



UTS
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 19, No. 1/2
December 2023



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Citation: Swan, E., Hussain, S., Miah, S., Yip, J. 2023. Mapping Pockets of Survival: Café Society in Post-war Cable Street. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 19:1/2, 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v19i1-2.8871>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal>

ESSAY

Mapping Pockets of Survival: Café Society in Post-war Cable Street

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v19i1-2.8871>

Article History: Received 18/10/2023; Accepted 29/10/2023; Published 22/12/2023

Abstract

In our Shadwell food history walk, part of a larger 'Food Lives' initiative, we employed counter-mapping techniques to shed light on overlooked post-war migrant cafés, revealing their essential role in facilitating food security and community. These spaces, often central in marginalised individuals' navigation through urban life, epitomise racialised resistance and survival. Their significance, especially the almost invisible contributions of women and men of colour, stands in contrast to dominant historical narratives. The spatial food heritage of Cable Street emphasises the longstanding influence of racially marginalised migrant communities, countering racism and racial inequalities. Drawing parallels to present-day East End eateries, often criticised yet serving as cultural hubs, the project underscores the enduring 'sticky emotions' tied to food, racial dynamics, and colonial legacies.

Keywords

Walking Tour; Cafés; Food History; Race

Introduction

On a dry, warmish November Saturday in 2022, we took a group of 12 visitors for a food history tour around Cable Street, Shadwell, a borough of Tower Hamlets, UK, close to the Tower of London and the Thames. With a population around 322,704 in 2020, Tower Hamlets is one of London's smallest but most densely populated boroughs. The 2011 Census shows 69% of the Tower Hamlets population came from 18 different racial minority groups, 31% White British, and 32% Bangladeshi ([LBTH 2013](#)).

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

The establishment of the docks in Tower Hamlets by The East India Company in 1802 underpins so much history. Its vast colonial, military, and slavery project created an infrastructure of large warehouses, docks, factories, and rows of terraced houses which transformed the borough and its residents ([Aziz 2021](#); [Brown et al. 2019](#)). Situated close to the Thames and the City of London, Tower Hamlets became a site for colonialists, global merchants, industrial elites, and shipping-based businesses working in the colonies and the slave trade. Generations of migrants, refugees, and labourers, many of whom worked for The East India Company, or merchant ships or were British subjects from the colonies, transformed the Borough ([Aziz 2021](#): 7). Men from India, Somalia, Yemen, and China, settled after working in The East India Company, the Merchant Navy, and the shipping industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; women much later.



First stop on the tour © Food Lives Team

We researched, designed, and led the tour for our research project Food Lives based in Tower Hamlets. Food Lives, which is one part of a multi-disciplinary, multi-university, and multi-stakeholder UKRI funded project called FoodSEqual, aims to transform what's termed 'the food system' in the UK. FoodSEqual works on a community research model and 'we,' the authors of this article, include two community researchers, a horticultural and sustainability expert from the Women's Environment Network, and a feminist food studies academic. Working in tandem with the Tower Hamlets Library and Archive's *Feeding the Hamlets* exhibition, our tour focused on the invisibilised and erased racialised spatial heritage of food sites and practices around Cable Street in Shadwell.

If you were to walk today along the one mile of Cable Street from Cable Street Studios to St Georges Estate, you won't see many cafés, restaurants, grocery shops, or working pubs. In contrast, post-war in the 1950s, academic [Michael Banton \(1955\)](#) in his book *The Coloured (sic) Quarter* mapped a food infrastructure at the west end of Cable Street which fed the bodies and the social life of colonial subjects from India,

Pakistan, Somalia, Malta, West Africa, and the Caribbean. Banton identifies, in one segment of Cable Street, five Maltese cafes, a Greek, Jewish, and Somali café, a Maltese-run fish and chip shop, an Italian restaurant, a Pakistani cafe-cum-lodging house, a general store run by a French family, an Arab, and a Trinidadian hairdresser, and a Pakistani cafe with an African and West Indian (*sic*) clientele.

Indeed, there's nothing or very little of Shadwell's medieval market gardens; 18th century German sugar refineries; nineteenth and twentieth century jam, confectionery, and biscuit factories; and nineteenth century Jewish and Methodist soup kitchens. But despite the utterly changed food environment, and because of neglected or erased colonial related histories of food and their significance for understanding food lives, we wanted to research, create, and share a food history tour.

Tourists might visit Shadwell for the Battle of Cable Street mural which commemorates community protests against Moseley's fascists in the 1930s, but they won't be coming for food heritage or culinary tourism. In contrast, the nearby neighbourhood of Brick Lane, the so-called 'Curry Capital of the world' is a destination stop for food tours. Tripadvisor and food tour websites describe Brick Lane as the 'vibrant jewel of East London,' 'a bustling Street with Vibrant Markets, Hip Boutiques and Delicious Cuisine,' a 'lively and colourful part of London, most famous for its curry restaurants.' Such superlatives mark these food tours as 'ethnic neighbourhood' tours. Scholars note how such tourism creates a desirable version of the Other as exotic, but safe and friendly, repackaging ethnicity 'into an exotic and inviting commodity... celebratory of diversity and multiculturalism' (Santos et al. 2008: 1003). Food tourism often draws from exoticist tropes, situated 'within a historical pattern of colonial Othering, as well as contemporary neo-colonial realities of economic and cultural inequality' (Johnston & Baumann 2015: 90). As scholars of food multiculturalism argue, eating the food of the Other in this way can reproduce the idea that individual eaters, and the nation, are tolerant and cosmopolitan and ignore histories of racism, agencies of 'ethnic feeders,' and their political claims (Parker 2000; Hage 1997). Hence, we might think of the food on the tours as what Sara Ahmed (2004) calls 'sticky,' i.e., saturated with affect.

Ahmed thinks about emotional stickiness in relation to the Othering of racialised, gendered, and queer bodies via negative associations of danger (Ahmed 2004, 2010; Lähdesmäki, et al., 2020). Ahmed explains how figures such as the terrorist, Muslim, and asylum seeker are sticky and typically generate associations of hate and fear in mainstream media. Working with the idea of emotion as circulating, she explains that sticky signs—words, ideas, and objects—become sticky, when they accumulate already existing discourses over time and their repetition makes them seem 'truthful' (Ahmed 2004). Depending on discourses, histories, and individual biographies, positive affects related to the Other may be produced through associations of purity, safety, 'unity,' 'social cohesion,' and 'mutual understanding' (Lähdesmäki, et al., 2020). For instance, Ahmed (2013: online) notes that diversity may be 'lighter' for white people in its stickiness than racism, which is stickier, heavier, and affectively intense.

Accordingly, we can understand the concept of 'ethnic food' as sticky on the Brick Lane tours, and associated with words such as diversity, tolerance, and cosmopolitanism. Ethnic food tourism then becomes a project of circulating what Ahmed calls 'happy diversity' (2012: 18). Bangladeshi restaurateurs showed they understood sticky affect related to multicultural exotics when they described the restaurants as Indian not Bangladeshi. Indianness is associated with the 'romance of the exotic' (Palat 2015: 30). As Ravi Palat explains in his work, Iqbal Wahhab, a Bangladeshi restaurateur, commented to a reporter in 2002 that 'Bangladesh is a land associated with floods and cyclones, whereas India is associated with romance, the Raj, Taj Mahal' (2015: 30). Ahmed explains: 'The circulation of objects is thus the circulation of goods. Objects are sticky because they are already attributed as being good or bad, as being the cause of happiness or unhappiness' (Ahmed 2010: 35). Indeed, most culinary food tours exclude histories of exclusion, exploitation, antagonism, geopolitics, and struggle which underpin Bangladeshi food entrepreneurship and survival in Tower Hamlets. As Nicky Frost (2011) notes, such initiatives ignore decades of racial violence,

severe housing, high rents, street crime, precarious incomes, changes in immigration policy, pressure to discount prices, and lack of recognition by food critics.

For many years, the secular Bengali group Swadhinata Trust has run walking tours and created a Bengali Heritage Trail map that attend to some of these themes. While mainstream culinary tours might skip over the fraught histories of exclusion and struggle in Tower Hamlets, the alternative narratives provided by initiatives like the Swadhinata Trust's walking tours bring these elements to the forefront. Such tours embody the essence of counter-mapping, which is critical for understanding the full spectrum of Bangladeshi food lives—beyond the simplistic narratives of cultural exotica, they map the resilience and the struggles against racisms faced by this community.

Walking Tour as Method

Shadwell, the neighbourhood for which we designed our tour and just over one mile from Brick Lane, is not typically recognised as a culinary tourist destination, although post-war priests and councillors organised 'moral outrage' tours for white middle-class journalists and policy makers ([Waters 2023a](#)). Shadwell thus represents a different affective stickiness proposition in relation to food which, as we will discuss below, is intricately tied to the broader narratives that our counter-mapping approach aims to uncover and critically analyse.

As a research team, our ambitions for the tour were multifaceted. First, we researched, designed, and led the tour as a research tool to deepen our understanding of the food history; secondly, it served as a means of counter-mapping, knowledge production, and community engagement; thirdly, the initiative supported our research training; and lastly, it was a platform for community-based knowledge production and engagement. Hence, we believe that walking and touring as research methods can lead to embodied knowledge and local literacy, from which to raise useful questions about food related sites, processes, and histories. Many academic, activist, and policy initiatives use the concept of the food system to characterise how food gets onto our plates. One such definition from the OECD states: 'The term "food system" refers to all the elements and activities related to producing and consuming food, and their effects, including economic, health, and environmental outcomes' ([OECD 2023](#)). Such characterisations largely ignore the affective, subjective, socio-cultural aspects of food. As food historian [Jeffrey Pilcher \(2016\)](#) argues, the term 'food system' is 'widely adopted for its implied scientific rigor,' and yet is 'amorphous.' In contrast, he proposes the narrow term of culinary infrastructure which expresses the tension between avowedly subjective symbols and meanings of culinary cultures and the seemingly more objective, indeed concrete, physical infrastructure ([Pilcher 2016](#): 107) On this view, material technologies such as greenhouses, transportation, refrigeration, and supply chains come together with embodied and immaterial knowledge networks such as food knowledges, recipes, cooking techniques, health regulations, and farming practices.

For culinary infrastructure scholars, historical analyses matter for understanding inequalities in contemporary food production and consumption. Matilda Dipieri explains that 'how food is valued, distributed, produced, and consumed are products of a history of physical and knowledge infrastructure (...) Infrastructure is reflective of these historical dynamics and capable of perpetuating histories of discrimination ([2023](#) 17). Of relevance for our research, [Pilcher \(2016\)](#) notes that historical analysis of food infrastructures—global food chains, street markets, grocers, small family shops, cafes—can foreground the often invisibilised culinary expertise, innovations, and skills of migrant labour in cities.

Scholars of culinary infrastructure and food systems often do not discuss emotion in relation to food. The inclusion of the subjective in culinary infrastructure opens up the potential to do so. Moreover, if you unpack food systems as currently defined and study food insecurity, gendered domestic foodwork, obesity moral panics, stigmatisation of fatness etc. then sticky emotions of shame, pride, superiority, anxiety, anger, and frustration come to the fore. Some food scholars centre affect and feelings, challenging a rationalist

approach to food, and link these to racism and racialisation (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy 2010; [Jones 2019a, 2019b](#)). For instance, the Black food geographer, [Naya Jones \(2019a, 2019b\)](#) argues for considering affect and memory, the ‘felt sense’ of culinary infrastructures, when trying to understand the food experiences of Black people in North America. For her, ‘the built environment is a felt environment, and material slow violence can and does affect emotional and mental health’ (2019a: 1082). This means learning how Black people ‘engage with food, not only as a commodity, but as a medium for expressing personal or collective memory, Blackness, and other identities’ (2019b: 58). By foregrounding food related affect such as joy, pleasure, trauma, and dehumanisation, she criticises public health interventions which focus on changing Black communities’ dietary practices. These interventions, she states, ‘elide[s] how Black food geographies feel’ (2019a: 1082).

Accordingly, we imagined the tour to be a way to reflect on historical processes which have shaped Tower Hamlets racialised food infrastructures and how they may have felt. We wanted to foreground the significance of people of colour and their historic food sites *in situ*. Reflecting on the work of Jones, we walked the sites that made it possible for racially minoritised people in the twentieth century to survive, eat, make a living, socialise, and politicise. We aimed to acknowledge the specific locations in which racialised agency, commensality, survival, and ingenuity took place. Such histories of food as racialised survival and resistance are difficult to find in official archives and academic understandings of food systems. Yet this spatial food heritage is worthy of memorialisation and remembrance.

Feminist Designs on Walking

Social scientists increasingly draw on walking, and walking tours as research methods. For instance, [Joseph Pierce and Mary Lawhon \(2015\)](#) stress the importance of walking as fieldwork—especially ‘observational walking’—which helps researchers to learn about the physical context, social context, and spatial practices of fieldwork sites. Walking opens up an embodied and sensory way of knowing wherein the researcher studies the lived experience of what it means to move in a city, market, estate, urban environment, which is quite distinct, for example, from being in a remote village ([Pierce & Lawhon 2015](#)). We chose Cable Street and Watney Market for our tour partly because it’s a route many of our participants walk, sometimes daily, for their food provisioning. Hence, it’s a possible means of ‘finding oneself in someone else’s everyday’ (Myers & Harris 2004, cited in [Heddon & Turner 2012](#): 234).

Walking, when performed through the lens of feminist methodology encourages a focus on the everyday, moving away from masculinist conceptions of ‘walking as individualist, heroic, epic and transgressive’ and the strange and exotic ([Heddon & Turner 2012](#): 224). Abigail Bartlett explains that ‘feminist heritage walks aim to locate lost knowledge, reacquaint with legacies of the past (...) The fantasy of getting lost, or being invisible, is replaced by a feminist fantasy of finding and being recognised’ (2020: 1016). In this vein, [walkwalkwalk](#) artists Claire Qualmann, Gail Burton and [Serena Korda](#) organised public walks through familiar places deemed domestic, mundane and overlooked, referring to them as ‘an archaeology of the familiar and forgotten.’

We worked with the idea of walking tours designed as counter-mapping. The aim is ‘to illuminate forgotten, ignored, or taken-for-granted features of the political, material, and cultural landscape’ ([Robinson, & McClelland 2020](#): 654). Such tours serve as an alternative form of storying that reveal inequalities in society. Counter-mapping tours enable us ‘to connect with stories in and of the landscape, to see and feel the experiences of another in embodied ways, and [open] a dialogue and space where embodied memories, knowledge and experience (biographies) can be shared’ ([Mullally, et al., 2023](#): 39). Finally, the walking tour deepened our community researcher training and capacity-building. Designing and leading the tour provided experience in undertaking local archival research, and in the skills of food tour guiding work such

as information giving, storytelling, shepherding, and marshalling, fostering conviviality, emotional labour, and body work (Swan & Flowers 2017).

In fact, creating and running the tour involved more than we had anticipated. Because the East End of London suffered severely from bombing during the second world war, and racialised migrants experienced racism, and precarity, their lives were often transient and little recorded, or erased by official history. Many of the sites—factories, lodgings, dining rooms, buildings, signs, and shops—and the food itself, which we wanted to cover had no material presence. Most sites are not visible and barely locatable on maps and in archives. This required us to materialise food lives and spaces through stories, snacks, and drinks, artefacts, archival photos and by visiting contemporary sites—a market, a community orchard, Brazilian food truck, and grocery and fish shops.

After much discussion, we mapped nine food history and contemporary food related locations and added an extra stop of the food truck on the live tour.

1. Cable Street Mural
2. Club Café Rio
3. Brazilian food truck
4. Sailor's Home (Wombats hostel)
5. Wilton's Music Hall
6. Wellclose Square
7. Swedenborg Gardens
8. Swedenborg Orchard
9. Meredith and Drew Biscuit Factory
10. Watney Market.

We added an additional five sites to the digital/paper map, each with mini histories, by piecing together snippets of community, public, academic histories, and local memories. On the tour we traversed time



Image of map by artist Nasima Sultana © Food Lives Team

and space: from the eighteenth century through to the twenty-first century, and across racial and ethnic spaces: Jewish, Irish, Bengali, Somali, and contemporary Brazilian and Bangladeshi. Collaborating with artist Nasima Sultana, we created a digital and paper map of the tour. We hoped the tour map would enable local people and visitors to carry out their own explorations and over time, to share their memories and histories. At the time of writing, we discovered the Somali Numbi Arts [‘Hida Raac’](#) heritage walk in 2015 which mapped the Somali stories, spaces, cafes, lodges, clubs, and homes.



Image of 1950s Meredith and Drew biscuit factory tin filled with Bengali sweets © Food Lives Team

We needed to create a walkable trail of suitable distance, with enough loo breaks, sheltered places for rain, snack stops, and the sharing of food objects and photographs to be hospitable and interesting for our visitors. As we designed the tour, we imagined ‘head-walk-throughs’ envision how our tour might feel cognitively, bodily and emotionally. We did several dry runs. We discarded parts of our walk for being too noisy, too far, or too close to polluted roads. We timed the walk, visualising how long we might need at each stop, and for walking between stops, nipping to the loo or doing a bit of shopping. We anticipated different types of walking in the group: stopping and starting, ambling, dawdling, and getting side-tracked. Despite our preparation, we had to rearrange the order of the stops on the actual day of the tour.

Through our archival and desk research, we gained insights about the historic and contemporary culinary infrastructure for feeding Shadwell. We found information about markets, shops, cafes, lodgings, clubs, food banks, dairies, soup kitchens, gardens and allotments, and the knowledge networks of café owners, restaurateurs, Kosher and Halal butchers, and the home cooks. The culinary infrastructure enabled racialised migrants to survive physically, culturally, socially, and emotionally in the face of hardship, precarity, hunger, and loneliness, often exacerbated by Empire racist tropes and other forms of racism.

Working in tandem with the Tower Hamlets Library and Archive’s *Feeding the Hamlets* exhibition, our tour focused on the often invisibilised and erased racialised spatial heritage of food sites and practices

around Cable Street in Shadwell. Our focus was on men of colour as there is so little recorded about the white working-class women, mixed race families, and the racialised women who came to London later.

Histories that Stick

What's clear is that historians, and policy makers both actively and systematically erase and repress colonial histories of the East End, often selectively misusing selected memories and histories for political purposes ([Ghelani & Palmer 2021](#); [Wemyss 2008](#)). [Georgie Wemyss \(2008\)](#) argues that official histories erase the brutal practices related to the East India Company and colonialism in Tower Hamlets. Thus, public history and policy makers neglect the centrality of the enslavement of Africans and profits of slave owners and traders to the existence of the docks. The East India's role in the history of British Bangladeshi people, and in creating the famines of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries in India, are also repressed. Outside of the Bangladeshi community, few know about the 1971 war and the targeted killing of an estimated three million Bengalis by the Pakistani Army and allies, and so Bengali migrants were not recognised as refugees 'fleeing persecution' ([Wemyss 2008](#)).

One significant amnesia is how colonial and imperial food infrastructures have been crucial to feeding London. European cities have been 'fed with the products of plantations and slavery' ([Ferrando et al., 2021](#): 62). The connections between colonialism, imperialism, and food are not understood. This includes how migrants from around the world have nourished us with their knowledge and labour ([Pilcher 2016](#)). As Shannon Woodcock reminds us 'food production was both the rationale for and the site of colonial expansion' (2016: 34). Accordingly, contemporary connections are occluded with ignorance commonplace about today's agro-food businesses stemming from colonial and masculinist roots ([Ferrando et al., 2021](#): 62).

Stepney, where Shadwell is situated and the site for our work has a history, due to its proximity to the Thames of the 'precariousness, settlement and unsettlement' of migrant naval and mercantile sailors in the East End—a 'floating population' from the eighteenth century ([Milne 2020a](#)). [Sarah Milne \(2020a\)](#) explains that 'through the colonial trade, black sailors from Africa and the West Indies, alongside lascars from Bengal, was well-established in East London by the twentieth century' (2020: 396). By the end of World War I, thousands of African, Arab, Caribbean, Chinese, Indian, Malay, and other colonial seafarers, and workers made London their home. The permanently resident population was small, but the East End of London was home to hundreds of transient workers 'whose channels of circulation, supply, and renewal were closely linked to seafaring and the sea' ([Balachandran 2011](#): 6). [Milne \(2020a\)](#) explains that many racialised seamen resided in the interwar and post-war years in Stepney despite racism and violence in the dockside areas.

During the Second World War, bombing devastated many buildings and homes. The post-war period saw the decline of the dock industries with entrenched deindustrialisation, rendering substantial areas of land and buildings derelict ([Brown et al., 2019](#)). The history of British colonialism and imperialism resulted in Britain turning to its former colonies to address labour shortages following the Second World War. The British Nationality Act 1948 meant that colonial subjects from the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent, and the African colonies, had a right of entry into the UK ([Brah 1999](#)). The government encouraged migration from former colonies with promises of government assistance and welfare support, with many settling in East London from the Caribbean, Bangladesh, and other Asian and African countries ([Aziz 2021](#); [Brown et al., 2019](#); [Milne 2020](#)). In the end, the government provided very little in terms of housing and welfare support.

These histories have left their material, social, and cultural scars. As Jane Jacobs writes: 'The foundational ideologies of imperialism live on in this city, shaping contemporary economic status, local class divisions and racial politics, and nationalist articulations' (cited in [Driver & Gilbert 1998](#): 22). Racialised groups in Tower Hamlets have historically been the subject of unjustified abuse, scapegoated, and unfairly blamed for the

historical and current ills of the host society, despite contributing little to the perceived problems of the host society and often living in abject poverty ([Aziz 2021](#): 7).

Café Society

Our walk revealed several food related histories connected to Empire: eighteenth century German-run sugar refineries processing sugar imported by merchants from the West Indies using enslaved labour in Wellclose Square; and two nineteenth-twentieth century jam and biscuit factories—part of an explosion in sugar-related food manufacturing due to the removal of sugar duty in 1874. Jam became more affordable for the working-class and jam, biscuit, and confectionery factories important, yet often dangerous and exploitative workplaces, for working-class women ([Atkins 2016](#); [Hood 2021](#)). Much of the fruit pulp for the cheaper jams came from the colonies—Australia, New Zealand, and Canada ([Atkins 2016](#)). What struck us most however was the relatively unrecorded post-war infrastructure of commensality, welfare, and politics in the cafés run, for and by Bengali, Sylheti (present day Bangladesh), Caribbean, Maltese, and Somali ex-naval and mercantile seamen, often cooks. Often providing cheap meals on limited resources, they played a critical role as ‘centers of conviviality and social life for migrants’ ([Panayi 2008](#): 69).

By the post-war years, Stepney had a long history, from the late 19th century, of being a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-faith area. Sailors from West Africa, the Caribbean, Sylhet, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia arrived for work and often settled in Stepney, sometimes as runaways, in an area already home to Jewish migrants ([Ellis 2015](#): 10). By the early 1950s, Stepney experienced significant new migration from South Asia, West Africa, and the Caribbean. Black men moved to certain streets around Cable, ‘often scrambling to get by in poor housing and neglected bombed-out areas’ ([Ellis 2015](#): 11). Although some were highly qualified, many could only find unskilled or semi-skilled work labourers, porters and stokers, and some were unable to find work at all. Some settled, some were transient, and despite relatively low numbers, the national media and policy makers constructed Cable Street as predominantly Black, and the area became known as ‘[London’s Harlem](#)’ and the ‘Coloured Quarter.’ In reality, white working-class people still inhabited much of the street ([Kushner 1998](#)).

Post-war Cable Street and its surroundings were littered with bombsites and many dilapidated buildings. Housing conditions were particularly dire, especially for men of colour. Employment was precarious and racism was rife. The 1950s and 1960s saw the notorious ‘No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs’ signs. Many cafes, pubs, and boarding houses prohibited people of colour. Low wages and racism meant that they were forced into insanitary, over-crowded housing. Jewish historian, Tony Kushner writes that ‘Cable Street had a reputation for being a place where the “dangerous classes” lived and congregated’ ([1998](#): 112).

Some of these men established cafes, dining rooms, clubs, and lodgings in the early twentieth century, and these proliferated in the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s. In addition to Banton, other authors, including the radical theologian/priest Kenneth Leech, who spent many years in Shadwell, reference the cafés and clubs, with some cafés even hosting basement clubs in the evening ([Leech 2001](#); Mills 2011; [Wills 2018](#)).

- Howards Cafe and Tequila Club (Nigerian)
- Hassan’s Rio Club for Somalis – café during the day
- Brunos, St George’s and Valetta cafes (Maltese)
- Rainbow café (Sierra Leone and Gambian)
- A Yugoslavian café
- Little Harlem café
- The Rio (Somalian)
- The Abdullah (Somalian)
- Ali’s café (Somalian) said to be established in 1917 and still running in

- The Barbados café
- Mr Howard's (Nigerian)
- An Egyptian Café
- One 'Arab' café had a praying room for Somalis and Arabs
- Five restaurants (Somalian) in Lehman Street.

We know very little about the owners. The [Layers of London](#) historic website offers us some names:

Abdi Warsama Shirreh, 1955 had a hostel and dining rooms for Somali seamen at 25–27 Ensign Street. The corner pub the Royal Standard (9 Ensign Street) had been adapted to be a café in the 1940s and run by Mokter Miah from about 1950 and came to be known as the Rio Café. Another café at 7 Ensign Street was run by Mohammed Hassan in the 1950s, and Mehmet Salih had dining rooms at what was then 14 Cable Street. (Layers of London 2023).

Billy Olu Sholenke ran the Blue Parrot Club and had special insurance for his wife Pat who was a fire-eater (Mills 2011).

Returning to questions of affect, what is of significance for us is that Ahmed understands sticky emotions as connected to racist, colonial and imperial history. She writes that emotions are 'bound[ed] up with the "absent presence" of historicity' (Ahmed 2004: 120) where 'past histories of association—Negro, animal, bad, mean, ugly—continue to stick to the present' (Ahmed 2004: 127). Social workers, local councillors, religious leaders, the media, and sociologists scrutinised the small Black communities, concerned about what they saw as the 'problems' their presence caused (Kushner 1998). Their writings reproduced colonial tropes, and pathologized, Othered and demonised Black men as immoral, hypersexual, promiscuous, infantile, and degenerate. Influential local chaplain Father Joe Williamson, in particular, sustained racist views of Black men, and was, accordingly, admired by racist movements at this time (Mills 2020).

Cafes, lodgings, and clubs along Cable Street post-war were sticky places saturated with white fear, disgust, and danger. The media, local councillors, local clergy and social workers associated the clubs with sex work, drink, gambling, and drugs. They campaigned to close the 'coloured clubs.' Black men were said to be the source of vice, as pimps and customers, and Cable Street rife with sex workers, drugs, homosexuals, and fighting. Many argue the reports were widely exaggerated. Kushner critiques the racist essentialism, writing of Cable Street's frequent portrayal through lurid sensational journalism during the 1950s as a frightening alien 'other' whose alleged problem of 'vice' was intrinsically linked to the 'coloured' presence' (1998: 113). Waters notes that Black men were characterised by what were seen as 'racialized excesses'—their presumed proclivities for drink, sex, music, and hedonism, each of which were read as a consequence, ultimately, of their blackness' (Waters 2023a: 28).

As Ahmed insists, sticky emotions have histories. Black men were criminalised like the Irish and Jews before them but through a racialised colonial stereotyping history. Empire-based tropes were reproduced, augmented with post-war anxieties about miscegenation, and the whiteness and cultural homogeneity of the nation (Waters 1997). Criticism of Black men 'centred on their supposed immorality—their music assailed "white" ears and their bodies assailed the bodies of white women' (Palat 2015: 176). Discussing the era's immigration politics, Wendy Webster (1998) pointed out a 'gendered construction of race.' This framework juxtaposed the image of the white woman—portrayed as domestic and familial—with that of the black man, who was seen as a threat to these sociocultural values (see Waters 2023a: 21).

Historians Clair Wills (2018) and Leech (2001) point out that white men ran much of the sex work industry, frequented the clubs, and were clients. As Wills notes, there weren't enough Black customers—locals or visitors. For some, such as councillor and quasi-social worker Edith Ramsay, the aim was a project of 'moral welfare' to save Black men from depravity, which was caused by working-class white women, and the State's dereliction of its duty of colonial improvement of the men (Ellis 2015). The sticky emotions

weren't all to do with fear and anger. [Waters \(2023a\)](#) points out that the reforming white middle classes, including academics and social workers who were promoting integration and 'tolerance,' responded to Cable Street café and club life with prurient fascination, desire, and erotics. Waters cites one white liberal integrationist:

In the Somali Café and Barbados Café I certainly enjoyed myself more than I have at a Cocktail Party for a long time', wrote Philippa, a young woman whom the social worker Edith Ramsay had taken on a tour of Stepney's 'coloured clubs', in 1959. It seemed to me that the darker the skin the greater our welcome. ([Waters 2023a](#): 237)

Subaltern Cosmopolitanism and Café Welfare

Turning our attention to the post-war cafés and dining rooms, these generated different feeling environments. [Milne \(2020b\)](#) notes that along Cable Street: 'Three-storey bomb-damaged terraced houses in a state of considerable disrepair accommodated cafés on the ground floor, dancing clubs in the basement, and bedrooms on the upper floors.' She adds that 'in 1944, thirty-four such humble cafés were identified' ([Milne 2020b](#)).

Life for the men in London was often difficult. Some didn't speak much English. Black and Asian seamen were often attacked during the years of recession that followed the First World War. In 1919 and again in 1930 there were riots and attacks on Black and Asian seamen in many British ports. African-origin men were the most affected by deficient housing conditions, some sleeping in bombed out housing after wandering the streets. On top of the sordid living conditions and ongoing racism, the colour bar restricted where they could relax, socialise, and live. while the new leisure spaces they set up faced coordinated attempts to shut them down. This was "an attack on black settlement and life in the city" ([Waters 2023a](#): 59).

Against the sticky racism of the reformers and racists, and representations of sordid, seedy café culture, the cafés (and clubs) provided men of colour with a 'safer and more inclusive spaces in which to stay, socialise and mix' ([Caballero & Aspinall 2018](#): 265). They offered 'a means of relaxing and socializing in a friendly setting and cultural space was therefore less hostile and threatening than the local pubs or seamen's bars' ([Seddon 2014](#)). The cafés were a place to meet and exchange news and gossip. Photos show men drinking coffee, smoking, bantering, and sometimes hanging out with white women. They offered multicultural social and cultural interchange, an important meeting point and congenial environment, open to different racial groups, including white working-class men and women. Black men returned after they had moved to different parts of London. Banton writes that they came back for African-style food, for girls, and for relaxation in a neighbourhood where their different appearance does not make them objects of particular attention ([Banton 1955](#)).

The cafés offered conviviality against a background of everyday racism and inequality. Importantly for the men who would have had very little easy access to cooking facilities, the cafés provided accessible, familiar, and culturally appropriate home-cooked food. Many of the cafés pre-war were Bengali and served what we today call curries (before Bangladesh was established). During rationing post-war, the options would have been limited. Javed Iqbal recalls his father Abdul's cooking for his restaurant The Star Café in Brick Lane at the end of the 1950s:

He used white onions—there were no red onions at that time—garlic, ginger, lemon and green chilli and, of course, tomato. Salt was added plus whatever spices were available, and then chicken or mutton would be put in the pot. ([Carey 2022](#))

Some sold curry and rice alongside fish, pies, and chips ([Collingham 2006](#): 223). Apart from references to curries, 'African style food,' spam, and fish and chips, we know little of what was eaten, but historians argue

that the cafés would have offered food consistent with faith and culture, including Halal food, and often using Kosher meat ([Carey 2022](#)). Collective eating holds cultural importance, and the cafés provided a space for this shared experience. Within these establishments, men would have participated in familiar culinary traditions and eating rituals.

The café owners were entrepreneurs, and they were innovative in buying bombed out cafés and chippies. They offered employment to compatriots and working class women. Not only can we understand the cafés as forms of Black and Asian entrepreneurship, they were spaces, as historian Gopalan Balachandran insists, where ‘subaltern cosmopolitanisms flourished’ ([2011](#): 20). Waters makes the point that the post-war racist media and integrationists focus on ‘racial otherness and racial conflict’ means ‘that it became hard to see the inner city in terms either of its multicultural or its conviviality’ ([Waters 2023b](#): 217). In contrast, 60 years later, Balanchandran is at pains to stress the complex emotional labour needed to reproduce subaltern sociality, defining it as:

An often capacious accommodation of the working poor from all parts of the world irrespective, though not heedless, of race, faith, nation, or gender, and to translate and mediate habits, attitudes, and meanings to affirm and sustain such sociality. The latter did not, and here does not, preclude conflict. ([2011](#): 2)

He notes some cafes were often co-owned with local white women who were their domestic partners. Indeed, Banton emphasises this point to dispel a widespread myth that migrants live from the earnings of sex-worker girlfriends ([Ellis 2015](#)).

Many cafés offered solidarity and community organising in the face of racism. As [Ansar Ahmed Ullah and John Eversley \(2010\)](#) note, Bengali cafés were ‘more than simply food outlets’ and offered advice and support. In contrast to the ‘moral welfare’ of the social workers, cafés offered ‘welfare’ functions such as letter-writing, form-filling, job networks, and advice. They facilitated a valuable network of informal social spaces through which private lodging places could be found. A pattern of friendly association brought men into this alternative economy, as former colleagues set up unregistered lodging houses hosting a circuit of friends and friends of friends who arrived after a period of time at sea ([Milne 2020](#): 407)

Some were sites of lobbying, assembly, organisation, and meeting places for political associations aimed at seamen and colonial subjects, ‘a quasi public setting to formulate new ideas’ ([Vaughan 2018](#): 22). Some groups were more interested in the politics of their home-countries, and others in improving conditions in London. It was at a café in Cable Street in 1952 that the Pakistan Welfare Association was established, which later, post-independence, became the Bangladeshi Welfare Association. The police monitored seamen’s activities and Sylheti seamen changed the name of the Indian Seamen’s Union to that of the Indian Seamen’s Welfare League, to avoid attention for being involved in trade union or political activities ([Hossain 2014](#)).

Learning about these histories reveals culinary infrastructure, support, and friendship against a lack of state support and middle-class racism. Cable street café society reveals a largely untold history of Black and Asian working-class agency, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Today, scholars write of the importance of cafés as sites of conviviality and social life, including everyday multiculturalism between people racialised as white, and of colour. But less attention has been, historically and today, given to cafés owned by people of colour designed for other people of colour. With the focus in food studies on the white “Anglo” cosmopolitan eating subject), Hage argues that migrant ‘feeders’ get lost ([Hage 1997](#): 118). This history reminds us too of inter-racial eating that doesn’t centre on white people.

The cafés enabled food security, feelings of safety, nourishment, conviviality— ‘culinary safe havens’—against a backdrop of ubiquitous racism, loneliness, precarity, and financial, cultural. and social impoverishment from displacement and exclusion ([Sabar & Posner 2013](#): 198). In this way, we can understand these cafés as ‘pockets of survival for ways of life’ ([Wills 2017](#): 65).

Conclusion

We designed our walk to share local histories of food in Shadwell, Tower Hamlets, as part of a larger funded project about contemporary food lives. We saw the tour as a form of counter-mapping and as part of our researcher training. We learned much more than we anticipated about the factories, cafés, and soup kitchens, and more than we can write about here. Our focus here has been on the post-war migrant café infrastructure and agency of men of colour and how they facilitated food security, commensality, conviviality, and networks of support.

Drawing on Ahmed's notion of stickiness and Jones on how food environments 'feel,' we can reflect on the significance of emotions when studying food systems/culinary infrastructure. As we learned, the role of the café:

in public life is an often-forgotten feature of the way in which marginalised people find a way on the one hand to negotiate a home away from home in the hostile city, and on the other to start to negotiate a position within society at large. ([Vaughan 2018](#): 216)

Such histories of food spaces as racialised survival and resistance are difficult to find in official archives and academic understandings of food systems. As we found out too, it's even more difficult to find women's histories in the area—the sex workers, working-class waitresses, wives of café owners, and later, women of colour who arrived. As Kinsi Abdulleh, chair of Somali arts organisation [Numbi](#) explains, the challenges facing researchers and the untold story of Somali women speaks to a racial, gendered dynamic of Empire's power.

The social, and material space of Cable Street and its surroundings that we mapped and toured, had been shaped by historic nutritional, commensal, and convivial practices. Our map and writing show that this spatial food heritage is worthy of memorialisation and remembrance, foreground largely forgotten food histories. As Mark Johnson writes: 'Landscapes, sites and monuments are always emergent and processual, whose meaning(s) and significance are continually being remade' ([2001](#): 75).

Our understanding of the café society in Cable Street extends Pilcher and colleagues' important claim that we need to remember how migrants from around the world have fed us with their knowledge and labour. In particular, our research underlines the significance of historic non-white contributions to the food system within a context of racial inequality. The café owners and workers created what today we would call 'community assets,' providing cultural and material nourishment, commensality, welfare, and feelings of conviviality. Critical race scholars note that such forms of racialised and classed conviviality 'produce everyday virtues' and 'enrich city life' ([Back & Sinha 2018](#): 522). Studies highlight how fast food outlets in cities offer opportunities for non-confrontational racial mixing but our tour shows how long this has been happening ([Jones et al., 2015](#)).

We can make a comparison with the contemporary, much maligned East End fried chicken takeaways and cafés, small businesses run by Bangladeshi families. Academics and public health policy makers have subjected them to never-ending critique for promoting poor health. A source of racialised employment, the cafés also provide places for Muslim families and young people. Research shows that these cafés feel good to their customers, offering culturally acceptable food and a safe social meeting place.

These histories remind us too about the sticky emotions of reform—the will to improve by public health, the media, academics—intervening in and monitoring racially minoritised food lives. Racialised subjects 'become an embodied "reminder and remainder" of imperialist pasts and their legacies in metropolitan centres' (Mercer 1994, cited in [Coloma 2017](#): 92). They are simultaneously exotic, to be commodified and consumed, as well as deviant, to be repelled or reformed (...) invisible through the silencing of their experiences of racism and colonialism and its failure to provide them with equal protection and citizenship rights under the law ([Coloma 2017](#): 92). But they resist marginalization, and declare 'their undeniable

presence, contributions, and interventions in metropolitan and colonial body politic by claiming that “we are here because you were there” (Coloma 2017: 92).

Acknowledgements

This research was funded through the Transforming the UK Food System for Healthy People and a Healthy Environment SPF Programme, delivered by UKRI, in partnership with the Global Food Security Programme, BBSRC, ESRC, MRC, NERC, Defra, DHSC, OHID, Innovate UK and FSA.

Community researchers, Shazna Hussain, Sajna Miah, and academic Elaine Swan did most of the designing and research for the tour; Elaine did the writing and research for the article. Julie Yip did archive work, and Shaheda Aziz ran some of the tour. Julia Kidd, Lucy Wheeler, and Jessica Horne from the University of Sussex helped us write up the histories, and artist Nasima Sultana, who did the design and art for the map. Sanjia Alam, of the *Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, London Borough of Tower Hamlets*, helped us with the archives and tour design.

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