

## WORKSHOP 6 WRITING THE PLACE WHERE YOU LIVE

How much do you know about the history of the area where you live? You may have noticed evidence of the past, just as you walk around – old signs painted on shops, for example, or the headstones in graveyards. You might have learned about the history of your area in school, or from members of your family. Are there any signs, around where you live, of how the area has changed over time? Which communities do you find in your area now, what languages do you see and hear spoken around you – and which would we have found if we'd come here 50, 100, 200 or 300 years ago? Under what circumstances have people come to live in this area?

Running a workshop like this will obviously differ in its form depending on where you are based. What follow are –

- ideas focusing on our own home borough in London, Tower Hamlets
- ideas for discussion and writing exercises
- further resources.

### WRITING TOWER HAMLETS: IDEAS AND RESOURCES

In our discussions we focused on our home borough in London, Tower Hamlets, where around 85 home languages are currently spoken. It is one of the most linguistically diverse boroughs in the UK, and also has a very long history of multilingualism.

Topics for discussion:

- the histories of immigration to the East End, and the significance of the docks nearby: lascars, including many Sylheti-speakers; sailors from West Africa and Somalia; Huguenots; Chinese; Irish; Jewish; Bangladeshi; Somali; Polish.
- how the history of migration and social change is built into the fabric of this part of London – for example in the Brick Lane mosque, housed in a building which used to be a synagogue, and before that was a Huguenot church: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/modern/1780690/>  
Or the history of 19 Princelet Street, Spitalfields, which now houses the Museum of Migration: <http://www.19princeletstreet.org.uk/>
- old (and modern) photographs from the East End, and the multilingual histories which they reveal to us. I found all of these examples via Google Images.



Pavilion Theatre, Whitechapel Road, c.1905.



H. Doe Foon restaurant, 57 Pennyfields Road, Poplar. 1926.



Three lascars on board the *Viceroy of India*, 1935.



Banner from the Battle of Cable Street, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1936.



Street sign in present-day Brick Lane.

### WRITING EXERCISE –

Write a poem, or a short piece of prose, prompted by one or more of the photos we have been looking at. For example, you might want to –

- think about the scenes themselves, bringing them to life in your imagination (for example the hustle and bustle of turn-of-the-century Whitechapel Road; the comings and goings to the Chinese restaurant on Pennyfields Rd; the drama of the Battle of Cable Street). What kinds of sounds would you hear? Which languages would you hear being spoken? What would the sights and the smells be like? Who might you meet?
- Think about the relationship between the scenes in the photos, and the present day. What would a passer-by from the Whitechapel Road in 1905, for example, think if she or he travelled forward in time to 2016? Or one of the lascars from the *Viceroy of India*? How would they interpret the East End of the present?
- Tell a story about the people in the photographs – how they came to be there, their stories, their experiences of living in this part of London. How might it differ from your own experience? How might it be similar?

## FURTHER IDEAS

This session provides opportunities to discuss locality and language diversity, but also to bring the idea of literature into conversation with the local, thinking about the kinds of literature and art which have been made in and out of your local environs. For that reason, in our own sessions I have tried to make use of all kinds of resources which offer varied perspectives on East End life. Here are some examples, which might be useful in themselves, or prompt your own thinking in other ways.

One interesting example is the video for Cornershop ft. Bubbly Kaur, 'Supercomputed', which was filmed in Bethnal Green, very near where our project is based:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GymRkiKXBgQ>

As you'll see, the video revolves around the idea of the barbershop as a cultural institution – something which is common to (at the very least) South Asian, African, and West Indian communities. It offers a particular, quite compelling kind of vision of community, and the local. It's also been useful for prompting classroom discussion of how different areas and communities are represented in the wider media. The video's framing of young British Asian men in Bethnal Green offers a self-conscious response to their representation in the wider culture, such as in news reporting, often in the context of the threat of terrorism.

We've also worked with a variety of literary texts set in and evocative of our own local area, from different periods and perspectives. This would be easy to do for any UK city (see list of resources for further ideas). For us, in our Mile End setting, these have included:

- passages from Tony White's 2003 novel *Foxy-T* (London: Faber, 2003). An example can be found in Workshop One.
- Siddhartha Bose, 'Swan Song, Mile End', in Jackie Kay, James Procter and Gemma Robinson (eds) *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2012).
- a passage from Israel Zangwill's novel *Children of the Ghetto*, written and set in the late-nineteenth-century Jewish East End:

There was a hubbub of congratulation ('*Mazꞛoltov, Mazꞛoltov*', 'Good Luck'), and a palsy of handshaking, when the contract was signed. Remarks, grave and facetious, flew about in Yiddish, with phrases of Polish and Russian thrown in for auld lang syne, and cups and jugs were broken in reminder of the transiency of things mortal. The Belcovitches had been saving up their already broken crockery for the occasion. The hope was expressed that Mr and Mrs Belcovitch would live to see 'rejoicings' on their other daughter, and to see their daughters' daughters under the *Chuppah*, or wedding canopy.

Becky's hardened cheek blushed under the oppressive jocularity. Everybody spoke Yiddish habitually at No. 1 Royal Street, except the younger generation, and that spoke it to the elder.

'I always said no girl of mine should marry a Dutchman.'

It was a dominant thought of Mr Belcovitch's, and it rose spontaneously to his lips at this joyful moment. Next to a Christian, a Dutch Jew stood lowest in the gradation of potential sons-in-law. Spanish Jews, earliest arrivals by way of Holland, after the Restoration, are a class apart, and look down on the later imported Ashkenazim, embracing both Poles and Dutchmen in their impartial contempt. But this does not prevent the Pole and the Dutchman from despising each other. To a Dutch or Russian Jew, the 'Pullack', or Polish Jew, is a poor creature; and scarce anything can exceed the complacency with which the 'Pullack' looks down upon the 'Litvok', or Lithuanian, the degraded being whose Shibboleth is literally Shibboleth, and who says 'ee' where rightly-

constituted persons say 'oo'. To mimic the mincing pronunciation of the 'Litvok' affords the 'Pullack' a sense of superiority almost equalling that possessed by the English Jew, whose mispronunciation of the Holy Tongue is his title to rank far above all foreign varieties.

Israel Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto* (1892; London: Black Apollo Press, 2011)

## FURTHER RESOURCES

A really excellent, accessible, diverse collection of poetry of place, written by contemporary black and Asian poets and covering the whole of the UK from the north of Scotland to the southernmost tip of Cornwall, is: Jackie Kay, James Procter and Gemma Robinson (eds) *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2012).

There may be cultural and artistic resources specific to your local area which can be employed in a workshop like this. For example, for Manchester there is the *Moving Manchester* project: <http://www.transculturalwriting.com/movingmanchester/>

Local publishers and writers' groups (which you can find via internet searches) can be useful resources for finding locally-set contemporary fiction and poetry. For example, Birmingham's Tindal Street Press, which emerged out of a writers' group, and has published distinctive Birmingham writers such as Clare Morrall and Catherine O'Flynn.