“The Surrounding Great Work”: Memory, Erasure, and Curating the Built Environment of the West India Docks, 1802–2022

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"The Surrounding Great Work": Memory, Erasure, and Curating the Built Environment of the West India Docks, 1802–2022

Article by **Aleema Gray**Article and **Danielle Thom**
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Abstract
The development of London's West India Docks, opened in 1802, made manifest the contemporary connections between culture, capitalism, and colonialism. A liminal space, the docks existed as a secure conduit for the importation of goods from the West Indies, most of which were produced by enslaved Africans. As such, they functioned as a threshold between the brutal realities of the plantation-based slave economy, and the polite world of the London merchant whose wealth derived from that economy. This collaborative article, which we wrote as two curators at the Museum of London, explores the lasting effects of that liminality, focusing on the aesthetic and spatial implications of the West India Docks's environment, and the ways in which these persist in influencing the site and its communities today.

Introduction

"Of this Range of BUILDINGS
Constructed together with the Adjacent DOCKS At the Expence of public spirited Individuals
Under the Sanction of a provident Legislature
And with the liberal Co-operation of the Corporate Body of the CITY of LONDON
For the distinct Purpose
Of complete SECURITY and ample ACCOMMODATION
(hitherto not afforded)
To the SHIPPING and PRODUCE of the WEST INDIES at this wealthy PORT
THE FIRST STONE WAS LAID
On Saturday the Twelfth Day of July, ad 1800"

This, the opening inscription upon the foundation stone of the West India Docks, obscures the purpose of the docks, even as it purports to offer a clear explanation for their development. The connection between the new docks's physical security (as a storage facility for commodities) and the financial security occasioned by the regulation of those commodities is made clear; as is the docks's geographical specificity, dedicated as they were to commodities travelling between Britain and the West Indies. Framed in the language of public service and civic participation, the

inscription nonetheless elides two key, interrelated facts: the ultimate dependency of all "SHIPPING and PRODUCE of the WEST INDIES" upon the labour of enslaved Africans; and the physical confinement and control of that "produce" in order to protect the profits of individual private investors.

This article is a collaborative one, produced by two curators at the Museum of London. While Danielle Thom concentrates on visual culture in the long eighteenth century, Aleema Gray researches Black community histories, contested heritage, and decolonial methodologies; together, our respective areas of expertise have enabled us to reflect upon the docks as a site of empire making and imperial memory. In building on recent calls to decolonise museum practices, we position the West India Docks as an embodiment of the entangled histories of colonisation and denial. We consider the spatial histories and contemporary experiences around the docks that put into question the fragility of heritage, citizenship, and nationhood.

Located on the Isle of Dogs in East London, the original West India Docks complex was formally opened in 1802. The Museum of London Docklands's site now inhabits this physical environment, occupying Number One Warehouse, a building originally constructed as a commodity warehouse within the docks complex. Until June 2020, a bronze statue of the slave trader Robert Milligan, who was one of the merchants instrumental in establishing the docks as a commercially viable concern, stood on the quayside in front of the Museum's entrance. By reading this statue in relation to "the surrounding great work" (the docks) referenced in its accompanying inscription, this article goes on to position the docks as an architectural and spatial expression of the relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy—a relationship which underpinned the entire economy of Britain and the Atlantic world in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the first instance, a brief history of the docks and their built environment will establish the means by which the site perpetuated hierarchies of race and wealth. Crucial to this process was the fact that, in its design, location, and the demarcation of its boundaries, the site was fundamentally liminal. It acted as a threshold between the City of London (to which it was connected by the purpose-built Commercial Road) and the colonised world: both geographically as a gateway to the ocean and a point of exchange whereby commodities entered and exited the city; and in the imagination, buffering the elegant and idealised world of the elite mercantile class from the labour exploitation and physical hardship on which their wealth was built. It embodied the dichotomy of "rude" versus "refined", as established by Kay Dian Kriz, whereby "refining the forced labour of African slaves into metropolitan ornaments involved suppressing the subject of empire, slavery and colonial trade altogether".[1] Built to process slave-grown commodities such as sugar, which was refined in more than one sense of the word, the docks and their visual representations constituted an aesthetic intervention, as much as a commercial one.

This quality of liminality has persisted, and continues to shape contemporary encounters with the locale in its incarnation as "Docklands" (or, synecdochically, "Canary Wharf"): a centre of global finance positioned within Tower Hamlets—the borough with the highest rate of child poverty in London—and still a highly securitised space with controlled points of entry and exit.[2] We consider the concept of liminality as it relates to the staging and experience of urban space, by exploring the daily encounters between Londoners of African and Caribbean heritage, and memorial sites upholding the colonial iconography of the West India Docks.[3] We argue that remembering often invokes forgetting, particularly for individuals who occupy a liminal space within Britain's colonial history. Drawing on the curatorial practices that shaped the Museum of London Docklands's "London, Sugar & Slavery" gallery, we highlight a number of community

interventions that have recently drawn on reparative history as a way to transform the possibilities of sites fraught with colonial violence. In this way, we examine the ways in which today's iteration of the West India Docks's locale has been imagined into being, by commercial and governmental forces; with the contested histories of slavery, empire, and commerce instrumentalised for the purposes of authenticity and cultural prestige. Referencing contestations over heritage and the lived interactions along the docks, we pose the question in this special issue of *British Art Studies*: if the "Thames River Works", for whom and what does it work?

Sugar and Security: The Building of the Docks

The West India Docks was the first "wet dock" complex to be completed during the London dock-building boom of about 1800–1815, and by far the largest. Located on the northern part of the Isle of Dogs, it enabled large ships to avoid the bend of the Thames towards Greenwich, and provided a convenient, efficient alternative to the system of crowded "legal quays" and "sufferance wharves" that had previously been the only legitimate points of entry and exit for dutiable goods. The eventual construction of the West India Docks was the result of planning and lobbying by commercial interests throughout the 1790s, resulting in the passage of the West India Docks Act in 1799, and they were developed alongside the rival London Docks upriver at Wapping.[4]

This dock-building boom must be understood in the context of two important architectural shifts during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. First, the Thames was reorganised to facilitate London's pre-eminent status as national and imperial capital, through the construction of additional bridges and public buildings along the river frontage as well as commercial docks; notably Westminster and Blackfriars bridges (1750 and 1769), and William Chambers's rebuilt government offices at Somerset House (1776–1786). Second, in Britain, an austere iteration of the then-fashionable neoclassical style, which we call "carceral classicism", was developed and deployed to protect the socio-economic interests of a mercantile elite. Viewed this way, London dock architecture exists in the same aesthetic and functional sphere as, say, George Dance's Newgate (fig. 1) and Whitecross Street prisons (1779 and 1813, respectively), Sir John Soane's Bank of England (1788–1833), and Jeremy Bentham's hypothetical panopticon which influenced the design of Millbank Prison (1819). The prescriptive, regular, and hierarchical nature of neoclassical architecture rendered it ideal for the projection of authority—not only judicial or financial authority, but also cultural and aesthetic.[5]

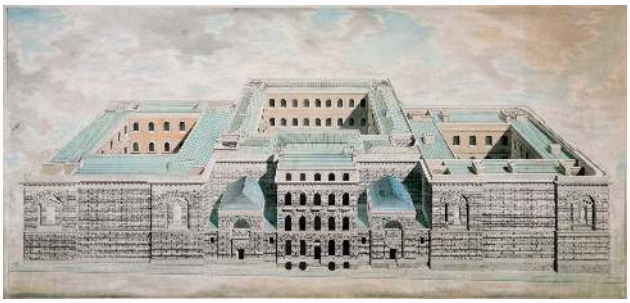

Figure 1

George Dance, *Newgate Gaol, Contract Drawings & Designs*, 1769–circa 1813, drawing. Collection of Sir John Soane's Museum, London (D4/4/16). Digital image courtesy of Sir John Soane's Museum, London (all rights reserved).

While the privileged world of the English country house might seem geographically and culturally distant from the utilitarian labouring space of the docks, or the punitive environment of the prison, neoclassicism connects them all. Notable among the many country houses built (or rebuilt) in the neoclassical style in the second half of the eighteenth century are those funded by the profits of the slave economy: Harewood House, Stratton Park, and Dodington House, to name just three.[6] The imposition of this style upon the vast stretch of commodity warehouses that ranged along the quaysides reified their role as a protective compound serving the financial interests of a social elite, again highlighting the liminal function of the site as both a labouring space and monumental representation of "civilised" (imperialist) British culture.

It is worth noting that, as Architect and Surveyor to the Corporation of London, George Dance played a significant role in drafting the first plans for the West India Docks, including the warehouses. Like so many of the individuals connected with this project, he was at least tangentially connected to (and benefitted from) the slave trade. His sister Hester, married to the MP and senior East India Company official, Nathaniel Smith, was the creditor of a plantation on St Vincent, deriving a portion of familial wealth from interest charged on the debt.[7] Dance himself was an investor in the West India Dock Company, thus profiting from the infrastructure supporting the slave economy.[8] This symbiotic relationship was not a coincidence, but rather a typical occurrence, highlighting the degree to which the slave economy was entirely integrated within the wider British socio-economic context, and not confined to those who directly dealt in enslaved people and slave-grown goods.[9]

The plans for warehousing and other dock buildings were later refined and completed by the father-and-son team of George and George Gwilt (who, likewise, had previous experience in the design of secure buildings, notably Horsemonger Lane Gaol in Southwark). The specific purpose of these warehouses was to receive and protect commodities imported from the West Indies, most of which were directly produced by the labour of enslaved Africans: sugar, rum, mahogany, cocoa, coffee, and ginger.[10] A secondary purpose, after the opening of a separate Export Dock in 1807, was to manage goods travelling out to the West Indies—primarily luxury goods for the use of white plantation owners and colonial officials, as well as staple goods intended for the maintenance of enslaved people. These "polite" commodities underpinned modes of intellectual and aesthetic exchange among the elite and "middling" classes in Britain—coffee and cocoa for social drinking, mahogany for the production of fashionable furniture, sugar and ginger for dining. In receiving these goods, the liminality of the docks was further entrenched, positioning

the site between the immediate lived experiences of the labouring classes who handled goods (and, at a remove, the experiences of the enslaved producers), and those wealthier individuals who consumed them. Therefore, the deployment of neoclassicism as an architectural logic for the docks's warehouses and other structures was entirely consistent with, and supportive of, their function as a secure space that buffered the conditions of consumption from those of production. This process of physical securitisation, as far as it applied to the Thames waterfront, was complemented by an increased emphasis on organisational and institutional change. Most significant was the establishment of a Marine Police force, in 1798, under the guidance of Patrick Colquhoun. Colquhoun, a merchant and magistrate with vested commercial interests in the "West Indian trade", was a pioneer of preventive policing. Actuated by what Peter Linebaugh has dubbed a "combination of law, economics, flattery and class hatred", the worldview of Colquhoun and his peers pivoted upon the dialectical belief that "property and acts of pillage are logically and necessarily connected".[11] Anticipating the opening of the West India Docks by four years, the Marine Police constituted a body that was designed both by and for the mercantile class whose commercial activities were enmeshed with the exploitation of enslaved people in the West Indies.[12] Furthermore, Colquhoun's endeavours were a reaction to the ways in which labour was traditionally organised along the river, where the unloading, porterage, and storage of incoming goods was subcontracted by shipowners to teams of semi-casual "lumpers", "gangsmen", and other labourers with specialised roles. One of the effects of enclosed dock development in the early nineteenth century was to disrupt this practice, instead introducing a system by which labour was employed directly by the dock companies, and thus brought under greater scrutiny and control.[13]

Robert Milligan and George Hibbert: *genius loci*

What Patrick Colquhoun was to the Marine Police, Robert Milligan and George Hibbert were to the West India Docks: founders, fundraisers, lobbyists, and public champions. Milligan, a Scottish merchant, established himself as a slave trader in Jamaica, returning to London in 1779 as an investor in several plantations.[14] He became a prominent member of the Society of West India Planters and Merchants, on whose behalf he lobbied parliament for the establishment of secure docks to receive their goods. Hibbert, whose family had existing financial interests in the slave trade, was not only active in the family firm of Hibbert, Purrier and Horton, but was also an Alderman of the City of London (from 1798) and an MP (from 1806).[15] From this public platform, he advocated against the abolition of the slave trade, and amassed a collection of art, rare books, and plants from the proceeds of his fortune.[16]

As Deputy Chairman and Chairman of the West India Dock Company respectively, Milligan and Hibbert were commemorated and celebrated in architectural forms commensurate with the nature of the site—the *genius loci* of colonial theft and white supremacist exploitation. That process of physical commemoration, and the forms that it adopted, enabled the docks to exist as a space that simultaneously celebrated and obfuscated the ties between city, commerce, and slavery. Celebratory representations of the newly opened West India Docks depict it as a kind of industrial spectacle, of the type celebrated by domestic tourism literature of the period.[17] An 1802 aquatint represents the patriotic pomp of the West India Docks's ceremonial opening, in which the entrance of the first ship, bedecked in "the flags of all Nations" is observed by crowds of men, women, and children (fig. 2). Likewise, an undated etching titled *West India Docks in the Isle of Dogs* shows the warehouses seemingly under construction in about 1800 (fig. 3). In this image, a gentleman in riding dress gestures for the benefit of two fashionably attired women,

while labourers work around them. While possibly a fictionalised or embellished scene, this latter print nonetheless frames the new docks as a focus of legitimate bourgeois public interest, even as the spatial and aesthetic qualities of the site reinforce its role as a secure enclosure; again, private commerce is repackaged as a public, civic spectacle. This contradictory sense of place, in which the docks functioned both as an imperialist celebration and an enclosed warehouse, was prompted by specific physical interventions commemorating Hibbert and Milligan: the west entrance gate to the West India Docks complex, known as the Hibbert Gate; and the bronze statue of Milligan erected shortly after his death in 1809.

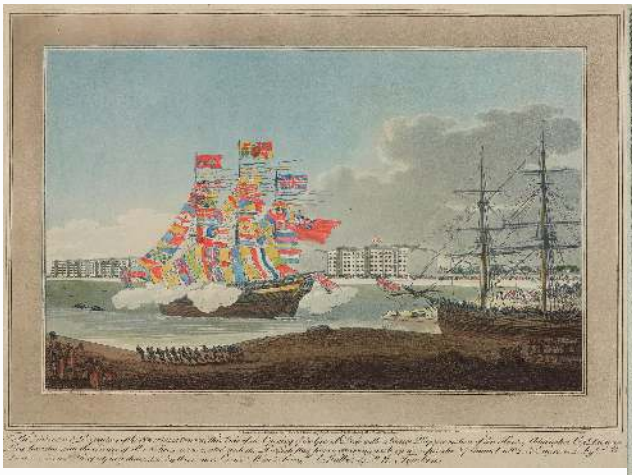

Figure 2

P.W. Tomkins, *West India Docks, View of the Opening of the Grand Dock with the Ship the Henry Addington, Decorated with the Flags of all Nations, 27 August 1802*, 1802, coloured aquatint, 17 × 13 cm. Collection of the London Metropolitan Archives / London Picture Archive. Digital image courtesy of London Picture Archive (all rights reserved).

Figure 3

West India Docks in the Isle of Dogs, undated, engraving, 13 × 11 cm. Collection of the London Metropolitan Archives / London Picture Archive. Digital image courtesy of London Picture Archive (all rights reserved).

Commissioned by the West India Dock Company from the noted sculptor Sir Richard Westmacott, this statue was unveiled in 1813 on the north quay of the Import Dock, in the vicinity of Number One Warehouse. While statues of merchant-philanthropists were not previously unknown in Britain (such as that dedicated to Sir Thomas Guy by Peter Scheemakers), Westmacott's figure is unusual in that it depicts its subject in contemporary dress, unencumbered by classicising draperies or institutional regalia.[18] Milligan is the epitome of the prosperous and confident merchant, the buttons of his fashionable waistcoat slightly strained by a paunch, as he leans one arm on a truncated Doric column. This mimetic quality, representing Milligan as he would have appeared to contemporaries rather than in an idealised guise, situates the statue as an instrument of surveillance and control. Located, as it originally was, within sight of the main entrance gate and in proximity to the principal dock offices, the figure of Milligan watched over the commercial activity on which his fortune, and that of his fellow investors, was founded. Indeed, the inscribed panel placed on the statue's plinth refers explicitly to Milligan in relation to the immediate environment:

> *To perpetuate the memory of Robert Milligan a Merchant of London, to whose genius, perseverance and guardian care the surrounding great work principally owes it's [sic] design, accomplishment and regulation. The Directors and Proprietors, deprived by his*

death on the 21st May, 1809 on the continuance of his invaluable services, by their unanimous vote have caused this statue to be erected.

An anonymous etching, published in the year of the statue's unveiling, depicts it in situ, foregrounding a bustling commercial scene of sugar hogsheads being transported into the warehouse complex on the left (fig. 4). Here, Milligan's posthumous avatar is raised above (and by means of) the process and proceeds of exploitation: the enslaved Africans who harvested the sugar, the land and natural resources of colonised territories, and the heavily policed and ill-paid labourers within the docks themselves. This image was echoed eighty years later during the London Dock Workers strike of 1889. By then relocated to the main, or northern gateway, the Milligan statue stood high above the central stone pier. It appeared in illustrated newspapers reporting on the strike, shown towering over the workers and trade unionists who continued to labour in the docks for poor and unreliable wages (fig. 5).

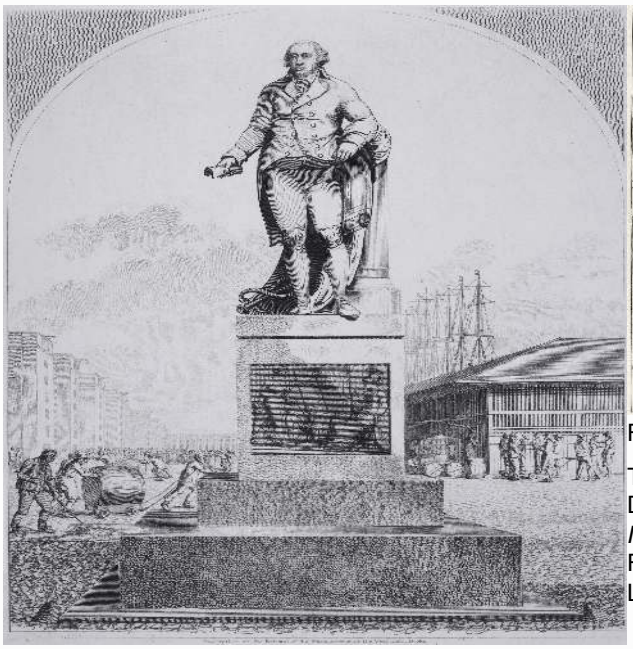

Figure 4

Anonymous, *Robert Milligan*, 1813, ink drawing. Collection of the Museum of London (81.620). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).

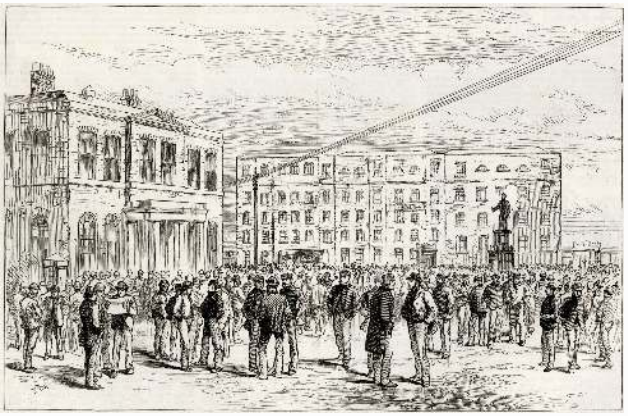

Figure 5

The unemployed of London outside the West India Docks, with the statue of Robert Milligan, in *The Illustrated London News* 80, issue 2444, 20th February 1886. Digital image courtesy of Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans (all rights reserved).

Despite the use of contemporary dress, Westmacott's statue retains classicising elements—the column, the pose modelled loosely after the antique, and the bas-relief frieze at the base of the plinth—which tie Milligan, and Milligan's milieu, to the Eurocentric construction of "civilisation" as fundamentally Graeco-Roman in origin.[19] Eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century European portrait sculpture, which derived its basic formal framework from antique precedents, was understood through a lens of racial difference, in which whiteness and civilisation were conflated and elevated.[20] To represent an individual in sculptural form was to associate them with a public culture of civic virtue, which was implicitly masculine, white, and wealthy.[21] The inscription at the base of this statue reinforces such a connection, referring to Milligan's "genius, perseverance and guardian care" in advocating for the West India Docks's construction. Viewed in this light, the representation of Milligan as a public, civic figure renders

the space around him a public space of sorts. Similar to other prominent works by Westmacott, including two bronze statues of Horatio Nelson erected in Birmingham (1809) and in Bridgetown, Barbados (1813), the presence of a figure associated with empire codes the space around it as inherently imperial.[22] As with the early involvement of Dance in designing the dock buildings, the choice of Westmacott to execute this particular statue typifies the tightly integrated relationship between the slave economy and seemingly unrelated forms of cultural and economic activity—as well as the coexistence of slavery as a socially accepted fact, and abolitionist sentiment.[23] Westmacott is not known to have directly benefitted from the sale, purchase, or labour of enslaved Africans, and yet his sculptural practice was undoubtedly entwined with the proceeds and promotion of colonial exploitation, both in terms of his social status and his list of clients.[24]

If the Milligan statue was the symbolic centre of the West India Docks complex, the Hibbert Gate marked the threshold between that complex and the external world; a break in the massive walls which surrounded the West India Docks for the purposes of security (fig. 6). Aesthetically and conceptually, the gate was adjacent to that other securitised space of empire, the plantation, in both instances uniting physical control of commodities with the cultural authority of neoclassicism (fig. 7). As in the Gwilts's warehouses and dock offices, the gate was designed according to austere neoclassical principles, with an unadorned pediment surmounting an arch of Portland stone. At the apex of the pediment sat a Coade stone model of the ship *Hibberts*—this ship, a West Indiaman built to carry valuable commodities from the West Indies to Britain in the fastest possible time, was one of a small fleet commissioned and owned by the firm of Hibbert & Co.[25] The placement of this model, and its eponymous identification with George Hibbert, ensured that anyone entering the docks would be greeted by a symbol of their purpose. The choice of a West Indiaman spoke to the idea of global commerce under the control of British mercantile interests; specifically, of trade with the West Indies and all that was implied in terms of slave-grown commodities. As with the figure of Milligan, and the inscribed foundation stone, the Hibbert Gate presented a cultural and economic argument for chattel slavery without ever explicitly referring to the practice. Thanks to these elisions, the built environment of the West India Docks has been reframed, often uncritically, as a locus of "heritage". The Hibbert Gate has proved particularly apposite to this process, being co-opted into the seal of the newly formed Borough of Poplar in 1855, and reproduced as a temporary structure on the nearby East India Dock Road during the Diamond Jubilee of 1897 (fig. 8). As recently as 2000, Canary Wharf Group commissioned a scale replica of the original gate—which had been demolished in 1932—and at present this structure stands near to the location of the original on West India Quay (fig. 9).

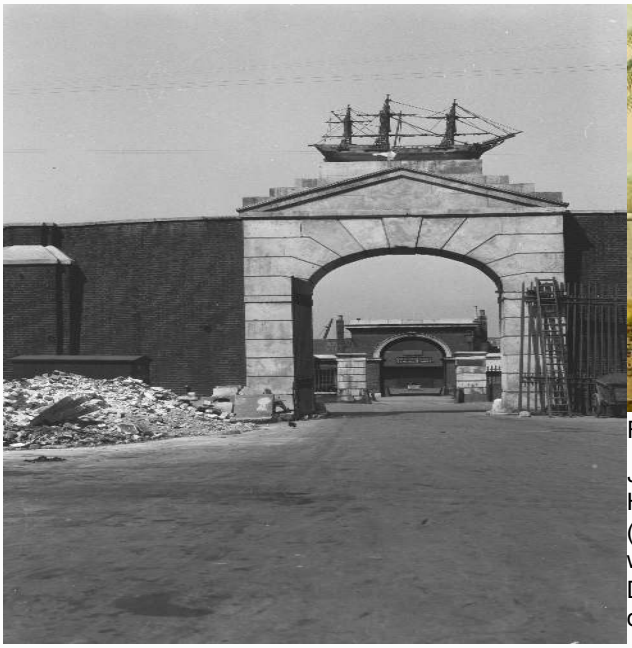

Figure 6

Albert Gravely Linney, *West India Docks: View through the Hibbert Gate, Through to the Outer Gateway and the Cannon Workshop Beyond*, 1929, photograph. Collection of the Museum of London (2012.28/440). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).

Figure 7

James Hakewill, *Rose Hall Great House*, in James Hakewill, *Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica* (London: Hurst and Robinson, 1825), 1825, watercolour. Collection of the Boston Public Library. Digital image courtesy of Internet Archive (public domain).

Figure 8

Anonymous, *Diamond Jubilee Archway over East India Dock Road*, 1897, photograph. Collection of the London Metropolitan Archives. Digital image courtesy of London Picture Archive (all rights reserved).

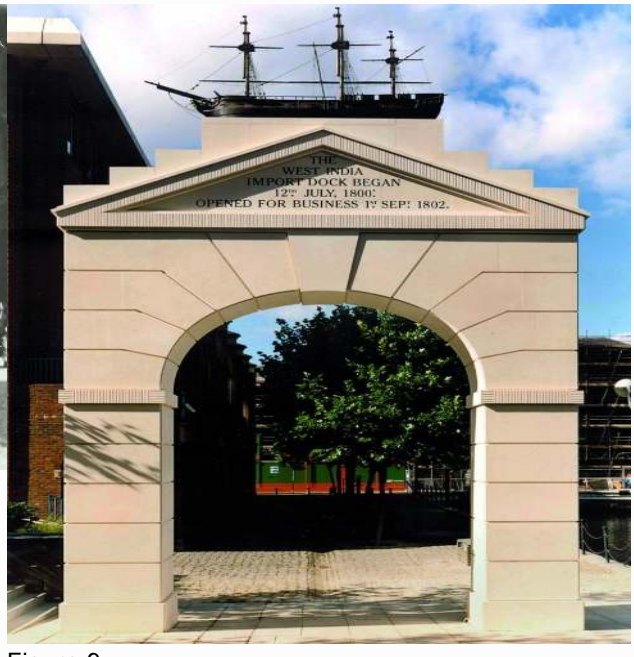

Figure 9

Leo Stevenson, *The Hibbert Gate*, 2000, bronze and stone. Digital image courtesy of Canary Wharf Group (all rights reserved).

Living History: Contemporary Reflections

The West India Docks complex reproduced, and continues to reproduce, an *idea* of Britain that had accompanied the company's imperialist agenda. The idea was twofold; on the one hand, situated neatly along the Thames, the docks stood as a national symbol of Britain's industrial and financial protection. This protection was not only espoused in the liminal location of the docks, but was also depicted in the imperial iconography of the Hibbert Gate. On the other hand, the statue of Robert Milligan invoked a notion of a *benevolent* Britain and imagined a certain form of citizenship. This sense of benevolence was reinforced in the notion that Britain had fostered the sensibilities of democracy. In other words, the Robert Milligan statue was erected, and subsequently protected, because of his role in the civic project of expanding the Docklands area and thus driving the city's financial growth, regardless of the fact that he owed this position to the labour of Africans forced to work on his family's plantation in Jamaica. The honouring of Milligan and the protection surrounding the docks has left a lasting reminder of what is publicly valued as heritage and citizenship.

Today, the spatial context from which Docklands was born bridges these two ideas of Britain in a way that demands sober reflection. Boarding the Docklands Light Railway, for example, it is all too easy not to think twice about the naming of stations such as West India Quay and East India, even though they are obvious reminders of the city's connection to a history of colonial violence. Indeed, the glassy towers of London's contemporary financial district of Canary Wharf seem to protrude from the remaining two of the nine original dock warehouses. Financed largely by the West Indian merchants, the warehouses were once sites designed to store produce from plantations in the Caribbean. Representing one of the largest civil engineering projects directly built to facilitate colonial profit, the sheer scale of the docks is testament to the huge wealth generated by the sugarcane economy in the Caribbean through the suffering of slave labourers. Today, though, these warehouses are often reinscribed with colonial iconography for marketing purposes: for example, a worker leaving their office at one of the financial institutions based at Canary Wharf might visit the "Rum and Sugar" bar—located in one of these very warehouses—and choose from cocktails such as "The Walking Dead" or "The Cane Field".[26]

Contestations concerning collective memory, nationhood and civil identity were brought to the fore in the lead up to the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, in 2007. The occasion provided a timely opportunity to carve out new ways to think about the relationship between the past and the present around the docks. How can we acknowledge the memory and legacies of slavery within a public realm? How can we commemorate Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade? What and who should we commemorate? And who should be involved in the processes of commemoration?

Following the commemoration campaigns to mark the bicentenary, it was widely accepted that there was an urgent need to highlight London's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade in a way that could critically engage with the docks's local histories. Along with communities of African and Caribbean heritage, the responsibility fell, to a large extent, to the Museum of London Docklands, formerly known as the Museum in Docklands. The site is located in the Grade I listed building that formed part of the West India Quay warehouses and is managed by the City of London Corporation and the Greater London Authority. As part of the commemorative efforts, an advisory board—consisting of academics and community activists—was brought in to co-curate the gallery, and, after fifteen months, the "London, Sugar & Slavery" gallery opened its doors in November 2007.

The gallery itself can be seen as the product of what Catherine Hall has described as a "reparative" moment.[27] Reparative work, as Hall notes, is less about documenting the politics of struggle and survival, but rather looks at the past to "develop a different understanding here of Britain's involvement in the slavery business and our responsibilities, as beneficiaries, of the gross inequalities associated with slavery and colonialism".[28] Reparative work offers museums a kind of practice that looks into the past to consider the possibilities of repair. While the recent calls to decolonise museums position heritage sites as important spaces to engage critically with colonialism, reparative curation situates the past, present, and future in constant conversation with each other. Such were the ambitions of the "London, Sugar & Slavery" gallery. The gallery allows visitors to critically examine the physical, cultural, and economic legacies of London's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Although it documents a two-hundred-year history, the gallery moves beyond chronological analysis to situate the histories of African and Caribbean people within a context of place—London. The colonial geographies it considers, from the personal and local histories of individuals such as abolitionist, Mary Prince, who lived in Hatton Garden, to life on the plantations in St Kitts as seen through the archives of British slave owner, Thomas Mills, puts into question the spatial histories between people, power, and place. Moreover, the gallery is positioned as a vehicle for community engagement. Its reparative framework not only considers the colonial histories around the docks as it *is*, but also as it *could be*. Many of the objects centring "white saviours"—such as the Buxton Table, a table on which the Abolition Bill in 1833 had been drawn up by white abolitionists Thomas Fowell Buxton, Zachary Macaulay, and William Wilberforce—are counterbalanced with creative interventions that show Black Londoners as agents of change.[29] This "balancing act" provided an important way for the advisory panel to negotiate their position as "outsiders from within", in that it provided an opportunity to repair and build something new.[30] As noted by Colin Prescod, a member of the panel, "my experience [of] Museum of London Docklands was good in that advisors were permitted to define something new of the tone and content of the gallery wall-text narrative".[31] At the centre of the gallery, for example, stand two large, competing portraits: George Hibbert, painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence in 1812, pitched against a contemporary photographic recreation of Robert Wedderburn by artist Paul Howard (figs. 10 and 11). The latter was commissioned by the museum as part of an effort to embed more critical responses that could centre the actions of abolitionists of African and Caribbean heritage. Wedderburn, the son of an enslaved woman and a Scottish merchant, was born in Jamaica and arrived in London in 1779. Influenced by utopian political ideals, he published an abolitionist book titled *The Horrors of Slavery*, and soon formed part of the city's radical anti-slavery movement.[32]

Figure 10

Thomas Lawrence, *George Hibbert*, 1811, oil on canvas, 244 × 147 cm. Collection of the Museum of London (PLA2). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).

Figure 11

Paul Howard, *Portrait of Lloyd Gordon as Robert Wedderburn*, 2017, laminated diasec print on paper, 210 × 125 cm. Collection of PLA Collection/Museum of London. Digital image courtesy of Paul Howard (all rights reserved).

However, despite these attempts to highlight suppressed histories, the statue of Robert Milligan, which had remained in front of the Museum of London Docklands, reinforced a sense of forgetting—particularly for those who have the lived experiences of existing in the margins of white dominant historical narratives. Prior to his death, Milligan had claimed ownership of 526 enslaved Africans on his plantations in Clarendon, Jamaica. Following his death, the West India Committee commended his "intelligent mind" for designing the "great and useful establishment" of the docks.[33] This sentiment was eventually encompassed in the inscription to Westmacott's statue outlining his "invaluable services". The statue of Milligan remained at the entrance of the gate of the docks from 1813 to 1875, at which point it was removed to improve the flow of traffic. It then stood at the West India Dock Road entrance until 1943 when the pier was demolished. In 1997, as part of the area's regeneration work led by the London Docklands Development Corporation, the statue was reinstated close to its original location.

The re-erection and repositioning of the statue in 1997 presents a particular case of colonial amnesia or what Paul Gilroy has referred to as "post-imperial melancholia", that is, an active forgetfulness to address histories of empire and slavery.[34] When observing the physical history of Milligan's statue within the Docklands complex, one is reminded of the ways in which histories of empire, colonial expansion, and violence are often ignored in favour of a national "white saviour" mode of analysis. At the centre of the debates following the 2007 campaigns for remembrance, for example, was the honouring of great white men such as William Wilberforce, who, despite the spread of uprisings in the Caribbean and the tireless efforts of freed Africans such as Ottobah Cugoano, Ignatius Sancho, and Olaudah Equiano, was celebrated as the driver of the abolition movement.[35]

Such legacies vested in the spatial logic of the docks not only speak to the discomfort and denial in confronting Britain's entangled colonial past, but also demonstrate the ways in which the past is conscripted into the present. Though positioned as a "public" space, the site retains its original status as a privately owned and heavily securitised space—an ode to the city's commercial wealth. The luxury residential homes and private banks have little to say to address local class disparities and child poverty. Moreover, the perpetuity of colonialism and empire in the naming of estates and spaces such as Cabot Square, Columbus Courtyard, and Churchill Place cannot account for the lives lost at the hands of empire. Often overlooked within the strategic spatial developments in the docks as an emblem of financial capital are the everyday encounters that bring into question the relationship between geographies of empire and contemporary citizenship. One must take seriously the emotional implications concerning space and place. What does it mean, for example, to be confronted by such colonial iconography for those whose stories of *coming here* and *being here*, are marked by rupture, or, more specifically, for those who have been unequivocally impacted by the legacies of Britain's imperial trade? And what does *just* citizenship look like in the context of spatial histories honouring colonial heritage sites? Tadhg O'Keefe has argued that landscapes are a product of our mindscapes.[36] In the same way that neoclassical architecture had deployed a construction of the citizen as a white man with political agency, contemporary encounters with statues regulate who is able to participate in notions of citizenship within the public realm. For those of African and Caribbean heritage, the question of citizenship reinforced in the colonial iconography of the docks, stands as a physical embodiment of exclusion. Consequently, the memory of slavery is often repressed, or merely kept alive in the private spaces of their living rooms, kitchens, and community halls. In other instances, several local initiatives have sought to create separate spaces of collective reflection and healing. The African Remembrance Day (ARD) group, for example, was formed with the support of the MP Bernie Grant to commemorate the Africans who died during four hundred years of the brutal slave trade. Every year since 1995, they hold a three-minute silence at 3pm on 1 August in recognition of the three hemispheres where the suffering unfolded (Western hemispheres, the African continent, and the Middle and Far East). ARD's commitment to foster collective remembering within the public realm demonstrates community-led interventions to repair a history that remains largely untold.

Speculations on Decolonisation

How might we fashion history and memory in a way that acknowledges how public and private spaces in Britain today were configured by a colonial project? There is a need to rethink the physical attributes of space and environment, especially in relation to what is valued as heritage. In other words, if the River Thames works—for whom does it work, and has it worked? It might be more helpful to consider the ways in which such sites of memory along the River Thames are *living*, in that they are constantly being conscripted according to our present. Despite the moral dilemma provoked by honouring Robert Milligan outside of a community-engaged museum commemorating enslaved Africans, the statue remained until June 2020, when, following the Black Lives Matter protests, it was removed by the joint landowners: the Canal & River Trust and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Prior to its removal, Black Lives Matter and local activists had covered the statue with an ankara fabric—a transformative intervention symbolising centuries of historical denial.[37] Such local campaigns for restorative justice have demonstrated the malleability of colonial iconography by showing the way in which the past can be lived again in the present.

At the time of writing, the integration of colonialism and the built environment in Britain has become the focus of controversy; the concept of "heritage" and its preservation explicitly weaponised for the purposes of attracting public support for a conservative agenda. Following the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, questions concerning public spaces, history, memory, and citizenship were anxiously co-opted by local councils in an effort to publicly address a move towards an "inclusive history". Within months, the land-owning authority, the Canal & River Trust, commissioned and published a report written by Jodie Matthews on the relationship between the canals and transatlantic slavery. The Canal & River Trust acknowledged that "as custodian of the waterways, and despite ongoing work with communities, we have lacked specific in-depth knowledge about the linkages between canal history and the transatlantic slave trade".[38] This effort coincided with Sadiq Khan's Diversity in the Public Realm initiative, which followed a series of public consultations led by Tower Hamlets Council on local statues, monuments, plaques, and street names.[39] It is still unclear whether the initiative will confront the specificities of London's involvement in the slave trade, or whether it will be replaced by a wider project of diversity and inclusion. Nevertheless, the process of decolonisation, inasmuch as it applies to historic sites and structures, can never be one of complete undoing, for nothing can undo or reverse the original purposes for which such sites were built, and the harm wrought by those purposes. Memory and meaning are constantly renegotiated. Throughout the history of the West India Docks complex, interventions in the built environment have upheld and, more recently, challenged dominant narratives of empire, capitalism, and white supremacy. The work to dismantle these structures is ongoing and, at times, as shown at the docks, this work is literal."

About the authors

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Footnotes

1. Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700–1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.
2. "Tower Hamlets: Overview", Trust for London, 2022, https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/tower-hamlets-poverty-and-inequality-

indicators.

3. See Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991). For a comparable study of liminality in a postcolonial spatial environment, see Kate Moles, *Narratives of Postcolonialism in Liminal Space: The Place Called Phoenix Park* (unpublished PhD diss.: University of Cardiff, 2007).
4. For a full account of the genesis of the West India Docks, see Hermione Hobhouse, ed., "Survey of London: Volumes 43 and 44, Poplar, Blackwall and Isle of Dogs", *British History Online*, 1994, https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vols43-4.
5. Eric Slauter "Neoclassical Culture in a Society with Slaves: Race and Rights in the Age of Wheatley", *Early American Studies* 2, no. 1 (2004): 81–122.
6. Up to sixteen per cent of English country houses may have been purchased or built (after 1700) with colonial and imperial wealth. See Stephanie Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire 1700–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 122–123.
7. "Hester Smith of Ashstead Surrey (née Dance)", Legacies of British Slavery database, University College London, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146658385.
8. Nick Draper, "The City of London and Slavery: Evidence From the First Dock Companies, 1795–1800", *Economic History Review*, New Series 61, no. 2 (2008): 438.
9. Nicholas Draper, "Helping to Make Britain Great: The Commercial Legacies of Slave-Ownership in Britain", in *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain*, ed. Catherine Hall et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 80–81.
10. "Warehouses and General Offices at Western End of North Quay, West India Dock Road E14", Historic England, National Heritage List for England, Listed Building, 19 July 1950, https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1242440.
11. Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Verso, 1992), 427.
12. William M. Taylor, "Ports and Pilferers: London's Late Georgian Era Docks as Settings for Evolving Material and Criminal Cultures", in *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront c.1700–2000*, ed. Brad Beaven, Karl Bell and Robert James (London: Palgrave, 2016), 147–150. See also Spike Sweeting, "Capitalism, the State and Things: the Port of London circa 1730–1800" (unpublished PhD diss.: University of Warwick, 2014).
13. Sarah Palmer, "The Labour Process in the 19th Century Port of London: Some New Perspectives", in *Environnements Portuaires: Port Environments*, ed. Anne-Lise Piétri-Lévy, John Barzman, and Éric Barré (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Presses Universiaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2003), 317–328.
14. Katie Donington, "Milligan, Robert (1746–1809), Merchant, Slave Owner, and Dock Promoter", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 6 October 2016, DOI:10.1093/ref:odnb/109520.
15. David Hancock, "Hibbert, George (1757–1837), Merchant", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, DOI:10.1093/ref:odnb/13194.
16. Katie Donington, *The Bonds of Family: Slavery, Commerce and Culture in the British Atlantic World*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
17. Rosemary Sweet, "Domestic Tourism in Great Britain", *Picturing Places*, British Library, https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/domestic-tourism-in-great-britain.

18. Madge Dresser, "Set in Stone? Statues and Slavery in London", *History Workshop Journal* 64 (2007): 162–199. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25472939
19. Lyra D. Monteiro, "Power Structures: White Columns, White Marble, White Supremacy", *Intersectionist Medium*, 27 October 2020.
20. David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 89–91. See also Cora Gilroy-Ware, *The Classical Body in Romantic Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).
21. Malcolm Baker, *Figured in Marble: The Making and Viewing of Eighteenth-Century Sculpture* (London: V&A Publications, 2000), 11.
22. Joseph Yanielli, "The Nelsons of Bridgetown and Birmingham: What Two Statues Tell Us About the Legacy of Colonialiam", *The Conversation*, 29 October 2020. https://theconversation.com/the-nelsons-of-bridgetown-and-birmingham-what-two-statues-tell-us-about-the-legacy-of-colonialism-148850.
23. Westmacott was also responsible for sculpting the monument to the radical politician Charles James Fox, which features the figure of a Black man kneeling to the dying Fox in gratitude for the latter's anti-slavery efforts—a paternalistic motif, but undoubtedly abolitionist in sentiment, with its echoes of Josiah Wedgwood's "Am I Not A Man And A Brother?" medallion.
24. Westmacott married Dorothy, née Wilkinson, the daughter of William Wilkinson of Jamaica. A William Wilkinson and a William Robert Wilkinson appear as owners of several Jamaican plantations in the Jamaica Almanacs of the 1820s, but whether either of these men were connected to Dorothy Westmacott is unclear.
25. Anthony Partington, "A MEMORIAL TO *HIBBERTS*", *The Mariner's Mirror* 95, no. 4 (November 2009): 441–458
26. The "Rum and Sugar" menu for 2019: https://www.rumandsugar.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/C1195-RS-DRINKS-MENU-TRIFOLD-315X297mm-V2-LR10.pdf On the connection between "walking dead" and slavery, see Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion and Living Dead* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).
27. Catherine Hall, "Doing Reparatory History: Bringing 'Race' and Slavery Home", *Race & Class* 60, no. 1 (2018): 3–21.
28. Hall, "Doing Reparatory History", 18.
29. Teju Cole, "The White Savior Industrial Complex", *Known and Strange Things* (London: Faber, 2016), 340–349.
30. The term "outsider from within" is taken from Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought", *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): S14–S32, DOI:10.2307/800672. We use it here to reference the ways in which those working "outside", yet "for", institutions, can often produce distinctive and meaningful standpoints to broaden museum audiences.
31. Colin Prescod, "Archives, Race, Class and Rage", *Race & Class* 58, no. 4 (2016): 82.
32. Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery* (London: printed and published by R. Wedderburn, 1824).
33. "Robert Milligan", Legacies of British Slavery database, University College London, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146645741.
34. Gilroy argues that "once the history of the Empire became a source of discomfort, shame and perplexity, its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside". See Paul Gilroy, *After*

Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture? (London: Routledge, 2004), 98.

35. See Vincent Carretta, "Cugoano, Ottobah [John Stuart]: (b. 1757?)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 26 May 2016, DOI:10.1093/ref:odnb/59531; Vincent Carretta, "Sancho, (Charles) Ignatius: (1729?–1780)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 11 February 2021, DOI:10.1093/ref:odnb/24609; and James Walvin, "Equiano, Olaudah [Gustavus Vassa]: (c.1745–1797)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 1 September 2017, DOI:10.1093/ref:odnb/57028. See also Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787).
36. Tadhg O'Keeffe, "Landscape and Memory: Historiography, Theory, Methodology", in *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity: New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape*, ed. Niamh Moore and Yvonne Whelan (London: Routledge, 2007), 4.
37. Disseminated via Dutch trade between Indonesia and the Netherlands, ankara fabric has become a popular symbol in Ghana and is often used to communicate proverbs and messages about the wearer.
38. Jodie Matthews, "Canals and Transatlantic Slavery: A Preliminary Literature Review", Canal & River Trust, 2020, https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/refresh/media/original/42453-canals-and-transatlantic-slavery.pdf.
39. Tower Hamlets Council, "How Should We Represent Race and Equality in Our Public Spaces?" *Let's Talk Tower Hamlets*, https://talk.towerhamlets.gov.uk/publicspaces.

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