

Imagining the City - Sensory Remapping of Brixton

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What is Brixton?

Brixton is a neighbourhood with a large Caribbean population in South London, an ethnic enclave if you will. Descriptions of Brixton are more often than not along the lines of “a lively, multicultural area with a down-to-earth vibe”, a “hive of cultural activity” (Tripadvisor, 2020). If it was not already clear, Brixton’s Black community and its *cultural* practices are central to external perceptions of the area. It is internationally recognised as a locus of Black British and diasporic culture, and when examined beyond surface level, is rich with expressions of a distinct local Black ‘Brixtoner’ identity.

My intentions

My goal is to spotlight the multifarious quotidian experiences and interactions that form the basis of Brixton’s social and cultural landscapes. I aim to reimagine Brixton as it is in its current form, and by this I mean to provide an alternative lens to view the area, one through which Black geographies are hegemonic. In simplest terms, I want to represent Brixton’s physical and ideological spaces in ways that are neither hostile to its Black residents nor subject its distinct localised form of Blackness to a process of reductive simplification. In doing so, I aim to centre Black embodied senses. I initially was drawn to the idea of imagining an idealised speculative future for Brixton, creating something of a Black British utopia. However, not to succumb to Afro-pessimist temptation, but this feels not only like a futile pursuit, but something I simply do not have the capacity for nor wish to spend time doing. As such my alternative conception of present-day Brixton is informed both by my personal experiences as a Black South Londoner, and supported by scholarly literature that provides insights into the origins of and reasoning behind the ways in which Black Brixtoners exist in and relate to the area’s spaces.

Sensory remapping

Sensory remapping felt like the most appropriate way to carry out my reimagining of Brixton. The medium of embodied senses, I feel, provides the most *human* account of a place as one *feels* a place's essence not only through sight. My goal is for you to have *experienced* Brixton, to feel as though you too have emerged from the depths of Brixton Underground station on a summer afternoon and have been immediately accosted by the glorious chaos that is Brixton. I want you to be able to visualise the clumsy traffic jam of red double decker buses, the hoards of city worker commuters in grey office - wear and trainers interspersed between meandering shoppers wearing bright, casual attire. Of course you cannot miss the iconic 'B our Guest,' 'Come in Love' and 'Stay in Peace' murals painted on the railway bridge. I want you to be able to smell Brixton's charming aroma of exhaust fumes combined with the incense sold directly left of the station's exit, and needless to say the intermittent yet everpresent scents of urine and marijuana. My aim is for the sounds of traffic, catcalls, buskers, market vendors and the resident street preacher and anti - knife crime teenagers vying for your time and money, to seem audible to you, as well as the stickiness produced from the heat of the sun mixing with almost visible haze of pollution to be palpable. As you get your bearings at the top of the station's stairs, you see your bus and have to run, suitcase in tow, through this sea of bodies and seek refuge on your bus's upper deck to observe Brixton's happenings from a bird's eye perspective. You know that while it is utter chaos, it is home.

The Unmentionable

Brixton's appeal apparently transcends racial and class lines. Its perceived 'multiculturalism' as well as the (formerly) relatively low inner city housing prices combined with its proximity to central London, has attracted scores of young middle class white university graduates looking to soak up its 'lively', 'down - to - earth vibes'. With them came investment and land developers. The most prominent investor in Brixton is Taylor McWilliams, a Texan DJ whose company owns most of Brixton market and has proposed the building of a twenty storey office block adjacent to Electric Avenue, which has naturally been met with fierce opposition (Doward, 2021). I am of course referring to Brixton's gentrification. One cannot write about Brixton without addressing the ongoing fundamental changes to its sociocultural and economic fabric affected by the mechanisms of gentrification. With that being said, this is the only time that I will explicitly refer to gentrification as it dominates discussions of Brixton. While it is undoubtedly an crucial piece of the Black experience in Brixton as it has necessitated impressive political organising, an overemphasis on it has drawn focus away from the everyday realities of Black residents. This is why I have opted to centre Blackness in its *pure* form - unadulterated Black creativity, not creativity directly born from 'struggle'. I want to highlight expressions of Black people's humanity - the things Black people do *just because*, not things they do *in spite of*. I refer to this as *peopling*.

Sight

Peopling

Aesthetics have become central to the production of urban space by way of an over emphasis on design-oriented urban planning. However I argue that sights of Black people *peopling*, and by that I mean simply intentionally *existing* in or *inhabiting* public spaces, are

crucial in the production of an area's aesthetics. The spatial formations and the aesthetic qualities that arise from Black people *peopling* are arguably far more illuminating of the area's sociocultural characteristics than the pre-determined and deliberate aesthetics represented on a map. *Peopling* and its outcomes can otherwise be described as “the intentionality of human consciousness and experience [which is] thus crucial in defining the essence of place” (Vihanninjoki, 2019, p463). In Brixton, the ‘intentionality’ of Black consciousness has produced an urban space rich with sites and expressions of Black people *peopling* in diverse ways.

Intentional sponteneity

I feel that the most appropriate way to introduce you to the sights of Brixton is from the upper deck of an iconic London double decker bus - the 118 to be exact. The 118 approaches Brixton from *deep* south London as it connects Brixton to Streatham via Brixton Hill Road. It is common to see groups of middle aged Black men gathered on the strip of grass under the council flat blocks adjacent to the busy main road. These string vest and tam - wearing, loc'd men play card and dice games atop foldable tables, accompanied by music, alcohol and other *substances*. They also migrate across the road to set up camp at the makeshift outdoor dining areas of ‘Negril’ and ‘KataKata’, Jamaican and Cameroonian restaurants. There is also ‘Brixton Hill Islamic Centre’ perhaps a hundred metres south of the flats, which, before and after prayers, sees groups wearing thobes and holding Quarans standing on the pavement, deep in conversation and often accompanied by playing children. These various groups fill space that would otherwise be characterised by intermittent fluxes of vehicles and pedestrians with what can only be described as a lively stillness; they are animated yet emanate a calmness that juxtaposes with London's constant rush. They are fixtures of the Brixton landscape - albeit fairweather fixtures as they only

really gather during summer months. Through their interactions they “transform spaces into places,” more specifically Black places filled with Black people *peopling* (Hunter et al., 2016, p3). What at first glance is a (deceptively long and steep) stretch of road connecting two neighbourhoods, has been transformed into almost a gateway to Brixton. It functions as a visible signifier of the neighbourhood’s inhabitants. Moreover, in a manner antithetical to most of London which is rigidly divided into public and private spaces, the side of the road has become a place at which important ‘private’ social functions are carried out. The pavement and patch of grass are places that Black Caribbean, predominantly Windrush generation “negotiate their belonging” by way of making their belonging in Brixton non-negotiable and hyper-visible (Allwood, 2021, pvii). Younger Brixtoners are no less visible in the Brixton landscape. They tend to congregate at night, at different locations such as inside and outside of the iconic Brixton McDonalds and along Brixton Station Road. What I am getting at is the enactment of Black geographies that are bold, public and spontaneous as well as utilise all available space to its utmost. Brixton’s landscape is steeped in sights of Black people *peopling*.

Hearing

Constant commotion

The hectic junction at which Brixton Hill Road meets Brixton Road is South London’s answer to Piccadilly Circus. It connects to Acre Lane which begins in Clapham, Effra Road which leads to Tulse Hill, Coldharbour Lane which meets Loughborough Junction and Brixton Road itself continues up to Kennington. As such, it is the heart of Brixton. It is here that Brixton’s soundscape is most affronting (but in a good way). Stepping off the 118 bus is like stepping into a million little conversations - or arguments. You are immediately accosted by

overlapping sounds, that when isolated, each tell a different story about the inhabitants of Brixton. The first is the constant stream of traffic - the roars of engines, beeping of car horns and indignant shouts of drivers as pedestrians who, unwilling to wait less than a minute for the green man, take their chances and run across the busy road. This sound is unrelenting; it is a naturalised part of Brixton's - and London's - soundscape at all hours of the day, ensuring that Brixton is constantly abuzz with people passing through.

Take me to church

Another sound that dominates the soundscape of Brixton Road is the sound of voices, all competing to be heard above traffic and that become increasingly audible as you cross the road towards Brixton tube station. Outside of the station, more often than not, there is a busker, ignored by the vast majority of commuters but nevertheless belting song after song and rewarded by the occasional passerby tossing some change into their upturned hat or guitar case. There is also the resident street preacher, usually with a West African accent, loudly speaking the gospel into a microphone and thrusting leaflets into the hands of passers by who have not mastered the blinkered vision/blank expression of true Londoners. No matter your opinion on street preachers, whether it be that they engage in “monologic effort[s]” to convert audiences to a religion “by means of performance,” or hold a more sympathetic stance that it is a well-intentioned effort to enlighten passersby, street preaching in Brixton is a means through which Black voices are hyper-audible (Edelman, 2013, p117). In an increasingly secular nation, Black people are among the most religious groups, and churches, mosques and other religious hubs function as community centres and safe spaces. Moreover members of religious communities act as the

extended family networks that are very important in many African and Caribbean cultures but play a lesser role in British society.

Magazine - pushers

As you walk southward towards the entrance of Electric Avenue, the sound of the half a dozen or so Black male youths selling magazines whose profits go towards efforts to reduce knife and gang-related crime, dominates. Their polite but persistent attempts to get your attention with phrases such as, “excuse me, do you have a moment to talk about knife crime in our area” followed by the less polite “do you not care that [*insert a statistic about the number of youths that lose their lives from gang related crimes*]” if you tell them you have neither time nor money. While at times the overlapping voices vying for your attention can be overwhelming, it ensures that interpersonal interactions are characteristic of Brixton's soundscape rather than impersonal sounds of traffic and construction that dominate other areas of London. Brixton is characterised by the sounds of its inhabitants and the things they care about - music, religion and the lives of its youths. While I am averse to politicising the quotidian actions of Black people, the audible presence of Blackness functions as a reminder of the immovability of a Black presence in Brixton.

Inglan is a bitch

Reggae music which is intimately connected to British soundsystem and deejay cultures, is also a very prominent part of the Brixton soundscape. Music can be heard from open windows of houses, flats and cars. One place it can without fail be heard is along Electric Avenue on a summer night, where it competes with the chatter from groups of stall owners and their friends

enjoying the warm weather and long daylight hours after their work days. When walking along Electric Avenue you can expect to hear catcalls and however, there is something about being called ‘princess’ or ‘sugar’ by an older rasta guy that is not quite as affronting as other instances of catcalling such as being followed down the road or abused when you don’t answer or dare not to smile. Reggae music, while being first and foremost recreational, also has a political function in Brixton. In 1970s and 1980s Brixton, with discrimination policies and racist policing practices at a climax, many Black Brixtoners found solace in “embrac[ing] Marcus Garvey’s philosophical outlook of a return to Africa through the lens of Rastafari and Reggae music” (Henry, 2012, p357). It was also used to voice dislike for the British experience as a whole, which is done very overtly in Linton Kwesi Johnson’s 1980 song ‘Inglan is bitch’. The significance of reggae endures, as does the appeal of using music as means of collective identity formation. Younger generations of Brixtoners have created new genres of music, namely British Grime, to express similar political and social sentiments. Artists include Brixton based ‘67 Crew’, who, while being a legitimate music collective, are also a known gang and big time drug dealers. Another notable artist that articulates the Black Brixtoner or South Londoner experience through the universally understood medium of music, is Dave. Dave, though I am most definitely biased as a fellow St Mark’s Academy alumni, does it best.

Sound of da police

Brixton police station is at the north end of Brixton Road, thus the sound of sirens is unfortunately a naturalised part of Brixton’s soundscape in all areas. I will make this brief as I do not want to dwell on the controversial role of police in London let alone Brixton, however I feel that sirens are too important of a sound not to address. Sirens arguably function as “sonic

structures of panopticism,” reminders of the constant state of police surveillance under which Black Brixtoners live, or at the very least the fact that they are always nearby (Surveillance, Race and Culture, 2019, p62). Sirens have in a sense been co-opted by Black people and made a feature of the global hip hop genre; the British Grime scene is no different. Many artists use sirens in the background of their songs to encapsulate Black lived experiences and soundscapes. For example, sirens featured in the aforementioned rap artist Dave’s 2021 songs ‘Heart Attack’ and ‘Three Rivers’ which address knife crime, racist policing practices and the 2018 Windrush Scandal among other contemporary political issues faced by Black Londoners. While police sirens are undoubtedly an ominous part of Brixton’s soundscape, I can attest that forming positive community relations absorb a lot of the Metropolitan police force’s time and resources in Brixton.

Smell

Caribbean Breeze

Smell is the sense that is often overlooked, however the vividness with which scents evoke specific memories show their integral nature to people’s experiences of places. Electric Avenue is perhaps the space in which smells are most pungent and Black geographies are most overt in Brixton. Unlike the inside market spaces such as Brixton Village, the stalls along Electric Avenue are for the most part owned and run by Black residents who sell the essentials - that is if you also consider string vests, knock off Gucci bags and crystals essentials. At the entrance of Electric Avenue, there is a foldable table with quite the array of incense and crystals on sale; the vendor also always has incense burning. This means that one is met with the aromas of ‘citronella splash’ or ‘Caribbean breeze’ as they pass by or enter Electric Avenue, providing

momentary relief from Brixton's dominant scent of pollution. Incense is important to Brixton's Caribbean population as it is used in Rastafarian tradition to 'go back to one's roots' so has taken on religious significance (Puri, 2020). Thus, in Brixton, the smell of incense functions as a reminder of the distinctiveness of the Rastafarian faith and tradition and its immutable yet subtle presence in the area.

Animal Aromas

A smell that fluctuates as you traverse Electric Avenue is that of raw meat and fish. It is accompanied by the sight of pigs hanging by their hind legs and carefully arranged fishes and other unidentifiable fish-like objects with glassy eyes gazing onto the street. This is reminiscent of marketplaces in the areas of the 'Global South' I have visited at which there are chickens roaming around which undoubtedly are intended to be somebody's dinner that night. What I am getting at is the lack of separation between the animal and its consumer, the idea that people are not put off by seeing the meat they eat in its animal form, nor do they mind smelling it - it is a natural occurrence after all. In Brixton Market, the butchers' and fishmongers' close proximity to the passersby and the aromas of meat and fish is a constant reminder that many of the inhabitants of the area are first, second, or third generation immigrants to the UK and infuse Brixton with some of their home countries' practices. Electric Avenue, for many, functions almost as a microcosm of home nestled in between London's highrises.

Marry Joanna

Another smell that is somehow always present in Brixton is marijuana. It can most often be smelled in whiffs out of car windows, however some more brazen people smoke it while

walking down or standing in the street. Possession and recreational consumption of marijuana is not (yet) legal in the UK but it is becoming increasingly widespread. However, it has long been used by Brixton's Caribbean population as it too has an important function in Rastafarian tradition. Its significance has shifted from being an everyday item to the 'holy herb' with the changes to the material conditions of its smokers one of which being the creation of a rastafarian diaspora. Marijuana's initial function was one of Rastafarianism's outward rejections of capitalism that was quickly sanctified and "assigned a biblical correlate" (Benard, 2007, p92). Thus, in Brixton, marijuana maintains its dual function. It is a way to cope with the many overlapping systems of oppression faced by members of the community - a form of escapism - and it functions as a link to Caribbean culture and to home. It also has a social aspect as it is rare to see many people smoking weed alone; it is a naturalised part of Brixton's nightlife.

Pee patrols

Before I move on, I cannot leave out the smell of urine. It is a smell that takes over Brixton's smellscape, particularly in dark, hidden corners such as under the railway arches or on the grounds of St Matthews Church which has long been known for being a meeting spot for drug users and dealers - less so since sprinklers programmed to go off at random times throughout the night have been installed. Additionally Brixton's 'vibrant' nightlife has made it necessary for police to have to go on 'pee patrols', sniffing out any partiers who cannot make it to bathrooms on time and opt to squat in doorways. On a more sobering note, Brixton does have a large transient population, many of whom use drugs regularly as they can acquire them with relative ease in the area. This means that it is not uncommon to see people strung out in doorways and encounter the smells of their bodily fluids.

Taste

Food for the soul

The market is perhaps Brixton's main attraction, it houses restaurants, takeaways and stalls selling imported groceries. While it most certainly has changed a lot since its conception, it is still a place from which you can get some of the best Caribbean and African food in London. Market row along Electric Avenue is where most of the fresh produce can be found - plantains, yams, jackfruit and other fruit and vegetables. You can even buy Matoke, a fruit indigenous to Uganda that is difficult to find in many places outside of the country. The availability of staple foods for so many different national and ethnic groups means that Brixton Market functions (parts of it at least), in the same way as marketplaces in the 'Global South' do, as "a cultural environment in which local community lifestyles are showcased" (Agboola et al., 2018, p87). People can carry out weekly grocery shopping to cook meals such as fried plantain, ackee and saltfish, and fufu and matoke, using ingredients not found in mainstream British supermarkets such as Sainsbury's or Asda. Residents and visitors alike can look to Brixton Market to connect to their home countries and cultures through their taste buds.

Fish, Wings and Tings

In other parts of the market, there are restaurants and takeaways selling ready made Caribbean and African food. Some of my favourite places to eat in Brixton Market are 'Fish Wings and Tings', a Caribbean restaurant that is known for its fish and wings, among other things, 'Light of Africa' an Ethiopian restaurant that has the best lentil sambusa I have tasted, and Eat of Eden which sells entirely vegan Caribbean food. Though somewhat expensive, probably to keep up with rent prices in Brixton village, all three are run by Black people and

their decor reflects the origin countries of their cuisine. I also have no reason to question the food's authenticity. There are more Caribbean restaurants and takeaways in the surrounding area, serving as a visible reminder of the cuisines and flavours that reflect Brixton's population.

Liquid Joy

Another taste that is characteristic of Brixton is Supermalt. Supermalt is a non-alcoholic malt beer that is drunk in many African and Caribbean cultures. It is an acquired taste that only a few people *actually* like, nonetheless Supermalt is a staple drink at most gatherings and celebrations. Brixtoners interviewed about the significance of Supermalt and concluded that it holds cultural significance owing to its uniqueness to African and Caribbean cultures; this dictates Supermalt's popularity, along with it being synonymous with celebration (Bech-Larsen et al., 2007, p9). Additionally Supermalt is also a niche product that can only be bought in certain corner shops in certain neighbourhoods with established Black populations. The distinct red and orange logo can be found on bottles littering Brixton as well as on shop signs along Electric Avenue. Supermalt is essentially the non alcoholic version of 'Magnum' a fortified tonic wine from Jamaica which is widely drunk by Brixton's Black population. Magnum is not for the faint hearted. It became popular on the dance hall scene in the 1980s for its ability boost energy and sexual vitality (Maislin et al.). There is still a demand for it today as it can be cheaply (and illegally) by individuals and sold at a profit. I digress, but what I am trying to communicate is the cultural significance of the food and drink sold and consumed in Brixton. Tastes of foods evoke distinct memories of African and Caribbean home cultures and are central to the maintenance of a distinct Black Brixtoner identity.

Conclusions

What I have tried to communicate, is that there is no one way to experience or to describe Brixton. All senses have to be engaged to get somewhat of a *feel* for its unique essence, which is a highly experience. Further, immense meaning can be derived from the seemingly quotidian activities of Brixton's inhabitants which have the effect of imbuing its physical and socio cultural landscapes with a unique 'Brixtoner' identity in which 'Blackness' is deeply embedded.

Blackness, though an oftentimes invisibilized quality of Brixton, is essential and immutable. Moreover, Black geographies in Brixton are both subtly and deliberately enacted in a myraid of ordinary yet brilliant ways.

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