

**Reading Room Geographies of Late-Victorian London:  
The British Museum, Bloomsbury and the People's Palace, Mile End  
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In her 1889 article, 'Readers at the British Museum', Amy Levy fashions the Reading Room as an egalitarian space with 'wonderful accessibility' for a wide spectrum of visitors, traversing boundaries of class, nation, gender, and occupation: 'For some it is a workshop, for others a lounge; there are those who put it to the highest uses, while in many cases it serves as a shelter, — a refuge, in more senses than one, for the destitute.'<sup>1</sup> Levy's essay on the environment of the British Museum Reading Room envisions it as a multipurpose sphere, a knowledge factory, a club, an asylum, thus melding together public and private, working and middle classes, scholarship and commercial production with social exchange. Levy's notebook, an unpublished booklet with 'British Museum Notes' written in her hand on the cover, gives us a preview of the work she accomplished in Bloomsbury's large circular Reading Room including reading notes for her essay, 'The Poetry of Christina Rossetti' and passages later folded into her short story, 'Eldorado at Islington'.<sup>2</sup> Levy was only one of a throng of women who regularly inhabited the Reading Room of the British Museum almost as an office of many, rather than a 'room of one's own'.

I challenge an assessment of the Reading Room of the British Museum as a bastion of class and gender privilege, an image firmly established by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and the legions of feminist scholarship that uphold this spatial conceit.<sup>3</sup> I argue not only that the British Museum Reading Room facilitated women's literary work, but I also question the overdetermined value of privacy and autonomy in constructions of authorship. Rather than viewing reading and writing as solitary, individual events, I am interested in the public and social dimensions of literary production, both writing and reading. Building on scholarship by Deborah Epstein Nord, Judith Walkowitz, and Ana Parejo Vardillo, this essay explores the intersections of gender, class, and reading in two discrete library spaces of late-Victorian London: the reading rooms of the British Museum, Bloomsbury and the People's Palace, Mile End.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the London Library where subscribers could browse and borrow the books for a fee, British Museum readers had to use all materials on site. There, acts of reading and writing

occurred not in a private domestic room of one's own, but in an exterior and institutional place with an architectural design that prompted visibility and circulation. Communal physical space brought frustrations, (echo chamber acoustics, among others), but this arrangement also had its advantages. Levy characterizes the Reading Room as an amalgamation of public and private dimensions, and from this I pursue the idea of a new exteriority. Such shared physical space for daily reading and writing offered opportunities for what Cass Sunstein has described as 'chance encounters, involving shared experiences with diverse others'.<sup>5</sup> Sunstein worries that cyberspace research today compromises this potential of relatively unfiltered public space interactions with people or print not sought out in advance. The Reading Room of the British Museum figured as a site of commercial opportunity, and activist and professional networking for women writers.

The same year — 1888 — in which Levy's essay 'Readers at the British Museum' first appeared her friend Constance Black, later Constance Garnett the renowned translator of Russian literature, became librarian for the new People's Palace Library in Mile End Road, East London.<sup>6</sup> She held this post for less than a year and resigned when she married Edward Garnett, who happened to be the son of Richard Garnett, the Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum. I propose to expand the scholarly discourse on public space, exteriority, and social mixing of genders and classes by juxtaposing these two library spaces, Bloomsbury's British Museum and the People's Palace Library in East London. While middle-class women in growing numbers at the British Museum irritated some male readers, young working-class readers posed a challenge to Black and her co-librarians at the People's Palace. Constance Black is an intriguing nodal point in this constellation of library readers because she struggled with a distancing discomfort toward her 'rough readers', in contrast to the dismissive disdain British Museum readers expressed about 'lady readers'. From mapping out these uneven networks of library readers and workers, I turn finally to Amy Levy's poem 'In the Mile End Road' because it imagines a different perspective of Mile End Road reading, one marked by fluidity of identification and proximity. By comparing Black's discussion of her library work at the People's Palace and Levy's poem about the street where the East End library stood, I highlight two kinds of exteriority, activist practice and imaginative poetics. In the first, Black contends with the complex work of enacting social mixing; in the second, Levy creates space for street encounters across boundaries. Despite the possibilities of Levy's vision, her movements remain part of a realm of interior fantasy, whereas Black effects

connections, however tenuous and fleeting, in an actual exterior space with working-class readers from the Mile End surroundings.

In Levy's circle of acquaintances, many women were readers at the British Museum who likewise participated in activist work through publications, speeches, or forms of organizing on behalf of poor East End workers. I link Bloomsbury and the East End by exploring these disquieting correspondences between the two reading rooms. For the mission and design of both public spaces served multiple purposes and a broad range of readers, much as Levy outlines in her essay:

The great library of the Museum, which has recently been described as incomparably the best, and is, with the exception of the National Library at Paris, the largest in the world, attracts to itself in ever-increasing numbers all sorts and conditions of men and women.<sup>7</sup>

Levy's vision of readers at the British Museum echoes suggestively Walter Besant's fantasy of slum regeneration in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, the 1882 novel Levy perhaps alluded to with her phrasing 'all sorts and conditions of men and women'. The most salient scene in Besant's fiction of social mixing in the East End spotlights the Palace of Delight, a grand scheme to offer recreation and education to the neighbouring working-class people; this fictional project inspired the building of the actual People's Palace. Yet the women librarians who then administered to readers at the People's Palace offer a more cautious view than Besant's urban romance or Levy's poetical Mile End.

## I

### **Library Democracy: Panizzi's Reading Room in the British Museum**

The idea of a new circular room [*Fig. 1*] to replace the original 1838 rectangular Reading Room was the brainchild of Anthony Panizzi, an Italian whose involvement in the struggle for national unification resulted in his arrival in England in 1823 for political asylum. Once he became a British citizen, he was a forceful advocate for building the national library collection. Panizzi's philosophy stipulated:

I want a poor student to have the same means of indulging his curiosity, of following his rational pursuits, of consulting the same authorities, of fathoming the most intricate inquiry as the richest man in the kingdom, as far as books go, and I contend that the Government is bound to give him the most liberal and unlimited assistance in this respect.<sup>8</sup>



*Fig. 1: Frederic York, Reading Room of the British Museum (1875)*

Although the first eight admissions to the original British Museum reading room in 1759 were men, women's names appear on indexes of ticketholders from the late eighteenth century. As the doors to elite Oxbridge colleges began to crack open for women in the 1870s and 1880s, the number of female readers rose markedly at the British Museum which offered an alternative community of scholars, what Judith Walkowitz has called 'a heterosocial space', a 'stomping ground of the "bohemian set" [...] of heterodox men and women'.<sup>9</sup> The exteriority — the physical visibility of the circular space which prompted a 'heterodox' sociability — of the Reading Room mobilized circles of women writers supporting themselves through translation work, journalism, and writing novels and poetry. As a Victorian 'knowledge commons', the circular Reading Room was crucial in the daily life of Levy, according to her calendar for 1889 where she records her frequent visits there.<sup>10</sup> Some forty years before Woolf pictured this space as 'another department' in the great factory of London, Levy employs the word 'workshop' in her vision of an egalitarian space, including political exiles, like her friend Eleanor Marx's father. Levy, Marx, and Black were part of a significant network of women who read, wrote, and met by chance or plan in Bloomsbury's national reading room during the 1880s. They used the Reading Room as an office, or a public space for professional work, only a short distance from their homes. Some of their colleagues who were also registered readers included,

among others, Olive Schreiner, Margaret Harkness, Annie Besant, Beatrice Potter (later Webb), and Clementina Black.

But how egalitarian was admission to the Reading Room of the British Museum, despite Panizzi's open-door policy? Unlike the London Library and other fee-paying subscription services like Mudie's Circulating Library, there was no fee for obtaining a reader's ticket, taking a seat at one of the desks distributed like spokes around the circular room, and requesting books and manuscripts to read. An 1866 handbook for readers at the British Museum claims that the venue is available to 'the world at large', and stipulates that the requirements for admission are threefold: a minimum of twenty-one years of age, 'a literary purpose — such as study, reference, or research', and 'Respectability'.<sup>11</sup> This last qualification, that great Victorian bugbear, was subject to interpretation. So too were the qualifications about recommendations 'accepted from *any respectable person*', with a list of those chief sources from 'Noblemen' and 'Members of Parliament' to 'Authors of eminence' and 'Merchants' and 'Publishers', as well as 'all other persons of well-known and established position'.<sup>12</sup> With such directives, it is small wonder that scholars have continued to see the Reading Room of the British Museum as a relatively exclusive venue; as Richard Altick asserts, 'admission was difficult; one had to be introduced by a peer, member of Parliament, alderman, judge, rector, or some other eminent man'.<sup>13</sup> Yet the same 1866 guidelines conclude with this note, 'A few Recommendations are given by Ladies'.

One instance of such a letter came from Eleanor Marx who wrote to the British Museum in 1877:

I am desirous of obtaining a card of admission to the Reading Room of the British Museum, & should be much obliged if you would kindly send me one. I do not know whether it is necessary to mention references. If so I suppose it will suffice to say that my father, Dr. Karl Marx visited the Reading Room daily for nearly 30 years.<sup>14</sup>

The reference sufficed, and Eleanor Marx was soon a registered reader at the British Museum where she worked for over twenty years. If this self-promotion on a father's reputation as a reader at the British Museum seems understated to us, Karl Marx's own 'respectability' at the British Museum was sometimes in question. According to Peter Stallybrass, this quality often revolved around the state of dress and Marx's cloth coat: 'The Reading Room did not accept just *anyone* from off the streets, and a man without an overcoat, even if he had a ticket, *was* just anyone.'<sup>15</sup> When debts accumulated, Marx had

to pawn his coat which meant he lacked suitable attire to enter the Reading Room. Whether such a dress code was implicitly enforced, Stallybrass exploits the irony of exchange-values in this story, even observing that both the overcoat and the paper Marx needed for his research there were composed of the same material, cotton rags. More to the point is the fungible nature of this respectability to secure a reader's ticket and entrance to the Reading Room in Bloomsbury. Eleanor Marx exploits a different exchange value in her letter of application.

The archived applications from the 1870s, when Eleanor Marx first entered the Reading Room, also belie the rigid code for proper introductions that Altick asserts and the respectability decorum that Stallybrass describes. For instance, one letter urges the admission of a seventeen-year-old Alice Florence Harrington who lived with her father on the Strand. The writer establishes the respectability of Mr Harrington whose 'very adverse circumstances' have necessitated 'his residing at present in so humble a locality'. Yet the writer pleads, 'His daughter has received a very liberal education, and it is with a view of furnishing her self that her Father and she are desirous of her admission to the Reading Room.' He claims that the purpose of Alice's admission is to assist her parents, her mother a milliner and dressmaker, the father a 'very well educated man' who works by commission for a stationer's business.<sup>16</sup> Although these profiles of British Museum ticket holders do not converge with the 'rough readers' Constance Black describes a decade later at the People's Palace, the difference is not as gaping as representations, from Woolf to Altick, of the Reading Room of the British Museum as an elite bastion of social privilege, have alleged.

## II

### The Novel People's Palace

Levy's gender-inclusive phrasing, 'all sorts and conditions of men and women', expands upon the title of Walter Besant's *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, the very novel that inspired, through the tale of a wealthy Newnham graduate's East End slumming, the People's Palace and its library, which opened its doors five years later in 1887. While life imitated art in that the People's Palace was prompted by Besant's fictional creation, elements of the library — the catalogue and the spatial arrangements and accessibility across the social spectrum — were modelled after the British Museum library and

Panizzi's vision of a democratic space. There are also parallels between Angela Messenger, the heroine with the social mission, and Constance Black; another correspondence between fiction and life. The novel opens in Cambridge as two Newnham friends discuss their postgraduate plans. Constance Woodcote intends to become a lecturer in mathematics and to raise women's higher education to the status of the men's colleges. But Angela Messenger decides to disguise herself as Miss Kennedy, a dressmaker in Whitechapel, and live in public housing 'Buildings' to make practical use of her brewery inheritance for the benefit of her poor neighbours, much as Besant designed the novel to inspire more social integration in the impoverished East End neighbourhood.

How did Besant's novel imagine the East End and its People's Palace?<sup>17</sup> A foreign country in effect, the neighbourhood to which Angela relocates is rendered as 'the far East, in that region of London which is less known to Englishmen than if it were situated in the wildest part of Colorado, or among the pine forests of British Columbia'.<sup>18</sup> Like a colonial outpost of a North American uncivilized nature, this 'utterly unknown town' is devoid of culture: 'They have no institutions of their own to speak of, no public buildings of any importance, no municipality, no gentry, no carriages, no soldiers, no picture-galleries, no theatres, no opera — they have nothing' (*SC*, p. 28). London, England that is not London or England, this East End is off the map and outside books: 'Nobody goes east, no one wants to see the place; no one is curious about the way of life in the east. Books on London pass it over; it has little or no history' (*SC*, p. 29). Like 'the West' in global geography, the west in this urban binary is aligned with progress and culture, while the east is nowhere. The wealthy heiress disguised as the cultured, yet poor, dressmaker embarks on establishing a 'Palace of Pleasure', a variation on the Crystal Palace 'with modifications' to include both 'libraries and reading-rooms' (*SC*, p. 70). This scheme for the Palace includes a specific location site 'about five minutes west of Stepney Green' (*SC*, p. 177).<sup>19</sup> In an article on free libraries published a year before Besant's novel, the author conceptualizes a model that conveys the imperative of Panizzi's national library to satisfy the intellectual needs of both 'a poor student' and 'the wealthiest man', and also anticipates the Palace of Delight:

The higher work of a healthy free library should be that of an Athenaeum, a centre from which advanced students can draw the accumulated experience of the highest authorities on their special subjects, and a meeting place for all the intellects of the neighbourhood — a common ground on which clubs for the most varied purposes can meet to contribute their quota of knowledge and

agree as to its further distribution, whether by exhibitions, museums, classes, or lectures.<sup>20</sup>

While Besant's fiction is less explicit about the library as the heart of his Athenaeum-turned-Palace, the parallels are clear.

Angela bankrolls this vision of a 'Palace of Delight' as a meeting-place where reading, as one of several species of 'delight', mingles with other activities including art-production and exhibitions, music and dancing, all combining into an urban utopia to offset the dystopic East End slums. Intent on expanding and managing time not devoted to work, Angela insists that this Palace of Delight is meant to prompt discontent to stimulate social reform. To those who fear her project 'will only make other girls discontented', Angela responds that 'unless they are discontented, there will be no improvement' (*SC*, p. 103). By introducing the East End poor to 'new forms of delight' Angela hopes to 'give them a craving for things of which as yet they knew nothing' (*SC*, p. 176). The Palace of Delight consists of three halls, one for dancing, one for art exhibitions, and 'the last was to be a library, reading and writing-room' (*SC*, p. 177). To stimulate and discipline new appetites, Angela links books, art, and music as creative commodities for inhabitants of this 'utterly unknown' urban area to consume. Similar to Panizzi's vision, this East End Palace of Delight would consist of a library and a reading room as a college to fill the gap left by the early leaving age of local schools for poor boys and girls. The novel construes the East End library as a multipurpose and egalitarian space quite distinct from the British Museum. Indeed, Bloomsbury's national library and the surrounding museum departments are indifferent or hostile to Daniel Fagg, an Australian transplant to the East End who has sought in vain subscriptions at the British Museum for his book on ancient Hebrew inscriptions he has found there. Fagg's great discovery, detailed in his book, is that Hebrew is 'the common language' (*SC*, p. 212), the key to these ancient inscriptions at the British Museum.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to his treatment at the British Museum, Angela's East End community offers the solace and support that Daniel, who is penniless and starving, has craved:

Why, if the British Museum people treated him with contumely, if nobody would subscribe to his book, if he was weary of asking and being refused, here was a haven of refuge where he would receive some of the honour due to a scholar. (*SC*, p. 210)

Levy's essay on the British Museum Reading Room construes it as 'a refuge, in more senses than one, for the destitute', and Besant's novel fashions the Palace of Delight for



the people as such a shelter.<sup>22</sup> Completion of the Palace converges with the novel's closure; Angela conducts a tour through the building, but its daily use remains a vision rather than a narrative reality, something the novel's subtitle, 'An Impossible Story', even forecasts, if historical events were shortly to belie this impossibility. After unveiling the gymnasium and theatre and concert hall, Angela pauses at the library: 'It was a noble room, fitted with shelves and the beginning of a great library', a place where working people 'may come, when they please, to read and study' (*SC*, p. 411). Angela's marriage to Harry Goslett, 'the son of a common soldier' (*SC*, p. 425), who realizes his East End origins much to the dismay of the heiress's family, finally upstages the focus on the newly constructed Palace of Delight. Yet the language of the conclusion invites a sequel of sorts beyond the book's final pages. Fresh from her wedding ceremony, Angela delivers her 'first and last public speech': 'I declare this Palace of Delight open, the property of the people, to be administered and governed by them and them alone, in trust for each other' (*SC*, pp. 431–32).

This impossibly Edenic 'Garden of Delight,' also described as 'a glorified Crystal Palace' (*SC*, p. 425), established a powerful vision beyond the novel's end, an idea that gained momentum and fuelled construction in the Mile End Road. Two years after Besant's novel was published, the Beaumont Trust, a charitable fund, sought contributions to finance the People's Palace as an educational facility, a kind of 'bricks-and-mortar' reform for the poor to 'improve themselves from the inside'.<sup>23</sup> However, the campaign to attract donations was derailed in part, according to Simon Joyce, by two external events, the West End riots of 1886–87, including 'Bloody Sunday' at Trafalgar Square, and the Ripper murders of 1888.<sup>24</sup> With contributions drying up, Joyce argues, the People's Palace drifted further and further from Besant's Palace of Delight with the overall shift of its function towards the middle class, and an appeal to local residents as an educational rather than a recreational site. Rather than a Palace of Delight as a 'club for the working people', according to the visionary Angela, in which local residents would 'make our enjoyment by ourselves' (*SC*, p. 411), the People's Palace functioned more as a makeshift vocational experiment, a philanthropic project undermined by 'a sublimated fear of class conflict' stirred by the riots, radicalism, and East End crime.<sup>25</sup> The People's Palace Library nevertheless offers an intriguing parallel to East End social reform work of other middle-class women who were likewise readers at the British Museum, including Harkness, Potter (later Webb), Marx, Annie Besant, and Clementina Black. Emma Francis usefully

distinguishes varied involvements of these socialist feminists, from investigative journalism to organizational and bureaucratic work, to fictional accounts, with her particular interest in Clementina Black's role in organizing the match girls' strike of 1888, the subsequent unionization of women workers, and her publications on these and related issues.<sup>26</sup> I would suggest that Constance Black's one-year career as librarian at the People's Palace is part of this larger picture of middle-class women pursuing reforms on behalf of working-class people in the East End. While Black's employment as a librarian expanded career opportunities for other middle-class women, her dedication to broadening the intellectual opportunities of local readers who entered the People's Palace must be viewed in relation to the range of social reform work of her sister and friends. Black's depiction of the reading tastes and challenges of 'rough readers' at the People's Palace also reveals a different facet of discontent, one not readily redirected as Besant's heroine imagines or Black attempts to discipline.

### III

#### **The Octagon at the People's Palace**

According to Baedeker's guide, the People's Palace was intended to provide for the 'recreation and amusement, the intellectual and material advancement of the vast artisan population of the East End'.<sup>27</sup> As the showpiece for a refurbishment of the East End, the People's Palace was enthusiastically embraced by Londoners as a magnificent venue to complement Alexandra Palace in North London, the Crystal Palace to the south in Sydenham, and the array of theatres, museums, and galleries populating the West End. Queen Victoria launched the first phase of the construction in May 1887 in Mile End with the completion of the Queen's Hall, an edifice decorated with twenty-two statues of queens across history and across Europe and Asia Minor, from Esther of Persia to Victoria.<sup>28</sup> Despite enthusiastic tributes in the press celebrating this East End 'Palace' that mirrored majestic public spaces across London, some descriptions were far from optimistic. Margaret Harkness's novel *Out of Work* (1888) counterpoints Besant's depiction in fiction and in journal accounts. Instead Harkness converts the occasion of the opening of the People's Palace into a festival of self-congratulatory philanthropy in which the periodical press represses

the hisses which the denizens of the slums had mingled with faint applause as Her Majesty neared her destination; no one would hint that the crowd about the Palace of Delight had a sullen, ugly look which may a year or so hence prove dangerous.<sup>29</sup>

Like one of the whitewashing press reports Harkness mentions, Besant wrote an article in July 1888 to promote the Palace's opening; he asserts that the members of the Palace belong 'absolutely to the working classes', that they 'are not of the lowest class [...] if they were, they would not stay in so orderly and civilized a place; but they are "respectable." They are those who work with their hands; both girls and lads.' Where the British Museum Reading Room handbook requires 'Respectability' as a class marker for its readers, Besant expects the same of the people in the People's Palace who, he adds, 'belong to the "better class" of labour'.<sup>30</sup> The resemblance between the two reading rooms also captures what Deborah Weiner calls Besant's 'gift of West End culture offered to the East End' in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*. Weiner insists that the People's Palace Reading Room was 'self-consciously modeled, albeit on a smaller scale, on that of the British Museum'.<sup>31</sup> In the case of both Besant's fictional Palace of Delight and his actual People's Palace, romance battled with reality.<sup>32</sup>

Whether Besant, registered as a reader at the British Museum from the 1870s, had the Reading Room of the British Museum in mind as a model in his novel, that space clearly was an inspiration for the East End construction.<sup>33</sup> A note in a June 1888 issue of *The Palace Journal* on the new library makes explicit this influence: 'East London is now to have a splendid Library, established in a room the like of which does not exist except at the British Museum.'<sup>34</sup> Another article from the same publication issued from the People's Palace elaborates that 'the room is arranged on principles of the British Museum; the tables instead of radiating lengthways, are arranged horizontally round the delivery desk'.<sup>35</sup> The physical structure of the People's Palace library was inspired by the round reading dome design at the British Museum, as was the Reading Room of the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane.<sup>36</sup> Designed by E. R. Robson, the Octagon, as this reading room was called, became the centrepiece of the People's Palace. A smaller-scaled and more angular version of the Bloomsbury round Reading Room, the Mile End Octagon boasted a central dome and a room with a diameter of seventy-five feet in contrast to the British Museum's 140-foot span. Metal staircases provided access to the two galleries, like the British Museum, of bookcases on the walls [*Fig. 2*].<sup>37</sup> Assistants used a funicular

railway to deliver books on overhead wires from the stacks to the librarian's central desk, a floor plan again echoing the British Museum.<sup>38</sup>



*Fig. 2: The Octagon, People's Palace*

While the designs of these two domed spaces were similar, with the librarian's desk at the centre of the catalogues, the People's Palace had far fewer desks in a different configuration than the 302 places arranged as spokes in a wheel for readers at the British Museum, which were increased with additional furniture added in the 1880s. Paralleling the instalments of the queen statues around Queen's Hall, the decorations above the book stacks and around the dome included busts of the British canon of eight male writers,

Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Johnson, Scott, Byron, and Wordsworth.<sup>39</sup> The 1907 redecoration of the British Museum Reading Room repeated six of these names, omitting Dryden and Johnson, in its band of nineteen British writers below the dome windows, the all-male canon that piques Woolf's women readers in *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *A Room of One's Own*.<sup>40</sup> That the Octagon was administered by women, including Constance Black, however, was a striking deviation at a time when librarians were typically men.<sup>41</sup>

Like the fictional Constance Woodcote and Angela Messenger, Levy and Black were Newnham students where they arrived in 1879 from Brighton High School for Girls before Besant's novel appeared in 1882. While Levy remained at Newnham only two years, Black read classical languages and philosophy there until 1883 and then moved to London. Black registered as a reader at the British Museum later that same year, on 14 December 1883, following Levy who had first obtained a reader's ticket a year earlier on 15 November 1882.<sup>42</sup> Black's address in the Reading Room book of signatures is Connaught Square in the West End, while Levy's address is Sussex Place, Regent's Park. Both women moved east in London in the next few years: Levy to Bloomsbury and a short walk from the British Museum; Black to Fitzroy Square with her sisters, and then to Whitechapel. Black briefly followed the path of Besant's Angela and for about a year lived and worked in the East End, until in August 1889 she married Edward Garnett and left both the library post and her Whitechapel housing. Her sister Clementina's acquaintance with the Garnett family, facilitated by her frequent use of the Reading Room network and Richard Garnett's readiness to dispense advice to women readers, led to Constance's invitation to tea at the Garnett residence at the British Museum, and the occasion where she met Edward. Constance Black also took guidance from Richard Garnett, who had compiled the first printed catalogue of the British Museum library, when she assembled the People's Palace library catalogue.<sup>43</sup>

That Constance Black followed her sister and her college friend to the circular British Museum Reading Room is not surprising; but how did she make her way to the People's Palace Octagon Library? With her Newnham education and with her sisters and friends already involved in activist work in the East End, Black obtained work as a teacher of Greek and Latin to the children of social investigator Charles Booth.<sup>44</sup> Booth then recommended Black to Walter Besant to serve as librarian for the reading room and library under construction in Mile End Road, and he in turn chose Black and Frances Low

as Joint Librarians despite their lack of experience and the rarity of women librarians throughout the country. When Black and Low began this position, they had over seven thousand donated books to organize into a provisional catalogue by the time the library admitted the public on 18 October 1888.<sup>45</sup> When Low resigned shortly after the library opened its doors to readers, Black was promoted to Head Librarian with an annual salary of one hundred pounds, with Olive Dymond and Minnie Stewart Rhodes James as sub-librarians.

Black published 'New Career for Women: Librarians' with details about her work at the People's Palace Library including cataloguing and supplying books to 'the East End reader', as Black termed her constituents. The article appeared in *The Queen, the Lady's Newspaper*, a periodical that had undergone various transformations in title, editorship, and slant since its launch in the 1860s. By the end of the century, as Margaret Beetham has discussed, *The Queen* offered 'cautious but not unsympathetic comment on the demands for wider access to political and social rights, including accounts of campaigning groups and meetings and examples of women's political activities'.<sup>46</sup> Like Oscar Wilde's *The Woman's World*, *The Queen* also ran pieces to show the widening of career opportunities for middle-class women.<sup>47</sup> Where 'Constance E. Black' appears at the end of the article, the byline below the title reads: 'by The Head Librarian at the People's Palace.' Black's 'New Career' suggests a position that sanitizes social reform with gainful employment for middle-class women in the East End. The structure of the article replicates this juxtaposition as Black focuses first on the catalogue system and then a profile of her rough readers.

Black does accentuate the uniqueness of her post:

There are one or two libraries in which women are already employed as librarians; and the number of free libraries is now so rapidly increasing, that we may now confidently hope that many women may before long find congenial employment and a modest remuneration in this calling.<sup>48</sup>

The public library movement reached beyond Panizzi's Reading Room at the British Museum by requiring neither fees nor letters of sponsorship. But despite the principle of open access in theory, most public libraries at the turn of the century made requesting an item formidable and handling a book only possible after a series of steps that deterred 'the reading proletariat'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, an 1881 *Macmillan's Magazine* article titled 'Free Libraries

and their Working' voices the prejudices with which public librarians encountered their readers:

Imagine the strain upon a careful librarian's judgment when a chimney-sweep sends for the first volume of Grote's *History of Greece*. Is he justified in putting a costly book into hands so far from clean? Is there any mistake as to the spelling of the subject? His anxiety is succeeded by relief when in due time the first volume is returned without readers' marks of any kind; and by surprise when the second and each of the twelve in succession is duly taken out and read.<sup>50</sup>

While this male librarian is duly astonished as his assumptions about the 'chimney-sweep' reader are dispelled, the passage captures the cross-class collisions in the new free libraries.

Black qualifies that 'the actual working' of the library of the People's Palace is 'presided over by ladies only'. So does Besant's column on the People's Palace accentuate that the librarians who 'sit to advise the readers, to receive and to give out the books' are 'two ladies'.<sup>51</sup> Focusing nearly half the short article on the process of organizing the library holdings by subject and author, Black offers the list of categories, and then asks, 'In which of these shall we place "Female Life in Prison," "One Thousand Wonderful Things," "Club and Club Life in London" and the "Story of a Popular Delusion?"'<sup>52</sup> Unlike the British Museum national library, where British publishers were required to deposit each book published in Britain at the library according to the Imperial Copyright Act, the holdings at the People's Palace library were largely the result of donations. The odd assortment of titles suggests the rather random nature of the collection. Yet readers registered their preferences, if not always following the 'advice' bestowed by the librarians. Besant's 1888 essay gives a preview of the Mile End reading appetite; he notes that 'as yet we have no lay student class' and that reading for 'amusement' rather than for edification directs the selection of books: 'Thus, out of 569 books taken out in four days, 448 were works of fiction. The chief favorite is Captain Marryat.'<sup>53</sup> With both land or sea tales of battles appealing to young males, an assistant at the Octagon later commented that 'indexing war periods' through many volumes of histories would facilitate retrieving books on popular topics.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, Joyce's assessment of the Palace of Delight in Besant's novel as 'bourgeois slum clearance in the guise of autonomous working-class activism' also characterizes the work these Octagon librarians pursue.<sup>55</sup> According to the 1881

*Macmillan's* article, the principal purpose of the free library is 'employing the leisure time of the working classes in a more rational way, and weaning them from the degrading haunts of drink and vice through its newspapers,' and thus through newspapers and books 'carrying on the education of the coming race'.<sup>56</sup> The same essay cautions that 'it is a mistake for the well-to-do classes to think that a free library should be treated like a charitable institution, and left for the use of the poor only'.<sup>57</sup> Yet all accounts of the People's Palace library indicate the class distinction between 'well-to-do' librarians and poor and even newly literate readers. To Black, the readers in the Octagon 'belong mostly to the less educated classes' with little leisure time. Given the schedule of working people, Black mentions the generous hours of operation, fourteen hours every day except Sundays when the library opened from three in the afternoon until ten in the evening. Sunday hours especially imply working-class readers, the ones Besant takes pain to qualify as 'respectable' and members of the "'better class" of labour'. His description of the Sunday readers matches this social class distinction: 'The place is always well filled. On Sundays, especially, when the librarian's work is done by volunteers, it is crammed with orderly and quiet readers, who find here a place for rest and reading.' Despite the 'crammed' overflowing space, Besant insists that these 'respectable' workers, even if their reading is for 'amusement' rather than education, still constitute at the People's Palace 'a strong and wholesome corporate life. Friendships are made which will be life long; the lads are finding out each other as young men do at Oxford or Cambridge'. This 'wholesome corporate life' as the East End variation on Oxbridge, however, takes on a different cast in the librarians' accounts.<sup>58</sup>

That the library doubled as a community centre that had a disciplinary purpose emerges in a comment by Minnie Stewart Rhodes Jones, one of Black's assistants: 'The class of people to be seen in the reading room would be for the most part spending Sunday in aimlessly loafing about the streets, or worse still.'<sup>59</sup> Jones's words echo the 'first important work' cited in the *Macmillan's* article on free libraries, to occupy 'the leisure time of the working classes in a more rational way', one that diverts them from 'drink and vice'.<sup>60</sup> Like Levy's assertion that the British Museum Reading Room served as a 'refuge, in more senses than one', the Octagon had a similar purpose. The broader accessibility to the library contrasts with the British Museum, although briefly the Reading Room there was also open on Sundays and evenings after protests were launched over the limited



hours. The regular Sunday hours at the Octagon, however, made this East End library again a pioneer.<sup>61</sup>

Like the holdings in the collection, those who frequent the library are also categorized by Black as she proposes three different kinds of readers: ‘the Mile-end reader, the man of learning, and the bibliophile.’<sup>62</sup> Black’s reading classes differ from Besant’s holistic profile of East End ‘respectable’ Oxbridge types. Offering a taxonomy of ‘the East End reader’, for the most part ‘young and inexperienced’, Black goes on to distinguish ‘the rough lads and men’ from the ‘girls’. Where the British Museum stipulated an age requirement for admission, the Octagon again maintained a more liberal open door policy. All ages were admitted, although boys between twelve and fifteen were ‘segregated’ for special surveillance.<sup>63</sup> Gender-specific spaces for these youthful readers figured in Besant’s account of a planned, but never realized, ‘ante-room of the library’ to be

given over entirely for the use of the girls who form the “Lady Members.” They will then have all to themselves, under the government of their own committee, their own music room, tea room, reading and writing room, and conversation room.<sup>64</sup>

Again, Besant’s vision of the People’s Palace where the people, in this case the ‘Lady Members’, will manage the operations of their ‘corporate life’, seems more consistent with his novel than with descriptions by the middle-class librarians such as Black imported to supervise the use of books.

Nowhere in these accounts is evidence of the ‘orderly and quiet readers’ Besant extols. For instance, Jones organized a Sunday class for factory girls whom she describes as ‘very good-hearted, and very kind to one another; but they will not be quiet, they disturb other people in the place, and, after a time, they have to be turned out’.<sup>65</sup> For Black, the East End male reader poses challenges, particularly ‘facetious youths’ who give their names as ‘Jack the Ripper’ or ‘Ally Sloper’. This last name refers to a Victorian comic strip character who was distinguished by angling down alleys to avoid creditors, a kind of humorous urban tramp. The first name, though, suggests the macabre rather than the comical view of the local environment, given that it was the pseudonym for the unidentified serial killer of prostitutes in the immediate vicinity of Whitechapel in 1888 when the People’s Palace Library opened and Black lived in Wentworth Street. Although Black mentions ‘Jack the Ripper’ ostensibly as an example of the ‘light sallies’ from the

‘rough lads’ of ‘the less educated classes’ that librarians encounter, the striking allusion also underscores the dangers for women in public, whether ‘public women’ as a euphemism for streetwalkers, or more broadly, any woman travelling alone in the immediate environment, whether factory workers, slummers, or activists. A police report asserts that ‘females attending the People’s Palace were continually being molested in the Mile-end-road by roughs’.<sup>66</sup> Whether this eruption of violent urban crime in Whitechapel compromised the ultimate success of the People’s Palace, that Jones even mentions the invented names of these ‘facetious’ readers registers some cross-class discomfort at least for middle-class women librarians in relation to the ‘rough’ people they serve.

The Octagon librarians struggled to engage their local readers and at the same time discipline their reading diets. Black notes that the ‘East End reader’ has ‘a pronounced taste in reading’, often on violent or otherwise treacherous subjects: a book titled ‘Jail Birds’ perfectly suits one male reader who recently had been imprisoned.<sup>67</sup> Volumes with illustrated war stories also hold appeal to these readers, along with guide-books and natural histories. Such reading interests do not suggest the industrious and ‘quiet and orderly’ workers who congregate at the People’s Palace as their local alternative for Oxbridge in Besant’s account. Nevertheless, Black implies that East End male readers are easier to accommodate than their counterparts. Where Black’s class and gender differences from these male ‘rough readers’ function as a shield of distance in those interactions, her reactions to her female readers are more ambivalent. On the one hand, she appreciates the frustrations of so-called suitable reading offered to girls: ‘Girls are difficult to suit; the books offered them will probably be condemned either for “childishness” or “dulness:” there are few books for girls infected with neither vice.’<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, Black does not perceive more complex social differences behind the discontent of these working-girl readers. She concludes with a cameo of the tastes of the East End reader and offers a list of authors including Stevenson, Marryat, Collins, Dickens, and, for representative ‘lady novelists’, sensation writers Ellen Price Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon.<sup>69</sup> James expands this list of requested authors to include ‘oddly enough, Swift and Fielding’, and she accounts for the enormous influence of Braddon on readers at the Octagon from ubiquitous posters in the neighbourhood advertising her books.<sup>70</sup> Whether impressionable due to their youth or to their limited education and other opportunities, these East End readers challenge not only Besant’s vision of ‘orderly and quiet readers’ participating in a ‘wholesome corporate life’ at the Palace, but also the Octagon librarians

who seem intent on a reading programme as part of a cultural uplift project. Braddon's appeal across class lines was evident from the massive popularity of her early sensation novels, perhaps not surprising since initially she wrote for the penny fiction market. One reviewer made clear how Braddon's serialized novels of the 1860s conflated readerships by 'making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room'.<sup>71</sup> The continued success of Braddon's fiction to Octagon readers, in James's account, likely exceeds the public advertising in the streets. More interesting is James's perplexity at the interest here in Swift and Fielding, another instance where the expectations of the middle-class librarians clash with the actual choices of their rough readers, much like the free librarian's surprise at the chimney-sweep's selection of the multi-volume *History of Greece*.

The educational mission of the Octagon surfaces in another 1889 article in *The Echo* on the role of a lady librarian:

It should be a part of her duty to read and explain books, say, once a week, to any girls who choose to listen [...]. It is not enough to plant working girls in a library and expect them to get any profit of pleasure out of reading unless the books are carefully written for them and they themselves helped a little to understand better books, so that they ultimately read them of their own accord.<sup>72</sup>

This remark clarifies the class conditions of literacy inasmuch as it challenges John Ruskin's advice in 'Of Queens' Gardens' to let girls 'loose in the library [...] as you do a fawn in the field'. Here the author makes explicit the necessity to discipline the reading diet of 'working girls' who will not be able to distinguish 'the bad weed' from the good variety, a power of discernment Ruskin attributes to his middle-class girl let loose in her father's library.<sup>73</sup> On the subject of books this fawn-like girl reader might encounter through a public library, however, Ruskin is less sanguine. Among these she may not have the ability to choose: 'only let us be sure that her books are not heaped up in her lap as they fall out of the package of the circulating library, wet with the last and lightest spray of the fountain of folly'.<sup>74</sup> Given that working-class girls lacked the presorted 'field' of Ruskin's home library or disciplined tastes through family reading, the Octagon librarians understand their mission to cultivate an appetite for 'better books'. Adapting a variation on family reading, a common practice in middle-class homes, the librarian in the *Echo* article stresses the crucial role of communal reading and recounts reading Tennyson's narrative poem 'Dora' to 'a set of rough factory girls — and the result was that there was a

regular run on Tennyson for some time'.<sup>75</sup> In effect, the librarian in the Octagon plays the role of the middle-class mother reading to her children, a patronizing relationship that collides with Besant's sketch of the People's Palace 'Lady Members' with a reading and writing room of their own. The ambivalent benevolence of these Octagon librarians is part of a larger story about middle-class women's contributions to social reform projects in the East End, activism that attracted several of Black's British Museum Reading Room colleagues.<sup>76</sup> If Black and her librarian associates gave to their working-class readers the benefit of their cultural capital by reading aloud Tennyson in the People's Palace, they also gained a sense of independence through their salaried position and status as supervisors at the helm of the library much like Richard Garnett's post as Superintendent of the Reading Room of the British Museum. Black resigned her post in summer 1889, just prior to her marriage to Edward Garnett in August. At that point, Dymond completed the catalogue which was printed in September. A few years later, Richard Garnett's daughter Olive took a friend curious to see East End life to the People's Palace. She records this visit in her diary:

The only signs of activity we found were in the Reading Room & in the Queen's Hall where a school & a few people were looking at a puppet show [...]. Everything else was shut up, no one about [...]. I fear the gigantic scheme is a gigantic failure. Except the Reading-Room.<sup>77</sup>

#### IV

#### Public Space Geometries

Although 'the wholesome corporate life' Besant recommends does not stand out in Black's account of her work at the People's Palace Library and the realization of a Palace of Delight ultimately fails, outside its doors in the vicinity were other places where middle-class reformers and working-class residents congregated. While employed at the Octagon, Constance Black lived nearby in College Buildings, Wentworth Street, near Toynbee Hall, the settlement house founded in 1884 in Whitechapel, about midway between the murders and the People's Palace. According to her grandson's biography of her, she supplied a description of these red-brick industrial buildings for the second volume of Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* in a section titled 'Blocks of Model Dwellings'. Black's 'Sketch of Life in Buildings' signed by 'A Lady

Resident' details the physical layout and descriptions of the inhabitants. The anonymous byline here clashes with forthright attribution of her *Queen* essay, perhaps suggesting a diffidence about the role of social investigator of this 'Lady Resident' surrounded by neighbours who are not ladies.<sup>78</sup> The author of this article is keenly attuned to social rank, as she mentions: 'Life in "Buildings," we may say, depends more on the class of inhabitants than on structural arrangements.' The 'Lady Resident' then describes the tendency of buildings to form 'a certain character' that reinforces segregation:

Racial prejudices keep the Christians apart from the Jews, and a taste for cleanliness or for quietness determines folk who can afford to indulge it to spend more on rent for the sake of mixing with those who are "particular," and who "keep themselves to themselves."

Recognizing that residents within building complexes might cling to their immediate neighbourhood, the writer also elaborates on the important effects of common rooms, balconies, and an enclosed court for promoting social interactions. Chief among the advantages she identifies with this urban housing development is communal, including 'neighbourly intercourse both between children and between the grown-up people, and, perhaps above all, the impossibility of being overlooked altogether'.<sup>79</sup> Even the disadvantages of lack of privacy along with 'the increased facility for gossip and quarrelling' also proves to have merit as it brings a 'constant variety of petting interest and personal feeling into the monotony of daily life'. This benefit of shared public space, of exteriority, of a 'corporate life', likewise emerges in the uneven appeal of the reading rooms of the British Museum and the People's Palace. Whether she lived in Wentworth Street as this 'Lady Resident', Black did occupy workers' housing in Royal Mint Square, also close to the Whitechapel murders. Here she was surrounded by familiar reformers and philanthropists, including her sister Kate and her husband, and Olive Dymond, the sub-librarian at the Octagon, as well as a former student from Newnham, like Black and Levy.<sup>80</sup>

By comparing the networked communities in these two public reading rooms of the British Museum and the People's Palace, we can appreciate how the Bloomsbury and People's Palace libraries fostered opportunities for middle-class women, but also how the Octagon accounts suggest stubborn class barriers between the librarians and their young working-class readers. The British Museum signified a space for women intellectuals and activists and writers to congregate in public. If the short-lived library in Mile End Road

provided the same middle-class women new freedoms to move about the city for employment or reform work, the value of a networking ‘corporate life’ in the People’s Palace Library is less evident for poorer classes of people from the immediate neighbourhood. In contrast to the camaraderie through identification among aspiring middle-class women readers at the British Museum seeking meaningful work beyond their homes, Black’s writing on her ‘rough readers’ articulates the challenges of connection between the classes. The failure of Besant’s promise to give East End readers not just a library but a palace of their own possibly stemmed from difficulties of communication and community across class divisions, in addition to the factors Joyce presents. Despite Panizzi’s manifesto of the British Museum library as democracy in practice, discontent abounded over such social mixing, as in a *Saturday Review* article published only five years after the new round Reading Room opened in Bloomsbury: ‘The library ought to be accessible to all literary workers, while it should be kept free from the common ruck of idlers who habitually infest every public room in the metropolis.’<sup>81</sup> Levy’s essay counters these attacks by extolling the importance of the British Museum Reading Room as ‘a shelter, — a refuge in more senses than one, for the destitute’, a formulation that resonates with Besant’s Palace of Delight and that mingles with his initial ideas for the People’s Palace as a multipurpose space to serve the recreational and educational interests of its working-class members.<sup>82</sup> As we have seen, however, Black and her co-workers at the Octagon confront as they attempt to bridge the evident social distance from their readers.

Unlike her British Museum friends Constance and Clementina Black, Eleanor Marx, Margaret Harkness, and Beatrice Potter, Levy did not pursue activist work in the East End. In her essay ‘Why Wasn’t Amy Levy More of a Socialist?’, Emma Francis explores a scholarly tendency to convert Levy either into a working-class heroine or into a ‘a socialist, or at least a social liberal who had direct engagement with reformist or radical social movements’.<sup>83</sup> If her close friends including the Black sisters and Marx did live or work in the East End on behalf of working-class labourers there, it remains unclear even from Levy’s 1889 diary if she actually travelled in this area of London.<sup>84</sup> She did creatively visit the same neighbourhood of Whitechapel and Mile End in two poems in her collection *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (1889). Levy’s East End lyrics provide another genre in which New Women writers imagined this London neighbourhood and the pleasures and perils of circulating through public spaces of the city: this particular area identified with a growing immigrant Jewish population and violent urban crime. Alex

Goody notes that Levy's writings encompass two late-Victorian figures of otherness — the New Woman and the Jew, both 'impossible, irreconcilable figures who nonetheless serve to delineate a space of possibility'.<sup>85</sup> Simon Joyce has contended that social unrest through riots and violent outrage may have contributed to the slackening of middle-class support for the People's Palace. I have argued that the distancing gaze Constance Black and her colleagues turned on their 'rough readers' in the Whitechapel library collides against the project of collaborative networking in Besant's fictional vision and in his journal promotions.

I turn here to Levy's East End poems to explore how the lyrical form facilitates a creative space for connection through the fluidity of identification in the space of the street rather than the domed sphere of the Octagon, which signified, in Weiner's apt phrase, 'a gift of West End culture offered to the East End'.<sup>86</sup> Levy instead opens up imaginative room in her poems of Whitechapel streets for the promise as well as the difficulties of links across gulfs of wealth and poverty, life and death. Ironically, Levy chooses an exterior street — the very one in which stood the People's Palace — to pose the inwardness of her imaginative travels there in London, in contrast to the actual work Black pursued with her Mile End readers. Levy's poems evoke the dangers and transgressive desires of the East End publicized in the late 1880s. 'Ballade of a Special Edition' poses the violence advertised and sold through the news, like the Whitechapel murders that occurred while her friends were pursuing social reform and living in the vicinity.<sup>87</sup> Rather than advocating increased restrictions on women's mobility through the city, the poem seems to assail the tendency of the media to circulate sensationalized accounts of crimes to frighten women from moving through the streets. Goody reads the poem as 'a specific critique of New Journalistic or media constructs of Outcast London in which the East End (and the Mile End Road specifically) function as signifiers of the horrors of urban life and the depths of darkest London'.<sup>88</sup> The other poem, 'In the Mile End Road', suggests the clandestine, fraught desires of same-sex love and identifications as unfixed and slippery. Taken together, these poems imagine the East End street as a space of urgent, vital connections, both deadly violent and intensely passionate. In contrast to Black's rendition of the interior space of the Octagon as one of cross-class active and fraught engagement, Levy's poems imagine the very street where the People's Palace stood as one of powerful, yet ultimately only symbolic, proximity.

‘Ballad of a Special Edition’ foregrounds the news vendor as ‘Bird of ill omen, flapping wide | The pinion of a printed sheet.’ He hawks both ‘Shocking Accidents’ and other sensational urban horrors from ‘slaughter, theft, and suicide’ to ‘A double murder in Mile End!’ This last line constitutes the poem’s refrain, repeated three times, and so capitalizes on the profile of violence aligned with this sector of London geography. However, Levy’s poem also protests the cheap thrills of commercializing violence, where the ‘tale of horror incomplete’ are ‘Those sounds which do mine ears offend.’ The poem is less a warning to keep women off the local streets than a condemnation of the exploitative voicing of these reports of violence, the conversion of violence against women in public into a demeaning commodity. ‘In the Mile End Road’ imagines the walker encountering a lover in this ‘crowded street’. Rather than the unexpected destructions broadcast in the ‘Ballad of a Special Edition’, here the East End thoroughfare, where the People’s Palace had just opened its doors, becomes a site for the memory of love. As the speaker sees ‘my only love’ in the street, a different kind of imaginative vision unfolds, one that echoes the entitled event in Levy’s story, ‘The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Museum’, in which an unrequited lover appears by the card catalogue as an apparition after death to a Reading Room habitué.<sup>89</sup> But instead of that heterosexual spiritual chance meeting in the British Museum, the poem’s ambiguously gendered speaker apprehends the appearance of a lover in the Mile End Road.<sup>90</sup>

HOW like her! But ‘tis she herself,  
 Comes up the crowded street,  
 How little did I think, the morn,  
 My only love to meet!

Whose else that motion and that mien?  
 Whose else that airy tread?  
 For one strange moment I forgot  
 My only love was dead.

The poem offers a multiplicity of blurriness: between the present moment in the street and the recent past of ‘the morn’; between bustling ‘motion’ of a walking ‘tread’ and the utter stillness of the final syllable ‘dead’ with the full stop that halts the poem’s metric movement. Yet the most radical facet is the pronoun puzzling that surges toward identification between the speaker’s ‘I’ and the lover’s ‘she herself.’ The ‘dead’ lover also loops back to ‘Ballade of a Special Edition’ with its ‘double murder in Mile End Road’. Only this poem implies a different ‘double’ transgression of the laws of life and



sanctioned sexuality, as unvoiced as the Mile End murders are egregiously broadcast. Both poems do exploit the geographical coding of the East End with violent crime, prostitution, opium den intoxication, and social unrest, traces of which circulate — whether humorously or threateningly — in accounts of public libraries. The speaker of Levy's 'In the Mile End Road' inhabits the very neighbourhood of the People's Palace and the Whitechapel murders. Yet the poem affiliates this East End geography with love, not violence, with porous borders rather than insuperable chasms.

As Goody reminds us, Levy's 'In the Mile End Road' offers an 'ambiguous space [...] at once a space of multiculturalism, peripatetic pleasure, democracy and progressivism', an address which Goody also identifies with the People's Palace opening.<sup>91</sup> I would also compare Levy's exterior East End street in these pair of poems with her prose account of the Reading Room of the British Museum as 'a workshop [...] a lounge [...] a shelter, — a refuge, in more ways than one, for the destitute'.<sup>92</sup> These intertwined versions of the Bloomsbury national library or a Whitechapel road, both spaces of desperate or delightful affiliation, clashes with the disciplining engagement of the Octagon librarians with their Mile End readers. Different kinds of exteriorities emerge in analysing these networking emplacements — to use Foucault's theory of modern space — of reading rooms and streets.<sup>93</sup> East Endness figures into this assessment of late-Victorian exteriority, especially for new 'public' women like Levy and Black. I have discovered more resemblance between the British Museum Reading Room and the Mile End Road as heterotopic spaces of uncertain transition and radical possibilities in Levy's essay and in her poems. The representations of the People's Palace I have traced, both Besant's urban romance of his fictional Palace of Delight and his cheery article on the new Mile End Road edifice as a utopian place, spar with the accounts of the Octagon librarians who instead register the divides of social class difference that they would rather efface by assimilating the unruly 'rough readers' into middle-class reading tastes. Nevertheless, Constance Black and her colleagues did engage directly with Mile End users of the library. Like periodical accounts of the British Museum Reading Room, Black's writing about the People's Palace library suggests an exteriority where middle-class women pursue new careers. If Black and her co-librarians seem to project their aspirations and values onto their local readers, even so they describe ongoing, actual encounters in this heterogeneous exterior space. Levy's exteriority, rendered through her Mile End poems, is impressionistic with some suggestive implications about fluid identities and

identifications; her treatment of the Reading Room of the British Museum as likewise a variegated space of social, intellectual, and material possibilities. Yet ultimately in practice she remained caught or limited by her own interiority, whereas Constance Black along with her fellow librarians at the People's Palace participated in a messy exteriority, one that entailed working across social differences.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Levy, 'Readers at the British Museum', in *The Romance of a Shop*, ed. by Susan David Bernstein (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2006), pp. 220–27 (p. 227) (first publ. in *Atalanta*, April 1888, pp. 449–54).

<sup>2</sup> Both the essay and the short story appeared in Oscar Wilde's magazine *The Woman's World*: 'The Poetry of Christina Rossetti', *Woman's World*, 1 (1888), 178–80; 'Eldorado at Islington', *Woman's World*, 2 (1889), 488–89. Both are reprinted in *The Romance of a Shop*, ed. by Bernstein, pp. 204–13, 227–31, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> For elaboration on this argument see two articles: Susan David Bernstein, 'Radical Readers at the British Museum: Eleanor Marx, Clementina Black, Amy Levy', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 3.2 (2007) <<http://ncgsjournal.com/issue32/bernstein.htm>> [accessed 23 December 2011]; Susan David Bernstein, 'Too Common Readers at the British Museum', in *Victorian Vulgarity*, ed. by Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 101–17.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Walkowitz describes the British Museum Reading Room as social gatherings of 'heterodox men and women' as well other heterosocial and homosocial spaces of late-Victorian London including discussion clubs and settlement houses, in *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 69. Vadillo devotes a chapter to Bloomsbury and women poets who lived near and worked at the British Museum: Ana Parejo Vadillo, 'Amy Levy in Bloomsbury', in *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 38–77. For studies of women in urban streets in nineteenth-century literature, see Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 11–12.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Garnett, *Constance Garnett: A Heroic Life* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1991), p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Levy, 'Readers at the British Museum', p. 221.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Marjorie Caygill, *The British Museum Reading Room* (London: The British Museum, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Night*, pp. 68–69.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of 'knowledge commons' encompasses diverse forms of knowledge made possible by the Internet; today libraries are repurposing their spaces to accommodate both print, archival, and digital sources under this term. I use 'knowledge commons' to mark the networking of knowledges in Panizzi's Reading Room of the British Museum. For discussions of 'knowledge commons' and knowledge as a shared social,

ecological, and material system, see *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons*, ed. by Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Nichols, *A Handbook for Readers at the British Museum* (London: Longmans, Green, 1866), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Nichols, *Handbook*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1998), p. 215.

<sup>14</sup> Applications for Reading Room Tickets, 1872–1879, Vol II, London, British Library, Add. MS 45.748, fols 2–4, No. 8401. The letter is dated 15 October 1877.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Stallybrass, ‘Marx’s Coat’, in *Border Fetishisms; Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. by Patricia Spyer (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 183–207 (p. 187).

<sup>16</sup> Applications for Reading Room Tickets, 1872–1879, Vol. II, Add. MS 45.748, fols 16–17, No. 2556. The letter is dated 13 April 1874.

<sup>17</sup> For details on how the People’s Palace emerged from Besant’s novel and the establishment of the Beaumont Trust, a charitable fund to finance the building, see Simon Joyce, *Capital Offenses: Geographies of Class and Crime in Victorian London* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 191–92. For recent scholarship on the late-Victorian East End and women’s engagement with social reform, see Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870–1900: Beauty for the People* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Walter Besant, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 28. Further references to this edition will be given after quotations in the text and prefixed *SC*.

<sup>19</sup> Besant’s words do indeed locate the Palace project ‘west of Stepney Green’, while the actual construction a few years later happened east of Stepney Green, yet still on Mile End Road.

<sup>20</sup> W. Odell, jun., ‘Free Libraries and their Working’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 258 (1881), 439–51 (p. 442).

<sup>21</sup> This focus on Hebrew as the lingua franca of ancient Egypt, Syria, Arabia, Phoenicia, and Judea is not surprising given Besant’s Christian Zionism (*SC*, p. 212). At the time he wrote the novel, he was serving as secretary to the Palestine Exploration Fund. Angela refers to Fagg as ‘a Hebrew scholar’ whose research took place in the British Museum, like Emanuel Deutsch, the Talmudic scholar employed at the British Museum as an assistant in the Department of Printed Books who tutored George Eliot in Hebrew and Talmudic studies (*SC*, p. 238). Although Besant’s allusions to Jewishness are elusive, such as these references to ancient Hebrew or a character named Josephus, the East End of London in the 1880s attracted Eastern European Jewish immigrants too, perhaps another facet of Besant’s varied populace in the novel’s title.

<sup>22</sup> Levy, ‘Readers at the British Museum’, p. 227.

<sup>23</sup> See Joyce, *Capital Offenses*, p. 192. A biographical note on Amy Levy associates Levy and her father as secretary and organizer of the Beaumont Fund. See ‘Amy Levy’, *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 589. However, Linda Hunt Beckman disputes this attribution and identifies other Levys associated with the Beaumont Trust. See Beckman, *Amy*

*Levy: Her Life and Letters* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), pp. 4, 6, 284. Although Beckman distances Levy from the People's Palace initiative, she does note that her friend Constance Black was the librarian (p. 283). Emma Francis also discusses how this mistaken identity offered one piece of false evidence that some scholars drew on to claim Levy was active in socialist reform like her friends. See Emma Francis, 'Why Wasn't Amy Levy More of a Socialist?: Levy, Clementina Black, and Liza of Lambeth', in *Amy Levy: Critical Essays*, ed. by Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 47–69 (p. 48).

<sup>24</sup> Joyce, *Capital Offenses*, p. 192.

<sup>25</sup> Joyce, *Capital Offenses*, p. 206. Constance Black's sister Clementina Black helped to organize sweated women labourers in the East End and published on this work in both fiction and journal articles; along with Annie Besant and Margaret Harkness, she worked on behalf of the matchbox makers in the 1888 Bryant and May strike. See Bernstein, 'Radical Readers' on Black, Marx, and Levy. Also see Francis, 'Why Wasn't Amy Levy More of a Socialist?' for a detailed discussion of Clementina Black's committed efforts on behalf of working-class women.

<sup>26</sup> Francis, 'Why Wasn't Amy Levy More of a Socialist?'. Francis mentions Constance Black (Garnett) in passing as Clementina Black's sister (p. 52).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Olive Garnett, *Tea and Anarchy! The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett 1890-1893*, ed. by Barry C. Johnson (London: Bartletts, 1989), p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> Garnett, *Constance Garnett*, p. 56. The People's Palace eventually became the Queen's Building, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, established in 1934, although the original building was partially destroyed in a fire in 1931. The original frontage designed by Robson remains as does the octagonal reading room, now part of the college library. See Garnett, *Constance Garnett*, p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Joyce, *Capital Offenses*, p. 207.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Besant, 'The People's Palace', *North American Review*, 380 (1888), 56–63 (p. 59).

<sup>31</sup> Deborah E. B. Weiner, *Architecture and Social Reform in Late-Victorian London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 186.

<sup>32</sup> *Children of Gibeon* (1886) is another novel by Besant in which he refashions the slums of East End London as romance, unlike the urban naturalism in such contemporary novels as Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* (1896), Margaret Harkness's *A City Girl* (1887) and *Out of Work* (1888), and George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889).

<sup>33</sup> Walter Besant, British Museum Reading Room Signature Book, 27 February 1875, ticket 1592. Besant also wrote a letter to the British Museum dated 12 October 1877 to request a replacement for his lost reading ticket.

<sup>34</sup> 'Notes of the Week', *Palace Journal*, 13 June 1888, p. 473.

<sup>35</sup> M. S. R. James, 'The People's Palace Library', *Palace Journal*, 1 May 1891, p. 273. Minnie Stewart Rhodes James was first an assistant librarian under Black and Low, and later a librarian there.

<sup>36</sup> See Jacqueline Banerjee, 'Architecture', in *The Victorian Web*

<<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/london/125.html>> [accessed 22 December 2011].

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<sup>37</sup> Garnett, *Constance Garnett*, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Garnett provides this description in *Constance Garnett*, p. 61.

<sup>39</sup> Garnett, *Constance Garnett*, p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> These gilt-inscribed names eventually faded over time and were fully eradicated in the 1952 renovation.

<sup>41</sup> Only Notting Hill Library employed women librarians in London before Black and Low were appointed at the People's Palace. See Peter M. Brading, 'A Brief History of the People's Palace Library, East London, 1882–1902' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sheffield, 1976). A copy is held in the Queen Mary University of London Archives.

<sup>42</sup> Constance Black, British Museum Reading Room Signature Book, 14 December 1883, ticket A17697.6236; Amy Levy, British Museum Reading Room Signature Book, 15 November 1882, ticket A13348.

<sup>43</sup> For background on Constance Black Garnett, see Richard Garnett, *Constance Garnett*, as well as Black's essay on her work as librarian at the People's Palace, 'New Career for Women: Librarians', *Queen*, 23 February 1889, p. 235.

<sup>44</sup> According to David Garnett, Black taught 'two of the almost-grown up daughters' of Booth. According to his son Richard Garnett, Black taught a son, Tom, and a daughter, Antonia. See David Garnett, *The Golden Echo* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1953), p. 8; Richard Garnett, *Constance Garnett*, p. 47. Also see Francis, 'Why Wasn't Amy Levy More of a Socialist?' for an account of her sister Clementina Black's involvement with feminist socialist reform in the East End, surely another indirect factor in Constance Black's engagement with the People's Palace.

<sup>45</sup> Garnett, *Constance Garnett*, p. 61.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 93.

<sup>47</sup> Wilde had a tenuous connection to the People's Palace too inasmuch as he wrote a letter to Sir Edmund Currie, its Director, in 1886 in which he expressed interest in the position of secretary for the Beaumont Trust. He wrote that he was 'very anxious to be connected officially with the People's Palace, as I have devoted myself entirely to the spreading of art-culture among the people'. Quoted in Joyce, *Capital Offenses*, p. 193.

<sup>48</sup> Black, 'New Career' p. 235.

<sup>49</sup> Melba Cuddy-Keane describes the procedures used by many public libraries as 'intimidating', and quotes from a librarian's report on such policies to keep books 'in working order and unpilfered' by 'the reading proletariat'. See Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 109.

<sup>50</sup> Odell, 'Free Libraries', p. 441.

<sup>51</sup> Besant, 'The People's Palace', p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Black, 'New Career', p. 235.

<sup>53</sup> Besant, 'The People's Palace', p. 61. Frederick Marryat (1792–1848) wrote maritime fiction later admired by Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway.

<sup>54</sup> Minnie James writes that ‘we are [...] so often asked for volumes containing pictures of the Afghan, Zulu, Soudan and other wars with the dates of these conflicts, that I have thought of indexing war periods to save time in searching through all the heavy volumes’. Quoted in Brading, ‘A Brief History’, section 17.3.

<sup>55</sup> Joyce, *Capital Offenses*, p. 197.

<sup>56</sup> Odell, ‘Free Libraries’, p. 440.

<sup>57</sup> Odell, ‘Free Libraries’, p. 442.

<sup>58</sup> Besant, ‘The People’s Palace’, pp. 59, 56, 62.

<sup>59</sup> M. S. R. James, ‘The People’s Palace Library’, *Library*, 2 (1890).

<sup>60</sup> Odell, ‘Free Libraries’, p. 440.

<sup>61</sup> Sunday hours were unusual and controversial. Besant notes that ‘the opening of the place on Sunday, although fiercely resisted by local bigots, has proved an unixed blessing and a boon to the people’. See ‘The People’s Palace’, p. 56. For related scholarship on debates about Sunday openings of museums in London, see Maltz, *British Aestheticism*, pp. 98–131.

<sup>62</sup> Black, ‘New Career’, p. 235.

<sup>63</sup> M. S. R. James, ‘The People’s Palace Library’, *Palace Journal*, 1 May 1891, p. 273.

<sup>64</sup> Besant, ‘The People’s Palace’, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> M. S. R. James, ‘The People’s Palace II’, *Echo*, 10 February 1892. Quoted in Brading, ‘A Brief History’, section 20.1.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Outrageous Conduct,’ *Morning Advertiser*, 21 February 1894.

<sup>67</sup> Black, ‘New Career’, p. 235.

<sup>68</sup> Black, ‘New Career’, p. 235.

<sup>69</sup> For background on popular reading, see Amy Cruse, *The Victorians and their Reading* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935); and Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>70</sup> James, ‘The People’s Palace Library’.

<sup>71</sup> William Fraser Rae, ‘Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon’, *North British Review*, 85 (1865), 180–204 (p. 204). For more background on the penny press, see Andrew King, ‘“Literature of the Kitchen”: Cheap Serial Fiction of the 1840s and 1850s’, in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 38–53. For a discussion of Braddon’s appeal across class divisions, see Susan David Bernstein, ‘Dirty Reading: Sensation Fiction, Women, and Primitivism’, *Criticism*, 36.2 (1994), 213–41.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Working Girls and Literature’, *Echo*, 31 December 1889. It is possible Black wrote this article, signed ‘[By a Late Librarian,]’ since she had resigned a few months earlier when she married Edward Garnett. There are many similarities between this and the earlier *Queen* account of the People’s Palace Library.

<sup>73</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (Chicago: Henneberry, [n.d.]), pp. 156–57.

<sup>74</sup> Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, p. 154.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Working Girls and Literature’.

<sup>76</sup> For a recent study on Victorian women’s altruism, benevolence, and gift-giving, see Jill Rappoport, *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Olive Garnett, *Tea and Anarchy!*, p. 84.

<sup>78</sup> Ruth Livesey questions the attribution of this article to Black. See Ruth Livesey, *Socialism, Sex and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880–1914* (Oxford: British Academy, 2007), p. 53.

<sup>79</sup> [Constance Black], ‘Sketch of Life in Buildings’, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, ed. by Charles Booth, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1891), II, 270–75 (p. 275).

<sup>80</sup> Garnett, *Constance Garnett*, p. 62.

<sup>81</sup> ‘The Museum Reading Room’, *Saturday Review*, 31 May 1862, p. 618.

<sup>82</sup> Levy, ‘Readers at the British Museum’, p. 227.

<sup>83</sup> Francis, ‘Why Wasn’t Amy Levy More of a Socialist?’, pp. 47–48.

<sup>84</sup> Levy’s 1889 calendar shows her frequent trips to the British Museum and also nearby in Bloomsbury to ‘the office’ — the Women’s Protective and Provident League (WPPL) and later the Women’s Trade Union League, where Clementina Black served as secretary. See Beckman, *Amy Levy*, p. 179, and Francis, ‘Why Wasn’t Amy Levy More of a Socialist?’, p. 53. Despite eight months’ worth of calendar items about London, not one entry in Levy’s hand suggests an East End location. See Beckman pp. 175–79 for other entries in this calendar.

<sup>85</sup> Alex Goody, ‘Murder in Mile End: Amy Levy, Jewishness, and the City’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34.2 (2006), 461–79 (p. 468).

<sup>86</sup> Weiner, *Architecture and Social Reform*, p. 186.

<sup>87</sup> Levy first published ‘Ballade of a Special Edition’ in *Star* on 5 March 1888, several months before the Whitechapel murders attributed to ‘Jack the Ripper’. Alex Goody notes that these crimes transpose the poem’s ‘double murder in Mile End’ into ‘all too real fact’ (‘Murder in Mile End’, p. 472). Goody also details the journalistic treatment of the brutal killings with headlines like ‘HORROR UPON HORROR/WHITECHAPEL IS PANIC-STRICKEN’ (p. 473). For discussion of the stereotyping descriptions of ‘Jack the Ripper’ or ‘Leather Apron’ as an Eastern European Jew also see Goody, p. 474.

<sup>88</sup> Goody, ‘Murder in Mile End’, p. 472.

<sup>89</sup> Amy Levy, ‘The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Museum’, *Woman’s World*, 1 (1888), 31–32.

<sup>90</sup> For a discussion of same-sex desire and identification, especially in relation to this poem, see Emma Francis, ‘Amy Levy: Contradictions? Feminism and Semitic Discourse’, in *Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830–1900*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 183–204 (p. 196).

<sup>91</sup> Goody, ‘Murder in Mile End’, p. 474.

<sup>92</sup> Levy, ‘Readers at the British Museum’, p. 227.

<sup>93</sup> Foucault defines ‘emplacement’ as ‘relations of proximity between points or elements’ as represented formally by trees or grids. See Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22–27 (p. 23).

<sup>94</sup> This essay offers a companion project, in a sense, to Emma Francis’s essay ‘Why Wasn’t Amy Levy More of a Socialist?’ where she argues that Clementina Black ‘should be reconsidered as an important figure in late-nineteenth-century socialist feminism’ (p. 54). I make a similar claim for Constance Black through her

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work at the People's Palace, prior to the launch of her career, as Constance Garnett, as a translator of Russian literature.