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Orta

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Traces:  
Stories of  
Migration

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# We are but Shadows: Stories of Immigration in London's East End

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“Paradoxically, our cultural identities, in any finished form, lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation. Culture is not a matter of ontology of being, but of becoming.” – *Stuart Hall*

In the heart of London's East End, at the corner of Brick Lane and Fournier Street, sits the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid, a Mosque that serves the local Bangladeshi and Muslim community. The tall brick and stone building has been a religious home for almost three hundred years, established first as La Neuve Église, a Protestant chapel for the French Huguenots who settled in Spitalfields after fleeing persecution in their home country. The Huguenots - one of Britain's first refugee communities - brought with them master silk weaving skills, establishing the East End as a specialist textile industry, creating sophisticated gowns and beautiful fabrics. To this day, the Huguenot settlers are still referred to as the Spitalfields Silk Weavers. Although they have long since moved from the area, traces of their lives are still visible in attic workshops perched on top of the large Georgian houses lining Fournier Street. Their large windows, stretching from floor to ceiling, once provided the daylight needed to illuminate the silk weavers' looms and showcase the latest textile designs to their clientele.

From the 1600's to the mid-1800's, the Spitalfields Weavers inhabited the East End. Then, as silk and fabric became increasingly imported, they moved on, seeking employment and building new lives elsewhere. As they left, new communities of immigrants moved in. Following the decline of the linen industry in Ireland, Irish settlers arrived, picking up work in the rag trade and the nearby docklands. They were followed by waves of Eastern European Jews, escaping persecution and harsh conditions in their homelands. Drawn to employment opportunities through the textile industry, the Jewish refugees established a thriving community in the East End, creating new forms of commerce. The names of their shops can still be found, painted above window arches and door cases. The most famous, CH N. Katz, is the remaining trace of a paper bag and string shop. Further along the street, Jewish bakeries still serve salt beef beigels and, in some doorways, two single holes can be found where mezuzahs once hung. After the devastation of the East End during WW2, most of the Jewish community moved further North and into the suburbs, and the area fell into decline. Since the 1970's, however, it has been home to a growing population of Bengali Muslims. Once again, they have revived textile trade in Spitalfields, activating the street markets and shops, and introducing new restaurants serving traditional Indian food. They established the London Jamme Masjid in 1976, in the same brick building belonging first to the Huguenots, and

then to the Jewish community. A Chapel, a Synagogue and now a Mosque, this building has witnessed centuries of movement through the East End. Under the roof of the Mosque is a white, stone sundial pressed into the brick façade. Its radial clock is directed into the same sunlight as the Huguenots' attic windows. The year of its making, 1743, is written in black, along with the words 'Umbra Sumus'. Translated from Latin, they mean 'we are but shadows' – a reference to a line from the Roman poet, Horatius – reminding us that we are all a part of this ever-shifting and infinitely complex cultural landscape.

Lucy Orta's *Traces: Stories of Migration* pays homage to these layers of East End history. Over the last two years, I have followed her project as it has unfolded through community workshops, engaging over 70 local residents who, each in their own way, identify as an immigrant. Through the project, the participants shared stories of their migratory journeys, describing the complexity of making a home in a city marked indelibly by mobility and constant change. For some, coming to East London was a promise of opportunity, of new adventures and discovery. For others, an unspeakable experience involving trauma, nostalgia and loss; a process of leaving behind lives, families and memories. As I am also an immigrant living in East London, I heard myself in many of their stories. I come from the position of knowing two worlds, the United States and the United Kingdom, and many homes within them. I have not been displaced through force or persecution, but I do understand how home can exist in many forms - as a memory and a physical place.

I know the complexity of the immigrant identity and how it feels to simultaneously belong, but always as an outsider. Stories of migration are complex. They are often shaped through nostalgia and memory, and they are always located somewhere between past and present. For migrant communities, storytelling is a powerful tool. Our stories narrate us as much as we narrate them. They map out our journeys and bring our histories into existence. Living in a transitory area like East London, they can also be strategies for survival and opportunities to connect to others through our differences. Lucy's project is a collection of migratory stories told through a community portrait gallery. Each story has been carefully and attentively brought to life and, drawing on histories of the East End rag trade, they have been created using specialist and traditional embroidery and textile practices. The practice of portrait making, with its roots in nationalism, class and power, is profoundly challenged in the context of this project. Here, these portraits represent a collective social experience, providing a deeply meaningful testament to the fact that London is, in fact, a city made up

of many global trajectories. It is always on the move, it has no boundaries and its history belongs to us all. From the Huguenot weaver to the Jewish paper bag seller on Brick Lane, we all leave our traces on its landscape.

In his essay *Thinking the Diaspora, Home Thoughts from Abroad*, Stuart Hall reminds us that our cultural identity is something that can never be found within fixed geographical boundaries. As processes of migration proliferate across the globe, just as they always have done, he points to the fact that nation states and boundaries have always been pluralised and irrevocably changed through the diversity of their inhabitants and by flows of people as they continue to shape and reshape our world. These transnational movements are unstoppable, their connections decentre the boundaries of cultural belonging, transforming home into a process, or something that can be made and re-made wherever we might land. Through our cultural practices, Hall says, we can 'produce ourselves anew, as new kinds of subjects. It is therefore not a question of what our traditions make of us so much as what we make of our traditions. Paradoxically, our cultural identities, in any finished form, lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation. Culture is not a matter of ontology, of being, but becoming' (1999: 16). For Hall, identity is not something found in the archaeology of written history. Instead, identity, as it is woven through the migrant experience, is mutable. We traverse multiple homes, moving between the margins and the centre. Returning to Horatio's words, we are but shadows in the landscape, writing our histories through the stories that we tell and the marks we leave behind. What *Traces: Stories of Migration* does is bring these stories to the centre, creating a restorative community through mutual sharing and the celebration of difference. The communal portrait gallery decentres histories that serve mythological notions of nationhood and hierarchies of belonging and, instead, shows how we can all make ourselves at home in a global world. The stories held within each of these portraits connect and intersect with transnational movements of people, past and present, who have taken refuge and found their home in London's East End. But most importantly, through imaginative cultural exchange, they engage us closely in the lives of others, carefully demonstrating how we can participate in the community we are all in the process of becoming.