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A Peckham Pilgrimage: Looking for Lagos & Considering 'Community'

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A Peckham Pilgrimage: Looking for Lagos & Considering ‘Community’

Beth Hunt

“Pilgrimage”[...] has a nice way of subverting the constitutive modern oppositions between traveller and tourist [...] Its “sacred” meanings tend to predominate – even though people go on pilgrimages for secular as well as religious reasons’.¹ The word ‘enlightenment’ is similarly bilateral, implying both spiritual and secular insight. Even before my trip to the *Doing Nothing is Not an Option* exhibition at the Peckham Platform proved to be so enlightening, it had already achieved the status of one of James Clifford’s subversive secular pilgrimages which conflate the tourist and the mere traveller in my imagination. This was due to my devotion to the figure of Nigerian activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, to whom I was first introduced by his diasporan daughter Noo in her travelogue-cum-memoir *Looking For Transwonderland*.² Ken is probably most famous for his death; he and eight other members of Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) known as the ‘Ogoni Nine’ were executed in 1995. Ostensibly, their crime was murder. In fact, it was their protestation of the degradation and abuse of the land, water and people of Ogoniland in Southern Nigeria by international oil companies, notably Shell, that landed them in court and later in the firing line. Ken was not just the environmental activist and martyr or the formidable father and philanderer that his daughter Noo described, but also an estate agent, novelist and television writer, and this discovery imparted to me such a complete picture of Ken that I felt inexplicably drawn to him. My attending the exhibition therefore seemed dually ordained by its apparition in Peckham, the centre that has held my social life together for the last 6 years. Peckham is also ‘the

¹ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel & Translation in the 20th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 39.

² In order to differentiate between father and daughter, I will refer to both Ken & Noo Saro-Wiwa by their first names.



Fig. 1. Sokari Douglas Camp, *Battle Bus*, *Living Memorial to Ken Saro-Wiwa*, London, 2007.
Photo: © Kristian Buus.

centre of Nigerian-British life and culture in London [...] there is nothing in Lagos that you will not find in this area' making it an obvious and accessible cite for the exhibition.³ The timing of *Doing Nothing is Not an Option* was also significant: 10th November 2015 would mark the twentieth anniversary of the wrongful deaths of Ken and his comrades. Nigerian-English sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp's *Battle Bus* formed the centrepiece of the exhibition. It features nine oil barrels to represent each of the Ogoni Nine and bears a quote from Ken: 'I accuse the oil companies of practising genocide against the Ogoni.' It was brought to Peckham in June 2015 to announce the beginning of the *Doing Nothing is Not an Option* exhibition before being sent to Lagos (where it remains held in customs by a fearful government), 'as an act of solidarity, and a powerful, loud message to Shell – Clean it up'.⁴

³ Oluwakemi Ojo, '10 Top Nigerian Neighbourhoods in London', *Travel Start Blog* (2014) <<http://www.travelstart.com.ng/blog/top-nigerian-neighbourhoods-in-london/>> [accessed 30 November 2015].

⁴ Sokari Douglas Camp, 'Action Saro-Wiwa', *Platform* (2015) <<http://platformlondon.org/oil-the-arts/asw/>> [Accessed 26 November 2015].



Fig. 2. *River Peck*, Peckham Rye Park, London, 2015. Photo: © Beth Hunt, 2015.

Journey

I was woken by my alarm at 8am on the 8th November 2015 after a night wracked with anxiety dreams. I had decided to make the journey to Peckham by skateboard, an ‘inherently subversive’ mode of transport that ‘challenges observers to examine preconceptions of who and what a city is for’, by way of the River Peck, the river from which Peckham takes its name (‘Peck’ meaning river and ‘Ham’ meaning town in Saxon English).⁵ The Peck was enclosed underground in 1823, making it one of London’s many underground rivers.

I started out on One Tree Hill, the genesis of the River Peck. I took my time enjoying the autumn colours of the famous forest where Elizabeth I came ‘A-Maying’ that is now home to a Hindu community centre. On leaving I discovered that I had lost my mobile phone. Swallowing my panic, I decided this was an excellent tactic for ‘Getting Lost’; that essential

⁵ Ocean Howell, ‘The Poetics of Security: Skateboarding, Urban design, and the New Public Space’, *Urban Policy* (2001) <http://urbanpolicy.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Howell_2001_Poetics-of-Security_NoPix.pdf> [accessed 30 November 2015].



Fig. 3.
Basi & Co. kiosk, Peckham Platform,
London, 2015.
Photo: © Beth Hunt, 2015.

traveller's skill in which 'The simple aim [...] is to [...] experience those emotions / of doubt and strangeness [...] even panic / which, for the experienced player, is especially / exhilarating.'⁶

Skating down Kelvington Road alongside the reservoir that tracks the progress of the Peck, I had my second disaster: being thrown off thanks to a rogue paving stone. Saving face in front of two amused onlookers, I jumped straight back on and rolled all the way to Peckham Rye Park to see the Peck's only remaining supraterranean portion. Stagnant and signposted 'Poison' my essential sadness was laced with the sinister thrill that my own polluted river made for a microcosm of those in Ogoniland that Ken Saro-Wiwa had sought to protect.

⁶ Vern Rutsala, 'Little Known Sports: Getting Lost', *The American Poetry Review*, 9.5 (1980), 43-43 (p.43).



Fig. 4. *Meat Counter*, Rye Lane Butcher's, London, 2015. Photo: © Beth Hunt, 2015.



Fig. 5. *View of Queen's Road (SE15) from Peckham Platform*, London, 2015. Photo: © Beth Hunt, 2015.

On reaching Rye Lane, Peckham's major street and the final leg of my journey to Peckham Platform, I dismounted my skateboard. Instead of skating, I played a game; *Looking for Noo's Lagos*. In *Looking for Transwonderland* her account of dangerous traffic, impromptu Christian sermons on public transport and evangelical events 'promoted like rock concerts [...] billboards featuring these star preachers looking extremely dapper' in Lagos all rang true of my own experiences in Peckham.⁷ I was therefore determined to capture a little slice of Lagos in London on film. Scrutinising signs I'd only ever glanced at, entering shops I had never noticed to photograph scenes I had only ever glimpsed, I realised that I had achieved the 'insight, joy, euphony, vivid experience, visual excitement, sensuous delight, and discovery' that is essential to travel and become a tourist in my own city.⁸

As I neared the mouth of Rye Lane the landscape changed. I was no longer flanked by hybrid African, Asian, Irish, Eastern European and Caribbean shops and eateries but by multiple pound stores, the ultimate symbol (alongside betting shops and cheap, sweet alcohol) of corporate attempts to pacify a poor community. As if to complete the picture of a changing Peckham, I encountered a farmer's market. I climbed the steps to the door of the Peckham Platform, and whispered conspiratorially to my Dictaphone that the mini-blackboard inviting me to 'Come Inside' and use of the hashtag '#Iaccuse' was 'quite gentrified'.

On entering the exhibition, I took a seat in front of a plywood booth decorated with Nollywood film posters and put on the headphones provided. I realised that I was watching an episode of *Basi & Co.*, Ken Saro-Wiwa's popular sitcom. Laughing along at the exploits of Mr. B and friends, briefly distracted by the powerful image of *Battle Bus*, I didn't initially notice the text spread across the wall below a second video exhibit. It detailed the script of the film (a flash performance by a local youth group on the day *Battle Bus* was parked in Peckham Square) and the exhibition's *raison d'être*: not simply to remember Ken Saro-Wiwa but to draw a parallel

⁷ Noo Saro-Wiwa, *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (London: Granta Books, 2013), p. 65.

⁸ Michael Mewshaw, 'Travel, Travel Writing, and the Literature of Travel', *South Central Review*, 2.22 (2005), 2-10 (p. 9).



Fig. 6. *View of Peckham Square from Peckham Library*, London, 2015. Photo: © Beth Hunt, 2015.

between the Ogoni people's dispossession of land in Nigeria and the Black communities' dispossession by gentrification in Peckham.⁹ Outside I could see a homeless man wrapped in a duvet. Inside the only visitors were young and white.

When asked for my opinion on whether Peckham Platform was 'welcoming for the whole community' I couldn't bring myself to tick 'Agree'. Immediately after my visit, I made my way across Peckham Square to Peckham Library, famously designed by Will Alsop to somewhat resemble a nest. It was packed to the rafters with a far more satisfying representation of Peckham's true demographics than the Platform: all ages and colours come to work, relax, study and socialise. I struggled to find somewhere to sit.

⁹ I use the term 'Black' after Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer, as a 'political, rather than racial category', and 'an alliance among Asian, African and Caribbean peoples, brought together in shared struggles against racism in Britain'. See Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 28, p. 81. However, I recognise and agree with recent discussions about the term "political blackness" that have focused on its unsatisfying utopian implications, because (among other things) anti-blackness is a very specific kind of discrimination that not all people of colour face. I capitalise the 'b' in Black because I use it as a proper noun describing a political, diasporic category: "Black British".

Scribbling notes under the baleful gaze of a bust of former resident and founder of the League of Coloured Peoples Harold Moody – a ghost of Peckham’s past indeed – and listening to teenage girls discussing silicon headpieces, I became convinced that *this* was the cultural centre of Peckham; The Platform, small and insignificant from the fourth floor window, was just a young pretender.

Analysis

Both my route and mode of travel for this journey were chosen, following Clifford, in order to help me to experience the familiar differently. By following the path of great significance rather than that of least resistance, I hoped to attract the unexpected on my journey and transform my gaze from that of desensitised citizen to hyper-aware academic-traveller. Through becoming a tourist in my own city I was able to playfully observe the decidedly ‘Black British’ landscape projected by Rye Lane’s shops, salons and eateries. The foods, flags and brands of each region were represented, their display literally shoulder-to-shoulder incredibly evocative of Black Briton’s ‘anti-racial alliances between immigrant South Asians, Afro-Caribbeans, and Africans.’¹⁰ According to Hall, ‘collective identities spoken through “race”, community and locality’ are ‘powerful means to coordinate action and create solidarity’, which have been and continue to be important in the creation and maintenance of Black British identities.¹¹ My own presence alongside that of people speaking Yoruba, Patois, Polish, Chinese, Bengali and English with South London accents seemed to confirm that Rye Lane belonged in Avtar Brah’s conceptual category of Diaspora Space which represents ‘the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location’ and ‘is “inhabited” not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous.’¹² Furthermore, in Diaspora Space ‘there is always an intimate

¹⁰ Clifford, p. 256.

¹¹ Paul Gilroy, ‘Urban Social Movements, “Race” and Community’, in *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams (Cornwall: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 404-420 (p. 418).

¹² Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1996), p. 208.

encounter at stake between strangers and natives', thus promoting the disruption of privileged subjectivities and hierarchies of belonging.¹³

Although Noo's Lagos was present in Peckham – Victory Food Store's exultant name and shop front bible quote providing a particularly satisfying example – it was naïve of me to expect to find any one (or anyone's) version of Lagos transposed precisely elsewhere, let alone in London. 'London and Lagos share certain goods, habits, styles and languages, but for each thing in common there also exists a corresponding local twist, inflection, idiolect [...] hinges that serve to both close and to open doors in an increasing global traffic.'¹⁴ Peckham's Nigerian community was clearly at home here and it was on their well-oiled transnational hinges that I was swinging in order to catch a glimpse of an African city 4500 miles away. 'Movement – of people, information and cultural symbols – takes place between a network of cities that is accessible because of translocal cultures' and this translocalism would not be possible without all of Peckham's dispareans.¹⁵ However, I could equally catch snatches of Accra, Kingston, and dozens of other distant cities written into my scripted Lagos. I was not looking at a print but at a patchwork quilt of places. Holding the patches together were the threads of the unique historical palimpsest of Peckham; (post)colonial migrations like Empire Windrush and local struggle and celebration, from the 1931 founding of the League of Coloured Peoples and the Battle for Lewisham in 1977 to the 2011 London riots and 2016's Peckham Community Pride.

Following Sara Ahmed, we can understand the configuration of Rye Lane's Black British-ness as being dependent upon the 'the very experience of leaving home and "becoming a stranger" [which] leads to the creation of a new "community of strangers."'"¹⁶

¹³ Sara Ahmed, 'Home and Away', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3.2 (1999), 329–347 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/136787799900200303>> [accessed 5 September 2016] (p. 340).

¹⁴ Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

¹⁵ Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. xxxviii.

¹⁶ Ahmed, p. 336.

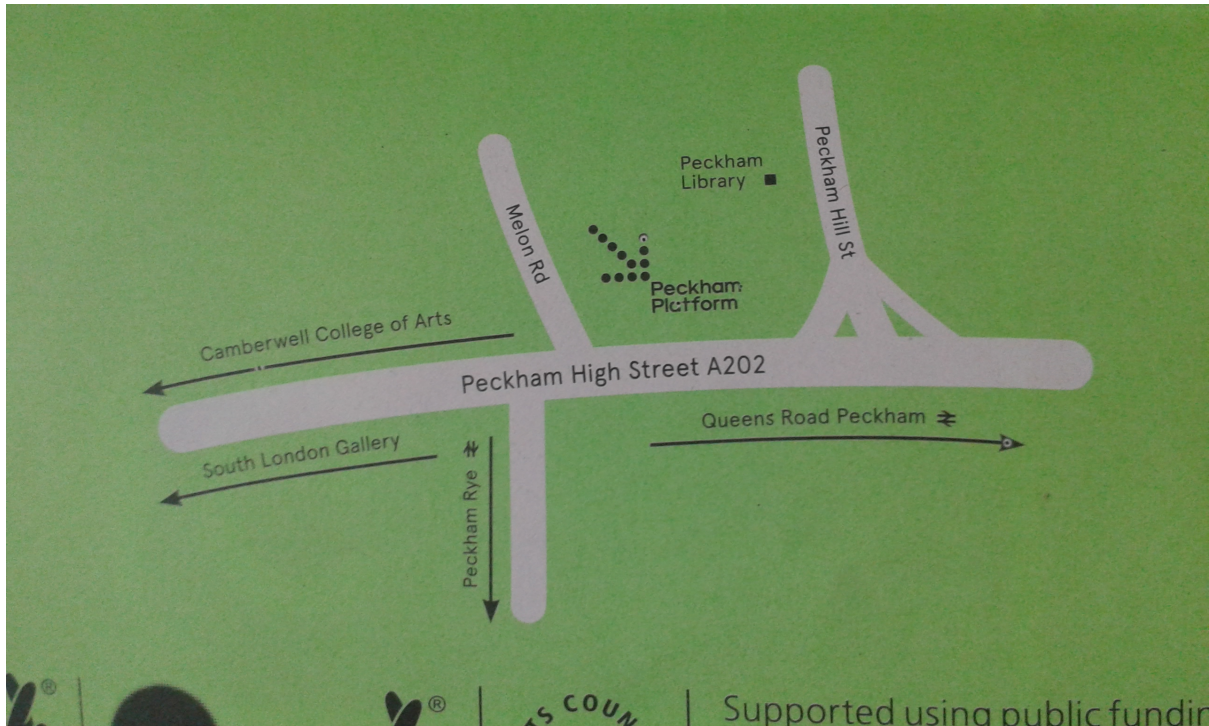


Fig. 7. *Map of Peckham High Street*, Design by Praline, 2015. © Peckham Platform 2015.

Although Rye Lane's united front must have emerged somewhat out of necessity, it still represents a victory of Otherness in the creation of an instated alternative to white London. This victory is at constant risk of being undermined, most conspicuously by neo-liberal, capitalist forces. The rapidity with which the landscape of Rye Lane and Peckham more generally can alter over a hundred metres (let alone a hundred days) is irrefutable evidence of this violence.¹⁷

The sudden proliferation of Poundlands not only represents the dominant neo-liberal, capitalist imagination of what (predominantly Black) working class lives are (cheap, colourful and disposable) but also an insidious attempt at the homogenisation of (predominantly Black) working class identities. Homogenising the high street, replacing family businesses that represent disparate immigrant roots/routes represents a particular kind of racist 'spatial governance' which disrupts the community of strangers and replaces it with a crowd. It is

¹⁷ Since the time of writing, Rye Lane has become home to at least two new cocktail bars and many more mini blackboards.

famously difficult to colonise a people with whom you empathise.¹⁸ It is similarly difficult to empathise with a crowd. Degrading multifaceted, intersectional, radical, queer (predominantly Black) working class identities by distilling them into a few universally acknowledged and popularly scorned signs (in this case cheap mass-produced consumer goods) also allows for the legitimisation of white, middle class culture in Peckham as “superior”. The juxtaposed ideologies of Poundland’s low value goods for low value lives and an open air farmer’s market selling expensive artisanal cheese for “knowledgeable”, “discerning”, “aspirational” (white) people was more than enough to shatter any cosy conceptions of Peckham’s togetherness and prompt me to engage more critically with what the exhibition entailed.

If *Doing Nothing...* was attempting to interrupt the museum’s ‘assumed audience [...] educated, bourgeois, white’ and establish Peckham Platform as a contemporary ‘Contact Zone’ where visitors ‘grapple with the real difficulties of dialogue, alliance, inequality and translation’ in the modern urban environment, they appeared to have failed.¹⁹ Looking over the (superbly branded) literature I gathered there, I analysed the map provided for clues about who Peckham Platform’s ‘Contact Zone’ was really for.

Inclusion of directions to the nearest train stations and exclusion of the street name ‘Rye Lane’ indicated that local people were not the only audience, giving lie to the projected notion that the exhibition represented solidarity with and celebration of Peckham’s predominantly working class Nigerian community. Of the other landmarks included on the map, two were exclusivist spaces *par excellence*: the university and art gallery. The third was an anomaly: the public library, where I made my way immediately after my visit and which represents a far truer Diaspora Space in which ‘those who are constructed and represented as indigenous [...] is [sic] as much the diasporan as the diasporan is the

¹⁸ El-Tayeb, p. xxxii.

¹⁹ Clifford, p. 209.

native' in which everyone, regardless of privilege has both an equal feeling of entitlement and desire to both take up and use the space.²⁰

I had come looking for Lagos and to bond with the Saro-Wiwas. Eternally privileged, I had achieved both these goals (albeit in unexpected ways) and found my sense of adventure along the way. But I had also had to confront uncomfortable home truths about the dimension of precarity that the threat of gentrification presents to the diasporan community, to whom I represent the most clear and present danger. For Peckham's Black diasporans, my alternate London where I am simultaneously a local, a tourist, a casual observer and even a pleasure seeker, is their only place to call home. In my ability to become "a tourist in my own city" I embody 'the subject who has chosen to be homeless, rather than is homeless due to the contingency of "external" circumstances [...] a subject who is privileged, and someone for whom having or not having a home does not affect their ability to occupy a given space'.²¹ Thanks to 'the glaring whiteness of Europe's self-image' I am immediately imbued with a right to be in cities and in Europe.²² I am allowed to feel at home even when I am a total stranger there. On the other hand, 'Europeans possessing the (visual) markers of Otherness [...] are eternal newcomers' even if they, their parents and grandparents were born in the local hospital.²³

Finding a place to call home, carving out a community and coming to feel they have the right to take up space is a triumph of struggle for Black British people. In instating their community of strangers they simultaneously cut the loss of the home they came from and accept that they and their family will never truly belong there again either. Seeing these struggles erased and the space these communities cultivated as their own recuperated for racist capitalist gain is a catastrophic phenomenon, but not altogether inexplicable. According to Fatima El-Tayeb:

²⁰ Brah, p. 209.

²¹ Ahmed, p. 335.

²² El-Tayeb, p. xxv.

²³ Ibid., p. xxv.

Encounters [by white Europeans] with the repressed presence of non-white Europeans [...] are not necessarily forgotten but rather decontextualized, denied any relevance [...] rendering events meaningless, without reference and thus without place in a collective memory means that every acknowledgement of a non-white presence always seems to have happened for the very first time.²⁴

This attitude of amnesia over the existence of Black communities, coupled with the homogenisation and demonization of the working class allows white gentrifiers to imagine that there is no one really “at home” in Peckham. It is *terra nullius*; nobody’s land. This was the exact wording of the papal bull issued by Pope Urban II in 1095, which allowed European Christians to claim land inhabited by non-Christians as their own, thus providing the original edict for violent colonialism. Viewed like this, it is very difficult to disagree with the sentiment that ‘gentrification is nothing more than modern-day colonialism’.²⁵ *Doing Nothing is Not an Option* indeed.

²⁴ El-Tayeb, p. xxiv.

²⁵ Lincoln Anthony Blades, ‘Gentrification is Nothing more than Modern-Day Colonialism’, *This is your Conscience.Com* (2014), <<http://www.thisisyourconscience.com/2014/02/gentrification-is-nothing-more-than-modern-day-colonialism>> [accessed 18 September 2016].

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