London’s (Migrant) Villages within the Metropolis

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My article London’s (Migrant) Villages within the Metropolis deals with two books by Rachel Lichtenstein, On Brick Lane (2007) and Diamond Street: The Hidden World of Hatton Garden (2012). The author explores, in her unique psychogeographical manner, how the close-knit Jewish communities lived and worked in village-like enclaves that existed along these two roads, but which have largely vanished. It is the exclusivity of London’s diamond district around Hatton Garden, as well as the seclusion of the former ‘Little Jerusalem’ at the turn of the last century on Brick Lane, that makes the boundaries of difference visible, and contrast these two areas with the rest of London. The question between the inside and the outside of a community will be raised on the basis of resolving this dichotomy as it is argued that the definition who is inside or outside is completely dependent on the point of view.

Introduction

This article focuses on the question of exclusivity among the population of London, a multicultural and multi-ethnic city. London, the ‘modern Babylon’, a conurbation and conglomerate of people, cultures, religions and languages, has always been attractive to migrants from all over the world. They often clustered together in particular areas, forming such closely-knit communities that they at times bordered on ghetto-like living conditions. I shall explore how far these areas were secluded from the rest of the city and whether a mingling of peoples took place within their boundaries. This question shall be tackled by addressing London’s historical development as well as the cultural formation of the city’s multi-ethnic society.

Two books in particular, written by the author, artist, oral historian and archivist Rachel Lichtenstein, serve as a basis for my research: On Brick Lane and Diamond Street: The Hidden World of Hatton Garden. On Brick Lane is the first in a trilogy of books on London streets that explores the heart of the (formerly mostly Jewish) East End. Hatton Garden, the so-called diamond street in central London, is the site of the jewellery and diamond trade, which, for a long time, was a predominantly Jewish business district. Each book is a collage that presents urban portraits of one particular street framed from an historical perspective. Both books also contain a range of sources and materials, including psychogeographical wanderings through Brick Lane and Hatton Garden, interviews with locals and historians, archival and historical research, as well as the authors’ own memories of these places. These combinations provide a multi-layered picture of Brick Lane and Hatton Garden as well as of the (former) inhabitants. Lichtenstein’s exploration is of a psychogeographical nature. Psychogeography is a methodological practice that involves a certain way of researching the impact of urban space on the behaviour of people that is often expressed in literary texts. It pays particular attention to the interplay of environment and human emotion, that is, how the latter is shaped and affected by its surroundings. This method or practice is a useful tool with which to consider the history of the East End as this part of the metropolis has so many different historical and cultural layers. Psychogeography tends to research these (often hidden) layers of urban history. Due to psychogeography being very sensitive to the


“Psychogeography” is a rather open term whose definition can be applied to a number of different writing styles. According to Guy Debord, one of the founders of the Situationist International (SI) (1957–1972) that defined and promoted psychogeography in Paris in the 1950s, it can best be described as ‘[t]he study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals’. Guy Debord, ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’ (1955), in Ken Knabb (ed.), Situationist International Anthology (1981), Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, 2006, p.8. Psychogeography enjoyed a revival in Great Britain in the 1990s, especially centred around London with writers like Iain Sinclair.
perception of a place, it is ideally suitable for this kind of exploration, being both shaped by an attempt at historical accuracy as well as by a thorough interest in subjective perception.

Despite the fact that not just one neat definition of the method exists, Merlin Coverley has compiled a few frequently recurring characteristics in his introductory overview entitled *Psychogeography*: firstly, ‘the activity of walking’ (be it the wanderer’s, the stroller’s, the flâneur’s or the stalker’s) which also applies to Lichtenstein; secondly, a ‘spirit of political radicalism’, paired with ‘a playful sense of provocation and trickery’; and thirdly, ‘the search for new ways of apprehending our urban environment’. Possibly linked to this third characteristic is ‘an engagement with the occult’ and a preoccupation with ‘excavating the past’ as well as with ‘recording the present’, the latter two being especially in accord with Lichtenstein’s approach to the metropolis. Coverley also states that ‘psychogeography is … the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioural impact of urban place’.

Psychogeography provides a very challenging approach to the chosen primary literature as the two books are not merely conventional chronicles, but two multifaceted pictures of the respective streets that pay attention to atmosphere. Lichtenstein herself seems especially sensitive to the emotional resonance of certain urban places and its hidden layers. In a newspaper article, she says about *Diamond Street*:

The book is almost like an archaeological excavation of a place through memories and stories— and it ends with me saying I’m really aware I’ve only just scratched the surface. Following Lichtenstein’s traces, one plunges into the past and begins to contemplate the lives of these migrants and the motives for their migration to London.

I particularly want to investigate the insider/outsider roles that are brought about by the central issue of exclusivity. Who is the insider? Who is the outsider? This dichotomy is widely utilised and debated in different disciplines and discourses. It is a crucial concept for the argumentation of my analysis which suggests a reversal of these conventionally fixed roles, as shall be elaborated in the course of this article. Jeppe Sinding Jensen, in his article ‘Revisiting the Insider- Outsider Debate: Dismantling a Pseudo-problem in the Study of Religion’, argues against this insider/outsider debate and believes that ‘[t]here is no theory behind the distinction’ while referring back to Rudolf Carnap who dismissed the debate as a ‘pseudo-problem’. Jensen, however, approaches the topic from a strictly religious angle. Yet for my purpose, this two-part division is conducive to the basic question from which to start my analysis of the two books, as shall be demonstrated forthwith. Dagmar C.G. Lorenz, in her ‘Introduction’ to *Insiders and Outsiders: Jewish and Gentile Culture in Germany and Austria*, remarks that, while discussing a number of ‘social critical texts’, they ‘are written from the dual perspective of an outsider who actually is an insider’. It is this ‘dual perspective’, or more accurately, the shifting of perspectives, that is at the core of my analysis of these ‘inner-city villages’. Despite the fact that I employ the concept, I will provide an alternative interpretation of the term.

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10Ibid., p.13.
11Ibid.
13Ibid., p.10.
15By ‘conventionally fixed roles’ I mean the usually assumed role allocation of the ‘native’ population as the ‘insiders’ and the immigrants as the ‘outsiders’.
20For more information on the insider/outsider debate with a specific focus on Jewry in Germany and Austria, refer to *Insiders and Outsiders*. 

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Were outsiders able to access these ‘metropolitan villages’? Who were the outsiders? Were the ‘villagers’ in turn entitled to participate in metropolitan life? Did ‘boundaries of difference’ between the inside of the community and the outside of the community exist?

My argument is based on a depiction of Jewish life in London. I will concentrate on the question of whether the idea of the Jewish shtetl within the city is an embellished myth or whether this strong communal spirit actually existed. The analysis, however, shall not be limited to the Jewish East End ‘ghetto’ or workplace. Other migrant communities, past and present, and their ways of life in the city shall also be taken into consideration, though to a lesser degree.

A concise overview of London’s migration history and the factors that play a decisive role in the process of ghettoization shall be followed by an elaboration on the seclusion of Brick Lane’s Jewish past and Hatton Garden’s almost vanished but still exclusively Jewish diamond business district. Thus, the question of exclusivity shall be illuminated from both an historical and societal angle.

The historical development of migration to the East End

Since the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43, the city of London with its strategic location on the River Thames has always been a Mecca for migrants and in the following centuries came to be known as ‘the Promised Land’. In particular, the East End of the metropolis, more specifically Spitalfields, the ‘place on the edge’, has always been home to the newly arrived. Its unique history of settlement is marked by a fluctuation of migrant communities, turning the area from Huguenot ‘Petty France’, to Jewish/Yiddish ‘Little Jerusalem’, to today’s Bengali ‘Banglatown’.

Although no laws that define certain areas of settlement have ever existed, a dense immigrant population has been reported east of the city since medieval times. Several factors, similar to those applicable to the attraction of London in general, have played a major role in the enduring initial settlement of this area, including: the possibility of affordable housing and labour, the availability of transport and, probably the most decisive factor, the familiarity of fellow countrymen and their customs, habits and traditions.

The proximity to the London Docks further accounts for the aforementioned tendency of immigrants to settle closely to their places of disembarkation, with the additional prospect of finding work and the incentive of upward mobility. Another reason for the broad popular appeal that applies to Spitalfields in all respects is the absence of ‘any legal, political and religious constraints which could make the incomer’s life untenable’. In consequence, it became a place attractive to political and religious dissenters.

The new inhabitants of Spitalfields could freely practice their religious beliefs. This was particularly applicable to the Huguenots who had been expelled from their mother country. Traces of religious convictions are also reflected in the area’s architecture, the most prominent and striking example being the edifice at the corner of Brick Lane and Fournier Street, which bears testimony to the changing immigrant population and the role of religion in the immigrants’ lives. This house of worship was erected in 1743 by French Huguenots, who at this time inhabited the area around Brick Lane. They called their Protestant church, La Neuve-Église. Later, from 1809, it was briefly used as a mission for converting Jews to Christianity. In 1819, it became a Methodist chapel until it was turned into the Spitalfields Great Synagogue, with a congregation of approximately two thousand worshippers, mostly Orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe.

Since 1976, it has been a mosque, the Jamme Masjid, home to the large Bangladeshi-Sylheti community in the area. Just before and after the call to
prayer, men in long garments rush to and from the mosque and mix for a brief period of time with the tourists and trendy young East Londoners who roam the street or make their way to the nearby Truman Brewery. The building’s fascinating history reflects the area’s changing inhabitants. In every century, it has been occupied according to the religion of the predominant ethnicity. The building recounts the population diversity of Brick Lane, which has in turn changed continuously and might change again in the course of time, indicated by the gradual outmigration of the Bangladeshi community due to rising rents and on-going gentrification. The historical background of the East End illustrates the development of the area into a spatial nexus for the respective immigrant community and provides reasons for the fact that ‘Petty France’, ‘Little Jerusalem’ and ‘Banglatown’ were able to establish themselves in London.

In the following section, it is crucial to investigate whether the denomination ‘ghetto’ was an appropriate de facto term for the East End as the term ‘ghetto’ would make the insider/outsider dichotomy even clearer due to the fact that the ghetto is per se a place where its inhabitants are secluded from the rest of the city. The term would therefore justify the insider/outsider juxtaposition to a certain extent. One has to bear in mind, however, that this article applies mostly to the past (i.e. the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), and not to the current state of Brick Lane or Hatton Garden as these places would certainly no longer be termed ghettos.

The East End–a ghetto?

For a long time, the eastern boroughs of London have been perceived as an othered and alien space by the non-locals, and a range of mostly negative connotations is attached to the location. This is to a large extent the result of a centuries-long creation of myths often passed on without critical revision.

The notion of Spitalfields as an area sealed off and spatially divided from the city proper, as well as being the conurbation of immigrant communities, points towards the formation of a ghetto culture. However, it must be noted that one has to be careful with this term as it entails a number of negative implications like extreme poverty, slum-like living conditions, overpopulation and epidemics. As Louis Wirth stated in his influential work, The Ghetto, a ghetto is a place of ‘transition between [the] old and [the] new world’, marked by its long-term isolation from the dominant society. In the process of ghettoization, the alien community tends to turn to what is familiar and known, and subsequently expands this culture until it becomes visible in the urban landscape of the newly adopted and specific environment, often on the margins of a city. This is also true for Spitalfields in the East. The expression, ‘ghetto’, is no longer confined to the Jewish diaspora; it is now an extended term for the habitat where ethnic minorities conglomerate and lead a more or less autonomous life as the ghetto meets all religious and cultural requirements the marginalised inhabitant needs in order to be turned into an insider.

To summarise the aforementioned features, one could have called Spitalfields a ghetto, although not in a strict sense, as the area and its immigrant population have never been cut off completely from the outside world. Furthermore, the term was only applicable in the early to mid-twentieth century. The term ‘ghetto’ is very much fraught with stereotypes and clichés. During the times of Huguenot and Jewish settlement, ‘Petty France’ and ‘Little Jerusalem’ seem to have been adequate nicknames as ghettoization was much more visible and pronounced than in today’s ‘Banglatown’, which I would be reluctant to label as a ghetto. It is a very mixed place nowadays and cannot be termed a ‘metropolitan village’ any longer. Nevertheless, I have decided to consider it a ‘ghetto’, even though the term might not be entirely accurate. However, as my focus is on Brick Lane and Hatton Garden in the past, the expression ‘ghetto’ seems justified for that period of time.

A Jewish shtetl?

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27The Yiddish word for a small village with a Jewish population in Eastern Europe.
Brick Lane was the heart of the Jewish community in London from the late 1880s until the outbreak of the Second World War. In On Brick Lane, Lichtenstein aims to ‘mentally map the area as it had once been’ by following any traces that are left of these bygone times. This claim emphasises her psychogeographical interest in the place’s layers of the past. Gradually, she loses herself in the vortex of history, memories, opinions of locals and her own imagination, and becomes totally absorbed by the place. She admits that she ‘became obsessed with the stories and mythologies of London’s East End’ and says her ‘reaction to Brick Lane became schizophrenic’.

As previously mentioned, she has a very personal approach when piecing together the stories and pieces of information that she acquires. This is evident in the attempt to re-enact Brick Lane at the end of the nineteenth century when Yiddish was spoken almost exclusively there. In the 1880s, a large number of Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews, fleeing the Pale of Settlement due to incipient pogroms after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 arrived in the East End of London. They brought with them their language (Yiddish was spoken to a large extent), customs, food and clothing, and hence contrasted noticeably with the British-Cockney population that lived in the East End at that time. Collecting the stories and memoirs of those members of the Jewish community still alive, she focuses on how the Jewish ghetto asserted itself in this particular area. Therefore, a specific notion comes into play: the myth of the Jewish shtetl is a phenomenon which the Jews who left the Russian Empire transported to their new home in East London, and subsequently passed this particular way of life on to the following generations. The historian John Klier defines the shtetl as ‘any settlement inhabited by Jews’ except for the big urban centres, and says it was also ‘a state of mind’ which would partly explain why the East End developed into a ghetto with its close-knit community. The local Yiddish poet Avram Stencel, a friend of Lichtenstein’s grandmother, described Brick Lane and its environs as ‘my shtetl, my holy acres, my Jerusalem in Britain’. In Journey Through a Small Planet, Emanuel Litvinoff, the son of Russian Jewish parents who had immigrated to London in 1914, recounts his childhood near Brick Lane in the 1920s and 1930s in the heart of the Jewish ghetto and confirms this notion of the East End as a ‘village within the city’.

From the outset, one has to bear in mind that Lichtenstein provides the reader with a literary rendering of what people remember and what they are willing to reveal. A certain choice is always made. With an idea of the Jewish East End in mind, Lichtenstein sets out to discover and reconstruct the Brick Lane of her Polish refugee grandparents in the 1930s and 1940s, where they had opened their watchmaker and jewellery shop, before the family left for Essex. The street was characterised by its plethora of Jewish tailoring workshops and kosher shops whose signs were written both in English and Yiddish—similar to today’s ‘Banglatown’ where several road signs are written bilingually in English and Bengali.
Through the stories Lichtenstein accumulates, she re-establishes a certain atmosphere of how life in the *shtetl* must be imagined. The historian Professor Bill Fishman, who specialised in East London, became her mentor and friend and provided her with valuable first-hand anecdotes and his memories of the earlier days. Despite his view that ‘Spitalfields and Whitechapel were poverty-stricken, filled with over-congested lodging houses, unemployment and crime’, and threatened by the violent presence of Oswald Mosley’s fascists that resulted in the legendary Battle of Cable Street in 1936 which Fishman witnessed, Fishman thinks of the former Jewish ghetto in astonishingly positive terms. He remembers the ‘spirit of the Jewish East End’ as one defined by charity and interpersonal relationships where one neighbour cared for and supported the other if help was needed. He paints the picture of a world closed off from its surroundings. Life in the Jewish ghetto mostly took place outdoors, and in the evenings the streets were crowded with ‘the old Jewish ghetto-dwellers [who] were going off to their evening services’. One was either part of this community, and hence *inside* it, or an *outsider* to the *shtetl*. Fishman also describes Brick Lane Market to Lichtenstein, where all kinds of kosher foods were available. Another elderly Jewish interviewee has similar memories of the market, which leads Lichtenstein to imagine that

[...]

These jigsaw pieces, which the author compiles in order to reach her aim of ‘re-mapping’ the East End’s past, provide the reader with a very clear image of the Jewish East End: a hidden world, an isolated place to live in, more or less sealed off from the rest of the city. The obvious questions would then follow: what made it so isolated? Who turned it into a ghetto? Did the wish to stick with one’s kind and to be left in peace, especially as overtly religious Orthodox Jews, emanate from the Eastern European immigrants who regarded London as a safe haven? Or did the local East Enders exclude the newly arrived Jews, making it impossible for them to integrate? These questions hark back to the insider versus outsider juxtaposition mentioned previously which is at the core of my investigation of these two books. A definite answer cannot be given, although it is probable that neither group was very much attuned to the other’s life. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the majority of Cockneys did not feel the incentive to integrate with their new neighbours, as elucidated by another account of a non-Jewish interviewee: Mr Tyler had worked in the Truman Brewery on Brick Lane for thirty-seven years yet never once set foot in a Jewish café or shop. Two different worlds seemed to have co-existed in very close proximity to one another.

The Jewish quarter is, however, a thing of the past now. ‘Little Jerusalem’ has vanished and its residues are hardly recognisable in the street scene any more, except for a Jewish *beigel* bakery. Most Jews left the area during the Second World War, and today, it is known as ‘Banglatown’. The Bangladeshis now settled near Brick Lane experienced a fate comparable to their Jewish precursors. *On Brick Lane* focuses on the Bangladeshi community as well, but here it shall merely be touched upon. A range of recent publications, novels and chronicles alike, deal with the new migrant communities and do not shy away from addressing the most recent development of Spitalfields as an area of noticeable gentrification.

**Hatton Garden—the diamond village in central London**

In the trilogy’s second book, *Diamond Street–The Hidden World of Hatton Garden*, Lichtenstein explores the diamond district of London, which has likewise been classified as a more or less...
exclusively Jewish area. Again, she sets out from a personal angle: her whole family, starting with her Polish grandfather, has worked in the diamond business in Hatton Garden, and her father opened a shop there in the mid-1980s which her husband has now taken over.\textsuperscript{47} She therefore has a very special attachment to this place which she remembers vividly from her childhood. The reader is introduced to the place as follows:

This is the way the flow of business has taken place in Hatton Garden for over a century. It is a secret, private, hidden world that operates according to a strict set of unspoken internal laws: never screw a partner; and once a deal is done it must be adhered to.\textsuperscript{48}

Lichtenstein is ‘one of the few prominent female figures operating within the fuzzily defined field of contemporary psychogeography’.\textsuperscript{49} Her method of approaching Hatton Garden is very similar to her chosen methodology in \textit{On Brick Lane}. Lichtenstein absorbs the street’s and the surroundings’ unique Jewish atmosphere by researching historical accounts and archives, talking to locals and exploring the area by walking it (a markedly psychogeographical activity), at times accompanied by historians or geologists and their expert knowledge of the area. This, however, has now almost given way to a new and very international circle of dealers and clientele who no longer bargain in Yiddish in the street or in one of the kosher cafes, but conduct their business dealings in the now highly secured London Diamond Bourse. It is a different world today, just like Brick Lane has changed over the decades. However, the Jewish presence is still perceivable, although not as distinctly as in earlier times. Lichtenstein points out the seemingly old-fashioned autonomy of Hatton Garden while simultaneously emphasising the modernity and internationality of the place:

Hatton Garden is a self-contained place. Everything the business needs is locatable within a square mile: from the London Diamond Bourse, to the gold-bullion dealers, to the suppliers of precious metals, stones, gems and jewels, to the shops that sell the finished products. The majority of the people who work there, in all areas of the business, are still Jewish. Orthodox Jews trade happily with assimilated secular Jews like my father. There are Jewish people working in Hatton Garden today from Israel, Iran, America, Holland, Britain and many other countries, who have links to an international network of jewellery markets in Antwerp, Tel-Aviv, New York, the Far East and other places. Despite the global nature of the street, there is a distinct village atmosphere. Everyone knows each other, gossip is rife and much like in the former Eastern European \textit{shtetls}, there are plenty of \textit{schlemiehs},\textsuperscript{50} \textit{menschen}\textsuperscript{51} and other intriguing characters making up the community.\textsuperscript{52}

It is noticeable that throughout the book, reference is made to the village atmosphere, which Lichtenstein herself confirms when she remembers helping out in her father’s shop in Hatton Garden in the mid-1980s.\textsuperscript{53} It is the same phenomenon encountered in Brick Lane when the majority of the population living on and around this street was Jewish. This has, however, long since changed.

Hatton Garden has experienced a similar though slightly less radical fate, possibly due to the fact that it was merely a place where people worked, not where they lived. Most locals to whom Lichtenstein speaks have been working in Hatton Garden for decades and stress that the area has changed considerably. It was once almost exclusively Jewish, which is no longer the case as it is a very international commercial world now. Nevertheless, most diamond dealers are still Jewish.\textsuperscript{54} The many Orthodox kosher eateries catering to the needs of business people on their lunch breaks have closed down, but, in contrast to Brick Lane, there is still a markedly Jewish presence.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{47}Lichtenstein, \textit{Diamond Street}, p.xviii.
  \item \textsuperscript{48}Lichtenstein, \textit{Diamond Street}, p.xviii.
  \item \textsuperscript{50}The Yiddish slang word \textit{mensch} (plural: \textit{menschen}) describes a person of great integrity and honour.
  \item \textsuperscript{51}Lichtenstein, \textit{Diamond Street}, pp.xix-xxi.
  \item \textsuperscript{52}ibid., pp.xviii & 283.
  \item \textsuperscript{53}Lichtenstein, \textit{Diamond Street}, pp.47, 75, 220 & 242.
\end{itemize}
One of the older members of the Diamond Bourse, who used to live in the East End but walked from there to work in Hatton Garden, remembers both locations as Jewish areas.\textsuperscript{55} His life as an Orthodox Jew must have been very different from his non-Jewish peers who grew up in other parts of London. Unfortunately, he does not disclose whether or not he felt he moved within fixed boundaries, from one ghetto to the next, or whether he had contacts outside of these two ‘planets’, though the latter is unlikely. He was an insider to the exclusive diamond business and its (mainly Jewish) members, but this made him an outsider to the local Cockney culture of the East End.

The requirement that a place like Hatton Garden, the centre of the diamond trade, has to be reclusive and isolated in order to provide the necessary security seems obvious. It was per se limited to a certain group of people, the majority of whom happened to have a migrant background and hence a distinguishable cultural and religious appearance. The additional finding that most business was conducted either in Yiddish or Hebrew must have contributed to the perceived exclusiveness and otherness of the place, unlike today where tourists roam the street. Hatton Garden was, despite its central location, not very much ‘on the map’ for most people. It was a hidden world, as the book’s title states. A certain code of conduct, that is, honesty and integrity, controlled the diamond trade. This was necessary as in the 1930s, business was often conducted on the street or in one of the many kosher restaurants, without any security.\textsuperscript{56} Another contemporary witness confirmed this by stating, ‘Your reputation is everything here and it takes a lifetime to build’.\textsuperscript{57}

Lichtenstein does not content herself with limiting her research to the time when Hatton Garden was a Jewish quarter. Rather, she goes as far back in her research as the Middle Ages in order to get a thorough overview. She must owe this urge to her psychogeographical interest in places and her aspiration for the authentic experience of a location. With the help of a local tour guide specialising in the area’s history, she uncovers the hidden layers of Clerkenwell: the subterranean River Fleet as well as Ely Palace, a priory that stood on the site of today’s Hatton Garden, and which was, in medieval times, surrounded by ‘stables and farriers, dairies and cattle sheds, orchards, vineyards, breweries, kitchen gardens and even fish ponds’.\textsuperscript{58} The only survival of this period is St Etheldreda’s Chapel,\textsuperscript{59} which has a marked impact on her:

It is easy to visualize the past in this ancient place. It is one of those unique buildings in London that appear to hold time in a different way to street time.\textsuperscript{60}

She has a similar experience when entering the Norman interior of St Bartholomew’s Church with her friend, author and fellow psychogeographer Iain Sinclair:

Standing beside this fantastical effigy [of the saint, St Bartholomew], I felt the closest I had come on my investigations into the area to physically touching the medieval past. Nowhere else I had been had resonated with the energy of the ancient priories quite like St Bartholomew’s Church.\textsuperscript{61}

Sinclair, who was a second-hand book dealer and sourced his book supplies from nearby Farringdon Street, is even more impacted by Hatton Garden:

Subconsciously the past is resurfacing here. ... The place seems to naturally respond to the spirit of what has happened here before, but if the market [the meat market Smithfield] goes the mystery of this region will collapse. I feel lucky to have experienced this area during a particular period of time, before it all disappears. The essence of London is at your fingertips here. I find it impossible not to drift from one street to the next and it’s all so astonishingly rich and layered ... .\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{55}ibid., pp.238-239.
\textsuperscript{56}ibid., p.11.
\textsuperscript{57}ibid., p.214.
\textsuperscript{58}ibid., p.80.
\textsuperscript{59}ibid., p.42.
\textsuperscript{60}ibid., p.67.
\textsuperscript{61}Lichtenstein, Diamond Street, p.155.
\textsuperscript{62}ibid., p.157.
Sinclair’s philosophical remark about the ‘essence of London’ is exactly the aim of Lichtenstein’s thorough investigations into Hatton Garden and Brick Lane. Comparable to the Bangladeshi community described briefly in On Brick Lane, Diamond Street also makes reference to Little Italy, as the neighbourhood adjacent to Hatton Garden ‘used to be heavily populated by Italians’. The atmosphere and living conditions, described by one of Lichtenstein’s interviewees who grew up there, are highly reminiscent of the Jewish ghetto in Brick Lane around 1900 as it must have been a little world of its own. Most of the people were Italians or of Italian descent and although they did mix with the English and Irish, this was not to a great extent. When the area was heavily bombed during the Second World War, many Italian families left and never returned. Hence, Little Italy dispersed. The Italians seem to have led a life segregated from the rest of London. This phenomenon is comparable to the ‘Bangladeshi ghetto’ of which one of the young women in Brick Lane speaks. However, as those closed communities lived in different parts of the city, at different times, and had a different cultural background and religion, I shall refrain from making any further comparisons. It remains nevertheless crucial to illustrate the similar migration patterns that have not considerably changed over the centuries.

Conclusion: Inside/Outside

Coming back to the contention put forth at the outset of this article and taking both Brick Lane and Hatton Garden into consideration, I argue that these ‘metropolitan villages’ were difficult to access for those not a part of the community. In this case, the outsiders would be the so-called ‘native’ British population and the insiders those immigrants who formed the respective ghetto.

Hence, the conventional inside/outside dichotomy has been reversed, in my judgement, as those inside the community are no longer the outsiders that they would once have been classified as. Lichtenstein’s approach enables the reader to view glimpses of the inside so the fascination can still be shared even if times have changed. Simultaneously, one could argue migrants are beyond the mainstream British culture in which they do not participate. As a consequence, according to this point of view, the question of inside/outside has to remain open. In this respect, my argument is novel, I believe, as, apart from a few book reviews in newspapers, no recent scholarship that analyses the two books exists, let alone from this particular angle. Diamond Street seems to be too new (it was first published in the summer of 2012), and On Brick Lane is often reduced to being a chronicle of this street, though, as I argue, it raises issues just like the ones addressed in this article: immigration, integration and acculturation, as well as all shades in between.

The ‘hidden worlds’ of Brick Lane and Hatton Garden had their own (unwritten) laws, customs, language and food. These nexuses differentiated themselves from the rest of London. It is difficult to determine whether this was a kind of protective mechanism (especially for the Eastern European Jews who had fled their homelands due to persecution), or of their own volition, or a situation into which they had been forced. It is legitimate to speak of ‘boundaries of difference’ in those cases, I believe, though it is crucial to stress that this is meant to be non-judgmental.

Sinclair and Lichtenstein sum up these two places as follows: ‘border places, where illegitimate, particular and peculiar things happened outside a protected zone’. One could also reverse this idea and say that peculiar things happened inside a protected zone. Both Brick Lane and Hatton Garden constitute very unique microcosms within the large macrocosm called London.

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63Sandhu, ‘Review of Diamond Street’.
64Lichtenstein, Diamond Street, pp.174-177.
65Lichtenstein, On Brick Lane, p.206.
66Lichtenstein, Diamond Street, p.159.