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# 'Not Deepest, Darkest Peckham': The middle classes and their others in an inner London neighbourhood

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## Introduction

This paper explores how middle class people in a socially mixed, gentrifying area in inner London (Peckham) understand, claim, and make place in their local area. The area of Peckham under study lies between two very different roads, Rye Lane and Bellenden Road. Rye Lane is an ethnically mixed bustling high street lined with fruit and vegetable shops, butchers and fishmongers that open onto the street alongside chain stores – such as Primark, Snappy Snaps, WHSmith – and African and Caribbean hair and beauty shops. Bellenden Road has a quieter feel and a mixed consumption infrastructure, with a launderette and greasy spoon cafes, alongside vegetarian cafés and boutique clothes shops. The Bellenden Road area has been the focus of a determined and longstanding series of policy interventions by Southwark Council to 'improve' the area by, for example, commissioning new street furniture from some of its local resident artists (notably but not solely Antony Gormley) and also supporting the renovation of local shops and houses. Such interventions have in part been directed at social improvement and changing the image of the neighbourhood. Gentrification – a process which is ongoing – has undoubtedly been encouraged by the housing stock of Victorian Terraces on tree-lined road.

Beyond these basic material characteristics, 'Peckham' is a loaded signifier, a place with a reputation. In particular, the area carries a racialised association with gang violence and gun crime. While our respondents regard what happens in the stigmatised North Peckham estates as largely unrelated to them, there is an evident fear that these problems might occasionally 'spill over'. Alongside this, there has been recent media interest in the area – since the Bellenden Road renewal project and the emergence of Peckham as a trendy, arty, up-and-coming place.

In this paper we argue that middle-class residents of Peckham define and understand themselves in opposition to the 'Other' groups of people and spaces (selective belonging (Watts 2009)) while also drawing on an understanding of Peckham that presents themselves, and others like them, as playing an *ongoing* and *central* role in the construction of the local community. It becomes clear that through associations with other middle-class residents our respondents are involved in place-making activities that attempt to overcome the negative connotations of the area and invest it with other meanings.

## Living with Difference? Making Sense of Rye Lane

It is common for respondents to emphasise the separateness of 'two worlds' that exist in Peckham, the world of the white middle-classes and the 'others'. This division is evoked by P6 a lawyer in his early thirties who described the division in people exiting Peckham Rye station at the evening rush hour, the people that turn left towards North Peckham (in his account mainly black and poor) and those who turn right (mainly white) towards the Bellenden Road area. Another respondent, also a male city lawyer, describes:

If you basically walked out on Peckham High Street, or Rye Lane which is the main shopping street, I would say at least two thirds to three quarters if not more of those people are black. And ... you are the minority as a white person, but ... if you then go to Bellenden Road to those cafes and those shops, you go to Lordship Lane, it's 90% white. Um, there doesn't seem to be... very much crossover. [P19]

These descriptions of neighbourhood relations are in line with what Butler and Robson (2001) name 'tectonic' relations ('Social groups or 'plates' overlap or run parallel to one another without much in the way of integrated experience in the areas' social and cultural institutions' (2001:78)). However, alongside these narratives of 'two worlds' existing in parallel are vivid descriptions of Rye Lane that demonstrate that this is not a place that is just ignored and passed by, but a symbolically important place for middle class residents. Rye Lane is cited by many respondents as a neighbourhood boundary but it is a porous one, most describe using it for some shopping or for accessing the train station. It also functions as a powerful referent, used to make sense of living with difference. Rye Lane is used by residents in at least three ways, to talk about the multiculturalism of the area, to distinguish middle-class leafy Peckham from this bustling and unsettling high street and to talk about possible future improvements to the area.

While the ethnic mix of the area is presented as an important and positive factor influencing residential choice, the respondents also demonstrate considerable ambivalence about this diversity. This ambivalence comes across in respondents' vivid descriptions of Rye Lane:

God you know... Rye Lane it's ... it's it's it does have a few chain stores WHSmith and everything, but... further down it's just ... it's er ... an Afro-Caribbean and African community, so there's shops full of... vegetables that you literally, that I couldn't name. Um ... you know, the other day we were walking down and there were big buckets full of giant snails, that size [gestures] the size of a coconut, just sort of crawling out of the bucket above my head and I was like 'oh my God' that's a bit too much! ... [later] I think Ian and I are one of those classic people who really do genuinely feel that life is

good when there's a diverse community ... we just really appreciate – although Peckham can be dirty and crazy, it's also 'wow', what an amazing place to live where you've got snails crawling out of buckets on the high street and who wouldn't find that – well obviously, not everybody! [Sarah, 35]

In the above account, the snails in a basket are first presented as 'too much' and later as indicative of a diverse community to be celebrated. The otherness of Peckham, more specifically Peckham's blackness, is central to these descriptions. Rye Lane is variously described in our interviews as 'little Lagos', 'third world', 'Africa' and 'weird' – like the snails in the basket, as both exotic and frightening.

In these accounts of Rye Lane a concern with a proliferation of butchers, fishmongers and hair and nail bars is repeatedly voiced. The lack of containment of businesses on Rye Lane is a common complaint from our respondents: the hair that gets brushed out into the streets, the smell of the butchers. These uncanny border transgressors – hair and nails – being classic examples of what Mary Douglas terms 'matter out of place' (1966; see also Kristeva 1982).

This preoccupation with Rye Lane as a confusing and disgusting space resonates through many of our interviews. P22 a nurse in her early thirties told us:

[W]hen you arrive here, you immediately feel kind of bombarded, bombarded by people all selling things and all the vegetable stalls and the meat hanging up and ... there's, it's noisy, there's lots of people in the streets, um... kind of, people bumping into each other and, lots of buses and sort of busy-ness I think [P22].

The bombardment she describes is a bombardment of the senses: touch (people bumping into you), noise (people trying to sell you things), visual and smell (meat and fish). Nevertheless, many of our respondents continued to use Rye Lane, for specific purposes – for example the purchase of vegetables and cheap household cleaning products – while for the two BME respondents in the Peckham sample (from Vietnam and St Lucia), being able to buy ingredients to make dishes from their countries of origin (possibly the vegetables that P4 finds unrecognisable) provide a powerful sense of home.

To take the tectonic metaphor further then, in the accounts of our respondents these are not two worlds that slide past each other effortlessly, but that grate, rub and leak over one another.

A council worker in her twenties described how Rye Lane was a talking point amongst her friends and neighbours:

[O]ne thing we always do end up talking about, I think with the neighbours and with our friends who live here is um ... Rye Lane. We talk about Rye Lane quite a lot in, that ... mainly the horrible butchers. Um ... and the fact that every time I walk past it makes me want to be vegetarian! Um with the, you know, chickens hanging there and meat everywhere. I cycle past in the morning and they've got this big wagon with just half a cow laying in it, makes me feel a bit sick. Um... just, just, kind of talk about that and ... how it's a bit bizarre that there's just so many butchers, so many shops that are kind of ... all seem to be selling the same thing, but are all still open and type thing, and you know fruit and veg with a butcher, you know that kind of thing ... it's a bit of a bizarre place Rye Lane, in a good way it's kind of a bit... quirky but – [giggles]. It has to be seen to be believed but umm, I guess we talk about that, a lot. [P15]

The insistence that this was a topic that was regularly and repeatedly referred to highlights the symbolic importance of Rye Lane.

### **Reclaiming Space**

The affective landscape of Rye Lane is important not only in the construction of white middle class subjectivities but as a basis for mobilisation within the local area. Within these arguments, discourses of strangeness and disgust are used not only to describe Rye Lane but also slip over into discourses of morality about dirty and disorderly behaviour and disregard for rules and regulations of the people who use it (Watt 2009; Lawler 2005).

Another way respondents make sense of Rye Lane is through a discourse of its Victorian past linked to their expressed desires for its restoration. As P14, an architect, argues:

As an architect, we would like to have the Rye Lane ... as a conservation area, so that it's preserved as a sort of ... part of town, and er... if you go there you will see that *if you just lift your nose* and you'll see all these Dutch-influenced buildings, Victorian brickwork, you know fabulous property, and some should be listed as well. And they are now part of an English heritage survey scheme – pointing out all these, and it's looking like it is, or there's a good chance that it could become a conservation area, which would limit developers, and limit owners not to do whatever they want, and you can see, that this is what's happened in the last thirty or forty years. It's really shabby... P14

It becomes clear from this quotation that such visions for how Peckham should be are in conflict with their sense of what it is now. Crucially, the architect asks the interviewer to 'lift up your nose', to go beyond the smell of the street level and to instead attune the eye to the architectural features of the past. This highlights the sense that our middle-class respondents feel that they can (perhaps uniquely) see beyond the superficial façade, and that they are the ones with 'taste'. Furthermore, active involvement around issues such as the restoration of

the 1860s station front square (which would involve the demolition of several shops) was presented as something that would improve the area for everyone. In addition, these narratives demonstrate how respondents consider their organisational skills, an element of their cultural capital, valuable resources which could be used to realise their visions of how the area should be. In this way, they laid claim to local space, and perhaps sought to gain a level of control over the definition of this contested place.

These narratives were bound up with claims about Peckham as an inherently middle-class place, closely tied to an interpretation of local history centred on the nineteenth century:

I think that people round here realise that this, that Peckham was once a very prosperous area, you know, in the 1800s, this was like Tunbridge Wells! This was like a spa town, and you came out to Peckham for your health. On the Rye. And that's what I kind of think. I like the history of the place (P24).

In this respect, the recollection of Peckham's middle-class past can be read not only as a way in which our respondents attempted to make sense of place, but also as a means of locating themselves within that place. By demonstrating a middle-class history, they discursively construct Peckham as having a longstanding middle-class appeal and presence. At the same time, they conveniently overlook (or erase) other histories of Peckham.

### **(S)elective Belonging**

While respondents were keen to emphasise the ethnic diversity of the area, it was also evident that they recognised their neighbourhood – the Bellenden Road Improvement Zone – as having a distinctly middle-class flavour. In addition, for many of them, the neighbourhood was perceived as predominantly white in character, a stark contrast to wider Peckham and particularly Rye Lane:

This bit has become more upmarket and very white. And the area has also become characterised by a kind of ... a 'time of the day' apartheid ... there's a farmers market on a Sunday morning, which is basically white people, white middle class people. And you don't see any black people (P3).

This echoes the discussion of social tectonics presented earlier in the paper, but additionally highlights that intersections of class and ethnicity are crucial to understanding the experience of class that many of our respondents presented both in relation to their own positions and those of their others.

The respondents simultaneously distance themselves from the stigmatised reputation of Peckham and claim an allegiance to the area. It was common for our middle-class respondents to say that they had both chosen to live in the area, because the property was affordable and because they liked to live (had had

previous experience of living) in an ethnically diverse area. Just as in the case of Watt's (2009) residents in Woodlands, our respondents in Peckham could access symbolic capital from housing as a result of the low cost of property in the area, itself the result of Peckham's reputation. Beyond this, though, it was clear that they had an emotional relationship to the place, demonstrating a sense of elective belonging (Savage et al. 2005); despite having few historical roots in the area, they had elected to belong in Peckham, and subsequently performed their identities and made sense of their lives through this site in their efforts to make it an appropriate place for people like them to live. People choose where to live on the basis not only of what their economic standing will permit, but also their desire to be around other people like themselves. That there were also other middle-class people living locally served to reinforce our respondents' sense that they were not 'out of place' in the area:

... when I first come here ... it was quite obvious to me erm that erm ... that a lot of people who lived around here were not that dissimilar to me ... when I get off the train, or when I walk around, I see people ... generally with who I identify, I don't feel out of place [P7].

... they loved this area for the same reasons we do. They liked the people, they liked the ... um ... the kind of common ground that you get with people ... you know, that you're kind of, you're all singing from the same kind of hymn sheet, you've all got the same kind of ideas ... [P24].

However, as the discussion of Rye Lane demonstrates, for our respondents, elective belonging could additionally be read as selective belonging, defined by Watt as 'a spatially *selective* version of the elective belonging discourse' (2009: 2875). In other words, while they were enthusiastic about the Bellenden Road area and a sense of the wider area as diverse, they also distanced themselves from, and to a certain degree rejected, the 'other world' and the stigma of Rye Lane. Following Atkinson (2006), this can be understood as a form of middle-class disaffiliation, insulation from the wider population and risks associated with the area.

What is interesting, however, and perhaps extends the discussion of (s)elective belonging further, are the respondents' investments in the local and the performative nature of 'doing' the local'. Indeed, respondents' interest in their surroundings within and beyond the immediate area demonstrate that they are claiming a stake in the locality in ways which are perhaps contested, and may or may not meet with success. They have an investment in the local which is, understandably, framed by their own cultural norms and expectations; the question of how they 'do' the local thus remains critical to understanding how they make sense of their surroundings.

One example of how respondents imagine and perform community is the importance that many of them placed on their relationships with neighbours. This

extended not only to other white middle-class people as the following quotation demonstrates:

... most of my neighbours are very multicultural, um ... and you know, and I've had curried goat before and I'm quite happy to have curried goat again, the Indian lady makes lovely Indian food when we go over there sort of thing ... so that is multicultural and I like that and I like our neighbours ... I like Bellenden area because that is sort of a little, um, villagey sort of feel [P19].

Relationships with neighbours, then, when they occurred, were not confined to talking over the hedge; they visited one another's houses, visited the pub and ate dinner out together. But beyond this, people believed that by living in the area and investing in it, they had a right to direct the future of the community:

[W]hat I'm subscribing to is the fact that, why refuse that you have, because you have a stake in the community – as in, put your hard-earned cash, and mental and emotional stake in a community, you feel as if you have some kind of power over what happens to it ... if we didn't live here, what would this area be? [P24]

Undoubtedly, this is a moral discourse that claims a right to power over the future of the neighbourhood and implicitly denigrates other local populations (see also Watt 2009). Other residents took a more cautious approach in their claims, highlighting their recognition that not everyone living in the area held in common the same tastes and that perhaps the changes they might desire would not be to the benefit of everyone.

... I suppose, to my taste, I would tidy up Rye Lane. You know, and, I would tidy up the kind of Choumert Road Market, the kind of bit that kind of comes round, because ... it's not how I live. But equally, if you did that, would it make the area better, or just everything the same? [P25]

While on the one hand the discussion of possible changes serves as one way of overcoming feelings of ambivalence, on the other, concerns over how such changes would be received reinforces the respondent's sense that they themselves occupy an ambivalent position within the locality.

## **Conclusion**

While the literature to date (see for example Savage et al. 2005; Watt 2009) identifies what constitutes (s)elective belonging, we have reflected here on some of the processes involved in achieving this sense of belonging. The examples presented here give some insights into how people variously understand and relate to their social and physical surroundings and how these intersect with processes of identification. Peckham, with its negative reputation and ethnically-diverse population, acts at one and the same time as a place to be celebrated



and a place to be feared. This ambivalence comes across clearly in our respondents' narratives. This ambiguous site thus reveals the tensions that are at play in people's claims to belonging. What we show is that these are by no means uncontested; even individuals themselves seem unsure as to how to represent their surroundings. But these are as much stories about themselves as they are about others.

Peckham gives our respondents opportunities. Through their residence in this 'edgy' neighbourhood, they are able to present themselves as distinctive, while the availability of Victorian terraces at a relatively affordable price in comparison to other neighbourhoods allows them to convert economic capital into cultural capital. However, their daily efforts to make sense of the local area demonstrate that maintaining and augmenting their cultural capital in a contested site is an ongoing process as they seek to position themselves in an unfamiliar social and physical landscape.

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