‘We’re all mad down here.’
Liminality and the carnivalesque in Smithfield Meat Market

Caroline Wilson

The cutting room is a hanging forest of carcasses: rose-pink and off-white; violet rumps hung before white panels. Against the urgent trill of fridges and the cold sound of rushing air, the hard metal surfaces resound with the rattle of overhead rails, the dull thumps of cleavers, with whistling and song, in raucous call-and-answer.

In the frenzy of busy nights, a lamb is undone in three minutes, from strung-up carcass to bits of body in bins. The cutters know all the bones, how the curves of flesh conceal them. The knife barely needs to seek them. Unhook the lamb from behind you, cold and stiff, and slam it onto the scored wooden chopping board with a bone-shuddering thud. Hold it against you, knife downwards and flowing along the shoulder-blade, hack the sinews, sling it into the metal bin with a cold gong-peal sound. Around, rotate, hacksaw to ribcage with a dry rasp, slap-slap, bin. Toss the trailing sinews and kidneys to the floor, cleaver to spine, count the ribs down, with thumps growing louder and sharper until the spine is severed, repeat through the night.

Introduction

It is the bone-white towers of Smithfield that first catch your eye. From afar they promise something grander or more holy, echoing with their neoclassical style the nearby domes of the Central Criminal Court and St Paul’s Cathedral. Drawing nearer, onto Charterhouse Street or West Smithfield (fig. 6.1), there is some edge of sadness to the towers, barely
discernible: streaks of dirt, rust, crumbling stone. Their boast of splendour rings hollow, they preside over a building that was once grand but is now grubby and battered, a jumbled mismatch of buildings. Modern parts are clumsily affixed to the Victorian main market (MM) building: huge numbered metal doors for loading, a filthy glass awning obscuring decorative stone arches overhead. Downhill, concrete arches join the older building to Poultry Market (PM), with its strange, dark, looming beehive windows in black brick and greying concrete (fig. 6.2).

In Cowcross Street, it’s all pristine stone pavements, perfect, smooth brick and the glib language of commerce and advertising enticing wealthy customers into expensive cafes for spiced chai lattes and superfood salads. As you cross the street to MM, the city fabric changes. The pavements have a dark, tarry gleam, streaked with dirt, the gutter filled with polystyrene cups and cigarette ends. It’s haunted with an uneasy smell, uncannily familiar, that lingers in corners and hits you through open doors in gulps of cold air: the pale smell of raw meat. Between windows blank and blind with dust, with bright-painted cast iron gratings, the red-brick walls are worn, the Portland stone dark and grubby (fig. 6.3). The walls are plastered with warning signs speaking
Fig. 6.2 The entire market as seen from west Charterhouse Street. General Market (GM) is in the foreground, followed by Poultry Market (PM), then Main Market (MM) in the background. Source: author

Fig. 6.3 Main market building, daytime, from Charterhouse Street. Source: author
a different language to those in Cowcross Street: a language of brute functionality, ringing with absent threat: ‘Do not reverse without an authorised banksman!’ ‘Caution! Forklift trucks operating!’ The anxiety reaches a pitch of greater urgency around the loading bays, their metal doors guarded by a regiment of battered yellow bollards. ‘LOOK LEFT’ the road markings cry, criss-crossing in alarming yellow, inverting: ‘LOOK RIGHT’. Moving along, the walls are marked with traces of another world. Names are carved into the brick, the stone smeared with handprints, cigarette ends inserted into the building’s seams. The building is charged with a feeling of absent presence.

Empty and silent by day, the building comes alive at night. Approaching the building at 2a.m., its busiest time, beyond the sleepy yellow streetlights there’s a harsher light – fluorescent, with a steely purity – a cold vitality that’s underlined by the sounds: a chorus of reversing sounds, a drumroll of trundling engines. Closer still, you can see that the building is encircled by rows of white vans; you can hear a clatter and shiver of metal trolleys, and the leitmotif of Smithfield: a resounding slam of metal on metal, wood on concrete, echoed by a yell: ‘OI!’

Anthropological studies of markets in large urban contexts often treat markets as paradigmatic of something in wider society. Geertz, Geertz and Rosen’s 1978 study *Suq: The Bazaar Economy in Sefrou* treats the bazaar like a magnifying glass through which ethnicity, class and various dynamics underpinning Moroccan society are highlighted and intensified by high-stake situations of buying and selling. Likewise, Bestor’s (2004) study *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Centre of the World* explores how economic institutions are shaped by socio-cultural forces in wider Japanese society, and how the market in turn shapes Japanese food culture. The study shifts dynamically between intensely local details of Tsukiji and much broader values surrounding food, drawing connections between both (see the introduction to this book). A similar study of Smithfield would certainly be possible. Yet market workers (MWs) do not see Smithfield as the centre of the world, or as microcosmic of anything in wider society; indeed, they pride themselves on Smithfield’s contrast with its surroundings, describing it as ‘a different world’ and ‘a time warp’, where outside rules do not apply. Following in this spirit, this study will explore Smithfield in all its local, specific detail, to examine what makes Smithfield unique in itself rather than representative of other socio-cultural dynamics.
A night in Smithfield

The night begins at around 10p.m. Shop men arrive to unload deliveries and load orders for larger customers. During the busiest times, lorries and vans are blocking the roads, and the pavements are teeming with life, meat is moving inwards and outwards, loading and unloading, boxes piled onto pallets, speared by forklift trucks and spun away.

Lorries from slaughterhouses reverse onto the loading bays (fig. 6.4). Up on a red platform, surrounded by a crazy complex of buttons and machinery (fig. 6.5), the drivers help MWs sling bundles of carcasses onto a slow-moving conveyor belt of hook rails, which lowers them into the dim grey-metal service corridors (fig. 6.6). Here, Davey the rail man guides them to their respective shops, sending them swaying and rattling along a dense network of overhead rails with a shove of his metal shepherd’s crook.

From around midnight, the cutters are ready in their cutting room (fig. 6.7), a refrigerated box of white panels scattered with exclamatory warning signs, with a cold that cuts to your toes, and a low ceiling with hooks and rails. During busy times, it’s noisy and crowded; duck to avoid a line of carcasses trundling towards you on rails; keep your wits about you, ready to answer the abuse flying your way (‘Get back in the ugly shop, you ugly bastard!’). People wander in and out with trolleys, appear framed in the doorway briefly, exchange yells, disappear. Some are old friends, others unknown (‘Right, who are you, and what do you want?’). On busy nights, the tempo is ramped up to an incredible speed: Rob rampages about the tiny room, slinging bags of meat, batting carcasses out of his way, hauling them about in a lumbering dance, organising orders, arguing with customers (‘No, you’re all done mate!’ ‘You’ve had four, and that was it.’ ‘No, you’re the one that’s fucking about, not me.’). He joins in with banter, cackling heartily, scolds inexperienced workers: ‘OI! ANTON! USE A FUCKING GLOVE!’

The shop men scrabble about in the bins, bent double as the cutters throw meat at them, groping bare-handed at cold, soft lamb shoulders, dripping trailing bleeding adhesive bits of flesh, hands saturated with the homely smell of lamb fat, gripping greasy forelegs below the elbow, tumbling them together into plastic-smelling bags.

With your back to the service corridor, pick your way across the cutting room, around carcasses, past quarters of beef and hatstands of smiling pigs’ heads, through a glass door and you’re into the shop front (fig. 6.8). The shops are boxed off from each other with white and stainless-steel panels that gleam in the harsh white tube-lights. At some stalls, the
Fig. 6.4 Smithfield Market floor plan (adapted from SMTA 2018)
Fig. 6.5  Loading machinery in the loading bays. Source: author

Fig. 6.6  Service corridor. Source: author
Fig. 6.7  A cutting room. Source: author

Fig. 6.8  Shop fronts. The purple pillars of the original building are still visible on the right. Source: author
white is broken with bucolic backdrops, images of cows grazing green pastures, cooked meat artfully presented. The salesmen arrive at 2a.m. and arrange the displays in glass cabinets: trays of pale-smelling chicken legs, lamb breasts marbled pink and white. Gleaming plucks and hearts, burgundy-brown or the deepest red, tripe with its earthy stench, piles of sheep’s heads: skin-off, red and madly grinning through dull blue eyes; skin on, hard and yellowish, tongues twisted in agony.

Although bright labels boast special offers, pitching is unheard of among salesmen. Most hard-sell activity is limited to mobile phone conversations and text-message exchanges with large customers; salesmen remain reserved with the customers in Buyers Walk, serving them in an almost pointedly unhurried fashion (‘I like to make ’em wait. Makes us look popular,’ a salesman winked at me as he refused my help in serving the gathering queue). Still, it’s a bustle even out here, with thin tinny music, yells and swearing across the fridge sounds.

And out, past the glass cabinets, you’re in Buyers Walk, with customers sauntering and shuffling, MWs rattling and trundling past with trolleys and pump-trucks, salesmen dancing in the aisles. Downhill towards the market’s centre, you’ll come out in Grand Avenue, underneath the clock that stands as synecdoche for the whole market, the market’s heart. Grand Avenue is lined with elaborate cast iron grating, lorry height, bold in green and lilac-blue, vaulting overhead in star-studded arches. Most striking are the iron gates to Buyers Walk, thrust open now: blue, purple, green, gold. Lions with tongues protruding, sea shells, a leafy twisting burst of gaudy colour (fig. 6.9).

A constable (security guard) gave me a tactile tour of these gates. Running his hands along them, he showed me the workmanship, where they were joined, where they were broken. ‘Try to push it. See how heavy it is.’ I felt the immense, cold resistance against my own force. ‘Ya see?’ he beamed, triumphantly. He summoned me to a room behind the office, where parts of the gate were lovingly kept while waiting to be re-affixed. He handled each one tenderly, passed it to me to show me the weight.

From under the clock, looking back along Buyers Walk, above the rows of stalls in white and metal, you can see the original structure again: lilac-blue and magenta pillars and arches holding aloft the wooden slatted ceiling, ‘Like the upside-down hull of a ship,’ said a shop man. It’s painted a different kind of white to the white below, with skylight windows that let in the pale light of dawn when the night comes to an end and everyone is exhausted, tempers are frayed, the avenues are lined with rubbish, and everyone wants to go home. And at the furthest point
at each end, plaques commemorate the market’s completion, echoing the gates in twisting leaves: ‘Completed 1868’ (fig. 6.10).

People would often gesture to this date when telling me the building’s history or when joking about a fellow MW’s age (‘He remembers when this was built!’). But for most MWs, Smithfield’s story begins hundreds of years before this date. Davey dreams of making a film about Smithfield. It would open with the excesses of Bartholomew Fair, with people being burned, before fading to modern times: a Smithfield cutter (and professional boxer) receives a blow to the chin from his friend and collapses to the floor. He regains consciousness, laughs. ‘What the fuck you do that for?’ This sense of seamless continuity between past and present violence and laughter is widely shared among MWs; for them, Smithfield today continues this tradition of lawlessness and wild abandon.

History

Attested in 1174 as ‘a smooth field,’ where livestock was sold, the market was originally situated outside the city walls, sharing its site with other institutions, industries and activities that could not be tolerated inside
the walls: St Bartholomew’s Hospital, Newgate Prison, slaughtering, tanning and prostitution. As MWs are keen to relate, Smithfield was the site of numerous executions, most notably the gruesome death of William Wallace and, later, the burning of heretics, with some 200 being burned at Smithfield during the reign of Mary I (Forshaw 1990:39). Smithfield continued as a site for society’s unwanted even after the city overspilled its original walls and absorbed Smithfield into its heart. Smithfield was notorious for its slums (or ‘rookeries’), which were eventually cleared in the 1840s (Forshaw 1990:163).

Smithfield continued to trade in live meat until the mid-nineteenth century, until it was deemed a place of such ‘cruelty, filth, effluvia, pestilence, impiety, horrid language, danger, disgusting and shuddering sights’ (Maslen 1843:16) that it could no longer be tolerated in such a central position. Eventually, the live market was moved to Islington and the current building was built in 1868 to house a carcass market. Designed by Sir Horace Jones, its open ironwork allowed for the circulation of air, which kept the building cool and was ideal for keeping meat fresh (Forshaw 1990:79). General Market (GM), now abandoned, was added in 1899 (Forshaw 1990:83), and the brutalist Poultry Market

Fig. 6.10  The top part of the building, seen from East Market looking downwards towards West Market. Source: author
(PM) was completed in 1963, after the original PM was destroyed by fire. Some MWs remember: ‘They said it was only a little fire. We come back the next day and the building was gone!’

The most significant event in living memory is the 1990s refurbishment. The market’s interior, once open, was divided into boxed-off shops; the number of shops was significantly reduced to make way for refrigerated storage rooms and freezers. The loading process was mechanised, making pullaback and pitchers redundant (see table 6.1). The market was made accessible to forklift trucks, so that bummarees (meat carriers), already dwindling in number since meat started arriving precut or boxed, and therefore easier to carry, became a ‘dying breed’ (see Kerridge 1988; Forshaw 1990).

Although there is some tension between ‘guv’nors’ and other workers, all MWs are united against a common enemy. Central to the market’s sense of identity and place in the world is the age-old rivalry with the City of London (CoL), which owns and rents the land and sets down regulations which are largely ignored. The CoL wryly acknowledges this struggle: ‘Smithfield has its own code of conduct quite apart from that laid down by regulations’ (Metcalf 1991:159). The threat of being closed and moved out of town has always overshadowed the market; the CoL is clear that ‘closing the markets and thereby releasing the area for development would produce a vast influx of funds to City’s cash’ (Metcalf 1991:161). Older MWs remember being discouraged from working at Smithfield years ago: ‘They said it would be gone soon.’ This constant sense of impending doom, of being out of place and unwanted, is crucial to MWs sense of identity, as will be explored throughout this chapter.

Smithfield: workers and trade

The typical ‘old boy’ MW is male, white, working class, based in Essex or Kent, and originates from London, able to boast of his cockney credentials: ‘This is a little pocket of the old East London!’ However, there has always been more diversity at Smithfield than some would like to admit. Billy, a cutter, frequently remarked that ‘It was all whites up here. No blacks, no foreigners…’ but as others point out, there have always been well-established foreign-born or non-white MWs (‘Well, he was more English than black,’ says Billy of one such well-known figure). ‘I’m still out on my own though,’ admits one MW of south Asian heritage. ‘They try to fire me, I just pull the race card!’ Now, several workers in
Table 6.1  Smithfield market workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Hours (approx.)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>individual shops</td>
<td>'guv'nor'</td>
<td>managing director, senior salesman</td>
<td>undefined</td>
<td>viewed with ambivalence; considered a category apart from other MWs; earn a lot (upwards of £50,000 p.a.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>salesman:</td>
<td>take payments, serve customers, write</td>
<td>2a.m.–8a.m.</td>
<td>most senior of shop employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>shop front</td>
<td>receipts, take orders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>salesmen:</td>
<td>as above, but work with larger orders at</td>
<td>2a.m.–8a.m.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>out back</td>
<td>the back door of shops; also manage shop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>men in loading and unloading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cashiers</td>
<td>take payments; handle cash</td>
<td>2a.m.–8a.m.</td>
<td>many are female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>shop men</td>
<td>load, unload, transport, various odd jobs</td>
<td>11p.m.–8a.m.</td>
<td>more junior, worse paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cutters</td>
<td>cut whole carcasses into smaller pieces</td>
<td>11p.m.–6a.m.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>butchers</td>
<td>cut meat as required</td>
<td>11p.m.–6a.m.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-employed</td>
<td>bummarees</td>
<td>gather large orders from across the market</td>
<td>2a.m.–8a.m.</td>
<td>remembered with affection; now only approximately eight on the market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>into one place for collection by customers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of London</td>
<td>railmen/</td>
<td>guide carcasses into appropriate stalls</td>
<td>9p.m.–2a.m.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hookmen</td>
<td>using overhead rails; ensure shops have</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>enough meat hooks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued table 6.1)
(Continued table 6.1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Hours (approx.)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cleaners</td>
<td></td>
<td>various shifts over 24 hours</td>
<td>many are from Nigeria; most have little relationship with market workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>constabulary</td>
<td>security guards</td>
<td></td>
<td>various shifts over 24 hours</td>
<td>now have limited powers; mostly well liked by market workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-employed/individual shops</td>
<td>pullbacks</td>
<td>brought carcasses from backs of lorries to front of lorries for unloading</td>
<td></td>
<td>redundant since refurbishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-employed/individual shops</td>
<td>pitchers</td>
<td>brought carcasses from lorries to respective shops</td>
<td></td>
<td>redundant since refurbishment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
various occupational divisions are foreign born. Many are from southern and eastern Europe; other nationalities include Brazilian, Vietnamese, South Korean and Kurdish-Cypriot. Many are accepted and loved, others less so.

Most women on the shop floor are cashiers, with about four female salesmen (MWs never use the term saleswoman) and one woman constable. No women work in other occupational divisions; indeed, the 2012 BBC documentary The Meat Market: Inside Smithfield notoriously documents the plight of the only-ever female shop man, who left complaining of sexism.

Customers who carry out transactions ‘out back’ are businesses collecting large orders: kebab shops and some well-known restaurant chains. Customers in Buyers Walk are generally of two types: high-street butchers, generally from a similar background to MWs and well-versed in Smithfield banter, and members of the public, with whom relations are notably strained. They argue over prices, complain the salesmen; they lack basic manners. ‘Gimme this. Gimme that,’ complains Jonny. ‘Honestly!’ MWs attribute such problems to cultural differences: very few of these customers are white British, the most commonly cited origins being Turkish and Kurdish. Any rudeness is met with equal doses of rudeness: ‘Because they know the way you are... I can be as rude as I want. And if someone upsets you, you can tell them where to go, basically.’

Despite this apparent disregard for customer service, and despite frequent complaints from MWs that business is declining (‘Two for one in Tesco’s!’ a bummaree liked to complain. ‘Can’t get two for one here!’), some shops are said to make a tidy profit. One shop apparently claims to have made a turnover of 7 million one Christmas, although some suspect that this may be an exaggeration. Still, many guv’nors and senior salesmen are comfortably off, as other MWs like to point out. ‘Oh yeah, they all drive the big flash cars and all, don’t worry about that,’ says a shop man with heavy irony. ‘They’ve got plenty of money... they’ll tell you they haven’t, but they don’t do too bad.’

The meat itself keeps up with modern consumer demands, coming from all corners of the world, bearing various labels certifying itself as a certain breed, fed on a certain diet, free-range, organic or halal. Few MWs showed much respect for such labels. ‘Is the chicken corn-fed?’ asks a customer. ‘Nah, we feed ’em on Weetabix!’ comes the reply, to hearty laughter from other salesmen.
Part 1. Inside the market: embodied labour and kinship

The market consists of 42 shops. I was told that no one knows the total number of MWs, but estimates range between 500 and 750. Occupational categories are as shown in Table 6.1.

‘I’ve been here 30 years… and my father, 50 years before me. And my grandfather, 80 years before that…’ Smithfield is a place of family; MWs count lyrically backwards through the generations, listing their ancestors at Smithfield. Most MWs find work through family ties; several generations still work side by side. A young saleswoman remarked that she loved coming to work, ‘to spend a bit of quality time with my dad’.

Beyond blood relations, people frequently remark that the entire market is one family, even one single body: ‘We’re family here. And we look after family. Have a go at one of us, you have a go at 2000 of us!’ People had known each other their whole lives, seen people die. Plaques commemorate MWs who have died; their ghosts haunt the building. Billy’s late friend appeared to him in the changing rooms upstairs. ‘Then he left, didn’t say a word. It broke my heart.’

Indeed, for some, Smithfield’s family-like ties are more valuable than real kinship ties: many remarked that they had spent more time with each other than with their families. Some continue to work long past retirement age, confessing that Smithfield offers an escape from the monotony of home life: ‘You just sit around, wait for the wife to finish the ironing.…’ MWs contrast to Marx’s alienated worker, feeling more at home while working (Marx 1992:326).

In the ‘Tail Piece’ of the market’s quarterly newsletter the Smithfield Gazette, ‘Fred’ – the pen name taken by the group of senior MWs who contribute this piece – declares: ‘We are together because Smithfield is our home’ (SMTA 2015:8).

A violent initiation ritual, ‘getting married’ (sometimes called ‘your birthday’), marks MWs as ‘part of their little family’, as one recent initiate puts it, producing local bodies (Appadurai 1996). Though now only performed occasionally, is it often talked about, described with excitement and amusement. The initiate is always a male MW – someone new to Smithfield or celebrating some kinship-related milestone such as a marriage, 21st birthday or any birthday. He is rendered passive – wrapped in box-wrapping, tied to something – stripped naked and violently pelted with the most defiling of produce. Pig’s blood is essential;
rotten eggs, offal, rotten product, ice water. Although violent, it is attended with raucous laughter, a sense of anarchic, riotous joy, as further explored below.

Likewise, kinship-like relations are forged through apprenticeship relations. Just as MWs count through the generations of their family, so too can they trace their apprenticeship genealogy (‘I taught the bloke who taught him how to cut’), a phenomenon that Bestor labels ‘fictive kinship’ (Bestor 2004:240). Fiddes claims that cutting (‘dismemberment’, he calls it) is an act of domination (Fiddes 1991:82). Yet cutting under the gentle guidance of Charlie, who learned the skill as a schoolboy from his grandfather and passes it down the generations, and who receives an affectionate pat on the shoulder from one of his students (‘very good teacher’), seems less an act of brutal domination, more a skill that forms parental ties.

These ties go beyond mere fictive kinship, finding material realisation. They are sedimented in the flesh, inscribed in the body. As you learn to cut from your elders, it sculpts your arm muscles, marks you with scars, inhabits your body and mind. ‘I was cutting again, last night,’ complains a cutter, savouring his fag-break outside. ‘Can’t get away from it.’ He demonstrates on a box-pile how the motions flow, how part of him cannot ever stop.

For some, the tools (always yours and yours only) become an extension of the body. ‘You look a bit fucking dangerous with that knife!’ a female salesman yells after a butcher wandering about with a vague yet fierce air to him, still clutching his knife. ‘It’s stuck to me,’ he replies. Body and environment are mutually constitutive; like Wacquant’s boxer, the MW ‘is inhabited by the game he inhabits’ (Wacquant 1995:88). The work and environment as a whole marks everyone in its physical and sensual intensity. You are daubed in blood, your hands saturated with grease. The cold seeps into your body (some are convinced that the sharp temperature changes explain Billy’s frequent blackouts while driving), the fatigue makes your body ache. The strange rhythm of days turns the most intimate cycles of the body on their head: a saleswoman confided that when she started working at Smithfield, she stopped menstruating.

Pressing on through the long nights, in the dark outside and the bright cold inside, there is a certain emotional way of being in Smithfield. ‘I love the job, but I hate it at the same time. It’s weird, man,’ a shop man confesses. Smithfield is a place of love and hate, pain and laughter, the humour as merciless as the cold and the harsh lights. Davey’s father’s
memories still ring true today: ‘Everyone had the hump like, you know… lots of people getting up early and working hard and maybe for not much money… so yeah, a lot of people were very aggressive. But my dad said to me […] you could get up in the morning with the hump, he said you’d get to Smithfield and someone would say something make you laugh, like. He said it was brilliant – he said it was so full of people laughing and joking.’

The environment marks them aggressively, and MWs respond with equal aggression, with a cheerful disregard for safety and for the building. Walls are smeared with handprints, chipped away; salesmen laugh as they try to piece together bits of battered and broken stalls; a CoL engineer lives in constant despair, spending long nights trying to piece together the destruction MWs leave in their wake. Davey can trace memories of his childhood across the surface of the stone; he used to come as a child with his father, a bummaree; he shows me where the wheels of the old bummarees’ barrows chipped away the walls. The bodily engagement with building is so intense that social relations become sedimented in the building with engraved names, initials and jokes; in PM, whole conversations are registered on the walls (fig. 6.11).

Body, work and building are co-constitutive, each element sustaining the other in a relationship that is aggressive yet organic and vital. Older MWs are regarded as part of the architecture: “They built this place “round him, back in 16-whatever!” In a striking description

Fig. 6.11 ‘Where’s Danny?’ ‘Round ya mum’s.’ Banter via graffiti on the walls of PM. Source: author
of Smithfield in the old days, when the stalls were divided not by white panels but rows of carcasses, a young salesman told me that ‘the stalls used to be made of meat’. Smithfield comes alive in an architecture of flesh; ‘This is a living, breathing market!’ Davey would exclaim. The trade is seen as living, sustained by the embodied skill of elderly MWs: ‘When these people die, the trade’ll die with them,’ said a shop man. And many remark that the place in turn keeps elderly MWs alive, those who work long past retirement age. ‘When people leave this place, they die. Dunno why.’

Part 2. The market and the other: liminal identity and carnivalesque performance

‘I strolled in the dark early hours through the City, place of enormous wealth. The silence gave a sense of comfort and a feeling of power over the banking giants.’ – ‘Fred’ (SMTA 2016a:4).

When the city around is asleep, it’s the liminal figures that take centre stage. The pavements heave with drunken revellers: one staggers down Buyers Walk; as MWs around him blithely ignore him, he steadies himself with both hands flat on a display cabinet, staring at the raw meat as if trying to cling to it as the stable core of a spinning universe. A homeless man finds his way behind a stall and collapses asleep. ‘Ever seen The Walking Dead?’ Keith, a salesman, shouts to me. ‘Well, now you don’t need to’; he nods to a regular customer inching down the aisle, hunched and ancient, grinning blindly. MWs tell me of people dressing as clowns to frighten co-workers, of the shady figures, gangsters, criminals and madmen who frequent the market, of prostitutes, drunkards and clowns who stumble into their domain, as if all are part of an ensemble cast of the marginalised, and Smithfield their stage.

Keith’s The Walking Dead reference implies a strange continuity between these liminal figures and the dead who come alive in MWs’ imaginings of the market. MWs often speak of all the bones in Smithfield, unearthed by construction work, the ghosts, the screams people hear at night. They would tell me of the executions, lingering on gruesome details of bodies pulled apart; ‘William Wallace, he was hung, drawn and quartered up here. Put his head up on the bridge, his legs…’ Its historically liminal position, by the hospital, threshold between life and death, where violent criminals met gruesome ends – all these were prominent in MWs’ imaginings of Smithfield. It is a topsy-turvy world, a world on the fringes of the civilised, sane, living, waking world.
With the pale dawn, the market fades and the silent sweep of commuters through Grand Avenue begins. They appear almost flimsy, in suits, heels and skirts, their firm, brisk stride contrasting to the MWs’ proud swagger. In my blood-smeared whites one morning I notice the looks they give; a woman walking hurriedly with a grim expression eyes me with disgust. When I return her gaze, she quickly diverts hers to the floor without altering her pace. In interviews, office workers describe with unease and disgust the spectacle of bits of bodies left behind in the mornings: an eyeball, a head, a trail of blood. Butchery, raw meat and blood are widely associated with lack of civilisation, and with barbarity and violence (Fiddes 1991:89). Likewise, many modern consumers view meat and animal as strictly distinct, bounded categories, eschewing products too reminiscent of their living, animal origins (Fiddes 1991:230). A BBC documentary, *Kill it, Cook it, Eat it*, follows people’s horror as they observe, for example, ‘How chickens are turned into nuggets’ (BBC 2010). MWs work with a substance that disrupts these categories in a way unsettling for many – a substance half way between animal and meat, recognisable as both. As Douglas explains, disruption of bounded categories is profoundly disturbing, threatening the project of civilisation itself (see e.g. Douglas 1978:55).

MWs are aware of this, aware of their appearance in their blood-stained overalls. A *Smithfield Gazette* article reveals the MWs’ gratitude to cafes that accept them in their bloodied whites (Smithfield Market Tenant’s Association (SMTA) 2016a:3). They return the disdainful gaze with pride and defiance, chin up, chest out, but in private they confess to feeling unwanted. Some are humorous about their feelings of rejection: ‘We’re all naughty boys here,’ laughs Jonny, a salesman. ‘No one else would have us!’ Others are less cheerful. ‘People are wary of you,’ says Frank, a butcher. ‘They see your white coat and they know you chop up animals; they think you’re gonna chop them up.’

All this is intensified by the constant threat of closure, the knowledge that the CoL does not want them there, that locals and office workers in the increasingly gentrified surroundings complain about the smell, mess and noise. And, as the daily furore around the EU referendum made clear, many MWs feel ignored and despised in society at large, worried that their children face an uncertain future. A constable voted leave with a heavy heart: ‘They say the EU is supposed to protect workers’ rights, but we weren’t seeing any of it. We felt left behind.’

Epitomising the EU and the CoL’s opposition to their way of being are the health and safety signs covering the building, the omnipresent voice of authority. Human images in the signs ‘Hard hats must be worn’
and ‘pedestrian route’ are faceless, the figures abstracted to dead symbols. These are the texts of non-place: ‘addressed simultaneously and indiscriminately to each and any of us: they fabricate the “average man”’ (Augé 1995:100). It was in the service corridors, where these signs reach a particular pitch of anxiety, that Davey told me: ‘It’s not just the market. It was faces, people, boxers, gangsters…’ Smithfield’s community cherishes its members for their quirks and eccentricities, yet these signs represent ‘a power that is not individualising, but… massifying’ (Foucault 2004:243).

Yet the voice is undermined by other voices, co-present with them in a single utterance. Several signs have been graffitied (fig. 6.12). In their bold lettering and absolute commands, the voice presents itself as absolute, monoglot; the graffiti challenges this, playing with the space between word and object, speaking subject and word (Bakhtin 1981:276). The original words remain yet are shot through with the obscene words of Smithfield’s social world, with a contradictory orientation to the same objects: health and safety, hygiene and danger. The signs become heteroglot; MWs’ voices are heard even in the words of authority. Additionally, they have turned the dead symbols back into their friends. A faceless hard-hat head is given glasses resembling the salesman at his desk nearby. A forklift driver is given an impossibly large belly and labelled ‘Teggy’; the letters sprout limbs and smiling faces, labelled with names.

Fig. 6.12 Graffitied signs. Source: author
MWs must continually fight to maintain locality against these forces that invade and threaten to undermine their very sense of humanity. Yet MWs ultimately must submit; their locality could not exist without this hostile authority. The building is as much the CoL’s as it is theirs; its very existence is due to these inimical outside forces, built to replace the old live meat market. Unable to create their own protected enclave of locality that is theirs alone, they must co-opt the projects of the other, co-exist with them in constant, aggressively humorous struggle. As further discussed below, the most developed idioms in Smithfield are of resistance: sadness, anger and opposition. MWs’ identity is dialectic, with opposition to outside forces at its heart.

Humour is essential in the MWs’ subversive identity, their struggle against authority. Smithfield sees its humour as the ‘popular corrective of laughter applied to the narrow-minded seriousness of the spiritual pretence’, of the dominant order (or of anyone who thinks too much of themselves) (Bakhtin 1984:22). One anecdote demonstrates this corrective in action: ‘I recall a right old snob coming down, being shown ’round the place. A Labour MP, I think. He was ignoring all the staff, so somebody got hold of a sheep’s eye and chucked it at him. Got him right on the back of the neck. The place was in uproar’ (Usborne 2015). All through the night, the air rings with the sounds of fridges, engines, trolleys and the shouts and laughter of the people as they yell in abusive exchange. It makes the ungodly hours bearable: ‘banter up here – fantastic’. Humour is considered an essential life force that keeps the world alive and continually revitalised. Commenting on the decline of the market, the economy, and society in general, Jonny would explain: ‘It’s ’cos people are too serious these days.’ In the old days, Kevin, a bummaree, said, ‘There was more life. You had a laugh.’

In the anecdote above, the use of a body part to bring the high-and-mighty down to earth is significant. Smithfield is marked by a celebration, through humour and ritual, of the earthiness of existence. Jokes revolve around sexuality, defecation, the phallus, the buttocks, parts of the body ‘through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to world’ (Bakhtin 1984:26). Penises are scrawled everywhere; people’s backsides are common property (‘I need a sign on here saying “do not touch – do not enter”’, jokes a shop man). Billy’s hands are endowed with healing powers; but such apparently mystic powers are degraded, brought down to earth, made flesh (Bakhtin 1984:20): his powers mostly cure constipation, mystic-utopian powers of the carnivalesque that open the body to the world through defecation. “Ere, what happened to Steve
when I put my hands on his stomach?’ He asks Jonny for proof. ‘He was shitting for weeks.’

‘Getting married’ is an intensified celebration of human/animal flesh as one, all one with the market family and one with the world. The use of rotten product is most striking. Anxiety about contaminated produce lies at the heart of most regulations that plague MWs’ lives. The disposal of rotten material is intensely regulated. The most severely contaminated produce is kept at the sad end of PM, behind a series of doors in a white-bright cold room with a smell that clasps my temples and stomach with the memory of it. In that room, trembling with fatigue and sickness, I remember how desperately I wanted to leave. For Kristeva (1982), abjection is part of our ordering of self against non-self, part of our project of maintaining bodily integrity. Yet the initiate is rendered passive, stripped naked (this requirement is heavily emphasised: ‘They tie you to a table, yeah, naked, with all your private parts hanging out…’); his agency, his barriers to the outside world are undermined in a gory spectacle as he is covered in blood, bits of bodies, abject matter that should be kept apart from the self. ‘Getting married’ dramatises ‘the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject’ (Kristeva 1982:207). He is absorbed into one body, that of the market family and the animal bodies he works with. Through imagery of slaughter, death and dismemberment, he is painfully reborn (indeed, an alternative name for ‘Getting married’ is ‘Your birthday’).

Among the violence, there is a riotous joy in the transgression of ordered demarcation, of separation, a jouissance. ‘One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [on en jouit]. Violently and painfully’ (Kristeva 1982:9). One does not know it. Indeed, the ceremony is riddled with uncertainty and contradiction. Commentary on the ritual was limited, questions answered with a shrug and a laugh. ‘It’s just what they do.’ Showing me a video, Jonny explained simply, ‘He’s getting married.’ ‘But… when? To whom?’ I replied, confused. ‘No one knows. He doesn’t know.’ Not knowing, knowing only the pain and jouissance, the smell and the cold shock of abject matter, the hard pavement to your face. ‘Getting married’ is a raucous, joyous celebration and dramatisation of MWs’ contradictory position in the universe.

Indeed, the whole culture of Smithfield celebrates disorder and contradiction. ‘It’s all wind-ups down here,’ was a common catchphrase. A wind-up is simply a story that isn’t true, nonsense told with wide-eyed sincerity. The guv’nors were notorious bank robbers; Billy used to be an
assassin; I was working undercover for Smith, Chairman of All Markets, conspiring to close the market. One salesman laughed: ‘There’s no truth up here!’ A great source of humour was chaos, things out of place, illogical, impossible happenings. Old characters are fondly remembered for amusing, nonsensical behaviour: the ‘Mad major’, ‘who went to work in a bowler hat, cashmere coat, bright yellow gloves and went home on the bus in his bloodstained smock’. Billy the Fib, in distinctly carnivalesque fashion, ‘once went into a pub dressed as a priest, ordered brandies for his mates and then walked out’ (SMTA 2016a:2). In Smithfield, laughter ‘frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities’ (Bakhtin 1984:49).

For Douglas (1978), dirt is what is swept to the edges as part of the ordering project of culture – just as Smithfield was swept to the edges of the city centuries ago, just as MWs feel they are matter out of place now. Thus, dirt and contamination are inherently linked with disorder, unreason and madness. MWs go straight to the heart of what marks them as liminal, into that contradictory space of dirt and unreason, between life and death, self and other, animal and meat, between life-sustaining food and potentially fatal contaminating substance, where the dead come to life and madmen reign, and they embrace it as the heart of Smithfield’s world. Smithfield is a world between real and ideal: it is a community like any other, but also a lived performance of an ideal, utopian order. Smithfield is a carnivalesque world, a space where conventional order, reality and reason are suspended, a ‘bodily participation in the potentiality of another world’ (Bakhtin 1984:48).

Fiddes argues that meat exemplifies ‘the masculine world view that ubiquitously perceives, values, and legitimates hierarchical domination of nature, of women, and of other men’ (Fiddes 1991:210). MWs’ attitudes are more ambivalent, marked by celebration of the cycles of life and death that unite all living things; by identification, even empathy. An MW contemplates the idea of killing a cow. ‘That cow looking you in the eyes […] It’s like shooting someone, innit? I dunno if I’d be able to sleep.’ Performing a popular joke, a salesman holds a skinned sheep’s head next to his own: ‘Who’s the best looking here?’ A common prank involves producing a pig’s trotter protruding from one’s sleeve as a hand: a human–animal metamorphosis, a lived grotesque form. The contradiction in attitudes – sadness and laughter – is resolved through that fearless humour that Bakhtin describes, that can laugh in the face of death – one’s own death, or the grisly reminder that an animal has died: its dull-blue eyes and skeleton-grin. In one Tail Piece, ‘Fred’ humorously
prophesises his death, encouraging his friends to drink merrily ‘as the ashes return to the earth’ (SMTA 2015:8).

Indeed, meat, like laughter, is believed to sustain the vitality of the world. Violence, death and domination are associated with the opposite: vegetarianism. Table 6.2 demonstrates the oppositions as conceived in the texts below. Text A is the Smithfield Gazette’s July 2016 ‘Tail Piece’ (SMTA 2016b:8). Text B is a comment, written by a prominent MW, on a YouTube video posted by a lorry driver, documenting the torments of parking at Smithfield, entitled Smithfield: The Parking Challenge [sic] (Martinelli 2016).

**Text A – Smithfield Gazette ‘Tail Piece’**

Dreams are mysteries most probably prompted by factual events. What happens when daytime awareness stops and night time dreams lead to weird, sometimes frightening situations? After being locked into a world of reality, are we drifting into a vision of the consequence of an act of supreme selfishness?

In this nightmare I dreamt of walking almost forever throughout the world in every hemisphere. Around me were dead bulls, cows, steers, calves, pigs, sheep, lambs, goats, turkeys, and their devastated owners.

Tip-toe through the vegans, you’ll know who they are, they are the ones with the celery sticks in their mouths looking like

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**Table 6.2  Opposotions between meat eating and vegetarianism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meat eating</th>
<th>Vegetarianism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smithfield Market</td>
<td>outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>real hunger for food</td>
<td>sterile hunger for money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life-giving healthy diet</td>
<td>life-draining diet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>real world (local?)</td>
<td>(fantasy world? nightmare world?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>impossibly vast, endless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>common people</td>
<td>land-grabbing elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(brick, marble and stone?)</td>
<td>concrete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vitality</td>
<td>listlessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abundant life</td>
<td>mass annihilation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>natural</td>
<td>unnatural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>care and love (laughter? noise?)</td>
<td>(indifference?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(laughter? noise? chatter?)</td>
<td>silence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
they need more substantial fillings. Move quietly through the vegetarians, pale but still eating fish; advance into the real world where we stewards raise meat and poultry, the natural food provided.

Stop now; hear the ‘starve the world’ fantasists; ‘let’s kill off billions of cows and bulls, let everyone else eat whatever they can get to survive’. The greatest terrorist act of all time has begun. Ask those who lay you to rest to preserve your teeth to use on your premature gravestones to help those who survive to wonder what sort of ancestors we inherited.

If you wish to stop eating fish, as vegans do, you can speed up the total decline of our world and help to achieve the total extinction of the human race. And, by the way, these animals vegans claim to protect are now extinct; nobody it seems wants a pet cow!

Millions of humans die slowly from disease and injury. Those who rear life-supporting animals do not allow them to suffer such agony or ‘caring homes’. Their parents and family will never need to mourn. Our animals will not grow old, anymore than a butterfly, they are God’s gift to all, created to give health and life.

Yours as ever,
‘Fred’

Text B – comment on YouTube video

Absolute nonsense – are Vegans running the show? For your guidance it is NOT ‘Smithfield’ markets’ which itself shows you lack of knowledge and even minimal appreciation of the GREATEST and only Market actually within the City. This is ‘Smithfield Market’ protected by the laws of the land and still providing a superb barrier against the huge Supermarkets from squeezing the common people into a meatless and killing diet.

Smithfield does more than any such self promoting supermarket to provide Parking than anyone of them.

Smithfield is an absolute icon to show how those who love and believe in its family, can snub the noses of the wicked, greedy, selfish land- grabbers. Do you really want a city of concrete and no heart? If not support the long term of Smithfield Meat Market.

Although still opposing earthy vitality to the sterility of the dominant order, these texts move beyond the carnivalesque. The latter subverts a power with a clear hierarchical structure (e.g. king on top) and easily
locatable textual or material manifestations (the crown, the prayer, etc.); anti-structure, madness, freedom, superabundance, counter-posed to structure, order, repression and containment. Breaking rules, defacing signs, subverting hierarchy, ‘Getting married’, are all in this spirit. But in an age of decentralised, multiform power (the EU, the CoL, bankers, supermarkets, politicians), the operations of such power have no obvious tangible manifestations. Indeed, they are perceived as deliberately opaque; even I was semi-seriously accused of working undercover for the CoL, conspiring to close the market. It is a power that no longer restricts but positively creates discourses and moulds subjects (Mitchell 1990:564). Thus, humour cedes to anger and fear. The new power can only be represented in terms that spill over into garish, semi-abstracted imaginings of the piling up of bodies, ‘fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm’ (Jameson 1991:46).

Carnivalesque mockery, subversion and excess are the most common idioms of opposition in Smithfield. But sometimes resistance takes other forms: wild rumours and, darker still, when Smithfield’s signature aggression won’t suffice, rage. This rage was effectively channelled by the Vote Leave campaign. Fresh from berating an inexperienced foreign-born worker, a cutter stormed into the cutting room, kicked a meat bin in an exaggerated performance of hyper-masculine bad-temper. But there was real, hard anger in his voice when he spun around and pointed at me: ‘Vote leave, Caroline! Vote leave! Leave. Get them all fucking out, love!’

**Part 3. The dying market: loss and lament**

The market dies as you move downhill. Beyond MM is PM, a ‘ghost town’, said Keith. Beneath its skull-like dome (fig. 6.13), the fridges sound with a higher pitch of urgency, drowning out the voices below. At the far end, the stalls are empty; a tour guide told me that this emptiness worried the SMTA, that they feared it could creep upwards into the market and ‘nibble it away, bit by bit’. Out into West Poultry Avenue, beyond the discarded concrete blocks and the ground that shudders with passing trains in the void below, the smell of vomit and piss, GM stands desolate. Rumours circulate that the CoL deliberately let it go to ruin, as an excuse to demolish and redevelop it. The emptiness is dangerous: it has agency and appetite; it could creep into the market itself and finally destroy it.

On an empty day, at the edge of West Market, an elderly salesman stands idle and silent, framed against the plastic curtains that blur the...
lamplit night outside. He snaps into life when I ask him how the market once was. ‘Now *that* was a market!’ he beams. His gestures become animated: ‘If you imagine, 400 sides of beef, it looked just incredible!’ And up to the present again, the excitement fades. ‘Not like this. This is a mickey-mouse market.’

In quieter moments, when the laughter fades and the aggression is calmed, there is another idiom central to Smithfield life: reminiscing about a cherished past, expressions of love, loss and lament. People delighted in describing the old market. ‘You’d a loved it. There used to be

Fig. 6.13  A ghost town: inside Poultry Market. Source: author
all meat hanging up.’ ‘It looked lovely!’ an elderly salesman says with a smile. Their descriptions convey a strong visual aesthetic, deeply embedded in Smithfield’s social world, one initially alien to me, borne as it is from intense communion between body and environment (see Charlesworth 1999).

There is also a tactile aesthetic of tangibility and immanence. ‘It was all sawdust!’ says the elderly salesman brightly, spreading out his hands to trace an organic, earthy memory. The meat wasn’t screened behind glass, people said. Transporting it used to be a full bodily engagement, the celebrated ‘Smithfield shuffle’: ‘one arm swinging free, eyes fixed doggedly ahead, blasphemy to anyone in the way!’ (Forshaw 1990:88). Now you stack identical blocks of cardboard, as many complain: ‘It’s all in boxes now.’

‘It was all open,’ everyone would say. Several drew me diagrams to demonstrate intersecting avenues, tracing paths, emphasising the possibility of movement through. The spatiality, the way of moving around the market, has an aesthetic and social charge, discussed by Bachelard as ‘the poetics of space’ (e.g. Bachelard 1969; Stasch 2013:561). The openness was a togetherness: ‘You’ve taken the humour out of the market,’ someone complains. ‘You used to go down there and it was all open with shouting and balling’ (Usborne 2015). Cutters could throw meat across at their friends, Charlie nostalgically recalls. Indeed, people move in a way that still resists the market’s new spatiality, wandering freely between each other’s shops and cutting rooms as if the divisions never existed.

Indeed, people sometimes talked as though the dividing steel, glass and white panels weren’t really there: ‘If you imagine all this gone’, ‘You could take all this away.’ ‘Mickey-mouse’, flimsy and transient, a parasite upon the real market building underneath. ‘This is original,’ people told me, slapping the bold purple iron pillars that descend, an anchor to the past among alienating white (see fig. 6.8).

The old market was brick and sawdust, blue and magenta cast iron, gas lighting, a warm golden glow on sides of beef, swirls and strokes of all shades of red, coral, pale pink through crimson to dark purple. There’s a new colour now. Red, blue and yellow are the health and safety signs, the absent voice issuing orders, plastic block-colours, abstracted and purified from the earthy, organic colours of the old-time market, and its feeling of identity and history.

And most of all, the new market is whiteness, steely bright. Whiteness is the refurbishment, the death of the old ways. Whiteness is refrigeration, the ruthless cold and hard blank panels of the lonely
sealed-off storage rooms that replaced the lived, open space of the old shops. Leaning on the stainless-steel counter, I can feel it drawing the warmth out of my hands, the cold core in the gleam of metal; the sound ricochets off its surfaces, hard and hollow. MWs would often grumble, ‘It’s all refrigerated now,’ and widespread mistreatment of fridges had the refrigeration engineer in constant exasperation. White is the material effect of biopolitics, new discourses of hygiene imposed by outside power, anxious about a diseased, weak, inefficient population, constructing new relations between people and their environment. Whiteness is the omnipresence of death as ‘something permanent [that] slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it’ (Foucault 2004:244). For MWs, the old market was simultaneously dirtier and ‘cleaner’, meat everywhere on the floor, but ‘No one died, there weren’t these diseases back then. All this hygiene….’ Now it is ‘too clinical’: for MWs, the new discourse on hygiene has invented a new kind of dirtiness and cleanliness, has invented death and diseases.

The refurbishment, with its mechanisation and rationalisation of labour, resulted in mass redundancies. Workers were replaced by those mute blank towers of identical white boxes, fluorescent pink piggy cartoons, and all that machinery in the loading bays where Davey works alone. In operation, the machines hiss and click, the noise drowns out conversation, sending dangling bunches of carcasses slowly down the rail, animating them in agitated movement with its hydraulic clicks and shudders. This is what Jameson describes as ‘That enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labour stored up in our machinery – an alienated power […] which turns back on and against us in unrecognisable forms’ (Jameson 1991:35). And it continues even after the loading is done, the lorries have gone and the carcasses are in their shops, and people pass, alone, through the white corridors and all those signs, past the red empty stage, the hiss and click and dull metallic gleam of the dead labour of their lost companions.

‘Gone, but not forgotten’, as a memorial to a recently deceased MW on Grand Avenue declares. On quieter mornings, older MWs gather to reminisce about the old days, recounting anecdotes about old friends (see SMTA 2016a:2), reciting litanies of fallen comrades ‘You remember X?’ ‘Aw yeah! He was a nutter, X!’ ‘And you had the pitchers and pullabacks, shunters…’ ‘You remember the bummarees, how they all used to go round in pairs?’ Like the aggressive humour, imaginings of cataclysm, and rage, lament and loss are paradoxically a vital force at the heart of Smithfield life. While the empty rooms ring with silence, Smithfield is kept alive in the warmth and eloquence of MWs’ reminiscences.
And like this mechanisation, like the devastation and ruin that creeps up the hill from GM, a new aesthetic of commerce and advertising, a new kind of post-modern, standardised space, non-place is pressing in on the market. The surroundings used to be a continuation of the market, full of spin-off trades: sausage-skin makers, pie makers, butchers’ equipment shops (Forshaw 1990:90). All have gone now, replaced with office blocks and expensive cafes where MWs never go. ‘That road there,’ says Keith of Charterhouse Street, ‘is like the divide between two civilisations.’ Only a few greasy spoon cafes hold fast against the tide of gentrification.

In their narratives about Smithfield and its history, MWs would trace detailed maps orientated around the church, the hospital, the bones in the earth and execution sites, sometimes speaking of them as if they were part of the market. MWs clearly considered themselves as belonging to Smithfield, not just the market. Indeed, one MW merged PM’s history with that of St Bartholomew the Great Church, telling me PM was one of the oldest buildings in London, the only one to have survived the Great Fire of London. Most of all, it was Smithfield’s clock that orientated narratives: important events were often said to have happened ‘under the clock’, even if this wasn’t strictly true; references to the market as a whole were often accompanied with a gesture at the clock. All these places serve as monuments for MWs, holding together the fabric of place and time as lived by its people, allowing them to orientate themselves in a meaningful environment, giving them a sense of history and temporality (see Augé 1995, Lynch 1960).

But Smithfield’s newer surroundings are increasingly strange to MWs. Billy grew up in Smithfield, worked there his whole life, and has a lot to say about it, but some places are a blank in his mental map of Smithfield. When I ask him if he knows that Amazon’s headquarters are just by Smithfield, I draw a blank. ‘… No.’ ‘Well, you know that huge office block right by GM?’ ‘… No.’ It is strange, following the market along the grubby pavement as it sinks into desolation down the hill, to come up against those pure depthless panes of glass that loom in two-dimensional grids against the sky (fig. 6.14). In MWs’ minds, the new office block is not part of the surrounding city; indeed, its glass repels it, shattering the ruins of GM into a dark jumble of fragmented images of itself.

Smithfield’s night-time world is equally strange to the people who work in these offices; none I interviewed had ever seen it. They pass in the mornings, dart glances at the piles of boxes, the debris being cleared, with dim and fleeting curiosity stifled under the press to get to work.

‘WE’RE ALL MAD DOWN HERE.’
Many frequent visitors to the area are totally unaware of the market. ‘To them, this place doesn’t even exist,’ said Tony the bummaree, as revellers spilled onto the street nearby, ‘and to us, it’s the centre of the universe.’

And, on the dirty pavement by PM, between metal bins and battered orange-painted metal-grate doors in dark brick, construction workers cleared away the remains of Smithfield’s beloved Cock Tavern to make way for a high-end jazz club. I asked a young man, sweeping debris under its grubby concrete arches, ‘What is this place?’ He contemplated me sullenly before asking his companion: ‘What is this place?’ I asked the workers about the area. Huddled on the pavement for a coffee break, they mostly answered with shrugs. ‘We’re not from round here.’ The market? ‘A bit of a dump.’ Would they visit the club once it’s done? The response was a bitter laugh. Like the place they inhabit, the object of their labour stands opposed to them as something utterly alien (Marx 1992:324). ‘They wouldn’t even let us through the door! The rich and that!’

The jazz club’s website speaks of a different experience of detachment, boasting that guests can ‘enjoy a glorious sense of disconnection from the outside world’ (Oriole 2015). Yet with this thrill of disassociation comes a sense of loss, a desire for authenticity, one that is
enthusiastically catered for by the club and other surrounding businesses. Its cocktails are each named after a locality, marketed as capturing its essential couleur locale. A tour guide told me many of her clients were office workers who had never seen Smithfield at night. Workers in the offices above Smithfield (the same who complain about the mess and the smell) are greeted with a life-sized black and white piece from the photographic collection Bummaree hanging in the reception area (fig. 6.15). Pulling his barrow behind him, yelling some blasphemy with a broad grin. The black and white image of a grinning rosy-cheeked cockney is readier for consumption; the fleshy, fatty, bloody reality is less appealing.

None of the office workers know the man’s name, but Davey does. ‘Yeah, the geezer with the barra. He was a bit loud apparently, my dad said.’ For Davey it’s a shallow fragment, a Platonic shadow of Smithfield’s lived reality, of a real place that has an immediacy in his mind, where he can place himself exactly.

That’s just a… a still, of… one person, like, you know? Pulling his barra through the market, but you’d have to dodge him. […] What
you’re looking at there is where we were standing, like, say we came in off the pavement, and walked into the market… what you’d see would be people buying meat, butchers, barras, all that, that, that was what it was like…

From urban space densely and intimately lived to non-place, without history or sociability (Augé 1995:77), from building, work and workers as one body to isolated, alienated and lost individuals – Smithfield’s surroundings stand in marked contrast to the market at its heart. The non-place threatens to creep into the market’s empty spaces, like the jazz club, the offices upstairs that have nothing in the world to do with Smithfield; could it finally swallow it whole? Shatter it into shallow, fragmented images of itself? Move the market out of town, reducing the building to a ‘stupid facade,’ as Davey puts it ‘with all like boutique-y shops and that’?

**Conclusion: in this valley of tears**

There are murmurings that this is indeed Smithfield’s fate. With the congestion charge, expensive rents and parking chaos, it would make economic sense to move the market elsewhere, as some younger, more hard-nosed and business-savvy salesmen will quietly admit. But the loudest, most prevalent sentiments are of three types: outright denial, noisy opposition and loud, angry prophesies of doom, like Kevin’s favourite phrase, pronounced with a booming voice, chin-up proud: ‘This market will be gone in three years!’

But, as should now be clear, the threat of closure has always hung over Smithfield. The market has suffered so many blows, each marked by speculation that this was the end: the congestion charge, several threats from the CoL (see, e.g., Metcalf 1991:174), right back to the removal of the live meat market.

A poem was published in the *Illustrated London News* to mark this latter event. Although a journalist’s parody of a MW, the poem rings remarkably familiar with contemporary MW narratives. It shows that a vivid, developed genre of lament, a sense of loss and impending cataclysm is not new to Smithfield; in fact, the market today was born in a moment of sorrow.

Don’t speak to me, Nat – I can’t bear it! I’m fifty-four year old come tomorrow;
And of course in my time, in this walley of tears, I’ve had my ‘lowance of sorrow.
I’ve burned three wives, but that’s nothink- I mean nothink at all in comparasin-
To the high-pressure-burster of biler-like feelings that now is my bosom a harassin’. (Forshaw 1990:58)

The poem ends with a speculation that sounds remarkably familiar: ‘But I’ve heard – The Wedgetarians has bought Smiffield and intend to convert it into a Kitchen Garden.’

Smithfield’s identity is built on a raucous celebration of liminality, on a sense of constant struggle against the oppressive powers that be. It is sustained and given its life and energy through humorous subversion, through rage and through that bitter and indignant sorrow at what has been lost.

Smithfield’s nonsense world is a performance of a utopia and is also built on a mythology of fading utopia: those better days, that real market, the openness, all the old characters and the laughter. A fading utopia that is still fighting proud, even if MWs are ultimately doomed to lose that fight. Their position is key in that fight: once outside the city walls, Smithfield is a noisy, smelly, rude enclave at the heart of the CoL, a ‘time-warp’ back to the good old times, a little pocket of the old east London, a last bastion for the ‘common man’ against the supermarkets, the banks, the EU, the greedy city, still holding fast against the sweeping tide of commercialisation. MWs weave their history together with the history of the church and hospital; they see themselves as belonging to Smithfield, as a continuation of its traditions of excess and violence.

And all this is rooted in the material: from the clock, which orientates memories, the cast iron structure, the real market that is theirs and that they fight to defend, to the walls they engrave and graffiti, that are marked with physical traces of memory, the signs they humorously undermine, the parts of the building that they constantly break, to the imagined material: the bones in the earth, the underground passageways and rivers, the bodies that were torn apart centuries ago. The materiality of the building, as mentioned above, is even thought to sustain some MWs’ lives. If it were moved, even if the social structure remained intact, there is a sense that something fundamental would be lost. Moving would be the end for some. ‘I wouldn’t follow it. I wouldn’t go on,’ said Kevin, speaking in a gentler, sadder tone, for the first time since I’d met him.
So many pieces written about Smithfield end on a note of doom and uncertainty about how long Smithfield will last. I will end with words of defiance from ‘Fred’: ‘Smithfield is forever! When will we leave? NEVER’ (SMTA 2015:8).

Methodological note

Smithfield is an intensely sensual and emotional world. As such, the phenomenological method, with its close attention to sensory and affective experience, is key to exploring Smithfield. As Charlesworth notes, ‘It is the socialised, phenomenal body that inhabits, because it is inhabited by, a world full of resonances, of fear and anxiety and pleasure’ (Charlesworth 1999:21). As a middle-class female student among mostly working-class men who had spent most of their lives in Smithfield, I am differently socialised from MWs. Thus, for a full understanding of the resonances of their world, extensive ethnographic work was necessary.

I visited the market between midnight and 8a.m. every weekday for two months. My initial apprehension about carrying out ethnography in a place of work proved unfounded: two shop men quickly took me under their wing and arranged for me to observe the goings-on in their shop. I combined this with wandering up and down the market, catching people in idle moments for a chat. This proved an effective method, giving me access to a great number and diversity of MWs. Once MWs were satisfied that I was not a CoL inspector, I was received with great warmth, provided with a generous supply of tea and conversation. Most MWs appreciated my interest; they loved the market and enjoyed talking about its history, sharing their memories and concerns. Even the one figure who was markedly hostile enjoyed complaining to me at length: there was no health and safety, everyone was crooked, too many immigrants: ‘You put that in your report!’

The butchers and cutters were spatially removed from the main walkways as they worked in specialist cutting rooms. Fortunately, one group of cutters found great amusement in having a female presence in an otherwise exclusively male part of the market, and frequently invited me to observe ‘how the real men work’. I occasionally helped gather cuts into bags (some cutters were amused, others mortified at the prospect of me helping with such work). On one occasion, I cut lamb carcasses under the careful, patient guidance of an experienced cutter.
Local office workers were questioned in brief unstructured interviews; CoL authorities were contacted for interview, but refused. Other local workers, passers-by and customers were briefly quizzed; I frequently relied on a soft opening question such as: ‘What is this place?’ Many MWs felt betrayed by previous attempts by outsiders to represent the market – most notably the BBC documentary, widely resented as an unfair portrayal. Some complained to me of the documentary’s portrayal of MWs as racist; yet others criticised the same documentary for not including enough of their complaints about immigrants. The biggest grievance was with the documentary’s focus on the female shop man and her complaints of sexism.

Class and gender offered additional obstacles. ‘It’s ’cos they think you’re posh; they’re testing you,’ chuckled a salesman when I told him about another MW offering me lewd pictures of himself. We were quantifiable others to each other, each aware of the stereotypes the other had of us. MWs would play with stereotyped images of themselves, and I was sometimes unable to distinguish truth from playful fiction. One MW, who frequently made provocative racist remarks, claimed membership of the National Front while another laughed away his assertion as a ridiculous lie, leaving me unsure who to believe. Another MW boasted about all the East End gangsters he knew; others dropped hints about ‘all the sex and violence that goes on here’. ‘This is my manor,’ a bummaree joked, in a lowered, aggressive tone, exaggerating his Estuary English vowels, aware his accent is culturally salient, sometimes seen to index aggression and criminality (see Eckert 2008 for discussion of indexicality). During moments like these, I often caught those around watching for my reaction with amused anticipation.

Previous ethnographic work has explored how informants negotiate power imbalance by confronting ethnographers with a stereotyped performance of themselves (e.g. Rampton 2005:96). There were additional complexities in our relationship dynamics that informed my methodology. As a young woman alone in a male-dominated environment, I also inhabited something of a satirical persona of a naïve and delicate young lady. For example, my standard response to provocative or lewd banter was to feign mortification. My ethnographic work never entirely lost this element of performance and play. This approach was entirely appropriate, as the spirit of performance and playful antagonism of outsiders lies at the heart of Smithfield life.

‘WE’RE ALL MAD DOWN HERE.’
References


