

# Introduction: Imagining Londons ☹

PAMELA K. GILBERT

**L**ondon: world city, global city, capital of empire. Literary London. The East End. Jack the Ripper. The Beatles. Beefeaters. The Tower. Village London. Merry Olde London. The London of St. Paul's and the Millennium Dome, the London of the Fire, of Dickens, of Blake. The London of Elizabeth, of Victoria, of tourists, of Londoners. The Londons of the Imagination.

This book does not simply celebrate the Londons of patriotic or touristic rhapsody. However, it is not to be seen as a corrective, a dose of "realism" designed to disabuse us of our postcard images of the city, either. This book seeks to understand imagined Londons, while at the same time encouraging the realization that, while there are an infinite number of Other Londons, there are no Londons other than those of the imagination. From multiple perspectives, in diverse historical circumstances, people have turned their faces toward the city, and created it as the site and embodiment of communities of their dreams and necessities.

The topic of the metropolis currently garners much interest. Urbanists find that world economic development is leading us toward an interlacing network of "global cities" and seek to understand and control this phenomenon. Cultural studies scholars of many disciplines have turned to geography, striving to reinscribe both space and place in bodies of work which have long privileged a disembodied textualism. British historians and literary scholars are seeking to create a richly textured, geographically informed sense of British history, both domestic and imperial. Scholars of the empire engage the mythic and material

history of the metropole. London—a key global city today and the metropole of the British empire of the nineteenth century—fascinates urbanists now as it has for over two centuries; for this new, larger generation of scholars and cultural commentators, it has become an essential part of the puzzle of British, European, and world urban history and culture.

*Imagined Londons* addresses these themes, in a collection which seeks both to represent and point the way for this new turn in scholarship. Although much excellent work in the past few decades has focused on the urban environment, relatively little has sought to respond to David Harvey's call in 1985 for a careful elaboration of the role of community in relation to urban space, especially in regard to London.<sup>1</sup> Many studies (including Harvey's) have focused on a fairly determinist view of the relations between capitalist urbanization and space. Others, following Benjamin and de Certeau, have focused on the city as a site of freedom and agency, like Walkowitz. Much of this work has been very properly focused on restoring space to social analysis, and has tended to oppose spatial analysis to narrative, as narrative represents the modern domination of space by time. Ultimately, however, space and time cannot, of course, be separated. Just as space determines and qualifies narrative, narratives shape people's understanding and uses of space. In their appropriate efforts to refocus on materialism, recent studies have sometimes failed to emphasize that people's perceptions—their narratives and beliefs about themselves and their environments—come often to have material force in the transformation of the built and natural landscape. Drawing on the themes implied by the title's gesture toward Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, this volume begins with the premise that London exists as multiple constructs, serving different purposes of representation connected to identity—urban, national, racial, etc.—and that such identity is imagined simultaneously as expansive over a particular space, whether of the nation, city, neighborhood or globe, and through historical time. The mid-nineteenth century through the present, the period included in this volume, is particularly marked by London's identification with modernity, and the communities that have been imagined there and then have generally been elaborated in relation to this sense of modern anxiety and possibility.

What authors, historians, and urban residents imagine when they invoke "London" as an entity has to do with the imagined communities, identities, exclusions, and inclusions which write a multiplicity of Londons into history, both local and global. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century responses to London's perceived complexity, its risks and opportunities, its heterogeneity and uncontainability, struggled to body the city forth in understandable structures; in turn those structures determined the shape that the growth of London would continue to take. In this sense, imagined Londons, like the imagined communities of nation, have enacted history as material entities.

*Imagined Londons* begins with the mid-nineteenth century, a time in which London was already well established as a modern city and the center of the British empire, and extends to the present “global city” of London. The chapters are organized chronologically from the mid-Victorian period to the millennium; they represent a diverse range of disciplinary approaches and methods focusing on a broad variety of materials, literary, architectural, graphic, musical, political, and journalistic. The authors hail from departments of English, history, philosophy, geography, and comparative literature from both the United States and United Kingdom. Although the volume doesn’t pretend to be comprehensive—one of its arguments is that such would be impossible—it does offer a fine range of the latest and most interesting scholarship on the city. As a volume focused on representations, *Imagined Londons* pays particular regard to the intersection of history and literature, and often neglected issues of race and empire, transnational, postcolonial, and queer identities receive detailed attention.

The mid-Victorian period is also a good starting place because it marks the high point of development of an anxious sense of London’s historical importance and relation to both modernity and history which remains in place today. No prior era was quite as consumed with, as Richard Altick has termed it, the “presence of the present,” and arguably in no prior era was that sense of historical immediacy so mediated through various representations of the past, in narrative, architecture, the arts, and everyday discourse. The period is characterized by its sense that London is both coherent and problematic, an obscure text whose interpretive key could be located in its relation to its own history and projected future. London is the most recent of the great European megacities to take the world stage as a center of global power. Its belatedness has expressed itself as ceaseless assertions of peerless modernity, and London has, in the twentieth century, continued to be preoccupied with its Janus-faced relation to the past and future to a degree greater than its fellow European capitals. Despite its perhaps unique level of anxiety, however, London can be read as exemplary in some respects; like all cities, London must market itself and to do so, city planners, the tourist industry, architects, and so forth must make decisions about representation which forge an uneasy relationship between history, capitalism, the lived experiences of Londoners, the rich representational history of London given by such artists as Johnson, Blake, Dickens, Winterson, Whistler, the Beatles, and the *London A to Z*, and the existing environment, built and natural, among many other factors which affect the Londons we imagine. My deliberately provocative list of artists above highlights, perhaps heavy-handedly, the fundamental precept of this book: there are only imagined Londons, and the work of understanding them is not best served by easy assumptions about fictive versus factual discourse or “art” versus science, journalism, popular culture, or what-have-you. If in this volume there is a preoccupation with representation which emphasizes London’s obsession with modernity, with

tourism, with the process of being perceived and how it can best be manipulated, the volume is also concerned with perceptions of London as “real,” lived space—overwhelming and ungraspable or conversely, eminently graspable within a grid of scientific observation and discipline—both of which extremes stem from the perception that the proper way to perceive (or construct) a city is to define its order, that the proper way to perceive London was as the teeming matrix of the urban future.

There have been many excellent volumes on the Victorian city (Briggs, Wolff and Dyos, and Mancoff and Trela leap to mind) and a good deal of work on Victorian London recently (Walkowitz, Nord, Schnee, and Wolfreys, just to name a very few). Likewise, twentieth-century London has spawned a good deal of excellent work (King, Dyos again, and many others in various disciplines). Generally, the two periods have been conceived and presented as separate. But one of the aims of *Imagined Londons* is to show, from the vantage point of the turn of the millennium, the continuities of these apparently disparate periods—their emphasis on modernity, and the city experienced through the eyes of Others (tourists and immigrants alike), their negotiation of London’s identity as a national capital with an increasingly disparate population representing London’s global ties, its exhilarating sense of possibility for new identities, new embodiments. To this end, the volume gives careful attention to the transitional years from 1870 to WWI, and the later pieces pick up threads initiated in the earlier ones. Late modernity, with its sense of London as an organic whole that demands representation and containment, is here seen itself very much as a period with its own continuity.

The volume, then, opens with four contributions that span the last half of the nineteenth century. My own chapter examines the social body in relation to Victorian understandings of metropolitan urban space, paying particular attention to medical and social thematic cartography, such as sanitary and medical maps and the Booth poverty maps. The construction of public medicine and social work as key to liberal government has been central to urban modernity in the “West.” One way by which medics, sanitarians, and social workers sought to understand and control the urban social body was through mapping. This chapter traces some of the ways in which public medics and social workers constructed communities in London by vulnerability to disease, domestic habits, and so forth, and also how existing narratives about class disease were used to support, complicate, and challenge existing mappings of London. Visions of both London and urban life more generally continue to be influenced by this cartographic tradition, as this mapping not only represented Victorian theories of urbanism, but inscribed them on the city itself, as such maps were used for slum clearance and other urban planning projects.

Heidi Holder’s chapter turns to Victorian theater for its representations of London life, which were extremely popular on the Victorian stage. As she

demonstrates, London scenes and stories provided audiences with ways of understanding the urban experience, in all its heterogeneity. Key to that sense of variety were Londoners' experiences of colonial subjects living in the city, largely in the East End. Although often overlooked in scholarship of Victorian urban literature until recently, African and Indian characters frequently appeared, and were particular staples of the drama. As Holder shows, the uses of such "other Londoners" were mediated by classed geography. West End theaters used such characters almost as metonyms for the East End, often seen as a "foreign" realm within London itself by virtue of its poverty and association with immigrants and shipping. In East End drama, on the other hand, African, Indian, and other Asian characters could be more prominent and carry more complex significance, even though they were unable to cross class boundaries the way white characters might. Holder reminds us that London as "global" city has a history with deep roots, and that already in the early nineteenth century, Londoners were defining themselves through the city's internal others.

Morris B. Kaplan continues our focus on the "Other Londoners" of the Victorian age, this time turning our attention to the respectable spaces of the middle classes in the West. Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park were arrested in 1870 for cross-dressing and consorting with other men as women, and tried for "conspiracy to commit" sodomy. Kaplan traces the copious publicity that the case received and finds a complex relation between the treatment of sexual deviance and social class; he also finds that London was already well-known, at least in some circles, as a site of sexual freedom and possibility for a wider range of gendered subjectivity than, supposedly, less metropolitan areas. Boulton and Park's visibility raised the specter of sexual license, emphasizing London's status as a site of deviance and multiplicity. As Kaplan also points out, it also raised frightening questions about spectators' abilities to read the city, as both men had "passed" in various middle-class public spaces as women. As legibility is an ongoing concern in this period, as we will see in the first two chapters, "queer" public practices continually threatened to undermine urbanites' tenuous confidence in their own spatial literacies.

Michelle Sipe takes us forward into the *fin de siècle*, examining Arthur Symons's 1890s poetry. Replete with images of "fallen" women who are both situated in and stand in for urban settings, Symons's poetry portrays women's bodies as fragmented images that mirror the discontinuities of modern city life. Concerned with positioning himself as a literate authority on the city's difficult, fragmented codes, Symons articulates a rhetoric of urban mastery. Posing a chaotic, dangerous, but ultimately controllable city represented in images of fallen women against the cozy safety of domestic space represented by his apartment in Lincoln's Inn Fields, Symons develops his artistry through a conscious strategy of representing his movements through London, its music halls and streets, its diverse social spaces, as the movements of a detached connoisseur, a

*flâneur extraordinaire*, who experiences the city as a series of sexual conquests through his ability to “capture” London’s ambivalent beauties, and then retreat safely to an inviolable domestic space.

Chapters 5 and 6 span the turn of the century and focus on competing claims to the modern. Angela Woollacott’s piece explores London from the view of colonial women coming to the metropole near the turn of the century from Australia. Possessed of a unique perspective on London, Australian women articulated their sense of Australian identity in relation to London’s otherness, its perceived privations, its difference from both the land of their childhoods and from their expectations of the imperial center, often finding—and perhaps being pleased and proud to find—that London fell far short of their expectations and experiences. As Woollacott points out, in constructing the metropole as the marked term, deficient in comparison to an originary point of plenitude, these women reversed the typical assumption that the metropolis represented modernity, against the backward colonies, as they critique the poverty of London, its inequities, and cruelty to the dispossessed. In this way, they formulated a sense of themselves as members of a superior community defined against London, even as they challenged London’s claims to represent modernity and progress—a fundamental component, not only of its imperial identity, but of its identity within the European context.

David Pike also emphasizes London’s intense preoccupation with its own modernity, here, explicitly *modernist* in form, in his study of Harry Beck’s schematic map of the underground railway, which is now perhaps the most well-known iconographic symbol of London. Pike argues that in portraying the railway network as beautiful, simple, and easily legible, which substituted an abstract representation of London for a much different and more complex topography, Beck’s map offers London to us as a modernist conception of space, wherein abstract utility takes precedence over the messiness of lived experience. Thus, the abstract representation—and the “oneiric” experience of London primarily through its streamlined underground spaces rather than its heterogeneous surfaces—could supplant the difficult and “primitive” London that Woollacott’s subjects so deplored. Pike argues that recent urbanist theories have all worked with or against modernist space, of which Beck’s map is a peculiarly fine example. Pike’s piece leads us from the Victorian fascination with “realistic” representations of London to the twentieth-century modernist predilection for the stripped-down icon, which allows for modern and postmodern notions of the trademark as representation of—and replacement for—London’s heterogeneity.

The next six chapters concentrate on London in the later twentieth century, and continue the focus on London’s preoccupation with its own representation and its ambivalent relationship to its own histories. Continuing Pike’s gesture toward the construction of London as a legible text for touristic consumption, David Gilbert and Fiona Henderson trace the representation of Lon-

don in tourist guidebooks in the twentieth century. Following Dean MacCannell, Gilbert and Henderson read tourism as an effort to create coherence out of a fragmented experience of the modern world. As Gilbert and Henderson point out, London has been an object of tourism in the modern sense for at least 150 years: a period of working out anxieties about modernity and empire. Concentrating particularly on the post-war period to the present, they focus on the assertions of modernity involved in the transformation of the skyline and South Bank of the Thames associated with the 1951 Festival and the later positioning of the city as a center of fashion. However, this construction of London is in tension with the appeals to the city's history as ancient site of empire and the coziness of Merry Olde "village London." These tensions finally dovetail in the apparently contradictory, but actually continuous, presentation of London today as multicultural, post-imperial world city.

Alexei Monroe is also concerned with the nature of London's representation of itself through tourism. However, he approaches the question from the perspective of what resists or is elided by touristic packaging, particularly in the world of popular music for which London is well-known globally. Monroe points out that "mainstream" rock culture and its historical locations have become integral to the marketing of London to tourists. The tourist industry has absorbed sites formerly associated with the countercultures of rock and punk and packaged them as "heritage." Recent music sub- and countercultures have resisted some of this commodification, in part through their mobility and association with marginal sites, such as abandoned warehouses and squats: what Monroe, using Hakim Bey's term, designates "temporary autonomous zones." Monroe traces structural congruences between these musical genres and the spaces with which they are associated to suggest that postmodern urban life and its attendant popular art forms are evolving in forms which are not always amenable to traditional forms of representation and cooptation.

John Eade, Isabelle Fremeaux, and David Garbin bring us back to the theme of (post) colonials in London; however, by the late twentieth century, these can no longer be conceived as "Others" existing on the margins of the metropole, but must be understood as an integral, if ambivalent, part of the city's identity itself, as Gilbert and Henderson suggest in their chapter as well. Eade, Fremeaux, and Garbin trace the settlement of migrants' diasporic communities, which have forged transnational links not only with those in their countries of origin but also with other migrants globally. These groups challenge notions of "nation" or "culture" organized around tropes of purity, whether of language, race, country of origin, or religion. Examining Bangladeshi community building and presence in local London politics and urban renewal, this chapter examines how Bangladeshi activists deal with the local, state, and metropolitan structures, as well as how such structures interact with traditional leaders and institutions and how those interactions reflect on concepts of community organized through

identifications with Bangladesh itself—through festivals, charitable contributions, and so forth which link the two geographically separated communities. Eade, Fremieux, and Garbin find that these communities deploy several competing conceptions of space, the metropole, and London, paradoxically, to affirm a community which is intimately related to London yet transcends its spaces in favor of other organizing factors. As the globe comes home to London, London becomes both global itself and extremely parochial, a single node of a “village” community which is itself decentered and global in extent.

Like Eade, Fremieux, and Garbin, Gautam Premnath uses issues of postcolonial identity and community to challenge the limitations inherent in a definition of London that depends on geographic space. His chapter attends to literary representations of these diasporic communities and their relation to the imperial metropole, especially in his study of V. S. Naipaul’s Ralph Singh, the narrator of *The Mimic Men* (1967). Naipaul, Premnath argues, rejects the spatial separatism that characterizes the work of some of his contemporaries, such as Lamming, with its concomitant embrace of nationalist identity. Premnath sees Naipaul’s figuration of London as site of both self-making and exclusion as central to Naipaul’s rejection of a naive celebration of the promise of decolonization. Singh’s disillusionment with the elusive and delusory “god of the city” associates metropolitan identity with the false promise of postcolonial independence. Locations in and movement through London’s geography are used to chart Singh’s journey, as the colony and metropole are shown to be inextricably imaginatively intertwined.

The last two chapters bring us to the brink of the present, while interrogating the present’s investment in the past. They are appropriate conclusions to a volume that began with the Victorian tendency to propel their city into visions of the future. Julian Wolfreys gives us an overview of postmodern narrative’s encounter with a city in which can be found the very vernacular of postmodern form, its fragmentary seductions, its sublime—or bathetic—juxtapositions, its frightening, exhilarating refusal to “mean” coherently. Wolfreys engages postmodern theories of space and architecture to read through work as diverse as that of poets Iain Sinclair and Allen Fisher, film-maker Patrick Keiller, and photographer Rachel Whiteread, illuminating what they have to teach us about encounters with and constructions of the city. In contemporary writers’ psychotopographies of London, Wolfreys observes, there is an insistent engagement with time as palimpsestic, recursive, amalgamated with space in often surprising ways. These imagined Londons insist on history, even as they insist on historicity’s fictive and subjective nature. This persistence of memory and event continually exceeds and subverts the neat packaging of London by “city planners or . . . any grand narrative,” whether of modernity or otherwise.

Michael Levenson is also concerned with time and memory at the end of the twentieth century. His chapter rounds out the volume, appropriately, with a



discussion of millennial celebratory architectures, whose monumentality seeks to memorialize past glories and anticipate future transcendence. The millennium was marked by the apportionment of considerable funding devoted to marking London's self-conscious march into the new era, through events, new architecture, and an overhauling of earlier structures to bring the city in line with its "new," "old" image. Beginning with conflicts over Victorian monuments in Trafalgar Square, Levenson charts discussions of public art and architecture—its meanings, aims, ambiguities, and failures, and the political and cultural stakes associated with them. The much-maligned Millennium Dome provides a case study. London, celebrating its national and (post-) imperial identity, waffled between self-gratulation and self-flagellation, as the Dome came to bear a burden of meanings far beyond its already weighty intended citation and subversion of St. Paul's, its assertion of a (post)modernity that simultaneously saluted and dismissed the past. However, despite the desire for a "legible" city marked by centralizing monuments, Levenson suggests, the true identity of contemporary London is more aptly revealed by the Docklands phenomenon, where, guided by nothing beyond capitalist individualism, a radically discontinuous profusion has become an oddly illegible, yet well-known and iconic, showpiece of urban possibility. As ever, imagined communities form as much from below as from above, and bear an unpredictable relationship to power, economic and otherwise.

So our volume ends with a beginning—a new millennium—and yet one that looks backward to the Victorian themes with which this volume itself begins. The tensions between urban profusion and coherent identity, liberal individualism and community values with which Victorian London was riven and from which it took its shape remain its most profound marker, architecturally and artistically. A multiplicity which has been relentlessly domesticated and packaged as the London "brand" is ceaselessly disrupted by new forms of the multiplicity that exceed and yet do not escape London's power to absorb them. And the most "modern" city of all—a term which now paradoxically evokes a receding past—is precisely so in its ceaseless negotiations of past, present, and its visions of the future. The following, then, are brief illuminations of some of the imagined Londons of late modernity.

#### NOTE

1. A notable exception is Jonathan Schneer's *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis*.

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