

**Heritage, Politics and Identity in East London, 1973-2008: A New History of
Imperial Memory**

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Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Declaration Page

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

Abstract

This dissertation is a history of imperial memory in East London's heritage industry, 1973-2008. It develops a new approach to the history of the heritage industry in contemporary Britain and intervenes in debates about imperial memory and its political significance. It consists of six chapters, with two each in three chronological parts. Each part includes one chapter on museums, specifically the Museum of London, and one on a community heritage group. Part one concerns heritage organisations funded by the New Urban Left, part two those responding to changes wrought by Thatcherism, and part three those operating under the 'Third Way' politics of the late 1990s and early 2000s. This structure facilitates a closer examination of the way diverse heritage organisations interacted with one another, their economic and cultural policy context, and specifically their funders. Through this, it corrects existing methodological assumptions and oversights among historians of heritage in modern Britain. Previous studies have grouped heritage organisations into museums, characterised by secure funding, professionalism and conservative or nationalist narratives, and radical 'community' heritage groups, who are museums' organisational and political opposite. This produces a neglect of the history of collaboration between museums and community heritage, and of the shifting, material relationships between funders and practitioners which shape and reshape discourses. My methodology also facilitates a more complex and sophisticated account of imperial memory in contemporary Britain. Recent scholarship debates whether imperial memory in Britain is best characterised as a form of imperial 'nostalgia' or 'amnesia'. Instead, I argue that it was shaped by producers' changing relationship to their political context, their funders, and wider changes in professional practice. This made its character fluid, messy and contradictory. Finally, I argue that this analysis of imperial memory is necessary to grasp the uneven and inconsistent place Empire still plays in British politics today.

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Introduction

1955 was a pivotal year in Britain's twentieth century, at home and abroad. The first wave of decolonisation, which had been accelerating during the decade since the Second World War, culminated in April's Bandung Conference, signalling the emergence of a new postcolonial bloc in world politics united in their rejection of imperial rule. The same year, as Jim Tomlinson shows, the protracted process of deindustrialisation began in Britain.¹ In the decades which followed, not only did the colonies of the former empire gain independence and the domestic economy transform, but the nature of the British polity itself changed, as a new multi-racial nation-state emerged fractiously and stutteringly in the former metropole. The debates over how to narrate and thus define decolonisation and deindustrialisation have ranked among the most vexed between politicians in, commentators on, and historians of, Britain since 1945.² The stakes here are nothing less than the right to define the terms in which we understand the emergence of the contemporary nation. Britain's heritage industry has been an important sphere of these debates.

This thesis works towards an understanding of the place of empire within narratives of domestic British history in this period by focusing on one locality: East London. The modern boroughs of Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Newham were contact zones between metropolitan industrial society and travellers and cargo from the colonies. Later, they became affordable points of arrival by migrants from the postcolonies in the same decades that the port closed. They were, that is, sites of the burgeoning of Britain's multiculturalism and the protracted ending of its industrial age. As such, East London offers rich insights into the narration of the relationship between empire, decolonisation and deindustrialisation in Britain. Between 1973 and 2008, museums and community heritage groups scrambled to tell the area's history with financial support from governmental groups participating in the radicalism of the 1970s and 1980s, the broadly contemporary conservative revolution, and the 'third-way' centrism of the 1990s and early 2000s. Each funder was investing not just in these heritage projects, but in the public perception of history more broadly. This study is, then, a *political* history of imperial memory within the heritage industry, focusing specifically on the imagination of the imperial within the fabric of metropolitan British life. Through this, it offers new insights into debates around British national identity after empire.

¹ Jim Tomlinson, 'De-industrialisation, Not Decline: A New Meta-narrative for Post-war British History', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27, (1, 2016), pp.78.

² Useful texts, encapsulating different political approaches to narrating the change of these periods include Tomlinson, 'De-industrialisation, Not Decline'; 87-88; David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, (London, 2018); On a 'political generation' who lived through these changes, Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*, (Cambridge, 2013), especially pp.9-13; Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, (London, 1978).

East London and the World

As John Marriott argues, East London was ‘forged’ in the nineteenth century by processes of urbanisation and industrialisation which both facilitated and were influenced by commerce between London, the British Empire and the world.³ The West India Docks began operations in 1802. Their construction was overseen by slaveowners, including Robert Milligan and George Hibbert, who exploited their metropolitan political influence to further their colonial commercial interests. The East India Docks’ construction was overseen, similarly, by East India Company director Robert Cotton from 1803. In both cases, the transformation of the economy and urban environment derived from imperial merchants’ decision to rationalise importation processes and increase capacity.⁴ As six more docks opened along the Thames between London Bridge and Tilbury in Essex from 1818 to 1921, related industries also grew, processing goods shipped through the port.⁵

These commercial concerns relied, in turn, on the labour of a highly precarious migrant workforce, often fleeing poverty and persecution. Migration to East London predated the nineteenth century; the Huguenots, French Protestant refugees, had for instance been a noticeable presence around Spitalfields throughout the Early Modern period. Yet in the Victorian period, both the quantity of migration and the qualitative meanings it acquired in public discourse, changed. The depopulation of rural England, Scotland and Wales due to agricultural precarity, mechanisation and rural depression was significant here. More, 107,000 Irish immigrants moved to London in the 1840s and 1850s, catalysed by the famine of 1845-9.⁶ By the turn of the twentieth century, there were 60,000 Irish born residents of London, and 435,000 of Irish descent; many clustered in the East End neighbourhoods of Smithfield, Stepney and Wapping.⁷ Not all arrivals were victims of British misgovernance. In the later nineteenth-century, the East End’s Jewish population grew from 20,000 to 140,000 following persecution in Central and Eastern Europe.⁸ Much of East London was exempt from Victorian pollution statutes, leaving little separation between residential areas and those processing raw chemicals and materials. Arrivals in the area moved into small dwellings which had been cheaply, poorly and hastily constructed following

³ John Marriott, *Beyond the Tower: a History of East London*, (Padstow, 2011), p.6.

⁴ Catherine Hall et al, *Legacies of British Slave-ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain*, (Cambridge, 2014), pp.203-249; H.V. Bowen, ‘Cotton, Joseph (1745-1825), merchant.’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (23 Sep 2004; Accessed 12 Nov 2020).

⁵ Marriott, *Beyond the Tower*, p.3

⁶ Colin J Davis, ‘Formation and Reproduction of Dockers as an Occupational Group’, in Sam Davies et al (eds.), *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History, 1790-1970, vol.1*, (Abingdon, 2017), p.545.

⁷ Jonathan Schneer, *London, 1900: The Imperial Metropolis*, (New Haven, 1999), p.171

⁸ Nazneen Ahmed, Jane Garnett, Ben Gidley, Alana Harris, Michael Keith, ‘Shifting Markers of Identity in East London’s Diasporic Religious Spaces’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, (39.2, 2016), p.225

industrialisation in previous decades.⁹ The nascent Jewish community took up residence largely in the older Spitalfields area, becoming the dominant force in its garments industry, often moving into cramped dwellings and conducting their social and religious life in attics, backrooms and shops.¹⁰ Smaller West African, Chinese and Bengali communities also grew in Dockland areas like Limehouse, Poplar and Wapping. Many of their members settled locally after having left employment - or been abandoned by their employers – on British merchant ships. The creation of the modern East End occurred, then, through the arrival in Britain of migrants drawn to the area by Britain’s changing geopolitical role and thrown into the vicissitudes of London’s industrialising imperial economy. While Britons often imagined the country’s acceptance of persecuted Jews as evidence of its liberal tolerance in contrast to Eastern Europe, many more arrivals – most notably the Irish – arrived in London as a result of the disastrous humanitarian consequences of Britain’s extractive rule.

Through the connections created by the port, East London became a permeable boundary between Britain and the world in elite discourses of the nation, threatening the metropole’s strength and its racial ‘purity’. The racialised figures of maritime migrants often embodied these fears. Anne Witchard argues that late-Victorian literature on Limehouse’s Chinatown generated concerns within British culture of an ‘Oriental invasion’, threatening the spread of miscegenation, listlessness and opium addiction. Here were fears of both the biological *and* cultural racial degeneration of the local white population¹¹ Onboard British merchant ships, ‘lascars’ (Indian and most commonly Bengali seamen) occupied the bottom rungs of racialised employment structures, were paid significantly less than their white counterparts, and subject to the most menial, hard work. Lascars’ cultures were both caricatured and disregarded; they were often displayed in port cities throughout the empire in faux-oriental garb and ritually made to eat *haram* food onboard.¹² Many either abandoned their employment or were dismissed after docking in London, forming the foundations of East London’s Bengali population. Journalists and politicians, too, presented the Irish as a squalid and even seditious force in the late-nineteenth-century city¹³

For Marriott, the East End and British India were brought in the late nineteenth century into a ‘unitary epistemological field’, wherein efforts to ‘gather, classify, categorise and order information’ by

⁹ Bruce Wheeler, ‘Language and Landscape: The Construction of Place in an East London Borough’, in Hilda Kean, Paul Martin, Sally Morgan, (eds.), *Seeing History: Public History in Britain Now*, (London, 2000), p.116

¹⁰ Ahmed et al., ‘Shifting Markers’, p.225

¹¹ Anne Witchard, *Thomas Burke’s Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown*, (Farnham, 2015), p.5; 98

¹² Gopalan Balachandran, *Globalising Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c.1870-1945*, (Oxford, 2012), pp.4-5; p.7, p.8.

¹³ Roger Swift, ‘The Outcast Irish in the British Victorian City: Problems and Perspectives’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 25, (99, 1987), p.264

novelists, travel writers, social scientists and missionaries functioned to frame both sites as ‘uncivilised’. While Jews were not British colonial migrants, their presence was understood within an imperial context. As Eitan Bar-Yosef and Nadia Valman argue, antisemitic discourse around the turn of the century centred on ‘The Jew’s’ perceived exacerbation of insanitary social conditions and the threat they posed of racial degeneration within the larger population.¹⁴ This reportage on an emaciated ‘alien’ population actively undermining the civilising destiny of the British imperial ‘race’ brings into sharp focus the East End’s contradictory place in Victorian modernity and demonstrates the role of Jewish immigrants in animating these anxieties. Westminster, municipal leaders and architects wanted London itself to embody Britain’s mutually constitutive strengths of economic advancement at home, and imperial expansion abroad.¹⁵ Yet, Bar-Yosef and Valman show, a belief in racial pollution by an immigrant population characterised by their liminality to European ‘civilisation’ threatened the imperial mission.¹⁶ In 1905, building on a discourse produced over decades by social investigators, journalists, literary figures and politicians, Parliament passed the Aliens Act, a bill designed to restrict the arrival of ‘undesirable aliens’, a group it officially termed as those in economic distress, ill-health or suspected of criminality. The act also facilitated the removal of those who already resided in Britain and lived ‘under insanitary conditions due to overcrowding’. This provision specifically revealed much larger truths around the Act. The term ‘Alien’ was, in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain, a widely recognised antisemitic euphemism; the Act was formulated specifically to prevent Jews’ entry and restrict those who were already present.¹⁷

The cultural discourses surrounding these different migrant groups were distinct but linked. If Chinese migrants threatened to spread intoxication and listlessness to the wider population, the preoccupation with Jewish migrants’ cramped conditions and sweated labour reified a quite different concern: an industrious migrant group depriving the native population of work and crowding housing. As the Irish became Anglicised in the decades after their arrival, they were increasingly positioned as part of a larger group sometimes referred to as the ‘residuum’: a squalid, hopeless white working-class who represented the degeneration of British ‘stock’ rather than the corruption of an outsider. In this sense, while the East End overall represented a racialised threat to the wider metropole’s population and economy, this was highly textured according to the perceived characteristics of different communities.

¹⁴ Eitan Bar-Yosef, Nadia Valman ‘Introduction’, in Bar-Yosef, Valman, (eds.), *The Jew in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Culture: Between the East End and East Africa*, (London, 2009), p.17

¹⁵ Schneer, *London, 1900*, pp.18-21

¹⁶ Bar-Yosef; Valman, ‘Introduction’, p.17.

¹⁷ David Glover, *Literature, Immigration and Diaspora in Fin-de-Siecle England: A Cultural History of the 1905 Aliens Act*, (Cambridge, 2012), p.3

In the early twentieth century a local identity flourished in defiance of this stigmatisation among the descendants of Irish migrants. Many residents reimagined the area's dense built environment as fostering an insular, self-reliant community which valued dignified respectability. Locals also employed these characteristics to reimagine their relationship with the nation. First- and second-generation Irish migrants became prominent within early trade union activism in the docks, forging what John Lovell terms 'a close hereditary corporation' based on familial bonds. Yet increasingly, this politics rested on assimilation and the articulation of an English working-class political identity.¹⁸ The son of Irish immigrants, Ben Tillett became a central figure in the 1889 and 1900 dock strikes, a prominent Labour politician, and an outspoken militarist and ethnonationalist.¹⁹ Tillett contributed to the broader production of concern about migration prior to the Aliens Act, telling a Parliamentary committee in 1890 that he had seen 'about 700 foreigners' arrive at Tilbury recently while on work duties.²⁰ Here, white trade unionists increasingly co-opted the politics of the nation both in their direct action and their involvement in parliamentary procedures. More widely, local authorities named landmarks like housing developments after imperial trading routes and ships in the municipal Woolwich Ferry fleet after colonial generals and governors. Empire became prominent within local toponymy.²¹ Many residents valued this connection and pointed through the port to their own communities' facilitation of national strength. In this sense, the defensiveness, parochialism and self-reliance often identified as characteristics of working-class identity were constituted in service to the ideal of the imperial nation. As I have argued elsewhere, white residents of Docklands often derived a sense of dignity and importance in their own and their communities' facilitation of the functioning of the port. This association with the (imperial, racialised) nation often served as a potent counterweight to their material deprivation and stigmatisation in daily life.²²

This was a vernacular reflection of a phenomenon identified by Gareth Stedman-Jones, that the first half of the twentieth century saw a shift in the popular cultural meaning of the 'cockney', from a stigmatised 'signifier of the disputed boundaries of the political nation' to a beloved 'portent of the destiny of empire'. For Stedman-Jones, this shift saw East Enders welcomed into the national community

¹⁸ Lovell quoted in Davis, 'Formation and Reproduction of Dockers', p.547

¹⁹ Satnam Virdee, 'Socialist antisemitism and its discontents in England, 1884-1898', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 51, (3-4, 2017), p.368; Davis, 'Formation and Reproduction of Dockers', p.547; Schmeer, *London, 1900*, p.60

²⁰ Glover, *Literature, Immigration and Diaspora*, p.3

²¹ On housing, see Finn Gleeson, 'Stories from London's Docklands: Heritage Encounters, Deindustrialization and the End of Empire', *Journal of British Studies*, 61, (4, 2022), p.989. On the Woolwich Ferry, see: Tom Cordell, 'Empire State of Mind', in Alberto Duman, Dan Hancox, James Malcolm, Anna Minton, (eds.), *Regeneration Songs: Sounds of Investment and Loss From East London*, (London, 2018), pp.89-114

²² Gleeson, 'Stories from London's Docklands'. Chapter four of this thesis will explore this further.

and cast as patriotic defenders of empire, ‘tradition’ and monarchy.²³ This reached its apotheosis in the mid-century after the East End’s proximity to the docks saw it heavily bombed during the Blitz. Residents’ bravery was widely celebrated, and the ‘cockney’ came to embody the cheerful resistance and siege mentality of the Home Front. As John Davis recently noted, the 1950s and 1960s were periods of relative affluence and stability in Docklands, with a labour shortage granting workers high bargaining power and strong employment options. The area was still relatively homogenous and the gentrification accelerating elsewhere in London had not taken root.²⁴ In these decades, Stedman-Jones argues that ‘cockneys’ enjoyed an ‘Indian Summer’ in their embodiment of an affluent and egalitarian, yet trenchantly socially conservative, British nation. Post-war Labour and Conservative ministers often framed contemporary expansions of the parameters of citizenship through the post-war settlement as a reflection of the state’s reverence for East Enders following their sustained national sacrifice.²⁵ From Victorian representations of these areas as threateningly racially degenerate in part due to the preponderance of Irish Catholic residents, by the mid-twentieth century these migrants’ descendants and their wider communities were racialised as white and imagined as central embodiments of the nation.

Yet the close relationship between cockneys and the post-war welfare state was short-lived. The publication of Michael Young and Peter Wilmott’s *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) was perhaps the definitive moment in narratives of their increasing estrangement. Young and Wilmott blamed the rehousing of residents as part of the post-war welfare state for the erosion of the working-class culture and community which East Enders had come to embody.²⁶ Lise Butler argues that in emphasising residents’ intimate sociability and autonomous self-reliance, Wilmott and Young articulated an organic, vernacular mode of ‘socialist citizenship’. This existed in sharp distinction to statist post-war Labour politics, critiquing alienating policies like comprehensive redevelopment and suburbanisation.²⁷ The demolition of much of the previous century’s housing and its replacement with ostensibly higher quality council flats remained a policy priority until the 1970s. By 1972, 54% of Tower Hamlets dwellings had been built since the war, while the figure for Hackney stood at 36% and Newham 28%.²⁸ Building on such scale necessitated the fundamental reorganisation of neighbourhoods, causing a dislocation which was exacerbated by the enlargement of existing boroughs to create all three local authorities during the

²³ Gareth Stedman-Jones, ‘The ‘Cockney’ and the Nation, 1780-1988’, in Stedman-Jones, David Feldman, (eds.), *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations Since 1800*, (London, 1989), p.279

²⁴ John Davis, *Waterloo Sunrise: London from the Sixties to Thatcher*, (Princeton, 2022), p.217

²⁵ Stedman-Jones, ‘The ‘Cockney’ and the Nation’, pp.314-315

²⁶ Michael Young, Peter Wilmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, (London, 1957)

²⁷ Lise Butler, ‘Michael Young, the Institute of Community Studies, and the Politics of Kinship’, *Twentieth Century British History*, (26.2, 2015), pp.203-224

²⁸ Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and its People*, (London, 2001), p.154

1965 reforms to London government.²⁹ Residents were uprooted from their employment and social networks, and placed in housing which had been constructed cheaply to meet the sheer scale of the task. The completion of these large, often alienating blocks followed long periods of environmental degradation, as the vast slum clearance programme undertaken by local councils left much of the East End in ruins until well into the early 1970s. Derelict areas often attracted congregations of homeless people and alcoholics, causing significant friction with respectable Cockney London and large rises in arrests. Nearly 80 percent of minor cases handled at Tower Hamlets' Leman Street Police Station in 1974 involved 'vagrant alcoholics'.³⁰ These areas' unpopularity and the stigma attached to them led increasingly to disinvestment in and creeping privatisation of council housing. These processes accelerated with the 1977 Housing Act which prioritised the neediest for council housing allocation and the 1980 enactment of Right to Buy, which allowed affluent tenants to buy their properties.³¹ Thus, a process of 'residualisation' accelerated whereby better-off residents bought and later sold their homes, leaving the area; council housing deteriorated, increasingly becoming the preserve of vulnerable, stigmatised tenants.³² By the 1980s council housing was, according to Jerry White, 'a symbol... of dependence on state benefits, of a morass of indebtedness to the council and the moneylender, of isolation from neighbour and kin and society at large'.³³ Housing has become familiar in the historiography of cities and the welfare state as perhaps *the* biggest failure of the post-war settlement, while moments like the 1968 Ronan Point disaster kept East London close to the centre of these narratives.³⁴

Yet historians of Modern Britain have only begun to elucidate the relationships between these developments and the parallel histories of race and nation. We might begin addressing this by considering the language of government 'betrayal' in accounts of the area's post-war redevelopment. Louis Heren, an East Ender who eventually became deputy editor of *The Times*, lamented that post-war planners 'set out to destroy what had survived the bombing. In their arrogant ignorance they destroyed the conditions of Cockney culture, the tight little neighbourhoods, the street markets, the intimate pubs and corner shops.'³⁵ This reference to the Blitz presented East Enders' national sacrifice as the fulfilment of their side of a deal for expanded citizenship which the state had subsequently reneged on. Heren presented the demolition of

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp.387-404

³⁰ Davis, *Waterloo Sunrise*, p.219

³¹ Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: an Intimate History*, (London, 2012), p.123

³² For an overview, see Hanley, *Estates*, p.123

³³ White, *London*, p.73

³⁴ Hanley, *Estates*, p.109.; Hellen Meller, 'Urban Renewal and Citizenship: the Quality of Life in British Cities, 1890-1990', *Urban History*, 22, (1, 1995), p.78; White, *London in the Twentieth-Century*, p.73

³⁵ Quoted in Chris Waters, 'Autobiography, Nostalgia and the Changing Practices of Working-class Selfhood', in Goerge Behlmer, Fred Leventhal, (eds.), *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia and Identity in Modern British Culture*, (Stanford, 2000), p.180

the built environment which fostered working-class culture's fundamental respectability and sociability as instrumental in these qualities' disappearance from Britain's cities more broadly. After this, the East End which epitomised mid-century social harmony was lost and replaced once more by an area marked by anomie and squalor.

Contemporary economic contraction was crucial in affecting this change. The closures of all but one of the Port of London's docks between 1967 and 1981 brought employment there from 31,000 in 1950 to 2,300 in 1982, and were the definitive moments in the broader region's deindustrialisation.³⁶ The persistent structural issue of the docks' inaccessibility upriver had caused London to lose business to coastal ports elsewhere in the UK from the late nineteenth-century, while the increasing technical advances of competitors throughout Europe exacerbated this in the post-war period.³⁷ Yet one London County Council (LCC) report noted that the port continued in the early twentieth-century to increase its share of the import trade from 'British possessions'. This suggests that London, to a greater extent than other British ports, was reliant on colonial trade for its continuing viability into the twentieth century.³⁸ The docks' closure, in turn, followed the erosion of this close colonial relationship as London continued to fall behind other British and European ports technologically. Prevailing national narratives surrounding the closures centred on outdated handling practices and union militancy. Unofficial labour struggles against the 1967 Devlin Report's recommendations for partial decasualisation, and the 1972 jailing of five dockworkers for protesting the threat wrought by 'containerisation', received national attention. The latter became a *cause célèbre* for those opposing the tightening of union restrictions, and is often cited as instrumental in the defeat of Ted Heath's 1972 Industrial Relations Bill.³⁹ From the rising tide of trade unionism which this encapsulated, historians of Modern Britain pointed first to a 'crisis' of social democracy and, more recently, an increasingly strident and anti-deferential working class's refusal to acquiesce to a compromise with capital.⁴⁰ More fundamentally, however, London's docks might show us the increasing anachronism of a port constructed to service the protected markets of the world's largest imperium through a highly exploited, expendable workforce.

³⁶ Janet Foster, *Docklands: Cultures in Conflict, Worlds in Collision*, (London, 1999), p.206

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp.38-41

³⁸ Schneer, *London, 1900*, p.42.

³⁹ Dave Lyddon, "'Glorious Summer', 1972: The High Tide of Rank and File Militancy', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, John McIlroy, (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol.2: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-1979*, (Aldershot, 1999), p.339

⁴⁰ Particularly useful here is Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28, (2, 2017). On 'crisis', see pp.269-271. On trade-unionism and deference, see pp.282-289

The loss of the international trade and industry which had forged the area held implications for its wider economy. 24,000 manufacturing jobs disappeared from Tower Hamlets and Newham between 1965 and 1975, and 75,000 jobs overall between 1971 and 1981.⁴¹ Six of Newham's ten largest firms closed between 1975 and 1981, with the large proportion reliant on the shipping of raw materials and goods particularly acutely affected. Tate and Lyle, a leading local employer who were embedded in colonial markets, made 3,000 redundancies in East London in the late 1970s.⁴² The closure of the railheads which made Hackney a secondary nexus for the domestic distribution of shipped materials and goods exacerbated the downturn further north. The borough's manufacturing jobs fell by 40% between 1973 and 1981, with unemployment particularly acute among Afro-Caribbeans and young people.⁴³ Failing commerce and declining tax revenues contributed to the overall physical deterioration of the built environment; derelict land in Tower Hamlets almost quintupled, from fifty-seven hectares in 1964 to 277 in 1977.⁴⁴

Deindustrialisation coincided with the advent of migration from the former Empire to London. Kennetta Hammond-Perry notes that early arrivals from the Caribbean claimed ownership of and belonging to Britain, as a natural continuation of their membership of its imperial family. Yet this popular colonial belief jarred with the prevailing metropolitan discourse of Black incivility. This encounter between the colonised and their imperial masters is key for Hammond Perry in understanding the structural and quotidian racisms which the former subsequently experienced at the hands of the latter.⁴⁵ 100,000 West Indians arrived in London by the 1960s, and 30,000 West Africans by 1971, with Hackney becoming one of the major sites of Black settlement.⁴⁶ More than 90,000 Bengali migrants arrived by 1962, overwhelmingly from the district of Sylhet in then-East Pakistan, and settling around Spitalfields. This population built on the centuries-long foundation laid by lascars in establishing communities near the port.⁴⁷

A growing body of sociological, journalistic, and political commentary responded to these demographic and economic developments, beginning in the immediate post-war years, but with increased urgency from the late 1960s. This narrative constructed the spectre of the depressed, deteriorating and

⁴¹ Marriott, *Beyond the Tower*, p.343

⁴² White, *London*, pp.206-7

⁴³ Paul Harrisson, *Inside the Inner City: Life Under the Cutting Edge*, (London, 1983), p.131

⁴⁴ White, *London*, pp.206-7

⁴⁵ Kennetta Hammond-Perry, *London is the Place for me: Black Britons, Citizenship and The Politics of Race*, (Oxford, 2016), p.6

⁴⁶ White, *London*, p.133

⁴⁷ White, *London*, pp.138-9

dangerous ‘inner city’ in Britain, as a locus of poverty, economic stagnation, racial disharmony, and criminality. For James Rhodes and Laurence Brown, the intellectual genesis of this lay in the development from the late 1940s of a branch of sociology concerned with ‘race relations’. This stressed the need to manage interactions between the white majority and new arrivals from the Commonwealth to prevent urban discord.⁴⁸ In his pioneering study of this intellectual movement, Chris Waters notes that post-war sociologists’ association of Black migrants with squalid, disordered living was reliant on the welcoming of the white working-class into the national community.⁴⁹ Earlier through Irish and Jewish arrivals, and later Asians and Afro-Caribbeans, the attribution of vice and squalor to migrant communities continued to animate larger anxieties about those communities undermining the nation’s purity. This only accelerated from the late 1960s, as the economy contracted and postcolonial migration increased. Then, commentators and municipal authorities inextricably linked unemployment, the built environment’s deterioration, poverty and social unrest to the presence of Commonwealth migrants.⁵⁰

This was particularly evident in East London, where both cultural discourse and local government policy were influenced by the racism of the imperial past in complex and inconsistent ways. The characterisation of South Asians as insanitary and predisposed to overcrowding, a trope of imperial discourse many residents were exposed to in childhood, remained tied to migrants from the subcontinent in post-war Britain.⁵¹ Such perceptions underwrote a concerted effort by Tower Hamlets and the Greater London Council (GLC) to tackle the social conditions prevailing in Spitalfields in the early 1980s by relocating Bengali council tenants to other parts of the borough, attempting to disperse them and moderate their perceived influence.⁵² Yet simultaneously, other areas of the borough locked Bengali tenants out of council flats by vocally prioritising ‘local’ (a coded term for white) applicants, given their longer history of residence. As a result, many Bengalis were moved into ‘hard-to-let’, cheaply constructed and sometimes structurally unsound homes, often in hostile white-majority neighbourhoods.⁵³ Taken together, these policies simultaneously dispersed Bengalis due to old colonial conceptions of their propensity for squalor, and denied that the state had any responsibility or historic connection to them.

⁴⁸ James Rhodes, Laurence Brown, ‘The Rise and Fall of the ‘Inner City’: Race, Space and Urban Policy in Postwar England’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44, (17, 2019), pp.3245

⁴⁹ Chris Waters, ‘‘Dark Strangers’ in our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963’, *Journal of British Studies*, 36, (2, 1997), 225.

⁵⁰ Rhodes, Brown, ‘Rise and Fall of the ‘Inner City’, pp.3243-3244.

⁵¹ John Marriott, *The Other Empire: Metropolis, India and the Colonial Imagination*, (Manchester, 2013), pp.160-184; John Eade, *The Politics of Community: the Bangladeshi Community in East London*, (Aldershot, 1989), pp.130-133.

⁵² Eade, *Politics of Community*, pp.132-133

⁵³ *Ibid.*

These contradictory tendencies also sit together in cultural responses to Bengalis' presence. Paul Harrison's *Inside the Inner City* (1983), a journalistic account which used Hackney as a microcosm of this national phenomenon, evoked in an apparently 'typical' local council estate the arrival in London of an exotic, colonial other. Harrison wrote: 'the odours of the world's cuisines, the scents of exotic spices, the smell of poor meat and fried fish mingle into a sickly stench that seeps into every flat'.⁵⁴ Here, food signified orientalised, unrefined and squalid cultures, capturing sensorially the essential cultural degeneration migrants were believed to provoke. Yet at other points, the significance of race in these relationships was downplayed. Discussing tensions between white and Asian residents and the allocation of housing, Tower Hamlets officers noted that complaints about the smell of Asian cooking which were frequently made to the council were 'not racist but merely traditional'.⁵⁵ In making this seemingly natural concession to 'tradition', the body responsible for allocating resources and housing legitimised a visceral aversion toward seemingly alien cultures as the basis of policy. The treatment of local Asian residents oscillated between reproducing orientalist perceptions of them and denying the relevance of race, or their longer relationship with Britain, to make parochial claims about the protection of 'local' residents and norms. In discourse and policy around Bengalis, housing and race in the 'inner-city', Empire was both present and absent, evoked and obscured in quick succession.

Afro-Caribbean migrants, and particularly men, were seen to pose a different threat altogether. Paul Harrison reported on one elderly white woman's description of her council estate:

I still say that Hackney Borough Council are traitors, because they brought in people they should never have... The worst for me are those girls that are in there [the flat next door] now... There's loads of men go in, huge great black men. They play loud music, they've got a pool table in there, you can hear the balls pinging, they've even got a red light in there... I never, ever thought I'd be brought down to living like this, having to hear all the goings-on in there... I feel contaminated.⁵⁶

If Bangladeshis embodied physical deterioration and squalor, Black men in particular were hyper-sexualised, criminal figures linked to moral vice and the breakdown of law and order. The language of 'betrayal' returned here, more overtly racialised than before, framing white residents' forced cohabitation with Black people as an injustice following their service to the nation and ownership of the area. Migrants thus embodied the breakdown of various aspects of the social and legal fabric of British society. As the imagined epicentre of the 'crisis' of the 'inner cities' the East End was central to this discourse's resurgence. As with its late-Victorian antecedent it was animated by the arrival through London's port of

⁵⁴ Harrison, *Inside the Inner City*, p.229

⁵⁵ Eade, *Politics of Community*, p.135

⁵⁶ Harrison, *Inside the Inner City*, p.237

immigrant groups whose presence corrupted the national community and seemed to embody its moral decline.

Another significant development in the relationship was the resurgent narrative of a pathologised, degenerate white population. Lynsey Hanley's account of white residents of a post-war housing estate in the East End during the 1990s is illustrative here. They were, she noted, 'drunk to a man and woman', spending their days 'clobber[ing] one another with cans of special brew' while young mothers 'wander[ed] in circles all day between the off-license, the pub and, when hungry, the chip shop'.⁵⁷ Like some of her nineteenth century predecessors, Hanley wrote with sympathetic intentions. But these descriptions served to pathologise her subjects' poverty, constructing a neurosis which was native to the estates of the redeveloped inner city. In contrast to the utopian ambitions of the post-war settlement, this built environment brought out vices in residents' innate character which seemed responsible for the perpetuation of their material deprivation. Hanley argued that, though these *Estates* had been constructed for the enfranchised, respectable working-class citizens of mid-century, their flaws had created a process of moral and physical 'decline' leaving behind a pathological, residualised population. That Hanley was advocating greater investment in more effective welfare systems did not prevent her from stigmatising the poor. Harrison, whose work on Hackney shared both Hanley's stated sympathy and its tendency towards pathologisation, remarked 'how many of Charles Booth's comments are still applicable to Modern Hackney', before framing the conditions of local residents as a 'sickness' infecting the entire British 'body-politic'.⁵⁸ As in the late nineteenth-century, East London once more reified anxieties around social degeneration nationwide; implicitly and explicitly, Hanley and Harrison suggested the threat that the symptoms there would spread if untreated. The contrast between this white population and the 'respectable', patriotic Cockneys of mid-century was stark, while the distaste of the latter for the changes the East End underwent is reflected in their huge departure in the post-war period. East Enders were disproportionately represented in the 22% of London's white population in 1971 who had left ten years later.⁵⁹ Of the 40,000, for instance, who left Hackney alone in the 1970s a large majority were white.⁶⁰ Bill Schwarz advocates a close reading of Cockney émigrés' frequent complaints about the prevalence of 'problem families' and 'outsiders' propelling the area's 'downhill' trajectory. Schwarz suggests that such

⁵⁷ Hanley, *Estates*, p.9

⁵⁸ Harrison, *Inside the Inner City*, p.21

⁵⁹ White, *London*, p.155

⁶⁰ Harrison, *Inside the Inner City*, p.371

complaints reveal a localised, vernacular participation in a contemporary conservative discourse of moral and physical ‘decline’ nationally.⁶¹

By the beginning of this study’s period, then, East London had become the site of vast, globally influenced, transformations within British society. Through the port the area had always complicated the relationships between centre and periphery, and metropole and colony, which were crucial to imperial discourse. Whereas Irish residents had previously been racialised, stigmatised and excluded from the nation, in the early and mid-twentieth century their descendants were, after assimilation and wartime sacrifice, increasingly welcomed and valorised. From a threat to the imperial race they later embodied the egalitarian nation. Yet this coincided with a contraction in the port’s business and a diminishment in its status as industrial base of and gateway to the Empire. The environmental decay which began with the Blitz accelerated from the late 1950s with comprehensive redevelopment and was accompanied from 1967 by the protracted closure of the docks and thereafter, the wider region’s deindustrialisation. Larger numbers of New Commonwealth migrants arrived, building on the early communities established by their colonial predecessors, and taking up residence in crumbling pre-war neighbourhoods and unpopular redeveloped ones. First social scientists, and later cultural commentators and policy makers, framed these arrivals as breaking up mid-century social harmony, spreading squalor and vice, and living listlessly in poverty; in short, as embodying national decline. In racialised discourse surrounding Afro-Caribbean and Bengali migrants and their effect on the area, the position of the imperial past oscillated. Sometimes, these migrants appeared to bring back the squalor of the colonial frontier. At other points councillors denied the salience of racism, excluding migrants on the grounds of apparent ‘common-sense’ and denials of their historical relationship to the area. Vast numbers of the ‘respectable’ Cockney working-class left the capital for Kent and Essex, and those who remained appeared to succumb to the malaise of their urban surroundings. These were the economic and social developments, and dominant cultural discourses, shaping the emergence of post-imperial East London. But what was the political response, and what role did memory play?

Urban and Cultural Policy

In order to grasp the influence of state funds on the production of heritage in London, we must first survey interconnected shifts in urban and cultural policy between 1973 and 2008. Three major political forces reshaped London in this period; the New Urban Left, the conservatisms most frequently

⁶¹ Bill Schwarz, ‘Where Horses Shit a Thousand Sparrows Feed : Docklands and East London During The Thatcher Years’, In John Corner, Sylvia Harvey, (eds.), *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, (London, 1991), p.82

characterised as Thatcherism, and the socially and economically liberal ‘third way’ politics of New Labour. The earliest of these formations, the New Urban Left and Thatcherism, encountered a deindustrialising, social democratic city experiencing significant urban decay with racial exclusion built into its economy and cultural institutions. By the early twenty-first century, their policies and those of later Labour administrations helped a rapidly expanding, financial and service-based economy – strongly committed to market principles - to emerge. Racial, gendered and sexual diversity were increasingly central values of public life, while the resolution of structural economic inequity was in large part no longer accepted as a concern of the state. In much of East London, wages stagnated and people of colour especially remained disproportionately exposed to unemployment, precarity and poverty.

In this thesis I follow other historians of Britain in referring to the municipal socialist councils of the 1980s, as well as the direct-action groups they supported, as the ‘New Urban Left’. Ken Livingstone’s ascent to leadership of the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1981 provided prominent and coherent political leadership to several strands of radicalism which had been developing in London (and Britain’s cities more widely) since the late 1960s. The council combined social democratic economic policies, consisting of the quashed ‘Fares fair’ programme of transport subsidies and investment in industrial regeneration through the Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB), with a new commitment to the marginalised. For the first time among elected Labour politicians of any kind, the GLC and other radical municipal councils consistently supported anti-racist and anti-colonial politics, feminism and advocacy for gay men and lesbians.⁶² As Adam Lent notes, this was pursued through three primary means. First, the council adopted hiring practices aiming for more diverse workforces within its own staff. Second, it organised set-piece public campaigns aiming to promote these politics throughout the capital, such as May Day, Peace Year, Jobs for a Change Festival, and London against Racism. Finally, and of particular interest to this thesis, it consciously oversaw large increases in the quantity of public money given to groups working towards more equal futures for the minoritised.⁶³ Through the Council’s Arts Committee, overseen by councillor Tony Banks, a significant portion of this funding was given to cultural groups with the goal of stimulating working-class, feminist, anti-racist and anti-homophobic solidarities through arts.⁶⁴ The Arts Committee sat organisationally within the GLEB, reflecting the conceptualisation of culture both as a means of fomenting radical solidarities and of stimulating redevelopment in depressed areas.⁶⁵

⁶² Stewart Lansley, Sue Goss, Christian Wolmar, *Councils in Conflict: The Rise and Fall of the Municipal Left*, (Basingstoke, 1989), p.51.

⁶³ Adam Lent, ‘The Labour Left, Local Authorities and New Social Movements in the Eighties’, *Contemporary Politics*, 7, (1, 2001), pp.7-8.

⁶⁴ Hazel Atashroo, *Beyond the ‘Campaign for a Popular Culture’: Community Art, Activism and Cultural Democracy in 1980s London*, (PhD thesis, University of Southampton, 2017), p.77.

⁶⁵ Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940*, (London, 1997), p.280.

Recipients of this funding included the community arts and publishing movement, which grew out of the broader tradition of community activism. In the post-war period community activism was linked by the 1970s to Black, feminist and gay politics, but as a tradition it was more organisationally and temporally diffuse than these post-1968 movements. Originating with the Communist Party of Great Britain in the 1930s and revived by the New Left in the 1950s, this particular tradition of community activism was important in establishing institutions to address exploitative landlordism, a lack of amenities or safe leisure spaces, and quotidian and structural racism.⁶⁶ In the post-war period, the failure of bureaucratic, stagnant councils dominated by an older generation of Labour councillors to deal with these specific urban deprivations led to another rise in activists challenging them electorally and taking direct action like squatting.⁶⁷ Community activism, then, challenged both the white working-class man's central position as the animating figure of left politics and relatedly, the Labour party's failure to engage with the specific forms of racial and gendered disadvantage arising in cities. Livingstone's GLC, meanwhile, brought these concerns into Labour politics and local government, giving grant aid back to Black, feminist and gay political organisations. Of particular interest to this thesis are community publishing and history projects. Often heavily reliant on GLC funding, these groups produced literature which advocated for local residents, providing cultural support for the broader community activist movement. By the 1970s and 1980s, community activist and publishing organisations often served profoundly diverse areas, and the relative positions of class, race and gender in their politics remained a source of contention.

A competing response to the 'inner city' in the early 1980s came from Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. Thatcher's rhetoric on cities constructed a morass of listlessness and immorality and sought to discipline the local authorities responsible. Thatcherites blamed the radical councils of the 'loony left' – foremost among them the GLC – for exacerbating inflation and hindering enterprise, while supporting campaigning groups implicated in the breakdown of the social order. Race was a powerful, if implicit, force here. If the New Urban Left sought to identify and combat the place of racism in everyday British culture, then - as Paul Gilroy notes - the potency of narratives of 'the riotous 'inner city' and ... the 'loony left' lay in their capacity to 'speak about race without mentioning the word', linking the stridency of minorities to the disintegration of the majority culture.⁶⁸ For Gilroy, race

⁶⁶ Camilla Schofield, Ben Jones 'Whatever Community is, this is not it': Notting Hill and the Reconstruction of 'Race' in Britain After 1958', *Journal of British Studies*, 58, (1, 2019), pp.142-173.

⁶⁷ John Davis, 'Community and the Labour Left in 1970s London', in Chris Williams, Andrew Edwards, (eds.), *The Art of the Possible: Politics and Governance in Modern British History, 1885-1997*, (Manchester, 2015), p.219

⁶⁸ Paul Gilroy, 'The End of Anti-Racism', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 17, (1, 1990), pp.71-74

‘rendered the national crisis intelligible’, becoming one of the ‘central’, ‘emphatic’ animating forces of the late-century Thatcherite revolution, even when it was not mentioned directly.⁶⁹

Thatcher’s urban policy was, then, both a reflection of her wider economic policy and a reaction against cities’ social and moral decline. As E.H.H. Green and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite have shown respectively, the Thatcherite policies of monetarism and social security reform were not driven by an economic rationality but a moralistic desire to encourage thrift, self-reliance and personal dynamism.⁷⁰ After seeking to limit the taxation and spending plans of the GLC and other radical city councils first through ‘rate-capping’ and outlawing the operation of a budget deficit, her government scheduled their abolition for 1986. In place of the GLC’s policies, the Thatcher government established several Urban Development Corporations (UDC), of which the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) was the flagship. This scheme relaxed planning procedures and tax exemptions for corporations willing to invest in deteriorating urban areas, eschewing state-led investment and social housing and re-centring the market as a mechanism to drive redevelopment.⁷¹ The LDDC requisitioned 8.5 square miles of Newham, Tower Hamlets and Southwark from these local authorities to act on behalf of central government.⁷² The language surrounding this policy drew heavily on the earlier pathologisation of the inner city. Chancellor Geoffrey Howe’s description of the area as an ‘urban wilderness’ for instance, alluded to a loss of purpose and direction and perhaps more significantly, a breakdown of law and order.⁷³ The Docklands was transformed into a financial and professional services haven, attracting hugely increased numbers of professionals and prompting the development of luxury housing for them to live in. The LDDC offered little for the area’s older, lower-income population either in terms of secure employment, new housing, or renewal of the existing stock.⁷⁴ Thatcherite urban policy, then, dismantled the funding arrangements of community arts and publishing groups. Yet as I will show, the LDDC and private developers invested in community groups and museums as a means, respectively, of repairing often fractious relationships with communities and celebrating their achievements in public.

By the late 1980s, the GLC’s initiatives to increase Black and Asian representation in cultural production and public office had made a significant impact. The Labour Party of the 1990s and 2000s

⁶⁹ Gilroy, *There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack: the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (London, 1987), pp.45-7

⁷⁰ E.H.H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in The Twentieth Century*, (Oxford, 2002), p.212; Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, ‘Neo-liberalism and Morality in The Making of Thatcherite Social Policy’, *The Historical Journal*, (55.2, 2012), pp.497-520

⁷¹ Sam Wetherell, ‘Freedom Planned: Enterprise Zones and Urban Non-planning in Post-war Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 27, (2, 2016), p.267

⁷² White, *London*, p.78

⁷³ Wetherell, ‘Freedom Planned’, p.267

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pp.65-66

continued to pursue a version of this policy, marrying it to the liberalised approach to urban redevelopment which characterised the Conservative party. A Labour Tower Hamlets council with strong Bengali presence oversaw the commercialised redevelopment of depressed Spitalfields, beginning the area's gradual gentrification. The essential components of the UDC policy were also maintained in Labour's 'City Challenge' programme, which led notably to the beginning of the long redevelopment of Stratford, culminating in the 2012 Olympics. Luxury accommodation proliferated, as did large, high-rent commercial developments such as Stratford City Westfield. Culture was a crucial aspect of Labour's plan to regenerate the inner city. The Major government had consciously overseen an increase in expenditure on the arts through the creation of the National Lottery, prioritising geographic areas and cultural forms – including heritage – otherwise likely to be neglected.⁷⁵ The Blair government's theorisation and development of the 'creative industries' sought, in more explicit and conscious terms, to support projects in depressed urban areas which served marginalised and economically disadvantaged communities.⁷⁶ As noted earlier with the GLC, investment in culture became a means of simultaneously reviving urban economies and, through cultural representation, ameliorating the stigma and alienation deriving from their depression. In politics more broadly, individual success and interpersonal harmony became hallmarks of an effective anti-racist politics, in place of the revolutionary calls for structural transformation of earlier social movements.

Adam Lent and Anandi Ramamurthy argue this feature of New Labour policy, which they view as markedly depoliticising, had been present since the GLC's emphasis on increasing the workforce's diversity.⁷⁷ In its early twenty-first century form, it received more persistent and vocal criticism from radical scholars. Gilroy notes that the ascent of a statistically insignificant number of Black people to the top of Britain's economic and political structures obfuscated the racism inherent within those structures to begin with.⁷⁸ Georgie Wemyss notes that the liberal discourse of 'tolerance' served to emphasise the benevolence of the white majority, make the presence of Asian, Caribbean and West African Britons conditional on that benevolence, and therein obscure their longer historical relationship with Britain.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ For an overview of Stratford City Challenge's approach, see Simonia Florio, Michael Edwards, 'Urban Regeneration in Stratford, London', *Planning Practice & Research*, 16, (2, 2001), pp.101-120

⁷⁶ Jonathan Gross, 'The Birth of the Creative Industries Revisited: An Oral History of the 1998 DCMS Mapping Document', Kings College London, (2008), p.16. Last accessed 18th October, 2022, at www.kcl.ac.uk/cmci/assets/report.pdf

⁷⁷ Anandi Ramamurthy, 'The Politics of Britain's Asian Youth Movements', *Race and Class*, 48, (2, 2006), pp.55-60; Lent, 'The Labour Left', p.21.

⁷⁸ Paul Gilroy, 'We got to get Over Before we go Under: Fragments for a History of Black Vernacular Neoliberalism', *New Formations*, 80, (2013), p.25.

⁷⁹ Georgie Wemyss, 'The Power to Tolerate: Contests over Britishness and Belonging in East London', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40, (3, 2006), p.236; Wemyss, *The Invisible Empire: White Discourse, Tolerance and Belonging*, (Abingdon, 2016).

The Institute for Community Studies' publication of *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict* in 2006, a follow-up to *Family and Kinship in East London*, demonstrates the pertinence of Wemyss's observation. *The New East End* criticised government's overly generous offering to Bengali migrants in the new millennium, blaming this for the emergence of 'conflict' between entitled Bengalis and white residents.⁸⁰ As Chapter Six of this dissertation shows, this reformulated racism rested on historical amnesia to urge the defence of the liberal, enlightened state from illiberal, insular and entitled migrant populations.

As this suggests, political upheavals had dramatic effects on changes to cultural production. Under different political formations culture served variously to articulate the exclusionary social and economic structures which its practitioners' hoped to see dismantled, to articulate a vision for a new, radically transformed society, to stimulate depressed local urban economies, and to offer a form of symbolic cultural inclusion at a time of material exclusion. Histories of cultural production must, therefore, be attentive to both individual case-studies' relationship with their urban surroundings and the motivations and material influences of their funders.

'Authorisation' and The Politics of Heritage

Heritage is no exception to this. Gaining a close understanding of heritage projects' complex relationships with funders from the state and in politics is necessary to understand the genesis of narratives, and the subsequent constraints on both the quantitative scope and qualitative nature of museums and community heritage organisations' work. Historians of contemporary Britain who study heritage have been centrally focused on their subjects' politics, but their methodology has primarily centred on a form of discourse analysis in which the material political forces influencing practitioners are given insufficient attention. This generates an understanding of the political divisions here as being primarily (but not exclusively) between two separate 'forms' of heritage. Museums, on one hand, served the interests of a state which was most often conservative but sometimes practiced an individualistic liberalism; community publishing groups, on the other, were perceived as radical and oppositional. This thesis questions this approach by exploring the more complex, contingent relations between heritage practitioners and the three political formations discussed above. Doing so, it seeks a fuller account of the interests shaping the heritage industry, and – by extension – influencing the forms of imperial memory articulated in late-twentieth and early twenty-first century London.

⁸⁰ Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron, Michael Young, *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict*, (London, 2006).

From the 1980s and 1990s, a first wave of heritage scholarship among historians of Modern Britain conceived the industry's growth as a broadly conservative phenomenon, supporting the contemporary rightward shift in politics and economics. Two strands emerged here. The first reified an anxiety, perhaps closer to Enoch Powell than Margaret Thatcher, about the erosion of traditional social hierarchies. Peter Mandler argues that sections of the aristocracy sought from the late 1970s to reassert their claim to culturally embody the nation, responding to their sustained loss of economic status following a centuries-long decline in agricultural profitability and a post-war inheritance tax. For Mandler, the marked subsequent emergence of country homes as a leisure destination, supported by organisations like the National Trust, constituted a reclamation of this authority. In flocking to these attractions, the public signalled their agreement about their importance as sites of national culture.⁸¹ Patrick Wright conflates this development's essentially high Tory resonance with the anxieties of several other forms of conservatism. For Wright, the rising salience of the past in British culture in the 1980s reflected a lament for economic 'decline', the 'persistence of imperialist forms of self-understanding', the 'continued existence of the crown and so much related residual ceremony' and nostalgia for the purpose, harmony and righteousness symbolised by the Second World War. All these conservative narratives, for Wright, existed 'in service of the nation... all other nostalgia really serves as a proxy for the nation.'⁸² Robert Hewison focused, meanwhile, on the dramatic emergence of industrial heritage museums in the early 1980s, which he framed as locking Britain in a 'climate of decline', in which nostalgia for a more cohesive, industrial society perpetuated reactionary social values, precluding any meaningful thought about economic renewal or social justice.⁸³ These scholars focused variously on a jingoistic longing for the imperial past, a time when British industry and engineering powered the nation's pre-eminent economy, and nostalgia for older forms of social hierarchy and pastoral national identities. Yet they were united in framing the rise of heritage organisations as supporting the contemporary resurgence of conservatism. They did not root their analysis in an account of these heritage organisations' material connections to politics or the state. With the exception of some of Wright's case-studies, they also exclusively studied institutionally secure, professionalised organisations, such as country houses or museums. Together, they establish a perception of these forms of heritage organisation as naturally allied to conservative politics, without a close or sustained account of the financial dynamics of those connections.

A later literature emphasised instead the use of memory in left politics from the 1970s. Explicitly rejecting Wright and Hewison's analyses, Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* argued for the

⁸¹ Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, (New Haven, 1997), pp.401-419.

⁸² Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*, (London, 1985), p.25.

⁸³ Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, (London, 1987), p.10.

pervasiveness of a vernacular ‘popular memory’, which was ‘a social form of knowledge; the work... of a thousand different hands’. Samuel argued that such a bottom-up focus would facilitate a more tangible understanding of ‘the perceptions of the past which find expression in the discriminations of everyday life’ and in radical politics, moving beyond the ‘state theatricals’ of the ‘ruling classes’.⁸⁴ *Theatres of Memory* was an academic counterpart to Samuel’s decades-long commitment to History Workshop, a movement to bring together worker and academic historians as equals to produce and discuss social history nationwide. Over the 1970s local workshop groups spread across Britain, spawning tens of projects, authoring booklets, pamphlets and journals, with the clear intention of democratising history, providing a usable past to communities engaged in struggle.⁸⁵ History Workshop was closely related to community publishing; as Chapters Two and Four of this thesis will show, many activists were involved in both. Building practically and intellectually on Samuel’s work, later historians have studied the community publishing movement and its radical politics, while adopting more critical interpretations. Tom Woodin traces the rise of the national Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP). ‘The Fed’ brought together scores of local groups who sought both to challenge the exclusionary parameters of cultural merit within the ‘mainstream’, and to foment a class solidarity among their members and communities which carried revolutionary potential.⁸⁶ Chris Waters notes the ubiquity of ‘nostalgia’ in narratives of a range of local constituent groups, as well as the differences in preferred content and tone between (activist) facilitators and (resident) participants.⁸⁷ Ben Jones denies that ‘nostalgia’ was ubiquitous, but suggests that where it was present it served to rescue the communities of the working-class past from stigmatisation and critique the increasingly alienating present.⁸⁸ Woodin, and Sam Wetherell, both trace the increasing divergence of the identities being articulated; while The Fed and many local groups initially sought to emphasise class, they moved increasingly towards alternative political identities like race and gender. Wetherell also notes the increasingly individualistic timbre of many publications, finding in these twin developments a working-class who were ‘present at their own unmaking’.⁸⁹ Though these scholars trace limitations in these cultural projects, they reify the notion that the politics of these community groups, existing outside and in conscious opposition to secure,

⁸⁴ John McAleer, Sarah Longair, ‘Introduction’, in Longair, McAleer, (eds.), *Curating Empire: Museums and the British Imperial Experience*, (Manchester, 2012), p.2.

⁸⁵ Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Post-war Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, (Durham, N.C., 1997), pp.184-5.

⁸⁶ Tom Woodin, *Working-class Writing and Publishing in the Late Twentieth Century: Literature, Culture and Community*, (Manchester, 2018)

⁸⁷ Waters, ‘Autobiography, Nostalgia’, pp.178-195

⁸⁸ Ben Jones, ‘The Uses of Nostalgia: Autobiography, Community Publishing and Working-class Neighbourhoods in Post-war England’, *Cultural and Social History*, (7.3, 2010), pp.355-374

⁸⁹ Sam Wetherell, ‘Painting the Crisis: Community Arts and the Search for the ‘Ordinary’ in 1970s and ‘80s London’, *History Workshop Journal*, 76, (1, 2013), p.247.

established institutions, were of the left. This dissertation tells a more complex, contingent story, placing these phenomena more firmly within the politics of the late-twentieth-century London left and considering the place of Empire within participants' life-narratives.

The binary established between 'elite' museums and radical community heritage groups becomes more complicated in studies of the 1990s and 2000s. This was, partly, a result of the changes heralded by practitioners involved in the 'new museology' (and the more radical 'critical museology'), which noted that collection policies, object interpretations and gallery narratives were not neutral, but actively shaped perceptions of history in ways which influenced the present.⁹⁰ Many of the theorists of this new museology were also professional practitioners, seeking to construct a more inclusive museum practice. As Chapter Five of this thesis will show, this development led in some instances to the reimagining of museums' entire historical narratives, and more commonly, the production of more accessible captions and interactive displays. This dovetailed with the Major and Blair governments' reconceptualisation of the arts as a means to both promote economic growth and urban renewal and ameliorate the alienation of the marginalised through cultural representation. To this effect, Bella Dicks' study of the Rhondda Valley traces the creation in the former coalfield of an open-air museum, narrating both the transition from an industrial to service-based economy and the frequent tension between curators and the communities which the project celebrated but often creatively marginalised.⁹¹ Laura Carter asserts that late-century local museums provided a space where 'subjective historical experiences could be discovered and remade, servicing the emotional needs of their audiences'. Carter argues that such rituals of attendance aided adjustment to deindustrialisation, supporting the needs of the individual and the polity.⁹² Emily Robinson charts a shift in industrial heritage projects in the late 1980s from constituting 'a radical campaign to challenge elitist narratives of national history' to participating in 'a widespread and politically ambiguous search for roots' thereafter.⁹³ While Carter seeks to challenge the critical interpretation of earlier heritage scholars, Robinson appears more uncertain of the therapeutic guise of industrial heritage from the 1990s. Yet both agree: heritage which on one level welcomed the economically excluded into cultural projections of the national community also served to normalise a new, resolutely post-industrial, economy.

⁹⁰ Peter Vergo, (eds.), *The New Museology*, (London, this edn., 2011), p.8. See also Anthony Shelton, 'Critical Museology: A Manifesto', *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*, 1, (1, 2013), pp.7-9

⁹¹ Bella Dicks, *Heritage, Place and Community*, (Cardiff, 2000)

⁹² Laura Carter, 'Rethinking Folk Culture in Twentieth-century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (4, 2017), p.568-9

⁹³ Emily Robinson, 'Inspirations and obligations: remembering the industrial past in Modern Britain', in Peter Itzen, Christian Muller, (eds.), *The Invention of Industrial Pasts: Remembering the Industrial Past in Modern Britain and Germany*, (Augsburg, 2013), p.114

While scholarship on earlier forms of heritage rarely paid sustained attention to imperial memory, some work on the 1990s and 2000s began to. Stuart Hall, Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo here produced work which closely resembled Gilroy and Wemyss's critiques of the 'liberal multiculturalism' of this period more generally. For Littler and Naidoo, while the 'uncritical imperialist' memory of empire as essentially benevolent was by the early twenty-first century relatively rare, it had been replaced firstly by a tokenistic framework which gave 'minorities' a small place in narratives separated from the 'mainstream', and secondly by an outlook they defined as 'white past, multicultural present'. This treated migration as a recent phenomenon unconnected to any longer history, celebrating liberal Britain's acceptance of a previously alien people and its gift to them of wealth, welfare and cultural acceptance.⁹⁴ In his keynote lecture 'Whose Heritage?' in 1999, Stuart Hall made a similar argument, addressing the government's nascent interest in 'diversity' and 'inclusion'. Hall dismissed the efficacy of such a policy without a deep-seated shift in prevailing conceptions of what constituted British history. He argued,

The majority, mainstream versions of The Heritage should revise their own self-conceptions and rewrite the margins into the centre, the outside into the inside. This is not so much a matter of representing 'us' as of representing more adequately the degree to which 'their' history entails and has always implicated 'us', across the centuries.⁹⁵

Here, Hall called for the final abandonment of an account of British history as 'our island story'. In its place, he asserted the need for a narrative which was global, imperial, and economically, culturally and politically connected. This was not about achieving some semblance of tolerance or inclusion, but was necessary for a full understanding of British modernity and nationhood. In this analysis, though museums and more institutionally secure forms of heritage sought more representation of communities of colour, they did so in a superficial way which was devoid of any serious engagement with the histories leading to these communities' presence in Britain. Though Carter is more sympathetic to the new goals of heritage, she agrees with Dicks, Robinson, Hall, Littler and Naidoo that reform of practice in this period did not prevent museums from aiding the process of adjustment to deindustrialisation or the construction of a new, liberal multiculturalism.

These distinct bodies of scholarship have given an aggregate image of established and institutionally secure museums which served the goals of the state, whether those goals were conservative, or part of a liberalism which was still implicated in the prevention of radical reform.

⁹⁴ Jo Littler, Roshi Naidoo, 'White Past, Multicultural Present: Heritage and National Stories', in Helen Brocklehurst, Robert Phillips, (eds.), *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain*, (London, 2004), pp.330-341

⁹⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imagining the Post-nation', in Littler, Naidoo, (eds.), *The Politics of Heritage : the Legacies of 'Race'*, (Abingdon, 1999), p.31

Opposing this, the literature has constructed radical, grassroots or community-based heritage organisations. In none of these studies are these two groups studied in conjunction with one another, so great are the perceived conceptual, organisational and political divides between them. Laurajane Smith is rare insofar as she studies both, yet a core tenet of her work is the insistence on a clear and binary distinction between them. Smith's concept of the 'authorised heritage discourse' identifies a dominant narrative of the national past which offered popular legitimacy for a conservative view of the nation. Here, the population were enlisted in visiting, maintaining and celebrating elite museums and monuments, thereby 'naturalis[ing] certain narratives and cultural and social experiences, often linked to ideas of nation and nationhood', and marginalising others.⁹⁶ This understanding of heritage is one in which Foucauldian biopower is mobilised to establish the dominance of 'authorised', celebratory versions of the national past. For Smith, this contrasts directly with 'intangible' heritage, or forms which take place among communities, in less secure settings and with a lesser emphasis on objects and the monumental. Intangible heritage is, for Smith, vernacular and therefore oppositional.⁹⁷

This thesis makes two connected critiques of Smith's theory, which are reflective of its critiques of the scholarship on heritage among historians of modern Britain as a whole. The first is to question the binary within Smith's work and the broader scholarship between monumental heritage and professionally organised museums as 'authorised' and elite, and community publishing or heritage as grassroots, oppositional and radical. This facilitates an appreciation of the rich history of collaboration & cross-fertilisation between these ostensibly separate groups. In doing so, it also reveals the repeated entry of conservative narratives into radical heritage and vice-versa.

This relates to my second criticism, which might be best formulated as a question: how, why, and by whom does heritage become 'authorised'? If Smith, and much of the broader field, assumes that the politics of museums and community heritage are separate and diametrically opposed, this might be partly because they engage with these groups' governmental partnerships only gesturally, without accounting for the tangible, complex, *material* influence this had on discourse. I argue, instead, for a focus not on the 'authorised', but on '*authorisation*': a fluid, shifting, multifaceted process by funders from politics and the various arms of the local and national state of *giving and withdrawing material support*. Whether consciously or unconsciously, this support was given to projects which aimed to *forge citizens* and *imagine communities* consistent with the funders' ongoing political battles. Authorisation most commonly took financial form: giving grants to heritage projects. But it also took more informal, immaterial forms.

⁹⁶ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, (Oxford, 2005), p.22.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.5

These included loaning or donating objects, or granting interviews, to heritage actors which political figures were personally acquainted and politically allied with. Any project receiving funding from or a material relationship with the local or national state was in that sense ‘authorised’, though this relationship was subject to frequent change.

Through a focus on the fluid, material, politically contingent *process* of ‘authorisation’, I argue here for a new approach among historians of Britain to analysing the politics of heritage. At the most basic level, this is a call to balance the familiar method of discourse analysis with a more sustained focus on the dynamics of heritage practitioners’ relationship with the shifting contexts of their broader political moment. Paying attention to the multifaceted *material* dynamics of practitioners’ relationship with the local or national state, I offer a route out of the binary between ‘authorised’ or conservative, institutionally secure museums and grassroots and ‘intangible’, oppositional and radical community heritage. In place of this binary, this approach allows a more sophisticated appreciation of the myriad ways in which a relationship or lack of relationship with the state shaped heritage organisations’ narratives, and how the exact form these narratives took was deeply contingent on the needs of political organisations at particular historical conjunctures.

Imperial Memory

In focusing on ‘authorisation’ we can, in turn, begin to capture in more sophisticated ways the political causes of the prevailing constructions of imperial memory in contemporary Britain. Since Britain’s 2016 vote to leave the European Union (EU) and the bitter aftermath of the 2020 protests for racial justice following the killing of George Floyd, scholarship on Britain’s memory of its imperial past has resurged. This work has been partially (but by no means wholly) concerned with the articulation of these memories within museums, while community heritage has hardly featured. Historians of Britain researching heritage have far to go to fully address the significance of imperial memory. Similarly, scholars of imperial memory have made only limited use of the methodological possibilities of studying museums and community groups. Before and after 2016, much scholarship on imperial memory has characterised Britain’s relationship with its imperial past as a form either of imperial ‘nostalgia’ or ‘amnesia’. This thesis argues not only that this binary is highly limiting, but that an emphasis on heritage organisations’ material relationships with the state is necessary to fully grasp the causes of the more complex forms of imperial memory which have, in fact, emerged.

Perhaps the most common analysis of imperial memory centres on the identification of a pervasive ‘imperial nostalgia’.⁹⁸ Often focusing on policy and political discourse, advocates of this interpretation point to Britain’s aspirations to free itself from the strictures of European multilateralism and become again a buccaneering commercial economy, firmly reconnected with the (white, Protestant) countries of the ‘Old Commonwealth’. Marc-William Palen draws comparisons between the new trading relationships pursued by Theresa May’s government and the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century movement for Tariff Reform, promoting trade especially with Britain’s white dominions. Palen sees this as evidence of ‘imperial nostalgia’ for a period when Britain prioritised close relationships with its ‘kith and kin’.⁹⁹ Sally Tomlinson and Danny Dorling connect an education system with ‘roots in nineteenth-century ideas about race and... class’, a post-war syllabus celebrating Empire after legal decolonisation, public schools which still reproduce these ideals today, and a political and donor elite composed largely of the old and wealthy. For them, ‘part of the reason ... Brexit ... happened’ was that these structures left a ‘number of [powerful] people in Britain’ with ‘a dangerous, imperialist misconception of our standing in the world’. These educational and generational factors could also partly explain Brexit’s popularity among the old.¹⁰⁰ Peter Mitchell’s *Imperial Nostalgia* takes Brexit as a significant point of departure, but also notes the summer of 2020. Mitchell notes that right-wing commentary on the toppling of Bristol’s Edward Colston statue foresaw a form of societal breakdown rooted in a rejection of the nation’s proud history. Here, ‘the convergence of imperial nostalgism and the further reaches of right-wing sentiment’ which had ‘for years... been occurring piecemeal, quietly, by suggestion and inference’, suddenly became explicit, tangible, and impossible to ignore. For Mitchell, ‘imperial nostalgia’ shifted ‘from a thing which inflected our rolling national crisis to the conduit of its most violent energies’.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ In addition to those examples discussed here, see Nadine El-Enany, ‘Things Fall Apart’, IPR Blog, University of Bath, (2nd May, 2017). Last accessed 13th October, 2022, at <https://blogs.bath.ac.uk/iprblog/2017/05/02/things-fall-apart-from-empire-to-brexite-britain/>; El-Enany, ‘Brexit as Nostalgia for Empire’, *Critical Legal Thinking*, (19th June, 2016). Last accessed 13th October, 2022, at <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2016/06/19/brexit-nostalgia-empire/>; Hannah Woods, *Rule, Nostalgia: A Backwards History of Britain*, (London, 2022); Robert Gildea, *Empires of the Mind: The Colonial Past and the Politics of the Present*, (Cambridge, 2019), p.149; Dane Kennedy, *Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire*, (London, 2017), p.1; p.7; p.135.

⁹⁹ Marc-William Palen, ‘Britain’s Imperial Ghosts have Taken over Brexit’, *Exeter Global and Imperial*, (June, 2017). Last accessed on 13th October, 2022, at: <https://imperialglobalexeter.com/2017/06/27/britains-imperial-ghosts-have-taken-control-of-brexite/>

¹⁰⁰ Sally Tomlinson, Danny Dorling, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire*, (London, 2019), British Library legal deposit ebook, no pagination (np). A similar argument in Sally Tomlinson, *Education and Race from Empire to Brexit*, (Bristol, 2019).

¹⁰¹ Peter Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia: How the British Conquered Themselves*, (Manchester, 2021), British Library legal deposit ebook, np.

Many of these accounts offer no definition of ‘nostalgia’, deploying the term to denote a broad, pathological enthusiasm to recreate past glories.¹⁰² Mitchell, however, does: emphasising ‘the centrality of mourning and loss’.¹⁰³ Though using different terminology, Mitchell’s ‘nostalgia’ here figures as a close relation of Gilroy’s influential notion of ‘postcolonial melancholia’. For Gilroy, melancholia animated the domestic and foreign policies of successive governments from Thatcher to Blair, and consisted both of an ‘unhealthy and destructive post-imperial hungering for renewed greatness’ and a desire for the renewal of a historic sense of destiny and purpose.¹⁰⁴ Mitchell’s ‘nostalgia’ also resembles the ‘memories of Empire’ which Bill Schwarz identifies in the late 1960s. Then, the intertwined threats of the loss of imperial authority, growing Black, feminist and trade unionist dissent, and the deteriorating urban built environment, led politicians of the right and their supporters to construct memories of the colonial frontier in which white authority guaranteed the maintenance of order. The lamentful, elegiac tone these memories often took closely resemble Mitchell’s notion of ‘nostalgia’.¹⁰⁵

‘Nostalgia’ has, then, both denoted blind, jingoistic faith in the nation’s capacity to recreate its historic influence, and characterised a displaced, *melancholic* defence of its historic good character. Yet these impulses carry markedly different emotional resonances and serve different contextual purposes. More, as I suggested earlier in this introduction, nostalgia has only ever been part of the representation of Empire in contemporary politics; so, too, has racism been predicated on denial of Britain’s historic relationships and obligations. The totalising characterisation ‘imperial nostalgia’, then, obscures the subjective and often contradictory nature of memory, and has been applied to describe phenomena with markedly different affective and political implications.

Another group, consisting mostly of economic and political historians, have rejected the notion of imperial nostalgia, sometimes signalling a preference for its opposite: imperial ‘amnesia’.¹⁰⁶ For Robert Saunders, Brexit was caused not by a longing for the greatness of a lost Empire, but by a vision of a small, plucky island exercising an outsized influence on world affairs.¹⁰⁷ David Edgerton, similarly, argues that as the Empire dissolved in the post-war period, a new British *nation* was forged through political discourse, economic policy, and welfare provision. For Edgerton, this nation existed in narrowly domestic terms; emphasising the persistent influence of Empire on late twentieth-century politics and

¹⁰² El-Enany, ‘Things Fall Apart’; El-Enany, ‘Brexit as Nostalgia for Empire’; Palen, ‘Britain’s Imperial Ghosts’; Kennedy, *Imperial History Wars*; Gildea, *Empires of the Mind*.

¹⁰³ Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia*

¹⁰⁴ Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Postcolonial Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, (London, 2004), pp.103-4, 331.

¹⁰⁵ Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Volume One: The White Man’s World*, (Oxford, 2011), p.11; pp.14-5

¹⁰⁶ Robert Saunders argues for the use of this term in Saunders, ‘Brexit and Empire: ‘Global Britain’ and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48, (6, 2020), pp.1159-1164

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

society constitutes a conceptual failing and an anachronism.¹⁰⁸ John Darwin, meanwhile, offers a sketch of the development of imperial memory between 1945 and the 1990s. For Darwin, the British government successfully framed decolonisation as the magnanimous completion of a successful mission to ‘prepare’ the colonies for independence, while efforts to challenge this narrative from the late 1960s had only limited success. Finally, he argues that racism around access to welfare was more likely the result of an economic struggle over resources than a longing for a lost Empire, understood as a symbol of ‘white mastery’.¹⁰⁹ With some qualifications, he shares Edgerton and Saunders’ conviction that memories of the Empire were largely disavowed as Britain’s politics of race and nation were reshaped after 1945. These arguments might be read as an application to the post-imperial period of Bernard Porter’s widely noted scepticism of the influence of Empire on British culture and identity.¹¹⁰

Darwin, Saunders and Edgerton remain focused on political discourse and policy. All three also continue Porter’s tendency to engage in simplistic, positivistic readings of political history sources.¹¹¹ Saunders quotes ex-trade Secretary Liam Fox’s disavowal of frequent invocations of ‘Empire 2.0’ during the Brexit negotiations as ‘offensive’. For Saunders this is satisfactory proof of the government’s distaste for the imperial past.¹¹² Yet the construction of memory operates in more subtle ways. As Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch note, Empire’s influence on contemporary Britain lies in ‘the persistence of certain habits of mind and structures of feeling’.¹¹³ Regarding Brexit, this might take place through the construction of semantic fields which affectively evoked imperial strength and power, a strategy not incompatible with the politically expedient disavowal of explicit imperial domination and violence itself. As Ward notes, to understand Empire’s presence in contemporary Britain, we need not necessarily look for sophisticated understandings of the ‘precise extent and nature of Britain’s imperial holdings’, but to understand the more subjective, slippery construction of memory and identity, both in political and cultural discourse and in everyday life.¹¹⁴ Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce, similarly usefully, note the consistent significance of memories of the old settler Empire, but assert that their importance was constantly shifting. These ideas were ‘not just a predictable kind of neo-imperial fantasy that crops up periodically at times of national crisis.’¹¹⁵ Kenny, Pearce, Ward and Rasch’s contributions are valuable

¹⁰⁸ Edgerton, *Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, (London, 2018), xxx, xxxvi

¹⁰⁹ John Darwin, ‘Memory of Empire in Britain: A Preliminary View’, in Dietmar Rothermund, (Eds.), *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945-2013*, (Cambridge, 2015), especially pp.32-34

¹¹⁰ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain*, (Oxford, 2006).

¹¹¹ On this, see Schwarz, *Memories of Empire*, p.15

¹¹² Saunders, ‘Brexit and Empire’, pp.143

¹¹³ Stuart Ward, Astrid Rasch, ‘Introduction: Greater Britain, Global Britain’, in Ward, Rasch, (eds.), *Embers of Empire in Brexit Britain*, (London, 2019), p.5

¹¹⁴ Stuart Ward, ‘Introduction’, in Ward, (eds.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, (Manchester, 2001), p.15.

¹¹⁵ Michael Kenny, Nick Pearce, *Shadows of Empire: The Anglosphere in British Politics*, (Cambridge, 2018), p.7

because they remind us that to point solely to either nostalgia *or* amnesia overlooks the subjective, complex and inconsistent nature of memory, and the rhetorical strength of allusion and implication.

A distinct group working at the intersection of heritage studies and history, including Katie Donington, Laurajane Smith, Emma Waterton and Corinne Fowler, have also identified ‘silences’ or ‘amnesia’ around Empire in their museological case-studies.¹¹⁶ Rather than suggesting Empire’s irrelevance to British identity though, these scholars emphasise the *active* silencing and obfuscation of violence and exploitation. Nor do they identify a total absence of Empire. This silencing, Donington notes, facilitates a celebratory narrative of the movement for the abolition of the trade in enslaved people in Britain as both popular and globally impactful.¹¹⁷ Though this work primarily concerned exhibitions produced to mark the 2007 bicentenary, Donington also notes a similar phenomenon after Brexit, relating to histories of Empire more broadly. Then, politicians and journalists placed increasingly fervent pressure on heritage practitioners researching the relationship between their collections, premises, and wealth extracted from the colonies, urging them to emphasise the Empire’s developmental and humanitarian achievements instead.¹¹⁸ These scholars make an important contribution: public discussions of Empire *do* oscillate between proud assertion and active denial, depending on the ways in which particular memories reflect on the contemporary nation. I take further this emphasis on contingency and pressure, to argue for the necessity of a more effective understanding of the influence of heritage practitioners’ political contexts and funders on their work. Only then will we fully understand the *interests* and *material forces* leading to the development of memory.

Donington, Moody and Hanley’s work is also useful for its emphasis on locality. A full understanding of memories of enslavement, they suggest, should centre not just on the *active choices* taken by heritage practitioners but on local specificity and nuance.¹¹⁹ Economic, cultural and migratory relationships between metropole and colony were often highly locally specific, as shown earlier in this introduction. Tracing local narratives, and heritage, offers a way to explore the complex construction of

¹¹⁶ Laurajane Smith, Geoff Cubitt, Kalliopi Fouseki, Ross Wilson, *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements*, (London, 2011); On ‘silence’, Emma Waterton, ‘Humiliated Silence: Multiculturalism, Blame and the Trope of ‘Moving On’, *Museum and Society*, 8, (3, 2010), pp.128-142; On ‘amnesia’, Katie Donington, ‘Relics of Empire’, *Colonialism and the Culture Wars*, in Ward, Rasch, *Embers of Empire*, p.123; Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England’s Colonial Connections*, (London, 2020). See also the ‘Colonial Countryside’ project led by Fowler in collaboration with the National Trust. ‘Colonial Countryside Project’, *National Trust*. Last accessed 13th January, 2023, at <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/research/colonial-countryside-project>

¹¹⁷ Katie Donington, ‘Local Roots/Global Routes: Slavery, Memory and Identity in Hackney’, in Donington Ryan Hanley, Jessica Moody, (Eds.), *Britain’s History and Memory of Transatlantic Slavery: Local Nuances of a ‘National Sin’*, (Liverpool, 2017), pp.172-194

¹¹⁸ Donington, ‘Colonialism and the Culture Wars’, 126.

¹¹⁹ Donington, Hanley, Moody, ‘Introduction’, 3-4

memories while remaining closely engaged with the areas and communities which people lived in, as they were constructed both in ‘elite’ museums, community groups and vernacular narratives of lived experience.

We need a conceptualisation of imperial memory which moves beyond binary, totalising analyses of imperial ‘amnesia’ or ‘nostalgia’ to foreground its contingent, complex and inconsistent nature. In working towards such an understanding, local studies can achieve a degree of depth, specificity and comprehensiveness not possible nationally. More, heritage offers one useful means to explore memory, insofar as it is connected to politics and the state while also engaging with and narrating the history of local communities. This thesis offers such a history of imperial memory in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. It is necessarily partial, but it can build towards future analyses which are more grounded in everyday lives, achieve greater methodological rigour and deliver more sophisticated conceptual analysis.

Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of six chapters over three parts. Parts one, two and three each analyse the impact of the respective cultural regimes of the New Urban Left, Thatcherism and New Labour’s ‘third way’ on one museum (the Museum of London) and one community heritage organisation. Doing so, each part brings these distinct forms into dialogue, frequently finding closer relations between them than heritage literature suggests. This reveals an imperial memory characterised by its fluidity, messiness and contradictory nature, where assertions *and* obfuscations, and nostalgia *and* denial, existed in close proximity and in unexpected places. The presentation of Empire depended on the perspective of the narrator, and specifically, the implications of imperial histories for narrators’ stories about the contemporary political struggles they, or their funders, were engaged in.

Part One explores the relationship of heritage to the New Urban Left. Chapter One considers the early history of the Museum of London, c.1976-1989. It traces radical local authorities’ influence on a Museum shaped by its predecessors’ relationship with the Monarchy and the City of London, and the tension which thus emerged between elite narratives and histories of radicalism and working-class life. Specifically, it explores the limits of the GLC’s anti-racist cultural project by revealing the ambiguous and contradictory engagements with race and Empire which emerged in exhibitions produced by curators from these two traditions. Chapter Two analyses the Centerprise co-operative in Hackney, 1973-1993, and its relationship with the GLC and Hackney Council. It traces the project’s gradual transition from well-funded worker writing groups seeking to foment class solidarity to precarious Black arts practitioners prescribing transatlantic political solidarities based on shared experiences of colonisation.

Grounding community publishing within the history of the New Urban Left, it shows that radical global analyses of British history were only briefly possible because of the twin pressures of an exclusionary, class-based activist culture and the external threat of Thatcherism.

Part Two centres Thatcherism itself. Chapter Three explores the early history of the Museum in Docklands (1982-1998), established by MOL curators after the closure of London's last urban docks in 1981. The project veered between exhibitions presenting the Georgian mercantile port as a site of patrician Gentlemanly commerce, those wondering at the industrial strength and technical genius of the first port of Empire, and those celebrating a tradition of cosmopolitanism and commerce on the Thames which foregrounded the contemporary redevelopment of 'Docklands'. These were respectively generated through different kinds of material collaboration with the City of London, the Port of London Authority, and the LDDC, and engaged with Empire through a shifting set of allusions, references and direct invocations. Chapter Four explores the history of the Island History Trust, on the Isle of Dogs. The Trust sought to protest deindustrialisation and the exclusionary redevelopment of the LDDC on behalf of a dwindling, aging local population. Through the port, local class identities invested great significance in Empire. Yet the Trust's presentation of this depended on the needs of its political moment. It celebrated Empire when it signified the empowerment of residents, challenged it when it appeared connected to the local popularity of the far-right, and obscured residents' investment in it when mourning the disappearing community for posterity.

Part three explores heritage related to the changing cultural policy of the 1990s and 2000s. Chapter Five shows that the 1990s saw significant changes in the MOL's narration of Empire and approach to public engagement and objects. But change remained constrained by the weight of decades of institutional practice, governmental relationships and public opinion. Pride in the industrial and imperial past remained a significant current of curation, while studying reception demonstrates persistent reactions against the critical reframing of London's imperial history. Chapter Six is a history of the Swadhinata Trust, a Bengali history group who focused on the community's history. The Trust emphasised the diaspora's struggles against centuries of imperial subjugation, first by the Raj and later against the repressive state of East Pakistan. It drew a linear connection between these anti-colonial struggles, the anti-racism of the 1970s and entry into Tower Hamlets Labour Party in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet the Trust's celebration of the role of Bengalis in the area's post-industrial redevelopment had little resonance with younger generations of the community, who had benefited little from the policies of Tower Hamlets Labour Party.

This thesis is concerned with East London as a site where local and global narratives of twentieth-

century British history collide. Here, deindustrialisation, successive waves of urban redevelopment and the transition from a Keynesian economy to a market-based liberalism were locked in a close and mutual relationship with the decline of the 'First Port of Empire' and the transition from an imperial metropole to a diverse, postcolonial multicultural. The area is, then, a rich case-study for understanding imperial memory within the heritage industry, and the political implications of those constructions of memory. This thesis moves beyond the commonplace binary between 'authorised' and 'radical' heritage, towards a focus on 'authorisation': the complicated material relationships of both museums and community heritage. Through this, it offers a more complex image of the shifting politics of heritage, illuminating the interests shaping funding decisions, and more effectively situating the political goals which heritage narratives served. In doing so, this thesis moves beyond reductive scholarly debates over whether imperial memory in Britain is characterised by 'nostalgia' or 'amnesia', revealing instead its messy, contradictory, fluid and contingent nature. It also, crucially, excavates the concrete political relationships which shaped its development.

Chapter One: The Museum of London, 1976-1989

When the Museum of London (MOL) opened to the public on 1st June, 1976, its collections and repertoire of narratives had been shaped throughout their development by the museum's predecessors' decades-long relationship with the City of London, the Monarchy, and the aristocracy. The larger of the MOL's two predecessors was the London Museum, established in 1912 by two aristocratic amateurs, Lewis, Viscount Harcourt and Viscount Reginald Brett Esher. These men lacked any collections, premises or regular funding streams, but did possess personal connections to wealthy, influential benefactors. Harcourt's father, William Harcourt MP, had been Home Secretary (1880-1885) and Chancellor (1886, 1892-5), while Brett Esher's father, the Marquis of Hartington, had served as Secretary of State for the War Office (1882-1885).¹²⁰ Harcourt and Esher envisioned a museum which would represent the experiences and history of the entire city. The first keeper Guy Laking aspired to a collection which 'would find no place in the British Museum or Victoria and Albert', moving beyond a focus on priceless artefacts and the monumental to prioritise the irreverent and the popular.¹²¹

Without a permanent home, the collections had spells at Kensington Palace in the 1910s and 1950s and, in the 1960s, at Lancaster House.¹²² The museum kept its collections and premises at the discretion of senior Royals, remaining reliant on these strong yet informal relationships without the security of a codified governance agreement. This indebtedness left the museum essentially incapable of refusing loans and donations from the crown.¹²³ Laking and his successors were, then, caught between an (albeit patrician, amateurish) desire to represent the entire metropolis, and a collection shaped by monarchs' and aristocrats' desires to store their used ceremonial and ornamental objects in a friendly home. Many of the collection's most valuable objects – and thus, many of the galleries' most prominent exhibits – were fine art, antiques and dress loaned by the Monarchy and aristocracy.¹²⁴

The MOL's other predecessor, the Guildhall Museum, opened to the public in 1874, possessing comparable relationships with the City of London. The museum was named after and headquartered in the Guildhall building, the administrative and political centre of the City for 500 years. Its early collections derived primarily from archaeological deposits made during the municipal redevelopment of the City in the 1830s.¹²⁵ The museum's staff aspired not to a popular attraction, but a resource for a local bourgeois

¹²⁰ Samuel Aylett, *Legacies of an Imperial City: The Museum of London, 1976-2007*, (London, 2022), p.34

¹²¹ Catherine Ross, 'Collections and Collecting', in Gaynor Kavanagh, Elizabeth Frostick (eds.), *Making City Histories in Museums*, (London, 1998), p.118-120

¹²² Francis Sheppard, *The Treasury of London's Past: An Historical Account of the Museum of London and its Predecessors, the Guildhall Museum and the London Museum*, (London, 1991), 37, 80-81

¹²³ Ross, 'Collections and Collecting', p.119

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.64

visitor base, using especially archaeological artefacts to facilitate didactic study of the nation's emergence and the City's contribution to it. It was supported by a band of middle-class, enthusiastic amateurs who urged the City to invest in the museum to support this goal.¹²⁶ The scope initially envisaged for the museum was never achieved, while many felt it was neglected at the expense of its sister institution, the Guildhall Library. Yet the City, like the Crown, used its resident museum to deposit significant artefacts facilitating the display of the Corporation's past.¹²⁷ The Corporation, that is, supported the Guildhall's work when it facilitated the preservation of its legacy, refusing more substantial support when it did not.¹²⁸

After much discussion, the 1965 Museum of London Act established a framework for these museums' merger, moderating their dependence on the favour of elite philanthropists, providing new professional structures and a permanent home. Within a new tripartite governance structure the Greater London Council (GLC), Whitehall and the City each supplied one third of the museum's annual grant, and one third of its board of governors.¹²⁹ As well as providing institutional security, the MOL's new relationship with the GLC gave it a responsibility to programme on behalf of the wider metropolis, developing social and political relationships beyond those of its patrician predecessors. After 1981, it would also bring aspects of the GLC's urban radicalism into the MOL, as the council made clear its desire – in more explicit, direct terms than the City or Crown – to see a wider engagement with London's social history in return for its annual grant.¹³⁰ As the introduction showed, the GLC consistently used its funding to challenge the exclusionary and tacitly conservative nature of mainstream cultural production, supporting cultural work which fostered working-class, anti-racist and feminist solidarities. At the MOL this was limited to the promotion of social history projects articulating working-class experiences and identities; critical histories of race and empire were largely absent.

Yet the influence of older interests remained. Lewis Harcourt's son, William, Second Viscount Harcourt, was appointed chair of the nascent MOL's board, responsible for overseeing the merger. William's credentials included an education at Eton and Oxford, followed by a career as managing director of the family firm, investment bank Morgan, Grenfell and Co.¹³¹ He inherited the chairmanship of the board of the MOL from his father, and showed Queen Elizabeth II around the MOL at its official opening, just as his father showed her grandparents, King George and Queen Mary around the opening of

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p.73

¹²⁷ Sheppard, *Treasury of London's Past*, pp.139

¹²⁸ *Ibid*.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p.161

¹³⁰ Michael Seaborne, Interview with the author via Microsoft Teams, 18th August, 2022.

¹³¹ Sheppard, *Treasury of London's Past*, p.163

the London Museum, in 1912.¹³² When the MOL opened in 1976, its collection comprised 102,700 objects, 75,000 of them inherited from the London Museum and 27,700 from the Guildhall.¹³³ In this way the governmental relationships of the MOL's predecessors limited the scope for change, shaping the new museum's collections, the expertise of curators recruited, institutional culture and exhibition narratives. This chapter's first consideration is the influence of the radical socialist and anti-racist politics of the New Urban Left on the early history of the MOL between the Museum's 1976 public opening and 1989, the eve of the Inner London Education Authority's (ILEA) abolition. In this period, the Museum increasingly became divided between competing approaches to curation. The GLC and the social history curators it supported had decades of close political relationships, collecting practices, established narratives and institutional cultures to contend with.

These tensions provide a more complex view of museums' politics and a fuller view of the multifaceted nature of 'authorisation'. Sam Aylett's recent study of the MOL offers useful insights into imperial memory at key points in the Museum's history. Studying the 1976 permanent galleries alone to understand this period, as Aylett has, *does* corroborate his characterisation of the MOL's early work as conservative. Here, the Victorian imperial metropolis was celebrated as bringing material abundance, infrastructural advancement and social and cultural enrichment.¹³⁴ Yet Aylett's primarily museological method leads to an over-reliance on discourse analysis, while in his sole focus on the museum's permanent galleries, Aylett – and historians of imperial more widely – fail to appreciate the material relationships shaping narratives. As such, Aylett also overlooks the emergence of multiple, contradictory aspects of the museums' narrative throughout the temporary *and* permanent galleries and does not elucidate the reasons for their emergence. This chapter goes further than Aylett to theorise *authorisation*. That is, to understand the mechanisms by which vested interests at the City, and the vestigial influence of the London Museum's relationship with the Monarchy, materially influenced exhibition narratives. If the 1976 permanent galleries do suggest that city museums in this period were bastions of this form of whiggish civic pride, they also suggest that curators' work did not emerge in a vacuum, hermetically sealed from politics.

The MOL's parent organisations had been subject to a form of *authorisation* which was informal and interpersonal, thriving on the institutions' close yet insecure and unofficial relationships with their benefactors. This had legacies at the MOL: the collections' focus on the regal and elite influenced the

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Ross, 'Collections and Collecting', p.174

¹³⁴ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.34.

specialisms and interests of the new curators the museum recruited, who – in post – perpetuated the institution’s interest in these traditional and essentially conservative narratives. The interpretation of gilded objects as evidence of patrician elites’ benevolence was ossified as a form of institutional common sense. Its proponents believed in this approach’s righteousness and were rarely explicitly conscious of its politics.

After 1981, however, this narrative was increasingly challenged by a combination of a new generation of curators and the GLC’s pressure to increase the MOL’s focus on social history. Yet in the absence of active intellectual or practical connections to the activist milieu of the New Urban Left, curators retained a class-based approach to social history and strong secondary interests in the technical and aesthetic histories of painting and photography. Finally, in 1989, ILEA – a relic of the GLC - mobilised their long sponsorship of the MOL to produce an exhibition there defending the tradition of municipal socialism on the eve of its own abolition. Between MOL curators’ art historical interests and unreflexive conceptions of class, and ILEA’s desire to promote the legacy of municipal socialism, neither of these approaches critically engaged with their own subjects’ connections to histories of race and Empire.

The 1976 Permanent Galleries

Colin Sorensen was appointed Deputy Keeper of the London Museum’s Modern Department in 1970, shortly after which he was promoted to Keeper, managing the expansion of collections and preparation of galleries as the department transitioned to the new MOL.¹³⁵ Sorensen arrived following a professionally formative decade-long tenure as Deputy Director of the Paul Mellon Foundation for British Art, from 1960-1970, a position he assumed just three years after his graduation from the Royal College of Art.¹³⁶ The foundation was established by and named for the son of the former Secretary of the US Treasury and industrialist Andrew Mellon to promote research and exhibitions on the British art canon. Mellon’s collection of British paintings and his family’s fortune were the foundation’s cornerstone. As such, it was shaped by Mellon’s ‘fascination with British life and history’, derived from childhood summers spent on his wealthy English mother’s Hertfordshire estate and his studies at Cambridge. The conception of British history and culture which Mellon developed and which animated the collections centred on the ‘love [of] English country life and country sports’, and especially ‘foxhunting and racing’,

¹³⁵ John Earl, ‘Colin Sorensen’, *Independent*, (11th August, 2001). Last accessed 7th September, 2022, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/colin-sorensen-9198759.html>

¹³⁶ Chris Ellmers, ‘Colin Sorensen: Innovative Curator Who Reshaped Our Museums’, *The Guardian*. Last accessed 17th August, 2001, at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/aug/17/guardianobituaries.humanities>

which he developed in these formative years.¹³⁷ The project sponsored exhibitions and publications which, like its own collections, reflected Mellon's personal attachment to an elite, pastoral idyll.¹³⁸ By his arrival at the London Museum a decade later, Sorensen was well practiced in the development of narratives celebrating the cultures and aesthetics of English elites.

Yet Sorensen's own interests lay in the Victorian period. The heady, formative memories of Sorensen's childhood which fellow curator Chris Ellmers relays in his obituary read like an elegy for the passing of the last vestiges of the Victorian social and cultural order. 1936 figures particularly prominently, a year when Sorensen claimed to have watched the demolition of the Alhambra theatre in Leicester Square *and* the 'glowing night sky over the burning Crystal Palace'.¹³⁹ However seriously we take these psychic explanations, little doubt remains over his professional fascination with the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Upon beginning work on the new MOL's permanent galleries, one contemporary remarked, 'Sorensen was disturbed to find' that they 'paid considerably more attention to little Londinium, the Roman outpost, than to the great metropolis which, by the mid-19th century, had become the centre of a mighty empire.'¹⁴⁰ This conveys a sense of injustice at the erasure of the Empire's might. Another obituary corroborates this, asserting that Sorensen's conception of Modern London centred around delight at the scale, richness and power which the city possessed during the late-Victorian, high Imperial, period.¹⁴¹ While the London Museum's modern collections had been their weakest, the Guildhall's were virtually non-existent; when the MOL opened in 1976 Sorensen had acquired around three quarters of objects in the nineteenth century galleries and virtually all of the twentieth century galleries in the previous five years.¹⁴²

Sorensen's influence was evident in the 1976 permanent galleries. The Victorian period and the early nineteenth century formed the two largest sections of the galleries, with 52 and 33 displays respectively, and 85 in total.¹⁴³ This was significant not only for the *quantity* of material, but also for these galleries' rhetorical function. As Aylett suggests, they were the culmination of the narrative, the highest expression of the ideals which the museum presented as innate to the city.¹⁴⁴ The text introducing the Victorian gallery, titled 'Imperial London', is illustrative here:

¹³⁷ Paul Mellon, John Baskett, *Reflections in a Silver Spoon*, (London, 1992), p.276

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p.330.

¹³⁹ Ellmers, 'Sorensen'.

¹⁴⁰ Earl, 'Sorensen'.

¹⁴¹ 'Colin Sorensen Obituary', *The Daily Telegraph*, no date (n.d.), Last Accessed 7th September, 2022, at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1338039/Colin-Sorensen.html>

¹⁴² Sheppard, *Treasury of London's Past*, p.172.

¹⁴³ Aylett, *Legacies*, pp.53-54

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

By her death in 1901 Queen Victoria had reigned for more than 60 years... By the turn of the century, *virtually all her Empire was within instant communication with London by telegraph and telephone*. Everyone could now expect an elementary education. Although there was much to be done to improve the lot of the working population, *the initial efforts of concerned individuals and groups were beginning to be absorbed and expanded by large-scale voluntary and state-aided organisations*. The most powerful, the London County Council..., had unprecedented administrative responsibility, as the government of *the world's largest city, larger and wealthier than many sovereign states*.¹⁴⁵ (My emphasis)

This passage captures many fundamental aspects of the permanent galleries' narrative. Empire was the central characterising feature of the period, deriving from scientific advancement and the benevolence of merchants and the nobility, and helping build the city's massive wealth, technical advancement and improving material conditions. Here, the museum used objects donated by its own and its predecessors' funders to promote their historic contribution to the city and its wealth. The MOL's first plan for the organisation of the 1976 permanent exhibition envisioned a mixture of chronological and thematic galleries, providing both an overview of London's history and an engagement with significant themes. The idea of thematic galleries was eventually abandoned however, with one exception: 'Ceremonial London'.¹⁴⁶ The regalia donated by the City and the Monarchy, including the Lord Mayor's coach and several pieces of Royal Dress worn at significant ceremonies, remained some of the collections' most valuable components. The significance of this was reflected in the MOL's employment of a curator of dress, Kay Staniland, who specialised in Royal fashion.¹⁴⁷ The Lord Mayor's coach also represented an important token of an ongoing relationship with the City, which provided one third of the MOL's annual funds. These objects were too valuable to the museum – in terms of their place in the collection, the relationships they represented, and the investment in curatorial expertise in them – to be excluded. 'Ceremonial London', then, survived the restructuring.¹⁴⁸ The gallery's text read:

Ceremonial occasions are one way in which London, city and capital, *celebrates its existence* [...] London ceremonies commemorate events fundamental to the nation's constitutional development, particularly those demonstrating publicly the continuous relationship of Crown and Parliament in a constitutional monarchy. [...] Quiet ceremonies remind the privileged of their duties to those in need. Things connected with the Royal Family and royal occasions, and the magnificent 18th century

¹⁴⁵ Museum of London (MOL), *The Museum of London Guide*, (London, 1976), 'Imperial London', no pagination, (np)

¹⁴⁶ MOL, *MOL Guide*, 'Ceremonial London', np.

¹⁴⁷ MOL exhibitions curated independently by Staniland are discussed later in this chapter. Staniland's monographs include: Kay Staniland, *Clothing and Textiles at the Court of Edward III, 1342-1352*, (London, 1978); Staniland, *In Royal Fashion: Clothes of Princess Charlotte of Wales and Queen Victoria, 1796-1901*, (London, 1997).

¹⁴⁸ MOL, *Museum Guide*, 'Ceremonial London', np.

coach used in the annual Lord Mayor's Show together symbolise London, international capital and independent city.¹⁴⁹

Insofar as these objects 'symbolised London' and showed the city 'celebrat[ing] its existence', curators here claimed for them a kind of universal authority to communicate the sentiments of the wider metropolis. These objects became features of the city's rightful, naturally occurring social order, which was divorced from any historic process of accumulation or struggle and elevated to the status of ontological fact. This curation, then, completed a process which began with the positioning of the 'Ceremonial London' gallery as the sole exception to the permanent exhibition's chronological structure. This gallery, and its place in the overall exhibition, de-historicised and naturalised these objects – and the forms of authority they represented – as part of a primordial, benevolent social order.

This emphasis on opulence was also reflected in the MOL's wider work throughout the late 1970s. The museum's very first temporary exhibition concerned the history of the coronation, organised by Kay Staniland.¹⁵⁰ Staniland organised this exhibition to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee; its centrepiece was the display of her coronation robes and dress. Convinced of the impending jubilee's significance, Staniland successfully requested to loan these items in an exhibition which recreated the splendour of the coronation.¹⁵¹ The forms of 'authorisation' underwriting these permanent and temporary exhibitions were slow and cumulative. These Royal collections were shaped over decades by the London Museum's relationship with the monarchy. Staniland – hired to work with these objects – volunteered another exhibit in conjunction with this same benefactor, helping to mark the jubilee and further cement a relationship which was significant for her professional approach and collections. She was overseen by Sorensen, whose previous position at the Paul Mellon Centre included significant promotion of exhibitions and research on art celebrating the aesthetics and culture of elite English rural life. Monarchism and deference were cemented within practice, as part of institutional common sense, because close political relationships shaped collections, then the recruitment of staff, then culture, and then exhibition narratives. The accumulation of this subtle, institutional influence on the MOL over decades served to frame elites within the city and the monarchy as the benevolent heads of a primordial social order and providers of great wealth to the wider society.

The permanent galleries' celebration of the monarchy was also, however, particularly rooted in the late-nineteenth century. While ornamental splendour ran throughout the permanent exhibitions and the

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Sheppard, *Treasury of London's Past*, p.181. In 1978, Staniland also organised the exhibition 'Court Presentation Dresses', (27th Feb- 3rd September, 1978), personal correspondence with Ruth Thomson, former MOL Business Archive archivist, 14th July, 2022.

¹⁵¹ 'Celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee', *Fulham Chronicle*, Friday 14th January, 1977, p.15, BNA.

‘Ceremonial London’ gallery especially, one display within the ‘Imperial London’ galleries, titled ‘Victorian Imperialism’, more explicitly linked the institution of the monarchy to Britain’s contemporary global power. The display’s centrepiece was a marble bust of Queen Victoria, made in 1887 to mark her Golden Jubilee. Around this were several union jacks; a large flag, draped over a section of the display, offered a monumental reminder of the nation, while several smaller hand-held flags conjured the presence of enthusiastic, actively participating crowds. The display also contained mannequins wearing military uniforms.¹⁵² This constructed distinctly corporal, militaristic and hierarchical national identities, headed by the crown, with the active mass support of the wider population. While these objects evoked the nation, they themselves did not intrinsically evoke the Empire. The military uniforms were not explicitly derived from specific colonial wars, nor did the bust of Victoria include any specific features which indicated her imperial role. Instead, what was remarkable here was the curators’ active choice to frame this connection, through objects which did not necessarily demonstrate it, as representing Britain’s expansion through the title ‘Victorian Imperialism’. This display, then, served as a hinge in the narrative, linking the seemingly natural authority of patrician elites to a popular enthusiasm for the material benefits of imperial expansion. It was a cultural reflection of a phenomenon identified by David Cannadine and Camilla Schofield, albeit with different understandings of race. That is, the conceptualisation of Britain’s paternalistic, nineteenth and early twentieth-century social hierarchy as being extended, through the Empire, to the globe. While, as Schofield notes, Conservative politicians like Enoch Powell spent much of the 1960s theorising the erosion of this ‘unique structure of power’, these permanent exhibitions suggested that its global scope provided a strength and grandeur which upheld its popular support among the metropolitan working-class.¹⁵³

The MOL also understood Empire as a means through which merchants provided material abundance. The galleries dwelled at length on the arrival of imperial cargo within the city, framing the significant wealth this brought as symptomatic of Londoners’ innate commercial character. The permanent displays’ narration of the Georgian docks offered a vision of material abundance at the port and the presence of a ‘rich variety of goods’, which ‘reflected the expansion of trade and commerce’.¹⁵⁴ By the late nineteenth-century this had grown further; the docks were

filled with ships from every part of the Empire. They were largely iron-built, and sail was slowly giving way to steam. Wharves and warehouses were crammed with an incredible variety of commodities; ivory and peacocks’ feathers, textile raw materials, timbers, tobacco, food and drugs...

¹⁵² Aylett, *Legacies*, p.65

¹⁵³ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire*, (Oxford, 2001); Schofield, *Enoch Powell*, p.13

¹⁵⁴ MOL, *Museum Guide*, ‘Georgian London’, np.

Of all the commodities passing through London, by this time known as the ‘warehouse of the world’, perhaps the most affectionately regarded by Londoners was tea.¹⁵⁵

The docks figured in this narrative as a means to marvel at the industrial scale, material abundance and wealth of the metropole and imagine the sophisticated trading networks through which they arrived. Empire, in turn, figured as the highest expression of Londoners’ ingenuity and the infrastructural revolution brought by their industry. Aylett astutely notes that the interchangeable use of Empire and ‘trade’ removed the coercive connotations of the former, reducing it to a symbol of the innate commercial character of the merchants at the heart of the capital.¹⁵⁶ Simultaneously, the title ‘Warehouse of the World’ – I will show – became a thread that characterised the MOL’s curation of London’s port throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and remains the title of a gallery at the Museum of London, Docklands today. This, too, allowed curators to frame imperial trade solely as a source of domestic abundance, specifically of rich, exotic cargo.



Figure 1.1 Wooden ‘Blackamoor’ Figure, displayed in ‘Imperial London’ gallery.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ MOL, *Museum Guide*, ‘Imperial London’, np.

¹⁵⁶ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.67.

¹⁵⁷ Image taken from MOL Online Catalogue, ID A5881. Last accessed 1st September 2022, at <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/66505.html>



Figure 1.2. Photograph of the 'Blackamoor' figure in the permanent galleries, 30th July 1984.¹⁵⁸

The exhibition continued that, having emerged from the port, the domestic consumer goods market expanded throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One large area recreated a Victorian high street with faux-cobbled streets and shopfronts stocking tea, sugar and tobacco, a sign of the abundance and richness of imperial imports (**Figure 1.2**). This gallery included a wooden 'Blackamoor' figure (**Figure 1.1**), which nineteenth-century shopkeepers displayed to indicate they were currently stocking tobacco from the Caribbean. With rough, accentuated facial features, carrying a roll of tobacco and wearing little but the plant's leaves, this figure reduced Caribbean labourers to a level of physiological and cultural primitivity.¹⁵⁹ As figure 1.2 shows, the Blackamoor figure was positioned prominently within this recreation of a tobacco shop; visitors experienced the Blackamoor figure as a prominent part of Victorian consumer culture. Curators opted to seek to create this immersive experience, rather than using more conventional exhibition techniques. As a result, there was no gallery text or interpretation of these objects. Conceiving Empire purely as a means through which commerce was expanded and domestic abundance realised, the 'Imperial London' gallery sought to recreate this experientially rather than to include any commentary on it. As such, it failed to engage with or even acknowledge the racist presentation of colonial figures which was at the centre of this consumer culture, and prominent within their own representation of it.¹⁶⁰ Beyond this, the exhibition engaged in no discussion of the exploitation and racialisation of Black, Asian, Irish or Jewish workers in the production,

¹⁵⁸ Photograph from Sam Aylett's personal collection.

¹⁵⁹ Aylett, *Legacies*, pp.68-69

¹⁶⁰ On this, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, (New York, 1995), p.33

transportation and processing of goods in the colonies, on British ships, or in the metropole, or the significance of their labour to the Victorian consumer boom. The only engagement with this history was the cursory, unreflexive reproduction of the image of the racially and culturally regressive ‘Blackamoor’ as an accessory to the overall narrative of domestic abundance. Empire was here both present *and* absent in the very same display. It gave form to the Museum’s celebration of commercial enterprise and material abundance. But the centrality of these values to their presentation of Empire led curators to conspicuously overlook the insight which the objects they displayed offered into the racialised and economically exploitative dimensions of the history they presented.

While the exhibition acknowledged hardship, it did so always within the context of political reform. In the eighteenth-century privation contrasted with growing prosperity. Yet electoral reform, cause-based politics, and reformist, Evangelical fervour begun efforts towards the amelioration of hardship and suffering.¹⁶¹ This continued into the early nineteenth century, when – again – ‘immense wealth and poverty appeared in sharper contrast’, and into the Victorian period, when ‘widespread concern for the appalling social conditions was beginning to have effect’ and ‘eventual administrative reform slowly improved the general health and welfare of London’.¹⁶² A combination of philanthropic fervour and administrative reform was instrumental to the gradual improvement of conditions. Religious philanthropists of this period were largely middle-class merchants, not the elite patricians being celebrated throughout the rest of the permanent galleries.¹⁶³ Importantly, the exhibition here did not foreground reformers’ social class. Instead, it provided a broad sense of the gradual and inevitable improvement of social conditions achieved voluntarily and by a benevolent state.¹⁶⁴

The politics of this framing were perhaps clearest on the issue of ‘crime’, which had ‘raged largely unchecked’, but was brought under control by the ‘institution of a new incorruptible police force by Sir Robert Peel in 1829’.¹⁶⁵ Here, the MOL expressed veneration for the order brought by the Metropolitan Police, bringing into clearer relief the paternalism of the museum’s often vague support for authorities and loosely defined charitable figures. Diverting briefly once more from the permanent gallery, in 1979 the Museum also held a celebratory exhibition to mark the 150th anniversary of the Metropolitan Police’s establishment.¹⁶⁶ This, Chapter Two will show, was the year that the killing of anti-racist school teacher Blair Peach led radical community co-operatives like Hackney’s Centerprise to

¹⁶¹ MOL, *Museum Guide*, ‘Georgian London’, np.

¹⁶² MOL, *Museum Guide*, ‘Early Nineteenth Century London’, np.

¹⁶³ Marriott, *Beyond the Tower*, p.112

¹⁶⁴ MOL, *Museum Guide*, ‘Early Nineteenth Century London’, np.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ ‘Police to Mark their 150th Anniversary’, *Fulham Chronicle*, (29th September, 1978), p.40 BNA.

reconceptualise police racism as a major barrier to empowerment in the area, requiring a concerted organisational response. Direct contradiction, then, emerged between the narratives which Centerprise and the MOL constructed of state power and bourgeois politics more widely, due to their different political affiliations and milieux. More widely, the MOL's elision of poverty reduction and policing spoke to the construction of a benevolent, harmonious and paternalistic social order – closer to Jon Lawrence's notion of a distinct British 'conservative modernity' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – than any radical or egalitarian cultural politics.¹⁶⁷

Municipal leaders complemented commercial abundance, cultural advancement and paternal social reform by reconstructing large swathes of the built environment during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Then, the city 'began to assume the appearance of an international capital as crowded slums were replaced by streets lined with hotels, office blocks, and the first great department stores'.¹⁶⁸ Here, reformist leaders delivered a more rational, ordered and hygienic city befitting London's global status. The muscular symmetry of a resurgent neoclassical architecture communicated the flow of influence, order and dynamism from the metropolitan centre out to the periphery. This framing, though, relied on the active elision of the potency of concerns in late-Victorian political and cultural discourse about the poverty rife in slums throughout the capital. The specific threat of racial degeneration brought both by these areas' residents, and especially migrants to them, was entirely absent. As Jonathan Schneer notes, though, municipal reform was animated in this period by a concern at the contrast between the city's self-perception as provider of order, rationality and dignity, and its jumbled, insanitary streets, archaic architecture, and lack of transport thoroughfares, which many felt might precipitate moral decadence. Participants in this development sought to reform these deficient urban settings, driving out the social vices which lurked there, achieving a city closer to the ideal imperial metropolis.¹⁶⁹ In the teleological narrative of the 1976 permanent galleries, building inexorably towards London's Victorian zenith, the preponderance of concern and uncertainty about London's inadequacy in relation to its global status threatened the affect of triumph, power and progress. The fact both that London's poverty and its insalubrious built environment were a source of concern in relation to the Empire could not be assimilated into curators' commitment to a narrative of gradual improvement delivered by benevolent civic leaders. It was therefore obscured.

After this crescendo, the exhibition framed the Twentieth Century in ambivalent, uncertain terms:

¹⁶⁷ Jon Lawrence, 'Paternalism, Class and the British Path to Modernity', in Simon Gunn, James Vernon, (eds.), *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain*, (Berkeley, 2011), 147.

¹⁶⁸ MOL, *Museum Guide*, 'Imperial London', np.

¹⁶⁹ Schneer, *London, 1900*, 22-24

The short-lived Edwardian period left a distinctive mark on the capital. New hotels, restaurants, theatres and public buildings were created to accommodate a more exuberant and cosmopolitan way of life. But this carefree gaiety could not hide the stark social problems. By the end of the First World War, which directly involved both privileged and poor, it was clear that London, England and the Empire could never be the same again [...] The Second World War brought London directly into the firing-line and it suffered destruction of a massive scale. Since then, London has felt many changes of mood. As war-scars and older buildings are replaced by high-rise offices and local authority housing schemes, and long-established communities dispersed, it may appear to have lost much that contributed to its unique character. On closer examination London life is still as rich and varied as ever with fresh vitality coming from its new communities, drawn now from many parts of the world and continuing the London tradition of 2,000 years.¹⁷⁰

After London's development reached its pinnacle in the late nineteenth-century, with Empire bringing material abundance, cultural advancement, architectural and social reform, here was a city diminished in status, scarred by conflict and stripped of purpose. While this text prevaricated on the city's loss of its distinctiveness – stating without conviction that the city remained as 'rich and varied as ever' – it was clear that depopulation and identikit redevelopment had sanitised and homogenised the Victorian built environment. The gallery made a brief allusion to the cultural enrichment brought by post-war migration, though nowhere was the experience of migrants considered at greater length. More, the complete absence of discussions of race from the earlier galleries meant that the arrival of Commonwealth migrants figured as thoroughly disconnected from the imperial history which was the narrative's animating force. It was equally disconnected from the longer histories of migration to the city which often derived from those imperial entanglements, and which often formed the foundation of these post-war communities. Individual displays progressed to detail particular developments including the advent of suffrage and the growth of new consumer cultures, woven through a narrative of London finding peace in its new status as capital of a smaller, more modest, yet still comfortable *nation*.¹⁷¹ Post-war rationing, for instance, did not prevent in 1951 'the greatest demonstration of renewed vitality, when the festival of Britain opened in a blaze of fireworks on a reclaimed site on the South Bank'.¹⁷² While the Early Modern, Georgian and Victorian periods were knitted into a narrative of gradual enrichment, cultural and intellectual advancement and urban growth, the twentieth-century gallery sat incongruously outside this narrative. It was not clear how the exhibition's acceptance of London's new, more modest status, or its (muted and brief) celebration of post-war migration, related to the previous galleries, where

¹⁷⁰ MOL, *Museum Guide*, 'Twentieth Century London', np.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

Empire was foundational to the City's status, but race was virtually absent. The extent of the permanent galleries' engagement with the complex experiences of London's vast, multi-racial migrant population – who formed a large portion of the Museum's ostensible audience and historical subjects – figured as an afterthought, meriting only one vague, elusive sentence. Empire, suddenly, was nowhere to be seen.

The 1976 permanent galleries, then, were significantly influenced by the MOL's close, decades-long institutional relationships with the City and the Monarchy. This shaped the new museum's collections, the curators hired to work with them, and thus, institutional culture and exhibition narratives. The weight given to these relationships and areas of the collection were such that 'Ceremonial London' – a celebration of Monarchical and City-based elites' position within the metropolis – merited its own gallery. These groups figured as primordial, natural leaders, their authority divorced from any processes of accumulation or economic exploitation. The role of industrialists in reshaping the economy in the nineteenth century was treated in more modest terms; curators mentioned the growth of the railways and the docks only briefly, giving more focus within these passages to the rich cargo they carried than their industrial scale.¹⁷³ The contrast between this approach, and that of other MOL curators working more closely with the Port of London Authority, will become clear in Chapter Three. Similarly, where the ascendant middle-class did dominate, including in the rise of charitable philanthropy, their social position was notably muted and their role assimilated into a broader narrative of gradual, paternalistic reform delivered in consensus with the state. With merchants and nobility prominent and shifting class relations from the nineteenth-century understated, the exhibition narrated the rise of London as the world's pre-eminent imperial metropolis. This project reached its apotheosis in the Victorian period, and was characterised by material abundance, cultural, social and intellectual advancement. There was little room here for engagements with racial violence and exploitation in the colonies, on imperial ships, and in the metropole. This silence rendered the discussion of post-war migration disjointed and incongruous. Here we see the construction of partial, contradictory forms of imperial memory. Empire figured as the source of Victorian consumer abundance, but curators made no connection between this and the later arrival of postcolonial migrants whose predecessors' heavily exploited labour helped construct that abundance. Yet the museum did not speak with one voice in this period. The remainder of this chapter considers the response of alternate discourses in temporary exhibitions produced by those broadly associated with the New Urban Left.

The GLC and Social History, 1980-1987

¹⁷³ MOL, *Museum Guide*, 'Early 19th Century London'; 'Victorian London', np.

Another strain of the Modern Department's work became increasingly visible in the early 1980s. As discussed, the Labour Left's ascent within the GLC led the Council to both actively fund grassroots cultural projects which supported the demands of socialist, anti-racist and feminist politics, and to apply their grants to influence more professionally secure, historically conservative institutions like the Hayward Gallery.¹⁷⁴ One senior curator at the MOL in this period, Mike Seaborne, recalled his and his colleagues' awareness of 'influence and pressure... from the GLC' to 'focus on social issues affecting everyday Londoners'. Ever sensitive to the politics of culture, the council interpreted the museum's emphasis on its Royal collections and the history of merchant capitalism as endorsements of the Monarchy and the City respectively. Instead, the GLC encouraged the MOL to pursue a new direction as 'London's social history museum', both publicly accessible to and narratively focused on London's wider population.¹⁷⁵

The Modern Department's conscious expansion throughout the late 1970s had led to the appointment of more social history specialists.¹⁷⁶ After 1981, management increasingly allowed these curators to pursue their interests in temporary exhibitions, with a high degree of autonomy. Yet managers, who were organisationally separate from and senior to curators, served as an intermediary between them and directorial level conversations. Curators were, then, rarely cognisant of the specifics of the GLC's desires or pressured to follow these prescriptions closely.¹⁷⁷ This quiet pressure at the directorial level, offering general encouragement over exhibition content with significant freedom over exact material, constituted a second, distinct form of 'authorisation'. This was more insistent than the MOL's relationship with the City and the Monarchy, yet it was equally subtle. The space it created for more social history exhibitions in the 1980s was claimed by new Modern Department curators who were licensed to pursue their own specific interests. Unlike Centerprise, the community publishing group discussed in Chapter Two, MOL curators were rarely active in the political milieu of the New Urban Left. While Centerprise's more active political engagement meant the organisation *did* reflect on and rethink its approach to class, race and Empire, MOL curators' independence meant they did not. GLC funding alone did not lead to discussions or institutional directives on effective approaches to race at the MOL; the museum's treatment of these issues was unreflective, often reinforcing historic racism and nationalism.

Upon appointment, Seaborne fervently collected from the archives of participants in what he called the 'golden period of documentary photography' between the 1930s and 1960s, including Henry

¹⁷⁴ Owen Hatherley, *Red Metropolis: Socialism and the Government of London*, (London, 2020), p.124

¹⁷⁵ Seaborne, Interview with the author.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Grant, George Rodger and Bert Hardy. Many of this generation were contemporarily approaching retirement and looking for permanent homes for their archives.¹⁷⁸ I asked Seaborne about the motivations of this work, expecting a commentary on the museum's historic neglect of social history or the dialectic which those on the activist left may have emphasised between the poverty the photographs captured and that present in the early 1980s. Seaborne acknowledged that these were considerations before repeatedly returning to what appeared his primary interest; he sought 'to give public access to [...] bodies of work that had been sitting in the archives, but had never been published, [or] exhibited'.¹⁷⁹ While Seaborne's superiors encouraged a broad focus on social history, he used the flexibility within this framework to organise exhibitions which treated their objects as *art* and their subjects as *artists*, seeking to rescue practitioners' aesthetic and technical innovations from obscurity.

Seaborne organised a series of photographic exhibitions of working-class life in interwar London, but archival records remain of only one. Between November 1980 and January 1981, 'Arapoff's London in the Thirties' explored the Polish-British artist Cyril Arapoff's interwar documentary work among working-class Londoners.¹⁸⁰ It offered an account of Arapoff's subjects' exploitation and resilience, but treated in uncertain and elusive terms the imperial port where many earned their living. This social history, however, competed for emphasis with Seaborne's interest in Arapoff's art historical significance. The exhibition was catalysed by the museum's acquisition of Arapoff's archive following his recent death, and Seaborne's fear that the public would remain ignorant to the insights he offered into a 'generation of photographers' who trained in Weimar Germany, leaving during the ascent of National Socialism to go to 'Paris, London or New York'. This group brought their training in the aesthetics of modernism to their new homes, preventing French, British and American photography from 'languishing in the nineteenth century'.¹⁸¹ A booklet accompanying the exhibition outlined the ensuing technical advances at length, through an extended passage focusing on Arapoff's use of the 'Rolleiflex... which he regarded as the best camera ever made'. The same document located the exhibition's significance both in the photographers' 'sincere interest in the subject', but also – importantly – his work's 'strong sense of design and appreciation of the dramatic qualities of light'.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ 'Arapoff's London in the Thirties', Press Release, MOL Business Archive (hereafter 'MOL'). The MOL Business Archive is at the time of writing uncatalogued. All subsequent references to the archive will read 'MOL'. For further information contact the author or the archivists.

¹⁸¹ Seaborne, Interview.

¹⁸² Draft Copy, 'Arapoff', MOL.

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Figure 1.3: Young child next to dangerous Hanbury Mansions fireplace.¹⁸³

One of the exhibition's major foci was Arapoff's work in 1939 in an infamous East End slum, the Hanbury Mansions, on the border of Poplar and Limehouse. The building had been condemned fifteen years earlier as unfit for habitation but – in Seaborne's words - 'tarted up and relet' at exorbitant rents. Living conditions were 'appalling', the estate became known as 'the plague spot of East London'.¹⁸⁴ Several passages emphasised the claustrophobic, almost carceral nature of the estate, comparing its sunken courtyards to a prison cell and emphasising the injustice of children playing in these spaces while large adjacent sections of the complex lay empty, with access to them denied without justification.¹⁸⁵ **Figure 1.3** corroborates this critical view of the estate as a dangerous and harmful place to live, depicting a small child whose brother was killed when the defective fireplace collapsed. Here, Seaborne offered through Arapoff's photographs an account of the restrictive, insanitary and dangerous conditions created by the profiteering drive of an interwar rentier class.

In response, Seaborne foregrounded these Londoners' resilience and the richness of their social lives. One display covered the practice of hop-picking, where Cockney families – most often mothers and children – worked seasonally in the fields of Kent. This combined respite from the East End with paid employment and was widely practiced by the 1930s. Seaborne noted celebratorily that by then 'hundreds of cockney families came to Kent for their annual 'holiday with work and pay', with contracts and accommodation already arranged. Out of the economic necessity of year-round work, something more joyous emerged: 'the hop-fields took on something of the atmosphere of a holiday camp, and as most of the pickers came regularly each year, the first day of each season was more a reunion of old friends than an assembly of strangers'.¹⁸⁶ Exhibits like **Figure 1.3** – depicting three women processing hop plants

¹⁸³ Mike Seaborne, *London in the Thirties*, Photographs by Cyril Arapoff, (London, 1989), p.23

¹⁸⁴ Press release, 'Arapoff', MOL.

¹⁸⁵ Mike Seaborne, *London in the Thirties: Photographs by Cyril Arapoff*, (London, 1989), 22-26, especially pp.25, p.26

¹⁸⁶ Gallery Panel Text, 'Arapoff', MOL.

outdoors, surrounded by fauna and bathed in dappled light – provided a sense of industriousness but also, romantically, of pastoral escape and fellowship.

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Figure 1.4 Hop-picking women.¹⁸⁷

Another section on the capital's waterways served to communicate the richness and significance of East End life. The Thames was 'essential to trade and communication in London', resulting in the development of hundreds of wharves across the banks, before the later construction of 'the great docks'. Between the late nineteenth century and 1960, the Thames was 'swarming with craft going about their business of maintaining the capital as a major world trading centre'.¹⁸⁸ Here, Seaborne conflated the exhibition and Modern Department's overall attempts to strengthen their social history work with an interest in the working history of the industrial economy *per se*, and thus, an emphasis on the abundant trade and rich commercial exchange of the nation's capital. Seaborne's framing of his enduring professional interest in deindustrialisation – and the energy and space he devoted to his secondary interest in the craft and artistry of photography – demonstrate a conscious but broadly defined approach to social history. While this exhibition demonstrates a sympathy for poor Londoners, Seaborne's conflation of working-class experience and the macrohistorical operation of the industrial port produced a narrative in which class identity and a vision of the strong, industrial nation were intertwined. As Chapters Three and Four of this thesis will show, this became a major feature of white working-class heritage in the late twentieth-century. For Seaborne, the abundance and vast technical scale of the port reflected the dignity of the working-class and the importance of their contribution to London's economy. In this sense, he again reified a romantic vision of the industrial nation, while foregrounding the contribution of the working-class. But while the permanent gallery presented the same motifs as signs of the abundance and wealth delivered by the Empire, here Seaborne stopped short of mentioning it explicitly.

Visitors to the museum at this point, then, encountered a nationalistic celebration of the commercial abundance of nineteenth and early-twentieth century London, but this carried markedly different implications in different galleries. In the permanent exhibition, it was a sign of the abundance and wealth of the metropole's imperial status, whereas in this exhibition it figured as a sign of the dignity of labour. The GLC's funding of the MOL brought an approach to 'social history' which, far from critiquing the place of race in British society, served to approximate the working-class to the nation in

¹⁸⁷ Seaborne, *London in the Thirties*, p.13

¹⁸⁸ Gallery Panel Text, 'Arapoff', MOL.

celebratory ways. In the Museum more widely, Empire was both present and absent, celebrated and obscured by different curators with contrasting relationships to the same aspects of London's history: the port and the domestic consumer market.

In developing a new exhibition entitled *The Making of Modern London*, curators also aimed to democratise their production and narration methods. They invited local history groups, community organisations and schools to produce projects on London's social history between 1914 and 1939 for entry into a competition. Each participant submitted ten items for display, an original sound recording under ten minutes, and between 1,500 and 5000 words of descriptive text.¹⁸⁹ The project, then, represented a conscious effort to actively engage the wider public, provide a more diverse range of objects and develop narratives rooted in their communities' experience. Sorensen and museum director Max Hebditch recruited a panel of competition judges including Asa Briggs, oral historian Paul Thompson, and the editor of *History Today*, Juliet Gardner.¹⁹⁰

Yet we should not overstate the cultural radicalism which the exhibition represented. As Chapter Two will show, Centerprise reflected the contemporary New Left's attempts to revolutionise existing methods of production and notions of cultural merit. As such, they sought to forge a culture emphasising new values, like solidarity and collectivism, and empowered the marginalised to be central to their articulation. MOL curators did not interpret the GLC's directive to produce social history as a means to rethink philosophies of production and notions of value, but in more literal and limited ways. This panel of expert judges, themselves ingrained within the structures of the academy, publishing and in Briggs' case even the national legislature, wrote a report on each of the entrants, identifying winners and allocating special commendations in different categories.¹⁹¹ Curators then gave the narrative form, using the judges' rankings to configure the amount of gallery space allocated to each entrant's submission.¹⁹²

Nor were the participating groups particularly reflective of the radical history milieu which Centerprise encapsulated, and which was so closely associated with the New Urban Left. Thirty-three groups entered the competition, of whom three are conspicuous as having radical politics. The Black Cultural Archives (BCA) had, as Rob Waters notes, been involved for much of the previous two decades in collecting and archiving the growth of Black Britain and specifically the history of post-war political resistance. This archiving was itself a radical act, a statement of collectors' faith in a future where

¹⁸⁹ Flyer, 'The Making of Modern London', MOL.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Press Release, 'The Making', MOL.

political transformation had been won and value was placed on these documents as artefacts of change.¹⁹³ They were competition finalists, their contribution leading to a display within the exhibition entitled ‘Six Black Londoners’.¹⁹⁴ Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop, meanwhile, was founded by local residents affiliated with the national History Workshop movement with training and assistance from the radical historian Ken Worpole, of whom we will hear more in Chapter Two.¹⁹⁵ Together, these groups demonstrate *some* involvement in the project from participants in the people’s history movements of the 1970s. But they were a small minority in a list of entrants dominated by secondary schools, hospitals and local history societies without any evident political commitment.¹⁹⁶ The MOL, again, was separated from the milieu of radical community history with which it shared a funder. While many within the cultural milieu of the New Urban Left were reimagining social history as a vehicle to rethink cultural merit, democratise production and formulate a heritage discourse which served a radical intersectional politics, the MOL imbued it with none of these wider theoretical and political goals.

This was reflected in *The Making of Modern London’s* narrative during its run between September and November 1985. Tasked with the curation of competition entrants’ diffuse and specific interests, MOL staff developed a narrative combining introductions to broad processes of social and political change with incongruous displays communicating an antiquarian excitement at the richness and oddity of the past. The exhibition’s press release listed highlights which included ‘courting in haystacks, opium dealing in Chinatown, freeing Uncle Bill from Aunt Ada’s bed and pawning dad’s suits every week’.¹⁹⁷ If this reflects the combination of the novel and the structural, the displays suggest that the former often came at the expense of a sustained or considered analysis of the latter. One audiovisual oral history installment was an interview with Madge Wick, whose mother was a bodyguard to Emmeline Pankhurst and a significant figure in the suffragette campaigns. This was the basis of a display relating this case-study to the broader history of first-wave feminism within this period.¹⁹⁸ Rather than a structuring theme of the exhibition, though – to be comprehensively examined as an important facet of the ‘Making of Modern London’ – this was one indistinguishable panel among many. Nearby, another more prominent display was the award-winning entry of Waltham Forest History Workshop, a study of Epping’s interwar meat trade. Exhibits included **Figure 1.4**, a large photograph of a farm pig being raised for eventual slaughter, which had escaped to roam free on the streets. Rather than elaborate on its

¹⁹³ Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964-1985*, (Berkeley, 2018), pp.209-210.

¹⁹⁴ List of competition entrants, ‘The Making’, MOL.

¹⁹⁵ Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop, ‘About Us’, Last accessed 23rd August, 2022, at <https://wforalhistory.org.uk/about-us/>

¹⁹⁶ List of entrants, ‘The Making’, MOL.

¹⁹⁷ Press Release, ‘The Making’, MOL.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

occasional, cursory overviews of political or social change, the exhibition frequently defaulted to marvel at the alterity of the past and the communication of this through the curiosities collected by local groups. That this was Waltham Forest History Workshop's contribution also suggests that even those participants who had emerged from the cultural radicalism of the 1970s did not substantially disrupt the broader exhibition's largely apolitical character.

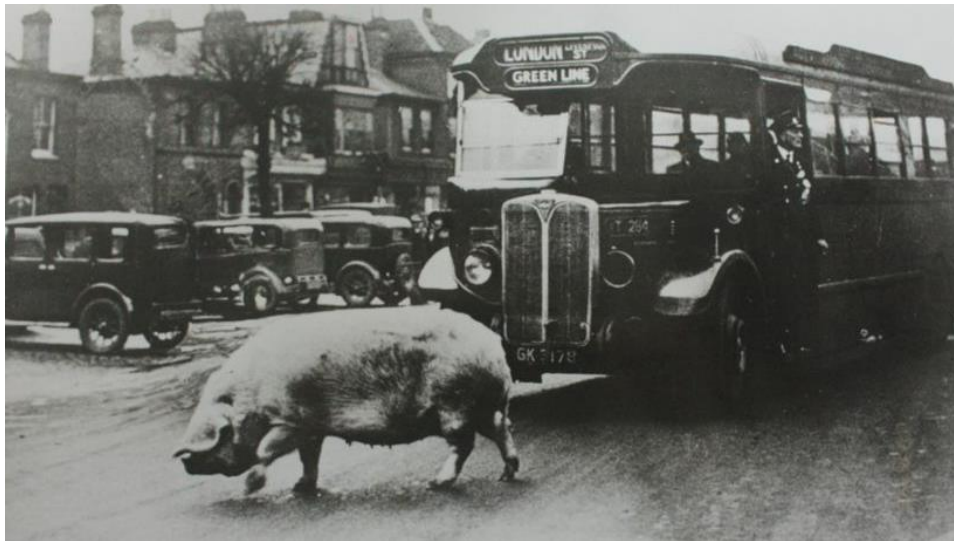


Figure 1.5 Escaped pig, Epping.¹⁹⁹

While the title of the BCA's entry, 'Six Black Londoners', signals an emphasis on early twentieth-century histories of race and migration, no archival records remain of the display's content. While the BCA's contribution *may* have been successful in this regard, it *is* clear that this was at least partially overshadowed by the large gallery space allocated to inadvertently racialising engagements with this topic. The prominent discussion of 'opium trading' in the exhibition's press release referred to the large, award-winning, and popular display given to the Overbury House Oral History Group's entry, 'Chinatown Annie'.²⁰⁰ This centred on an oral history with Annie Lai, 'now in her eighties, who was drawn into the opium trade'.²⁰¹ The interview was accompanied by a photograph of three Chinese migrants standing in front of a 'mystery shop', which the caption explained was 'a front for opium dealing'. This contribution, awarded one of the competition's major prizes by judges and thus given a prominent gallery position by curators, provided a vision of shadowy Chinese migrants overseeing

¹⁹⁹ Gallery Photos and Captions, 'The Making', MOL

²⁰⁰ Press Release, Gallery Photos and Captions, Questionnaire, 'The Making', MOL.

²⁰¹ Gallery Photos and Captions, 'The Making', MOL.

organised crime networks and preying on working-class East Enders.²⁰² Despite the long, complex and often violent history of opium shipping and imperial commerce more generally, this account – focused around organised crime, drug consumption and addiction – constituted the exhibition’s coverage of Limehouse’s Chinese community, and its most prominent account of migration *per se*. The competition entrants published their findings in *Oral History* in 1986, in a piece which acknowledged Britain’s punitive approach to opium traders but continued to conceive early-twentieth-century Chinese migration solely through the lens of organised crime.²⁰³ The leading social historians judging the competition, the left-leaning curators organising the exhibition, and a prominent academic journal in the field, all commended and amplified this framing. While the BCA’s entry may well have offered a different perspective, judges ranked that contribution less highly and curators gave it a smaller display size, leading ultimately to its obscurity in the archive. The anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot identifies ‘four moments’ during the production of history where silences enter the narrative which reinforce the functioning of power. At three of Trouillot’s moments – the creation of archives, the making of narratives, and the retrospective assignment of political significance – various arms and affiliates of the institution downplayed the significance of histories of migration and racism, limited its gallery space, and prevented a qualitative understanding of the display’s content for researchers.²⁰⁴

The limitations of this approach, and particularly its interpretation of objects, were also evident in the 1987 exhibition *Londoners*, focusing on artistic depictions of the capital’s residents. Seaborne’s Arapoff exhibition elided a commitment to social history with a specialist interest in the technical development of photography throughout the 1930s. *Londoners* offered a starker example of a similar phenomenon, with direct implications for the framing of race. In the accompanying publication the project’s curator Celina Fox suggested her aims were reparative, to rectify the fact that ‘almost every book written on the depiction of London in art and every exhibition to take the city as its theme concerned themselves primarily with the buildings of the metropolis. The millions of inhabitants who provided the *raison d’être* for ... London had all but been ignored. I hope to restore their presence’.²⁰⁵ The exhibition, then, appeared a radical project to rescue the capital’s population from their art historical obscurity. Yet Fox continued ‘my guiding principle has been to focus attention on the images themselves’, revealing a primarily technical and aesthetic approach to curation.²⁰⁶ Throughout, Fox framed Europe as the most

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ Annie Lai, Bob Little, Pippa Little, ‘Chinatown Annie: The East End Opium Trade 1920-1935: The Story of a Woman Opium Dealer’, *Oral History*, 14, (1, 1986), pp.18-30

²⁰⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (1995; repr., Boston, 2015), p.26

²⁰⁵ Celina Fox, *Londoners*, (London, 1987), p.7

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*

significant international site of exchange, pointing to passages on the innovations of the Dutch Golden Age and the Italian Renaissance.²⁰⁷ Though it claimed egalitarian goals, then, *Londoners* retained a traditional, Eurocentric conception of art history, communicated through arcane language, and narrowly focused on paintings' visual qualities. The contradictions within Fox's approach to curation were particularly stark in *Londoners*' framing of race. Fox noted that 'London has always been characterised by extraordinarily high levels of immigration', stating an interest in how artists visually rendered migrants to 'stand out, remain visible as foreigners'.²⁰⁸ Yet the exhibition reinforced their fundamental alterity and exteriority by titling the relevant gallery *Strangers and Foreigners*.²⁰⁹ The catalogue included discussion of a 'Red Indian... in St James' Park around 1615', and - even more strikingly, for 1987 - framed the presence of 'an albino negro woman' in a Johann Zoffany painting as demonstrating a cultural 'fascination with freaks'.²¹⁰

This project, then, encapsulates the characteristics of this persistent approach to social history at the MOL. Curators were directed by their superiors that the GLC had, in managerial and governance-level conversations, underscored the need for a broadly defined emphasis on social history and a greater engagement with London's population. But this left curators free to pursue these goals as they saw fit, and in ways which cohered with their existing interests. The result was the emergence and persistence until 1987 of an approach to social history which was focused primarily on objects' aesthetic and technical qualities, at once arcane and insensitive in its use of language and lacking both the conviction and critical theoretical tools to engage with histories of race, migration and Empire.

'Responsible to the People' and the End of Municipal Socialism

By the mid-1980s the viability of urban radicalism was under severe threat. Thatcher's campaign to repress the municipal socialist councils' expenditure on poverty reduction, social infrastructure and radical cultural politics culminated in the abolition of the GLC and the other Metropolitan County Councils in 1986. Education formed one crucial facet of the GLC's agenda, pursued through ILEA, a 'special committee' of the council with jurisdiction over the twelve inner London boroughs. ILEA oversaw educational policy at a strategic level, as well as funding and organising public information campaigns. The authority retained its jurisdiction for four years between the GLC's abolition and the development of alternative educational provisions for the capital, during which time it continued to

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁰⁹ Sylvia Collicott, 'The Peopling of London', *History Workshop Journal*, 38, (1, 1994), p.261

²¹⁰ Fox, *Londoners*, 246.

formulate radical policy and communications. At the MOL, the authority supplemented the wider GLC's overall funding with significant contributions to educational outreach work throughout the 1980s.²¹¹

In 1988, ILEA submitted a proposal to broaden its involvement in the MOL beyond supporting the education department. With the authority's own abolition impending in 1990, it offered to produce an exhibition marking the centenary of the establishment of the GLC's predecessor, entitled *London County Council [LCC]: Responsible to the People*. Given this suggestion by the authority which had consistently supported its educational provision and whose parent council played such a large role in providing funding, the museum accepted.²¹² Shortly after the GLC's abolition and before ILEA's own, *Responsible to the People* – displayed between March and May, 1989 – marked the centenary of the establishment of the council's predecessor, constructing a longer tradition of municipal socialism within which to understand contemporary struggles. Promotional material made pointed parallels between late-Victorian London and the present, where great wealth and opulence once again persisted in the face of urgent hardship, and the city lacked a strong municipal government to address this.²¹³ There was marked incongruity with the permanent galleries, both in this, the exhibition's core narrative, and in the framing of the Empire in relation to London's economy and politics. ILEA needed to frame the LCC as benevolent from the anti-racist perspective of contemporary municipal socialism. To do so, the LCC obscured the racialised and imperial terms in which many of its socialist and feminist protagonists articulated their politics.

ILEA's chairman Tony Powell, not MOL curators, devised and sent invitations to the exhibition's private view. The event brought together leading figures within the London Left, including Jeremy Corbyn, Ken Livingstone, John McDonnell, and the Mayors of Brent, Islington and Lambeth, as well as national figures like Tony Benn.²¹⁴ It provided an opportunity for ILEA to host these allies, affirming their work with a celebration of their shared political heritage and a demonstration of the wide cultural support they still enjoyed despite recent defeats. More widely, the exhibition's leaflet directed visitors who desired further information to local community publishers including Tower Hamlets Arts Project and, significantly, Centerprise.²¹⁵ In the next chapter we will see that ILEA had a close and sustained relationship with Centerprise. Here, in turn, the authority used this prominent platform to seek to generate new sources of income for community publishers and wider audiences for their radical cultural project. ILEA, then, used the exhibition to strengthen both the political networks of the Labour left and the

²¹¹ See 'Educational Projects in Other London Museums', (GA/5/4), ILEA collections, UCL Special Collections

²¹² Exhibition Proposal; Promotional Leaflet, 'London County Council: Responsible to the People', MOL.

²¹³ Promotional Leaflet, 'London County Council', MOL.

²¹⁴ Private View Invitation; List of Accepted Invitees, 'London County Council', MOL.

²¹⁵ Exhibition Guide, 'London County Council', MOL.

cultural politics of activists from the wider milieu of the New Urban Left. The authority, in this sense, employed a form of *authorisation* which exchanged material support for the opportunity to directly create narratives and use exhibition space for political activities and promotion.

The exhibition was divided into two halves. The first covered the background to and foundation of the LCC, providing a vision of a late-Victorian city plagued by poor sanitation, without adequate infrastructure investment, and with a deteriorating, dysfunctional housing stock. One gallery, ‘Health and Welfare’, pointed to the vast numbers of urban poor housed in small, cold and dark dwellings, or even poorhouses and almshouses. The lack of adequate sanitation infrastructure gave scant protection from waste and led to repeated, severe epidemics; 7000 East Enders died in the last great cholera epidemic in 1866, and the Thames was, the exhibition noted, a ‘national disgrace’.²¹⁶ Another gallery, ‘A City of Sweatshops’, dealt with exploitative, dangerous working conditions, while a section on education noted that a lack of investment meant that attendance and the quality of buildings remained low.²¹⁷ The city was without an adequate municipal authority to address this malaise. The body responsible for developing public infrastructure, the Metropolitan Board of Works, was found guilty of corruption by a Royal Commission in 1888, while a patchwork of other boards – including lighting, paving, and water – existed without organisational coherence or clear direction.²¹⁸ The parallels with contemporary London - which again lacked a functioning authority and faced a national government emphasising individual thrift in the face of poor material conditions – were clear. In this way, the 1880s figured as a threatening parallel towards which the city was regressing.

In both the 1880s and 1980s then, the exhibition suggested the necessity of a strong municipal government. In this light it introduced the first LCC elections, in which voters chose between ‘Moderates’ (mostly conservatives) and ‘Progressives’, (mostly liberals and socialists).²¹⁹ Gallery text offered profiles of leading socialists including the councillor, former glassworkers’ union leader and later Battersea MP, John Burns, and John Williams Benn. The narrative emphasised these councillors’ rise to prominence through trade unionism and particularly the 1889 Great Dock Strike.²²⁰ The exhibition framed these early councillors, then, as pioneers of a longer tradition of urban radicalism, wielding increasing authority in the city halls and honouring their close connections to trade unions. **Figure 1.6** shows Tony Benn standing at the private viewing with a displayed portrait of his grandfather, John Williams Benn. The

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ Promotional Leaflet, ‘London County Council’, MOL.

²¹⁹ Exhibition Guide, ‘London County Council’, MOL.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

portrait's caption emphasised the connection between Benn and his grandfather, in perhaps the clearest statement of the continuities the exhibition sought to draw between the two periods.²²¹

REMOVED FOR PUBLIC DEPOSIT

Figure 1.6 Tony Benn standing in front of a portrait of his grandfather, John William Benn.²²²

From their first meeting in 1889, moreover, the exhibition noted that the LCC began its 'honourable history of improvements to the quality of life in London'.²²³ One gallery noted the gradual construction of new estates, first by Philanthropic trusts like the Peabody, and later by the LCC itself.²²⁴ The re-ordering of London's intricate, small and chaotic streets and the construction of early underground lines signified the rationalisation of the roadways and the improvement of municipal transport infrastructure.²²⁵ The Council developed labour regulations, and itself became 'a major, model employer' through initiatives like the LCC Works Department in 1893.²²⁶ The final gallery charted the radical reform of education, the construction of more school buildings, and heavier investment in teacher training, addressing decaying buildings and poor attendance.²²⁷

With this, *Responsible to the People* came to directly contradict the permanent galleries. **Figure 1.6** is an article from the *Daily Chronicle* displayed in this gallery, in which a cartoonist imagined the composition of a future Lord Mayor's show 'under the London County Council'. Participants in the fictional parade wore the traditional regalia of the City, but carried signs proclaiming the collective advances of the new age, including 'Municipal Lighting', 'Municipal Water Supply', 'Municipal Markets', 'Municipal Education', and – in summary of these endeavours' overall effect – 'Municipal Progress'.²²⁸ These proclamations of this future city's goals and ideals outlined a vision of another London, where the financial speculation and vast wealth of the City had been brought into line with the city's reformation under the LCC. While this entire exhibition demonstrates the contradictory, partial and uneven nature of the museum's politics – and the necessity of attentiveness to the different interests operating within it – this is the starkest example. The finery and regalia which were such prominent tokens of the MOL's close relationship with the City, and which the permanent galleries celebrated as

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Photographs from 'Responsible to the People' Private View, MOL.

²²³ Promotional Leaflet, 'London County Council', MOL.

²²⁴ Exhibition Guide, 'London County Council', MOL.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Exhibition Objects and Contents, 'London County Council', MOL.

signs of Corporation's benevolence, here figured as a symbol of the neglect of existing civic bodies and a target for socialist reform.



Figure 1.7: *Daily Chronicle*, February 18th, 1895.²²⁹

ILEA also found within the LCC's early history usable pasts for their contemporary feminist politics. Though three women candidates were elected to the council in 1889, a successful legal challenge overturned this. This vignette facilitated the introduction of the late-Victorian and Edwardian battle for suffrage, finding first-wave forebears for contemporary municipal feminism.²³⁰ Reflecting on the issues raised by the early LCC, the sixth gallery – titled 'burning issues' – claimed that these years saw the emergence of the major political dividing lines of the twentieth century, citing working-class education, feminism and trade unionism.²³¹ A century later, as Thatcherite dominance threatened the dismantling of gains in all these areas, this gallery made the clearest case of the LCC's importance as a symbol of the

²²⁹ 'LCC: Responsible to the People', Objects, MOL.

²³⁰ Promotional leaflet, 'London County Council', MOL.

²³¹ Exhibition Guide, 'London County Council', MOL.

possibility of a city where a strong and vibrant left, firmly in touch with trade unionism and feminism, won radical advances.

Yet conspicuously absent from this account was the significance of these celebrated figures' investment in prevailing discourses of race, nation and Empire. The late-Victorian and Edwardian period saw outgrowths of racialised and imperial sentiment among the socialists and feminists who were this exhibition's protagonists. Jonathan Hyslop theorises this period as the moment when an 'Imperial Working Class' self-consciously came into being throughout the British Empire, forged from solidarities between white labourers in the United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia. This transnational phenomenon's philosophy of 'White Labourism' emerged in large part out of a fear of the undercutting of white labour by cheap migrant workers. For Hyslop, this was 'a major cultural source of the rise of working-class racism in turn-of-the-century Britain', reaching its apotheosis in 1913 through huge marches in Hyde Park in solidarity with white workers in South Africa who had been deported to Britain after demanding the exclusion of Black and Asian workers from skilled positions.²³² Hyslop attributes the reluctance of labour histories of Britain to engage either with this Hyde Park march or the broader phenomenon of 'White Labourism' to the fact that they were 'embarrassing in the extreme to later twentieth-century historians of labour sympathies'.²³³ These histories posed a similar challenge to ILEA's need to construct a benevolent tradition of municipal socialism before its impending closure.

We can see a similar phenomenon in the investment of many of the socialist and feminist protagonists of *Responsible to the People* in eugenic racial 'science', which often had distinctly imperial goals. Late-Victorian reformers often saw poverty not only as an injustice for the sufferer, but as a threat to the vitality of the wider body politic. The fear of racial 'degeneration', the loss of the biological vitality which was the foundation of British strength through poverty and the procreation of the poor, was central here. As Lucy Bland notes, eugenics sought to respond to late-nineteenth century challenges from Germany, the US and Japan to Britain's imperial pre-eminence. Commentators often attributed Britain's seeming comparative stagnation to the poor racial 'fitness' of the British working-class. For many first-wave feminists, eugenics offered an opportunity to underline the importance of women to the reproduction of the imperial 'race'; many middle-class late-Victorian and Edwardian feminists spoke in a language, according to Bland, of 'maternalist imperialism'.²³⁴

For socialists and bourgeois reformers alike, degeneration was also inexorably linked to the

²³² Jonathan Hyslop, "The Imperial Working Class Makes Itself 'White': White Labourism in Britain, Australia, and South Africa before the First World War", *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 12, (4, 1999). pp. 398–421.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p.398.

²³⁴ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists*, (New York, 1995), p.231.

presence of racial outsiders, and specifically Jews or ‘aliens’.²³⁵ As Nadia Valman and Eitan Bar-Yosef argue, narratives of a destitute ‘alien’ population who occupied a liminal space on the periphery of European whiteness served to undermine the racial purity and vigour of the capital and the functioning of the colonies abroad.²³⁶ While Jews were not colonial migrants then, their presence was understood within a specifically imperial context as a threat to the dignity of labour and the imperial body. As the political home of the trade unionists and councillors being celebrated in this exhibition, East London was the nexus of these fears, the imagined epicentre of this phenomenon. Many of these feminists and socialist councillors premised the uplift of the area’s working class on the restoration of racial homogeneity, as commentators linked sullen ‘destitute aliens’ with a pathological predisposition towards the spreading of disease, the destruction of the population’s vigour and the erosion of working conditions and living standards. The 1890 House of Lords Select Committee into the Sweating System, for instance, drew heavily on the work of prominent socialists including Margaret Harkness, who fervently attributed London’s exploitative sweated economy to the preponderance of Jewish arrivals and small business-owners. The 1890 commission’s report eventually rejected these arguments, but the discursive link between East End Jews, sweated conditions and squalor only grew, becoming increasingly influential prior to the passing of the 1905 Aliens Act.²³⁷

Many of the prominent leftists elected to the LCC were central proponents of the racial logics underwriting this diagnosis of ‘degeneration’ and the resulting prescription for its remedy. As both councillor and later MP, John Burns – a central figure in *Responsible to the People* – frequently framed the presence of Jews as a roadblock to reform and root of degeneracy. This was established among historians of late-Victorian politics well before the exhibition. In 1980, Claire Hirshfield documented Burns’ vocal antisemitism, including his 1889 reflection following a visit to the East End that ‘the undoing of England is [evident] within the confines of our afternoon’s journey amongst the Jews’.²³⁸ Note, again, Burns’ rhetorical connection here of Jews’ local presence and the threats to the wider nation. This was established scholarly knowledge by 1989, but its capacity to undermine the central political goal of *Responsible to the People* – the recuperation of an enduring, linear tradition of municipal socialism by its final, endangered inheritors – led to its obfuscation as a line of enquiry. More widely, the threat posed to the exhibition’s central narrative by late-Victorian feminists and socialists’ investment in Eugenics and

²³⁵ Glover, *Literature, Immigration and Diaspora*, 49-50

²³⁶ In Bar-Yosef, Valman, (eds.), *The Jew in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Culture*, p.17

²³⁷ Glover, *Literature, Immigration and Diaspora*, 73-75

²³⁸ Claire Hirshfield, ‘The Anglo-Boer War and the Issue of Jewish Culpability’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15, (4, 1980), 626

subscription to an imperial ‘White Labourism’ can explain ILEA’s disinterest in exploring these lines of enquiry.

ILEA were able to frame the struggle of women LCC members as a forebear to contemporary feminism, and thus frame this tradition as benevolently contributing to the material advancement of the city. Equally, they could celebrate councillors and trade unionists’ close relationship as demonstrative of a left which was firmly connected to its wider social base and admirable for its delivery for a disempowered city, blighted by poverty and failing infrastructure. This served both to underscore the damage caused by contemporary Conservative local government policy, and galvanise leftist responses by demonstrating the achievements of such opposition historically. But from ILEA’s anti-racist perspective, Victorian trade unionists’ antisemitism and subscription to eugenics and an imperial ‘White Labourism’ could destabilise the entire narrative, rendering untenable the notion of a linear tradition of municipal socialism. While anti-racism is often argued to be central to the New Urban Left’s cultural politics, ILEA were disinclined to pursue this avenue of research despite nascent efforts by historians to elucidate the relationship between race and the late-Victorian and Edwardian left. The presentation of Empire, this suggests, was contingent on the ability of the imperial to either underscore or undermine the ‘usable past’ being constructed by the narrator. Unlike the MOL’s permanent galleries, produced by conservative curators who framed Empire as the source of material abundance, ILEA obscured their socialist protagonists’ investment in racial and imperial logics. Visitors attending the MOL between March and May 1989 experienced permanent galleries where the Empire was central as a source of great pride, and a temporary exhibition on the same period in the city’s history, where it was conspicuously absent.

Conclusion

In its first thirteen years, the MOL was the site of divergent forms of practice. Each emerged through a distinct form of material political relationship, or *authorisation*, and was congruent with a different political interest within the capital. The MOL’s predecessors’ close, informal relationships with the Monarchy and the City of London shaped the development of their collections, influencing in turn the recruitment of curators and the narratives developed. This was a slow, cumulative, and indirect form of authorisation. Reverence for the Monarchy, the City and their material culture became inherent to collections and interpretation at every stage of the MOL’s development, a form of institutional ‘common sense’ whose politics were rarely perceived. The result was a permanent exhibition which emphasised the important role of these organisations and patrician leaders more generally in providing material abundance, splendour, cultural enrichment, and intellectual and social advances. This culminated in the Victorian period, after which the multicultural, post-imperial London of the post-war period figured in

uncertain and cursory terms, and the contemporary acceleration of deindustrialisation was absent. The Museum would soon address this, as Chapter Three will show.

From the 1980s curators within the Modern Department sought to move beyond these elite foci to produce a geographically wider, more democratic and contemporary programme of temporary exhibitions. Their efforts were encouraged by GLC pressure on the MOL's directors to engage more substantially with the wider metropolis. The Council issued this directive to governors and directorial-level staff in broad terms; individual curators had autonomy in their interpretation of it. They also maintained strong interests in particular artistic disciplines including photography and painting, a reality which detracted from close critical engagement with their sources' historic reinforcement of racist and nationalistic discourses. One important example of this was Seaborne's unreflective reproduction of his photographs' close association of the (white) working-class and the industrial power and might of the Port. This, I will show, became a major feature of the area's heritage industry throughout the late-twentieth century, reproducing a close association between class-based, national and racial identities which was already present within the sources of the early-twenty-first century themselves. Just as this form of authorisation was broad and loose, so too was the political congruence between these exhibitions' narratives and the GLC's politics. The MOL did not possess the critical thought, or conscious radical zeal, of many artistic and cultural groups receiving GLC sponsorship. Finally, ILEA directly organised *Responsible to the People* to protest the authority's impending abolition by pointing to municipal socialism's long tradition of delivery for and empowerment of Londoners being neglected by national government. This was a direct, explicit and transactional form of *authorisation* in which ILEA directly employed the MOL as a resource for political communication.

This also reveals the more complex place of imperial memory within museum narratives. Empire became the highest expression of the achievements of the elite protagonists of the permanent galleries; the objects donated by the City and the Monarchy became a symbol of the affluence, intellectual, cultural and social advancement they brought to London. Yet the reliance of the Victorian consumer boom on racialised (and often) colonial labour, and its culture's belief in colonial taxonomies of civilisation and race, was entirely absent. Curators did not pursue these lines of research, because they were incongruent with the image of this period and their exhibitions' protagonists' benevolence. Social history curators' temporary exhibitions also demonstrated a marked disinterest in imperial history, and unwittingly reproduced nineteenth and early-twentieth century racism. Similarly, ILEA sought to construct a linear tradition of municipal socialist provision on the eve of their own abolition. Yet the position of race and Empire as a wedge between these generations of municipal socialists meant that ILEA erased the exhibition's subjects' participation in the construction of contemporary racialised anxieties around the

corruption of the racial fitness of the metropole, belying their commitment to anti-racism. This brings into focus one of the central findings of the thesis which follows: understanding different and competing material relationships, once again, is *the* key to understanding the messy and inconsistent nature of imperial memory. Empire was both present *and* absent, often simultaneously, within the galleries of one museum: the former when it informed a sense of funders' benevolence, the latter when it did not.

Chapter Two: The Centerprise Publishing Project, 1971-1993

In 1971 a group of youth workers led by an American, Glenn Thompson, opened their first premises in Dalston, Hackney, seeking to enact a new vision for social work. Thompson had spent much of the previous decade working at a social enterprise café in nearby Hoxton designed to employ and entertain deprived youth. Yet he grew disillusioned with that project which, funded and governed by distant and unresponsive philanthropists, limited participants to passive receipt of middle-class beneficence. With colleagues Anthony Kendall and Margaret Gosley, Thompson related his experience to an analysis of the spatialisation of class in British cities by the late 1960s. Deteriorating ‘inner-city’ boroughs shed jobs and residents, subjecting their residual population to condescending intervention by wealthy suburbanites convinced of their capacity to ‘do good’.²³⁹ Local residents were trapped between middle-class charity and the stigmatisation and exclusion which, as this thesis’s introduction showed, characterised much contemporary commentary on the ‘inner city’ in general and Hackney particularly. Paul Harrison’s *Inside the Inner City: Life Under the Cutting Edge* (1983) marked the culmination of a longer process. Taking the borough as his sole case-study, Harrison presented Hackney as indicative of the nationwide urban crisis, a malaise sparked partly by seemingly inevitable racial discord following large migration.²⁴⁰

Eschewing both paternalistic charity and stigmatising national commentary, Thompson’s group sought more ‘legitimate’ means to both work in and imagine cities, encouraging locals to participate in service provision and exercise agency. They created a co-operative which offered residents a tangible stake in its governance, offered social and legal services, and engaged in commercial activities to remain free from accountability to charities or philanthropists. Selected by the group’s American contingent, the name ‘Centerprise’ integrated these ideals.²⁴¹ From this nexus, the founders hoped to encourage community activism to radiate outwards, flourish independently and create a self-conscious, organised local citizenry. This would counter prevailing perceptions of the crisis-ridden ‘inner-cities’, galvanising local youth to think of themselves as agents of change, as in contemporary Black educational projects.²⁴² Rejecting images of a ‘defeated client population of a dilapidated welfare state’, Centerprise constructed a vision of ‘a stubborn, multiracial community’ which offered ‘occasions and moments when it does exhibit

²³⁹ Margaret Gosley, *Remembering the Beginning*, no date (n.d.), Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections, ‘A Hackney Autobiography’ collection (Henceforth AHA) AHA/1/3/1.

²⁴⁰ Harrison, *Inside the Inner City*.

²⁴¹ Rosa Schling, *The Lime Green Mystery: An Oral History of the Centerprise Collective*, (London, 2017), p.9

²⁴² Waters, *Thinking Black*, p.127

and prefigure [...] the qualities of openness and joint activity.’²⁴³ As Aaron Andrews, Alistair Kefford and Daniel Warner recently argued, many residents of the inner city came to 'defy the cataclysmic narratives' surrounding their neighbourhoods, turning them into 'dynamic and generative sites for new modes of urban living, new forms of social action and a mundane but powerful multiculturalism'.²⁴⁴ Centerprise was a locus for such developments; it sought to empower residents to defy Hackney's pathologisation, challenging its prominence in narratives of national decline.

In taking this approach, Centerprise was influenced by the political upheavals of the late 1960s and the New Left's longer-term interest in 'culture'. While Thompson built on his experience working in counter-cultural New York bookshops, Kendall came to the co-operative following his involvement while studying at the London School of Economics in the 1968 student protests.²⁴⁵ Hackney seemed a natural choice: it housed an abundance of cheap, disused premises, and a population whose disempowerment Thompson knew only too well. Both men were interested in contemporary third world anti-colonial struggles.²⁴⁶ The group secured a grant from ILEA and began offering diverse services including youth projects, adult education classes, legal advice, and – they claimed – the borough's only bookshop. They sought to empower residents to transform their own lives through raised consciousness, educational advancement, and information about (and assistance pursuing) their rights.²⁴⁷ Centerprise thus drew on diverse inspirations including New Left internationalism and the demand for greater autonomy after 1968. It was a radical space where these forces intersected to pursue a localised liberation politics.

I focus here on one Centerprise institution, established in 1973: the publishing project. This venture built on the bookshop's work, addressing the perceived lack of a local literary culture and mainstream literature's exclusion of the 'working-class' nationwide.²⁴⁸ By publishing Hackney residents' life-narratives, Centerprise sought to challenge the exclusionary parameters of cultural and literary merit.²⁴⁹ Birgit Harris, whose 1986 PhD on the community publishing movement drew on a ten-week placement at Centerprise, employed concepts from cultural studies to define the project's goals. Harris developed Raymond Williams' conceptualisation of culture as 'the signifying system through which [...] a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored' with EP Thompson's definition of class-consciousness. Thompson argued that 'class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences

²⁴³ Centerprise, *1978 Annual Report*, p.4. AHA/1/5/39.

²⁴⁴ Aaron Andrews, Alistair Kefford, Daniel Warner, 'Community, Culture, Crisis: The Inner City in England, 1960-1990', *Urban History*, (Special Issue, 2021), pp.4-5

²⁴⁵ Anthony Kendall, Transcript of interview with Lynda Finn, (15th May, 2015), pp.10-11. AHA/2/21

²⁴⁶ Gosley, *Remembering the Beginning*, AHA/1/3/1

²⁴⁷ Schling, *Lime Green Mystery*, p.18

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.9

²⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.10.

[of capitalist exploitation] are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas and institutional forms'. He argued that these cultural resources helped forge an 'oppositional (second) culture with democratic and socialist aims'.²⁵⁰ Centerprise attempted to construct a 'second culture' through historical literature. As Smith's concept of the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' states, practitioners here mobilised heritage to *forge participatory citizens* and *imagine communities* in support of a political project. But rather than a conservative nationalism, this was in pursuit of the community activism of the New Urban Left. More, Centerprise's reliance on funding from ILEA, the GLC and Hackney Council to remain sustainable demonstrates the significance of theorising 'authorisation'. Grant aid facilitated or 'authorised' Centerprise's participation in a broader milieu of activism constructing class identities and solidarities. Focusing on its relationship with other activists and political funders can reframe our understanding of community publishing.

Many studies of the community publishing movement focus on the tension between practitioners' radical goals and the more diffuse perspectives of their working-class participants. Chris Waters presents nostalgia as a deeply felt yet largely apolitical phenomenon among participants bewildered by prevailing social change, in distinction to facilitators' more political goals.²⁵¹ Ben Jones, argues that nostalgia was not ubiquitous – many remembered drudgery, poverty and marginalisation - but that when present, nostalgia sought to reclaim pride in areas which were contemporarily stigmatised.²⁵² Tom Woodin traces the emergence of race and gender as discursive counterpoints to the primacy of class, noting rising tension as the groups affiliated to the FWWCP diversified.²⁵³ Others stress that the ideal of shared experience which such projects were premised on was constantly undermined by respondents' articulation of individual identities.²⁵⁴

This research is important, and often coheres with my reading of Centerprise publications. However, these largely textual analyses reveal little of community publishing's relationship to what Daisy Payling calls the 'vibrant... wider activist milieu' of urban radicalism, which it existed within and contributed to.²⁵⁵ Historians often overlook or treat as incidental community activism's relationship to municipal socialist councils, which is problematic given the same scholars' acknowledgement that

²⁵⁰ Birgit Harris, *The Federation of Worker-Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP)*, (PhD thesis, University of Oldenberg, 1986), pp.2-3, AHA/1/1/1.

²⁵¹ Chris Waters, 'Autobiography, Nostalgia', pp.178-195

²⁵² Jones, 'The Uses of Nostalgia', pp.355-374

²⁵³ Tom Woodin, *Working-class Writing and Publishing*, pp.157-175

²⁵⁴ Wetherell, 'Painting the Crisis', pp.235-249; Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000*, (Oxford, 2018), p.77

²⁵⁵ Daisy Payling, *'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire': Activism in Sheffield in the 1970s and 1980s*, (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2015), p.36

Thatcherite reforms to local government rendered many such projects unsustainable.²⁵⁶ More fundamentally, Rob Waters argues that grassroots Black writing was animated by the ‘struggle against a racialised social order’, employing the example of Centerprise and one specific figure, Ken Worpole. Waters establishes a binary between his view of community publishing as fundamentally political and Chris Waters’ suggestion that it ultimately reified an apolitical nostalgia.²⁵⁷ Rob Waters is correct that Worpole published Black schoolchild Vivian Usherwood’s poetry. But, as I will show, he crucially overlooks that Worpole often faced strong criticism for his neglect of race and privileging of class, a reality which caused such tension it contributed significantly to his eventual resignation. In fact, Centerprise was not meaningfully anti-racist until the late 1980s, after fifteen years of criticism of a condescending approach to publishing Black writers embodied by Worpole himself. Waters’ simplification of the project’s history derives from an over-reliance on textual, literary sources. It reflects an analysis engaging insufficiently with community publishing’s material relationship to contemporary political struggles and activism.

Community publishing was not a purely literary phenomenon whose texts can be simply analysed as ‘political’ or ‘apolitical’. It was a theatre of debates within a New Left seeking internal renewal, and a site of struggle against the external pressure of a rightward moving political climate. These complex stories of resistance and renewal are indispensable for a fuller, richer account of Centerprise activists’ difficulty placing London’s history in a global and imperial framework. Worpole’s emphasis on class-based identities and politics in the 1970s gave way in the early 1980s to an emphasis by white publishing project workers on increasing Black and Asian writers’ visibility without attempting structural reform or the development of a new theoretical framework. Further critiques of this new approach’s superficiality gave rise in the late 1980s to a more uniformly politicised, theoretically engaged group of Black Arts writers who expressed diasporic identities and transnational solidarities rooted in a shared history of colonisation and postimperial racism. The Thatcherite assault on local government led to the project’s discontinuation in 1993 and represented the culmination of the co-operative’s longer loss of authorisation. This more historically rooted account of community publishing shows that its unified mobilisation towards a project of radical racial justice was hard-fought due to intransigence on the left and short-lived due to encroachments from the right. Given both these political realities, an account of local history centring Hackney’s global and imperial connections was only briefly and ephemerally possible.

²⁵⁶ E.g., Wetherell, ‘Painting the Crisis’, p.247.

²⁵⁷ Waters, *Thinking Black*, p.143

Ken Worpole's Worker-Writers, 1973-1979

In Centerprise's early years, Thompson and Kendall attracted a staff and user-base of 'young idealists' moving into Hackney. Drawn to the area by cheap rent, many of those becoming involved pursued careers with strong public-service components such as social work and teaching.²⁵⁸ They were influenced by the potential that radical pedagogical theory like Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1970) and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) ascribed to democratising education and empowering residents to take control over their own lives.²⁵⁹ In a physically deteriorating area lacking amenities, Centerprise provided a space for this growing demographic to discuss these ideas and enact them through services offered to the borough's wider population. Ken Worpole, an English teacher at Hackney Downs school, channelled this sentiment towards publishing. Worpole's friend Chris Searle, a fellow teacher in neighbouring Tower Hamlets, had recently been reinstated following his sacking for publishing a collection of students' poetry, *Stepney Words*. Worpole watched Searle's case become a *cause célèbre*, emboldening radical educationalists nationwide.²⁶⁰ Inspired, Worpole published a collection of poems by Jamaican pupil Vivian Usherwood through Centerprise in December 1972, before convincing Thompson to establish a publishing project and leaving his teaching job to staff it.²⁶¹

Searle was deeply politically committed to and influenced by anti-racism and anti-colonial struggle. He sought through his pedagogical emphasis on Black and working-class histories to negate the alienation and stigmatisation which many students felt. He was, here, closely influenced by the Black supplementary school movement.²⁶² Searle would go on to spend 1977-1978 teaching in revolutionary schools during the Mozambican Civil War, and 1979-1983 in Grenada where, after he volunteered to work as a tutor with school children, leaders of the New Jewel Movement invited Searle to 'contribute to ministerial discussions, devising national education policy, creating a publishing house' and co-writing Maurice Bishop's education speeches.²⁶³ For Searle in the early 1970s, class struggle, anti-racism and anti-colonialism were intertwined commitments, mutually contributing to the intellectual and practical development of one another. Yet the co-operative's interpretation of Searle's influence overlooked the

²⁵⁸ Schling, *Lime Green Mystery*, p.24

²⁵⁹ Margaret Gosley, Transcript of interview with Charlie Clarke, (25th March, 2015), p.9. AHA/2/21

²⁶⁰ Schling, *Lime Green Mystery*, pp.24-29

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.29

²⁶² Bob Davis, 'Teaching Tough Kids: Searle and Stepney', *Race and Class*, 51, (2, 2009), p.29

²⁶³ Didacus Jules, 'A British Anti-imperialist Lion in the Grenada Revolution', *Race and Class*, 51, (2, 2009), pp.109-111, especially p.109

global dimensions of his activism and thought. This reflected a similarly selective use of Searle's thought throughout the early, class-focused community publishing movement.²⁶⁴

Worpole established the *People's Autobiography of Hackney* group with funding from the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). In 1978, the group's ten regular members had a more mixed demographic profile than its rhetoric might suggest, comprising three teachers, two students, a librarian, a pensioner, a postman, a decorator, a council labourer and Worpole, another (former) teacher as coordinator.²⁶⁵ Members interviewed residents, before processing and selecting material for inclusion and collaborating on the framing, introduction and conclusions. Thus, they enacted their commitment to collective, democratic cultural production. By collating personal testimonies into larger collective histories, they sought to negate the individualism inherent in the life-narrative, and to foreground in their introductions the thematic significance of class in shaping experiences and identities. Hackney's history of political activism – demonstrable in the 1926 General Strike, and anti-fascism and anti-racism throughout the twentieth century – supported the group's conviction that class consciousness was an enduring feature of local identities.²⁶⁶ Worpole's argument that 'working-class life [...] should be published in the long-lasting form of books, as a permanent record and as a means of maintaining an active local class consciousness' is instructive.²⁶⁷ It captures a strategy to construct through heritage a local identity rooted in class solidarity, and to actively enlist residents in shared struggle. Receiving institutional support - or *authorisation* - from ILEA, the GLC and the WEA, this early history suggests the existence of authorised heritage discourses supporting the revived class politics of the 1970s. Yet this focus limited their ability to represent the complex social forces shaping the experiences of Black writers like Usherwood and obscured the publishing project's anti-colonial and anti-racist intellectual debts. It also occluded the more complex class positions of its participants.

One of Centerprise's earliest publications, *The Threepenny Doctor: Dr Jelley of Hackney* (1974) celebrated the advances of post-war social democracy through an account of pre-war health provision. The book offered a profile of a doctor practicing in interwar Hackney through an introduction written by the *People's Autobiography* group and a series of residents' anecdotes. The introduction illustrated these decades' harsher inequalities by discussing healthcare, likening hospitals to the workhouse, connecting chronic ill-health to poverty, and emphasising the prohibitive expense of medical treatment.²⁶⁸ Thus, the

²⁶⁴ Searle's thought is treated similarly selectively in Woodin, *Working-class Writing and Publishing*, p.13.

²⁶⁵ List of Hackney Workers' Educational Association members, 1978. AHA/1/16/1

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.24

²⁶⁷ Ken Worpole, *Local Publishing and Local Culture: An Account of the Work of the Centerprise Publishing Project, 1972-1977*, (London, 1977), p.10

²⁶⁸ Hackney Workers' Educational Association (HWEA), *The Threepenny Doctor: Dr Jelley of Hackney*, (London, 1974), I-V

poor relied on incompetent or inexperienced doctors, those who worked part time for friendly societies but had more profitable priorities, or those driven – like Jelley – by ‘ideals about service’.²⁶⁹ Charging threepence for holistic medical advice which addressed patients’ poor diets and living conditions, the book presented Jelley as possessing an understanding of the roots of ill-health in poverty.²⁷⁰ The introduction asserted:

This context of inadequate or inaccessible medical treatment [...] is important if we are to understand why Dr Jelley was an important figure in Hackney. He was not just a colourful eccentric [...] *he was the ‘threepenny doctor’ who had put his knowledge within everyone’s reach, had ‘taken pity on poor women’, and in doing so had sacrificed his [...] medical career.*²⁷¹ [My emphasis]

In Jelley’s social understanding and provision of healthcare, and his brushes with the law (he was eventually jailed for performing illegal abortions), the *People’s Autobiography* group granted him a similar rhetorical significance to the ‘social bandits’ described by Eric Hobsbawm. Supportive of the local oppressed population but without fully formed politics, Hobsbawm conceptualised ‘social bandits’ as ‘primitive rebels’ against the state who foreshadowed the growth of mature revolutionary sentiment.²⁷² Here, the book presented Jelley’s connected understanding of urban poverty and ill health, and his professional martyrdom, as harbingers for the coming reassessment of the state’s relationship to health and poverty. Jelley’s amelioration of two of what William Beveridge would later term Britain’s ‘five giants’ – disease and squalor – positioned him as an early observer of this injustice and his work as a forerunner to socialised healthcare. Promoting the book, Worpole wrote letters to literary reviewers asserting that Jelley ‘identified with [the] working-class people he served and in many ways was ahead of his time’.²⁷³ Jelley served to stress the significance of solidarity and constant political commitment to the maintenance of socialised institutions by dramatising the hardship which predated them; the book’s press release argued, ‘now that our health service is under attack it is timely to remind ourselves what healthcare consisted of before its establishment’.²⁷⁴ Through a focus on one doctor’s response to acute local hardship, the book encouraged readers to mobilise for the defence of the collective institutions of the welfare state.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, I

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, III-IV

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, V.

²⁷² Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Manchester, 1959)

²⁷³ Letter from Worpole to literary reviewer, 25th April, 1974. AHA/1/28/14

²⁷⁴ *Dr Jelley* Press release, AHA/1/28/14

In their following project, *Working Lives*, the group progressed from this focus on collective institutions to emphasise shared identities. The series collated residents' testimonies of employment over the preceding century, creating a two-volume history of 'work, what it is and what it meant' for locals.²⁷⁵ The *People's Autobiography* group explicitly sought to avoid an approach to autobiography which could be construed as individualistic, 'link[ing] people through a common experience more explicitly', and historically grounding a class consciousness.²⁷⁶ Primarily, these shared experiences centred on the injustice and danger of work.²⁷⁷ Demolition labourer John Welch recalled the danger of falling rubble and the regularity of incapacitating injuries on site, causing his early retirement and multiple colleagues' deaths.²⁷⁸ Annie Spike suggested the consciousness raising effect of such experiences: 'the majority of working-class people don't forget each other'. Ron Barnes, meanwhile, called for greater solidarity among taxi drivers.²⁷⁹

Yet this text's potential as a galvanising force for an explicit class-consciousness was limited. The only sustained discussion of industrial action was among teachers, a reflection more of the decade's growing middle-class trade unionism than of working-class struggle.²⁸⁰ Politicised class-consciousness was rare. If a 'working-class' culture did emerge, its primary characteristics in these decades were – as Mike Savage argues – a parochial emphasis on 'ordinariness' and an individualistic aspiration for economic self-determination.²⁸¹ In recollections of events before 1939, an undercurrent of deference to class authority was equally significant. Older women's recollections of their interaction with employers frequently betrayed admiration for their material wealth. A dressmaker, Emily Bishop, marvelled at her manager's 'richly furnished office', its 'beautifully polished furniture' and 'a carpet your feet sank into'.²⁸² Bishop progressed to mourn the 'court dresses and beautiful embroidery' which formed the firm's workload after she was made redundant in 1929, and asserted nostalgia for conspicuous Edwardian displays of opulence when lamenting the firm's 'belong[ing] to the world that ended in 1914'.²⁸³ Betty Ferry felt 'very good one day when the forelady told me I was a good worker' and was 'honoured' when a

²⁷⁵ HWEA, *Working Lives: Volume One, 1905-1945*, (London, 1976), frontispiece

²⁷⁶ 'Draft introduction for the *People's Autobiography of Hackney* contribution to the anthology of community publishers', AHA/1/11/1

²⁷⁷ HWEA, *Working Lives: Vol. One*, p.53; 86; HWEA, *Working Lives: Volume Two, 1945-1977*, (London, 1977), p.18

²⁷⁸ HWEA, *Working Lives: Vol. One*, p.37; 50

²⁷⁹ HWEA, *Working Lives, Vol. Two*, p.114, pp.140-149

²⁸⁰ HWEA, *Working Lives, Vol. Two*, pp.180-183, 188-192; see also Roger King, Neill Nugent, *Respectable Rebels: Middle Class Campaigns in Britain in the 1970s*, (London, 1979), p.2

²⁸¹ Mike Savage, 'Working-class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology*, 39, (4, 2005), pp.929-946

²⁸² HWEA, *Working Lives, Vol. One*, p.10

²⁸³ *Ibid*, p.12

departing foreman ‘did call me by my first name, but only after I had worked with him for a couple of years.’ Here, Ferry demonstrated pride at *earning* this privilege, even though the foreman was frequently condescending, made women work through their lunch hour, and sent them home without pay on a whim.²⁸⁴ Far from the publishing project’s ‘oppositional’ aims, these testimonies suggest admiration and deference for the bourgeois culture Worpole sought to eschew.

Others spoke as self-determined individuals. Lil Smith discussed her father’s toil as a taxi-driver with seven dependents. His fondness for overcharging ‘toffs’ leaving nightclubs showed an awareness of social difference, but one which was detached from political conviction. Rather, Smith couched it within a larger discussion of his efforts to maximise his income, and provide as effectively and comfortably as possible.²⁸⁵ Cartage contractor Albert Moseley’s account, likewise, asserted the significance of resourcefulness and thrift, while *Volume Two* opened with contributions from a barber and a hairdresser which offered accounts of running small businesses, more petit bourgeois than proletarian.²⁸⁶ Equally, Barnes’ call for solidarity among taxi-drivers was a response to his perception that his colleagues mostly viewed themselves as independent small businessmen.²⁸⁷ As John Davis argues, while taxi-drivers were more class conscious in the interwar and immediate post-war years, in the later twentieth-century their lack of occupational benefits and individualist working culture allied many with Thatcherism.²⁸⁸ More broadly, these testimonies suggest that residents’ responses to persistently poor working conditions into the 1970s rarely centred on the ‘class consciousness’ Centerprise sought to foster. More often, they sought to maximise control over their immediate material circumstances. Active hostility toward employers was rare, and as Lucy Delap notes of domestic servants and their mistresses, affection towards them was notable among some women born in the pre-war period.²⁸⁹ Contributors’ response to hardship at work was the articulation of individualistic identities and personal industriousness. This undermined Centerprise’s efforts to construct collective class identities and politics.

In the late 1970s Centerprise faced growing political strains deriving from their engagement in anti-racism and anti-fascism. Several Centerprise staff attended counter demonstrations and marches against the far-right, while bookshop staff set up a stall at the 1978 Rock Against Racism festival in

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, pp.106-127

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, pp.60-61

²⁸⁶ HWEA, *Working Lives, Vol. One*, pp.64-69; *Working Lives, Vol. Two*, pp.9-31, pp.32-42

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, pp.140-149

²⁸⁸ John Davis, ‘The London Cabbie and the Rise of Essex Man’, in Clare Griffiths, James Nott, William Whyte, (eds.), *Classes, Cultures, and Politics: Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin*, (Oxford, 2011), pp.102-120

²⁸⁹ Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain*, (Oxford, 2011), p.166

Victoria Park.²⁹⁰ The co-operative were prominent in local anti-racist activism; the National Front targeted their Kingsland Road premises persistently in retaliation. By 1978, far-right activists had vandalised the building with racist slogans, smashed its windows four times, and firebombed the bookshop, causing significant damage.²⁹¹ Worpole was particularly involved in these confrontations and affected by their results. He described Blair Peach – a teacher murdered by police during an anti-racism demonstration, who visited Centerprise to pick up books the day before his death - as his ‘best friend’.²⁹² The same year Vivian Usherwood, the local schoolchild whose poems sparked the publishing project’s establishment, died in a housefire. Many of these personal tragedies illustrated the political reality that violent racism and poverty were no less foundational to the area’s character than the ‘traditions’ of working-class anti-racist activism which Centerprise sought to celebrate and emulate. Worpole described the shifting climate which the co-operative worked within in these years as ‘harsh’; the prospect of creating a local culture defined by solidarity and mutual uplift became increasingly remote.²⁹³

Simultaneously, staff faced mounting criticism for their failure to attract the more active participation of Black and Asian residents. Many attributed this to the persistence of a condescending, paternalistic approach to social work which betrayed the organisation’s founding principles. Toby Taper – a civil servant who volunteered on Centerprise’s management committee - asserted in 1974 that, conducting community outreach, Kendall ‘strode into Hackney much as his ancestors had gone into distant parts of the Empire to bring the British way of life to the natives’.²⁹⁴ Kendall’s childhood as the son of a Shell executive in the British protectorate of Egypt is significant here. Taper suggested that such formative experiences led him to a neo-colonial assumption of power and knowledge that – far from empowering migrants to the area – continued to imagine them as helplessly reliant on white beneficence.

Similar criticisms emerged in the publishing project. Worpole remembers the increasingly confrontational tone which national meetings of the FWWCP took in the late 1970s, as Black and feminist groups increasingly challenged the primacy of class.²⁹⁵ With racist violence rising in Hackney, meanwhile, Harris noted concerns within the wider co-operative about ‘whether the concentration on white working-class experience and the exclusion of [...] immigrants had contributed [...] to reinforcing a racist mentality’.²⁹⁶ That is, the publishing project’s uncritical and unwittingly exclusionary emphasis on the ‘working-class’ appeared overtly racist when it was likened to the far-right’s use of the term as code

²⁹⁰ Ken Worpole, Transcript of interview with Beatrice Moyes, 4th June, 2015, p.23. AHA/2/16

²⁹¹ Centerprise annual report, 1977-8, AHA1/2/16

²⁹² Worpole, Interview with Moyes, p.22

²⁹³ Worpole, Interview with Moyes, p.24

²⁹⁴ Schling, *Lime Green Mystery*, pp.35-36

²⁹⁵ Worpole, Interview with Moyes, p.22

²⁹⁶ Harris, *FWWCP*, p.223

for a politicised whiteness. These concerns about the absence of Black and Asian experiences and identities from the project's understanding of its own politics were heightened when white respondents expressed racist views in interviews.²⁹⁷ Through Searle's influence, the project was deeply intellectually indebted to anti-colonial and anti-racist educational work. It was also founded on the promise of poetry written by a Jamaican schoolchild. Yet it obscured these connections, and reproduced a notion of a (tacitly white) working-class which often unwittingly resembled the racist claims to sole ownership over the area made by the far-right.

Indeed, the texts *Centerprise* produced in these decades almost entirely excluded the role of race, Empire and migration in shaping the area's history. Throughout Worpole's tenure, spanning the decade in which Hackney became one of the country's most diverse boroughs, the publishing project only worked with two migrants from the newly independent colonies: Vivian Usherwood and a Jamaican hairdresser, Myrtle Mae Green, who contributed to *Working Lives, Volume Two*. Usherwood's poems were unique insofar as they hinted at his migration from Jamaica. One poem, 'Life', concluded with the lines 'Life is Hard/ I wish I didn't come here at all'.²⁹⁸ Though this was the collection's sole, fleeting and subtle reference to his early life in Jamaica, Usherwood *did* often identify social workers and teachers who punished him and identified him as deviant in instances when he was innocent.²⁹⁹ Green's narrative was largely a story of her professional excellence leading her to a position of relative financial independence and commercial success. She reflected, while she was studying at the hairdressing academy, on a white client who upon seeing her 'went all red then pale-faced and wouldn't say anything to me'. But Green did such a good job that the client left a generous tip, telling her 'I wish you could pass your exams by the weekend, I wish you the best of success'. Green's published testimony carried no mention of her earlier life in Jamaica.³⁰⁰

Among the published testimonies of white residents whose occupations led them to engage with people and goods from the declining Empire, these dimensions of the narrative were downplayed. The contribution to *Working Lives, Volume One* of Alfred Dedman, a lighterman in the Docks, did not include a single mention of such cargo or sailors, although the places which much of his testimony concerned – West India Dock, East India Dock, Colonial Wharf – were a constant reminder of the impact of Empire on local toponymy.³⁰¹ The archive leaves no record of whether editors removed these sections of Dedman's memories from his interview. But Chapters Three and Four will show that colonial connections

²⁹⁷ Anna Davin, Transcript of interview with Beatrice Moyes, 30th April, 2015, p.14. AHA/2/1.

²⁹⁸ Vivian Usherwood, *Poems*, (London, 1972), p.1

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p.2, p.16, p.22.

³⁰⁰ HWEA, *Working Lives, Vol.2*, pp.32-42. Especially p.32.

³⁰¹ HWEA, *Working Lives, Vol.1*, pp.81-95

were often central motifs of the life-narratives of white workers in and residents of Docklands. The publishing project's central focus on 'class' in the 1970s, then, led it to rarely engage with migrant narratives. On the rare occasions it did interview migrants, or white residents who experienced the imperial port first-hand, it showed a marked disinterest in the colonies or the East End's connection to the Empire.

In 1977 Worpole lamented his group's failure to create a truly collaborative editorial process. He retained ultimate autonomy over the attribution of literary value and decisions over which material to publish. When the group agreed to establish an editorial board to attempt to empower participants, this often increased the influence of those like postman Ken Jacobs, who viewed their interest in history to be largely apolitical and felt detached from the larger 'crowd of educated left-wingers'.³⁰² Structurally, this may help to explain the disparity between publications' grandiose ambitions to harness 'class consciousness' and the more disparate, individualistic and mundane forms which respondents' testimonies often took. Worpole and others did little to rethink the primacy and celebratory treatment of working-class identities within their work, despite growing criticism of the exclusion and misrecognition of Black and Asian voices in the project. These years saw the construction of a heritage discourse, authorised by the WEA, Hackney Council and the GLC, seeking to foment class solidarity and democratise the means of cultural production. This class politics faced growing criticisms both within Centerprise and community publishing nationwide, while Worpole sustained a series of personal tragedies which each also brought political blows. He resigned from Centerprise in 1979.

Visibility, Subjectivity and Power, 1979-1986

The publishing project was, by the early 1980s, threatened by a shifting political and economic climate. A rise in state racism was manifested in the 1981 Nationality Act which narrowed ethnic minority migrants' routes to full citizenship, and locally in the 1983 death by gunshot of Colin Roach, a Black man, in Stoke Newington Police station. Rising tension between the police and particularly Black and Asian youth throughout the period culminated in riots in Dalston in 1981, mirroring those in Brixton.³⁰³ The area's stigmatisation by national commentators soon compounded this. Centerprise's idea of a 'stubborn, multiracial community' distinguished by its capacity for solidarity and joint action was eclipsed by the view of the borough described in Harrison's *Inside the Inner City*, beset by a racialised decline embodied by migrants from the Commonwealth. This sensational account of life in Hackney

³⁰² Schling, *Lime Green Mystery*, p.126; Ken Jacobs, Transcript of interview with Richard and Julia Gray, 13th August, 2015, pp.18-19. AHA/2/15

³⁰³ Schling, *Lime Green Mystery*, pp.42-43

under Thatcherism attracted significant attention. Its presentation of the borough's poverty as a 'symptom of [the] disease [which] spread throughout the British social, economic and political system' pathologised residents, undermining the co-operative's repeated emphasis on their untapped potential.³⁰⁴

The book prompted searching questions in an internal Centerprise memo: 'are there any positive aspects of life in Hackney?' and, tellingly, 'why isn't Centerprise included in the book? Has our impact over twelve years been negligible?'³⁰⁵ The latter quote particularly suggests a growing sense of the futility of communal self-organisation in addressing the acute urban deprivation of the early 1980s and the stigmatisation accompanying it. Centerprise's 1982-3 annual report expressed a new detachment from the co-operative's utopian vision. It noted that while the 1970s carried 'a sense of gradual expansion and improvement, reflected in legislation', 'nowadays [...] we have to defend what little ground remains, and the practical and imaginative leaps forward become harder and harder to sustain'.³⁰⁶ Following the deaths of Peach and Roach, hostility to state violence and racism became an increasingly clear and coherent aspect of the co-operative's rhetoric, in sharp distinction – as Chapter One showed - to the MOL's contemporary celebration of the Metropolitan Police in 1979. With the national state and the police acting as a barrier to rather than a resource for uplift, the dismantling of the local state through the GLC's abolition in 1986 cemented Centerprise's increasing political isolation. The 1986-7 Annual Report noted that without the GLC 'the future for us and many other projects in London [...] looks very grim'.³⁰⁷ These shockwaves necessitated organisational reforms seeking greater efficiency. The management committee voted to temporarily lay off five part-time staff, indefinitely discontinue the publishing project and abolish the lengthy weekly collective meetings.³⁰⁸ The distance between the project's utopian beginnings and its defensive present grew, as the revolutionary promise of the 1970s receded into the cold reality of Thatcherism. The Conservatives' war with and eventual abolition of the GLC represented the removal of Centerprise's 'authorisation', premised on the persecution of the cultural radicalism the co-operative embodied.

Yet in the shorter term, these spending cuts addressed the worst of the 1981-3 financial crisis. The publishing project resumed its activities with a renewed approach to addressing its critics. Critics of Worpole's publishing project often combined its neglect of Black and Asian voices with its obfuscation of women's experience. Within the People's Autobiography group, feminists such as Anna Davin expressed frustration with the tacitly white, male ideal of the 'worker-writer' and the fact that ethnic minorities and

³⁰⁴ Harrison, *Inside the Inner City*, p.325

³⁰⁵ Memo on Paul Harrison's *Inside the Inner City*, n.d, AHA/1/28/5.

³⁰⁶ 1982-3 Annual Report, n.p. AHA/1/28/1

³⁰⁷ 1986-7 Annual Report, p.2. AHA/1/18/1

³⁰⁸ 1982-3 Annual Report, n.p. AHA/1/28/1

women rarely attended the group's meetings. Davin did achieve some victories – Annie Spike's entry in *Working Lives* addressed housework as a form of unpaid domestic labour – but she was just as often frustrated.³⁰⁹ Davin stopped attending Centerprise meetings from the late 1970s for personal reasons, but her criticisms were not forgotten. Maggie Hewitt was hired in 1979, having taught English in a Newham comprehensive school for fifteen years, mostly as head of department. Hewitt moved to Centerprise because she wanted to do something 'very different' and was not interested in progressing to senior leadership within education.³¹⁰ Hewitt brought, then, a background of public service, specifically focused on engagement with literature. But she had no interest in the critical and theoretical political commitments which characterised Worpole's publishing project. Once in place, she wrote several pieces criticising Centerprise and the broader community publishing movement's exclusionary preoccupation with class and neglect of women and ethnic minorities' perspectives.³¹¹ She co-ordinated these efforts with the bookshop, which stopped stocking books deemed racist or sexist and increased its holdings from Caribbean, African and Asian literature.³¹² This is suggestive of Centerprise's broader response to its earlier failings: to address structural inequity and the exclusion of minorities primarily through an increase in their visibility.

This approach was evident in *Breaking the Silence* (1984). Manju Mukherjee, a worker at the nearby Dalston Children's Centre, approached Centerprise to collaborate on a project she had conceived. Mukherjee had been creating writing spaces and groups for Asian girls at the centre. One mother arranged a visit for Mukherjee at a specific point when her father would be away, and requested her daughter participate on the condition of anonymity. Specifically, she reminded Mukherjee of her promise that 'no harm comes to her daughter if she writes'. Mukherjee then decided to collate a book of writing by Asian women reflecting on their experiences in London; the promise of anonymity, she stressed, was crucial to securing participants.³¹³ From the project's inception, then, its goal was the reclamation of Asian women and girls' voices; conservative Asian men were, Mukherjee noted, one major barrier to this. Hewitt agreed to publish the book, which consisted of fifteen autobiographical entries by South Asian women, each printed in English and one of five South Asian languages. Mukherjee and Hewitt sought to empower its authors, rectifying the absence of self-narratives in public discourse around Asian women and pointing to

³⁰⁹ Davin, Interview with Moyes, pp.3-5; HWEA, *Working Lives, Vol. Two*, pp.10-13

³¹⁰ Maggie Hewitt, Transcript of Interview with Beatrice Moyes, 27th May, 2015, p.1. AHA/2/19

³¹¹ Hewitt, 'Women and Writing'; 'Dialect', n.d., 1984-1986; 'The Invisible Hand', (May 1986). AHA/1/12/26

³¹² 1982-3 Annual report, n.p. AHA/1/28/1

³¹³ Press Clipping, publication unclear, from Papers of Manju Mukherjee, (n.d., 1986-1993). (AHA/1/26)

the recurrence of ‘certain themes’ linking their experiences, including the family, education, and racism.³¹⁴

Many of the phenomena the press release identified were manifested in authors’ testimonies. While Parveen remembered having bricks thrown through the window of her council flat by white teenagers, Farida recalled a fire being started outside her family’s front door while they slept.³¹⁵ State neglect compounded this quotidian racism; the police and the council’s respective refusal to investigate or rehouse Farida reflected a contempt that recurred throughout the book.³¹⁶ The family unit was equally prominent, as the press release put it, in both its ‘positive, supportive’ manifestations and its ‘negative, restrictive’ ones.³¹⁷ Authors articulated their parents’ resentment of their desires for independence, or the shock of being ‘caught’ or ‘trapped’ between two cultures, alongside vehement assertions of personal success following familial support.³¹⁸ Authors experienced, related to and understood these phenomena in highly differentiated ways, and pursued responses which emphasised their independence. Three attitudes to the family can illustrate this. Some resented their overbearing parents’ inhibition of their desire for social and cultural independence.³¹⁹ One woman used a discussion of family relations to trace the progress of her parents’ leatherwear business, contrasting the feelings of stigmatisation and dependency foisted upon them during its early years with the admiration granted following their later success. This demonstrated that ‘what matters is MONEY [sic].’³²⁰ Others noted that family provided the support necessary to excel educationally, providing a route away from the alienation and racism of contemporary Hackney.³²¹ Faced with the myriad deprivations of the ‘inner-city’ and the persistence of racism and sexism these women emphasised the role of the individual or the family in achieving advancement through commerce or education. This was consistent with the publication’s intentions. As its title suggested, *Breaking the Silence* sought simply to amplify unheard voices, addressing a deficit in public discourse. Unlike the previous decade’s collective autobiography, it never linked this into a broader project of fostering group identities to be politically mobilised. Whereas Worpole sought to recuperate the benevolence of his favoured community for posterity, contributing to a broader cultural reevaluation of

³¹⁴ *Breaking the Silence* press release. AHA/1/28/14

³¹⁵ Centerprise Trust, *Breaking the Silence: Writing by Asian Women*, (London, 1984), p.11; 41. Similar testimony, see p.30; 73.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.42. See also p.30; p.42; p.73; p.83

³¹⁷ *Breaking the Silence* press release. AHA/1/28/14

³¹⁸ Centerprise, *Breaking the Silence*, p.30; 42; 73; 83. Other perspective, see p.31; 35; 41; 63

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.6

³²⁰ *Ibid*, p.25

³²¹ *Ibid*, pp.56-63

them, Asian men's perceived conservatism was one of the primary causes of this book's conception and a significant theme in the eventual publication.

The autobiographies of specific individuals published in the 1980s also reflected a turn away from collective identities and politics. The publishing project frequently collaborated in these years with the reading centre, the co-operative's adult literacy initiative. The reading centre encouraged pupils to write about their lives, with the most promising pieces considered for publication and their authors assisted by staff from both departments.³²² One pupil-author, Isaac Gordon, published two books with Centerprise in these years, *Going Where the Work Is* (1979) and *It Can Happen* (1985). For authors these books were an expression of personal achievement, reflecting their acquisition of greater control over their lives. As both textual narratives and physical artefacts, the publications were testaments of individual triumph. Gordon dictated *Going Where the Work is* to reading centre staff before collaborative editing with publishing project workers, outlining his life before and after moving to Hackney from his native Jamaica.³²³ Gordon next resolved to write a longer version independently when his literacy had progressed sufficiently.³²⁴ *It Can Happen's* original proposal, its press release and eventual introduction all emphasised the importance of Gordon's progression into more independent authorship, affirming his stated desire to move beyond simply being a beneficiary of the charity.³²⁵ In this sense, the collaborative production of memoirs between the reading centre and the publishing project shaped Centerprise's recruitment of Black and Asian writers around the narrative of individuals' self-improvement. This was a marked departure from the previous decade's explicit efforts to forge shared identities and politics.

This shift was reflected in content as well as form. *It Can Happen* began with Gordon's upbringing in Jamaica, where he was stigmatised for his illegitimate birth and often beaten by his stepmother. Gordon left school at eight without telling his father, remaining only partially literate until attending Centerprise's writing classes.³²⁶ Faced with acute rural poverty he followed much of his family to England in 1960, where he experienced social isolation, suspicion and extortion, squalid accommodation.³²⁷ Despite a reference from the Labour Exchange, Gordon struggled to find employment, facing rejection from multiple factories, shops and the post office.³²⁸ But Gordon's story was ultimately of

³²² *It Can Happen* working papers, AHA/1/28/17

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ *It Can Happen* working papers. Proposal from Hackney Reading Centre, AHA/1/28/7; Press release AHA/1/28/14. Also Jean Milloy Chris O'Mahony, 'Introduction', in Isaac Gordon, *It Can Happen*, (London, 1985), pp.1-3

³²⁶ Gordon, *It Can Happen*, p.7

³²⁷ *Ibid*, pp.10-13

³²⁸ *Ibid*, pp.18-21

triumph over injustice. He found employment gardening at Kenwood House, learnt to read, and sent for his wife to join him from Jamaica.³²⁹ Eventually, he managed to buy a house in Hackney and publish two books, writing the latter independently. In this sense, *It Can Happen* was the self-reflexive crescendo of its own story of determined self-improvement, marking a clear progression both from *Going Where the Work Is* and Gordon's longer-term experiences of domestic squalor and employer discrimination. *It Can Happen* continued Centerprise's departure from class, publicising Gordon's experience of racism in housing and employment. Yet as its title suggested, it promised the possibility of overcoming discrimination through personal application. It thus reflected what Sam Wetherell calls the 'ironic process' by which the community arts movement's foundational desire to encourage collective uplift and action gradually morphed into an alternative focus on fostering *individual* self-confidence and self-advancement.³³⁰

Strong parallels exist between Gordon and Pauline Wiltshire. Wiltshire's autobiography *Living and Winning* (1985) was a deeply personal story of triumph over racism and ableism. Born in Jamaica, Wiltshire's struggles to communicate from a young age led relatives to brand her as 'lazy'.³³¹ Growing up, responsibility for Wiltshire was passed between several reluctant family members.³³² As a young woman, she was often left alone in her insecure family home, when intruders frequently goaded and stole from her, and once raped her.³³³ The mother of an illegitimate child, she was ostracised by the Church, and moved to Hackney in 1976.³³⁴ Despite facing heavy discrimination, Wiltshire managed to secure a shop assistant job, attend adult education classes at Centerprise, move her son to join her from Jamaica, and begin to write.³³⁵ *Living and Winning* received acclaim within community publishing, winning the 'Best Autobiography' prize at the 1985 Socialist Bookfair Awards. Like Gordon's, Wiltshire's book marked the final seizure of control over her own life-trajectory and narrative, facilitated by the partnership between the reading centre and publishing project. Though Wiltshire was clear about the racism she experienced, she eschewed politics generally and Black activism in particular.³³⁶ More explicitly than Gordon or the *Breaking the Silence* collection, Wiltshire's example complicates Waters' characterisation of this period's Black writing as politically animated by 'the struggle against a racialised social order'.³³⁷ While at Centerprise, this period's memoirs traced migrants' experiences after moving from former

³²⁹ *Ibid*, pp.31-40

³³⁰ Wetherell, 'Painting the Crisis', p.247

³³¹ Pauline Wiltshire, *Living and Winning*, (London, 1985), p.9

³³² *Ibid*, p.13

³³³ *Ibid*, p.39

³³⁴ *Ibid*

³³⁵ *Ibid*, pp.40-49; 70

³³⁶ Pauline Wiltshire, Transcript of interview with Judy Joseph, 27th May, 2015, p.35. AHA/2/29

³³⁷ Waters, *Thinking Black*, p.143

colonies to the metropole, their understanding of racial disadvantage and their solutions to it remained markedly personal. The memoirs of this period dealt in individual subjectivity, not historical consciousness.

These texts marked significant advances for the visibility of women and people of colour within Centerprise, while the co-operative also increasingly advocated diversity within community publishing nationwide in these years.³³⁸ Yet just as these texts did not conceive Black experience within explicitly colonial terms or in relation to structural inequity, Hewitt continued the project's employment of earlier, paternalistic approaches to publishing and its neglect of authors' desire for greater control over their work. Editors retained autonomy and expertise to identify cultural value during the production of these texts, reproducing the fundamental inequity of Centerprise's relationship with authors, a dynamic which began through Wiltshire and Gordon's initial position as students at the writing centre. The co-operative's model of reinvesting profits from sales meant that unlike editorial staff, writers were not paid for their contribution, but seen as recipients of a 'service'. Eveline Maurius told Birgit Harris 'a lot of time you're left to feel we should be grateful that they published it [...] a lot of Black writers feel they're being patronised'.³³⁹ While offering greater visibility to Black and Asian authors, Hewitt's publishing project refused them full recognition or compensation.

Nowhere were these conflicts starker than over *Living and Winning*, following a disagreement between Wiltshire and Hewitt over several passages criticising organised Christianity. Hewitt wanted to remove these sections, whose tendency toward 'preaching' she felt actively lessened the book's appeal.³⁴⁰ Conceiving the book as a response to a lifetime of condescension, Wiltshire wanted to include them to demonstrate her capacity to engage with intellectual questions, particularly one deemed so significant to West Indians on both sides of the Atlantic. Hewitt and Wiltshire's accounts of this episode's precise details are contradictory. It is clear that Wiltshire deemed Hewitt's editing excessive, and symptomatic of her lack of control over her own life and its representation as a Black disabled woman and writer.³⁴¹ Arriving at work shortly after the Socialist Bookfair awards, Hewitt was met by a group of Black protestors demonstrating against her editorship and the broader issue of white publishers exploiting Black stories at Centerprise. Birgit Harris submitted her PhD thesis and sent it to Centerprise the following year. Harris observed that the organisation's ostensibly progressive, largely white staff retained a condescending attitude towards Black service users, and rarely moved beyond a 'patron-to-client'

³³⁸ Woodin, *Working-class Writing and Publishing*, p.162

³³⁹ Harris, *FWWCP*, p.209

³⁴⁰ Hewitt, 'Invisible Hand' article, (1986), p.3. AHA/1/12/26

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

relationship. While offering a service *for* the local population, the Trust never – as was its fundamental goal – became *by or of* it.³⁴² Throughout the early 1980s, then, the publishing project worked to increase the visibility of writers of colour without rectifying their structural exclusion from positions of power.

These criticisms fomented another crisis within the publishing project, and thus another change in direction. Centerprise's 1986 annual report acknowledged that 'the project perpetrates institutionalised racism' and expressed 'doubts within the collective about the directions being taken'. Responding to these criticisms, staff organised a series of meetings whose outcomes included the publishing project's agreement to 'employ a Black worker at the earliest opportunity' who would 'encourage a Black writers' workshop to develop' and rebalance the unequal power relations through which Black literature was created.³⁴³ Hewitt remembered a confrontational and bitter atmosphere within the co-operative after the *Living and Winning* protests. She interpreted this change in direction as being motivated by a 'battle of oppressions', in which the priority of rethinking the co-operative's approach to Black authors came at the expense of all other groups, even though Centerprise framed itself as a 'community publisher' who served all of the local community equally.³⁴⁴ These interpersonal hostilities and professional disputes led Hewitt to resign in 1986, shortly after which she penned an article defending herself, arguing that her expertise 'as editor was totally denied [...] it was entirely Pauline's book'. She complained that 'I was simply the person who dealt with the printer and had access to the cash to publish' and asserted her need 'to put myself into the book again... to reclaim it as part of my life'.³⁴⁵ Hewitt's striking appeal to her literary authority marked a departure from Centerprise's principle of breaking down the barriers to cultural production, allowing the creativity of others to flourish. She championed writers, providing they showed gratitude for her beneficence and deference to her expertise. This article's tone reveals Hewitt's reluctance to engage with criticisms of Centerprise's continued privileging of the figure of the (white) editor, or to engage substantially with Black and Asian authors' structural exclusion from positions of power. In 1986 Centerprise began implementing these internal reforms, however, leading to the emergence of a new cohort of Black Arts practitioners who argued that visibility was insufficient, and must be allied with collective historical consciousness and structural reforms to the operation of power. Yet the hostility towards Black claims for greater autonomy which Hewitt demonstrated here persisted.

³⁴² Harris, *FWWCP*, pp.239-240

³⁴³ 1985-6 annual report, p.5. AHA/1/18/1

³⁴⁴ Hewitt, Interview with Moyes, p.34

³⁴⁵ Hewitt, 'The invisible hand', pp.7-8, AHA/1/12/26.

Black Arts, Anti-racism and Thatcherism, 1986-1993

While Michael McMillan was a pupil in the mid-1970s at Daneford, a secondary school in Bethnal Green marked by racist violence and children openly identifying with the NF, McMillan's English teacher Norman Goodman introduced him to his 'cupboard of Black books'. McMillan, whose parents settled in Britain from St Vincent in the late 1950s, became increasingly fascinated by Black literature. He soon won an essay competition advertised by *West Indian World* for his essay 'Power to the Black Youth'. The prize, a ticket to the 1977 Festival of World Black and African Arts in Lagos Nigeria, exposed McMillan to artforms and Black cultural traditions from throughout the diaspora; it was a formative experience. Returning to Britain, McMillan progressed to study sociology at Sussex. He became a published poet and playwright before having a son and finding himself in need of regular employment by 1988. He saw Centerprise's posting for a Black publishing worker, advertised in the wake of the *Living and Winning* affair and Hewitt's departure, and applied for the position successfully.³⁴⁶

In post, McMillan oversaw a shift in the form and content of Black literature at Centerprise, and in the demographic of Black authors recruited. Gordon and Wiltshire had arrived at authorship through the reading centre's tutelage; their books marked the completion of their acquisition of literacy. Yet from the late 1980s McMillan and his successor Dorothea Smartt oversaw the growth of a group of consciously literary writers whose Blackness was their work's central theme. These authors articulated a consciously diasporic, postcolonial politics through expressive literary forms such as poetry and fiction. Rather than literacy classes, they developed and shared writing at workshops and poetry readings. This complimented the project's continuing work in memoir and history, which began publishing more explicitly anti-racist authors, drawing parallels between its new focus – the Jewish East End – and the contemporary experiences of Black and Asian Londoners. These years marked an adoption, not a continuation, of what Waters describes: a heritage discourse using consciousness of the imperial past as the basis of a contemporary radical anti-racism.³⁴⁷ Yet the synergy achieved here was vulnerable and short lived. McMillan's new directions often met resistance within the co-operative, while his appointment closely followed the abolition of the GLC, which left the publishing project in persistent financial difficulty until its discontinuation in 1993. What follows is a more complex image of postcolonial literary radicalism. After struggling for internal recognition for fifteen years, the viability of this work was jeopardised again as the defeat of municipal socialism engulfed the publishing project, and the wider activist New Urban

³⁴⁶ Michael McMillan, Transcript of interview with Charlie Clarke, 9th June, 2014, pp.1-3, AHA/2/22; Schling, *Lime Green Mystery*, p.152.

³⁴⁷ Waters, *Thinking Black*, p.143

Left, in financial crisis. This loss of authorisation narrowed the possibility of a sustained engagement with the imperial past just as momentum for this gathered within Centerprise.

Perhaps the primary organ for Black Arts at Centerprise was a newly-established writing workshop and literary journal, *Words, Sounds and Power*. Its members were critical of Centerprise's approach to Black writers, demonstrated in their joint authorship of a letter to the publishing project over Monica Jules's memoir of her experience raising a disabled child, *Wesley, My Only Son* (1987). The letter accused reading centre tutor Jud Stone of discussing Jules's work condescendingly in her introduction to the text and suggested the editor's sporadic inclusion of Caribbean dialect was self-gratifying and lacked conviction. It argued these issues reflected the persistent condescension of Black writers by publishing project and reading centre workers, underwritten by a system of production predicated on the unequal relationship between student-authors and their publishers and teachers.³⁴⁸ Significantly, this method had produced much of the memoir published by Centerprise, a body of work marked by its individualistic nature.

In contrast, the workshop sought a return to collective production and publication, an editorial process which encouraged contributors to reflect on shared racial experiences and themes. As such, *Words, Sounds and Power*'s inaugural edition included an editorial asserting its goal to 'address and re-evaluate the influence and effect of colonialism and neo-colonialism on our language and the survival of our oral tradition. This means promoting our National Languages/positive images of history/herstory despite the dominance of European culture'. It cited among its influences James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Chinua Achebe, and in the UK, Benjamin Zephaniah and Linton Kwesi Johnson.³⁴⁹ As well as British imperial history specifically, this pointed to the stigmatisation and delegitimation of African cultural heritage which was a legacy of colonialism more broadly. The editorial combined this with an embrace of a tradition of Black radical writers from throughout the diaspora and cultural nationalist forms such as dialect. The shift toward these literary forms was closely connected to identification with a transatlantic tradition of writers whose experiences of diasporic displacement and cultural exclusion were central to their advocacy of a politics of racial resistance. In connecting historical consciousness to political advocacy so clearly, this constituted the revival of an explicitly theorised political discourse departing from the sole emphasis earlier in the decade on Black visibility.

This was reflected in the poetry published in this first edition. Gwen Goodman's 'A Visit Home' described the speaker's return to her Jamaican birthplace. It acknowledged alterations to the landscape

³⁴⁸ Letter by members of the *Words, Sounds and Power* workshop to Centerprise, 8th December, 1988. AHA/1/19/2

³⁴⁹ 'Editorial', *Words, Sounds and Power*, (1.1, n.d.) AHA/1/28/11

which occurred while she was away – foremost, the demolition of her childhood home – but expressed an enduring, immaterial identification which defied these changes:

Lord God! Long have my eyes
 Seen the light of paradise
 Memories stabilised my sense of little change.
 The burial ground of my umbilical cord
 Lay beneath another decade
 Of earth refuge.³⁵⁰

The sight of the speaker's birthplace evokes a 'sense of little change'. Following a Jamaican childbirth custom, its earth held the remnants of a literal part of her foetal body, suggesting the site held a maternal relationship to her. In this sense, the speaker's belonging appears primordial and unchanging, in defiance both of her emigration and the subsequent disruption to the landscape. The poem concludes:

I breathe love, freedom and peace
 As my sweet little Island squeezed me gently.³⁵¹

While the strength of the connection and belonging articulated seemed to be contrasted implicitly with Britain throughout, the feeling of 'love, freedom and peace' leaves the reader to infer their lack in the speaker's adopted home. If this seemingly innate diasporic connection formed the affirmative basis of Goodman's speaker's identity, elsewhere it offered a source of transnational solidarity and political strategy. George Assaye's poem 'Compromise' advocated militancy among Black people living in white-dominated societies globally. He turned first to South Africa:

Yes I hear you say, my brother, I must compromise
 I have seen what compromising does
 Ask Winnie Mandela of her compromise
 Ask Mrs Biko what she compromised

Then to the United States:

"Ask Martin Luther King and Mrs King of compromising
 Go on my brother ask Huey P Newton
 Mrs Jackson and all the others before them."

³⁵⁰ Gwen Goodman, 'A Visit Home', *Words, Sounds and Power*, 1, (1988), p.14, AHA/1/28/11.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Finally, these lessons of white political violence globally were likened to policing in London:

Ask the police who just split my head open
How much he compromised.”³⁵²

Here, the evocation of Blackness shifted from a means to affirm personal identity to the basis of political solidarities and strategies in a global fight against violent white supremacy. Much, Assaye posited, could be learnt by Black activists in 1980s Hackney from struggles against intransigent white violence in the US and South Africa. This was the basis for advocacy of a militant, unified, Black response to racism in all three places. These texts moved from the assertion of diasporic identities and shared experiences of racism to advocacy of unified political action. In Centerprise’s new approach to Black Arts, diasporic consciousness was *the* foundation of advocacy for radical anticolonial struggle.

Yet McMillan often met resistance from his colleagues. Despite resolutions to address internal racism following the 1986 annual report, McMillan was one of two Black employees not working manually in cleaning or the café. While the co-operative framed his recruitment as a partial solution to their failures around race, and for Hewitt it signified the privileging of race above all other forms of oppression, McMillan suggested he was perceived upon arrival as a ‘token... Black person’. He realised this when his attempts to challenge racist practice met significant resistance. McMillan was employed at Centerprise when he signed the *Words, Sounds and Power* letter of complaint over Jules’s *Wesley, My Only Son* in December 1988.³⁵³ While he hoped his position as the co-operative’s Black Arts worker would add gravity to the letter’s arguments about the book’s editing, the letter’s sharp public criticisms increased white staff’s suspicions of him. Particular tension arose with McMillan’s publishing project colleagues, Bridget O’Reilly and Rebecca O’Rourke, whom the letter’s criticisms directly concerned. McMillan gained extra funding from the Greater London Arts Association for the expansion of Black Arts work and felt unsupported by O’Reilly in this. Tensions came to a head when she attempted to stop him attending a conference in Birmingham, and their subsequent disagreement led both parties to raise official grievances against one another.³⁵⁴

The wider co-operative sided with O’Reilly, which McMillan saw as indicative of their suspicion and obstruction of his work.³⁵⁵ Working excessively with minimal support he built up so much time off in lieu of uncontracted overtime that after eighteen months employment he was statutorily able to take off

³⁵² George Assaye, ‘Compromise’, *Words, Sounds and Power*, 1, (1988), p.7

³⁵³ *Words, Sounds and Power* letter to Centerprise. 8th December, 1988. AHA/1/19/2

³⁵⁴ McMillan, Interview with Clarke, pp.9-10.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

every Friday for the next year. Frustrated, he gained a place for part-time postgraduate study at Saint Martin's College, but the management committee told him he could not enrol. McMillan persisted, noting that colleagues had similarly reduced their hours to meet personal commitments or even taken sabbaticals. The committee first suspended him for gross misconduct, and later fired him.³⁵⁶ Yet the Black Arts worker role became permanent following McMillan's departure. Centerprise appointed Dorothea Smartt, a performance poet, as his replacement; she was shortly joined by Bernadette Halpin, who had worked in feminist and lesbian publishing for much of the previous decade. Halpin and Smartt's relationship was much stronger than those between their predecessors. Both were committed to Black Arts and anti-racist work; together, they oversaw the foundation of Black and women's writers' workshops, and the publication of two books on the Jewish East End.

Smartt and Halpin built on the foundation established by McMillan to develop and circulate Black Arts through an enhanced program of workshops and readings connecting these writers with national and transatlantic networks of writers and poets. Smartt and Halpin organised fortnightly meetings for Black women's writing and Black writers, while the monthly feminist poetry performance evening, Word Up Women's Café, was reserved for Black women only every third month.³⁵⁷ Smartt continued a regular event series initiated in March 1988 by Michael McMillan offering 'story-telling in the African/African-Caribbean oral tradition for children and parents' and a 'Black women's creativity workshop', while the *Words, Sounds and Power* group held regular performance evenings throughout the period.³⁵⁸ 1992 brought Black writers of international renown to Centerprise. Gay African-American poet Essex Hemphill performed in March while promoting a collection of his work. From July to September, Mervyn Morris – pioneer of 'nation language' in Caribbean literature, and later Jamaican poet laureate – taught a series of workshops at Centerprise as part of his residency at the Southbank Centre.³⁵⁹ Through these initiatives, Smartt led Hackney to briefly become a site of some significance within the poetry networks of the Black Atlantic.

In its collaborative mode of production, the content of its work, and the transatlantic connections it helped foster, the publishing project's turn to Black Arts was a shift towards a more diasporic, postcolonial literary position. Formally, poetry was individualistic in much the same way as the earlier focus on memoir. Yet liberated by the expressive form, its practitioners entered a reflective dialogue

³⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.15

³⁵⁷ Centerprise Arts Quarterly Activity Details Report, April-June, 1991; January-March, 1992; October-December, 1992. AHA/1/28/14

³⁵⁸ Events flyers, from *Words, Sounds and Power* workshop papers. AHA/1/28/11

³⁵⁹ Centerprise Arts Quarterly Activity Details Report. January-March 1992, April-June 1991, respectively

between personal lived experience and macro-historical phenomena like racism and European cultural dominance, conceptualised in key texts like *Words, Sounds and Power* as a result of Empire. This marked a departure from the earlier focus on increasing the visibility of stories of Black and Asian self-improvement. Rather than representing Black experiences in terms of the individual life, aiming simply to rectify their absence from popular culture, this new approach made lived experience the basis of a politicised historical consciousness.

Smartt and Halpin complemented this with two historical publications on the Jewish East End: Cyril Spector's memoir of his childhood in interwar Hackney *Volla Volla Jew Boy* (1988), and Morris Beckman's study of Jewish ex-servicemen's opposition to far-right activity in the late 1940s, *The 43 Group* (1992). These texts contributed to a shift after the mid-1970s away from prevailing understandings of Jewish life in Britain since the late 19th century as a story of political and social integration and upward mobility. David Cesarani argues that both the historiography and public presentation of Anglo-Jewish history had, until then, been 'overdetermined' by the 'struggle against exclusionary tendencies in English culture and politics', precluding the presentation of Jews in any position 'that was unpleasant, tainted with criminality, or discordant with the dominant political trends of the day'.³⁶⁰ The poverty and political radicalism synonymous with the Jewish East End in these years led to its obfuscation in mainstream narratives. Privileged instead was the more triumphant story of immigrant and second-generation Jews' growing affluence, their movement out of the East End, and entrance into universities, professions and positions of power. Yet anti-racist councils like Tower Hamlets challenged this narrative through large public events including the 1987 Jewish East End festival, which likened the historic experiences of Jews with the contemporary experiences of Afro-Caribbean and Asian Londoners.³⁶¹ Centerprise authors' challenges to these earlier trends followed three steps. First, they rejected dominant narratives of inclusion and assimilation in the Jewish East End. They then employed this to explain dissenting political activism. Finally, they likened these experiences to contemporary racism, demonstrating its persistence in particular sites and at multiple levels within British society, and the eternal need for anti-racist vigilance.

Cesarani's desire to reframe Anglo-Jewish history took him beyond the academy, and into collaboration with Centerprise. Introducing *Volla Volla Jew Boy*, he asserted the book demonstrated 'it was not a straight line from the immigrant ships of the 1880s to the cabinet in the 1980s'. Rather, he emphasised the 'emotional and cultural cost' of employment in the East End's sweated industries and

³⁶⁰ David Cesarani, 'Dual Heritage or Duel of Heritages? Englishness and Jewishness in the Heritage Industry', in Tony Kushner, (eds.), *The Jewish Heritage in British History: Englishness and Jewishness*, (London, 1992), p.29

³⁶¹ Kushner, 'The End of "the Anglo-Jewish Progress Show"?: Representations of the Jewish East End, 1887-1987', in Kushner, (ed.), *The Jewish Heritage in British History*, pp.78-105

widespread local racism.³⁶² Spector, meanwhile, remembered sharp division *within* the Jewish population. National identification and belief in ethnic superiority remained stark: Russians were the wealthiest and ostensibly most refined group, followed sequentially by Ukrainians, Poles, and finally, Latvians and Estonians.³⁶³ Stark inequality was reflected in worship: a number of ‘palatial’, ‘ornate’ synagogues opened throughout Hackney by the 1930s, yet often excluded poorer Jews. Spector likened his temporary and makeshift synagogue, conversely, to a ‘broom cupboard’.³⁶⁴ Emphasising these divisions, Spector noted: ‘thousands of Jews eked out a precarious living, cheating one another, united only in their religion’.³⁶⁵ Class divisions, then, were central to Spector’s scepticism toward the notion of a unified Jewish ‘community’. This internal disharmony was compounded throughout Spector’s childhood by anti-Semitism, leading to his withdrawal from one school and relocation to another, whose many older Jewish children, his parents hoped, would provide physical protection.³⁶⁶

These experiences drew Spector to socialist politics. He identified the Spanish Civil War as ‘a landmark in my life’ and became involved in Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) activism. He participated in street confrontations with the British Union of Fascists (BUF) across Hackney at sites such as Ridley Road market. Spector viewed the BUF as a tangible, local manifestation of fascism across Europe, and an immediate threat. Cesarani’s introduction to the memoir noted that much of the CP’s appeal for young Jews like Spector was the perception that they were the only political organisation committed to confronting anti-Semitism.³⁶⁷ Yet for fear of their safety, Spector’s parents pressured him to cease involvement. He acquiesced.³⁶⁸ Here, Spector and Cesarani challenged two prevailing narratives of Anglo-Jewish history. The first was that of Jews’ increasing political integration and affluence. The second was the argument - often in literature authored by historians connected to or directly funded by the CPGB - that solidary class identities drove interwar anti-fascism, over-riding differences between Jews and gentiles, and spearheaded by the CPGB.³⁶⁹

³⁶² Cesarani in Cyril Spector, *Volla Volla Jew Boy*, (London, 1988), v

³⁶³ *Ibid*, p.17

³⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.24

³⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.10

³⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.25

³⁶⁷ *Ibid*, v

³⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p.50

³⁶⁹ An example of this ‘class reading’ in David Renton, ‘Dockers and Garment Workers, Railwaymen and Cabinet Maker: the Class Memory of Cable Street’, in Tony Kushner, Nadia Valman, (eds.), *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, (London, 2000), pp.95-108. A discussion of this interpretation’s links to the CPGB in Tom Buchanan, ‘Beyond Cable Street: New Approaches to the Historiography of Antifascism in Britain in the 1930s’, in Hugo Garcia, Mercedes Yusta, Xavier Tibet, Cristina Climaco (eds.), *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to the present*, (Oxford, 2016), pp.61-63

Yet victory over fascism in Europe did not spell the defeat of anti-Semitism in Britain, which Morris Beckman's *The 43 Group* argued could no longer be ignored after the war. Following the conflict's completion, Oswald Mosley instructed former Blackshirts to return to activism. Significantly, Mosley moved away from the iconography of European fascism, rooting his rhetoric in tropes more closely tied to the British nation by invoking 'patriots', 'St George' and 'ex-servicemen'.³⁷⁰ Jewish veterans established an organisation to physically confront this group, named *The 43 Group* after the number of attendees at its first meeting.³⁷¹ Following tip-offs from supporters, headquarters directed small groups of 'commandoes' to confront or physically attack far-right publication vendors or public meetings.³⁷² Beckman estimated the involvement of 300 commandoes by April 1947, identifying many 'tough, nerveless East End boys', Jew and gentile, among them. By Summer, he estimated six to ten fascist meetings were being attacked weekly.³⁷³

Like Spector, Beckman thus presented direct action as a necessary response to what Cesarani called 'the exclusionary tendencies' of British culture and politics, rejecting any representation of the nation as innately tolerant. Anger at the Attlee government's inaction on far-right activism ran throughout *The 43 Group*, fuelling alienation with established forms of progressive politics.³⁷⁴ Beckman recalls that British rule in Mandatory Palestine exacerbated this. Colonial violence exerted on Jewish nationalists both increased alienation among Jews in the metropole and facilitated the anti-Semitic presentation of Jews as 'anti-British'.³⁷⁵ Yet Beckman also outlined an alternative view of Britishness in the late 1940s with greater progressive potential. The experience of being Jewish ex-servicemen was foregrounded throughout the text, as an expression of national belonging which allowed members to garner sympathy from the police and judiciary, countering the appropriation of the nation by the far-right.³⁷⁶ Racism appeared as a persistent feature of national politics and culture, which could be overcome through confrontation by an organised and committed group, able to make a successful claim to Britishness. Like Centerprise's contemporary Black Arts literature, the persistence of racism as an important feature of British politics and culture was *the* central feature of these texts on the Jewish East End. Yet discrepancies between these strands did exist. While Black Arts looked to the diaspora in response to its ongoing domestic political alienation, Jews' widespread departure from Hackney and increasing affluence was significant. It meant that *The 43 Group's* account of Jews mobilising to challenge and overcome the

³⁷⁰ Morris Beckman, *The 43 Group*, (London, 1992), p.13

³⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.25

³⁷² *Ibid*, p.29

³⁷³ *Ibid*, pp.92-3

³⁷⁴ Beckman, *The 43 Group*, p.25

³⁷⁵ *Ibid*, pp.13-4

³⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp.32-35

nation's exclusion of them, finding a place within Britain, cohered with the contemporary community's experience. The tensions which had in the 1940s appeared inherent within Anglo-Jewish identity could be resolved more easily than those which many of Centerprise's Black Arts practitioners still felt.

These texts reflect broader shifts in the publishing project's politics in this period. Whereas the *People's Autobiography* group of the 1970s had, as Anna Davin summarised, 'quite a strong' 'Labour, socialist, even communist' contingent and produced texts which supported these larger political goals, this was no longer the case by the early 1990s.³⁷⁷ As the publishing project moved to focus on anti-racist and Black Arts literature, these older forms of leftist politics no longer held the same influence over the co-operative's production. The CPGB disbanded in 1991 following decades of stagnation and splintering under the weight of social and economic change, the global collapse of socialism and theoretical disputes between Eurocommunists and anti-revisionists.³⁷⁸ By the 1990s, the presence of the CP and other workerist political organisations had drastically diminished since earlier decades both within Centerprise and London's wider activist milieu. When Centerprise launched *The 43 Group* in Golders Green, Halpin remembered marked enthusiasm among the 'thousands of older Jewish people' who attended, and stated that the book itself was her most significant work at Centerprise.³⁷⁹ These texts' emphasis on Jewishness as the basis of political organisation was facilitated by their increasing distance from class-based political organisations and their simultaneous appeal to an older demographic of Jews who had lived through these struggles and since left Hackney. The fragmentation of the Left, then, facilitated the co-operative's shift to producing texts which centred ethnic identities like Jewishness, rather than class. But the ageing nature of the co-operative's readership, and their relocation outside of Hackney, also signified the publishing project's increasing separation from an active, ongoing political movement.

Indeed, by the late 1980s the hostile political climate in which Halpin and Smartt operated increasingly compromised their work. The abolition of the GLC (1986) and ILEA (1989) deprived Centerprise of two of its largest funding bodies: by 1992 Hackney Council provided 52% of the co-operative's income.³⁸⁰ These constraints led to further commercialising reforms. The co-operative made marketing and promotional training compulsory from 1988 for bookshop workers, while the shop's stock

³⁷⁷ Davin, Interview with Moyes, pp.6-7.

³⁷⁸ A recent reflection on divisions within the CPGB in Jenny Turner, 'A Difficult Space to Live', *London Review of Books*, 3rd November, 44, (21, 2022). Last accessed 21st January, 2023, at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n21/jenny-turner/a-difficult-space-to-live>. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, (London, 1981).

³⁷⁹ Bernadette Halpin, Dorothea Smartt, Transcript of interview with Mary Mullen, 11th April, 2015, p..33. AHA/2/4/3.

³⁸⁰ Schling, *Lime Green Mystery*, p.36

expanded to include posters, cassette tapes and greeting and postcards. Prices were also increased.³⁸¹ These changes marked the reversal of the prioritisation in previous decades of accessibility over profit. Smartt expressed frustration with these changes, lamenting the strictures of the “‘enterprise culture’ being forced upon us’.³⁸² For Centerprise’s management, however, the move into Black Arts had always carried a market imperative. The organisation’s 1991-4 Development Plan identified two separate ‘markets’ for increasing revenue. The first consisted of Hackney and the neighbouring boroughs. The second - ‘groups under-represented in mainstream society’ – consisted of ethnic minorities, women and LGBT people over a larger area. The Development Plan earmarked these groups for increased targeting and revenue. This document’s other plans involved employing market research, restructuring to end collective governance, and removing pay parity among workers.³⁸³ While McMillan and Smartt sought in these years to promote a radical analysis of Black experience, management employed their work to try to expand markets and increase the organisation’s profitability. This was reflected in Black Arts nationwide. Smartt attended the ‘Financing Black Arts’ conference in Birmingham in December 1990, which encouraged practitioners to work towards ‘an economic as well as a cultural basis for expansion’, ‘equip ourselves for the market [... and] develop business plans, proposals and strategies to enter the world of financing’.³⁸⁴ This suggests that not only did radical anti-racist literature and Black Arts become predominant at Centerprise at the moment of the increasing marketisation of cultural policy, but that these forms actively benefited from the desire to increase revenue through arts insofar as they assisted with the expansion of markets to the historically excluded. This development continued throughout the 1990s and was reflected in museums as well as community heritage, as Chapter Five of this thesis will show.

By the 1990s, the leftist councillors dominating Hackney Council the previous decade had lost control, and the centrist group who displaced them progressively cut Centerprise’s grant and threatened eviction.³⁸⁵ In 1992, the council made its funding offer dependent on the promotion of administrator Neil Barklem to the role of centre manager. Barklem’s very appointment ended the principle of co-operative governance: his job description offered its holder responsibility for ‘all aspects of development, management and financial control of the community centre’.³⁸⁶ Upon assuming this role, Barklem oversaw a series of reforms which included the discontinuation of the publishing project as a cost-cutting measure. The alliance between Black Arts and marketisation was shortlived.³⁸⁷ The defeat of municipal

³⁸¹ Centerprise 1987-8 annual report, n.p; 1989-90 annual report, p.7. AHA/1/18/1

³⁸² Dorothea Smartt, three month employment review, n.d – 1990/1991. AHA/1/28/5

³⁸³ Publishing project workers’ notes from the 1991-1994 development plan, (n.d), AHA/1/28/14

³⁸⁴ Program for ‘Financing Black Arts’ conference, Balsall Health, Birmingham, December 1990. AHA/1/28/2

³⁸⁵ 1988-9 annual report, p.7. AHA/1/28/5

³⁸⁶ Centre Manager job description, (n.d., 1992/3) AHA/1/28/14

³⁸⁷ Schling, *Lime Green Mystery*, p.106

socialism in the late 1980s left Centerprise without institutional funding or support for its political goals, isolating it from the broader radical milieu. This left it politically and financially vulnerable to a rightward shift on Hackney Council shortly thereafter. These years' renewed historical consciousness and calls for radical racial justice proved weak and short-lived because they lacked institutional security or coherence with a broader political movement. This heritage discourse failed, ultimately, because it was rendered untenable by the loss of *authorisation* following the defeat of the New Urban Left.

Conclusion

This chapter has returned community publishing to the history of the New Urban Left. Between 1973 and Worpole's departure in 1979, Centerprise aimed to foment class-consciousness through histories focusing on changing experiences of work and welfare. Centerprise's relative institutional security in these years connected this work to a broader, revived class politics and instilled a sense of the literature's revolutionary potential. We can locate a process of *authorisation* in the reciprocal relationship between the funding which the WEA and Hackney Council gave to Centerprise and the co-operative's efforts to foment class solidarity and militancy through these texts. This reveals one of the major findings of the thesis to follow: conceiving authorisation as a process shows that 'authorised' heritage discourses emerged not only in museums supporting the aims of conservative politics but in community groups supporting left-wing political projects too.

More, just as Chapter One showed that museums were not straightforwardly conservative, responses to Worpole's approach also complicate the notion of a uniform radical politics in community heritage. Dissent proliferated, more subtly in participants' individualistic testimonies and more overtly in Black and Asian activists' critiques. The co-operative addressed this firstly by increasing the visibility of authors of colour. Yet without any theoretical framework like that underlying Worpole's work, this separated life-narratives from any broader historical consciousness. Reacting against this from the mid-1980s, a growing number of anti-racist and Black Arts practitioners formulated a critique of contemporary racism rooted in the exclusion inherent in British society and the cultural legacies of European imperialism. This sought a new approach to lived experience, placing the personal in consistent dialogue with the political through memoirs of struggle and new literary forms like poetry. It looked to the diaspora for affirmation and transnational political alliances. Centerprise's presentation of Empire was, then, inconsistent and derived from political contingency. Left-wing practitioners showed a marked lack of curiosity or reflexivity to engage with the British Empire when to do so would complicate their limited projects to increase minorities' visibility or, as in Chapter One, their emphases on working-class experience. Yet for Black Arts practitioners, historical consciousness of the transatlantic histories of the

colonisation and exploitation of the diaspora, as much as history of the British Empire specifically, was the necessary foundation of contemporary anti-racism.

These practitioners also contended with an accelerating rightward shift in politics and economics. McMillan's appointment in 1986 coincided with the GLC's abolition, and thus a loss of funding or 'authorisation'. The Black Arts project was thereafter economically precarious and politically isolated from any institutional ally or vibrant contemporary movement. Management responded to this by reconceptualising Black Arts as a means to grow markets and expand revenue to meet shortfalls, a phenomenon which will be echoed in chapters five and six of this thesis. Yet their commercialising reforms eventually led to the discontinuation of the publishing project altogether. Placing community publishing more concretely in its political context demonstrates that rather than flourishing in these years, the literature of radical racial resistance constantly had to legitimise itself in a milieu dominated by white activists and against a nationally resurgent right. Cultural work placing local history in its imperial contexts struggled for validation within the New Urban Left and for security against a bellicose Conservatism. Conscious engagements with imperial memory were hard-fought and only fleetingly possible.

The imperial past was largely evoked here by critical Black writers and activists. While Anna Davin remembered interviewing white residents for *Centerprise* and being taken aback by their racism, archival records of these interviews do not exist, obscuring the sources of this racism.³⁸⁸ Chapters Three and Four consider white working-class residents of Tower Hamlets and Newham's relationship to Empire, centring on the influence of their proximity to the port. Unfortunately, no comparison is possible into the localised dimensions of racism, comparing those who lived by the port and those, in Hackney, who were further afield.

³⁸⁸ Davin, Interview with Moyes, p.14.

Chapter Three: The Museum in Docklands Project, 1982-1998

In Chapter One we saw the Museum of London's (MOL) early forays under the directorship of Max Hebditch (1977-1997) into the development of social history collections and exhibitions. This chapter explores the Museum in Docklands (MID) project, one of that initiative's central components. The MID was established by Chris Ellmers. In 1973, Ellmers abandoned his LSE PhD on the history of Clerkenwell's urbanisation to begin work as a Research Assistant at the London Museum, developing the Modern galleries of its successor, the new MOL. Promoted after the MOL's opening in 1976 to become the second most senior member of staff in the Modern Department, he helped develop the museum's social history work, pursuing an interest in London's trades & industry, commonly known as its 'working history'.³⁸⁹ From 1979, Ellmers increasingly focused on London's Docklands, moved by 'a period of incredible economic change' in the area.³⁹⁰ St Katharine's was London's first major dock to close in 1967, while the scheduled closure of the Royals in Newham in 1981 spelled the formal end of London's urban port. The fulcrum of London's wider industrial economy, the port's contraction and relocation to Tilbury in Essex was central to the larger region's deindustrialisation, rendering a much wider range of trades and businesses unsustainable and leaving 8.5 square miles of derelict land throughout Newham, Tower Hamlets and Southwark.³⁹¹ This catalysed the wider exodus of East and Southeast London's (especially white) working-class, out to Kent and Essex.³⁹² In the moribund urban landscape which remained, the Thatcher government established the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) to begin a process of transformative redevelopment. The LDDC offered tax-breaks and liberalised planning laws to companies investing in the construction of a new, financial and professional service-based future. Faced with the disappearance of an entire industrial maritime culture, Ellmers began a major contemporary collecting project, seeking to preserve vestiges of the old East End before it was too late.³⁹³

Seeking a junior member of staff to help, Ellmers hired Alex Werner. Werner studied for an English degree at the University of York in the late 1970s, where he developed an interest in working-class culture after reading E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. From there he completed the Museum and Art Galleries Studies postgraduate course at Manchester University, a professional MA primarily geared towards the curation of fine art. Multiple curators have reflected in interviews that in the early 1980s, only two British universities offered museum studies courses:

³⁸⁹ Chris Ellmers, personal correspondence with the author.

³⁹⁰ Alex Werner, Interview with the author, conducted via Microsoft Teams, 9th November, 2020.

³⁹¹ Foster, *Docklands*, p.206

³⁹² *Ibid.*

³⁹³ Werner, Interview with the author.

Manchester and Leicester. While Manchester was oriented towards fine art, Leicester focused specifically on technical aspects of professional practice like object handling.³⁹⁴ These narrow approaches left emerging professionals with little connection to contemporary historical scholarship, or training in analytically engaging with objects to develop complex historical narratives.

As Chapter One showed, the MOL's approach to the interpretation of objects in the 1980s often led to the inadvertent reproduction of historic racism and the conflation of social history with primarily aesthetic analyses of art and the development of photography. A similar phenomenon was evident here. Werner reflected that the project's early collecting priorities were the 'working-class, the docks, [the] trades [and] the river'.³⁹⁵ Werner framed this work as a professional, temporal and spatial shift. The MID sought a modernised and contemporarily engaged form of curation and a departure from the stuffy, insular milieu of the City of London towards the transforming, post-industrial expanse of Docklands, where History was still in flux, moving quickly and urgently.³⁹⁶ The project's focus was broad from the outset, combining an effort to conduct recuperative history which ameliorated the displacement felt by Docklands communities with a broader focus on industry, trades and the historical significance of the larger port. The tendency this suggests to conceive 'working history' as part of 'social history' was also reflected in the interests of the MOL's management; Hebditch's major work prior to assuming the directorship of the MOL was a two-volume history of London Transport.³⁹⁷ Yet the MID's zeal for the details of the port's infrastructure, engineering and industrial processes, often limited engagement with the experiences, desires and politics of the exploited, be they dockworkers or colonised peoples. This was supported at managerial level by Hebditch's own intellectual interests, shaped by the 'working history' approach of specialist Chris Ellmers and reproduced in the narrow, aesthetic and technical terms of the professional education of young curators like Werner.

The MID's history can enrich and advance scholarly understandings of the 'conservative' politics of heritage. As shown throughout this thesis, Laurajane Smith identifies *one* elite 'heritage discourse' which encouraged identification with and participation in a conservative nationalism.³⁹⁸ Patrick Wright also framed the heritage of the 1980s as being broadly supportive of Thatcherism, conflating the political resonances of its laments of deindustrialisation, the decline of the aristocracy and deference, and the end

³⁹⁴ Werner, Interview with the author. This observation also made by Nick Merriman, Interview with the author, conducted via Microsoft Teams, 5th December 2022.

³⁹⁵ Werner, Interview with the author.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁷ Sheppard, *Treasury of London's Past*, 176

³⁹⁸ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, pp.4-5

of Empire.³⁹⁹ Sam Aylett's study of imperial memory at the MOL critiques the Museum of London, Docklands' (MOLD) celebratory framing of Empire as the source of nineteenth-century prosperity and consumer abundance after its opening on permanent premises in 2003.⁴⁰⁰ Aylett does not engage with the MOLD's prehistory in the 1980s and 1990s and as a result, overlooks the competing political interests which shaped it from its inception. In doing so, he – like Wright and Smith - overlooks the relationships leading to the deficiencies he describes. An attentiveness to the material and financial dynamics of museums' relationships with funders, or 'authorisation', shows that politics influenced the Museum in more complex and contradictory ways. The MID collaborated with three governmental bodies: the City of London, the Port of London Authority (PLA) and the LDDC. These relationships respectively led to the narration of three visions of the maritime nation's history.

As seen in Chapter One, the MOL curators' close working relationship with the City of London influenced their work. This chapter's first section explores the implications of this relationship at the MID, as curators constructed the commercial prosperity brought by the Corporation's stewardship of the eighteenth-century mercantile port. Empire, here, figured as a symbol of merchants' benevolence. The second section explores the MID's major focus in this period: the 'working history' of the industrialised nineteenth and twentieth-century docks. Here, curators secured on permanent loan much of the PLA's vast collections. Though seeking to democratise and modernise museum practice, this work produced a discourse of British industrial genius delivering the Empire and the wealth it brought. Finally, I explore the MID's relationship with the LDDC. The Corporation gave the MID free use of premises and funded specific projects, and used the project's work to promote its legacy of transformation during the 1990s, by grounding it in a history of dynamic, commercial reinvention. Though distinct, each heritage discourse made their funder the protagonist of celebratory narratives of the maritime nation. Empire's prominence fluctuated, but it remained a reference point in demonstrating the significance of governmental partners' contributions to the metropolis.

The MID and the City of London, 1981-1989

In the 1981 Report of the Board of Governors Hebditch identified the Docklands as one important site of the MOL's growing social history remit, citing the area's transformation through deindustrialisation and nascent redevelopment. Yet while curators from the Modern Department had begun the Docklands collection as a project in its own right, Hebditch stressed that any potential Museum would have to be

³⁹⁹ Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, pp.2-3; 25

⁴⁰⁰ Aylett, *Legacies*, pp.191-202

organisationally and financially self-sufficient.⁴⁰¹ In his own entry to the report, head of the Modern Department Colin Sorensen welcomed the wider department's increased funding, while lamenting the residual 'disparity between the resources available to investigate the history of London during the last three centuries, compared with the more distant past' as 'a matter of persistent disappointment to us'.⁴⁰² This report usefully captures the Docklands project's position within the organisational and financial structures of the MOL in the early 1980s. If the Modern Department's allocation of funding remained relatively small, the Docklands project was more limited still. While recognised as an important area of contemporary collecting by both the department and the whole museum's management, the MID lacked the resources for financial or organisational autonomy. Though the project's work was supported in principle, it remained financially precarious. This led Ellmers and Werner to continue using the exhibition spaces and honouring the financial relationships of the main museum at London Wall, and thus to retain a close connection to the City of London Corporation. Here I consider two exhibitions held at London Wall in which Docklands curators celebrated the City's maritime history, coinciding with major anniversaries in the Corporation's calendar. In markedly similar fashion to the permanent galleries discussed in Chapter One, these temporary exhibitions built on close institutional ties with the Corporation to celebrate the benevolent, patrician City's provision of national prosperity, cementing its connections to the monarchy and aristocracy.

The first such exhibition, *200 Years of Shipbuilding on the Thames* (July-October 1982), was presented and funded by the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights in celebration of their bicentenary.⁴⁰³ Aware of the coming celebrations, Ellmers proposed an exhibition to the livery company which marked the anniversary, drawing on the MID's recent collecting of material relating to shipbuilding in the industrialising port during the late-eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴⁰⁴ *Shipbuilding* brought together the individual skill of the Livery Company's imagined constituents and the larger spectacle of the port. In organising the exhibition around 'warships and merchantmen', the exhibition gave an account of the port rooted in military strength and commercial prosperity, manifesting this in photographs and scale models of East India Company ships, armoured battleships and lighters.⁴⁰⁵ **Figure 3.1** is a model of Horatio Nelson's flagship *HMS Victory*, displayed during the exhibition.⁴⁰⁶ The *Victory* was built on the Thames to serve at the Battle of Trafalgar; it was the craft on which Nelson was fatally wounded. The

⁴⁰¹ MOL, *Second and Third Report of the Board of Governors, 1979-1981*, (London, 1982), p.7

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p.23

⁴⁰³ Press Release, *200 Years of Shipbuilding on The Thames* (1982). Museum of London Business Archive (Uncatalogued, henceforth MOL). On the exhibition's funding, see Sheppard, *Treasury of London's Past*, p.177.

⁴⁰⁴ Ellmers, personal correspondence.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁶ *Sun Day*, (3rd Oct, 1982), 'Shipbuilding' press clippings, MOL.

exhibition made both shipbuilders and the livery company central to narratives of the port's success and the nation's prosperity and strength, both in the mercantile eighteenth century and the industrialised nineteenth and twentieth. It attributed industrialisation to eminent individuals with a close connection to the company and the City more broadly. Isambard Kingdom Brunel was ubiquitous throughout coverage of the exhibition, with *The Times* attributing the shifts 'from wood to iron, sail to steam and paddle to screw propellor' to great men of his ilk.⁴⁰⁷



Figure 3.3 *Model of HMS Victory, (1759-1824)*⁴⁰⁸

This was complemented by allusions to a less temporally specific maritime strength. The anachronism of Walter Raleigh to the exhibition's period did not stop curators reminding visitors, via the Tudor explorer, 'Whoever commands the sea, commands the trade of the world, and whoever commands the trade, commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself'.⁴⁰⁹ This quotation hinted at the connection between expanding markets and imperial power. Yet insofar as its focus was on

⁴⁰⁷ *The Times*, (2 Oct, 1982), 'Shipbuilding' press clippings, MOL.

⁴⁰⁸ Model of HMS Victory (1759-1824), (A13808/1), MOL Catalogue.

Accessed 15th December, 2022, at <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/755186.html>

⁴⁰⁹ Quote reported in *The Nautical Magazine*, September 1982, MOL.

commanding ‘the sea’ rather than territories specifically, curators - via Raleigh - linked British power to trade rather than political conquest. Empire was evoked here, as a commercial rather than violent endeavour. Though this connection was in its infancy during Raleigh’s life, these words acquired a mournful tone when reproduced in 1982, made explicit by *The Nautical Magazine*’s exhibition review. Misattributing the quote to Henry VIII, the piece stated ‘no doubt many seafarers in these recent years of decline may think we should have paid more attention to Henry’s words’.⁴¹⁰ In slipping into this more generalised view of an eminent maritime Englishness which pre-dated the establishment of the Company of Shipbuilders, the exhibition linked its celebration of the City, as paternal provider of prosperity, into a more abstract appeal to an innate national seafaring character. In these sympathetic allusions to ‘command [of] the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself’, curators alluded to Empire as a vast trading endeavour which helped to give form to an ideal of the exceptional commercial nation, embodied by the City.

For the Shipbuilders’ Company as well as the monarchy, the exhibition’s significance stretched beyond the gallery walls. The process of ‘authorisation’ was here direct and strong; curators organised the exhibition for the livery company, who funded it and used its complementary narrative to strengthen their political relationships. As Jan Ruger argues, the Navy – the most mythologised arm of the British military - had long been a means through which the Royal Family approximated itself with a maritime national identity, through patronage of organisations, public ceremonies, and male members’ service.⁴¹¹ Throughout July and August, *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* reported on royal visits to the exhibition. In addition to a visit from Prince Charles, Philip visited twice in his official capacity as Master of the Shipwrights’ Company, the first time to officially open the exhibition before a celebratory city banquet at Ironmongers’ Hall.⁴¹² Nationally, the exhibition featured prominently within Tourism England’s 1982 Maritime England Year, in addition to exhibitions at the National Maritime Museum and Cutty Sark in Greenwich, HMS Belfast, and events in Brighton and Bournemouth. This campaign was packaged in tourism magazine *Where to Go* as an opportunity to experience the ‘indisputable’ ‘English passion for messing about in boats’.⁴¹³ While the exhibition foregrounded the City within projections of a commercial, seafaring nation, it also provided opportunities to tangibly renew and solidify the aristocratic networks the exhibitions celebrated. More, it formed part of a nationwide tourism campaign which

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹¹ Jan Ruger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire*, (Cambridge, 2007), p.140

⁴¹² *The Times*, 22 July, 1982; *The Telegraph*, 19th July, 1982; 23rd July, 1982; 14th August, 1982, MOL.

⁴¹³ *Where to Go*, 29 July, 1982, ‘Shipbuilding’ press clippings, MOL.

presented patrician merchants as embodiments of a commercial maritime identity and providers of material abundance.

Hebditch expressed serious doubts around the Museum's long-term funding security in the 1985 annual report given the scheduled abolition of the GLC the following year.⁴¹⁴ This dilemma was quickly resolved through the replacement of tripartite governance with a new, two-way division of responsibilities between the City and central government.⁴¹⁵ This major recalibration intensified the reliance of the MOL – and thus the MID – on the Corporation, leaving them dependent on it for half of their guaranteed annual funding, totalling £1.35 million in 1986 and rising thereafter.⁴¹⁶ In this context, Werner and Ellmers began formulating a plan for a major exhibition for the approaching octocentenary of the Lord Mayoralty in 1989. Though Werner asserted that the Docklands team never felt any curatorial pressure from the City, he was equally clear about their need to create something which actively 'worked for' and 'involved' the Corporation given its ongoing support for the museum.⁴¹⁷ Curators designed the exhibition to bring together their own interest in maritime and industrial history and a promotion of the City's centuries-long stewardship of the river, under the title *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River*. They discussed these plans with clerks and masters from the livery companies and loaned objects from their collections for the exhibition. Yet during development, Ellmers and Werner's desired emphasis on the construction and ownership of barges gradually diminished in prominence. Companies' enthusiasm to loan ornate objects meant that collection increasingly centred around the pageantry of historic river processions, a centrepiece of the Lord Mayor's show before the river's industrialisation.⁴¹⁸ The resulting narrative increasingly came to reify the City's opulence and commercial eminence.

Incumbent Lord Mayor Christopher Collet opened *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River* on June 6th, 1989, as the MOL's major summer exhibition.⁴¹⁹ The exhibition was central to the octocentenary celebrations within the City, whose other events included Thames boat races, a procession through the Square Mile and Lord Mayor themed parties. With the exhibition at its centre, this calendar of events promoted the Corporation's role in the modern city. The exhibition's narrative was, according to Werner, unambiguously 'celebratory', framing the Corporation's stewardship as a 'glorious tradition' and presenting the prosperity it brought by foregrounding 'gilt' objects to create a 'sumptuous' display of the City's opulence.⁴²⁰ These items reified the success of the City's eighteenth-century stewardship of the

⁴¹⁴ MOL, *Annual Report, 1984-5* (London, 1985), p.1

⁴¹⁵ MOL, *Annual Report, 1985-6*, (London, 1986), p.1

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.5.

⁴¹⁷ Werner, Interview with the author.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴¹⁹ Press Release, *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River*, MOL.

⁴²⁰ Werner, Interview with the author.

river, suggesting their provision of much of London's prosperity. The exhibition's centrepiece was a model of the Lord Mayor's barge which the Museum cared for on the City's behalf. Visitors were welcomed to the exhibition's entrance with a 'huge decorative cartouche' using ropes, blocks and oars, surrounding a Corporation coat of arms, and evoking a mercantile Georgian grandeur.⁴²¹ Text within the galleries evoked London as 'the world's busiest and wealthiest port' whose 'merchants were forging trading links with all corners of the world', and as the opulent site of ceremonials which 'moved commentators to liken London to Venice'.⁴²² The evocation of this halcyon age had a high Tory resonance; city merchants figured as benevolent leaders of a prosperous, hierarchical social order. A more voluntary form of authorisation emerged here. This narrative derived from Ellmers and Werner's proactive efforts to cement their relationship with the City following the GLC's abolition by producing an exhibition which would appeal to them. It saw curators self-consciously crafting a heritage discourse with the direct intention of preserving their viability in an increasingly conservative funding environment.

The exhibition lamented the passing of this golden age in the nineteenth-century, blaming the port's industrialisation for the river's increasingly unsanitary conditions and many companies' abandonment of their barges by the 1840s.⁴²³ The creation of new, industrial docks outside the City's walls, and the Corporation's eventual loss of jurisdiction over the river in 1857 (they were eventually replaced by the PLA in 1909) figured as the debasement of the opulent, mercantile splendour of the eighteenth century.⁴²⁴ This suggests tensions between competing conservative heritage discourses in the 1980s, as the settled social order romanticised by the Corporation was supplanted. The next section will show how, outside of the main Museum at London Wall, Ellmers and Werner derided this emphasis on the City as archaic, and – in collaboration with the PLA – shifted into romanticising the vigour and spirit of Victorian captains of industry.

Yet the exhibition's distaste for the insanitary nature of the Victorian river did not prevent it from celebrating city merchants' role in the port's industrialisation and thus, the city's further enrichment. William Vaughan and George Hibbert were central here. As 'merchant and director of the Royal Exchange', Vaughan was instrumental in winning 'funding and support for the construction of London Docks'.⁴²⁵ It was equally 'through the influence of George Hibbert' that the West India docks were constructed, after Hibbert 'managed to convince the City fathers that docks should be built to the east of the City.' Curators attributed Hibbert's interest in and influence over the project to his combination of

⁴²¹ Press Release, *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River*, MOL.

⁴²² Gallery Text, 'The City Port', *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River*, MOL.

⁴²³ Gallery Text, 'River Ceremonials', *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River*, 'River Ceremonials', MOL.

⁴²⁴ Chris Ellmers, Caroline Williamson, John Edwards, *City and River*, (London, 1989), p.9

⁴²⁵ Gallery Text, 'The Coming of the Docks', *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River*, (MOL 58.10)

‘the different roles of Alderman of the City, of wharfinger and of West India merchant’.⁴²⁶ Hibbert and Vaughan appeared as enlightened leaders, rationalising shipping and increasing prosperity by constructing larger docks upriver which helped negate ‘chronic overcrowding and expensive delays’.⁴²⁷ This image was bolstered by the inclusion of portraiture (**figure 3.1**) showing Hibbert’s hand resting on a plan of the new docks. The West India Import Dock can be seen through the window behind Hibbert, its vast sugar warehouses sitting on its bank on the horizon.⁴²⁸ In opulent surroundings he appears dynamic, overseeing the construction of the dock, catalysing the port’s industrialisation, and expanding the prosperity of London and the nation. These celebratory framings of the Hibbert and Vaughan collections were not limited to this exhibition and pervaded the MID’s promotion of these collections more widely.⁴²⁹



Figure 3.2 George Hibbert, portrait by Thomas Lawrence, 1811.⁴³⁰

Tracing the provenance of the portrait reveals a chain of inheritance which can be traced back to Hibbert himself. Following Hibbert’s death, much of his collection was bequeathed to the West India Dock company which he had directed. In 1908, the company merged with the London Dock Company to form the Port of London Authority, who – as noted – provided the Docklands project with much of its

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁷ Ellmers, Williamson, Edwards, *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River*, p.6

⁴²⁸ Caption of painting in *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River* gallery.

⁴²⁹ Bob Aspinall, ‘‘Liquid History’’: The Museum of London’s Docklands Library and Archive’, *Business Archives*, 69, (1995), p.28

⁴³⁰ Thomas Lawrence, Oil Portrait of George Hibbert, (1811), MOL Catalogue. Accessed 21st December, 2022, at <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/726143.html>

collection during the 1980s.⁴³¹ As this succession and the portrait itself suggest, Hibbert bridged the gap between the eighteenth-century mercantile port and the nineteenth-century industrial port. With objects inherited albeit indirectly from Hibbert himself, the exhibition constructed the epochal shift of industrialisation, and the prosperity it brought, as deriving from the personal eminence of patrician City merchants.

Yet, though references to Hibbert and Vaughan as ‘West India merchants’ abounded, this narrative obscured the exact nature or political context of their commercial interests in the Caribbean. When interviewed, Werner asserted that the Docklands project simply remained ignorant of Hibbert and Vaughan’s active participation in colonial slave-ownership until the early twenty-first century.⁴³² Here curators’ primary focus on the technical functioning of the port and lack of exposure to critical, analytical approaches to curation created a disinclination to consider the broader imperial context of this maritime narrative. As Katie Donington shows, the Hibbert family’s influence was rooted in their deep and sustained investment in plantation slavery throughout the second half of the eighteenth century.⁴³³ The Hibberts oversaw the financing and sale of 16,254 slaves in the decade between 1764 and 1774, while keeping 896 slaves on their own plantation by the late 1770s.⁴³⁴ In London, the Hibberts opened merchant houses and provided shipping, insurance, warehousing and portage services, as well as arranging plantation supplies for absentee slaveowners.⁴³⁵ The trade was central to the family’s commercial endeavours in metropole and colony, and propelled them to political influence in both. George’s cousin Thomas Hibbert became speaker of the Jamaican House of Assembly by 1756. Three generations of the family were prominent within the Society of West India Planters and Merchants (SWIPM) in Britain, a lobbying organisation campaigning against the trade’s abolition. George spoke against abolition thrice in the Commons as Member for Seaford (1806-1812), and in favour of compensation when abolition became inevitable.⁴³⁶ The exhibition catalogue celebrated Hibbert’s eight terms as chairman of the West India Dock Company and his £2000 investment in the dock’s construction, central as these details were to the technical narrative of the port’s construction.⁴³⁷ Yet there was no room here for critical engagement with objects or imperial histories. Curators made no note of the fact that these acts were an extension of his family’s interests in plantation slavery on both sides of the Atlantic, expanding the capacity of the port

⁴³¹ Werner, Interview with Author.

⁴³² *Ibid.*

⁴³³ Donington, Hall, Draper, McClelland, Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-ownership*, pp.203-249

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.208

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.211

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.204

⁴³⁷ Ellmers, Williamson, Edwards, *The Lord Mayor, The City and The River*, p.6.

and rationalising shipping processes by creating one site which oversaw all aspects of docking, sorting and secondary distribution.⁴³⁸

Operating within the organisational structures of the main MOL compromised Ellmers and Werner's primary interests in the later, industrial port. As Chapter One showed, the collections inherited from the museum's predecessors oriented exhibitions towards displays of the Corporation's opulence and wealth. Curators' desire to strengthen their financial relationships led them to proactively organise these exhibitions to mark key City anniversaries. Ellmers and Werner borrowed livery companies' objects and created narratives which historically rooted contemporary celebrations. In turn, the City used these exhibitions to promote its historical significance and strengthen its links to the monarchy. This marked a direct, transactional form of authorisation, voluntarily led by curators. Empire, when briefly invoked, figured as an expression of the City and the nation's innate commercial spirit. Curators directly obfuscated violent and racialised dimensions of this history. Their 'working-history' approach and the wider deficiencies of contemporary museological practice left no professional grounding for critical analysis of either of historic narratives or specific objects. Curators disavowed the significance of enslavement, and colonial economic extraction more broadly, in the nation's enrichment and the development of their own collections.

The MID, the PLA and Narratives of Industrial Modernity

Yet even as these exhibitions were romanticising the City's history, Ellmers and Werner grew impatient with their antiquated focus on elites. Following the closure of the Royals, Ellmers and Werner worked closely with the PLA's archivist Bob Aspinall to preserve the authority's collections.⁴³⁹ Overnight on the 31st December 1985, the MOL's total collections grew by 35 percent after the two parties finalised a deal for the MID to accession the entire PLA archive on a permanent loan. This comprised 30,000 artefacts from dockers hooks to quay cranes, 7,000 books, 20,000 photographs, 20,000 engineering and architectural drawings, hundreds of unframed prints, maps and engravings, thousands of property and estate documents and the complete archives of the City of London's River Committee (1770-1857) and Thames Conservancy (1857-1909), the private enclosed dock companies which preceded the PLA (1808-1909) and the PLA itself (1909 to the present).⁴⁴⁰ For the authority this represented an opportunity to secure their legacy for posterity at a museum convinced, in Werner's own words, of the importance of

⁴³⁸ Donington, Hall, Draper, McClland, Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-ownership*, p.212

⁴³⁹ Werner, Interview with the author.

⁴⁴⁰ Aspinall, 'Liquid History', p.27.

their ‘very proud history’ of stewardship over London’s port.⁴⁴¹ The downsizing PLA seconded Aspinall to the MID for the duration of 1985 before making him redundant at the end of the year. The MID hired him as their librarian and archivist on a permanent basis shortly thereafter.⁴⁴²

Though I will later show this was not entirely accurate, MID curators perceived the LDDC as uninterested in the MID project due to the incongruence between its focus on the industrial past and the Corporation’s redevelopment agenda.⁴⁴³ This perception was central to the MID’s conception of itself as oppositional. In moving into the Docklands, the MID sought more democratic collection and exhibition strategies. Funded through a Manpower Services Commission grant, it recruited local residents to conduct cataloguing and oral history interviews, capturing a social and industrial history neglected by the City and the LDDC alike.⁴⁴⁴ Yet curators used these collections to establish another narrative centring on the industrial might and technical genius of Britain’s first port, presenting these phenomena – and the Empire whose trade the docks serviced - as expressions of the nation’s innate character.

In his official 1991 history of the MOL, Francis Sheppard stated that the institution’s purpose was meeting Londoners’ ‘needs for ‘roots’ or ancestors, or for a sense of belonging’. This task was, he stated, of particular importance ‘in the post-war era of standardisation, anonymity and loss of individual identity’, processes which had fundamentally shaped ‘the modern urban condition’.⁴⁴⁵ This suggests that an important dimension of the MOL’s work in these years was offering validation and personal affirmation, seeking to overcome the bewildering urban change of the late twentieth century. Subsequently adopted by the whole Museum, this new orientation was pioneered by the MID’s collection strategy throughout the 1980s. According to Ellmers, ‘closure of the upper docks’ necessitated ‘thinking on a large scale... to collect and worry about how to display [collections] afterwards’.⁴⁴⁶ Werner, meanwhile, remembered the team travelling on an *ad hoc* basis to individual workshops, industrial yards and factories as they heard of their closure, collecting as much material – including ephemera, tools and machinery – as they could in narrow windows.⁴⁴⁷ These accounts carry a sense of the urgency and time limitations of the MID’s task. They encapsulate a sense, which ran throughout my interview with Werner, of scrambling to react directly to closures, working against the tide of vast, globally influenced historical

⁴⁴¹ Werner, Interview with the author.

⁴⁴² Minutebooks of the Board of Governors of the MOL meetings, (1981-1986), p.325; p.379. London Metropolitan Archives, COL/CC/MLB/01/01/004.

⁴⁴³ Werner, Interview with the author.

⁴⁴⁴ Ellmers, personal correspondence

⁴⁴⁵ Sheppard, *Treasury of London’s Past*, p.183

⁴⁴⁶ Cited in George Cossey, ‘Docklands Museum Planned’, *The Port*, 392, (January 1983), pp.8-9. Museum of London Port and River Archive (PRA) 813.1.4 (PRA 813.1.4)

⁴⁴⁷ Werner, Interview with the author.

shifts, seeking to capture as much as possible of the area's historic industries and workplace cultures.⁴⁴⁸ This was premised on a desire to document the 'roots' of contemporary London, capturing this for posterity and ameliorating the alienation brought by deindustrialisation.

Curators sought to democratise their collection processes, involving residents in order to ameliorate their sense, following closures, of loss. Between 1985 and 1988, the MID won a major grant from the Manpower Services Commission, a governmental body established eleven years previously by Edward Heath's government to fund vocational training and employment opportunities for unemployed people in depressed areas. The MID was able to offer residents a paid opportunity through the scheme to contribute to the development of a collection documenting the disappearing industrial culture which had shaped their lives.⁴⁴⁹ The MID began a major oral history project in early 1985 by sending a letter to PLA pensioners which received 350 responses.⁴⁵⁰ The PLA's newspaper *The Port* promoted participation in the collection process, imploring readers to 'turn out the junk stowed away up in the loft or garden and sort out anything to do with your job in the docks. We have been proud of the heritage that has been handed down through many generations – it seems right that future citizens of London and the thousands of tourists should know how the London river and docks operated'.⁴⁵¹ Here, the MID and the PLA organised public appeals for collection around the theme of the port's economic and commercial significance and its complex technologies.

Under the Manpower Services Commission scheme, Docklands residents – if unemployed for over six months – could receive pay to participate in collection, cataloguing and oral history interviews for the MID. At its peak in the mid-1980s, Werner estimates that sixty residents were participating in this scheme.⁴⁵² More broadly, Ellmers and Werner actively organised regular visits from Dockland residents. In September 1986, *The Port* reported on Ellmers and his team receiving a group of ex-dockworkers on one such visit, reuniting retirees with items from their working lives. A foreman found a ledger he himself had written in, while a sampler 'had his photograph taken in the very office he had used 35 years before'.⁴⁵³ Laura Carter argues that heritage allowed individuals to undergo a process of personal reconciliation, aiding the whole polity's adjustment to deindustrialisation.⁴⁵⁴ Indeed, this practice and the wider Manpower Services Commission scheme gave residents opportunities to participate in the creation

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ The Museum in Docklands History Timeline, Chris Ellmers, personal collection.

⁴⁵⁰ MOL, *Annual Report, 1985-6*, p.3

⁴⁵¹ Cossey, 'Docklands Museum Planned', *The Port*, pp.8-9, PRA 813.1.4.

⁴⁵² Werner, Interview with the author.

⁴⁵³ 'Ex-dock workers visit Museum in Docklands, *The Port*, 436, (September 1986), p.5. (PRA 813.3.436)

⁴⁵⁴ Carter, 'Rethinking Folk Culture', pp.544-5

of history, forming narratives through oral interviews, preparing items for storage and categorising the collections, creating the archive of their own lives. Yet it also reveals that the PLA mobilised this process to project harmony, presenting ex-employees in *The Port* as finding solace and contentedness in the museum's memorialisation of their working lives. More, by encouraging residents to focus on technical narratives around the functioning of trades, or relive their roles as skilled practitioners, this visit resembles the earlier call for donations in *The Port*. In both instances, the 'working history' approach led to an engagement not with working conditions or material conflict, but to a narrative resembling the *Alltagsgeschichte* – or 'history of everyday life' - analysed by Geoff Eley. Eley traces the German practice's trajectory from its broadly left-leaning, recuperative origins to its eventual anodyne fascination with the strange alterity of the past, its communities and industries, noting its loss of critical political faculties along the way.⁴⁵⁵

We might add to Eley's critique that the MID incorporated their focus on individual trades into a larger, overarching narrative of the port's vast scale and its signification of the nation's industrial advancement. When searching for a permanent home throughout the 1980s, the Museum strongly considered staying at its temporary visitors' centre in the Royal Victoria Docks. The Royals' appeal lay in their spacious nature, and their greater capacity for large items than the Georgian warehouses opposite Canary Wharf which curators eventually decided on.⁴⁵⁶ This reflected the increasing importance of *size* itself as an ideal within the project's work. The MID's entry in the 1986 *Annual Report* highlighted their collection of 'material as diverse (and large) as' a steam engine train, a quayside crane from the King George V Dock, and a tug-boat. These objects captured the ongoing priorities of the collection process: 'reflecting London's pre-eminence as a centre of commerce and industry'.⁴⁵⁷ When remembering the significance of the MID's collection work in the Port, Werner reflected this seeming tendency to shift emphases, moving without pause between curators' inclusion of local residents and their desire to adequately represent the 'enormous... Great Port of London', 'the largest dock system the world's ever seen'. When I noted this, Werner suggested that it stemmed from the lack of time available within the 1980s, given the rapid contemporary transformation of the landscape, to think critically about the nuances of the Museum's narrative.⁴⁵⁸ Yet this conflation of working-class experience and the vast functioning of the industrial port was in fact inherent to the 'working history' approach Ellmers favoured, and

⁴⁵⁵ Geoff Eley, 'Labor History, Social History, "Alltagsgeschichte": Experience, Culture and the Politics of the Everyday – a New Direction for German Social History?', *The Journal of Modern History*, 61, (2, 1989), p.300

⁴⁵⁶ Werner, Interview with the author; 'Museum Centre opens in Victoria Docks', *The Port*, 438, Nov 1986. (PLA 813.1.4), pp.8-9

⁴⁵⁷ MOL, *Annual Report 1985/6*, p.2

⁴⁵⁸ Werner, Interview with the author.

reproduced by the narrow terms of Werner's professional training at Leicester before taking this, his first curatorial position.

Another crucial way in which the MID's narrative was reproduced, however, was through the MID's oral history interviews. Residents participating in the project through the Manpower Services Commission conducted over 250 interviews for the project with a significant degree of autonomy. Conversations flowed freely and flexibly, with interviewers taking the initiative to dwell on those aspects of interviewees' testimonies they felt significant. Through both the questions interviewers asked and the responses interviewees gave, then, interviews' content and tone incorporated not only curators' interests, but also those of white residents. (Though the MID did interview a small number of Londoners born in Poland, Ireland and Italy, they did not interview a single West African, Caribbean or South Asian resident. These groups' experiences and identities remained absent from this account of the area's history). A comprehensive analysis of the oral history archive is beyond this chapter's scope, yet I here present some tentative findings based on a close reading of a small sample of ten interviews.

A significant number of these interviews were directly congruent with the major thrust of Werner and Ellmers' narrative, focusing on the rich diversity of cargo moving through the port and the industrial strength and intricate technical proficiency of the dock. Arthur Rylands was one such interviewee. Rylands had been a foreman in the sorting department. Rylands and his interviewer, Jane Baldwin, spent most of his interview discussing the processes involved in sorting cargo, including an extensive discussion of ensuring accuracy when tallying and the importance of having an acute knowledge of the capacity of different kinds of tins. Rylands remarked in amazement at the possibility of going from Tobacco Dock in Wapping to St Katharine's, by Tower Bridge, while relying solely on warehouses, passages and walkways between various warehouse buildings and dock complexes, without using roads or walking at ground level. More, he discussed at length the variety of cargo moving through his own warehouse, including canned fruits, nuts, beans, cereal and 'beautiful' pineapples.⁴⁵⁹ A focus on the dock's engineering processes and prowess also characterised the interview of Mr Mather, an engineer in dry dock. Topics here included the locations of and equipment in engineers' offices and methods of pumping water out from dry dock to work on ships' upkeep.⁴⁶⁰ Ex-merchant sailor Tony Williamson and his interviewer Louise Mather spoke at length about the mechanical differences between deep-water ships, on which Williamson sailed to Australia, and more agile 'coasters' which he worked on later on shorter trips around Britain and to Northwest Europe.⁴⁶¹ Eric Cropper reflected on the methods of

⁴⁵⁹ Arthur Rylands, interview with Jane Baldwin, 13th May, 1987, p5. PRA Docklands Interviews (DK) DK87.43

⁴⁶⁰ Mr Mather, interview with Russell Clark, 15th June, 1987, p.7. DK87.52

⁴⁶¹ Tony Williamson, interview with Louise Mather, 22nd June, 1987, pp.21-22. DK87.54

weighing tobacco and bananas used at the docks, and the significance of this to assigning pay for dockers' piece work.⁴⁶² An almost antiquarian emphasis on the minutiae of the docks' sorting processes and its overall scale pervaded these narratives, celebrating the aggregate creation of the world's pre-eminent port.

When asked about trade unionism, residents' responses were often hostile. Discussing the closure of the Regents' Canal Docks, Joe Bloomberg – a docker – stressed the limited support which the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) offered to workers' strikes against their redundancy. Bloomberg then used this example to express scepticism in the apparent importance which leftist activists and politicians invested in 'solidarity'.⁴⁶³ Doris Salt also built on her experience working in the port to question trade unions' benevolence. 'We all had to belong to a union', she remembered, but 'I didn't like unions and I still don't because I think at one time when they first originated they did good but it's all abused now'.⁴⁶⁴ The MID collected the testimonies of dockworkers in order to democratise narratives and capture the experiences of the working class. But while Werner and Ellmers envisioned this work as possessing radical political potential, in practice it revealed distrust of trade unionism.

Interviews also focused on the impact which Britain's global maritime role had on the lives of local residents. Interviewing Elizabeth Garrett, a former supervisor within the PLA women's staff, Jane Baldwin asked what the dock meant to Garrett in her youth. Garrett recalled that her father frequently took her to work with him on a Saturday, where she often spent time with ships' lascars crews. Garrett remembered:

My father used to place me in the hands of the Sarang, the captain of the lascars. His word was the law... and he would cut a man down with a knife. It was very primitive you know, death didn't mean a lot to them. They were very tough people... but they were rather lonely men too, they were away for many months and had families in India.

Garrett continued that she felt quite safe with the lascars, remembering them in a fond and affectionate light.⁴⁶⁵ They were gentle, kind figures, still irrevocably 'primitive' and docile under the potentially violent and almost despotic leadership of the Sarang. An ostensibly benevolent yet markedly condescending orientalism shaped Garrett's account of Indian sailors. Britain's imperial role also appeared to shape Bloomberg's nostalgic memory for Britain's maritime commercial strength and its

⁴⁶² Eric Cropper, no interviewer name provided, no date (n.d.), 1987, p.7. PRA DK87.4

⁴⁶³ *Ibid*, p.26-28

⁴⁶⁴ Doris Salt, Interview with Jane Baldwin, 26th June, 1987, DK87.53, p.25.

⁴⁶⁵ Elizabeth Garrett, interview with Jane Baldwin, 27th July, 1987, DK87.62, p.9

shipbuilding capacity: ‘At one time, Great Britain had the biggest merchant navy fleet in the world’. Garrett was perceptibly melancholic when remembering its loss: ‘Now we’re among the smallest’.⁴⁶⁶

Later in his interview, Bloomberg lamented immigration, claiming that the Labour Party ‘have been so concerned with getting the immigrant vote but now you hear Labour are against Black sections in Parliament. They’re right in this but it wouldn’t have happened if they hadn’t been cuddling up with them in the first place’. For Bloomberg this was evidence of Labour’s separation from their core (white) working-class constituency: ‘Labour say ‘[we] can’t have racism in the working class... in this country we’ve got a shortage of housing. If you keep having immigrants come in, where are you going to put them?’ The interviewer responded that the East End had always been an area with high levels of migration, to which Bloomberg agreed, but noted that Jews had historically mixed with the white majority, and now were inseparable from the white majority. On the other hand, Bloomberg claimed, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis lived in separate areas, spoke separate languages and sent their children to separate schools.⁴⁶⁷ There were potentially complex racial dynamics at play here: ‘Bloomberg’ is likely an Anglicised version of ‘Blumberg’, a German-Jewish surname. In this sense, Bloomberg’s claim around Jews’ active integration could be read as a commentary on his own ancestors’ efforts to do so. But it also elided Jews’ racialisation in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an irreconcilably ‘alien’ force. More broadly, his claim to speak for the ‘working-class’ reveals his belief in a homogenous white community, which assimilation to was necessary. This may also have been connected to his earlier nostalgia for a strong, commercially, and industrially pre-eminent nation. For these residents, pride in the port’s historic strength, its industrial genius and the richness and abundance of exotic cargoes were stronger strains of local identity than a belief in the unity of an organised, solidary working-class. Another strong and perhaps linked feature of residents’ testimony was the racialisation of South Asians present in Britain, whether in the affectionate yet condescending manner adopted by Garrett or the more belligerent view of contemporary multiculturalism taken by Bloomberg.

Given the MID’s lack of an independent exhibition space, the two publications *London’s Lost Riverscape* (1988) and *Dockland Life: A Pictorial History of London’s Docks 1860-1970* (1991) were central to the project’s early promotion of its work. The latter, the culmination of the decade-long construction of a photographic archive, offered an overview of London’s industrialised port between its later-nineteenth century zenith and its closure in 1970. This sought to increase accessibility; its departure from the excessively textual basis of previous exhibitions was instrumental according to Werner in its

⁴⁶⁶ Bloomberg, interview with Clark, DK87.22, p.13

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.22.

striking popularity with residents.⁴⁶⁸ Yet this emphasis on the book's accessibility is insufficient without at least an equal emphasis on the appeal of its content. Werner and Ellmers' introduction stated their awareness of 'the [PLA's] use of photographs as part of publicity and promotional material', giving the 'overall impression... of the enormous size of the dock company's undertaking'. They acknowledged, moreover, that these photographs did 'not ... really convey anything of the variety of dock work or dock life'.⁴⁶⁹ Werner noted that one particularly common use of photographs was the promotion of the port's capacity, facilities and handling methods to prospective shipping companies.⁴⁷⁰ In other words, the curators knew that these objects were not neutral. Yet rather than critically analysing the sources' provenance, the text marvelled at the vision they provided of industrial modernity: 'the photographs make the staggering facts and figures of so many acres, ships, tons and warehouses' floorspace believable'. They were representative of 'the greatest port in the world', even one of the '*wonders* of the world'. London's seven dock systems totalled 720 acres, 35 miles of quayside lined with working wharves, ship repair yards and barge yards, receiving 50,000 annual commercial visitors.⁴⁷¹ The rest of the book consisted of thematic chapters substantiating particular facets of this narrative, including the scale and spectacle of the port, its construction process and shipbuilding facilities.⁴⁷² This introduction also made explicit the nationalistic implications of much of the broader 'working-history' narrative. For Ellmers and Werner, the port's vast scale and intricate skill were significant not just in their own right, but for their facilitation of the cargo of the 'first port of Empire'.⁴⁷³

The MID recycled the title of one chapter, 'Warehouse of the World', from a gallery of the MOL's 1976 permanent galleries which Ellmers had worked on. Here, the MID continued to frame Empire, as we saw in this thesis's first chapter, as the source of exotic material abundance. This narrative began in the introduction, which listed the myriad goods held in the docks' many warehouses, including wine, dried fruit, pulses and beans, tea, sugar, grain, wool and meat.⁴⁷⁴ The chapter itself continued this listing technique, noting that the dock's cargo included 'every conceivable commodity... but especially those of the British Empire', including '28,000 pipes of wine, 12,000 casks of brandy, 33,000 puncheons of rum, 1,000,000 bales of wool, 125,000 tons of grain, 500,000 carcasses of meat, 35,000 tons of tobacco, [and] 30,000 tons of tea'.⁴⁷⁵ These lists merit inclusion at full length in order to capture their

⁴⁶⁸ Werner, *Interview with the author*, 10th November, 2020.

⁴⁶⁹ Chris Ellmers, Alex Werner, *Dockland Life: A Pictorial History of London's Docks*, (London, 1991), p.11

⁴⁷⁰ Werner, *Interview with the author*.

⁴⁷¹ Ellmers, Werner, *Dockland Life*, p.11; p.9. Similar narrative offered on p.15; p.16

⁴⁷² *Ibid.* Respectively 'City of Ships', pp.33-110; 'Building the Docks', pp.148-160, 'In Dry Dock', pp.148-160

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.9

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.89

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

frequency within the books and draw attention to their primary effect: overwhelming the reader above all else with the variety and abundance of goods. Later in the chapter, such as in **figure 3.2** and **figure 3.3**, colonial cargo was strikingly visually obvious, but – particularly in the former – appeared as an unfamiliar, exciting presence to those working within the docks. Curators often noted the precise origins of much of this cargo briefly or illusively. This narrative was centrally concerned with Empire, but it was not interested in the geography or history of specific colonies. Empire instead figured in broad, loose terms, as the source of a rich abundance of exotic goods and creatures encountered by ordinary Britons.



Figure 3.3: Giraffes transported from East Africa to London Zoo (1946)
Ellmers, Werner, *Dockland Life*, p.91.

Figure 3.4: Elephants transported from Ceylon to a Harringay Circus (1947)
Ellmers, Werner, *Dockaldn Life*, p.92.

The book also contained one chapter each on Docklands communities and dockworkers.⁴⁷⁶ The former constructed a popular enthusiasm for the port's industrial pre-eminence. Continuing to conceive their work as sympathetic social history, Ellmers and Werner acknowledged this shortcoming, suggesting it came from their difficulty representing residents' lived-experience due to an apparent dearth of sympathetic photojournalism within their collections.⁴⁷⁷ Yet as Chapter One showed, the MOL's curator of photography Mike Seaborne had by 1991 been collecting and regularly exhibiting the work of social documentary photographers in the East End for over a decade. We might here recall these exhibitions' portrayal of white working-class Londoners' affinity with the port's industry and note a similar phenomenon emerging in *Dockland Life*. With a vast photographic archive at their disposal which was strong in documentary photography, Ellmers and Werner chose images representing residents' enthusiasm

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid*, Respectively 'Around Dockland', and 'Many Hands', pp.110-148; pp.185-200

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid*, pp.11-12

for the industrial and maritime spectacle of the dock. **Figure 3.3** is an image of the *Mauretania*, entering the King George V Dock at North Woolwich following her maiden voyage across the Atlantic. Crowds of residents, each hardly more than a speck, watch this historic event from both banks as the vast ship entered the Dock. The image's caption estimated 100,000 East Enders came to watch the ship's arrival.⁴⁷⁸ Curators' efforts to sympathetically capture working-class residents' experiences and cultures culminated in their representation of popular enthusiasm for the docks' muscularity.



Fig 3.5: The *Mauretania* enters the King George V Dock, North Woolwich, 1939.⁴⁷⁹

A similar narrative was at play in **Figure 3.6**, from *Silvertown* in 1950. This photograph portrays children playing in a terraced *cul de sac*, a trope of the left's romanticisation of 'traditional working-class communities'. In sight, an ocean liner pulls into dock in the background following a voyage from New Zealand. Here, intimate aspects of community life played out in the shadow of global shipping to and from the Dominions. As we saw in Chapter One, discourses of community were intertwined with those of global shipping, mobility and encounter. This narrative was initiated in contemporary sources and reproduced in the late-twentieth century by heritage practitioners, constructing a close discursive affinity between the white working class and the industrially and imperially strong nation. Yet as shown, interviews also tentatively suggest it was a significant force informing local identities.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.13

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid*. p.111

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Figure 3.6. QSMV Dominion Monarch over Silvertown, 1950.⁴⁸⁰

The Chapter ‘Many Hands’ focused on the dock’s workforce. The second half of the chapter’s introduction focused on successive campaigns for security and fair pay within the docks, taking in the 1889 Great Dock Strike, Ernest Bevin’s union leadership and oversight of decasualisation, and the difficulties of containerisation and closures from the later 1960s.⁴⁸¹ Yet this emphasis on trade unionism came as a caveat to the book’s broader focus on the genius of the port’s working history, which workers were assimilated into and made representative of. The diversity of workers employed in the docks encapsulated its intricate, highly specified division of labour, contributing on aggregate to its larger industrial might. The book noted that while by the 1930s the Port was staffed by 100,000 manual labourers, at the post-war peak of 1955, 32,000 dockworkers alone were registered in London.⁴⁸² Curators quoted the promotional film *Waters of Time* which the PLA produced for the 1951 Festival of Britain, listing the dock’s myriad occupations and providing textured detail to this numeric outline. According to the film, Werners and Ellmer noted, the Port employed:

‘dockers, tallymen, checkers, stevedores, hatchwaymen, winchmen, samplers, grain porters, timber porters, teamers, tacklemen, yardmasters, pilots, tub boatmen, freshwatermen, blacksmiths, boilermasters, masons, bricklayers, joiners, shipwrights, patternmakers, ship chandlers, gangers, tractor-men, coopers, bankriders, weighers, dock watchmen, dredgermen, launchmen, needlemen, jetty clerks, warehousemen, measurers, coal trimmers, lightermen, and cranedrivers’.⁴⁸³

This passage is worth including at length to capture Werner and Ellmers’ emphasis on the important relationship between the operation’s colossal size and its precision and intricacy. In their own words: ‘The port not only employed thousands of men, but did so in one of the most intricate occupational structures to be found anywhere’.⁴⁸⁴ Listing again foregrounded both size and variety. The approximation of dockers and warehousemen with superintendents and dockmasters framed each individual group as contributing mutually to a co-operative, effective whole. **Figures 3.5** and **3.6** reflect this within the Chapter’s photographs. In the former, well-heeled captains of industry inspect a new piece of machinery while in the latter a skilled worker finetunes the hulking steel pipes of a Millwall hydraulic engine house. Though economic disparity

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.199.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.112-115

⁴⁸² *Ibid*, p.111

⁴⁸³ *Ibid*.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid*.

was consciously visible, the book retained a sense of shared purpose. The docks' workforce constituted a class-gradated organism; separate constituent parts operated interdependently, upholding industrial pre-eminence.

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Fig 3.7: Dock Company Directors inspect a new steam bucket dredger, 1901⁴⁸⁵

REMOVED FOR PUBLIC DEPOSIT

Fig 3.8: PLA plant attendant at work in hydraulic engine house, Millwall Docks, 1953⁴⁸⁶

The MID did not present such harmony of purpose between social classes in representing late-Victorian and Edwardian poverty. Here, curators' characterisation of Docklands neighbourhoods relied upon the most sensationalising and lurid contemporary commentary on the East End. This included A.G. Linney's observation of Rotherhithe's 'strange mixture of races... people from Scandinavian blood, dark-skinned southerners [and] negroes', alongside Thomas Burke's reports on Limehouse's Chinatown and its preponderance of West African seamen, 'Arabs, Malays, Hindoos, South Sea Islanders and East Africans'. Burke was perhaps *the* most significant figure in the construction of London's Chinatown, in Anne Witchard's words, as 'a forbidden zone [...] of unimaginable Chinese excess, grotesque heathen practices and bizarre perversities'.⁴⁸⁷ These reports' anxieties around Britain's racial degeneration was not left to the subtext. The authors noted that Shadwell and Ratcliff were 'mapped out largely in black on Charles Booth's *Map of London's Wealth and Poverty*[...] black standing for the criminal, semi-criminal and lawless classes'.⁴⁸⁸ They also quoted the evangelical minister Henry Walker's characterisation of the area as 'the dumping ground for the moral and social debris of the Kingdom'.⁴⁸⁹ As Geoff Ginn notes, the degradation and decay which characterised these narratives was neither an uncontested nor uniform feature of late-Victorian accounts of the East End.⁴⁹⁰ The year after *Dockland Life* itself was published, Judith Walkowitz also showed the significance of commentaries like these in reshaping the politics of

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p.136

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p.141

⁴⁸⁷ Anne Witchard, 'Aspects of Literary Limehouse: Thomas Burke and the 'Glamorous Shame of Chinatown'', *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 2, (1, 2004), p.2

⁴⁸⁸ Ellmers, Werner, *Dockland Life*, p.186

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹⁰ Geoff Ginn, 'Answering the 'Bitter Cry': Urban Description and Social Reform in the Late-Victorian East End', *The London Journal*, 31, (2, 2006), p.179

gender, sex and race in Britain.⁴⁹¹ These accounts' sensationalism and stigmatisation were being challenged and deconstructed both in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period, and contemporarily by researchers at the moment in which Ellmers and Werner were working. Here, we again see both the gulf between the curators and ongoing developments in critical scholarship, and the results of their indiscriminate approach toward the selection and interpretation of sources. The result was an echoing of the most lurid and sensationalist Victorian representations of poverty, resonating at a point when the East End was again prominent and heavily stigmatised in national culture.

The volume *London's Lost Riverscape* (1988) also underscored the Port's centrality to London's history by compiling highlights of a 1937 PLA project to photograph a panorama of both banks of the Thames, East from London Bridge. The book's introduction, written by conservative architectural historian and polemicist Gavin Stamp, noted that George VI's coronation made 1937 'a time to celebrate the history, importance and character of the capital of the British Empire'. The PLA's headquarters at Tower Hill remained 'a symbol of the power and confidence of the Port of London in the Edwardian period'.⁴⁹² This maritime grandeur stretched eastward to 'Stately buildings' such as the Royal Victoria Victualling Yard, Custom House and Wren's Naval Hospital, while Stamp quoted a contemporary tourist guide to remind readers that 'the wealth represented by the contents of [the river's] warehouses at any one moment is stupendous'.⁴⁹³ Stamp then reiterated the global significance of these images; they captured, he wrote, 'the greatest port of the British Empire at the height of its wealth and power'.⁴⁹⁴ This built environment was indicative of a more abstract 'character', rooted in industriousness and ingenuity, which was the dynamic cause of geopolitical strength abroad and material abundance at home. Here, Empire figured as the highest expression and logical conclusion of national industrial genius. This narrative echoed the 1976 permanent galleries seen in Chapter One and, Chapter Five will show, persisted into the new millennium. In more explicit and sustained terms than in *Dockland Life*, Empire here emerged as the highest expression of the industrial genius of eminent Victorians.

Yet crucially, *London's Lost Riverscape* framed this memory of the industrial port through the subsequent experience of loss. Werner noted that the book aimed to 'chime with people moving into the riverside wharves, realising the worlds that had existed before the Blitz'.⁴⁹⁵ Werner here framed the book as seeking to counter the naivety about the area's industrial history which accompanied contemporary

⁴⁹¹ Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian Britain*, (Chicago, 1992)

⁴⁹² Gavin Stamp in Ellmers, Werner, *London's Lost Riverscape*, (London, 1988). Quotations pp.2-3; p.4 respectively.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid*, p.2

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p.3

⁴⁹⁵ Werner, Interview with the author.

financialised redevelopment. Stamp also reflected on the book's contemporary relevance, noting in his introduction: 'today it is all too obvious that London has no port at all', a tragic result of its 'inability to survive the passing of the British Empire'.⁴⁹⁶ 'The present appearance of the same stretch of the river', Stamp continued, 'is also an expression of our present status and character. Whether – visually - it is a change for the better I rather doubt'.⁴⁹⁷ Economics aside, closures and deterioration also here reflected a more intangible loss of ingenuity and industriousness in civic life, deriving from a loss of vigour within the national 'character'. Nor, importantly, could a riverscape housing the identikit glass and steel office blocks of an expanded financial services sector ever recreate the romance of the muscular industrial port. These quotes reveal, once more, the congruence of the MID's ostensibly democratising industrial heritage work with a nostalgic conservatism lamenting what Martin Wiener called the 'decline of the industrial spirit' within 'English culture'.⁴⁹⁸ More, they also reveal the position of Empire as the highest achievement and fullest expression of this innate 'spirit'. Though Ellmers and Werner often stopped short of mentioning this explicitly, their nostalgia for abundant and exotic cargo and intricate yet vast and powerful industrial processing techniques ultimately served to celebrate the commercial processes of the nation's first port during its imperial heyday. For Stamp this connection was more direct, explicit, and sustained. These quotes also suggest the tension between two conservative heritage discourses. They demonstrate within this emphasis on the industrial modernity of the nineteenth and twentieth century port a distaste for the sterility of the contemporary redeveloped Docklands. This narrative's lament for the lost virile character of the nation was, in political terms, a reflection of the PLA's loss of jurisdiction over much of East London to the LDDC.

When asked about the position of the British Empire within the MID's vision of the Port, Werner responded:

In that period the focus was very much on white working-class life in London. The docks themselves were very much [a] white labour force, they were fairly racist actually. You'd see lascars on the ships, you'd obviously see foreign crews on the shipping lines, but it was quite a white working-class area so I think the books probably reflect that and they don't really interrogate where all this produce was coming from, what it actually means. And I think it was probably just using the collection, the collection has one particular narrative that seemed appealing. A lot of those photographs were publicity photographs that reflect 'The Great Port of London'.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁶ Gavin Stamp in Ellmers, Werner, *London's Lost Riverscape*, (London, 1988) p.2

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.3

⁴⁹⁸ Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, (Cambridge, 1981)

⁴⁹⁹ Werner, Interview with the Author.

This quote captures the central developments and contradictions within the collection and exhibition work covered in this section. The project's ostensible focus on the 'white working-class' was soon elided with, and subsumed by, a focus on 'The Great Port of London'. The photographs which curators collected cemented the appeal of a heritage discourse centring on London's centrality to British industrial strength. In donating their collections, the PLA exercised an informal and indirect form of *authorisation*. This section's narrative was contained within the fabric of the PLA collections themselves and reproduced by curators who conflated working history and social history, selected and interpreted objects without any critical grounding or analytical basis, and had no connection to ongoing innovations within historical scholarship. Curators' inclusive, modernising fervour gave way to a focus above all else on size and technical skill. They voluntarily framed the PLA as stewards of the port, its industrial genius, and the importation and processing of the commercial fruits of the Empire. Within this relationship, curators understood influence as flowing firmly out from the innate character of the metropole to the world; Empire figured as the highest achievement of British industrial spirit. More, oral histories suggest that these emphases within the narrative largely reflected residents' priorities. A fuller analysis of the place of industry, Empire, nation, and race in white working-class identities in Docklands will be explored further in Chapter Four.

The LDDC and Reinvention Narratives

Much of the work discussed so far carried an implicit critique of the LDDC, who after their establishment in 1981 replaced the PLA as the authority with jurisdiction over much of the area. Werner contrasted the PLA's enthusiasm for the MID during the 1980s with the LDDC at that point, who he suggested wanted to base redevelopment around profit-making enterprises. The LDDC envisioned this commercial approach, which Werner termed 'the new', as preferable to the establishment of an organisation memorialising 'the old' and reliant on government grants. This was both a case of prioritising commerce over arts and heritage, and derived from a concern that the docks were 'tainted with labour disputes' and the 'working-class history' that the curators saw themselves as cultivating.⁵⁰⁰ This was particularly acute in the 1980s, when poor transport connections and stuttering redevelopment made the economic revival the Corporation were tasked with seem daunting. Curators' overtures to the LDDC for greater involvement were rarely successful, given the Corporation's basic belief that funds should be 'used... to create jobs or businesses', a calculation which Werner argued revealed a failure to understand heritage as an important 'cultural economy'.⁵⁰¹ In Werner's view, the LDDC of the 1980s was

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

characterised primarily by its subscription to two Thatcherite ideals: enterprise and thrift. He did stress, however, that this relationship strengthened in the 1990s as redevelopment became increasingly successful and the Corporation began to look beyond private enterprise.⁵⁰²

Yet Werner's narrative jars with the simple fact that for much of the 1980s the LDDC's annual financial grant to the MID dwarfed the PLA's. In 1985, for instance, the respective figures stood at £101,260 and £3,866.⁵⁰³ More, the LDDC provided 'W' and 'K' Warehouses in the Royal Victoria Dock, which served as the MID's stores and temporary visitors' centre, free of charge between 1983 and 1998.⁵⁰⁴ When the Museum of London, Docklands (MOLD) opened on independent premises in 2003, it benefited from the LDDC reserving these premises and giving a £3.5 million grant towards building conversion costs.⁵⁰⁵ Though personally, Werner often perceived relations with the Corporation in the 1980s as being fraught, institutionally its funding was indispensable throughout this period and into the new millennium. At important points throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the LDDC drew on the sense of historical legitimacy which the MID provided. This occurred first when, faced with stuttering redevelopment and persistent unemployment in 1984, the LDDC and PLA used the nascent MID to defend themselves as respectful of the area's history and populations. Later, the LDDC commissioned a photography project by MOL curators documenting the changing face of the river, which the Corporation used to promote its legacy. 'Authorisation' was here more direct once again. In both instances, the LDDC leveraged its ownership of property and supply of funding to use MID premises and curators' work to ease and promote the transition to a redeveloped, financialised future.

In 1984, three years after the closure of London's last urban dock system, much of Tower Hamlets and Newham were left untouched by developers despite the LDDC's offer of tax exemptions and relaxed planning processes. As Chapter Four will show at greater length, a network of community activist organisations headed by the Joint Docklands Action Group pressured the Corporation to invest in industrial employment and social housing.⁵⁰⁶ In this context, PLA Chief Executive John Black and Edward Sargent of the LDDC hosted a delegation of trade unionists led by Len Murray and Brian Nicholas, respectively General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and vice chairman of the TGWU, for a tour of the proposed site of the Docklands Museum at West India Docks.⁵⁰⁷ There, they were joined by Ellmers and Max Hebditch, director of the MOL. As the MID's landlords at their

⁵⁰² Werner, Interview with the author.

⁵⁰³ MOL, *1984-5 annual report*, (1985), p.7

⁵⁰⁴ MID History Timeline, (Ellmers, personal collection).

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁶ Marriott, *Beyond the Tower*, 346

⁵⁰⁷ Len Murray visits Dockland, *The Port*, (May 1984, 408), p.2 (PRA 813.1.4)

temporary visitor site at the Royal Victoria Dock and the owners of their potential permanent future address, Ellmers was obliged to meet the LDDC's invitation, attend the meeting and discuss his work preserving the legacy of the historic port. The LDDC and the PLA leveraged Ellmers' expertise to publicly present this as a conciliatory meeting between two, mutually respectful sides. The PLA's newspaper *The Port* covered the visit prominently. Murray told reporters of his partial regret when visiting empty, redundant buildings 'where men used to work and where they were active'. Yet he ultimately asserted in terms markedly similar to Sheppard's earlier discussions of 'roots', 'how important it is... to create for the benefit of this and future generations an awareness of where we all came from and what it was that created London'.⁵⁰⁸ With the trade union movement facing dramatic losses by 1984 both locally and nationwide, this validation served for Murray as a proxy for any kind of positive material resolution to the conflict. The MID's indebtedness to their landlords allowed the LDDC to offer a sense of validation and acknowledgement which provided consolation for displacement without requiring the Corporation to amend their course. Emily Robinson frames the growing prominence of 'roots' as an ideal within late-century discussions of heritage as a 'politically ambiguous' shift towards the affective, offering a sense of personal affirmation and cultural enfranchisement which helped individuals overcome the experience of loss.⁵⁰⁹ Yet an attentiveness to the material dimensions of authorisation suggests that in this case at least, this 'ambiguity' was a veneer, helping the LDDC to normalise displacement and distract from the failures of financialised redevelopment.

In 1995 the MOL's curator of photography Mike Seaborne revisited the *London's Lost Riverscape* catalogue with two friends, Graham Diprose and Charles Craig, both practicing photographers. The three men considered the possibility of embarking on a follow-up project, documenting the changes to the Thames in the subsequent sixty years, and particularly the most recent fifteen. Judging an LDDC photography competition, Seaborne proposed this idea to the Corporation's Chief Executive, Eric Sorensen. Sorensen ensured the LDDC gave the project a grant, supplemented by the housing developer Fairview New Homes who had overseen many residential redevelopments and wanted a record of their work. The LDDC set a deadline of March 1997 for shooting. Twelve months later, in March 1998, the MOL independently opened an exhibition at London Wall which coincided with the date of the Corporation's closure.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁹ Robinson, 'Inspirations and Obligations', pp.59.

⁵¹⁰ Mike Seaborne, Graham Diprose, Craig Charles, *London's Found Riverscape: Photographs of the River from 1937 and 1997*, (London, 1998), n.p.

No archival record of the exhibition's gallery text remains. Its press release, however, advertised the exhibition as 'both a mark of the LDDC's achievements and a valuable historical record in itself'.⁵¹¹ This defence of the LDDC's record was developed further in the introduction the photographers wrote to a book accompanying the exhibition:

We believe in our city, we live and work in it and we see the river as crucial to its well-being and survival. The LDDC, despite the controversial nature of some of its policies, has more than any other agency in modern times revitalised London's riverscape. This is a tremendous achievement given the social and political upheaval that the process has involved. In truth, we had some misgivings about the redevelopment of Docklands when we first embarked on this project, but over the past eighteen months or so the sheer scale and variety of the work undertaken by the LDDC and the other developers has impressed us all.⁵¹²

The exhibition and accompanying book consisted of two parallel photographic panoramas, running horizontally across the exhibition hall, of the 1937 and 1997 riverscapes. While the former captured the industrial modernity of the working port, the latter captured a new, affluent riverscape, of angular, glass and steel office blocks and landmarks of the new Docklands such as the Canary Wharf. Warehouse buildings remained, but were converted into apartments and lofts 'with tell-tale windows and balconies replacing cargo loading doors'.⁵¹³ This futuristic spirit was nowhere clearer than in the Millennium Dome, which framed this new riverscape as a firm break with the industrial past, setting the tone for the twenty-first century.⁵¹⁴ While invoking the connections earlier drawn by Stamp between the Thames and the nation, the introduction contradicted his pessimism: 'As ever, the appearance of London's waterfront reflects our changing culture, economy, desires and ambitions'.⁵¹⁵ Here was a temporal shift from retrospection to futuristic optimism, or from a 'lost' to a 'found' riverscape. Above all, it was a transition within the MID's heritage discourse from declinist nostalgia for a lost national character to a faith in the power of marketised redevelopment to deliver prosperity once more.

As the LDDC turned to promote its legacy prior to its closure it requested use of the photographs for a special issue of conservative daily newspaper the *London Evening Standard*. Seaborne, Diprose and Craig, who felt 'grateful to the LDDC for their funding' agreed, though they were not consulted about the photographs' application and 'didn't know what the narrative [adopted] would be'.⁵¹⁶ The newspaper and

⁵¹¹ *London's Found Riverscape* press release, 1998. MOL.

⁵¹² Seaborne, Diprose, Charles, *London's Found Riverscape*, n.p.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁶ Seaborne, Interview with the author.

the Development Corporation collaborated on a special issue of the supplement magazine *Evening Standard* marking the latter's closure on the 20th March, with 440,000 copies distributed for free throughout the capital.⁵¹⁷ Images from the 1937 and 1997 panoramas ran throughout the magazine, printed at the top and bottom of each page respectively. These photographs framed a clear, celebratory message throughout, beginning with a full page advertisement on the magazine's inside cover. This noted the creation of five new health centres and 25.1 million square feet of commercial and industrial floorspace, the redevelopment of 2,042 acres of previously derelict land, the construction of 24,042 new homes, the employment of 85,000 people in 2,690 new businesses, the improvement and construction of 145 kilometres of roads and Docklands Light Railway tracks, and the attraction of £7.2 billion of private sector investment and 2.1 million annual visitors. This was proof, the advert noted, that 'there is a great future ahead'.⁵¹⁸ The following page applied these changes to a new, more explicit counter-narrative of economic change in late-century Britain, under the headline 'Our Friends in the Wharf'. A conscious challenge to the narrative of loss, disruption, and deindustrialisation in the BBC drama *Our Friends in the North* two years previously, this wondered at the 'Sun-kissed steel of Canary Wharf', noting the 'gleaming spires of urban reconstruction' as the 'millennial capital' moved on from the 'once derelict docks', marking a new epoch for the 'ancient city'.⁵¹⁹ A teleology ran throughout this: the past was significant insofar as it contributed to a dynamic process of movement towards the future. Facilitated by the labour of MOL staff and bolstered by its exhibition halls, the LDDC here positioned its work as the reinvention for the new millennium of a longer history of commercial eminence on the docks. In a later feature entitled 'rockin in docklands [sic]' celebrities, including Cherie and Tony Blair, Samuel L Jackson, Diana Ross, Ben Elton, Steve Coogan, Jennifer Saunders and the music producer Goldie were photographed at an exclusive local club, and dubbed the 'new eastenders [sic]'.⁵²⁰ From the 1990s, the Major and Blair governments gave significant state funding to the cultural industries in order to spur urban regeneration and economic growth. These urban economies, in turn, were also key to a renewal of discourses of the nation which centred on the idea of a cosmopolitan, young and vibrant Britain. Yet they often inhabited sites transformed by development corporations, and built on the introduction of private funding and market principles to the arts' governance, both policies inherited from Margaret Thatcher's government.⁵²¹ In the 'rockin in docklands' feature we see a confluence between the buccaneering, market-driven redevelopment of Thatcherite urban policy and the cosmopolitan 'cool Britannia' of the turn of the century, here embodied by Blair himself. Little tension existed between these political

⁵¹⁷ *Evening Standard Magazine*, (20th March, 1998), Press Reports, MOL.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.1

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.2

⁵²⁰ *Ibid*, pp.28-9

⁵²¹ Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, p.269; Gross, *Birth of the Creative Industries Revisited*, p.7.

formations; the denizens of the latter were at ease when inhabiting the landscape created in part by the former.

This issue of the *Evening Standard* playfully evoked maritime history throughout, drawing on its racialised and imperial dimensions to provide a sense of the area's commercial and cosmopolitan historical inheritance. A further article, written from the perspective of a young professional living locally, mused on the process of 'settling' Docklands to 'fashion a civilisation' there, comparing this with comedic jest to colonial settlement in Australia or Hong Kong. One Canada Square, Canary Wharf's flagship skyscraper, was a beacon for settlers which urged: 'Go East, young businessman'.⁵²² A two-page advertisement featured a model of East Asian descent standing on the riverbank in front of a boat and repurposed industrial buildings. It promoted Docklands' burgeoning fashion industry, encouraging readers to 'head out East to discover brightly coloured cottons, wool and rubber' and make the most of the fact that 'once again the Orient is passing through Docklands'.⁵²³ This crude play on the maritime past drew parallels between the abundance of garments and rich materials in both periods. Only just stopping short of calling the model an 'Oriental', it highlighted her racial alterity to echo the historical movements of goods and people through the area. Here, a jocular evocation of the imperial past served as an antecedent to the contemporary Docklands, establishing a tradition of cosmopolitanism and commercialism which affirmed the present. The Docklands promoted by the *Evening Standard* at the moment of the LDDC's closure sat at a historical conjuncture between the urban landscapes created by Thatcherism and Blairism. It marked a break from the declinist nationalism of the MID's earlier work to celebratorily suggest that the roots of contemporary British commerce and cosmopolitanism lay in the Empire. This suggests a more complex picture than Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo's conceptualisation of heritage around the turn of the century as characterised by a narrative they call 'white past, multicultural present', which celebrated contemporary multiculturalism while occluding the imperial past it emerged from.⁵²⁴ Empire was central to this narrative, albeit in jocular, crude and racialised ways.

Conclusion

Analysing the contingent, material relationships influencing the MID's work between 1981 and the closure of the LDDC in 1998 reveals the need for more complex accounts of the influence of conservatism within museums. Much of the MID's early work was scheduled and formulated by curators with the clear intention of strengthening its relationship with the Corporation of London. The process of 'authorisation' was direct: the City's funding reaped clear, immediate political benefits. 'Authorisation'

⁵²² *Evening Standard*, pp.10-11, MOL.

⁵²³ *Ibid*, pp.20-21

⁵²⁴ Littler, Naidoo, 'White Past, Multicultural Present', pp.330-341

became more indirect as Ellmers and Werner moved eastward into Docklands. Curators' conceptual conflation of 'working' history and 'social' history was reflected by their partnership with the MID. Their separation from contemporary research and lack of a critical analytical approach to the collection of objects, in turn, led them to default to narratives of the port's genius and Britain's industrial pre-eminence. From the mid-1980s, the LDDC used the MID to provide legitimisation for an important political goal: redefining the docks as an artefact of London's history. Though this served both defensively to console trade unionists during periods of difficulty and later, to triumphantly promote the corporation's legacy in establishing a new riverscape, it saw heritage applied more directly into live debates, marking a return to a more transactional form of authorisation.

These relationships led to not one but three heritage discourses, through which we can trace rifts and tensions within late-century conservatism. Like the 1976 permanent galleries seen in chapter one, the first romanticised patrician merchants' delivery of prosperity for the whole metropolis, celebrating their leadership within a benevolent social order. These exhibitions attributed the port's industrialisation to these merchants' benevolent leadership, obscuring their important motivation of improving shipping between London and slave-owning colonies. More broadly, when discussed in these exhibitions, Empire figured as a project of the expansion of commercial ties rather than economic extraction or political conquest. Though presented as a force for the modernisation and democratisation of the MID's collection and narratives, the shift to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries served above all to construct the docks' technical proficiency and muscular strength. These motifs were the central characteristics of the Victorian nation's industrial genius whose highest achievement was the creation of a global Empire. The sample of interviews analysed here suggests that this narrative of local history was also that favoured by white residents of the area. As we saw in Chapter One and will see again in Chapter Four, heritage practitioners reproduced their sources' celebratory approximation of the 'working-class' and the strong industrial and imperial nation. The LDDC, meanwhile, drew on the area's past as an earlier instance of the evolving tradition of commerce and cosmopolitanism on the Thames, drawing together the free markets of Thatcherite redevelopment and free spirits of Blair's 'young country'. Empire was not here an expression of a mourned-for national greatness, but a playfully evoked antecedent for the diversity and affluence of contemporary Docklands. Despite its seeming embrace of multiculturalism, this narrative's central conceit about the 'Orient' returning to Docklands retained a markedly racialising lens. Empire did not disappear from heritage narratives around the turn of the century but was reformulated in jocular ways in order to understand the contemporary city's cosmopolitanism and its commercial heritage. The further development of imperial memory at the Docklands Museum, and throughout the wider MOL, will be explored in Chapter Five of this thesis.

Chapter Four: The Island History Trust, 1980-2004

In 1980 community activists on the Isle of Dogs received an opportunity. Urban Aid, a scheme established a decade previously by Harold Wilson's first Labour government to improve social provision in the decaying 'inner cities', approved their application for funding.⁵²⁵ Locally, discussions of 'the community' and its perspectives and opinions generally referred to a group of older, White, working-class residents who since the 1950s had lived through creeping deindustrialisation and outward migration. The area, isolated by the East and West India Docks to the north and the Thames to the south, was largely neglected within the new borough of Tower Hamlets' medical, educational and housing provision.⁵²⁶ Through their political mouthpiece, Ted Johns' Association of Island Communities (AIC), this group had protested in vain as housing, shops and jobs disappeared and the area stagnated. In the 1970s the AIC watched as two redevelopment initiatives failed, the former commissioned by Edward Heath's Conservative government, the latter by Wilson's second administration.⁵²⁷

One of the community's few victories in these years was the comprehensivisation and relocation of George Green's School to the Isle of Dogs in 1976. Named after a famous local shipbuilder, the school transformed the area's secondary education provision, relieving large numbers of local teenagers from their long daily trips North, over the docks to Poplar.⁵²⁸ George Green was founded as a 'community school'. It hosted resources for the wider population, including an elderly person's group, a sports centre, and an adult education project. The 1980 Urban Aid funding was for an expansion of these activities, including plans for a local history project. The school's governors and its adult education co-ordinator hoped to record for posterity locals' pride in their 'close-knit' social relations and local culture, which many feared doomed in the 1980s. But local pride was also rooted in something bigger. Many felt enriched by their connection through the port to the wider world. The East and West India Docks had been integral to the industrialisation of trade with British colonies in South Asia and the Caribbean respectively. Generations had spent their lives servicing the port and encountering its visitors, finding purpose and dignity in their facilitation of the global movement of people and goods. Activists often spoke of the power of this memory, particularly in contrast to contemporary disaffection.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁵ Lizzie Crowley, Brhmie Balaram, Neil Lee, 'People or Place? Urban Policy in the Age of Austerity', *The Work Foundation*, (September, 2012), p. 2. Last accessed 28th January, 2023 at <https://barrowcadbury.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/People-or-Place-Urban-Policy-in-the-Age-of-Austerity-FINAL-FOR-WEB1.pdf>.

⁵²⁶ Foster, *Docklands*, pp. 38–42

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁸ Eve Hostettler, Interview with the Author, conducted via Microsoft Teams on 26th March, 2021.

⁵²⁹ Island History Trust, *1986 Annual Report*, Tower Hamlets Local History Archive (hereafter THLC.), TH LC6296.

The history project hired Eve Hostettler and Bernard Canavan. Canavan was a graphic designer and graduate of Ruskin College, where he had become active in the History Workshop Movement. But Hostettler, over three decades, would become the defining figure in the project's history.⁵³⁰ Hostettler abandoned her Ph.D. at Essex University to accept the job. She had been researching women agricultural workers in nineteenth-century Britain and was becoming established within the people's history movement. She sat on *History Workshop Journal's* editorial board, was vice chair of the Oral History Society and taught part-time in adult education.⁵³¹ With Anna Davin and Sally Alexander, Hostettler had just published her first article, 'Labouring Women: a Reply to Eric Hobsbawm'. The authors criticised Hobsbawm's failure to recognise women as historical agents, arguing that the narrow masculinity of contemporary social history severely limited its understanding of the working class as a whole.⁵³² But Hostettler had grown sceptical of academics' claims to radicalism, lamenting that many remained confined to 'university staff rooms', debating 'minor points of theory'.⁵³³ Leaving the academy for the Island, she saw herself leaving these pretensions behind, fulfilling the failed promise of 'history from below'. The project, soon named the Island History Trust, moved into shared premises with Johns' AIC.⁵³⁴ There it became part of the activist milieu of the Island's older population, preserving residents' memories and constructing a 'usable past' for activists.

The Trust's history can be separated into two overlapping periods. Between 1980 and 1997 it intensively collected residents' oral testimonies, photographs and ephemera, creating an open, democratic archive of the community just as it seemed to be disappearing forever. The protracted loss of population caused by a lack of accessible housing, jobs and services gave this work its urgency, while young people's particularly pronounced departure intensified the Trust's focus on the experiences of the old. The collection sought to ameliorate a sense of alienation following these profound changes. A product of social democratic urban policy, the Trust found itself at the very frontier of Thatcherite redevelopment. Michael Heseltine would shortly redefine Urban Aid to focus on wealth creation, while the 1980s saw the rapid, market-led and financialised transformation of the area by the LDDC.⁵³⁵ The Trust was becoming politically anachronistic and economically precarious. It was never, in this sense, truly *authorised*, possessing no close connection to a sympathetic, ongoing political movement with access to state funds.

⁵³⁰ Hostettler, interview with the author.

⁵³¹ 'Oral History Society: Annual General Meeting 12 April 1980', *Oral History*, 8, (1, 1980), p. 8; Hostettler, interview with the author.

⁵³² Sally Alexander, Anna Davin, Eve Hostettler, 'Labouring Women: A Reply To Eric Hobsbawm', *History Workshop Journal*, 8, (1, 1979), pp.174-182

⁵³³ Hostettler, interview with the author.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁵ Crowley, Balaram, Lee, 'People or Place?'

Its goal became not so much political as personal: granting dignity and recognition to the ‘traditional working class’ as their way of life disappeared from London. Part One of this chapter tells the story of these years, providing a fuller, more detailed account of a phenomenon identified by Laura Carter and Emily Robinson: white working-class heritage’s transition to fulfilling a more mournful, therapeutic role based on a commemoration of lost local histories.⁵³⁶ For Hostettler and local residents, association with the Trust had a deeply personal impact. Hostettler noted that the Island

fostered this incredibly strong belonging in people ... If you had a connection, you warmed back to that connection and felt it all your life, that was very noticeable. A big part of the success of the Island History Trust [was] that it took that feeling of belonging ... and enhanced it, justified it, valued it. All that, to the individual, is really important.⁵³⁷

Hostettler said this slowly and falteringly in our interview, with an intensity of feeling that brought her to tears. I recognised in her then the same profound affinity to the area and its rich maritime identity that was echoed in countless letters sent to the Trust. This moment seemed to capture the essence of what it meant for Hostettler to do this work: to leave the academy, to side with the powerless, to offer dignity and hope despite rapid change, to be left with complete transformation, and fundamental loss.

But this moment also seemed telling because of its relationship to something darker. Minutes later Hostettler noted that there existed an ‘overt, casual, everyday racism among these wonderful people I’ve just been talking about’. Speaking during 2021’s long lockdown, she called this racism ‘endemic, like Covid-19’.⁵³⁸ Racism was mostly directed at Bengali residents, who had moved reluctantly into ‘hard to let’ housing locally under coercion by Tower Hamlets’ one-offer policy on council housing.⁵³⁹ Hostettler felt the effects of this personally when a friend moved to Brixton, fearing for her mixed-heritage son’s safety.⁵⁴⁰ In this light, the interview revealed a visceral, bewildering dissonance between the kindness, solidarity and enrichment shown to Hostettler and her awareness of a virulent racism with roots at the very centre of local culture. Hostettler formulated a number of responses to this over time, leading her to frame and reframe the area’s maritime economy and identity in three different ways. In the early 1990s Hostettler foregrounded residents’ relationship to empire in antiracist education schemes for local history classes. Hostettler’s shift from confrontation here to disavowal later is central to this chapter.

⁵³⁶ Robinson, ‘Inspirations and Obligations’, pp.114-131; Carter, ‘Rethinking Folk Culture’, pp.568-569

⁵³⁷ Hostettler, Interview with the author. Ellipses indicate gaps in speech.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁰ Hostettler, Interview with the author.

Parts two and three of this chapter offer a close analysis of the Trust's publications' narratives, the former focusing on the period before 1945 and the latter after. From the late 1980s Hostettler moved gradually towards securing the future of the collections and writing histories based on them. The Trust's constituency was by then politically defeated, dispersed and ageing, and it was materially separated from any supportive local authority or ongoing activist movement. This lack of *authorisation* shaped the mournful tone which publications took. In part two I show that as in the MID's work, memories of encounters with colonial sailors, the spectacle of the port's vast industrial muscularity and the enrichment of exotic cargo offered a sense of dignity which ameliorated historic experiences of poverty and stigma. This corroborates my findings on similar Docklands communities in Newham.⁵⁴¹

Part three traces the disavowal of these imperial connections in the Trust's later publications, where Hostettler explained post-war racism as deriving from the economic neglect of an area that had become isolated and insular. Drawing on Catherine Hall and Daniel Pick's work, I call this disavowal an act of 'denial'.⁵⁴² I argue that framing racism as aberrant, rather than embedded in local culture, served an important psychological purpose. After the community's political defeat and disintegration, Hostettler's desire to eulogise the Island for posterity required her to resolve the profound discomfort caused by the persistence of a racialised, imperial nationalism in local identities. The search for solace through a celebration of distinctly *localised* histories, which Carter and Robinson present as central to late-century working-class heritage, was here predicated on an obfuscation of the global and imperial dimensions of the area's history. Studying the Trust's history reveals an imperial memory which was fluid, shifting and politically contingent. More, this active choice, so contingent on circumstances, helped to consolidate in academic and popular culture a vision of 'working-class community' as inherently defensive and fiercely insular.

The Trust in the Community, 1980-1997

Hostettler and Canavan's first act after arriving on the Island was to post 2000 leaflets to local houses seeking information relating to their work.⁵⁴³ Their first response was from Ada Price, a lifelong Islander who received the appeal shortly after retiring and becoming widowed. Price's story is emblematic of the Trust's relationship to many locals. She might have initially seen history as a refuge at this disjuncture in life, but it grew from that point to become a vocation. Price volunteered with the Trust for over two decades, serving as chair of its board for much of that period.⁵⁴⁴ Equally telling, however, was that Price

⁵⁴¹ Gleeson, 'Stories from London's Docklands', pp.980-981

⁵⁴² Catherine Hall, Daniel Pick, 'Thinking About Denial', *History Workshop Journal*, 84, (3, 2017), p.1

⁵⁴³ Hostettler, Interview with the author.

⁵⁴⁴ *Island History News* (IHN), Series 2, no.23, January/February 2004, p.2 (TH LCP00186)

was the letter campaign's only respondent. Hostettler and Canavan became aware of residents' wariness of newcomers and resolved to offer services to locals before expecting contributions.⁵⁴⁵

They began researching and preparing a course of adult education classes on the area's nineteenth and twentieth-century history. The syllabus emphasised the area's connection to the world, expanding from 'purely local history ... to include national and international themes'.⁵⁴⁶ The classes were a success, growing from ten students in their first term to thirty in their second.⁵⁴⁷ They became the fulcrum for the Trust's collection work. Hostettler encouraged students to bring and discuss photographs or other possessions, interviewing regular attendees for a growing oral history project. The Trust received a further boost when Raphael Samuel recommended that *Timewatch* producer Peter Maniura, who had asked for advice on a community history segment, contact Samuel's old History Workshop contemporaries at the Trust.⁵⁴⁸ *Timewatch* visited to film a feature, whose broadcast in January 1985 led the Trust's newsletter subscriptions to more than double from around 200 to 482. This growth came overwhelmingly from Island émigrés, dispersed by war and deindustrialisation, who wanted to reconnect with their Cockney past. By 1986 the Trust's collection numbered 2,000 photographs and sixty-four oral histories.⁵⁴⁹ Hostettler and Canavan frequently displayed these with maps and old censuses at open days at the end of each term, offering residents regular opportunities to socialise in a way that was structured around physical interactions with the past. By 1986 the open days were three-day events, attended by between 800 and 1,000 people. The Trust also held exhibitions at their premises, including one on Island women and another on childhood, which both became the bases of later books.⁵⁵⁰

In this way the Trust 'became part of the fabric' of local associational and activist culture.⁵⁵¹ Hostettler remembered hearing that old academic colleagues had criticised her for having 'gone native', only increasing her scepticism of their claims to radicalism. The theoretical, insular nature of academic history 'just didn't gel' with her own practice. Far more useful was learning from the community and 'their attitudes to life'. The Trust assumed responsibility for publishing the community newspaper, *The Islander*, which Hostettler told me specialised in 'articles critical of the LDDC'.⁵⁵² Johns told *The Listener* that far from being middle-class interlopers, Hostettler and Canavan were 'two historians ... who

⁵⁴⁵ Hostettler, Interview with the author.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; Island History Trust, *1986 Annual Report*, p.13 (TH LC6296)

⁵⁴⁷ Hostettler, Interview with the author.

⁵⁴⁸ *IHN, Series 2*, no.16, Jan/Feb 2003, pp.4-5 (TH LCP00186)

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁰ Hostettler, Interview with the author.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*

are actually trying to serve the community'.⁵⁵³ Hostettler, likewise, saw this work as helping 'the campaign to save the community' by 'strengthening people's sense of their place, their belonging, and their ownership of their own history'.⁵⁵⁴

The area's maritime history was central here. Hostettler suggested that residents' proximity to the port gave them 'a particular character ... a particular kind of education', leading them to become 'strong, [and] philosophical'.⁵⁵⁵ In *The Listener* Maniura hinted that this was connected to nationhood: 'Now the past is disappearing: London's decline as a port has finished off what, forty years ago, the Luftwaffe failed to destroy – a sense of community'.⁵⁵⁶ The Trust's 1986 annual report, likewise, celebrated the area's 'rich and fascinating history, firmly entwined with the history of British trade and industry over the past 200 years'. It stated that the 'community ... takes a real pride in that history'.⁵⁵⁷ These latter quotes demonstrate what was implicit in the first. The port forged the community, and its significance to the nation left an indelible mark on many residents' identities. The 1986 Annual Report listed the National Maritime Museum among the Trust's collaborators, while I will later show that the Museum in Docklands, whose industrial and imperial nationalism was shown in Chapter Three, became a crucial partner for the Trust.⁵⁵⁸ Here, established museums and 'grassroots' community heritage projects were not diametrically opposed, but practically co-operative and rhetorically congruent. Hostettler's admiration of residents' enriched and engaged identities chimed with the long-established celebration of autodidacticism within British working-class life, a trope which was powerful because it implied self-determination in the face of state neglect.⁵⁵⁹ But rather than being straightforwardly oppositional, here it also relied on affiliation with the nation's maritime strength.

There was a tension here, which came to a head in the early 1990s. Housing was then scarcer than at any previous point in the Island's recent history. New developments were often prohibitively expensive, while Right to Buy had shrunk the existing council housing stock and disinvestment was leading to the deterioration of what remained. Tower Hamlets forcibly moved Bengali residents into the area's worst housing from nearby Spitalfields with a 'one-offer' policy that carried the implicit threat of homelessness.⁵⁶⁰ Between 1991 and 1995, 589 incidents of racist abuse on the Island were reported to the

⁵⁵³ Peter Maniura, 'The Isle of Dogs History Project', *The Listener*, 113, (Issue 2894), (31st January, 1985), p.10

⁵⁵⁴ Hostettler, Interview with the author.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁶ Maniura, 'Isle of Dogs', p.10

⁵⁵⁷ Island History Trust, *1986 Annual Report*, (TH LC6296)

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁹ See Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, (New Haven, 2001).

⁵⁶⁰ A good summary of these developments in Foster, *Docklands*, pp.249-286

Metropolitan Police. Of these, 179 were actual bodily harm.⁵⁶¹ Derek Beackon of the British National Party (BNP) was elected to Tower Hamlets Council to represent Poplar in 1993, provoking a crisis among community activists and the Labour Party.⁵⁶² Public pressure on the BNP, effective counter demonstrations and intensified local electoral campaigning all forced Beackon to resign his post after only eight months. The Labour candidate was elected in the subsequent by-election.

Sustained education programmes from local churches and schools also brought some improvement in daily life, turning opinion against the most virulent public expressions of racism.⁵⁶³ Hostettler's own contribution to the education campaigns focused on the crisis's longer roots, suggesting the need to go beyond what was publicly acceptable and seek deep cultural change. Hostettler felt that residents 'saw the world through the docks', that their identities were informed by a knowledge that infrastructure such as 'bridges ... were built on the Island and went to India and South America'. She framed Islanders' understanding of their relationship to the world as 'We made things for them and then ... all the riches came in'. Many pictured themselves 'right at the centre of this hub ... of trade and transport and manufacturing' and had a sense of 'Britain [as] dominant ... the best'. The racial hierarchy implicit within this, Hostettler felt, had a profound influence on residents' later encounters with Black and Asian Londoners. These attitudes had become 'so deeply embedded' that any attempts to address them through education would 'take forever'. In an attempt to encourage the deep-seated cultural change she felt was necessary, Hostettler's classes sought to frame this relationship from the opposite perspective. She sought to 'try and persuade people to think about Britain's relationship with the rest of the world and how that affected their perspective on other people'. She encouraged students to ask 'what it was like to be at the receiving end of British imperialism and then come here'.⁵⁶⁴

Hostettler reported that this brought some success. She estimated that the core 'forty to fifty' individuals most active in the Trust's work 'at least came to realise that racist remarks weren't acceptable within the group', while some 'changed their attitudes' more concretely.⁵⁶⁵ This was an anti-racist educational programme that confronted the historically embedded position of a racialised and imperial nationalism within local identities. Differentiating between what residents felt able to say publicly and what they actually believed, Hostettler suggested the need to go further. Yet as public forms of racism receded and funds became scarcer, the Trust discontinued this work over the later 1990s. This episode

⁵⁶¹ Calculation made from statistics in Foster, *Docklands*, p.270

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*

⁵⁶³ Nigel Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism: the British National Party and the Quest for Legitimacy*, (Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2008), pp.56-59,

⁵⁶⁴ All quotes from Hostettler, Interview with the Author

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

suggested some fundamental contradictions in their work. The intense local pride that Hostettler fostered and celebrated was predicated on proximity to imperial trade and, among some, a vernacular belief in racial hierarchy. The Trust criticised this when challenging racism at its most virulent. Yet when the BNP was defeated and racism was less immediately visible, they did not pursue this criticism further.

In large part, this was due to the worsening funding landscape. In the new, financialised Docklands the Trust was living on borrowed time, estranged from the social-democratic funding regime that had helped found it. The Trust's grant ran out in 1985 and was followed by modest, individual grants of £6,000 from Tower Hamlets, £3,000 from the Greater London Council and £11,500 from the LDDC.⁵⁶⁶ The LDDC's new status as the Trust's largest funder was the result of their concerted effort to improve public relations, having appointed a community liaison officer in 1982 and set aside greater funding for local residents since 1985.⁵⁶⁷ Hostettler described their community liaison officer as a 'mediator' tasked with the remit of 'keeping people quiet' and hoping 'they'll go away'. Many companies had a similar approach. Commercial bodies referred privately to investing in local schools and community groups as a form of 'brand awareness'.⁵⁶⁸ By 1998, for instance, the Trust was also receiving substantial sums from Morgan Stanley.⁵⁶⁹ These comparatively minor commitments allowed private capital to soften conflict and appear sympathetic without prioritising the healthcare, housing or skilled employment that residents frequently campaigned for.

Though this new funding regime left the Trust indebted to redevelopers and private businesses, it did not bring security. In 1986 the Trust was a small but professional organisation: Canavan and Hostettler were supported by one part-time fundraiser and one part-time indexing and cataloguing worker. Yet shortly thereafter, Canavan moved to part-time work, before leaving altogether in search of greater security. He was not replaced, and the Trust shed its part-time staff too, their responsibilities assumed by volunteers. Hostettler began lecturing part-time at the Open University to supplement her income, after funding also ran out for her position. She stayed on, but by 1996 the Trust was entirely voluntary and institutionally precarious. The LDDC had by now transformed the area, and the Trust was in no position to help inspire opposition to it. A 1996 newsletter reported the Trust was 'hanging on by the skin of our teeth', and in 1997 it was incapable, for the first time, of publishing a calendar.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁶ *1986 Annual Report*, p.26, (THLC 6296, 036)

⁵⁶⁷ Foster, *Docklands*, p.211

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p.232

⁵⁶⁹ *IHN*, Occasional, no.9, (July 1998), pp.14, (TH LCP00186)

⁵⁷⁰ *IHN*, Occasional Issue No.5, (August 1996), (TH LCP00186); Hostettler, Interview with the author.

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Figure 4.1 ‘Commercial and community interests’⁵⁷¹

This dependence on individual donations strongly influenced the projects that the IHT pursued. The property developer NCC funded the conversion of the Trust’s childhood exhibition into the book *Memories of Childhood on the Isle of Dogs* (1993). Robin Tassell of NCC wrote the book’s foreword, stating his desire to ‘build bridges between commercial and community interests’.⁵⁷² The book projected a harmonious Island in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evoking ‘the distant past ... when the Isle of Dogs was a greenfield site, when the first London Board school was built, when the family who kept The Tooke Arms went shopping by horse-drawn tram and had their groceries delivered to the pub’. Yet the advanced age of participants meant that the book ended in 1970, avoiding discussion of the recent explosion of financialised redevelopment.⁵⁷³ In other words, it promoted nostalgia while bypassing contemporary controversy. The book won the Arts Council’s 1994 Raymond Williams Prize for community publishing. At the ceremony, Hostettler and Price received the award from Michael Foot; afterwards they took a photograph together (**Figure 4.1**), which was widely and celebratorily publicised by the Trust. Funded by a property developer at the height of the Island’s housing crisis, this book encapsulated the contradictory nature of the Trust’s work by the mid-1990s.

Yet more telling were those projects which failed to receive funding. In 1983, the GLC funded the Trust to commission Mike Seaborne, Island History volunteer and MOL curator of photography, to take photographs of the area before it was transformed by redevelopment. By 1986 the collection numbered several hundred photographs, covering local businesses’ closure, redevelopment and ‘community life’ (including carnivals, education, leisure, home life and community action). Seaborne and Hostettler originally envisioned this work as an archival project but by 1986 the Trust reimagined its purpose, actively planning to publish the photographs.⁵⁷⁴ Ultimately, however, the original grant was insufficient and after the GLC’s abolition no alternative sponsors of the project came forwards.⁵⁷⁵ The photographs went publicly unseen for decades, and were not exhibited until 2014, or published in print until 2019.⁵⁷⁶ They were eventually published as *The Isle of Dogs Before the Big Money*, a title which was suggestive of their tone. Ken Worpole’s introduction confirmed this: ‘while change had to come to the

⁵⁷¹ *IHN*, Occasional no. 1, October 1994, (THLC, TH LCP00186.).

⁵⁷² Robin Tassell, ‘Foreword’, in Eve Hostettler, *Memories of Childhood on the Isle of Dogs, 1870-1970*, (London, 1993), np.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid*, p.7

⁵⁷⁴ Seaborne, Interview with the author; *1986 Annual Report*, pp.11-16 (THLC 6296)

⁵⁷⁵ *1986 Annual Report*, pp.11-16 (THLC 6296)

⁵⁷⁶ Mike Seaborne, *The Isle of Dogs Before the Big Money*, (London, 2019)

Isle of Dogs, it came with a ruthlessness and indifference to residents' sense of identity and history that was traumatic'.⁵⁷⁷ Here, we should recall Seaborne's contemporary work with the LDDC, as discussed in the previous chapter. While these photographs remained in storage, Seaborne worked with his primary employers the MOL to produce *London's Found Riverscape*, a photography project marking the transformations the LDDC had overseen. The Corporation, together with the *Evening Standard*, widely distributed these photographs to promote its legacy at the moment of its closure.⁵⁷⁸ While the fate of the photography project which Seaborne and the Trust were collaborating on suggests that heritage projects criticising Docklands' transformation became increasingly financially unfeasible in the 1980s, the LDDC simultaneously funded Seaborne, despite his sympathies with the Trust, to work on a project which they used to promote the area's transformation. The financial power the LDDC and private capital held over the area shaped the work which heritage practitioners could gain funding - or 'authorisation' - for.

By the mid-1990s, the Trust was virtually bankrupt and in possession of collections of thousands of the photographs, interviews, letters and other ephemera of a 'community' which had almost entirely disappeared at the hands of developers. They moved towards trying to protect the collections' long-term security and accessibility. In November 1995, the Trust announced plans to deposit the collection at the archive of the new Museum of London, Docklands (MOLD).⁵⁷⁹ Bob Aspinall, the Docklands Museum librarian discussed in Chapter Three, stated he was 'very keen to continue the open access policy which has been a hallmark of the Trust'.⁵⁸⁰ These plans never came to fruition: the collections were ultimately stored at Tower Hamlets Borough Archive given the Docklands Museum's own insecurity prior to their 2003 opening. Nonetheless this moment reflects the broader collaborations between the Trust and MOL and MOLD curators and suggests the congruence of their historical narratives.

Recounting the Trust's history between 1980 and 1997, I have here shown the need for contingent histories of heritage that understand 'authorisation' as a fluid relationship rather than a static fact. Rather than juxtaposing conservative, elite museums and radical, grassroots community histories, I have shown that Hostettler's work was shaped by a more complex set of historical narratives and political interests. The Trust was in fact reacting to what the community perceived as the twin losses of the late twentieth century: those brought about by Thatcherite redevelopment, and those brought on by the loss of their place servicing the first port of empire. Yet this collection work became increasingly untenable during the 1990s; the Trust's communitarian political project was overwhelmed by economic and urban change, and

⁵⁷⁷ Ken Worpole, 'Introduction' in Seaborne, *Isle of Dogs*, np.

⁵⁷⁸ See Chapter Three of this thesis.

⁵⁷⁹ *IHN*, Occasional Issue No.4, (Nov 1995), p.4 (THLCP00186.).

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

the defeat of radical local authorities severely curtailed which historical narratives could receive funding. The position of weakness arising from these losses was fundamental as Hostettler turned away from collecting to write the Island's history.

Remembering Industrialisation, Childhood and Early Adulthood

As the Trust's political goals became more remote, its therapeutic significance grew. From 1994 the newsletter regularly carried family history sections, relaying the requests of old 'Islanders', now dispersed across Britain and the world, for information about their ancestors. Hostettler advertised the East London Family History Society and published advice pieces for first-time genealogists at the London Metropolitan Archive.⁵⁸¹ In 1993 she helped Brian and Joyce Piggott, amateur enthusiasts who had left the Island as children, to self-publish a local history book.⁵⁸² The newsletter's obituary section grew steadily; by the millennium it often occupied the entire back page of the eight-page publication.⁵⁸³ Efforts to 'save the community' from international finance had failed, and the old Island lived on mostly in the minds of surviving relatives and émigrés. The Trust moved towards helping Islanders and their descendants to mourn following the area's transformation and the community's dispersal.

The most significant feature of this new direction was Hostettler's authorship of six books between 1988 and 2004, including a three-part survey of the area's history and individual books on women, children and the local Anglican Church.⁵⁸⁴ These publications' elegiac tone was captured in the introduction to the second volume of Hostettler's *Brief History*, which promised to 'bring back to life, for those who remember it or have heard it spoken of, something of the "old" Island of industry and the port'.⁵⁸⁵ Hostettler's effort to honour the community was, however, often made uneasy by this relationship to the port; the remainder of this chapter centres on the dissonance within the Trust's treatment of this history. Residents' vernacular narratives of industrial and imperial strength gave their lives a dignity and purpose in the face of historic stigmatisation and contemporary alienation. But these

⁵⁸¹ *IHN*. Occasional Issue no.9, July 1998, p.3. (TH LCP00186)

⁵⁸² Brian Piggott, Joyce Piggott, *Isle of Dogs: Old and New*, (Ilford, 1993), np.

⁵⁸³ *IHN*. Series 2 no.16, (Jan/Feb 2003), p6; Occasional no.4, (Nov 1995), p.4; Occasional no.5, (Aug 1996, p.1, p.8; Occasional Issue no.7, (June 1997), p.3; Occasional issue no.12, (March 1999), p.7; Series 2. No.2, (May/June, 2000), p.8. (TH LCP00186).

⁵⁸⁴ Hostettler, *An Outline History of the Isle of Dogs*, (London, 1988); Hostettler, *The Isle of Dogs, 1066-1918. Vol.1, A Brief History*, (London, 2000); Hostettler, *The Isle of Dogs: The Twentieth Century. Vol.2, A Brief History*, (London, 2002); Hostettler, *Island Women: Photographs of East End Women, 1897-1983*, (London, 1988); Hostettler, *Memories of Childhood on the Isle of Dogs, 1870-1970*, (London, 1993); Hostettler, *The Anglican Church on the Isle of Dogs, 1854-2004*, (London, 2004)

⁵⁸⁵ Hostettler, *Brief History, Vol.2*, p.3

narratives' inseparability from the 'endemic' and deeply rooted racism of the 1990s would threaten to destabilise the sympathetic image of the community altogether.

Hostettler emphasised empire's centrality to the Island's urbanisation. Between 1800 and 1860 the peninsula transformed 'from a marsh to a town', its population growing from 200 to 14,000.⁵⁸⁶ Facilitated by the new docks, growth was founded on 'exploiting natural resources, using existing skills and learning new ones, [and] continuing to engage in wars of conquest and voyages of discovery to secure new markets and new sources of raw material'.⁵⁸⁷ In turn, 'almost every area of everyday life in Britain was affected by the expansion of empire. What we ate, how we dressed and what jobs and careers were opened up, were all linked to Empire'.⁵⁸⁸ This reciprocal relationship was particularly stark on the Isle of Dogs. By 1837, Hostettler noted, the Trade Directory listed twenty-three Millwall companies, with twenty-two connected to shipbuilding and related trades. The chain makers Brown and Lenox, Hostettler noted, possessed 'the longest ever Admiralty contract', from 1811 to 1916.⁵⁸⁹ Later in the nineteenth century, 'railways opened up the interiors of America, Canada, Russia, India, Africa and South Africa ... Steam engines were being applied more and more to industrial production ... Iron bridges built on the Isle of Dogs were being exported around the world'.⁵⁹⁰ Hostettler united the interconnected processes of urbanisation and imperial expansion through a motif of industrial strength.

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Figure 4.2 'The Grand Undertakings of the New Industrial Age'.⁵⁹¹

More, the texts placed industry, and thus empire, at the very core of population growth. New employment opportunities created a cosmopolitan area, attracting Scottish, Welsh, Irish and Italian migrants in the nineteenth century, whose gradual integration created a new community with an enriched, maritime identity.⁵⁹² References to encounters with exotic (and frequently colonial) cargo, such as cocoa beans, grains, wine and rum, nuts, fruit, and timber, ran throughout Hostettler's narration and residents' recollections, offering what Hostettler called 'an education that could never be taught in a classroom'.⁵⁹³ The Trust frequently reproduced images of ships hanging over street scenes, approximating the muscular

⁵⁸⁶ Hostettler, *Brief History*, Vol.1, p.22

⁵⁸⁷ Hostettler, *Brief History*, Vol.1, (2000), p.22. Similar narrative in Hostettler, *Outline History*, pp.2-4

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁹ Hostettler, *Outline History*, p.4

⁵⁹⁰ Hostettler, *Brief History*, Vol.1, p.53

⁵⁹¹ *Island History News*, Series 2, no.32, (Sep/Oct, 2005) (Tower Hamlets LCP00186), p.1

⁵⁹² Hostettler, *Outline History*, p.4

⁵⁹³ Hostettler, *Outline History*, p.3; *Brief History*, Vol.2, p.12

industrial modernity of the former and the intimate sociability of the latter. Hostettler's return to specific images that captured this suggests a pleasure in their reproduction, as was the case with Figure 4.2, which appeared both in her book *Outline History* (1988) and on the front cover of a 2005 newsletter. The striking similarity between this image and those reproduced by the MID in chapter three, particularly **figure 3.6**, demonstrates the marked similarity of the IHT and the MID's heritage narratives in this period. Over two decades this scene retained its attraction to Hostettler: mothers sat outside their houses watching children play cricket on a terraced street, both overlooked by a hulking ship coming to dock.⁵⁹⁴ Hostettler summarised these scenes' appeal in one caption, noting residents 'found themselves ... participating in grand undertakings at the forefront of the new industrial age'.⁵⁹⁵

The texts strengthened this further through extensive reproduction of residents' memories of childhood. Bonny Hornsby reflected that living locally,

you got so educated – all the boys that were sitting there, they could tell you every ship from the mouth to the bend of the river. Where it was going ... whether it was a navigation ship, Cunard or Furness ship – they knew, as soon as it came round.⁵⁹⁶

Ship watching, then, was a popular pastime among boys, who competed to be the most informed. The language of 'education' spoke to the enrichment of self-identities through residents' encounters with ships and goods, and suggested a popular interest in trade from across the British world. Colin Hall went further, reflecting on the 'magic' of one local vantage point:

You could be transported to any place in the world, by just looking at the different ships and cargoes that passed you by ... pulling barges containing all different types of things; exotic spices from the East, timber from Scandinavia and coal for the power stations. In those days the river was alive, the hustle and bustle had a purpose: to supply the capital's needs.⁵⁹⁷

This elucidates the earlier discussion of 'education'. It speaks to the pride residents gleaned from encounters with individuals and goods from across the globe, and the purpose they found in servicing the interface between Britain's capital and the wider world. When residents spoke of the informal 'education' the river gave them, they were referring to these feelings of pride, enrichment and dignity.

⁵⁹⁴ Reproduced in *IHN*, Series 2, no.32, (Sep/Oct, 2005) (TH LCP00186), p.1; *Outline History*, p.3

⁵⁹⁵ Hostettler, *Brief History, Vol.1*, (2000), p.39

⁵⁹⁶ Hostettler, *Memories of Childhood*, p.11

⁵⁹⁷ Quotes respectively from *IHN*, Series 2, no.2, (May/June, 2000), p.2 (TH LCP00186); Hostettler, *Memories of Childhood*, p.31

Visiting sailors were also pivotal to residents' imagination of their place in this world. Two interviewees recalled American soldiers based at Greenwich during the Second World War spending time in the area and beginning relationships with local women. They were accepted, receiving invitations to Christmas and 'Old Years' Night' celebrations. The racial composition of these American squadrons was unspecified. But contrary to the moral panic Sonya Rose identified in the press around wartime 'good time girls', this suggested a community who were personally welcoming of their allies.⁵⁹⁸ More, a short autobiographical piece submitted to the Trust by Betty Cocks remembered sailors of an unspecified nationality arriving in Millwall Dock before residents arranged friendly football matches between them and local teams.⁵⁹⁹

Residents occasionally made racial difference more explicit. William Chapman spoke of the impression left on him by Lascars, who 'all wore traditional long white robes' and seemed to him like 'Supermen'. Though they were 'small framed, skin and bone to look at', Chapman remarked on 'the fantastic weights they used to carry! Forty-gallon drums full of clinker and ashes, slung on a pole!'⁶⁰⁰ Seemingly undernourished and almost effeminate in their orientalist garb, these Indian sailors were actually mysteriously – almost cunningly – strong. Peggy Gleeson, on the other hand, was less awestruck than alarmed by visitors. She remembered seeing Black sailors approaching her in the street as a child and running away terrified, hiding with a shopkeeper until they passed.⁶⁰¹ These sailors' specific origins were not known, nor was their behaviour deemed relevant. Their very physical presence, though, was intimidating – almost menacing. Some of these quotes suggest that encounters with colonial sailors created convivial relations on the Island; all show the sense of novelty they brought to local life. Residents rarely remembered Black and Asian sailors in explicitly hostile terms, but their perceptions of them were conditioned by assumptions of racial difference with clear roots in these groups' representation in wider metropolitan culture.⁶⁰² Visitors were largely fondly remembered. They were embodiments of residents' global significance, physical reminders of their position at the nexus of world trade. Through these encounters, residents imagined themselves within a larger maritime industrial modernity, closely tied to Britain's imperial status.

⁵⁹⁸ Mrs Anderson and Dorothy, Interviewed on 6th March, 1980, TH TR/006. Also Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945*, (Oxford, 2004)

⁵⁹⁹ Betty Cocks, Autobiography submitted to the Trust, TH Autob/042, IHT

⁶⁰⁰ Hostettler, *Brief History*, Vol.2, p.14

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰² Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour*, p.8 ; p.49; McClintock, *Imperial Leather*; Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain*, (New Haven, 1994).

The publication of *Memories of Childhood* in 1993 provoked a strong nostalgic reaction among readers. Mr. Williams wrote to tell the Trust of the book's remarkable effect on him, provoking memories of his own childhood obsession with the ocean:

It started when I was five or six years old. I was walking along Preston Road with my Mum when I saw the bowsprit of a sailing ship sticking over the wall and halfway across the road. From that moment I was transported into a world from which I shall never fully return. To me there is nothing more beautiful ... than a fully rigged ship heeling with the wind – sadly a sight seen no more.

Williams tried and failed to run away to sea as a teenager, before succeeding in joining the Royal Navy in 1939 and serving until 1951, long after the end of war.⁶⁰³ In resolving this narrative of his childhood obsession in this way, Williams connected his experience of the sea, mediated at a formative age through the docks, and a later identification with ideals of the nation.

Two letters from the Conn family corroborate this connection. Frank Conn's 1999 letter to *Island History News* included the following section on his grandfather, born in the mid-nineteenth century:

Grandad Conn was a tough man and worked as a dock foreman, a big man, who liked his beer, and very patriotic. When visiting them on Sunday my two brothers and I had to stand to attention before departing and sing: 'God Save the King', for which he rewarded us with a penny each ... We were surrounded by ships, from sailing vessels to cruise liners. They lay outside the house like cars in a car park. Day and night, the bustle never seemed to stop ... The size of them seemed to swamp our houses and we could stand in the bedroom window and look into the cabins on the top deck. We all got to know the crews well. It was an exciting life for a boy, and we all wanted to go to sea when we grew up, as quite a few of us did.⁶⁰⁴

In another letter Conn's brother stated that their father, born in 1898,

may have assumed that life would continue like this for ever. The Empire was secure and the map, displayed on the cream classroom wall for all to see, was largely red. His father [the Grandad Conn mentioned by Frank] was proudly working class and certainly fiercely royalist. Thus, the fabric of society was stretched safely, almost unquestionably, between two distant poles ... and but for a few murmurs of disquiet all seemed well and destined to remain that way.⁶⁰⁵

One final quote is worth inclusion here, not from the Conn family but from Catherine Lerpiniere, a local woman, recalling a scene from her childhood around the turn of the twentieth century:

⁶⁰³ *IHN*, Occasional no.11, Nov 1998, pp.3-4, (TH LCP00186).

⁶⁰⁴ *IHN*, Occasional no.13, Jul 1999, pp.4-5, (TH LCP00186).

⁶⁰⁵ *IHN*, Nov/Dec 04, Series 2, no.27 (December 2004), (TH LCP00186)

The men on the boats were singing ‘Hearts of Oak’ and ‘Rule Britannia’. I think it must have been the Relief of Mafeking. The news had come through that our soldiers had got through to save them. I know all the Island went mad. I was very small, but it sticks in my mind so much because my father came in and picked me up and put me on his shoulders so that I had a good view [of the ships]. I thought it was all lovely.⁶⁰⁶

If empire was latent in childhood discussions of ‘enrichment’ and ‘education’, here the sentiment was fully formed. Encounters with visiting sailors, colonial cargo and the vast spectacle of ships – all tropes of childhood memories – were in adulthood central to a vernacular discourse of imperial nationalism. By the later 1990s the weight of economic change necessitated a more mournful form of heritage production. Hostettler sought to preserve for posterity the lives of her friends and comrades in the disappearing community. Residents imagined themselves as actors at the centre of the British world, deriving a purpose and dignity from the docks that helped negate material deprivation in the past and marginalisation in the present. Hostettler’s global framing of industrialisation, her discussion of residents’ informal ‘education’ and personal enrichment, and her decision to publish the Conn and Lerpiniere letters suggest a quite different conception of empire to the critical eye she cast in her anti-racist education work. Rather than presenting this imperial nationalism as a malign influence on residents’ identities, she reframed it as providing purpose and dignity.

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Figure 4.3: VE Day, Fiftieth Anniversary Newsletter.⁶⁰⁷

The Second World War was the apogee of this narrative. The conflict catalysed the destruction and redevelopment of the area’s built environment, and I will later show, initiated the slow disintegration of the ‘community’. More immediately though it cemented in local identities the importance of affinity with and ‘sacrifice’ to the nation. The Blitz in particular was a frequent presence in the Trust’s newsletter throughout the 1990s.⁶⁰⁸ The pure scale of loss was emphasised throughout, and was often presented in sacrificial terms. Catherine Taylor remembered the conflict as ‘a period of great change, a sad time, nearly every family had lost someone... and everyone was striving to make a home’.⁶⁰⁹ Here was a community expressing resilience by rebuilding from the rubble, brought closer by shared experience. A

⁶⁰⁶ Hostettler, *Memories of Childhood*, pp.59-60

⁶⁰⁷ *IHN Occasional No.2*, (May 1995), p.1 (TH LCP00186)

⁶⁰⁸ Including but not limited to *IHN occasional no.2*, (May, 1995), p.1; *Occasional no.4*, (Nov, 1995), p.2; *Occasional No.5*, (Aug 1996), p.6; *Occasional No.6* (Jan 1997), pp.3-4; *Occasional No.13* (July, 1999), pp.2-3

⁶⁰⁹ Hostettler, *Brief History, Vol.2*, p.77

local man asserted ‘I have never known one bloke who was a conscientious objector. No, no way. You had a job to do and that was the end of it.’⁶¹⁰

The docks closely connected residents to the war’s most pervasive myths. One local spoke of a flotilla of small citizen ships leaving from nearby to participate in the Dunkirk evacuation (1940) and returning afterwards for repairs. Many dockers were also held back from conscription, and travelled nationwide to staff ports such as Cardiff which were more remote and thus less accessible to the Luftwaffe.⁶¹¹ The Blitz demonstrated at its starkest the orientation of local culture and identity around sacrifice and responsibility. The port provided residents with the dignity and purpose of national service, while the material threat and precarity inherent within that service seemed only to strengthen locals’ feeling. On the front cover of the May 1995 Newsletter, **Figure 4.3** showed women and children at an outdoor table, between terraced houses and under Union flag bunting. On the Fiftieth Anniversary of Victory in Europe Day, the nation was positioned at the very heart of the local ‘close-knit’ community.

Hostettler’s account of work mirrored the MID’s in defaulting into wonder at local industrial strength. The Trust’s narrative differed primarily in that it foregrounded residents as facilitators of this. **Figure 4.4** mirrored Ellmers and Werner in showing the vast, looming spectacle of the Great Eastern as it was first launched. Yet the text accompanying the image emphasised that the ship was constructed locally, bringing Scottish engineers to the area to construct it. Afterwards, Hostettler noted, they built a Presbyterian chapel on West Ferry Road and settled in the area permanently.⁶¹² Again, like the MID, Hostettler drew heavily on statistics to emphasise the scale and size of local industry. By 1837, she wrote, two million passengers used local roads and railways annually, while the same year 160,000 tonnes moved along the river from the docks on the Island to City warehouses.⁶¹³ Later, Hostettler simply listed at considerable length the ‘famous names’ associated with the Island’s industry, including Brown Lenox, Joseph Westwood, Matthew T Shaw, and Thomas Tierney.⁶¹⁴ Residents were actively involved in creating this industrial modernity, but their stature was also seemingly enhanced through association with these eminent industrialists.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.65

⁶¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.65-67

⁶¹² *Ibid*.

⁶¹³ Hostettler, *Brief History, Vol.1*, pp.32-35

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.55



Figure 4.4. The Great Eastern, 1858.⁶¹⁵

Indeed, Hostettler was more critical of many other tropes of the ‘traditional working-class community’. In place of straightforward nostalgia for the past, she sought to emphasise the privations and hardships which Island life often entailed. Bearing the hallmarks of her academic training, the texts were especially sensitive to the particularities of women’s experiences, at home and at work. Hostettler repeatedly articulated both the significance of this - including, notably, to colleagues at a 1993 Museum of London symposium - and the difficulty posed by many women’s tendency to downplay their own work’s significance.⁶¹⁶ The texts captured the frequency and variety of women’s work in factories; processing and packing food produce; making sacks, boxes and packing cases; testing cables and working with chemicals; serving in bars, canteens and coffee shops, and in offices.⁶¹⁷ But this was not a triumphant story. Factory work, for instance, brought ‘long hours in unpleasant and sometimes dangerous conditions... working with hot, stinking glue’, ‘opening barrels of pickling cauliflowers alive with caterpillars’ or ‘handling pigs’ bladders soaked in freezing brine’. When Gladys Humphreys’ mother lost her footing on the sticky floors at JR Morton’s jam factory her arm landed in a basin of boiling syrup, leaving her permanently scarred.⁶¹⁸ Though the Second World War was a moment of ‘pride... in the

⁶¹⁵ Hostettler, *Outline History*, p.7

⁶¹⁶ Hostettler, ‘Discovering Women’s History on the Isle of Dogs’, in Amanda Devonshire, Barbara Wood, (eds.), *Women in Industry and Technology from Prehistory to the Present Day: Current Research and the Museum Experience*, (London, 1994), p.296; Hostettler, *Interview with the Author*.

⁶¹⁷ Hostettler, *Island Women*, p.2

⁶¹⁸ Hostettler, *Brief History, Vol.2*, p.18

skilled work and responsibilities which women undertook’, this was always ‘tinged with regret’ given the subsequent backlash of the late 1940s and 1950s.⁶¹⁹ Hostettler’s account of women’s work did not centre on ‘agency’ or empowerment; rather, the widespread characterisation of women as primarily wives and mothers distracted from their particularly dangerous and unsanitary conditions.

Deference was a more common response to these conditions than militancy. Though strikes were remembered against his factory’s poor conditions, JR Morton was remembered fondly as a figure who ‘employed hundreds of local men and women throughout the year’.⁶²⁰ Similarly, in January 1997 Hostettler wrote the obituary of Jessie Gofton, a ‘skilled dressmaker’ who ‘often delivered her work herself to various VIPs in central London’, relishing ‘the chance to watch a Society wedding’. Gofton ‘had the ability to reproduce the style [of dresses] from memory’ and was thus ‘an asset to her employers!’.⁶²¹ Gofton admired the fashion of elite society events, relishing her proximity to and facilitation of them, in terms strikingly similar to the working-class women discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. The texts, then, emphasised the particularly exploited and unrecognised nature of women’s work, and the dearth of a unified response based in class politics.

Hostettler showed a similar attentiveness to women’s home lives, offering the rich and varied account of this often missing from community history and the broader cultural left.⁶²² Hostettler’s *Island Women* were not simply domestic matriarchs, mute victims or hidden rebels. Their struggles for basic dignity and comfort – often mundane, often unsuccessful, often against their husbands - were unearthed from a sourcebase and local culture which sought to obscure them. Hostettler wrote the lives of women who worked and (more rarely) who did not, women who were comfortable and precarious, chronically ill and healthy. Figures 4.5 and 4.6 are two photographs placed next to one another in *Island Women*. The former is of Annie Ethel French and her family, taken in 1923. The Frenches were smartly dressed and closely groomed for what was clearly a trip to a professional photography studio. The image suggests that they possessed that elusive, desired local trait: respectability. Yet the caption quoted Annie’s son Alfred to note that, in addition to raising these six children Annie worked ‘morning til night’ in pursuit of this lifestyle. By Annie’s early fifties her body was exhausted, by fifty-five she was dead.⁶²³ Hostettler here

⁶¹⁹ Hostettler, *Island Women*, 1988, p.4;

⁶²⁰ *Ibid*, pp.62-63

⁶²¹ *IHN* Occasional issue no.6, (Jan 97), p.2 (TH LCP00186)

⁶²² On community publishing, see Waters, ‘Autobiography, Nostalgia’, On popular culture more broadly: Joanna Bourke’s *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960*, (Abingdon, 1994); Jon Lawrence, ‘Inventing the Traditional Working-Class: A Re-analysis of Interview Notes from Young and Wilmott’s ‘Family and Kinship in East London’’, *The Historical Journal*, 59, (2, 2016), p.570.

⁶²³ Hostettler, *Island Women*, p.14

read her sources critically to reveal the strategies women adopted to hide poverty.

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Figure 4.5: Annie Ethel French (1890-1945) and Family, 1923.⁶²⁴

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Figure 4.6 Nora Dutfield and family, 1927.⁶²⁵

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Figure 4.7: Louise Stanley, 1902.⁶²⁶

On the next page, **Figure Five** showed Nora Dutfield and her family, four years later. The Dutfields were photographed not in a studio but outdoors. They were plainly dressed and less thoroughly groomed. Their children in particular did less to pose, and two even appear as though they may have been crying. Not for Hostettler, then, was the trope that ‘we were all the same’; for the Dutfields even the illusion of gentility was beyond reach. Yet poverty, and attempts to hide it, recurred throughout the text. Hostettler read her sources critically again when noting in a local school photographs’ caption that children without school shoes were placed at the back of pictures to hide their bare feet from the camera.⁶²⁷ Hostettler was compelled to return twice to an image of Louise Stanley (b.1887, **Figure Six**). The photograph showed Louise, the eldest of thirteen children, in Mile End Hospital two weeks before her death from ‘a combination of diseases including tuberculosis’. Her gaunt face and resigned expression suggest suffering, fatigue and fear; the children in a row of beds behind her suggest the regularity of such stories.

The texts’ accounts of work and community life suggest the legacies of Hostettler’s radical academic training. She created a more nuanced, compelling account of working-class life than that which often predominated in community publishing and on the larger cultural left. Hostettler presented the divisions, deference, poverty and restrictions which characterised work and home life, and were particularly acute among women. She sought to find dignity and meaning in the lives of her ageing contemporaries, and in doing so refused to elide difference. While Hostettler demonstrated the more

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.15

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.12

⁶²⁷ Hostettler, *Outline History*, p.12

complex relationships that many residents - especially women – had with the poverty of their earlier lives, the testimonies of Catherine Lerpiniere and Peggy Gleeson demonstrate that women were also enthusiastic participants in the narrative of industrial might and imperial strength. Indeed, residents’ facilitation of and proximity to the port served as a vital discursive counterpoint, offering dignity and pride despite the privations and stigma of the past. Yet this sat uneasily with Hostettler’s broadly contemporary attempt to foreground critical accounts of the imperial past in her anti-racist educational schema. I will now show that when Hostettler turned in the 2000s to write the history of the 1990s, she obscured these narratives’ connection to local racism altogether.

Remembering the Post-war Island

The Second World War catalysed redevelopment locally. Destroying 1,000 homes on the Island and damaging many more, the conflict exacerbated the long, largely unchecked deterioration of the area’s housing stock that had been taking place since the early nineteenth century.⁶²⁸ Hostettler noted that reconstruction was from the outset synonymous with urban dispersal: though many wanted conventional homes with gardens, there was ‘simply not enough space’.⁶²⁹ Council house sales crept up from the early 1960s as part of a gradual disinvestment in the overall stock. This brought steady, sustained departures to peripheral estates like Becontree and Harold Hill, and New Towns Basildon and Harlow.⁶³⁰ Hostettler included residents’ laments of housing policy, including one resident’s assertion that ‘the layout of streets in the style of the old Millwall was how communities should be housed. How they got away with what replaced it I don’t know’.⁶³¹ Here, the Trust conveyed an image of disempowered local residents abandoned by impersonal, bureaucratic planners.

This marked the beginning of a shift in Hostettler’s account. Residents no longer appeared strengthened by their proximity to the port, but increasingly powerless as they were marginalised by large, impersonal processes. Statist post-war redevelopment was exacerbated economically by ‘the effects of competition from abroad, with more efficient producers at home with access to faster transport, and from new docks with up-to-date cargo-handling methods’.⁶³² The very centres of local industry and culture were lost as the East India Docks closed in 1967 and the West India Docks in 1980. More, residents’ relationship with their employers was eroded as the ‘famous names’ of local industry were bought out by large multinational corporations. George Clark’s Millwall Sugars and the large local paint

⁶²⁸ Hostettler, *Brief History*, Vol.2, p.97

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶³¹ *IHN*, Occasional No.5, (Aug ’97), p.2, (TH LCP00186)

⁶³² Hostettler, *Brief History*, Vol.2, p.83

manufacturer Burrells were prominent casualties here, while other firms simply moved away.⁶³³ This broke local families' generations-long relationship with local firms and, through them, global commerce. Those who were spared redundancy had to adjust to more impersonal workplaces with harsher management styles.⁶³⁴

Hostettler now saw as provincial and powerless residents who had decades previously appeared worldly and enriched. The LDDC's arrival in 1980 cemented this: 'the Island became an uneasy mixture of two worlds – the old streets ... appeared alongside the glittering structure of print works, telecommunications satellites and a business efficiency centre; the new housing contrasted sharply with the council flats and maisonettes, many of which were in a neglected state of repair'.⁶³⁵ Hostettler continued:

The redevelopment promised to bring thousands of new jobs – and it did. The majority required skills which redundant Islanders did not possess; or the jobs were filled by companies bringing their own workforce with them.⁶³⁶

The text then reproduced a complaint by Mrs. Warwick:

Who wants these big monstrosities the Americans are going to put up ... None of us want that. It's going to be an eye-sore but they're still going on with it. No, I'm not agreeable with all this. And they're building houses, not for the working-class. The price they're charging, ninety-six thousand. Build houses for the local people!⁶³⁷

Here, 'working-class' residents were fundamentally disempowered, their horizons resolutely local and diametrically opposed to the intrusive, international 'Americans' and 'redevelopers'. Deindustrialisation and successive waves of financialised redevelopment led Hostettler to increasingly frame the area as insular and parochial *per se*. In *Outline History* Hostettler insisted that despite the Island's 'international industrial and trading connections', it was 'an isolated community'.⁶³⁸ In the second volume of *Brief History* Hostettler referred to the 'clannishness' that resulted from this. *Memories of Childhood*, meanwhile, framed the area as a haven from the complex outside world: 'The Island children who appear in this book lived in a small world which, for all its poverty, was organised in a way they could

⁶³³ *Ibid*, p.93.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid*.

⁶³⁵ Hostettler, *Outline History*, p.20

⁶³⁶ Hostettler, *Brief History, Vol.2*, p.122

⁶³⁷ *Ibid*. p.119

⁶³⁸ *Ibid*, p.6

understand. They knew their neighbours, they played safely in the streets'.⁶³⁹ While in the earlier sections of this and other books Hostettler had argued that empire was formative to residents' identities, and in education classes she argued it was still present, here she framed residents' identities as fundamentally parochial.

The Island was around this time frequented by social scientists interested in the effects of recent economic change on urban communities, and on those communities' political responses. Janet Foster's study *Docklands* (1998) drew heavily on ethnographies of local residents and activists, including work with the Trust itself.⁶⁴⁰ The political geographer Steve Pile spent an extensive period during the 1990s in the field with activists in Poplar, on the northern tip of the Island, before going on to write a journal article and edit a collection of essays on related themes.⁶⁴¹ As seen earlier, the photographer and MOL curator Mike Seaborne volunteered on the Island for the Trust throughout the 1980s, working on a photography collection that would eventually be published in 2019.⁶⁴² We might add to this list Peter Maniura, the *Timewatch* producer who also wrote about the Trust in *The Listener*.

These commentators' published work offered a remarkably familiar account of the area. In the journal *Political Geography* Pile spoke of local activists' mobilisation of 'a sense of community' based on 'a territorialised sense of neighbourhood' and, importantly, 'the boundaries between inside and outside'.⁶⁴³ In the 1993 volume *Place and the Politics of Identity* he wrote of the political uses of activists' discursive construction of a strong sense of territorial ownership.⁶⁴⁴ Seaborne's photograph collection of the Island was published as *The Isle of Dogs: Before the Big Money*. In four words this title obscured the area's centuries-long centrality to the shipping routes of the world's largest empire. In the book's introduction Ken Worpole told of the area's 'intensely local sense of identity, and even insularity'.⁶⁴⁵ For *The Listener* Maniura framed locals as enigmatic, almost unknowable: 'They call it "The Island", themselves "Islanders" and outsiders are known as "foreigners"'.⁶⁴⁶ This narrative – of an isolated, insular community excluded by prevailing economic change – came after these commentators had worked intimately with community activists, including the Trust, using methodologies that consciously privileged their perspectives. Through extensive co-operation with these visitors, the Trust

⁶³⁹ Hostettler, *Brief History, Vol.2*, p.6; Hostettler, *Memories of Childhood*, p.9

⁶⁴⁰ Foster, *Docklands*.

⁶⁴¹ Michael Keith, Steve Pile, 'Introduction', in Keith, Pile, (eds.), *Place and the Politics of Identity*, (London, 1993), pp. 1–40; Steve Pile, "'What We are Asking For is Decent Human Life": SPLASH, Neighbourhood Demands and Citizenship in Docklands', *Political Geography*, 14 (2, 1995), 199–208.

⁶⁴² Island History Trust, 1986 Annual Report, pp. 11–16; Seaborne, *The Isle of Dogs*.

⁶⁴³ Pile, 'Decent Human Life', p.199.

⁶⁴⁴ Keith and Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity*

⁶⁴⁵ Ken Worpole, 'Introduction', in Seaborne, *Isle of Dogs*, n.p.

⁶⁴⁶ Maniura, 'Isle of Dogs History Project', p. 10.

and their contemporaries were helping to spread this narrative through wider scholarly and popular culture.

Hostettler did not directly address the racism of the early 1990s until two books written in the early 2000s, *The Anglican Church* and the second volume of *Brief History*. A decade after Beackon's election had brought Hostettler to interrogate Islanders' relationship to Britain's 'first port', these texts reverted to a narrower view of local racism as an aberration deriving from the 'clannishness' of the economically neglected. The texts foregrounded the context of housing shortages at the expense of a sustained engagement with residents' longer relationship to empire. Bengali families were 'decanted onto the Island from a nearby estate which was being demolished', and 'Islanders experienced increased racism and confrontation'.⁶⁴⁷ The use of 'experienced' here absolved the majority of residents of any responsibility, suggesting that an aberrant minority – disaffected by the specific economic conditions of the moment – were responsible. Hostettler continued that Islanders 'had been isolated and had nourished a traditional anxiety about strangers'. Racism had the same origins as hostility to 'yuppies', but 'Bengali families ... were vulnerable in a way which the rich professional home buyers were not'.⁶⁴⁸

Again, social scientists working locally through ethnography echoed much of this sentiment. Foster's monograph attributed racism almost entirely to housing shortages exacerbated by the LDDC's shortcomings.⁶⁴⁹ George Morgan argued, similarly, that the erosion of the 'economic base ... the social structure and [the] ecology of traditional neighbourhoods' had frustrated residents' desires for 'respectability'. For Morgan, this led to a reformulation of local identities that actively excluded 'rough' residents and ethnic minorities.⁶⁵⁰ As they consolidated this new view of the 'left behind' community reacting against the economic neglect of larger, impersonal forces, Maniura, Pile, Worpole and Seaborne, Foster and Morgan, all drew on co-operation with or at least observation of local activist groups. But though this narrative appeared as fact, its emergence was contingent on changes in local conditions. As the political threat which the BNP posed receded in the later 1990s and the dispersal and death of members of the 'community' accelerated, Hostettler no longer felt compelled to interrogate the maritime influences on local identity. Thus, the view of the 'community' as fundamentally benevolent yet isolated and powerless was consolidated, and racism was reframed as an aberration deriving from neglect.

⁶⁴⁷ Hostettler, *Anglican Church*, pp. 44–5.

⁶⁴⁸ Hostettler, *Brief History, Vol.2*, p. 126.

⁶⁴⁹ Foster, *Docklands*, pp. 249–86.

⁶⁵⁰ George Morgan, 'Frustrated Respectability: Local Culture and Politics in London's Docklands', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 11, (5, 1993), p.527

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Figure 4.4: One World Day.⁶⁵¹

This was reflected in the anti-racist activism Hostettler championed in *The Anglican Church and Brief History, Volume Two*. In the former, clergymen were presented as instrumental: Reverend Nick Holtam of Christ Church ‘roundly condemned the racism from his pulpit. He was at the forefront of the movement which saw the BNP councillor ousted’.⁶⁵² Many of this activism’s initiatives were premised on the belief that Islanders’ racism derived from ignorance. Residents opened a ‘multicultural education’ centre locally. An annual event, ‘One World Week’ was central to this campaign. It brought the 270 residents who ‘represented’ 41 ‘nations’ together, to discuss each other’s ‘cultures’. **Figure 4.8** shows attendees ‘sampling the food of different cultures’ at the 2001 event.⁶⁵³ This image is strikingly reminiscent of what critics have termed the ‘Saris, samosas and steel bands’ approach to multiculturalism.⁶⁵⁴ As Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo note, this approach both essentialised Caribbean and Asian cultures, and ‘reinforced’ an idea of them as ‘foreign’, or exotic.⁶⁵⁵

Yet the texts carried glimpses of the limitations of this approach. Turning to the period following the BNP’s defeat, Hostettler included the following testimony from Nazir:

My grandfather came here to work on the naval ships and fought in the war. My father came here as a semi-skilled labourer and earned money. And then we came here as a settled family and I became a barrister. How nice the changing steps of our history are!

Published in the early 2000s, Hostettler framed this quote as a success story of liberal multiculturalism, as successive generations of the family made what she called ‘a contribution’ to the area.⁶⁵⁶ More, Nazir was through his own merit upwardly mobile; his ascent undermined racist stereotypes. Yet another reading was possible: Nazir’s family had an enduring connection to the metropole throughout the late and post-imperial periods, theirs was a close and historically rooted relationship with the area. Inadvertently, this quote destabilised Hostettler’s framing of the area as isolated and insular, creating a linear thread between the maritime imperial past and the racist present which was elsewhere being obscured. In his introduction to *Before the Big Money*, Worpole took more direct issue with the uncomplicated romanticisation of the area’s community and specifically its relationship with the port. He warned readers against perceiving ‘a heroic working-class culture, whose

⁶⁵¹ Hostettler, *Brief History*, p.126

⁶⁵² Hostettler, *Anglican Church*, p.45

⁶⁵³ Hostettler, *Brief History*, p.126

⁶⁵⁴ Littler; Naidoo, ‘White Past, Multicultural Present’, pp.333-334

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁶ Hostettler, *Brief History, Volume Two*, p.125

members were avatars and keepers of the utopian promise of the industrial revolution and the rewards of global trade'. Seemingly alluding to his own experience at Centerprise, he noted 'as elsewhere in east London, relationships with newly arrived Bengali immigrants were also at times strained'.⁶⁵⁷ As Chapter Two showed, the National Front's appropriation of the (white) working-class in Hackney in the late 1970s caused great turmoil for Worpole and his Centerprise colleagues who feared the unintended interpretations of their work. This ultimately contributed to Worpole's decision to leave the organisation. This quote suggests Worpole's desire to learn from this, and think more critically about class identity.

As we saw earlier, Hostettler was also aware of the danger of romanticising the community's relationship with the port. Yet her reframing here of the Island's history and reinterpretation of local racism actively contradicted the Trust's earlier positioning of the port at the very centre of local culture. As the decade progressed and the visible threat of racism receded, the need to think critically about residents' relationship to empire diminished. As members of the community aged, moved away or died, the Trust's therapeutic attempts to imbue residents' lives with meaning and dignity became dominant. If the BNP's defeat made the framing of racism as an aberration possible, the need to memorialise the disintegrating community for posterity made it seem necessary. In changing her narrative so markedly, Hostettler embarked on what Hall and Pick call an act of 'denial'.⁶⁵⁸ Hostettler expressed regret that she had never discussed the relationship between local identities and a conservative, racialised nationalism in books. She stated that this was because her histories were 'factual' rather than 'interpretive'.⁶⁵⁹ But in light of their many political interventions, most notably on the LDDC, this claim seems untenable. Hall and Pick suggest that such logical discrepancies can draw attention to authors' efforts to 'quell' their own psychic distress regarding the violence and suffering caused by their political positions.⁶⁶⁰ Beyond this odd claim to disinterested neutrality, we might note the more fundamental discrepancies in the Trust's framing of residents' attachment to empire over time. Hostettler celebrated the empire when it signified residents' enrichment, criticised it when addressing the BNP's popularity, and obscured its connection to racism when mourning the disappearing community for posterity. In seeking to preserve this lasting impression of the community that she was so invested in after its disintegration, she erased its deep entwinement with British imperialism.

Conclusion

⁶⁵⁷ Worpole in Seaborne, *Before the Big Money*, np.

⁶⁵⁸ Hall, Pick, 'Thinking about Denial', pp.1-23

⁶⁵⁹ Hostettler, Interview with the Author.

⁶⁶⁰ Hall, Pick, 'Thinking About Denial', p.5

As I have shown throughout this thesis, this kind of approach to heritage shows that imperial memory cannot be defined in binary terms like amnesia or nostalgia, but that it was fluid, contradictory and historically contingent. It emerged from heritage practitioners' personal and economic relationships to changing political climates. Its contours were shaped by dissonance and inconsistency within the left and right's imagination of their constituencies, and their traditions' histories.

Carter and Robinson attribute the emergence of a new, therapeutic form of working-class heritage in the late twentieth century to individuals' desire to reassert personal and localised pride in response to alienating national trends.⁶⁶¹ But a close account of the Trust's history and its participants' life narratives suggests that these local class identities were in fact inseparable from a racialised, imperial nationalism. Encountering this, the Trust's left-wing staff experienced profound emotional and cognitive dissonance. The Trust formulated three responses to this. They first encouraged residents to rethink their attachment to empire through an anti-racist history education initiative. With little financial support in the transformed Docklands, however, the Trust lost the *authorisation* which came from its connection to an active political movement with access to state funds. Its work became increasingly therapeutic and mournful, seeking to honour the community for posterity in print. As a result, the Trust came to celebrate many of the motifs of this same nationalism. Memories of 'exotic' cargo, encounters with colonial sailors and the spectacle of industrial strength all became counterweights for the stigma and poverty which many residents felt, and which women – Hostettler noted – were particularly harshly exposed to. If Chapters one and three showed that the Museum of London's sources consistently led it to emphasise white working-class Londoners' connection to the industrial might of the Empire's first port, here this connection was also central to popular identities. This is corroborated by research I have conducted elsewhere.⁶⁶²

In its final publications, the Trust addressed the local racism of the 1990s. The BNP was defeated, and the old community disappearing. Hostettler discarded her earlier belief that the 'endemic' nature of local racism required confrontation. The Trust reimagined the Thames and the docks, not as connecting residents to Britain's empire, but as isolating them from the rest of London. Far from imperial citizens, residents became parochial islanders. Racism was reframed as an aberrant result of residents' insularity and their economic neglect. Through collaboration with academics, broadcasters and authors, the Trust also played a modest role in the formation of a new discourse of isolated communities, *left*

⁶⁶¹ Robinson, 'Inspirations and Obligations'; Carter, 'Rethinking Folk Culture'

⁶⁶² Gleeson, 'Stories From London's Docklands'.

behind by economic change. But this narrative was not inevitable; nor for large parts of the Trust's history did it even seem logical. It was the result of an act of denial.

Chapter Five: *The Peopling of London* and the Museum of London, 1986-2007

The Peopling of London: Fifteen Thousand Years of Migration from Overseas opened on the 16th November, 1993 as the Museum of London's (MOL) major temporary exhibition until the 11th May, 1994. The exhibition marked a tonal shift within the MOL's work, striking a newly didactic tone. It consciously *argued* that migration had made a foundational and essentially positive impact on the city's development.⁶⁶³ The museum also developed a wider program of accompanying events inviting migrant community groups to focus on their history more extensively.⁶⁶⁴ *Peopling*, then, sought to address the museum's historic representation of Empire and create closer, more enduring relationships with migrant communities. It triggered the acceleration of existing forms of contemporary collecting and contributed to the museum's wider development of more reflective, collaborative approaches to the use of objects. From the mid-1990s, larger numbers of MOL curators moved away from conceptualising objects as neutral, to be analysed in aesthetic or technical terms. Proponents of this approach noted that the collections had been active participants in the histories of colonialism and migration, and their interpretation had the capacity to reproduce or critique imperial discourses of self and other, centre and periphery.

Though *Peopling* was only displayed for seven months, its curators envisioned its impacts resonating over a much longer period. Primarily, it served as a means for the MOL to reconnect with a profoundly diverse population among whom it lacked relevance. In 1993, the Museum had no permanent post-war galleries, precluding any sustained engagement with the advent of mass-migration from the declining Empire.⁶⁶⁵ Nor did it discuss the cosmopolitanism which characterised the city over the longer term. Audiences shrank throughout the 1980s, their demographic profiles stubbornly white and middle-class into the early 1990s.⁶⁶⁶ These shortcomings were particularly urgent given the contemporary rise in electoral and violent racism in the city. As chapter four discussed, the early 1990s saw the rising visibility and electoral success of the far-right throughout the East End. Over the longer term, the previous decades saw a raft of legislation constricting the rights of migrants, especially from the former colonies, to settle in Britain and remain freely following their arrival.⁶⁶⁷ Exhibition curator Nick Merriman sought to challenge the logic he saw beneath both these developments: that migrants were economically damaging

⁶⁶³ MOL, 'Press Release: The Peopling of London', np, (May 1993), MOL business archive, (uncatalogued: henceforth MOL).

⁶⁶⁴ Colin Holmes, Nick Merriman, (eds.), *The Peopling of London: Fifteen Thousand Years of Settlement from Overseas*, (London, 1993), frontmatter, np.

⁶⁶⁵ Nick Merriman, 'Hidden History: The *Peopling of London* Project', *Museum International*, 47, (3, 1995), p.12

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.13

⁶⁶⁷ Richard Ashcroft, Mark Bevir, *Multiculturalism in the British Commonwealth: Comparative Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, (Berkeley, Ca., 2019), p.29

and culturally irreconcilable with Britain, draining the resources of a state with which they had no pre-existing relationship.

Following an Archaeology BA and an MA in Museum Practice at Leicester, Merriman was appointed Assistant Keeper of Prehistory at the MOL in 1986 while still completing his Cambridge PhD. Merriman had grown increasingly frustrated with academic museology's disinterest in its audiences and what he would later call broader 'philosophies of practice'.⁶⁶⁸ While retaining a strong archaeological interest, Merriman's PhD concerned the public's perceptions of the past and engagement with museums; he published it as *Beyond the Glass Case* in 1991, gaining a sabbatical from the MOL to do so.⁶⁶⁹ Throughout this period Merriman was prominent within an emerging academic discipline seeking to critique museums' existing practices and harness their educational and egalitarian potential, the new museology.⁶⁷⁰ *Beyond the Glass Case* became a foundational text within the field, calling for museums to fulfil their potential as egalitarian sites of public education.⁶⁷¹ A congruence emerged between the MOL's financial interests, nascent shifts in professional practice, and innovations within related scholarship. Though Merriman doubted his appointment derived directly from the museum's concerns about falling visitor numbers, he noted that his job interview panel – led by director, Max Hebditch – were impressed by his participation in debates about the renewal of museum practice.⁶⁷² While Merriman was not party to managerial-level discussions, his work proved vital to efforts to boost visitor numbers, income and commercial viability.

Curators and scholars have retrospectively affirmed *Peopling's* achievement of its goals, attributing to it a longer shift in both exhibition narratives and collection practices. Alex Werner, one of the early Docklands project curators who subsequently enjoyed a forty-year career at the MOL, credited *Peopling* with the MOL's break with older celebratory presentations of London's imperial past. Werner went as far as to call the exhibition 'ground-breaking in museological terms in the UK'.⁶⁷³ Similarly, Sam Aylett frames *Peopling* as the defining moment whose 'message and spirit' pervaded all of the Museum's subsequent efforts to reframe London's relationship with Empire.⁶⁷⁴ Though Aylett dwells on managerial

⁶⁶⁸ Merriman, Interview with the author. Quotation here from Nick Merriman, *Beyond the Glass Case: The Past, The Public, and The Heritage*, (London, First edn., 1991. This edn., 2016, online ebook), no pagination (np)

⁶⁶⁹ Merriman, Interview with the author.

⁶⁷⁰ See Merriman, 'Museum Visiting as a Cultural Phenomenon', in Peter Vergo, (ed.), *The New Museology*, (London, 1989), pp.149-171

⁶⁷¹ Merriman, *Beyond the Glass Case*

⁶⁷² Merriman, Interview with the author.

⁶⁷³ Ashcroft, Bevir, *Multiculturalism*, p.29

⁶⁷³ Werner, Interview with the author.

⁶⁷⁴ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.201. Also evokes 'spirit of *Peopling*' on p.191.

resistance to these changes and reactionary strains within the public's reception of *Peopling*, he and Werner agree that the development of narratives emphasising the economic, cultural and political influences of the Empire on London's development derived from *Peopling*.⁶⁷⁵

Peopling also unsettles two orthodoxies within the relevant scholarship. First among these is the tendency, evident throughout heritage studies and critiqued throughout this thesis, to juxtapose conservative or 'authorised heritage discourses' which emerge in museums and the oppositional work of community heritage groups.⁶⁷⁶ *Peopling*'s attempt to critically reframe British history in pursuit of a more inclusive, equitable future was facilitated by extensive collaboration with community heritage groups and built towards closer, more co-operative futures. *Peopling* also suggests the need to rethink a common critique of the 'liberal' form of multiculturalism which emerged from the 1990s in Britain. Jo Littler, Roshi Naidoo, Paul Gilroy, and Georgie Wemyss argue that this form of multiculturalism's close relationship to a then-ascendent free market economics led to its commitment to the emancipatory power of the economic success of, and interpersonal harmony between, individuals. This, they reason, precluded a reckoning with the structural nature of racism and the histories of imperial domination which were its root cause.⁶⁷⁷ Yet while Merriman developed *Peopling* with an explicit aim to radically rethink the place of race and Empire in British history, management supported the exhibition as part of their longer attempt to increase revenue from the untapped markets of migrant communities. In fact, the commercialisation of the MOL's governance facilitated Merriman and later MOL curators' radical revaluations of British imperial history and its contemporary racialised legacies.

Aylett's primarily museological interest in *Peopling*'s significance in relation to 'other urban history and migration museums' comes at the expense of a focus on the museum's relationship to its local surroundings and their residents. While Aylett's account of *Peopling*'s genesis largely overlooks the MOL's relationship with community history groups, these were central to the MOL's collection and borrowing of objects, development of narratives, and organisation of related events.⁶⁷⁸ Similarly, Aylett only briefly mentions the significance of rising hostility to Black and Asian residents of East London, most clearly manifested in the 1993 and 1994 local elections in Tower Hamlets.⁶⁷⁹ But these developments were central in both motivating Merriman to organise the exhibition and informing some

⁶⁷⁵ Werner, Interview with the author; Aylett, p.201

⁶⁷⁶ See introduction to this thesis.

⁶⁷⁷ Littler, Naidoo, 'White Past, Multicultural Present', p.334; Gilroy, "'We Got to Get Over'", p.25; Wemyss, 'The Power to Tolerate', pp.215-236

⁶⁷⁸ Collaboration with communities is briefly mentioned in Aylett, *Legacies*, pp.91-92, but this discussion remains centred on the MOL's leadership. Those communities' own contributions to the development of an object-base for the exhibition and the production of knowledge is largely overlooked.

⁶⁷⁹ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.80; pp.167-169

visitors' responses. An inattentiveness to place has clouded crucial aspects of *Peopling*'s goals, organisation and reception.

This chapter offers an account of *Peopling*'s development, its collection and interpretation of objects, and a close reading of its narratives. It also traces the exhibition's legacies into the new millennium. *Peopling* did reframe the nationalist narratives of Empire which were outlined in Chapters One and Three of this thesis with a more critical account of the role that imperial conquest, violence and exploitation played in the making of Modern London. Merriman's didacticism – the fact that the exhibition sought to explicitly develop an *argument*, oriented around migrants' positive contribution to London – enhanced *Peopling*'s political message. But it also led to some significant simplifications of these histories of race and Empire, and left the exhibition vulnerable to claims of the politicisation of history by both museum managers and intransigent visitors.

More broadly however, *Peopling* also influenced changes in the permanent galleries in 2001, and later work at the new Museum of London, Docklands. Throughout this period, these shifts in narrative were underpinned by an expansion of collaboration with and support of community groups' work, and a more reflective, critical approach to objects. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the museum collaborated closely with community historians, activists and radical scholars to create explicit critiques of the role of Empire in shaping modern London and forging the MOL's collections, and to redress the institution's historic failures. Yet this work was slowed by managerial opposition, the persistence of older curatorial styles inadvertently producing nationalist narratives, and a strong, persistent current of reactionary resistance within this work's reception. The weight of decades of established practice, institutional narratives and public discourse remained heavy. Reading the MOL's history more contingently, this chapter shows that shifts in the forms of imperial memory being articulated in the museum overall were slow, partial and heavily resisted.

The Development of *Peopling*, 1986-1993

As Chapter One showed, the Museum of London's permanent galleries celebrated the leadership of aristocratic, monarchical and mercantile elites, as delivering Empire and through it, material abundance, intellectual and cultural advancement and social reform. A growing modern department also organised regular temporary social history exhibitions but remained focused solely on white Londoners, conceived objects in aesthetic or technical terms, and neglected to engage with race and Empire. Merriman reflected that upon his arrival at the MOL in the late 1980s, the permanent galleries did not include a post-war display or 'any mention of the city's long history of cultural diversity'. For Merriman, it was not therefore surprising that while ethnic minorities made up 20% of the capital's population in

1991, they contributed only 4% of the museum's visitors: 'their history was seemingly irrelevant, it had no place in the story of London presented there'.⁶⁸⁰

These findings reinforced the convictions of Merriman's ongoing research. Five years after his recruitment by the MOL in 1986, he published *Beyond the Glass Case*.⁶⁸¹ 'The past', the book began, 'belongs to all'. While museums were 'one of the principal means by which people can gain access to the past, and everyone should thus... feel at home in them', there existed 'cultural barriers that have been deterrents to wider participation', which needed to be 'dismantled'.⁶⁸² The intellectual advances of the new museology revealed that 'museums in Western society' possessed 'a particular social and ideological role which has, by and large, been associated with the dominant classes'.⁶⁸³ Merriman asserted that any work addressing the question of democratisation had to 'go beyond what analysts say museums are for, to take account of what people who visit the museums themselves think of ... and want from the museum'.⁶⁸⁴

This commitment to democratising access was congruent with the museum management's contemporary pursuit of greater private revenue overall. Merriman started work at the MOL on the day the Greater London Council (GLC) was formally abolished.⁶⁸⁵ His early employment, then, was marked by the Thatcher government's introduction of the principles of commercial management, seeking to deliver 'value for money' in return for public funds and an increase in revenue from visitors and private sponsors.⁶⁸⁶ Faced with this shifting tide in cultural policy, the MOL's concern over the sustained fall in its visitor numbers throughout the 1980s intensified. Senior museum managers and directors established a marketing department in 1991 and produced the *Museum Forward Plan* to chart a course to future commercial security. The plan, Aylett notes, 'expressed a need to encourage visitors from more 'diverse' backgrounds as one way of firming up their financial position'.⁶⁸⁷ From the early 1990s, John Major's new Department for National Heritage (DNH) pursued the Thatcherite aim of expanding markets through an attempt to widen minorities' participation in heritage. The new DNH actively encouraged heritage organisations to engage historically excluded communities, boosting both their economic activity and their cultural inclusion.⁶⁸⁸ In this context, the new MOL marketing department began in April 1991 to

⁶⁸⁰ Merriman, 'Hidden History', pp.12-13

⁶⁸¹ Merriman, Interview with the author.

⁶⁸² Merriman, *Beyond the Glass Case*, np.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁵ Merriman, Interview with the author.

⁶⁸⁶ Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, p.257

⁶⁸⁷ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.157

⁶⁸⁸ Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, p.251

interview 250-300 visitors every quarter to gauge visitors' demographic profile, occupation and income, to assess the duration, regularity and motivations for their visit, and survey their responses to exhibitions.⁶⁸⁹ This revealed that the museum's audience between June and September 1993 was 0.5 per cent South Asian, two percent East Asian and lacking any identifiable African-Caribbean contingent.⁶⁹⁰ The museum accompanied the *Museum Forward Plan* with the introduction of entrance fees in order to increase revenue.⁶⁹¹ For the MOL, financially strained and disconnected from much of the population, there was a clear congruence between the need to diversify exhibitions, widen audiences and increase footfall and thus revenue. While Merriman sought to create a more inclusive museum, the MOL's management came to similar conclusions given their shrinking audience and the increasingly commercialised nature of the wider cultural policy climate.

In this context, Merriman submitted a proposal for a temporary exhibition, *The Peopling of London: Fifteen Thousand Years of Settlement From Overseas*.⁶⁹² The exhibition was necessary, Merriman later wrote, for the Museum to 'obtain any credibility as an organisation responsive to the public'.⁶⁹³ The project would help gain this credibility through two means. First, it would reframe the permanent galleries' narrative, demonstrating that migration was an enduring, formative and essentially positive influence on London's development. Merriman wrote that 'the rhetoric of many far-right groups' then ascendent in East London especially 'situated itself in history by constructing a mythical vision of the past in which a homogeneous, white, pre-war society had become overlain and corrupted in the post-war period by people with a different skin colour and customs who... did not belong here'.⁶⁹⁴ The MOL itself felt complicit in this. Museum director Max Hebditch lamented 'the Museum's permanent galleries do not reflect the important role played by settlers from overseas in the development of London', meaning that many visitors 'do not see their own history', 'an imbalance we hope we can begin to redress'.⁶⁹⁵ Merriman put this more directly, stating his desire to 'explode such myths', demonstrating that 'they were based on an erroneous reading of history'.⁶⁹⁶ Note here the didactic, political tone adopted in Merriman's justification of *Peopling* from the moment of its inception. This, I will show, strengthened the

⁶⁸⁹ Museum of London, *Peopling of London Evaluation*, (London, 1996), p.19. MOL Business Archive, uncatalogued. (Henceforth MOL).

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹¹ Merriman, 'Hidden History', p.16

⁶⁹² Aylett, *Legacies*, p.77

⁶⁹³ Merriman, 'Hidden History', p.13

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁵ Max Hebditch, 'Preface', in Holmes, Merriman, (eds.), *Peopling*, x

⁶⁹⁶ Merriman, 'Hidden History', p.13

exhibition's central message and intervention. But it also produced some simplistic narratives and left *Peopling* vulnerable to criticism from museum managers and visitors.

The exhibition also sought to transform the MOL's approach to *producing* history, developing collaborative relationships with grassroots organisations, consulting communities more widely, and borrowing and collecting sensitively from them. The paucity of migrant narratives within heritage derived from large institutions' lack firstly of expertise around these histories and secondly of access to well-developed collections with which to work. *Peopling* would develop narratives, borrow objects and strengthen the museum's collections in order to create the potential for more consistent engagement over the long term. To do so, it would strengthen its relationships with migrant community groups and small local museums, who would, in turn, gain influence over exhibition narratives and find new outlets for their objects.⁶⁹⁷ A natural congruence emerged, once more, between Merriman's political and intellectual concerns with improving the museum's accessibility and management's desire to strengthen networks with previously excluded communities with a goal to ultimately broadening the museum's appeal. The Museum's management accepted Merriman's proposal.

The Museum hired Rozina Visram to help develop these relationships and bodies of research. A researcher and historian, Visram had most recently worked for the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) to produce anti-racist education material, developing strong relationships with migrant community groups.⁶⁹⁸ She was also a recognised expert on the South Asian presence in Britain, following the publication of *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: The Story of Indians in Britain, 1700-1947* (1986).⁶⁹⁹ Merriman was concerned about his 'credibility' to independently lead a project on contemporary racism, collaborating with racialised communities far beyond his academic expertise or personal network, as a 'white young... archaeologist' specialising in prehistory.⁷⁰⁰ Visram's networks and expertise were integral in developing narratives, building broad collaborative networks, and opening opportunities to engage in contemporary collecting and borrow objects for the exhibition. Merriman recalled: 'Rosina... had immense respect from community members and people working in this field'. Her research reports were also integral to the formation of the exhibition's narrative.⁷⁰¹

Peopling also accelerated new directions being taken in the MOL's approaches to contemporary collecting, addressing a broader institutional concern that the post-war period remained the collection's

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁸ Merriman, Interview with the author

⁶⁹⁹ Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: The Story of Indians in Britain, 1700-1947*, (London, 1986)

⁷⁰⁰ Merriman, Interview with the author.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*

weakest. The project was one of the new curator of oral history Rory O’Connell’s first major assignments, and also drew on the participation of the curators of ephemera, Nicola Johnson, and photography, Mike Seaborne. Seaborne commissioned photographers to produce new collections of London’s contemporary migrant communities for the galleries, while Johnson collected migrants’ border documents, letters and post-war community newspapers.⁷⁰² Visram also expanded the ‘Museum on the Move’ initiative pioneered by the Docklands project in the 1980s. Here, Visram took leaflets and a caravan with a miniature exhibition to neighbourhoods throughout London on Saturday mornings, engaging residents with the project as it developed.⁷⁰³ Visram visited Surrey Quays Shopping Centre, Lavender Hill, Lampton Park and, in East London, Hackney Town Hall and Ridley Road Market. Over eleven outings staff distributed roughly 5,000 leaflets and over 1,000 visitors saw the temporary exhibition and learnt about *Peopling*’s goals. The connections established here formed the basis of O’Connell’s development of a new oral history collection on migration, comprising 65 interviews and over 100 hours of tape, which joined the MOL’s collections and were prominent in the eventual exhibition.⁷⁰⁴ Visram also developed relationships with the Black Cultural Archives, Bishopsgate Institute, the Jewish Museum, the London Museum of Jewish Life, Hackney Museum and Archive, Newham Local Studies Library, Tower Hamlets Local Studies and Archives, and the Arab League Library.⁷⁰⁵ These organisations bolstered the expertise the project could access, developing narratives of the recent past, loaning objects themselves, and establishing community connections who could provide further objects. Contemporary collecting for *Peopling*, then, centred on oral histories, photography and ephemera. Yet Merriman also noted that ‘very few [large, physically tangible] 3D objects were acquired’ on a permanent basis. The MOL also used these connections with migrants, community groups and smaller museums to borrow passports and larger objects such as suitcases or domestic items from migrants’ homes. Adopting a more consensual and collaborative approach, the MOL borrowed these for the duration of the exhibition before returning them to their owners.

Rather than creating a superficial and individualistic multiculturalism which still held migrants as exotic and exterior, then, the context of the 1990s led Museum managers to envision a market for the exhibition’s anti-racist narrative, and pushed them to make engagement and collaboration with migrant groups central to their collection and borrowing practice. Merriman and Visram could, as a result, feasibly

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*

⁷⁰³ On the Museum on the Move project’s origins, Chris Ellmers, ‘The Museum in Docklands’, *London Topographical Record*, XXVI, (1990), p.266.

⁷⁰⁴ MOL, *Peopling Evaluation*, p.22, MOL.

⁷⁰⁵ Frontmatter, in Merriman, Holmes, (eds.), *Peopling*, np.

hope that London's fundamentally cosmopolitan character would enter the MOL's galleries through *Peopling* before progressing to permeate its work more generally.

The Peopling of London, 1993-1994

When *Peopling* opened, the MOL's marketing department had a clear message. The exhibition's press release began with the provocation that 'far from being a recent 'problem', the presence of overseas populations has always made an essential and positive contribution to the prosperity and cultural life of the capital'.⁷⁰⁶ It continued that migrants' profound economic and cultural contributions necessitated a reappraisal of the very definitions of belonging, 'challeng[ing] people's ideas of what it meant to be a Londoner', arguing that many 'could trace ancestors who came to settle in London from overseas'.⁷⁰⁷ Contrary to the arguments of Gilroy, Wemyss, Littler and Naidoo, this exhibition – emerging directly from the cultural policy context of the 1990s – was making migration integral to accounts of national history and identity.⁷⁰⁸ Yet while re-centring Empire and race, the exhibition's didactic goals of promoting above all else a 'positive' narrative of migrants' contribution to British society did also occasionally simplify colonial history and metropolitan racism, and obscure the more violent, confrontational forms of resistance taken by migrants.

Upon arrival, visitors were greeted in the foyer by three installations: a sculpture of a giant suitcase, a newspaper stand displaying many of the multilingual daily newspapers for sale in London, and shop shelves of tinned goods from China, Cyprus and the Indian subcontinent. Here was an attempt to make the mundane, quotidian artefacts of migrant life monumental and spatially central to the museum.⁷⁰⁹ The exhibition's first display, 'The World in a City', sought to communicate the cosmopolitanism of contemporary London through photographs and objects before a five-minute film outlining the exhibition's major themes.⁷¹⁰ The accompanying panel noted: 'London today is a multicultural, multi-faith city with a population from all over the world. How long has it been like this? 50 years? 100 years? 200 years? Or Longer?', correcting such misconceptions to note 'London has had a cosmopolitan population from its very beginnings, not just since the Second World War as some people believe'.⁷¹¹ After sections on prehistoric and Roman London, the 'Age of Migrations' (450-1066 AD), and Medieval Europeans (1066-1500), the exhibition included three Modern and Early Modern galleries: 'London and the Wider World' (1500-1837), 'The Heart of the Empire' (1837-1945) and 'After the Empire' (1945-

⁷⁰⁶ MOL, 'Press Release: Peopling', (May 1993), MOL.

⁷⁰⁷ MOL, 'Press Release: Peopling', May 1993.

⁷⁰⁸ Gilroy, 'Fragments'; Wemyss, 'Power to Tolerate'; Littler, Naidoo, 'White Past, Multicultural Present'.

⁷⁰⁹ Collicott, 'The Peopling of London', p.262

⁷¹⁰ MOL, 'Press Release: Peopling', May 1993.

⁷¹¹ Gallery text, 'The World in a City', *Peopling*, MOL.

present). These are my central focus here. There, curators presented the migration deriving from Britain's expansion since the sixteenth century as central to London's development.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the 'London and the Wider World' gallery noted, 'many fashionable Londoners, including successive royal families, had a Black or Indian slave servant'.⁷¹² Some were eventually able to purchase or obtain their freedom, while others simply ran away. Together with a smaller number of South Asian ex-sailors, these groups were by the mid-eighteenth century crucial to the emergence of small migrant communities.⁷¹³ The exhibition sought both to address popular ignorance around these figures' significance in early modern British visual culture and document the range of cultural responses to their presence. Merchants and administrators frequently brought enslaved and indentured servants back from working visits to the Caribbean or South Asia, before including them in portraits to signify wealth accrued from the colonies. Painters included servants as often heavily orientalised figures to approximate white Britons' wealth with colonial strength and dominance. 'Often adorned in extravagant finery', Merriman and Visram noted, 'these servants acted as status symbols for their owners, and appear in aristocratic portraits of the period'.⁷¹⁴



Figure 5.5: William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress: Quarrels with her Jewish Protector* (1732).⁷¹⁵
Listed in the exhibition as *A Harlot's Progress, Plate Two*.

⁷¹² Gallery text, 'The Early Black and South Asian Presence', *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷¹³ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁴ Merriman, Visram, 'The World in a City', in Holmes, Merriman, (eds.), *Peopling*, pp.5-6

⁷¹⁵ Object list, William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress, Plate Two*, (1732). Pm2, 40, *Peopling*, MOL.

Borrowed by the MOL from the Royal Academy. Original accessed at (<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/a-harlots-progress-plate-2>), on 7th March 2022.

Elsewhere African figures took on more complex meanings in relation to a broader set of racial signifiers. The MOL borrowed the second plate of Hogarth's *Harlot's Progress* from the Royal Academy for the exhibition (**figure 5.1**). Scholars have argued that the Black enslaved child, the mahogany table and the monkey in the image suggest that the merchant who the series' central figure Moll Hackabout was marrying had made his wealth in the Caribbean colonies.⁷¹⁶ Positioning the painting within this gallery, the MOL critiqued the frequent absence of the colonies in discussions of this canonical piece of British art. As Catherine Molineux argues, Hogarth's frequent depiction of enslaved Africans was less likely a cry for liberty through abolition than a critique of the period's excessive consumption.⁷¹⁷ Indeed, that Moll was kicking over the coffee table to distract her recently returned husband (centre) from her escaping lover (left) firmly linked the conspicuous consumption facilitated by plantation wealth to other, contemporary vices like licentious sex. Curators listed the etching simply as 'Harlot's Progress Plate Two', offering a shorter title which did not note that Moll's 'protector' was identified in the etching's original title as a Jew. No more substantial text accompanied the image. While enforced migration from the colonies was, then, prominent in *Peopling's* account of eighteenth-century visual culture, curators' primary focus on the entwinement of Britain and the Caribbean led to an obfuscation of Hogarth's Antisemitism. A Jewish merchant luxuriated in the excess of Empire; his home was the site of decadent consumption and infidelity. A more complex triangular relationship was at play between metropole, colony and Jews, whose propensity for excess animated the metropole's corruption. Rather than a uniform, British whiteness Hogarth was here critiquing the corruption brought to Britain by the arrival of liminally white Jews.

The exhibition also emphasised intimacy of some domestic relationships between white Londoners and those of African descent in their treatment of Dido Elizabeth Belle (1761-1804). Dido, the daughter of Sir John Lindsay and an enslaved African servant, grew up in the household of an uncle and aunt Lord and Lady Mansfield, where – the MOL noted – her status was 'probably halfway between a personal servant and a companion for [the Mansfields' daughter] Lady Elizabeth Mary Murray'.⁷¹⁸ Dido lived with the family at Kenwood House, their residence on Hampstead Heath. Mansfield gained prominence in abolitionist circles when, as Chief Justice in the 1770s, he freed an enslaved man, James Somerset, establishing a legal precedent against taking slaves by force within England.⁷¹⁹ The exhibition

⁷¹⁶ 'Silver Service Slavery: The Black Presence in the White Home', *Victoria and Albert Museum Online*, (n.d.), Accessed 7th March, 2021, at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/silver-service-slavery-the-black-presence-in-the-white-home/>

⁷¹⁷ Catherine Molineux, 'Hogarth's Fashionable Slaves: Moral Corruption in Eighteenth-Century London', *ELH*, 72, (2, 2005), pp.495-496

⁷¹⁸ Emma Webb, *Peopling of London Teachers' Resource Pack*, (London, 1993), p.5, MOL.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*

included a portrait of Dido and Elizabeth (**figure 5.2**), in which Dido wore a silver dress and orientalist turban, a necklace and earrings, and stood behind and to the right of Elizabeth. She appeared mischievous, her left leg suggesting motion and an index finger held to her face. This portrait captured Dido's essential liminality; she was at once genteel and exotic, present and peripheral. St Paul's Cathedral figured in the background and left of frame, separated from the sitters by the verdant scenery of Hampstead Heath. These intimate colonial relationships were positioned at the heart of aristocratic society life in and around the Georgian capital.⁷²⁰



Figure 5.6: Johan Zoffany, *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Lindsay and Elizabeth Mansfield*.⁷²¹

While Dido occupied a liminal and complex position in metropolitan society, perhaps a more common response to Black people in London was a more overt racism. The gallery documented the visual art distributed by anti-abolitionists portraying Black men and women as base creatures, driven by assertiveness and desire. George Cruikshank's engraving 'The New Union Club' (1819) (**fig.3**) warned 'against the consequences of the abolition of slavery', depicting highly sexualised encounters between white men and Black women, consuming large quantities of alcohol in a raucous scene in which the formerly enslaved stood on top of the table of a London drinking establishment. Such images constructed a future where the imperial social order was dismantled by assertive Africans, their corporeal desires for

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷²¹ Object List, Johann Zoffany, 'Portrait of Lady Elizabeth Mary Murray and her cousin Dido Elizabeth Lindsay', (1799), pm2 7, *Peopling*, MOL. Borrowed from Earl of Mansfield. Accessed at <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/women-in-history/dido-belle/>, on 15th March, 2022

intoxication and licentious interracial sex unleashed by white radicals under the rubric of justice. Interconnected anxieties of the dilution of white racial purity and erosion of Britain's social order carried a long shadow, returning over a century later to animate concerns over the African-American and African-Caribbean presence in Britain during the Second World War and in the post-war period.⁷²² *Peopling* here suggested these contemporary anxieties dated from nineteenth-century commentary on Britain's colonial possessions.

The exhibition also centred both white and African-Caribbean resistance to slavery. Curators displayed familiar objects here including the abolitionist medallion of a kneeling slave, designed by Henry Webber and funded by Josiah Wedgwood which implored visitors: 'Am I not a man and brother?'⁷²³ Yet the catalogue and gallery text foregrounded Black figures, including Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano.⁷²⁴ Paintings and etchings framed these figures as dignified agents. Freedom from slavery was not in *Peopling*'s account granted by the benevolent host but wrested by Africans through struggle. The exhibition, then, framed the early modern Black and Asian presence as characterised by a number of different relations to racialised servitude, between the ambivalence of Dido Elizabeth Belle, the (simplified account of the) moralising gaze of Hogarth, the hard biological racism of Cruikshank, and the resistance of Sancho, Cugoano and Equiano.

Yet new imperial relationships emerged with industrialisation. The next gallery covered the high imperial period, between Victoria's 1837 ascent to the throne and the end of the Second World War in 1945. The gallery's introduction distinguished the period as when 'Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Indian sub-continent, Hong Kong, Cyprus and large parts of the Caribbean and Africa fell under British rule', allowing 'people from these lands to enter Britain freely' as visitors, students and workers. Many of today's Londoners can trace their ancestry to those parts of the world directly because of their exploitation by Britain in this period'.⁷²⁵ Under a title borrowing from Ambalavaner Sivanandan's aphorism 'Imperial Citizens: We are here because you were there', the gallery organised its narration of migration through the theme of inter-imperial mobility. More, in taking this cue from a contemporary commentary on post-war migration, it oriented this history squarely at the present. It suggested post-war

⁷²² Rose, *Which People's War?*, pp.77-79; Anna Maguire, '“You Wouldn't Want your Daughter Marrying One”: Parental Intervention into Mixed-race Relationships in Post-war Britain', *Historical Research*, 92, (256, 2019), pp.432-444

⁷²³ Object List, 'Ceramic medallion of kneeling slave, 1787', pm2.9, *Peopling*, MOL. Borrowed from British Museum.

⁷²⁴ Merriman, Visram, 'The World in a City', in Holmes, Merriman, (eds.), *Peopling*, p.24; Gallery Text: 'The Early Black and South Asian Presence', *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷²⁵ Gallery Text, 'Imperial Citizens: We are here because you were there', *Peopling*, MOL.

migration was not novel, but a legal continuation of these longer entanglements. Rather, it was the raft of immigration restrictions after 1962 which marked a historical rupture.

Discussions of the impact of the industrialisation of imperial trade on London's topography had their roots in the latter stages of the Early Modern gallery. Curators accompanied an image of the West India dock from 'The Microcosm of London' by AC Pugin and T Rowlandson with the observation that 'many of London's wealthiest merchants' owned plantations in the Caribbean.⁷²⁶ This hinted that the slavery economy was both an important source of capital to invest in larger, more efficient ports *and* the envisaged beneficiary of these improvements. Nearby was a watercolour by the emancipation-era Jamaican artist Isaac Mendes Belisario, 'Sugarworks at Kelly's, St Catherine's Parish' (1836-1842), where smoke billowing from a plantation processing plant showed the development of the corresponding infrastructure to support this trade in the Caribbean.⁷²⁷ Underneath a print of an unattributed engraving, 'A View of East India House, 1802', curators noted 'trade with the East brought foreign merchants to the capital' who were 'easily identifiable by their unfamiliar clothes'.⁷²⁸ Relating the port's development to corresponding visitors from and agricultural processes in the colonies marked a shift from the cursory treatment given to these connections by the MID project in the 1980s, shown in chapter three. No longer were the colonies a vague signifier of the Port's pre-eminence, its Georgian architecture embodying a classical era of logic and rationality. Rather, colonial resources and people provided the labour, natural resources and capital as the metropole's port industrialised. This narrative shift established a precedent for the full confrontation of these relationships in the *London, Sugar and Slavery* gallery the following decade.

This new framing gave greater attention to the experiences of the increasing numbers of migrants working on British merchant ships who settled in Britain permanently. From these maritime beginnings grew 'extensive London communities' from India, China, West Africa, Malaysia and Somalia.⁷²⁹ The exhibition also documented the growth of Jewish refugees to London in the later nineteenth century, as the population grew from 35,000 to 150,000 between 1880 and 1914 before a further wave in the 1930s.⁷³⁰ The largest proportion of all these maritime communities settled in the East End's dockland. Upon arrival, they contributed significantly to London's economy and infrastructure. The exhibition also documented the arrival of *Ayahs* (Indian nannies), penniless on arrival, who were often abandoned in

⁷²⁶ Object List, 'Illustration from AC Pugin, T Rowlandson, 'The Microcosm of London', (1808), pm2.29. *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷²⁷ Object List, Isaac Mendes Belisario, 'Sugarworks at Kelly's, St Catherine's Parish', (1836-1842), pm2.36, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷²⁸ Object List, unattributed engraving, 'A View of East India House', (1802). PM2.30. Object List, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷²⁹ Gallery text: 'Living and Working in the Port', *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷³⁰ Gallery text: 'In Search of a Better Life', *Peopling*, MOL.

London by wealthy merchant families after they were no longer useful.⁷³¹ *Peopling* also highlighted discrimination against these arrivals. In 1837 the Strangers' Home for Asiatics, Africans and South Sea Islanders opened in Limehouse, offering shelter to the large numbers of sailors whose exploitative employment led them either to be dismissed or to abandon their jobs upon arrival in Britain.⁷³² A letter from Hilton Docker, an East India Company doctor in 1814, dismissed the possibility of employing lascars and Chinese labourers in the docks on the basis that English and Irish workers would be disadvantaged.⁷³³ *Peopling* sought to document the racialised exploitation of migrant communities which London's industrialisation relied on. More, the origins of London's Bengali community in colonial service to Britain were here documented by the Museum a decade before they were consistently raised by the Swadhinata Trust, as will be discussed in chapter six of this thesis.

Perhaps the most prominent community in this section of the galleries were the Irish. Many Irish women in particular worked in domestic service or in the garment industry.⁷³⁴ Irish men, meanwhile, helped to construct the capital's growing public transport network. Two labourers' tools - a barrow collected from Snow Hill tunnel, and a 'thumper' from the railway tracks - told the story of Irish labourers' work connecting Farringdon and Kings Cross underground stations. A dock trolley, a stevedore's hook and an image of St Katharine's Dock under construction were also displayed. As such, the curators placed Irish migrants at the very heart of the city's growing transport infrastructure and its expanding port.⁷³⁵ Yet, while the exhibition emphasised the colonial dimensions of British territories further afield, the exhibition framed large the Irish migration to Britain in the mid-nineteenth century vaguely as 'a result of the famine in Ireland'.⁷³⁶ It made no mention of the Protestant Ascendancy's land monopoly or systematic extraction of tenants' rent and produce, the relationship between Ireland's reliance on potatoes and their need to maximise exports to Britain, or the mass evictions of Catholic tenants incapable of paying their rents due to diseased crops.⁷³⁷ Nor did the gallery directly engage with the discrimination Irish migrants to London faced, rooted in their racialisation as a squalid, drunken, culturally alien and potentially seditious group.⁷³⁸ I do not want here to revive debates over whether

⁷³¹ Gallery text: 'South Asians in London', *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷³² *Ibid.*

⁷³³ Object List, Letter discussing Lascars' Employment, 5 April, 1814, v2.4. Lent by India Office Library, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷³⁴ Gallery text: 'Building London: The Irish Connection', *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷³⁵ Object List, Barrow and thumper, v1 13; trolley and hook, v1.16/14. *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷³⁶ Gallery text: 'Building London: The Irish Connection', *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷³⁷ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*, (London, 1991), pp.21-25

⁷³⁸ Gallery text: 'Building London: The Irish Connection', *Peopling*, MOL. See also Roger Swift, 'The Outcast Irish in the British Victorian City', p.264

Britain's governance of Ireland constituted a form of colonialism.⁷³⁹ What *is* significant is that the history of Irish settlement was not simply one of harmonious contribution following migrants' arrival in London. The primacy of *Peopling's* didactic goal to demonstrate the positive role played by migrants upon arrival in London led to a disinclination to engage with the more complex histories of remote misgovernance, systematic and centuries-long agricultural extraction, and racialised economic exploitation following migration.

The exhibition then noted that colonial intellectuals responded to their poor treatment in London increasingly stridently. *Peopling* gave prominence to the work of pioneering figures such as Harold Moody and his early Black pressure group the League of Coloured Peoples, as well as Shapurji Saklatvala, the first South Asian Labour MP. More, it also discussed anti-colonial nationalists learning, working or writing within the metropole while also developing critiques of it. Here the liberal MP, political theorist and Indian National Congress stalwart Dadabhai Naoroji figured prominently alongside future postcolonial African leaders Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah and radical Caribbean intellectuals CLR James and George Padmore.⁷⁴⁰ *Peopling* prefigured by two decades Marc Matera's vision in *Black London* (2015) of a city whose status as imperial metropolis created the very communities of radical colonial intellectuals whose work would help precipitate its own transformation.⁷⁴¹ Other colonial figures also featured included M M Bhownaggee, the Parsi Conservative MP for Bethnal Green (1895-1906), a 'political moderate... concerned with the rights of Indians in India and South Africa'.⁷⁴² Mention was given too, to Duleep Singh, a prince who 'lived in England on a government pension having had his Indian dominions annexed by the British'. He used this to live an 'extravagant' lifestyle, but also contributed financially to the foundation of the Strangers' Home.⁷⁴³ The exhibition's account of the colonial influence on Metropolitan politics and culture, then, extended beyond the narrowly radical. It also incorporated the monarchic leaders of vassal states deposed when direct rule better suited the Raj, and the novel forms of philanthropy which resulted.

⁷³⁹ E.g., Stephen Howe, 'Questioning the (Bad) Question: 'Was Ireland a Colony?''', *Irish Historical Studies*, 36, (142, 2008), pp.138-152

⁷⁴⁰ Gallery Text: 'Black African and Caribbean People', *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁴¹ Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century*, (Berkeley, 2015)

⁷⁴² Object List, Watercolour, v3 26, *Peopling*, MOL. Lent by National Portrait Gallery (NPG).

⁷⁴³ Object List, Leslie Ward, 'Portrait of Duleep Singh', v3 40. *Peopling*, MOL. Lent by NPG,.



Figure 7.3: Oswald Mosley Stencil, 1932.⁷⁴⁴

One form of radicalism was, however, particularly prominent: that of the Jewish community. The exhibition detailed the flowering of ‘more than fifty tailoring unions... between 1872 and 1915’ whose organisation culminated in 10,000 workers downing tools against poor working conditions and low pay in 1889. The community also faced forms of violent and state racism. The gallery text discussed the coded legislative racism of the 1905 Aliens Act.⁷⁴⁵ It also included a 1935 stencil poster asserting ‘Mosley Will Win!’ (**Figure 5.5**), a sign of both the violent hostility the Jewish community faced and their defiance to overcome it. While the exhibition noted that Mosley’s threat persisted until after the war, it was more understated on the violent forms which resistance to it took *Peopling* included a leaflet for The 43 Group, the Jewish ex-servicemen and women whose post-war anti-fascism was the subject of Morris Beckman’s much celebrated memoir, discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis.⁷⁴⁶ This leaflet’s caption noted that the group aimed ‘to fight Fascist activity in Britain and lobby Parliament to outlaw Fascist’ groups.⁷⁴⁷ As shown earlier, however, the group’s explicit primary aim of violently confronting Mosley’s supporters was a response to their unsuccessful efforts to gain support from parliament and the Board of Deputies of British Jews.⁷⁴⁸ *Peopling*’s ‘contributions’ narrative here created an obfuscation of migrants’ resort to violent resistance in response to their frustration with the neglect of the British state and the moderation of respectable organs of Anglo-Jewish civil society. Visram’s collaboration with the Jewish Museum and the London Museum of Jewish Life connected the MOL to the same milieu in which Centerprise was

⁷⁴⁴ Object list, Stencil Poster of Oswald Mosley, v4.72. *Peopling*. MOL.

⁷⁴⁵ *Peopling* Gallery Text: ‘In Search of a Better Life’, *Peopling*, MOL

⁷⁴⁶ Object List, The 43 Group leaflet, v4.144. *Peopling*, MOL

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁸ Beckman, *The 43 Group*, p.16

operating in the early 1990s. In one sense, this reveals museums and community heritage groups formulating similar responses to the contemporary rise of the far-right. Yet while Centerprise emphasised Jewish activists' increasingly radical resistance, the MOL's respectability politics led it to misrepresent The 43 Group's antipathy towards the state.

The exhibition also pointed to the forms of cultural hybridity which characterised Irish migrant communities. The Irish gallery included images of the archetypal working-class East End street party featuring children sitting on long, improvised tables on cobbled streets between rows of terraced houses.⁷⁴⁹ Narratives of Cockney street parties often revolved around Britishness and Englishness, organised most commonly for coronations and jubilees and adorned with images of the Union Flag. Yet these photographs were marked by Catholicism: a banner over the street read: 'God Bless Our Pope'.⁷⁵⁰ The exhibition also displayed an 1839 architects' plan of St George's Church – later to become a Cathedral – built to meet the demands of Southwark's large Irish Catholic population.⁷⁵¹ Presented without caption, these photographs suggested Irish migrants' conscious religious and national alterity, noting the diversity of cultural and associational life in the capital and complicating notions of the homogeneity of London's white working-class. This reflected one of the exhibition's major political goals: to demonstrate that all London's people, including those with white skin whose presence had therefore since become naturalised, had migrant origins and complex cultural heritage. Yet these photographs were not accompanied by captions, and so this gallery's larger political critique over the complex malleability of Whiteness remained implicit. The exhibition earlier neglected to discuss Hogarth's racialisation of Jews as non-white and the histories of agricultural extraction and racialisation surrounding Irish migration to Victorian Britain. Here it left one of its major political interventions, around the diverse cultural heritage of even white Londoners, to visitors' intuition.

More visible and immediately obvious to visitors was the cultural hybridity brought by other maritime communities. The sailors who settled in Wapping, Shadwell, Limehouse and Canning Town lived in relative harmony with the established populations, often creating convivial communities with syncretic cultures. From 1856, The Old Friends' Restaurant on Mandarin Street was 'one of a number' established 'to serve the Chinese community', whose emergence was so substantial it led to the use of Chinese Street signs in the area, a 'reminder of the community and London's far Eastern trading connections'.⁷⁵² Chinese and African sailors signified the port's wider status as permeable boundary

⁷⁴⁹ Object List, Street Party Picture, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵¹ Object list, 1839 Plan of St George's Church, *Peopling*, MOL

⁷⁵² Object List, Old Friends Photograph, v2.27. *Peopling*, MOL.

between metropole and colony. Their presence precipitated moral panics about intoxicated and potentially sexual encounters with white women. **Figure 5.6**, an illustration from James Greenwood's *The Wilds of London* (1874), applied many of the same tropes which were visible in Cruiskshank's 1819 engraving *The New Union Club* (**Fig 5.3**) to the later port. While Cruiskshank warned against the sexual threat of emancipating the enslaved, this engraving framed cultural interaction around the abandonment of morals and the suggestion of miscegenation. These tropes remained central to the racialisation of peoples connected to London through its imperial port as the mercantile eighteenth century passed into the industrial nineteenth. With *some* limitations then, *Peopling* demonstrated the prominence of racialised and often colonised communities in London's culture, the stigma of their discursive representation, and the range of strategies they adopted both within and beyond their communities to consolidate their precarious positions.



Figure 5.4: Illustration from James Greenwood, *The Wilds of London*, (1874).⁷⁵³

Completing the exhibition's cyclical structure, the final gallery 'The World in a City: London since 1945' returned to the first room, recontextualizing London's post-war history by relating it firmly to these centuries of colonial exchange and exploitation. Since the war, it was noted, migrants from Poland, Italy, Ireland, Cyprus, South Asia, the Caribbean, Hong Kong, Africa, Australasia, the Arabian peninsula, North and South America had 'made their homes' and 'rich economic, cultural, [and] political contribution[s] to the city'. Yet 'many' still faced 'hostility and discrimination', their lives remaining 'difficult'.⁷⁵⁴ Both migrants' connection to and influences on London's culture, and the discrimination they faced, were all taken outside the immediate context of the 1990s and related directly to these imperial histories.

⁷⁵³ Object list, Greenwood illustration, v3.17. *Peopling*, MOL

⁷⁵⁴ Gallery Text, 'The World in a City: London Since 1945', *Peopling*, MOL.

Yet the gallery also outlined the distinct social and political conditions migrants faced in this period. Legislation was a key site of this shifting terrain. The 1948 British Nationality Act formalised the earlier informal right of British people living in former and present colonies to settle freely in Britain. But ‘Since 1962’, the gallery noted, ‘successive laws have placed ever greater restrictions on primary immigration, which has slowed to a trickle’. The overall impression given was of increasingly strained movement, in the words of this gallery’s title, ‘through the closing door’. Photographs of a Moroccan advice centre and a Somali community centre showed nascent post-war arrivals struggling to forge new communities while navigating a legal environment marked by increasingly stringent restrictions to their rights and legal protections.⁷⁵⁵

A final section of the gallery, ‘A Liberal City?’, noted ‘most Londoners... pride themselves on living in a liberal city, tolerant of newcomers’, but noted that immigrants had ‘always met with active hostility from a minority of people, who have made them scapegoats for London’s social and economic problems’.⁷⁵⁶ Though some sympathetic Londoners actively supported migrants, and the majority were ‘indifferent’, the substantial history of violence led the exhibition to challenge assumptions of the capital’s overall liberalism.⁷⁵⁷ These violent reactions were again particularly visible in the Docklands, where the National Front and later the BNP were particularly successful. This was accompanied by photographs of Bengali residents protesting against poor living conditions in the East End and marching through Brick Lane to Trafalgar Square following Altab Ali’s murder to demand racial justice.⁷⁵⁸ If discussions of these far-right organisations warned against complacency around racism, celebratory invocations of the anti-racism of the 1970s and 1980s pointed to the need to revive such radical opposition.

The allusions here to the exhibition’s contemporary political imperatives were further highlighted in the catalogue, which noted ‘the general experience of London’s ethnic minorities can be of exclusion and marginalisation in many areas of life, and racial violence is still common’.⁷⁵⁹ One particular photograph (**figure 5.7**) got to the crux of this dialectic. It was taken on Brick Lane in 1978 in the wake both of Ali’s murder and a subsequent spike in anti-racist activism. A swastika had been scrawled on the wall, accompanied by the words ‘We are back’. A second person had written ‘sod off’ directly underneath this. Here, curators pointed to enduring contests over the definition of the East End’s political identity.

⁷⁵⁵ Object List, ‘Photographs, Through the Closing door gallery’, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁵⁶ Gallery Text, ‘A Liberal City?’, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁸ Object List, Photographs of Bengali families protesting against poor living conditions and racist violence, (1978). N12.10, N12.9. *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁵⁹ Visram, Merriman, ‘World in a City’, in Holmes, Merriman, (eds.), *Peopling*, p.22

This example was particularly salient, once again, in rooting the contemporary rise of the BNP – which was one of Merriman’s major motivations in organising the exhibition – in a longer history both of racism and resistance in the area. It called on the population to emulate this rejection of intransigent racism. This encapsulated both the wider exhibition’s recognition of a persistent, violent and structural racism with roots in colonial exploitation, and its call for a new city transformed by racial justice. In pointing to the presence and historically rooted nature of the former and calling for renewed energy in pursuit of the latter, this final gallery captured the didacticism and political imperatives of the entire exhibition.

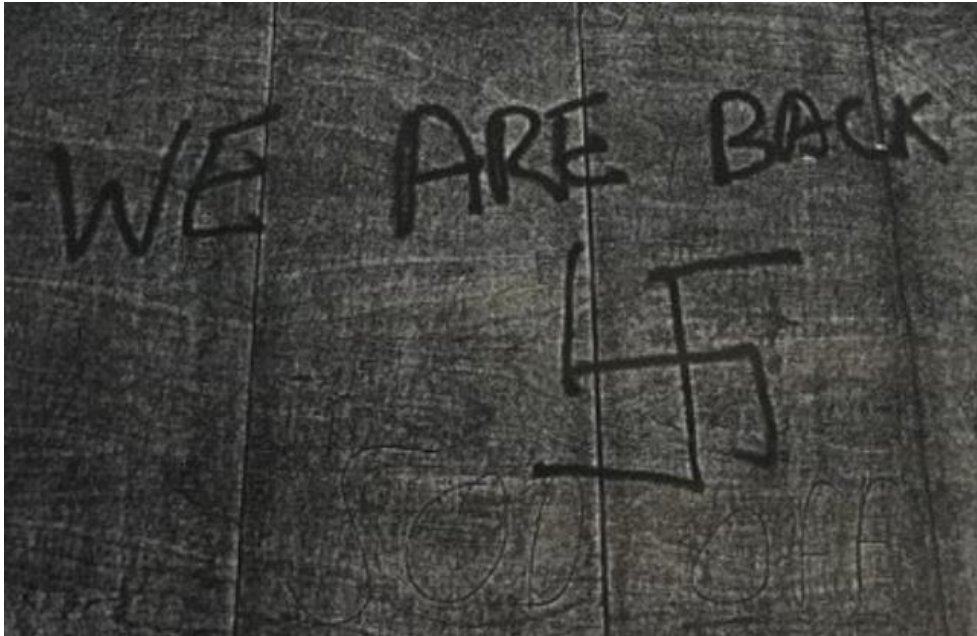


Figure 5.5: Brick Lane Graffiti, 1978.⁷⁶⁰

The exhibition concluded with one final panel, ‘The End and The Beginning’, which read: ‘remember – your ticket is valid for three months! Please come again!’⁷⁶¹ This invitation to return was accompanied by a listing of the wider calendar of events accompanying the exhibition, facilitating a deeper engagement with the histories and cultures of particular communities and providing their members with a more sustained connection to the museum’s activities. These included lectures, conferences, historic walks, workshops, dance, music and poetry performances. (The exhibition guide, meanwhile, was translated into Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Mandarin and Cantonese, Arabic, Greek, Spanish and Polish.⁷⁶²) These events were mostly structured as ‘focus weeks’ which grouped together activities on particular

⁷⁶⁰ Photograph from Brick Lane, Whitechapel, April 1978, n12.2. *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁶¹ Gallery text, ‘The End and the Beginning’, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁶² Press Release, ‘Peopling’, May 1993, MOL.

groups including Cypriots (11th–16th January, 1994), the Jewish community (25th–30th March), Chinese focus week (8th–13th February), Arabic focus week (16th–20th February), the Irish (8th–13th March), African and Caribbean focus week (29th March – 3rd April) and South Asian focus week (10th – 15th May).⁷⁶³ Such events have since become widespread components of large exhibitions. But in 1993 they constituted innovative features of museum work, designed to maximise individual communities' access to and participation in the exhibition, as well as the depth of the MOL's coverage of their histories. There were, moreover, signs of enthusiastic participation in focus week events. The British edition of the Pakistani newspaper *The Daily Awaz* celebrated the South Asian focus week, noting that a Bengali folk music group, Indian film director, and Pakistani community groups had all contributed harmoniously to its delivery.⁷⁶⁴ Here the MOL was instrumental in reshaping professional, 'elite' museums as spaces which foregrounded South Asian narratives and South Asian contribution to those narratives, although Chapter Six of this thesis will show Bengali community groups framing their struggles for autonomy in opposition to Pakistan. *Peopling* created space for engagement with the histories of racialised and colonised peoples, though communities would later themselves revise these histories' narratives.

These successes were propelled in part by the Museum's increased commercialisation, and specifically its enhanced marketing capacity. This was evident in a sustained advertising campaign in what Merriman referred to as the 'ethnic press' and on billboards in previously neglected areas.⁷⁶⁵ These efforts were effective in increasing exposure to the exhibition's narrative, helping to reach an unusually large and diverse audience. 94,350 visitors saw the exhibition during its run, an increase of approximately 50% on *Purple, White and Green*, the previous temporary exhibition on the suffragettes. 20% of visitors were from ethnic minorities, an increase of 800% on *Purple, White and Green*.⁷⁶⁶ The returns brought by these approaches were also evident in the catalogue, which sold out its first print run of 3,500 before entering a second edition.⁷⁶⁷ The MOL's embrace of commercial logic was instrumental in both incorporating migration narratives into their work *and* maximising the exhibition and wider program of events' audience.

Yet it remains insufficient to point to the diversification of exhibition narratives as evidence of a comprehensive shift in imperial memory. Studying *Peopling*'s reception reveals a more complex and multifaceted audience response, with many contesting the relationship depicted between Empire, migration and racism. The *Peopling* archive contains clippings of newspaper reports and several visitors'

⁷⁶³ MOL, *Peopling Evaluation*, p.25, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁶⁴ South Asian Communities Help', *Daily Awaz International*, (28th Oct, 1993), *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁶⁵ Merriman, 'Hidden History', p.15

⁷⁶⁶ MOL, *Peopling Evaluation*, p.40, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁶⁷ Aylett, *Legacies*, 126

books, which include approximately 1000 pages of responses. This analysis is based on a sample of two hundred of those pages, a smaller number of responses cited in Aylett's *Legacies of an Imperial City*, and archived press clippings. Most visitors' responses were short, between one and three words. Most often these indicated general approval, sometimes indifference. But the visitor books also saw significant and multifaceted discussion of the exhibitions. Many visitors enthusiastically endorsed *Peopling's* narratives of London's fundamental hybridity and migrants' positive contributions. One, for instance, wrote: 'very informative, it just shows that there are no "foreigners" in London but that at one time or another we all were, and are the better for it now.'⁷⁶⁸ Activist and academic publications of the left also endorsed the exhibition. In *History Workshop Journal* Sylvia Collicot heralded *Peopling* as 'the first time a major museum in London had addressed the truly multicultural history of London life'.⁷⁶⁹ The anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight*, too, championed the exhibition as a challenge to the contemporary rise of the BNP.⁷⁷⁰

A vocal minority of visitors rejected the exhibition's message in overtly racialised ways. One called *Peopling* 'biased in terms of ... Black immigration'.⁷⁷¹ Another asked for 'a more balanced viewpoint' incorporating 'the indigenous population', pointedly ignoring the exhibition's central argument: that London's population was always protean and hybrid.⁷⁷² A third called the exhibition 'complacent', arguing

the rapid illegal immigration from non-Western countries is putting a heavy load on schools, welfare services, and (look at the statistics) prisons. For example, the teachers in Eardley Road Primary School in Streatham – see colour photograph at the end of the exhibition – are not likely to have given as much attention to the British children as they are from non-Western cultures, with all their learning problems.⁷⁷³

This visitor identified a complacency within the exhibition's celebration of diversity in schools, identifying a strain on the state's resources from the 'problems' brought by 'cultures' who seemed irreconcilably different and perhaps inherently deviant. It drew on a long current of white anxiety, at the level both of policy and parental opinion, about the threats multiracial schooling posed to white

⁷⁶⁸ Visitor books, (np), *Peopling*, MOL,

⁷⁶⁹ Collicot, 'Peopling', p.261

⁷⁷⁰ Katherine Cracknell, 'Because I'm a Londoner', *Searchlight*, (Nov, 1993), pp.50-51. *Peopling* press cuttings, MOL.

⁷⁷¹ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.168

⁷⁷² *Ibid*, p.264

⁷⁷³ *Ibid*.

schoolchildren through a reduction of standards and a more nebulous cultural disintegration.⁷⁷⁴ This criticism reflected a larger, contemporary panic – propagated too by politicians and the press - about the dangers which multiculturalism posed to services and the majority culture.⁷⁷⁵ Indeed, these criticism chimed with one review in the *Daily Telegraph*, which called *Peopling* ‘too politically correct’, lamenting that while ‘Africans and East End Jews get a lot of space’, white American, Scottish and Welsh Londoners received scant treatment.⁷⁷⁶ For some visitors and the *Telegraph*, *Peopling* symbolised a larger liberalism which gave preferential treatment to minorities, corroding the boundaries of the national community and compromising the welfare state which existed to serve it.

Yet many visitors’ responses also had a specifically local character. The above discussion of schools suggests that particular visitors’ complaints about the exhibitions’ multicultural message were informed by their understanding of migration being the cause of strain on their immediate surroundings and local services. These arguments about entitlement to services and space were central to the political narrative contemporaneously delivering the BNP significant electoral gains in the East End. Other visitors also engaged with these developments more closely and directly, using the exhibition as a means to signal their support for the far-right in more explicit terms by sympathetically referencing racist graffiti photographed in the exhibition. One wrote: ‘Keep Britain White? What a hope!’, while another asked “Why is ‘Keep Britain White’ described as racist?”.⁷⁷⁷ While Merriman intended the exhibition as a means to challenge the historical narratives which underwrote the BNP’s contemporary success, intransigent visitors rejected this message, indicating their support for the arguments of far-right graffiti photographed in the exhibition. In this sense, they rejected the exhibition’s didactic message, indicating their support for far-right politics in a context in which the BNP was once more ascendant. Yet these entries did not go unchallenged. One visitor responded with an anti-racist slogan, also photographed in the exhibition, in reply: “‘GET RACISTS OUT OF BRITAIN’ WILL BE A REALITY ONE DAY’. Another voiced their disagreement more simply: ‘You wanker.’⁷⁷⁸ The visitor books, then, saw the reproduction of confrontational debates between racists and anti-racists depicted within the exhibition, drawing on the exhibition’s own source material. They became one arena of a wider cultural debate about immigration, liberal multiculturalism and ‘political correctness’, then raging throughout London and culminating in the nationally infamous election of the BNP councillor, Derek Beackon, to Tower Hamlets

⁷⁷⁴ Paul Gilroy, Errol Lawrence, ‘Two Tone Britain: Black Youth, White Youth and the Cultural Politics of Anti-racist Sensibility’, in Philip Cohen, Harwant Bains, (eds.), *Multi-racist Britain: New Directions in Theory and Practice*, (Basingstoke, 1988), pp.134-140

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁶ Leslie Geddes-Brown’s *Telegraph* review quoted in *Freedom* magazine, (Feb 1994), pp.6-7. *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁷⁷ Visitor books, (np), *Peopling*, MOL,

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Council. Through some visitors' rejection and contestation of the exhibition's central message, we can see that the parameters of imperial memory moved slowly, incrementally and onerously.

Others criticised the exhibition's insufficient attention to the specificities of particular communities' experiences. One seemed to critique the reductive treatment of racialised people's identities and the distinct postcolonial identities which subsequently emerged: 'Why am I a "South Asian"? OR am I an Indian, Bengali or whatever?'. This suggests that the grouping together of the entire Indian subcontinent led to an elision of the complex regional and national identities contained within that category and the histories of the postcolonial states which succeeded the Raj. Other visitors appeared to critique *Peopling's* sanitisation of migration history. One entry asked why there was no record of the 'Irish Traveller' population or 'gypsies' despite the fact that they had been 'in London for 100 years now'.⁷⁷⁹ The exhibition, then, not only elided Britain's exploitation of Ireland and racialisation of Irish migrants but its sanitised narrative of 'contributions to Britain' led to an obfuscation of Irish Travellers and other groups, such as Romani people, who had similar histories and remained heavily stigmatised. *Peopling's* openly didactic tone, then, made its message of the centrality of Empire to contemporary British multiculturalism clear and direct, prompting some to respond strongly and positively to it. But it also led to elisions of significant dimensions of imperial history and the sanitisation of some migration history, including the racism faced by Romanis, travellers, Jews and the Irish.

After *Peopling*, 1994-2008

Peopling provided curators at the MOL with the means to reform their approach to objects and collecting, and to reimagine exhibition narratives. The museum began by commissioning an evaluation of *Peopling* by an independent consultant Sara Selwood and a team from the University of East London's New Ethnicities unit, headed by Bill Schwarz and located within the university's cultural studies department. Named for Stuart Hall's influential essay of the previous decade, the unit emulated Hall's celebration of new formations within culture which moved beyond a unified and flattening 'Blackness' towards a variety of 'new' identities or 'ethnicities' marked by cultural and historic specificity. Respect for these differences, Hall reckoned, need not have an atomising effect, but could be the basis for a deepened mutual understanding between activists and a genuine solidarity.⁷⁸⁰ Not only was there a general congruence between *Peopling's* narrative and this development within Black intellectual life, but the Museum's specific commissioning of this unit suggested they were actively and critically reflecting on

⁷⁷⁹ Visitor books, (np), *Peopling*, MOL,

⁷⁸⁰ Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in David Morley, Chen Kuan-Hsing, (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (New York, 1996), pp.442-451

their practice through dialogue with leading figures in critical postcolonial scholarship within the contemporary academy.

More, Schwarz's foreword was explicit about the exhibition's implications in relation to the changing politics of race and nation in Britain. *Peopling*, he noted, emerged within a climate marked by ongoing ferment in Northern Ireland, debates over Europe, the Tebbit test, and Conservative changes to the national curriculum. Yet, simultaneously, London was the starkest example of the process whereby 'the imagined frontiers of the British nation – its coastline [...] – can no longer function as an effective, believable boundary, separating the British from "the rest".' Rather, London showed that 'these external changes are lived inside domestic culture' and 'in our own interior imaginations'. While 'for the British, collective memory is shot through with ethnic identifications', any notion of 'the English island race', stretching 'back to the mists of time' had 'precious little affiliation' for much of Britain's population.⁷⁸¹ For Schwarz then, *Peopling* carried high stakes. It sought nothing less than the rewriting of the national past to demonstrate the enduring presence and profound contributions of those whose presence was wrongly thought novel. In doing so, it aimed for radically new, just and durable conceptions of the national community. While Schwarz noted that the exhibition had flaws, he praised curators. They had instigated 'a process: questions which have been forced into the open here' would not be easily obscured again.⁷⁸² The Museum was then, not only reflecting on and developing their work in conjunction with radical, postcolonial scholarship. It was also touted by thinkers within that tradition as contributing directly to the kind of cultural reckoning with exclusionary conceptions of history which were necessary to confront contemporary racism.

The connection between the Museum's desire to enhance its relationship with London's migrant populations and its increasingly commercialised approach to its operations only strengthened after *Peopling*. The evaluation's 'Executive Summary' reiterated the earlier justification of the exhibition in relation to the DNH and London Museum Board's anxieties about the museum's poor market appeal and its exclusion of ethnic minorities.⁷⁸³ While the document was, then, a remarkable indicator of the MOL's new commitment to radically reframing British history, it also corroborates the influence of the marketising context on this project. More, as commercial success and accessibility were increasingly intertwined in governmental thinking, this logic was baked into the codes which governed the MOL. The Museum's 1997-8 funding agreement with the DNH made continued government aid contingent on

⁷⁸¹ Bill Schwarz, 'Introduction', in Schwarz, Sarah Selwood, Merriman, *The Peopling of London, an Evaluation*, (London, 1997), pp.4-5, *Peopling*, MOL.

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*

⁷⁸³ 'Executive Summary', in Sarah Selwood, Merriman, *The Peopling of London, an Evaluation*, (London, 1997), p.11, *Peopling*, MOL.

adherence to the DNH's aims to 'encourage quality and diversity in creative and leisure activities', to 'extend opportunities to enjoy and appreciate rewarding leisure activities' and to 'promote the contribution all of DNH's sectors make to national prosperity and prestige'.⁷⁸⁴ These guidelines framed creative excellence as one of the major rewards of the museum's pursuit of increased diversity, while the significance of both lay in no small part in their contributions to rejuvenated urban economies. In pursuing these goals, the Museum agreed to aim to increase its annual visitors from 270,000 (1996-7) to 300,000 (1997-8), agreeing to quotas to better measure its improved market performance.⁷⁸⁵ This annual agreement was passed by Major's Conservative government shortly before their election loss in May. Yet the pursuit and increasing intertwining of accessibility, excellence and commercial acumen continued in the 1998-9 Funding Agreement after New Labour restyled the DNH as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).⁷⁸⁶

The Museum also sought to improve practice by addressing the exhibition's weaknesses. Because *Peopling* offered an overview of migration history, seeking to shift the paradigm around an entire topic, MOL staff reflected it gave only brief treatment to the histories of individual migrant communities and the sites of their origins. Both the evaluation and visitors identified this as a major flaw of the exhibition.⁷⁸⁷ The exhibition's catalogue was also skewed towards white former settler colonies and Europeans, while – as I have suggested - focus weeks such as 'South Asian' week often grouped together 'communities' from vast areas with diffuse experiences and, in some cases, historical antipathy.⁷⁸⁸ Merriman himself also retrospectively acknowledged the exhibition's 'reluctance to dwell on the less positive aspects of the immigrant experience.'⁷⁸⁹ Here we see the Museum as an institution seeking to acknowledging the elisions and simplifications of the histories of colonial exploitation and metropolitan racism which formed one of the major flaws of *Peopling's* narrative. 'Empire' was not overall conceived as a variety of politically and historically specific territories, but served an ancillary role in reframing a history which remained centred on the capital. While the history of postcolonial migration was important to the exhibition's narrative of the formation of London, details of particular communities remained cursory and their stories largely began at the point of arrival.

⁷⁸⁴ DNH; MOL, *Funding Agreement Between the Department of National Heritage and the Museum of London, 1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998*, (London, 1998), p.1

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸⁶ DCMS; MOL, *Funding Agreement Between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Museum of London, 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999*, (London, 1999), p.1.

⁷⁸⁷ Schwarz in Selwood, Merriman, *Peopling Evaluation*, p.4

⁷⁸⁸ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.137

⁷⁸⁹ Merriman, 'Hidden History', 15

Yet the MOL remained committed to strengthening its collaborations to provide communities of colour with greater prominence in and influence over MOL exhibition narratives and greater resources across the capital's museums. Although within the exhibition, detail on individual communities was often spare, the evaluation noted that much of the 'groundbreaking work' involved was conducted in direct collaboration with smaller museums who had already developed closer relationships with their constituent communities.⁷⁹⁰ This provided local partner institutions including Newham, Tower Hamlets and Hackney local history departments, the Black Cultural Archives, Bishopsgate Institute and the Jewish Museum with the connections, narratives and resources to continue their progressive collecting, exhibiting and collaborating practice.⁷⁹¹ The museum's director Max Hebditch touted this as part of a wider cultural change, whereby the museum would actively collaborate with these communities, learning from them in developing practice.⁷⁹² The 'Museum on the Move' project continued throughout the 1990s to engage Londoners outside of the Museum's premises, develop connections in individual local areas and collect oral histories. The entrance hall space which hosted many of *Peopling's* focus week activities became the permanent site of exhibitions designed and curated by heritage groups from particular communities.⁷⁹³

It was through this initiative that, in 2006, the MOL invited the Swadhinata Trust to host an exhibition based on their major oral history project 'Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain'.⁷⁹⁴ While *Peopling's* treatment of British Bengali history was brief and ancillary to the primary narrative of London's imperial status, Chapter Six of this thesis will show that the Swadhinata Trust (ST) made Bengalis central actors in a history of the late and post-imperial British world. More, while *Peopling* granted one 'focus week' for the entire South Asian subcontinent, the ST's work - which the MOL here amplified and supported - was characterised by an attentiveness to these specificities. The injustices of the fate of Bengal in partition, and its exploitative rule by Pakistan for 24 years thereafter, were central to their work. Here, we once again see a direct collaboration between 'elite' and 'community' heritage projects to re-centre migrant narratives in the making of modern London. The Museum's critical practice and its desire to meaningfully democratise, informed by reflection and collaboration with scholars, activists and racialised communities led it to provide the institutional space for exhibitions which addressed *Peopling's* shortcomings, foregrounding migrants in a reformulated, and critically postcolonial, narrative of British history.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p.14

⁷⁹¹ 'Acknowledgements', in Merriman, Holmes, (eds.), *Peopling*, frontmatter, np

⁷⁹² Selwood, Merriman, *Peopling Evaluation*, p.16, *Peopling*, MOL

⁷⁹³ Hebditch, 'Preface', in Merriman, Holmes, (eds.), *Peopling*, x MOL.

⁷⁹⁴ Ruth Thomson (former MOL archivist), Personal correspondence with the author.

Yet the effects of these initiatives on the wider Museum were limited by significant managerial resistance and scepticism. For much of the 1990s, Aylett notes, Merriman remained concerned about the Museum's willingness to integrate these developments into its overall planning and mission.⁷⁹⁵ While the MOL accompanied 'Museum on the Move' and the foyer exhibitions with annual Black History Month displays, it did not substantively reconsider the tone or approach of the overall temporary exhibition calendar, permanent galleries or collecting initiatives. Much of this derived from management scepticism. Shortly after celebrating a 'culture shift' at the Museum around collaboration, Hebditch warned of 'tension between perfectly valid but presentationally third-rate exhibitions' by 'amateurs' and 'the sort of high-class exhibition techniques that we normally apply'. In the same piece, Hebditch worried about the implications of the MOL veering too much towards becoming a 'community museum' and losing its status as a 'museum of national significance' in competition with the likes of the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert.⁷⁹⁶

If Hebditch remained concerned about the erosion of relative prestige and standards for a more collaborative and democratic practice, his deputy Valerie Cumming worried that the museum risked jeopardising its 'apolitical' message and attendant respectability if it persisted 'ramming' a 'political message... down people's throats'. Cumming continued by likening visitors of colour to the enthusiasts and 'ladies who lunch' who had briefly earlier become regulars at the museum for the duration of an exhibition on jewellery.⁷⁹⁷ Here, the Museum's deputy director framed the representation of the city's foundational diversity as the goal of amateur hobbyists, both equivalent to other novel and esoteric pursuits and antithetical to the functioning of a 'neutral' or 'professional' museum. Merriman noted that Cumming remained the major barrier of an expansion of work on race and migration. He linked this to her early career in the MOL's predecessor, the London Museum, and commitment to its 'fairly exclusive... focus on old pictures of London... [and] the Royal Family'.⁷⁹⁸ Cumming's specialism was costume and textiles. Here we see the conservative culture discussed in Chapter One, inherited from the MOL's predecessors and reinforced by its collections, retaining some residual influence in the 1990s.

This commitment to an ostensible neutrality led practically to a reproduction of the same celebratory, nationalistic framing of London's eighteenth and nineteenth-century history. A 1995 Museum guidebook foregrounded 'the commercial city' and 'industry', narratives which were - as chapter three of this thesis showed - still then fomenting nostalgia for the engineering ingenuity and gentlemanly

⁷⁹⁵ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.178

⁷⁹⁶ Hebditch, 'Preface', in Selwood, Merriman, *Peopling Evaluation*, p.4

⁷⁹⁷ Selwood, Merriman, *Peopling Evaluation*, p.46

⁷⁹⁸ Merriman, Interview with the author.

commerce of the port.⁷⁹⁹ The guidebook obscured the more immediately violent aspects of this history through euphemism, referring to Britain's growing presence in West Africa in the Early Modern period vaguely as an 'expansion of trade'.⁸⁰⁰ Throughout the late 1990s, then, museum managers viewed even the piecemeal and often marginal implementation of some of the approaches pioneered in *Peopling* as threatening to reduce standards and diminish prestige. This delayed an extension of the exhibition's critical eye into the Museum's wider narratives and collections, facilitating the continued obfuscation of imperial violence and exploitation within the Museum's celebratory narratives.

Yet the later 1990s brought the beginnings of greater institutional change throughout the museum. A community officer was appointed in 1996 to build institutional capacity to further develop relationships with the broader public. Two years later, Simon Thurley replaced Hebditch as director, prioritising the dissemination of the ideas and practices developed in *Peopling*.⁸⁰¹ In 2004 the MOL published *Reassessing What We Collect*, a document which encouraged curators to think more critically about the relationship of prospective acquisitions to, among other things, London's imperial history. Here the MOL's approach to objects continued to develop; the collaborative and consensual borrowing of objects for *Peopling* developed into a wider and more critical consciousness of the role objects played in reinforcing colonial epistemologies or otherwise facilitating the maintenance of exploitative social relations.⁸⁰² More, a series of temporary exhibitions drew heavily on the narratives, networks and collections developed around *Peopling*. *Windrush: Sea Change* (1998) critiqued Britain's underdevelopment of the Caribbean, recontextualizing post-war migration through colonial misgovernance and imperial free movement. *Out of India* (2007), meanwhile, considered the relationship between the Raj and post-war mass migration, emphasizing the cultural contribution made by Indian migrants to post-imperial Britain.⁸⁰³ Changes to the permanent displays were more ambiguous. In 2001, the MOL refitted the entire modern galleries, including the installation for the first time of a post-war gallery which carried a strong emphasis on migration and cultural diversity.⁸⁰⁴ Yet curators from the early Museum In Docklands (MID) project who remained in position and gained promotions to influential positions since also worked on the refurbishment. They brought to it the same antiquarian tendency to marvel at the scale and technical prowess of London's industry, reproducing that narrative's nationalistic undertones. Alex Werner, an early MID curator who had become senior curator for the MOL's nineteenth century collections, told *History Today* that the new 1789-1914 'World City' gallery charted a period

⁷⁹⁹ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.185

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰¹ Cathy Ross, Hedley Swain, *Museum of London, 25 Years: 1976-2001*, (London, 2001), p.24

⁸⁰² Aylett, *Legacies*, p.185

⁸⁰³ Thomson, Private correspondence.

⁸⁰⁴ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.184

when ‘London became the first great metropolis of the industrial age, a city with a globally dominant economy, and the financial and commercial capital of an expanding empire’.⁸⁰⁵ Here, tension again emerged between curators working on different aspects of the same redesign. While the discrimination and disadvantage migrants faced were central to the post-war galleries, the earlier histories of imperialism and industrialised extraction which underwrote them were still viewed wistfully. Older approaches to curation, and their more nostalgic interpretations of London’s imperial history, remained influential in this period.

Werner’s old colleague at the MID, Chris Ellmers, oversaw the implementation of a markedly similar framing in the first permanent galleries of the Museum of London, Docklands following its opening on independent premises in 2003. Its galleries, ‘The Coming of the Docks’, ‘Sailortown 1840-1850’, ‘First Port of Empire’ and ‘Warehouse of the World 1840-1939’, carried the same basic narrative as the pair’s earlier work on the MID and the wider MOL’s narration of the Victorian port from its first permanent galleries in 1976, as shown in chapters one and three. They offered a narrative in which engineering genius brought industrialisation on a scale which was at once awe-inspiring and impressively intricate. London became a hub for both vast and exotic riches and licentious orientalist sailors. Together, these characteristics reified a vision of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century zenith of the major port of the world’s largest and most technologically advanced imperium. More, events at the Museum in the first quarter of 2004 rooted this vision in the resourceful genius of great Victorian men. Ellmers gave a series of lectures focusing on the minutiae of engineering processes, while Mike Chimes of the Institute of Civil Engineers visited on the 26th February to give a lecture titled ‘Haste Pregnant with Risks: Telford and the Construction of St Katharine Docks’. Advertising for the lecture promised to discuss how the project ‘taxed [Telford’s] powers as a designer and as a project manager’.⁸⁰⁶ Once again, these technical, almost antiquarian aspects of the narrative combined to frame these industrialists’ genius and innate character as the cornerstone of the (imperial) nation’s strength. Here, the influences of these established curators’ older narratives and curatorial approaches was great, persisting well beyond the 1970s and 1980s, into the new millennium. Shifts in the presentation of Empire were contested, slow, and uneven.

David Spence’s move from the National Maritime Museum following his appointment as director in 2005, however, was a significant turning point. Spence’s clear desire to engage more critically and comprehensively with the port’s imperial history marked a break with the MOLD’s existing account of the port’s working history. This new turn in direction was financially supported, or ‘authorised’, through

⁸⁰⁵ Werner quoted in Aylett, *Legacies*, p.184

⁸⁰⁶ ‘Museum of London Docklands flyer’, Tower Hamlets Local History Library Archive (TH), Doc:748

the large quantities of funding – (£16 million nationwide) – made available from various DCMS funds for projects marking the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. The MOLD was awarded £506,500 from the proceeds of the Heritage Lottery Fund and a further £230,000 from the arts and urban regeneration initiative Renaissance in the Regions.⁸⁰⁷

Given this funding support, the Museum once again chose to develop their exhibition through collaboration with scholars. The MOLD's curatorial team, led by Caroline Bressey and Tom Wareham, recruited a consultative group to advise on the historical and political implications of different approaches to the history of London's Docklands and colonial slave ownership. Their members included the historians Hakim Adi and Catherine Hall, the scholar, heritage practitioner and former advisor to the government of South Africa, June Bam-Hutchinson, and the actor Burt Caesar.⁸⁰⁸ Wareham noted that museum staff envisioned the group as 'an advisory body to whom we could turn for help and advice' as well as 'an audience who could react to what we were doing', offering unreserved and critical feedback on the exhibition in development. Through this method, the MOLD aimed to 'transcend boundaries between the intellectual, the creative, the professional and the experiential'. Crucial, here, was the fact that 'the group included those who were the direct descendants of enslaved Africans', whose 'life experiences often jarred with established historical narratives', and whose 'interpretations' must retain 'absolute... equal weight'.⁸⁰⁹

When mounted, *London Sugar and Slavery* replaced 'The Coming of the Docks', recontextualising its narrative of nineteenth-century industrialisation by positioning it within the political, commercial and social histories of Transatlantic slavery. The entrance of the gallery featured a list of ships that traded from the West India docks, pre-empting a passage discussing the mutual flows of capital and goods between financiers in the Square Mile, slavers in the Caribbean colonies and consumers in Britain. Then, the gallery noted the redistribution of much of this wealth and post-abolition compensation to help shape the politics, economics and culture of the Victorian metropole. It detailed the systematised brutality and violence upon which this was built and established genealogies between racial discourses which emerged in commentary on the slave trade and contemporary cultural presentations of Black British people.⁸¹⁰ The reconciliation of such an overview of slavery's structural legacies with an equal emphasis on the more immediate, visceral forms of violence and brutality during the trade was important

⁸⁰⁷ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.196

⁸⁰⁸ Caroline Bressey, Tom Wareham, *Reading the London, Sugar and Slavery Gallery*, (London, 2010), frontmatter, np.

⁸⁰⁹ David Spence, 'Making the London, Sugar and Slavery Gallery at the Museum in London, Docklands', in Laurajane Smith, Geoffrey Cubitt, Ross Wilson, Kalliopi Fouseki, (eds.), *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums*, (Abingdon, 2011), p.153

⁸¹⁰ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.200

to the consultative group.⁸¹¹ As such, at twenty minute intervals, the gallery lights lowered for a three minute sound and light show, playing ‘powerful images’ over the gallery walls. A voiceover described in ‘imperious tones’ the experiences of the enslaved: ‘Your children will be taken away from you; you will be beaten; you will not keep your own name’.⁸¹² Both the general role of colonial slave ownership in the making of nineteenth-century Britain, and the particular details of brutality, were then highlighted in a narrative of mutual but deeply unequal exchange. Bressey and Wareham wrote of their ambition that in offering ‘a cohesive and inclusive history that explains how Britain’s colonial past has shaped society today’, *London, Sugar and Slavery* would make a ‘vital’ contribution ‘to our wellbeing as a community’.⁸¹³



Figure 5.6: George Hibbert, portrait by Thomas Lawrence, 1811.⁸¹⁴

⁸¹¹ Spence, ‘Making London, Sugar and Slavery’, p.157

⁸¹² *Ibid.*

⁸¹³ Bressey, Wareham, *Reading London, Sugar and Slavery*, p.7

⁸¹⁴ Thomas Lawrence, ‘Portrait of George Hibbert, Oil on Canvas’, (1811). Museum of London, Docklands online catalogue, PLA2. Accessed at <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/726143.html>, 1st April, 2022.

The exhibition also marked the culmination of the MOL's longer reevaluation of its collections, collecting policy and premises. For *London, Sugar and Slavery*, the MOLD acquired the papers of Thomas and John Mills, plantation owners in St Kitts and Nevis. These included letter books and journals which provided a visceral account of the conditions of the enslaved in the British Caribbean during the 1760s and 1770s.⁸¹⁵ The exhibition also saw the MOLD reframe its portrait of the merchant and slave-trader George Hibbert (**figure 5.8**). As discussed in Chapter Two, the MID had in the 1980s secured the portrait on permanent loan from the Port of London Authority, the successor company of the West India Dock Company which Hibbert himself established to aid shipping between the slave-owning colonies and the metropole. In the 1989 exhibition *The Lord Mayor, The City, and the River*, MID curators employed this painting in a manner which reproduced its original intentions of celebrating the illustrious, patrician merchants who brought about London's industrialisation. Yet hanging the painting again in *London, Sugar and Slavery*, the MOLD critiqued this narrative and their own earlier work. In this context, they presented the painting's image of mercantile benevolence as obscuring a deep, centuries-long investment in the brutality and extraction of colonial slave-ownership. More, this display also brought a direct and explicit confrontation with the history of the building itself. A publication accompanying the exhibition noted that the museum's premises in a former West India Docks warehouse were 'once stacked with hogsheads of sugar that was grown, cut, ground and boiled by enslaved men, women and children. The building was literally a cog in the machinery of slavery, its owners the merchants and absentee plantation landlords who harvested profits from the suffering of others.'⁸¹⁶ Here, the more critical, research-led approach to the colonial lineages of objects, pioneered in *Peopling* and theorised in *Reassessing What We Collect* helped curators reframe the narrative of the permanent displays. The museum highlighted its objects and premises' active role in documenting plantation violence, deifying slave-owners and housing the bounty of the trade. This restitutive move aimed to redress the museum's earlier failings on the issue.

Again however, the narrative's reception was more complex, and often marked by visitors' resistance. In 2007, Laurajane Smith conducted an analysis of 1498 interviews at eight bicentenary exhibitions including *London, Sugar and Slavery*. In the resulting article, she argued that the white British reception of the bicentenary was 'dominated' by emotional avoidance and disengagement. Many, Smith wrote, refused to understand themselves as personally connected to the history of colonial slave-ownership or to connect 'the deeper issues of continuing social injustice' to 'Britain's exploitation of Africa and its peoples'. Asked *whose history this was*, only 11% of Smith's respondents said 'British' or

⁸¹⁵ Aylett, *Legacies*, p.200

⁸¹⁶ Bressey, Wareham, *Reading London, Sugar and Slavery*, p.7

‘English’ history. 14% said that of the slave trade, and 18% said ‘African’. 43% said ‘everybody’s’.⁸¹⁷ I do not share Smith’s conviction that the response ‘everybody’s history’ should necessarily be interpreted as a disavowal any more than an acknowledgement of the trade’s global nature. More starkly, however, when asked ‘What message does an exhibition like this have for modern Britain’, 4.1% responded by indicating a connection with racism and 6.3% with multiculturalism more broadly. Smith interprets this as evidence of the pervasiveness of the Authorised Heritage Discourse, arguing that visitors could only imagine Britain as either isolated from a remote trade or as benevolently granting emancipation. For Smith, ‘the extent to which some visitors to these museums were attempting to insulate themselves from perceived negative emotions is a function of the inability of the AHD [Authorised Heritage Discourse] to provide the intellectual and emotional tools necessary to engage with dissonant and controversial histories and heritage.’⁸¹⁸ Much academic commentary on reactionary cultural responses to the 2007 bicentenary, more widely, has also employed this Foucauldian method of discourse analysis to conceptualise resistance to critical historical narratives of the slave trade.⁸¹⁹

In one sense, Smith’s study of reception facilitates an attentiveness to a wider range of participants than is possible under her framework of the Authorised Heritage Discourse’s usual focus on the monumental and the elite. But Smith and other scholars’ Foucauldian framework, conceiving visitors as passive subjects of an elite discourse, mischaracterises the nature of the encounter between their conceptions of history and that of the museum. *London, Sugar and Slavery* shows that nationalist myths were not solely being disseminated by privileged ‘expert’ voices and accepted and reproduced by the wider population. Rather, the MOLD was producing critical interpretations of the national past, while some visitors - participating in a wider cultural reaction against this work after the bicentenary - were contesting them. Visitors’ rejection of the exhibition’s critical narrative suggest the need to conceive of the production of memory in more complex terms than is possible under the method of Foucauldian discourse analysis. Imperial memory was messy, fragmented, and contested by some visitors.

One visitor to *London, Sugar and Slavery* lamented the exhibition’s stated aim to avoid using offensive language:

⁸¹⁷ Laurajane Smith, ‘“Man’s Inhumanity to Man” and Other Platitudes of Avoidance and Misrecognition: an Analysis of Visitor Responses to Exhibitions Marking the 1807 Bicentenary’, *Museum and Society*, 8, (3, 2010), p.193-4

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.207.

⁸¹⁹ See, for instance, Emma Waterton, Ross Wilson, ‘Talking the Talk: Policy, Popular and Media Responses to the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade using the ‘Abolition Discourse’, *Discourse and Society*, 20, (3, 2009), pp.381-399.

Just in case you and yours have not realised it, we are a quarter of a century behind the supposedly epoch-changing world of George Orwell's 1984 where double-speak was the order of the day. Or I suppose, perhaps I need to be corrected there by reference to what we have experienced for well over a decade under this barren 'New Labour' thing.⁸²⁰

Another noted:

This museum up to now has been very interesting and informing. It is wrong that we should apologise for something that happened in a previous life. It is also wrong that we should have 'politically correct [messages]' thrust upon us in this way. Whoever compiled this museum should keep politics out of it.⁸²¹

And a third:

What is done is done. End. As a white person- you must respect what this country does for you and become English In Your Soul [sic].⁸²²

These visitors identified the censorious and harmful effects of the museum's efforts to present the narrative without derogatory language, or to highlight connections between British modernity and colonial slave ownership. With varying degrees of explicitness, all three visitors drew a connection between the exhibition and the multiculturalism of the 2000s. They framed it, specifically, within a wider political and institutional attempt to censure the national past and in doing so, question the sanctity and benevolence of the nation. While the second comment's critique of 'political correctness' can again be read as a rejection of the pride in multiculturalism which marked the early New Labour years, the third appeared tinged by what Les Back et al, following 9/11, called the 'return to assimilationism'.⁸²³ As Emma Waterton and Ross Wilson note, these themes were also prominent in political and journalistic responses to the bicentenary, a factor which likely influenced these responses.⁸²⁴ As I showed in Chapter Four of this thesis, pride in imperial history was also an important aspect of local white working-class identities, expressed in vernacular culture on the Isle of Dogs neighbouring the MOLD, for much of the previous century. Gauging the motivations for the response to *London, Sugar and Slavery* is impossible given the limited number of visitor responses available. But such a project should be as attentive to the

⁸²⁰ Spence, 'Making London, Sugar and Slavery', p.159

⁸²¹ Brassey, Wareham, *Reading London, Sugar and Slavery*, p.40

⁸²² *Ibid.*

⁸²³ Les Back, Michael Keith, Azra Khan, Kalbir Shukra, John Solomos, 'The Return of Assimilationism: Race, Multiculturalism and New Labour', *Sociological Research Online*, 7, (2, 2002), pp.96-105

⁸²⁴ Waterton, Wilson, 'Talking the Talk', p.381

local histories shaping nearby residents' lived experiences as nationwide, journalistic or political discourses.

Moreover, *London, Sugar and Slavery* failed to deliver the long-lasting and systemic change which curators and the consultative group hoped for. Alex Werner noted the gallery's failure to consider London's relationship to imperial trade more broadly, and particularly the connections between the East End, the East India company and Tower Hamlets' large South Asian and particularly Bengali community.⁸²⁵ The necessarily partial remit of funding attached to the bicentenary was never fully equipped to stimulate an investigation into the connections between London and the wealth of imperial trade more widely. Once more, conceiving 'authorisation' as a contingent process of the provision and withdrawal of funding over time reveals that critical, postimperial histories at the MOLD were limited to key anniversaries and national initiatives. They lacked the sustained investment required to precipitate a deep-seated and comprehensive shift in practice. In 2019 MOLD staff reflected on the gallery's impact in its first decade. They noted that its presence had failed to generate a wider reconciliation with the persistence of imperial objects and colonial epistemologies within the object's collections and its curation. More, Wareham and Bressey's assertions of the need to mobilise the exhibition in pursuit of a more resilient and vibrant multiculturalism had led to little work at the museum to foment 'deeper understandings of London's historic links to slavery' and how Londoners 'still live with these legacies'.⁸²⁶ If funding was offered too sporadically and for projects too specific to precipitate a shift in exhibition narratives more broadly, neither was the promise of the exhibition converted into a more deep-seated and enduring shift in practice. Shifts in the contours of imperial memory remained partial.

Conclusion

In the late 1980s, the MOL's main site at London Wall had a shrinking, homogeneous audience. Its discussions of race and Empire veered between the celebratory and the obfuscatory. *The Peopling of London* marked a clear attempt to address these failings. It sought to promote a more dialogic and democratic approach to objects predicated on meaningful collaboration with communities. Through this, it pointed to migrants' enduring, formative and positive role in the making of modern London. It also precipitated a more critical, self-reflexive and collaborative approach to interpreting objects, which confronted their capacity to reinforce colonial and racialised mentalities. The exhibition's didactic tone occasionally led to the simplification of complex imperial histories, the understatement of aspects of metropolitan racism, and the sanitisation of histories of migration more widely. Yet slowly, these

⁸²⁵ Werner, Interview with the author.

⁸²⁶ Mellissa Bennett, Kristy Warren, 'Looking Back and Facing Forwards: Ten Years of the London, Sugar and Slavery Gallery', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 63, (1,2019), p.97

narratives and approaches contributed to the redesign of the MOL and the MOLD's permanent galleries to emphasise the foundational role of Empire in the cultural and economic making of Modern London.

This shift reveals the inadequacy of a deterministic, dichotomous view of the relationship between conservative 'authorised' heritage discourses and radical grassroots ones. It shows the need for a contingent view of the *process* of authorisation and its relationship to museum practice. Curators' incorporation of critical scholarship began with Merriman's publication of *Beyond the Glass Case*, moving through Bill Schwarz's evaluation of *Peopling*, and culminating in the development of *London, Sugar and Slavery* in conjunction with New Imperial historians. This form of practice is often framed in tension with the commercialised forms of multiculturalism which emerged in Britain from the 1990s.⁸²⁷ But curators' work persistently dovetailed with managers and cultural policy makers' intertwined pursuits of diversity, accessibility, and greater commercial success. Curators' belief in the constitutive role the Empire played in forging London repeatedly appealed to directors and policy makers keen to improve market performance and appeal to neglected populations.

Yet these exhibitions cannot be read as texts which themselves tell the triumphant story of change. Both *Peopling* and *London, Sugar and Slavery* stimulated aspirations for a renewed approach to collecting and a paradigm shift in gallery narratives. But management's hesitancy created an inertia at an institutional level, and funding opportunities' scarcity and concentration around key commemorations meant that the reworking of narratives and approaches was always partial. More, the persistence of an older antiquarian approach to curating with nationalist undertones created a dissonance between new exhibitions' emergent narratives and the simultaneous restatement of the older nationalist myths they were critiquing. These forms of imperial memory were also contested by visitors and journalists concerned that their reframing of London's past threatened a form of national disintegration. The commercialising climate of 1990s and 2000s multiculturalism 'authorised' more critical work on the formative influence of Empire on London. But it was inconsistently and insufficiently applied, as different groups within the MOL's broad organisational remit pulled in different directions simultaneously, offering diffuse and even contradictory narratives of imperial expansion and industrialisation. Working against decades of established practice and public opinion within the museum and the wider population, these curators struggled to shift the entire edifice of imperial memory within Britain at both an official and personal level.

⁸²⁷ Wemyss, 'Power to Tolerate'; Gilroy, 'Fragments'; Littler, Naidoo, 'White Past, Multicultural Present'.

Chapter Six: The Swadhinata Trust, 2000-2012

Bengalis born in Britain from the late 1980s were caught between a Bangladesh they had never personally known and a Britain which refused to accept them, truly, as its own. As Chapter Two showed, Thatcher's defeat of municipal socialism resulted in diminishing political support for many Black and Asian community organisations, accompanied more broadly by monetarism and a rise in nationalist discourse.⁸²⁸ Chapters Two and Four also showed the persistent threat of violence Bengalis faced in Hackney and Tower Hamlets throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In 2000, around 50,000 of the 160,000 Britons of Bangladeshi descent lived in Tower Hamlets. A huge 40% were unemployed; those in employment were disproportionately involved in menial and poorly paid work and under-represented in the professions.⁸²⁹

In this context, concern grew both within the Bengali community and in British culture more widely about the rise in support among young Bengalis for a conservative and politicised interpretation of Islam. The 1979 revolution in Iran and Saudi Arabia's promotion of the ideology of Wahhabism both aided the transcontinental spread of conservative religious doctrine. Rob Waters sees in these states' supranational Islamism, and their defiance of Europe and the US, an ascendent form of global postcolonial radicalism from the mid-1980s.⁸³⁰ These states' geopolitical strength and pious, ascetic cultures provided a vision of principled, effective political organisation which contrasted with the exclusionary malaise of Britain's cities. In East London during the 1990s, there were two major varieties of Islamism. The first, embodied by the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO), represented the larger, more reformist tendency. The YMO's control after 1985 of the East London Mosque gave the organisation a central community hub from which it influenced religious and academic education, the administration of state and charitable welfare to the community and the allocation of local government grants for community activities.⁸³¹ At Tower Hamlets College, Sarah Glynn notes, their 200 members 'forced the college to provide a larger prayer room, frightened students away from the disco and pressured Muslim girls to wear the *hijab*'.⁸³² The YMO worked within existing political infrastructure to gain a significant presence in the East End, which it used to promote more pious behaviour in the community, increasing identification with a conservative religious lifestyle. Groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir (commonly known as

⁸²⁸On this moment, see Gilroy, 'The End of Anti-Racism', p.72.

⁸²⁹ Danielle Lamarche, 'Shadinata Trust: Creating a Centre for Excellence in Arts, Research and Education: Feasibility Study', (December, 2000), p.6. Last Accessed, 28th January, 2023, at <https://swadhinata.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Swadhinata-Trust-Feasibility-Study-by-Danielle-Lamarche.pdf>

⁸³⁰ Waters, *Thinking Black*, pp.214-215

⁸³¹ Sarah Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion in the Bengali East End: A Political History*, (Manchester, 2014), p.177

⁸³² *Ibid*, p.187

‘Hizbt’) adopted a more militant approach. ‘Hizbt’ actively sought to work towards the establishment of a caliphate, encouraging followers to send aid to armed struggles throughout the *Ummah* (global Muslim community) and rejecting participation in British legislative politics.⁸³³ Hizbt achieved notoriety in national news given its radical slogans and leaders’ insinuation of their support for political violence, but the organisation remained fairly numerically small.⁸³⁴ Enjoying support among a minority of some of the most vocal and politically energetic young Bengalis, these political movements became infamous in the community around the turn of the century.

For many of their parents and grandparents, this moralistic, conservative politics was anathema. Their experience had convinced them that secular, progressive activism was the only route to material improvement. While first generation Bengali Britons had from the 1960s fought Pakistan’s theocratic and extractive governance of Bengal, their children joined them in activism for racial justice and autonomy over Spitalfields from the mid-1970s. As a result, many first and second-generation Bengalis viewed a politicised Islam and the National Front (NF) as analogous barriers to the global Bengali struggle for security and prosperity.⁸³⁵ Ansar Ahmed Ullah, who arrived in the UK in 1975 aged 15, was one such activist. Ullah’s papers at Tower Hamlets archive contain a panoply of material from these campaigns, revealing a deep and sustained engagement in secular Bengali community activism. Ullah kept papers from the Bangladeshi Youth Organisation (BYO), Joi Bangla Youth (a cultural group aiming to promote Bengali identity), the organisation of the first *Baishakhi Mela* (Bengali New Year) celebration in Tower Hamlets, and the Bengali women’s centre, Jagonari.⁸³⁶ By the 1990s many veterans of this generation had graduated into positions of authority within the Bengali community. Some served on the management committee of the apolitical Brick Lane Mosque, while others were business owners.⁸³⁷ Others won election as Labour councillors, where they cemented the advances of previous decades through policy.⁸³⁸ Many of these first and second-generation activists understood their decades of secular activism to have culminated in their embeddedness in the local area, and in the political, cultural and commercial autonomy of the 1990s.

⁸³³ *Ibid*, p.187

⁸³⁴ *Ibid*, p.188

⁸³⁵ Equivalence between these two forces made in ‘Tower Hamlets Community Stands up to Fight Fascism in All its Colours’, *UK Indymedia*, (18th June, 2010). Papers of Ansar Ahmed Ullah, Tower Hamlets Local History Archive (TH P/Ull/4/5)

⁸³⁶ Ullah papers, (TH P/Ull/4/5)

⁸³⁷ Jamil Iqbal, Daniel Nilsson Dehanas, Ghaffar Hussain, (eds.), “Seminar Report on Countering Extremism, Brick Lane Mosque, 10th March, 2011. Accessed 29th October, 2021, at https://swadhinata.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Extremism-Report_final.pdf

⁸³⁸ John Eade, Ansar Ahmed Ullah, Jamil Iqbal., Marissa Hey, *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, (London, 2006), pp.56-7

The early 2000s unsettled this fragile foothold. Unrest in 2001 between South Asian and white residents of Burnley, Bradford and Oldham was followed months later by the attacks of September 11th in New York and, in 2005, the London bombings. The spectre of an insular, conservative and violent Islam became a key means through which South Asians *per se* were increasingly cast as a threat to British norms. Often writing for liberal outlets including *The Guardian*, *Prospect* and *Open Democracy*, commentators framed British Muslims, in Tariq Modood and Nasar Meer's words, as making 'culturally unreasonable and theologically alien' demands.⁸³⁹ New Labour's Preventing Violent Extremism programme (or 'Prevent') mandated sustained and often baseless surveillance of South Asians.⁸⁴⁰ These attacks also extended to economics. Michael Young, Geoff Dench and Kate Gavron's *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict* (2006) positioned the East End as the epicentre of a broader struggle over resources between newcomers and the 'indigenous' working-class. It called for the 'reclamation' of the promise of post-war social democracy, which it claimed had been eroded by a shift in welfare provision away from the longest contributors and towards the neediest. In policy terms, this meant a redirection of resources to white residents.⁸⁴¹ Trevor Phillips, appointed head of the Commission for Racial Equality after the publication of his triumphalist *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multiracial Britain*, called *Kinship, Race and Conflict* 'one of the most important books I've read for a long time'.⁸⁴² In these years, then, a belief in Britain's liberal benevolence - what Kennetta Hammond-Perry terms the 'mystique of British anti-racism' - worked to preclude reform and frame British Asians as illiberal and entitled.⁸⁴³

Ullah and several contemporaries agreed to form an organisation, the *Swadhinata* ('Freedom') Trust, to promote a Bengali identity which would repel racism and eschew Islamism alike. These included Julie Begum, an educator and oral historian who had worked most recently at Hackney's Geffrye Museum and been active throughout the mid-1990s in the local group Women United Against Racism.⁸⁴⁴ Also present was Daniele Lamarche, an activist and photographer who first came to Spitalfields while working for the GLC's Race and Housing Action Team; and Dan Jones, a youth worker and trade

⁸³⁹ Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood, 'The Multicultural State We're In: Muslims, 'Multiculture' and the 'Civic Re-balancing' of British Multiculturalism', *Political Studies*, 57, (2009), pp.473-497

⁸⁴⁰ Meer, Modood, 'The Multicultural State We're In', see also Les Back et al., 'The Return of Assimilationism', p.97.

⁸⁴¹ Dench, Gavron, Young, *The New East End*, pp.223-233

⁸⁴² *Ibid*, frontispiece.

⁸⁴³ Hammond-Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, pp.92-3.

⁸⁴⁴ 'Julie Begum on Brick Lane', *Spitalfields Life (SL)*, May 12, 2014. Accessed 3rd January, 2023 at <https://spitalfieldslife.com/2014/05/12/julie-begum-on-brick-lane/>

unionist active locally for decades.⁸⁴⁵ The group was multiracial in composition, but conceived to address young Bengalis' perceived ignorance towards Bangladeshi history and culture.⁸⁴⁶ The Trust sought to build on Caroline Adams' pioneering oral history of Bengali settlers in East London in the 1920s and 1930s, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* (1994), and her pamphlet *Once Upon a Time in Docklands*, challenging the narratives and myths which fuelled support for Beackon and the BNP in 1993.⁸⁴⁷ Adams sought to raise historical consciousness to support the practical work of building community activist movements. Her work was an inspiration as the Trust developed educational and cultural facilities, study packs, walking tours and a website. This, they hoped, would demonstrate that British and Pakistani exploitation, and Bengali resistance, together constituted an 'integral part of [Britain's] history', dispelling narratives of benevolent liberalism and re-centring racism.⁸⁴⁸ Young people's participation sought to counter alienation and strengthen solidarity with their forebears, fomenting a resurgent Bengali identity and inspiring progressive community sentiment. This participatory approach was most clearly evident in the 'Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain' project. Here third generation Bengalis interviewed elders about the history of the diaspora from the earliest post-war migration to the present, leading to a large oral history collection and the publication of a book aimed at young people and the general public.

The Trust's relationship with Tower Hamlets council revealed a transactional, transient form of 'authorisation' rooted in personal connections and shared histories. It received several project-specific grants from Tower Hamlets' regeneration team, the EU and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), but never a regular 'revenue' grant which would provide stability.⁸⁴⁹ The Trust sometimes worked on commission, including to produce a guide for a historic walking tour of the area for the council's tourism drive. Through both occasional collaboration and shared political experiences, the Trust and its funders consensually created a narrative around the achievements of the secular activist tradition. This funding model also placed constraints on the Trust's work. Ullah noted the Trust's difficulty attracting funding in 'very... professionalised' local-authority administered competitions. For Ullah, the Trust's difficulties attracting funding and securing resources more broadly meant that it had 'not been too successful in

⁸⁴⁵ Daniele Lamarche's East End', *SL*, February 6th, 2019, Accessed 5th November, 2021, at <https://spitalfieldslife.com/2019/02/06/daniele-lamarches-east-end-x/>; 'Julie Begum, Someone Still Evolving', *SL*, February 2nd, 2020, Accessed 5th November, 2021, at <https://spitalfieldslife.com/2020/02/02/julie-begum-someone-still-evolving/>; Dan Jones, Interviewed by Jamil Iqbal, Ansar Ahmed Ullah, on 6th March, 2006. Accessed on 5th November, 2021, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-2/>

⁸⁴⁶ Ansar Ahmed Ullah, Interview with the author conducted via Microsoft Teams, 23rd September, 2021

⁸⁴⁷ Caroline Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain*, (London, 1994). See also Papers of Caroline Adams (1949-2001), at TH P/ADM.

⁸⁴⁸ Lamarche, 'Shadinata Feasibility Study'

⁸⁴⁹ Ullah, Interview with the author.

engaging with young people'.⁸⁵⁰ The Trust's proximity to the council *did* inhibit its connection to young people, but not only for financial reasons. The *Tales of Three Generation* project recruited young people to conduct its interviews, creating an intergenerational 'dialogue' which was envisioned as more directly educating young people and empowering them in the production of history.⁸⁵¹ But young people's influence over this dialogue or the broader narrative of the Trust's work was superficial. In recruiting young interviewers to ask pre-ordained questions with negligible space for improvisation, the Trust created a one-way relation of knowledge. Though the Trust existed for marginalised young people, their perspectives and contributions had only a limited influence on the substance of its narratives.

This chapter analyses the Trust's published work between 2000 and 2012, consisting of two published books, fifty-eight oral histories, two walking tours, and a collaborative project with the Imperial War Museum. The Trust first explored the connections between Bengal's centuries of entanglement with and struggle against colonial powers - first Britain and later Pakistan - and the emergence of London's Bengali community. Then, from the late 1970s this community fought against state neglect and racist violence. Many veterans of these struggles went on to gain authority in the council or as business owners, achieving a significant degree of economic, cultural and political autonomy. The trust framed Bengalis' street activism and their later embrace of market liberalism as analogous, complimentary strategies in their successful struggle for autonomy. This was congruent with other, contemporary positive representations of Bengalis in East London, such as Monica Ali's bestselling *Brick Lane* (2003). As Nadia Valman notes, Ali 'celebrates the commodification of 'Banglatown' [and] casts the East End... as a place of multicultural harmony especially receptive to female enterprise.'⁸⁵²

The Trust's history, then, can help refine established narratives around multiculturalism and memory in New Labour's Britain. As the previous chapter discussed, Jo Littler, Roshi Naidoo and Paul Gilroy argue this period saw the emergence of a 'liberal' or individualistic multiculturalism which celebrated the success and inclusion of minorities while refusing to engage with racism's structural roots, and especially the history of the British Empire. For these scholars, true racial justice could not be achieved without such a historical reckoning.⁸⁵³ Yet the Trust folded centuries of anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle neatly into a celebratory narrative of political and economic empowerment through private enterprise and election to the council. The experience of *overcoming* coloniality was central to the Trust's liberal narrative of Bengalis' triumph against adversity to gain wealth and security. Yet it was precisely

⁸⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵¹ *Bengali Info*, Vol.8, (March 2006), no pagination (np), (TH P/ULL/4/5)

⁸⁵² Nadia Valman, 'The East End *Bildungsroman* from Israel Zangwill to Monica Ali', *Wasafiri*, 24, (1, 2009), p.7

⁸⁵³ Littler, Naidoo, 'White Past, Multicultural Present', p.334; Gilroy, 'We Got to Get Over', p.25.

the unquestioned dominance of this narrative, impressed by an older generation on relatively passive younger ‘participants’, which limited its intergenerational impact.

Empire and Early Settlement

‘The roots of immigration, exchange and trade between Britain and Bengal’, Daniele Lamarche’s guided tours around Tower Hill noted, ‘can be directly traced to the creation of the East India Company.’⁸⁵⁴ British imperialism in India was the temporal and thematic foundation of the Trust’s narrative. The almost two centuries between the 1857 Battle of Plassey and 1947 saw the intensive flow of people and goods between London and Bengal. An early Bengali presence developed in London as *lascars* (Indian sailors) and *ayahs* (domestic servants) escaped or were unceremoniously dismissed from British employment upon arrival. Eschewing the help of bourgeois philanthropists from the late nineteenth century, this small population pursued its own material needs and asserted independence. A self-conscious community emerged, seeking security and autonomy in response to colonial domination; it had been present – instrumental, even – at its own making. These were crucial foundations for the Trust’s narrative of post-war mass migration, laid through collaboration with prominent national museums and on commission from Tower Hamlets council.

The Trust’s accounts of eighteenth-century Bengali settlement centred on the claim that the majority of Indians then present in Britain were or had been employees of East India Company merchants.⁸⁵⁵ This employment took two forms. The first was domestic service. Lamarche’s guided tour of the East End stopped by the former Ayah’s Home for servants who had been left destitute following dismissal by their merchant employers, while *Bengalis in London’s East End* encouraged readers to ‘imagine’ the feeling of servants who were transplanted to and abandoned in London.⁸⁵⁶ The majority of eighteenth-century arrivals, though, were sailors on merchant ships. *Bengalis in London’s East End* reproduced an Indian visitor to Britain’s amazement, in 1765, at the number of lascars in London. By the early twentieth century, Ullah and collaborator John Eversley noted, seamen and ex-soldiers had formed a small community near the docks in Cable Street and Shadwell.⁸⁵⁷ Merchants employed lascars because they were cheap and easily exploitable, employing them at ‘the bottom of the British Merchant Navy

⁸⁵⁴ Danielle Lamarche, *Bengalis in East London: A Community in the Making for 500 Years*, (August, 2017, n.p). Accessed on the 4th October, 2021 at <https://swadhinata.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/BENGALIS-IN-EAST-LONDON-daniele-lamarche-AAU-edited.pdf>

⁸⁵⁵ Ansar Ahmed Ullah, John Eversley, *Bengalis in London’s East End*, (London, 2010), p.18

⁸⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

hierarchies'.⁸⁵⁸ Industrialisation actively accelerated this trend as the advent of engine rooms increased demand for menial and insanitary labour.⁸⁵⁹

Lascars were sometimes deserted without wages in London, while others abandoned their employment upon arrival. *Bengalis in London's East End* included the report of nineteenth-century missionary Joseph Salter that the Muslim crew on his return voyage to London had been forced to eat pork and flogged. Some had died because of their employment conditions, their corpses thrown overboard.⁸⁶⁰ Many lascars found themselves destitute and unemployed in the East End. In the years leading up to 1810, an estimated 130 lascars died in Britain each year, while authorities found nine dead in one night during the particularly severe winter of 1813.⁸⁶¹ In a tourism booklet commissioned by Tower Hamlets Council, Dan Jones of the Trust noted that the winter of 1850 saw the death of forty lascars in London.⁸⁶² Across multiple formats and in different contexts, the Trust positioned displacement, destitution and abandonment as fundamental to the creation of the Bengali East End.

Bengalis in London's East End also showed how metropolitan observers attributed this poverty to Bengalis' character: 'locals saw the seamen as dirty (which, given their living conditions, was hardly their fault) and tended to blame them for their poor health.'⁸⁶³ Though one observer in 1814 noted that barracks were incapable of 'affording reasonable accommodation... with a due regard to the comfort, health and cleanliness of the people', they still attributed poverty 'in a great degree to the habits of the lascars themselves.'⁸⁶⁴ Positioned within this longer narrative, Eversley and Ullah showed that after merchants recruited, exploited and in some cases abandoned Bengalis, the broader society attributed Bengalis' poverty to their temperament, or innate racial character.

The ST took this collaborative approach again in 2012 after the Imperial War Museum (IWM) recruited Ullah to conduct research for *The Unremembered*, a Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government-funded project commemorating colonial contributions to the First World War. The project sought both to rethink the IWM's framing of the conflict, and therein to increase its appeal to

⁸⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.20

⁸⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.22

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.22

⁸⁶² Dan Jones, Danielle Lamarche, Jo Skinner, Ansar Ahmed Ullah, 'Exploring Banglatown and the Bengali East End', Tower Hamlets Council tourism trail, (n.d). Accessed 4th October 2021, at <https://sylhetproject.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/bengali-history-walk.pdf>

⁸⁶³ Ullah; Eversley, *Bengalis in London's East End*, p.24

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 36

ethnic minority visitors.⁸⁶⁵ The project allowed Ullah to apply the Trust's longer interest in Bengali service on British ships to the conflict. Publicising the project's findings, Ullah emphasised that the Indian Army was the 'largest volunteer army in the world'. It numbered 1.5 million servicemen, including 573,000 serving in non-combatant roles in the Indian Labour Corps, providing food, water and sanitation to the military, carrying ammunition, and building infrastructure.⁸⁶⁶ Ullah told of Bengalis' convivial encounters with Australian troops, including the exchange of cigarettes and food and the organisation of football matches. But structural racism persisted: white soldiers' wages were double those given to Indians and came with considerably higher quality uniforms.⁸⁶⁷ Ullah expressed ambivalence, then, on Bengalis' experience during the war. Bengalis had convivial relationships with white Commonwealth soldiers and played a crucial role in the Empire's war effort but also faced systemic exploitation. The project allowed Ullah to address his dissatisfaction with the erasure of Bengali war service, offering a pointed rebuke of British amnesia towards colonial soldiers' sacrifice. Publicising the project in the *Daily Star*, he bemoaned the disregard for Bengali life which allowed 4-5000 Indian sailors to die at sea during the conflict without their names being recorded, presenting such historic negligence as instrumental in creating contemporary ignorance.⁸⁶⁸ In our interview Ullah suggested that such naivety facilitated the widespread perception that the Bengali presence in Britain derived solely from post-war economic migration.⁸⁶⁹ But the IWM's proposal of the project, their funding and their collections provided the time and resources necessary to reframe the First World War as the culmination of these centuries of colonial entanglement and service.

Beyond the First World War, the Trust's broader work emphasised that Bengalis living in London began to provide services for the community autonomously, rejecting the inadequacies and condescension of British philanthropy, and becoming aware of their own abilities in doing so. The figure of Mr Munshi was one such pioneer. Upon arrival in 1922, Munshi provided lascars in London with accommodation in a lodging house off Brick Lane. Ayub Ali Master, similarly, opened a seamen's café in Commercial Road in the 1920s, before establishing a resource centre from his home offering letter writing, form filling, educational and travel support.⁸⁷⁰ As the population's growth accelerated in the 1950s these early services were formalised in the full establishment of the Pakistani (later Bangladeshi) Welfare Association

⁸⁶⁵ Ansar Ahmed Ullah, 'In Search of Lascars', *The Daily Star*, (23rd December 2013). Press cuttings in the Papers of Ansar Ahmed Ullah, Tower Hamlets Local History Library (TH P/ULL) TH P/ULL/4/2

⁸⁶⁶ Ansar Ahmed Ullah, 'Remembering World War One's Army of Bengali Workers', (16th February, 2018). Accessed on 05/08/2021 at <https://swadhinata.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Remembering-World-War-One.pdf>

⁸⁶⁷ Ullah, 'In Search of Lascars', TH P/ULL/4/2

⁸⁶⁸ Ullah, 'In Search of Lascars', TH P/ULL/4/2; Ullah, Eversley, *Bengalis in London's East End*, p.33

⁸⁶⁹ Ullah, *Interview with the author*.

⁸⁷⁰ Ullah; Eversley, *Bengalis in London's East End*, p.38

(PWA).⁸⁷¹ Throughout the post-war decades, as first male workers and later their families settled in an often-hostile East End, the PWA was a vital, supportive resource for the community.⁸⁷² In this way, the Trust framed the support networks provided by earlier lascar pioneers in response to British colonial neglect as offering important foundations for the post-war flourishing of Bengali community activism and associational culture more broadly. They positioned the racism and activist resistance of these later post-war decades within these longer historical contexts..

The Trust's narration of Bengalis' colonial service and early settlement confounds both the division between 'elite' and 'radical' heritage and perceptions of imperial amnesia in millennial Britain. The IWM was for much of the twentieth century the archetypal practitioner of Laurajane Smith's 'authorised heritage discourse', offering a monumental narrative of national service and sacrifice which excluded the contributions of racialised outsiders.⁸⁷³ But the *Unremembered* project again reveals collaboration between 'authorised' and grassroots forms of heritage in a changing cultural policy climate. With the benefit of large central government grants, this elite national museum sought to maximise its offering to visitors and reach into new demographics by telling diverse histories rooted in Empire. It employed Ullah, a researcher from a community heritage group, to conduct this research, funded or 'authorised' by a department of a Conservative-led coalition government.

It's worth here returning to the Trust's collaboration with Tower Hamlets council to boost tourism to 'Banglatown', the newly renamed area surrounding Brick Lane. The Trust's council-funded tour guides positioned the contemporary, commercial and cosmopolitan area as constituting a triumph over centuries of colonial entanglement and exploitation. Here, this leaflet utilised this history as a heritage-based attraction for tourists to the area. Rather than - as Gilroy, Littler and Naidoo suggest - obscuring imperial history in pursuit of a 'liberal' or individualistic and commercial multiculturalism, Tower Hamlets council drew on these histories to create an attractive product for consumers. As we saw with changes to the MOL's work in the 1990s and 2000s covered in Chapter Five, local and national governments' investment in heritage in this period was increasingly tied to an attempt to increase revenue and engage previously marginalised groups, especially ethnic minorities. We see this phenomenon reflected in the Tower Hamlets Tourist trail and the ST's collaboration with both the MOL and the IWM. In the face of the intertwined processes of commercialisation and diversification, the inadequacy of the widespread dichotomy between 'elite' and subaltern heritage is revealed. Rather than being conducive to

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.50

⁸⁷² *Ibid*, p.85

⁸⁷³ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*; Gaynor Kavanagh, 'Museum as Memorial: The Origins of the Imperial War Museum', *Journal of Contemporary History* 23, (1, 1988), pp.77-97

imperial ‘amnesia’, this increasingly commercialised funding regime enabled the ST to offer the most sustained and detailed account anywhere in this thesis of the significance of Empire in leading to the development of a contemporary migrant community in London. This form of imperial memory was also qualitatively different to any other organisation studied in this thesis; Bengal was not part of an undifferentiated and uniform ‘Empire’ but itself a primary focus, with a close, mutually influential relationship with London.

Coloniality Endures: British Bengalis and East Pakistan



Figure 6.1, The Indian subcontinent at Partition, (1947)⁸⁷⁴

The Trust turned next to the history of East Pakistan from 1947-1971, and particularly diaspora support for the burgeoning Bengali nationalist movement. In 1947 Britain separated Bengal’s Muslim-majority east from its Hindu-majority west, politically unifying the former with the new Dominion of Pakistan, first as the province of East Bengal and later as the territory of East Pakistan (**See figure 6.1**). The Trust emphasised the oppression of young Bengalis’ ancestors in the name of Islamic political unity after partition, the animating power of British Bengalis’ diasporic consciousness, and the significance of white allies’ solidarity. These developments drew on the consciousness and organisational networks developed in the earlier twentieth-century, and themselves laid foundations for later anti-racist activism.

⁸⁷⁴ Reproduced from Reece Jones, ‘Dreaming of a Global Bengal: Discontinuities of Place and Identity in South Asia’, *Asian Studies Review*, 35, (3, 2011), pp.373-395

In demonstrating the achievement of emancipation from a repressive and theocratic coloniser, they advocated an alternate course to the Islamism attracting many young Bengalis contemporarily. If the Trust offered a more complex account of the specificities of Britain's relationship with Bengalis than any other organisation or postcolonial community studied in this thesis, this complexity did not stop with partition. The Trust progressed to explore two different, though connected, forms of imperial domination - the first British and the second Pakistani - as well as a later imperial temporality, showing that Bangladesh was not truly postcolonial until the 1970s. Rather than serving solely to inform a narrative centred on London, as with other case-studies in this thesis, the Trust continued to make Bengal and London the equal, inseparable foci of its narrative, centring a close and mutual relationship between them.

For the Trust, any effort to understand Bengalis' contemporary place in East London relied on a substantial engagement with the history of the Indian subcontinent between 1947 and 1971. An interview the Trust conducted with F Stephen Miles, a British diplomat who worked in Bengal after Partition, can illuminate the persistence of coloniality in Bengal in this period. Reflecting wider post-war shifts in Britain's presentation of the Empire's goals, Miles presented the Commonwealth as a developmental fraternity, emphasising its legacies of parliamentary democracy, English as an international language, and multi-racial harmony and co-operation.⁸⁷⁵ Yet in surrounding Miles' testimony in *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain* with accounts of Bengal's subordination from Islamabad, the Trust suggested the spurious nature of all three claims. Struggles over language became emblematic of the larger, violent suppression of Bengali nationhood. The state systematically excluded Bengalis from the professions and public-sector employment. Finally, the institutional foundations of the democracy touted by Miles were shown to be fragile during the extra-judicial killing of students in 1952, the institution of military rule under President Ayub Ali Khan, and military counterrevolutions following the eventual independence of Bangladesh in 1971.⁸⁷⁶

Miles' explanation of this unrest included reference to Bengalis as 'real rabble rousers' who had 'always given us trouble', after partition as well as 'in the British days'. This framing of Bengalis as temperamentally deviant took place during Miles' recollection of protests throughout the early 1950s against Islamabad's choice of Urdu as the state language of East Pakistan. The violent repression of these protests saw seven killed by the police, and the establishment of a state of emergency between 1954 and 1955 which left Chief Justice Sir Thomas Ellis, who 'happened to be British... in full control of East

⁸⁷⁵ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, p.36. On British men of Miles' generation's ideas of Empire and their role in, see Chris Jeppesen, 'Sanders of the River, Still the Best Job for a British Boy': Recruitment to the Colonial Administrative Service at the End of Empire', *The Historical Journal*, 59, (2, 2016), pp.469-508

⁸⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp.37-41

Pakistan as in colonial days'. Ellis had been an administrator in the Indian colonial service, remaining in a transitional role in the young Pakistani state, though Miles noted 'nobody seemed to think it [his temporary return to power] at all odd!'⁸⁷⁷ Miles's myopic defence of the foundations laid by British rule, his racialisation of Bengalis, and his discussion of the co-operation between old and new authorities in curtailing freedoms all point to the long shadow of the Raj in East Pakistan. Though freedom had nominally been won, Bengalis still lived under a state which institutionally, linguistically and racially suppressed them. East Bengal province was renamed East Pakistan in 1955, reflecting legal reforms which brought the state under more direct control from Islamabad.

More, the Trust framed the chronic political turmoil which plagued the new state as deriving directly from the unification of fundamentally different peoples according to religion. In *Tales of Three Generations*, Ullah and John Eade lamented 'attempts to forge national unity through the politicisation of Islam' despite the division of 'over a thousand miles of Indian territory.'⁸⁷⁸ An interviewee similarly stated: 'a country a thousand miles apart, established on a purely religious basis could not survive for long, because except for religion, everything else was so different.'⁸⁷⁹ Organising a polity along these lines, then, figured as necessarily repressing ethnic, cultural and linguistic particularity; that is, the things which make up a nation.

In this light, the conditions for Pakistan's repression of Bengal appeared present from the moment of the state's establishment. Increasingly convinced of the two groups' irreconcilability in the aftermath of the emergency, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy formed the Awami League, a secular Bengali nationalist party.⁸⁸⁰ Though Islamabad found a compromise through the recognition of no fewer than four state languages – Urdu, Bengali, English and Arabic – the Trust quoted Abdur Rashid in noting that East Pakistan 'started to look like a colony'.⁸⁸¹ Bank staff, Mosque clergy and professionals were nearly always West Pakistanis; the government's executive, legislature and military were also based in West Pakistan. This meant that despite official multilingualism, representatives of private and state authority in Bengal almost always came speaking Urdu.⁸⁸² Abdur Rashid remembered returning to Chittagong after five years in London to find the city's market dominated by Urdu speakers from the Punjab, extracting

⁸⁷⁷ Transcript of interview with F Stephen Miles, conducted by Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah, on 17th March, 2006, accessed on 25th August, 2021, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>. Death statistic at Eade et al, *Tales of Three Generations*, p.15

⁸⁷⁸ Eade et al, *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, p.8

⁸⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.15

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid*.

⁸⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.16

⁸⁸² *Ibid*, pp.15-.18

wealth and overcharging and condescending to locals. He attributed such experiences to his growing national consciousness, creating the feeling that ‘this is no country, this is a country of servitude’.⁸⁸³

The persistence of discontent led President Ayub Khan to declare military rule in 1962, emboldening nationalist opinion among interviewees.⁸⁸⁴ The Awami League’s popularity grew throughout this period, and in 1966 it adopted its ‘six points’, six substantial reforms to bring equality between Pakistan’s territories.⁸⁸⁵ Islamabad granted elections, scheduling them for December 1970, though in November a catastrophic cyclone – the deadliest ever recorded - made landfall in Bengal, killing at least 300,000. The huge death toll was the result of poor preparation and response; it appeared to encapsulate the systemic neglect of a government based in and preoccupied with West Pakistan, over a thousand miles away.⁸⁸⁶ In December’s election the Awami League won 160 of East Pakistan’s 162 seats and thus a majority over the entire Pakistani legislature.⁸⁸⁷

West Pakistani leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto refused to recognise the election’s legitimacy, postponing the meeting of the new assembly indefinitely. Student leaders organised mass protests calling for independence.⁸⁸⁸ The Awami League’s popular leader Mujibur Rahman was arrested, sending shockwaves throughout the diaspora; the Trust quoted Mohamed Israel’s assertion that it was ‘as if your heart is taken away’.⁸⁸⁹ On 25 March, subsequently remembered as *Kalo Natri* (‘Black Night’), the Pakistani military and allied Islamist militias cracked down, targeting Bengali Hindus and Muslims suspected of advocating an independent, secular future.⁸⁹⁰ *Kalo Natri* was perhaps the starkest moment in a sustained and concerted strategy of violent repression by the West Pakistani government towards Bengalis which many scholars have labelled a genocide.⁸⁹¹ Disinterested estimates of the numbers of deaths during the war vary between 269,000 and 1.5 million, many of them Bengali civilians. Pakistani soldiers and Islamist militias raped an estimated 200,000 Bengali women.⁸⁹²

The terror of 1971 ran throughout interviews. Husna Matin’s husband, who worked for the Pakistani state but was sympathetic to independence, feared for his life when he was arrested at work

⁸⁸³ *Ibid*, p.18

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.16

⁸⁸⁵ *Ibid*.

⁸⁸⁶ Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion*, p.57

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid*, pp.58-59

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.59

⁸⁸⁹ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations*, 24

⁸⁹⁰ Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion*, p.195

⁸⁹¹ Jalal Agmar, Bina D’Costa, ‘The 1971 Genocide: War Crimes and Political Crimes’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46, (13, 2011), p.38

⁸⁹² *Ibid*.

shortly before the family planned to flee.⁸⁹³ Aziz Choudhury told a similar story when, on an internal flight from Dhaka to Sylhet during the conflict, the Pakistani authorities turned back his plane. At Dhaka Airport, soldiers with machine guns lined up the passengers, inspected their identification and questioned them. With extra-judicial killings then commonplace, Choudhury felt sure his death was imminent. But the soldiers let the passengers go, having failed to find their target.⁸⁹⁴ Sazzad Khan, a Bengali fighter who had returned from the UK to take up arms, was imprisoned by the authorities and tortured for days before his release.⁸⁹⁵ The Trust's dialogic method was crucial here. The young Bengalis recruited to conduct these interviews were confronted with the repression of their parents and grandparents' generation at the hand of a theocratic state and Islamist militants acting in its name. In orchestrating these interview encounters, Ullah et al sought to force the personal, familial imperative of secularism into sharp relief. More, in foregrounding this history, the Trust – more than any other case-study in this thesis - offered a close account of the relationship between global and local histories in which the former had a sustained and formative influence on the course of the latter.

With this necessary context established, the Trust's narrative returned to East London. *Tales of Three Generations* noted the war was 'not just fought in the Bengal delta', but in 'London, Luton, Birmingham and Manchester' too.⁸⁹⁶ Eade and Ullah presented British Bengalis as effective agents within the liberation struggle. Here, as with the earlier establishment of autonomous resources in response to British neglect, the Trust once again framed the community as being constituted by its struggle to overcome the hardships of colonial domination. Fundraising was central to this narrative. Donation was framed as a popular activity, pursued at great personal cost. Many donated their entire weeks' wages at a time, while one woman was believed to have given 'her entire wedding gift of gold jewellery'.⁸⁹⁷ CAS Kabir left his business and home in Tower Hamlets for nine months to travel around the UK, raising funds and forging alliances with activists in Luton, Birmingham, Manchester and Swindon.⁸⁹⁸ Mathin Miah noted 'all my family and my parents donated [a] huge amount of money [...] the participation was generous, and the people were very glad to participate[...] I have never seen so much unity of the Bengali before'.⁸⁹⁹ Mohamed Israel, accountant for the nationwide Bangladesh steering committee, calculated that

⁸⁹³ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations*, pp.20-21

⁸⁹⁴ Aziz Choudhury, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal, 1st February, 2006. Accessed on the 4th October, 2021 at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>

⁸⁹⁵ Sazzad Khan, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal, Ansar Ahmed Ullah, Charlie Sen, 9th March, 2006. Accessed on the 4th October, 2021 at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>

⁸⁹⁶ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations*, p.8

⁸⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.8

⁸⁹⁸ C.A.S. Kabir, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal, on 27th February, 2006. Accessed on the 4th October, 2021, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>

⁸⁹⁹ Eade et al, *Tales of Three Generations*, p.31

£406,856 was raised in the UK for the guerrilla war.⁹⁰⁰ This was not a sum which would materially shift the geopolitics of the Indian subcontinent. Yet it was a significant amount in 1971, particularly for a marginalised community concentrated in low-wage work. In this sense these memories' significance was primarily affective. They invoked a shared experience of sacrifice which fomented solidarity and national consciousness, catalysing further action.

The texts also emphasised the diplomatic pressure Bengali Londoners placed on Pakistan and its allies. Mohamed Israel attended a demonstration outside the Pakistan High Commission in Britain, burning photos of President Yahya Khan (who succeeded Ayub Khan in 1969) with his fellow protestors and painting the walls with the slogans *Joi Bangla (Hail or Victory to Bengal)* and *Swadhin Bangla (Free Bengal)*. Israel gathered information from the *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, and *International Herald Tribune* to ascertain the source of Pakistani arms and funds. Discovering an imminent arms shipment from Canada, Israel orchestrated a snap protest at the Canadian High Commission in London to demand its suspension. The group's demands were met.⁹⁰¹ Pressure was also exerted within the halls of power: activists approached Members of Parliament representing large Bengali communities to raise the issue in Parliament. Michael Barnes, MP for Brentford and Chiswick, spoke against the Pakistani cricket team's 1971 tour of Britain, frequently raised the issue in the commons, and co-ordinated a communications campaign with the Indian government which sought to 'prepare... world opinion for the need for intervention to stop the genocide'.⁹⁰² This work was crucial within the conflict's political history; Indira Gandhi's government's intervention in December 1971 proved decisive, securing the independence of Bangladesh and ending Pakistani atrocities.⁹⁰³

Barnes also embodied another important facet of the Trust's representation of the conflict: the contribution of white allies. Kabir remembered the important organisational work of Paul Connet, a school teacher, and Marietta Prokop, a recent graduate.⁹⁰⁴ More, Badrun Nesa Pasha remembered an English barman who was so compelled by a meeting in his pub that he volunteered to travel to participate in the conflict. For Pasha, such gestures demonstrated that 'white people were ready to fight for Bangladesh'.⁹⁰⁵ Whether or not this barman actually travelled, these testimonies conjured a feeling of radical, solidary community, which appeared to contain the seeds of real political change. In this, the Trust inverted the logic of contemporary discourse which positioned young Muslims and liberal white

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.12

⁹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.23

⁹⁰² *Ibid*, p.33

⁹⁰³ Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion*, p.71

⁹⁰⁴ Kabir, interviewed by Iqbal.

⁹⁰⁵ Badrun Nesa Pasha, Interviewed by Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah on the 18th September, 2006. Accessed on the 5th October, 2021 at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>

society at cultural and political odds with one another and foregrounded the interracial alliances of later antiracist organising.

Passages like this made visible the lesson running implicitly throughout these texts: the necessity of a secular, progressive Bengali politics centring on material autonomy. The December 1998 issue of the Trust's youth magazine, *Bengali Info*, lamented British Bangladeshis' 'emotional and mental' distance from the struggle. It remembered the joyful culmination of the 'quest for freedom' as 'Bengali freedom fighters and the allied soldiers of India march[ed] through the streets where jubilant people tossed flowers at them.' This moment of self-realisation had been forgotten, despite its 'significance for us... individual[s] and a community.'⁹⁰⁶ Bengalis achieved independence under a banner of progressive nationalism, with the fruits of the economy reclaimed from colonial powers and shared between all the region's citizens, whether Muslim or Hindu. The liberatory effect which participation had on British Bengalis was also emphasised. This was particularly true for some women, who reported greater self-confidence and respect from the community more widely after 1971. Notably, two of these participants reflected that these advances had been undermined by the subsequent spread of Islamism.⁹⁰⁷

Thus concluded this section of the Trust's narrative. Here, the Trust offered the first history analysed in this thesis which was as oriented towards the former colonies as it was to the Metropole. It showed that developments in Bengal had a close and formative relationship with those in East London, and revealed multiple, overlapping colonial temporalities and forms of domination. Pakistan's political institutions grew out of partition; the racial, linguistic, and cultural exclusion of Bengalis was inscribed into the new state as it was established by the departing British. More, at key moments of protest in the young state's life, British administrators returned and intervened to prevent reform and re-assert a colonial order predicated on Bengalis' subjugation. Yet despite the long shadow of the Raj, political and economic exploitation after 1947 also possessed novel characteristics. The exclusion of Bengalis from Pakistani political and religious authority and the extractive nature of the East Pakistani economy reinforced a structural divide between the two branches of the new state and fomented growing resistance both in Bengal and the diaspora. The Trust framed these resistance struggles as instrumental in changing the course of subcontinental politics, and in fomenting the rise to political consciousness of the community in London and other British cities. Through both publications and the interview encounter, the Trust sought to expose the youth they worked with to the colonial violence which a politicised and

⁹⁰⁶ *Bengali Info*, 13, (Dec 98), np. TH P/ULL/4/4)

⁹⁰⁷ E.g., Anowara Jahan, Interviewed by Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah, 4th July, 2006; Husna Matin, Interviewed by Iqbal and Ullah, 30th January, 2006. Both accessed 5th October, 2021, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>

exclusionary conception of Islam had inflicted on their parents' and grandparents' generation, and the truer, cultural and economic emancipation offered by secular progressive activism.

Yet the highly structured nature of the Trust's interviews for the project which engaged most substantively with this history, *Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, illustrates the limitations of the participatory 'dialogue' the Trust engaged young people in. The Trust conducted eighteen interviews on the 1971 Independence War, all of which consisted of pre-arranged questions with minimal space for improvisation, covering the same broad themes: revolutionaries' ideals, the practicalities of the solidarity campaign in London; the contemporary memory of the war; and interviewees' ongoing relationship with Bangladesh. Interviewers asked five interviewees - a large proportion of those who lived in Bengal until shortly before the war - 'Can you remember any specific incident of prejudice by the Pakistanis' or 'did you feel like a second-class citizen in Pakistan'.⁹⁰⁸ Interviews moved on to the practicalities of organising the solidarity movement, which served to detail methods of resistance and differed only insofar as this allowed respondents to engage with the specifics of interviewees' individual roles. Nine out of eighteen interviewees, for instance, were asked 'how did you get news of the war?'.⁹⁰⁹ Interviews then moved to the contemporary memory of the war. Seven out of eight were asked whether 'you feel that the independence war is part of your history', while seven out of eighteen were asked what information they hoped to impart to younger people about Bangladesh.⁹¹⁰ The repetition of these questions, often verbatim, makes the fact that they were pre-planned almost certain; what is clear is that individual interviewers had little autonomy over interviews' course. Only two of the eighteen transcripts show even one instance of interviewers actively responding in an improvised or detailed way to interviewees' testimony; this marked a brief respite from the otherwise universal tendency of progressing to the next generic question.⁹¹¹

⁹⁰⁸ CAS Kabir, Interview with Jamil Iqbal, 27th February, 2006; Tunu Miah, Interview with Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah, 17th January, 2006; Tahir Ali, Interview with Iqbal, 19th January, 2006; Shahid Ali, Interview with Iqbal, 7th January, 2006; Sazzad Khan, interview with Iqbal, Ullah and Charlie Sen, 9th March, 2006. All accessed 5th January, 2023, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>

⁹⁰⁹ Ajmat Ullah, interview with Iqbal, Ullah and Maliha Haque, 23rd January, 2006; Anowara Jahan, interview with Iqbal and Ullah, 4th July 2006; Kabir, Interview with Iqbal; Mathin Miah, interview with Iqbal, 3rd January, 2006; Mohammed Ibrahim Baksh, Interview with Jamil Iqbal, 9th July 2006; Mohammed Israel, Interview with Iqbal, 25th February, 2006; Tunu Miah, interview with Iqbal; Shahid Ali, Interview with Iqbal. All accessed 5th January, 2023, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>

⁹¹⁰ On the first question: Abdur Rashid, Interview with Iqbal, 14th January, 2006; Choudhury, interview with Iqbal; Kabir, interview with Iqbal; Kulsum Ullah, interview with Iqbal; Israel; interview with Iqbal, Miah, interview with Iqbal and Ullah; Sultan Shariff, interview with Iqbal, 16th January, 2006. On the second: Rashid, interview with Iqbal; Mathin Miah, interview with Iqbal; Tahir Ali, interview with Iqbal; Shahid Ali, interview with Iqbal; Shariff, interview with Iqbal; Jahan, interview with Iqbal and Ullah; Choudhury, interview with Iqbal. All accessed 5th January, 2023, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>

⁹¹¹ Badrun Nesa Pasha, interview with Iqbal and Ullah; Choudhury, interview with Iqbal. All accessed 5th January, 2023, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-1/>

Interviews adopted a didactic and structured tone. If the ‘three generations’ project was envisioned as a dialogue which would strengthen relations between young and old by bringing them together in the production of memory, younger interviewees in practice passively learnt from the wisdom and experiences of their elders. Interviewees’ genuine participation was largely superficial; they received no real opportunity to contribute to or alter uniform talking points and narratives, to probe or consider these at greater length, or find any alternate paradigm. The extent to which they were able to actively contribute towards the production of the memory or engage substantively with the experiences of their community was severely limited.

Community Activism and Street Anti-racism

The Trust then turned to the entry of the ‘second generation’ of Bengali community activists into British politics during the 1970s and 1980s.⁹¹² Spitalfields was by this period neglected and dilapidated; many of its businesses had failed, their old premises falling into disrepair. Bengalis’ experience of the 1971 war was foundational as they sought first to protest education and housing policy, the stagnant economy, and the borough’s race relations.⁹¹³ The relationship between direct action and entry into institutions was framed as symbiotic and complimentary. In this sense, the Trust consciously framed anti-colonial struggle as a crucial step in Bengalis’ ascent to political, commercial and cultural authority over the area. Bengalis reflected a nationwide pattern in which community activists progressed from protesting against injustice in the street to legislating on it in positions of authority in local councils which were increasingly committed to free markets. Scholars have critiqued this as betraying the radicalism and authenticity of community politics.⁹¹⁴ But as Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Rob Waters note of contemporary developments within Black politics, this trajectory was not foisted on Bengalis.⁹¹⁵ The Trust framed ascent to the institutions as emerging organically from earlier activism, as one strategy among many contemporarily pursued by activists seeking to empower the community.

Bengalis lived under constant threat of racist violence throughout the 1970s. The murder of Tosir Ali in Aldgate in 1970, Ishaq Ali in nearby Hackney in 1978, and Altab Ali in Whitechapel the same year, were the starkest moments in a longer campaign of intimidation and violence by the NF.⁹¹⁶ Bengalis

⁹¹² Eade et al, *Tales of Three Generations*, p.49

⁹¹³ *Ibid*, p.49; p.58

⁹¹⁴ Ramamurthy, ‘The Politics of Britain’s Asian Youth Movements’, p.56; Adam Lent, ‘The Labour Left, Local Authorities and New Social Movements in Britain in the Eighties’, p.21

⁹¹⁵ Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Rob Waters, ‘The Privatisation of The Struggle’: Anti-racism in the Age of Enterprise’, in Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Aled Davies, Ben Jackson, (eds.), *The Neoliberal Age? Britain Since the 1970s*, (London, 2021), p.202

⁹¹⁶ Ullah; Eversley, *Bengalis in London’s East End*, p.56

began confronting NF demonstrations around Spitalfields in the mid-1970s, but it took the outrage which followed Altab Ali's murder in 1978 to wrest momentum in the struggle over the area's political identity. Nascent activist groups like the Bangladeshi Youth Movement (BYM), Bangladeshi Youth League (BYL), Bangladeshi Youth Federation (BYF) and Bangladeshi Youth Association (BYA) organised nationwide demonstrations. 7000 attended the vigil march from Brick Lane to Downing Street in the aftermath of Ali's death.⁹¹⁷ This provided fresh energy and impetus to the more mundane acts of resistance necessary to repel the NF's frequent incursions into the area around Brick Lane. Akikur Rahman recalled that members of these organisations occupied a favoured NF newspaper selling point at the corner of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road every Saturday morning for six months. On the border of Spitalfields and the still-white, frequently-racist Bethnal Green, the corner was a symbolic and territorial boundary. The NF appealed to the police to grant them access to the site, but were unsuccessful.⁹¹⁸ Such persistent, quotidian acts were crucial in Bengalis' incremental fight for ownership over the area.

The Trust again emphasised the importance of Bengalis' support from white allies and the larger anti-racist movement in these years. Trade unions and far left groups including the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), Militant, the Internationalist Marxist Group and the Revolutionary Communist Group rallied after Ali's murder.⁹¹⁹ The Trust also foregrounded the support of figures from the *Race Today* collective, including Darcus Howe and Farrukh and Mala Dhondy.⁹²⁰ Yet the community's acceptance of the wider left's support was conditional, considered and critical. Kenneth Leech remembered the way that the disapproval of an older Bengali man quickly silenced a group of tone deaf SWP members who began chanting 'fascists out' at Ali's vigil.⁹²¹ Significantly, then, Bengalis and their local allies were the real driving force of change. The energy of this wider milieu brought significant momentum at the key moment after Ali's death. But its members' insensitivity served to underline the more permanent presence and routine activism of the community. In this way, the Trust emphasised the importance of intersectional co-operation while emphasising the community's primary role in grasping change for itself. Yet this period also revealed the need to confront state racism, perhaps most notably in the Metropolitan Police. Akikur Rahman captured a larger sentiment when referring to the force as 'one of the problems we had'.⁹²² Alope Biswas, meanwhile, recalled an occasion in June 1975, when – upon attempting to defend Brick Lane from an NF group – Bengalis were violently arrested *en masse* by

⁹¹⁷ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, p.63

⁹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.75

⁹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.69

⁹²⁰ *Ibid*, p.59

⁹²¹ *Ibid*, p.76

⁹²² *Ibid*, p.65. See also p.78

arriving officers. Their allies organised a large march to Bethnal Green Police Station to demand the release of those arrested and established a vigilante group to physically confront organised street racism.⁹²³ These campaigns provided tangible security to residents, and in time led to a significant decline in the NF's visibility locally.

From the late 1970s, the number of Bengali activist organisations in the East End grew significantly. The Federation of Bangladeshi Youth Organisations (FBYO), an umbrella body founded in 1980, aimed to provide 'a truly national campaigning organisation that represented Bengali interests and spoke for Bengalis across the borough and nationally.'⁹²⁴ The FBYO provided strategic and organisational unity to the older BYM, BYL, BYF and BYA, while the Kobi Nazrul Centre, established in 1982, provided a hub both of associational life and political organisation on Hanbury Street, near Brick Lane.⁹²⁵ Jagonari women's centre was established to provide a secure and autonomous space for Bengali women, distinct from the wider masculine movement. The centre provided a space for women to organise opportunities to socialise and receive childcare, professional training and language classes.⁹²⁶ The groups capitalising on the space the centre provided included Women United Against Racism (WUAR), which Julie Begum was instrumental in founding and leading. Begum and her contemporaries founded WUAR after Derek Beackon's election as the BNP councillor for Poplar in 1993, playing an important role in the public campaigns which forced Beackon's resignation the following year.⁹²⁷ Through this, Ullah's involvement in the BYM, and the contemporary sympathetic involvement of trade unionists like Dan Jones, many of the Trust's leading members had been active in this wider milieu between the late 1970s and mid-1990s.⁹²⁸ Here, the Trust most explicitly championed the tradition of secular community activism which they emerged from.

This approach gave rise to a largely unequivocal endorsement of the strategies, trajectories and achievements of this cohort since the 1970s. This included, most notably, the combination of direct action and alternate service provision with activists' entry into the local state and use of its funds. *Tales of Three Generations* highlighted the importance of Dan Jones, drawing on his experience as a local youth worker to help Bengali activists to become proficient in applying for grants from Tower Hamlets council and the GLC.⁹²⁹ Jagonari were particularly successful in this regard.⁹³⁰ This example suggested that Bengali

⁹²³ *Ibid*, p.78

⁹²⁴ Ullah, Eversley, *Bengalis in London's East End*, p.53

⁹²⁵ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, p.59; 97

⁹²⁶ *Ibid*, p.94

⁹²⁷ 'Begum on Brick Lane', *SL*.

⁹²⁸ Ullah Papers, TH P/Ull/4/5, Jones, Interview with Iqbal, 'Daniele Lamarche's East End', *SL*

⁹²⁹ *Ibid*, p.60

⁹³⁰ *Ibid*, p.94

activists' increasing comfort within the state emerged organically from their experiences within the New Urban Left. In turn, Jones's participation in this interview was an extension of his longer role as a contributor to the Trust, most notably in authoring their tourism booklet for Tower Hamlets council. Though this project was ostensibly a dialogue, empowering younger Bengalis in the creation of the community's history, it practically led them into interviews where they passively listened to the Trust's generation - even their contemporaries - as they relived their contribution to the community's achievements. Though Ullah, Begum and their colleagues had been members of a radical, popular activist milieu between the 1970s and 1990s, they reproduced these narratives to younger interviewers who had little opportunity to share their own experiences or make substantive contributions to interviews.

A similar pattern emerged in housing provision. While in previous decades Bengalis had overwhelmingly been concentrated in expensive, poor quality private housing or had lodged with family members, the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act of 1977 compelled the state to provide larger numbers with council flats. Yet these were in similarly poor condition, concentrating the community in overcrowded, deteriorating housing. From the 1980s Tower Hamlets' 'one-offer' policy forced Bengali families to accept such accommodation in remote, primarily white and often hostile areas of the borough or risk homelessness.⁹³¹ Privately, officials admitted to researchers that allocations were conditioned by what would be deemed 'acceptable' by white residents.⁹³² The Trust dwelled on these conditions, suggesting that if the council's allocation policy treated Bengalis as an incursion to be managed, officials' interactions with families in need was characterised by cultural illiteracy and contempt. The Council, John Newbigin reflected, 'really had absolutely no understanding of the incoming Bengali culture', while 'the way they thought you communicate to... Bangladeshi[s] was that you shout at them in English'.⁹³³

Through this framing, the Trust expressed support for the goals and methods of the Bengali squatting movement. The Tower Hamlets Squatters' Union was established in 1974, followed by the Bengali Housing Action Group in 1976, providing formal structure and organisation to residents' discontent.⁹³⁴ From the mid-1970s, the council began demolishing properties deemed to be in poor condition, diminishing the already meagre supply. In Spring 1976, Pelham Building in Whitechapel was earmarked for demolition despite activists' assertion that it held 60 habitable flats. Activists occupied it on Easter Saturday, 1976, and by the end of the year had offered housing to 300 residents.⁹³⁵ This built on the occupation of entire streets scheduled for demolition and redevelopment, such as Aston Street in

⁹³¹ Foster, *Docklands*, p.249.

⁹³² Eade, *The Politics of Community*, p.33

⁹³³ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, p.61

⁹³⁴ Ullah; Eversley, *Bengalis in London's East End*, p.52.

⁹³⁵ *Ibid.*

Stepney and Nelson and Varden Streets off New Road.⁹³⁶ The squatters, with Bengalis in leadership positions, began intervening in policy. A 1982 GLC solution which became widely known as the ‘ghetto plan’ proposed to concentrate all council housing for Bengalis in a small area around Spitalfields, suggesting that this would ensure their access to accommodation and safety. Activists’ unanimous rejection of this plan saw it shelved by the council. Newbiggin remembered telling council officers: ‘that’s not what we want at all. We want decent housing and we want to live with our neighbours. We want to be part of a wider community but at the moment we can’t because it’s not safe and there is not appropriate housing available’.⁹³⁷ Newbiggin’s quote demonstrate squatters’ demands both for safe housing, and for the council to share their political insistence on the sanctity of multicultural co-existence. In this sense, the Trust used the squatting movement to offer a vision of Bengali activists rejecting the racism of the post-war welfare state, and re-shaping Labour councils’ political identities from the bottom up.

This approach to the production of memory narratives also influenced the narrative’s presentation of Bengalis’ entrance into electoral politics. By the 1970s, Bengalis were voting in larger numbers; the community had the potential to form a powerful local electoral bloc. Tower Hamlets Labour Party began printing their material in Bengali while simultaneously denying memberships to prospective Asian activists, thus aiming both to secure the community’s vote and prevent political challenges.⁹³⁸ But this strategy managed only to delay Bengalis’ ascent within the Party and the council. Ashique Ali was the first Bengali elected after winning St Katharine’s ward in 1982, while by 1985 a Bengali majority was achieved in Spitalfields.⁹³⁹ This would prove hugely significant in reshaping the area in subsequent decades. While the Trust framed the election of Rushanara Ali as MP for Bethnal Green and Bow in 2010 as the belated culmination of this organising, Pola Uddin’s ascent to the Lords in 1998 followed decades as an activist, member of the Jagonari collective, and local councillor. Uddin most clearly marked the trajectory from the street to the state.⁹⁴⁰ This foothold *within* government was a necessary compliment to and extension of Bengalis’ creation of alternative, autonomous forms of social provision.

This dual approach was evident in education. The NF’s influence in white communities was often reflected in schools, where white children verbally and physically abused Bengalis. John Newbiggin recalled discovering that one school’s response ‘was to lock Bengali boys in a classroom at break time to stop them being beaten up’. This practically constituted a further punishment for the racist violence inflicted on these boys. It was also ineffective; Newbiggin recalled ‘the white kids beating at the windows,

⁹³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹³⁷ Eade et al, *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, p.86

⁹³⁸ *Ibid*, p.66

⁹³⁹ *Ibid*, p.70

⁹⁴⁰ On Ali and Uddin, see Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, p.58

spitting, saying ‘we will get you when you get out’.’ Many of these pupils had recently arrived in the country from Bangladesh and spoke minimal English; this experience was foundational to their experience of England.⁹⁴¹ Responding to this situation, volunteers established weekend and night schools such as the East End Community School. These offered a secure and supportive supplementary education which emphasised Bengali ‘language and culture’ and circumvented institutional neglect and the threat of physical violence.⁹⁴² Though the Trust made no mention of any formal connections, this development reflects the similar contemporary concerns and strategies of the Black Supplementary Schools Movement. The Bengali Educational Needs in Tower Hamlets (BENTH) campaign was established in 1983 to pressurise ILEA to address the community’s exclusion and attract greater funding. Its frequent successes were indicative of community activists’ increasing accomplishment in procuring state funds.⁹⁴³

The Trust framed these organisations as forebears to the state schools named after Bengali historical figures which proliferated under the leadership of Bengali councillors in Tower Hamlets from the late 1980s. These institutions included the Bangabandhu (‘friend of Bengal’) School, named for revolutionary leader Mujibur Rahman; the Osmani School, named for the Commander-in-Chief of the Bengali forces in 1971; and the Kobi Nazrul School, named after the poet, musician, and cultural nationalist icon.⁹⁴⁴ Again, the Trust framed Bengalis’ entry into the state and subsequent educational reforms within a longer tradition dating back to anti-colonial struggle, and as a natural institutionalisation of the Bengali night schools of the 1970s and 1980s.

Building on and even cementing these victories in education and housing, the new cohort of Bengali councillors began a renaming and memorialisation campaign which asserted the community’s significance to and permanence in the area. St Mary’s Park in Whitechapel, where Altab Ali was murdered in 1978, was renamed in his honour twenty years later in 1998.⁹⁴⁵ The park had in the intervening years become the destination of the annual marches in Ali’s memory and anti-racist demonstrations more widely; this was a final, decisive act of reclamation. Within the park, the council commissioned a replica of the Dhaka *Shahid Minar* (Martyr’s monument), a commemoration of the Bengali language movement activists killed by the West Pakistani police in February 1952 for protesting the imposition of Urdu in East Pakistan.⁹⁴⁶ The spatial politics of this park neatly encapsulate the fundamental duality of a tradition of Bengali activism which was as steadfast in its progressive, secular

⁹⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.62

⁹⁴² Ullah, Eversley, *Bengalis in London’s East End*, p.68

⁹⁴³ *Ibid*, p.53

⁹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.69

⁹⁴⁵ Ullah; Eversley, *Bengalis in London’s East End*, p.91

⁹⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

diaspora identity as it was in its struggle for security in and autonomy over Tower Hamlets. Ullah's papers at Tower Hamlets archive demonstrate his active involvement in the organisation of the annual Altab Ali marches, his trusteeship of the Altab Ali Memorial Foundation, and in the planning stage of the *Shahid Minar*.⁹⁴⁷ These acts marked the culmination of secular activists' transition from street protest to state power; the Trust's framing of this as natural and logical derived from its members' personal participation in these very developments.

But the Council's most fundamental act here was the renaming of the area around Brick Lane 'Banglatown', overseen by Sunahwar Ali as vice chair of the council's regeneration committee in 1998. Ali argued Banglatown was 'never established by the businessmen', but by 'politicians and community activists'.⁹⁴⁸ But as this decision cemented the area's status as a tourist attraction, stimulating further redevelopment overseen by Ali's committee, property prices spiralled.⁹⁴⁹ In this act, the council cemented Brick Lane's Bengali identity while making the most prominent public expression of that identity inseparable from the area's commercialisation. Bengali councillors' immortalisation of memories of local radicalism was central to their efforts to oversee deeply commercialising reforms in the area.

Contemporary Banglatown and Bengali Culture

As the Trust turned towards the present, it countered prevailing narratives around the Bengali East End in the clearest, most direct terms. Redevelopment brought new life to the area. Spitalfields had been revitalised as 'Bengali entrepreneurs ... market the area's Banglatown'.⁹⁵⁰ This was the culmination of centuries of entanglement as Bengalis moved upwards from servitude, through anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle, towards commercial, political and cultural autonomy. The Trust neatly folded these radical histories into a framing of the contemporary Bengali community as good citizens who embodied the multiculturalism and commercial zeal of the modern city and indeed the nation. Concern was raised, mostly by older white radicals who had lived locally for decades, about the exclusion of residents caused by the garment industry's decline, gentrification and the expansion of City offices into the area.⁹⁵¹ But the interviewing of Bengali 'community leaders', many of whom had profited commercially or contributed politically to these changes, meant that critiques of these changes were rarely sustained. The Trust

⁹⁴⁷ Ullah Papers, TH P/Ullah/4/5

⁹⁴⁸ Sunahwar Ali, Interview with Jamil Iqbal, 23rd May, 2006. Accessed 10th November, 2021, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/interviewee-profiles-full-transcripts-strand-2/>

⁹⁴⁹ Claire Alexander, Sean Carey, Sundeep Lidher, Suzi Hall, Julia King, 'Beyond Banglatown: Continuity, Change and New Urban Economies in Brick Lane', *Runnymede Perspectives*, p.10, (London, 2020), Accessed 28th January, 2023 at https://assets.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/61bcbda054b2e6d474ed8d03_RunnymedeBanglatownReport.pdf

⁹⁵⁰ Ullah; Eversley, *Bengalis in London's East End*, p.57

⁹⁵¹ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations*, p.49

accompanied this with a broader appeal to young people to find identity and purpose in their dual heritage, in Bengali culture, and in the infrastructural achievements of contemporary Bangladesh. This constituted an attempt to promote a confident, dual identity consistent with the secular diaspora politics of the older generation of community leaders.

Elizabeth Buettner is among the most prominent critics of Britain's commercialised multiculturalism. For Buettner, the proliferation and popularity of 'Indian' curry houses helped create a multiculturalism predicated on consumption, premised on a merely superficial understanding of South Asian cuisine and its historical relationship to Britain.⁹⁵² The Trust, however, endorsed the 'Indian' restaurant in London while positioning it within Britain's longer imperial history. *Bengalis in London's East End* included a chapter on food and tea which began with an account of the foundation of Calcutta by English sailor Job Charnock in 1687, before detailing the town's growth into an East India Company trading post, fort, port city, and eventually the capital of British India.⁹⁵³ In nearby Sylhet, tea was intensively farmed and transported to Calcutta for shipping.⁹⁵⁴ Ullah and Eversley framed this extractive trade of food and drinks from Bengal to London to satisfy metropolitan tastes as the foundation of the growth of 'Indian' restaurants in Britain to 9,500 in the early 2000s.⁹⁵⁵ Yet the major acceleration in Brick Lane's curry houses had taken place more recently. While it was estimated that there were only two restaurants on Brick Lane in the early 1980s (only one of them Bengali), the industry had since grown profoundly, in large part due to redevelopment initiatives throughout the 1980s and 1990s.⁹⁵⁶ Brick Lane was the epicentre of this imperial and post-imperial history, the 'heartland' of Bengali Britain, and the 'curry capital of Europe'.⁹⁵⁷ In this sense, the Trust argued for the significance both of the foundations laid by colonial trade and the wave of redevelopment since the 1980s in giving rise to contemporary Bengali commercial success.

Indeed, Ullah and Eversley marvelled, "'Banglatown' has 'become a global icon' and a 'branding concept'".⁹⁵⁸ Through grants from national regeneration programmes including the City Challenge Scheme (1991-1996) and the Single Regeneration Budget (1994-2007), as well as the council's participation in local partnerships like the City Fringe (1997-2002) and Cityside (1997-2004), a total of £42 million was

⁹⁵² Elizabeth Buettner, "'Going for an Indian': South Asian Restaurants and the Limits of Multiculturalism in Britain", *Journal of Modern History*, 80, (4, 2008), pp.869-870

⁹⁵³ Ullah, Eversley, *Bengalis in London's East End*, p.72

⁹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp.74-5

⁹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.78

⁹⁵⁶ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, p.57

⁹⁵⁷ Ullah, Eversley, *Bengalis in London's East End*, p.78

⁹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.57

invested in the area's regeneration over roughly 15 years.⁹⁵⁹ The area's Georgian townhouses were renovated and inhabited by the wealthy, while redevelopment brought a huge proliferation of luxury flats. Some white radical activists such as Kenneth Leech objected to these changes; in particular, references to the area as 'City Fringe' seemed at once to obscure its rich history and submit to the encroachments of the financial district.⁹⁶⁰ Leech noted 'the concept of Banglatown... is certainly good for business, [but] I am not sure whether it is all that good for the people who actually live there.'⁹⁶¹ In similar terms, Eversley – a community activist who also wrote for the trust – suggested when interviewed for the *Tales of Three Generations* project that local people lost their sense of ownership following redevelopment.⁹⁶² Rajonuddin Jalal noted ambivalently that while Brick Lane in 1978 'was not such a nice place... a lot of rich people have [since] moved into the area'. 'The rich people', Jalal continued, 'are not Bengali people'.⁹⁶³

Jalal aside, the majority of the Bengali people the Trust approached in this section of the project were prominent community leaders. Many had politically overseen or commercially profited from recent changes, and their defence outweighed criticisms of redevelopment. Kenneth Leech noted that many of the anti-racist activists of the 1970s and 1980s graduated into small business ownership, as restaurateurs or proprietors of clothes and food shops.⁹⁶⁴ Discussions of Spitalfields' earlier squalor were consistently contrasted with Banglatown's contemporary dynamism.⁹⁶⁵ After becoming councillors, business owners and cultural leaders, this generation created in contemporary Spitalfields 'one of the great icons of our country'.⁹⁶⁶ Councillor Abdus Shakur argued that Brick Lane had become 'far more vibrant than it has ever been'. 'Bangladeshis' had, as a result of 'our regeneration policy', come to 'own a lot of those businesses' and were 'making a lot more than they would have if there was no improvement'.⁹⁶⁷ Shakur helped found the BYM in the 1980s with Ullah; again, he reflected the Trust's broader tendency to interview contemporaries who had since become community leaders, and reproduce their testimony unedited in the text. *Authorisation* was here granted through the personal connections and shared histories of members of this secular activist tradition. Contemporary Banglatown appeared to emerge naturally from the radicalism of earlier decades, marking the final achievement of its goals. The Trust and councillors both belonged to this milieu and agreed on the rhetorical power of these histories of

⁹⁵⁹ Alexander et al., *Beyond Banglatown*, p.10

⁹⁶⁰ Eade et al., *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*, p.84

⁹⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.107

⁹⁶² *Ibid*.

⁹⁶³ *Ibid*, p.56

⁹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.58

⁹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.107

⁹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.58

⁹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.108

empowerment and uplift as a counterweight to media racism and contemporary disaffection.

The Trust also sought to promote a confident, hybrid Bengali youth culture. While the closing stages of *Tales of Three Generations* explored the contemporary Bengali music industry, the Trust also published a youth magazine, *Bengali Info*. The March 2000 issue's editorial asserted '*Bengali Info* has opened its pages to Bengali young people as part of our policy to let your voice be heard', while later issues carried the frontpage 'for young people by young people'.⁹⁶⁸ Yet Ullah, who was 40 in 2000 and Julie Begum, who was 32, were not obvious editors of a youth magazine. They were joined in this role by Sunahwar Ali, a founding member of the Bangladesh Youth Front in the late 1970s who was later elected a councillor in the mid-1990s, when he was instrumental in the rebranding of Spitalfields as 'Banglatown'.⁹⁶⁹ The average issue included three or four pieces which had been repackaged from other publications and around the same number of original pieces written by young contributors.⁹⁷⁰ The magazine did little to acknowledge the economic difficulties young people had in the redeveloped Tower Hamlets; when the magazine published young contributors' voices, it did so on firmly prescriptive lines.

One major strand of the magazine's work was the reproduction of features on Bengali figures within the creative industries. One story introduced Ruby Hamer, 'one of Britain's most successful make-up artists'. Hamer arrived as a refugee during the 1971 war and discussed her love of London. The profile emphasised Hamer's glamour, after detailing her triumph over trauma and adjustment to life in Britain. Rani and Kajal Mukherjee, two Bengali actresses who found success in the Hindi film industry, were profiled similarly. Most notable though was the Trust's promotion of an underground Bengali music industry at ease with its cultural hybridity. While Mo Magic, 'a DJ and up and coming producer', asserted 'because you're Asian, you have to prove yourself every step of the way', he praised the vitality of the 'scene'. Others frequently described their style as 'East meets west', referring to the fusion of Bengali vocals, instruments and scales with time signatures taken from Western electronic music.⁹⁷¹ More broadly, *Bengali Info* carried a recurring advert for a company hiring out lights, turntables, and 'all other party/rave essentials'.⁹⁷² Working against the piety and asceticism associated with Bengalis in both assimilatory and Islamist discourse, the magazine promoted a liberated and hybrid identity where expression offered a route to self-actualisation. This was apparent throughout the magazine, whose frequent 'careers' section held lofty ambitions for its readers. The March 2000 issue, for instance,

⁹⁶⁸ *Bengali Info*, Issue 3, March 2000, np. TH P/ULL/4/4

⁹⁶⁹ Ali, interview with Iqbal.

⁹⁷⁰ *Bengali Info*, Issues 1-8, March 1998-March 2006, TH P/ULL/4/4

⁹⁷¹ *Bengali Info*, March 2000, np. P/ULL/4/4

⁹⁷² E.g., *Bengali Info*, March 2000, np. P/ULL/4/5

encouraged readers to consider film making, balancing an acknowledgement of its competitiveness with the potential of its economic rewards. Young Bengalis, then, were called on to identify with and aspire to the achievements and comfortable, self-assured identities of a burgeoning group of Bengali creatives. The magazine's celebration of these figures' achievements offered an aspirational example which it encouraged young members of the community to follow. It did not, however, engage with the effects of the rapid, exclusionary redevelopment which had transformed Tower Hamlets without addressing chronic unemployment among young Bengalis especially. This was a feature of both formal and informal forms of 'authorisation'. *Bengali Info* was funded by Tower Hamlets Council; more immediately, one of the most active councillors in the redevelopment initiative, Sunahwar Ali, was an editor of the magazine.⁹⁷³

While, in oral history interviews, the Trust's young contributors had no meaningful opportunity to influence the course of the narrative, their contributions to *Bengali Info* were more substantive. One such contribution came from sub-editor Sherina Begum, who introduced the March 2002 issue as follows:

Girls, *Bengali Info* ain't no *Cosmopolitan* and guys don't cancel your monthly subscription to *FHM* yet! *Bengali Info* is a unique magazine, an honest account and reflection of the interests of young Bengalis in and around the UK.

Introducing the issue's contents, Sherina particularly emphasised a reproduction of an *FHM* interview with Rhona Mitra, the 'hot babe Lara Croft was modelled on'.⁹⁷⁴ While historically, the Trust championed a radical activist tradition which embraced the demands of second wave feminism, contemporarily contributors like Sherina leaned in to the post-feminism of the 1990s and early 2000s. For the theorist Katharine Angel, post-feminism was 'the view that feminism had achieved its aims, understood largely to be economic, and no longer needed to trouble itself anxiously with sexuality'. Angel continues that post-feminism 'insisted on sexual assertiveness and sex-positivity – on a gleeful pleasure taken in seeing oneself as an object of desire, and in asserting oneself as a subject of desire'.⁹⁷⁵ Sherina's contribution suggests enthusiastic participation in these post-feminist discourses among the Trust's young contributors. In claiming Rhona Mitra as a Bengali Icon, Sherina reproduced a leering article from the pages of *For Him Magazine*, encouraging young Bengali women to think they, too, could be 'hot babe[s]'. As the interview with Mo Magic showed, *Bengali Info* did not shy from dwelling on the racism which young Bengalis still faced. However, while in previous decades material emancipation from colonial and racial dominance had been the primary goal of Bengali community activism, in this council-

⁹⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷⁴ *Bengali Info*, 4, (2002), p.2. P/ULL/4/4.

⁹⁷⁵ Katharine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex will be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent*, (London, second edn., 2022), quotes respectively p.32; p.34.

sponsored publication the solutions offered increasingly revolved around personal confidence. Here, young female members of the community were encouraged to find empowerment in a vision of themselves as sexually empowered and desirable. More broadly, all young members of the community were encouraged to identify with aspirational creative figures, confident in their cultural hybridity. Discussions of inequality, exclusion or structural economic change were absent.

Turning to the present, then, the Trust sought to encourage young Bengalis to feel pride in their area's reinvention as 'Banglatown', an economic centre with thriving catering and tourism trades. The Trust presented a long, singular trajectory from anti-colonial resistance to political power and cultural and social autonomy. At its conclusion, Bengalis figured as empowered and idealised citizens of the commercial, cosmopolitan contemporary city. More, The Trust sought to construct a diasporic youth culture around Bengalis' visibility and empowerment through the creative industries. If young people were in practice disempowered in the Trust's creation of historical narratives, *Bengali Info* amplified the voices of those who viewed an assertive confidence as a means to empowerment. Discussion of young people's economic exclusion in contemporary Banglatown was largely absent.

Conclusion

Against prevailing narratives of the 'irresistible' post-war 'rise of multiracial Britain', the Trust's account of Bengali British history centred centuries of colonial entanglement with and struggle against Britain and Pakistan. It foregrounded the complex history of a colonised people in richer and more sustained depth than any other case-study in this thesis and considered the relationship between the different, though overlapping forms of colonisation which Bengal faced. The basic amenities and associational culture established by early settlers to London provided a support network for the growing numbers of Bengali migrants to post-war Britain. More, they helped the community organise in support of the 1971 liberation war and against the NF and state racism between the 1970s and 1990s. Drawing on the testimonies of its political allies, the Trust then narrated activists' attainment of a foothold in the state as a natural development. There, councillors invested in schooling provision for Bengalis, renamed parks and entire areas of the borough, and attracted private and public funds to invest in redevelopment. The Trust called on young people to take pride in this generation's achievements, and to note that secular progressivism had brought Bengali Britons from colonial servitude to cultural, political and economic autonomy. They also pointed to the intellectual and economic achievements of contemporary Bangladesh and sought to emulate the confident cultural hybridity seen in the contemporary Bengali music scene.

Chapter Four of this thesis corroborated radical scholars' observations that the individualistic multiculturalism of the 1990s and 2000s relied on an active obfuscation of the imperial past. It showed that while white residents mourned their place within a racialised and imperial British world, activists – caught between discomfort, affinity with residents and a totalising, disorienting experience of loss – obscured this current of local identities. This contrasted with the Swadhinata Trust's approach. The Trust's emphasis on Empire and its aftermath was necessary to counter the rising racism which followed 9/11 *and* warn against a conservative Islamism whose politics echoed the repression of Bengalis' ancestors. Secular, material struggle – they argued – brought Bengali Britons to the cultural and economic centre of millennial London. The Trust articulated this narrative in partnership with Tower Hamlets council and benefited from the spaces, resources and funding of elite heritage organisations such as the IWM and the MOL. (In the period since the conclusion of this chapter in 2012, the Trust has continued to collaborate with prominent national institutions; they partnered with the British Library in 2021 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Bangladeshi independence).⁹⁷⁶ Though funding was rarely reliable or consistent, this cultural policy climate created space for the Trust to foreground Empire, post-imperial racism, anti-racist and anti-colonial struggle as integral to Britain's history and to the emergence of contemporary multiculturalism. This complicates Gilroy, Wemyss, Littler and Naidoo's conception of the relationship between historical consciousness and radical politics, showing the appeal of anti-colonial and radical memory within a marketising political context. The representation of Empire did not determine heritage groups' contemporary politics but *was determined by* the narrators' experience of the late twentieth century. Bengalis' triumph over the adversity of Empire and post-imperial racism offered an aspirational narrative for young people and helped position the community at the very centre of the cosmopolitan and commercial 'world city'. Radical history was assimilated into a deeply liberal politics.

Yet the Trust's method of recruiting personal acquaintances to answer pre-ordained questions from young interviewees, with minimal opportunity for improvisation, created a severely limited dialogue. Ullah and his colleagues imposed this older generation's perspective *onto* young people rather than creating a genuine dialogue in which the latter were more than passive recipients of the former's knowledge and experience. *Bengali Info* did recruit young people to contribute while prescribing a self-assured confidence as the solution to racism and neglecting to mention the exclusions inherent in the councils' contemporary redevelopment programme. While the Trust was founded to empower young people in a context marked by unemployment and stigmatisation, its close political connections to the council led it to abandon analyses of structural inequality in the twenty-first century.

⁹⁷⁶ 'Songs of Freedom', Event at the British Library organised by the Swadhinata Trust. Programme accessed 6th January 2023, at <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/songs-of-freedom/>

In recent years, challenges to Tower Hamlets' Labour council have accelerated. Lutfur Rahman, a Bengali independent, was elected mayor of the borough in 2011 and re-elected in 2022, after radical campaigns promising investment in housing and opposition to exclusive redevelopment initiatives.⁹⁷⁷ More widely, the youth-led Bengali campaigning group Nijjor Manush has been at the forefront of the 'Save Brick Lane' campaign to halt the Truman Brewery's redevelopment into a shopping mall. The Truman Brewery scheme, according to Nijjor Manush, marks the culmination of the wider area's decades-long gentrification.⁹⁷⁸ This was the same process whose earlier iterations were celebrated by the Swadhinata Trust. While the Trust offered little opportunity for young people to discuss exclusionary contemporary redevelopment, resistance to this process has since become more organised and strident. In this sense, the Trust's triumphant narrative of commercial and cultural autonomy, to the exclusion of the more complex experiences of the borough's young people, is a vital prehistory of the contemporary politics of Tower Hamlets.

⁹⁷⁷ Aubrey Allegretti, Rowena Mason, 'Lutfur Rahman Wins Tower Hamlets Mayor Vote After Five-year Ban', *The Guardian*, (6th May, 2022). Accessed 6th January, 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/may/06/lutfur-rahman-wins-tower-hamlets-mayor-election-results>

⁹⁷⁸ 'Save Brick Lane Campaign', *Nijjor Manush Website*. Accessed 6th January, 2023 at <https://nijjormanush.com/save-brick-lane-campaign/>

Conclusion

This thesis began with three related proposals. Firstly, heritage scholars' methodological separation of discourse analysis and heritage's social, political and cultural contexts has produced a simplistic and deterministic political dichotomy between elite museums and 'radical' community heritage. Secondly, returning heritage discourses to these contexts might create more effective understandings of the politics of heritage. Finally, this might also help to rethink another similarly limiting binary, generating more sophisticated understandings of imperial memory and its political resonances than is possible through the terms 'nostalgia' and 'amnesia'.

I pursued this new methodological approach through six case-study chapters, three on the 'elite' Museum of London (MOL) and three on community heritage groups. I asked how these organisations and the narratives they produced were shaped by the changes to cultural policy wrought by three significant forces in the recent political history of London. These were the urban radicalism which reached its zenith under Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council (GLC); the broadly contemporary, revived conservatism whose national figurehead was Margaret Thatcher; and the socially and economically liberal politics of the 1990s and 2000s, synonymous with New Labour. As an organisation which spanned these decades, maintaining relationships with bodies from all three contexts, I used the MOL to measure change in one institution throughout the period. As such, I examined the forms of imperial memory produced by different *kinds of organisations* in different *economic, political and cultural climates*, testing the existing literature's methodologies, political assumptions and analyses of discourse.

This suggested several new methodological imperatives for the study of heritage moving beyond an approach best captured by Laurajane Smith's *Uses of Heritage*. Smith argues that professional museums and monuments naturalise discourses of nationhood which support elite interests, enlisting the population to subscribe to these myths and maintain the sites which propagate them. Her juxtaposition of this 'authorised heritage discourse' with 'intangible', vernacular and radical forms of heritage makes explicit the implicit binary which characterises much of the rest of the field in relation to the historiography of contemporary Britain.⁹⁷⁹ But this thesis showed that approaches which frame heritage organisations as simple vectors of discursive power remain insufficient. It argued for a reconceptualisation of 'authorisation' as a dynamic, shifting *process* undertaken by political organisations of granting (and withdrawing) material support. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the dynamics of this relationship relied on heritage organisations' capacity to encourage identification with political

⁹⁷⁹ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, pp.18-20.

communities and struggles which supported their funders' politics. In reconstructing how political interests used state power to actively and materially shape heritage discourses, I traced a richer, more complex and uneven set of relationships.

This material support took varied forms. Most frequently it was financial. The narratives traced in all six case-studies were either facilitated or constrained by changing funding regimes, while community heritage organisations were especially affected by the abolition of the GLC and the constraints imposed by Thatcher. But it also came more informally, through personal acquaintance following mutual participation in historic campaigns or through institutional relationships. This informal kind of material support often came through the granting of *access*, either to objects or to individuals for interviews.

Reconstructing these relationships suggests new ways of conceptualising the relationship between politics and heritage in contemporary Britain. Firstly, museums and community heritage were rarely politically opposed. Changes to their practice often occurred through collaboration with one another and in dialogue with shifting policy from above. For example, In the 1980s and 1990s the MID actively sought to democratise museum practice in conjunction with the local community. Collaboration with community heritage groups became central to the wider MOL's practice in the 1990s and 2000s, leading the museum to host exhibitions by community groups including the Swadhinata Trust. The egalitarian tenets of the new museology influenced practice in a way which is missed by heritage scholars such as Smith who do not trace institutional histories, and those – like Patrick Wright and Robert Hewison – who were writing as the new field emerged.⁹⁸⁰

Secondly, neither museums nor community heritage can accurately be characterised as internally politically united. Political difference and tension often characterised the histories of the 'New Urban Left', late-century Conservatism, and New Labour, as well as the heritage organisations they worked with. We saw this particularly acutely in the tensions between different factions at Centerprise, and - at the MOL - between the implicit nationalism of the 'working history' approach and curators influenced by critical theory and the new museology. Museums and community heritage were, then, neither diametrically opposed to one another nor internally unified. The binary within existing scholarship which associates the former broadly with the right and the latter broadly with the left does not reflect these relationships as they actually existed historically. This had important implications for the historical narratives which they produced.

⁹⁸⁰ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*; Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*; Hewison, *The Heritage Industry*.

The New Urban Left, comprising both radical local authorities and the activist organisations they funded, is often credited with making racial, gendered and sexual justice more prominent within Labour politics and on the wider left. Part One of this thesis explored heritage organisations receiving funding from radical local authorities. Historians have traced the efforts of grassroots arts and publishing organisations to construct a radical critique of Britain's structural racial, class-based and gendered inequities.⁹⁸¹ I paid closer attention to these organisations' financial relationships with government, and also focused on these councils' relationship with 'elite' heritage organisations such as the MOL. Doing so, I asked how effectively the New Urban Left constructed a historical critique of the racial legacies of Empire.

Chapter One explored the implications of GLC and ILEA funding at the early Museum of London (1976-1989). The Museum's first permanent galleries were indelibly marked with the legacies of its predecessors' close relationships with the City of London and the crown. This shaped the young institution's collections, curatorial specialisms, institutional culture and favoured narratives. Here was an informal, cumulative form of 'authorisation' which shaped common-sense at the MOL and produced a narrative of patrician stewardship over the world's pre-eminent city. Empire figured as the highest expression of the city's innate character, and as a source of material abundance. In the 1980s, however, the GLC – responsible for one third of the MOL's funding and trustees - increasingly encouraged collecting and exhibiting on social history. The MOL recruited social history specialists, who organised a regular calendar of exhibitions. Yet neither the GLC nor MOL managers sought to influence the precise content of these exhibitions. Curators retained strong foci on their secondary interests in the art historical development of painting and photography and felt no pressure to develop the critical thought or radical zeal which is often attributed to cultural groups receiving GLC funding. Faced with its impending closure, ILEA directly organised one MOL exhibition, *Responsible to the People*, which constructed a tradition of valiant municipal socialist councillors delivering for Londoners and compared Thatcher's London to the late-Victorian city. These temporary exhibitions remained in conflict with the permanent galleries. Yet their class-based approach to social history left them disinclined to engage with emerging postcolonial research demonstrating their socialist protagonists' subscription to ideas about eugenics and the racial health of the imperial body. One curator even celebratorily reproduced his photographic sources' framing of their white working-class subjects as dignified given their facilitation of the muscular spectacle of the city's industrial port. This would become an abiding image in memorialisation of the area's Docklands

⁹⁸¹ E.g., Waters, *Thinking Black*, pp.125-164; Wetherell, 'Painting the Crisis', pp.235-249

communities. GLC funding did little to produce a substantive reckoning with histories of racism or Empire.

Chapter two offered an analysis of an important group within the community publishing movement, Centerprise. It showed that Centerprise only actively published literature calling for radical racial justice during one relatively brief period of its existence. Black writers were virtually absent as the early publishing project espoused an exclusionary class politics tied to its Workers' Educational Association (WEA) funding and its association with the wider worker writers' movement. They were visible but disempowered during a later period overseen by well-meaning but uncritical white editors. In the 1980s, radical Black Arts practitioners wrested control of the publishing project, beginning an account of the area which reflected a confrontation with racism and the legacies of Empire. While efforts to produce 'social history' at the MOL remained inattentive to race, Centerprise's position within the radical milieu of New Urban Left activism led its approach to develop and adapt over time. But almost at the very moment Black Arts practitioners wrested control of the project from others on the left, attacks from the right rendered their work unsustainable. Thatcher's abolition of the GLC in 1986 placed the publishing project in an ever-escalating financial crisis, leading to its discontinuation in 1993.

Part two explored heritage responses to the vast changes underway in London's Docklands in the 1980s and 1990s, as a redevelopment scheme offering tax and planning exemptions to investors transformed the area. This generated a new financial and professional services hub, redrawing the area's economic map and accelerating the departure of historic communities who had settled around the port. This process, a central tenet of Thatcherite urban policy, led heritage organisations to construct a number of visions of the area and the nation's maritime past.

Chapter Three focused on the early history of the MID, an offshoot of the MOL established to respond to upheaval in the area. The MID possessed relationships with the City of London, whose financial primacy had been challenged by the Docklands' redevelopment; the Port of London Authority (PLA), who had administered the area's now-obsolete maritime economy; and the LDDC, who oversaw the rise of a triumphant new services economy. These relationships led it to champion different visions of the nation's maritime history, which often seemed in tension with each other. Seeking to maintain strong relations, MID curators voluntarily organised exhibition to promote major events in the City's calendar, borrowing ornate objects from livery companies to construct a romantic image of the eighteenth-century port and its patrician gentleman traders. They also met the PLA's attempts to secure its historic legacy by using the authority's collections to focus heavily on the working history of the industrial port. This initiative also aimed to modernise the MOL's focus and democratise its methods, drawing on the assistance and testimonies of local residents affected by closures. While curators saw this work as a

radical departure from conservative methods and a critique of contemporary free-market redevelopment, they constructed a narrative not of class struggle and exploitation but of the technical genius and industrial spectacle of Britain's first port. They employed photographs of workers and communities in close proximity to the muscularity of the docks, reviving the representation – seen in Chapter One - of the white working-class as stewards of Britain's industrial pre-eminence. With funding from the LDDC, curators produced a photography collection marvelling at the scale of redevelopment. The LDDC and sympathetic journalists used these photographs to construct longer, nebulous traditions of cosmopolitanism and commerce on the Thames. In these years, the MID offered three different conservative views of the nation: a mercantile tradition embodied by the City; the world's greatest industrial power; and a people defined by their buccaneering cosmopolitanism. All three of these conceptions of the nation were closely tied to its imperial contexts, but their evocation of it was inconsistent. The first presented Empire as a benevolent trading network; the second presented colonial cargo and material abundance as the deriving from the nation's industrial genius; the third evoked Empire in jocular and light-hearted ways to contextualise contemporary diversity and commerce.

If this showed there was not internal coherence within 'elite' heritage, Chapter Four revealed practical co-operation and rhetorical congruity between the MID's work and a contemporary community heritage group, the Island History Trust (IHT). Mike Seaborne, MOL photography curator and Bob Aspinall, MID librarian, were long term volunteers at the IHT, helping Eve Hostettler and the group develop photographic collections and preserve their archive. There were also marked similarities between these ostensibly progressive organisations' narratives. In both cases, a desire to tell working-class history often defaulted to a focus on the technical ingenuity and industrial spectacle of the port which carried deeply nationalistic undertones. Once again, curators established a close connection between white working-class Londoners and the strong industrial nation. At the IHT, this derived from the fact that the community's proximity to the docks led many of its members to become deeply economically and culturally invested in Empire. They expressed a sense of enrichment and dignity deriving from their encounters with exotic cargo, large ships and colonial sailors. This revealed marked identification with an (imperial and racialised) nationhood. In local history classes the IHT challenged this imperial nostalgia when it appeared connected to widespread support for the far-right. But in their written accounts of the mid-century Island, they championed these motifs as a counterweight to contemporary alienation following redevelopment. Finally, when writing the local history of the 1980s and 1990s after the community had largely dispersed and its legacy was at stake, they downplayed the relationship between the imperial presence within local culture and contemporary racism. While the IHT's ostensibly progressive laments for a betrayed working-class culture revealed that culture's investment in an imperial and racialised nationalism, the Trust's framing of this depended on changing political circumstances.

Part three explores the years between 1994 and 2012. Paul Gilroy, Georgie Wemyss, Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo have all criticised the cultural policy of this period as a ‘liberal’ form of multiculturalism; liberal in the sense that it emphasised the success and beneficent treatment of individuals but declined to consider racism in structural or historical terms. They particularly level this charge at New Labour, as keen on ‘inclusion’ and ‘diversity’ as it was on the market economics which perpetuated inequality.⁹⁸² The IHT’s eventual disavowal of Empire to promote contemporary harmony appears to corroborate this criticism, as does my research elsewhere on similar community activists in Newham.⁹⁸³ But chapters Five and Six - which focus on case studies whose primary purpose was not to support white working-class communities – give a more complex picture. These suggests that the memorialisation of Empire was contingent on the way that imperial histories reflected on the experiences and political struggles of the communities which heritage organisations sought to represent. If white communities’ investment in Empire signalled their stake in a (racialised and imperial) nationalism which left-wing practitioners were often uncomfortable with, colonisation was central to Black and Asian narratives of migration to Britain and struggles against racism.

Chapter Five showed that, through exhibitions like *The Peopling of London* (1993-4) and *London, Sugar and Slavery* (LSS, 2007-present), the MOL tried to move beyond celebratory narratives of Empire. The Museum emphasised the enduring demographic, economic and cultural influence wrought by migration deriving from Empire. They also sought to replace their technical and antiquarian approach to collecting with a more critical view of objects’ provenance and the epistemic and physical violence they helped to perpetrate. This drew intellectually on a critical turn within museology and British history, and professionally, on closer collaboration with these scholars as well as community representatives. Crucially though, it was propelled by an increasing emphasis both among museum directors and government funders on diversifying audiences, in part as a means of expanding market reach and improving commercial performance. But simultaneously, other curators involved in the newly opened Museum of London Docklands (MOLD) perpetuated many of the same nostalgic tropes around Britain’s industrial strength which were evident in Chapter Three, and which *Peopling* sought to dismantle. Even as *London, Sugar and Slavery* emphasised the relationship between London’s commercial wealth and colonial slave-ownership, elsewhere the MOLD retained nostalgic galleries like ‘Warehouse of the World’. More, studying reception reveals that both exhibitions were met by a significant portion of visitors who simply rejected their message. Shifts towards a more direct and sustained engagement with

⁹⁸² Littler, Naidoo, ‘White Past, Multicultural Present’, p.334; Wemyss, ‘‘The Power to Tolerate’’, pp.216-236; Gilroy, ‘‘We Got to Get Over’’, p.25.

⁹⁸³ Gleeson, ‘Stories from London’s Docklands’.

Empire's legacies were propelled by market forces, but they remained contested and fragmented among both the museum's staff and its visitors.

Chapter Six focused on the Swadhinata Trust, one of the community organisations who collaborated with the MOL and benefitted from the opportunity to hold an exhibition there in 2006. The Trust was established to restore pride and purpose, especially to young Bengalis who had been badly affected by decades of marketising reforms, rising racism, and the defeat of an organised municipal left. Many within this generation, the Trust feared, were turning to radical Islam. The Trust foregrounded centuries of Bengali struggle against two different forms of colonial dominance, the first from the British Raj and the second a union with Pakistan according to a conservative interpretation of Islam. They highlighted the necessity of a tradition of secular Bengali activism, tracing continuity between its radical anticolonial origins, its search for good housing and safety from violence, and its more recent acquisition of power within Tower Hamlets Council, supporting free-market regeneration and Bengali business. This narrative drew on close collaboration with members of this ascendant political and commercial class, who the Trust's coordinators knew from earlier campaigns. More, Empire was central to its narrative of solidarity, pride and radical self-empowerment. But many young Bengalis had gained little from the policies the project celebrated, and the Trust gave little opportunity for young people to contribute their own perspectives to the narrative. Radical historical narratives did not necessarily work towards structural reform as has often been suggested; rather, this history provided a usable past for a cohort who had overseen rapid free-market redevelopment. However, the Trust's singular commitment to this narrative limited its intended audience's ability to engage substantially with it.

As the introduction showed, much recent scholarship on Britain's imperial memory has centred on a debate between those who identify a form of imperial 'nostalgia' and those who preferred its inverse: imperial 'amnesia'. Danny Dorling, Sally Tomlinson and Peter Mitchell note that, since 2016, justifications of Brexit and resistance to calls for racial justice relied on the mobilisation of myths about the righteousness and glory of Britain's imperial past.⁹⁸⁴ Conversely, Robert Saunders argues that Brexiteers actually relied on the motif of a small, defiant nation exercising an outsized influence on world affairs. For Saunders this was predicated on a wilful ignorance – or 'amnesia' – toward the Empire. For David Edgerton, similarly, the post-war decades were a moment when a new distinctly *national* Britishness was constructed, leaving behind older imperial modes of identification. For Edgerton, characterising post-war Britain as a society preoccupied with Empire is a conceptual failing and an

⁹⁸⁴ Tomlinson, Dorling, *Rule Britannia*; Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia*.

anachronism.⁹⁸⁵

But my thesis suggests that imperial memory in contemporary Britain was more complex than can ever be communicated through binary terms like ‘amnesia’ or ‘nostalgia’; it was fluid, contradictory and historically contingent. On one level, this corroborates the findings of a third group of scholars identified in the introduction – like Katie Donington, Ryan Hanley, Jessica Moody, Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch – who note the simultaneous absence and presence of Empire, and the political imperatives which influence its oscillating position. This group note that *absences* do not necessarily mean Empire was irrelevant to political identity, but that they reflect active choices by the narrator, revealing discomfort and dissonance.⁹⁸⁶ Yet through the lens of ‘authorisation’, I have gone further than other scholars in showing that the shifting position of Empire emerged from heritage practitioners’ personal and economic relationships to changing political climates. Its contours were shaped by inconsistencies within the left and right’s imaginations of their traditions and constituents’ histories. Particularly significant was the way Empire could accentuate, undermine or complicate the narratives favoured by practitioners’ communities or funders, whether it emboldened their account of their search for justice, provided a global context to their dignity and agency, or undermined the image of their benevolence. Shifts within imperial memory were stuttering and partial, constrained by practitioners’ organisations, their funders, and the changing needs of their communities. Finally, imperial memory was also shaped by the need to compete with audiences’ preconceptions, and the effect this had on heritage narratives’ reception. These were the messy *characteristics* of imperial memory. But what do these chapters tell us about the development of its *content* at an elite and popular level in these decades?

My case-studies suggest that the New Urban Left had only a minimal impact in precipitating a reckoning with imperial history or its structural legacies. Rob Waters, largely through close textual reading, argues that the Black radical publishing organisations which emerged at this moment developed a substantive, sustained challenge to the persistence of structural racism through publications which pointed to the legacies of Empire.⁹⁸⁷ Yet Waters’ literary methodology overlooks the constraints imposed by an exclusionary activist milieu and Thatcher’s assaults on local government. Between the restrictions these factors imposed, explicit and direct engagements with the imperial past were fragile and ephemeral. At the MOL, the 1976 permanent galleries celebrated Empire as a source of material abundance derived

⁹⁸⁵ Robert Saunders argues for the use of this term in Saunders, ‘Brexit and Empire: ‘Global Britain’ and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia’, pp.1159-1164; Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, xxx; xxxvi.

⁹⁸⁶ E.g., Stuart Ward, Astrid Rasch, (eds.), *Embers of Empire in Brexit Britain*, especially Donington, ‘Relics of Empire’, pp.121-131. Also Donington, Hanley, Moody, (eds.), *Britain’s History and Memory of Transatlantic Slavery*. Especially useful on this point is p.9

⁹⁸⁷ Waters, *Thinking Black*, p.143

from patrician stewardship of the city. Social history curators received neither training nor political pressure to expand their primary, unreflexive focus on the ‘white working-class’ into an engagement with race. Finally, ILEA’s desire to celebrate the legacy of municipal socialism led to a series of obfuscations of its socialist protagonists’ racial and imperial logics. If relative curatorial freedom meant that GLC sponsorship did little to encourage social history specialists to be attentive to racism and empire, the more direct and assertive nature of ILEA’s involvement actively hindered it.

In the Docklands of the 1980s and 1990s, Empire had a potent place in popular memory. But in exhibitions and publications on both local working-class communities and the port, its position was more complex, the subject of a constantly shifting set of direct references, allusions, and obfuscations. For many residents of the Isle of Dogs, the imperial port was the animating force in the empowerment, cultural enrichment and national significance they mourned. The IHT celebrated these motifs when attempting to commemorate Islanders’ lives, challenged them when they appeared to inform support for the BNP, and obscured them in text when trying to preserve the community’s good name for posterity. Not dissimilarly, the narratives the MID produced in collaboration with the City and the PLA invoked Empire as a great, benevolent trading network, deriving from the commercial spirit and industrial genius of the British nation, embodied respectively by City merchants and nineteenth and twentieth-century industrialists. The LDDC, meanwhile, alluded to Empire jocularly and light-heartedly without ever dwelling on it directly, in order to provide a vague antecedent for contemporary diversity and cosmopolitanism. At a juncture when post-industrial community heritage activists and the right sought either solace or order, industriousness and reinvention, they drew on those aspects of the imperial past which helped, discarding the more violent and racialised aspects which did not.

Here, we see the limitations of Edgerton’s insistence on the nation as a sole category of analysis. It *is* true, as he suggests, that the MID’s work here led to the mournful evocation of different Conservative visions of Britain’s national character. But Empire was not irrelevant to these mournful laments, or the politics they serviced. Rather, it was always implicit and sometimes explicit within them, figuring as the nation’s highest achievement. The two categories – nation and Empire - had been discursively linked for centuries, and could not be so easily disentangled. Similarly, scholars of heritage organisations serving white working-class communities following the upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s have understood these projects as responding primarily to economic marginalisation by the forces of Thatcherism and deindustrialisation.⁹⁸⁸ Few studies of white working-class heritage or class identity in general have pointed to mass migration, national economic ‘decline’ or the end of Empire as forces influencing popular

⁹⁸⁸ Dicks, *Heritage, Place and Community*; Robinson, ‘Inspirations and Obligations’, pp.114-131; Carter, ‘Rethinking Folk Culture’, pp.568-569

experiences of this period. But on the Isle of Dogs (and, as I have shown elsewhere, in Newham), imperial forms of identification lived on clearly and explicitly in popular memories, continuing to inform residents' perception of the social and political upheavals of the late twentieth-century.⁹⁸⁹ While Empire appeared inconsistently in published booklets and exhibitions to foreground the nation's strength or communities' dignity, in popular memory its loss animated the erosion of an entire value system, its dignity and its culture. More broadly, as discussed, Chapters One, Three and Four all show that in London, the close affinity between the white working-class and the industrial nation was a major facet of both museum exhibitions and community heritage work. Here, the framing of the working-class as stewards of Britain's (industrial and imperial) modernity served as a prominent, recurring feature of both elite discourse and popular identities, which has largely been overlooked by scholars of white working-class heritage.

Moving into the New Millennium, the relationship between the period of 'liberal multiculturalism' and imperial memory remains more complex than Gilroy, Hall, Littler and Naidoo, and Wemyss suggest. The MOL, MOLD and ST's work in this period did see direct, explicit and searching confrontations with the imperial past develop both among the communities of the East End and in the galleries of the capital's official museum. This was in direct partnership with local and national government bodies representing the Labour Party and overseeing commercialising reforms both to economic and cultural policy. This work suggested that a reckoning with the racialised and economic legacies of Empire had to be central to any contemporary anti-racism. The MOL focused largely on London, referring to events in the colonies to reframe a primarily domestic history. But it did give exhibition space to groups like the Swadhinata Trust, to foreground the colonies themselves as independently significant, their history worth sustained study as a means of truly reframing London's history from the outside looking in. These case-studies indicate the growing opportunities which emerged from the 1990s for heritage organisations to address Britain's imperial history.

But they also reveal the institutional and popular constraints on more enduring shifts in memory. The continuation of the Docklands project's earlier nationalistic narrative created a heritage discourse which oscillated sharply between criticism of Empire's legacies and celebrations of the wealth it brought. Equally, journalists and visitors often simply rejected radical exhibitions' narratives, reiterating reactionary discourses of the disintegration of British culture and the collapse of the state's capacity through unchecked migration and a corrosive 'political correctness'. The Swadhinata Trust limited the opportunities for the young people they targeted to meaningfully engage with the colonial and

⁹⁸⁹ Gleeson, 'Stories from London's Docklands'.

postcolonial histories of Bengal. The fact that both these organisations articulated radical, critical histories of London does not mean their messages were universally accepted. We need to pay greater attention to the conditions of narratives' production, as well as to reception, to understand the effectiveness of memory work with its intended audiences. The inertia of large, complex institutions like the MOL, the intransigence of some visitors, and the limitations of the ST's engagement with young people all meant that change remained arduous, partial and fragile. As the cultural climate has become coarser and more chauvinistic again in recent years, critical heritage organisations have struggled to expand these increasing opportunities to emphasise Empire's legacies into more fundamental shifts in institutional practice, political discourse, or popular identities. In this light, the difficulties of the MOL and the ST, and the methodological approach of this thesis overall, can be instructive as we seek to make sense of the contemporary politics of imperial memory.

Perhaps most notable here has been the controversy over statues in Britain's cities of figures whose wealth derived from slavery and Empire more generally. As protests for racial justice broke out across the world following the murder of George Floyd in May and June 2020, demonstrators in Bristol famously tore down the city's statue of the slave-trader Edward Colston. While students at Oriel College, Oxford renewed their calls for the removal of the college's statue of Cecil Rhodes, Tower Hamlets Council elected to remove that of the slaver Robert Milligan which stood outside the MOLD's premises on West India Quays.⁹⁹⁰ Led by Secretary of State Oliver Dowden, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) forcefully indicated its opposition to the removal of statues and the greater reappraisal of British history it accompanied. In an early 2022 speech which reiterated many of the logics of a discourse honed throughout 2020 and 2021, Dowden reasoned that such efforts constituted a 'cancel culture' propagated by a 'noisy minority of activists' who were nothing less than 'enemies of the West'. In re-examining prevailing, benevolent images of British national heroes, Dowden implied, historians and curators undermined democracy and threatened a form of national disintegration. More, he painted an image of the 'majority' of the national community as under siege.⁹⁹¹ This majority, in being framed as identifying with Britain historically, were subtly racially coded as white. Instead, DCMS proposed a policy of 'retain and explain'. Instead of apparently 'cancelling' historical figures by removing them from cultural discourse and public spaces, as the government claimed heritage organisations aimed to, it urged

⁹⁹⁰ 'Robert Milligan: Slave Trader Statue Removed from Outside London Museum', *BBC*, (9th June, 2020). Accessed 27th May, 2022, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-52977088>.

⁹⁹¹ Oliver Dowden, 'The Threat to Democracy: Defeating Cancel Culture by Defending the Values of the Free World', (Speech at the Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., Monday 14th February, 2022), 1 min, 8 min. Accessed 27th May, 2022, at <https://www.heritage.org/europe/event/the-threat-democracy-defeating-cancel-culture-defending-the-values-the-free-world>.

practitioners to work harder to contextualise their histories and beliefs. Here, the government oscillated depending on their context between an ostensibly dispassionate, scholarly defence of history against a censorious and partisan left, and fanatical defences of the nation's fundamental benevolence.

One example from the East End is particularly illustrative here. The London County Council opened the Geffrye Museum in 1912 as a museum of furniture and woodwork to celebrate local craftsmen and increase leisure opportunities for the local 'respectable' and 'rational' working-class.⁹⁹² The Museum moved into former almshouses constructed by Robert Geffrye, a local civic leader and merchant who had derived much of his fortune from the trade in enslaved Africans. The Museum, then, was a municipal initiative to foster a respectable local (white) working-class culture, built on premises constructed with the wealth of colonial slave-ownership which, from the 1970s, served one of London's most diverse boroughs, where many residents descended from enslaved people. The site saw the intersection of apparently separate aspects of London's history; working-class culture and the legacies of slave ownership.

When protests broke out in June 2020, the museum was closed for redevelopment. It announced its intention, upon reopening, to change its name to The Museum of the Home in light of recent events. It also indicated a willingness to enter discussions with residents campaigning for the removal of a large statue of Geffrye at the centre of the courtyard.⁹⁹³ In conjunction with the local council, the Museum held a consultation on the statue's future. 2,187 residents of the borough responded, of whom 71% voted to remove the statue.⁹⁹⁴ While democracy had elsewhere been a key plank of DCMS's opposition to the removal of statues, they overlooked the popular will expressed in this consultation with residents of this diverse inner-city borough. In a number of leaked emails, Dowden leant heavily on the Museum – to whom DCMS provide a yearly annual grant - to retain the statue, reminding its director of her 'crucial role in conserving our heritage assets'.⁹⁹⁵ Dowden's implied threat became explicit a few months later, when DCMS convened large meetings with representatives of museums nationwide, threatening to

⁹⁹² Ross, 'Collections and Collecting', p.124.

⁹⁹³ Toyin Agbetu, personal correspondence with the author, 12th September, 2022.

⁹⁹⁴ Museum of the Home, 'Have Your Say On the Future of the Sir Robert Geffrye Statue, Consultation Report', (July 2020). Accessed 27th May, 2022, at

https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk/media/r4sfteny/statue_consultation_report.pdf

⁹⁹⁵ Graeme Demianyk, 'Museum Felt 'Extremely Compromised' by Minister's Plea to Keep Slave Trader Statue', *Huffington Post*, (27th August, 2020) Accessed 27th May, 2022, at https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/museum-of-the-home-robert-geffrye-statue_uk_5f480bb2c5b6cf66b2b4ed4c

withdraw their funding unless they moderated decolonisation efforts.⁹⁹⁶ At the time of writing, Geffrye remains in place. A small sign, dwarfed by the statue and illegible from more than a few metres away, outlines his connection to the museum's premises and his historic role in the slave trade.

Though many similar reports have emerged in recent years, this example offers one particularly useful insight into the contribution which the methods adopted in this dissertation can make towards understanding the relationship between politics, heritage and imperial memory today.⁹⁹⁷ As a stark violation of the 'arm's length' principle under which government-funded museums in Britain ostensibly operate, the Museum of the Home offers particularly vivid insights into the process of 'authorisation' in motion. Dowden's threat to withdraw funding functioned as a form of political disciplining, checking curatorial ambition and curbing the museum's efforts to contribute to a broader discussion about the wealth derived from London and Britain's imperial, slave-owning past. Similarly, the museum had never proposed totally removing the statue, but relocating it to the museum's garden, a space more conducive to a substantial curatorial engagement with Geffrye's history and his legacy. While this democratically supported approach matched the 'retain and explain' process advocated by the government, Dowden's intervention precluded this in favour of keeping the statue in its prominent position at the centre of the Museum's courtyard. Over and above the informed scholarly discussion it frequently claimed to desire, the government intervened in practice to protect Geffrye, his centrality to the courtyard a spatial reminder of DCMS's refusal in practice to cede any ground to critical thought around Britain's national past. The government's oscillation between these two contrasting positions, equally, suggests the contemporary significance of this thesis's insistence on characterising imperial memory as fluid, contradictory and deeply contingent on the narrator's political relationship to imperial history.

This thesis has outlined a methodological path to a study of the production of heritage which is more attentive to social, cultural and political contingencies, as opposed to reading narratives and discourses as texts without fully considering their position within their immediate contexts. It has identified the process of 'authorisation' - whereby state actors offer material support to projects which

⁹⁹⁶ Museums Association, 'Our Response to the DCMS Contested Heritage Meeting on 23rd February', (24th February, 2021). Accessed 27th May, 2022, at

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/our-response-to-the-dcms-contested-heritage-meeting/>

⁹⁹⁷ E.g., Nosheen Iqbal, 'Downing Street Rewrote 'Independent' Report on Race, Experts Claim', *Guardian*, (11th April, 2021). Accessed 27th May, 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/apr/11/downing-street-rewrote-independent-report-on-race-experts-claim>; Jamie Doward, 'I've been unfairly targeted, says academic at heart of National Trust Woke row', *Guardian*, (20th December, 2020). Accessed 27th May, 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/20/ive-been-unfairly-targeted-says-academic-at-heart-of-national-trust-woke-row>

align with their goals - as a means to understand the politics of heritage. Through this, it has revealed the contours of imperial memory to be messier, more contradictory and partial than can be appreciated through the terms 'amnesia' or 'nostalgia'. Specifically, the presentation of Empire depended on the capacity of the imperial to support, undermine or complicate narratives around practitioners' funders or the community they represented. The New Urban Left struggled to gain widespread exposure for critical histories of Empire in support of calls for radical racial justice. Empire remained potent in the emergent Docklands of the 1980s and 1990s, signifying a lost dignity and enrichment among white working-class Londoners and variously, commercial abundance, industrial genius and cosmopolitanism among the MID's conservative sponsors. Finally, while the 'liberal' multiculturalism of the 1990s and 2000s gave heritage organisations an opportunity to foreground the violent and racialised aspects of Empire, these initiatives faced resistance; their success remained contested and partial. The precarious institutional foothold of these efforts to establish more critical forms of imperial memory, and the broader framework of 'authorisation', can also cast light on the contemporary politics of Empire. Again, the threat of a withdrawal of funding has prevented efforts – still underdeveloped, almost thirty years after *Peopling* - to explore the formative place of race and Empire in the making of Modern London. As a local study focused solely on museums and community organisations, this dissertation's findings remain partial. But the replication of its method into new local sites of memory, new forms of media, history and public commemoration, and new political, social and cultural conjunctures, can develop its potential further.

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In a thesis like this, focusing on firstly contemporary history and secondly historiography produced both in and beyond the academy, there is significant overlap between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sources. I have categorised sources here according to my intended use of them. I acknowledge that many could have been listed differently.

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