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**Multiculture and public parks: researching super-diversity  
and attachment in public green space**

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## **Multiculture and public parks: researching super-diversity and attachment in public green space**

### **Abstract**

Situating itself in encounter and public space debates and borrowing from non-representational theory approaches this paper uses data from the authors' two-year ESRC research project to consider how local urban parks can work as sites of routine encounter, mixity and place belonging. The paper explores how parks as green public spaces are not only important as sites of inclusive openness but that the materiality of parks is a key dynamic in affective encounter processes. Parks can work as animators of social interactions, participatory practices and place affinities across ethnic and cultural difference. The paper concludes that the concept of convivial encounter can be extended to incorporate the concept of elective practices - choosing to be in shared public space can generate connective sensibilities which are not necessarily contingent on exchange. In using parks as a lens to examine localities and diversity the paper critically reflects on research practices for understanding and describing heterogeneous formations of multiculturalism and argues that the project's research design and the fieldwork methods present an attempt to carefully and appropriately respond to research with complexly different places and populations.

**Key words** multiculturalism, encounter, diversity, public space, public parks, materiality, practices, research.

## **Multiculture and public parks: researching super-diversity and attachment in public green spaces**

The difference that place makes to understanding the nature of social relations has had something of an 'on-off' presence in research on ethnicity and migration (Neal et al 2013) but as migration processes and formations of multiculturalism have become more complex as well as more dispersed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a return to geography and a recognition of the importance of 'placing' studies that examine the impact of increasing cultural difference in everyday social relations (Byrne and de Tona 2013). It is in this context that we explore two interconnected themes: the relationship between situated public green spaces and super-diverse populations and the relationship between social research processes and those complex multicultural populations. Blending the data from, and experience of doing, the fieldwork for 'Living Multiculture'<sup>i</sup>, a multi-method qualitative research project, the paper initially sets out and describes the ways in which we bring together everyday multiculturalism and encounter literature with the work of urban geographers on public space. Thinking through the role and meaning of green public space in increasingly heterogeneous urban environments, the paper details the research design and reflects on fieldwork experiences and research interactions. In particular it considers the implications of recognising that qualitative research practices create 'contact zones' between groups of 'very differently positioned' participants and researchers (Torre et al 2008: 24; Askins and Pain 2011).

Shaped and informed by these reflections, the paper examines the relationships between park spaces and ethnically diverse (white majority, black and minority ethnic, migrant, once migrant and never migrant) local populations. Working with non-representational theory (NRT) as a 'background hum' (Lorimer 2008: 556) we focus on: first, social practices and the quotidian ways in which park spaces are used and, second, the extent to which the materialities of parks may become a part of people's vocabularies of affect and attachment, community and belonging to local places. We suggest that parks become affectionate and *elective spaces* in multicultural geographies - encounters across difference may happen within them but, more significantly, ethnically different populations using parks may have a 'proto' disposition to mixity and to sharing those spaces. The final section of the paper returns to the ways in which a consideration of parks can usefully contribute to debates around migration, diversity and public space, as well as suggesting that the doing of the project itself created encounters and convivial sharing, which meant that

there were sometimes convergences between the focus of our project and the research process itself.

### **Living multiculturalism and green public spaces**

The Living Multiculturalism research project on which this paper draws is organized around a bundle of interconnective puzzles that emerge from our interest in the changing geographies of cultural difference in England since 2000 (see Neal 2009; Neal et al. 2013). These changes are a result of complex, diverse global migrations as well as a reflection of the social shifts that have taken place within established migrant and minority ethnic and majority communities (Office for National Statistics 2012). In short, ethnicity in England is becoming more spatially and socially diverse. In some urban areas the extent of cultural difference has meant that Vertovec's (2007: 1025) notion of 'super diversity' (a 'diversification of diversity') has become a widely used short-hand for the more complex pluralities and intersectionalities of contemporary multiculturalism.

In the UK context, the segregation-distrust-conflict model has tended to dominate and shape public and policy debates about cultural difference (see Neal et al. 2013). But we follow those commentators who have instead highlighted a counter-narrative of convivial encounter across difference (e.g. Back 1996; Amin 2002; Gilroy 2004; Wise 2009; Gidley 2013). This work does not diminish antagonisms but argues for a recognition of the engagements and dialogue that are also part of the lived experience of multiculturalism. In this context there has been an emphasis on the unpanicked, 'commonplace' nature of contemporary multiculturalism (e.g. Noble 2009; Wessendorf 2010) and on the ways in which culturally mixed populations may develop competencies (Wise 2009; Neal and Vincent 2013) and 'skilled co-operation' (Sennett 2012:6) to manage, and even thrive, in increasingly heterogeneous urban environments. Our approach draws on Back's (1996) concept of the 'metropolitan paradox' in which tensions *and* joys co-exist in everyday complex diversity but also places emphasis on multiculturalism as ordinary, as the unexceptional 'is' of social relations rather than necessarily celebratory or conflictual.

Using encounter and competency approaches alongside a recognition of the changing geographies of multiculturalism, the project examines first, the ways people routinely experience and manage cultural difference in their everyday lives and second, the role 'place' plays in these processes and practices. It explores these in three geographies which each offer very different profiles of current formations of multiculturalism: the London Borough of Hackney which is in the north east of the city;

the new city of Milton Keynes in South East England; and Oadby, once a small town in Leicestershire but now more of a suburb of the city of Leicester in the English Midlands. Each of these geographies presents a distinct but connected narrative of situated multiculturalism – super-diversity, new multiculturalism and suburban multiculturalism.

Hackney has a long history of migration and ethnic diversity but has become even more mixed through new migrant settlement and processes of gentrification. In short, Hackney has a geography in which there is a diversity of diversity. In contrast, Milton Keynes is a 'new town', established in the 1960s and until relatively recently was predominantly White British. However, new migrations and settlements mean that Milton Keynes now has one of the most rapidly growing Black African populations in urban England. Milton Keynes has a newly multicultural geography. Oadby, an affluent suburb of the city of Leicester, reflects changing social and economic shifts within established migrant communities and the growth of a black and minority ethnic (BME) suburban and middle class population (ONS 2012).

In each of these locations we have focused on public parks as key social and material spaces within which very different populations may 'come together'. As the Commission of Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) argue, 'when properly designed and cared for', public spaces enhance social cohesion, because they 'are open to all, regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender and as such they represent a democratic forum for citizens and society [...] they bring communities together, provide meeting places and foster social ties [...] These spaces shape the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities' (2004: 12).

There is an extensive literature regarding the importance of public space for democratic, representative and heterogeneous cities (Young 1986, 1990; Sennett 2000; Mitchell 1995, 2003; Iveson 2007). For example, Young argues it is in public spaces that 'the diversity of the city's residents come together' (1986: 437). For Watson too (2006: 6) it is in public spaces that differences are 'negotiated with civility, urbanity and understanding'; and Clayton's study of young people in Leicester found it was 'the shared spaces such as the main central park in the city that offer the opportunity for intercultural engagement on the basis of informal and loosely organized mutual interests such as playing football' (2009: 489).

This work highlights the importance of urban public spaces. However, the materiality of these public spaces is often overlooked, as the political and social relations within them are emphasized rather than the ways in which the public

spaces themselves affect those relationships. Don Mitchell (2003) persuasively argues that public spaces are necessary for publicness to exist - 'public space is the space of the public' (2003: 140). But this emphasis on the material space does not develop into a concern with the *materiality* of the space. In his analysis of the contestations over the People's Park and the University of California, for example, Mitchell (1995) rarely talks about the park environment itself. The focus tends to be on public spaces as the *context* (Iveson 2007: 7) for the social and the political rather than as co-constitutive of the social and political.

Watson's (2006) suggestion of enchanted urban public spaces which 'entice' and 'lure' different populations in 'to sit, watch, chat, be' offers a helpful way forward for thinking about the interdependencies between public spaces and social interactions, reminding us that 'the public is not just about 'talk', it concerns bodies and their micro-movements' (2006: 3-6). This echoes NRT concerns with affective bodies and 'mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards other and themselves in particular sites (Thrift 1997: 142). NRT's urging attention on description and 'doing' and away from representation has incorporated a focus on the relationality of social practices and materialities. The interactions of things, bodies and practices centre the more-than-human and the multi-sensory into accounts of social worlds (Thrift 2007; Whatmore 2002; Lorimer 2008). For example, Goodall et al. (2008: 181) touch on NRT ground when they focus on human-environment relationships in their examination of multicultural fishing practices in the public park spaces along the Georges River in Sydney. They found that fishing, and the various equipment and tools used, the skills involved, the stories and the time spent sharing a physical environment, prompted pleasurable exchanges and transformative connections between ethnically different groups which were 'extraordinary in a climate in the area and the country generally where communication between Arabic speaking and other Australians is becoming more tense and difficult' (2008: 192).

Our focus on *green* public space brings together and draws on an NRT emphasis on affect, practices and human-more-than-human interactions, on Watson's concern with the extra-discursive aspects of public space and on CABI's definition of urban green spaces as a 'key service, alongside housing, health, education and policing – one of the essentials in making a neighbourhood livable' (CABI 2010: 40). The value of green space identified in the CABI report is consistent with other investigations of the relationship between ethnicity and green and/or nature spaces (Goodall et al

2008; Neal 2009) as well as wider work on ethnicity and the countryside (Neal and Agyeman 2006).

However, some care is needed to ensure that any argument for the importance of public green space (and its increasing re/articulation in policy-making) does not marginalize the potentially problematic nature of public space. Although parks and green urban spaces may be valued, sought and used, they may also (and even at the same time) be neglected, avoided and feared. For example, Ravenscott's and Markwell's (2000) study of BME young people and park use in Reading, a large town in South East England, found that parks were defined by their participants as the 'least safe' environment in the town. The work of Mitchell (1995; 2003) and Iveson (2007) also reminds us that public spaces are spaces of social ordering and social exclusion, as urban environments are securitized and policed. Nevertheless, it is clear that green public space and urban parks are productive of social as well as place connections. They can generate first, what we have called 'park practices' – sets of doing and behaviours that involve being in and sharing material spaces, and second, sets of complex and sometimes contradictory emotional relationships with those material spaces.

### **Research craft and complex multicultural**

#### *Research design and methods*

In order to investigate these issues, we have used a mixed methods approach that has involved members of the team in sustained participant observation and multiple forms of interviewing with ethnically diverse participants in our three geographical locations. The interviews were initially one-to-one with participants who were then invited to become part of a series of group interviews. The one-to-one interviews took the form of 'walking interviews' as participants took the interviewers around the park. This emphasized – and brought to life - the participant's personal relationship with the park space. At the centre of this design was an attempt to develop a familiar but non-intrusive (Back and Pulwar 2013: 11) research-researcher relationship, based on repeated contact and dialogue. The parks themselves were embedded in this process through the time that research team members spent just being in them, attending park events and in doing the walking interviews.

The group interviews took place in venues as near to the parks as was possible and the process of recruitment of participants emphasized the relationship between the researcher, the park and the participants. For example, this recruitment process,



slightly different in each park space, involved research team members in a range of activities from joining a keep fit 'outdoor gym'; to having a project stall at park social events; to face to face contact and distribution of project flyers and invitations to be part of the research; to online invitations via park users groups and networks. In this way we were always approaching people who were likely to have a pre-existing relationship with the park.

In each park we worked with a group of ethnically diverse participants. We provide brief biographic details of the pseudonymised participants as we discuss their accounts. In total we conducted 29 individual interviews and nine group interviews with park related participants. The group interviews had six to nine members.

### *Profile of the park spaces*

Each of the parks was inflected by the wider urban geography in which it was located. Knighton Park in Leicestershire is a 78-acre park located at the border of the city of Leicester and within easy reach of residents in Oadby. Developed as a municipal park in the 1950s it has a varied landscape of planted woodlands, formal gardens and ponds and landscaped walkways. It has two play areas and sporting facilities and grounds. It has a gardening club and a volunteer group. It is a well-used and very ethnically diverse 'destination' (i.e. specifically visited) park space. The ethnic diversity of the park users reflects the established South Asian origin residents of Oady and Leicester as well as Black African and White British and a smaller Eastern European local population. There is no café but the park holds regular social events during the summer period.

Springfield Park in Hackney was created from formerly private residential grounds in 1909. It covers about 40 acres and includes planted woodland areas, sloping lawns and heathland and an ornamental lake, a play area and sporting facilities for cricket and football and tennis courts. The Georgian villa from whose grounds Springfield was made is now the park café. It has a high level of usage among a very ethnically diverse and socially mixed population. This ethnic diversity reflects Hackney's population, a mix of recent migrant, old migrant and never migrant residents made up of white British; White Other (Turkish, Jewish, Polish); African-Caribbean; Black African. Its location also means that it is very much a 'walked through' park as people use it to reach other areas as well as being a park that is a destination place.

Willen Lake and Campbell Park in Milton Keynes are products of the highly planned green design of Milton Keynes as a new town. Both are large and extensively landscaped around lakes, with walk and cycle ways, formal gardens, planted woodlands, water features and open pastureland elements. Willen Lake has extensive water based sports and adventure style activities and Campbell Park is regularly used as the site for the city's social and celebratory events such as the World Picnic, the May Day Festival and the city's fireworks display. Both have café and restaurant facilities. Willen Lake and Campbell Park tend to be destination rather than walking through parks. The park population tends to be lower density and less ethnically mixed than in the other two parks in the study. The majority of the park users appeared to be white British although at organised events in the park (e.g. fireworks night, International Festival) a more ethnically diverse park population was apparent, again a mix of Black African, South Asian and some Eastern European people.

*Researching difference – fixing or connecting difference?*

The project's methods mix is an attempt to develop a researcher de-centred and a more inventive and attentive (Back and Pulwar 2013: 11) research practice in which participants' voices and practices are privileged. Designing in multiple and iterative points of connection to changing places and their populations was both intended to help us to hear *more* but, equally important, to build relationships and connections so as to see and hear *better*. For all our attempts to do this in ways that recognize and engage with a complex social world there are persistent challenges. In a context in which identities are composite and multiple, there may nevertheless be a danger of enacting processes of research and fieldwork that do the opposite, i.e. by actually 'fixing'/securing populations within categories of difference, of ethnicity, of national and non-national identity. When we wandered through the parks, lingered and looked at the social world and make field notes about difference and interaction, perhaps we were not being so nuanced and attentive after all but doing archaic 'difference work', reducing people to their visible characteristics and emphasizing/defining (their) difference on this basis. There is something of a paradox in looking at the physical (skin colour), the cultural (dress, listening to language/accents) and assigning an ethnicity to identify difference in order then to identify how difference may have been disrupted - or not.

These tensions are not easily or simply resolved, especially in a mostly white British research team and one where information has to be relayed and shared with team

members not in the research site. In our fieldnotes, descriptions of populations and the people in the social worlds that we saw take on familiar categories - white British, black British, South Asian, Muslim, Eastern European, black African and so on. The allocations of ethnic categorization felt like an engagement, not so much with a new world of super-diversity and complex multiculturalism, but with an older parochial world of reducing people to racialised sets of other identification. The ethnographic process reinforces this anxiety and the uncomfortable sense of objectified, biologised seeing (Gilroy 2004).

Participation and conversation and a multiple (and mobile) interviewing process can help to counter some of this. The imagining of the research through the notion of contact zones in which exchange and listening takes place locates the research team - we are ourselves part of the research world - either because we are transparently explained and related to as researchers and/or because we are also engaged in the routines of that social world. As Askins and Pain argue, thinking in terms of contact zones is valuable for diversity research because these zones can be understood as both method – sites of participant-researcher encounter (coming together), asking questions and listening - and theory – the zones ‘foreground questions about difference, power and privilege and developing nuanced consideration of the nature of particular settings, events within them and the ways that intergroup relations play out’ (2011: 806). In other words, direct and dialogic engagement with our research world mediated our research relationship, decentered us as researchers and disturbed, even if it did not resolve, the problematic ethnographic gaze (Valentine 2013). Similarly, the concepts of multiculturalism, super-diversity, mixing and negotiation inherently recognize the dynamic, inventive social and spatial identifications. These are concepts whose business is to disrupt notions of stable, uncontested national, white identities. They work as shorthand reminders that all identifications are contested, partial, plural, unfinished. Alongside these ‘disrupting concepts’ the research process itself creates encounters and moments of convivial coming together between participants and researchers. We return to these issues towards the end of the paper, but now we turn to the ways in which parks animate practices and feelings.

### **Park practices: quotidian engagements, diverse populations**

Parks are animating spaces. The CABI (2010) park study used *thirteen* categories of park activities and practices – fresh air, relaxing, taking children out, exercise, meeting friends, being where other people are, seeing nature, eating and picnicking

etc. Our observations and interviews confirmed the diversity of ways in which park spaces are used in day-to-day ways. The CAGE report found that ethnic categories mapped on to different park practices, but in our observations and interview conversations the ethnicity break down of practices was not so clear.

What was clear was that parks invite social practices and generate processes of 'doing' amongst ethnically different populations. Organized park events and celebratory occasions - fun days, festivals, fetes - were particularly identified as moments of diversity and amicable interaction by participants. For example, Maureen (an older white English participant in the Milton Keynes parks group) described the various park festivals as 'uplifting' and explained a cautious, but ultimately positive, engagement with the Islamic Arts and Culture Festival in Campbell Park, 'it was full of Muslim people and I just walked through [...] and it was alright, I didn't feel...I was...it was fine [...] I wanted to see what was happening [...]'. At the International Festival also in Campbell Park Hannah describes in her fieldnotes how, '*though the crowd was majority white, there was a reasonable mix of different ethnicities attending as well as running stalls and performing [...] at the top of a slope [!] noticed a [...] group of older South Asian woman in glittering saris sitting on a picnic blanket and clearly enjoying themselves*' (Milton Keynes, August 2012).

The ethnic diversity of park events - viewed positively - was a theme that also came out in our Knighton Park group interview's discussion of the park's Fun Day:

Jo (a middle-aged, white English woman): I would have said the fun day... was brilliant [...] absolutely brilliant, for people getting together [...] that was one of the nicest days out I've had in a long time, sort of in Leicester. I just thought it had a really good vibe. There was... there were so many different people from all over. And they did seem to be mixing together...

Sally (an older white English woman): That seemed to be one area where we can all mix irrespective of/

Jo: /Yeah. Maybe that should be more of the sort of things that let people organically grow into getting on with each other, at events like that, rather than it being a worthy cause.

Akash (a young South Asian man): But those sorts of events are... they're curtailing them aren't they? Like the Park Show, was another one

where [...] All different people used to come there, now the city council cut the funding and so on and [...] those are the sort of places where people would mix sort of thing.

The affectionate remembering of the Fun Day ('one of the nicest days') is striking not least because this affection is particularly expressed around the ethnic diversity ('so many different people') of the event and the mixing ('getting together') that happened. Jo's emphasis on the informal nature of the Fun Day – it not being 'a worthy cause' – and this making togetherness/interactions seem 'organic' is also significant. While formally organized park events were explicitly valued as shared public pleasure in our interview conversations it was notable that more often, and more routinely, parks worked to generate informal, everyday social practices. For example, in this Knighton Park fieldnote, Katy, who lives near the park and uses it for walking her dog Fubsy, describes the different ways (dog/walking, cycling, football) the park is being used on a rainy summer's evening,

*[The] park was ticking over despite the rain. One of the older British Punjabi morning walkers [I recognized] was on his way out. He glanced over and smiled [...]. [I] turned right, walking towards the river, passing others, small smiles and acknowledgements here and there. Could hear shouts and yells from the playing fields on the other side of the bridge, so walked across to see two football matches. The one nearest me was an all South Asian team who were kicking the ball about in the rain, yelling at each other to pass the ball. Fubsy ran down the bank for a roll, another (white) dog walker threw a ball across the grass that landed close to the football match. [She] glanced my way, smiling. Cyclists passed by wearing yellow glow in the dark jackets [...]. (Fieldnote, July 2012).*

A very mundane, micro sociality threads through these various park practices. But what is notable is the way they give rise to social exchanges – some cordial (people walking) and some more urgent (the football matches) - and acknowledgements of presence. In our parks, the small-scale social exchanges we observed often occurred or took place around dogs, children, ice-cream and café queues, all of which present opportunities for shared stories and spontaneous interactions between ethnically different populations. But there was also evidence of more implicit, but seemingly at-ease, sharing of public green space as Hannah observed in Springfield Park,

*As I walked down through the park, it felt happy relaxed comfortable, people enjoying and valuing the place. So much space between people too, not crowded but companionable [...] Groups of people on blankets. Two black women with small children having a picnic. A white couple sitting snogging next to their upended bikes. Two women in hijabs climbing the hill with an older man walking behind them, pushing a child in a pushchair. Just above the tennis courts, a white couple in their sixties and an East Asian woman in her forties chose a spot to spread out a blanket and watch the tennis and the view over it towards the marshes. A family? (Fieldnote, May 2013).*

Hannah identified a sense of comfort and enjoyment (sitting, picnics, blankets, kissing) as well as a shared social confidence of a diverse population in using the park in different ways. This confidence was more widely evident and was often connected with familiarity. In Knighton Park and Springfield Park in particular the regularity of going to and being in the park was notable, with participants often speaking of going every day or at least once a week. These two parks were places of familiarity; spaces which participants felt they knew intimately through the repeated routine of 'being in' them. Having favourite walks, places and things - benches, trees, views, flower beds, ducks, ponds, play areas - was commonly expressed. But this familiarity is also about the other people who regularly use the parks; people become recognizable and, as a result are also acknowledged, as Katy's rainy evening Knighton Park fieldnote illustrates.

These encounters and acknowledgements through the sharing of familiar space resonate with Hall's study of Walworth road in South East London, where she too found 'a comfort of local familiarity', suggesting that 'regularity is therefore a component of public sociability reliant on the fixity of local places and on repeated participation; of knowing and being known by returning to the same spaces, engaging with familiar faces' (2012: 98). This was an experience many of the participants mentioned as enjoying about parks as Akash and Mira (a middle aged South Asian origin woman) explain in this Knighton Park group interview:

- Akash: And I think sometimes you see them, the same faces and you say "Hello," and you start chatting on so on.
- Akash: And that makes a difference, you know what I mean.
- Mira: Yeah, it does have a core of regular users.
- Akash: Yeah.

Mira: So, familiarity...

What we want to stress here is that first, everyday park practices are wide ranging and very different; from people going to parks to do exercise to people going simply to relax, sit, meet others and be alone. But these practices have a rhythm and a repetition to them that can produce place confidence as well as affection and recognition. Second, that the people within the parks, those engaging in one or more of these practices were multiculturally constituted as Grace, an African-Caribbean, middle aged woman who has grown up and always lived in Hackney explained to Hannah in their walking interview:

Grace: And as you can see, it's such a diverse community. It's not, you know... people - just Afro-Caribbean. If you look around, there's everybody in the park. Do you know what I mean? Using the park...strolling through the park.

Hannah: Do you think that's something that everyone kind of values?

Grace: Yeah. Even my community, [and] the Jewish community that I live in, and even the non-Jewish community members that are on my street - we're all in the park. Ah, especially when it's snowing! Everybody [comes]...

From Grace's description it would seem that some of this mixing happens simply because people share the parks' spaces ('strolling through') as well as the park's resources ('using the park'). The ways in which the spaces and resources of parks - play areas, cafés, picnic areas - and other materialities ('snow') were animators of social practices across cultural difference was a reoccurring pattern in what we saw. For example, this is Hannah's observation of Springfield Park,

*Walking down the slope of the main park, meandering around a bit, the range of people, by ethnicity, age, class and activity, seemed very broad. [...] People were using the same space but not paying much attention to one another, other than the group they were in – though many of the groups of friends or family were of mixed ethnicities. [...] At the bottom of the hill, more mixtures of people playing in the kids' play area and the tennis courts (Fieldnote, July 2012).*

The description emphasizes the dynamic between mixed social practices taking place and ethnically diverse populations engaging in them. Hannah describes the play area and it was these in particular that drew in a range of ethnically different park users. This is also captured in Katy's description of being in the play area in Knighton Park with her children,

*The park was heaving with individuals, couples and families enjoying the sunshine [an ice cream van is present]. An elderly British South Asian couple sat on a bench watching their children play with their grandchildren. Young Eastern European families talked in their own language. A young white British family played in the sand [...] Families kept themselves to themselves, not interacting with others as mothers tend to do when alone during the week. But there was a sense of warmth in just being together, enjoying the park in the sunshine, enjoying the children running around, somehow linking us as they played on the train, slid down the slide. A [ethnically diverse] group of teenage boys walked by; talking about the bikes they were pushing. On the way down the hill I bumped into a colleague from work who was with her two sisters and nephew who were over from Jamaica and visiting (July 2012).*

While there are interactions across ethnic difference described here (the teenage boys; Katy's own conversation with her work colleague), Katy also comments on a lack of conversational interaction in the play area (although she suggests it is apparent at other times). What Katy describes as 'a sense of warmth' and 'just being together' can be thought of as a structure of feeling made more significant because it did not seem to require dialogic interaction per se - but shared routine practices, amongst diverse populations in proximate space - to be conjured up. And while this is Katy's own perception of the Sunday afternoon play area it does bring to mind Watson's (2006) enchanted but ordinary urban spaces. The things to play (the slide) and relax on (the bench) appear to enable and facilitate this structure of feeling. The ways in which the allure of things (ice cream!) and the park resources (benches, gardens, slides, water) generated mixed and mingling populations was notable in all the park spaces.

Interaction also happened in more organized park based group activities. For the project Katy joined the popular, ethnically diverse Knighton Park's exercise group - Fitness Camp – as a way of engaging with the park and its users as well as recruiting participants,



*It's 9.30, damp and cold and I'm taking part in Fitness Camp. Jake, a black male fitness coach at is leading the session. We're a mixed group of young to middle aged, white and British South Asian women. There's one white (English) man.... Jake introduces me and the research project to the group [...] Maggie introduces herself to me, Amita comes up and says 'Hi'; she wants to know more about the project. We set off [...] some of the exercises require us to work in pairs [...] I work with Maggie, Paula, Kay, Amita, Shivani and others, we introduce ourselves, laugh a lot because it's all a bit awkward and hard work [...] Some of the women chat in between exercises, catching up with news, how weekends went, gossip. The women don't seem to know each other very well, but chat about their lives, their children. Someone's child is unwell. We start to warm down, doing stretching exercises. Lou talks about arranging a Christmas do for Fitness Campers (Fieldnote, October 2012)*

While the ethnic diversity of the group is apparent in Katy's description of her first exercise morning, it is the ways in which doing this activity brings together ethnically different participants, the park setting, the things in the park, as well the physicality of exercising and produces a series of interactive micro material and social intimacies – supporting each other's bodies in the exercises, exchanging worries about children's illnesses, making plans for group members to come together for Christmas celebrations. This is not a group whose members are all familiar with each other ('it's a bit awkward') but this is negotiated and managed through a 'light' conviviality.

The variety of practices and diversity of ethnic presences in park spaces suggest that parks are mixing and mingling spaces. This mingling does not necessarily involve interactions across ethnicity, although sometimes it does. Our fieldwork notes show ethnically mixed family and friendship groups and the quotidian activities of park users especially play areas and exercise and sport often involved ethnically diverse groups. But what is most apparent in our observations, fieldnotes and interview conversations is ethnically different populations *in* and sharing local park spaces. In this way the act of going to parks - and being visible in them - can be interpreted as a practice of publicness; a disposition to social mixing and to the production of a diverse localities (Goodall et al 2008: 193; Young 1986, 1990; Mitchell 2003).

### **Park affections: materialities, memories and mixings**

In the sections above we have mostly drawn on what members of the research team have observed in parks – sometimes at a distance and sometimes as participants.

These accounts have focused on park practices but these practices shape what are often intensely affectionate people-place relationships (Thrift 2007; Lorimer 2008). In our interviews with our participants, both in our one-to-one walk-alongs and in the group interviews, what was striking were the ways in which parks elicited intense emotions. These expressions of affection for park spaces occurred across ethnicity and often highlighted how parks as facilitated place and community belongings amongst newly migrant, never migrant, once migrant participants. For example, Fahad, who is of South Asian origin and had only recently moved to Oadby, runs one of the football groups in Knighton Park told us 'I absolutely love the park [...], the set-up, the locality [...] the people that I meet there, you know, I always run into somebody that I know'. In Fahad's description, the park, the locality and experiences of sociality are bundled together but the park is core to creating a sense of belonging. And for Grace too, while her relationship to Springfield Park is marked by her longevity as a Hackney resident, her affection also relates to the ways in which the park is a belonging space:

Grace: So it's my hometown, really, it is, yeah.

Hannah: Have you always used the park?

Grace: Always. From a young child growing up, we've always come here with friends and family. Yeah, we loved it.

Hannah: [...]Do you have memories of childhood when you walk around?

Grace: Oh yeah, definitely. I say to my children, what we did, places we used to play in when we used to come down here, you know. I actually take them around Hackney so they can see where I grew up and, you know, allow them to enjoy it. But they love coming here. You know, you can sit on the bench and then they're off.

These extracts show a joining-up of parks, place and practices. They also speak to deeply felt attachments - both Fahad and Grace use the word 'love' to describe the park spaces. The notion of parks as beloved and, as in Grace's account, as memory spaces, were recurring themes in the interview conversations. For example,

Gabriella - an older white Irish woman, who has lived in Hackney since the 1960s and has visited Springfield Park nearly every day for the last forty years - explained how:

Gabriella: I used to take my children over there [to the park], when they were small, and now my grandchildren and [...] we go over and sit there under the [weeping willow] tree and walk along and just, you know, go to the café [...] I've known that park for 40... 43 years [Laughter]

Sarah: So it's a special place?

Gabriella: Very special, because I don't really have a garden, as such. Not enough for the children to play in, so it was always... that's where we lived. And everything was there.

The extent to which it is the park space that holds together children, place, nature things and a life course is very apparent (in Gabriella's words 'everything was here'). Pat (an older white English woman in the Milton Keynes park group) picked up on similar themes in a story of her adult children visiting her and them having spontaneous picnic in Campbell Park 'we walked across the field [in the park] full of buttercups this high and under the trees [...] and it was lovely, and we took a ball as well and they were playing ball and stuff...[Laughter] they're all in their 20s'. As with the tree in Gabriella's account (this tree was also shown to us and/or described by others in the Springfield Park interviews as 'special', as their 'favourite') there is real sense of the multi-sensory and materiality here – the buttercups, the field, the shade.

While Pat, Grace and Gabriella have well-established relationships with their parks, Lucy, a young Indonesian-English woman, who has lived in Hackney for three years, had only recently 'discovered' Springfield Park. Lucy spoke of the contradiction of Springfield Park feeling to be both 'incredibly English' with its lawns and ponds and manor house but also 'universal' in its greenery, 'peacefulness'; a place of urban 'escape'. In her walking interview with Sarah, Lucy pointed out her favourite sitting place in the park and explained how she had specifically brought her Mum, visiting her from Indonesia, to Springfield Park because it was a cherished place, and had sat in that place to have their picnic. Micro-vignettes like that of the picnic were common in participants' narratives of parks as spaces of attachment. Such vignettes

brought to life the ways in which relationships between people and places can be generated. As Hall (2012: 109) argues, ‘the importance of the local is [...] not as an exclusive form of territorial solidarity, but as a collection of spaces outside of the domestic sphere in which to engage in difference, particularly for those who social mobility or global fluidity is less of a reality’.

While the social affinities afforded by sharing the park space may be temporary, the repeated, on-going nature of using/visiting park space may generate a deeper form of engagement. Out of the process of electing to be in spaces of mixing, participants identified feelings of connectivity to known and unknown and culturally different others. As we have noted earlier this sometimes came about through organized events and activities in the park spaces – the International Festival and World Picnic in Campbell Park, the Fun Day and Fitness Camp in Knighton Park, for example. But it was present in routine choosing to ‘be in’ park spaces. We have already noted Grace explaining that the mixing of ethnically different people is something she associates (and celebrates) about Springfield. Reflecting on her own and a Charedi (Jewish) presence in Springfield Park, Lucy captures how the production of a diverse local can happen:

*We’re in Stamford Hill so it’s the Orthodox Jewish area and they’re known for keeping themselves to themselves but they’re walking through this park as well which is nice to see [...] You usually see them walking in the street and you don’t get much interaction [...] but at least in the park you feel like you’re kind of interacting even if you’re not speaking with them directly, but you’re sharing the space together. Even though you’re sharing a street space together it feels different because [here] you’ve both come to the park to enjoy what it is.*

The distinction that Lucy draws between the street and the park is significant. The park space elevates the contact from an awareness/acknowledgement of difference into an experience of connection and shared affinity for the park itself – it is a place that is purposively sought for enjoyment and pleasure. Like Katy’s experience of the play area in Knighton Park, what is also significant in Lucy’s account is that direct interaction is not necessary for her feelings of social affinity – shared presence is enough to establish lines of connection.

We have been examining the ways in which parks are productive spaces. Mostly this production has been positively inflected but this is not to diminish the ambivalences

of parks –they can also slide into being places of anxiety, insecurity and menace. This was reflected in some of the interview conversations. There was a highly gendered articulation around insecurity, but it was not explicitly raced. There was also an unevenness about where feelings of anxiety were expressed – much less in Knighton and Springfield Parks and much more in relation to the larger, less densely populated Milton Keynes Parks, where both Pat and Maureen spoke of their parks having ‘good and bad memories’. The times of day and the season also affected how participants felt about parks in terms of security and safety, with people adjusting how they used and visited the park accordingly.

While strain, dread and tensions about sharing parks in terms of diversity were not directly articulated, there were hints of discomfort apparent when people complained about parks being used for rap concerts and groups of young people or even individual young people were spoken of as worrying some participants. Tensions and anxieties were also there in complaints about some practices - picnic groups spreading too far, dogs not under control and ball games in parks. We should also note that the relative absence of more negative interpretations and park avoidances has to be contextualised with our methods and the project’s recruitment process being disproportionately weighted towards contact with people who used the parks.

### **Concluding reflections**

We began with arguing for the importance of places in multicultural interaction. In suggesting that public parks can be a key part of people’s place-making processes, we have brought together work on everyday encounters and public space. Iris Marion Young’s (1990) idealised conception of the city as the ‘being together of strangers’ can be persuasively glimpsed within public spaces. Developing this we have suggested that it is green urban spaces parks which particularly present opportunities for examining the ‘being together’ of multicultural strangers as well as enabling a focus on the *bringing together* processes. With an NRT inflection, we have sought to show that materialities of park spaces make them productive in ‘bringing together’ multicultural populations. This is a relational process as parks elicit and animate social practices which increase possibilities of encounter, contact and proximity. In our research accounts, such encounters were expressed around the sharing of the park as an inclusive public space. Sometimes the ethnic mixity of the park spaces was explicitly valued and celebrated, as Akash’s and Grace’s accounts show.

However, we also suggest that understandings of everyday encounter can be extended. Encounter not only matters as a moment of (potentially transformative) interaction and dialogue between ethnically different populations but is also present and affective in the sharing of spaces and participation in similar practices. In other words the routine, repeated use of park spaces, of being in parks with unknown, different others, may generate, as Lucy's account illustrated, extra-discursive senses of affinity for those spaces and a connection to others *without* interaction. As Wilson (2011) found with public transport, park spaces are able to assemble 'temporary communities', which were often ethnically diverse (Knighton Park gym, the International Festival, the Fitness Camp and the park play areas, for example), through their everyday use. Like buses, streets, shops and shopping centres and so on, parks are routinely engaged with multicultural public spaces. However, buses and streets can all be imagined as 'necessary' public spaces and, unlike these, parks as *elective* or *choice* spaces. Parks pull people in not simply because they are public spaces, but because of their leisure-pleasure associations and their multi-sensory materialities. But this is not to over romanticise park spaces. Parks are also spaces in which insecurity, isolation, conflicts, threat and danger are experienced or associated. The materiality of parks can also contribute to this. Trees, overgrown shrubbery, empty lawns, a deserted lake can create uninviting spaces and landscapes (cf. CABE 2010). Some participants, like Pat and Maureen, did speak of the ways in which parks can move from beloved to being avoided and having anxiety associations. But the dominant theme in the park interviews was of affection and of their facilitation of place belonging.

As the findings discussed above show, parks are multiple use spaces – offering escape, activities, events, sociality - and they have a quotidian democracy and inclusivity to them. This returns us to the ordinary 'is' of contemporary multicultural, but also to place. In Springfield and Knighton Parks in particular, the ethnic diversity of those using the park spaces was established and unremarkable. This would seem reflective of the super-diverse and suburban multicultural geographies that these parks were each located within. Ethnic difference in the park populations in Milton Keynes appeared as a more emergent ordinariness, which reflected newer migrations and multiculturalism of the city as well as the city's generally smaller park population, its particular urban design and the parks' locations in this.

The importance of place returns us to the importance of methods. We have sought to tell a bigger than 'this is what we did' methods story here. For the participants, the parks were often highly personal, as well as public, spaces. This intimacy shaped

how participants spoke about and described their parks but it also affected our relationship as researchers (and park users). For example, Hannah's fieldnotes describe walking through Springfield Park and some of the landmarks that have come up in the interviews – the hilly slope, the pond, a set of trees – and the stories that participants have told us coming to mind; what she describes as the 'ghosts' of others' interactions with the park. We have argued that parks are contact zones of differently positioned others and that the interviewing approach of the project - the bringing together of unknown others into a dialogical research relationship - is also a contact zone within which intimate, and often intense, disclosures are made (Askins and Pain 2011). Back (2012: 28) argues for more 'craftful' research practices that are able to 'move with the social world and develop multiple vantage points from which empirical accounts are generated'. The project's mix of methods is an attempt to respond to this. In particular, the repetition of the interviewing developed our empirical attentiveness and at the same time produced senses of sociality and intimacy within the interview groups. The repeated interview contact meant that while we did not know our participants well, we did know them more and they began to know each other. Brought into conversational being by the parks, and their willingness to participate in the project, group interviews became sites of familiarity and sociality.

This convivial sensibility and intra-group dynamic is difficult to convey in writing or to discern by reading the transcripts. The inclusion of 'laughter' in the transcripts gives a hint at the social nature of the interviews themselves. But it is the unrecorded conversations of participants saying goodbye and expressing sadness that it is the end of coming together that testifies to the ways in which the research process converged research and social worlds and itself become part of a locally embedded – if temporary - convivial process. Some of this has been a conviviality in its most obvious form – sociality built on connective experiences of a shared physical space – but some of it has been a less obvious form of conviviality in which a diverse group of people, unknown to each other, have come together and had to negotiate uncertainty and strangeness as well as tensions as participants expressed particular stories.

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