**Metaphors of Migration in the East End Imaginary**

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**Abstract**

This article focuses on the metaphors at play in the construction of Brick Lane and its surrounding locale. Drawing from a range of literary and non-fiction texts, the article deconstructs the metaphors and mythologies which form an East End imaginary in order to explore points of friction. In this way, rather than reading Brick Lane as a location that exemplifies a seamless and inevitable vertical sequence, in which each group of successive immigrants arrives, adapts and then moves on, the article explores the more horizontal interactions that take place between past and present and the sometimes jagged and lumpy interfaces that occur between Jews and other racial, ethnic and cultural groups.

**Keywords**

Jewish, East End, Rachel Lichtenstein, Richard Bean

# The East End of London, especially Brick Lane, is routinely depicted as a location which is defined by its inter-culturalism. As is often pointed out, this area has for centuries received successive waves of migrants. From the eighteenth-century influx of Flemish weavers to subsequent Irish, Jewish, Bangladeshi and Somali inhabitations, the East End is cast as an environment in which newcomers are generally welcomed and prosper. In such narratives, patterns of inflow and dispersal are seen as natural and rhythmic. Thus, in stereotypical depictions, each group of immigrants is presented as at first arriving in a state of diasporic displacement; then they settle within deprived but close-knit communities comprised of other exiles from the original homeland; before, in time, they become more affluent and eventually move out to more scattered suburban locations. Jews have historically been essential to this figuration. In fact, a common perception that Jews are somehow predisposed towards upwards social mobility means that they have been seen as an exemplar of effective immigrant assimilatory adaptation.[[1]](#endnote-2) With this in mind, the following discussion focuses on the mythologies that underlie such narratives and the ways in which interfaces between Jews and other immigrants are depicted within these figurations. I am terming this the East End imaginary.

# The number of popular as well as academic explorations of Brick Lane that have been published in recent years attests to its hold on the collective imagination. In the following, I reflect on a selection of literature that facilitates an interrogation of the mythologies that have gathered about the East End. Much of this discourse is coloured by nostalgia for what has passed in terms of a romanticised sense of belonging and community. However, in the memoirs that tell stories of East End Jewish life from a first-hand perspective, the streets of Spitalfields, Mile End and Whitechapel, are often recalled in either distinctly unromantic or at a least ambivalent terms. As the discussion goes on, I shall draw from memoirs and family stories which depict tales of social mobility. A text such as Emmanuel Litvinoff’s *Journey Through a Small Planet* provides a grounding point. From a third-generation Jewish immigrant perspective, Andrew Miller’s *The Earl of Petticoat Lane* draws from family history to tell what is, in essence, a rags to riches story of immigrant upward mobility; but he also suggests the residue, the social and cultural uncertainties, that these East End origins leave behind. [[2]](#endnote-3) From a slightly different perspective, Tarquin Hall’s *Salaam Brick Lane: A Year in the New East End* (2005) presents a middle-class outsider’s experience of Brick Lane, portraying it as a place of self-discovery and transition. What these, in some respects quite divergent accounts, have in common is the presentation of the East End as a place of social, economic and personal transformation; a mythical site of migratory potential.

# In terms of fiction, Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), which was adapted for the screen in 2007, has made a considerable, if contested, impact on depicting the Bangladeshi experience of the area and I shall look briefly at the figuration of the immigrant trajectory that is set out in that text. In order to explore the Jewish East End imaginary more fully, I shall focus on Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair’s *Rodinsky’s Room* (1999) and Lichtenstein’s subsequent work, *On Brick Lane* (2007).[[3]](#endnote-4) I shall also reflect on the less well-known novel by Jeremy Gavron, *An Acre of Barren Ground* (2006), a text which offers a lyrical exploration of the area, depicting it as a palimpsest made up of different, layered and subtly interconnected, inhabitations.[[4]](#endnote-5)

# The critical texts that influence my conceptualisation of the East End imaginary include those that interrogate the stories that have been told about the East End, in particular Devorah Baum’s ‘Life writing and the East End’ and Rachel Garfield’s ‘Towards a Re-Articulation of Cultural Identity’. These are both essays that expose some of the clichés that predominate in the stories that are told about East End life and which suggest new approaches.[[5]](#endnote-6) Drawing from more historical contexts, David Cesarani’s essay, ‘A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Suburbs: Social Change in Anglo-Jewry Between the Wars, 1914–1945’, presents an important questioning of some myths of interwar Jewish social mobility; whilst Nadia Valman’s ‘The East End Bildungsroman from Israel Zangwill to Monica Ali’ develops an insightful discussion that explores the contextual and narrative resonances between these two literary texts.[[6]](#endnote-7) More broadly, Ephraim Sicher and Linda Weinhouse’s chapter, ‘Down Cultural Memory Lane’, presents a useful overview of some of the themes that I am exploring.[[7]](#endnote-8) In theoretical terms, my reading is informed by Svetlana Boym’s evocative book, *The Future of Nostalgia*[[8]](#endnote-9), a study which, in arguing that ‘nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy’, underpins much of my discussion.[[9]](#endnote-10)

# With these literary and critical works in mind, my focus is on the metaphors at play in the construction of Brick Lane and its surrounding locale. In particular, I look at the points of interface between Jews and other migrant groups, especially those who are coded as non-white, in and around Brick Lane, in order to ask questions about the ways in which such Jewish-black intersections have been imagined. Having set out some of the tropes used to frame the area, I want to deconstruct these metaphors and mythologies to explore points of friction, the places at which different immigrant communities might be said to rub up against each other. In this way, rather than reading Brick Lane as a location that exemplifies a seamless and inevitable vertical sequence, in which each group of successive immigrants arrives, adapts and then moves on, I am also interested in the more horizontal interactions that take place between past and present; and particularly the often jagged and lumpy interfaces that might occur between Jews and other racial, ethnic and cultural groups. In this vein, the final part of my discussion develops a reading of Richard Bean’s 2009 play *England People Very Nice*[[10]](#endnote-11), a work which challenges mythologies of the East End by rendering multiculturalism as a form of pantomime knockabout. In this denaturalised drama, many of the key tropes that have come to shape a liberal humanist ideal of the East End imaginary are thus shown to be fragmented, clashing and contradictory.

**Paradise Lost: The East End Imaginary**

In ‘The Diasporic Imaginary’ Vijay Mishra suggests that the idea of an original homeland is often viewed through the emotional lens of diasporic yearning. Mishra focuses, in particular, on the Indian diaspora but his theorisation of nostalgic longing for the first homeland can also be applied to other diasporic contexts. As Monika Fludernick explains, the mythologies that underpin such imaginings are subtle and multifaceted:

People who identify themselves as part of a diaspora are creating an ‘imaginary’ – a landscape of dream and fantasy that answers to their desires. The term ‘imaginary’, moreover, implies that this landscape is stocked with a variety of perhaps contradictory landmarks …Nobody has the same dream entirely; and nobody’s diaspora therefore looks wholly like their neighbour’s.[[11]](#endnote-12)

This sense of the ‘diasporic imaginary’ as a contradictory and unstable dreamscape can, I would suggest, be extended to incorporate places of migratory resettlement, once they too have been left behind. In this way, destinations which come to be figured as ghetto-like immigrant enclaves, such as Brick Lane, are also mythologised within the secondary revisions of the diasporic imagination. Arguably, this process is more pronounced for second-and third-generation immigrants, as they are further removed from the ghettos of the East End.[[12]](#endnote-13) In this respect, the original and the adaptation (the homeland and the place of resettlement) are both nostalgised and imaginary.

As Svetlana Boym points out, there is a difference between 'restorative nostalgia', a wish to return to the past, to reconstruct the lost home; and 'reflective nostalgia, which ‘thrives in …the longing itself’.[[13]](#endnote-14) This sense of nostalgic yearning which, in its reflective form, is intrinsically ambivalent and open-ended is a useful way of understanding aspects of the contemporary British Jewish condition. For British Jews, living in the increasingly shifting and dispersed conditions of the twenty-first century, Brick Lane has often been figured in the collective psyche as a latter-day shtetl, in other words, an imagined homeland. This, as a number of commentators have observed, is as much a fantasised construction as an aspect of socio-economic history. David Cesarani, commenting on the process of working-class Jewish ‘out-migration’ from the East End to more suburban locations during the interwar years, quotes the American journalist, William Zukerman, who as early as 1937 made the point that 'what goes under the name of the East End [of London] is actually no longer a geographical area, but a psychological concept.'[[14]](#endnote-15) This is an astute observation and the East End as a ‘psychological concept’ becomes in many respects more vivid the further it moves away from lived experience and becomes processed within the narratives of cultural memory.

In a suggestive essay, which brings together aspects of her own family history with a reflection on the writing of Jewish life stories, Devorah Baum explores some of the ways in which the East End has been romanticised. Illustrating the process, she cites Antonia Fraser who, when visiting the East End with her husband Harold Pinter, imagined it to be ‘something very green and garden-like; as if, Baum comments, it were ‘a lost Eden’. Pinter, who was raised in the area, reminds Fraser that this is far from the case. His childhood home, he recalls, had actually been ‘a terribly depressing place.’[[15]](#endnote-16) This distinctly unromantic sense of hardship is conveyed in many first-hand accounts of what it had been like to grow up in the East End. Whilst autobiographical reminiscences by writers such as Willy Goldman, Emanuel Litvinoff and Harold Rosen, are at points bathed in a nostalgic glow for the lost Jewish End, they also tell gritty stories that convey the hardships that they endured.[[16]](#endnote-17) Goldman, reflecting on the privations of his boyhood, questions this nostalgic strain in his own writing, wondering, ‘why should one be nostalgic about memories that are bloody?’.[[17]](#endnote-18) He understands the contradiction by comparing survival in the East End slum to the feeling of a soldier who has survived battle.’ ‘Looking back later’, he notes:

It is not the horror but the tenacity with which he fought that he cherishes. Returning to the scene enhances the miracle of his survival. Nor can he forgo wallowing in some degree in a kind of regret for the loss of feeling that his triumph over adversity must inevitably entail…

There are surviving landmarks in my Stepney but it’s the gaps that tug at my heart.[[18]](#endnote-19)

What has been lost is not so much paradise but the gaps in the self, ‘the loss of feeling’, that the idea of home, however imperfect, leaves behind.

Jack London, who observed life in the slums of the East End from a socio-economic perspective, described the area in unvarnished terms.[[19]](#endnote-20) Characterising the inhabitants as ‘people of the abyss’, he painted a bleak picture of lives defined by poverty, degradation and squalor. Andrew Miller, in his family history, cites London’s 1902 experience of asking a cab driver to take him to ‘the East End’ and being met by the driver’s confusion and uncertainty. Miller suggests that this response reflects ‘the East End’s existence more as a vague, mythic region of poverty, reliance and lawlessness than as an identifiable place – a sort of cramped, urban version of the American West.’[[20]](#endnote-21) The analogy to the American West here is thought-provoking. It suggests that despite the obvious social and topographical differences between the two regions, the Wild West and the Jewish East End are both places that have been imagined as frontiers; mythologised landscapes of restless danger and self-invention.

Miller, from the Jewish perspective, also expands on this particular seam of nostalgia that runs through the East End imaginary. ‘After they left’, he notes:

The Jewish immigrants created their own myth of the East End. It came in retrospect to be regarded as a prelapsarian region of innocence, camaraderie and opportunity, where everything was familiar but at the same time anything was possible.[[21]](#endnote-22)

In such imaginings this element of prelapsarian ‘innocence’ is important. It carries a sense of nascent possibility, ‘opportunity’, but it also anticipates the inevitable fall; the fated and irreversible exile from paradise.

Where exactly the original paradise is located is not entirely clear. For many immigrants the homeland is of course always elsewhere. For many Jews, who have created a sense of an East End Jewish ghetto, the diasporic imaginary becomes attached to the streets in and around Whitechapel and Spitalfields.[[22]](#endnote-23) Whereas, for London, the fall was figured as life within the abyss, for those immigrants who have since relocated to the new worlds of the outer London suburbs, the loss becomes focused on what has passed. This however, is reflective, rather than restorative nostalgia: they do not want to actually ‘rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps’ but rather to linger ‘in the ruins of what has passed.’[[23]](#endnote-24) The past is thus reconfigured in a mood of melancholic postlapsarianism. As Baum suggests, in terms of the East End, the idea of a ‘lost Eden’ has accompanied ‘the development of an East End heritage industry’ which has been characterised by ‘an unmistakable and, for some critics regrettable, strain of nostalgia.’[[24]](#endnote-25) Within a postmodern topos, in which the complexities of the past become repackaged as simulated tourist experiences, nostalgic longing provides a sense of connection to an imaginary East End; a paradise lost. Brick Lane, a place in many respects characterised by hybridity and constant change, thus becomes figured as a Garden of Eden, a place of beginning, belonging and primary loss. ‘Adam and Eve’ as Boym points out, ‘were the first exiles’.[[25]](#endnote-26) One might wonder, then, how the cultural exiles from the East End imaginary come to process the knowledge that the Garden will continue to renew itself long after they have stepped into their postlapsarian new worlds.

Litvinoff experienced life in the East End first hand and recollected his early years in the series of vignettes which are collected in *Journey Through a Small Planet*. In his preface, he describes a sense of profound loss and this becomes accentuated by a perception that the Jews of the old East End have been supplanted by subsequent immigrations into the area. Here, a sense of nostalgia is both generated and somehow complicated by an interface with difference. He recalls visiting his old home some years after leaving it behind, having migrated to a new life in Hertfordshire. His account is infused by an acute sense of disorientation and discomfort. Accompanied by a Swedish writer who he is showing around, he describes a journey that starts out in ‘a mood of mild curiosity’ but which ends in an expression of profound loss and lamentation:

As we proceeded on foot through the once familiar streets the change was startling. Clumps of Muslim men stood aimlessly on corners….Shrill, eerie music wailed in the heat of the afternoon. The odour of spices mingled with the stench of drains…Stubborn survivals of the past existed in the form of one or two small Jewish bakeries, or shops selling cigarettes, lemonade and long-forgotten brands of boiled sweets; but instead of the old Yiddish newspapers on the counter there were others printed in Urdu. In Old Montagu Street, the very heart of the original Jewish quarter, nothing was left of the synagogue but a broken wooden door carved with the Lion of Judah.[[26]](#endnote-27)

A broken door; a queasy mixture of nostalgia and distaste. There are traces of the Jewish past here but, as with the newspaper printed in Urdu, Litvinoff can no longer read the location. ‘I felt indescribably bereaved’ he writes, ‘a ghost haunting the irrecoverable past.’[[27]](#endnote-28) The ache of homesickness is compounded by a sense of having been replaced as well as displaced and he starts writing about the Jewish East End in order somehow to preserve it. Litvinoff’s comments on the changes he encounters are brief, but they make for difficult reading.

In this way, the familiar narrative trajectory of immigrant life in the East End being about progression, as one group of immigrants sequentially makes room for the next, is shown to be far more complex and confusing than many accounts suggest. The East End is not so much, as many figurations would have it, a kind of down market transcultural arrivals and departures lounge, but rather a place of liminal identifications, lost baggage and unfinished stories. In the next part of this discussion I focus, in particular, on Brick Lane in terms of the myth of an East End imaginary whilst also exploring the rougher edges of this illusory topos.

**‘We Are Shadows’: On Brick Lanes**

In Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003)*,* Chanu, a disillusioned Bangladeshi immigrant, reflects on what was once his hopeful vision for an economically and socially transformed future. His perception has been formed by a sense of what previous waves of immigrants to the area had achieved:

Do you know how many immigrant populations have been here before us? In the eighteenth century the French Protestants fled here, escaping Catholic persecution. They were silk weavers. They made good. One hundred years later, the Jews came. They thrived. At the same time the Chinese came as merchants. The Chinese are doing very well…Which way is it go?[[28]](#endnote-29)

As Nadia Valman notes, ‘the potent myth of immigrant self-betterment’, ‘has been especially attached to Spitalfields, the East End neighbourhood of London through which successive waves of newcomers have passed onward and upwards over three centuries’.[[29]](#endnote-30) This is a story that is repeated in numerous characterisations of the area. As Sukhdev Sandhu, in a review of Ali’s novel, points out:

Brick Lane has always been a holding area, a temporary interzone for immigrants who have not yet fully settled in England; whose lives are defined by the past – their own or that of their parents – but who wish to seize the future.[[30]](#endnote-31)

For many immigrants, the future, as well as the past, is always elsewhere. In Ali’s novel Chanu realises that the mythology of economic advancement does not apply to him and, disillusioned, he reverses his journey and returns to his homeland. It marks a moment in which a narrative of immigration based on arrival, improvement and eventual dispersal into the more affluent outer London suburbs, is revealed as a broken ideal.

Whilst the focus of Ali’s novel is primarily on the Bangladeshi community, it alludes to some of the uneasy interfaces that exist between different migratory groups within the East End. Early in the narrative, a character called Mrs Islam outlines her doubts about the effects of living within such diverse conditions and cautions against the dangerously diluting processes of assimilatory adaption.

'Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. I am not old-fashioned,' said Mrs Islam. 'I don't wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing. Plus I have cardigans and anoraks and a scarf for my head. But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That's how it is.'[[31]](#endnote-32)

The mixing that Mrs Islam perceives as threatening to the integrity of a Bangladeshi ethnic identity suggests a tense process of acculturation. The novel, as it goes on, explores both the limits and the inevitability of such compromise. As Valman notes, by the end of the novel, Nazneen, the female protagonist, finds a different way to relate to the streets of Brick Lane, and her ‘apprehension of the East End…is no longer filtered through the memory of elsewhere.’[[32]](#endnote-33)

Valman’s reading demonstrates the ways in which gender, race and ethnicity are equally significant in determining a sense of location and dislocation. Looking at other representations of East End migrations, we see a number of intersecting aspects of identities at play. In *Salaam Brick Lane* (2005) the white British journalist Tarquin Hall gives an account of his year in the ‘New East End’ from a perspective of class migration. Exiled briefly from the leafy suburbs of West London, his perspective is of a foreigner; a middle-class tourist who encounters a series of local characters whose textual function is to educate him about the historical and present diversity of the area. Solly, an elderly Jewish man who had grown up in the East End before moving out to Romford, Essex, is one of his chief tour guides. He tells Hall a familiar tale of the East End:

Its streets have been irrigated with immigrants for centuries: Chinese and Ethiopian sailors, Flemish brewers, German sugar bakers, Irish labourers, Vietnamese boat people. After the war, you even got the Maltese and Cypriots living in Spitalfields. But they all come and go.[[33]](#endnote-34)

He adds, on a melancholic note,

Tomorrow you’ll wake to find that Brick Lane’s changed once again. I should know! I’ve watched the world I grew up in vanish again. Look at it now. You’d never know that fifty years ago it was the heart of a Jewish ghetto.[[34]](#endnote-35)

Here, whilst Solly expresses a sense of nostalgia for the passing of the Jewish East End, like Chanu he understands that the mythological landscape of this East End imaginary is predicated on a sense of rhythmic fluidity, a coming and going of different racial and ethnic and cultural groups, each irrigating the ground for the next. However, the question that Chanu faces, what happens if an immigrant group does not ‘make good’? and the discomfort expressed by Litvinoff about the inter-cultural processes of displacement that stretch across temporal moments, are elided.

Hall’s narrative of his brief but disorientating period of living alongside the diverse Brick Lane population of immigrants and refugees is engaging but, in its setting out of a formulaic cultural choreography, stays largely within conventional parameters of such tales. Jeremy Gavron’s more experimental lyrical novel, *An Acre of Barren Ground* (2005), presents a more expansive consideration of the area. Here, narratives of transmigrations, displacements and resettlements are layered throughout the novel. In a series of non-linear, interlinked fragments, Gavron tells stories which feature plants and animals as well as buildings and people. These are potent and allusive tales of migrant settlements and dispersals. As they tell stories about lives lived above and below the ground of Brick Lane they suggest the subtle imbrications of this palimpsestic site of inhabitation

Gavron includes a narrative strand which presents a series of intersecting moments across the generations between two families. In one family, the grandfather, Mr Basu, is a Pakistani immigrant who arrived in Brick lane in the 1960s; in the other, the Lewises are the descendants of Moses Levovitz, a butcher from Lithuania who was part of the late-nineteenth-century wave of Jewish migration from the Pale of Settlement. The moments at which the stories of the two families cross are fleeting and understated. In glimpsing these characters, the reader might sense that the stories set in a tailor’s shop, a care home and in a traffic incident, for example, subtend other parts of the narrative; but we can never be sure. As Sicher and Weinhouse argue, this is a delicate work of interweaving which avoids some of the romanticising tendencies that infuse other depictions of the area.

There is no trace of nostalgia, only fragments of lives, lived mostly in poverty, despair, madness and hopelessness. There is something approaching a parallel between the generations of Huguenots, Jewish and Bangladeshi immigrants, but the East End is never presented as an ethnically determined space…No multicultural rainbow here, but lonely voices of obscure individuals ignored by history. [[35]](#endnote-36)

Gavron’s writing is, as they note, unusually subtle in the way that it teases out some of the flickering rhythms of the area without forcing connections. I would argue, however, that there is perhaps a trace of nostalgia here; but of the kind that is, in Boym’s terms, reflective. This form of nostalgia is ‘ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary’. Nostalgics of this type, she notes,

are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. This defamilarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future.[[36]](#endnote-37)

Boym’s differentiation between these modes of nostalgia is a useful way of understanding the ways in which the East End imaginary can be deployed. The reflective nostalgic, such as Gavron, ‘cherishes fragments of memory and temporalizes space’; in this mode, longing for a homecoming is perpetually deferred.[[37]](#endnote-38)

Focusing on the same locale, but from a less diffuse, and perhaps more restoratively nostalgic perspective, Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair’s *Rodinsky’s Room* relates Lichtenstein’s quest to recover the story of David Rodinsky. Rodinsky, another example of an ‘obscure individual who has been ignored by history’, was an orthodox Jew who disappeared mysteriously from his lodgings in the attic above the Princelet Street Synagogue in the 1960s. His absence, signified by his uninhabited but apparently untouched room, was only discovered in the 1980s. In tracing the story of Rodinsky, an absent presence within the Jewish East End imaginary, Lichtenstein also explores her own somewhat fraught sense of Jewish identity. In earlier readings of this narrative, I commented on the ways in which ideas of the Jewish past are constructed within Lichtenstein’s telling of her story (Sinclair’s voice provides the context).[[38]](#endnote-39) In this next part of my discussion, I want to return *to Rodinsky’s Room*, and Lichtenstein’s subsequent exploration of the area in *On Brick Lane*, in order to focus in particular on the interfaces between Jews and others within Lichtenstein’s texts.

Rachel Garfield has questioned what she identifies as a troubling strain of mythologisation in some recent depictions of the East End. With particular reference to *Rodinsky’s Room*, Garfield argues that, ‘Lichtenstein is in awe of the so-called Jewish East End’ but that ‘her romance is with a world that no longer exists’.[[39]](#endnote-40) Critiquing Lichtenstein’s over-identification with a myth of the Jewish East End, Garfield makes the point that Lichtenstein’s passionate defence of the Jewish past, ‘reveals the ersatz nature of her quest – that her desire to perform a self is defined by a romanticised cultural memory.’[[40]](#endnote-41) In an argument that shifts the focus of the debate away from Lichtenstein’s primary interest in Jewish self-exploration, Garfield’s reading also draws attention to that which is silenced in the text. She notes, for example, that Lichtenstein’s evocation of the romanticised Jewish East End is in contrast to ‘her one encounter with a contemporary Bengali working class youth.’[[41]](#endnote-42)

The ‘encounter’ that Garfield alludes to, refers to an incident that had occurred when Lichtenstein had been trying to track down information about Rodinsky from an elderly Jewish woman called Mrs Lipman. She discovers that Mrs Lipman lives in a ‘graffiti-covered, crumbling Sixties council block’ and, recalling that ‘it took me a while to find the estate, wandering through the narrow streets of Brick Lane’, she finds herself in unfamiliar terrain. In this moment she has, in a sense, slipped out of the East End imaginary of her own construction and is jolted into a strange and threatening environment. Entering the building, she describes,

A dank stairwell that reeked of urine. I pressed for the lift and walked straight in it, completely preoccupied with my own personal mission and without noticing the gang of Asian teenagers with whom I was sharing the small metal cubicle. I stared blankly straight at them.[[42]](#endnote-43)

Arguably this overriding preoccupation, the ‘personal mission’, to recover the Jewish past is symptomatic of a myopic tendency that runs through the narrative. It soon becomes apparent to Lichtenstein that she has inadvertently stumbled into a drugs deal and she is momentarily threatened with ‘a small but sharp looking penknife’ by one of the Asian youths.[[43]](#endnote-44)

This unexpected interface between Lichtenstein, the pursuer of a mythologised Jewish past, and the Asian youths, who represent aspects of a present reality, briefly splinters the narrative. It is as if the ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’ nostalgic impulses within Lichtenstein’s emotional topography have crashed into each other and the impact is somehow unassimilable. Afterwards, Lichtenstein returns breathless and shaken to ‘the refuge’ of the Princelet Street synagogue. Reflecting on her naivety and lack of awareness, she observes that, ‘inner city areas are much like a desert full of dangerous creatures that are rarely seen unless you become curious and start to overturn stones or poke about in dark crevices.’[[44]](#endnote-45) Interestingly, it is when she feels herself to be emerging from the shock of this encounter that she hears a strange noise from within the synagogue; thinking it might be rats (epitomising perhaps the ‘dangerous creatures’ that lurk beneath the surfaces of cities), she considers the possibility of a ghostly presence. She soon realises that the noises are coming from two Jewish women who are visiting the synagogue and, distracted by the renewed hope that they can help in her reconstruction of Rodinsky’s life, she moves on from the moment of peril with the teenagers in the lift. The Asian youths of the present are thus somehow consigned to the ‘dark crevice’; suspended within the ‘small metal cubicle’, while Lichtenstein resumes her quest to recover the Jewish past.

Although Garfield does not expand directly on her remark about this incident, her discussion in general raises important questions about the place of different ethnicities within Lichtenstein’s text. There are, in a fact, a number of encounters with non-Jews and non-white characters throughout Lichtenstein’s narrative; not least of all in Adam, the Muslim man of Asian descent, whom she marries. However, I think that Garfield is right to signal a tension that this moment in the lift suggests and to infer its connection to the mythologisation of the Jewish East End that runs through *Rodinsky’s Room*. Garfield reads this limitation within Lichtenstein’s work against the more abstract and expansive art produced by other contemporary British Jewish artists such as Ruth Novaczek and Joshua Sofaer.

Lichtenstein’s depiction of Jewishness and the diasporic spaces of Brick Lane is more literal and certainly less characterised by irony than in, for example, Novaczek’s work. However, I would argue that she is to an extent aware of, in Garfield’s words, ‘the elisions and gaps’ in the story that she constructs about Jewish presence and absence within this nostalgised Brick Lane imaginary.[[45]](#endnote-46) Lichtenstein has herself described Brick Lane as featuring in her childhood as a ‘mythical landscape’ and in 2007 she published *On Brick Lane*, an oral history and photographic documentation of the area which provides context to the earlier, more personal, narrative.[[46]](#endnote-47) In this text, Lichtenstein sets out explicitly to explore intersections between the different types of migrants who have made their homes in Brick Lane. Acknowledging the history of Huguenots, Irish, Black and Asian migrants, as well as artists, queer and middle-class settlers to the area, Lichtenstein recognises that this is a place in which *other* identities foreshadow, follow and converge with Jewishness.

Early in the text she notes that there is a sign over the great mosque, that ‘was once a synagogue and before that a church’, which reads: ‘Umbra Sumus – We Are Shadows’.[[47]](#endnote-48) This can be seen as a mark of loss, signifying the ghostly trace of past inhabitations; but it can also be read as emblematic of an ongoing process of migratory adaptation. Bemoaning the gentrification of the area in the late 1990s she charts the waning of an authentic Jewish presence, tracking the ways in which Spitalfields is becoming reconstructed through films, tourism and commerce and packaged as a ‘newly discovered “ethnic quarter”.’ She acknowledges her own compromised position within this shifting imaginary, however; admitting that ‘my own fantasies and visual projections on to the streets and buildings were feeding into the constructed mythology of the place’.[[48]](#endnote-49)

Gathering stories as she walks the length of Brick Lane, Lichtenstein hears many tales and testimonies and collects maps, photographs, letters and documents of various kinds which are then reproduced within the text. As she passes by the buildings, bridges and broken mosaics of the area she oscillates between nostalgia for the Jewish ghetto of the past and an attempt to present a more gritty sense of contemporary Brick Lane. Sicher and Weinhouse detect a tension here:

If we thought that the East End was ideally a meeting point of cultures, we find that the different ethnic and religious groups that have moved into the area have no common ground. … Lichtenstein seeks the common ground, a shared humanity, but she turns her attention to what interests her most – the loners and drop outs, above all the few remaining aging veterans of the East end who have preserved some memory of the past.[[49]](#endnote-50)

The text thus shifts the reader’s focus away from an idealised sense of the collective ebb and flow of the area, to focus on individual stories, often coloured by loss. The equivocation that underlies *On Brick Lane* is summed up in the metaphors that recur throughout the text. Palimpsestic figurations, in which the traces of previous inscriptions linger within the surface of the present, are an important trope. But other myths and metaphors about overlapping and intersecting migratory identities also recur and images of rivers, mosaics and tapestries, as well as shadows, ghosts and so on, permeate this Brick Lane imaginary.

A poem, reproduced by Lichtenstein, captures the dreamy topography of this mythologised landscape. The poet, a long-time resident of Brick Lane, called Stephen Watts, explains that:

The place has its own poetry…a sense of communities past and present, the evidence of the role of migration for three, four hundred years, and the traces of different languages that have passed through, particularly in Brick lane, where words hang in the air, fragments of speech and noise. There is a tidal wave of sound and memory rushing down that street.[[50]](#endnote-51)

Watts’ ‘Brick lane Mela Poem’ opens with the line, ‘Ghosts come pouring out the houses’ and it continues for thirty-eight stanzas, as different characters and groups from the past and present, lap through its lines. ‘Here we stand’, it ends,

raw history gushing us past on the river

of our street, not holding back coiling

waters of our spate.[[51]](#endnote-52)

Again, drawing from metaphors of fluidity, Lichtenstein describes an installation by Mohini Chandra in 2001 called *Flow.* This soundscape, which was installed at the junction of Hanbury Street and Brick Lane, deployed the ‘waves of immigration’ motif in what seems to have been a multifaceted response to other, more simplified narratives of multicultural intersection. For Lichtenstein, the appreciation of this artistic rendering of the ‘disparity between myth and reality’ is telling and her exploration of the area demonstrates the difficulties of navigating a tension between such apparent polarities.[[52]](#endnote-53)

By the time she comes to the end of her journey, arriving at Aldgate East tube station, she seems to have reached a place of uncertainty. She closes with the words ‘my time on Brick Lane seemed to have reached its natural end’,[[53]](#endnote-54) but then she supplements this somewhat subdued moment by appending a walking tour of the area to the body of the text. It seems hard to let go.

**Jagged Interfaces: England People Very Nice**

In this last section of my discussion, I want to reflect on how imaginings of the East End, circulating within a metaphorical register of migratory flow and flux, perhaps elide more jagged interfaces. With this in mind, we can think about Richard Bean’s 2009 play *England People Very Nice*. [[54]](#endnote-55)Taking the familiar narrative, that the area has historically been home to rhythmic waves of immigrant inhabitation, Bean’s drama presents a crude procession of racial and ethnic stereotypes that turn such myths on their head. In this way it might be described as presenting neither restorative nor reflective nostalgia; but, rather, as being *anti*-nostalgic.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the play garnered mixed responses when it was performed on the Olivier Stage at the National Theatre. Some reviewers described it as a profoundly ’uncomfortable’ and ‘unpleasant’ experience and condemned it for what they viewed as its offensive racist stereotyping, whilst others praised it for its challenge to lazy pieties about multiculturalism.[[55]](#endnote-56) Subsequent discussions of the play often reference the ‘media storm’ that it supposedly ignited, focusing in particular on the onstage protest that took place when Richard Bean was debating the piece at the National.[[56]](#endnote-57)

The play presents a denaturalised exploration of some potent themes. It is set in Pocklington Immigration Centre, Tower Hamlets and focuses on a group of asylum seekers who, whilst waiting to find out if they have been granted their leave to stay, are staging a play which depicts well-worn tales of migratory inhabitation of the area. The sense of contingency here is important. As Philippa, the middle-class, Hampstead-based, director of the play within a play puts it; devising the drama has been an act of cultural didacticism, setting out to teach these asylum seekers ‘how England became a liberal, tolerant, democratic society.’[[57]](#endnote-58) However, as the play presents various arrivals, clashes and assimilation, the piece effectively exposes some of the faultlines which underlie liberal myths of multiculturalism.

In its gross caricatures and clattering juxtaposition of time and type, the play refuses its audience the comforts of liberalism and thus reconfigures some of the existing metaphors and mythologies which have become attached to the East End imaginary. As Taher, a singularly uncooperative Christian Palestinian refugee character, points out, even an illusory sense of chronology has been collapsed in this dramatic review of immigrant histories. ‘I research Irish Famine on Wikipedia’ he says. ‘Irish Famine 1840! The Gordon riots 1780. In this play the two things happen on the same afternoon.’[[58]](#endnote-59) Following some jostling knockabout, involving French Huguenots and then Irish immigrants, Act Three opens in 1888 as the Jewish refuges arrive at St Katherine’s dock. A street singer bellows:

‘Behold…

A human invasion of an alien variation

The children of the He-brew Nation

The Eternal People, oppressed, ground down

A shtetl to make of our tenter ground

This swarming is the most unwelcome news

For the French, the Irish. And the

English … Jews’.[[59]](#endnote-60)

They are met at the dock by the Chief Rabbi, Lord Rothschild and MP Harry Samuels, ‘the elite of Anglo Jewry’.[[60]](#endnote-61) For the existing East End community, as well as the resident Jewish population, these newcomers are disturbing and unwelcome.

In this section of the play, Jews are foregrounded, but they are only ever part of a broad sweep of immigrant arrivals and integrations. The basic narrative presents each wave of migrants, Irish, Huguenots, Jewish and Bangladeshi, receiving an initially hostile reception before they establish a way in which to settle through compromise and romantic connection. The trope of Romeo-and-Juliet-type lovers is repeated as the star-crossed pair, played each time by the same young actors, enact a love which supposedly crosses racial and cultural divides. In a brief discussion of the play, Sicher and Weinhouse argue that Bean’s comedy as it ‘pokes fun at both xenophobia and ethnic insularity, urging us to believe that love between hybrid offspring of different cultures…will conquer all, is not plausible.’[[61]](#endnote-62) I would argue that the play is far more ambivalent in its conclusion than this reading suggests. The play does not aim to be plausible. Its realism, such as it is, stems from the difficult questions it poses about the ways in which the East End imaginary has been, in part, constructed around such mythologies. This is a denaturalised story in which liberal humanist ideas of tolerance and assimilation are thoroughly deconstructed.

Taher picks up on the problem, asking Philippa, ‘Is this a play about immigration or love?’. He elaborates:

TAHER: The play is like four Romeo and Juliets, but what does it matter? I worry, we may have made the play too light, everybody falls in love – in love, out of love, why is it so important?

PHILIPPA: We discussed this during the research. The truest measure of racial and cultural integration in any society is the rate of inter-marriage.

Philippa’s answer presents a cornerstone of a liberal ideology which is predicated on principles of assimilation. In *On Brick Lane*, for example, Lichtenstein cites her friend and mentor in East End history, Bill Fishman, who, reminiscing on the rebranded ‘Banglatown’, adopts a nostalgic tone. He remembers the ‘obliterated’ streets of his childhood as ‘a mixed place where Jews, Irish and native English coexisted together’ and he goes on to note the ‘interaction, cross-sexual relationships and a fair amount of intermarriage’ that had characterised the East End he knew from his childhood.’[[62]](#endnote-63) Whilst Fishman’s knowledge of the East End is unquestionable, and patterns of intermarriages are of course significant in processes of acculturation, any emotional attachment to such narratives is knowingly undercut in Bean’s drama.

Moreover, in its vague sense of exact location, the play rejects many existing strategies for depicting the area. In its refusal to draw from the precise and sometimes laboured psychogeographical perspectives that we have come to expect, it offers little in the way of familiarity or reassurance. Instead, Pocklington Immigration Centre is a cipher: a space in which time and type is clattering, jumbled and often nonsensical. The play thus subverts the premise of the East End imaginary. It works on a blunt principle of stratification to present an anachronistic series of repetitions, misrepetitions and repudiations. So, this piece does not present a river in which Jews and other migrants swim around in the same waters, albeit buffeted by their own flux and flow. Instead, the play draws from the over-familiar in order to refuse resolution. The drama is, therefore, unsatisfying at a number of levels. In the epilogue, the asylum seekers receive their letters telling them the outcome of their applications, but we, the audience, do not learn who has been granted leave to stay. Sara Upstone notes that the withholding of resolution in this regard, which is ‘deliberately denied to the audience’, is the point of the drama.[[63]](#endnote-64) As this harsh contextual reality impacts on the compromised spectator, the anodyne, over-played ‘love will conquer all’ narrative thread is thus confirmed as meaningless and absurd.

**Excesses**

In an ongoing joke in the play about how each group will, in time, move away from the East End into the suburbs, Redbridge in particular comes to represent the antithesis of the East End imaginary.

‘I’ve heard Redbridge is very nice’, one character tells the other

‘I wouldn’t be seen fucking dead in Redbridge!’, the other replies.[[64]](#endnote-65)

In fact, as it turns out, ‘Redbridge’ is the last word of the play within a play. Its humour stems from the bathos that Redbridge comes to represent. Yet, in its invocation of these outer London dispersals, we approach the more nuanced terrain of some recent fiction which is attuned to the ways in which imbrications between Jews and others have been formed and are unfolding. These displaced places - Ilford, Willesden, Finchley, Southend and so on - are not so easily mythologised as in the romanticised ghettos of the East End imaginary; but as writers such as Zadie Smith, Adam Thirlwell, Jake Wallis Simons and others have shown, perhaps these are exactly where current, complex, and more suggestive interfaces between Jewish, black and other minority cultures, are to be found.

1. See for example, Tony Blair’s speech presented at Bevis Marks synagogue in 2006 to celebrate 350 years since the readmission of Jews to England, in which he praised British Jews for their successful integration. The speech is discussed in a special issue of the *New Statesman*, 28 May 2012. For an overview of some of these issues see Keith Kahn-Harris and Ben Gidley, *Turbulent Times: the British Jewish Community Today* (London: Continuum, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See also the more commercial, *The Real Deal: My Story from Brick Lane to Dragon’s Den* (2009) by the entrepreneur James Cann. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair, *Rodinsky’s Room* (London: Granta, 2000); Rachel Lichtenstein, *On Brick Lane* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Jeremy Gavron, *An Acre of Barren Ground* (London: Scribner, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Devorah Baum, ‘Life Writing and the East End’, in*The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction*, eds David Brauner and Axel Stähler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 221-236; Rachel Garfield ‘Towards a Re-Articulation of Cultural Identity’, *Third Tex*t, 20, 1, (2006): 99–108. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. David Cesarani, ‘A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Suburbs: Social Change in Anglo-Jewry Between the Wars, 1914-1945’, *Jewish Culture and History*, 1 (1998): 5-26; Nadia Valman, ‘The East End Bildungsroman from Israel Zangwill to Monica Ali’, *Wasafiri* 24, 1 (2009): 3-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Efraim Sicher and Linda Weinhouse, ‘Down Cultural Memory Lane’, in *Under Postcolonial Eyes: Figuring the ‘Jew’ in Contemporary British Writing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 144-175. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Svetlana Boym, *the Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Boym,7. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Richard Bean, *England People Very Nice* (London: Oberon Books, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Monika Fludernick, ed., *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New Developments* (New York: Rodopi, 2003), xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. For a more developed discussion of this intergenerational process, see Ruth Gilbert, *Writing Jewish* (London: Palgrave, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Boym, xviii. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Cesarani, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Baum, 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Willy Goldman, *East End My Cradle: Portrait of an Environment* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011); Emanuel Litvinoff, *Journey Through a Small Planet* (London: Robin Clark, 1993); Harold Rosen, *Are You Still Circumcised? East End Memories* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Goldman, p.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Goldman, p.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Jack London, *People of the Abyss* <http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/PeopleOfTheAbyss/> Accessed 18/08/17 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Andrew Miller. *The Earl of Petticoat Lane: From an East End Childhood to a West end Life* (London: Heinemann, 2006), 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Miller, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. There are of course other areas of Jewish settlement such as Manchester and Glasgow and a comparable discourse of attendant nostalgia surrounding such locations. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Boym, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Baum, 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Boym, 256. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Litvinoff, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Litvinoff, 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Doubleday, 2003), 388. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Valman, 3. Valman references the work of Anne Kershen on the area. See *Strangers, Aliens and Asians: Huguenots, Jews and Bangladeshis in Spitalfields 1660-2000* (London: Routledge, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Sukhdev Sandhu, ‘Come Hungry, Leave Edgy’, *London Review of Books,* 25, 19 Oct (2003): 10-13. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n19/sukhdev-sandhu/come-hungry-leave-edgy>. Accessed 21 August 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. Ali, 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. Valman, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Hall, 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Hall, 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Sicher and Weinhouse, 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. Boym, 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Boym, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Gilbert, 69-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Garfield, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. Garfield, 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. Garfield, 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Lichtenstein and Sinclair, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. Lichtenstein and Sinclair, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Lichtenstein and Sinclair, 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Garfield, 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. Lichtenstein, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Lichtenstein, 3. ‘We Are Shadows’ is also the title of the second chapter in Hall’s book. Solly shows Hall the building and explains its history, noting that ‘it doesn’t belong to anyone…it belongs to the street, to Brick Lane.’ 44 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. Lichtenstein, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. Sicher and Weinhouse, 165 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. Lichtenstein, 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. Lichtenstein, 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. Lichtenstein, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. Lichtenstein, 327. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. Directed by Nicholas Hytner. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. See for example, Michael Billington, ‘England People Very Nice’, *Guardian*, 12 February 2009 and [Nicholas](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/feb/12/england-people-very-nice-review%3BNicholas) de Jongh, ‘Cruel Cartoon Not Very Nice’, *Evening Standard*, 12 February 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. The sense is that this meta-drama has now become part of the story of the play itself. However, as John Bull has pointed out, in a response to James Moran’s article published in *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 32.1 (2012), 15-28, which discusses the protest at the national, the so called ‘near-riot’ has been overstated. See John Bull, ‘Chinese Whispers’, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 32. 2 (2012), 227-231. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
57. Bean, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
58. Bean, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
59. Bean, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
60. Bean, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
61. Sicher and Weinhouse, 167. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
62. Lichtenstein, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
63. # Sarah Upstone, *Rethinking Race and Identity in Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2016), 31.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
64. Bean, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)