Making space: Investigating the diversity conundrum for British music festivals

Jo Haynes & Magda Mogilnicka

To cite this article: Jo Haynes & Magda Mogilnicka (2022): Making space: Investigating the diversity conundrum for British music festivals, Social & Cultural Geography, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2022.2152088

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2152088

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 01 Dec 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Making space: Investigating the diversity conundrum for British music festivals

Jo Haynes and Magda Mogilnicka
School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT
Culture always speaks to the history and meaning of place. Music festivals in particular carry considerable significance as they are produced through spatial and temporal processes that extend their symbolic and material meaning beyond their local settings. The onset of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in Bristol intensified debates about festival diversity. Drawing on interviews with Bristol-based festival producers, this article examines popular music festivals and the places, communities and identities they represent. Rather than repeating the common criticism of festivals for being too white, we contribute to the debates by unravelling complex processes embedded within festival production. Using Lefebvre’s concept of conceived space, we argue that (racial) diversity is a spatial conundrum for music festivals. We demonstrate this through the way festival space is conceived: culturally – as it is framed within established music festival discourses; economically – through entrepreneurial networks of independent producers within local music cultures; socially – their ideals (including diversity), tastes and lifestyles inadvertently organise and represent particular symbolic and material formations of (racialised) identities and communities.

RESUMEN
La cultura siempre habla de la historia y el significado del lugar. Los festivales de música en particular tienen una importancia considerable, ya que se producen a través de procesos espaciales y temporales que extienden su significado simbólico y material más allá de sus entornos locales. El inicio del COVID-19 y las protestas de Black Lives Matter (BLM) en Bristol intensificaron los debates sobre la diversidad de festivales. Con base en entrevistas con productores de festivales con sede en Bristol, este artículo examina los festivales de música popular y los lugares, las comunidades y las identidades que representan. En lugar de repetir las críticas comunes a los festivales por ser demasiado blancos, contribuimos a los debates desentrañando procesos complejos incrustados en la producción...
1. Introduction

In June 2020, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters in Bristol – as part of the global response to the murder of George Floyd by the police in the US – tore down the statue of Edward Colston, a former trans-Atlantic slave-trader, and rolled it into the canal (see, Olusoga, 2020). Bristol had been one of the UK’s leading port cities that acquired its wealth from this trade which is still visible in the city’s architecture, statues, street and building names (Dresser, 2009). It is within this tumultuous context, as Bristol-based researchers, that we
were examining how music festivals produce a social space where diverse histories, identities and the public are seen and heard. Moreover, at the same time, COVID-19 was exposing and intensifying ongoing issues around inequality and diversity within live events, prompting demands to find effective means to improve the cultural sector (Taylor et al., 2023). Together, these global events brought racial diversity into sharper focus at the local level of festival production in Bristol. This paper examines how festival space is conceived within a context overshadowed by BLM and the heightened visibility of the diversity deficit across the cultural sector, alongside social and commercial pressures relating to their COVID-19 recovery.

Bristol is often portrayed as ‘one of the most significant “music cities” in Britain’ (Hyder, 2014, p. 85). It is located within England’s south-west region where many festivals take place, including Glastonbury. While Bristol’s music culture developed a reputation for a dynamic, ethnically diverse and culturally progressive scene from the 1990s (Haynes, 2019), according to Hyder (2014), it is a space for both culturally syncretic influences and parallel cultures that accommodate specific ethnoracial communities. The diverse music culture that continues to develop through both processes of syncretism and separation takes place in a city which, as mentioned above, has historically complex social and political relations around race due to the historical legacy of its entanglement in the slave-trade. Moreover, while Bristol has growing Black, Asian and Mixed Ethnic populations – 22% in 2011 compared to 12% in 2001 (Bristol City Council, 2022a) – it also has increasing socioeconomic disparities and unequal levels of both ethnic and economic diversity within its neighbourhoods (Goff & Laurence, 2017). Indeed, McKay (2018) emphasises that within slavery heritage sites such as Bristol, festivals offer an opportunity to reflexively address such issues as they can be significant spaces of contestation. However, there are a number of competing cultural discourses that configure the popular music festival.

Recent studies demonstrate that the dominant idea of music festivals in the public imagination is still informed by myths surrounding festivals of the late 1960s such as Woodstock and thus as countercultural spaces of hedonism, freedom, escape and resistance (Anderton, 2019; Griffin et al., 2018; Morey et al., 2014). Popular music festival producers continue to trade on these long established notions to promote and brand their seasonal events (Hagan, 2021). Even as their number has increased and they have become important revenue streams for the music industry as an aspect of the wider festivalisation of culture (Anderton, 2019; Bennett & Woodward, 2014), music festivals continue to be heralded as remedies for social exclusion and political malaise (McKay, 2015). Moreover, the broader notion of ‘festival’ is narrated as having the potential to champion diversity, equality, inclusion and human rights (Pernecky & Lück, 2013). However, several critical issues are raised about its framing and the extent to which festival producers are genuinely aiming to ‘make their festivals spaces of inclusivity’ (Laing & Mair, 2015, p. 252). Some question discourses of freedom and alterity and argue that such meanings are a reflection of the values and lifestyles of a predominantly white middle-class audience (Griffin et al., 2018; Pielichaty, 2015). Duffy et al. (2019) claim that some festivals appear to reproduce and mask power relationships in the way they are planned, staged and frame their ‘community’. Music plays a crucial role in this regard as specific music genres and associated lifestyles can ‘shape understandings of place and communal identity formation within that spatial context’ (Duffy, 2005, p. 678). Such conceptions of community can also reflect dominant or contested
histories of race, migration and displacement (Richardson, 2013). The music and lifestyle choices that the festival space represents act as (racialised) spatial logics that work to symbolically and materially exclude/include and to create forms of localised and national belonging. As the calls for greater diversity within cultural events have become more insistent since the BLM resurgence and COVID-19 (Eikhof, 2020), music festivals are at the centre of competing layers of localised and abstracted meaning, ritual and taste that have unfolded over time.

This article, drawing on a sample of Bristol-based music festival producers between autumn 2019 and spring 2021, examines how festival space is conceived in light of competing discourses about popular music festivals and the places, communities and identities they represent. To do so, we draw on Lefebvre’s (1991) theories of (social) space as the outcome of social relations. Spatial processes are key to understanding the changing formation of race (Richardson, 2013). The use of Lefebvre’s spatial ideas as a framework for analysis enables us to consider festival space as more than the culturally produced and consumed ‘live’ event and instead, view it as a set of unfolding and interpenetrating layers of complex cultural, economic and social processes. Based on the analysis of qualitative interviews with producers, this article argues that (racial) diversity is a spatial conundrum for music festivals. We demonstrate this conundrum through the way festival space is conceived: culturally – as it is framed within well-established music and festival discourses; economically – through entrepreneurial networks of independent producers within local music cultures; socially – their ideals (including diversity), tastes and lifestyles inadvertently organise and represent particular symbolic and material formations of (racialised) identities and communities.

Following this introduction, we contextualise the festival space through Lefebvre’s (1991) theory with emphasis on how it is conceived. Then, we briefly discuss the ubiquity and ambiguity of diversity discourse which frames festival production. The third section provides an account of the research design, which is followed by the analysis of interview data which explores the intersecting dimensions in how festival space is conceived. Our concluding arguments reiterate how racial diversity is particularly challenging within music festival production and how our analysis illuminates the spatial and temporal dimensions that produce this present conundrum.

2. Conceiving music festival space

Lefebvre’s (1991) ideas about the production of space are used to understand the production of (postcolonial or diasporic) locality within a French Antillean cultural festival in Paris (Donnelly, 2017) and how racialised representations shape perceptions of ‘safe public spaces’ within US cities (McCann, 1999, p. 164). Lefebvre’s work has also been put to effective use to understand music production and consumption. Prey (2015) frames digital streaming as social spaces formed around ‘the practice of sharing music’ (p. 2) and, more recently, Taylor et al. (2020) focus on the disruption to the dominant spaces and materialities of music caused by COVID-19 which they frame as a crisis of spatial materiality. We use Lefebvre’s ideas to analytically frame popular music festivals as conceptual conundrums of (racialised) spatiality that embody a cluster of ambivalent meanings...
derived from cultural, economic, and social practices over time. In this section, we focus on the cultural and economic dimensions.

Elaborating on Lefebvre’s (1991) definition of the social space as embodying ‘social relationships’ (p. 27) rather than being a fixed object that pre-exists social interaction, Prior (2011) emphasises the ‘fluid and processual nature of space’ and the reciprocal dynamics of these relationships (p. 198). In this sense, space ‘is not a neutral backdrop, container, or stage set for action but is part and parcel of the unfolding of social relations, part of their production or construction’ (Prior, 2011, p. 199). However, Lefebvre (1991) argues that it is difficult to move from a space, that is ‘the object (product or work) to the activity that produced and/or created it’ because the remains of production ‘cover their tracks’ making it difficult to fully understand its characteristics (p. 113). To understand the formation and meaning of the produced space, the interpenetrating temporal and spatial layers have to be illuminated. Lefebvre’s spatial framework provides a critical platform for explaining festival space as the product of an intersection of established public narratives, cultural and economic opportunity and commercial music industry forces, while anchored to place-based histories and materialities, and as we stress here, amidst the social pressure to reorient themselves to wider ethnic constituencies. First, we need to outline what Lefebvre (1991) means by conceived space and the role of professionals in order to understand the significant role that festival producers play.

While social space consists of three co-constituting and entangled processes referred to as conceived/representations of space, perceived/spatial practice and lived space/representational space/spaces of representation (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 38–40), our analytical argument prioritises festivals as conceived space. Conceived space is identified as the ‘space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic sub-dividers and social engineers … the dominant space of any society (or mode of production)’ (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 38–39) and it includes whatever ‘signs, jargon, codifications and objectified representations used and produced by these agents and actors’ (Merrifield, 2000, pp. 173–174). Those who conceive space therefore ‘reflect how power creates dominant discourses through the ways in which space is surveyed, surveilled, controlled, delimited, delineated and organised to meet particular ends’ (Zieleniec, 2018, p. 6). Lefebvre contends that if we want to understand space, it is of primary importance to examine the role of professionals, as conceived space takes precedence over perceived and lived space (Merrifield, 2000) as it constitutes the conditions for the other two spatial dimensions and how space is perceived (spatial practice) and inhabited (lived space). Although the three spatial dimensions – conceived, perceived and lived space – constitute aspects of the same process, for heuristic purposes our argument that (racial) diversity is a spatial conundrum for music festivals is based on the analytical importance of conceived space and the significance of festival producers’ representations.

Culturally, as a conceived space, the festival has a longstanding ritualistic connection to everyday life. Traditionally, it was considered as coextensive with the rhythms and rituals of work and leisure, and emblematic of the fluctuations of modern life and thus markers and expressions of possible forces – identities and freedoms – that lie beyond the rationalising and routine practices of the everyday (Getz et al., 2010; Lefebvre, 1991). Falassi (1987) argues that there is no other ‘more significant way to feel in tune with [the] world than to partake in the special reality of the Festival and celebrate life in its “time out of time”’ (p. 7). In this sense, festival space is conceptualised as a universal category of
temporal escape from the everyday for all members of a society. This ‘time out of time’
element is further extended through the idea of festival as ‘freedom’ or ‘escape’ asso-
ciated with countercultural festivals from the 1960s (Anderton, 2019; Griffin et al., 2018;
Morey et al., 2014).

Economically, festival space is also a platform for representing genres and repertoires,
and continues to arise from the development and proliferation of new cultural and
economic opportunities. Hence, festival space also constitutes a form of cultural en-
trepreneurship within local economies and the wider music industry. McKay (2015) empha-
sises how in addition to being shared ritual events for many young people, festivals are
also a ‘pivotal economic driver in the popular music industry, are a constituent of urban
repertoires of regeneration, [and] are a key feature in the seasonal cultural economy’
(pp. 2–3). Furthermore, Roche (2011) argues that festivals not only satisfy the contempo-
rary requirements for cultural performance that embeds itself within ‘collective under-
standings and practices of space, time and agency’ (p. 127), but also represent and restore
‘the social agency’ of both producers and participants (p. 128). Festival space therefore
constitutes a specific mode of cultural production by bringing together cultural producers
from local music economies, established thematic festival narratives, and spatial-material
settings to collectively represent histories, communities and identities.

Lefebvre’s category of ‘professional’ is extended here to frame festival producers as
cultural professionals. Although many festivals emerge through informal and independ-
ent clusters of entrepreneurs, artists and promoters operating (initially) on shoestring
budgets within local music economies, those that are able to mobilise cultural capital and
networks already occupy positions of relative power within the music and festival field
(see, Brooke et al., 2020). In doing so, these cultural and economic forces that represent
and ‘festivalise’ music produce a form of ‘social closure’. Jordan (2021) argues that ‘social
closure’ is evident across the UK cultural sector and upheld by professionals managing
cultural events and institutions. She defines social closure as a question of ‘status’ and as ‘a
concerted, although not necessarily conscious, process of exclusion by communal groups
in order to maintain power’ (p. 4). By extension, forms of ‘social closure’ also operate as
a form of ‘market closure’ as taste becomes the basis of a ‘largely unconscious structural
norming process’ over time that can produce biases including racism and sexism (Jordan,
2021, p. 6). We argue that the informal networks of independent festival producers
operating within local music economies and coalescing around shared music tastes,
also inadvertently produce a form of social and market closure. Their representations of
festival space provide the structures and conditions for participation and the meaning
and experience of the space itself. In turn, these mechanisms can obfuscate strategies to
be a racially inclusive space and to appeal to wider audiences.

3. Festival space in the age of diversity

Contemporary music festivals are conceived within a context where diversity discourse
has become ubiquitous. However, there is little consensus on what diversity means in
light of changing sociocultural identifications, what the policy goals and strategies are or
should be and who or what should benefit from a diversity agenda (Penrose, 2013;
Vertovec, 2012). But while there is no reliable consensus and a clear agenda around
diversity, given that different political ideologies (separatism, assimilation and
integration) underpin the variety of meanings it has (Penrose, 2013). Vertovec (2012) suggests that it has become ‘an omnipresent emblem of openness and fairness’ (p. 302) and has been ‘institutionalized, internationalized, and internalized’ (p. 309). One of the major problems with its discursive ubiquity is that while the recognition of a range of diversities such as age, ethnicity, gender, disability and sexuality is important, it can mean a loss of political efficacy around tackling the specific mechanisms of racism for instance. Nevertheless, it has subsequently changed the collective social imaginary and as Vertovec (2012) argues, it has become part of a ‘new’ moral order and defines ‘a sense of how we ought to live together’ (p. 305). Even if diversity manifests on a mundane level as a recognition that ‘difference matters’ and ‘everyone is different’, according to Vertovec (2012), this demonstrates a transformed social consciousness and signifies the ‘age of diversity’ (p. 309). This means that diversity is more commonly accepted as the normative benchmark for practices, events and institutions in society. Indeed, UK Music (n.d.) – the body representing the UK’s music industry – state on their website that ‘[d]iversity is not an option for music. It is a necessity’. Racial diversity in particular appears to be one of the most incorrigible issues for popular music festivals, along with gender.

Both conceptually and ideologically, festival space appears to be compatible with diversity. Popular music festivals, as outlined in the previous section, represent a social space within which the festival-goer is afforded agency and opportunity for creative, critical and transgressive experiences. Yet, despite this apparent openness, those more likely to attend music festivals are typically from ‘a relatively affluent, white, middle-class demographic that is highly attractive to marketers’ and for whom ‘affordable escapism’ is part of an ‘experience economy’ (Morey et al., 2014, pp. 254, p. 252). Indeed, a recent media headline about Glastonbury festival 2022 asks: Why are big festivals like Glastonbury so white? (Phillips, 2022). While this has become a familiar observation, the conceptual mechanisms that produce music festival space need to be better understood.

Music festivals are spatially configured through a complex set of intersecting social processes including its repertoires of music and how they represent local racialised histories of migration and displacement that manifest within the places where festivals are set. Focusing on music’s role in mechanisms of festival inclusion/exclusion, Duffy (2005) claims that ‘music marks the individual as belonging or not belonging to categories of spatially defined identities – such as nation, ethnic group, “here” or “there” [and] engage with ideas about place and who they are or could be in that place’ (p. 681). A significant empirical example is detailed by Richardson (2013), who examines how racialised music categorisations are evident within St Paul’s Carnival in Bristol – a long running African Caribbean street carnival. Richardson explores how racial ambivalence manifests within contrasting musical visions of the carnival. On the one hand, it captures the racially inclusive and extended meanings of Britishness by championing more localised preferences and interpretations of Black British hybridised Caribbean music such as drum n’ bass and sound system culture. And on the other, it competes with the ‘racial purity in the national imaginary’ represented through musical and stereotypical depictions of a non-specific, Latin-Other themed tropical carnival (Richardson, 2013, p. 715). Temporality is also important to these racialising spatial processes. In the study of the Edinburgh Mela festival in Scotland, Penrose (2013) notes how different manifestations of multiculturalism emerge over time that are dependent on both racialised minorities and majorities’ shifting requirements for separation and integration. Thus, through spatial and
4. Researching music festivals

Our research location and thus festivals within Bristol and the south-west region was prioritised. We focused on smaller, independent commercial festivals. We spoke to producers from other festivals while negotiating the research sample (see Table 1); however, the core sample drawn on here includes Boomtown Fair (BTF), Bristol International Jazz and Blues festival (BJB) and Love Saves the Day (LSTD). From this point, we refer to them as BTF, BJB and LSTD.

All three core festivals are produced by Bristol-based organisations. BTF is a greenfield camping festival held in Winchester. Occurring over 5 days in August, the 66k capacity festival is unique due to its immersive theatrical element and is musically eclectic. BJB started in 2012 and is the major jazz and blues event in the city, with performances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3C</td>
<td>17/12/19</td>
<td>F2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LSTD</td>
<td>07/01/20</td>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LSTD</td>
<td>09/01/20</td>
<td>F2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>Ms</td>
<td>GG</td>
<td>14/01/20</td>
<td>F2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>FF</td>
<td>28/01/20</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>GG</td>
<td>29/01/20</td>
<td>F2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2 T</td>
<td>11/02/20</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LSTD</td>
<td>21/02/20</td>
<td>F2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>BJB</td>
<td>26/02/20</td>
<td>F2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>BTN</td>
<td>26/02/20</td>
<td>F2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>BTN</td>
<td>12/03/20</td>
<td>F2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>BTN</td>
<td>27/03/20</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>BJB</td>
<td>15/04/20</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>BJB</td>
<td>29/04/20</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WI001</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LSTD</td>
<td>24/05/20</td>
<td>F2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>BTN</td>
<td>24/05/20</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>BJB</td>
<td>23/03/21</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LSTD</td>
<td>02/04/21</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>BTN</td>
<td>24/06/21</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3C</td>
<td>07/04/20</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>GG</td>
<td>07/04/20</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>FF</td>
<td>04/04/20</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2 T</td>
<td>08/06/20</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: Shaded rows denote ‘supplementary’ interviews/emails not drawn on here.
ranging from internationally recognised artists to local bands. The main venue of the festival has been the Bristol Beacon (formerly Colston Hall). LSTD originated in 2011 and is a 2-day urban festival normally held in May within Eastville Park, but it moved location to the Ashton Court Estate in 2022. It showcases a variety of dance music and includes local and emerging talent, as well as national headlining acts. The wider festival sample includes four others: Green Gathering (GG) that emerged from the free-festival movement; 2000 Trees (2 T), a small rock festival with an environment ethos; Frome Festival (FF), a market town event involving music, theatre and poetry; and finally, Three Choirs (3C), a classical music festival.

We recruited a sample of 14 producers consisting of directors/co-founders, music programmers, creative directors, and marketing and communication directors (see, Table 1). COVID-19 both extended and complicated the timeline of our data collection. A total of 19 interviews (face to face and online) were conducted with festival producers. We conducted 12 out of the 14 initial interviews between November 2019 and March 2020 before the first national lockdown and the remaining 2 in April 2020. Following this (in addition to email catchups with four supplementary festival producers), we carried out five further interviews with the same core festival producers (including a walking interview through an empty festival site). In the COVID-19 data collection phase between March 2020 until spring 2021, the dynamics of the interview were influenced not only by viscerally evocative scenes from the toppling of the Colston statue and BLM protests elsewhere, but it was also shaped by the pandemic, which heightened sensitivities around racial diversity and the future of music festivals, and politicised the research context.

The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed with the support of NVivo. An initial coding framework was developed to examine how producers conceptualise the festival, audience, music and creative design, and explanations of its emergence from the local music economy and position within the wider music industry. The next analytical phase focused more closely on identifying any intersecting tensions raised through the mechanisms of festival production in relation to diversity. This included their representation of the festival, its inception and temporal development, and the relationship to Bristol’s music, history and publics. In this regard, both researchers and producers’ positionality and focus had shifted given widespread impatience with ongoing intransigence about the lack of diversity within the cultural sector.

While the festivals are identified, producers’ names and roles are anonymised to ensure confidentiality. The data presented is identified by the festival’s name followed by the interview number, e.g., LSTD01 and BTF03. The next section draws on this original interview data and demonstrates how festival space is conceived through intersecting social, cultural and economic processes that illuminate the spatial and temporal layering of embedded tensions around addressing racial diversity.

4. Conceiving festival space

Although the data revealed how significant diversity discourse is in the way festival space is conceived, it also showed intractable dilemmas underpinning the festival’s development over time that perpetuate exclusionary mechanisms, especially around race. The discussion examines how diversity is not only realised through creative ideas to refresh
approaches to festival labour, audiences, venue, location and design of festival spaces but is simultaneously tempered by music reputation and the commercial ‘bottom-line’.

**Diversity matters**

When producers were asked to describe how the festival was conceived in terms of its vision, cultural diversity featured in their responses, where views like this were common: ‘we want it to be an inclusive space where everybody is welcome’ (LSTD03). Similarly, another LSTD producer said:

I think it’s nice when there’s people from all different backgrounds […] it’s what brought me to Bristol, […] I make it an absolutely concerted effort to be as inclusive as possible. (LSTD02)

This reflects how a positive recognition of difference provides a moral impetus to be inclusive, signifying the transformation of social consciousness – that ‘diversity is good’ (Vertovec, 2012, p. 307). It is also important to acknowledge how Bristol as a place has shaped the response as it implies a recognition of its dominant representation as a role model for diversity (Haynes, 2019). The festival is conceived by the producers as an open and non-discriminatory space. Both quotes demonstrate that the commitment to cultural diversity goes beyond an organisational obligation and is embedded in their personal values and beliefs.

The importance of diversity is also visible through perceptions of the relationship between the music and audience. One Boomtown producer explains that the musicians should represent the audience:

I mean essentially you want the audience to … be able to see themselves […] a kind of interpretation of themselves on stage. So I think you have to be diverse. […] unless you want to be overly exclusive, which we don’t. You know, certainly not exclusive in … respect to … to … to race or gender. (BTF12)

This comment is indicative of the tendency for the dominant conceptualisation of diversity to continue to coalesce around racialised and gendered differences. Historically, diversity discourse has been very closely tied to the unfolding debates and politics of race and gender (Vertovec, 2012). Yet, compared to other differences defined through sexuality and disability, race followed by gender were the main sources of tension for festival producers. For some producers, certain music genres are believed to provide a better basis for ethnic diversity. This is the case for BJB, where the implication is that jazz and blues are embedded within histories of people with black origins:

I mean, a big component of the origins of jazz is from the early blues, so you are looking to the Americas for that, and particularly the sort of New Orleans kind of districts. A lot of it came out of the sort of thirties, forties music of black origin. So it is a great platform for that because of its roots in those scenes. (BJB09)

This is reiterated by another BJB producer where following this logic, ethnic diversity is assumed to be an integral part of the festival:

being jazz based and having, as I mentioned those sorts of routes in, ethnic minorities, and from where the music came from […] we are probably viewed as one of those outfits that are representing, if you like, a wide diversity (BJB13)
This suggests that the festival is considered a contemporary music platform for the recognition of what Gilroy (1993) refers to as the ‘black Atlantic’ and thus the ongoing influence of the transatlantic slave trade on social and musical relations today. However, as one of the problems they reported was an inability to attract younger local ‘nu-jazz’ (the new wave of jazz and electronic music prominent in Bristol) enthusiasts, their representation of jazz appears to be one that essentialises Black people in a similar way to the musical representation of the St. Paul’s carnival noted by Richardson (2013). We explore the further significance of the festival venue in the next section where we discuss how Bristol is narrated and engaged with in the way the festival is presented.

Festival space was also imagined to provide encounters with alterity through which self-transformation became possible as exemplified by a Boomtown producer:

… when you get it right as a festival, and people kind of have these almost life changing experiences, and kind of like inspirational … I think that’s what is really exciting about it isn’t it? It is like providing that space for people to find that, whatever that is. (BTF10)

In this sense, ‘getting it right’ is when festival space conforms to counter-cultural myths as a space of freedom and transformation (McKay, 2015). These ideas were accompanied by other moral commitments and a sense of social responsibility, as the same producer reiterated repeatedly that when it comes to diversity, drug awareness and the environment, ‘we don’t want to be seen as doing good, we want to actually be doing good’ (BTF10). It is important to acknowledge that their commitment to diversity within conceptions of festival space were accompanied by a range of ideas and strategies being used to enhance diversity including ways to involve different local communities (BJB, BTF and LSTD), enhancing physical accessibility to the main stages (LSTD), operating tiered-ticketing pricing systems (LSTD), running workshops with local schools (BJB, BTF), offering festival production placements for disadvantaged young people (LSTD), and supporting fundraising initiatives with local charities (LSTD). However, these inclusive mechanisms are compromised by structural and contextual paradoxes specifically around race.

**Narrating Bristol: dilemmas and disjunctures**

Despite their inclusive conceptions of festival space, the producers were puzzled as to why the festival audience did not reflect a wider constituency of people. One of the LSTD producers asked:

“how do we tackle this?”, why are people feeling like, not necessarily that they’re excluded because I don’t think that they’re excluded, I actually think access has potentially never been easier […] So, we’ve been scratching our heads on that a little bit […] “why is this crowd 95% white?” (LTSD08)

This is further confounded by the festival’s location (prior to COVID-19) which was in one of the more ethnically and class diverse neighbourhoods in Bristol, but physical proximity to the site did not significantly diversify attendance. Location and venue also figured in BJB’s calculations and the recognition that other parts of the city may not be associated with elite culture and audiences:

If certain groups of people won’t come to those venues we’ve got, then we need to work with those venues in those communities where people will go to, because … it’s all very worthy
putting on music from various countries, with world music themes and various things like that, but actually if it is not the places that people from some of the communities feel comfortable going to, or it is not part of their routine, you are not going to get people there. (BJB13)

Balfour (2014) suggests that the more localised festivals tap into existing ‘communal and participative dimensions’ of a place and use the ‘arts . . . as a vehicle for the community to talk to itself, to reflect, to celebrate and to reinforce the distinction of a place’ (p. 208). However, while our festivals recognise the lack of diversity and are attempting to be more inclusive through location and venue choice, there are structuring processes that underpin the development of the festival over time that stymie their ability to be more representative of the local community.

It is not just how festival space is conceived through specific neighbourhoods and venues that is important. As Lefebvre (1991) argues, space is also conceived through language, signs and other representations which also unintentionally form exclusionary mechanisms. For Boomtown producers, addressing the use of symbols has become an important part of their focus as they recognise the potential harm of what they frame as ‘inappropriate’ representations, which is critiqued through a discourse of authenticity:

it became quite evident that actually we are doing quite significant cultural appropriation here. [...] over the years we have really tried to tackle that. And I don’t even want to say “phase it out”, but just replace it with authenticity. So we had a Chinatown for example, but it had absolutely no Chinese input into it whatsoever and one day we got told that the sign was upside down. [...] So that was something that we’ve learnt and focussed on a lot over the years, to [...] have as much input from as many different diverse backgrounds, cultures, scenes, and as much as we possibly can within the ability and the budgets that we have. (BTF10)

Visions of authenticity were also mobilised through the representations of music genres and performers at the festival. This was something reflected upon by the same Boomtown producer, as a strategy to move away from cultural appropriation and to therefore ensure that artists come from diverse cultural backgrounds.

So one of the things we’ve always got actually kind of right is our reggae area. So that has always been very authentically reggae, and very authentically Jamaican, artists coming over with their back-catalogue of music. But then also a mixture of more modern day stuff which does include white reggae artists. But it is kind of a celebration of everything reggae, but not trying to pretend that it is (...) we banned Rasta hats with fake dreadlocks on them and things like that (BTF10).

Duffy (2005) highlights similar anxieties surrounding the differentially perceived ‘inauthenticity’ of music ‘appropriation’ within a multicultural festival space that is contingent upon the ethnic background of the performer. However, the comment above reifies the relationship between ethnic identities and music by portraying ‘real’ reggae as essentialist expressions of (Black) Jamaican artists and excludes hybrid forms or, as Duffy (2005) suggests ‘spatialized identity’ (p. 689), that challenge those fixed notions of ‘authenticity’ associated with racialised bodies (Haynes, 2019).
All of our producers reasoned that festival space can potentially become more diverse if they include local musical acts which in turn would attract a wider constituency of festival-goers and strengthen ties between the festival and its local communities.

we have … international headline acts, but we try and mix that up with emerging talent from Bristol. […] And you get to see these big acts in your home city … but then also you might know … one of your mates might be playing as well. (LSTD03).

Including local artists was also in recognition of Bristol’s musical reputation. In addition, the LSTD festival producers also emphasise the importance of providing a platform for diverse local talent (DJs, musicians and promoters) in how they conceive the festival space thus enabling ‘a celebration, bringing everybody together [from] the Bristol music scene’ (LSTD03). For LSTD, however, the local Bristol festival-goer and the city as a whole are also portrayed as very critical and discerning in their taste, reflecting the way in which Bristol’s music scene tends to be narrated as cutting edge and ethnically diverse (Haynes, 2019).

And with … Bristol’s status as one of the most significant music hubs in the country comes a responsibility to produce an event that meets the city industry’s standards. I just don’t think you can do a crap event in Bristol. Because they’ll call you out on it [laughs]. (LSTD08)

Although the BTF festival is held on an estate in Winchester and concerted efforts are made to embed themselves within local communities, for the producers, Bristol’s creative innovation is still present in how BTF is conceptualised: ‘Bristol is such a creative hub, and Winchester isn’t in the same league as Bristol in that kind of way’ (BTF10).

BJB festival is also navigating Bristol’s musical history in the way it is conceived, specifically the importance of jazz and blues to the city’s main music venue, which:

dates back to the 1950s when Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald … major jazz artists back in the fifties were coming to Bristol, for sell-out audiences in Colston Hall [i.e. Bristol Beacon] (BJB14).

Another BJB producer knowingly responds to criticisms of the venue by describing it as ‘that kind of problematically named venue’ but because it is jazz and thus rooted in African American traditions of the twentieth century, it alleviates some of these tensions, ‘so we are some of the good guys’ (BJB13). McKay (2018) argues that because of its longer discursive and sonic associations with ideas of freedom, jazz could be a ‘powerful sonic marker’ to act as a ‘reflexive cultural critique’ of histories of oppression that it formed in opposition to (p. 7). Indeed, some of the commissioned performances and outreach school and community work the festival champions, as well as the inclusion of local and international musicians, suggests that the festival space is temporally and spatially conceived as a reminder of Bristol’s jazz legacy and future.

However, as the Bristol Beacon (Colston Hall) was the main festival venue, its connection to Edward Colston (the slave-trader) suggests the music may not be sufficient, as McKay (2018) argues, ‘where the links are actively silenced or ignored in the local event itself’ this runs the risk that jazz festivals are reproducing historical forms of power and privilege (p. 8). This constitutes what Richardson (2013) regards as erasure, one of the ongoing strands in debates about racial ambivalence, which traces ‘the way in which it is increasingly written out of social concerns through claims of a “post-racial” era’ (p. 711). The following quote demonstrates how these debates resonate through the festival:
I don’t have a lot of patience with people who want to sort of somehow wipe out history. Bristol was a major slave trade port [. . .]. So what are you going to do? Turn away. You can’t change that, and I just find that knocking down … not using names or having statues or whatever, I just find that somewhat … I don’t know, I think it is somewhat naive. (BBJ14)

There are competing perspectives and fraught debates about the way in which this history should be represented and addressed within Britain (Dresser, 2009). However, it does appear that momentum is gathering in the wake of the toppling of the Colston statue in 2020 given the recent Bristol City Council report (2022b) about the lack of diversity at the Bristol Harbour Festival, which ‘celebrates’ Bristol’s maritime history without acknowledging its links to the transatlantic slave trade.

We are not arguing that these matters are easily resolved through music festivals. As discussed earlier, BJB producers make a lot of effort to foster creative and diverse festivals. Our data demonstrates the power that is embedded within the way festival space is conceived through these interpenetrating temporalities and histories of local settings. The debates and struggle for recognition of racialised minorities in Bristol’s history are symbolically reproduced in discourses and practices that omit or silence these histories including the way in which festival spaces are conceived and subsequently produced. Thus, despite their attempts, festival space is inadvertently producing both inclusionary and exclusionary practices and, as we discuss next, structured through the hierarchies engrained in how the festivals evolve. We hope that our analysis prompts further reflection as they continue to address issues around racial diversity.

**From friendship to entrepreneurship**

A striking aspect of the interviews related to explanations of the festival’s development as they were initially conceived as both musical and entrepreneurial opportunities as well as to sustain the producers’ lifestyle experiences. This is important because their informal networks and shared tastes, as we argue above, act as a form of social and market closure, and therefore the festival is conceived in such a way that inadvertently structures and normalises certain experiences and subjectivities as preferable. The idea for BTF emerged through an involvement in the rave scene and grew out of the free-party culture prominent in Britain from the 1990s and which ‘just kind of really came into its own as a festival’ (BTF12). Another of BTF’s producers describes how the festival was

[. . .] born out of a sort of free party culture originally [. . .] we used to move around together and put on these parties [. . .] and those kinds of experiences bring you really close together and form a really strong group bond. [. . .] we wanted to create that environment and it gave people the freedom. And, you know, the hedonistic element too but it’s like the freedom to be yourself. And this sort of, the thing about that scene that I’ve found was that it was non-judgemental. I think that’s why I ended up in that scene (BTF11)

The representation of the festival and festival-goer is conceived within the discourses of freedom and hedonism produced through their attempts to recapture those experiences. These conceptions of festival space are often challenged. Igrek (2018) examines how material conditions limit the potential transgressions and freedoms for festival-goers, noting that through dominant idealised formations of festival subjectivity, life is
constructed as ‘fundamentally weightless, free of racial and gendered determinations’ which of course ‘is the fantasy of an isolated, self-sustaining, untouchable subject’ (p. 249). This highlights the power of the producers’ imaginations when it comes to conceiving festival space and how, as Luckman (2014) argues, festivals are maps of their imaginary worlds whereby the festival presents their ‘values and the prejudices, the perceptions and misconceptions, the insights and the blindspots, the ideology and the culture’ (p. 189). And this is the subsequent problem for the festival producers we interviewed – the challenge of going beyond their values and choices that unconsciously produce a festival reflecting their own cultural taste.

While all of the producers said that it takes more than music to make a music festival, the interview data reveals how the genesis of the festival evolved from friendship, festival attendance and music industry experience to entrepreneurship. One account of the LSTD festival emphasises how friendship and local industry experience were important in the festival’s development by suggesting, ‘it came about mostly because … there were a few different individuals within the … Bristol dance music scene that were doing different things at the same time but were all quite friendly’ (LSTD08). Our third festival, however, emerged through a professional partnership forged around music alone: ‘My partner is a jazz musician. I am not, but I am a producer of festivals, and together we put this thing together’ (BJB14). Such collective visions based on music, friendship and networks may have been identified as significant elements in how the festivals are conceived, but the festivals would not have happened without an entrepreneurial sensibility drawn from their experience within the local music industry.

The entrepreneurial drive around music is crucial in shaping the identity of each of the festivals. A BJB producer said for instance, that,

> it was founded by two people … who identified there was a gap in, really, the Bristol music calendar. There … was no real celebration of jazz and blues. There was lots of music going on but no way in which it was all sort of coming together and no way of actually bringing together a lot of the musicians’ (BJB13).

These ideas emphasise how the reconfiguration of existing music through the festival as an economic driver for commercial opportunity around a new cultural repertoire is part of the mechanism of festivalisation (see, Bennett & Woodward, 2014). Whereas for LSTD, it was about more than establishing a new cultural repertoire, it was also about the untapped potential of local talent and a reflection of ‘people who are passionate about what they’re doing’ (LSTD03). However, as much as the music was a galvanising force, it can also represent a symbolic marker of exclusion and thus demonstrates part of the (racialised and classed) conundrum in the way festival space is conceived. Another producer expressed concern about the mainstream appropriation of underground dance music that their event champions:

> … the certain dance music that we grew up with, which was quite niche, is now very mainstream and played on Radio 1 during the day time, and so we’re attracting more of them, which is making us grow, but they may not necessarily come with the same set of values that we’ve always thought inherently everyone that came to our events had those values. So, it’s a really interesting time to be looking at how we then maintain our identity because what you don’t want is to grow too big or grow too popular, and then actually that
atmosphere inside of your event changes, and you lose your identity because of that. (LSTD08)

This indicates how the festival-goer is conceived around the values and practices associated with certain types of music and an awareness of how the shifting dynamics of music consumption over time can potentially compromise the future integrity of the festival. Thus, the moral commitment to diversify the festival, sits in tension with some unwitting (racialised and classed) representations of the festival space which pivot around assumptions about particular music tastes, lifestyles and the development of the festival over time.

It is not just music that can produce symbolic boundaries which define the festival-goer. The friendship-to-entrepreneurship character of independent, commercial music festivals also means there is typically a tight network of festival workers and volunteers with limited opportunities for expanding beyond that pool which creates a form of social closure (Jordan, 2021):

you learn very quickly who’s good and who’s not [...] it’s a personal recommendation [...] that’s something that we discussed in our inclusivity workshop, like the pros and cons of a closed network. Obviously, we get to work with people we trust and [...] we know are good, but then that necessarily could put a block on other people coming into the industry. (LSTD08)

A BTF producer acknowledges an issue with hiring practices, ‘We did a lot of unconscious bias training [...] so that was really good [...] in terms of my department what we’re doing is always trying to actively [...] look for crews who might represent LGBTQ’ (BTF11). LSTD specifically identified how they need to racially diversify their workforce and had set up internships for young locals from disadvantaged backgrounds. These reflections are a testimony to the recognition of the exclusionary role that cultural and social capital plays within local, creative communities of music professionals. Furthermore, as Jordan (2021) argues, the limited mobility around festivals is often realised through social closure around white, middle-class cultural taste and without considerations of hierarchies in cultural participation. However, despite interview data reflecting the normative pressure to diversify in the wake of the BLM resurgence in Bristol and the necessity for developing strategies for change, attempts to shift away from established ideas and embedded practices are particularly challenging when it comes to tackling the racialised logic implicit in music festival space.

**Conclusion**

There are persistent observations that suggest that popular music festivals are for white, middle-class people and do not reflect the local places they are situated within. Such remarks do not further analytical understanding of the complicated mechanisms that produce them and the wider social structures that shape participation. Our paper contributes to geographical and sociological debates about these issues by unpacking the complex spatial and temporal processes that produce ‘present’ festival space because once produced it is hard to understand the activity and social relations behind it. In particular, we have revealed that racial diversity constitutes the most significant spatial conundrum for smaller, independent commercial music festivals in the UK.
Our empirical contribution is important because where Laing and Mair (2015) suggest little is known about the aims of festival producers – as cultural professionals – regarding inclusive festival strategies, we have prioritised their representations of festival space due to the powerful discourses they re/produce. Moreover, while Duffy (2005), Jordan (2021), Penrose (2013) and Richardson (2013) focus on non-profit arts, community or multicultural festivals, we have focused on smaller, independent commercial events that have shifted and sharpened their focus on festival diversity reflecting its ubiquity in public discourse, especially in the wake of the pandemic and BLM protests. Maintaining visibility and cultivating an audience within a burgeoning and competitive festival market is an important structuring factor for all commercial music festivals, whether produced independently or by a larger corporation. Our interview data demonstrates that music festivals constitute sites of individual and collective entrepreneurial opportunity that coalesce around producer’s tastes and lifestyles which are expressed through the conception and ethos of the festival, the music line-up and programme of activity, and the material-spatial settings.

Theoretically, we draw on Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of social space, namely the primacy of conceived space and the professional role played by festival producers, as a lens for framing spatial and temporal processes that produce intersecting competing logics of inclusion and exclusion. His ideas have been applied to a number of research contexts to, for example, interpret racialised geographies of urban space (McCann, 1999) and within and around music consumption and production (Prior, 2011; Taylor et al., 2020, 2023), but we have shown how instructive it is for analysing music festival space.

In doing so, we demonstrate how forms of power, ideology and knowledge were embedded within their representations of festival space and how these conceptions closely aligned with the relations of festival production and thus the structures that these relations enact. However, our data also demonstrates awareness of how festival space is conceived through a social imaginary that is sharpening more tightly around a moral commitment to diversity. We highlight evidence of their attempts to recalibrate both the cultural tropes and structural processes that were embedded in the genesis and unfolding of the festival over time. When considering how diversity inflects the publics, histories and identities that music festivals produce, they are therefore more compelling when examined as an evolving space with contradictory mechanisms. Furthermore, Duffy (2005), reminds us of the important role sound plays for developing insight about the social world and social relations, as she stresses, ‘it is in the doing of music that being and becoming occurs’ (p. 689).

In his recent reflections on contemporary British jazz festivals, McKay (2018) emphasises how the music and culture of a place is inevitably always speaking to or through its present and its past, suggesting that there is an ‘... impossibility of disengagement, culture [is] never silent or invisible about its historical setting but always sonic and present’ (p. 9). While not all of our festival sample was oriented to jazz, Bristol’s past and present resonated in different ways in our data. Thus, we saw how festivals were conceived temporally, through a dialogue with Bristol as an ethnically diverse place, its troubled, unresolved history and reputation for having a vibrant, culturally syncretic music scene, as well as in the evolving iterations of each annual festival, and spatially, in terms of negotiating the empirical venues and sites of each festival within the wider context of what festivals mean.
Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding support for the project ‘European Music Festivals, Public Spaces, and Cultural Diversity’ (2019–2022) from the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) Joint Research Programme ‘Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe’. We also wish to thank the Editor and the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments on an earlier draft. Most importantly, we thank our festival producers for their valuable contribution during a very difficult period.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by HERA Joint Research Programme 'Public Spaces' (PS) Collaborative Research Project (CRP) [JRP Public Spaces 2.074].

References

Bristol City Council. (2022b). The future of Bristol harbour festival for EDM.


