
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Life Between Walls: Race, Subdivision and Lodging Houses in Postwar London

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Four solid walls and a roof over one's head. These, from an essentialist standpoint, are the minima of homely existence. What happens then under conditions of speculation and subdivision when domestic walls are no longer stable givens, but become flimsy, mobile and contested? Drawing on a rich seam of popular British films from the late 1950s and early '60s — set in the transitional world of postwar London lodging houses — this paper examines how partition walls refashioned the interior space of the terraced house. Analysis of popular visual culture is supported by archival research centred on local valuation lists, which allow us to read the traces of these sometimes temporary, often illegal structures. The paper argues that partition walls were key to the extraction of value from a declining private rental sector by property traders and landlords. At the same time, these ubiquitous structures formed a series of highly charged thresholds between disparate individuals. Partition walls were instrumental in the 'spatialisation' of race in postwar Britain, serving to heighten an awareness of otherness while simultaneously bringing individuals into uncomfortable proximity. Finally, the paper asks how people overcame or lived *between* these divisions, and how this affected questions of visibility and representation.

Introduction

Lynne Reid Banks' 1960 novel *The L-Shaped Room* (2004) is a book built on descriptions of rented rooms. These rooms — whether in lodging houses, boarding houses, multiple occupancy homes or cheap residential hotels — were the basic units of private rented accommodation that continued to house large numbers of people in postwar British cities. Furnished and unfurnished rooms that were let out in ones or twos could vary in size and comfort, but usually included access to shared bathroom and kitchen facilities. In Banks' novel, the rooms provide not only the setting but in some ways the motive force of the story. They are characters in themselves as much as the people who live in them. The L-shaped room of the title is conceived from the beginning as a relational process, a way of sectioning and organising space, rather than a singular object or subject. Banks describes not the room as such but its architectural elements, the partition walls that divide the room internally:

There were two rooms under the sloping roof, which had once been one biggish square one. ... It had been divided by the simple process of putting up two partition walls set at right-angles. This resulted in a small square room and a small L-shaped room along two sides of it, which was mine. The square room which had been stolen, as it were, from the main area, had a little window up

near the ceiling ... The partitions didn't look very thick. I leaned over, and knocked on the nearest one, to test it, and immediately someone on the other side knocked back. I snatched my knuckles away as if the wall had been red hot. (2004: 41)

In the passage above, the main character, Jane, has just arrived in her bedsit in Fulham.¹ Having been forced out of her family home when her father hears of her unexpected pregnancy, Jane chooses this (at the time) run-down part of West London, because, in the narrator's words, 'in some small way I wanted to punish myself ... to bury myself in this alien world ... feeling that I and the other inhabitants ... would scarcely speak the same language, and that they would all remain unknown to me except as closed doors to pass, or occasional footsteps or voices through walls' (2004: 36, 38). Here is a young woman of middle class parents working in low-paid catering and secretarial jobs, suddenly plunged into the world of 'big city loneliness', the world of bedsits and lodging houses (Anant 1956). As this paper will argue, this 'alien world' was a key site of contestation in the evolving cultural and racial landscape of postwar Britain.

Banks' novel, adapted for the screen by Brian Forbes two years after its publication, was one of a string of literary and cinematic portrayals of the postwar rented room. Works such as Laura Del-Rivo's *The Furnished Room* (1961), which became *West 11* directed by Michael Winner (1963), and Ted Willis' 1958 play *Hot Summer Night*, adapted by Roy Ward Baker as *Flame in the Streets* (1961), depict a space distinct from that inhabited by the working class heroes of British New Wave cinema and the theatre of the so-called

Angry Young Men (Hill 1986; Todd 2015: 236–51),² and which sociologists at the time were also keen to document (Young and Willmott 1957). While these films emphasise themes of illicit sexuality and criminality, what really distinguishes them, I argue, is a particular spatial patterning and material texture. Rather than the kitchen sinks, laundry lines, doorsteps, dockyards and smoking chimneys of the East End or northern factory town, we are led into a world of shadowy staircases, public telephones in the hallway, landlords' notices in windows, and, crucially, walls that are always too thin (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

In what follows, I consider the starring role played by partition walls in *The L-Shaped Room*, which I take to be an

important example of a popular subgenre in British cinema of the 1940s to '60s. In the first section I argue that we can read in these fictional rented worlds the increasing spatialisation of race in postwar Britain. I then connect the analysis of popular visual culture with an investigation of the archival traces left by these often temporary structures, examining, in the second section, local valuation lists from North Kensington to highlight the important role that subdivision played in the uneven development of postwar British cities. In the final section, I return to *The L-Shaped Room* to consider the muted utopianism inherent in fictional portrayals of the lodging house. I conclude by arguing that the humble partition wall became



Figure 1: Still from *Pool of London* (dir. Dearden 1951).

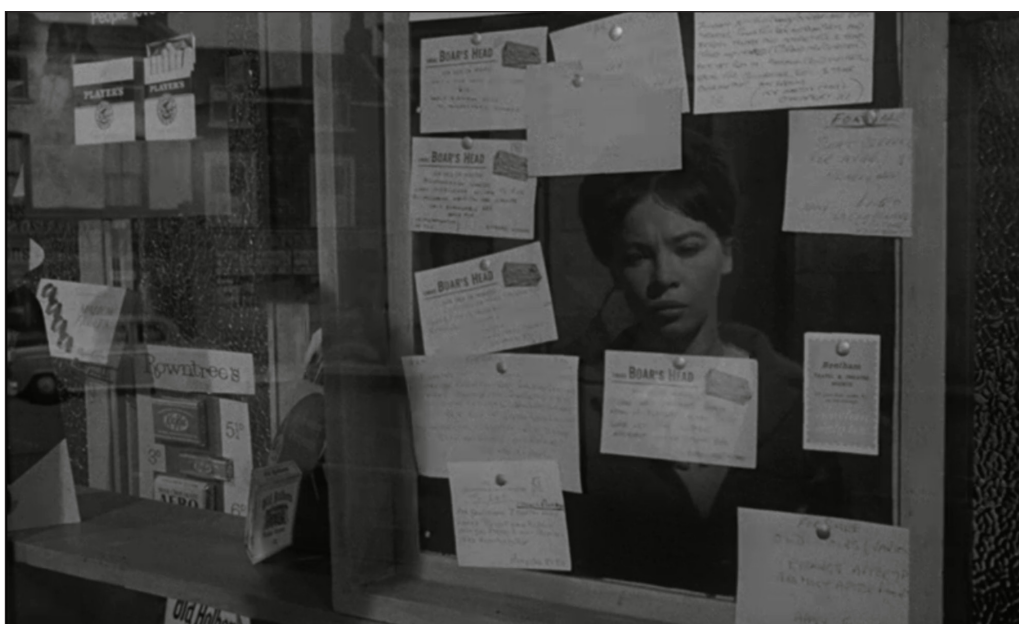


Figure 2: Still from *The L-Shaped Room* (dir. Forbes 1962).



Figure 3: Still from *The October Man* (dir. Ward Baker 1947).

a stand-in for the only plausible container of a new vision of community.

The films and archival materials I want to consider in this paper represent an experience that defined modernity: the atomisation of space in housing and other social institutions, through rationalising or profit-driven processes of subdivision (Foucault 1991; Taunton 2009). The partition wall therefore becomes a token of the vast, elusive world of postwar lodging houses; a world that in its isolation and alienation of the lodger – and, I will argue, in its role as a harbinger of unforeseen forms of conviviality and community – goes to the heart of city life in the twentieth century.

It is no surprise that such a ubiquitous architectural element has been neglected in historical studies (for a notable exception, see Lee 2005). The western idealisation of ‘home’ as a container for the model middle-class nuclear family has tended to eclipse other ways of ‘making home’. Consequently, the materiality and changeability of homes has been obscured and the role of partition walls reduced to near-invisible background elements. The envelope of domestic space is thus reduced to a facade, while the interior becomes, as Walter Benjamin put it, the soft inner lining on which are inscribed all the traces of bourgeois property and patriarchal dominance (Benjamin 1973: 169; Mulvey 1989: 69).

Recently there has been a great deal of research interrogating both the historical construction of this idealised image and the experience of other forms of domesticity, considering, for example, the domestic lives of migrants, single people and those living in institutional accommodation, as well as conceptions of home across national and cultural formations (Barratt and Green 2017; Webster 1998). Within this literature, lodging houses have received some attention. Jane Hamlett, for example, reveals networks of solidarity and everyday antagonisms that existed

in common lodging houses in nineteenth-century London (Hamlett 2015: 115–34). Focusing on the interwar period, Terri Mulholland shows how boarding houses could offer freedom to women escaping domestic norms, while at other times trapping them in the double binds of patriarchy and class inequality (Mulholland 2017: 23–25). Particularly relevant to the issues I want to explore here is Clair Wills’ work on postwar migration and lodging house life (Wills 2017a). Wills argues that lodging houses were a reminder of the persistence of an ‘underclass’ amid the gains of postwar affluence. The often ruinous state of subdivided terraced housing offered a home to immigrant and other ‘outcast’ communities. In this way, lodging houses – though perceived as architectural relics – were crucibles of modernity (2017a: 58–59, 74).

The architecture of the terraced house – an inheritance largely of the nineteenth century endlessly adapted through subdivision and other forms of conversion – was crucial to this paradoxical and much maligned modernity. Yet most of these studies draw exclusively on literary and documentary sources. In the analysis that follows, I build on this body of work by piecing together a number of largely unexamined archival sources to shine light on the spatial and architectural aspects of lodging house life and the rented world.

On the eve of the First World War, roughly 90% of people in Britain lived in privately rented housing. By the end of the Second World War, that figure was down to just over 50%; a decade later, with rising home ownership and the expansion of council housing, it stood at a little over one third (Lowe 2005: 263). In contrast to the long term nationwide decline of private renting, concentrated pockets survived in large, inner city areas – especially London. The 1961 Census recorded 64% of inner London households in private rented accommodation (Hamnett and Randolph 1988: 36). The concentration of bedsits and

lodging houses in the heart of the capital gave these housing types a symbolic importance that defied their supposedly marginal status. People experienced these changes in extremely uneven ways, according to class, race, gender and geography. Rented rooms in postwar London thus became the site of a host of social anxieties: from the threatened break-up of the family (Starkey 2000; Wilson 1977), to fears over ghettoisation (Smith 1989: 112–21). Here I focus on how questions of race – and intersectional issues of class and gender – shaped, and were shaped by, the space of the postwar lodging house.

Finally, a word about the methods used in this paper, which draw from film studies and architectural history. Scholars such as Stephen Jacobs (2018) and Dwayne Avery (2014) have shown how by focusing on the breakdown of normative concepts of ‘home’ these two disciplines might be usefully combined. Taking a similarly interdisciplinary approach, this paper moves dialectically from filmic representations to architecture and back again. In particular, the deployment of archival materials aims to put the material and economic aspects of property centre-frame. A home, a building, a city, can thus be seen to exist in the cinematic space of films, in the measured and projected space of a plan, and in the evaluated, capitalised space of property. Power, including the production of race, is exercised somewhere at the intersection of these different frames of reference.

Given that historians have tended to focus on the huge leaps forward in public housing during the postwar period in Britain (Boughton 2018; Grindrod 2013; Swenarton 2017), there is a pressing need to expand our spatial imagination of these rented worlds. A combined reading of films and archival materials centred on architecture and property, or *architecture-as-property*, can help us in this project. Doing so not only opens up a neglected aspect of housing history, it also brings historical and material depth to political issues that continue to trouble the present moment, when private renting is once again on the rise, and as tenants, activists, architects and policy-makers grapple with how to regulate, or even revolutionise, these spaces (Black 2019; Aureli, Tattara et al. 2016).

‘Somewhat Thicker than Ordinary Hardboard’

Walls can be seen as the most elementary units of built space. After all, what are buildings, and especially houses,

without walls? Walls shelter the body and the self. Acting as both barriers and interfaces, they mediate public and private realms. Yet in meeting these social and existential criteria, walls can also trap and isolate the subjects they contain.

In this first section I will offer an interpretation of the role that partition walls play in the cinematic imagination of domestic space, with particular reference to *The L-Shaped Room*. This award-winning film, which enjoyed critical acclaim and commercial success on both sides of the Atlantic, is characteristic of a number of British productions from the late 1940s to the early 1960s which set their narratives of social dislocation within the space of London’s rented rooms.³ Lodging house dramas such as *The October Man* (dir. Ward Baker 1947), *Pool of London* (dir. Dearden 1951), *Sapphire* (dir. Dearden 1959) and *Flame in the Streets* (dir. Ward Baker 1961) have been discussed by film historians within the context of the postwar ‘social problem film’ – seen alternately as confronting difficult social issues of the day or reflecting the ingrained social conservatism of a society reluctantly emerging from postwar austerity into the affluence and ‘permissiveness’ of the 1960s (Murphy 1989; Nava 2006). The aim here is to provide a close reading of the spatial and material construction of domestic space in the *L-Shaped Room*, paying particular attention to the way in which the film demarcates racial otherness through the device of the partition wall. In doing so, the *L-Shaped Room* holds up a mirror to the politics of race, immigration, housing and urbanisation in postwar Britain.

The two images juxtaposed in **Figure 4** are from the film adaptation of *The L-shaped Room* (dir. Forbes 1962). Together they form a kind of interrupted reverse shot. They are two sides of the same wall. Yet the film’s editing does not connect them in any immediate sense. Rather, like a tunnel that starts in one location and burrows underground to emerge in another, the two spaces remain discontinuous (**Figures 5** and **6**). The threshold of Johnny’s room (seen on the left in **Figure 4**) is traversable through sound, vision, and – in the book – smell (Banks 2004: 31, 51 and 60). But it is never the setting of the story, unlike all the other tenant’s rooms. Johnny’s room is an elsewhere that could be as distant as another postcode, or even another country; and yet it is *right there*, so close one could almost touch it.

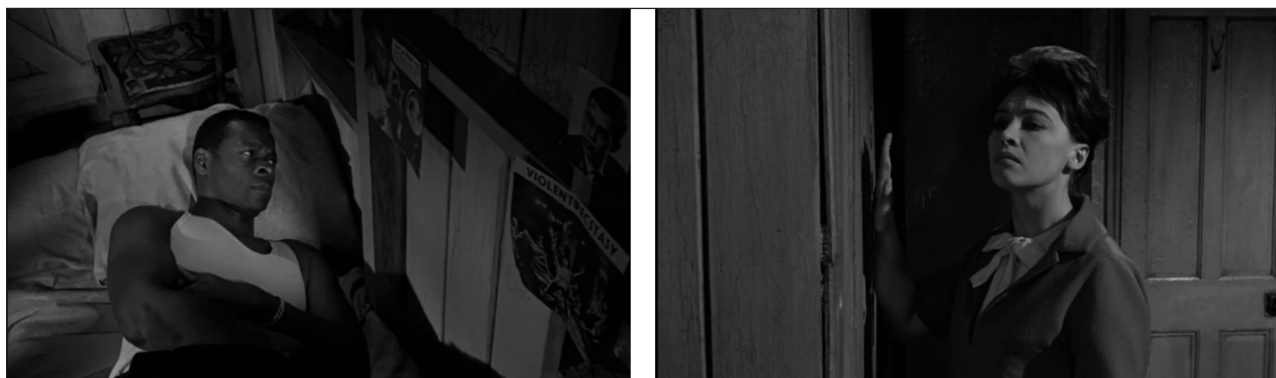


Figure 4: Stills from *The L-Shaped Room* (dir. Forbes 1962).



Figure 5: Still from *The L-Shaped Room* (dir. Forbes 1962).



Figure 6: Still from *The L-Shaped Room* (dir. Forbes 1962).

This discontinuous linkage electrifies the wall. In both Banks' novel and the film adaptation, this close-farness, or far-closeness, is clearly racialised. Descriptions early on in the book drive home the horror of racial otherness made proximate. And again the wall plays an important role:

I sat frozen, staring at the wall, half-expecting someone to burst through it like a circus lion through a paper hoop ... I felt a shiver of nervousness as the clear, hollow sound emphasized the thinness of the barrier. Suddenly the knocking changed. It was on glass this time, near the ceiling. I looked up and saw, in the little window, a huge black face (2004: 41).

The thought of someone, or *something*, bursting through the wall renders it uncanny; the wall's superficial smoothness conceals all manner of horrors (Vidler

1992: 29–30). What the book does with words, the film does with close-ups, unusual angles, and rapid pans (**Figure 7**).

The wall brings things together and keeps them apart. It produces otherness through the spectacle of proximate separation. Was this not the role of the old ghetto wall in 16th-century Venice and Rome (Duneier 2016: 6–8)? It was a key function, too, of those invisible walls created by racially discriminatory planning laws and redlining credit practices throughout the twentieth century, particularly in northern cities in the US during the 1930s (Rutan and Glass 2018), as well as in British colonies continuing into the twentieth century (Njoh 2008). In all cases, a vicious circular logic played itself out. As Mitchell Duneier has written: 'Isolation from mainstream society, as well as the decrepitude caused by overcrowding, produced notorious conditions ... that could gradually be invoked to rationalize ... more extreme

isolation' (Duneier 2016: 11). Isolation hides 'the other' away while simultaneously making them an object of morbid fascination.

The rented room can be seen as an emblem of isolation both in the classic modernist sense (Baudelaire 1979: 85; Simmel 2014) and in this specifically racialised sense. Race, I will argue, becomes the touchstone – the polariser and accelerator – of a general economic drive towards subdivision in private rented housing. And yet in terms of popular culture, no sooner does race occupy this position, than the polarisation thus established, akin to a one-way mirror or semi-permeable membrane, starts to be applied to all manner of other 'social problems'. It is the same principle of 'proximate separation' which sets the stage for the mental breakdown of Richard Attenborough's character, Peter Watson, in *The Man Upstairs* (dir. Chaffey 1958), for example (Figure 8).

In other films of the period, gender, class, sexuality and age all play a role in the spatial organisation of the rented world. The way these identities and categories intersect warrants further attention. For now, however, I want simply to note the fractured, polarised nature of the spaces depicted in *The L-Shaped Room* and similar films of the period. Playing with the different ways in which sound and light penetrate space, these films splinter the perceptual integrity of the rented room into several discontinuous tracks or layers. But rather than simply an effect of cinematic representation, this discontinuity at the heart

of the rented world derives from the material fabric of the wall itself.

In the case of *The L-Shaped Room*, the wall that defines the room is no ordinary wall. It exists halfway between the imposing stone walls of the early modern ghetto and the invisible walls of discriminatory practices such as redlining. In the novel, the partition wall is constructed from a material 'somewhat thicker than ordinary hardboard' (Banks 2004: 41). In the film it consists of wooden slats and plasterboard, with timber studding on the reverse side. Like the stone wall that encloses a whole district, the partition is tangible. It asks to be *touched*, to be tested with fingers, palms or knuckles. Nonetheless, this special kind of wall has a surreptitious relationship to the realm of the visible. Instead of encircling buildings, it hides behind their facades. It divides and encloses space deep within the interior. Yet if we are familiar with interior walls being constructed like a sandwich, rendered on both sides with the filling tucked away in the middle, this wall is again different. It is asymmetrical. The fact that the studs are unclad on Johnny's side gives his room a paradoxical status. He lives inside a structure whose ostensible, 'public' function is to offer an illusion of smoothness and continuity to the world 'outside' (except this public exterior is now *inside* the house).

Johnny's room – the other side of the L-shaped room – appears more like a cabin or shack than the interior of a terraced house. This rusticated appearance brings us back



Figure 7: Stills from *The L-Shaped Room* (dir. Forbes 1962).



Figure 8: Stills from *The Man Upstairs* (dir. Chaffey 1958).

to questions of race and their intersection with issues of class, gender and sexuality. In highly abbreviated form, the shack-like appearance of Johnny's room recalls the outward appearance of the traditional Caribbean two-room cottage, built from wood on a single-floor plan 'with a hip-roof and small gallery in the front' (Fog Olwig 1999: 74). But as Karen Fog Olwig has made clear, this 'traditional' dwelling type is fully entwined with colonial history. Its form derives from a mixture of two 'creolised' kinds of housing: the initially self-built homes erected on abandoned plantations in the post-slavery era (1999: 75) and what Stuart Hall has described as the lower middle-class 'gingerbread' style family house, with porches and balustrades on three sides together with an outdoor kitchen, found, for example, near Spanish Town in Jamaica (Hall 2009: 18). It is only by conflating these greatly different housing types that a singular image of home can be produced. Transported to the interior of a terraced house in London, this distinctly 'raced' image of home leaves its inhabitant never quite 'at home'.

The materiality of Johnny's room, especially the rough and ready quality of the partition wall, testifies to the enduring absence of any authentic image of home in public representations of Britain's colonies. At events such as the 1924 British Empire Exhibition and, in the postwar period, the Ideal Home Exhibition, the colonies were represented solely as places of production and distribution, sites where raw materials were extracted and manufactured goods sold (Ryan 1997; Barnes 2014; Meredith 1987). Representations of labouring black bodies and iridescent heaps of produce rarely extended to depict domestic life. Where images of home did appear, as in the 'House in the Sun' display at the 1962 Ideal Home Exhibition, they formed part of a fantasy projection onto the *terra nullius* of colonial wilderness (Bhandar 2018: 93–95). Surrounded by lush vegetation, this tropical-modernist Caribbean version of the ideal home was reserved for would-be colonial staff, businessmen and tourists (IHE 1962: 6). While the biological racism of the late nineteenth century had largely given way to something more subtle in the postwar period, representations of colonial domestic space such as this reveal how structures of racism and imperialism endured in Britain (Waters 1997).

The materiality of the partition wall which plays such a key role in *The L-Shaped Room* speaks of this legacy. The wall is a paradoxical structure not only because it inscribes a public-private divide within the domestic interior itself, but because it evokes, like a mirage, the absent term of an imperialist construct of home and not-home. The other side of the L-shaped room is an 'image of home' that evokes the 'double consciousness' of its inhabitant, a displaced identity borne of empire (Gilroy 1993). In the film, Johnny's backstage existence is gently subverted through his practice of using the horizontal studs as shelves or rails (Figures 4 and 6). In these brief snatches of his interior life, we see cut-outs of jazz musicians and what appears to be a reproduction of an abstract painting, as well as other items propped up against or hanging from the timbers. For the briefest of moments, these details transform the partition wall into a gallery of mementos and talismans,

keys to past memories and future dreams. The partition wall, artefact of an incomplete or un-ideal domesticity, recalls that hallowed domestic surface, the mantelpiece.

But the bohemian lifestyle suggested by the constellation of images and objects found on Johnny's wall is quite unlike that of the traditional family home with its mantelpiece. The world of the jazz club, which we encounter later in the film, tiptoes into the home via these small signifiers. We are reminded of the blues clubs that sprang up across North Kensington and other parts of London during the 1950s and '60s (Gutzmore 1993: 214). Set up usually without licences in the basement rooms of people's homes, the clubs marked out an archipelago of black safety and cosmopolitan conviviality. Acting as meeting places for the 'overworlds' and 'underworlds' of London, they attracted an unlikely mix of high society outcasts, gay men, working class jazz fans, white middle-class bohemians, American GIs, and enterprising black impresarios (Mort 2010: 290, 311). The partition wall – viewed from Johnny's side – bears a trace of this volatile mixture.

Blues clubs subverted traditional domestic space and as such became a target for municipal authorities, racist thugs and organised fascists (LCC 1959: 733; Olden 2011: 27). But the anxiety the clubs provoked was part of a larger phenomenon. The Conservative government of Harold Macmillan, as well as many Labour politicians, took the view that uncomfortable proximity to black migrants' domestic habits 'provoked' popular racism (Carter, Harris and Joshi 1993; Smith 1989: 116–21). Racism, and indeed race itself, was therefore *spatialised* by mobilising the housing crisis in this way. A complex dynamic connected race, space and housing, as property speculators exploited racial tensions to promote neighbourhood differentiation, while politicians who were pushing for stricter immigration controls leapt on the housing question for their own purposes (Davis 2001).

The culmination of these developments was the collapse of the commonwealth ideal of universal citizenship and a clampdown on immigration through the Immigration Acts of 1962 and 1968 (Gilroy 2007: 89 and 94). In Britain during the late 1940s and early 1950s, 'ghettoisation' was associated in policy makers' minds with the US race problem. Later in the postwar period, the unpalatable idea that something similar might be developing on this side of the Atlantic was not only recognised but actively (albeit surreptitiously) pursued, via local slum clearance policies (Smith 1989: 112; Ungerson 1971: 39–40). In effect, policy makers attempted to swap the interior polarisation created by partition walls for a much clearer demarcation of space at the urban level. Racism was an inescapable factor at both these levels.

Zones of Transition

The previous section explored the role of partition walls in cinematic representations of race relations in London during the 1950s and 60s. I want now to examine how that history intersected with the postwar property system. The balance and composition of this system were undergoing profound change. New actors, including insurance firms and developers, entered the field (Hamnett and Randolph

1988: 80–81; Marriott 1967: 39); tenure categories were recast via the growth of both public housing and home-ownership (Malpass 2005); and new mechanisms of state and capital began to take effect, from enhanced compulsory purchase powers (Massey and Catalano 1978: 17–19) to a range of new ways of extending and underwriting mortgage finance (Scott 2008: 7–8).

These changes transformed the visual landscape of post-war British cities, as office blocks sprouted from bomb sites, terraces designated ‘slums’ were cleared away, high rise council flats grew ever taller, motorway flyovers cut through city centres and neglected Victorian facades were suddenly replastered. But as well as changes on the street, important transformations were taking place behind the facades of existing houses. I turn now to property valuation lists and drainage plans held by local archives in London to explore how partition walls were used to sub-divide properties.

In the case of a partition like that in the *L-Shaped Room*, the question of visibility is complicated by the fact that the wall itself exists in a legal grey zone, leaving precious few traces in municipal archives. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, this ephemerality became problematic. The London County Council (LCC), for example, was increasingly concerned with the spread of ‘flimsy partitions’ within terraced houses illegally converted to multiple occupancy. Several high risk areas were identified for special attention – particularly with regard to the risk of fire (LCC 1957a). Fulham, where *The L-Shaped Room* is set, was not on the Council’s list, but nearby North Kensington was (LCC 1957b).

The LCC’s regulatory initiative directs our attention to the subdivision of properties that was taking place across inner city London during the 1950s and early 1960s. Tracking these changes is difficult because many of them did not receive planning permission. Valuation lists, however, which were compiled every few years by district surveyors in the setting of local property taxes known as ‘rates’ (Pilmer 1998: 178–210), represent an untapped source of information regarding how individual houses were let out.

Given that the private rented sector was declining rapidly yet remained the largest single tenure category in London well into the 1960s (Hamnett and Randolph 1988: 36), the number of houses in an area let out as ‘rented rooms’ is a potentially revealing indicator of the impact these changes were having. In the analysis that follows I

take North Kensington, and more specifically Notting Hill, as a case study area. For those who may not know the area, it is the poorer, northern half of what was, and still is, one of the most unequal boroughs in London. Historically the area owes its existence to suburban expansion in the early nineteenth century, as speculative builders raced to establish the first bourgeois enclave west of the Royal Parks – what would become known as Notting Hill – and tracts of workers’ housing cropped up to service the new railways and ‘noxious’ industries a little further west/northwest, the basis of contemporary Notting Dale (Sheppard, 1973: 235–51, 298–332). By the end of the nineteenth century, many of the grander streets in Notting Hill had already begun to decline, failing to attract the wealthy clientele who preferred the newly blossoming South Kensington. Following the Second World War, Notting Hill became known for its growing Caribbean community (Mort 2010: 133). This burgeoning cosmopolitanism sat uneasily with the more sedentary working class streets of Notting Dale, as well as the aggressive commercial redevelopment taking place around Notting Hill Gate and neighbouring Paddington (Marriott, 1967: 82, 85; Jenkins 1975: 221). It is this moment of change which led the urban studies pioneer Ruth Glass to describe Notting Hill not as a ‘slum’ but a ‘zone of transition’ (1964: xxi–xii).

Focusing on this moment of change, two valuation lists from 1956 and 1963 are relevant to the analysis that follows. A comparison of several streets in the area shows that while private renting was in general declining, the number of houses containing rented rooms in Notting Hill appears – in at least some areas – to have increased (**Table 1** and **Figure 9**).

While the figures in the table represent a small proportion of properties in the area, and further research is needed, the pattern corresponds with descriptions of Notting Hill as a ‘zone of transition’, especially compared to the more ethnically homogeneous population observed by sociologists in Notting Dale (Jephcott 1964: 25–26). Southam Street, for example, regarded as one of the hubs of Notting Dale’s working class community (Brooke 2014), featured just two houses with parts let out as rooms, according to both the 1956 and 1963 valuation lists.⁴

Yet even a very limited sample of the valuation lists, focused on the transitional streets of Notting Hill, has more to tell us. **Table 2** compares two pairs of houses that are similar in size, with the same number of storeys, located only a few doors down from each other, with the

Table 1: Number of houses let out wholly or partly as ‘rooms’ on selected streets in North Kensington (1956 and 1963). Source: Kensington Valuation Lists, districts 1 and 2, 1956 and 1963, RBKC Local Studies department. ‘Rooms’, as opposed to ‘flats’, ‘houses’ or ‘maisonettes’, is the term of description used in the Valuation Lists themselves.

Street names	Number of houses let out wholly or partly as ‘rooms’	
	1956 Kensington Valuation Lists	1963 Kensington Valuation Lists
Kensington Park Road	43	47
Ledbury Road	31	30
Clarendon Road	28	52
Blenheim Crescent	11	15
Powis Square	19	20

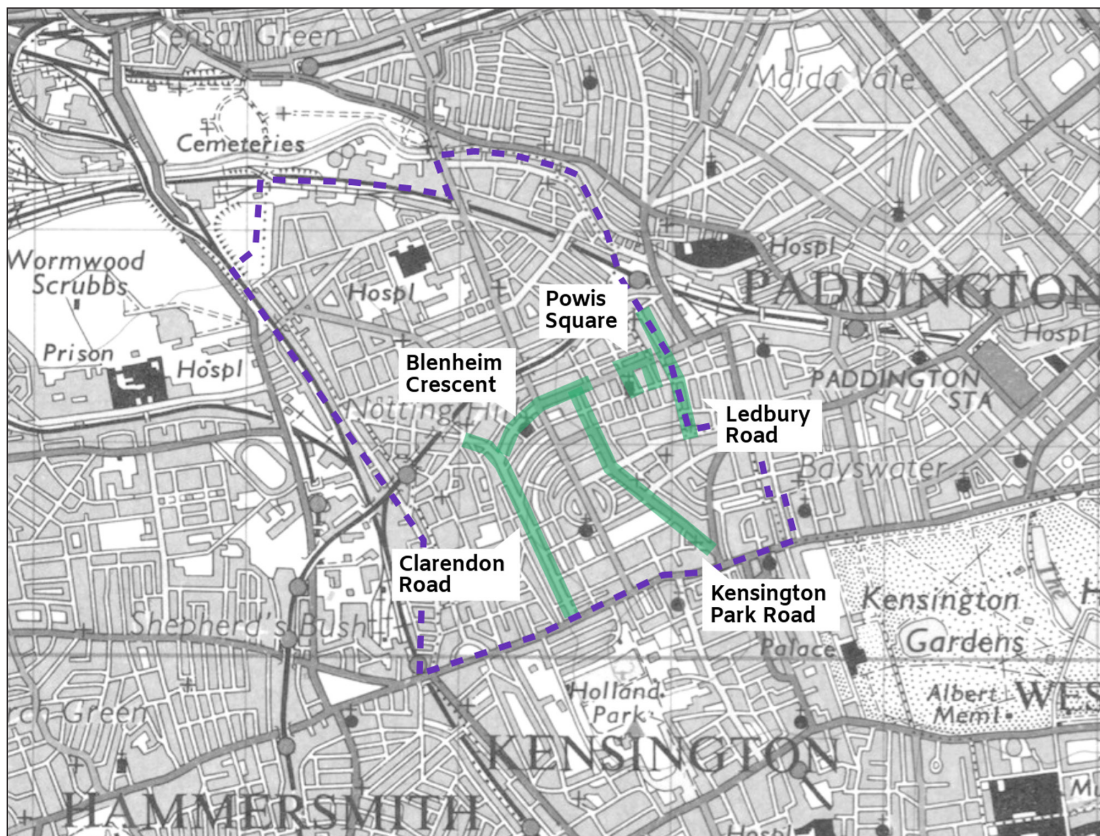


Figure 9: Map of North Kensington with streets from Table 1 highlighted in green. The purple dashed line shows the approximate boundaries of North Kensington. Base map taken from Ordnance Survey sheet 160 London NW (1958), available from *National Library of Scotland* <<http://maps.nls.uk/view/91577131>> [last accessed 20 October 2017]. Annotations by Alistair Cartwright.

Table 2: Comparison of estimated rental incomes for nearby houses on Kensington Park Road (1956). Source: Kensington Valuation List, district 2, 1956, pp. 487–501, RBKC Local Studies department.

Kensington Park Rd – house number and description from Kensington Valuation List 1956	Rental Income ('Gross Value of Hereditament')
No. 84 'Rooms' on all floors (four storeys plus basement)	£245
No. 90 House and premises (four storeys plus basement)	£140
No. 140 Basement flat plus 'rooms' on ground, first and second floors	£180
Nos 142 to 152 Houses and premises (three storeys plus basement)	£75–90

purpose of showing differences in the value of houses let out as 'rooms' or flats versus properties let out as whole houses. Note that at the time valuations were based on estimated rental income (gross of maintenance costs, insurance, etc.), rather than sale value (Pilmer 1998: 178, 210). Comparison of the top two rows suggests that subdividing a house such as 90 Kensington Park Road to produce something closer to number 84 Kensington Park Road – or simply renting out each room physically unaltered to a separate tenant or group of tenants – could have yielded a 75% increase in annual rental income.⁵ A similar comparison of numbers 142 to 152 Kensington Park Road (even numbers only), which were all valued as whole houses, and number 140, which was let out as 'rooms' on the first,

second and ground floors, with a self-contained flat in the basement, indicates at least a twofold leap in value. The gains that could be made from subdivision or re-letting were considerable, even before the Conservative government lifted rent controls in 1957 (Simmonds 2002).

The cell-like space of Johnny's room in *The L-Shaped Room* was far from exceptional. Landlords had every incentive to subdivide or re-let their properties, with the result that the spread of rented rooms was a growing phenomenon in certain parts of London. The LCC's concerns about the 'division of old houses for multiple occupation' (LCC 1957a: 319) were echoed in press reports and parliamentary debates which detailed the cramped living conditions and overcrowding faced by private tenants. *The*

Times reported in August 1963, at the height of the scandal surrounding the slum landlord and property trader Peter Rachman, how a 'young girl, close to tears, showed the pitifully small room in which she and her husband had to live. There was no water, except for a cold tap in the backyard down three flights of a dark rickety stairs' (Banting 1979: 23).

As the private rented sector declined, letting arrangements fragmented. Data presented in the 1965 report of the official Committee on Housing in Greater London found that 78.1% of landlords let only one building as a whole or in parts, and that these landlords accounted for 28% of all lettings (Holland 1965: 317). According to another government report from 1976, in areas of the country where private renting was the dominant tenure category, 36% of residential landlords had just one letting, while 42% had two to four lettings, with each letting usually consisting of just one or two rooms plus shared facilities (Harloe 1985: 111). The parcelling out of private rented housing into small to very small units testifies to the long-term inefficiency of the sector, as well as to the increasing predation upon this declining tenure category. The strategy of the infamous landlord Peter Rachman, of buying up tail-end leases and then subdividing and remortgaging individual rooms or floors with loosely regulated lenders, using the rent sweated from the expiring properties to pay off the interest, exemplifies this tendency (Green 1979: 83–86). In doing so, Rachman provided ground landlords and existing leaseholders with a helpful exit from a sector that was increasingly seen more as a liability than an opportunity.

The archival traces found in valuation lists suggest the broad transformations that affected properties where 'flimsy partitions' were most likely to be found. They reveal the distribution of change and the dynamic at play. While the number of rented rooms increased across

Notting Hill, this process was highly uneven and varied dramatically from street to street (**Table 1**). Ruth Glass noticed something similar in the abrupt changes that she saw across inner city London around this time. Writing in 1964, Glass characterised Notting Hill and other zones of transition as areas inhabited by disparate groups, who 'move, so to speak, on separate tracks, even if they do meet occasionally at a station' (1964: xxi–xxii). The term 'zone of transition' originated in Chicago School sociology (Park, Burgess and McKenzie 1925), but her understanding of these zones was more radical, focusing on the fractious dynamics that led 'change and stagnation [to] exist side by side'. In 1960s London, redevelopment went hand in hand with adjacent areas becoming 'hemmed in'. 'Remaining pockets of blight' became denser, as areas not 'ripe' for investment were 'left to decay' (1964: xx–xxv).

It was this dialectical process, whereby isolation was understood as an active product of the refashioning of urban communities, that led Glass to coin the term 'gentrification', anticipating later theories of uneven development (Harvey 1974; Smith 1979). Subdivision could be associated with decay, but also with new influxes of wealth. Side by side with the large number of rented rooms in Notting Hill, that's exactly what one finds on streets such as Kensington Park Road, where from the late 1950s houses let out in rooms were converted back into single family homes, regaining some of their past Victorian grandeur, or premises licensed as shops and offices were converted into maisonettes for professional couples.⁶

Evidence of these more formal conversions survive in the form of drainage plans submitted to the local authority when requesting permission to run pipes into the public sewer. A pair of plans for 156 Kensington Park Road as it existed in 1959 (**Figure 10**) indicates two bedsits on the first and second floors, with changes to the plumbing in pink, as well as a new partition wall between the

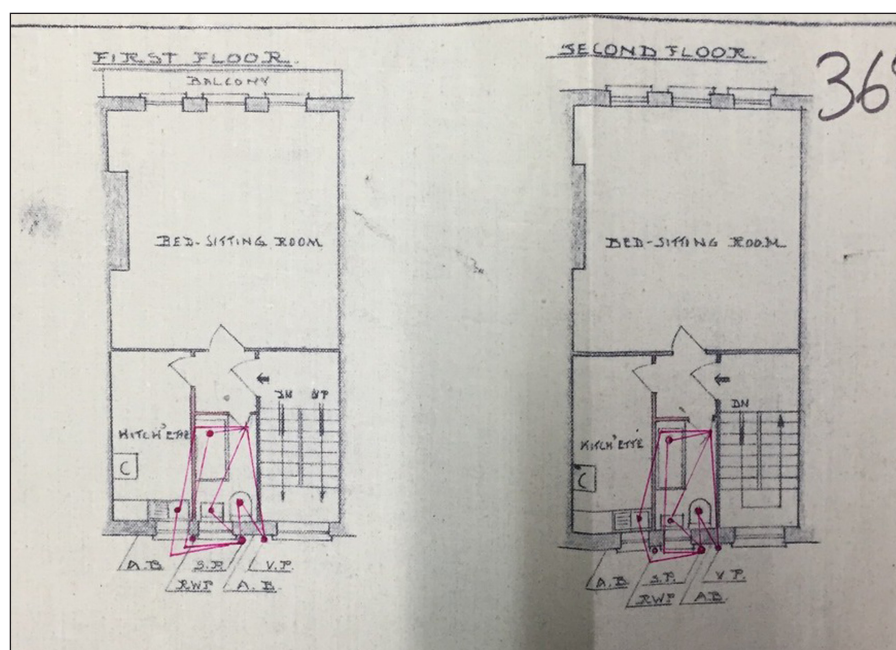


Figure 10: Drainage plans for 156 Kensington Park Road, first and second floors, 1959. Image courtesy of the RBKC Local Studies department.

kitchenette and the bathroom. A look at the relevant valuation lists shows how this property went from 'house and premises' in 1956 to two maisonettes by the time of the updated list in 1963. The plans from 1959 (**Figure 10**) therefore represent an intermediate phase. Before the house was converted to maisonettes, it was subdivided to produce two bedsits on the upper storeys. Changes like this demonstrate the degree to which these properties existed in a state of flux, going through a series of conversion from large, single family homes, to bedsits for unattached clerks and service workers, to maisonettes for more affluent residents, often within the space of a decade.

Geographers and historians have examined the cultural signifiers and social demographics of early gentrification in 1960s London (Moran 2007; Butler and Robson 2003: 52–53), yet little attention has been paid to the way incipient gentrification in places like Notting Hill overlapped with processes of subdivision, rent sweating, predatory landlordism and capital withdrawal. Indeed, these oppositional processes of disinvestment and reinvestment form the basis for uneven urban development, generating the windfall profits that speculators look for when an area previously thought of as undesirable can be 'flipped' into a desirable one (Smith 1996: 23). The house at 156 Kensington Park Road illustrates the rapid, contradictory changes resulting from subdivision in one particularly fractious part of postwar London. This, we might say, is the spatial DNA of the zone of transition.

Visions of Community Between the Walls

Within this period of flux and fragmentation, walls were used to divide, isolate, alienate and exploit; to separate people and to corral them together; to reproduce otherness and extract profit. But what does this reveal about how urban and domestic spaces were actually experienced? The sociologist Pearl Jephcott, writing at the same time as Ruth Glass, describes Portobello Road, which runs directly parallel to Kensington Park Road, and offers an insight into what a postwar zone of transition felt like:

Saris and sandals, the Sikh's white turban and black beard, the carefully careless headscarf of the Nigerian and the goffered guimp of the Italian nun lend a (slightly seedy) exoticism to the area. At one end [of the street] the American tourist haggles over his purchase from a stall displaying antique silver; at the other end the pensioner fumbles through an old clothes barrow. ... Teddy boys hail taxis with assurance; a dignitary of some eastern church, purple cassocked, conducts his daily services in his council flat; an elderly refugee lady from Shanghai fights a losing battle with her smooth-tongued tenants from Cork. Cosmopolitanism on this scale means that even the officials to whom it causes so much extra labour and anxiety agree that the place is oddly stimulating. (1964: 26)

The passage recalls the fear and excitement experienced by Banks' narrator in *The L-Shaped Room*. But within this complex of attraction and repulsion, there is also a dynamism and fluidity that goes beyond exoticism. Here, in the heart of Notting Hill, people from distant parts of the world and different classes of society formed an unstable yet powerful alloy.

In late summer 1958, a wave of racist violence swept North Kensington. The week-long Notting Hill Riots, which saw white youths rampage through the streets attacking black residents and passersby, was a turning point in the history of postwar race relations (Ramdin 1987: 106–10). A few months later, when an element of calm had returned to the streets, thirty-eight residents from the southern end of Portobello Road petitioned Kensington Council to change the name of their part of the street to Kensington Park Terrace, claiming the 'old world characteristics' of the residential south felt 'disconnected' from the bustle of the street market ('Class War' 1959). As well as explicitly disavowing the memory of the riots, the petitioners were worried that the value of their houses might drop. As one signatory explained, 'A better class of people has been coming into this part of the road recently' ('Class War' 1959).

The people who signed the petition – with the support of Conservative-controlled Kensington council ('Are They All Snobs' 1959) – expressed their full awareness of the uneven development that Ruth Glass highlighted. In order for redevelopment to move forward in one area, there had to be de-development in another. What the petitioners wanted desperately to forget, however, was that the hardening of racial otherness witnessed in the riots was essential to this process. It was via the spatialisation and polarisation of race that one went from the uneasy cosmopolitanism of Jephcott's Portobello road to the idea of splitting a street in half.

Subdivision was part of the context for the growing racial tension that culminated in the riots and their aftermath. But processes of subdivision also made room for a whole new range of unforeseen alliances. Such alliances were clearly envisaged in postwar films set within the walls of London's rented rooms. Elements of the dynamism and conviviality of Portobello Road in the early 1960s could also be found – at least within these fictional rented worlds – inside the lodging house itself. Quite apart from the motives of landlords and planners, I'd like to suggest that we consider the ways in which these spaces were catalysts for progressive change: breaking down barriers of race, sexuality and class, and thus enriching, and complicating, the moment in which working class people in postwar Britain, as Selina Todd has argued, assumed the mantle of 'the people' (Todd 2015). Films and other examples from popular visual culture reflected and crystallised this volatile mixing of peoples. The radical value of these works lay not in an idle form of wish fulfilment but in the uneasiness of their mode of expression.

In *The L-Shaped Room* moments of conviviality infiltrate the cellular space of the lodging house: cups of tea offered, meals shared in bedrooms, even Christmas parties in the landlady's flat. Moments like these are clearly part of the sentimentality of both film and novel. At the end of the film Jane returns to her room and can look fondly on it, not so much because her problems have disappeared,

but rather because she can recall all the small, irreplaceable intimacies that might otherwise never have befallen her. Moreover, the scenes in which food and tea are shared among the tenants (**Figure 11**) do not redeem the racialised portrayal of Johnny's character; indeed they sometimes reinforce it (Banks 2004: 51).

In a similar way, there is something more than whimsy in the strange awkwardness of the Christmas party with the landlady. The most surprising aspect of the scene is the diverse cast of characters assembled in this room: a lower middle-class ex-typist, a black jazz musician, an aspiring working-class writer, a Hungarian refugee and sex worker, an ex-music hall artist/pensioner. At the same time, the most striking cinematic presentation of this group is also the most gauche, the one that breaks most decisively with conventional film grammar (yet without integrating the result into an alternative experimental language).

Recalling the uncomfortable close-ups of Johnny in his room (**Figure 5**), we see the assembled residents ranged around Jane, peering down into the camera as if viewed from her seated position (**Figure 12**). This is the moment she is about to be rushed to hospital to give birth, and for a second, the group appears transfigured into a bizarre devotional scene. The narrative rationale for the Christmas party sequence – and, I would argue, for the entire film – is the desire to assemble these misfit characters in a single space.

In *The L-Shaped Room* and other lodging house dramas, strange, temporary, powerful alliances emerge (**Figure 13**). The community of the lodging house is pitched as a force beyond the state, the only one capable of rescuing individuals from isolation. These images of community are the essential complement to the figure of the working class hero in better known films and plays of the period.



Figure 11: Still from *The L-Shaped Room* (dir. Forbes 1962).



Figure 12: Still from *The L-Shaped Room* (dir. Forbes 1962).



Figure 13: Stills from *The Man Upstairs* (dir. Chaffey 1958).

The L-Shaped Room invites viewers to experience the exotic thrill as well as the vicarious dejection of the 'alien world' of the rented room. But there is also something else: the projection, or enactment, of a possible community, for which the lodging house serves as the only plausible container. This gesture of *projecting* or *enacting* community seems bound up with a powerful visual sensibility, a sensibility that is tied to social changes that exercised an increasing force on popular consciousness in the postwar period, such as Caribbean and Asian immigration, which grew from a few thousand in the early 1950s to a peak of over 125,000 in 1961 (Fryer 1984: 372–73; Wills 2017b: 235); the growing sense of confidence among working class people that crystallised in the first round of major welfare measures in 1948 (Todd 2015: 148, 169); the increased independence of women, who despite the anti-feminist backlash of the 1950s continued to enter employment in large numbers (Pugh 2000: 284–98); and the dawn of the so-called permissive society, hailed by a wave of liberalising social legislation in the late 1950s to early 1960s (Jarvis 2005). If the 1950s in Britain have often been seen as a quintessentially reactionary decade, then a closer look at the visual culture of the period reveals the cracks in the established order that were already well developed before the explosion of 1960s radicalism (Thomas 2008). Partition walls were important fault lines – both physical and imaginary – within this moment.

Notes

- ¹ The term 'bedsit' or 'bed-sitting room' was commonly used in the 1950s and 60s, for example in property listings in the back pages of local newspapers, to refer to furnished private lets, usually consisting of a single room that could include basic kitchen facilities and a wash basin.
- ² See for example Shelagh Delaney's 1958 play *A Taste of Honey* (Delaney 1987), and the film adaptation directed by Tony Richardson in 1961. See also Alan Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (Sillitoe 1959), adapted to film by Richardson in 1962.

- ³ *The October Man* (dir. Ward Baker 1947), *Sapphire* (dir. Dearden 1959) and *Flame in the Streets* (dir. Ward Baker 1961) were produced under the Rank Organisation umbrella. *Pool of London* (dir. Dearden 1951) was an Ealing Studios production, while *West 11* (dir. Winner 1963), mentioned earlier, came out of Rank's major rival, The Associated British Picture Corporation. *The L-Shaped Room* was produced by Romulus Films, founded as an independent break-away from Rank in 1949 but by the mid-'50s already a heavyweight in the British film industry (Bergan 1999). Columbia Films acquired the distribution rights to the film, earning around \$1 million in cinema rentals (Top Rental Features, 1964). For production information about *The October Man*, see the *Two Cities Films* website, <http://two-cities-films.com/files/abouttwo-citiesfilms.html> [last accessed 14 November 2019]. For the other films see Company Credits on IMDB, <https://IMDB.com> [last accessed 14 November 2019].

- ⁴ Valuation lists. RBKC. See the District 2 list in 1956, pp. 615–21, and in 1963, pp. 743–47.

- ⁵ Note that in 1956 estimates were based on rent-controlled values as established by the Rent Act 1939 (Pilmer 1998: 208).

- ⁶ For examples of houses that underwent these sorts of changes, see numbers 26, 120 and 156 Kensington Park Road: Kensington Valuation Lists, District 2, 1956, pp. 487–501, and 1963, pp. 600–14, RBKC Local Studies department.

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