

MAYOR OF LONDON

Getting found in London

By Dominika Fleszar

BACKGROUND

It is very easy to get lost in London – and even easier to get found in it, and sometimes in a whole new world indeed. Intertwining my own story of finding myself with the thoughts of Londoners on this matter, this piece tells a story of the countless possibilities that London offers for those who find relief in anonymity and explores how our choices shape our identities.

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Getting found in London

I vividly remember my very first London impression. It was in 2015 when I was attending the Open Day of a university I then wanted to study at. This impression was: London is strange. I was honestly astounded. In my eyes, Londoners formed sort of a spider web, tightly and intricately connected to one another in some bizarre labyrinth of relations. Multicultural, and yet so tight-knit that nigh impossible to break into. I remember that I fell asleep on a bus – not just a bus, but a famous red double-decker, which to a 19 year old me was a magical carriage only to be seen in movies – and woke up some 30 stops after the one I was supposed to get off – and London there was so different to where I got on. I remember myself pondering how this was even possible.

There is no better place in Europe to get lost than London. There is also, paradoxically, no better place to get found again – and oftentimes as an utterly different human being. Artists and fortune seekers for centuries have been coming to London in quest for career, fortune and education. We are keen to pay attention to huge things – massive successes and zero-to-hero stories. With rates of immigration peaking, English being spoken by 1.5 billion people and social media shaping our notion about the world, there are nowadays more stories of getting found in London than ever.



(Photo Credit, Veronica Ortero)

London, a melting pot of cultures, welcomes everyone. People from dozens upon dozens of cultures are connected in pursuit of utopian multiculturalism. Chinese takeaways, Indian restaurants, Scandinavian furniture, German beer – it all is hoarded by locals from all over the world, who oftentimes find comfort in contacts with people from their ethnic groups, be that country, tribe, clan or family.

I find comfort in the amount of people there are – in the anonymity said of participants in The Conversation Booth, London's pop-up sound installation.¹ With population approaching 9 million people, London is 3rd biggest city in Europe and the biggest in European Union. 1st

¹ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

and 2nd – Istanbul and Moscow respectively – are generally much less accessible due to numerous (mainly language and political) reasons. I too find comfort in anonymity in a sense that community and identity are much more complex of an issue than plainly surrounding oneself with countrymen.

I could not, as much as I tried, find my tribe among other Poles. I set up my mind to look for people similar to myself, not by innate characteristics, but rather by choice. And, well, I may say, I did find my own tribe – I am a Quaker. I did not grow up Quaker, of course. Baptised and raised Catholic, I became more and more disenchanted with the Church as years passed by. I remember myself looking for **the** religion (and, as I look back at it now, **the** community) since I was a teenager. *Something needs to trigger them (communities). Something natural, something bad, good. You just feel it, you just know there's so much to do* another Londoner says.²

I did what every good millennial would do – I went on the internet. And I found Quakers. *I think teenagers concept of community is completely different. Some people would probably spend more time playing X-box, they probably don't know their next door neighbor.*³ Although I for one do know my neighbours pretty well, I think this sentiment is generally true – and much more on the sunny side of the street that people sometimes give it credit for. Young people nowadays are in position to choose their social groups, as opposed to the ones they were thrown into. It is not that I somehow disregard being Polish – I just do not deem it particularly important in my life. Of course I am Polish and I cannot really do anything about it, however I do not find it an inherent part of my identity. I do not identify as Polish – I just am. Identity is strongly connected to the choices we make, in that “identifying” yourself means validating yourself. And being Polish is just not validating enough. *I haven't really got one (idea of community). A lot of people do similar things but they're all different* says David.⁴



*Community to me is that essence of help giving – says another Londoner. An 8 year-old girl adds: Community is when you work together for example if two people are fighting they make up and also they work together.*⁵ Not that any Polish immigrant has never helped me, but none ever offered me as much support as did my Quaker community. By Quaker community I do not mean one particular Meeting House – a woman named Ruth from my first online meeting group was the

(Photo Credit, Veronica Ortero)

² London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

³ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

⁴ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

⁵ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

only one to be an actual ally on the war that is looking for accommodation in London. I do not think it is because Quakers form some perfect mystical organization – oh, very far from it – but the notion of common choice is, I daresay, fairly prevalent. Many a Quaker are converts. Almost all non-British Quakers in Europe are converts. The awareness of connection based on informed choice definitely helps.

Ethnic group is for certain people, including myself, too broad to actually share experiences and stories. *So what excites me? (about local area) It's just diversity. We have so many people from different backgrounds and ethnicity as well and they're all sharing their experiences, their stories* claims another Londoner.⁶ It is a sentiment shared by many – London is so diverse that closing oneself in a small wardrobe of shared ethnicity seems like a loss. In fact, London is so diverse, that people are free to pick and choose from the endless stream of human variety, be it religion, language or tradition-oriented. It is not easy to be “someone” in London, but it is very easy to be someone else.

For me personally, London was an important part in a process of finding myself. I finally feel that I am in the right place – not only because I found my “tribe”, but also for the truly astonishing diversity of human thought that exists in the city. The tightly-knit spider web of people that I observed on my very first day here may be difficult to break into, but to be surrounded and caught by it. And if you find comfort in anonymity, then London welcomes you. I may not be the greatest artist or famous actor, and I am 99.99% I will not marry a prince – but London gave me something else: the possibility to choose.

Certain Londoners worry that regeneration will significantly harm the local community. London is very much a being, and as all being is condemned to go through and through the cycle of rebirth. One interviewee backs this up with example of Lower Place near Harlesden Station – very poor, slum area, that was renovated in 1950s and 1960s, only to be poorly cared for and thus found unwanted.⁷

The cycle of seeking identity is similar. *London is a place where you can could and be whoever you are and whoever you want to be.*⁸ Being an immigrant is not easy. It is extremely expensive and emotionally draining. The process of seeking identity without restrictions is far from a perfect dream. Many a person has lost their health, mind and life on this pursuit. For others, though, it was worth it. Not because they made it to the movies or married a prince – because the overwhelming anonymity gave them possibility to choose from dozens options out there.

I cannot say that I do not like being Polish or I somehow feel bad about it. On the contrary, I love my Polish family and friends, Polish Christmas, food and Gdansk is probably my favourite place on planet Earth. It is just that, *Community is what I choose to seek out when*

⁶ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

⁷ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

⁸ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

*I want to know more about the world.*⁹ And community, as defined by this, is a huge part of my identity.

⁹ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

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