The City of Others: Photographs from the City of London Asylum Archive
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Caroline Brogden (c. 1905). City of London, London Metropolitan Archives

Fig. 1: Emily Lane. A private patient admitted to City of London Asylum in May 1900. Her husband lived in London, her sister in Oxford. CLA/001/B/013:16.

Fig. 2: Ignoz Rominsh. Before arriving at the asylum in June 1896, Rominsh had worked as a Ship's Collier. He was described as a sad and dejected thirty-two-year-old Roman Catholic. CLA/001/B/02/013:54.

> Any destitute boy and girl, of whatever nationality, who finds itself upon the streets of London without a home may apply at our doors for help. During the month of March [1887] three boys from *Constantinople* were admitted. So also was an African negro, rejoicing in the grandiloquent name of Cæsar Pompey Gortschakoff; together with a very interesting Christian lad from *Syria*; with John Nzipo, a *Zulu*, and Thomas Watt, a half-caste from *St. Helena*.[1]

In 1887 Thomas John Barnardo reported in his charity's journal *Night and Day* that in their Youth's Labour House 'no fewer than *fourteen* languages and dialects' were spoken among the young people who lived there.[2] Barnardo was of course not the first to reflect upon the multicultural geographies of the Victorian East End. The diversity of London life was written about by a number of social commentators from Charles Dickens to Charles Booth.[3] During his explorations of London, Henry Mayhew described 'several varieties of street-folk, […] the Irish fruit-sellers; the Jew clothesmen; the Italian organ boys, French

singing women, the German brass bands, the Dutch buy-a-broom girls, […] and the Indian crossing-sweepers'. In addition, he recorded 'a coloured man or two' in a hostel for the homeless, and among the crowd at a pub in Whitechapel he 'noticed a sprinkling of coloured men and a few thorough negroes scattered about here and there'.[4]

Artists also included 'people of colour' in their visions of the city, locating a Black and Asian presence in painting, prints, photography, and ephemera.[5] These men and women, used to illustrate the dynamic, exotic, and unknowable nature of the city, are often thinly drawn characters. Uncovering evidence of their lives beyond the lines of an artist's pen, a witness record in an Old Bailey session paper, a printed note in a newspaper, or a national census return has proven difficult.[6] Research on the historical geographies of the black presence in Britain illustrates that it was usual for black men and women to have no reference made to the colour of their skin in institutional records.[7] In searching for evidence of a 'city of others', photographic archives can provide pathways into new historical geographies, particularly biographies of 'people of colour' that it would otherwise be very difficult, if not impossible, to trace.
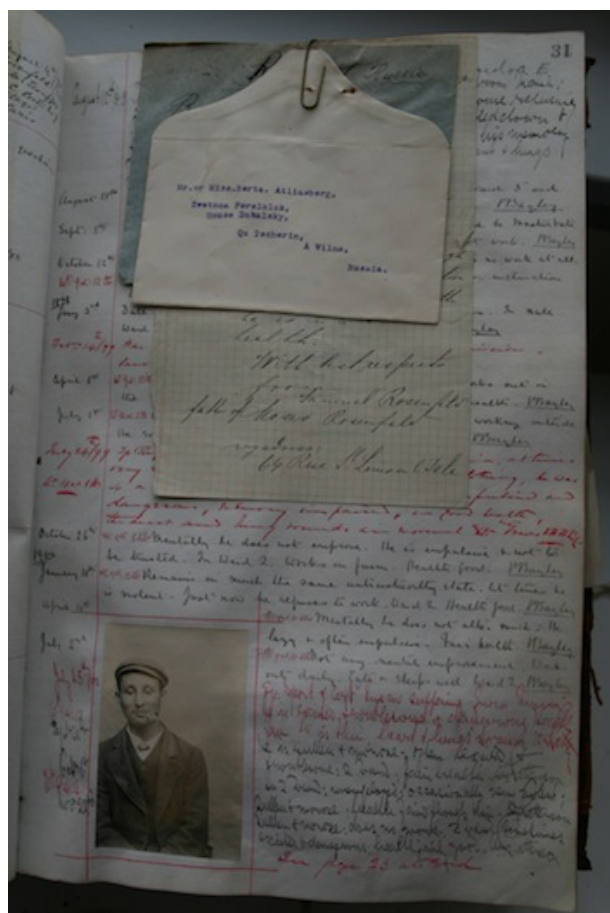

Fig. 3: Moses Rosenfeldt. Nineteen-year-old Moses was admitted to the asylum in August 1898. He refused to answer the asylum staff's questions and was described as 'wild and excited'. Diagnosis: Mania. A single 'Hebrew' man, letters and addresses in his records show that he had a brother in Russia and a sister in France. His records illustrate the more personal items and family histories that can be found in the casebooks. CLA/001/B/02/014:31.

Fig. 4: Miriam Andrade. A 'Hebrew' private patient who arrived at Stone House in 1906. Her record states that she was 39, single, and had a brother living in Lewisham, south-east London. I have identified Miriam as a black woman, but her entry reflects the difficulties of using photographic sources to identify 'people of colour' in the archives. Miriam's portrait reflects features associated with an 'African': 'full lips', a 'wide face'. Identifying Miriam as a black woman through these features draws upon racialized stereotypes and relying upon them is methodologically problematic. Her written records do not make reference to the colour of her skin, and unlike Caroline Brogden's portrait, the flattened tones of Miriam's photograph make it hard to 'see' the colour of her skin and thus to prove she was a 'black' woman.[8] CLA/001/B/01/015:137.

The kind of archival spaces that tend to hold systematic photographic materials within their records are places that were occupied by the marginalized in children's homes, prisons, hospitals, and asylums. Here the administrative documentation of the lives of the poor included a photographic portrait which could serve a variety of purposes, from the documentation of a prisoner, the 'improvement' of a pauper child, an illustration of poverty, or a medical affliction.[9] The examination of such archives by social historians and geographers, including Anna Davin, Adrienne Burrows and Iwan Schumacker, and Gillian Rose, has illustrated how socially constructed and politicized such images, and the textual narratives they helped create, often were.[10] Lindsay Smith and Seth Koven have revealed the political play and racialization located in photography created by institutions such as Barnardo's.[11] Through this work we have been alerted to the many uses to which the images have been put, even before our own readings and manipulations. Still, within such records examples of the diversity of London life have been archived. As an illustration of what can be found, the images in this photographic essay are taken from one source, the patient casebooks for the City of London Asylum.

The City of London Poor Law Union, constituted in 1837, favoured the provision of 'out relief' — to 'farm out' its paupers to institutions outside the city — refusing to build a workhouse until 1848.[12] That year, work began on a workhouse for up to 800 inmates on the south side of Bow Road. In 1869, when the City of London Union merged with the East London and West London Unions, the new organization took over the running of the former East London Union workhouse at Homerton and the former West London Union workhouse on Cornwallis Road in Upper Holloway.[13] The Bow Road Workhouse became an infirmary from which a number of patients would be referred to the City of London Asylum. The Corporation of London had been reluctant to build an asylum, and the City of London Asylum was the only one run by them, for which construction began in 1862. Built on a site at Stone, near Dartford, the asylum opened in 1866 with a capacity for 250 patients; by 1872, it was full.[14] An expansion of the hospital meant 583 patients could be treated during 1895, including a relatively large number of private patients who had been admitted since 1892. In his analysis of a thousand admissions to the asylum in 1900, the Senior Assistant Medical Officer, Arthur E. Patterson, assessed that the great majority of rate-paid patients admitted to the asylum had been found 'wandering' in the City of London. They came not only from various parts of England, but from all quarters of the globe.[15]

The patient records, held at the London Metropolitan Archives, date back to the hospital's opening, although the inclusion of patient photographs comes relatively late in the catalogue. Portraits begin to appear in casebooks in the late 1880s, but it is more usual to find newspaper clippings about the patients stuck into the leather-bound volumes. Prints from the late 1880s remain infrequent, and are often faded, some so much so that the faces in them are rendered invisible once again. From the 1890s onwards most patients have at least one photograph accompanying their medical notes, and this continues into the early twentieth century. They are usually pasted into a page of their records and framed by red ink. They are not dated and usually appear as single portraits (rather than, for example, the before and after treatment images taken at Bethlem Royal Hospital, London).[16] Some of the images have faded, but many are clear and full of texture, like that of Caroline Brogden [*Fig. 13*]. Her portrait seems to speak to Susan Sontag's claim that historical portraits present us with a tracing from the past, an image directly stencilled off the real, like a death mask.[17]

Sally Swartz reminds us that when asylum patient records are read, either with or against the grain, they must be 'understood as discursively shaped by psychiatry as a discipline, with the purpose of accounting for an illness, with symptoms and a prognosis. Doctors cannot be held accountable for failing to produce biographies'.[18] In South African archives, despite the colonial politics of race in operation while the records were made, this means that 'there is a startling uniformity of narrative across all patients, regardless of their race, class or gender, and this in itself is a caution to those seeking the subaltern voice'.[19] This observation is true for archives attached to institutional spaces in Britain too. Although Koven has highlighted the racialized images in the Barnardo's archive, there are also many other images in that collection where the colour of the skin belonging to the young women and men in the pictures is not obviously highlighted.[20] This is also the case for the 'others' in the Stone Asylum archives. The photographs are not records of an individual's exotic otherness, but part of their medical record. Although the images are not as regulated as those found in prison portraits, they are relatively standardized, although some individuals challenge the institutional gaze with a defiant stare or a protective hand.

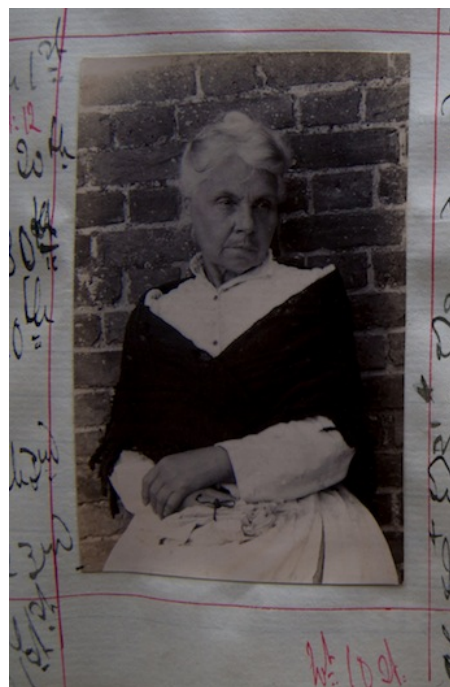*Fig. 5:* Anna Brown[?] shields her face from the camera's gaze. CLA/001/B/01/013:70.

Fig. 6: Olympe Noirot[?]. A French national who found herself in the asylum more than once between 1900 and 1901. CLA/001/B/013:21.

Swartz also observes that although they are imbued with the institutional complexities of which Foucault has warned, asylum portraits provide a sense of intimacy seldom delivered by their surrounding textual material.[21] Still, we must acknowledge that such portraits remain limited reflections of the lives they record.[22] As with all historical artefacts, we see these nineteenth-century images with twenty-first-century eyes, and are thus presented with a graphic representation of 'otherness'.[23] Despite these caveats, however, with these photographs we are able to see some of the men and women who spoke the many languages and dialects referenced by Barnardo. In previous research I have used photographs from institutions such as Barnardo's to draw out histories of the black presence in Victorian London.[24] Recently, I have been reflecting on how these histories can be fully integrated into histories of London, rather than being seen as a specialist niche in nineteenth-century research. There remains a need for 'people of colour' to become part of integrated histories of London life. To this end, this essay presents a selection of images of 'others' and asks how they might contribute to new diverse but integrated social histories of the East End, even though they come to us because of the disciplining of bodies, the rituals and power of 'examination', and are attached to ethical questions we may not be able to answer.[25]

The idea that the human face carries indelible signs of the real character and attributes of a person is an ancient belief, and looking at these portraits it is hard not to be seduced by the 'promise of knowing' that they offer.[26] It is easier to read a sense of agency into some of the images than others. There are pictures in the collection (not shown here) that depict heads being held up by another's hands, ensuring they face the camera. Yet surely Anna covers her face with her hands to avoid our gaze [*Fig. 5*], while Caroline Brogden's defiant stare challenges our right to judge her, or even to know her [*Fig. 13*].[27] When we connect with such images, when we meet the gaze of the sitters before us, the people in the images can 'live again in print as intensely as when their images were captured on the old dry plates of sixty years ago' or more.[28] Despite the beauty and individuality captured by the lens it is important to remember that there are limits to the degree of understanding we can read into them. These images are not family photographs, but pictures taken as part of the 'task of constructing new forms of social inventory' throughout the nineteenth century.[29]

Pictures tell different stories depending on how they are framed, literally and metaphorically.[30] Images of African adolescents in seventeenth-century portraits have

proved an illuminating entry point for research on the historical geographies of the black presence in Britain during the earlier centuries of the Atlantic slave trade. However, as David Bindman has highlighted, it will not always be possible to know whether the young people depicted in these images were created from the imaginations of the artist, copied from other paintings, or posed from figures who were owned by English families or employed by the painter.[31] This is not the case with the images brought together here. Despite the restrictions placed upon their narratives by their institutional setting, we know that the people in the images were people who lived in London at some point in their lives.

As Swartz noted in the interrogation of colonial asylum records in South Africa, although a photograph can offer a promise of knowing a patient, casebook entries say more about medical practitioners, the system of asylum governance, and evolving psychiatric knowledge: 'the subaltern voice, the subject of it all — the patient' is herself a 'black hole in the centre of the archive'.[32] Our knowledge of patient lives inside and outside the archives is limited. Roy Porter has shown how medical events, such as entry into an asylum, were complex social events that involved families and communities, as well as the sufferers and their physicians.[33] These men and women were not solely defined by their experiences in the City of London Asylum. They had travelled, worked as clerks, porters, and labourers. They remained sisters, brothers, wives, husbands, friends, sons, and daughters. Since some provision was made by asylums to return a pauper patient to his or her relatives or friends once they had satisfied the asylum that they would no longer be chargeable to any union and would be prevented from doing injury to themselves and others, it seems likely that the men and women who did leave the asylum returned to their working lives within the fabric of the city or beyond.[34]

Fig. 7: John Levina was taken to Bishopsgate Police Station on 30 December 1898, and then sent to the asylum on 12 January 1899. John was registered as a badly educated, twenty-one-year-old sailor who was single and a Roman Catholic. At first it was thought that John was Spanish, but in red ink a note has been added to his records: 'a Philippino'. CLA/001/B/02/014:64.
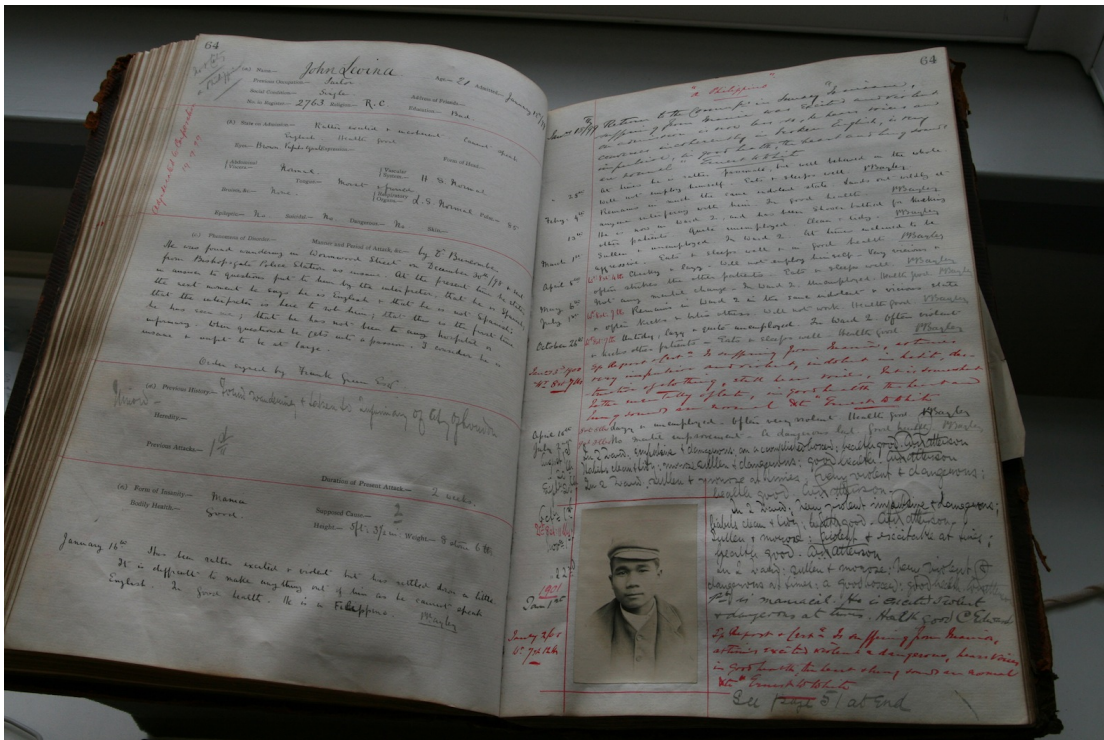
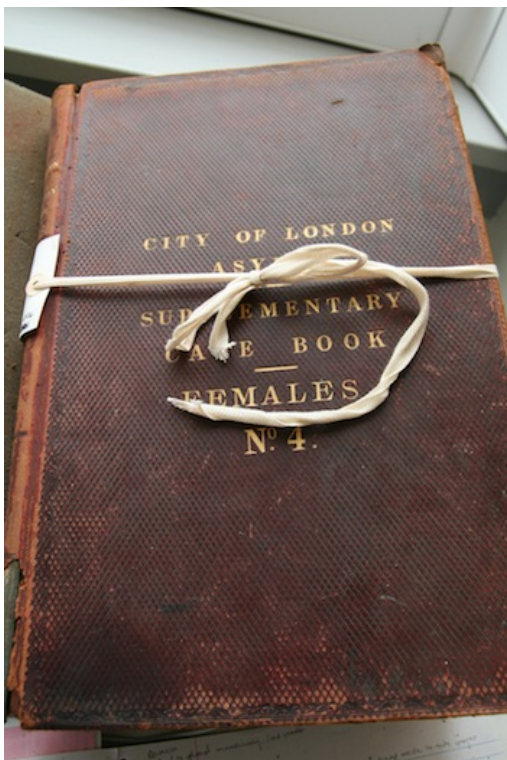*Fig. 8:* Part of John Levina's record. CLA/001/B/02/014:64.

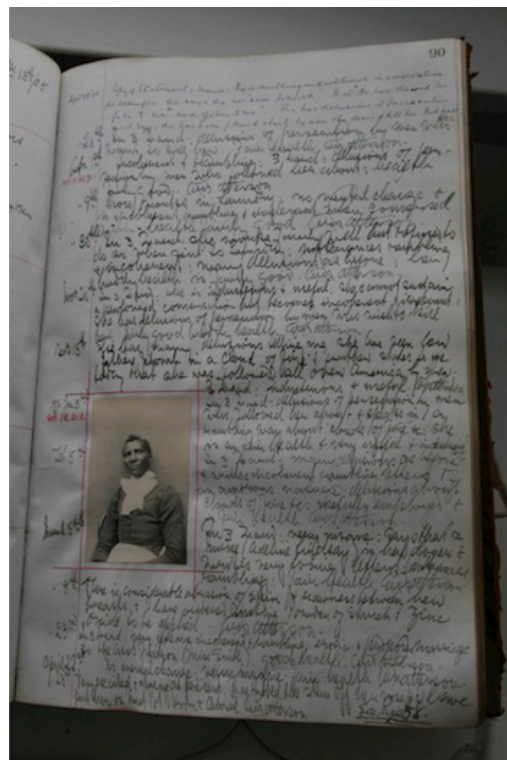*Fig. 9:* A casebook from the City of London Asylum archive at the London Metropolitan Archives.

Fig. 10: Part of Caroline Brogden's record.

Figs. 11 and 12: John Bushell. Aged 24, John worked as a kitchen porter before entering the asylum with 'melancholia' in January 1901. He 'recovered' but was readmitted later in the year. He left on 31 January 1901. CLA/001/B/02/015:64 and 154.

Thanks to the record-keeping practices of asylum administration, we know the names of these individuals, their religions, their professions. Although patient addresses were not recorded in casebooks, for some the 'Address of Friends' was, telling us for instance that Hannah Moses's father James lived at 13 Duke Street, Aldgate East, and that Moses Rosenfeldt [*Fig. 3*] had 'friends' living in France and Russia.[35] John Bushell's sister lived in Camberwell, south London [*Figs. 11 and 12*] although John, like Ignoz Rominsh [*Fig. 2*], entered the asylum via the City of London Union Infirmary on Bow Road. Did both these men live in Bow, or had they temporarily 'wandered' into the City's jurisdiction? We may ask why some individuals had no 'Address of Friends' recorded. Perhaps they were travellers like the seaman John Levina [*Fig. 7*]? The institutional archive allows us to go beyond the thinly drawn images of artistic caricature, enabling us to draw together fuller, more integrated and cosmopolitan histories of London's East End.

Yet, in pulling out these particular photographic stories from the archive books, they become dislocated from their supportive text and context. I have publicly revealed private lives and personal secrets, utilizing the power vested in me as a researcher to ignore, or to crush, Caroline Brogden's challenging stare. By digitally copying the records, cropping the images and representing the portraits in this format, I have created among

them a new form of unity, one that underlines the categorization and institutionalization of their original form. There is a danger that through this reshaping these images will appear extraordinary or representative beyond their own singular case.[36] These men and women are not representative of Victorian London, or of asylum archives in London, or even the City of London Asylum. Yet, by conflating time periods and geographies, each photograph now builds towards a larger meaning of the newly edited archive as a whole.[37] This new archive illustrates that diverse and extraordinary stories belonging to 'people of colour' — including those whose 'whiteness' would have been under question because of their religious heritage — are to be found within very ordinary archives among the records of citizens of all ethnicities.

Fig. 13: Caroline Brogden. Also known as Paul Downing, Caroline Brogden was sent to the asylum in September 1905 following her arrest on Blackfriars Bridge where (s)he had been searching for her wife and the case attracted the press. Brogden died in the asylum less than a year later. CLA/001/B/01/015:90.

These portraits and texts pose other questions of the cosmopolitan communities of London's East End. We need to consider and attempt to analyse the personal geographical biographies of the individuals depicted here: their movements in and out of the East End,

their paths of travel and migration, work, and experiences of intercultural encounters and exchange. These asylum images are layered with meanings around the representations of class, health, gender, and sexuality developed by the Victorians, and the meanings added to them now. By placing the portraits in this context it is possible to see them as part of the dynamic process of deconstructing Victorian history, rather than as static images of racialized difference. Institutional records invariably record histories of the poor and the excluded in a language not of their choosing, but they also preserve a sense of the diversity of life in London. As such, the images — and the stories around them that we have yet to uncover — have an important role to play in developing our understandings of the lives of others in the long nineteenth century.

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[1] Thomas John Barnado, *Night and Day*, June 1887, p. 2 (emphasis in original).

[2] Barnado, *Night and Day*, June 1887, p. 3 (emphasis in original).

[3] Charles Dickens, 'The Black Man', *All The Year Round*, 6 March 1875, pp. 489–93. On Charles Booth and others, see William Fishman, *East End 1888* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2005).

[4] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 419, 482.

[5] See Jan Marsh, *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art, 1800–1900* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2005).

[6] For two examinations of the Black and Asian presence in Britain, see Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), and Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

[7] Caroline Bressey, 'Invisible Presence: The Whitening of the Black Community in the Historical Imagination of British Archives', *Archivaria*, 61 (2006), 47–61; Kathleen Chater, *Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales During the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660–1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

[8] For a discussion of the difficulties of 'seeing' race in photographs, see Bressey, 'Invisible Presence'.

[9] See Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[10] Anna Davin, 'Waif Stories in Late Nineteenth-Century England', *History Workshop Journal*, 52 (2001), 67–98; Adrienne Burrows and Iwan Schumacker, *Portraits of the Insane: The Case of Dr Diamond* (Quartet Books, 1990); Gillian Rose, 'Engendering the Slum: Photography in East London in the 1930s', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 4.3 (1997), 277–300.

[11] Lindsay Smith, 'The Shoe-Black to the Crossing Sweep: Victorian Street Arabs and Photography', *Textual Practice*, 10.1 (1996), 29–55; Seth Koven, 'Dr Barnardo's "Artistic Fictions": Photography, Sexuality and the Ragged Child in Victorian London', *Radical History Review*, 69 (1997), 6–45.

[12] See Andrea Tanner, 'The Casual Poor and the City of London Poor Law Union, 1837–1869', *Historical Journal*, 42.1 (1999), 183–206.

[13] See Peter Higginbotham, 'The City of London Poor Law Union and Workhouse', *The History of the Workhouse* <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/CityOfLondon/> [accessed 30 November 2011]. The East London Poor Law Union formed in 1837 comprised the parishes of Saint Botolph, Aldersgate, Saint Botolph, Aldgate, Saint Botolph, Bishopsgate, and Saint Giles, Cripplegate. In 1869 the three Unions were amalgamated under the City of London Union. See 'City of London Board of Guardians', *AIM25* <http://www.aim25.ac.uk/cgi-bin/vcdf/detail?coll_id=12878&inst_id=118&nv1=search&nv2> [accessed 30 November 2011].

[14] See Francine Payne, *Stone House: The City of London Asylum* ([n.p.]: DWS Print Services, 2007). On paupers before 1862, see Elaine Murphy, 'The New Poor Law Guardians and the Administration of Insanity in East London, 1834–1844', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 77.1 (2003), 45–74.

[15] See 'Hospital and Dispensary Management', *British Medical Journal*, 2.1856 (25 July 1896), p. 237; Arthur E Patterson, 'An Analysis of One Thousand Admissions into the City of London Asylum', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 46 (1900), 473–87. In 1905, private patients accounted for 46 percent of those at the asylum (see 'Hospital and Dispensary Management', *British Medical Journal*, 2.2380 (11 August 1906), p. 337.

[16] See Peter Hamilton, 'Conclusion: Template for a New Order?', in Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves, *The Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2001), pp. 109–15.

[17] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

[18] Sally Swartz, 'Colonial Lunatic Asylum Archives: Challenges to Historiography', *Kronos*, 34.1 (2008) <http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-01902008000100013&lng=en&nrm=iso> [accessed 30 November 2011], 285–302 (p. 297).

[19] Swartz, 'Colonial Lunatic Asylum Archives', p. 297.

[20] See Koven, 'Dr Barnardo's "Artistic Fictions"', and Lindsay Smith, *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children and Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

[21] See Swartz, 'Colonial Lunatic Asylum Archives', and Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. by Jean Khalfa, trans. by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2010).

[22] For example, see John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

[23] See Suren Lalvani, *Photography, Vision and the Production of Modern Bodies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

[24] For example, Bressey, 'Invisible Presence', and Bressey, 'Forgotten Histories: Three Stories of Black Girls from Barnardo's Victorian Archive', *Women's History Review*, 11.3 (2002), 351–75.

[25] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

[26] Swartz, 'Colonial Lunatic Asylum Archives', p. 291.

[27] For more detail on Brogden's story, see Alison Oram, *Her Husband was a Woman: Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[28] Ansel Adams, quoted in Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 102.

[29] Hamilton, 'Conclusion', p. 110.

[30] See Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1999), and James Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (London: Reaktion, 1997).

[31] David Bindman, 'The Black Presence in British Art: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. by David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010–), III: From the 'Age of Discovery' to the Age of Abolition: Part 1: Artists of the Renaissance and Baroque, , pp. 235–70.

[32] Swartz, 'Colonial Lunatic Asylum Archives', p. 291.

[33] Roy Porter, *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane* (London: Phoenix Giants, 1999).

[34] See George Savage, *Insanity and Allied Neuroses: Practical and Clinical* (London: Cassell, 1886).

[35] Hannah Moses, not shown here, was admitted in June 1899. Aged 20 and described as a single 'Hebrew' woman, she worked as a scrubber. CLA/001/B/01/013.

[36] See Swartz, 'Colonial Lunatic Asylym Archives', for a discussion in the context of South African archival cases.

[37] See James Polchin, 'Not Looking at Lynching Photographs', *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, ed. by Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas (London: Wallflower, 2007), pp. 207–22.