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Life in Brixton

● Rumours

of an
Irish
Future

I remember it was early one summer's morning when I potted out to the corner shop to find myself beset by ugly rumours of an Irish future. I stood under Mr. Khan's 'No Loitering' sign, scanning the newspapers and shaking my head. The National Office of Statistics study examining

the ethnic breakdown of the '91 UK census returns had just been released and the news did not look good for some of my kind:

Diran
Adebayo

'One of the most telling differences between the Caribbean and Asian settlements in Britain,' wrote social geographer and Oxford Professor Ceri Peach, in a widely quoted introduction, 'is that the Caribbeans



face what I call An Irish Future, while the Asians face A Jewish Future.'

A white-collar, blue-collar divide is emerging within Britain's ethnic communities, the study went on to explain, with growing numbers of Indians and Pakistanis enjoying rising prosperity, becoming owner-occupiers and joining the professional classes, while the Caribbean population remain marooned in the working-class, doing waged labour and council housed.

Although someone of Nigerian parentage and thus not directly implicated in this part of the study, I knew that prognoses such as these have implications for all black folk resident here, whatever their background. And even if I had not wanted to be factored in, many of the 'papers' had already done this work for me, collapsing Black African and Black Caribbean into a swiftly digestible catch-all.

'A hard-hitting report strips bare the taboos about race to reveal significant successes, but also glaring

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failure,' gloated The Daily Express. 'Among blacks, the report reveals alarming levels of crime and says half of all children live in home with no fathers....'

Coming so soon after the rumours of inferiority that accompanied tomes like 'The Bell Curve' and

'The G Factor', these new tolls of doom were enough to make a sleepy eyed man congratulate Mr. Khan, give up the fight, and return to his bed.

But the rumours would not keep away. Sky's Breakfast News is the first to come out with the dread word: 'There are growing fears of a black underclass.' Inhouse heavyweight Adam Bolton is doing a news special at 6pm.

The meat of the charge, as I saw it, were two-fold. We stood accused, like the long-standing blue-collar Irish before us, of having certain structural and behavioural fault-lines so embedded as to all but guarantee successive generations of under-achievement. Something was rotten in our ways of being and in the structures, in particular the family, the report implied, that surrounded them.

Did I recognise any of this in my world, and that of those around me? Something I did instantly recognize was another, barely commented-on, piece of data from the report:

'The black population is moving increasingly from the inner city to ethnic villages in the suburbs...'

I smiled as I thought of some of my middle-class friends who had made that transition, just as their peers are doing in America. We would laugh about how galling it must be for the white suburbs who had left town to escape black folk, to find the very same moving into their street. White flight, black flight, moving on to sweeter pastures, because the city ain't pretty. I wondered whether it was the urban, rather than our family settings, as the report implied, which was the key institutional impediment to progress. Could it be that we were getting undone by the city?

It was time for a walk, a tour of the neighbourhood.

The first thing I do is to put my city face on. This face is quite hard, set and wary. It, without being categorically unfriendly, is an 'I'm not to be messed with' face, and comes with a roll in the

shoulders and stride.

It is a look that suggests, I hope, an ability to survive the hustles and dangers of the city. It is a look framed in response to the one thing that others know about me when they see me, and lays claim to one of the key qualities that young black people are famous for having: street smarts.

My city look is not a look I was born with. It is a face I have developed to deal with the underlay of suspicion and fear in the single-cigarette stores, with their bars and grills, with threats real and perceived. It is a face that I have honed in observation and part-imitation of my peers around me. It is, if you like, a cultural face.

Now I'm ready.

'I'm not black any more,' Larry Holmes, the former world heavyweight boxing champion, once said. 'I was black when I was poor.' His comment reminds me sharply how black communities in the West are, typically, poor communities, black Western norms are poor people's norms.

Brixton in a place that is generally on the up, but this trend is selective, and black men feature high on its casualty list. There are increasing signs of public distress. In the community hostels on my street, its residents walk up and down,

these people are not local. Like King's Cross, folk come from everywhere to be casualties on this doorstep.

Liberal white middle-class people have been moving into many of the nice, relatively cheap properties to be had, and its business economy is certainly expanding. But few of the black business people at the Eurolink Business Centre actually live here. They are part of that flight to the suburbs. It is a place that has many cultural resources, a big arts and entertainment scene, black and white, and this is part of the reason why I'm here. But curiously, it is a place where more and more regular young black men are not wanted.

The businesses that start up - often on public sector 'City Challenge' money, and cater to a local clientele - seem to go upmarket as quickly as they can. A black sandwich shop where you used to see a fair sprinkling of average, local guys, is now mainly patronised by folk in suits. Prices have shot up, and a few seats have been brought in to discourage the hanging out tendency.

The old frontline on Railton Road, which functioned in its own way as a resource where unemployed men could hang out and hustle, has been cleaned out by police, and the 'Atlantic' pub, once a haven for black locals, has

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inadequately provided for. Derelict middle-aged men have joined the traditionally white drunkards around the station and outside the cinema, and now overwhelm them in number. Many of

changed hands and now targets the insurgent middle-class crowd.

On the high road I bump into a journalist friend. He's been writing a story about the door policy of a new

black nightclub. The owner is only interested in attracting the 'new breed,' certain of ambitious economically active black women. If he could get these women, then the 'right' kind of men would follow here to the club. He did not envisage that either he, or the women, would want your average black man in there. All the grief and stresses of the streets would follow such guys in. If, at some point in the future, he had a club which was full of black women and non-black men, the owner had shrugged, then so be it.

I asked my friend if he had seen today's rumours and we agree that this so-called Irishness (in the sense of 'No Blacks - No Irish') is happening more for the men than the women. Three in five young black men in London are unemployed whilst black women are now doing as well in the workplace as their white and Asian counterparts. We're both worried about this new development in the prejudice exclusion that marks the attitudes of institutions to our young men. Not just the usual suspects, the police, education and criminal justice but now black businesses too. It is more evidence of a growing internalised suspicion, a communal belief in our own worst hype.

In private, we often bond with one another so swiftly and in ways that give credence to the frequently invoked greeting which sees all black people as 'brothers and sisters', but translates less and less into the public arena. Step around and you find a certain harshness, a coarseness pervading our public dealings with one another, a reluctance to give one another the benefit of the doubt. You hear reference to it in the generic complaints of 'too much attitude' that black men throw at black women, and in the spat that's going on between a shop assistant and a customer in the pound shop that I pop into. 'Don't come with their difficult black ways,' she is saying. Even familiars keep their distance. I see black couples around me, but none of

them are holding hands, or displaying other public affection. Part of what goes with living black in the city is this love of the stern.

My girlfriend, despite growing up in Forest Gate, another sharp end of the city, does not have this face. I am forever reminding her to put it on when she comes to visit me in Brixton, but it's too foreign to her spirit. The other day we were on the bus, and she thanked the driver when I got off. I was aghast. 'Please don't be doing that when I'm not with you,' I pleaded. 'People will take your kindness for weakness.' She says we should resist this requirement to be stern. I say I do my best, but it's bigger than me.

Later that night, we went to a party in Tottenham that a friend of mine who runs a hair salon was having. It was a private party, but there was still security on the door. We had a nice time until three youths who have been standing by the wall looking moody, started touching up my girlfriend. I step in and have words with the main guy. It is city look against city look, with my adversary challenging me to demonstrate my blood skills 'if you're bad and brave enough...'. I don't want to go down that route. No doubt I am less proficient in these areas than him, but I'm not about to walk away when he's the one out of order.

Eventually, security men arrive and break up our tete-a-tete. My girlfriend, upset, tells me that one of these days those city looks will do for me.

My father was not interested in the city, and sought to remove me from the expectations and institutions of the north-east London neighbourhood I grew up in as quickly as possible. Wood Green/Green Lanes, although never as poor as Brixton, was like a blue-collar, white-working-class and immigrant area with that characteristic whiff of being set up for mediocrity that you smell in the local schools and services. Education for my parents was paramount and they cobbled together the money to send me to a fee-

paying school in the suburbs when I was 8. At 13 I went, on a scholarship to a boarding-school in darkest Worcestershire.

Both schools were fine in the 'O'/'A' Level way my parents wanted them to be. There were, of course, few other black pupils there, and those that were tended to be scions of wealthy West Africans, not the kind that lived in an area like mine. After a decade of this, and three more years away at college where the racial make-up was similar, I had had enough. I was tired of the myriad bizarre encounters that occur when you're the flyboy in the buttermilk.

Part of the reason why, when I returned to London and flats of my own, I stayed in black areas was to catch up with what I had been missing. I wanted to embrace my mainstream, use it as an emotional and cultural resource. Increasingly though, the constraints challenge the resource.

If black norms in the West are poor people's norms then black Western orthodoxies are especially affected by street orthodoxies. Attitudes developed against the backdrop of the asphalt jungles have far greater purchase on our general mores than say, white working-class ways have on the white population, simply by dint of the greater proportion we have living there. When those attitudes are glamourised and endorsed by a contemporary black popular culture, in music, film etc, which is heavily ghettocentric, then it becomes harder to prevent the collapsing of 'street, urban black' into 'real black.'

This had much to do with my encounter with the guy at the party. He was coming to me on the basis that black men are fighting men. It also explains the sting in the chat-up that is going on in front of me.

A car, adorned with laser lights on its sides, has slowed to a crawl as its young male occupants chat up a nice-looking lady walking alongside. She has a bag on her shoulder and is wear-

ing a cotton, knee-length dress.

They want her to step in the car, come for a ride, come for a drink, whatever. She's cool, she doesn't give them grief, but declines the offer. They ask her if she's got a boyfriend, she replies it's not for them to know her business.

'So wha', you don't check brothers? You tink you too nice?' they tease her, before adding a loud 'Cha', and speeding off.

The incident bothered me, partly because of the way the chirps had degenerated into abuse, but more because of the way these guys had accosted her, and believed that simply being street should be enough. When she had rebuffed them, their first instinct was to impute her racial solidarity, as if her behaviour had placed her outside some pro-black magic circle.

The cultural triumph we can claim for redefining the sound and style of the city, has been won with some cost to us as a people. Street types may be marginalised by club owners and others, but they occupy a central space in our thinking in the sense that anyone who spends time amongst the mass of black Britons feels under some pressure exerted by the grip it has on 'black authenticity.'

The great thing about the country areas, from a black point of view, is that there simply aren't enough of us there to form an orthodoxy and set of norms. This does lead to some country black folk displaying a backwardness or ignorance about black life as it is routinely lived in this country, but more often it frees up people from the preconceptions and big city baggage their London cousins carry around.

I'm sure that my termly absence from London during those years helped me to have an open heart and mind on my return. During my time away I met a number of regional black folk who likewise displayed a greater charity, a spirit less diminished by metropolitan corrosions.

I went through a mental checklist of my friends, amazed at how many of the more progressive, ambitious ones had some unorthodox, non-London element to their make-up. Maybe they had spent some time in Europe, or back home in Africa or the Caribbean, or simply travelled out to school or college.

A friend of mine who teaches Twi in a local Saturday school which has a range of African languages on offer, tells me the increased take-up in the last few Afrocentric years has been negligible. The learning of homeland languages, I'm sure, could have a vital role to play in resisting the city's stronghold on our identities.

I stop off at one last friend's house on Loughborough Road for a drink. He keeps open house pretty much and there's always a little crowd there, deep in global reasoning. The talk is of Jamiaca, of flight from the country areas to the city, and the big lousy development along its north coast: of how people are foolish to be deserting the hinterland of the island, where its milk and honey and plenty is, to go to the cities which do not have enough to provide for the numbers who flock there. The interior would take time now to bring to its former fruitfulness, they say. too much of its has lain fallow for too long, but there is enough inside the

agreed that war is going, a war in which the West is counting the cost of its 'encounter' with the East. A war that needs its heroes and villains, its cowboys and Indians, its Indians and Blacks. We need new arms and new terrains to fight this war, new bases of moving out of our city heartlands, and creating new communities which will develop new orthodoxies with less limitations. But most of it will be an inside job. We have to do something about this rampant romance with the urban; get it out of our beds and out of our heads.

The City and bridges

'Mas-ter Blas-ter! Ay,
Blaster! M.B, M.B!'

He dipped into the money bag that lay on his lap and, with an instinct for self-preservation so foreign to his style on the field of play, flicked out folds to all and sundry. Small denomination bills, I grant you. but largesse none the less. This way, no-one would come to him and his status as the People's Champion was assured.

Folk still spoke proudly of how he still lied on this side. Although I understood that he maintained a place here, in truth he lived out west. But he always did a tour of the soil that bore him during the build-up to Sports Day, stirring up the juices amongst his homies for the match

Amyriad little lamps (lights?) beckoning the cars on their myriad little missions. You could make fat curves and swerves as the lanes widened on the approach, pick up speed once you hit your chosen one proper, and smile once again at the pleasure to be had behind a wheel. Even make a night of it as the native boy racers had taken to doing on the W11 bridge

ground to feed the whole country.

We discuss the implications of the rumours, its place in a chain made up of Operation Eagleeye, and 'get tough' talk on immigration and welfare. We're

to end all grudges.

Half a mile beyond this scene was an uglier one: two lighties doing the taser dance. The boy and girl staggered, stunned and disorientated, like

short-circuited automations, as five officers sniggered around them. One returned to the van to switch on the hosepipe and douse the screaming pair to the ground. The others moved in to cuff up the catch, slipping their batons under the restraints to lever them up and fling them into the van, beyond the reach of any street cameras. And I feared for the pair, for there seemed to be some malice in the officers' approach. No doubt, we would be reading of their fatal heart conditions come the morning.

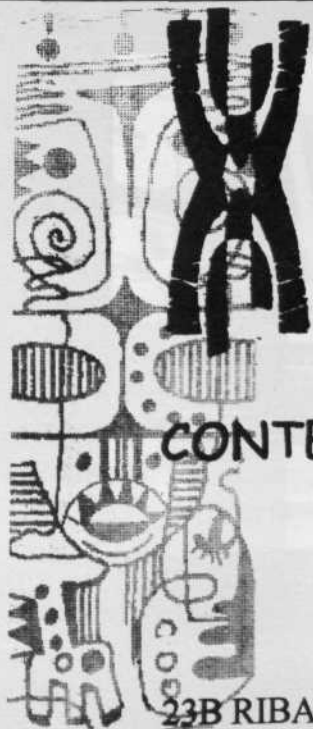
I pulled over by Nyam Food as the road left into the S11 division. The front had been granted a fresh lick of green paint. You hadn't really noticed the flaky dryness of the front before but, as soon as you saw the paint you thought, yeah, it could really do with that.

My pulse quickened as I approached the bridges, the gateways to everything else. A couple took you east, into the old City, but most took you to the end - or its beginning, you understand, from my direction - of the West.

Aaah, the bridges! Their sight at night! A myriad little lamps (lights?) beckoning the cars on their myriad little missions. You could make fat curves and swerves as the lanes widened on the approach, pick up speed once you hit your chosen one proper, and smile once again at the pleasure to be had behind a wheel. Even make a night of it as the native boy racers had taken to doing on the W11 bridge, whirling in their customised Escorts and fat bumpered Fiestas, with indulgent police and emergency series in attendance. But all the while, your own efforts were dwarfed by the greater majesties around you. The murky expanse of water to right and left. So easy, so near to fall

and barely a murmur down there. And the undaunted slabs of cross-stone, with their cross-arches, their craft, their repetition, erected to govern this expanse, and assert the triumph of men.

So when I am asked, as I frequently am by some depressed new arrival, to talk of some beauty in the city, I return to the bridges. One such man, who had rashly joined us from his State across the Channel, told me that his capital city was full of such stony grandeur. He said that the places of work and rest were blocks of polished white stone. He said that the suburbs, the places where our kind lived, was a different story. But the city proper flaunted untold proud statues and monuments, while triumphal arches lined the grand boulevards everywhere you looked. These great projects had begun, he explained, by bulldozing through the rebellious slum areas of the town, build in its place the city of stone and its vaulting ambition. I had to insist on our bridges. One of the delights I recommended to him was that, beyond their night towers, you could glimpse a thousand lights again, but this time of the myriad territories and villages which had sprung up around the original centres of the City and the West's End, to make up this town. For although my city had settled into a number of loose concentric rings - natives (!?) in the suburbs, newer arrivals of the inner city, and anyone who had got, or was born with their beachhead in the wide spaces of the west - this had not been planned in any systematic fashion. Our city, like its late, great empire, had been built in fits of absent-mindedness. What monuments we had were scattered, our grand developments half-cut. **GR**



NIMBUS GALLERIES

CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN ART

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