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Shifting markers of identity in East London's diasporic religious spaces

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Abstract: This article discusses the historical and geographical contexts of diasporic religious buildings in East London, revealing – contrary both to conventional narratives of immigrant integration, mobility and succession and to identitarian understandings of belonging – that in such spaces and in the concrete devotional practices enacted in them, markers and boundaries of identity (ritual, spatial and political) are contested, renegotiated, erased and rewritten. It draws on a series of case-studies: Fieldgate Street Synagogue in its interrelationship with the East London Mosque; St Antony’s Catholic Church in Forest Gate where Hindus and Christians worship together; and the intertwined histories of Methodism and Anglicanism in Bow Road. Exploration of the intersections between ethnicity, religiosity, and class illuminates the ambiguity and instability of identity-formation and expression within East London’s diasporic faith spaces.

Keywords: diaspora; East London; faith spaces

People pray and worship. But buildings also speak, act and symbolise. Informal spaces become more formalised, and set up conversations and institutional relationships with pre-existing religious places, which have exerted their own symbolism and power across time. Devotional spaces in this sense play iteratively with the landscape of devotional practices. And devotional practices form only one strand of social life that binds the fabric of connection between peoples that move across the globe. Certain kinds of stories are easily told about the trajectories of those who share transnational ties and links of religious faith. These stories are not wrong as such. It is rather that through their telling they assume a power that, in narrating and making visible some things, has the effect of obscuring many others. They generate logics of social analysis that invoke as much as observe social phenomena. Here we identify four teleologies of storytelling that have commonly made visible both formations of diaspora and evolutions of religious practice in the 20th/21st centuries, and contrast them with the uncertain mutations of material practices that allow buildings to act on the social world and narratives of the diasporic to complicate stories of the transnational.¹

The first is the teleology of assimilation (e.g. Gordon 1964). The migrant group disappears into the receiving social world. In narratives of modernization, this disappearance was one that was increasingly secular (Beaumont and Baker 2011; Eade 2012; Molendijk et al 2010). The second is that of the ethnic mosaic (e.g. Porter 1965). The crucible of the globally-connected city generates landscapes of rich diversity in which distinctions are reified through practices in place. The solidaristic ethnic quarter and the stigmatized ghetto become two sides of the coin of irreducible difference. In a third story some scholars have argued that globalization changes the coordinates of identity-formation. Migrant minorities may initially focus solidarity on networks of the familial and markers of ethnicity. However, particularly in the case of contemporary Islam, markers of ethnic specificity may be displaced by identitarian faith-based associational forms. For example, it has been argued that first-generation diasporic Bangladeshis in London focused identity-formation on anti-racist movements and ethnic similarity. Following 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the 7/7 bombings, the bonds of a shared Muslim identity have become more powerful, and religious identities have in some ways displaced ethnic ones (Eade and Garbin 2006). A fourth narrative highlights the empirical reality of the transnational connections of migrant minorities and sustained links between homeplace and sites of arrival (e.g. Cohen 2008). The concept of diaspora serves as a powerful analytical framework to explain connections between origins that may be distant in time as well as space and new locations. One way in which diaspora “displays” is through the expression of transnational links in the built environment. Diasporic communities may mark a presence through new architectural forms and buildings, particularly religious buildings, that announce the presence of minorities that are here but also sustain a link to elsewhere. This visibility is important, but visibility of minorities is only one facet of contemporary social change. Visibility makes minority presence a spectacle. That which is seen assumes a symbolic importance at a particular moment. But the meaning of these symbols is highly contingent, particular to time and place, and often contested (Cosgrove and Daniels 1989).

These stories share a common analytical flaw. Generalisation in social analysis always potentially generates an illusion of uniformity when reality might be more uneven. There is an easy metonymic slippage between an

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empirically-observed phenomenon and its meaning. The particular may come to stand for the group in a way that reifies and in turn “proves” the existence of predetermined categories of ethnicity, race or faith (Keith, 2013). This has been critiqued by Brubaker (2002) as a tendency to “groupism”. In all social contexts, various parties have an interest in the relevance, salience and power of group categories. As Brubaker notes, “By *invoking* groups, they seek to *evoke* them, summon them, call them into being” (Brubaker 2002, 166).

We suggest that a focus on the rich detail of the built form might provide a useful corrective to the fallacies of “groupism”. We see material forms assuming an agency of their own but also becoming appropriated and reappropriated by social practice. We are also concerned about the dangers of a “presentism” that reads the built form in the context of contemporary events. The symbolism of individual buildings can oversimplify the social practices they contain. In the late 17th/early 18th centuries a state tax on coal imported into London was used to help fund first the building of St Paul’s and other City churches after the Fire of London and later the six landmark Hawksmoor churches (Stevenson 2013, 266, 276; Port 1986). In the late 20th century the East London Mosque received significant support for its extension from both local and municipal London government. In both cases, such funding focused attention on the relationship between faith and state. The controversial experience of high-church attempts to civilize the East End in the early 18th century played out in complex and unexpected ways to complicate their symbolism at the time of Hawksmoor’s work. These examples should make us cautious about reading the contemporary built form of growing numbers of London mosques uniquely through the lens of global conflict and rhetoric of a “clash of civilisations” (Phillips, 2012).

We demonstrate how historically- and spatially-situated practices disturb our tendency to “groupism” and complicate our understanding of the diasporic. We consider diaspora through a focus on religious practice in all its contradictory and ambivalent forms. Our case-studies make comparisons and connections which have not tended to be made – deriving from the interwoven experiences of Jews, Muslims, Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics and Hindus in East London over the last 150 years. Through foregrounding both the historical archive and the material practices of East London’s cultural geographies we argue for a different diaspora of space and time that sees simultaneously-emergent patterns of devotional practice alongside the agency of buildings that become actors in their own right. This notion holds on to an ambivalence of diaspora because these religious cultures are themselves inherently diasporic, innately ambiguous.

Rooting diasporic practices

Our first case-study is Fieldgate Street Great Synagogue in the inner East End. This synagogue dates from the late-19th century, when the Jewish population in East London rose from c20,000 to c140,000. This migrant population was denominationally and doctrinally diverse, including committed secularists and lapsed practitioners as well as the observant. Consequently, a variegated landscape of devotion emerged, which gave rise to a range of spatial practices, with particular visual rhetorics.

Fieldgate Street Synagogue was opened in 1899 with a £500 donation from the Jewish philanthropist and Liberal politician Samuel Montagu, supplemented by smaller donations by its congregants, mainly immigrant tailors and carpenters. It was not purpose-built as a synagogue, but was converted for this use. As signalled by the adjective “Great”, it was deliberately distinct from the far more numerous temporary synagogues established by migrants in the area – attics or back-rooms in residential or commercial buildings which, sometimes for just one day a week, served as spaces of prayer, learning and religious discussion for small associations (*khevres*), which Beatrice Webb described as “self-creating, self-supporting and self-governing communities” (Booth 1889, 172). Many *khevres* were based on *landsmanshaftn*, hometown associations, such as the fraternity from Krakow that operated one on this street in the 1890s. *Landsmanshaftn* tied migrants to their “home” contexts in both material and affective ways, threading diasporic memories into everyday practices, while simultaneously providing an associational infrastructure that enabled migrants to access opportunities for structural integration in the metropolis (Gidley 2013). At least two of these existed on the same street at the time the synagogue was built; one a few doors away at 35 Fieldgate Street was “approach[ed] through a somewhat dingy passage, and is built in the same way as many workshops in the locality on what was originally an open space at the back of the house” (Federation of Synagogues 1897). The relative spaciousness of Great Synagogue was thought to be healthier than the *khevres*, at a time of huge concern about overcrowding, and the explicitly ecclesiastical stylings of the wood-panelled interior signalled a commitment to a more anglicised form of Judaic practice.

Fieldgate Street can also be contrasted, however, to the purpose-built synagogues which the Anglo-Jewish communal establishment was sponsoring in the East End and its suburbs, particularly during the “Colossal Synagogue” Scheme of 1890, which sought to provide regular, decorous and financially-sustainable places of worship in areas of Jewish settlement, modelled on the more fully anglicised practice of the existing communal leadership. Converted spaces such as Fieldgate Street typically lacked the resources and visual grandeur of the larger purpose-built synagogues, and attracted a less aspirational and respectable congregation. Indeed, the presence of prayer-books marked with Yiddish and Cyrillic inscriptions testifies to the partial nature of the anglicisation process.

Fieldgate Street was affiliated to the Federation of Synagogues, established by Montagu in an attempt to bring the unruly self-governed Yiddish-speaking attic synagogues of immigrant East London under the authority of the Chief Rabbi and the long-settled English-speaking Anglo-Jewish authorities. The Federation had a similar aim to the synagogue-building programme – “the integration and 'uplift' of the alien Jew” (Glasman 1991, 173) – but took a different approach: funding by and subordinate inclusion in the official community, conditional on anglicised practice and deference to communal authority. The aesthetic style of the synagogue reflects this partially-anglicised practice: the interior draws on both Anglican churches and Eastern European Orthodox synagogues, conforming to the conventions of Federation synagogues. Following Eastern European traditions, an ark containing Torah scrolls is on the eastern wall and the lectern is positioned centrally, but otherwise church architectural conventions are followed. Similarly, and characteristically of Jewish devotional spaces in Britain during the period, the external façade is unobtrusive, reflecting an orientation towards invisibility in a period of normative monoculture, when the Anglo-Jewish community sought to represent itself as indistinguishable from other faith communities within the British mainstream (Kahn-Harris and Gidley 2010).

The synagogue was badly damaged during the Blitz. Minor restoration enabled it to reopen for worship in 1950; larger-scale refurbishment led to re-consecration in 1960. The visual rhetoric remained substantially similar. By this time Jews were moving out of the inner East End, following the capillaries of social mobility and integration into suburbs to the northwest and east. However, not all East End Jews followed that trajectory and, through processes of amalgamation of the surviving congregations (the membership of the Lubner and Lomzer Synagogue – a former *landsmanshaft* – joined Fieldgate Street in 1947; Vine Court Synagogue joined in 1965, with more smaller former *landsmanshaftn* joining in the 1960s-70s), a handful of East End synagogues continued to thrive. Fieldgate Street (with a brief hiatus in the mid-2000s) until very recently held regular monthly services and on the high holy days, and in 2010 had over 200 households in its membership (Graham and Vulkan 2010), dropping to 180 by 2015 - the same number of households as a century before. These 180 – describing themselves as “loyalists” (Rocker 2015) included some who lived outside the East End, most often in Essex, but continued to maintain their connection to the area through regular attendance, resisting integration’s linear teleology and rearticulating connections to the past. At the start of 2015, the now mainly ageing congregation decided to wind-down services (most choosing to attend other nearby synagogues, such as Nelson Street) and to transfer ownership of the building to the Federation. In July 2015 the building was sold to the neighbouring East London Mosque, which intends to preserve its façade, whilst repurposing the interior to a different devotional use.

Religion and diaspora in flux

The East London Mosque’s history goes back almost as far as the Synagogue’s. Its history shows a range of practices comparable to those associated with synagogues in the area: temporary use of space in secular buildings, conversion of existing buildings (whether secular or of other denominations) and purpose-built construction. While the identitarian narrative of the East End contends that a broadly secular wave of South Asian migration displaced the area’s Jewish population during the 1960s, a significant South Asian, predominantly seafaring population in East London dates back much further (Adams 1987; Visram 1986; Visram 2002). Moreover, this population included a significant practising Muslim component which used temporary halls including Poplar Town Hall and music halls on Commercial Road for Eid and Friday prayers, organised in the 1930s by the national Muslim organisation Jamiat ul Muslimin, established in 1934 and based in East London. Jamiat ul Muslimin’s membership would later overlap considerably with the East London Mosque, and would for a significant portion of the mosque’s early history act as its managing agents. Its nationwide networks and its organisation of large-scale public events, to which British and international Muslim dignitaries and politicians were invited, indicate the presence already of a confident Muslim associational culture in early-twentieth-century London. The Eid event at Poplar Town Hall in January 1934 attracted 400-500 worshippers and was profiled in local newspapers (JUM/05/0001).

The size of this Eid event indicates the pressing need for a mosque in East London at this time. A fund for the development of a mosque in London was opened in 1910, but due to organisational and financial disputes, the first East London Mosque only opened on Commercial Road in 1941. Its early history was one of multi-faith partnership and collaboration (Ansari 2011). Baron Nathaniel de Rothschild, a Jewish communal grandee, sat on the board of the fund, along with the Jewish Mundji Fikri Bey, the Ottoman Consul-General in London. A community leader, Suleman Mohamed Jetha, was married to a Jewish woman. An early imam was married to a Welsh convert, Moyram Ali (born Josephine Morgan), who, when interviewed in the 1970s, recalled buying meat from kosher butchers in the “early days”, because halal meat was not available (*East London Advertiser*, April 13 1979). The infrastructure of the Jewish East End was thus a living resource for East London Muslims before the mass arrival of migrants from the Indian subcontinent.

The academic literature on Islam in East London has predominantly drawn a sharp distinction between the East London Mosque’s Wahabi Islam and Brick Lane Mosque’s Barelvi Islam with its Sufi and regional inflections (Eade 1993; Glynn 2002, 2010; Kibria 2008, 2011; Alexander 2013). This distinction rests on the implication that the East London Mosque is an orthodox Islamic space where other forms of identity, such as diasporic or local political identities, are not in play, while Brick Lane is a “diasporic” mosque, with strong links to the Bangladeshi homeland, diaspora politics and local politics. This distinction simplifies the complex ways in which diasporic, local, national and transnational connections have been in flux from the East London Mosque’s inception. The form of worship was from the outset in a Wahabi tradition, rather than being a reactive product of post-“War on Terror” radicalisation. The first *khutba* (sermon) at the mosque’s opening was delivered by the Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Hafiz Wahba. At the same time, in this earliest phase, the mosque was attended by a congregation diverse in language, ethnicity and class, the Second World War having brought a number of colonial troops into the port city. This diverse congregation, brought together in London by global and imperial circuits, required a mosque offering a form of worship all could participate in, rather than one which catered to one particular sect and geographical area.

Although funds derived from the London Mosque Fund, this was not the ornate, centrally-located, iconic mosque “worthy of the traditions of Islam and worthy of the capital of the British Empire” which the Fund’s Committee had originally envisioned (*East London Mosque* 1941, 40). Instead, it was a refurbished set of three terraced houses, externally demarcated only by a small sign in English. Despite the absence of a spectacular building, a complex number of services, organisations and networks clustered around the mosque from its beginning. Alongside space for prayer, these included a library, a shop, medical expertise, employment assistance, a public telephone, burial services for the deceased, and offices for its members. The Commercial Road site (like Fieldgate Street Synagogue) was bombed, but remained active throughout the war for the use of Muslim soldiers and dignitaries.

Diasporic identities, transnational networks and local politics have played significant roles in the history of East London Mosque at different moments, particularly from 1950 to the late 1990s. In the post-war years, the departure of troops significantly reduced the size of London’s Muslim community, and only the long-established seafaring community from South Asia remained. The mosque’s leadership during the 1950s was predominantly West Pakistani, with some East Pakistani Bengali involvement. In the 1970s, changing demography caused the mosque’s committee to consider whether the recruitment of a Bengali-speaking imam would be preferable. This attempt at more diverse representation was not approved by all. Yet opposition stemmed less from a suspicion of Bangladeshi secular nationalism than from some members’ concern about the potential incursion of sectarian politics into the non-political domain of the sacred (Management Council Meeting, May 1, 1976). Like a more conventional “diasporic” mosque, during the 1970s Ramadan and post-prayer collections were sent to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, although care was made to ensure provision also for Bangladeshi’s Bihari Muslim minority in the newly-formed state of Bangladesh, deemed to be at risk of persecution from secularists for their support for Pakistan during the 1971 war (Management Council Meeting, May 10, 1975). Donations were also made to the Anti-Nazi League to support local activists fighting violent racism in the area (Management Council Meeting, April 25, 1979). Despite the committee’s wariness of sectarianism, and contrary to the representation of the mosque as detached from secular Bangladeshi nationalism, Bangladeshi cultural events and nationalist celebrations, including the performance of nationalist songs and poetry readings, were held by the Young Muslim Organisation at the mosque and at nearby venues in East London in the 1980s and 1990s (Dawatul Islam and Young Muslim Organisation papers and correspondence, ELMT/EX/02/0006). Whilst religious leaders at the mosque and commentators might seek to

draw clear identitarian boundaries around the mosque, demarcating its activities as purely religious and devoid of diasporic and local political meaning, the individuals and activities clustered around the mosque have always transgressed these boundaries and rendered them unstable and permeable.

The mosque mobilised local and transnational connections in order to gain support for a series of expansions from the 1980s onwards. In 1975 it moved from Commercial Road to its present location on Whitechapel Road. After years of worship in overcrowded portakabins and extensive fundraising locally and in the Middle East, the East London Mosque was rebuilt and reopened in 1985 as a three-storey building with space for 2000 worshippers. Its golden fibreglass minaret rises 70ft into the East London skyline and the building features a striking patterned brick façade, realising to some extent the London Mosque Fund Committee's original vision for an iconic mosque. Further expansion ensued when a contested planning proposal to build houses adjacent to the mosque generated a sustained campaign for the land to be amalgamated with the mosque. Through the combination of a Section 106 planning agreement with the Council, significant urban regeneration funding from London and local government, and community fundraising, the London Muslim Centre was opened by Prince Charles in 2004, providing accommodation for Islamic shops, businesses and charities, a school, and a Muslim funeral service. In 2013, the first phase of the nine-storey Muslim women's centre, the Maryam Centre, was opened, providing a female-only gym, childcare facilities and access to counselling, advice regarding domestic violence and immigration, and employment and training support. These expansions have enabled East London Mosque to host key local events such as media debates and London Citizens gatherings. It hosted and supported meetings to organise Unite against Fascism/United East End protests against the march of 600 English Defence League members through Whitechapel in September 2013. The mosque has also engaged in preserving and reflecting on its own history, formalising its archives and granting general public access from January 2015, the first British Muslim institution to do so.

The mosque's expansion culminates in the purchase of Fieldgate Street Synagogue, with whom the mosque had shared space for forty years. Over that time, interactions between the synagogue and the mosque were complex and ambivalent. Everyday examples of hospitality and respect exist alongside more formal gestures of goodwill. In an interview with the *Jewish Chronicle* in the 1990s, the wife of the then-president of the synagogue recounted the helpfulness of Muslim young men:

There are no reported cases of friction between the neighbouring Muslims and Jews. Indeed, if its wheelchair-bound president and honorary minister, the Rev. Leibish Gayer, ever has any difficulties getting out of his wheelchair, Muslims run out of the mosque to help him and his wife, Sarah. Mrs Gayer told *London Extra*: "They say, 'We'll take you out of the wheelchair, dad. We'll help you!'" (*Jewish Chronicle*, January 26, 1990)

In the 2000s, the mosque paid for the synagogue's roof repairs (Rocker 2015). However, local co-operation and conviviality can be over-determined by wider geopolitical events. On the day after the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000, the synagogue had its windows broken. After both 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, East London Mosque was a target for reprisals, while the mosque has also been the focus for political solidarity with representatives of the transnational Islamic *ummah* perceived to be under attack in the global war on terror. In 2010, the synagogue and mosque signed a broad interfaith statement on community cohesion, noting the difficulty of overcoming these tensions, but also celebrating local histories of co-existence that pointed to more positive possibilities:

We are aware that the tragic situation in the Middle East and the devastating human consequences gives rise to strong feelings. We are, however, proud of the history of positive relationships between the diverse communities in our borough, which have in the past helped us remain resilient and unified in difficult times (Tower Hamlets Inter-Faith Forum 2010).

The mosque's 2015 Ramadan fundraising focused on the acquisition of the synagogue, and in one month £400,000 were raised through a televised campaign on the British Bengali-language satellite Channel S. On 23 July 2015 the mosque's website announced it had been successful in purchasing the building, stating that ideas for its use would involve "a balanced development that fits with ELM ethos and history, which include community use, preservation of heritage, interfaith use – as well as to help generate income for the mosque's sustainability and its debt repayment." On 22 August 2015, the mosque held a "Community Open Day" for its members to visit the synagogue (East London Mosque 2015).

The diasporic identifications of London Jews and Muslims are always present in the continual re-negotiating of local co-existence; but markers of identity are not straightforward to read. A signature building makes a claim on a place. The sense of architectural ambivalence by which spaces are appropriated by newly-arrived communities in East London is displaced by the institutionalisation of religious settlement and the establishment of communal authority. The grand growth of the complex around the London Muslim Centre contrasts with the associational energy of the more informally-constituted mosques and prayer-rooms in tenants' halls, old rag-trade workspaces and redundant railway-arches that proliferated in East London in the 1990s and 2000s, as they had in earlier decades. Formal architecture and design set up different rhetorics from informal appropriation of space and extemporised religious practice. But these differences apply within as well as across religious traditions, and their coexistence in itself has formed part of the self-conscious complexity of identities in East London over a long historical trajectory (Davies, 1873). Whether the architecture of a religious building serves to reveal with pride or conceal with care the presence of a faith community to a wider public, the materiality of the built form and those who seek to represent it cannot contain the multiple affiliations that continually transgress architectural and identitarian boundaries. The relationship between them is inflected variously, from within and without, at specific historical moments.

The shifting landscape of an urban mission

Both Fieldgate Street and the East London Mosque, as gathered religious communities, have represented staged interventions into an urban landscape whose conventions have been shaped over centuries by the presence of Christian churches. Anglican parochial identity as the church of the whole territorial area (not just of a committed membership) has remained resonant, and has never been static in form or merely residual. The cultural resonances of Establishment have themselves changed repeatedly over historical time. By the later 19th century Methodism as a firmly-rooted mission church was articulating itself architecturally in a comparable idiom to that of the Church of England to make analogously ambitious religious claims, as well as continuing to take over pubs and other secular buildings. In complementary ways at different points across the 20th/21st centuries each church worked both within and across denominational boundaries to reconceptualise ideas both of parish and of mission, and in so doing to rearticulate Christian witness.

Bow Road – now in East London's inner suburbs – offers an example of the stretching of the borders of identity drawn around faith buildings, as the intertwined histories of Methodist and Anglican congregations reveal the shifting cartography of the metropolis. From its nineteenth-century origins, the Methodist Home Mission in Bow operated in a dynamic urban context which was in constant flux, demographically and religiously, moving from suburb to inner-city to inner suburb within a little over a century, with changing socio-economic conditions. In 1938 William Clapham, since 1920 Minister of Bow Road Methodist Church and recently-appointed Superintendent of the combined Poplar and Bow Mission, recalled a time, only 60 years before, when Bow was a middle-class suburb surrounded by market gardens and rhubarb fields. By the interwar period better-off families had moved to the new eastern suburbs of Forest Gate, Manor Park, Ilford and Seven Kings, and the three- to four-storey houses had each been divided into overcrowded flats (*Methodist Recorder*, March 21, 1935; Clapham, 1938, 60). Within 100 yards of the main road were some of London's worst slums (Clapham 1938, 56). Migration out from the inner city and in from other parts of the country had created a zone of poverty in a previously prosperous area; the bucolic Anglican parish of St Mary's Bow Road was now an urban area, and Methodist missionary activity was being refocused to confront this new reality.

In 1935 the *Methodist Recorder* commented that it was surprising that effective mission work was being carried out 'in a Chapel of the Greek order, with a facade reminiscent of the Parthenon'. Contrary to the expectation that East Londoners would not be attracted to such a place, they were responding in large numbers (*Methodist Recorder*, March 21, 1935). The Corinthian columns which had emblematised the self-confidence of the Methodist Home Mission in the 1860s were now making a new impact, following architectural restoration and renewal of the Mission in the 1920s. There was a large Jewish population around the church, reflecting movement out of the inner East End, and during the restoration Clapham had overheard two Jews on a tram discussing whether the church was to become a cinema or a synagogue (Clapham 1938, 21). Yet by 1933, in a mission area of 60,000, within which ten churches had closed in the previous decade, the two local mission centres – Bow Road Church and Devons Hall, Bow Common – were conducting fifty services and meetings each week, alongside providing a wide range of explicitly non-denominational social outreach, including free breakfasts and dinners, recreation and work for the unemployed. Plans had been drawn up for

the conversion of a derelict cinema, formerly a school, next to Devons Hall, as a three-storey day nursery, medical and social centre. Support had been solicited from a range of charitable bodies as well as philanthropic individuals, both Christian (Anglican as well as Methodist) and Jewish, including J. Arthur Rank, George Shrubshall, George Lansbury, Lord Wakefield and Sir Louis Baron, trustee of the Bernhard Baron Trust (*Methodist Recorder*, November 23, 1933). When the Queen Mary Day Nursery and Social Work Settlement was opened in February 1937, it was heralded as a joint enterprise of the Methodist Church and the local authority, open to all irrespective of creed, and providing services not otherwise available in the deprived locality. News of the centre was reported in the national press and regional newspapers across the country (LMA ACC/1850/203/1).

Whilst many of those who benefited from these facilities were not churchgoers, Clapham's tenure also saw congregations and membership numbers rise. From the beginning, he adopted innovative measures both to draw people in through the imposing main door, and to use the theatricality of the facade and forecourt to wider effect. Early on in his ministry he began to suspend a screen between the columns, and at dusk every Sunday evening were projected pictures and messages by lantern-slides, to catch the attention of passers-by. In the early to mid-1930s his Armistice Day services drew huge crowds. In a strikingly modern idiom he invited the public to plant poppies in a "field of remembrance" in front of the church, arranging with the borough to have the entire church and forecourt floodlit (*Methodist Times*, November 16, 1933; *East London Advertiser* November 18, 1933, November 16, 1935, November 14, 1936). This project was not just about conversion, but about regeneration of community within a more diffused Christian idiom, mapping locality onto a national act of commemoration.

After the Second World War, and the destruction of the church, the new church building (in a more modest but still ecclesiastical idiom) was welcomed as a "beautiful modern building", in which "West Indians and all others from abroad are welcome" (*Sunday Compass*, October 4, 1961) – a newly explicit emphasis on race, but consonant with a longstanding tradition of openness: the availability of social and welfare facilities to all, irrespective of faith or no faith; Clapham's opposition to Fascist encouragement of anti-Jewish feeling in the 1930s; and the legacy of the nineteenth-century Mission which had helped to establish the German Wesleyan congregation in London (Sampson 1896). The 1950s and 1960s in many respects offered parallels to the 1920s and 1930s, in the recognition that the Mission could valuably supplement local authority provision, especially in offering a social focus for the elderly and the young. Successes and activities since then have not been continuous, but up to the present the ethos of mission work as being about witness more than identity has been repeatedly reinvented. In 1967 the Mission at Bow Common, which had been closed for three years, reopened as a welfare centre (*East London Advertiser*, January 13, 1967). The Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest in East India Dock Road, founded in 1843, and historically part of the Mission, is now under separate management, but in close association with the Methodist circuit. It provides an interfaith prayer space, has a German Lutheran chaplain, as well as maintaining its original Methodist chapel, where residents of all faiths gather for services at Christmas. Its promotional material stresses both the integrity of its Methodist heritage and its long history of embracing diversity. The Poplar congregation meets there every Sunday, having moved from the next-door URC church following its sale to a Black Pentecostal church. Members of the Pentecostal community join the Methodists for coffee half-way through their Sunday services. Methodist coordination of an Island Neighbourhood Project on the Isle of Dogs from 1980 to 2014 involved working with Bengali Muslim community groups, especially women and young families, and sponsoring activities like the multicultural Island FC, now vigorously self-sustaining, as the Methodists have moved on.

Despite denominational conventions of itinerancy, the Methodist Mission in Bow attracted and retained long-serving ministers, who worked ecumenically with other churches in the area. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries the devotional lives of the Anglican and Methodist churches in Bow became more formally intertwined for twenty-five years from 1980, when Holy Trinity, Mile End (from 1990 united with All Hallows, Bromley-by-Bow) abandoned its church (taken over by the charismatic New Testament Church of God in 1996) to use Bow Road Methodist Church. All three congregations shared a weekly newsletter. Over this period the Methodist space provided continuity at a time of Anglican decline and then revival. After seven years as a separate parish from 2003, All Hallows became linked to another Anglican church as part of a network of 'plants' built on the model of small evangelical groups living and working within religiously and ethnically mixed communities – in many respects more of a mission than a parochial dynamic (Dadswell and Ross, 2013). Here Anglicans have come to operate in some ways more like 18th-century Methodists. Meanwhile, Holy Trinity united with St Mary's Bow, and together with Bow Methodists and other faith groups

within the Tower Hamlets Inter-Faith Forum, has developed cross-community projects within the territorial parish such as an independent food bank. Different ways of modelling mission and parish have thus overlapped and intertwined, constituting different approaches to religious and communal identity.

The Bow story illustrates that the borders around faith-based identity have been permeable in the East End, reflecting the changing demography of the area. Belying the identitarian logic of mosaic multiculturalism, parish boundaries, ethnic divisions, and lines between natives and settlers, Anglican and Methodist, congregant and non-congregant, have been continuously opened up and re-drawn. The quiet encroachments on religious space of everyday encounter subvert a symbolic landscape iconography of religious difference. Rather than Anglicans or Methodists giving way to Jews, Muslims or African evangelical Christians, as conventional narratives of ethnic succession would suggest, the Mission has found novel and shifting ways over time of sharing space with other communities and fostering interethnic and interfaith conviviality.

Focalising devotions and complicating identities

Whilst devotional cultures have been recognised as focal points of distinctive identities within particular religious traditions, in forms which connect the local and the transnational, East London has provided a context within which diasporic practices have been not just translated but specifically constituted and elaborated (Garnett and Harris 2013a and b). Markers of identity are not stable or self-evident even within the seemingly exclusive setting of a denominationally distinctive service.

On Tuesday evenings in Forest Gate, a Victorian-gothic Catholic Church provides a setting for remarkable religious fervor. At least 200 people of diverse ages and ethnicities buy and light hundreds of candles, gather around a plaster statue of the Franciscan Antony of Padua (running their hands along the folds of his brown habit) or place slips of paper in a large wooden box marked “petitions” (A. Harris, fieldwork, 2009-14). Meanwhile men and women walk on their knees from the back of the church to the altar, praying with moving lips and with a lighted candle between their hands. This diverse congregation has come for the “Novena of Saint Antony”, a devotion which brings together people from highly-diverse faith backgrounds, including a substantial number of self-identified (and publicly-acknowledged) Hindus. The shared diasporic identities of Tamil Catholics and Hindus (David 2012a, 2012b; Van Hear 2010, 2012) allows for the circumvention of differences of religion, class and caste and the identification of common intercessory needs in times of austerity in contemporary London (cf. Garnett and Harris, 2013a). Moreover, this devotional practice resonates with people within (and well beyond) this parish in London, providing a striking example of religious vitality and the potentially porous, flexible nature of “markers of identity”. These shared practices, and the colonial legacies and Christian missionary histories that contextualize them, defy mobilization for the purposes of identity politics.

Although there is a pre-Reformation history of Franciscans in this part of East London, the current settlement is analogous to that of the Bow Road Mission a few miles to the west. Franciscan monks from Scotland and northern England came to the area in the 1870s, establishing the Catholic parish of St Antony in 1884 and building the first English post-Reformation friary to train a local priesthood. The church was completed in 1891 to provide accommodation for 1000 (McLoughlin n.d., 231-2; 235); in 1903 it had 4000 parishioners and was the largest parish in Greater London (Calder 1991, 22). A 1930 article in the *Catholic Times* described a visit to this “spacious Franciscan church in East London” within a “dull, drab district, miles and miles of seemingly endless streets of dirty yellow brick two-storey houses”, noting that an encounter with the “wonder worker of Padua in a niche above the Tabernacle” would provide a lens through which visitors “will visualize East London from a new angle, and a journey to Forest Gate may be as romantic as a pilgrimage to ‘Umbria Mystica’” (*Catholic Times*, 26 February 1930). Here we find a transnational Catholic imaginary in which the church becomes a palimpsest with multiple elsewheres layered over each other. The recognition of St Antony’s as a pilgrimage site or shrine church has been long-established – the first shrine to the saint was installed in 1892 and a replacement statue erected in 1931 (Calder 1991, 17) – the 700th anniversary of the saint’s death.

Devotion to St Antony has remained strong through successive changes in the composition of the parish – from the predominantly Irish community at the turn of the century, through the 1960s when a parish history recorded the introduction of a Polish mass in 1963 and welcomed “the very large communities of Caribbean and Asian families ... come to swell our numbers” (McLoughlin and Cloonan 1984, 30). Against this historical backdrop, the present-day Tuesday Novenas attract a highly-mixed congregation, with around a third from the

Indian subcontinent and mostly balanced numbers of men and women (cf. Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012). African, Caribbean, Eastern European and longstanding white East End devotees are also in evidence, but the other strikingly distinct group is a knot of young, white men with shaved heads, tattoos and an Irish lilt, lighting candles and praying conscientiously. Amongst them are several couples with young children, some of the women with carefully-coiffed, bouffant hair and sparkling costume jewelry: the Traveller community is fervent in its devotion to St Antony. The current parish priest, Father John, highlighted their enthusiasm, commenting that “their prayer system, religious belief system is very petition orientated”. These Irish Travellers come from all over London each week to offer their intentions and to seek forgiveness within the confessional. Through these embodied practices, a shared communal reality is created, using materials drawn from traditional practice and refracted through far from monolithic Christian scripts.

One feature of the Tuesday evenings is the reading out of written petitions to St Antony, patron saint of lost things, ranging from requests for help with immigration problems to recovery of lost items such as mobile phones. On a typical night in 2014, amongst these hundreds of slips ‘posted’ were thirty-four petitions in a foreign language, mostly Tamil (but one in Sinhalese). One prayer in English included the statement “We are Hindu but we believe in Jesus too” (handwritten petition, March 25, 2014). On Tuesdays when the Tamil priest stationed in the parish attends the Novena, the weekly petitions in that language are read out. More than once, these requests have been signed “from a Hindu devotee”, and the attitude of the longstanding former priest (recently deceased), and the newly-arrived fathers of the Community of Saint John, is that “all are welcome” at this service or throughout the day when they create “their own little liturgy”.

Limits to the sharing of experience exist, although they themselves are transgressed. While veneration of the relic of St Antony after the reading of the petitions is open to all, announcements have had to be made at the 10am Mass, at which the Eucharist is given, that this is strictly reserved for Catholics. However, it is acknowledged that many Hindus come up for communion innocently and that it is sometimes difficult to detect the differences, physically or attitudinally, between Hindus and Tamil Catholics. In this setting, conformity to embodied ritual conventions cuts across exclusionary definitions of religious affiliation.

Such practices connect Forest Gate to diasporic devotional pathways. St Antony is popular throughout India and Sri Lanka, and inter-religious places of pilgrimage on the sub-continent are not uncommon (Raj 2004; Raj and Harman 2007). The most famous shared Catholic/Hindu sacred space is the Marian shrine, Vailankanni, in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and visits to this “Indian Lourdes” were mentioned by some of the Novena devotees in London. In Uvari, Tamil Nadu – the region of origin (alongside northern Sri Lanka) for a significant proportion of the Forest Gate congregation - there is also a long-established pilgrimage site dedicated to St Antony. There Catholics and Hindus undertake rituals together across caste and religious boundaries. Elsewhere – in Portugal and Morocco, for example – Catholics and Muslims similarly co-inhabit sacred spaces and customize devotional practices to St Antony or other saints such as Mary, who open spaces for intercultural translation and intimate contact (Albera and Couroucli 2012; Jansen and Kühl 2008).

Within the Tuesday-night Novenas, markers of identity – distinctively Catholic practices and the existence of confessional boundaries (especially surrounding the taking of Holy Communion) – are explicitly acknowledged and enforced. But these understandings are also re-configured, and sometimes contravened, as the church becomes a space for the expression of multivalent faith identities and the customization of a range of devotional traditions. Devotion to St Antony has the capacity to erase distinctions of ethnicity and religious tradition – bringing together Catholics from a multiplicity of national backgrounds, as well as South Asian migrants – Hindu and Catholic alike.

Between buildings that act and people that practice: reframing faith and urban space

Exploration of intersections between ethnicity and religiosity illustrates the ambiguity and instability of identity formation and expression within East London’s diasporic faith spaces. Visible markers of identity have been inscribed in the physical space of faith buildings, but the thresholds of these buildings have not marked the borders of belonging. Faith buildings have served not just as anchors of identity but also as points of connection across identities. Faith spaces have provided an infrastructure for the absorption of migrants into the urban landscape, but also sanctuaries enabling them both to maintain vernacular traditions brought from elsewhere and to create new ones. They have provided spaces for co-operation and contact around shared

religious needs (such as halal and kosher food), shared experiences of racism (whether Mosley's Blackshirts or the English Defence League), or shared social missions (such as food banks and social welfare).

We have argued that we need to synthesise geographical and historical sensibilities to understand the complexities of devotional practice and diasporic formation. The Brick Lane Mosque was once a church and then a synagogue. We should be cautious about how this mosque is chosen to symbolise processes of ethnic succession, just as we should be cautious about reading either the symbolism of the proximity of Fieldgate Street Synagogue and East London Mosque or East London's Mosque's historical links to Saudi Arabia just through the lens of contemporary public understandings of Islam.

The city makes visible and renders invisible different forms of social practice. The mundane and everyday realities of Bow Methodist Mission space and the hidden informalities of prayers in buildings and spaces that are largely unseen caution against the spectacularization of devotional practice and the symbolism of religious difference in the city. In contrast, we argue that both ethnographic experience and historical detail can be read against the grain of the symbolism of the built forms. Buildings act in part through their symbolism, but dwelling in the city involves practices that may disrupt and complicate such easy readings of the iconography of landscape.

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