for a home
Changing Identity

instead of an identity, hooks’ (2009) theory on the topic foregrounds movement and change as key components.

When regarded as a study immersed in the culture of place and mutual aid based organisation before that of identity and disadvantage, my ethnography reveals individuals willing to engage with others in a similar circumstance irrespective of their own social status.

The artist and local housing activist, Emily Jost is a good example. Up until December 2014, Emily was employed at Hackney Museum as its Heritage Officer. There she held a job share with Emma Winch as a Schools and Families Learning Officer. As part of her role, Emily created educational resources for schools and delivered the Hackney Ancestors Churchyard Tour, a guided walk exploring the 700-year history of one of the boroughs most recognised landmarks. Her previous work experience made her well suited for the task, as prior to working for the local authority, she was the Heritage Officer of St John at Hackney Churchyard. Nevertheless, despite Emily’s credentials as a resident, community worker and local historian all asserting that she is authentically Hackney, that is not how she considers herself when discussing the topic of gentrification.

Emily: ’I’m part of the problem, I’m a middle class incomer, its been my home for 15 years, I chose to live here, I’m an artist and a professional, I love Hackney, but I’m one of the waves of incomers, so I’m not going to pretend I’m not. I would say that newer waves of incomers are quite different, significantly wealthy, Hackney has changed a lot to cater for its new populations, walk down Lower Clapton road and the new shops are not for me or anyone else I know in Hackney.’

While Emily, who now manages the education department of a gallery in King’s Cross describes herself as a middle-class, professional, her concern with being socially excluded following the transformation of Hackney’s commercial spaces mirrors that of the young people I spoke with who are often referred to as NEETs. The term is an acronym used by government institutions to describe people ‘Not in Education, Employment, or Training’ (ONS 2019).

Their similarity over regeneration concerns does not rest there. In 2016, Emily’s landlord, the Guinness Partnership housing association, sent all the residents where
she lived in Upper Clapton, a letter saying they were planning to make some improvements to the estate and build more houses. As part of their regeneration strategy, Guinness proposed demolishing over one hundred homes for redevelopment purposes. Driven by anger and fear of being forcibly displaced from their home, Emily, a few neighbours and others from the estate met in her flat and started the Save Northwold campaign to challenge the planned demolitions.

Emily: ‘my housing activism was [triggered by] getting that letter from Guinness, I was already interested in housing politics and looking at it as an observer, [but] I wasn’t involved directly in anything at all until my home came under threat and then [laughs] leapt into action.’

Emily’s anxiety over what would happen if she had to leave Hackney, possibly London and resettle somewhere else in the UK encapsulates the terror anti-gentrification scholars have conceptualised as a process of ‘un-homing’ (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2019).

In 2019, the group were successful in getting the housing association to agree that none of its homes would be demolished as it announced plans to build seventy-three houses elsewhere. Understanding these place-based, sub-regional forms of resistance to regeneration efforts, requires an analysis of the way neighbourhoods continue to be redefined in response to social change.

When Keller drew upon a cross-cultural study of British and American urban districts in *The Urban Neighborhood*, her account assisted with the removal of some of the ambiguity surrounding the term ‘neighbourhood’. In defining it as a concept, Keller had previously explained that the essence of the neighbourhood had moved beyond the role and relations of neighbours and friends or people and places. In addition, she explains, it refers to the physical and the social with a focus on identity and systems of interaction, especially in urban settings affected by rapid social change (Keller 1968; Keller 1966:67–71). This is what has occurred in Hackney among its inhabitants whose residency predates the local authority’s latest regeneration efforts starting in 2006.

Irrespective of whether previous neighbourhood boundaries are based on geographical markers, ethnic homogeneity or demarcated by some social
characteristic, the factors that establish them should be regarded as a creative act of social construction. This is important to highlight for Suttles reminds us that once the neighbourhood label is assigned to a region there are various implications. The emergence of ‘communities’ then leads to an application of social control where people 1) are segregated to exert status claims; 2) define areas where friendships can be cultivated; and 3) avoid intruder danger as the neighbourhood becomes a component in the identity of individuals (Suttles 1973).

With reference to New York, Suttles describes the ‘face-block’ with its residents whose dwellings share a common egress along with local facilities as the most basic unit of community organisation occurring in cities. Despite Emily’s class status, the “block” which we term “estates” in the UK, is where she lived, belonged and referred to as home. Emily’s tale which stipulated belonging in the borough does not require residents to be homeowners is shared by almost all my interlocuters.

It reminds me of my discussion with Gary, despite meeting each other several times while I was doing field work, we kept missing the opportunity to talk at any length. Instead we met during January 2020 for an interview at his home after a chance catch up in 2019. Gary who is in his early fifties, a former renter and now house owner in Dalston, didn’t start living in the borough until 1998. Although he now has growing concerns about neighbourhood changes over the decade, he told me that before then he didn’t have much of a connection to the area.

Gary: ‘I was attracted to London in general and Hackney in particular as a place to live because it was multiracial and because there were a range of classes, there were always middle-class people living here, but there was also working-class people living here, that’s why I liked it’

Gary explained that in 2000, he felt it was affordable for him to buy a property in the borough and purchased his home from a “white doctor”. He then lived in Hackney for three years before leaving for America where he resided in Chicago until 2015. Upon his return to the UK, he reports that; “the image of the place had changed”, with some people even regarding him as one of those “trendy people” now living in Dalston. Gary stated this with a little laugh but also a hint of displeasure.

94 Today we would use the US term ‘projects’ or in the UK, ‘estate’.
Gary: ‘there’s quite a lot of poverty in Hackney, there are quite a lot of people who are hipsters but there’s also quite a lot of people just looking at the street furniture, the shop changes, coffee shop changes, [and not realising] there’s four hundred people in the [nearby] council block.’

His words reflected the reality that while the local authority had achieved much in its transformation of the borough’s public veneer, its underlying problem with poverty remained. In Hackney, the middle-class identity typically associated with the process of gentrification was no longer intrinsically bound to ethnicity but also, culture and lifestyle. The term “hipster” as used by Gary and others throughout this thesis is not a synonym for European, but instead alludes to a subcultural lifestyle that has been racialised as “white” and portrayed in the media as being beyond the reach of those on low incomes.

The irony here is that the term which stems from the 1940s, originally referred to the cultural appropriation of the fashion, social behaviours and lifestyle of African American Jazz musicians by young Euro-Americans. By the 1950’s those who aspired to be “hip”, often artists, became known as the beat generation. In Africentric circles such practices became known as the actions of “culture bandits”.

‘The hipster style was assembled in relatively close proximity to the ghetto black: it gave formal expression to an experienced bond, it shared a certain amount of communal space, a common language, and revolved around similar focal concerns. The beat, on the other hand, lived an imaginary relation to the Negro-as-noble-savage.’ (Hebdige 2000:48)

While Gary did not self-define as an activist, he described his wife as one. He also considered his activities as bolstering the work of those engaged in social justice causes, especially those that worked locally. Married and with two children, Hackney is now Gary’s home. However, like Emily, there is a little reticence over his status.

‘I’m a Guardian journalist moving in here so maybe I’m gentrifying the neighbourhood in a way... so there is that, someone could say class wise [I’m] not exactly helping things’.

Yet despite their acts of self-flagellation both Gary and Emily in being residents who both possess a high level of cultural capital (Bourdieu 2000:12:13) have no hesitation in expressing their love of Hackney, in particular, its eclectic, multi-ethnic mix of middle- and working-class residents, both young and old – it is where they belong.
Figure 3-19: Journalist Gary Younge uses his work to support social justice causes and local activists

Figure 3-24 Housing activist Emily Jost uses online media to campaign for tenant's rights
Activist Communities

Diversity

It was March 2018, and I had been personally invited by a text message to attend a Hackney Stand Up to Racism (SUTR) event promoting the United Nation’s Anti-Racism day. As it came from one of the organisers I felt compelled to attend, however, as I had a previous commitment on the same day I explained I would be late. By the time I arrived there were five people sitting at a head table with a long banner attached to the front. Printed in black and white were the words “HACKNEY STAND UP TO RACISM AND FASCISM” (SUTR) while underneath there was a multi-coloured slogan that read “WE ARE ALL MIGRANTS”. Susan who appeared to be chairing the meeting sat in the middle as her companions listened, writing notes. It had just gone ten o’clock at night inside the basement of Halkevi, a small Turkish and Kurdish Community Centre in Dalston. There were no windows letting natural light in but several rows of florescent daylight tubes on the ceiling made it bright inside.

Susan, also a local councillor explained to the room of almost sixty people that, ‘Stand up to Racism is an organisation supported by individuals, social society and unions’. Her words while accurate underplayed the movements activist credentials. When I looked around the room, I spotted many familiar faces from recent community protests. As with most of Hackney SUTR campaigns designed to protect ethnic, national and linguistic minorities in the borough, they were often boisterous.

Their most rebellious in recent times was leading a campaign against the platforming of far-right speakers at the LD50 gallery situated minutes away from where the event we were at was taking place. Their most high profile was outside Stoke Newington police station in support of the calls for justice following the death of Rashan Charles.

Hackney SUTR with its close proximity to the borough’s residents, workers, unions and local politicians is one of the several well organised social movements in

95 A Turkish word that translates to “people’s houses”
the area each addressing their own area of interests. Emerging on the political landscape in 2013, the movement which has a secure position within civil society emerged as a localised subsidiary of its parent organisation Unite Against Fascism (UAF). The smaller movement’s political independence differentiates itself from the UAF which was initially supported by all the UK’s established political parties. While Hackney SUTR has close links with the liberal local authority, they publicly avoid engaging in the party-political skirmishes which occur between local Labour party members and their political counterparts in the rival Hackney Green Party or Liberal Democrats.

The format of Hackney SUTR meetings seldom vary - speech, applause, questions. However, that time I had missed a performance by a popular artist and several of the participants had already left. As Susan finished her comments a woman stood up. She was holding a blue clipboard and moved in front of the table to speak.

Jane: ‘Thank you, I’m a teacher in Hackney and a representative for the Hackney National Education Union and we have supported Stand up to Racism from the beginning, we donate quite regularly and publicise the events to our members... but one of the things we are very proud of in Hackney is the inclusiveness of our schools and that we do have students from of every faith, every background, every culture and actually we do seek to respect them all.’

Jane, who is one of SUTR’s acting union members has been a teacher at Hackney schools for almost thirty years. She explained that there were several teachers challenging the national guidelines that they believed promoted intolerance. A few minutes later after she had finished speaking Jane received a rousing round of applause. It was a pattern as one after another the panellists stood up, each giving a passionate speech beside a huge canvas on the wall that read “NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL”. Most of the talks related to neighbourhood issues, but not all.

96 Hackney Stand Up to Racism (SUTR) differs from most in that it operates to automatically bolster the ranks of other groups engaged in protest addressing discrimination alongside organising its own discreet campaigns.

97 The UAF was founded in 2003 in response to electoral successes by the BNP and initially set up by the Socialist Workers Party, formally founded in 1977 after operating as the Socialist Review Group from 1950.
Lucy, who had come representing the London Fire Brigade Union spoke about the role social housing and gentrification played in the fire at Grenfell Tower,

‘Those victims that lived in Grenfell Tower didn’t stand a chance, the moment those rich people living in Kensington and Chelsea decided they no longer wanted to look at a ugly building and that it should be covered in cladding to make it look prettier, that was the moment those people’s fate was sealed.’

*Lucy Mahmood speaking at SUTR Event, March 2018*

The room was eerily silent as she spoke, the audience listened intently as she explained the failures of the Government and Kensington and Chelsea council. It was only after she spoke about the resilience of the west London community in its attempts to rebuild their lives and ‘the contempt this government holds the emergency services in’ that the silence was broken with hand clapping.

There were several more contributions from both the panel and audience before Weyman, the joint national convenor of the group took to the floor. Standing behind the desk he explained in a softly spoken tone that the objective of the nights event was to galvanise support for a forthcoming demonstration. Making direct reference to Rashan Charles he made it clear there would be a section dedicated against deaths in custody on the planned march.

While passionately gesticulating Weyman concluded with an appeal for the group to organise reminding them, ‘We broke [extremist movements] by organising from below, black, white, Jewish, straight, gay. It wasn’t the politicians, it was us’. While the diversity he cited and more was present in the room, there was a palpable absence of other significant blocs that make up Hackney’s activist community.

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*Figure 3-30 - A message written on the toilet door at Hackney’s Wetherspoons venue "The Blackman a Spoilt Brat Universally disliked"*
Political Socialisation

The last time I had entered the Halkevi community centre was a year earlier after being invited to assist with a Black Lives Matter (UK) strategy meeting. It was an organising session closed to the public and attended by various young activists, half from Hackney, the rest from other boroughs across London. The demographic of the two events were very different. Whereas with the BLM(UK) session the oldest person other than myself was in their early thirties, during the Hackney SUTR event there were only four of five people present under the age of thirty, with none under twenty.

For the purpose of this study, this separation of activists across age lines is significant in influencing those who are recognised by the local authority and Hackney residents as being engaged in ‘legitimate’ social justice work. During my field work I noted that Hackney Stand Up to Racism members support BLM events. However Black Live Matter (UK) core members who are overwhelmingly young and from minority ethnic backgrounds, do not attend SUTR meetings even when addressing BLM issues.

This is not to suggest Hackney’s young people are apolitical. Throughout my time in the field I interacted with numerous young people affiliated with local government although often through youth services designed to help the most vulnerable. Nevertheless, my interlocutors gave me three reasons why they stayed away from Hackney SUTR.

The first was a reluctance from all but a small minority to being co-opted by the local authority with whom Hackney SUTR is aligned with, despite some having grown accustomed to interacting with civil society. The second reason was a legacy issue originating from accusations that SUTR is “a front for the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)”. This emerged in 2010 after the SWP was embroiled in a scandal where its leadership covered up allegations of rape. The third was that SUTR was perceived as informally co-opting BLM related causes without consent to bolster its own

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98 https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/19423
/ https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/05/comrades-war-decline-and-fall-socialist-workers-party
reputation. Ironically it is the same accusation the social movement activists accuse the local authority of.

Outside the BLM(UK) group there was also a small minority of young people who spoke of their anger at “them people selling their papers at our protests”. Another person asked me for anonymity after stating they believed SUTR and the Socialist Worker Party “are government agents working for the security services”.

This distrust contributes greatly to the activists in Hackney’s established social movements largely failing to attract and engage with the young people that comprise the borough’s urban social movements. While these political adolescents tolerate the presence of groups like Hackney SUTR when protesting at moments of crisis, many of Hackney’s young people I engaged with would only support new movements or those without a reputation of “working with the establishment”.

However, there were some alternative social movements that had members who loosely straddle both camps. Andrea’s membership of Hackney Unites, a community coalition for social justice and inclusive communities as well as various grassroot groups is one example but it is uncommon.

In comparison, the local authority has a better, although explicitly indirect outreach program for young disenfranchised young people than the boroughs more established social movements. In being able to sponsor or partner with grassroot organisations that offer direct support to families struggling with issues linked to evictions, school exclusions and the criminal justice system it can indiscreetly survey youth trends and opinions.

It is an important ability for the local authority. From at least 2013, each iteration of the Council’s annual report on the regions demographics has stated that, ‘Hackney is a relatively young borough’. It is a recurring statement that refers to around 25% of the borough’s population being under twenty. When you combine this statistic with another 20% who are aged between twenty and twenty-nine, it becomes apparent that almost half of the borough’s residents are under thirty. Of a total
population numbering over a quarter of a million people, those aged over fifty-five years make up 14% of the borough (LB Hackney Policy Team 2018).

While they do not all engage with formal mechanisms of political engagement, their interest in causes such as Justice for Rashman, the Grenfell tragedy and rises in violent inequality and racism are the same as groups like SUTR. As such the political activities and opinions of young people, especially those engaged in various forms of activism that include ad-hoc acts of unorganised dissent constitute a large, under-documented bloc in Hackney. Collectively they represent a range of place-specific activist subcultures that aspire a habitus which generates an equitable version of their cosmopolitan ideals.

However, trying to ascertain whether age impacts upon their willingness to get involved in social movements is challenging. In the 1930s, a largely Freudian based model called the ‘life cycle’ was used by social scientists to explain protests in the sixties. Students’ it was argued, were challenging authority on matters that did not directly affect them to construct an social identity they coveted (Feuer 1969). Adolescent rebellion was thus framed as a form of deep-rooted emotional conflict between young people and adults over prescriptive social roles and authoritarianism.

As an explanation, this life cycle model would seem to answer why various social movements with individuals over thirty in leadership roles fail to attract a significantly younger cohort. However, the presence of young and elder participants working collaboratively in other social movements like Occupy London, Momentum (Hackney) and more recently Extinction Rebellion (Hackney) across the borough suggest the explanation for the apparent age division lays elsewhere.

From the late 1960s, the life cycle theory was eventually abandoned as further research revealed there was no general reduction of left-orientated values with age. Social scientists turned towards recognising the diversity of roles in different “sub worlds” alongside how their attached responsibilities may be valued and perpetually revalued in different contexts (Strauss 1997). Scholars theorised that over any

\[99\] Rashan Charles
individual’s lifespan, their political outlook alters in response to changes to society’s political agenda.

Instead of age being the key determinant of political behaviour and attitudes, political scientists like Roberta S. Sigel argued that it was a sequence of ‘age-graded events and social roles that are embedded in social structure and historical change’ that mattered (Fillieule 2013; Sigel 1989). This realisation gave birth to the concept of the ‘life-course’ which recognised the impact of political socialisation upon individuals. Moreover, it suggested that irrespective of age, all humans have a lifelong capacity to learn and in turn, influence society as actors capable of actions that contribute to the resocialisation of the mass public (Sigel 1989:xi–xii).

Weyman’s words of solidarity at the SUTR event about Hackney’s grassroots organising across ethnicity, faith, gender and sexual orientation boundaries, rings true in the neighbourhood. However, his omission of any reference indicating vastly different life courses obfuscates not only differences in the ideology between young and older activists, but also vocabulary. Whereas the people I engaged with during the BLM session spoke in terms of “oppressor”, “feds”, “the system” and “liberals”, in the SUTR meeting the language was dominated by terms like “left”, “right”, “comrade” and “fascist”.

The terms “bourgeoisie”, “capitalist”, “hipster” and “racist” were used by both groups who were an inter-ethnic, mixed gendered, multi-faith alliance of actors. Both expressed resentment over their exclusion from opportunities to benefit from regeneration changes occurring in the area. However, they differed when it came to identify the source of the problem. Blame was unequally shared between the government, the local authority, businesses, developers, olders and newcomers.

Young Man: ‘They come set up their businesses and that takes away a space for someone locally to set up a business, and all the money their getting doesn’t go back to the local community, so you’re taking a slice of the local community and you’re gonna kind of have the government and policies around you to help you... you’re gonna have people policing... and then you complain why there’s this rebellion.’

These words were uttered during the same month as the SUTR meeting but instead on a rainy Sunday morning at Mabley Green. A young man wearing a dark grey coat and
hoodie was talking with the Hackney Speaker, Councillor Soraya Adejare. Visually, the encounter was striking. Adejare who was wearing a bright red cloak with gold regalia was there fulfilling the ceremonial and public duties traditionally associated with the post. The two of them were in full flow and being observed by a small group of young people. Their elder family members nodded in agreement but stayed silent while their teenage children not engaged in the discussion played football in the pouring rain.

Luke, a youth worker specialising in mentoring and exclusion prevention for a local organisation called Hackney Quest had invited me there to attend its Hackney Wick Community Cup and Family Fun Day event. When I arrived there were at least ten teams playing football against each other in caged pitches designed to stop the balls falling into the path of nearby traffic.

That Sunday Mabley Green was packed with energetic young people and their families of which the overwhelming majority had no intention of entering Hackney Town Hall to observe neighbourhood debates in council chambers. The discussion between the councillor and the young man in his early twenties was another matter. He had started arguing that gentrification in Hackney had led to a lack of long-term financial support for young entrepreneurs forcing them to compete amongst themselves, sometimes with violent consequences:

Young Man: ‘I want to get to a point where I have an organisation [where young people can] come and meet and link at some point so they have joint ventures, joint projects, joint funding, joint solutions, joint everything. I feel like instead of just Hackney having funding [to invest in youth projects], then [neighbouring borough] Tower Hamlets having funding, that they have to do something together so young people step out of their comfort zones and get along with people that they dislike... miscommunication leads to complications and that complications can be devastating so when you mix around you might not react to someone on a bus.’

His words had been greeted with much support and concern. Three days prior to the tournament, an eighteen-year-old named Israel Ogunsola who attended the local City Academy school had been murdered while cycling a couple of miles away near Morning Lane. The young footballer known locally as “Izzy” had been stabbed to death.

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Speaker of Hackney is a ceremonial post, the position is held by an elected councillor.
by two teenagers armed with hunting knives\textsuperscript{101} near the local authority’s controversial regeneration project, “The Hackney Fashion Hub”\textsuperscript{102}.

While speaking with Adejare, who herself had a reputation for direct, honest, plain talking, the young man who had a history of contact with the criminal justice system made little reference to her council status. While their discussion was an institutional interaction, it was an informal one. The young man championing their cause was labelled by those gathered including the Hackney Quest workers as their activist. Adejare was a representative of the council who in giving up her time to meet them for ‘real talk’ on a Sunday in the pouring rain was potentially one of their politicians. As they politely remonstrated about the detrimental impact of gentrification, more people from the Hackney Quest family gathered around to hear them speak.

As a registered charity, Hackney Quest sits oddly in both the civil society and subaltern camps. As an organisation it is no stranger to the borough’s disaffected young people or the local authority. Indeed, in 1992 the organisation was awarded a ‘shield of appreciation’ for its work by councillor Harry Shaw, then Mayor of Hackney. Yet where this could have been the kiss of death to its street credibility, its integrity as a genuine service survived on the strength of the support it offers to families with members facing socio-economic impoverishment, educational disadvantage or discrimination after contact with the criminal justice system. Through the charity’s use of football, music production, mentoring, advocacy and other activities, Hackney Quest works across postcodes regions to bring potential neighbourhood rivals together in a safe, family-friendly environment.

“We give people a safe place to be in, a safe place to explore themselves and to explore who they are as people without being judgmental... I like to see people being loved, basically, and we create like a family atmosphere”

\textit{Interview with Collette, Hackney Quest director, 2018}


\textsuperscript{102} The Council’s flagship was built with seed money from the Mayor of London following the London 2011 uprisings.
While experience and cultural capital enables SUTR and other social movement members to navigate the political spaces of the borough, it is not the same for the neighbourhood’s young people. Instead it is their day to day movements through Hackney’s public spaces which grant them a tactile understanding and subsequent desire to reject the alien regulatory systems and structural practices encoded in their environments habitus (Bourdieu 1992:53). Gentrification was not just about the risk of losing their homes, but also the increase in business rates that led to the demise of the cultural food shops, barbers, clubs, favourite pubs and even parks that all provided safe, spaces for them to congregate in public. That is not to suggest they, or more so, their parents rejected all the changes that regeneration has brought. Mabley Green, used to be a flat, empty, thirty-five-acre space frequently used by illegal fly-tippers. However, ever since 2016, Hackney Council had started transforming the area into a new park with sporting facilities and natural play elements built into the landscape.

‘[Hackney is] cleaner, I like it, but it’s so expensive and there’s nowhere to sit. You have to be rich to drink in any of those cafes, but I like going into the shops, I know they’re for the whites, the middle class, but I don’t care, the black pound speaks the same language and there are more blacks with houses and status around than before.’

Hackney parent discussing gentrification, March 2018

Many of the Hackney Quest patrons feel othered, overpoliced and victimised through violent stop and search. The suspicion and related treatment they attract in the neighbourhood where some of their families had resided before the arrival of recent newcomers makes them angry. Moreover, they claim it is racism that drives the local authority and police to ignore the silver cannisters that litter the streets of Dalston as very visible evidence of the violation of the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 after each weekend.

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103 Alongside the recreational use of cannabis and cocaine, Hackney’s young partygoers are involved in the illegally sale, purchase and use of a large amount of nitrous oxide, a substance capable of inducing euphoria.

‘My mum’s lived here for days, she went school in Hackney, so did I, but we no longer fit the profile, the new image. If I’m at the chicken shop with my boys, people cross the road but least they leave us alone… if I walk down Dalston or Shoreditch (laughs) it’s like “somethings up, call the police”. All of a sudden I’m a gangster, I don’t belong… I’m getting stopped, but I lived here before you even knew these endz.’

Young person discussing gentrification, March 2018

‘We get the bad reputation but its dem doing drugs, partying on a Friday, sex on road all kind of things with the police turning a blind eye. Then Saturday morning its all like lets ride up to [Broadway] market and get a nice cup of tea, here’s a vegan slice of cake, £20.’

Young person discussing gentrification, March 2018

Butcher and Dickens (2016) argue, investigations into contemporary forms of processes such as urban regeneration are predominately from adult perspectives. Their study, which looked at youth perspectives on gentrification in Hackney, exposed them to the experiences of spatial dislocation and affective displacement felt by young people as they experienced feelings of disorientation and not belonging caused by the speed of urban change occurring around them.

Moreover, when acting as an urban social movement at moments of crisis, young people often reject the social practice that the architectural and urban critic Kim Dovey (2017:284) calls ‘a form of ‘game’ within which the habitus is learnt... as a set of dispositions to act’. At time of social disorientation many refuse to yield to the cultural authority maintained by a disposessing gentrification that involves a ‘developmental drive that seeks to colonize space for the affluent’ (Harvey 2009:331).

It is at these times and in the immediate aftermath of moments of transgression when the local authority is unable to formally address these concerns that the informal approach of groups like Hackney Quest becomes critical. Those organisations informally linked with the council through its museum staff enable politicians to access and gather some of the ‘real talk’ insights that the Council as a local authority continuously missed.

These young urban philosophers I have quoted are my field sites ‘organic intellectuals’ (Gramsci 1971). They possess an intimate understanding of the negative and positive aspects of urban renewal policies transforming the public realm in ways that are different from that of their parents and carers. As counterpublics conscious of their subordinate status, they also theorise that the destruction of their favoured sites
of congregation cannot be explained by racism, fascism, islamophobia, antisemitism and rampant capitalism alone as postulated by various social movement actors.

Their schooling in Hackney’s diverse schools means they have friends belonging to other ethnic groups, many sharing a similar cultural reality. One where their reflexive discursive arenas develop outside official public spheres and near the Nando’s, MacDonald’s, Caribbean takeaways, chicken and chip shops and football pitches where they are cognisant of the role the invisible hand of the market plays in a cultural war that is decimating their future with the support of a violent police force pushing them off street corners and out of parks.

Whenever they talked amongst strangers in these counterpublics, their often-loud performative speech sought to be affective in addressing matters of historicity, poetic in its political attempts at world-making. In his essay on Publics and Counterpublics, the English professor Michael Warner defines counterpublics as being more than subaltern groups with a plan for reform, he writes:

‘The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media’ (Warner 2002:86).

What the ugly bravado about the brutal assault at Broadway Market masked for some of those young people on the Narrow Way, was their hatred and fear of the violence that blights their daily lives and that of their peers. They did not want to be condemned to the same life course of their parents, grandparents and great grandparents with whom they shared a similar level of cultural capital. They were aware that even if they gained access to civil society many of them were trapped in a generational cycle of political impotence. In Kimberley Brown’s study of how young people in Hackney view gentrification, she concluded ‘For the young people, culture becomes the utmost basis for spatial claim and ergo, sense of belonging in Hackney’ (Brown 2016:31). The same appears true for most of the borough’s urban activists.

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105 Which include online gaming platforms and forums like Reddit
Figure 3-35 Floral tributes for 18 year old, Israel Ogunshola stabbed to death near Morning Lane in 2018
Self-Help Organising

While there is a role for charities like Hackney Quest and social movements like Hackney Stand up to Racism to engage with and represent those holding countercultural and anti-authoritarian values through formal interactions, the majority of community organisations addressing these concerns informally are in the community and voluntary sector organised around principles of self-help and mutual aid.

The informal connections existing between these groups, which includes those who are not members of the borough’s civil society should not be ignored in any roll call of community activists. While some grassroot organisations remain resolutely off the grid, others have a minimal presence through umbrella networks like the Hackney Council for Voluntary Service (HCVS). Located in the old C.L.R James Library, the twenty-year-old organisation which first opened in the borough with three members of staff is situated a few meters away from the *Dalston Peace Carnival Mural*, a local cultural landmark.

During my walk with Ngoma, he told me that the mural’s design which was completed in 1985, depicts a procession of musicians marching in protest for Nuclear Disarmament and was funded by both the GLC & Hackney Council. Ngoma explained that Hackney Council’s opposition to the transportation of nuclear waste through the borough was typical of its governmental activism. Although this occurred before the formation of the HCVS he revealed that many of the activists of the 1980s era were primarily educated, strategically minded musicians stating: ‘Hackney was very, very radical at that time you had a group of people that evolved into the organisation that itself eventually became HCVS’.

The HCVS charity which was formed in 1997 after a council survey asking the borough’s communities to express their organisational needs now resides in the

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106 Having started in Print House on Ashwin Street

107 On trains
Adiaha Antigha Centre\textsuperscript{108}. Named after the HCVS’s founder, the Dalston based building is an old but relatively spacious site with free and affordable spaces and access to conference facilities for community groups. Moreover, on the Charity Commission website, it is described as providing “capacity building services, training, grants, representation, advocacy, information, engagement and other services to Hackney’s voluntary and community sector and those individuals or organisations connected to the sector”.

Jake Ferguson\textsuperscript{109} the HCVS’s current CEO, joined the organisation in 2001 taking over as chief executive after Adiaha passed away unexpectedly in 2006. Under Jake’s management, HCVS has grown from having an annual turnover of £300k to one of over £3.5 million and employing thirty members of staff. Together with some fifty volunteers they manage or assist various community projects such as Hackney Healthwatch, the Hackney Refugee Forum, the Children and Young People Forum, Young Black Men Parents Programme and other schemes that address issues such as mental health, safeguarding, domestic violence as well as scrutinising council services designed to support the boroughs most vulnerable people.

I spoke to Jake during a sweltering Bank Holiday in May 2018. It was the day after a local Peace March occurred under the banner of ‘Because We Care’ in the aftermath of sixty young Londoners dying due to knife and gun crime over the past year. With around a quarter of the murders occurring in Hackney, various community organisations as well as Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith groups organised and attended the march with local councillors to reassure young people in the borough that they were trying to protect them.

Jake who was also concerned about the violence in the borough, spoke to me passionately about Adiaha who he regarded a mentor. She was a “fantastic leader” who

\textsuperscript{108} In March 2016, Hackney Council for Voluntary Service (HCVS) was forced to relocate from its previous site. Although it is still situated in close proximity of Dalston Junction train station, the move was precipitated after a fashion company let its landlord know it was willing to pay increased rent prices.

\textsuperscript{109} Who is also the co-leader of a band called The Heliocentrics and given the opportunity will share his extensive musical knowledge in a heartbeat.
taught him the HCVS’s focus “should be on the underdog, those that don’t have, because who’s really caring and looking out for them”. Jake who looks at the problem of youth violence from the perspective of both the victims of peer violence and police violence tries to adopt a holistic approach to the issue. The HCVS offers resources to community groups assisting struggling families. Furthermore, the charity simultaneously supports youth-led organisations like Hackney Account\textsuperscript{110} by providing a safe space for young people distrustful of formal institutions to effectively scrutinise senior police officers over issues such as discriminatory stop and search practices.

Jake: ‘Young people have no faith in the criminal justice system, stop and search, [they are] silent victims of state persecution by police as a result of [their] colour, our job is to make sure that information comes to the fore.’

It is in this manner that the HCVS building serves the neighbourhood as more than just a meeting place for the development of community organisations. In practice, it also serves as a hub for those involved in grassroots led cultural projects to organise. Adiaha’s comments to Jake underpin the roots of the HCVS as one of providing a non-statutory safety net for a variety of cultural networks involved with general social concerns. Whilst not a community centre like the Halkevi across the road from it, the HCVS is a neutral site for the council which is useful for the local authority as the charity does not shy away from acting as a counterpublic sphere.

Locally, the HCVS is known as the centre for community organisations. Although some of its members predate the charity’s existence. Groups like the Hackney Society formed in 1967, are run entirely by volunteers dedicated to the conservation and regeneration of Hackney’s built environment and public spaces. Others include various church, martial arts and sports groups involved in community organising as well as bespoke networks like the parent led Hackney Special Education Crisis (HSEC) campaign. This group I observed directly challenging council proposals to change Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Funding Arrangements for the borough’s students.

\textsuperscript{110} Disclaimer: My daughter is a member
As part of its role as a council for voluntary services, the HCVS which also provides hot-desks and office space for various organisations inevitably finds itself serving at the front line developing the capacity of its two thousand plus members and subscribers, many who also run or are part of activist organisations. Through HCVS’s delivery of training courses, the charity provides Hackney’s residents involved in forms of self-help activism with the skills, confidence and where possible, the funding to run community projects, manage their finances and strengthen governance structures. However, there has been tension with the closeness HCVS has with local authority figures that has seen the body, as with the Hackney Museum, accused of being a trojan horse. I ask Jake if there is a risk that institutionalising voluntary work with social justice objectives in this manner could reduce their efficacy for activism:

Jake: ‘Difficult one, some people may say you’re pandering to the state and professionalising activism, it’s a problem as activism itself is not organised or disorganised, but saying the system we are in, is not working and to buck the system you have to be the opposite.’

It is an interesting answer revealing how Jake considers the term activist as a non-exclusive label defining a broad spectrum of socio-political work characterised by counter-hegemonic practices. It is in this manner that the HCVS serves as a halfway house bridging the gap between civil society, counterpublics and the local authority. Of course, on national matters, the status quo, or “the system” is represented by the Government, on local matters, that changes, as the system, then becomes the Council.
Figure 3-56 Gary is interviewed by community activist Andrea Enisuoh at HCVS during Hackney Litfest, 2017

Figure 3-45 Jake stands outside HCVS’s home, The Adiaha Antigha Centre, formerly the site of the CLR James library
Restoration work done in the sweltering heat
Chapter 4 Hackney Council

This chapter explores the history and political background of the council; it reveals its past struggles to address structural racism and its attempts at reform through a form of municipal socialism engaged in activist practices. I argue that culturally and politically, those working within institutional spaces are never neutral. Moreover, even when those insiders enacting social change hold high office, their efforts are restricted by governmental constraints that serve intertwined interest of hegemony. It is these barriers that makes it crucial for the local authority to work with outsiders disinterested in incrementalism as a policy making strategy to successfully achieve radical socio-political change.

To do this the chapter examines how the local authority employs both top-down and bottom-up strategies often with contradictory results. It explores the cultural and curatorial activities of the Council and Mayor to observe how they facilitate the local authority to achieve its political aims.

Formally, the council utilises a process of formal co-optation with civil society actors from social movements, residential and commercial networks, community groups and active individuals representing ‘official’ and ‘professional’ neighbourhood concerns when creating place making policy. Informally, it cultivates relationships with harder to reach grassroot actors primarily through cultural institutions like the Hackney Museum that enable the council access to counterpublic perspectives.

These two approaches towards institutional activism can result in conflict over competing interests when used to determine policy to shape public space. This chapter offers two examples of this. The first depicts the council’s politicians and senior officials directly engaging in curatorial work to authenticate the moral credentials of the local authority. This results in the establishing of a “municipal museum” within the Town Hall that marginalises counterpublic narratives while culturally co-opting transgressive forms of political agency. The second example reveals how when attempting to introduce a radical zoning idea to the public realm,
the council can fail or be ignored unless it is publicly partnered with an existing protest campaign or cultural activist outsiders.

**Curating the Town Hall**

Crouching inside an 8-foot-wide shipping container located in a secured council site behind the Hackney Museum are two women. Jacoba Minjnssen and Naheed Bilgrami. Both are on their knees wearing face masks and gloves in the corrugated iron box where the temperature is at least 27 degrees Celsius. Naheed is a long-standing volunteer at the museum, a film director and editor whose specialism in aural and visual cultures lends itself to contributing to film projects about the gender and health issues faced by the women of the Niger Delta. She is currently assisting with the museum’s learning programme as she completes her dissertation on Hackney Museum’s social impact (Bilgrami 2017). As such she has become a familiar face to the local authority’s curatorial team, giving back wherever and however needed. Jacoba is a former volunteer at the museum, a curator and experienced heritage worker who is often employed and deployed by local authorities for their special projects. Both are meticulously cleaning the antiquated furniture found during the town hall’s recent refurbishment.

![Figure 4-1 Restoration work done in the sweltering heat](image-url)
Jacoba: ‘some of these things are going to go in the [new] display, but because they’ve been left in the building works and the basement and no one really looked after them they are really, really dirty and filthy, not really nice looking, so Naheed is helping me today to clean them up’.

The items they are working on are covered in years of rust and grime making theirs a laborious task. Nevertheless, under the sweltering heat, they continue cleaning each item, one inch at a time. With their minuscule brushes they restore the facia of objects such as an assembly hall switchboard and heating regulators. All of the items originate from a past era but are slowly being returned to a presentable but non-functioning state for the Council’s latest project to attract public visitors to its Town Hall.

The borough’s original Town Hall, now a betting shop, was first opened on the Narrow Way in 1866111. Together with the Grade I listed, Old Tower of the former Church of Saint Augustine situated next to it, they remain two of the oldest buildings still standing in the area. After seventy years of service, the old Town Hall was replaced with the current Grade II listed building located on Mare Street. Erected in 1937, the New Town Hall with its art deco architecture, became the symbolic home of the newly created borough of Hackney. This was a legal entity realised on Tuesday 19th May 1964 as Councillor John Kotz, the Mayor of Hackney welcomed the Mayors of Stoke Newington and Shoreditch alongside newly elected members of the council and Arthur E. Wicks, the Chairman of the London County Council to Hackney Town Hall.

On that day at 7pm, the three Metropolitan boroughs – Stoke Newington, Shoreditch and Hackney came together to start the process of amalgamation. In total, at least sixty-five people were present for the meeting, their occupations ranging from social welfare organiser and company executive to bank clerk and bricklayer (LBH 1964:2–3). After almost a year later, much preparation and the dissolution and re-organisation of twenty-eight smaller London councils into twelve larger authorities, on 1 April 1965, the London Borough of Hackney began its physical existence. (LBH 1964:1–9, 184).

The Town Hall was and remains the symbolic and administrative heart of Hackney. Indeed, when opening the building, the incumbent Mayor Henry William...

111 https://openhouselondon.open-city.org.uk/listings/549
Butler, called it “that great dignified centre of public life” (Ijeh 2017). However, following eighty years of constant use, various parts of the building fell into a state of disrepair. The council determined to ensure the Town Hall maintained its role as a beacon of civic pride authorised a twelve-year, sixteen-million-pound renovation program to restore and modernise the building. In 2017, the restorers, Hawkins\Brown completed the task and in turn, enabled the council to run free, guided tours for schools, residents and visitors to the borough interested in learning more about the building and the function of the council. This is the main reason for the Council employing Jacoba for this project.

Contained in the basement of Hackney Town Hall are three rooms referred to as “the Vaults”. Before most of the local authority’s official paperwork was moved offsite and processed through the Council’s digital document storage systems, the vaults are where the council kept its records detailing the borough’s births, deaths, and local tax receipts. With the space now redundant, the borough’s former Mayor, Jules Pipe led on a plan to house and display some of the antiquated objects found during the refurbishment in these now vacant spaces and use them to document the historical roots of the local authority.

However, his desire for the display to focus on civic life meant the exhibition was likely to depict a presentation of local government in its rigid ‘text-book like’ form similar to the early conceptions of political history in US state museums (Message 2013:49). The objects would tell the story of the administration whilst the surrounding environment could deliver details of the borough’s noted political actors. However, with the change of Mayor and his adoption of the curatorial tone used by the Hackney Museum team, the project now mirrored the aspects of the Smithsonian’s *We the People* exhibition which encouraged visitors to reflect upon the relationship between people, government and museums, especially ‘citizen action... in relation to contemporary protest and petition’ (Message 2013:51–2). Mirroring aspects of *The Right to Vote* exhibit (1972-1974), the vault would utilise a collection of exhibition

techniques to bring alive and express a meaningful link between protest as a discursive instrument of democratic processes.

Perpetually Labour

Starting in 1964, there have been fourteen elections in Hackney, each conducted every four years in May for the political control of the Council. After the Labour party’s inaugural win, the Conservatives took control between 1968-1971. However, despite this, Hackney remains a Labour stronghold. Other than two periods of ‘No Overall Control’ in 1990 and 1998, the Labour party has won every borough election up to the present time (GLA 2018). As a result, it is fair to say that the policies and core values of the Labour Party has dominated Hackney and shaped the council’s inner workings. However, it has not been without challenge.

The activities of Hackney Council, like most local authorities, are influenced by the interrelationships and political allegiance that exists between its elected representatives and various officers. The late 1960s saw the council’s ambitions buffeted by the presence of councillors belonging to smaller parties like the Liberal and Communist Party. By the mid-seventies, this led to the regular inclusion of various other independent groups like the Green and Humanist Party as well as racist, far-right parties like the National Front. During that era, London’s East End had become the home of the UK’s largest concentration of Jewish people and faced numerous demonstrations by Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF) protesting their presence.

An investigation by the Commission for Racial Equality into Racial Harassment on Housing Estates revealed that Hackney was not immune from a growing national plague of xenophobia. Buoyed at a governmental level by parliamentary rhetoric such as the politician Enoch Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968, Hackney council estate tenants were publishing and distributing racist and fascist comic strips. In addition, the National Union of Teachers would later express concern over the rise in Hackney students making racist attacks on fellow pupils with some even caught wearing Nazi uniforms (LBH 1981:456).
Hackney Council may have sought to extol the Labour Party’s antifascist and broadly socialist aspirations, however, it is wise not to forget how public votes can cause conflict for party councillors and MP’s who are empowered by nomination but elected to represent all, which includes considering the views of those hostile to the presence of minority ethnic communities living in the borough. For the following decades, Britain’s streets and corridors of power were dominated by bouts of racial strife.
Embracing Equalities

The years following 1981 marked a significant shift for Hackney and Labour majority councils across the UK. The national Labour Party, led by Michael Foot, shifted to the political left in response to rising class inequality resulting from then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s government policies. A few weeks before the Brixton Uprising of the same year, a new election had seen Ken Livingston defeat Andrew McIntosh for the leadership of the GLC. Livingston’s intention, he declared, was to renew the Labour Party by using the GLC as ‘a mechanism for the redistribution of wealth on a grand scale’ (Livingstone 1984:19–22).

Now in charge of the UK’s largest, most powerful local authority, the London Mayor set about using the authority’s significant public profile and resources to address what Herman Ouseley, a race relations advisor at the GLC, would call the failure of the pre-1981 Labour Party to have a positive impact on the lives of ‘black’ people. Livingstone also utilised powers granted to local authorities by the 1976 Race Relations Act to implement ‘positive action’ measures. In particular, he used them to increase compliance with equal opportunities policies and raise awareness of discrimination.

Hackney as a Labour Council followed the GLC’s lead starting with an almost militant replacement of the old political guard built around stalwarts like Kotz. In 1982 only 8 per cent of the council’s workforce originated from a minority ethnic community, by 1983 the council had become more inclusive, appointing Kenyan born activist Dan Thea, as race relations advisor and Mackenzie Frank as community librarian (Bennett and Høgsbjerg 2015:23–24). It was a trend that continued throughout the 1980s seeing a marked increase in the number of African and Asian employees and representatives in the borough (Virdee 2014:151–153).

The local authority now appeared willing to recognise what Daley (2018:secs. 536–537) refers to as ‘it’s not about race’ based denial. Conscious of its lack of awareness on grassroots matters, the Hackney Council for Racial Equality (HCRE), an

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113 In 2017/18 this is now around 57%
https://drive.google.com/open?id=1WBaHsV UdNZlkymaG-bJauzQKVYvp1c0-
Curating the Town Hall

An umbrella group for antiracist organisations operating in the borough was invited to address the council in support of its initiatives with meetings scheduled every quarter with a provision for urgent meetings to be convened as necessary (LBH 1981:135–136, 279). This is the local authority’s first significant attempt at the co-optation of grassroots outsiders. The formal collaboration with council insiders and activist outsiders would later come to help shape, with the help of the Hackney Museum, what would become the council’s template for institutional activism.

After monitoring developments in other London boroughs, the council accepted recommendations to create a Race Relations Sub-Committee (Ball and Solomos 1990:105). Mounting public pressure from various urban social movements nationwide had created public pressure on local authorities to take the issue of inequality seriously. Accordingly, with the socio-political perceptive of the borough’s counterpublics now visible and centre stage the council took progressive action.

Its measures included applying to the home office for four new posts under section 11 arrangements to assist with the development of the equal opportunity policy and related work. (LBH 1981:742). The council also agreed to support an Open Day on Lesbian and Gay Rights during Gay Pride Week and ensure its council committees adopted its equal opportunities statement and policies relating to service delivery and employment issues of lesbian and gay people. Hackney Council had officially started the process of rebranding itself a campaigning local authority.

The Campaigning Agenda

It was around half past five during August 2017 when I noticed a commotion taking place across the road from the Hackney Museum. I had just finished a day of observing meetings and was surprised to see protesters gathered outside the civic looking building directly opposite the Hackney Town Hall and the iconic Hackney Empire. Underneath a sign with the word “CINEMA” there was a group of around sixteen people; three were carrying green placards with the words “DO NOT CROSS OUR PICKET” stencilled in white. On the floor and leaning against a tree was another sign

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114 It was the original home of the Hackney Museum before becoming a music venue named Ocean.
handwritten in black and red – “POVERTY WAGES ARE HORROR”. The latter was designed like a b-movie advert with splashes of fake blood while another sign with the words “Picturehouse” subverting the name of the venue whilst adhering to the style of its logo. A lone security guard inside the cinema watched over the entrance of the venue as his colleagues engaged in strike action for a London Living Wage for all Picturehouse employees.

This use of public space as a site of urban activism outside commercial space is an apt reflection of the one foot in, other out strategy used by both the Hackney Picturehouse and Hackney Council. Both grant tacit support for regeneration while publicly claiming opposition to gentrification through cultural means. Accordingly, the six screen, boutique\textsuperscript{115} cinema which sits almost next door to the working class orientated ‘Baxters Court’ Wetherspoons also hosts a café-bar favoured by office workers during the day. The Hackney Picturehouse also gives back to the neighbourhood through offering various educational programmes for local schools and hiring an event space which is used by local community groups for social events at night.

The protest I observed was a reminder that the complaints about gentrification made by Hackney’s activist community were not limited to concerns with rent increase and the demolition of social housing to cater for middle class newcomers. Instead, they were also about standalone processes of cultural displacement and the symbolic fracturing of a community linked through their low incomes and precarious employment status.

To that effect, the Hackney Picturehouse stood accused of exploiting its staff to prioritise its ability to cater for a privileged, time-poor clientele within the borough with new specific, expensive, but also lucrative cultural needs. In front of a person wearing an armband with the words “OFFICIAL PICKET” written on it, was a protestor

\textsuperscript{115} The venue hosts culturally themed film festivals alongside a variety of esoteric film screenings with its mix of the mainstream blockbusters.
with a microphone and mini public address (PA) system. While choreographing the motions and positions of those present, he spoke out.

Protestor: “when people say to me if you don’t like it here then leave, If I leave someone is going to come in they’re going to be paid less than the living wage, nothing’s gonna change, so its better to just stand and fight, fight for a better wage, fight for better rights, fight for union recognition, than run away, join a union, join a union”

As members of the public stopped to see what was going on, some took the “LIVING WAGE, LIVING STAFF” leaflets that were being handed out. Others less interested, merely walked by the picket line as a woman holding copies of the Socialist Worker newspaper and another holding a yellow, blue and white BECTU\textsuperscript{116} flag sought their engagement. A change of tactic meant the sound of Curtis Mayfield’s “Move On Up” coming from the PA system while one of the protesters shouted “come on guys, support the worker’s strike” was more successful. As the music played more people seemed encouraged to stop walking or cycling to look at what seemed at times a mini street party.

Protestor: “... we’ve proven with this movement that you can actually unionise casual workers, we’ve managed to expand this site to five sites. This movement is gaining momentum, people are talking about us at PMQ’s, were mentioned in articles in newspapers, the Mirror the Guardian”

As I listening to the growing number of conversations flowing with bystanders and protesters, it became clear the picket had provided some of them with an opportunity to engage in political discussion. That is not to suggest that this was a gathering of counterpublics. Moreover, in actively drawing upon the support of mainstream media and established political groups as a validating source, they risked travelling the path of coöptation.

I suggest this for in the middle of the picket line wearing a suit adorned with a “I love Hackney” badge stood Philip Glanville, Hackney’s successor to Jules Pipe, the borough’s first elected Mayor. Mayor Glanville or “Phil” as many people called him was engaged in chat with the protestors. Despite their jovial manner, they were clearly angry with the leadership of the Picturehouse group which they announced had

\textsuperscript{116} The Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union
recently ‘registered £93 million in profit’. Directing their ire at its managerial staff they argued that while the chain had continually increased its charges for tickets and snacks like popcorn, the cinema bosses had failed to offer any “acknowledgement that we’re not happy about the amount of money we’re getting paid”.

As the Mayor took his place on the picket line, he was watched by the occupants of passing vehicles like the red 106 bus to Whitechapel and some religious evangelists who were across the road passing leaflets to the public. His actions were a coup for the protestors. However, in choosing to co-opt a powerful, political figure to their cause carries risks for the group. While such actions even when informal can be progressive, maintaining the tension required for meaningful opposition if such partnerships become formalised can be difficult. Especially in campaigns such as this where the local authority was instrumental in enabling the chain to set up in the venue.

Such decisions represent the risk all communities of activist practice take when choosing to make unequal strategic alliances. It is true that the opportunity to institutionalise group concerns through co-optation can lead to immediate influence over contentious decision-making processes. However, on matters where all parties are diametrically opposed, such long-term cooperation can lead to undesirable outcomes which includes the political neutralisation of the group itself. For the local authority the opposite is true. Active engagement with protestors that experience different life courses from its officers can boost its moral credentials. More so when formally recognising the everyday social experiences of people engaged in protest about ‘mundane activities’ occurring in banal spaces (Nolas, Varvantakis, and Aruldoss 2017).

After a while, a suited man approached the Mayor, whispered something in his ear and they both left. I asked one of the protestors what did they discuss with him:

Protester: “[we spoke about the fact that Picturehouse] like to portray themselves like an ethical employer, selling Fairtrade coffee, showing movies about social justice, like the social housing crisis and yet at the same time they refuse to pay their staff a fair wage, this is insane. I was just letting him know and he strongly supports us and has come out in support of us and it means a lot, not just politicians but the wider public, people from Hackney, people from this community coming down to support us, its empowering man, it feels really good.”
This is one of my first ever encounters with Hackney’s civic leader during this project. That it was unscripted and took place on a picket line amongst striking workers sans media reporters is typical of the Mayor’s politics. The next few times we met before I formally interviewed him in his office was during various council meetings and public engagements where he had been invited to speak about the Council’s active role in reducing street violence.

Throughout my time doing field work I noted that the Mayor and his officers frequently used the public realm as an urban discursive space to reach those otherwise disengaged with civic culture and activities occurring within the public sphere. As a tactic it enabled council officials to practice the political side of public life by enabling its participation in cause-based activism to include engagement with protests, petitions, strikes, community organising and campaigning.
Figure 4-6 The Mayor in solidarity with the 'pay us a living wage' picket line outside Hackney PictureHouse

Figure 4-3 The Mayor speaking at a multi-faith peace rally to address violent crime in the borough
I introduce Mayor Glanville in this way to explain how, and why the concept of the vaults project that Jacoba and Naheed were working on shifted to align with his character and political strategy for the local authority. With the unassailable backing of Hackney’s steadfast concentration of left-wing politicians, the newly elected Mayor had been able to re-commission a design that enshrined social democratic values inclusive of grassroot forms of protest as an integral part of the municipal museum’s display.

This would be a significant moment for the project. Up until then, work on the displays which was also categorised by some council officers as an exhibition ‘showcasing the council’s political power’ had stalled. Reticence to the project existing outside the local authority’s managerial circles had led to the brief which had been unilaterally assigned to the Hackney Museum team, being informally referred to as ‘the poisoned chalice’. In addition, there was a growing perception by many that the municipal museum was a vanity project of the previous Mayor which in adding to the museums existing workload represented an unwelcome burden for the team lacking in any obvious social justice outcomes.

However, when in 2017, former curator, Hana Dethlefsen took over as Hackney Museum’s interim manager while Niti Acharya went on maternity leave, the Council seized upon this temporary moment of managerial change to kick start work on the beleaguered project. It was in this context that the local authority also employed Jacoba as a curator and utilised Hana as an in-house, but external consultant and assigned both the total responsibility of completing the task. Explaining how she was inducted into the project by senior officials Hana stated:

Hana: “I knew walking into that meeting they were going to drop something on me because I was not Niti. They basically said, this is what’s going to happen and you’re going to make it happen. So I said ok and thought how could I use this to the advantage of the people who are on my team.”

With both council employees having impermanent links to Hackney Museum, it seemed as though they were considered ideal candidates to oversee the development of what Jacoba described as “the biggest project I’ve done so far”. However, what had initially started as one mayor’s legacy project would be reshaped by the political
character of the next. As Hana was pulled into frequent meetings to ensure she stayed the course, Jacoba’s brief adapted to incorporate the current Mayor’s enthusiastic vision for displays incorporating the council’s ‘campaigning brand’ – a key plank of his electoral campaign.

Before the UK decided to normalise the election of local authority mayors by the public, a leader of the Council would have been appointed by the governing body’s majority group. Back then, the role was mostly a ceremonial position centred around officiating council meetings and participating in various social engagements. Notably, it had few executive tasks or responsibilities. This changed in Hackney when during October 2002, Hackney voted for its first mayor. The inaugural winner, Jules Pipe, a Labour councillor of fourteen years, served four terms as Mayor in the borough before leaving to become *Deputy Mayor of Planning, Regeneration and Skills* for London.

During his tenure, the post extended beyond serving as the communal embodiment of the borough to including responsibilities of being the Cabinet lead responsible for communicating council business to public and media. However, following his presiding over mass infrastructural changes as a result of the Olympic 2012 investments, Pipe’s name became tightly associated with successfully overseeing Hackney’s vast urban redevelopment schemes while simultaneously being responsible for exacerbating the practice of gentrification in the borough.

By 2016, Pipe was succeeded by Hackney’s Deputy Mayor and councillor for Hoxton West for ten years, Philip Glanville. However, keen to detoxify the administrations’ image as a force of neoliberalism, this mayor possessed a strategic vision for the local authority which would see it designated “a campaigning council”. To this purpose, the bureaucratisation of socially revolutionary aims was presented as not necessarily negating an activist agenda (Tilly 1978:39–40). Hence, while still adhering to the Mayoral tradition of hosting eminent guests, supporting charitable actions, attending civic and cultural events, Glanville became part of UK wide cohort of Mayors that wilfully broke with tradition dictating they abstain from any ‘controversial activities’ that may taint respect for the office and ‘does not concern himself with the details of local administration’ (Richards 1983:86).
Instead, Glanville as Mayor is explicit about actively promoting a socially inclusive, social justice orientated approach to council work. While not institutionally activist by itself, it is an approach that in accepting the authenticity of alternative routes for mediated discourse between the state and civil society, creates the possibility for an intermediary sphere between the public authority and less visible counterpublics to emerge.

Figure 4-9 The council runs ad campaigns pitting itself against rampant capitalism and Tory government policy
The Mayor’s Office

In London’s City Hall, the 9th-floor space offering an iconic view of the capital is named London’s Living Room. While its Hackney equivalent does not have such a panache name, the Mayor’s physical office space does afford its visitors a scenic viewpoint of Hackney’s cultural quarter. From the teal coloured cushions that cover the chairs and sofas to the antique wooden walls, frames, cabinets and tiled floor, the decor seemed fitting for its occupant typically granted legal and traditional authority based on charismatic ‘grace’ (Weber 1946:4–5).

At the back of the room, beside the double front door laid a cabinet with a glass display area. On it, was a candle holder with nine lopsided sticks, various flags, papers and a collection of postcards. Daylight entered through a couple of windows, but there were no pictures on the walls augmenting this homage to art deco styling. Despite its sheen of modest opulence, the Mayor had curated the room to give it the veneer of being in transition, ready for official business while simultaneously homely, personalised with items such as the pair of jeans and cycle helmet that lay on a sofa.

It was a large office space, dominated by a conference table capable of seating over twenty people, but the character of the room came not from the large desk, but instead, the items in front of it. The most significant being a surprisingly compact workstation covered with paraphernalia, a large office phone, a computer monitor, a small plant in a blue container, a wooden toy monkey and a bottle of water.

Situated nearby on the floor was a placard with artwork by the Hackney street artist-activist Stik, this was positioned underneath a framed certificate resting on a mantlepiece. Behind this desk, an even smaller table was propped against the wall. On it was a photograph of a ‘Pie and Mash’ man sitting in a shop on Hackney’s famous, Broadway Market. The man in the photo came from a family that had long been involved in Pie and Mash shops across the East End and had now adapted his business practice to engage in running collaborative popup sessions with the new vendors around his store. The Mayor told me that he purchased the image after attending a
“Camp Kilimanjaro” event in 2002 for Positive East\(^{117}\) with his husband and “Team Hackney” council colleagues. At the event, he had bid for the photo during an auction and won it. It was not until he was elected Mayor that he first visited the shop.

Mayor Glanville: ‘It was one of those things that I brought from home because I think it’s a vanishing part of the East End, to go into the Pie and Mash shop and say – not only am I Mayor but you’re in my office was quite a nice thing, and that is a process that... was pre-last election, so it was not something that was contrived, it’s just like the journey of this photo into this office.’

Glanville is keen to stress the authenticity of the objects in his carefully curated office which serve to delineate his interest in institutional and local concerns. The political theorist Michael Walzer’s definition of an office as a place of authority or service in which a political community takes a role in regulating the procedure leading the appointments of officials is useful here (Walzer 2010). Of course, this is not always true, privilege and nepotism in systems of state bureaucracy has meant that positions are often held as property by powerful individuals.

Nevertheless, Hackney Council’s transition from selected to elected mayor, is part of a democratic process seeking to ensure those in charge of political power with regulatory influence over market power can be held accountable to the public. Indeed, Walzer suggests that for such systems to serve principles of justice and equality legitimately, all such positions must be won in open competition (2010:129–132).

While this did occur in the borough, Glanville holding the position of Deputy Mayor before his election means there is little evidence visible to rebuke characterisation of his success as an inevitable coronation. Perhaps this is why Glanville’s mayoral office presents as more than a space for conducting business. As with his executive decision to incorporate a campaigning character into the new Town Hall display, the Mayor’s adoption of institutional critique methodologies in his political practice enables his commitment to activist causes and socially progressive

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\(^{117}\) Positive East is an East London based charity that has provided care for people living with HIV for over twenty-five years. The Kilimanjaro Challenge involved people climbing the Kenyan mountain to raise funds for the support of people living with HIV.
credentials to be presented in a manner, differentiating him from his politically
centrist predecessor.

Mayor Glanville: ‘what the [Hackney] museum and I are supposed to be doing is getting some
of the posters that the museum [have] and put them on the wall in here, so some of the historic
activism is displayed... so some of these historic photos that have always hung in this room... need to be put back up, but I also wanted to blend it with some of the things from the archives
and rotate it, because some of it is amazing, what we’ve been campaigning for, we’ve always
been that kind of radical place, that’s why the museum wants to keep that record of activism in
the borough.’

Political geographers criticise western social scientists for considering space as a
neutral entity awaiting inscription by human, social or natural processes. Yet to
dismiss the particularity of place and its deliberate production ignores that when
those with power control such institutional spaces, they can form empowering bases
of political resistance (Ethington and McDaniel 2007:132).

The practice of institutional critique to reflect critically on its own housings as
well as the social function of art, may usually be reserved for galleries and museums
but the choice of symbols that Glanville has on display indicates his intent while in
office. Carrying on with the local authority’s tradition of municipal socialism, he too
seeks to challenge any unjust application of state power upon the domain he now
presides.

Herzfeld (1993:61–62) regards the process of securing such badges of
authenticity to being like sorcery. Glanville may be sincere in his intent, but Herzfeld
reminds us that bureaucrats ritualistically work on creating social categories to also
secure their place in it. In becoming the personified embodiment of the Hackney’s
local authority Glanville is complicit in its acts as well as restricted to resist by
institutional baggage.

Nevertheless, as Mayor he can be deliberate in making sure he is surrounded by
reminders of the role activism has played in his journey. A placard with the words -
“STAND UP FOR SOCIAL HOUSING. SCRAP THE HOUSING BILL. HACKNEY
LABOUR” comes from a housing campaign he was engaged with during 2016. A free-
standing coat rack is also used as a place to hold a white t-shirt linked to a local
campaign with the words’ LIVING STAFF, LIVING WAGE” written in orange and a
couple of bags promoting Pride. This room and its Mayor embody a vision of the Town Hall as the home of local democracy.

Trophies of Authentication

‘I’m a collector, unfortunately, so this is year one… I’ve still got all my Sisters uncut valentine day cards, a lot of people put a lot of effort into that campaign… so maybe they’ll go to the museum or something.’

*Mayor Glanville in an interview, 2017*

‘objects have been ripped from their cultural context only to languish in mausoleums, objects may have entangled and transitive lives both before and after they enter a museum’s collection’

(Herle 2003)

While it is easy to assume that the reticence of the Hackney Museum team to work on the “the poisoned chalice” emerged solely from an issue of increased workload and lack of resources, to do so would be an error. Coleman and Moore have identified today’s museum professionals as belonging to an era where they increasingly seek to distinguish themselves from their institutional identity.

Although the team were hesitant to speak publicly about it, I was informed that one source of dissension was the manner in which the small museum team had to adopt its curatorial practices. In being forced to exhibit community history that prescribed legitimate forms of political engagement they felt implicated in an act of what the anthropologist James C. Scott (1999) referred to as high-modernist planning. Moreover, where the inclusion of radical expressions of political agency were formally adjudicated through formal processes of top-down planning, the potential for marginalising underrepresented political voices in the borough made them uncomfortable.

These specific concerns did not arise with the Mayor’s office where he has the authority to sidesteps the issue, and yet, in divorcing social context from his collections a new problem is present. The objects were often chosen for their ability to represent cultural moments of local activism but made no reference to the outcomes of such actions. For as there were no explanatory notes detailing the objectives the activist paraphernalia he displays served, they became historically and politically disembodied, at risk of existing as poeticed, institutionalised trophies. Kirshenblatt-
Gimblett (1991:388–389) denotes the status of these cultural artefacts as that of being either an ethnographic object or a neutered ethnographic fragment.

For example, Glanville’s reference to the ‘valentine cards’ from the feminist direct action group the *East End Sisters Uncut* (EESU) places the objects in situ. It becomes an artistic fragment amplified through that which is absent, mischievously serving as a metonym of the cultural body that produced it. However, if we were to reconstruct the relational context between the Mayor and the displayed fragment, another narrative competing with the council as home to governmental activists would emerge.

It would be an opportunity offering invited guests a new interpretive lens through which to view the objects in his exhibitory office space. Such context would reveal that the Mayor first met EESU during July 2016 while still Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Housing. Angry at the lack of safe and secure housing for survivors of domestic violence in the borough, the group “occupied” an empty council flat in Lower Clapton and transformed it into a community centre offering a free breakfast club and skillshare hub. EESU’s primary demand centred around an objection to the use of private hostels for survivors of domestic violence. Instead, they argued there were 1047 empty council houses in the borough that could be used, starting with the empty flats at Marian Court which they had occupied.

Now, while EESU’s actions were unlawful, their actions – “squatting” - were not new to the borough which has a long history of unauthorised occupancy of residential buildings. In January 1986, when the total number of squatted properties was 676 it was council policy to allocate a caseworker to rehouse vulnerable homeless people and ensure “that no squatters be evicted from tower blocks until all the empty properties in the individual bocks have been let and that efforts be made to have block evictions coincide with block refurbishments” (LBH 1985:521). Today the local authority is far less charitable. In the case of the domestic abuse survivors occupying Marian Court,

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118 The ‘reclaimed’ space was designated as being for “women and non-binary people and [their] children” to highlight several issues exacerbated by cuts in the borough.

119 Hackney Council stated in response that they only had 384 ‘empty homes’ present
the Mayor communicated with the group and offered to work on a solution that saw survivors housed in either the empty Marian Court flats, council-run hostels or self-contained accommodation with trained staff.

The situation only deteriorated when EESU became convinced by Glanville’s failure to fill all the empty flats on the estate by a Christmas deadline as having reneged on his agreement. As a result, on 14 February 2017 they mobilised over a hundred people to stage a protest outside the Town Hall in support of their campaign. In a previous protest, the group had splattered the Town Hall with paint costing thousands of pounds to clear. This time they used a diversity of tactics, including the posting of numerous ‘valentine’s day’ messages on postcards signed by supporters and the projection bombing of the Town Hall with the messages “How can they leave if there is nowhere to go?” and “@MayorOfHackney Phillip Glanville Keep Your Promises! @ SistersUncut” (Bartholomew 2017; Eckersley 2017; Bausells 2017).

None of this is communicated to me verbally, likewise none of this negates Glanville’s progressive credentials. Before moving to Hackney in 2003, the Hillingdon born Mayor worked for an HIV charity in Old Street and occupied various roles in Parliament. Since becoming Hackney’s second-ever directly elected Mayor of Hackney in September 2016, his decision to select six women into the Hackney cabinet saw the male members outnumbered for the first time in the borough’s history. Also, following an amendment to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 in 2014, he and his partner, the artist Giles McCray became the first same-sex couple to marry in Hackney.

Parading Counterpower?

“Authenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do.” (Crew and Sims 1991)

The Sisters Uncut debacle serves to underline how the institutional commodification of protest paraphernalia outside of its social context, can transform objects of dissent into fragments asserting moral authenticity instead of undermining it. The recontextualisation of everyday items used in specific acts of protest into cultural artefacts for display is not new.
There has long been a trend of elitist public institutions that reinforce cultural hegemony displaying objects of dissent in terms disconnected from contemporary versions of their claims for social change. For example, also in 2018 the Citi exhibition I_object hosted by the British Museum stated its parading of rebellious objects was designed to show that ‘questioning authority, registering protest and generally objecting are an integral part of what makes us human’ (British Museum 2018). At a cost of £12 for adults to enter and view an eclectic range of objects such as the ‘pussyhat’ worn by protesters marching for women’s rights in 2017, it is an expensive lesson to learn. Moreover, it calls into question not only the authenticity of the museum around its curatorial processes of acquisition and display of objects, but also its historical authenticity when offering interpretations of dynamic issues of cultural and social expressions and values.

However, commercial gain is not the only benefit that can be acquired through the exploitation of activist objects created through voluntary means, usually under duress. In 2014, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&AM) loaned several exhibits from social movements across the world for its exhibition Disobedient Objects. Alongside the customary protest banners, flags and posters that have become customary for such exhibitions, there were also Zapatista dolls, defaced currency and how to guides for creating items like a Makeshift Tear-Gas Mask from plastic bottles and a Bucket Pamphlet Bomb to distribute censored information as used in South African cities from 1969.

Here as in the Hackney Mayor’s office and the Town Hall’s vaults, the inclusion of these objects, many refashioned by grassroot actors with limited resources for strategic use was not designed to increase awareness of the specific protest issues. Instead they served to facilitate an aesthetic coöptation of activist processes. That is not to assert the intent was malignant. Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon (2014), the curators of the V&AM exhibition have expressed their interest lay in revealing how a material culture of protest can be involved in ‘out-designing authority’. Their

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120 http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/i_object.aspx
exploration lauds the creative way activists defy standard definitions of art and design when mobilising for radical social change.121

However, ‘out-designing authority’ does not occur where the use, placement, interpretation and exhibition of objects loaned or sourced from activist groups has been designed by and for authority. Indeed, it risks mobilising activist creativity for political gain without consent. Especially where museums, galleries and indeed Mayoral offices seek to offer ethics as a useful educative, discursive framework for developing strategies to promote and address social justice issues. Neutralising this requires fostering an authentic activist orientation among institutional insiders that publicly acknowledging the conflictual influence social, cultural, political and economic forces has on policy. Else, where Flood and Grindon’s Disobedient Objects seeks to invite a reversal of ‘unacknowledged grassroots cultures of social movements’, the Hackney Mayor’s office just serves as an incomplete catalogue of protest movements and very disobedient actors in the borough.

For, also exorcized from the display in the Mayor’s office was the Council’s role in facilitating the demolition and redevelopment of Marian Court. The planned development designed to see the estate reconfigured to offer a mixture of housing with social and ‘affordable’ rent or shared ownership and private sale is contested by anti-gentrification groups. The Architects for Social Housing (ASH) is a collective of architects and urban designers formed in 2015 to support London council estate communities in resisting the regeneration of their homes. ASH describes the local authority’s informal coöptation of the local Tenants and Residents Association as a ‘dirty trick of a dirty council’.122

There is little doubt that the Mayor is committed to a form of participatory democracy that promotes civic engagement through critical reflection. Nevertheless, to challenge unequal distribution of power in society validated by the disobedient exhibits in the local authority’s displays of hegemony requires their deliberate

121 Which they poetically describe in a coöptation of Malcolm X’s famous mantra as ‘Working by any media necessary’.
122 https://architectsforsocialhousing.co.uk/2016/09/08/regenerating-hackneys-estates-the-dirty-tricks-of-a-dirty-council/
empowerment using interpretations cognisent of the meaning imbued in cultural and countercultural semantics (Macdonald 1998). Without this or fully enabling the ‘revenge’ of the displaced object through counter discourse (Starn 2005:83), any attempt to cultivate a successful ‘performative process that challenges individuals and communities to become active participants, collaborators, and organizers who are willing to transgress (local) sociopolitical borders’ (Rectanus 2020:246) will fail.

The Municipal Museum

Object Focused Design

To watch Jacoba design and curate the new Town Hall displays I had to observe her conduct her duties across three sites. The corrugated box storing the objects that served as a display backdrop was one; the vaults themselves as she co-managed both the construction work and installation, was another. However, most of her work was conducted behind a desk in the offices of Hackney Museum. It was there using an antiquated HP Compaq computer that she perused onscreen images from the museum’s collections management system alongside various images and news clippings from the Hackney Archives. With less than two weeks to conduct all the required research for the project she explained; ‘[this] is not my favourite way of doing things’.

One of the constraints many researchers face when being forced by time limits to rely on readily available historical sources, is a restricted opportunity to identify the gaps missed within the official records collected by institutions of power. The anthropologist Thomas Abercrombie (1997) argues that basing our historical interpretations around the results of colonial collecting processes introduces the risk of failing to excavate the voices of the oppressed and marginalised. Such processes invariably return a skewed interpretation of history that if devoid of countercultural context and meaning, serves only to reinforce hegemony (Ibid. 1997).

Nevertheless, Jacoba diligently went about researching ideas for the display’s themes, drafting layout suggestions and selecting potential display items, communicating with Hana when managerial oversight was required. With awareness of a forthcoming meeting with the council’s planning team present in Hana’s mind,
she reminded Jacoba; ‘I think as much as we can get them to [decide] on the spot, we should do, otherwise we’re chasing them, and I don’t want to do that… ask which objects, what’s your priority?’ Both were equally determined to successfully deliver the project before their contracts expired and were wary of the difficulty in securing timely responses and approval from the officials on issues of minutiae.

It was at those times the difference in organisational culture of the local authority and that of the Hackney Museum team became explicit. While the planning meetings were always cordial, they did not dispel the perception that some of the officials involved regarded the museum’s ‘expert knowledge [being] … not merely as irrelevant but as a potential inhibition to communicating with the public’ (Macdonald 1998:105). This is not to frame the tension as a struggle of the curator versus the bureaucrat. Moreover, as to highlight the prioritising of minimising public costs for a liberal consumerist vision of civic culture and protest over delivering a presentation inclusive of counterpublics and countercultural forms of political engagement. Whereas the Hackney Museums object selection process would usually be scrutinised with the assistance of a community stakeholder group, for the municipal museum project, the task was led and decided by a team of senior council officials including the Mayor and the local authority’s communications officer.

Hana’s direct liaison with the council was through Nick. Describing him as ‘the one that makes things happen’, he was a member of the council’s planning team who had been assigned the task of working on the project and solving any potential issues that could derail its completion. To all intents and purpose Hana and Jacoba’s curatorial process mirrored that of many small local history museums. Following the sketching of the available floor space, a selection of objects from the collections and archives occurred. Then working from the brief, a taxonomic system was devised.

Yet, where the output of most social history museums is predicated around the advocacy of social justice issues affecting vulnerable, under-represented or minority groups, this project was designed to classify, organise and present the council’s epistemological position on political agency. Despite being framed and presented by
The context and aesthetics of its physical location through the language of cultural conservation, as an exhibition it was also designed to do something else.

Mayor Philip Glanville: ‘[I know people’s stories are important but] the story of the people that done the restoration are told in the booklet, they don’t necessarily have to be told in the museum, because in five years’ time it will be more about where we’re at in the building than the people’

The Mayor’s comments were indicative of the power asymmetries that shaped the construction of the exhibition from its conception. Moreover, the curatorial approach used differed from that employed by the core Hackney Museum team which were driven by what Ho and Ting regard as cultural citizenship designed to represent and strengthen political rights via the cultural domain (2019:198–199).

However, this power differential was not always visible, especially during a key meeting at which the planning group was invited to select display items from objects identified in Jacoba’s research. Macdonald explains how the intentions of all acts of governmentality can be observed in its ‘semio-techniques’, that is, the seemingly, insignificant small details defining the architectural choices, object classification and decisions on artefact placement within exhibitions (1998:3). While it is true that the impetus for the vault displays could be characterised as the antithesis of contemporary cause-based collection, Glanville’s choices revealed a willingness to expose, albeit to a limited degree, the interconnectedness and tensions that exist between politics, culture and urban redevelopment.

On issues of the overall layout if not content, the senior council officers willingly showed deference to the expertise of the museum-based team. In compliance with her briefing, Jacoba’s research had shaped the basis of a presentation illustrating how the vaults were to be categorised under the themes of “Governance and Democracy”, “Civic Pride” and “Town Hall History and Refurbishment”. Each was then to be subdivided into small sections. For example, in the vault focused on the building itself, there would be a panel on style explaining the Town Hall’s art deco styling alongside information on its function and restoration. Issues such as labelling adhered to the museological approach and formal council styling already established and used by the Hackney Museum.
However, despite this concession to established museological practices, this was still primarily an exhibition transmitting symbolic representations of municipal power with the choice of which objects to include being identified based on a mixture of aesthetic quality and political back story. Although unintentional, this method of displaying power to the general populous was simultaneously a use of disciplinary techniques imprinting upon the public how and where to occupy a cultural space (Bennett 1995:93–94).

Therein lay the ubiquitous pressure that exists between institutional activism that prioritises governmental concerns and curatorial activism that serves community needs. Bob Kerrey, the former Democrat governor of Nebraska between 1983 to 1987 offers an interesting postulation on the topic. Seeking to define the difference between activists and politicians despite the occasional overlaps in objectives he writes:

‘when an activist becomes a politician, society loses the former to gain the latter. The reverse is also true. There are exceptions but they are rare. A politician must compromise to get results. A good activist must be uncompromising and does not have to worry about offending large numbers of people by using language that is strident... to gain the public’s attention’ (Kerrey 2016).

Where the municipal exhibition encouraged visitors to engage in the mimicry of preferred societal roles, the public was being asked not only to modify their thoughts and behaviour but also to cede agency to mechanisms of political hegemony (Foucault 1995:40–42; Bennett 1995a:23–24).
Some of the vaults were retrofitted with display cases.

A meeting between museum staff and the Mayor and his team about building the new display.
Council History Tour

In May 2018, the council announced the relaunched tours of the refurbished Town Hall. While still the space of representative civic authority, its revitalised guise as a public space of civic materialism alongside political action was put on display. Visitors were to be given the opportunity to experience the governing environment and objects of democracy as part of Hackney’s tourism marketplace (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Much of this was in line with the 2017 Mendoza Review commissioned by the government as an independent review of museums in England.

Mendoza who identified that council museums had been particularly affected by funding cuts suggested that local authorities adapt them in order to increase and diversify their income. In 2017, the arts and culture sector, including museums and libraries created an estimated £29.5 billion for the UK economy. Hence, while stating that museums should contribute to placemaking and assisting communities to become involved in local decision-making, Mendoza’s review recommended the use of museums as part of a local tourism strategy (Mendoza 2017:17).

The opening of the tour which was promoted through the Hackney Speakers office as a public meeting space between local government and community, was simultaneously announced through various press outlets. In a message published on the social media platform Twitter the council announced; ‘Book onto a free #Londonhistoryday tour of Hackney Town Hall including a visit to the buildings new historical display, The Town Hall Vaults’. With the project completed and the space now home to a permanent exhibition hosted across three rooms, the newly built municipal museum was set to open on a bi-monthly basis to the public and year-round to school children. Indeed, its first visit was from members of staff, followed by a session facilitated by Hackney Museum’s School’s Officer, Josie Stevens accompanied by the Speaker and a small group of children.

Due to the exhibition’s location in the building, access to the municipal displays required security clearance and is the final stop of a 45-minute guided tour. Located in

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124 https://twitter.com/hackneycouncil/status/1147799908704300034
the Town Hall basement and lacking natural light, each vault door is several inches thick and blocked by metal gates that need to be moved out of the way before entrance is possible. Herzfeld (1993:175) when writing about hospitality within institutional settings argues that ‘the bureaucrat as ‘host’ holds the key to social inclusion’ in his domain while the guest, once having shown sufficient deference, seeks to gain access. That is certainly true in this case where access, the route taken, and the levels of information visitors are invited to consume are heavily mediated through security, institutional and curatorial gatekeeping.

Once inside the vaults its bright white, ceiling lights illuminate rows of “John Tann Reliance Safes” while retrofitted inside each of the three rooms are display cases of various sizes. In one room, the installation of civic memorabilia in the form of a gold mace and chain is encased in a large freestanding glass cabinet. The display chronicles the history of the borough through the clothes and regalia worn by the various mayors in the 1965 formation of the borough. It is a display that complements earlier stages of the tour where visitors walk along corridors adorned with portraits of former mayors.

Also, recognising the exhibition would be attended by young people, there was a chest of replica mayoral regalia in the corner of the room and an allocated area for them to wear the items. When children dress up in mayoral clothing, the room provides an apt example of how the bureaucratised museum object can serve as a potent instrument of public didacticism (Bennett 2010:25).

However the space was not all dedicated to such exhibitory purposes. During the planning phase, the Mayor stipulated that when depicting the inner working spaces of the local authority, that there was to be a focus ‘on public-facing rooms rather than [just those] where politicians sit in’. Building upon this request to foreground opportunities for public engagement, one of the vaults hosts a long, detailed infographic styled montage containing various texts, photos of council workers and numerous black and white outlines of key council buildings. While it successfully maps the function of the many public services offered by the local authority, the pictorial narrative projects a ‘deeply circumscribed’ universalist model
of citizenship that lies at the root of all local authority practices defining eligibility for access to council services. It is an uncritical representation that depicts an aspiration rather than reality.

New Enlightenment?
Over the past few years there has been growing recognition amongst English civic museum workers to make them better serve the changing needs of society. This desire has been exacerbated by a marked reduction in funding from local authorities that has left the sector in crisis. Despite their instrumental roots in the reform movement of the nineteenth century, many such institutions have struggled to offer more than contemporary representations of the democratic links existing between local people, place and history.

Recognising the need to justify and attract future investment, the English Civil Museum Network (ECMN) was established in 2015 with the support of the Arts Council England (ACE). In its inaugural report looking at the future sustainability of civic museums, its author, Professor Peter Latchford (2018) claimed there was support for the notion that society is at the dawn of, and in need of a ‘new Enlightenment’. He argued that beyond the twentieth century, civic museums should be catalysts facilitating a societal shift away from Western cultural preoccupations with individualism and wealth generation, and instead cultivate a move towards collective fulfilment.

‘There is growing recognition that twentieth century ways of thinking have run into the sand; and that we are at the beginning of a new Enlightenment concerning, individual happiness, community and public life. To flourish, this emerging movement needs reform catalysts... The civic museum movement had its roots in social reform. Civic museums have the potential to play a similarly powerful role in the contemporary era.’ (Latchford 2018:13–14)

It is a laudable aspiration although it downplays the risks posed to the existence of the larger number of independent and avowed ‘activist’ museums (Janes and Sandell 2019)

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126 The informal network is made of 52 local authority owned or ex-local authority owned museums representing around 200 sites
in the UK that already engaged in such reformation work. For while civic museums historically prioritised representations of the government and the governed, a large, diverse range of alternative museums emerged to counter and address existing problems of inequality and social injustice caused by institutions of cultural hegemony.

While many independent museums with limited access to public funds adopted aspects of the New Museology to address social issues such as gentrification, homelessness, marginalisation, socio-political inequality and discrimination, some had to resort to using museological innovations to bring about their own existence. I refer to virtual museums without physical sites (Turtle and Turtle 2017; Migration Museum 2012) as well as under resourced, thematic micromuseums (Candlin 2016).

The danger of establishment funded and large cultural institutions seeking to be at the forefront of this new route of museological enlightenment is that they are likely to divert already scarce resources from existing museums engaged in institutional activism. Although it is right that civic museums critique and seek to address democratic failings of contemporary society, it is worth remembering that the promotion and development of civic society by municipal museums, including its layer of bourgeois administration was deliberate.

Moreover, in an exploration of the foundation of the welfare state by Langan, Clarke and Williams, the trio explains that the system was originally designed for a homogenous ‘indigenous population at whose heart were wage-earning males supporting families surrounded by a set of dependent populations’. Other marginalised ‘populations’ they revealed included non-citizen aliens that could be differentiated by “race” as well as age, gender and infirmity (2001a:42). As a curatorial strategy of revisionism, the Council’s municipal museum offers resistance to the inadequacy of ‘accepted conceptual structures’. However, until realising the role proposed by the ‘new Enlightenment’ includes the public authorship of permanent displays, such exhibitions will continue to centre a westernised hierarchal system as the natural norm (Reilly 2018:23–24).
Petitions

I earlier included reference to the *We the People* exhibition that opened in the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC. However, in the lead up to its launch in 1976 the museum *The Right to Vote* exhibition laid the ideological path for it through its focus on issues of social justice, enfranchisement and political campaigning between 1965 to 1972 (Message 2013:67). While I do not juxtapose the display in the municipal museum with the NMAI exhibition to suggest the former is a space for dialogue, the themes that both cover, such as the apparatus of formal citizenship and the informal, contemporary and historical processes of political reform are closely related.

The best place to observe this was the Municipal Museum’s “Governance and Democracy” vault with its sections on “Local Elections”, “How Do You Vote”, and “How do you become a local Councillor or Mayor”. Presented alongside it is a local authority poster notice from 1952 that reads; “If you are a GOOD CITIZEN You will wish to attend The Next Council Meeting”. Once inside, the vault’s visitors will see a replica polling box in front of a wall outlining the electoral process and routes to becoming a councillor or mayor. This is juxtaposed against a more extensive section on local communities and protests. Within these display cases are various objects such as those highlighting occupations of the Town Hall and a pamphlet advertising Hackney Council’s “Lesbian Strength and Gay Pride” day in 1986. Accompanying them behind the protective glass screen are also descriptive texts outlining the purpose of joining forces, engaging in civil disobedience and utilising symbolic displays to communicate political messages.

Theme wise it is a condensed representation of the borough’s complex history of radical protest. However, while the section was labelled as highlighting the political petitioning of “YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY”, the display was inclusive of governmental forms of activism. Flanking the display case was a banner emblazoned with the words “PAY NO POLL TAX” erected on placard sticks. The object, positioned above a picture of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made direct reference to the council's rejection of the 1980s Conservative leader plans to ‘shake off the shackles
of socialism’ introduced to the welfare system by the previous Labour administration (Langan, Clarke, and Williams 2001:75).

Between 1981-82, Michael Heseltine, who was responsible for local government, presided over a new system of ‘targets and penalties’ for councils. Heseltine had designed a punitive scheme to reduce central government grants to local authorities that he deemed to be overspending on public services. Hackney Council was amongst the many local authorities that fought back in a nationwide ‘rate-capping rebellion’ (Shepley et al. 2015:217).

In a bold and provocative action that was transgressive in terms of governmentality, the policy was thwarted by opposing councillors raising their rates proportionally to the amount withheld by Heseltine. The Labour stranglehold on the council meant that opposing voices from parties with minority seats were unable to force the executive to comply with central government dictates. Such actions were and remain common for the local authority.

Not all the paraphernalia in the “Governance and Democracy” section that is dedicated to protest was sourced from activities related to municipal action. Alongside the banner in a section labelled “RAISING YOUR VOICE” was a reprint from an edition of the Hackney Gazette reporting on how in 1962, a group of schoolchildren marched to Parliament demanding racial hatred be criminalised. The headline “A SILENT MARCH BY TEENAGERS” was contextualised by signage that read:

“Hackney has a proud tradition of people raising their voice to fight for what they believe. This action can take many forms and tackle a wide range of issues.”

The decision to use contemporary cause collecting to showcase examples of Hackney’s civil society petitioning for change does offer us an opportunity to critique the neutral ideological stance the Council presents about its own institutional authority.

There was an absence of objects representing local objections to issues such as gentrification, racism and police violence within the borough. This was perhaps reflective of the fact that the council in its formal guise remains more attuned to the interests of civil society and established social movement members. Despite aspects of the display being designed with young pupils in mind, their contemporary voice as
radical actors were muted. Moreover, some of the included symbols indicative of the
counterpublics and urban social movements that exist within the borough were
politically neutered, much like how the Valentine cards in the Mayor’s office lose
context when objectified.

Message (2013:85) explains that curators must accept that in such exhibitory
processes, they will struggle with the positioning of collections and institutions with
regards to contemporary events and changing identity politics. Despite altruistic or
malignant intent any exhibitionary display that purports to be engaging in community
building, by design must limit or worse, exclude the inclusion of ideologically ‘alien’
others. In this instance this is done through the process of ‘perpetuating the norms of
the already privileged, and reducing questions of freedom and liberation to voting
procedures’ (Fendler 2006:303–304).

To its credit, in the absence of paraphernalia symbolising what today are
referred to as voting engagement activists, the Council in line with its social justice
credentials did seek to include some representation of those who feel failed by their
political representatives. Located at the centre of the Vault’s display was a
decontextualised fragment mounted on the wall without any apparent connection to
the borough. The object, a piece of protest art, was an illustration depicting thousands
of people of African heritage marching through the streets of London carrying banners
reading “BLACK PEOPLES DAY OF ACTION”. There was no signage giving any
explanation for its inclusion.

Curating the Borough

Municipal Antiracism

I smiled when Jake from HCVS told me that he had been approached by the Royal
Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC) for community engagement
advise. The RBKC council were reeling from a total breakdown in trust following the
tragedy at Grenfell Tower. Not only were they desperately seeking to stem waves of
political dissent that had gathered national support, they were fighting the twin
charges of gentrification and institutional racism costing innocent lives.
Hackney Council has faced similar charges in its history and the previous chapter included an example of Ngoma and Andrea addressing issues of gentrification and heritage through cultural activism in Hackney. Nevertheless, despite its failings, the local authority has long sought to be antiracist in its place making plans across the borough. Moreover, its previous use of the “BLACK PEOPLES DAY OF ACTION” in an exhibition curated by the Hackney Museum had been to represent the council’s decision in the 1980s to adopt a multicultural policy leading to a policy of symbolic innovation within Hackney’s public realm. It was during that era when the Council passed motions for all its official mail to carry the slogan “Hackney committed to Racial Equality and Justice”.

In 1985 when the council adopted the GLC ‘Anti-racist year’ theme it renamed various roads and buildings after political icons of African heritage. As mentioned, the Dalston Library in Hackney became the C.L.R James Library and a council estate on Cazenove Road was renamed Nelson Mandela House in solidarity with the imprisoned anti-apartheid leader. Council offices were renamed after the revolutionary Grenadian Prime Minister, Maurice Bishop (Jackson 1985a:99). Opposing its agenda were the borough’s Conservative councillors, notably, Councillor Joe Lobenstein a prominent member of the Haredi community and council chairman from 1969 to 1971. During a rare moment when the council was under Conservative control he remarked:

> ‘the council should leave names alone. People are used to them, and a change like this will only cause confusion, particularly for elderly people’.  
> (Bennett and Høgsbjerg 2015:33–34)

However, despite his influence, individual councillors without membership to the majority party group and a means to successfully petition them are effectively powerless. Clark and Newman suggest that the principles of bureaucracy are supposed to free public policy from ‘the effects of personal whims, enthusiasms and commitments’, however in Labour Hackney, it also neutralises those at odds with resolutions to issues proposed by local party activists (1997:5).

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The local authority’s commitment to ensure Hackney’s public realm contained symbols representative of the ethnic diversity of its residents was a progressive, symbolic act of cultural decolonising at its time. In seeking to assert Hackney’s antiracist credentials, the local authority had attempted to reshape the borough’s habitus. It was not an easy task.

Bourdieu stipulates that habitus is developed through process of socialisation and that any given practise does not emerge from free will or an automatic response to the presence of structures in the field. Instead, habitus explains how society becomes deposited in people in the form of lasting ‘dispositions’ that shape their tastes and phobias, their sympathies and aversions. The habitus works to unconsciously forge a class unity that guides people into to thinking and acting in specific and structured ways (Bourdieu 2000:77,101).

Hackney Council’s success in its endeavours can be attributed in part to the support it had in the form of solidarity from the GLA and other local authorities. Spurred on by the moral pressure exerted by urban social movements the work was not being done in isolation. Across London, in Labour boroughs, more sites and roads were having sites named after people with African heritage. In Lambeth, a public park was named after Max Roach, the African American Jazz drummer and political activist who visited the space in 1986. It is a process that Gilroy referred to as ‘municipal anti-racism’ when describing the same boroughs renaming of “Rhodesia Road” to “Zimbabwe Road” during the era (2002:138).

By December 1986, Hackney Council had established a race relations committee after the sub-committee explained that the status of sub-committee ‘does not adequately reflect the political importance and social significance of race relations work’. The committee included representatives from ‘BME’ communities, people with disabilities and those who were orthodox Jewish. It also sought to include, Irish and traveller representation to support those who were then feeling persecuted by the government’s Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The council made public that it recognised ‘the Irish community as an ethnic minority with the full rights of the rest of

\[128\] Black and Minority Ethnic
the community.’ (LBH 1986:260)” Then in a landmark act during 1987, the borough elected Diane Abbott, the first African Caribbean woman to become a Member of Parliament.

It is somewhat tragic that now, some thirty years from that date, the Council now faces frequent critiques over the status quo and its future plans for the public realm. More so now that the Town Hall’s Municipal Museum alludes to the local authority being an institution committed to antiracism. Across the borough of Hackney, there are several hundred streets, landmarks, statues, buildings and public spaces that serve as symbols commemorating the architects and primary benefactors of transatlantic and colonial enslavement such as the white supremacist Cecil Rhodes. This includes prominent slavers such as John Cass (1661-1718), a director of the Royal African Company, Francis Tyssen (1625-1699), an active member in the East India and Royal African Companies after whom Hackney streets and schools have been named (Donington 2016:181).

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 4-16** The Hackney estate renamed Nelson Mandela House in solidarity with the people of South Africa during the apartheid era
The Parklet

This chapter has explored how the local authority explores activism in the form of collections of objects as well as practices. It has also documented how this can result in the symbolic obliteration of acts of protest that characterise the council as deliberately illiberal. However, it is necessary to provide contrast, hence this concluding section offers a case study of successful petitioning from the ground up that is not directly related to issues of “identity politics”, although class and neoliberal politics are a factor.

When writing about the changes to street names above, it is not usual to use the language of curation, likewise when decorating one’s office. Yet, whenever a local authority uses the currency of culture as a driver for neighbourhood change, it engages in a form of curatorial activism that validates the terms use. However, as with any exhibition, irrespective of whether it is within the personal, private or public domain, the curatorial choices that frame what is visible and whose voice is speaking cannot mask the reality that as one group becomes a beneficiary of such representation, another will invariably be dispossessed – sometimes deservedly, other times not.

In a historically Labour borough where the ideological tenure is not up for grabs, it is here where, irrespective of the nature of the grievance, that the different forms of political capital held by various Hackney residents significantly affects their capability of influencing social policy that potentially affects all existing residents. Moreover, in cases where residents have the resources to innovate and utilise new approaches to campaigning outside those depicted in the municipal museum’s ledger of acceptable forms of protest, their ideas for neighbourhood change can often be catapulted from the streets to the heart of local authority policymaking.

One example illustrating such political entrepreneurship was premised on an idea imported into the borough and built upon the Council’s decision to turn Hackney into a cycle-friendly borough. Before I explain more, I’d like to offer some context.

For some of the cyclists living in Hackney, but not owning a bike, the council’s investment in its bike infrastructure is perceived as discriminatory. If you live in a region of the borough like Homerton where urban redevelopment takes place at a relatively slower pace than more affluent wards like Shoreditch, then you have no opportunity to rent a TfL ‘Boris Bike’\textsuperscript{130}.

As a result of this disparity, streets of Hackney serving families belonging to a low socio-economic bracket have become littered with discarded yellow \textit{ofo} bikes\textsuperscript{131}, the cheaper, dockless alternative of which some people have learned how to circumvent its security by smashing the rear wheel lock. This is not the only impact. With bikes now forced to compete against cars to occupy roadside real estate, there is increasingly less space in the public realm for pedestrians to sit, gather or just rest and collect their thoughts. It is with these caveats in mind I turn to a period during my fieldwork when in August 2017, as I was walking along a road with one of my interlocutors, we observed a novel form of protest indirectly related to this matter erected outside the Clapton Community Seventh-day Adventist Church on the intersection of Chelmer and Glyn Road.

Sandwiched between a car and a van in a residents parking bay were two wooden chairs separated by a table covered with books and newspapers. A red parasol covering them matched the colour of the cushions on the seats and where there was usually grey concrete, lay a carpet of green artificial grass decorated with an assortment of potted plants. The furniture which was bordered by what looked like mini trees were in a pair of burgundy buckets with rails for attaching bikes\textsuperscript{132}. Pinned to the parasol pole, a sign printed on a laminated sheet of A4 paper explained that this ‘People Parking Bay’ had been erected as a demonstration of how residents without cars would like to use ‘precious roadside space for community use’.

Anticipating the council would quickly remove the unauthorised erection the sign went onto asking users to sign a nearby visitors’ book and online petition and

\textsuperscript{130} The informal name used to refer to the bikes used by the TfL Santander Bike Scheme
\textsuperscript{131} In 2017, ofo deployed over 10 million bicycles in 250 cities and 20 countries.
\textsuperscript{132} Plantlocks are bolted into the carriageway and provide 4 bike parking spaces.
finally - water the plants. Many of the people I observed walking past this unofficial extension of green space seemed unbothered by what appeared to be an ad-hoc expression of urban terraforming, yet the ‘Book 2’ sprawled on the front cover of the visitor book suggested another side to the story. Written inside, residents offered thanks and praises using superlative words to describe the Parklet as ‘incredible’, ‘fantastic’, ‘sweet’, ‘brilliant’, ‘awesome’. Children scrawled words like ‘fabulous’ and ‘beautiful’ while others sought to address the local authority directly stating – ‘Please keep it Hackney Consel!’
Figure 4-30 Discarded ofo bike locks litter the streets

Figure 4-21 The Parklet invites passers-by to sit down and take a break
This request is important for, despite the ‘People Parking Bay’ being perceived as an act of beautification by some, it existed in violation of the law, a point made clear in a nearby sign which read:

‘When I offered the Council full price for an annual parking permit they refused to let me have one because I do not have a car. I wanted to show how the same space could be used instead of parking a car and I’m afraid I took matters into my own hands’.

Acknowledging the transgressive nature of the self-help action, one person signed off writing ‘Power to the people!’ while various visitors from locations as far apart as New York and Oxford described it as a ‘wonderful idea’ and ‘fantastic innovation’ making suggestions that Hackney council ‘moves with the times’.

Of course, not all agreed. The lengthiest comments emerged from the very few opposed to its presence; “Why haven’t you parked this outside your own house instead of someone else’s... So annoying!! Hope the council stop you”. This denigration and seeking of punishment for people who either seek to help others through acts of cooperation or appear to be acting more morally than ourselves has been labelled ‘Do-gooder derogation’ by researchers like Monin (2007). Researchers have long examined the rejection of moral rebels by mainstream actors across fields ranging from social psychology to anthropology.

The council did eventually intervene but not before the protest had generated media interest. The Glyn Road parklet as it was later referred to had been erected by 52-year-old Brenda Puech. Puech who was a campaigner for the Hackney Living Streets (HSL) group built it with less than a £1000 worth of material purchased from a DIY store. HSL are a local branch of the registered UK charity Living Streets. Originally founded in August 1929 as the Pedestrians’ Association, the association changed its name to Living Streets in 2001. Now with branches established nationwide, it campaigns for a better walking environment for people across the UK. In 2017, it

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133 The term “do-gooder” is used as a morally neutral reference to individuals or groups who deviate from the majority on moral grounds, offering morality as the justification for their nonnormative behaviour.
134 https://www.livingstreets.org.uk/get-involved/take-action-in-your-area/local-groups/hackney
135 https://www.livingstreets.org.uk/about-us/our-history
secured some success when after years of active campaigning it succeeded in getting the Government to launch a regular Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS).

The local HSL group that Puech belongs to consists of a small number of Hackney residents that communicates through email and meets up bi-monthly in a local pub. There they discuss ways to reduce air pollution, motor traffic and increase footway and green spaces in the borough. To achieve their aims they work closely with the cycling activists that run the Hackney Cycling Campaign (HCC), itself a derivative of the city-wide London Cycling Campaign charity. Consisting of a group of local volunteers like HSL, they use open spaces to host bike maintenance workshops and also ‘lobby, advise and challenge the London Borough of Hackney’\(^{136}\) to adapt key routes in the borough to make them safe for cyclists.

The parklet idea was a cultural fad appropriated by Puech after she learned about a similar scheme originating in the US to create extra space for pedestrians to stop and relax next to pavements. Puech’s petition called on Mayor Glanville to enable the Parklet to remain long enough to ascertain public support for the idea. By the time the council forced the removal of the installation, it did so in the face of opposition from seven hundred signatures of support. Moreover, by 2018, Puech’s efforts had earned her a nomination for the Transport Planning Society’s People’s Award and saw the idea spread to other UK cities like Cambridge.

This, in turn, resulted in Hackney Council doing a u-turn and officially re-adopting the scheme which would see less public space allocated for cars and more to support cycling. I say re-adopting for there is a tad of irony at play here. In 2015, Hackney Council had tested a Public Parklet scheme outside a café in Pitfield Street during 2015\(^{137}\). Back then Feryal Demirci, the councillor for Neighbourhoods and Sustainability asked residents to let them know; ‘where they would like to see more parklets and, if approved, we’ll work with the community to come up with the most appropriate designs’. It was not a success.

\(^{136}\) [https://hackneycycling.org.uk/about/](https://hackneycycling.org.uk/about/)

However, the idea, now reinvigorated two years later by Puech’s guerrilla campaign saw it once again trialled by the council as a roadshow stand in Shoreditch’s Broadway Market. It eventually became an officially funded programme by the local authority under the tagline of “reclaim the roads from cars and open up spaces to the whole community”. With a community figurehead around which to promote the idea, the council were able to use Puech’s efforts to promote environmentalism and award nomination as a springboard to relaunch a scheme that now also offered up to £150 for fifteen, public designed, 4.5 x 2.5 metres sites. Moreover, the council scheme that invited residents to propose ideas for community parklets on residential streets also installed mandatory ‘PlantLocks’ at each site that provided four bike parking spaces.

This type of outcome driving neighbourhood change in the borough is typical of the innovation borne from a council with a long history of residents engaging in voluntary, culture-based, self-help activities. However, there is a problem if the council is following through using the government’s doctrine of localism where individuals and communities are granted powers ‘to get things done’ easier (Great Britain and DCLG 2011:8).

The government’s Localism Act assumes social actors have the freedom to initiate such actions, likewise the local authority becomes reliant on the borough’s residents possessing enough economic and political capital to engage in potentially transgressive actions to transform spaces without the debilitating fear of legal repercussions. In this scenario Puech’s demonstration successfully used a form of cultural activism that resulting in the council creating a permit system to install community parklets. Moreover, this worked especially well for the local authority as it had the advantage of providing the council with a route to reintroduce a failed initiative of neighbourhood change, only this time with added social capital.

As an example of local government institutionalising activist processes, it contains two lessons. The first reveals how the municipality absorbs and reflects citizen activism and popular cultural fads, whereas the second is indicative of why

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139 https://hackney.gov.uk/parklet-guidance
Hackney Council attempts the use of coöptation whenever seeking to engage in acts of institutional activism. The alternative is education and encouragement or if all fails enforcement, a route which always carries the risk of non-compliance and social disadvantage.

Figure 4-36 - The Hackney Peace Mural in Dalston, 2017
Chapter 5 Hackney Museum

The previous chapter which examined Hackney Council through a historical and museological lens provided the background to the municipal socialism that guides the local authority’s institutional activism. This included covering how the council democratically adopts and adapts citizen led acts of social action occurring in the borough as a cultural offer bolstering Hackney’s tourism package. There was also a focus on the council’s display of campaigning objects to brand itself within the Town Hall. This included the use of items representing political action and civic materialism in both the Mayor’s office and its newly constructed museum of representative civic authority. In each case the local authority practices and use of its collections offered insights into how it absorbs and reflects citizen activism through both formal and informal methods of coöptation.

In continuation of this theme, this chapter seeks to expand upon the local authorities’ museological offering by focusing on the history and political background of the Hackney Museum. Where the municipal museum is the borough’s echo of the exhibitionary complex, the work of the Hackney Museum forms the heart of the council’s cultural offerings including the use of its social inclusion and community engagement expertise to provide consultation on the local authorities equalities and place making policies.

The chapter starts from the inaugural donation of private objects that saw a private library transform into a museum. It next covers the later changes in the UK’s domestic political climate leading to severe impacts on the funding, organisational structure and operation of local authority museums across the UK. In-between these key moments the chapter provides details of how the museum’s status as the Council’s cultural institution has seen its adoption of the New Museology. Moreover, it charts how the local authority insiders of the Hackney Museum came to operate like an ecomuseum while simultaneously embedding alternative countercultural approaches to issues of social injustice and inequality within both the council and museum sector.
The Past (1697 – 2016)
Chalmers Bequest (The Gallery)

Like many public institutions in the heritage sector, Hackney Museum was founded from the donation of a private collection. In 1697, the Tyssen family had acquired the Manor of Hackney from the Cooke family alongside two other manors in the area (Baker 1995). Such families often possessed personal libraries but until 1850 when the government passed its Public Library Act most were private affairs.

In 1885 the executors of John Robert Daniel Tyssen, a vice-president of the *London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* (Coote 1871) and editor of several archaeological surveys including the *Royal Charters and Historic Documents relating to the Town and County of Carmarthen 1878* gifted a repository of records and books to Tyssen Library on his passing in 1883. This library first located at Manor House and then later at the Town Hall with its own librarian, took on the duty of storing Hackneys’ local history collection.

In 1903 the council adopted the government’s 1850 Public Library Act and purchased land in Mare Street for a central library which opened in 1908. Although the legislation enabled all boroughs with populations of over 10,000 to finance public libraries, the funds for this particular one came from the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie who built many public libraries in the UK and US. At this time, the wider London Borough of Hackney did not exist, and up until 1965, the bounded region that exists today was formed of the three smaller Metropolitan boroughs of Stoke Newington, Shoreditch and Hackney (North).

However, before the amalgamation of these regions occurred, a Scottish banker for the Providential Clerks Guarantee Company named Alexander Henry Chalmers (1849-1927) had amassed a substantive amount of paintings and *objects d’art* throughout his life. When he passed away in 1927, he bequeathed to the then borough of Stoke Newington his art collection, some money and shares alongside a set of specific instructions. The terms of his will stipulated that he had “left 1000 guineas and £4,000 in India 3% stock” and that the income generated, which he had calculated as an endowment of £126 every three years, was to be used by the current council for various
tasks. These included the purchase of ‘an oil painting on canvas’ and various art objects made from bronze, ivory, wood or marble.

Chalmers also wanted the income to cover fees for those responsible for advising the selection; maintenance and cataloguing of the collection; a “non-political Evening dinner on the Library premises or Library Hall” each October; a medal and prize to reward the winners of a proposed essay contest on the art collection and ‘an honorarium to the Librarian or Curator’ (National Archives 1927; Chalmers 1927).

The Chalmers collection was stored at Stoke Newington Library and exhibited in a gallery created from a conversion of the library hall in 1964 (Baggs, Bolton, and Croot 1985). Apart from a few amendments made in response to Chalmers living family members, the bequest remained in force even after the 1965 merging of Stoke Newington with Hackney North and Shoreditch (National Archives 1927) to form the London Borough of Hackney.

During the period that the Chalmers Bequest remained housed in Stoke Newington, several Hackney libraries were built or refurbished\(^\text{140}\), but by 1988, at least three had been closed down. By 2017 the total value of heritage assets held by the council now totalled £2,010,000 (Williams 2018:86,108). The artworks, being held in trust, could not be sold or disposed of by the local authority which only administered the trust. Eventually plans were made to move the collection to a location offering better access, security and supervision, perhaps - a new museum.

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\(^{140}\) Kate Greenaway, Hackney Central, Shoreditch District, Stoke Newington District, Clapton, Dalston, Homerton, Parkside, Eastway, Brownswood, Howard, Woodberry Down, Somerford Grove, Stamford Hill, Rose Lipman, Goldsmith’s Row and Wenlock Library (HSMO Authority 1984)
The displays in Central Hall were very basic – done on a shoe string with second hand cases inherited from the Natural History Museum and our exhibition budget was pitifully small - everything done inhouse with a photocopier, lettraset (!) and spray-mount. The displays were thematic – and the most memorable parts were a giant papier mache statue of the Hindu goddess Sita made by a local primary school and carnival costumes which hung from the ceiling. There were sections on local industries and politics with a lot of posters.’ (Davison 2018) Fiona Davison, Head of Hackney Museum Service, 1993-2003

In 1987, the council launched Hackney Library and Museum at the former Methodist Central Hall on Mare Street. However, due to inadequate security at Central Hall, the Chalmers collection remained in Stoke Newington. Christine Johnstone who ran the museum service also curated it from 1987-1988 during the start of the sector transforming ‘New Museology’ discourse (Vergo 1989). As a contributor to the seminal ‘Documenting Diversity’ session at the 1988 Museums Association Conference, Johnson was known for her concerns on how to make museums and their systems relevant to the communities they served (Vance et al. 1990; Museum Management and Curatorship 1990).

When the museum first opened it took painstaking efforts to record the oral testimony of Jewish elders, many whom, during the early 1900s had been refugees seeking to escape fascist persecution. In 1932, the growing support for the former Labour MP, Oswald Moseley’s British Union of Fascists had seen the East End become...
a key base of its operations. In keeping with Hackney’s historical reputation for political dissent, many within its neighbourhoods fought back. In incidents like the famous Battle of Cable Street, thousands of people took to the streets in a multi-ethnic display of community solidarity to see off a scheduled Mosley march in 1936. Jewish people were forced to live through the borough’s struggles with fascism\textsuperscript{141} for several decades more.

These circumstances eventually changed with the migration of people from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia to Britain. However, endemic systems of racism within the council itself impacted upon the lives of the borough’s new residents. As visibly new migrants, they faced many challenges including being moved into segregated ghettos because of racial discrimination linked to economic considerations and cultural difference. This occurred simultaneously as Hackney residents with homosexual\textsuperscript{142} or Irish\textsuperscript{143} backgrounds faced political persecution supported by the Conservative national government.

Social Inclusion

To address the increasing discrimination occurring in the borough, the council empowered the Hackney Museum to adopt a curatorial stance committed to promoting social inclusion. This is where its co-production of knowledge with community outsiders enabled it to put the population’s social reality and concerns on public display with the intent of encouraging social change. The decision meant the local authority museum was now behaving in a manner that contradicted the behaviour expected from institutions that form part of the exhibitionary complex (Bennett 1995c). In eschewing the old museological practices based on wealth and class divides, Johnstone and her team worked to dispel the notion of the museum as a high culture destination for its audience. The cultural institution was to become a

\textsuperscript{141} In many instances, the Jewish community were inadequately protected by the police, with some officers also harbouring antisemitic beliefs.

\textsuperscript{142} The passing of the “Section/Clause 28” of the Local Government Act 1988 prohibited local authorities from engaging with any action that “intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality”. The law remained enforceable until 2003.

\textsuperscript{143} Following the failure of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement signed by the British Prime Minister (Margaret Thatcher) and the Irish Taoiseach to resolve the political conflict in Northern Ireland
place showcasing how ‘museums interact with their communities and communities with their museums’ (Davis 2011:28). Moreover, it was a site that enabled those visiting to feel a sense of belonging and ownership in Hackney’s rich history.

Their efforts to employ a radical social reforming approach to collection building saw the team deprioritise cultural elites and give voice to the boroughs excluded and demonised communities. The Hackney Museum subsequently hosted exhibitions such as ‘Over here, over there’ and ‘Guildford 4’ addressing political issues such as the wrongful imprisonment of IRA bombing suspects.\(^\text{144}\) In sharing the social and political issues of these communities the local authority institution had embraced the role of museum as ‘a platform to safeguard the fundamental ethical values surrounding international human rights’ (Golding and Modest 2013:3). Its shift of emphasis from objects to people was an example of the New Museology at work in Hackney. While the museum had not formally classified itself as an ecomusée (ecomuseum) (Rivard 1984), its adoption of the sectors philosophies around place, people and participation saw it open up as a site inviting civic discourse about contemporary issues.

However, Johnstone not only critiqued the systems of inequality presented to the museum by outsiders, she also advocated for change of curatorial practices as a museum insider. In 1989, the Hackney Museum curator shared her concerns within industry publications about how biases in collections management systems such as the Social History and Industrial Classification (S.H.I.C.) schema, struggled to manage with the growth and pace of change in Hackney. She was an adherent of the theory that museums should be inclusive of grassroots perspectives when dealing with both objects and ideas defining the world and conceptions of what it is or should be.

‘Museums do not simply issue objective descriptions or form logical assemblages; they generate representations and attribute meaning and value in line with certain perspectives or classificatory schemas which are historically specific’ (Lidchi 1997:160).

Making her case, Johnstone explained that while the team at Hackney Museum worked hard to capture the growing ethnic and sexual diversity present in the

\(^{144}\) This occurred during the museum’s participation in the first borough wide, Hackney Irish festival held between 4th and 12th February 1989.
The Past (1697 – 2016)

The analytical system of classification being used by the museum sector was still locked into the erroneous paradigm that ‘the culture being documented comes from a homogenous community’. Stuart Hall referred to this ‘system of representation’ used by museums to construct meaning through exhibitions and displays as being like a language (Hall 1997:5,17).

Reviewing the system developed by the Social History Curators’ group for documenting social history artefacts, Johnstone criticized the rigidity of the existing ‘white/able-bodied/heterosexual/male culture which dominated SHIC145 and other analyses within the museum profession’. She is not alone in her assertion and the museologist Viv Golding (2013:18) has also suggested that some contemporary curatorial practices utilise homogenous power to control and/or stifle presentations of ‘difference’.

Positive Action

One major effect of the local authority museum’s critique of existing classification systems was to inject its ideas into the council. In mapping what form of support and resistance to social issues in the borough existed, the museum helped influence those policies designed to support Hackney’s underrepresented groups. Although Johnstone had left Hackney Museum by this stage, her proposal that the inclusion of a ‘Positive Action’ classification would be ‘useful for curators of colonial and ethnographic collections, as well as all the social history curators involved in twentieth-century popular culture’ were influential (1990). This is not unusual, for while it is common that idea’s such as Johnstone face challenge from within academic and museological circles, the museum’s reputation as a repository of uncontested knowledge frequently grants it the tacit support of the source communities they serve (Watson 2007:10).

Working like a feedback loop from cultural institution to the municipal administration, Johnstone’s ideas also helped increase the visibility of previously marginalised communities amongst civic actors and civil society alike. Within the museum, the Positive Action category was designed to capture the socio-political

145 Social History and Industrial Classification
nature of objects the team expected to be included. It featured the categories “Anti-fascist”, “Anti-racist”, “Anti-sexist”, “Anti-homophobic”, Pro-immigration” alongside their contrary counterparts. Indeed, it is in this manner of collecting, classifying and ordering social phenomenon that many of the local authority museums specialising in local history like Hackney Museum became mirrors of local grievances.

As a practice, the display of countercultural material and sharing of transgressive perspectives from counterpublics also served an essential democratic purpose. When theorising on the nature of state power being utilised to fight state power, the political scientist Jane Mansbridge postulates that to avoid tyrannies and chaos, the act of democracies ‘encourag[ing] the nagging reminder of injustice also means affirmatively encouraging oppositional discourses and oppositional cultures (Mansbridge 1994:68). With “positive action” and social inclusion at the heart of its mission, from 1992 onwards, the museum along with its partners did just this and recorded numerous interviews on various topics by mostly Hackney residents or former residents of various ages and backgrounds.

‘the objects we do collect... actively contribute to an understanding of the subject matter of the museum – immigration and settlement in Hackney.’

_Hackney Museum Collecting Policy 2009_ (Levin 2016:190)
Collection Building

Fiona Davison was appointed Curator of Hackney Museum Service in 1993, and later its head when Johnstone left. Having started her career in museums after completing a degree in Modern History and the Leicester Museum Studies course, Davison became an Assistant Curator at Greenwich Borough Museum Service. From there she served as Assistant Curator at Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery in South Wales which led to her setting up the Cynon Valley Museum Service (Khan 2002).

In 1997, Hackney Council announced its intention to create a ‘Cultural Quarter’ on Mare Street with substantial updates to the Town Hall and the local Hackney Empire theatre. While these transformations also included plans for the public institution to eventually be rehoused, from 1998, the museum team were ejected from their home at the Central Hall and Public Library while building work commenced to improve the facilities of what up until now had been their only home (Cherry and Pevsner 1998:479).

The museum was unceremoniously relocated and ended up operating out of the old Parkside Library building behind Victoria Park. From 1998, Claire Adler who ran the museum's education service organised a touring service delivering exhibitions and contemporary collecting projects based in community centres around the borough (Adler 2018). Lacking their previous sites ability to mount public exhibitions and workshops due to lack of space, Adler ran the museum schools programme from the back of her car determined to also ‘help the communities tell their own stories rather than tell them a history of their area’ (Adler 2018).

While this approach laid the groundwork for the museum’s curatorial activism that would emerge later, it is important to recognise that the local authority’s support at the time did not extend to providing it with enough financial resources. With over a decade having passed since the council’s acts of municipal activism renamed its street

146 Supported by Laura Williams, the museums Curatorial and Outreach Manager who also sought commercial sponsors for special exhibitions
and place names, matters of culture and heritage were no longer at the front of the local authority’s priorities.

As a result, the council’s cultural institutions like the Hackney Museum were forced to operate on an exhibition budget that was ‘pitifully small’. This not only included being chronically understaffed, but also forced to produce all its displays with an inhouse photocopier and Letraset and use second-hand display cases inherited from the Natural History Museum (Davison 2018).

Nonetheless, despite the resource challenges, the small team seized the opportunity to engage with outreach work that recognised source community members as ‘authorities on their own cultures and material heritage’ (Peers and Brown 2003). With limited resources available this required development of a creative suite of inclusive practices. David Martin, a writer for the Museums Association, explains this included hosting displays and temporary exhibitions in borough libraries which helped make them more accessible to the communities they served (Martin 1999).

However, by 2000 and with part funding from then Prime Minister Tony Blair’s Private Finance Initiative147 secured, the strategic plan for the cultural quarter was updated to include a couple of major developments. First, the Central Hall and Library space would be utilised as a venue for an ambitious, £16 million National Lottery funded plan to create a music venue called the Ocean. Second, the project which had attracted £19m in support from the multinational property developer Carillion would include the building of a new Technology and Learning Centre situated in part, on 287 Mare Street, the site of a vacant housing office (LBH 1995:6–8). Confirmed in the design by Hodder Associates, was that the new centre would house “a museum, library, café, shops, gym and council offices” (Butler and Hegarty Architects 2000:37–38; Building 2000).

The reassurance that the museum would eventually have a permanent, purpose-built home was received as great news by the team. Though, they also

147 Hackney Museum was the first local authority museum building to be funded through the governments new Private Finance Initiative.
recognised that the notification meant the project would require extra build time resulting in them being without a base for longer. Determined to make the most of a challenging situation the museum staff continued accepting items from Hackney residents willing to share their personal histories.

While planning for the new museum, Davison also considered Hackney’s reputation of attracting newcomers as an opportunity to use the museum’s collections to tell a new universal narrative of movement and migration. The museum team did not want to open with a new permanent display that used ‘cultural diversity’ as an addendum to a master narrative of homogeneity. Although, this was then a popular curatorial approach in local history museums.

Instead, they agreed that the new museum would centre the settling of Saxon migrants alongside multicultural migration as one of the borough’s defining characteristics. It is in this progressive manner that museums defining their territory on a small geographical scale are better able to sustain communities by transgressing normal museum roles and administrative boundaries (Davis 2011:276).

‘Although the long period of time it took for the new building to be constructed was frustrating, it gave us the opportunity to experiment and make the contacts to help us create permanent displays with a greater degree of community input.’ (Davison 2018)

The Hackney Museum team used its temporary status as a touring service to deliver on its museological vision. Its community outreach programme saw the staff visiting the borough’s schools, libraries and community centres to collect community stories and objects. This included setting up small groups of volunteers from various minority communities as Collecting Panels and giving them a budget to acquire objects that depicted their culture and history.

The first attempt at this approach required some refinement after a Vietnamese group returned with religious and traditional artefacts but nothing reflecting their current experiences of living in Hackney. However, this improved when the subsequent Collecting Panels were given a more personalised brief and told their results only needed to be representative of themselves and not their entire community. The following West African Panel members were asked for items they
played with as children and a Turkish Panel for artefacts that made them homesick for the life they had outside the UK. The changes made for a successful strategy with the subsequent panels not only returning a wider range of objects but also fostering long term links between the cultural institution and community (Davison 2002:43–44).

During the five years it took for the Hackney Museum staff to take possession of their new home, the small four-person team utilised Heritage Lottery Funding to run many such collection building schemes. This included Suitcase Sculptures where Adler and an artist named May Ayres worked with local children from Shacklewell School to create handheld sculptures illustrating the story of why their family moved to Hackney. Tragically, the objects which had to fit into a suitcase often depicted traumatic histories. Nevertheless, the students who had received preparation on the sensitive themes they would encounter from the museum staff and their teachers developed the confidence to express themselves. It ended up being a powerful exercise in knowledge co-production winning a commendation from the “Interpret Britain” Awards. The project also revealed that of the class involved, only one student had family roots in the borough lasting over two generations.

Finally, the collection of oral testimonies also took an important role in the museum’s collection strategy. When explaining the suitability of oral history in telling community stories, especially tales which recall the perspectives from ‘Revolutionaries and Underdogs’, the digital archivist Julianne Nyhan and oral historian Andrew Flinn (2016:258) write, ‘Shared narratives and ways of understanding can be both inclusive and exclusive and help to determine a community’s relationship with the present and future as much as with the past’. It is a pertinent point when made in reference to museum collections. However, recognising the likelihood of potentially emotional and controversial issues arising while capturing personal tales of immigration and settlement, the Hackney Museum team altered its method of collecting testimonies from some of the local communities.

‘In the course of the preparation for the new displays, we decided to extend that process by commissioning people from the relevant communities to record interviews rather than museum staff. For instance, a Jewish radio producer, Allan Dein, was asked to record the memories of Jewish people who used to live in the borough in the 1920s and 30s. Allan worked within a brief to devise his own questions, select his own interviewees, record the interviews
and, where possible, collect associated material. The resulting archive\textsuperscript{148} was an excellent resource, both for the permanent display and as a touring exhibition in the run up to re-opening. Allan was able to make a much better range of contacts than we would have been able to, and I am convinced that the quality of the material he was able to collect was much higher than anything museum staff would have been able to obtain on their own.’ (Davison 2002:41–45)

It was this mixture of curatorial strategies which included collaboration with contracted community outsiders, focus groups who evaluated display proposals and draft copy and contemporary collecting projects that shapes most of the museums current approach to community engagement. While this did not involve the same type of co-optation between outsiders and council insiders used by the Hackney Museum today, it was a legacy carried over in the collections, displays and museological ethos to what would eventually become their new site.

The New Museum

On Monday 22 April 2002, the museum opened the doors to its new purpose-built home at the Technology and Learning Centre on Reading Lane. Its opening times were Tuesday to Friday, 10 am to 5 pm and Saturday from 1.30 pm to 5 pm. Visitors were invited to explore everyday items that evoked the past while giving an insight into Hackney’s diverse, cosmopolitan population starting from the Viking era (West 2002:114). Its new displays which included touch screen technologies, had cost almost £400,000 to build and were fully funded by a grant from the National Lottery. The launch showcased the use of objects and oral histories to offer a mix of historical and contemporary stories of Hackney residents. A typical narrative would read:

‘Mohamed who has moved to Hackney to avoid persecution in Sierra Leone, Mary Woolstonecraft [sic] who lived in Hackney in the 1700s, where she had the freedom to express her non-conformist views, Thanh Vu who fled Vietnam in 1979 and Keith Charles who responded to a recruitment campaign for teachers from the Caribbean.’ (Vincent and Pateman 2002)

Of the two hundred and fifty plus museums and galleries in London at the time, twenty-six of them were delivered by local authority museum services in small to medium scale venues. Without the big draw of major exhibits to attract large crowds,

\textsuperscript{148} Up until 2013, this archive was stored on ‘140 Compact Cassette, 15 DAT, 19 Audio CD-R, 45 Digital Audio Files,’ (BISA 2018). To date, some ninety-two of them have been transcribed and made available via the museums online catalogue.
many of these cultural institutions engaged in programs of audience diversification based on the interpretation of local and social history collections\textsuperscript{149}.

That is not to suggest the Hackney Museum did not have exhibits of high monetary value. In an effort to acknowledge the museum’s roots the staff have exhibited the Chalmers Bequest collection in collaboration with Elizabeth Price’s project re-enacting *The Will of Alexander Henry Chalmers* between 5 December 2002 - 7 January 2003 (Newman 2014).

However, from its inception, Hackney Museum did not shy away from its decision to encompass the histories of refugee and migrants coming into the borough. The cultural institution’s approach towards enshrining representation of the borough’s ethnic diversity in its output meant that within four months of its opening, Hackney Museum had recorded 17,000 visitors with 65\% of those attending describing themselves as belonging to a minority ethnic community.

Davisons’ objective to increase visits from the communities it served by shaping a museum service capable of telling “The story of immigration and settlement in Hackney” through a diversity of voices was on track (Prudames 2002). Her team’s decision to eschew a chronological approach helped make the museums’ central narrative about the migration into and out of the borough stand out. The local authority institution had chosen to inhibit the ability of civil society to define the direction of cultural change in order to reject curatorial representations that could assert the value of some communities over others (Karp et al. 1992).

\textsuperscript{149} To ensure London’s educational and cultural institutions best reflected the diversity of London’s ethnic diversity, the Greater London Authority established *The Mayor’s Commission into African and Asian Heritage* to make sector wide, best practice recommendations.
The Layout

The Hackney Museum’s exhibition layout was arranged into three main zones – a permanent gallery, a temporary exhibition space and the community-based “Platform”. In the 405m² permanent gallery, the museum made explicit its willingness to offer space to local narratives by chronicling the present alongside the past. Interactive computers were offered to visitors encouraging them to record their family history and there was a dedicated space including artwork from local school children depicting their homes which invited comments on the borough itself.

The Hackney Museum’s permanent exhibition which utilised the most floor space was organised into ten themes, each marked by a unique colour and given one of the following titles: “City Limits”, “Free Speech”, “Safe Haven”, “A Place to find Work”, “A Place to do Business”, “A Place to Live”, “No Choice”, “Street Level”, “A Sense of Community” and “Moving On”. As suggested by the names, the stated intention of the museum was to place emphasis, not only on the borough as a place to live and work but also as a safe haven for those fleeing persecution. This intention to document Hackney’s reputation as a home to radical writers, dissenters and free thinkers was highlighted by the presence of the original headstone and a carved marble bust of Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe was imprisoned for political offences in 1703 after penning *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* pamphlet.

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150 Defoe has been accused of being supportive of African enslavement and passive advocate of white supremacy (Boulukos 2001). https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/19/robinson-crusoe-at-300-its-time-to-let-go-of-this-toxic-colonial-fairytale
In actively working to avoid the use of ethnic stereotypes around the periphery of grand Eurocentric narratives in the exhibitions, the team followed in the Boasian tradition of attempting to place all cultures in the same frame. Their approach which was primarily shaped by what the anthropologist Ruth Benedict refers to as ‘patterns of culture’ instead of biology or ‘race’ sought to recognise that:

‘The old method of constructing a history of human culture based on bits of evidence, torn out of their natural contacts, and collected from all times and all parts of the world, has lost much of its hold’ (Franz Boas in Benedict 1960:xiii)

To this effect the people of Hackney were defined in a myriad of ways emphasising issues such as their housing, employment and businesses but not “race”. The museum exhorted an egalitarian ethos where the roots of the borough’s residents were not presented as important as their cultural contributions and historical role in its place making. There are no maps or historical backstories given for the migrants and refugees that have moved to Hackney. While the display covers topics such as African enslavement there is no chronological ordering. The objects on display gave a hint of the many cultures left behind by those arriving in the Hackney from outside the UK, but the texts only spoke to what had occurred since arrival.

In the area themed on local businesses there was a sign that explained people settled and started their enterprises in the borough because Hackney “is close to the wealthy city of London”. Beside it, as with each thematic zone was a chequered board with text and images. Nearby, a collection of displays containing related artefacts, photographs and captions documented the boroughs cultural history. The business zone display described local ventures such as publishers, jewellers and home hairdressers. Alongside them were a couple of object cases containing a full-size barber’s chair and a lithographer’s press.

Throughout the gallery many of the contributions made by individuals and communities were displayed in an unspoken juxtaposition between new and old, big and small, rich and poor. Where images of tower blocks depict standards of living, models of former factories and their owners in the area give hints to success in the borough alongside the realities of working-class toil. The only reference to “gentrification” laid in a panel that read, ”Hackney has always attracted newcomers.
But the area’s population remains mobile as people move out.” Nevertheless, despite their egalitarian intent, Levin’s study of community diversity at the museum suggests the staff were not wholly successful in their efforts at social inclusion (2016:189). The curatorial decision not to use the term “white British” rendered the category normative when contrasted to the prevalence of those communities that had been ethnically identified.

This is a challenge often faced by those with representational power theorising from the inside. Even when seeking to address issues of equality, in only marking those who face exclusion, the emphasis on difference erects a boundary that can reinforce the reification of biologically essentialist terms like BAME\textsuperscript{151}. Moreover, wherever institutional actors struggle to decentre themselves in the quest for equality, they risk ‘whitesplaining’\textsuperscript{152} - a term used to define a top-down explanation to a discriminated against ‘other’ as if they have a linguistic, cultural or intellectual deficit.

‘The notion of invisible whiteness is still deeply ingrained in heritage practices and made clear when the ‘other’ is invited into the institution to talk about outsider heritage only when they can be ‘seen’, rather than acknowledging that the ‘other’ is always present in all displays, exhibitions, ideas, institutional practices and discourses.’ (Naidoo 2016:506)

The Hackney Museum team seeks to counter this innate bias through its curatorial activist practice which takes an overtly political approach to migration and social justice. This requires engagement and cultural collaboration with communities that extends beyond consultation for planned displays and exhibitions. In addition to providing spaces where engaged publics exercise ownership over the stories told like most community museums, the staff adopt what museum workers Wajid and Minott (2019:25) now describe as an antiracist ‘Insider Activists’ status challenging the history-is-neutral concept within the cultural and heritage sector to improve it.

The Hackney Museum’s curatorial team were explicit about seeking to employ culture as a terrain for power to flow and drive social action and shape habitus. Bourdieu stipulated that as a concept, habitus explains how society becomes deposited

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\textsuperscript{151} A controversial analytical term used to refer to people of African, Asian or other minority ethnic backgrounds

\textsuperscript{152} https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-28/calls-for-a-national-indigenous-theatre-company/10146792
in people in the form of lasting ‘dispositions’ that shape their tastes and phobias, their sympathies and aversions. The habitus works to unconsciously forge a class unity that guides people into thinking and acting in specific and structured ways (Bourdieu 2000:77,101).

However, in a 1960s study of European museums, Bourdieu also critiqued the way most of these institutions represented culture arguing the practice only served to attract visitors with a certain level of education and cultural capital (Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper 1997). Seeking to increase the participation of different social groups irrespective of their status and level of education, the Hackney Museum was configured as a site of non-formal education for widespread neighbourhood use.

Hence, while the museum’s permanent exhibition has been designed to depict the changing demographic of Hackney from the 16th century until present, its museological approach simultaneously encourages broad community engagement. In recognition that capital also exists in social, cultural and symbolic forms that transcend material assets, the team developed “Platform”, a small supplementary, flexible exhibition area designed to accommodate locally donated artefacts, images and sound recordings.

“This Museum presents one version of Hackney but there are many more stories to tell… What do you think we should display? Would you like to see your group or project featured here?”

Text displayed on the wall at Hackney museum inviting submissions for Platform displays.

Each Platform showcase was scheduled to last for a maximum of eight weeks with its content based on community topics suggested by members of the public. The displayed theme could be based on a specific group or individual, but most were linked by issues highlighting an under-represented or counterpublic perspective from within the borough. Davison presided over the initial Platform displays that were developed in partnership with local community members. Some of the themes covered were ‘the experiences of black foster carers, the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras festival on Hackney Marshes, the thoughts of 14–19 year olds on regeneration in Clapton and the history of the German Hospital in Dalston’ (Denniston, Langham, and Martin 2003:25).
Platform’s countercultural bias provided a useful counterbalance to the museum’s permanent gallery focus on Hackney as a place historically linked through migration. Along with its temporary exhibitions highlighting contemporary issues affecting local communities, the museum team had realised its ambition of creating a space for civic engagement that expressed a level of class unity. In 2010, after seven years directing the Hackney Museum Service, Davison left her post effectively leaving Claire Adler, the museum’s former Community Education Officer its new manager.

**MUSEUMS SERVICE**

![Diagram of Hackney Museum Service structure](Source: hackney.gov.uk)

Figure 5-6 Emma joined the Hackney Museum team, 2004 (Source: hackney.gov.uk)
While the East End of London hosts over seventy art galleries and at least fifteen museums, including the Museum of London Docklands and the V&A Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, in the borough of Hackney there are only three museums. Housed at an 18th-century building in Hoxton is the Geffrye Museum\(^\text{153}\) exploring ‘the multiple meanings of home – past, present and future’. Housed behind a tiny shop front on Mare Street and describing itself as being a “museum [that] will merely display everything that has glittered & caught the eye of its founder” is the successful crowdfunded Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities, Fine Art & Natural History. The space which crosses art with curiosity serves as a potent ode to the Wunderkabinett (‘cabinet of wonders’) origins of the museum.

Mare Street is the ‘official’ political and cultural capital of Hackney and is few minutes walking distance from the Hackney Central Overground train station. It hosts a set of iconic buildings and these include the Grade II listed Hackney Empire theatre and the art deco styled Town Hall situated amongst a group of civic gardens. A few

\(^\text{153}\) Originally named after its benefactor, the slaver Robert Geffrye the museum rebranded in 2019 as ‘Museum of the Home’
metres away from these landmarks sites on Reading Lane is a building named the *Hackney Technology and Learning Centre*.

Flanked by multi-storey blocks that are adorned with corporate grey cladding, its reception area is dominated by an expansive glass fascia in front of three tall vertical banners. The first banner indicates that the *Central Library*, the boroughs’ most extensive repository of publicly accessible books and media is hosted inside, the next, makes reference to *The Learning Trust*, a department dedicated to supporting education services in Hackney that is based on the top floor. The final banner reads “Hackney Museum”, for it is in here, located on the ground floor that the museum is situated.

On entering the lobby, there is a large desk shared with a receptionist and security guard who issues temporary passes to visitors authorised to enter the back offices of the local authority various institutions. To the right sits a series of signs leading to the museums’ automated door.

“HACKNEY MUSEUM >>> The World on your doorstep >>> HACKNEY MUSEUM, Come on in, FREE Entry”

The sensor operating the mechanism is a tad too sensitive meaning on a busy day it is prone to exposing the museum’s cavernous space to any unsuspecting library-goers that walk nearby. Once inside the museums front desk is to your left, where there are usually two staff members present, both ready to greet and answer any queries. The desk they stand behind is usually covered with ephemera detailing local events and opportunities taking place as well as pieces of paper and pencils in a cup. In this way, this space serves as an ad-hoc community noticeboard where people deposit their leaflets and fliers.

Continue forward and there are two vehicles in a display case dedicated to transport. The first is a mini replica of a red ‘38’ Routemaster play bus large enough for children to climb into. The second, sitting on a small plinth, is Hackney’s first fire ‘engine’ from the 19th century. Describing itself in most of its literature as a ‘community museum’, the team at Hackney Museum, are transparent about their
explicit focus on the historical, contemporary and cultural affairs of the neighbourhood the museum resides in.

Despite the museum’s roots being based on the Chalmers collection\textsuperscript{154} which in 2016 the council had valued at around £659,000, Hackney Museum has resisted the temptation to adopt collection based ordering practices that reduce the neighbourhood residents and workers to a set of multiple, differentiated populations, and instead present an explicit focus on the contemporary and historical concerns of the neighbourhood as a whole. At the time of the 2011 census, there were some 246,270\textsuperscript{155} people resident in Hackney with over 54\% of them classified as ‘white’. Immigration is a historical feature of Hackney where over a third of its residents were born outside the UK\textsuperscript{156}. As such, the museum uses its exhibitions, public displays and even its reception desk to reflect its commitment to develop forms of representation built upon collaboration and a desire to understand local perspectives on social and political issues.

Utilising its position within a flagship council building at the heart of the borough, the museum has stayed committed to recording and sharing the memory of its socio-cultural environment. It achieves this using a democratised form of museology where residents are invited to participate in its working as key actors instead of just visitors. This has resulted in the Hackney Museum partially falling into the category of ecomusée (ecomuseum) defined by Georges Henri Rivière and Hugues de Varine in 1971 as a category where:

‘the museum is so closely linked to the population that it no longer fits into the traditional, hierarchical structures. The all-powerful curator, reigning over ‘his’ collection, answerable only to an administrative or political authority, no longer fills the bill.’ (Varine‐Bohan 2014:86)

This is partially because despite its localised, community ethos and focus, it is a local authority museum. While engaged with community volunteers and organisers to co-

\textsuperscript{154} Individual items from the Chalmers collection which were appraised for insurance purposes and valued in excess of £20,000 included ‘A Storm off the coast with Men O War’, ‘View of London from Denmark Hill’, ‘Interior of St Peters with Papal Process’ and ‘The Crucifixion of Christ’.

\textsuperscript{155} https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=E09000012

\textsuperscript{156} https://www.hackney.gov.uk/media/2665/Hackney-profile/pdf/Hackney-Profile
curate exhibitions and displays to further local interests, the Hackney Museum does answer to a political authority.

The Team

At local authority level, the Hackney Museum is strategically represented by its Heritage Manager, Tahlia Combs who periodically worked on site for specific projects. However, on a day-to-day basis the museum was run by a small team of seven people employed on a mixture of full and part-time contracts. Niti Acharya, a former curator at Brent Museum and exhibitions officer at Redbridge Museum is its Manager. Although during 2017, Hana Dethlefsen, a former curator at the Science Museum Group in Canada became the museum’s interim manager while Niti was on leave.

The Hackney Museum’s Curator was Rebecca Odell, previously a museum worker for council run Enfield Museum and the Museum of Croydon. While working as its Heritage Learning Manager was Emma Winch, a former volunteer at various museums and charities. They in turn were helped by three assistants. Josie Stevens who also worked in Heritage Learning and coordinated the museum’s popular year-long school’s programme. While sharing “front of house” and managing administrative public-facing duties were Elena Grippino and Linda Sydow. Finally, the museum also had several placement students and volunteers. All were unpaid but the museum covered their travel and lunch expenses. Rebecca ran the development program where they engaged in cataloguing and exhibition related duties.

Introduction to Hackney

While I observed the museums curatorial work with Rebecca and some of the volunteers she supervised, many of my insights on the museums institutional activist practice emerged through my shadowing of Emma, its Heritage Learning Manager and her organisational work and interactions with Shiri, the Antiuniversity co-founder.

Although Emma had chosen to commute from her home in Essex to Hackney for over a decade, her path into the world of museums was quite accidental. Throughout her childhood, Emma had perceived museums as “boring spaces about dead people” with

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157 Joining in 2013, she was its first manager with a minority ethnic background.
little relevance to herself. However, this all changed when she was accidentally subscribed to the Museum Studies course while submitting the course code for an art-based module during her MA programme at Essex University.

During her two years of university study, Emma volunteered with a gallery and various cultural institutions. This gave her the experience that would lead her to securing a job as a Learning Assistant at Hackney Museum. Fourteen years later, during July 2017, I watched while she stood in front of the museums’ welcome display addressing a crowd of around twenty people.

Emma: ‘So welcome to Hackney council, I’m Emma and I work in the museum and I have done [so] for 14 years since the museum opened in this space, we’ve been going since the 1980s and we’ve been collecting materials that relate to the people’s history of Hackney, so the social history of Hackney... The star piece in our museum is this, this object under the floor’

As she spoke, Emma pointing to a perfectly preserved, dilapidated wooden object displayed in a large enclosure built into the floor with the caption; “First settlers: Anglo Saxons – After the Roman city of Londinium was abandoned in the 5th century the Saxon settlement of Lundenwic grew up. In the 7th century it was an important trading port”. Despite the front of the display being made with reinforced glass strong enough to hold an elephant, almost everyone there hesitated to stand on it. Emma asked whether anyone wanted to guess what the object was. After moments of murmuring from the group a person wearing a Hackney Council security lanyard replied:

Tour Visitor: ‘A log boat?’

Emma: ‘A log boat, yes... this is what it looks like now because its probably fifteen hundred to two thousand years old, and it was found in Springfield park in Hackney, it was dug up when they were making the park and its incredibly important to this museum because its evidence of the first people to migrate to Hackney, the first people to come from Sweden, Germany and Denmark, fifteen hundred years ago and to make Hackney their home. So they were the first people to settle in Hackney and ever since people have been moving to Hackney and settling here so we use this log boat with everybody who comes into the museum to explain what the museum is about and its essential a migration museum... it tells the story of different people coming to Hackney, settling in Hackney and changing Hackney, so it’s the peoples history of Hackney, the museum was set up with different communities, so it’s their voices, not our voices it’s their voices telling their stories.’

This emphasis that the Hackney Museum has placed on providing a space for local communities to speak through their own voices and objects is crucial to its identity.
Whereas this can and often places the museum in conflict with policies from its local authority parent, it simultaneously enables the staff to adhere to Varine-Bohan’s plea for present-day museums to be ‘client-centred’ by disparaging the practice of other present-day museums that primarily cater for a homogeneous public that often only exists in the mind of its curators (2014:84).

Following a consultation process with residents and the Hackney Museum Service that led to the museum reopening in 2002, it has fiercely adhered to its remit of engaging with source communities that reflect the demographics of the sixth most diverse borough in London (LB Hackney Policy Team 2018:6). However, just as the key position of the museum’s displayed collections assist in embedding the issue of migration throughout its work, the museum itself serves a similar function in grounding and connecting the local authority to its communities.

While the museum does perform its public sphere duties of providing a space for mediated discourse between civic and public actors, it also goes beyond that and works in a consultancy capacity with the council where as a proxy advocate of the museum publics it communicates their concerns through its various activities. Its exhibitions often utilise or creates public spaces for democratic discourse, informal learning and social action addressing neighbourhood issues.

Its displays are often the result of co-curation with counterpublics that lead to knowledge production and the renewal of the local authority’s relationships with groups both inside and outside civil society. Moreover, its collaborative research conducted through the formal coöptation with community members generates content and current cultural information that feeds directly into council policies and the museum’s collection strategy.

Message (2013:46–47) writes about such curatorial approaches, where the interests of senior museum staff and diverse populations over contemporary socio-political events align. Such work she explains, can culminate in the museum serving as a site of conscience for dialogue between ‘the people’ and their government. That is what occurs in Hackney. The group Emma was speaking with were a representative mix of this diversity – ethnically most of the group were European, the rest were of
African, African-Caribbean and Asian heritage. The session Emma delivered formed part of an ‘Introduction to Hackney’ ritual for staff joining the local authority. Every new council employee is invited to attend it as an inauguration to the borough where at once it is possible to observe the role of the museum in its dual guise as both a community asset and council institution.

Emma reminded the delegation that the museum also held more traditional elements in its collection and proceeded to share an innocuous-looking stone which she dated as being at least two hundred thousand years old. After an initial spurt of tactile activity, the council staff’s attention with these artefacts eventually waned and their focus shifted onto the diverse range of objects on display in the welcome cabinet. There were two panels, the first, at the top, contained an innocuous ‘Welcome to Hackney Museum’ sign. In contrast, the lower panel, hosted a handmade sign with a drawing of a yellow and white flag beside the words – ‘Make Racists Afraid Again’.

Emma: ‘It was given to us about three months ago when there was a protest outside a gallery in Dalston... that had far-right extremists coming and giving talks. There was a big protest in Dalston to shut it down... [afterwards] some of the protesters brought their [Shutdown LD50] placards into the museum and asked if we wanted them...’

The words which could be perceived as a threat, generated much attention from the group. Responding to the furore, Emma explained, the sign was an example of the contentious nature of exhibits which were donated to the museum by the public. The object in question had not been officially collected by the museum although she indicated the museum was likely to put it through its acquisition and accessioning process.

The Forum

‘...is neither to neutralize nor to contain that which questions the established order. [But] It is to ensure that the new and challenging perceptions of reality – the new values and their expressions – can be seen and heard by all’ (Cameron 1971:23–24).

The Hackney Museum operates in what Duncan Cameron, director of The Brooklyn Museum (1971:12–14) refers to as ‘forum’ mode. In tearing up the rule book on ‘temple’ like behaviour it seeks to distinguish itself from institutions that adhere to more stricter definitions of what a museum must be. Where formal museum etiquette suggests ‘don’t touch anything, don’t get excited, don’t take pictures’, here the
museum offers tactile displays and object handling while actively encouraging visitors to get excited with approaches to museology that welcome visitors touching certain artefacts and posting photos on social media.

Its adaptation of the change in museum tradition following the New Museology era also extends to its architectural aesthetics. Whereas when it was housed at the Central Library, its external facia drew on architectural designs influenced by Greek and Roman forms (Duncan 1991:91), its location in a contemporary new build eschews the aesthetic and expectations of cultural behaviour associated from museumgoers visiting civic buildings. Bourdieu informs us that it this mediation of social practices through institutions and objects of culture that guide people into established institutionalised hierarchies where social differences and inequalities persist in a state of permanence (Bourdieu 2000:105–106).

If this museum is indeed a temple of any kind, it is a temple of Hackney, past and present. When working with various community interest groups, the team has consistently attempted to embrace change and shun the authoritative ritual where visitors are compelled to act as receptors of the museum's ordered knowledge. The museum has not limited its exhibitions to showcasing cause-based collections. During my time in the field I observed it highlighting the plight of community groups afflicted with mental health issues, physical disabilities, gender discrimination and homelessness. Visitors came to the museum not only to learn, but also to see authentic representations of themselves, family, friends or community encoded in its practices (Bilgrami 2017:19).

Across its history, the team has used events, tours and even festivals to redraw and demarcate an inclusive rendition of what Hackney is as opposed to what some may imagine it to be. This, in itself, is not unique. While examining the Boerum Hill neighbourhood in Brooklyn, the sociologist Philip Kasinitz (1988) discusses how two polarised groups in a gentrified space engaged in the utilisation of cultural sites and artefacts to assert their idea of the neighbourhood. Their conflicts manifested themselves through the use of tours, manipulation of boundaries and other tactics of collective. In the case studied by Kasinitz, the success of the newer, affluent resident’s
methods revealed how political capital and access to resources have a bearing on how a socially constructed space is really created.

To counter their actions, in a similar manner as to what occurred with the C.L.R. James Library debacle, the older, less-resourced residents with less economic resources and political influence to challenge the socio-cultural seizing of their spaces, utilised their cultural symbols, namely ethnic pride, to construct their boundaries. It is here where the council paradoxically occupies the role of both gentrifier and anti-gentrifier.

Empathetic Representation
Whereas the local authority is committed to representing the entirety of the borough in the public realm, it is an act that invariably privileges the borough’s ethnic majority. Simultaneously, while the council’s own cultural institution works to address any imbalance that socially marginalises minority communities, it cultivates a reputation that makes donations of objects like the “Make Racists Afraid” sign possible. In the Hackney Museum’s attempts to ensure cultural representation in its spaces are a bastion of social inclusion, its policy marginalises the views of publics formed around anti-immigration, nationalist and capitalist philosophies.

The museum, and by extension the council have thus been practicing an ‘always voluntary - not compulsory’ policy of positive action to help under-represented groups overcome disadvantage that only became lawful in UK under the Equality Act 2010. Hence, when neighbourhood tensions and competition for resources are caused by the local authority’s urban regeneration policies, the museum can and did operate as a semi-independent broker informally mediating between the council and the various representatives of the various community groups within the borough. As museologists, they recognised the various distinct ways in which different communities sought access to them with differing requirement from them as a museum (Karp et al. 1992).

Alongside witnessing Emma engaged in the tasks customarily associated with museum work alongside co-organising the Antiuniversity festival, I observed her meeting with local teachers, students, elders, activists, artists, refugees and vulnerable young people to identify their needs and concerns. She then systematically mapped, matched and represented their concerns and any proposed solutions with the most appropriate person in meetings with council officials, politicians and various external bodies with the required resources or sufficient political capital to secure a positive outcome. Sometimes the community member accompanied us to the sessions, mostly they did not and rescheduled follow up talks at the museum for feedback on progress and future strategising.

For those that belonged to socio-politically vulnerable communities, having a local authority museum on side made possible not only a safe space to discuss change, but also the possibility of an empathetic one that was or would be suitable adorned with sociocultural markers, where contested views could be discussed and negotiated at a personal level to build a more equitable and respectful society (Vlachou 2019:47). Collectively, the museum’s efforts transcended museological concerns designed to reinforce governmental rule.

However, to suggest it operated as a community centre would be hyperbolic. Nevertheless, it did fulfil the role of creating forums not limited by hegemonic protocol, values or convention. Yet while the museum’s multiple modes of work often gave the impression of a well-funded organisation with access to sufficient resources, despite its status as a local authority institution, it struggled to secure enough funding from the council to carry out its operations. Instead, the museum heavily relies on grants from external funders and the goodwill of volunteers, local activists and its community partners. Many who openly admit while they appreciate it as a museum, they value it more as a culturally aware, strategic partner bridging the gap between council and community.
Council Commitment

Throughout this thesis I maintain that Hackney Council engaged in institutional activism through the curatorial practice of Hackney Museum. Politically wise this remains true. However, evaluating the local authority’s commitment to this form of social action also requires a corporate examination. A financial review is outside the scope of this inquiry, especially the prerequisite study of how national politics influence local government policy that it would require. Nonetheless, a snapshot of how the museum has been positioned long-term by the council can be made by an examination of its recent approach to the retention and development of its staff. Such decisions are intrinsically linked to the priority the local authority gives to its funding.

Prior to its proposed reform in 2002, the controversial Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) introduced in 1990 was the key tool used to measure spending needs for social services. As a result, limits on local authority spending imposed by SSA targets saw councils choose to cap discretionary services like museums with ‘standstill’ revenue budgets (Lawley 2003:75–76).

Sector Challenges

The LAM sector forced to operate in a harsh financial environment and without being able to rely upon stable funding, accelerated its adoption of new strategies to find savings and generate income. This was all while continuing to contribute to initiatives based on social inclusion and life-long learning. There were many casualties. A rolling mapping project by the Museums Association (2010) monitoring the number of museum closures since 2005 reveals almost eighty have ceased to operate publicly or have reopened in a markedly different form of organisation.

The resulting cost-saving transformations in museological practice by LAM’s have included objects being displayed in council libraries, sites becoming volunteer-run or in some cases reconfigured to exist solely as virtual entities in online catalogues. In a 2012, Judy Lindsay, Chair of London Museums Group reported on the continuing challenges facing local museums. Listed was the need for more advocacy work to prevent museums being the first service at risk of reduced service provision.
and closures when local authorities faced funding cuts\textsuperscript{159}. Lindsay also challenged the trend of museum professionals being replaced with non-qualified staff to cut costs (Lindsay 2012).

One of the Hackney Museum’s strategies to address these long-term financial challenges has been to supplement its allocated budget with income from a range of charitable sources. With larger institutional partners like the Red Cross this occurred through grant programmes supporting collaborative working. With local community partners it has resulted in the development of a co-commissioning process enabling them to bid for project funding.

Nevertheless, by 2015, John Orna-Orstein former director of Museums at the Arts Council revealed that the reduction of council budgets had not halted. As a phenomenon it was leading to worst-case scenarios like ‘a local authority [being] on the verge of selling a museum building that holds important collections’ (2015). Moreover, while he also painted a landscape where economically, some LAM’s were better off than others, it was suggested that most were faced with difficult choices when deciding how to balance their local community needs against their local authority priorities.

Austerity
The catalyst for many of these problems was the 2010 election results. In returning a hung parliament, the minority Conservative government were forced to enter a coalition agreement with the Liberal Democrat party to maintain control of parliament. As a government they immediately worked to enact austerity policies on the public sector in a bid to reduce the size of the state and national “deficit”. Their action led to the imposition of drastic, large-scale reductions to public spending for a decade. This exacerbated the pre-existing problems which Lindsay spoke off. For many museums, especially those that were local authority funded and for whom public

\textsuperscript{159} https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2016/07/062016-axe-to-museum-services/
funding constituted at least 75% of their total income (Brodie, Kane, and Clark 2012), the consequences were catastrophic.

The government justified its action through the passing of the Locality Act\textsuperscript{160}. This was legislation that promised to help local authorities innovate their services to empower neighbourhoods. However, to do so, it simultaneously brought a major reduction of local authority funding for services offering support for grassroots services. In 2015, a three-year investigation by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation into the socio-economic impact of these government cuts revealed that since 2010, local authorities in England lost 27% of their spending power. In particular, those Councils offering discretionary social care with a preventative or people supporting focus had their funding for these services reduced by up to 45% in cumulative terms (Hastings et al. 2015:3–8). By 2018, analysis of Freedom of Information (FOI) figures from 152 local authorities by the Local Government Chronicle (LGC) revealed that from 2010 local authorities had made some 222,800 municipal staff members redundant at the cost of £3.9bn (Paine 2018).

As the internal managerial structures of councils altered with changes to their organisational and political structures, such shifts impacted upon their subordinate institutions. Even before this crisis of funding, Ian Lawley (2003), the former head of museums in Stoke-on-Trent wrote that the organisational structures of local authority museums had been in a state of constant flux for several decades. Not only did many find themselves no longer with a divisional sector of their own, but they were shunted from directorate to directorate in an astounding assortment of configurations - one moment categorised under Lifelong Learning next, Community Information Services.

The Hackney Museum, which was at one stage placed in the Public Health directorate currently lies under the Neighbourhoods and Housing Directorate. The council’s online chart detailing its organisational structure reveals its place in a hierarchical structure that firmly situates the cultural institution within the Public Realm (Hoo722) > Library’s Heritage and Culture (Hoo878) > Museum and Culture (Hoo209). However, while the council has resisted moving the institution to a less

\textsuperscript{160}https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted
resourced directorate, its rolling cuts in the museums core funding has seen a
redeployment of key personnel often with redundancies imposed on those in public-
facing posts.

Staffing
When many local authorities are struggling with budgetary concerns, unless their art
and cultural services are generating significant tourism revenue they are often
regarded as a luxury. When this occurs, heritage roles such as that of museum staff are
redefined to serve cost-cutting agendas instead of reflecting museological expertise.
Hence, instead of senior museum officers being labelled or promoted to the post of
council director, they are redefined as managers or at the higher level ‘service heads’.
Hackney is not alone in this practice and out of the 92 local authorities surveyed in a
report on museum directors, only one head of museum service was also a chief officer
(Lawley 2003:77). As a practice this impacts upon which posts and services receive
support at a high level in the council and which do not. It also provides scope to
measure the impact of such changes in terms of gaining managerial assets versus a loss
of specialist expertise.

Between 2004-2009 the Hackney Museum had a Curator, Exhibition Officer,
Community Education Manager, Schools & Families Learning Officer and a Museum
Development Manager. By 2013, there were more job titles in the museum, but less
staff as most of those who remained were no longer employed on a full-time basis with
some moved onto job shares. From 2011 the Hackney Museum had a General Manager,
a Museum Development Manager, a Curator, a Head of Museum and Culture, a
Learning and Community Programmes Officer, a Community Education Manager, a
Heritage Manager and Officer, a Learning and Community Programmes Officer, a staff
member involved in education and outreach, a specific Outreach Project Coordinator
and a Schools and Families Learning Officer.

Nonetheless, the collection of new titles did not translate into retention of the
museums’ experienced staff and after 2013 its curator of nine-years, Sue McAlpine left.
Sue’s departure meant the loss of her experience organising and curating exhibitions,
managing collections and working with the public left the museum with an
operational deficit. The museum also saw Cheryl Bowen, its Community Education Manager leave. Cheryl, who specialised in community engagement and education had eighteen-years expertise as a Senior Youth Worker and Arts Development Officer in the local authority, charity and voluntary sectors. Emily Jost, who was in a job, share with Emma also left her post as the museums Heritage and later Schools and Families Learning Officer.

With a reduced roster and marked loss of community engagement specialists, the museum was forced to utilise the skill sets of its other workers to the make up for the deficit. The loss of any museum staff member intimately engaged in social justice orientated practice, especially those who have worked for several years in a specific neighbourhood, typically results in the severing of human connections that have been caringly forged ‘one relationship at a time’ and often with people who are socio-politically vulnerable (Silverman 2010:153). At its worst, the effects are limited to the weakening of hard-earned bonds of trust between hard to reach social networks and various council institutions.

Fortunately for Hackney Council, some of its staff members like Rebecca had the capacity and transferrable skills to fit their newly assigned roles. Rebecca who had studied at the University of Southampton had been able to adapt and employ the “Community Archaeology”161 skills she developed there to fit her museological interests. When I asked her why she took and remains in the full-time post at Hackney Museum there is no ambiguity in her words. Despite being a local authority museum, its advanced museological practice has meant that she has “never looked back”.

161 https://www.southampton.ac.uk/archaeology/research/groups/theory_representation_and_cultural_politics.page
Figure 5-13 A schematic of Hackney council’s structure organised by posts (Source: hackney.gov.uk)

Figure 5-10 Niti and Emma hold a meeting at the museums Shanghai restaurant exhibit
Figure 5-16 – Inside the Hackney Museum’s office space, 2017

Figure 5-15 - Emma attends a meeting inside the Hackney Service Centre, 2017
Chapter 6 Activism on Display

This chapter offers a selection of the museum’s cultural outputs as a series of ethnographic snapshots depicting its exhibitory related activities between 2017 and 2018. It first highlights the community engagement expertise of local authority museum workers through a breakdown of its consultation processes that enable institutional interactions. This is followed by two related case studies.

The first provides samples of the organisational culture that underpinned its curatorial activism throughout the year. Discussing its practices through the lens of the Making her Mark project, it foregrounds the importance of the museum’s rituals, its use of formal and informal spaces and the services it provides for participatory, exploratory, democratic discourse.

Next, the second study offers an analysis of how the institutional insiders symbolically reproduce activism committed to contemporary social work. It explores the museum’s curatorial activism when fashioned as institutional critique using From Bedroom to Battleground, an exhibition hosted in museum’s Platform space.

Together both examples are used to further the argument that when working as museum practitioners, the council insiders can mute their governmental links while utilising institutional resources to achieve social justice outcomes. Moreover, success requires they sensitively adopt modes of co-optation enabling the formation of long-term relationships with grassroots actors. It is through this process, in addition to its temporary countercultural themed outputs that the museum’s organising spaces act as a public sphere capable of facilitating the participation of counterpublics.
Consultation

Hackney Museum is one of around 2,500 museums in the UK. However, unlike the number of larger and more famous National Museums in Britain, it belongs to a sector of some 700+ registered local authority museums (LAM). This means instead of having charitable status and being administered by trustees or an independent board, its ownership, management and funding are provided/subsidised by the local Council to promote collections reflecting local history and heritage. Moreover, having been established on the back of the New Museology, it has adopted the movements defining feature of working to best serve the current and future needs of local communities through collaborative practice (Davis 2011:65; Golding and Modest 2013:13–16).

Rebecca Odell\textsuperscript{162} started working there after seeing the post of Museum Officer advertised in 2015. Before then, she was employed at a library in Edmonton, an area she describes as incredibly diverse and with a lot of poverty - “providing vital front lines services there was a real eye-opener to the challenges and barriers faced by many”. It was this experience, her academic background in community archelogy and her later work at the Enfield Museum and the Museum of Croydon that saw her promoted to the role of the museum’s exhibition curator by 2017. When comparing the museological approach of the previous cultural institutions she worked at with that of the Hackney Museum, Rebecca stated without a hint of regret or malice - “To be honest it felt like jumping forward ten years in terms of museum practice”.

Rebecca’s praise in part referred to the support the local authority offered the Hackney Museum when working on projects that shared contested histories in its public spaces. To achieve this, she openly acknowledged community engagement as an integral part of her workload when planning exhibitions. Moreover, her experience on consulting with communities resulted in her frequently being called upon to share her expertise with other museum specialists.

\textsuperscript{162} Rebecca is a close relative of Jack Odell, an engineer whose work famously, led to the production of the successful Matchbox toys. Many were manufactured in the company’s main factory at Hackney Marshes during the 1960-70s.
One such request came from the Social History Curators’ Group who asked her to present at its annual conference. The event which took place in June 2017 was held at Reading Town Hall and included an interactive workshop ‘to look at how Doncaster 1914-18 engage with marginalised groups’, a guided walking tour of the area and an opportunity to look around the local museum. Rebecca’s contribution ‘The LD50 Gallery and museums creating debate and a resulting controversy’ was part of a programme of presentations addressing topics such as ‘How do live events in museums and galleries deal with contemporary issues?’, ‘Contemporary collecting and taking more risks’ and ‘Beyond the Family Tree: Using Genealogy to Explore Cultural Identity’.

Once there Rebecca delivered her presentation to a group of around thirty people. She was then quizzed on how the museum managed its activism and its stance on issues like “no platforming”.

Conference Participant: “More power to your elbow, cause it takes a bit of courage doesn’t it, to deal with and get involved in those kind of complexities.”

Rebecca: “I really don’t want to preach cowardice, we didn’t enter into it, they came to the museum [with the contentious protest objects] and we decided to say yes okay. And I think it’s good that we engaged, I think we didn’t consciously plan to engage [with the protest], I think we probably wouldn’t have done. I know it sounds a bit disappointing... um... because I think at the time bearing in mind... we knew the protest was going to happen, there were lots of different contradictory [voices], but we didn’t know [how best to engage].”

Conference Participant: “But you’re trusted you see and that’s why you were approached and that’s a very important [commodity for a museum].”

While Rebecca’s humble response did not mention the restrictions that being a local authority museum imposed on the team’s actions, she inferred it when referring to the “Make Racists afraid Again” poster which Emma had recently shown to the new council members during their introductory tour. Despite the Hackney Museum’s campaigning reputation which Rebecca played down in her answer to questions about the museum’s radicalism, the #Shutdown LD50 poster describing the gallery and

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counter-protesters\textsuperscript{164} as “Nazi Scum” is not on display in the Hackney Museum galleries. Neither was there a follow-up discussion about the Council’s close proximity to the SUTR activists involved in the protest who had described the planned LD50 sessions as “an organising space for racists”.

This exchange sharing the museums reticence in collecting such ephemera is a useful reminder of two issues. The first is that within the museum sector, the local authority supported institutional activism of the Hackney Museum marks it as an anomalous cultural outsider. Furthermore, it is this specialism that also adds value to the museum’s staff credentials as external consultants on best practice for community engagement. The second is that although the museum’s curatorial activism is partially predicated around the practice of cause-collecting, it can and does cause conflict between its museological mission, its council obligations and the social justice values of the staff themselves. Nevertheless, when all three are in sync as with the museums planned Making her Mark project, it is the museum’s informal membership into Hackney’s community of activist practice that delivers results.

Throughout 2017, Rebecca participated in other museum sector events including those organised by external institutions. During the Women and Power conference organised by the University of Oxford she delivered a presentation called “Dead Women Can’t Vote. Rebecca’s participation there was typical of the yearlong process she did in preparation for any major exhibition. Her numerous consultations with local actors and organisations discussing how the exhibition could and should be delivered was a laborious process.

It is not my intent in this chapter to share a verbatim account of the museum’s consultation meetings. However, in attending so many, I was able to observe some of the most eagerly anticipated ones were those that I term speculative encounters. These were those informal gatherings that were set up through chance at council training sessions, public ceremonies, community events or simply after members of the public reached out to the team. The museum’s lack of financial resources meant they frequently had to turn down project ideas that came without the required funding for

\textsuperscript{164} They argued they were defending free speech and the right of leading alt-right figures to a platform.
large or long-term cultural projects. However, for those ideas within its scope, the museum actively pursued and engaged with those neighbourhood ideas that offered to assist them with existing projects especially when offering to add countercultural perspectives.

Spaces
As well as hosting and facilitating steering group meetings, Rebecca along with the rest of the team were perpetually involved in meetings with various individuals across the borough about which stories to tell, objects to share and services to provide to achieve agreed outcomes. These primarily took the form of consultation meetings for the museum’s various 2017 projects. The topics were diverse and included agreeing to artistic collaborations on display styles, strategic exhibition planning with community partners and a larger collaborative project about refugees which involved meetings at the British Red Cross headquarters.

These consultations also took place in a variety of locations and formats. This meant they were organised as an informal coffee break at a local café and others, a booked session at a council building like the Hackney Archives. Nevertheless, despite this diversity of modes and locations, most meetings occurred within the museum’s walls. With space at a premium in the museum’s office, this meant for small gatherings the team frequently appropriated its gallery or exhibitions space for group ‘chats’. However, other times when needing privacy or expecting to discuss sensitive matters, they used a cramped but private area at the back of their office.

The small open plan workplace the team shared had a general hot-swapping area at the back. This was typically used by myself, the museum’s various volunteers and occasionally, other senior council officials. Emma, Rebecca, Josie and interim manager Hana, had semi-permanent desks. Unless there was a scheduled morning meeting, each day would start with a casual, synchronised look at the other’s calendars, preceded by hours of silence punctuated only by keyboard tapping or voices engaged in phone calls. Perhaps it was because everyone was within earshot of each other but there were rarely any personal calls. Most communications by phone seemed to be either a maintenance, refreshing or establishment of a community
relationship incorporating the words along the lines of “long time”, “it’s been a while” or “we must meet up”. Notably for a council site, the conversations elicited a wide gamut of emotional responses ranging from rambunctious laughter to tones that exuded sympathetic concern.

Compared to the staid environment I observed during meetings at the Council’s other buildings, the atmosphere in the museum’s office invited intimate dialogue. There was little clue to the local authority status of the museum in the design and adornment of its office where the walls were adorned with a messy mixture of maps, “I ♥ Hackney” and Socialist Worker posters, Adinkra symbols, timetables, photographs, fresh flowers and the words “Spiritual Energy”.

Despite its small size and its location at the heart of borough’s municipal administrative complex, the Hackney Museum office space presented as a refuge from council policy and compatible with its community engagement ethos. On any given day, a small area at the back of the office would host either Rebecca or Emma engaged in conversation with a visiting resident or worker in the borough be they an artist, activist, educator, journalist, politician, student even museum-goer critiquing a current display.

This space was supplemented by the museums larger and culturally malleable education room. From the morning it was used to provide services for new and expectant mothers, people with learning disabilities, those in need of English language classes and a variety of primary school sessions. In the afternoon and early evening, it hosted adult learning classes and the bulk of its community consultation sessions. During these meetings the room would be filled with a diverse range of people representing local community groups, organisations as well as local authority officials and other institutional actors linked to the myriad of topics addressed in their existing and planned displays and exhibitions.

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165 Whereas, the Hackney Service Centre, a public space built with open plan office designs exuded a corporate atmosphere that invited inquisitorial interviews and inhibited any personal social interaction.
A significant proportion of the Hackney Museum’s community engagement process was initiated online. Whenever the team were alone in the back office, their collective sharing of a social media post or an update from a messaging app like WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger would often elicit cultural and political discussions. Occasionally the team would engage counterpublics on social media platforms. While this was not a formal strategy it was a useful practice that would periodically lead to them randomly encountering groups and individuals involved in social justice discussions and activities. If it was a topical issue or currently linked to a theme the museum was working on an office discussion would ensue that often determined whether they should contact them as new potential collaborating partners.

At moments like this, there seemed to be a few factors that increased the odds of the team initiating an institutional interaction. Being local to Hackney was a priority, being a cultural activist especially aligned with or belonging to a countercultural collective was another. Being able to engender a level of intersectionality missing from any of their existing projects was another.

It was a flexible, open approach to working with those outside the museums immediate circle of influence which the team also applied to how and whom they scheduled for their face to face consultation appointments. While most were arranged onscreen through emails to those on their extensive contacts list, several were arranged offscreen resulting from unscripted, informal discussions with people, literally on the neighbourhood streets.

Rituals
These subsequent meetings, whether organised through happenstance at a community event or a suggested introduction from a councillor then followed a ubiquitous procedure. Irrespective of the topic, who would be present and the expected duration, there would be the distribution of an agenda, recommended pre-readings which could be as simple as a link to a related website or video, and where involving more than a few people, a designated host or in official meetings, a chair. Even when facilitating the meeting the museum tried not to lead them.
Their workshops typically involved a context-setting introduction based around a presentation of community history, a collective discussion where objectives and expectations were shared, an object handling session or guided walking tour around the museum, and a series of exercises conducted in small breakout groups. In these collective writing exercises, participants wrote their needs on provided sheets and were invited to pin ideas and suggestions on a wall before closing with a final group discussion/plenary.

This does not suggest all other meetings were “unofficial”, for even when the team gathered with community participants at informal locations, the museum officers - were council officers - and each engagement, every meeting whether regulatory, casual, governmental, transcendental or consultative represented an opportunity ‘for the alignment and negotiation of distinct perspectives... constituted through the contextual interplay of similarity and difference’ (Brown, Reed, and Yarrow 2017:14). In having access to senior council officers who would otherwise be inaccessible to the participants in these consultations, the museum team were also perceived by my cultural activist interlocutors as sympathetic insiders. Subsequently, when the museum staff attended the numerous mandatory ritualised meetings that accompany bureaucratic life in a local authority, there was an expectation that they actively sought opportunities to progress the ambitions of community outsiders, which they did.

This expectation from local communities for the Hackney Museum staff to operate in an institutionally activist manner placed a twin burden on its staff. Although council officers, as museologists they were expected to look at contested neighbourhood issues through resident’s eyes and prioritise their perspective above that of the local authority. Furthermore, whenever neighbourhood and council aspirations were out of sync such as on matters of gentrification, the team had to increase both its council and community engagement activities to avoid losing long held community relationships.

In preparation for this intense level of interaction, every Hackney Museum staff member was briefed of the museum's short, medium and long-term objectives
regularly. Balancing the competing stresses caused by engaging in curatorial activism that can challenge council policy is a whole team effort. Indeed, from the front-of-house staff to senior managers, the job descriptions for all those working at the museum make it explicit that involvement with ‘community engagement’ (Winch in Bilgrami 2017:22) is a vital requirement of all posts alongside any other responsibilities. Strategically, the museum had ritualised its holistic approach to community engagement to ascertain and seek solutions to local needs.

Services

“Museums utilise a wide variety of specialisms, skills and physical resources that have a far broader application than in the museum. This may lead to shared resources or the provision of services as an extension of the museum’s activities. These should be organised in such a way that they do not compromise the museum’s stated mission.” (International Council of Museums 2017:28)

While as council officers the museum staff were upfront about their liberal bias, they never promised influence over local authority policy. Nevertheless, under the guise of consultation the museum did offer a rich mix of local authority looking facilities to the borough’s residents outside the delivery of its exhibitions and cultural displays. These services that took the form of informal learning and problem-solving workshops also allowed for the provision of a safe space for mediated sessions between various voluntary, public and professional groups sometimes with other council officers present. It is worth noting that these sessions were not always activist in nature. During 2017, they addressed various topics linked to cultural heritage from photography and autobiography writing to a skills development session with their counterparts in Islington council. However, as varied as these were, most of the Hackney Museum consultation sessions were predicated on issues related to social justice matters or at the very least progressive placemaking.

A classic example occurred in July 2017, when a group of schoolteachers during a planning session for the forthcoming Black History Month season wrote on a Post-it note that they wanted the museum to provide their pupils with workshops delivering a learning outcome that “increased understanding of reasons why people come from the Caribbean and [the] positive influence they have brought to Hackney”. Another social justice orientated request occurred later in October 2017 during a consultation that
united young people, youth service providers, teachers and council officers. There, in a session designed to feed into the Council’s YBM\textsuperscript{166} policy (Improving the Outcomes for Young Black Men), the museum was asked to provide the tools for a programme that could address the “radicalisation of young Muslim men and women” and a workshop that could increase the political efficacy of young voices engaged with urban social movements.

“I have an issue with how activism and the way its viewed when young people [are involved as with the Rashan Charles protest where] the police came and suddenly it was [classified as] violent disorder, but actually they have something to say, I really want to move forward with how to support young people to be active about issues that impact them.”

(Participant at IOYBM consultation meeting hosted by Hackney Museum, October 2017)

It is through consultation work of this type and other forms of service provision that the Hackney Museum approach to institutional activism becomes visible. Whereas their direct engagement with the councillors who dropped by the museum for hands-on advice and updates on local affairs saw an obvious hierarchy of power played out in polite discourse, the opposite was true during their community engagement session. The museum staff did their best to make their council officer status subservient to their identities as museum professionals. Irrespective of social status, they engendered trust and offered reciprocity on neighbourhood issues where there was cultural and political alignment. Moreover, they showed deference and offered to share their limited powers as council officers with those from whom they co-produced knowledge and collected objects for future exhibitions, displays and projects.

\textsuperscript{166} https://hackney.gov.uk/young-black-men
Emma meets with the council’s equalities team to address issues affecting residents and the local authority’s workforce.

At the Red Cross office working on the first of a series of meetings for a collaborative project on refugees.
Figure 6-7 Many learning sessions with local schools focus on demystifying migration to the borough

Figure 6-8 The museum schools team meets with local teachers to identify their needs
Consultation

Figure 6-9 Working with Andrea Enisuoh to organise a Hackney Black Women Writers event

Figure 6-10 Rebecca reflects on some of Hackney Museum’s strategies for exhibiting controversial community objects at the Social History Curators Group conference 2017
The Exhibition

It was the Women’s March, a worldwide protest on 21 January 2017 advocating for female rights that helped set the Council’s agenda for the year. Intent on utilising the museum’s main annual exhibition launch as a beacon of its commitment to democratic social change, the team were put on notice by the Council that they had twelve months to put together an exhibition for 2018 marking the 150th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act (RoPA) 1918. This was a landmark moment in British parliamentary history where some women acquired the right to vote.

The Community Advisory Panel

The celebration of such a transformative legal instrument fitted in with the Council’s agenda of promoting the strengths of the democratic process. Hence, this was set as one of the museum’s main priorities. In preparation for the project, Rebecca Odell, the museum’s exhibition curator, convened a community advisory panel of community representatives interested in the idea to decide how to best shape the exhibition.

When collaborating with outsiders, the museum utilises written terms of references to outline the level of involvement community partners have in any decision-making process. Its Advisory Panel is a borough-wide forum where partners reflect on strategic issues; membership is three-years. The museum’s smaller Community Partners Groups calls for a narrower collection of actors with the relevant knowledge, experience or expertise to get involved as “critical friends”. As a steering group for specific projects such as exhibitions and displays, they agree to work together for up to 18 months.

For this project, Rebecca chose to use a consultation process steeped in a collaborative form of critical community practice. It was a decision which led to her frequently altering the original plans she held for the exhibition in a “gigantic word document”. As well as telling the story of women-led activism in Hackney from 1918

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167 Rebecca is a close relative of Jack Odell, an engineer whose work famously, led to the production of the successful Matchbox toys. Many were manufactured in the company’s main factory at Hackney Marshes during the 1960-70s.
onwards, the Community Advisory Panel had been insistent that they wanted to include the history of marginalised women who had changed society. Although this reshaped Rebecca’s perspective on the exhibition, she seized the opportunity to utilise the museum’s strengths as an agent of social inclusion. In Naheed Bilgrami’s 2016 study of the social impact of Hackney Museum, she concludes that despite restrictions within the social and governmental context defining the parameters in which the Hackney Museum operates:

‘the transformative, long term impact that their co-creative and radical engagement practices have on empowering people would seem to exceed the outcomes desired by the more instrumental aims of Hackney Council’s priority of efficient service delivery and social cohesion. Empowered citizens have the potential to not simply cohere with a majoritarian social body, but to act to change a status quo that protects entrenched hegemonic interests’ (Bilgrami 2017:43).

The museum’s recognition of these counterpublic voices that are usually marginalised or excluded from similar civil society discourses serves to elicit trust from groups such as its Community Advisory Panels. This came to the fore in the project’s consultation process where community partners demanded its social work be realised through collaborative and ‘polyvocal practices’ (Golding and Modest 2013). Despite the Hackney Museum being a local authority institution, the participants were insistent that the exhibition incorporate themes relevant to contemporary issues and activist causes even where the Council had erred.

Although the bi-monthly sessions organised in collaboration with the East End Women’s Museum168 (EEWM) were predicated on commemorating the suffragettes, the Community Advisory Panel members expressed a collective desire that the exhibition must do more than reflect the history of women. Moreover, they also wanted it “inspire action” and subsequently named the project - Making Her Mark: 100 Years of Women’s Activism in Hackney. Following their brief, the exhibition’s scope was set to highlighting relevant events over the past century and promoting the role of women in Hackney. Making her Mark they agreed, should refer to women both past

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168 The EEWM project started in 2015 as a protest against the Jack the Ripper Museum in Whitechapel after those involved in its construction reneged on plans to make it a museum about the history of east London women. Its plea for a museum to represent the stories of women in the area led to a successful crowdsourcing campaign.
and present who had ‘brought about change in their community and in wider society through political campaigns, industrial action, peaceful protest, direct action, and the arts’ 169.

The consultation process, which continued over the period of a year generated a wealth of ideas on which themes they wanted to prioritise in the exhibition’s displays. However, while the early sessions were well attended, participation dwindled as the process became technical. Even in their absence at meetings over time, panel members stayed actively engaged and donated items such as pictures and book fragments for inclusion in displays. Still, as the curatorial process became more intensive, Rebecca ended up working with a smaller core on the refinement of themes. While where the work became more about matters of research, selection of objects and panel content she worked primarily with Sarah Jackson 170 the EEWM co-founder.

Both Emma and Rebecca often lamented the ethical implication of relying on community contributions without paying for their services. They described the museum as being used to operating on a near to “zero budget” with most of its projects unless there was an external funding partner attached. For Making her Mark, they were fortunate, although the EEWM was the project’s official collaborating partner, the local authority adopted the role of its “external” sponsoring partner. As a result, Rebecca could secure finance from the Chalmers Bequest to subcontract Thea, a former volunteer to help with collections work. The team still had to hang the exhibit’s themselves, however, the extra resources and support they received from the Council enabled them to loan objects and support that greatly enriched the finished exhibition.

169 https://news.hackney.gov.uk/making-her-mark/
170 Sara Jackson was also the organiser of the East London Suffragette Festival in 2014
Making her Mark

In comparison to its permanent display space, room for the museum’s temporary exhibitions is limited at 99m². It is a fact that forces the team to creatively exploit every part of the display area to tell its stories. To cover the main topic of democratic enfranchisement, gender and race inequality as well as the associated political campaigning involved, the Making Her Mark exhibition was divided into various zones with walls and dividers painted in a neutral, pale yellow. Although the team were expected to focus primarily on the one-hundredth anniversary of women’s suffrage, the exhibitions seven-plus distinctly themed sections used women’s activism to explore historical and contemporary local issues, as well as national events like the Bus Girls Strike of 1918.

The exhibition started with the topic of suffrage using a photographic diorama that recreated the Hackney feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft and the Dissenters of Newington Green in 1794. The image, which was loaned from Red Saunders, a local anti-racist campaigner, was placed in a prime spot above a cabinet

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Red Saunders is a professional photographer and renown anti-racist campaigner who combines his photographic practice with cultural, musical and political activism.
full of related paraphernalia. The vibrant diorama led a series of panels that followed
the Community Advisory Panel’s brief that the exhibition showcased and inspired
activism.

Across the narrative arc, a series of ubiquitous captions followed the standard
institutional format of making objective statements of facts written in the third
person. However, preserved across the mixture of exhibition techniques arranged in
an array of thematic zones, was the simple narrative that the women of Hackney were
a capable, organising, politically engaged community.

Democratic politics was represented via a video of the Hackney MP Dianne
Abbott explaining her parliamentary history in an interview. Another screen showed a
discussion with Roz Kaveney, a local poet and trans-rights activist who fought for the
legislation that would become the Gender Recognition Act (2004). Oral testimonies
made up a large part of the exhibition, and throughout the space there were
headphones hanging next to objects augmenting the details provided by the
interpretive captions. There was also a display case with an assortment of books
written by female authors used to internationalise the exhibition with an assortment
of titles including *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker and an anthology of “New
science fiction by women”.

Social Movements were symbolised in the exhibition in several ways. This
included the use of exhibits linked to the historical campaigns and the projection of
images and photographs. A poster with the words “Calling all women” was situated
next to a wall with a projected moving montage of still images in a section labelled
Campaigns and Direct Action. The footage which depicted women engaged in various
acts of protest included scenes of anti-apartheid activism and advocacy of suffrage.

A couple of meters away from the projection was a plinth containing
paraphernalia from a campaign launched by seven housewives based in Stoke
Newington. The display contained objects that symbolised their successful 1965
campaign to get early cervical screening on the NHS. There were two prominent
objects juxtaposed against each other highlighting the different communication
strategies used by the campaign. The first was a pink brochure with an image of the
Venus gender symbol and text that read “Have your cancer check now”. The second and arguably the cornerstone of the display was a cartoon. Using accessible language, it explained the importance of screening in various languages that the group used to reach women who would not access the service.

Marking a break in symmetry with the rest of the displays was one of the exhibition’s centrepieces. In a section cordoned off by three burgundy ropes was an array of objects that depicted elements of an anti-nuclear campaign from the 1980s. Whereas the rest of the exhibitions displays had so far consisted of carefully placed images in black or brown frames with white borders accompanied by tidy interpretation captions, this section recreated the sense of disruption caused by direct action through a cacophony of aesthetic disharmony. Mounted on the wall was a piece of metal fencing from the RAF Greenham Commons airbase in Berkshire. Attached to it in a skewed manner with black rip-ties, were flowers and a series of photographs of the Hackney contingent of activists involved in the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp.

This section of the exhibition with its images of women tearing down fences, setting up solidarity roadblocks in Dalston and erecting sheets and banners with the words “HACKNEY GREENHAM WOMEN” aptly depicted the women’s only “no nukes” protests of the late 1980s. Their action at the time, opposing the presence of US cruise missiles within the UK sought to weaponise traditional notions of femininity to confront state power172.

To the right of this display, was a life-sized model dressed in a dark blue, jumpsuit worn by the activist group Eastend Sisters Uncut. The suit, with its legs adorned in green and purple letters spelling out the collective’s name, was one of those used during the groups highly publicised ‘die-in’ protest. This was when during October 2016 at the premiere of the Hollywood film Suffragette the group laid across the red-carpet chanting “dead women can’t vote”. Hanging next to the mannequin was

a pair of black headphones playing an interview of one of the activists involved in the action and describing a protest squat that took place in Hackney.

This part of the exhibition exalting the work of Sisters Uncut offers us an insight into the tensions that occasionally exist between the museum and Council. The Sisters Uncut group have frequently embarrassed councillors and officials through public shaming protests. Nevertheless, the museum team were insistent that their tale was a local story that needed to be told. They were subsequently required to check with the Council’s legal team to define the limits of how far they could go, but ultimately the local authority museum was granted the permission to go ahead.

In a wall dedicated to “Police Relations” the museum also attempted a form of ‘counterwriting’. This is a decolonising process designed to make visible narratives of the oppressed (Karavanta 2013). The section which featured a picture from the “Family and Friends of Trevor Monerville” showed a ventilated patient in a hospital bed alongside a bold yellow caption asking, “Who Did This?” Flanking the image were two smaller black and white photographs. The first, taken by the local socially engaged documentary photographer, Alan Denney showed a funeral procession for Michael Ferrera, the nineteen-year-old who bled to death in Stoke Newington police station following a racist attack in December 1978. The image showed hundreds of people from Hackney’s various communities marching outside the police station in sorrow and anger. The other photograph was taken at a protest for a man named Winston James who was mistreated by the police as he attended an inquest for Ferrera.

While these incidents were of police violence committed against men, in keeping with the exhibition theme, the protest images mostly featured the leading role women played in the resulting campaigns for justice. A nearby interpretive caption explained the display sought to subvert the mainstream media trend of focusing on angry young men by instead highlighting how “black women as mothers, sisters,

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173 Another nearby caption described the formation of a Clapton Park Action group founded by African Caribbean women to monitor police interactions which their children on their estates.
daughter, aunts” have been propelled into activism to protect their children from police brutality.

The combination of yearlong community consultation and activist cause-based collection that created Making her Mark, is typical of the exhibitions produced by the Hackney Museum. Moreover, it is their synthesis of intergenerational, civic and countercultural perspectives when reproducing interpretive narratives that shape and defines the cultural institution’s form of museological practice as curatorial activism.

Post Engagement
While installing the exhibition, Rebecca had quipped that Making Her Mark is “a how-to-guide in exhibition form”. Her words were an apt description of how the Making her Mark displays made poetic use of history to reconstruct historical narratives as a schematic cultural tool (Wertsch 2002:13–29). By simplifying the complex historical narratives occurring in the borough’s social communities, the museum had facilitated active learning, knowledge construction and remembering. Although unsurprisingly, the museum which asserts the power of collective organising through the exhibition is careful only to depict, not advocate protest actions that break the law.

Silverman (2010:26) suggests that as the number of museums committing to acting as agents of human well-being and social change increases, they will need to learn from and about professional social work. For the Hackney Museum this includes examining failed local authority policies that potentially embarrass the Council while searching for evidence of actions used by civilians that have successfully encouraged the Council to remedy social problems.

Making her Mark included such an example in a display highlighting the Hackney Abortion Campaign (HAC) group. During the 1970s, when Hackney Council had a legal obligation to house pregnant women, it opted to place this responsibility onto an anti-abortion charity. In attempting to outsource its obligations, this was a decision that stoked much community anger leading to local women organising to change its policies.
Despite the risk of portraying the Council in a bad light, Rebecca had made the curatorial decision to display the group’s leaflets despite them being highly critical of the local authority. As an issue, the Hackney Abortion Campaign’s actions directly impacted upon female rights and showcased the plight of local women fighting for social justice. The HAC leaflets situated near to photographs of demonstrations were accompanied by interpretation captions that explained the group’s actions led to the Council overturning its decision.

There can be little doubt that the section explicitly followed the Community Advisory Panel’s brief that the exhibition must depict and “inspire action”. Nevertheless, it simultaneously tarnished the Council’s reputation as a local authority consistently engaged in ethical placemaking. While the Hackney Greenham Women’s campaign took aim at central government, exhibits like this and that exalting the *Eastend Sisters Uncut* highlighted flaws in both previous and current municipal administrations.

However, where such risks accompany all acts of institutional critique, not so with curatorial activism. To mitigate damage to the Council’s campaigning brand *Making her Mark* maintained a careful balance between panels sharing testimony critical to the Council and that which lauded its accomplishments. Championing the local authority as an attentive council in another section of the exhibition was a green A2 sized poster with text in a bold white font which read:

“HACKNEY LISTENS TO WOMEN – Come to an open meeting on Thursday October 21 at 7:30 in the Town Hall Mare Street London E5 - WOMEN ONLY”

Accompanying the council message from 1982 was an image of women marching with trade union banners and placards reading “Parents Must Unite and Fight” while their children carried handmade drawings with the words “A nursery is my right”. While a laudable message in its time, in the context of the 2018 *Making her Mark* exhibition the poster from the Council’s Women’s Rights Sub-Committee could be misconstrued as propaganda. For whenever the museum failed to highlight its relationship to the Council when mentioning such content, they asserted that the object’s inclusion was an ‘objective’ decision (Macdonald 1998:200).
This was not the only example of the exhibition’s juxtaposition of both institutional critique and curatorial activism. Playing on a video screen beside a framed banner that depicted three dancing women dressed in African attire, was an interview of Ngozi Fulani from the local domestic violence organisation *Sistah Space*. Ngozi and the museum have had a positive relationship for several years and in recent times had used the museum as a safe space for vulnerable women in the area to gather and learn of useful council services.

However, Ngozi maintains that the very existence of *Sistah Space* emerged from a failing of the local authority. The community organisation was set up in 2015 with the help of the HCVS to provide the culturally appropriate, domestic abuse service for women of African heritage which they argued the borough lacked. Likewise, elsewhere in the exhibition was a display case dominated by a green poster reading “Hackney Women’s Aid Domestic Violence – Don’t stand For it!” amongst a variety of related paraphernalia. With this display, the exhibits told the story of a group of social workers who used to meet in the borough’s old Centerprise bookshop and set up the first refuge in Hackney. Moreover, also included in the display was a damning letter revealing the local authority’s misogynistic viewpoint at the time.

‘[we don’t consider this woman and child] homeless, having accommodation [with her abuser] to which they could return if she so wished”.

*Hackney Council, 1975*

While there had been forty-five years between the formation of *Sistah Space* and the *Hackney Women’s Aid* group, many of the organisational challenges they faced were similar. Both ran on a minuscule budget and were financially supported by donations and sales from jumble sales. In the *Hackney Women’s Aid* case, a copy of their financial accounts for 1975 was on display, revealing the group had a cash balance of £54.

Perhaps it would have been useful for the exhibition to show how in contrast the local authority had supported *Sistah Space* by locating subsidised office space for its use. While the African centred refuge for women experiencing domestic abuse is open about its support of the museum, it is less so of the local authority that sponsors it. However, just as adding contextual details to the activist fragments on display in
the Mayor’s office would alter the narrative being suggested, to do so in the *Making her Mark* exhibition would be adding details that were superfluous to requirement.

Therein lies the paradox, as cultural agents of hegemony, this curatorial thrust and parry is a compromise most local authority museums must face whenever seeking to promote social action. It is also here when adopting the institutional activist practice of partnering with cultural outsiders with social justice campaigns proved most useful. When consultation and advisory panels are engaged to co-produce knowledge, they can do more than authenticate the preconceptions of well-intentioned curators who may also be cultural outsiders. Moreover, when such an approach is adopted in a meaningful, long term manner, it enables a museum’s curatorial team to provide curated voices of collective remembering in the form of mediated action (Wertsch 1994:204). That is, alongside advocating direct action in symbolic terms, also taking an active role in using and transforming cultural tools to address sociocultural issues by challenging existing systems of understanding.

![Figure 6-12 - Display on Hackney Women’s Aid in Making Her Mark exhibition](image-url)
Figure 6-13 Rebecca and volunteer Thea frame the Sistah Space banner

Figure 6-14 The team work together hanging images for the exhibition
The Launch

On the 8th February 2018, International Women’s day, a large group of people gathered at Hackney Museum for the launch of the Making her Mark: 100 years of women’s activism in Hackney exhibition. The museum always holds its launches on a Thursday which is its longest day, opening at 9.30 am and closing at 8 pm. There were some two hundred people present, and the space was filled to capacity. Despite the loud noise of multiple conversations, there was an amicable atmosphere, possibly assisted by the copious amount of free wine and soft drinks that the visitors had helped themselves to. Gathered around each of the themed sections in the exhibition, were between six to seven people. Some watched video recordings; others read the interpretation captions as a few took photos of panels with their phones. The majority of those in attendance were women of various ages and ethnic backgrounds; the few males that were present appeared to be either their children or partners.

Outside the exhibition space, the museum team had erected a podium. The front of a row of seats was occupied with women holding babies, while others jostled to locate a prime location and sat on any nearby surface in preparation for the scheduled presentations. The small Hackney Museum team were rushed off their feet as they engaged in numerous discussions with old friends, contributors, visitors with queries, and later during the evening - a few councillors and council administrators who had joined the event. At the reception desk, a volunteer handed out leaflets about local campaigns as groups of people waited to use the museum’s popular badge making device.

To start the program, Rebecca stood on the podium and formally welcomed the museum’s visitors to the launch event describing the venue as a community history museum. She explained; “This exhibition needs to be inspirational and convince women they can change society regardless of their background and disadvantages”. Rebecca then invited five of the exhibition’s Community Advisory Panel members on stage and the audience gave them a round of applause for sharing the “ideas at the heart of the exhibition”. Rebecca’s definition of the Hackney Museum as a community

174 Although the vast majority are European.
history institution underpinned the team’s approach of excavating marginalised narratives of the past and reconstructing them with interpretations provided by the local community (Wallace-Casey 2016:372).

Rebecca’s celebratory opening espousing the museum’s inclusive values attracted the attention and support of the gathered audience, including senior council officials like the Mayor and various influential civil society representatives. It was then followed with a keynote speech from Councillor Carole Williams, Hackney Council’s cabinet member for employment, skills and human resources. William’s started her speech by naming a list of female activists, both local and national, who had a significant impact on society. However, after explaining there was still a long way to go, she was keen to ensure that the Suffragettes were not the only group of women to be recognised by the museum’s audiences.

“[We must also remember] all those activists... all those giants that went before them like Sojourner Truth because of the intersectional perspective they bring to feminism. And without people like her, I wouldn’t be here today doing the work I’m doing”.

Williams’ speech explicitly referred to prominent African American abolitionists whose work had been expunged from the main narrative on female suffrage175. Having framed the historical background, she then provided details of the local authority’s current gender composition as evidence of the Council’s efforts to address contemporary around the similar themes. Under Mayor Glanville’s tenure, Hackney’s cabinet contained six women and four men. Compared to an average figure of 33% of female councillors nationally, the figure in Hackney is 42%176. Williams, who is also responsible for the Council’s equalities agenda, has also presided over changes in the local authority’s gender pay gap shift towards women as its female employees receive higher pay than men. While the councillor’s words were well received, once again the local authority’s current progressive achievements were being juxtaposed against the radical social actions of the female activists depicted in the exhibition.

175 Her comments also indirectly referenced the omitted comments of suffragette’s like Frances Willard, national president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union who argued; “It [is] not fair that a plantation Negro who can neither read or write should be entrusted with the ballot,” (Logan 1999:67).
176 https://www.hackneygazette.co.uk/news/women-s-suffrage-top-hackney-councillors-on-the-fight-for-equality-100-years-on-1-5383560
After William’s there were a few more speeches from other attendees such as Sara from the EEWM. The launch closed with a joyous expression of solidarity in the form of a collectively raising of fists as the gathered participants shouted out “Women Power”.

Figure 6-15 Participants at the exhibition launch shout out “women power” with raised fists
The Exhibition

The Platform

“I don’t feel happy putting on an exhibition that has nothing to do with the people of Hackney. The idea comes from communities – they approach us and we collaborate on it,”
(A Hackney Museum staff member commenting on Platform in Lynch 2014:13)

Whenever people came to attend the museum’s events or exhibitions, their predilection for congregating in the permanent gallery inevitably saw many of them encounter its spaces for local issues referred to as Platform. Varying in size but typically restricted to no more than half a dozen panels, the museum’s limited real estate meant that the curatorial team were usually forced to utilise every blank wall and available location capable of hosting a cabinet, canvas or object. The overall result would often result in the use of various exhibition techniques. Nonetheless, whenever Platform was conceptualised across multiple locations, its cohesiveness as a display lay not in its aesthetic signature, but the consistency of its narrative.

Platform displays were co-produced in partnership with the local community. Many of these would be local groups, organisations and individuals hoping to exhibit images addressing a specific theme. In 2014 this involved exhibiting the photography of students at The Garden School177 in Hackney. The museum in collaboration with their teachers had helped develop the children’s camera skills to explore and capture their lives in the borough. The following year, Platform was used to document the 30th anniversary of the Hackney City Farm. Exhibitions varied in length, some lasted for a few weeks, others lasted over a year updating through an iterative two-way consultation process. For example, between 2015-17 the museum worked with Access All Areas, a theatre company that helped the museum co-produce a display with adults with learning disabilities. As a result of this prolonged community engagement, there were two positive outcomes. The planned production of a Platform exhibition and an improvement of the museum’s language policy when using archaic terms like ‘cripple’ and ‘invalid’ to describe disability-related material in its collections.

177 The school offers highly specialised educational provisions for learners between 4-16 with autism.
Occasionally Platform based partnerships would be made with external cultural organisations and used images that did not feature Hackney residents or workers. During January 2017, the museum hosted a pop-up photographic exhibition in partnership with the Hackney based, artist led charity, *Autograph ABP*. The exhibition, an extract from a wider project called *The Missing Chapter: Black Chronicles* featured a selection of rare portraits of people with African, Caribbean and South Asian heritage taken in 19th and early 20th century Britain.

These examples are typical of how *Platform* was used by members of Hackney’s invisible, minority or misrepresented communities seeking to tell their story, usually on their own terms and often with a high level of creativity. *Platform* was not only an important exhibitory space for the museum, but also an experimental space through which the local authority insiders could explore new cultural means of challenging existing inequalities in the borough.

**From Bedroom to Battleground**

As was demonstrated by some of the panels within the *Making her Mark* exhibition, the Council’s social inclusion policy is not limited to encouraging discussions on acceptance around themes of ethnicity, but also gender, disability, age and sexuality. At the same time as the displays celebrating a centenary of women’s suffrage and activism were being produced, the museum team was working on an exhibition called *From Bedroom to Battleground* for *Platform*. This was an exhibition created with Project Indigo, a local Hackney-based youth service that offered counselling and support service for young people and those questioning their sexual or gender identity.

For safeguarding reasons, I could not observe the community engagement sessions that Emma, Hana, and Elena coordinated in the museum education room. Shiri, who was subcontracted to curate and produce what was the Hackney Museum’s first LGBT+ exhibition in a decade informed me there were eight weeks of these contact sessions. I did manage to observe a few of the consultation meetings between Hana, the museum’s interim manager and the Project Indigo youth counsellor, Susy...
The Exhibition

Langsdale. However, for the sake of brevity, I have omitted detailing their content which largely focused on budgetary constraints.

The three month long exhibition which ran from February – May 2018, physically began near the museum’s welcome sign in a black display cabinet with a cut-out panel. Behind its glass facia and illuminated with white light were badges, photographs and prints depicting the Hackney float at London Pride\textsuperscript{178} in 2016. Attached to the cabinet’s front was a lone interpretation caption written in black ink on a pink background. It explained that the display case was part of an exhibition created with a donation from Stik, a famous Hackney-based street artist.

Situated directly beside it was a collection of squares on the wall arranged in a six across and four down formation. Each square was encased within a white border, and each column coloured with a different band of the rainbow flag\textsuperscript{179} using the scheme that is now synonymous with Pride. Within most of the squares were pinned postcards with handwritten comments on them. Written above them was another caption that read; “What are you going to do differently to support the queer people in your life?”

As with the rest of the captions that guided visitors through the exhibition’s thematic zones, the use of black text on a pink background was used as a defining visual motif. Each one was written in a third person and could be differentiated from the museum’s usual interpretive texts in several ways. Besides the use of a coloured “non-white” background, the tone was personal and inquisitorial. Also, there were no signs of the staid design language that signalled the local authority’s corporate branding.

Throughout the exhibition, the only evidence of curatorial ownership existed on two walls where a couple of panels lay facing each other, one with the emboldened caption “Artist Statement” which named Liv Wynter as the artist facilitator. The other

\textsuperscript{178} London Pride, now known as Pride in London, is an annual festival and parade for the UK’s LGBT community held each summer in London.

\textsuperscript{179} This version of the rainbow flag colours omitted the black and brown stripes that have been adopted by some communities to highlight African and Asian members within the LGBTQIA community.
with the words “Exhibition by local LGBTQI+ youth group Project Indigo” and “We are Indigo” printed across them. Together the words framed a screen playing a seven-minute video\(^\text{180}\) that shared testimonies describing the project and detailing some of the challenges and violent homophobic attacks the group’s members had experienced.

On the exhibition’s main wall were handwritten placards attached to a tableau made of printed love letters to “all those living their truth”. Situated beside them were multicoloured symbols of activist protest positioned behind a mixture of construction hoarding and blue and white police tape resembled a crime scene. Lynch (2019:124) who argues the role of museums today must be one of providing hope and action insists exhibitions are no longer tied to a neutered performative mode, but are instead, activist, collaborative and capable of change-making during times of despair.

The museum and Project Indigo members attempted to do this by dividing the From Bedroom to Battleground narrative into two sections – “bedroom” to embody the intimate nature of their despair and “battleground” to represent social action. The first transmitted their vulnerability with a section defined through a kaleidoscope patterned curtain containing the message “I wish my bedroom could be my safe Haven”. The second utilised a plethora of protest themed placards to symbolise their activism.

The messages which varied in intensity did not share a central campaign identity. Unlike the objects displayed in Making her Mark, they were not from cause-based collections existing as social fragments of historical social movements. These were objects created in a creative process to represent a contemporary social malady. In the included video, Wynter explains this was deliberate. During a banner making workshop she had asked the young participants to produce protest slogans they would use if they were campaigning for a manifesto they had drawn up in an earlier session.

Written on the placards were proclamations such as “We aren’t just a history project. We need help now”. Some stated a desire to be free from persecution with words like “I AM THE GAY AGENDA”, “LOVE AND RAGE”, “NOT SHE NOT HE BUT

\(^{180}\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=729kKsookqU
STILL VALID” while others questioned; “Why do some people HATE LGBTQI+ ppl when they are the ones who GIVE BIRTH 2 US”

With its distinctive curatorial design, *From Bedroom to Battleground* visually presented as a prohibited adjunct to the museum’s other displays. Furthermore, through its use of objects associated with marking public boundaries at moments of emergency, breaching the symbolic barrier that defined the faux-protest area invoked a feeling of engaging in voyeurism while occupying the exhibitory space.

Social Action

As an act of institutional critique, the curatorial activist approach of the museum enabled the exhibition to escape what Smithson (1979a) regarded as cultural confinement. As a result, it became impossible for the ‘political lobotomization’ of Wynter and Project Indigo’s work to occur (Nowotny 2009:24). In granting the group access to *Platform*, Hackney Museum was not only using governmental power to try and change public perception and promote LGBTQI+ wellbeing needs. The curatorial activist insiders were also exhibiting through the spectacle of tragedy. The irony being that the museum’s local authority status made it part of the system responsible for the societal failings being depicted. To this end, the discrimination faced by members of Project Indigo were depicted in captions that explained how police officers “would not use my chosen name, instead misgendering me with my old name. In doing that, they invalidated me”. The dangers this caused were highlighted by a single caption attached to a video calling out for recognition and social acceptance not only from society’s many institutions of hegemony but also family members.

“I wish I could be in the video but I can’t. I had to come to London cos my family tried to kill me when I said I was a gay man. I would be scared if they somehow see it”.

Once again, the moral compromise inherent in every act of institutional activism emerges. Although the consultation process of *From Bedroom to Battleground* empowered Hackney community outsiders to recreate symbols affirming social identities that were being marginalised, it was also necessary to repudiate the continued absence of rights and institutional protections in the borough too.
The From Bedroom to Battleground exhibition was hosted in the museum's Platform space.
Conclusion

"Today’s museum has no choice but to think seriously about who their visitors are and why they come, as well as about who does not visit and why not. Visitors are at the heart of the twenty-first century museum’s existence. Understanding something about museum visitors is not a nicety; it is a necessity!" (Falk 2009:20)

In their attempts to render themselves public, museums have committed to decentralising their authority in the hopes of becoming more inclusive of the public which are defined as an active component of their mission. This is one of the legacies of the New Museology. Although, its initial focus on the presentation of objects, implied ‘the development of new theories and techniques to enable museums to communicate more effectively with their visitors’ must be prioritised (Davis 2011:61).

Nevertheless, the curatorial practices of today’s public institutions are no longer limited towards the aesthetic importance of their displayed artefacts. Some are preoccupied with assessing the importance of their cultural value in attracting and engaging audiences, others in a climate demanding accountability from public institutions feel compelled to justify their worth by broadcasting their social work (Silverman 2010). The two positions are not diametrically opposed, the Hackney Museum attempts both and more.

Although the displays of activism described throughout this chapter are the outcomes of consultation processes made visible, the ‘assumptions, rationales, compromises and accidents that lead to a finished exhibition’ remain concealed (Macdonald 1998). Recognising that the traditional presentation and interpretation of objects as being socially exclusive, it develops progressive strategies designed to cultivate ‘new relationships with communities both within the museum walls and beyond’ (Watson 2007:29).

The addressing of socially contested issues in their exhibitions is one of the ways that the institutional activism of the Hackney Museum facilitates the engagement of Hackney’s publics, counterpublics and key institutional actors. Another is through its long-term community engagement processes that utilise formal and informal setting to facilitate democratic discourse between various laypersons and those who formally represent institutions, organisations and other professional bodies.
These events which Drew and Heritage (1992:3–4) define as institutional interactions were largely successful in furthering countercultural perspectives, but not so when it came to sustaining transgressive social action. Although the museum team was effective when attracting activist and counterpublics actors in mediated public spaces, as a public sphere the museum’s consultation process became dominated by privileged civil society members once its resources for engagement were depleted.

Nevertheless, as will become evident with the following Antiuniversity chapter, the museum’s reputation as a trusted, activist institution means it does attract commitment and in-kind support and small-scale donations from volunteers and organisations. However, these community partners tie their support to an expectation that it engages in a form of institutional activism which demonstrates an unequivocal willingness to render central, any local government acts of negligence or maleficence visible to as large a body of public sphere members as possible. On this, the museum never equivocated although on occasion, it was directed by the Council to compromise the form of its cultural representations and ensure its interpretation captions maintained political neutrality.

The museum’s Making her Mark exhibition did provide an opportunity for politicians to directly meet with activists during programmed cultural events. Similarly, through the work exhibited on the Platform the Hackney Museum was able to facilitate the co-production of images which when displayed in a public space were designed to trigger uncomfortable, but urgent, political discussions about current social affairs affecting minority and countercultural communities in the borough. Moreover, through From Bedroom to Battleground the museum demonstrated how its curatorial activism engages in social work. In this case, it helped members of the LGBTQIA+ community express an aspired need for belonging and affiliation with other people as well as granting them the opportunity to experience uniqueness and autonomy, without any negative impact from others (Silverman 2010:54).
Chapter 7 Antiuniversity Now!

In the previous chapter we were able to see some of the ways that Hackney Council uses the museological expertise of the Hackney Museum to present the borough’s residents, workers, and visitors a cultural representation of its political identity and current social agenda. The staff of the museum in turn, utilise a mixture of curatorial activism and institutional critique to place both grassroots activism and institutional activism on display. Its short-term displays like Platform directly support community and organisation led social action, these are produced through a formal coöptation of cultural activists. The museums annual and longer-term exhibitions use cultural activism to signal that the Council is open to active partnership with progressive social justice campaigners.

This final chapter on the museum presents another, more radical form of practice used by the local authority institution. It offers a look at a project that was independently initiated by the Hackney Museum following an act of formal coöptation not of the Council’s choosing. It depicts how museum insiders can operate in an institutionally activist manner even when as political subordinates, they are obligated to fulfil wider governmental policies and agendas. Moreover, it explores how the active creation of long term, informal relationships with a small number of community outsiders can enable a broader form of informal coöptation. The objective of which is to facilitate the use of institutional resources and relationships to create and develop sustainable, transgressive forms of cultural activism for social change.

The following case study offers a snapshot of the annual Antiuniversity Now! festival, a radical, countercultural education project based on a 1968 project of a similar name. This new iteration adapts the original’s anti-institutionalist principles with anarchist values. It started with the museum forming a partnership with a university. It is now operating as an autonomous project run through the collaboration of activists and artists with arms-length support from the Hackney Museum, a cultural institution run by local government.
Institutional Collaborations

‘In November 2015 around 1,200 people attended the first Antiuniversity Now festival. Over one weekend, they took part in 60 public events, self-organised by about 90 people in libraries and galleries, pubs and private homes, from St Ives to Sheffield. The hosts weren’t experts or academics and the guests didn’t have to pass any exams or pay a fee. There was no application process and no one was refused entry. The programme included sessions on DIY Feminist Practice, Urban Mining (of your phone), Radical Archiving and Art Education post New Labour as well as experimental sound performances, a participatory reading of the Greek play Lysistrata, a three-sided football match and a walk around Sizewell 2 nuclear power station.’

*Antiuniversity Now Co-founder, Shiri Shalmy (2016)*

In 2014, Oisín Wall approached the Hackney Museum about collaborating on an AHRC funded Collaborative Learning in the Arts, Society and Humanities (CLASH) programme led by University College London (UCL). The scheme which was designed to make academic research accessible to the wider public required him to locate a partner in the cultural or creative sector. As an institution, the museum’s staff were accustomed and actively embraced heritage projects and community initiatives with ‘little resemblance to the concept of an institution established to collect, conserve and exhibit material culture’ (Watson 2007:3).

In this instance, Oisín, a Kings College graduate had selected the local authority museum because part of his research, which was a study of British Psychiatry, had uncovered a direct connection to Hackney. His research showed that on 12th February 1968, a radical education project named the Anti-University of London had opened its campus doors at 49 Rivington Street in Shoreditch. The anti-institutional project which lasted for nine months, had been spawned by a small but influential group of intellectuals, artists and activists inspired by the ‘Invisible Insurrection’ (1963) proposal of the Scottish novelist Alexander Trocchi. The most

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181 Arts and Humanities Research Council.
182 The Shoreditch site of the 1968 Anti-University was located only a few miles away from Hackney Museum.
183 Previously rented to the Vietnam Solidarity Committee, a mainly Marxist group organising marches against the Vietnam War (Winch and Wall 2015)
184 Including psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell and poet Asa Benveniste
185 Trocchi was a member of Situationist International (SI), a global collective of social revolutionaries dedicated to challenging societies various structures of hegemony.
influential of those involved with the project were the noted “anti-psychiatrists”, Dr Ronald David Laing, Dr Joseph Berke and Dr David Cooper.

‘Our university must... create an independent moral climate in which the best of what is thought and imagined can flourish. The community which is the university must become a living model for society at large.’ Alexander Trocchi (1963)

Emma, who at that time oversaw the museum’s *Schools and Family Learning* programme\(^{186}\) became interested in the Anti-University’s radical educational activities. Moreover, as the CLASH program was designed to develop scholars into being civically minded and socially engaged actors, both Oisín and Emma saw no conflict with them organising a public event as a countercultural experiment in community engagement and informal learning.

By January 2015, Oisín had formally started his CLASH fellowship with the Hackney Museum as his agreed cultural partner. Emma was his lead institutional insider. This was not the first time the museum had worked on a collaborative project connected to a university\(^ {187}\). While working on this fledgling collaboration, the museum was simultaneously engaged in another UCL project\(^ {188}\) leading to its 2014 exhibition ‘Who Were the Slave-owners of Hackney’. Alongside that, the museum staff were also supporting Alex Brown, a Hackney Resident doing his placement conducting research around its collections as part of his MA degree course on Arts Policy and Management. Alex in turn, gave back to the museum through volunteering there at a time when it was understaffed and under-resourced.

The museum was no stranger to often being forced to locate unpaid assistants or external funding sources for community-based projects that were not explicitly requested by its local authority sponsor. Fortunately for the Hackney Museum this was not the case in this instance, for with Oisín’s project, the financial burden of facilitating the collaboration between the educational and cultural institutions was

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\(^{186}\) The museum delivers an annual Black History Season programme to several thousand school children in the borough, starting in October and closing in January.

\(^{187}\) In 2011, the museum commissioned The University of Leicester to evaluate the ’Mapping the change’ project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

\(^{188}\) From 2013-2017 Hackney Museum worked with University College London on ‘The Legacies of British Slave-ownership’ project.
reduced. As part of the CLASH scheme, UCL provided a small grant to the partnering museum for its administrative costs¹⁸⁹ (2015). This removed the need for the museum to request additional funds from the local authority to engage with the partnership.

The institutional collaboration resulted in two events. The first was a community forum session where a small group of artists, activists and educators that Emma had invited from a community of alternative learning projects¹⁹⁰ looked at Oisín’s research. During the session, they engaged with the history of the Anti-University through the oral histories he had collected. Their reflection on the state of higher education since the 1960s led to an outpouring of anger. Collectively they shared their frustration at what they regarded “the neo-liberalisation of higher education” in the form of rising tuition fees, privatisation and structural inequality based on class, gender and ‘race’.

The community forum members expressed a desire to do something; more specifically, they wanted the museum to help them do something to challenge the formal co-optation of educational institutions by the state. With the agendas of the community outsiders and museum insiders in alignment, this ‘something’ was to begin with a second, larger public engagement event based around countercultural education.

Being Countercultural

‘Most of the people involved [in the Anti-University] have all been working at their own subject in London during the last few years; they are writers, poets, psychiatrists, sociologists, marxists, anarchists, artists, musicians and filmmakers. All of these people have not been unaware of each other’s activity in the past, but anti-university will bring them into an immediate and continuing relationship.’

*The International Times* (1968)¹⁹¹

When the Anti-University opened in 1968, it was launched with a simple message; ‘no formal qualifications was needed to get involved and no degrees would be awarded’

¹⁸⁹ The 2014/2015 fellowships provided a maximum grant of £2,500 to cover financial support for researchers and the host Cultural partners supervisory costs for projects including public engagement activities

¹⁹⁰ Open School East, School of the Damned and Alt MfA

¹⁹¹ Published a month prior to the Anti-University’s official opening
Institutional Collaborations

(Jakobsen 2012). As indicated by its name, the Anti-University project was driven by anti-institutionalism, an ideology which in its most basic form is defined by its challenging of the tendency for social groups to perpetuate their existence through formal organisation and bureaucratic structure. At the heart of the philosophy is a mission to subvert the tendency by groups of people to politically organise in the form of ‘dynamic conservatism’, a mode which the educational sociologist, Maurice Punch refers to as ‘the tyranny of routinization’ (1974:312).

With its resistance to institutional forms of authority, anti-institutionalism is a concept that shares many anarchist ideals. While it is not predicated around a rejection of the state, it is opposed to structural violence alongside all hierarchal forms of leadership. For many, anarchism, with its deployment as a strategy in service of the oppressed and working-class people of the world is regarded as exciting. Yet in contrast, anti-institutionalism in seeking the demise of bureaucracy is not regarded as sexy; this is despite it ideologically sharing anarchism’s category of what Graeber calls, being ‘Marxism’s poorer cousin’ (2004). This is unfair.

As a concept, anti-institutionalism gained much popularity during the radical politics of the late 1960s. It was an era marked by mass political agitation and characterised not only by student protests but also the presence of many radical and revolutionary movements. Today, constructs such as ‘far-right activists’ and ‘alt-right counter-protesters’ have cultural currency. However, in the 1960s, political activism was largely defined as being countercultural and shaped by either anarchist or Marxist thinking, often both. Being ‘activist’ was primarily defined by public participation. This could be visible engagement in anti-colonial struggles, supporting the fight for Black Power, championing women’s liberation, resisting the draft, calling for nuclear disarmament or calling for an end to America’s Vietnam War. In leftist circles of agitation, the fight against ‘power’ almost always involved challenging large corporations and state institutions of hegemony.

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192 There is political push back to such classifications. On 7 Jan 2021 – president Elect Joe Biden said “Don’t [you] dare call them protesters... they were domestic terrorists” after an assault on the US Capitol by political extremists. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/07/joe-biden-trump-mob-domestic-terrorists
Of course, the roots of anti-institutionalism predate this. In the early 1920s, several radical schools\(^{993}\) openly fought against the rigid institutional forms of traditional public schools. Seeking to break free from the shackles of orthodoxy that dominated education at the time, they engaged in countercultural practices where they relinquished established mechanisms of authority to cultivate a legitimate form of radical pedagogy.

In most instances, the loss of charismatic leadership, resistance from wider society, and difficulties in setting, evaluating and agreeing upon long term goals of such anti-institutions led to the demise of such projects. The overarching problem being not one of proving the validity of such a concept, but instead, finding a sufficient means to sustain it (Punch 1974:312–322).

Nevertheless, as an idea, anti-institutionalism would not die while liberal, constructivists (Dewey 1997) rejected the authenticity of a world order represented by democracies of hegemony using social control to maintain the status quo. Hence in 1968, countercultural education rooted in anti-institutionalism seemed to offer many a route to realising the myriad of transnational customs, values and cultural institutions that transcend world politics (Marin Thornton 2017). When the Anti-University of London first opened its doors, it was under this social and political backdrop.

'\textit{The Antiuniversity of London is in contact with antihospitals, communes, communities, etc. in London and elsewhere. We ally ourselves with these groups and seek to interdigitate our functions in confronting the stagnation and dehumanization of life in the West.}' Anti-University (1967)

\(^{993}\) Punch refers to the most notable radical schools being; Summer Hill 1921, Beacon Hill 1925, and Dartington Hall 1926
Dialectics of Liberation

Following the community forum’s enthusiasm over the research on the Anti-University, Oisin, Emma and Alex\textsuperscript{194}, started preparation for a follow-up, participatory event. Together they worked on a programme that included screening excerpts of *The International Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation* hosted in London during 1967. This was the first ever Anti-University event and due to the variety and quality of speakers who presented there, is regarded a seminal countercultural event.

The conference was held at the Camden Roundhouse between the 15th and 30th July 1967. There to discuss the African American response to racism, poverty and police brutality was Stokely Carmichael\textsuperscript{195}, the *Black Panther* leader and civil rights activist. Alongside him, the line-up included Gregory Bateson - the English anthropologist and social scientist, Allen Ginsberg\textsuperscript{196} - the American poet, writer and ‘father’ of the Beat Generation, Herbert Marcuse - the philosopher and political theorist, Simon Vinkenoog - the Dutch poet, C.L.R. James - the socialist historian, John La Rose - the poet and cultural activist, and Emmett Grogan - the leader of the San Francisco based community anarchist group *the Diggers*.

‘The [Roundhouse] was occupied 24+ hours a day for sixteen days by hordes of people meeting, talking, fucking, fighting, flipping, eating and doing nothing, but all trying to find some way to ‘make it’ with each other and together seek ways out of what they saw to be a common predicament – the horrors of contemporary existence’

*Dr Joseph Berke reflecting on the Dialectics of Liberation Conference* (Levy 2012:15)

The overall aim of the *Dialectics of Liberation* conference was to demystify the abusive, controlling use of violence within all institutions including the family, school, university, hospital, and factory. Unsurprisingly, the scope of the Hackney Museum’s planned event was far narrower in comparison and designed to answer a single question – “what would an Antiuniversity look like today?”

\textsuperscript{194} Alex was not present at the initial community forum session

\textsuperscript{195} Carmichael reclaimed an African name when he became a Pan Africanist and was later known as Kwame Ture

\textsuperscript{196} Ginsberg was also an associate member of the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA)
In recognition that such an event would require assistance\textsuperscript{197} to reorient consultation for negotiating with art-based communities, Emma and Oisín arranged for an alternative venue to host it. With the help of Shiri Shalmy, an independent curator and associate artist based at the Open School East (OSE), the team agreed for the event to occur there. The session would not be object based, but instead seek to draw upon the intangible heritage and knowledge of the communities existing within the Hackney Museum’s geographical boundaries (Watson 2007:3)

The OSE was a free, independent art school founded in 2013 and located at the Rose Lipman Building in Hackney’s De Beauvoir Town\textsuperscript{198}. There it served as a community space attached to a council estate for collective learning and creative practice. The site which was first constructed during the 1960-70s was initially the home to the Hackney Archives and Library. However, when the service was relocated to what was then, the new CLR James Library in Dalston, it became a local community centre.

Now working in partnership with the OSE through Shiri, the museum team continued to organise what they now described as a “Public Participatory Anti-Symposium” (OSE 2015b). However, as Oisín’s contribution became restricted to sharing research for the project, Emma Winch, Shiri Shalmy and Alex Brown cemented the formation of what would become the core organising team for the Anti-University project.

Collectively they constituted a formidable nexus of academic, managerial, and organising skills in the culture, heritage, and arts sector. Shiri had over ten years’ experience curating in art galleries and had joined the OSE in an experiment to discover whether she might become an artist herself\textsuperscript{199} (OSE 2015a). Alex, whose placement with the museum had finished, remained fully engaged with the project which aligned with his activist and academic interest in anarchism as a method to...
organise society. With the duo completed by Emma using her museological expertise and institutional resources, they set about attempting to measure public interest in recreating an experiment in radical education. By June 2015, the Antiuniversity organisers had sent out invitations for the Anti-Symposium.

‘Despite being short-lived and mostly shrouded in mystery, the Anti-University continues to capture the imagination of anyone interested in alternative education, self-organisation, non-hierarchical structures and radicalism. Was it a failure or a seminal cultural event? A ground breaking institution or an experiment gone wrong? Join us for an evening of food and conversation as we revisit the history of the Anti-University and discuss its relevance today.’

Promotional email from the Hackney Museum inviting public participation, 19th June 2015

Figure 7-1 A reprint of the 1967, Dialectics of Liberation poster
Anti-Symposium

The Public Participatory Anti-Symposium took place on a warm summers evening on 15 July. The event had been scheduled to begin at 7 pm but this ended up being delayed because of a continuous flow of extra people that had come to attend. Inside the main hall where the discussion was to take place there was an abundance of people present but not enough seats. As Emma, Shiri and Alex fervently prepared for the evening’s presentations, other members of the museum team supported them by catering for the unanticipated flow of extra participants.

At the back of the hall was a row of tables artistically covered with a green coloured newspaper and an assortment of drinks and plastic cups. On the walls were a variety of posters promoting the Anti-University concept, while others shared quotes from Roberta Elzney and the anarchist US actor Julian Beck who was critical of the existing system of higher education. As people waited for the proceedings to begin, they gathered in groups, sharing seats, with some newcomers opting to sit on the floor.

The session eventually started with introductions followed by short talks from supporting groups like Occupy UAL stating that “an alternative education is possible”. There were similar solidarity call outs before Oisín went on stage and gave his presentation on the history of the anti-psychiatry movement and the events leading up to the Anti-University of 1968.

Once he had finished, the team offered a free ‘Aniuni’ newspaper bundled in large stacks on a pallet to any attendees that wanted additional information. The tabloid’s monochrome pages were printed in either red, green, blue or brown ink and contained images of ephemera, interviews, photographs, official documents and notes donated from various archival sources and personal collections related to either the 1968 Anti-University or the Dialectics of Liberation Congress. The publication which  

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200 Roberta Elzney worked on the original 1968 Anti-University of London project
201 This was conveyed in part through Wall screening an assortment of clips showing events and interviews of key people involved in the countercultural movement of the 1960s.
Institutional Collaborations

had been put together by the visual artist, Jakob Jacobsen\textsuperscript{202} was based on his work as a researcher and associate at the Mayday Rooms\textsuperscript{203}.

This sharing of objects and ephemera as a bridge to form social relations with events tied through time was more than community outreach. In organising the Anti-Symposium and negotiating for a participatory approach extending beyond the museum’s walls, the museum team had facilitated a holistic form of democratising museology called ‘inreach’ (Corsane 2006:115-116). This is a process where members of communities that could be considered ideological or social ‘outcasts’ are encouraged to become active participants directing museum operations.

By the event’s midpoint, there were over a hundred people gathered. They were a diverse group of varying ages, ethnic backgrounds, and impairments with women outnumbering the men roughly two to one. They were a collection of artists, educators, independent gallery owners and people who having learned of the event from the museum, were interested in learning more about the ‘anti’ nature of education. Some worked within government and educational institutions, others were members of social movements or ran self-help organisations for subordinated social groups. However, despite the multitude of identities, interests, and needs, what seemed to link most in the room was and an interest in education and activism.

‘For Dewey, the pedagogic aspects of progressive education were necessarily linked with the social goals of progressivism… In order to engage in progressive educational practice, museum staff need to keep progressive social aims as well as pedagogic practices foremost in planning both exhibitions and programs.’ (Hein 2012:38)

The museum education theorist George E. Hein writing on the philosophy of the educational reformer and American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952)

The Proposal

The collective reflection of the Anti-Symposium participants on the 1968 Anti-University of London had created an atmosphere of much excitement. However, while there was broad consensus defining the failings of the higher education sector,

\textsuperscript{202} Jakobsen has been researching the free university movement for many years and set up set the Copenhagen Free University which ran from 2001-2007.

\textsuperscript{203} The Mayday Rooms is an educational charity promoting radical history and an ‘active repository’ for information and artefacts on social movements and various counter cultural histories.
competing interests amongst those gathered made their articulation of what to do about it less harmonious. Some of those present regarded capitalism or class-based oppression as the prime concern; others saw gender and ethnic discrimination as the priority problem. While exchanges between attendees were never anything but courteous, agreements on a single approach required compromise.

With the overtly political nature of relationships between museum and communities this was one of the benefits of congregating beyond their walls (Watson 2007:29). As a local authority museum, the cultural institution is often caught between its intention to act as ‘agents for social justice and the reality authorizing particular and often triumphant historical and cultural narratives’ (Golding 2013:7). In hosting the session at the OSE, the curators could yield the authority assigned to their local authority roles to better mediate tensions between the gathered community of activists.

To move the discussion forward, the Antiuniversity co-organisers used humour to direct the proceedings while expressing the opportunity consensus building would make available; “we’re not entirely sure how this project moves forward, but you’re going to help us and figure it out” (Brown 2019). The hall was divided into spaces for several groups of up to nine people each. Each were then invited to discuss ideas of what a contemporary Anti-University could look like. Their suggestions were then written down on several sheets of blank paper attached to the OSE walls.

Despite their overall discontent with the neo-liberalisation of the higher education sector, the attendees at the Anti-Symposium agreed that many of the topics advocated by the 1960s countercultural movement had been incorporated into the curricula of many universities. Their theories on the assimilation of radical thought by universities as a commodity were correct. Under various disciplines ranging from International Development to Anthropology, there is a healthy presence of courses addressing issues such as post-modernism, intersectionality, critical race theory and decoloniality. However, the participants suggested that the delivery of these offerings, still propagated Eurocentric doctrines that remain largely androcentric and heterocentric. Rather than engaging in critical pedagogy, such universities presented a
façade of tolerance by incorporating a diverse range of voices accompanied by a plurality of alternative theoretical approaches to be explored. There was almost unanimous agreement that on an institutional level, most educational institutions never adopted any of the radical proposals for change emerging from their own studies.

One by one, the individual ideas and comments posted on the wall by each of the groups were discussed. What the Anti-Symposium attendees proposed was that a contemporary Anti-University could model a cost-free educational system that would serve as the template of a new format for the university sector. One that drawing upon the critical pedagogical approaches existing outside the current system would simultaneously adapt or appropriate useful institutional resources from within. This suggestion calling for the coöptation of formal institutions was a recurring theme, although it initiated an unresolved debate over the risk that such collaborations would pose to the integrity of the project.

Although the “Public Participatory Anti-Symposium” was organised in partnership with the OSE, formally it remained a council meeting, or at the very least an informal council sponsored consultation event. Even if it were a consequential act, there were several advantages with the event organisers choosing not to use a site formally associated with the local authority. Besides having access to a larger space at no cost, the museum gained access to a new audience, a wider community, and a politically supportive space to generate and test radical participatory ideas. The symposium was not a gathering of publics or civil society in a form typical of most museums. It was predominantly a collection of counterpublics united by a shared vision of intersectional resistance to cultural hegemony in the form of radical education.

Within the walls of the OSE hall, the Hackney Museum team were physically freed to adopt any museological object-based presentation of culture into a discursive format designed to facilitate an openly critical encounter. In her exploration of responses by science museums to address politically charged narratives supportive of anti-science and anti-intellectualism, Macdonald highlights the potential of these
types of reflexive exhibitionary strategies, as a means for museums to promote public
debate about issues, rather than merely transmitting information in the form of facts

Here outside its local authority building located in the heart of Hackney
Central, next door to the Town Hall, the fledgling AU team and supporting staff from
Hackney Museum noted a core theme.

Most of those present at the Anti-Symposium wanted to build a home for a
community of cultural activists, artists, and educators. Their objective was to inspire
collective social action by creating, teaching and exhibiting countercultural
epistemological ideas. After learning that the 1968 Anti-University had offered low-
cost courses204 on topics such as “Guerrilla warfare”, “Black Power” and “Dragons” as an
alternative to the offerings from the mainstream education system which was free at
the time, the participants started work on a format through which a similar range of
classes addressing creative, cultural and socio-political topics could be delivered.

The Format
First, it was agreed that the new Anti-University project would be free to access for
both learner and educator. While the original Anti-University of London was self-
financed, to cover the rent and use of utilities on its campus, it charged dues for
tutors, a membership fee of £5 a quarter, an admittance fee of 10/- (shilling) although
it did offer scholarships to those who could not afford to pay. Moreover, similar to the
original Anti-University, where anyone was able to enrol irrespective of their
qualification, the new Antiuniversity would also not offer any certificate or
qualification at the end of any courses.

However, there was another major difference between the old and new project
being proposed. Whereas the faculty of the 1968 Anti-University included notable
academics, activists, artists, and practitioners, it was proposed that the new version
would also enable anyone to teach on any subject, in any form, for free.

204 As detailed in a ‘anti-tabloid’ that was distributed free to participants.
Institutional Collaborations

With the new model being premised on zero income, it was decided that the new Anti-University project would not be campus based to avoid having to pay rent for venues and subsequently be forced to charge fees to survive. Instead, it would take the format of a weekend-long festival of alternative-educational events hosted across the UK.

Although the traditional notion of festivals has a somewhat benign reputation, in East London, the festival has a history in the repertoire of communities campaigning for socio-political change. In seeking to explore whether “joy or beauty [could] be ways of protesting rather than everything being painful or angry all the time?” (Paskett 2017), Hackney Showroom art director Sam Curtis Lindsay co-launched a festival of cultural activism called “Joy & Dissent”. Here, performance art and comedy were envisioned as tools of radical protest. While, earlier in Butler’s (1996) study of the M11 link road protests that occurred in Leyton and Leytonstone during 1993-4, the festival was used as the main structure of dissent for protesters challenging the government decision to build a motorway that would demolish hundreds of residential homes. During the process, education was foregrounded as a tool of self-empowerment and the sharing of information using cultural symbols, in this case, a ‘festival of resistance’, served the role of providing counterpropaganda to neoliberal policies.

Reflecting on the potential use of satire as a weapon of resistance, the anthropologist and ethnohistorian Michael Harkin (2017) suggests activists without access to institutionalised power outside government must find new means to adapt their protest methods. He argues whilst some can use the authority invested in churches, universities, the judiciary, etc., others, can employ a ‘corrosive [, disruptive] discourse’ that utilises myth and ritual to deconstruct and delegitimise an existing social order through creative means (Lincoln 1989:4–11). The proposal for the new Antiuniversity was that through the festival format, it could and would enable the utilisation of similar creative and socially disruptive, pedagogical tactics.
Institutional Collaborations

Figure 7-3 - Eventbrite Ticket for AU Public Participatory Anti-Symposium

Figure 7-4 - The Public Participatory Anti Symposium to discuss The Anti University of East London (Source: AU)
AU Organising Culture

“We did a lot behind the scenes in putting together the programme and finding venues for events to take place, it was incredible (and still is) that Antiuni is taking place on no budget. In the beginning we didn’t really know what we were doing but it had this great DIY political feel of things like printing flyers off at work when no-one’s looking and then handing them out at demo’s or taking them to activist meetings.’ (Brown 2019)

The proposals made at the anti-symposium were not limited to shaping the format of the Anti-University alone. For its organisation, the group suggested using a method similar to that of the original Anti-University of London, and thus chose to adopt the anti-institutional type ideology found in revolutionary communes, kibbutzim, therapeutic communities, and various other radical social movements (Punch 1974:312). It was anticipated that anyone who signed on with the Anti-University project would then have access to the entire groups’ collective skills, connections, and resources to support and make the project work without money changing hands.

After the public participatory event, Emma, Shiri and Alex were taken by surprise when they received over sixty submissions to organise individual events. They had anticipated to receive around a dozen requests. However, the success of the Anti-Symposium in attracting potential educators for the project created a new problem. Organising a festive of this scale would require help but their call for volunteers to help run what was being referred to as the “Antiuniversity Now!” (AU) festival had been less fruitful. Although the local authority museum was using its resources to sustain the project, with its delivery of the public-participatory event they had successfully delivered on the requirements for Oisín’s CLASH project. This meant that there was no longer any funding for the project. This also left the Hackney Museum’s learning manger as the only AU co-organiser on a full salary.

“In practical terms the Antiuniversity is a loosely organised team [,]... an unconstituted, unfunded and unaffiliated organisation and we constantly collaborate with others.’ (Shalmy 2016)

Horizontal Authority

At this point, it may be useful to explain the internal terminology used by the core team to define the roles of those involved in organising events for the festival.

Although Emma, Shiri and Alex themselves, formed a mixture of institutional insiders and outsiders, they attempted to ensure that the festival volunteers were free from the
risk of coöptation. This they reasoned would banish the contemporary relationship between museums and communities as one of a paid professional exercising power over issues of representation and interpretation (Watson 2007).

In practice, this involved attempting to create a hierarchy free administrative system based on anarchist principles where responsibility and tasks was delegated through a process of consensus making. However, the reality, while resulting in a decentralised managerial system, still left authority resting with the core team.

The original Anti-University of London sought to break down the difference between ‘teacher’ and ‘student’. Likewise, the Antiuniversity Now offered something similar to its ‘Everyone’s a teacher, everyone’s a student’ mantra. Emma, Shiri and Alex who took the lead were defined as co-organisers with the intermittent support of a mixture of volunteering contributors privy to relevant organising decisions (Golding 2013).

The artist Kerri Jefferis is an example of an event organiser who became involved in the organising of the first festival. Jefferis had become interested in the Antiuniversity from its inception and although her participation as a co-organiser was short-lived, Brown (2019) remembers her as having made a contribution in various capacities to every subsequent festival and being ‘a really amazing energy around the project’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AU Festival Administrators</td>
<td>Co-organisers* (Internal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Organisers (People running events)</td>
<td>Organisers (External)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Attendees (Students/Audiences)</td>
<td>Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue Providers</td>
<td>Hosts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

205 The involvement of most from these groups was typically limited in duration, but they should be acknowledged nonetheless.

206 Absent from this table is a label for ‘volunteer-co-organisers’, defining those working closely alongside the core co-organisers.
As an unfunded project supported primarily through in-kind donations, the Antiuniversity’s co-organisers struggled to find an effective means to manage the festival. Their full-time jobs, families and other commitments made it crucial that they maintained flexibility with their assignment of tasks necessary to function effectively.

In her landmark book on the topic of mapping the terrain of organisational culture, Joanne Martin argues it is useful to consider them from three viewpoints to avoid missing any issues and analytical distortions that occur when using a singular view. Furthermore, for organisations involved in cultural change (1992:169–177) it is useful to consider the structures from a fragmentation perspective where the presence of persistent conflict between subcultures within them, prevents the formation of a stable consensus. That was not the dominant narrative here.

The next step is to evaluate the organisational culture from an integration perspective. This could reveal a leader-centred process resulting in small ideology centred formations, or alternatively large centralised organisations such as that present within the council and museum. In this guise, organisational members are restricted by top-down control but with the freedom to question and suggest creative strategy for cultural deviation.

The integration viewpoint would seem to be the most applicable lens for this study overall. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 which focused on the council and museum’s curatorial activism we can observe the way the local authority utilised culture to forward its agenda. Moreover, it would also apply to the organisational culture that delivered the CLASH project’s Public Participatory Anti-Symposium described earlier in this chapter.

However, such a perspective has limitations in the context of the decentralised Antiuniversity with its inclusion of countercultural co-organisers that operate outside institutional domains. Consequently, when attempting to define the organisational culture of the Antiuniversity, it is Martin’s final model depicting a differentiation perspective which offers the most useful focal viewpoint for analysis. Martin (2002:186) defines this perspective as occurring where teams of leaders with the secondary ability to influence change and emphasise collective action, adopt the form of either large
and/or decentralised organisations. In these instances, individual attempts at change are locked into subcultural identities.

The Antiuniversity may have aspired to be leaderless free and collaboratively managed around principles of self-help and mutual support, but despite the best efforts of the co-organisers, it was not. Emma, Shiri and Alex were its leaders. Batteau (2000:729) explains this phenomenon by asserting that to be organised always requires having a structure of authority, and despite this structure being either horizontal or vertical, it is always focused around an individual or a collection of peers. This is a fact; he argues that holds true even in organisations where power is said to be decentralised like the Antiuniversity. In which case, the way members of an organisation understand authority then depends on factors such as how they each perceive and respond to symbols of professionalism and technical ability. Especially when in the presence of charismatic leadership.

Portrait of a co-founder

With Emma working full time at the museum while working on Antiuniversity projects, Shiri took on the bulk of the day-to-day administrative tasks. Despite working in Hackney, Shiri lives close to Tufnell Park which lies on the border of Islington and Camden. Whenever organisation for the festival is done online, much of it occurred in her home.

Shiri attributes her organisational skill as originating from being raised in a *kibbutz* / קיבוץ (a gathering) with communist parents. She described her grandparents as pioneers who left everything they knew in Europe to work in a quarry and build a new home in the desert. Shiri’s first foray into activism came when after attending school in the city at six years old and observing her family become embroiled in political organising. Her grandfather, formerly an artist and Russian photographer who worked on establishing the Israeli Red Cross was imprisoned for

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207 A Jewish settlement where a community live in a cooperative manner, traditionally with an agricultural base.
harbouring weapons against the British army. Her mother, unhappy with the school allocated to her children, started a campaign for educational reform.

Shiri: ‘at the time there’s [no option to change school, there’s] only state school, no private school, you can’t say ok I don’t like this one [so I’m leaving to go over there] it’s just one system and they realise the only way to make a change is to actually change the system, so what started from my mum wanted my school experience to be a bit nicer turned into a massive national campaign - and they won.’

As a result, throughout her school life, the young Shiri had been involved in stuffing envelopes and helping with the general administration for her mother who ‘had a full-time job, two children and a revolution’ to manage. Eventually, they were given a failing school that was about to be closed. Shiri states that her mother then restarted it using her own pedagogical approach and it served as a model to the state for the system they were advocating. The campaign had taught Shiri a vital lesson - changing the system is possible, it takes time, and it is not glamorous.

Where it was Shiri’s experience with her mother that would give her a first-hand experience of activism, it was her father’s sacrifice that would teach her the power and risks involved with art and culture. Alongside learning about the practicalities of activism of her mother, Shiri was also learned first-hand about the
risks involved whenever culture encroached into the realm of politics. Her father who worked in the cultural sector and hosted exhibitions that lay somewhere in-between art and activism remains on a blacklist for degenerate cultural figures.

Today, her parents still live in Israel, their age now a barrier to them leaving and starting again elsewhere. Since arriving in London, Shiri has spent most of her adult life working in the art sector for some “amazing artists doing incredible work, conceptual art, cerebral, socially-minded but with zero political impact”.

In her home she has a variety of signs ranging from a poster featuring Lesley Rankine’s famous “Hips Tits Lips Power” lyrics\(^{208}\) from the indie rock band Silverfish and an Education Activist Network flyer demanding “Education for the 99% - strike and occupy”. However, one of the most striking images in her room where the Antiuniversity work is carried out are a couple of red A2 sized placards with the words “Angry Artist” written on them. These were made by her friend, Jon Hoskins for the Anti-Austerity #J20 Demo they attended in 2015.

Shiri: ‘we went as artists, we reused them at the first Sotheby’s action – working with cleaners who were being paid shit money, [solidarity] was important we are all cultural workers.’

As an art professional Shiri has chosen never to engage with the commercial side of selling or buying art and is exclusively engaged with public commissions curating and making sure artists get paid for their work. She describes the experience of making exhibitions as an amazing opportunity that has enabled her to engage in some exciting and fulfilling projects. However, as time has passed, Shiri has started to regard the privileged audiences, institutions, and even certain artists that she was curating for, as part of a wider, societal problem. It has led to her inner conflict where, despite enjoying the privilege of being able to make ‘beautiful things’, she now believes that the huge cuts to funding for educational and cultural institutions is causing the systematic exploitation of artists and cultural workers as unpaid volunteers.

‘[O]nly the wealthy can now enter the arts. Cultural institutions are becoming safe playgrounds for the privileged. The art sector is experiencing a campaign of social cleansing which will take it back

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\(^{208}\) The words “hips, tits, lips, power” originally appeared in the Silverfish’s single *Big Bad Baby Pig Squeal*
Shiri still works in the sector feeling forced to do freelance work for as few months within each year as possible. This she laments as being necessary for her to be able to finance her living expenses which includes raising her son. However, in deciding it is a sector where she does not belong, she also became an organising member of the workers union - *United Voices of the World*. Alongside her Antiuniversity obligations, she attended various protests, rallies and occupations including the Sisters Uncut ‘amazing #directaction’ demonstration and occupation of Hackney Town Hall in 2016.

Shiri’s activist profile and physical presence at offline meetings often sees her recognised as the official spokesperson for the AU project. It is a position that makes her uncomfortable as she worries about being perceived as being “a boss”. She is insistent that the Antiuniversity must speak with different voices and wants to ensure the co-organisers are not arranged in a hierarchy.

Shiri: ‘We never ever sit together, Emma and me and whoever’s working with us at the time and discuss Marxism or anarchism or anything... we never discuss anything that’s not practical, it’s not about my political views even though it’s in everything that we do, it’s just about doing.’

It is a position she reasserts during her presentations, such as the one she delivered at the William Morris gallery where invoking a famous slogan from the May 1968 protests in France - “*Sous les pavés, la plage!*” (Under the cobblestones, the beach!). She suggests to the twenty-plus seated people gathered listening to hear her speak, that beneath the ubiquitous presence of a capitalist higher education system, lay a body of scholars clamouring for freedom.

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209 Coined by student-activist Bernard Cousin and Bernard Fritsch
Figure 7-9 Shiri reflecting on her time in the art industry

Figure 7-7 A slide from Shiri’s presentation at WM Gallery, 2017

**The Antiuniversity is:**
- Autonomous
- Non-hierarchical
- Self-organised
- Decentralised
- Free

**It is based on:**
- Cooperation
- Direct action
- Mutual support
- Common ownership
- Voluntary association
Asynchronous Decentralisation

“While everyone worked under the Antiuniversity Now banner, most people didn’t know each other and we, the three co-organisers, never met most of the hosts. In fact, we never imagined that so many people would even hear about our project, nevermind put all that time and effort into planning so many events.’ (Shalmy 2016)

The Antiuniversity website was the central hub for all those involved in the project. To start the process, the team sent out emails and social media alerts inviting people to host an event within an eight-week timeframe. As the events were not curated, each submission was vetted to ensure they complied with the published AU principles of doing no harm. Once the submission deadline was reached, the team started working through the proposed events, which included locating spaces for those sessions without venues, and on occasion arranging workshops on event facilitation skills for those seeking teaching experience.

Overall, coordination of the festival required engaging in a relentless series of administrative tasks over an intense twelve-week window. This included the incessant, systematic marketing of the individual events on several London and national listing websites as well as promoting the festival by engaging in press interviews, the writing of articles and distribution of leaflets at events and venues with audiences likely to be interested. The AU organising team also needed to be able to easily collaborate on tasks such as updating the website and spreadsheets used to organise access to spaces between venue providers and event organisers.

To manage this workload, the team needed the means to be in frequent, but discreet communication at all times. Emma’s primary responsibility of managing the Hackney Museum’s learning activities and consultations placed an additional challenge to the process. Her workload included attending many council and community meetings followed by intense bursts of administration, tours and consultation sessions. This often meant that the best time she had to work on Antiuniversity matters was while in transit. Like Shiri, Emma was not a Hackney resident and commuted to the borough from her home in Colchester every morning by train.
With their mobile phones capable of enabling them to frequently and discreetly communicate on AU related issues, technology would provide the answer. Most of the communication between the team occurred via Facebook (FB) Messenger and was livened up with the humorous use of cheesy Power Rangers’ stickers to emote. The team had already registered its Antiuniversity page on Facebook under the pseudonym of Juliet Mitchell, one of the Anti-University of London’s founding Ad-Hoc committee members.

This had many advantages. In the study of the hacktivist group Anonymous, the anthropologist Gabriella Coleman (2014), notes the effectiveness of online tools in her study. While the Antiuniversity lost some of the privacy that the infamous ‘Misfits of Activism’ gained by utilising the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) system, there were other benefits. Like IRC, FB messenger service is a free communication tool and offers a level of real time functionality that provides for immediate group and individual responses. However, as a platform the messenger service is far easier to setup than IRC, richer in content and provides direct access to Facebook’s inbuilt networking and online marketing features.

Through the language of, emoticons, text speak, hashtags, avatars, and emojis expressing emotions, concepts, and ideas the Antiuniversity co-organisers utilised synchronous, but largely asynchronous forms of communication to get their work done. Although, despite the use of an informal platform for decision making, admin status shared with all members of the group and a decentralised approach adopted the AU co-organising group failed its aspiration of becoming free of a hierarchy. For as with all organisations, an examination of the role of influence and deferential treatment occurring during communications and negotiations revealed the presence of structured authority even when subtle (Batteau 2000:729).
Figure 7-11 - AU co-organiser meeting locations (online and offline)
The 2017 Festival

“It’s been a tough few years to be working in a local authority museum and archive, but being part of this unwieldy, risky, exciting venture has been a fantastic opportunity for the museum. We’ve tested new ways of working with reduced budgets, built new bridges with artistic communities and spaces in Hackney, expanded our networks, provided an open and inclusive platform for people to teach and learn where fees and academic hierarchy might previously have been a barrier, and challenged preconceptions about the role and potential of small community museums as we grow more innovative, risk taking and radical in our approach to organising.”

*Antiuiversity Now Co-founder, Emma Winch*²¹⁰ (Svinning 2016)

The Schedule

The schedule of work for the 2017 festival was decided early by the AU team. The callout for event ideas would start on 19th February with the deadline for submissions set for the 15th April. The next four weeks would then be utilised organising and uploading the event details to the central Antiuniversity website. In the past, this had been a laborious task involving the manually transferring of data from the submitted applications onto the website. Fortunately, this year saw a friend of the project redevelop the back-office element of the AU site enabling the process to be semi-automated. The festival programme would go live on 2 May giving the team a further six weeks for promotion for a launch on the 10th June. The festival would then conclude on the 16th.

By the time the submission window had closed, the number of valid entries for the festival had reached a total of 127. This was more than double the original amount of events at the 2015 launch. For an unfunded project without any tangible assets other than a small team of unpaid, dedicated volunteers, this offered a substantial logistical challenge. To solve this, it was decided that instead of trying to host all the events over 3-4 days as in the past, the 2017 Antiuniversity would become a weeklong festival.

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²¹⁰ Emma is speaking to the London Museum Group, a peer to peer network that supports museum workers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of Events</th>
<th>Event Locations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sat 10 June</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>South East (Lewes, Margate, Essex)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>North (Newcastle upon Tyne)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>South West (Bristol)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun 11 June</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>North (Liverpool)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>South East (Margate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon 12 June</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>South West (Devon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tue 13 June</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>South West (Cornwall)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wed 14 June</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thu 15 June</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fri 16 June</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>South East (Margate)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While on the face of it, this was a logical solution, it was also one that would generate extra work and cause considerable stress for the core team. Since its inception in 2015, the main co-organisers had also been the Antiuniversity’s co-founders - Emma, Shiri and Alex. Although Hackney Museum provided support for the festival with staff helping to run and promote aspects of the festival, by this stage, the initial funds that had accompanied the initial project were spent and Oisín’s contribution was limited to that of an informal, advisory partner. Likewise, despite Emma’s continued involvement as a co-organiser, the museum’s official role in the Antiuniversity gradually become less official. Instead of leading on major AU events, it became limited to hosting and enabling access to free spaces for a small number of events each year.

Co-Organisers

In 2017, Alex chose to leave the AU organising team. With the annual growth in interest about the project, managing the festival had slowly become a six to ten month process. His leaving was a blow for the team and without the addition of new co-organisers, the project faced an existential crisis.

‘I stopped because it was quite a full-on endeavour, a mix of changing jobs and having to work more hours, combined with the way we organised via Facebook messenger led me to not have the time for it any more. It was a really hard decision to quit.’ (Brown 2019)
Using their respective networks, Emma and Shiri made public the Antiuniversity’s urgent need for additional help and within a short time, the positions were occupied with new members, Liv Wynter and Elanor Smith. Both were a good fit for the team, Wynter was an artist currently working with Project Indigo at Hackney Museum, she had held an artist’s residency at The Royal Standard Gallery & Studios in Liverpool and most recently the Tate. Smith was a member of the anti-capitalist activist collective, Feminist Fightback, housed at Common House (2013) in east London.

Common House had been a supportive host of many previous Antiuniversity events. The subsequent joining of these two now meant that the administrative burden could at least, in theory, be shared. In addition, after speaking with Emma and Shiri over a lunchtime meeting at the Black Cat, a co-operative Vegan café based in Hackney, it was decided I would split my time between the museum and the Antiuni as a researcher and become more like what felt a co-organiser-lite. This in its short history, was the largest size the inner AU group had ever been.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year / Co-Organisers</th>
<th>Event Submissions</th>
<th>Festival Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015 Shiri, Emma, Alex</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3 Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 Shiri, Emma, Alex</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>4 Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017 Shiri, Emma, Liv, Eleanor</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>7 Days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was a crucial development, for a significant part of organising the festival involves each co-organiser selecting events to manage from those submitted. That person then becomes the official AU contact for the associated event organiser when it comes to arranging venues, marketing, ticketing and updating the Antiuniversity.

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211 When speaking with the independent artist network blog a.n, Wynter describes herself as a “queer, working-class artist working and living in South London”. She resigned as the Tate’s artist in residence in protest over the failure of arts institutions to fully support women, especially those facing sexual harassment.

212 Common House is a collectively managed space setup in 2013 to facilitate ‘radical groups, projects and community events’.

213 In 2019 the Antiuniversity co-organising team almost quadruples in size as it becomes an assembly
website with the relevant details. Of the 127 events, 107 needed the team to laboriously attempt to match the pool of venue capacities with expected audiences.

During this process, Wynter resigned as a co-ordinator effectively leaving Shiri to work on over 75% of all the events. This required her to contact each organiser and arrange a meet up so they could visit the space and host they would be working with. This was done to ensure the organisers felt comfortable and confident about using their venues during the festival, as well as explaining the basic housekeeping rules that were specific to each location.

With some event organisers Shiri also took on a pastoral role and alongside Emma they found themselves having to reassure and sometimes facilitate the training of organisers who had doubts about their capabilities to deliver. Nevertheless, despite the stress of managing over a hundred events, Shiri worked, quietly, efficiently with a skill honed by years of experience producing art exhibitions. Seeing the task primarily as a production job she explained; ‘I’ve been doing it professionally for so many years so I can just do it.’

Assigning sites

“Antiuniversity Now has more of a status of its own... Much of this has to do with attitudes to where someone learns and how they approach the experience of learning. We have events happening that universities couldn’t even dream of, held in public spaces like Hackney Museum and Archives and in cafés, parks, pubs, libraries and artist spaces. And because the festival isn’t curated a festival goer could go from attending a practical workshop on Black Power to a discussion in a mobile sauna...”

Antiuniversity Now Co-founder, Emma Winch (Svinning 2016)

The 2017 Antiuniversity Now events were held all over the UK. Sessions took place in Dublin, Southend, Bristol, Liverpool, Margate, Newcastle but mainly London. The classes occurred in a variety of informal locations and formats, including several walks, and sites of cultural relevance. In the quote above, Emma suggested that the sites of educational engagement tended to have an impact on how learning took place.

Whereas Shiri’s connections with cultural activists made public spaces for critical artistic practices available to the festival, the inclusion of the Hackney Museum in Antiuniversity led to its expertise in site-specific curating as well as its institutional
relationships within the borough, literally opening Council and Council affiliated doors.

Dividing the Antiuniversity ‘campuses’ into one of four categories reveals that the most significant number of sessions occurred at independent art and performance-based venues (13). This was followed by spaces dedicated to informal education or community projects (10), then heritage and ‘formal’ cultural institutions (8) like museums, galleries and universities, followed lastly and equally by public and open spaces (8) like parks and pubs.

The themes were equally diverse. From 1968-1971\textsuperscript{214}, the Anti-University of London emerged to offer low cost ‘anti’ education for all able to afford it. With its interdisciplinary offerings that rejected doctrinal rigidity, many of the courses at the anti-university utilised critical reflection as an educative practice to ensure that there was ‘no teaching without learning’ (Freire 1998:9–12). The focus of the 2017 courses, did not all profess to be anti-institutional, but instead, a mixture of “how-to”, “did-you-know”, “self-help” and “live-life” classes freed from existing academic restraints in theory and liberated from bureaucracy in practice.

Within the Museum itself, Ioanna Korfiati of the Xenia project repeated the 2016, Antiuniversity workshop ran by Theo Cadbury and provided a session where migrant and refugee women could have informal conversations with native English speakers to assist their language use. The Xena session in particular became a regular part of the museum’s formal activities. Following its success at during initial Antiuniversity sessions the local authority brought it in-house where institutional resources were allocated with support from Hackney Council and various local organisations to cover the cost of a host and space to provide monthly, then fortnightly workshops in 2017.

\textsuperscript{214} The Anti-University of 1968 started first with a central base in East London and later in a decentralised form in various private and communal spaces.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heritage/Institutions (unofficial)</th>
<th>Art/Performance</th>
<th>Outside/Public spaces</th>
<th>Informal/ Alternative / Community/Charity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hackney Museum</td>
<td>Open School East</td>
<td>Waterlow Park Centre</td>
<td>Furtherfield Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hackney Archives</td>
<td>Red Gallery</td>
<td>Dragon Cafe</td>
<td>Deptford X</td>
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<tr>
<td>St Augustine’s Tower</td>
<td>DOOMED gallery</td>
<td>Speakers Corner</td>
<td>3Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King’s College London</td>
<td>Arcola Theatre</td>
<td>Hampstead Heath</td>
<td>Rabbits Road Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London College of Communication</td>
<td>ExFed Theatre</td>
<td>Furtherfield Commons</td>
<td>Varosi</td>
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<tr>
<td>V&amp;A*</td>
<td>Five Years gallery</td>
<td>Clissold Leisure Centre</td>
<td>Grow Elephant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Barbican*</td>
<td>Dissenters’ gallery</td>
<td>Amersham Arms (Pub)</td>
<td>New River Studios</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tate Britain*</td>
<td>E5Process</td>
<td>The Greenwich Pensioner (Pub)</td>
<td>Common House</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SET SPACE</td>
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<td>MayDay Rooms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rosina Studio</td>
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<td>Conway Hall</td>
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<td>Camden People’s Theatre</td>
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<td>Rabbits Road Institute</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The White Building</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
What had begun as a museum and university sponsored festival collaboratively led by artists, curators, academics, public intellectuals and activists had manifested a bona fide, autonomous, anarchist platform of learning where the prioritisation of ethics over a lack of coherence and aestheticism was *not* discouraged. Moreover, in utilising art and culture to subvert the bureaucracies of public institutions like museums, galleries and universities, which Trocchi (1963) argues mesh with and mirror the bureaucracy of the state, the Antiuniversity festival, itself as an act of curatorial activism moved from practice to praxis.

**Participation**

Overall, the 2017 Antiuniversity hosted over one hundred events across the UK collectively offering a diverse range of activities under the festivals countercultural ideological umbrella. Attendance figures for individual events across the festival varied averaging between ten to fifty people each. In many ways it is useful to conceptualise the event participants not as an audience but as an un-constituted social movement of cultural activists and their supporters primarily situated in Hackney.

Alongside the festival’s regular mix of attendees which included event organisers from these various activist communities of practice and their networks,
participants included museum goers, host venue users and interested bystanders where events occurred in open public spaces.

What started as a project led by two institutions, the Hackney Museum and University College London, had avoided the process of co-optation that relies on the absorption of radical elements threatening anti-hegemonic change. The Antiuniversity Now! project had not only escaped any possible cultural confinement by the local authority obligations of the museum but was now a de-institutionalised, countercultural, non-hierarchical model of what I term - *Exhibitionary Praxis* - the results of a process where the sharing of authority through insider/outsider collaborations enable a critical curatorial practice that displays heterodox and radical theories of cultural transformation in practical, non museological forms.

Subsequently, the composition of AU participants was inclusive of a roaming pool of Antiuniversity event organisers. These participants offered active forms of intersectional solidarity by organising support and cooperation with other and “othered” event organisers (Einwohner et al. 2019). Instead of coalition building being their main organising tool, they attempted to use intersectional praxis. Participation for some was thus, also a means to counter the internal exclusions and marginalisation present in radical collective processes (Crenshaw 1991:1264).
The Photo Essay

The images that follow were taken from the documentary footage filmed for this research project. They represent under a quarter of all the sessions occurring in the 2017 Antiuniversity festival. I did consider this photo essay as an appendix item as it does not reveal new display technologies and techniques, it does not investigate the impact upon the people of Hackney or illustrate the social lives of those involved. However, it does include acts of curatorial activism and institutional critique while providing a snapshot of Hackney’s inter-class, multi-ethnic, cooperative community of activist practice, empowered by the local authority museum’s acts of institutional activism.

To that effect, the accompanying labels and/or short explanatory texts that offer an interpretation of what is depicted are provided to share how the self-help teaching styles utilised a mixture of the experimental, anti-institutionalist, performative and critical pedagogical practices of the Anti-University of London from 1968. As a form of representational production, it is hoped these images of Exhibitionary Praxis and their captions resist simple classification as either people portraits or environmental landscapes. Instead, they are offered here as visual testimony of individuals, groups and spaces embodying the Antiuniversity experience through their examples of teaching and learning utilised as a form of direct action.

Figure 7-14 Of the Festival’s 106 events across the UK, a third were held in Hackney (Google – My Maps)
Preparation

Although the Antiuniversity co-founders, Emma and Shiri both live outside the borough, Hackney is the central hub for all of the Antiuniversity organising. Other than for the festival and meetings with co-organisers, both rarely met up in-person and worked mostly online. When they did meet, to sit down to talk, it was usually at a café nearby the museum.

Figure 7-20 AU Co-founder Emma restarts smoking as a result of stress from workload

Figure 7-29 An event organiser discussing their session needs with host of the MayDay Rooms
For the festival events that occurred outside Hackney, Shiri would usually arrange to meet with the co-organiser at the venue. There discussions over access, equipment and capacity were agreed. In most instances, these site visits would be the only formal meeting between the event organisers and the AU organisers other than during the festival and any AU social gatherings.

Figure 7-41 Checking the state of printers for a DIY publishing workshop

Figure 7-36 Two event organisers visiting a site in Shoreditch
The meetings with event organisers were usually cordial, although there were a few instances where political differences threatened to create disharmony. As a cultural bonding ritual, the Antiuniversity team annually invited event organisers to meet for a social gathering. There amidst the “party”, members of the Antiuniversity family were able to reconnect or make new links with new event organisers.

Figure 7.47 - Disagreement with venue host over AU politics during site visit

Figure 7.52 Before the 201 festival several AU event organisers gathered socially to perform, dance, drink, and debate culture, activism and politics at a nitespot in Stoke Newington.
Opening

In 2017, the festival started on a Saturday morning. Scattered across the borough were discreet signs leading to AU events attached to various doors and windows. Despite the anti-institutional roots of the festival, its very first sessions were hosted in venues linked to the local authority.

Figure 7-70 A oral history tutorial was hosted at St Augustine’s Tower, the oldest building in Hackney

Figure 7-61 An AU flyer on 13th Century door marks the way to early morning session
Alongside the Xenia session that took place within the Museum itself, another organised by Josie, a Hackney Museum team member was a session designed to teach participants how to collect the oral histories of older women in their families.

Figure 7-79 Hackney Museum worker Josie co-leads informal training session in the “Suck Eggs” event

Figure 7-88 Event attendees practise interviewing techniques from the top of the tower
In Dalston, the *Doomed Gallery* hosted *Rethinking Administration: Subversion, Automation and Care*. This self-help session which inculcated therapeutic techniques was run by a group of professional administrators called the Critical Administrators. Participants learned how to challenge the abuse of bureaucratic power and practices where they worked that “dehumanised” people. Together they devised concepts for creating Anti-Administrators.

Figure 7-104 *Doomed Gallery* is located in the heart of Ridley Road Market, Dalston

Figure 7-97 A group of professional administrators work on ideas of how to be a positive, disruptive force within organisations and institutions
Healing was a theme repeated throughout the festival. Located within the rehearsal room of Arcola Theatre, Sue MacAlpine, a former Hackney Museum curator hosted a session called *The Healing Sounds* utilising a mixture of Chi Kung (Chinese for ‘working with the life energy’, meditation and discussion to help address harmful emotional imbalances within participants. While at Common House there was a popular workshop on the health benefits of marijuana.

Figure 7-116 This meditation practice incorporates the six healing sounds of the Tao

Figure 7-113 In “The Blunt Truth about Cannabis” workshop the event organiser shares the origins and medicinal benefits of marijuana.
The innovative use of technology by event organisers also meant there were several radio programs broadcast as events. This enabled people with impairments to participate in spaces that could be physically inaccessible. Solace SG, a patient-led sickle cell and thalassemia support group for Hackney and City, presented an interactive educational session on how to live well with the condition. Although the event was mostly peer-to-peer, by broadcasting it as a live radio stream it also catered for those outside the group with interest in the topic.

Figure 7-121 Members of the Solace SG group use an NHS office space in Dalston to offer support and encouragement to Hackney’s sickle cell community through a self-broadcasted radio programme
In the White Building, a creative laboratory for artists, situated alongside the Lea Navigation canal was a book launch called *Worshiping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation*. During this session the author engaged in ‘grassroots scholarship, taking the study of the State out of academic institutions and into the streets’.


Figure 7-127 - The White building, a former sweet factory and now artist hub

Figure 7-129 - Author Peter Gelderloos shares anarchist theories on the formation of states.
Participants
Despite the presence of event organisers from different ethnic backgrounds, a large number of the events were drawn from a mostly ideologically homogenous Antiuniversity pool of festivalgoers from across the years. While several did engage in sessions based on accessibility and proximity, most participants were drawn to events by their specialist interests, affiliation with the host site being used, familiarity with the event organisers or AU organisers offering active, intersectional solidarity.

Figure 7-139 Music and history consultant, Kwaku marks the ‘30th anniversary of the introduction of Black (now known as African) History Month in Britain’.

Figure 7-130 The use of storytelling bridged cultural and religious differences between an intergenerational group.
Praxis

The festivals advocacy of subversive strategies to promote political messages also invoked the spirit of the 1960s student protests with the presence of Rent Strike. This is a national working group that works to spread the use of rent striking as a tactic to campaign for affordable rents for students in university accommodation. Another workshop taught the art of ‘subvertising’, the hijacking of commercial advertising space in public spaces.

Figure 7-148 The sale of Ad Space Hack tools were accompanied by a practical demonstration on how to use them.

Figure 7-149 In Rent Strike, AU organisers use a creative mix of applied improvisation, art and free vegan crisps as the backdrop for the event.
Outside Hackney

While the origin, organisation and administration of the Antiuniversity is Hackney centred, because of the festival's exponential growth since its revival, the annual project has developed into a national project with many events taking place outside the borough. Key sites, like the Grade II listed Conway Hall\textsuperscript{216}, were large enough to host multiple events simultaneously. Its rooms were configured in a way where the modern, blank sheen of the rooms facilitated modes of communication that followed the university lecture format. The venue hosted several events including an introduction to anarchist-communism, climate change and celebrity studies.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure7-158.jpg}
\caption{Using Conway Hall in West London requires the AU team to engage in bureaucratic form filling although the space is generously donated free of charge in support of its anti-institutional activities.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{216} The ethical society's Conway Hall supports radical thought and critical pedagogy.
Dr. Jimmy O’Keefe delivers a lecture on the dangers of climate change.

Anarchist history, philosophy and theory provides backdrop for an animated discussion on politics.
Figure 7.185 A group of attendees come together to discuss the lives of popular celebrities that they have researched in small groups.

Figure 7.192 The “Star and Celebrity Studies” event opens with a presentation promoting critical thinking on the topic of ‘stardom’ through the use of academic and non-academic texts and videos.
Alongside institutions that wilfully made their space available for the Antiuniversity, were some that event organisers informally co-opted into the festival through the use of tours. Most offered an alternative perspective on the histories of the landscapes they traversed. However, there were some like the *Uncomfortable Art Tours* held at Tate Britain that used one-hour tours to highlight the role of colonialism in shaping and funding the collections.

Figure 7-210 Tate Britain is utilised by the Antiuniversity tour as a site for unlearning and institutional critique.

Figure 7-201 AU host, Alice Procter assumes the role of ‘The Exhibitionist’ to provide a post-colonial narrative.
This use of art to conceptualise ideas and cultural activism was a significant theme across the festival. In the *Intersections of Art, Protest and Law* session a collection of artists, lawyers and agitators shared poetry alongside utilising items like Lego bricks in search for innovative solutions to legal issues.

![Figure 7-220](image)

Figure 7-220 An AU group attempt to eradicate the barriers between art and law to find new ways to discuss legal problems.

![Figure 7-219](image)

Figure 7-219 In the 45 minute, Mutabili Numerus (OOO) session, six dancers reflect on the French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze ideas of repetition and difference.
Closing

One of the last Antiuniversity session in 2017 was the *Education for Emancipation: Stories of Intellectual Liberation*. The event which took place on the closing day of the festival was based around a discussion of philosopher Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. This session spoke directly to the objectives of the festival. That is, of conceiving a theory of liberatory education that can sidestep institutions for direct use by communities within society. After seven days and over one hundred events, the public element of the 2017 Antiuniversity Now festival came to a formal close.

Figure 7-226 One of the festivals final sessions takes place at The Stone of Free Speech in Hampstead Heath park.
Figure 7-227 A graphical index of all the Antiuniversity events scheduled to take place in 2017
(Courtesy of www.aniumiversity.org)
Chapter 8 Conclusion

The Gentrification of Protest?

In his 1989 interview, John R. Kinard, the first director of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum\textsuperscript{217} prophetically said:

’My vision is that the Smithsonian Institution ought to take the lead in developing a national African American museum on the Mall. This is a critical thing. This is a life and death thing. Why do people shoot each other in the head, man? Because they don’t have respect for human life. Because they don’t have a respect for history that they can know and understand. They don’t share a knowledge of history of America for themselves.’ (Smith 1989)

It would take another twenty-seven years before the National Museum of African American History and Culture; a Smithsonian Institution opened its doors in Washington during September 2016 with a ceremony led by President Barack Obama. The ongoing critique and increased institutionalisation of participatory methodologies and community engagement within museum practices has enabled museum practitioners to realise there were unnoticed needs of its publics that it should be paying closer attention to. Kinard was a supporter of this revolutionary museological shift. He believed that museums had a key role in ensuring local people had a record of their history if they were to escape centuries of institutionalised socio-political disadvantage.

When I started this project in 2016, my intention was to investigate how an intersection of gentrification, protest and institutionalised forms of cultural activism facilitated by the Hackney Museum had resulted in forms of countercultural production servicing social justice aims. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 we see the local authority museum utilising progressive museological practices such as curatorial activism and institutional critique. Whereas in Chapter 7 its socially inclusive approach to community engagement was designed to go beyond matters of representation. There is no explicit chapter on “audiences” as the museum’s participants are the communities in Chapter 3. Instead these publics and counterpublics engage in collaborative pacts using the museums curatorial,

\textsuperscript{217} Founded by the Smithsonian Institution in 1967
consultation and pedagogical services. Collectively they open the operational reach of the Council’s cultural institution beyond its museum walls.

To analyse this progressive form of municipal social action I first examined the existing research on institutional and governmental activism (Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2017) in Chapter 2. In each case the concept had the following characteristics; 1) It was framed through various political lens such as neo-institutionalism; 2) It focused on the involvement of social movement organisations (SMO) and ; 3) The object of any resulting campaign was a protest against aspects of the national government’s domination of economic, cultural and social life.

These traits posed a problem for my research. In privileging the relationship between governing institutions and civil society, such theories risked obscuring the existence of contested minority perspectives. In my field site, issues surrounding conflict over processes of gentrification were perceived as much a cultural matter as they were political. In Hackney, it is both local and central government that are perceived by communities as responsible for acts of malfeasance driving anti-gentrification protests.

Yet, despite the relevance of locality in these matters, much of the existing literature that define governmental and curatorial activism typically focus on national issues and the role of national cultural institutions. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the exhibition and collaborative projects discussed in Chapter 6 the Hackney Museum, like many other local authority cultural institutions has strayed from this paradigm.

Instead, the museum had sought to reject, or at least minimise a form of governmental faddism. I use this term to define a behaviour where various individual, organisational or governmental actors follow popular social justice orientated protest trends in pursuit of quick solutions, social capital and/or influence with the public or an electorate. We saw a minor example of this in Chapter 4 with the

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218 I use the term civil society as it is likely where most of the analysed SMO actors that engaged in political mobilisation and self-organisation originated from.

219 To be specific, short term (approx. 3-9 months), high profile activist projects that secure mass participation, radical rhetoric, but few outcomes leading to sustained structural change to systems of social injustice.
council’s cultural appropriation of the US parklet scheme and the mayor temporarily joining the picket line. Instead, the museum has stayed resolutely committed to engaging in a form of cultural activism that agitates on a perpetual basis for progressive forms of social transformation in the borough (Bilgrami 2017).

Outside its rolling exhibitory outputs and workshops for schools and various publics, this also includes delivering Continuing Professional Development to council staff as part of their induction. Moreover, it includes the facilitation of discussions with local authority colleagues to identify community supported, inter-departmental strategies capable of addressing long-term social challenges (Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2016).

It is not unusual for state-funded cultural institutions to render their engagement with activist causes as a problem of endogeneity. Yet, in museum studies where there has been an increase in projects premised on themes linked to the principles and practices of decolonising there has been an introduction of the use of concepts like ‘state sponsored museum activist’ to describe cultural practitioners (Wajid and Minott 2019:26).

Such forms of practice between governmental actors and cultural activists rely on an inversion of Selznick’s concept of formal coöptation (1980:259–261). Instead of the enabling institutions seeking to nullify recalcitrant grassroots objectives, salaried insiders facilitate the sharing of their power with community outsiders. Selznick’s refers to this process designed to manage opposition in order to preserve stability of an organisation as ‘informal coöptation’. A process that can lead to progressive outcomes, which is the opposite of what often ends up happening in larger, state sponsored museums.

I have previously observed this behaviour with various independent and smaller museums across the UK. However, in these instances, most were established and managed by local volunteers and stakeholders in community affairs and not powerful institutions. The difference with them and the Hackney Museum is that it is

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220 Typically, ecomuseums and micromuseums
a council institution where the “state sponsored” staff remain committed to local affairs despite some of them residing outside the borough they work in.

As a mixture of primary and secondary stakeholders their social inclusion and democratic participatory efforts facilitates the bridging of social capital for the communities they serve. This is crucial for whenever any process of gentrification occurs, it inevitably attracts new residents, workers, visitors and activists with varying levels of cultural capital and political agency into pre-existing social spheres. By the museum actively mapping the changing boundaries that identify which newcomer identities and activities are being classified by key stakeholders as socially and culturally legitimate, they are better able to highlight new opportunities for socially vulnerable or marginalised people to exert collective control of what happens in their own lives and communities.

Exploring Hackney from the institutional vantage point of both the council and its museum revealed an inconvenient and opaque truth for advocates of “mixed communities” strategies as a panacea for eradicating poverty. In the young, inter-class, multi-ethnic Hackney, gentrification includes a process of cultural colonisation widely perceived as pummelling the area compliant to host a mixture of bohemian, bourgeois lifestyles. It is a process that is altering and then fracturing the neighbourhood’s historical identity built on class and ethnic solidarity.

Gentrification is no longer just a phenomenon of residential displacement (Glass 1964). It is now perceived as a forceful replacement of cultural and social capital across the borough that was long fought for. This aspect of the process signals to many within the local activist community that politically, and ideologically, the Council is no longer onside. It is at this point it may be useful to reiterate that while this project has occurred under gentrification’s backdrop, it is equally a study of how organisations think and act under its effects and not solely in direct response to it.

221 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mixed-communities-initiative
Methodological Reflections

‘Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification’ (Fanon 1963:36)

Defining “grassroots” in Hackney is a complicated matter. In delineating my community of activist practice as those engaged in social justice oriented activities, it included participants holding a mixture of ideological views. These included but were not limited to feminism, socialism, anarchism, Pan-Africanism, veganism, ethical consumerism, anti-racism and environmentalism. I sought membership to right-wing nationalist and local Jewish communities in Hackney, but my requests were either rejected or ignored.

The personal attributes of my interlocutors varied by age, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality and able-bodied status. I actively observed those who self-defined as activists while my interlocutors directed me to others, often from marginalised communities to whom they assigned the label “activist”. Finally, I also observed and participated with several council insiders who “unofficially” felt their approach to bureaucratic work may warrant the label “activist” but were uncomfortable using the term to define themselves.

There is a reason why I bring this up in this conclusion, rather than in the introduction. After reflection on my deskwork, I struggled with the knowledge that some of this ethnographic richness would be diluted in a process, where I must conform my fieldnotes and over a hundred hours of video footage into a written thesis.

This was complicated by the fact that much of the time I spent doing fieldwork I was immersed in civil society, institutions of cultural hegemony and local government sites. Having adopted a decolonising methodological stance, I have tried my best to balance the insights I collected from the various community groups I observed with that from my prolonged contact and meetings with council officials.

222 To that end, by Autumn 2021, a documentary containing many of the ideas contained within this thesis will be made freely accessible outside the institution which spawned it at; www.ligali.org/gentrificationofprotest
There was also, always going to be a need for me to use an extra measure to maintain an objective distance. Prior to starting this investigation, I already had unfettered access to many of Hackney’s various grassroots communities. As a long time, member of the borough’s activist community I have participated and organised actions by the neighbourhood’s various urban social movements.

To assist me in securing the required distance required to analyse my ethnographic findings without ‘going native’ I used an obligatory consent form that I had designed to look like a flyer. I also ensured my camera had an overt presence to ensure any familiarity with me was offset by my “working” persona that precluded any potential predisposition for ‘over rapport’ (O’Reilly 2009:88).

Although I had anticipated my filming could elicit performative responses, there were other unexpected consequences from adopting this approach. By inviting my interlocutors to be co-producers in the documentary component of this research, many of them made it clear that they trusted me to negotiate the “speaky-spokey”, “book talk” world of academia on their behalf. They primarily wanted to see the outcomes of our work in documentary form.

Nevertheless, this thesis does not refer much to the collaborative filmmaking process, although it is fair to say that the footage served me well as a supplementary, complementary version of the famed anthropological book of ethnographic fieldnotes. Like museum workers, anthropologists trade in ethnographic fragments. We too make capital of captured folklore to further our understanding of the “other”.

Yes, I had legal consent from my interlocutors to focus on the phenomenon of cultural activism in its governmental, institutional, organisational and personal guises.

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223 It is intended that the eventual documentary will reveal the voices and actions of my interlocutors in an alternative, accessible format simultaneously enabling me to give back to the community in a language free from academic jargon.

224 I used both video and written notes to capture my time in the field.

225 Can we not experience, reflect, theorise without taking possession of, and displaying to the world, the private domain of others, esp. those with less social and political power when negotiating consent with us?
However, I still questioned whether I had the moral right, to order, to exclude, to render - to institutionalise - in an etic anthropological tone, the emic perspectives detailing the various struggles I observed.226

I write this concluding chapter during a year which saw many of themes covered during my fieldwork in 2017 re-emerge in tragic and spectacular form. 2020 has been a year of tragedy coupled with a debilitating national lockdown as the result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The social conditions caused by the Coronavirus have amplified existing racialised injustices facing marginalised communities in Hackney and across the world.

Nevertheless, like many scholar-activists, I am tired, but I remain on active duty, I am realistic but also optimistic. For 2020 was also the year that saw a global stream of unprecedented protests unite people across age, class, ethnic and religious divides. Although the British government often gave explicit support to so called “counterprotesters” who defended the status quo, there were millions more who rallied against longstanding acts of state-sanctioned violence systematically causing economic, educational and health related harms.

Institutionally support also came from the cultural sector, sympathetic elites and far beyond. Sadly, as I write this chapter, the momentum for change has waned. Nevertheless, I am aware that like many others who have struggled, I still exist. Disappointed and still in pain from a year that has been emotionally exhausting and traumatising, I have not thrived. However, unlike some, including family, friends and several from my community - I give thanks for the fact I have survived.

226 The street market traders in Dalston, the foragers living on the canal, the students working in solidarity of the vulnerable, the artists bemoaning the loss of affordable space to practice their craft, the activists pushing back against police violence, the teachers using personal resources to challenge Eurocentric narratives in their classrooms.

227 And the mass xenophobia linked to the UK’s leaving of the European Union (Brexit) on 31st Jan 2020
Why Institutional Activism?

To answer why institutional activism and not curatorial or museum activism first requires we recognise that while intimately interconnected, the terms “Museum Activism” and “Curatorial Activism” are marked by a subtle distinction. Many of the New Museology initiatives categorised as museum activism are a broadly policy-led institution or departmental wide programmes for social change e.g. improving the socio-economic conditions for disadvantaged communities, promoting immigration and social inclusion as positive societal values, and facilitating participatory democratic debate and practices. In contrast, acts of curatorial activism which encompass “Institutional Critique” are typically curator-led in response to specific cultural artefacts, artists, and exhibitions. This includes offering critical reflections on the social function of art, critiquing the social and cultural conditions through which institutions present artefacts and the inclusion of perspectives from excluded artists.

Although the Hackney Museum’s day-to-day practices encompasses all of the aforementioned techniques, David Pettinicchio’s definition of institutional activism as ‘insiders with access to resources and power – who proactively take up causes that overlap with those of grassroots challengers’ is apt. As a concept which places the insider/outsider dichotomy as a prominent feature of the practice, institutional activism is better capable than using formal co-optation at including members of counterpublics as legitimate democratic challengers. Its strength lies in the manner it depicts individuals within institutions affecting change to organisational culture and driving policy reforms for outsider causes. As such, it is inclusive of members from non-governmental institutions as well as grassroots communities originating from within civil society, various publics and urban social movements.

Conceptions of governmental activism mostly limit the type of interactions possible by local authority institutions to that with social movement organisations (Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2017). In emphasising the importance of acts of curatorial

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228 Which seeks to reconceptualise institutional activism in service of a form of emancipatory sociology
activism (Reilly 2018; Message 2013) by institutions with a national profile, we risk ignoring that museum size is becoming increasingly irrelevant.

While smaller, open museums and virtual museums have yet to seize the public imagination, they continue the move to extend curatorial reach beyond existing politically neutered public spheres. Moreover, the French historian, museologist and community development specialist Hugues de Varine suggests that when museum insiders choose to address societal problems with community outsiders in places and ways that were previously regarded inconceivable or even unacceptable, they are not only serving a public good; they are also practising a ‘Museology of Liberation’ (Varine 1996:25–26).

By institutionalising the processes enabling activist perspectives, as opposed to uncritically lauding institutional buy-in to practices of institutional critique (Smithson 1979a; Raunig 2009), it becomes possible to prevent the coöptation that enables institutions to neutralise outsider threats by superficially institutionalising challengers and the representations of their issues.

All institutional insiders like the council officers working within local authority museums occupy a space of contradictory forces. Irrespective of its anti-racist and social inclusion work, cultural institutions like Hackney Museum are part of local government. Even when working on cultural projects that are countercultural or anti-institutional, the workers remain part of a municipal framework that finances enforcement action against people in rent arrears and sponsors institutions with embedded systems of institutional racism\(^{229}\) like the Metropolitan Police\(^{230}\). Indeed, several of my interlocutors referred to these connections, and a few were even suspicious of the motives driving the museum’s extra-institutional efforts. Did the museum engage in work which extends beyond its legal responsibilities of service provision to mitigate against reputational damage? It is a valid question. The

\(^{229}\) Galtung suggests that in order not to overwork the word violence we sometimes refer to the condition of structural violence as Social injustice (Galtung 1969:171).

\(^{230}\) Hackney Council funds its local police service from an annual £7 million fund it allocates to address “gangs”.
municipal museum in Chapter 4 suggests - no, the displays of activism in Chapter 6 suggest – maybe, while the Antiuniversity festival in Chapter 7 demonstrates - yes.

Nevertheless, each time a government institution aligns its policies with an existing social justice cause, it has the potential to gain social capital. Although no council officer confessed this to me publicly, others have commented with enthusiasm about their partnering with community projects and voluntary groups to deliver needed services in the borough. However, whenever any governmental institution unilaterally decides to encroach upon a political terrain that was previously the exclusive terrain of a specific community, there is initially distrust and resentment and fear of exploitation. This is no different in Hackney.

You can witness it in Chapter 3 through the voices of the borough’s young people who feel their future is being destroyed before their eyes by all governing authorities. Moreover, they consider the Council as responsible for forcing their life course between the boundaries of bohemian and bourgeoise lifestyles to which some do not aspire, and others cannot attain.

Despite the penchant for urban social movements to be rendered as a transitory force, their participants are not ethereal, apolitical agents of social disorder. The depth of their moral reasoning mirrors that of their civil society based counterparts, in many cases it is only the limits on their chosen course of action that differs. For whereas activism is frequently referred to in terms of high prolife protests and revolutionary movements leading to civil unrest, it also must be recognised as the everyday practices involving critique, creative practice and other novel forms that challenge social norms and cultural hegemony. This includes administrative action and substantive shifts in organisational processes.

This is not to suggest that all actions committed by institutions which can be perceived as activism are predicated on resolving matters of social injustice. Hackney Council’s overt partnering with community and volunteer groups engaged in mutual aid activities was welcomed by some who appreciated the extra resources. For others,
it was seen as an exploitative way to compensate for the reduction and sometimes loss of funding from central government for its so-called ‘non-core’ services.

While the museum has been successful in building bridges with some community members, for others, the council’s cultural appropriation of the symbols and methods of social movements erects a wall. Within the community, I learned of activists who refused to attend any council event wherever they took place. They told me they considered neighbourhood initiatives by the local authority as “not for them”. Yet some of these same people attended multiple Antiuniversity session organised by the local authority museum which is trusted.

For many minority communities in Hackney whom the staff have at one point exhibited a physical vignette of their social and political world, it is these salaried institutional insiders, some more “voluntarily” than others, that have helped to amplify their political voices. As cultural workers with council badges, they have forwarded their grassroots complaints to senior officials. Moreover, during their highly ritualised public launches, community activists have had the opportunity to address local councillors and MP’s directly.

In providing participatory opportunities for discourse in the public sphere and public realm, the museum is perceived as enabling them to demand politicians allocate resources to solve their socio-political problems. They consider their partnership with the Hackney museum does with culture what they cannot achieve alone. It institutionalises activism in an exhibitionary form.

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231 They used terms like “governing on the cheap”, “exploiting voluntary labour” or as one group of students exclaimed, “neoliberalism in sheep’s clothing”.

232 Those services considered outside the legal minimum required by the local authority’s duty to provide social care for vulnerable residents and refuse collection services.

233 It is from these perspectives that the name “gentrification of protest” came to define this project.

234 Two of them that I am aware of even organised their own events.
Exhibitionary Praxis

‘Aestheticism is the antithesis of Activism’ (Eucken 1912:374, 258–259)

In Chapter 7, I introduced the term “Exhibitionary Praxis” to describe the outcome of Hackney Museum’s use of institutional activism. The Antiuniversity Now! festival which featured countercultural productions and workshops occurred outside the museum premises, across Hackney and other locations within the UK. None of this would have been possible without the tacit support of its sponsoring institution, Hackney Council. Nevertheless, it was the absence of high-level institutional interactions in the organising process that helped ensure that the method of coöpitation remained informal enough to incorporate radical actors and counterpublic perspectives.

Projects predicated on achieving exhibitionary praxis do not design for, but instead, allow for institutional interactions which are otherwise unlikely to occur. They facilitate exchanges of critique, counterdiscourse (Fraser 1990:68) and guides for everyday practises of social transformation between people who formally represent institutions or organisations and others, both professionals and laypersons.

Of course, not all practices of curatorial activism and institutional critique occurring outside cultural institutions result in Exhibitionary Praxis. Social change does not simply emerge by the enabling of institutional interactions and progressive exhibitionary displays to occur outside the public sphere.

When describing Exhibitionary Praxis in Chapter 7, I propose that it results from the sharing of authority through collaborative curatorial practices that fuse critical pedagogy with forms of curatorial activism and institutional critique. However, as the term implies, it is more than that. To distinguish it from aestheticism, Exhibitionary Praxis must also constitute a synthesis of critical reflection, practical action and irreducible socio-political forms of collective power. Moreover, it must be designed to resist being objectified for artistic goals and persist as social action rendered in a cultural guise.
It is the Hackney Museum’s use of its institutional authority to form and sustain long-term, meaningful relationships with social justice organisers, campaigners and sympathisers that enabled the Antiuniversity to occur. Using institutional resources secured through cyclical processes, the museum engaged in acts of cultural activism designed to strengthen the social and political rights of its stakeholders through the cultural domain.

Active Partnerships

‘[our] community networks are strong because we are such a small team, we don’t have dedicated marketing staff... we rely on word of mouth, and us going out there and meeting people. I think our visitor figures are about 50% new visitors and 50% repeat visitors, and those repeat visitors are very important to us because they’re our kind of way of getting into different groups....’ (Bilgrami 2017:57–58)
*Emma Winch answering how small museums can successfully engage new audiences and their local community*

In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 were examples of how the Hackney Museum is bound by policy to ensure their curatorial projects address a key priority or theme identified by the Hackney Mayor’s manifesto and the Hackney Council’s corporate plan. Despite this, the borough’s campaigning identity makes it easier for them to align its strategic objectives and outputs with local activist agendas.

Whenever the museum begins long term consultation with community outsiders it creates either an *Advisory Panel* or a *Community Partners Group*. These active partnerships which frequently become vehicles for co-collaboration, initially serve as a civic forum where pressing issues can be discussed by institutional insiders with the borough’s communities residing inside and outside the public sphere. With the museum staff simultaneously being council officers, this also has the effect of enabling the potential sharing of contentious neighbourhood perspectives within institutional spaces where only privileged insiders usually have access.

In acknowledgement of their expertise in community engagement and museological matters, the staff of Hackney Museum are often invited to feed into policies and governing decisions that are operational and effective outside their mandated domain. In doing so, their involvement in even the seemingly insignificant details defining ‘architectural choices, object classification and decisions on artefact
placement’ are acts of governmentality utilising ‘semio-techniques’ (Macdonald 1998:3).

In Hackney, the museum’s longstanding partnerships with community groups can go further, with the tacit support of council officials, outsiders are often provided with direct routes to help co-curate the public realm. While this can help the local authority counter accusations of “gentrification” it also opens the door to the installation of countercultural symbols in public spaces. Moreover, when done without PR friendly, formal coöptation and with the support of sympathetic elites, this can also provide cultural activists with the opportunity to embed radical agendas into institutional frameworks. This includes influencing decisions and driving programs over the contextualising or removal\(^\text{235}\) of hegemonic symbols imbued with values of cultural and symbolic violence or discriminatory values present in the public realm.

Such partnerships also embolden Hackney Council to offer contested symbolic responses to the needs of urban social movement members while working to deliver on systemic promises\(^\text{236}\). For example, in 2018, the local authority was accused of creating “anti-police sentiment”\(^\text{237}\) after it funded a plaque in memory of Rashan Charles in the Forest Road youth club that he frequented. The use of culture as a poetic tool aiding the construction of historical narratives often has powerful results, especially when delivered in a “how-to” format. This is irrespective of whether it is in the form of an exhibition within local authority controlled public spaces or hosted in community spaces spread across the country as with the Antiuniversity festival.

\(^{235}\) Despite its aspirations to be recognised as a “anti-racist” borough, the streets and properties of Hackney are adorned with symbols memorialising slavers like Robert Geffrye, John Cass and members of the Tyssen and Rhodes family, all who facilitated and benefited from acts of African enslavement or colonisation. It took power to erect them, it requires the same to remove them.

\(^{236}\) Eg. The Improving outcomes for Young Black Men project

\(^{237}\) https://www.hackneygazette.co.uk/news/hackney-council-funds-memorial-plaque-for-rashan-charles-361842
Exhibitionary Praxis

It is also why in the continued existence of projects such as Xenia (see Chapter 7), we can observe one of the benefits of a museum creating an autonomous, multisited exhibition of countercultural learning.

In delivering an annual festival of Exhibitionary Praxis, the Hackney Museum went beyond catering for a civil society audience to engage in a mode of consumption limited to virtue signalling. Instead, it realised hooks’ (1994:8) assertion that in teaching to transgress, ‘any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone’s presence is [genuinely valued and] acknowledged’.

Museums across the world are leaning towards a more activist approach in their work. In the UK, the Museums Association’s strategic framework for its work between April 2020 and March 2025 declared its objectives as planning to ‘work collaboratively, inclusively and ethically [while campaigning] for social and climate justice’\textsuperscript{238}. The growth in publications like Robert Janes and Richard Sandell’s Museum

\textsuperscript{238} https://www.museumsassociation.org/about/our-strategy/

It is a change reflected in the outcome of Kidd’s study of UK and US media articles reporting on museums linked to activism or protest between 2015-2017. While some 58% adopted a dispassionate tone and documented stories where museums were linked with social justice issues as a sequence of key events, 42% were ‘incredibly positive reports about museum activism’ (2019:391–392). Despite intense government pushback, there has been a marked shift in the perception of museums and galleries as apolitical reflected within mainstream media debates and across social media platforms.

The topic of cultural heritage has become embroiled in a nationwide, controversial tussle between those who run public institutions and those that fund and govern them. Since the global wave of Black Lives Matter protests that followed the death of George Floyd in 2020, there has been a clamour for the removal of symbols in public space that celebrates Britain’s involvement in African enslavement, colonisation and Imperialism. This public fervour for change revitalised by the grassroots removal of the Edward Colson statue in Bristol has resulted in museums, heritage institutions and local authorities opting to conduct research and follow democratic processes such as public consultations and debates on the issue of symbolic, structural and institutional racism. Consequently, during August 2020, the British Museum opted to move the bust of its founder Hans Sloane (1660–1753) from

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https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2021-01-18/hcws713
its prominent position on a celebratory plinth to a display case. The commemorative bust is now accompanied by interpretive text detailing his profiteering from African enslavement. Outside London, the Colonial Countryside project explored and contextualised the links between the Empire and the UK’s various country houses and gardens. Its report highlighted over ninety National Trust properties as being linked to wealth extracted from the forced labour camps operating in the Caribbean during African enslavement and colonialism. While, doing related work in an urban setting, the City of London’s Tackling Racism Taskforce reviewed its public assets and decided to remove and re-site the statues of British slavers, William Beckford and John Cass, in its ‘journey towards a more inclusive and diverse City’.

However, staunch, ideological resistance to this work has seen the British government pass extraordinary legislation to curb the progressive actions of cultural and heritage workers across the sector (UK Government 2021). Museum workers are now at risk of being criminalised if they engage in the removal of statues from the public realm without explicit permission from the Secretary of State. Corinne Fowler, an associate professor of postcolonial literature and founder of the Colonial Countryside project, was publicly vilified by The Common Sense Group of over fifty Conservative MPs and received death threats because of her work. Moreover, the Conservative MP, John Hayes, called for the evidence-based Colonial Countryside report to be shredded (BBC 2021).

Museums have also been specially targeted by government ministers breaching the arms-length arrangement usually afforded to public cultural institutions. In February 2021, Oliver Dowden, the UK culture secretary, invited key cultural leaders to a Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) meeting to explain the government new “retain and explain” policy. At the session, influential leaders of public cultural institutions were instructed how to interpret objects which government ministers described as having a “contested” history or risk cuts to their

242 Frequently referred to using the benign term- “plantation”
state funding. In response, Charles Saumarez Smith, the former director of the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery, warned against government intervention demanding museums interpret national history in ‘the over-simplified, ahistorical and triumphalist manner that it has pushed in the wake of Brexit’ (Saumarez Smith 2021).

Ironically, much of the government’s recent drive to force museums to retain artefacts and statues\(^{244}\) that promote simplistic nationalist narratives has been driven by the results of a democratic process. Above one of the entrances of the Hackney-based *Museum of the Home*, is a statue of the slaver Robert Geffrye (1613–1703) forming part of the borough’s public realm. As it is situated on the museum’s private property, the local authority has no legal power to remove it\(^{245}\). When the *Museum of the Home* in partnership with Hackney Council, organised a public consultation over the matter during July 2020, it resulted in over seventy percent of the participating local community voting for the statue to be removed\(^{246}\) and placed inside the museum. Then, in a controversial act encouraged and directly supported by the culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, the museum’s governing body led by its chair Samir Shah, unilaterally rejected and overturned the democratic process\(^{247}\).

The resulting public debate that has followed reasserts how public support for museums increasingly relies on them forging a moral relationship with source communities instead of a prescriptive, antagonistic one. The work of networks like *Museum Detox* whose membership consists of museum workers from minority ethnic communities, takes this one step further. The group seeks to restructure and diversify both the workforce and audiences of British museums. Their activities have helped encourage the sector to recognise that the decolonisation of knowledge curators, knowledge producers, knowledge producing spaces and knowledge itself is ‘one of the

\(^{244}\) Building upon statistics sourced from the Public Monuments and Sculpture Association, there are approximately 15 out of 610 statues of identifiable people in the UK depicting people of African heritage. The majority commemorate wealthy European males.

\(^{245}\) [https://news.hackney.gov.uk/a-statue-of-a-slave-trader-has-no-home-on-our-doorstep/](https://news.hackney.gov.uk/a-statue-of-a-slave-trader-has-no-home-on-our-doorstep/)

\(^{246}\) [https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk/media/r4sfteny/statue_consultation_report.pdf](https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk/media/r4sfteny/statue_consultation_report.pdf)

most important intellectual challenges of our time’ (Pratt 2008:460). It is an ethos that has many supporters, but not all agree.

When the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford decided to remove human remains from its displays, it was described by some political and media pundits as an erasure of history that denied generations of visitors much enjoyment (Fletcher 2020). Nevertheless, the Museum Association, which has convened a sector-wide Decolonisation Guidance Working Group248 for individuals and institutions continues to provide a robust response to such opposition. It offers an authoritative rebuke to the attempts of ‘ministers to dictate what constitutes a legitimate subject for investigation or what the outcome of that research might be’ (Museum Association 2021).

Embedded Relationships
The museologist Peter Davis once wrote that the impression given by the initial New Museology theorists implied a revolution in object presentation would attract improved interactions with visitors (2011:84). This later expanded to include amongst other things, the piecemeal sharing of curatorial authority and improved management of community relations. However, I’d like to conclude this thesis with a suggestion and a plea for what I consider to be the most valuable resource of all museums and public facing institutions. The answer is not their collections or any prized signature objects, but the current and potential relationships they have with the source communities they serve.

Throughout Chapter 5 where I uncovered the formation of the Hackney Museum, it is evident from the ground up its curatorial team sought to denounce the practice of describing visitors in terms that assert institutional possession of ‘their communities’ (Karp et al. 1992). In defining multicultural migration as one of the borough’s defining characteristics it committed itself to a journey of ‘inreach’. As a co-participatory process requiring active partnerships this not only helped the institution to continuously reaffirm and redevelop its museological practices, but also allowed the

248 https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/decolonising-practice/
museum workers to ‘reach into society as empowering agents for education, the construction of identities, and citizenship’ (Corsane 2006:115).

In observing the Hackney Museum operate across various domains, I witnessed it partnering individuals and collectives whose work could place it in positions of procedural ultra-vires. Such risks are inevitable for to be considered truly institutionally activist requires a move from theory to praxis. Moreover, it demands the formation of relationships with disengaged communities and a rejection of concepts of inclusivity narrowly defined as the presence of diversity and equality in cultural representations.

Diversity is not a panacea for the lack of inclusivity. However, the institutionalisation of ongoing continuous programmes working for the socially excluded to have parity of participation (not just access) and equitable distribution of power (to define not just interpret) helps to make amends. To include, in a manner that is ethical requires actions premised on holism. To engage in inclusive practice therefore requires progressive museums insiders to openly constitute themselves as members of a decentralised, yet openly accountable social movement. Not as an act of charity, or an initiative based on a faddism, but a formally mandated process operating with the authority of the institutions they inhabit.

Of course, with the presence of intransient resistance from above such a goal is difficult. Nevertheless, institutional activism continues to enable the informal devolution of curation and interpretation to co-partnering outsiders from below. Institutional insiders allied to decentralised social movements for radical change that exist within their sector - have agency. They can and must use collected objects of ethnography to help locate and secure relationships that co-creates cross-cultural knowledge. This means active engagement in epistemic practices, then working to realise people-centred strategies for change refining the process ad-infinitum. Otherwise, the ubiquitous presence of power in officially recognised arenas of deliberation creates a barrier to unscripted critiques of governmentality.

“To change the world, one has to change the ways of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced.” (Bourdieu 1989:23)
In the 21st century, it is not our status as citizen-subjects or membership to bourgeois publics that carry the bulk of our socio-political capital. Instead, it is our presence and latent pyrotechnic potential as politically literate residents empowered through the strength of our relationships with sympathetic, principled members of local and global networks. This is especially true where the goal of active partnership working rejects assimilation as proposed in neo-institutionalism conceptualisations. Particularly those which regard institutional activism as a new way for social movements to see their activities be recognised within existing repertoires of rationality (Roose 2016).

Attempts to “gentrify” protest dilutes the long-term efficacy of such actions for social change.

However, when institutions tap into streams of locality represented by those using its services on a day-to-day basis, their organisational systems make them better positioned to harness that source and focus it through their bureaucratic structures for egalitarian aims. For it is only this unique, unpredictable sharing and synthesis of power that emanates from principled individuals working on the inside and ethical radical actors on the outside, that can reject top-down utopian schemas to create a truly, sustainable, healing and nurturing environment that liberates both.

Moreover, it requires museums, galleries, libraries, archives, universities, and other gatekeepers of cultural hegemony to comprehend ethnographic objects not as a collection of things, but as an epistemological gateway to start priceless relationships with people and important events occurring ‘in a place where there is no space or time’249. When this occurs, institutional activism leading to Exhibitionary Praxis that ethically transforms the physical, social and temporal dimensions that we occupy across our ‘life course’250 can become more frequent. Not as a fragmented display of curatorial or pedagogical transgression, but rather as a sustainable, holistic environmental, organisational and cultural phenomenon delivering a potent, people-centred means of advancing radical social justice aims.

249 A Song for You (1970) as written by Leon Russell and performed by Donny Hathaway
250 https://www.who.int/ageing/publications/lifecourse/alc_lifecourse_training_en.pdf
‘If we are to get on to the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society.’ (King Jr 1967)

#Justice4Grenfell / #Justice4Rashan / #BLM / #EndSARS
Articles of Collaboration

Ajéjé owo kan ko gbe igbá de ori

Institutional Activism occurs whenever grassroots directed acts of unscripted social, cultural and political action are delivered through the informal coöptation of bureaucratic organisations by radical actors for a specific equitable purpose not provided or delivered by their existing policies or legislation.

The minimum requirements to form an institutionally activist group are:

Transparent Collaboration
Participants are an open and diverse collection of institutional insiders and outsiders who represent or are stakeholder community members (from civil society, publics, counterpublics and urban social movements).

Active Partnerships
Participating insiders share their institutional authority and resources to embed and facilitate democratic or consensus-based, non-hierarchal, decision-making processes and social relations that serve a specific, publicly declared objective of stakeholder grassroots outsiders.

Politically Transgressive
The collective mission of the insiders and outsiders is to support, promote or produce cultural forms and activities that are liberatory, counterhegemonic and actively rejects strategic incrementalism.

Exhibitionary Praxis
The insiders consistently use their access to institutional resources to enable and expand the opportunities for sustainable, accessible, transportable forms of democratic public engagement with critical pedagogical participation that extends beyond traditional means and locations.

Reciprocal Remuneration
Unsalaried stakeholder outsiders and any required administrative volunteers are to receive an adequate fee after publicly agreeing to be actively engaged for the duration of achieving any agreed objectives.

Sustainable Practice
Where possible, all objectives are written into institutional policies that detail required actions, measurable targets and a timetable for work. This must be secured with the political authority necessary to guarantee permanent access to any required bureaucratic or public resources.

251 A Yoruba proverb about collaboration. It reads “No single hand, regardless of its might, can lift and place a calabash on the head”
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