

Ambivalent Decay: Regeneration Anxieties in East London

Robert Deakin

This multimedia essay explores the relationship between infrastructural anxiety, class and agency in Poplar, east London's former docklands. It draws on multimodal ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2019 alongside Jimmy – a white, working-class man in his early sixties and long-term resident of a social housing estate undergoing redevelopment. Jimmy experiences clinically diagnosed and sometimes debilitating anxiety. This has many causes and triggers, but the ongoing regeneration of his estate is a particular cause of distress. He is anxious about the future, amid the uncertainties of regeneration. But equally, Jimmy is preoccupied with the past. Here infrastructural anxiety is not the same as “displacement anxiety” (Watt 2021: 28) discussed in gentrification literatures, whereby the uncertain prospect of an imminent, forced move effects a psychological toll. Rather it stems from how contemporary gentrification aggravates, and brings to the surface, older injuries of class characteristic of this post-Fordist milieu.¹ Here I try to make sense of these affective dynamics with reference to the anthropological literature on ‘post-Fordist affect’, while also – through text, still images and video emerging from our research – conveying something of Jimmy’s agency vis-à-vis anxiety. More than a symptom of structural inequality, how might infrastructural anxiety be engaged as a “life force trapped and twisted at an impasse, awaiting a chance to break through” (Biehl and Locke 2010: 332)?

¹ 16.1 percent of residents in Tower Hamlets (which includes Poplar) self-report depression and anxiety – the highest across all London boroughs (LBTH 2019).



Jimmy's Lament

The redevelopment of Jimmy's estate sees low- and medium-rise housing blocks, built by municipal authorities in the postwar era, demolished and replaced by a denser, mostly private development. This is part of a process of state-led gentrification occurring throughout London's extensive network of twentieth-century modernist social housing (Watt 2021). On long walks around his neighbourhood, Jimmy described to me his feelings of loss regarding the regeneration and his frustrated aspirations to claim some influence through his intermittent involvement in a residents' group. But while I had expected our conversations to be focused on the present redevelopment, Jimmy – a lifelong resident of Poplar – often dwelt on changes that had occurred further back in time. Prominent among these reflections was the loss of local pubs, the former sites of which Jimmy would often point out to me; they had usually been redeveloped into housing or, in one case, simply demolished and left as a fenced-off void in the landscape.²

These walks were important in our evolving multimodal research collaboration. I began by audio recording the walks and later gave Jimmy a DSLR camera to take his own photographs. This subsequently developed into improvised filmmaking when, standing on the street where he had lived until his mid-twenties, Jimmy began to tell me about two pubs that had closed in the early 2000s.

*"Motorcycle in Repose,"
Aberfeldy Estate.*

Photo: Jimmy Watters,
mid-1990s.

² Long-term UK pub closure trends have accelerated in recent decades, with numbers falling by more than 25 percent since 2000 (BBPA 2024).



"It's gone, it's just gone" is Jimmy's repeated refrain. His sense of loss – and anger about this loss – is palpable. At other moments in the video he is more wistfully nostalgic. Talking about the photographs in the Princess of Wales pub showing customers outside, one taken in the 1930s and another in the 1970s, he conveys a sense of historical continuity now lost. He also engages in self-reflection: "You have to try and be objective about change, but it's an emotional thing; what I used to know, and feel comfortable about, is not there anymore."

After long days driving a London Black Cab, Jimmy used to frequent local pubs several nights a week. For him they were a vital source of community and wellbeing, a place to meet friends and acquaintances, to listen to live music, even to embark on romantic relationships. Without this "social infrastructure" as he calls it, and with his immediate family having moved out of London, he feels increasingly isolated.³

Jimmy's complaints of loneliness and social isolation are connected to the loss of pubs as spaces of friendship and acquaintanceship (Thurnell-Read 2021). But his complaints also emerge from a more generalised affective disorder. Having given up his job as a taxi driver not long before we met, he subsequently suffered what he described as a "breakdown" and was diagnosed with anxiety and depression. Jimmy would sometimes talk about these affective disorders as his "industrial injuries" – the attritional result of driving a taxi around London for thirty years. This was a job that he had found increasingly stressful, in part because of growing competition from ride-hailing apps. He also recounted the day-to-day emotional toll of sharing his private space with so many strangers, and sometimes feeling looked down upon or judged because of his working-class appearance and accent.

↑ *Gasometer at Leven Road Gasworks, north side of Aberfeldy Estate.*
Photo: Jimmy Watters, mid-1990s.

³ This story of outmigration reflects broader trends. For discussion of the white "Cockney Diaspora," see Watt, Millington and Huq 2014.

Electricity substation with Beatles graffiti on the Aberfeldy Estate.
Photo: Jimmy Watters, mid-1990s.



Through the anthropological literature on post-Fordist affect we can also think of these as post-industrial injuries (Muehlebach 2011; Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012). Alongside the attritional impact of Jimmy's working life, it was the growing absence of employment, the social infrastructures associated with it, and an intense desire to return to something approximating this life that troubled him so deeply.⁴

⁴ For discussion of race/class entanglements in discourses of pub closure, see Deakin 2023 and Singh, Valluvan and Kneale 2024.



Stairs to railway bridge linking Lansbury Estate and Teviot Estate.
Photo: Jimmy Watters, mid-1990s.

Post-industrial Injuries

The recording and watching back of this first footage ignited in Jimmy a desire to make further videos and led to an iterative process of playback, feedback and re-recording. Most of this [subsequent filming took place in Jimmy's one-bedroom flat](#), focusing on his extensive collection of artefacts and memorabilia relating to his life and local history (Deakin and Watters 2022). This collection included four images of his neighbourhood, taken using a disposable camera sometime in the mid-1990s: a small motorbike lying abandoned in the middle of the pavement, one of the gasholders at the nearby gasworks, old graffiti memorialising The Beatles on the back of an electricity substation, and a crumbling brick wall near a railway bridge. Ordinary, decaying infrastructures, all since demolished. Jimmy was pleased when I remarked how much I liked the images, and we discussed them in detail.

"Motorcycle in repose" was the title that Jimmy jokingly suggested for the first photograph, which he said conveyed "despair, abandonment, lack of engagement [laughs]. Something's been discarded and not cared for, a bit like what the neighbourhood was then."

The mid-1990s were a time when the area was suffering heavily from the impacts of deindustrialisation (most notably with the closure of the docks) but before programmes of urban regeneration had taken hold. Jimmy's wry laughter about the abandoned

*Jimmy at the site of
"Motorcycle in Repose."*
Photo: Robert Deakin,
2019.



motorcycle conveying a “lack of engagement” captures his ambivalence about contemporary regeneration in relation to this larger historical picture. No one wants to live in a place that is “discarded and not cared for” and Jimmy has actively supported some of the regeneration projects, in the hope of seeing some long-overdue financial investment in his estate. But at the same time, the language of engagement employed by those overseeing the regeneration could seem hollow. Jimmy would frequently communicate to me his fears that the regeneration ultimately was not for working-class people like him, who he saw gradually being displaced while multinational developers turned a profit. Going to visit him at his flat, I would often find him despondent about his prospects of having any significant influence on local regeneration, and ambivalent about staying in Poplar.

Ambivalent Endings

The literature on post-Fordist affect has shown how the regimes of industrial employment known as Fordism – and the forms of social provision and organisation that accompanied it – are “less helpfully thought of as an era past than as a locus of sensibility and yearning that leaves crucial traces in the neoliberal present” (Muehlebach 2011: 62). For Muehlebach and Shoshan (2012), paradigmatic post-Fordist affects such as melancholia and anxiety are both symptomatic of – and reinforce – structural inequalities. Such dynamics are present in Jimmy’s ambivalent attachment to regeneration. Caught between a desire for investment in long-neglected infrastructure and a fear that further changes might only compound his sense of loss, Jimmy was at an impasse (Berlant 2011).

In this way we might tragically characterise Jimmy as one of the “melancholic subjects” of post-Fordism, “often found at the bottom of the social ladder, scavenging for the approximations of Fordist security and stability for which many of their hyper-privileged counterparts tend to have little patience” (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012: 336). But, building on articulations of an anthropology of becoming (Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos 2008; Biehl and Locke 2010) and a multimodal “politics of invention” (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019), I invite another reading of the research materials presented here. If the infrastructural transformations associated with urban regeneration provoked anxiety in Jimmy, manifesting long-running and multifaceted class injuries, our making infrastructures the subject of a collaborative artistic practice generated other affects, capacities and lines of escape.

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