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*Urban multiculture and everyday encounters in semi-public,  
franchised café spaces*

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***Urban multiculture and everyday encounters in semi-public,  
franchised café spaces***

**Abstract**

This paper engages with an emergent literature on multiculture and concepts such as conviviality and negotiation to explore how increasingly ethnically diverse population routinely share and mix in urban places and social spaces. As part of a wider ESRC funded, two-year qualitative study of changing social life and everyday multiculture in different geographical areas of contemporary England, this paper draws on participant observation data from three branches of franchised leisure and consumption café spaces. We pay particular attention to the ways these spaces work as settings of encounter and shared presence between groups often envisaged as separated by ethnic difference. Our findings suggest that corporate spaces which are more often dismissed as commercial, globalized spaces of soulless homogeneity can be locally inflected spaces whose cultural blandness may generate confident familiarity; ethnic mixity; mundane co-presence and inattentive forms of conviviality.

**Key words**

Multiculture, café spaces, ethnicity, place, conviviality, civil inattention

## ***Urban multiculture and everyday encounters in semi-public, franchised café spaces***

### **Introduction: Everyday encounter and café spaces**

Amid normative ‘big’ arguments over the politics of belonging, multiculture and local and national identity, the routine, micro ways in which ethnic and other forms of difference are lived out in everyday settings are often overlooked. As some of us have noted elsewhere (Author B et al 2013), much social science literature and public interest in multiculture tends to focus on crisis, where difference is taken to mean inequality, segregation and resentment, spilling over into riots and/or extremism. Such framings tend to be preoccupied with cultures as fixed and bounded, with the solution being either assimilation into some notion of a majority culture or, failing that, institutional means of bridging between cultures to produce ‘cohesion’.

In contrast to these discourses of cultural absolutism and in the context of increasing migration and cultural diversity within and outside cities there has been something of a ‘convivial turn’ (Author B et al 2013) as an emerging literature focuses on the ways in which cultural and ethnic difference is negotiated and managed in everyday lives and places (for example, Gilroy 2006a, 2006b; Wise and Velayutham 2009; Hall 2012; Author B and XXXX 2013; Byrne and de Tona 2013; Wilson 2011; Wessendorf 2014). Part of this negotiation is the slight or taken for granted encounters in public spaces, where the physical nature and social construction of these spaces are important for the quality of the mixing that occurs. This means attending to the ‘micro-geographies’ of encounter (Amin 2002; Watson 2006; Hall 2012) and in this article we focus on the semi-public spaces of chain cafes and fast food restaurants – semi-public because, despite being formally marketised and privately owned, they take on the form of public space through the ways in which they are used. While we follow others (Laurier and Philo 2006a; Zukin 1995, 2010; Woldoff et al 2013) in scrutinising social interactions within these spaces we are particularly interested in how they are used by diverse populations. This paper first explores ethnic diversity within the

anonymity of franchised café space and second, reflects on the meanings of convivial multicultural social relations in particular localities.

These findings arise from our two year ESRC funded<sup>i</sup> research project which investigates the changing configurations of multiculture and social relations within different areas of urban England and draws on Amin's contention that 'much of the negotiation of difference occurs at the very local level through everyday experiences and encounters' (2002: 959). We begin by examining some of the sociological thinking around café spaces and sociality, before examining the micro-geographies of 'our' café spaces and their relationship to place. We present data, primarily from a series of participant observations, in three chain cafes in three different geographies to expand empirically on how 'conviviality', in the sense of 'living together with difference' (Gilroy 2004; Hall 2000) works in time and space in these informal environments.

### **Multiculture, conviviality and café spaces**

In her ethnography of a London street urban sociologist Suzanne Hall (2012: 52-53) introduces Nick's Caff - 'a small meeting place in a large and rapidly changing city'. Hall cautions that 'to relegate Nick's Caff solely to the status of an eating establishment' would be to miss the point because the cafe space, used by a mix of migrant, local, long-settled and newcomers, 'provides a base to consider the complexities of belonging in a local place like the Walworth Road'. In using Nick's Caff as a site through which to examine the city and urban multiculture Hall's work echoes the sustained emphasis that sociologists have given to public space, ranging from Goffman's (1963) concept of civil inattention which emerged from his analysis of public behaviour (and which we draw on here) to Habermas' (1989) connection of public spaces and public discourse to Zukin's (1995, 2010) contention that the nature of public spaces create (or counter) exclusionary cities. Public spaces, 'points of assembly where strangers mingle' (Zukin 1995: 45), are of sociological intrigue first, because of their extensive and varying material forms e.g. coffee houses (Habermas 1989), parks (Author B et al 2015), streets (Hall 2012), markets (Watson 2006), buses (Wilson 2011) and second, because the

nature of social presence and practice within gathering spaces is co-constitutive of wider social change, interaction and formations of belonging. Like Hall we share a concern with how local cafés might be sites within which diverse people encounter one another to negotiate, use and define shared space. Where we depart from Hall is in our focus on franchised rather than independently owned café space and a suggestion that branded café environments are particular sites of multicultural mix. In order to understand how franchised spaces may operate as places of diversity we begin by examining briefly the well-known claims about McDonaldization and the ‘non-spaces’ of globalisation.

#### *Non-space, corporate space*

Corporate chain cafes have generally been dealt with by social scientists as problematic. Most notably, Ritzer (2006; 2008) examined ‘McDonaldization’ as a process of Weberian rationalisation in which the principles of the fast food restaurants increasingly permeate other areas of life. His fourfold framework - efficiency, calculability, predictability and control - explain how the design of human and non-human technologies creates global phenomena with remarkably similar features with the interior design of the restaurants functioning to speed people through the eating process and become normalised into the conventions of fast food establishments. Engagements with and critiques of Ritzer’s thesis are widespread (see for example, Turner 2006) but his broad framings of the process do identify why such disciplined spaces are so popular. McDonalds and the like are attractive (even enchanting) to a broad range of consumers (Waters, 2006), which suggests that forms of power other than coercion may be at work.

Ritzer’s thesis echoes Augé’s ‘ethnography of non-places’ that ‘create solitary contractuality’ (Augé 1995 [1992]: 94) in contrast to more communal experiences of place. Like Ritzer, Augé postulates that the anonymity of superstores and hotel chains can create familiarity through its very globalised and decontextualized nature. Both Ritzer and Augé have been criticised for their assumptions that such anonymous places are without context, history, or social relationality (Miller et al 1998; Merriman 2004; Goidanich and Rial 2012; Sharma 2009; Muhr 2012). As

Merriman puts it, ‘places such as supermarkets, Internet chat rooms, airports and motorway service areas do act as ‘meeting places’ where all manner of social relations are performed... (2004: 151-2). Moreover ethnographic accounts of food and coffee chains in diverse geographical settings show that the meanings of these spaces is fluid and intimately attached to locality (Muhr 2012). For example, in their work comparing independent and branded café spaces Woldoff et al (2013) found that although the ‘independent coffee houses offered local flavour that Starbucks does not’ (217) the Starbucks’ cafes offered higher levels of sociality and were places in which staff chatted with customers ‘on a first name basis, were familiar with their regular orders and knew significant personal information about them’ (209).

Similarly, in her research examining the social adjustment strategies of elite intra-EU migrants in Poland Aneta Piekut (2013: 127) found that chain cafes and restaurants were identified as ‘familiar points’, as easily recognised spaces of cultural reassurance and social comfort. And in their ethnomethodological study of café space Eric Laurier and Chris Philo suggest that cafes are ‘a place where an individual can be left alone in relative comfort by others, even as s/he is in their presence’ (2006a: 204). Their study raises questions about gestures, conversations, temporal rhythms, the layout of cafes and people’s choice of seating, all of which we pick up on in our own ethnography of ‘uneventfulness’. This comfortable co-presence is pertinent to our work and a counter to the solitary world of Auge’s non-places.

However, such locally-contextualised studies tend to focus more on the meanings attached to these chain and/or particular intimate café spaces, their amenities and products, socialities, practices and etiquette rather than as spaces of ethnic diversity and mixing. In this context, we take the ‘McDonaldization’ argument in a slightly different direction, asking whether it is the very predictability/known-ness of such corporate leisure and consumption spaces that enables the ethnic mixity of those in corporate café space and materialises Gilroy’s (2004, 2006b) notion of conviviality as the way in which diverse populations ‘dwell in close proximity’ without ‘insuperable problems in communication’ (2006b: 40). Our research suggests that the cultural blandness of

brand, the ‘ordinary cosmopolitanism’ (Skribis and Woodward 2007) of these leisure and consumption café spaces may facilitate an equality of presence in which Goffman’s (1963: 83-88) notion of civil inattention is the most pronounced mode of social interaction. Goffman’s work on public behaviour emphasised disinterested (but not indifferent) forms of interaction. It is important to note that Goffman defines civil inattention as a positive interaction; it is what he describes as a ‘courtesy’. For Goffman civil inattention is the way in which ‘the individual implies that he has no reason to suspect the intentions of others present and no reason to fear the others, be hostile to them or wish to avoid them’ (1963: 84). While developed fifty years ago we suggest that Goffman’s ‘delicate’ inattention dynamic resonates particularly with contemporary urban semi/public space and the increasingly culturally diverse populations likely to be in those. In being a practice of recognition but not reaction civil inattention directly relates to the banal (rather than celebratory) forms of multiculture that are central to current conceptualisations of conviviality (Gilroy, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Author B et al 2013).

#### *Corporate café spaces and multiculture*

The way in which franchised semi-public spaces offer and generate inattentive forms of sociality is reflected in Amanda Wise’s (2011) explorations of multiculture in Australian shopping mall food courts. Wise brings corporate space and ethnic mixing into direct focus as she examines the boundaries of what it means for food to cross between the exotic and the everyday in the food courts of suburban shopping malls. Noting the range of ethnic speciality foods consumed alongside one another, Wise observed customers ‘sitting alone but apparently enjoying the light-touch company of others occupying this public space’ (2011: 87) arguing this ‘light-touch’ sociality occurs ‘precisely because they slide beneath the “Otherness radar” of the average suburban consumer (of whatever ethnicity)’ (2011: 88). This is a slight and slow-burn multiculturalism made possible by the anonymity of the spaces. Wise connects these processes to an unfolding ‘space of hopeful encounter’ relating to both the malls and their relationship to their surrounding neighbourhood, arguing that that we should not read all chain restaurants as

essentially the same. Wise's main emphasis is on the specific foods being consumed as part of 'becoming multicultural', in a reworking of bell hooks' (1992) critique of 'eating the other' as a form of cultural appropriation.

The proximities of ethnic diversity among customers in consumer environments are also part of Elijah Anderson's (2011) work on semi-public spaces in Philadelphia. Anderson argues that the ethnic diversity of the city's Reading Terminal indoor market is distinct, since 'the many lunch counters encourage strangers to interact, as they rub shoulders while eating. At certain counters in particular, talking with strangers seems to be the norm' (2011: 34). Anderson contrasts this with experience in other urban spaces, suggesting that 'The Terminal is a neutral space in which people behave civilly, whatever their ethnicity, usually will not be scrutinised, as would likely happen in the city's ethnic neighbourhoods if an unknown person were to pass through. In these neighbourhoods taking notice of strangers is the first line of defence but the Terminal is not defended in this manner' (2011: 34). Laurier's and Philo's cafés, like Anderson's Terminal and Wise's shopping malls, are constituted locally in space and time - '*this* café in *this* neighbourhood in *this* city' (Laurier and Philo 2006a: 204, original emphasis). Each of these studies attempts to understand the relationship between the local social geographies and the micro-geographies of encounter and negotiation inside the café spaces. This relationality also shapes our own research. But unlike Wise, we are less concerned with the unspectacular consumption of 'multicultural food' than with the use of apparently homogenous spaces by multicultural populations. And unlike Anderson, we want to extend the consideration of how consumption space is shared by a variety of bounded cultural 'types', to puzzle over what it is makes the apparently bland places we have studied seem conducive to ethnic mixity, space sharing and forms of togetherness.

### **Researching living multiculture: the project**

Our focus on café spaces is part of a wider qualitative project on everyday, living multiculture that aims to *interrupt* the associations of cultural difference and

social problems through a focus on negotiation of cultural difference. Without marginalising everyday racism, exclusion and inequalities our research aims to examine micro-narratives and routine encounters of cultural difference that are part of the lives of a growing majority of people in England. Partly this is a response to the new geographies of ethnic diversity in England, in which multiculture is becoming a feature of in smaller cities and suburbs and already multicultural places have become more so. New levels of migration and migratory populations with little or no connection to previous migrants are one aspect of this (Vertovec 2007; Wessendorf 2014). Mixed ethnicity populations are also increasing and established migrant populations are becoming more socially and economically diverse and fragmented (Author B et al 2013).

Three distinct areas in England were the settings for our multi-method study: Milton Keynes, a ‘new city’ in South-East England; Oadby, a small town and now suburb of Leicester; and Hackney, a borough in North-East London. Within each place, we carried out repeated participant observations and a series of in-depth, repeated individual and group interviews with users of public parks; 6<sup>th</sup> Form and Further Education college students; members of local leisure organisations (e.g. gardening, football, coffee morning groups) as well as conducting repeated participant observations in local libraries and corporate cafes. In each area the research team, and particularly Hxxx and Kxxxx, the project’s Research Associates, conducted regular participant observation in a branch of a global café chain over a nine-month period. This ethnographic work allowed an embedded engagement with the cafés’ publics, practices, uses, atmospheres and rhythms (Cavan 1966; Laurier and Philo 2006a,b). In this article we mainly draw on our field note data but also include on some interview data. The issues of methods and the dilemmas and challenges of this qualitative approach are discussed elsewhere (Author B et al 2015).

### *The project’s geographies*

In Milton Keynes we studied a branch of McDonald’s in the city centre. Established in 1967 and Milton Keynes is a city created through in-migration (most residents

were born elsewhere in the UK and beyond) and its population growth has increasingly incorporated a growth in ethnic diversity. In the 2011 Census 26% of residents identified themselves as an ethnic group other than White British and in this way Milton Keynes can be understood as an example of a ‘newly multicultural city’. Central Milton Keynes is a series of largely indoor shopping malls, entertainment and leisure complexes, housing a range of national and global outlets. ‘Our’ McDonalds is on a busy spur of the main shopping mall, the large yellow McDonald’s ‘M’ sign visible from the outdoor market down the road. It is divided into two floors: downstairs, where orders are placed and the atmosphere is often frenetic; and upstairs, where it is usually more relaxed and leisurely though still difficult to get a table at lunchtimes and at weekends.

Oadby, effectively a suburb of Leicester, is relatively affluent and has seen immigration from within and beyond the UK, and movement of Leicester residents seeking larger homes outside the city centre and evidences the suburbanising drift of UK multiculture. The largest ethnic groups in the local authority area (Oadby and Wigston Borough) at the 2011 Census were White British (71%) and Indian (18%), though for Oadby itself the latter figure was higher. Participants spoke of Oadby ‘being village like’, having a ‘slow pace of life, nice houses and good schools’. At the heart of Oadby is the Parade, a row of traditional shops (butchers, greengrocers, pharmacist, pubs) now including the Costa Coffee café which we studied. Costa has a main room where the serving area is located with floor to ceiling windows looking onto the street and mixes dining chairs and tables with sofas and armchairs around lower tables as well as having tables outside. Imagined geographical roots of the café are evoked through sepia prints on the walls of mediaeval Italian hill towns and iconic cityscapes.

Our final setting is the London Borough of Hackney. In many ways Hackney works as an exemplar of Vertovec’s (2007) notion of super-diverse multiculture. Census data show 36% of the population identified as White British, with large proportions of Other White (16%), Black African (11%), Black Caribbean (8%) and ‘Any Other Ethnic Group’ (5%). Like Oadby and Milton Keynes, Hackney is experiencing rapid population change in terms of class and ethnicity. More recent

migrants from Eastern Europe, Central and South America and Sub-Saharan Africa are part of new population mixes, as are changing class dynamics: Hackney has some of the highest house prices in London while also having a large proportion of social housing (Jones, 2014). In Hackney we studied Nando's, a global chain chicken restaurant. It sits on a busy junction in a grand three-storey Victorian building that was once a pub. With the pub's elaborate Victorian tiling still in place Nando's both accommodates this distinctiveness and combines it with its own branding which emphasises the chain's African-Portuguese roots. Along the main road are small discount and grocery shops and Turkish and Kurdish cafes, alongside a more recent proliferation of trendier bars and cafes.

The layout and design of each café space are quite distinct. McDonald's is a classic US-style fast food space in the vein of Ritzer's (2008) description of efficient spaces to speed people through the eating process, hard seats, vivid colours and bright lighting. In contrast, Costa evokes its supposed Italian-ness and the lifestyle of European street culture, even though the core design is fast food (self-service, drinks station, minimal menu). The sofas and coffee tables are designed to flag comfort while the provision of newspapers, web access and sockets for charging appliances contribute to an environment to linger in. Nando's presents a more exoticised branding (colours, designs, spices, promoting African art), alongside the fast food elements of (semi) self-service and a menu centred on barbequed chicken. In this way Nando's and Costa explicitly flag 'ethnic' origins in a way that McDonalds does not, except in its echo of a generic 'North American' modernity. In a sense all of them are *in* place but not *of* place, expressing corporate versions of cosmopolitanism.

### **Multiculture and mix in the semi-public franchised café spaces**

What is consistently apparent in our participant observations and our fieldnotes is that the three corporate café spaces attract ethnically diverse customers. Kxxxx's description of McDonald's is a typical example of our observations of this diversity (and also captures the generational and gender mix also regularly seen in the café spaces): *three older South Asian women in headscarves [are] immediately obvious*

*in the centre of the main seating area. I took my burger upstairs and sat on the only free table I could find. I noticed a South Asian man watching as his son (?) tucked into a burger. An elderly white [English?] couple came in and sat next to them and shared a burger and fries [...], I noticed a group of girls who looked about sixteen or seventeen. They were an ethnically mixed group – two of them looked South Asian, one East Asian and the other was white [English?].* (Milton Keynes, 23rd November 2012). In all our visits, McDonald's seemed more ethnically diverse than the other cafes in central Milton Keynes, and more diverse than the population in the shopping mall in which it sits. The informality of the fast food system adds to the sense of a busy, ethnic-, gender- and age-mixed micro world of the café space conveyed here.

Although it is different in being a restaurant orientated café space Nando's conveys a very similar sense of business, informality and ethnic diversity to that in McDonald's as Kxxxx records, '*a white woman by herself eating sweetcorn and reading the Guardian, a young South Asian woman working on a laptop and a black (African-Caribbean) mother with two young sons who kept on getting up to get another drinks refill. Another woman – Turkish, I guessed – came in by herself and seemed to know the staff, going straight up and ordering without a menu and saying, 'I'll sit wherever you want me' [...] a couple of white [English] guys in business suits* (Hackney 16 August 2012). Noticeable in these field accounts is not only the cultural difference of those in the cafes, but also the mixed use of the café and, related to this, the solitary *and* sociable nature of the café population. As Laurier and Philo (2006a) and Woldorff (2013) also found, these are café spaces which people are using in multiple ways to work, escape, restore, eat, catch up, be alone, pass time. And these are part of daily routines, meaning customers become recognised and known by staff. For example, Hxxxxx observed some of this familiarity in her early morning visits to McDonald's - *at different times of day the mix of customers change – at 8 a.m., its less full but still ticking over with customers. Staff recognise regulars at these times, anticipate what they might order, sometimes have a short chat* (Milton Keynes, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2012). Laurier also (2008) discusses how café regulars provide a sense of continuity for other customers. These recognitions and exchanges mean the corporate nature of the

space becomes blended with a small-scale localism that is not dissimilar to the daily rhythms and repetitions - enactments of belonging - noted by Hall (2012: 56-60) in Nick's Caff.

Each of the café spaces we spent time in revealed the ways in which they blur the lines between leisure, work (or school), home and become part of daily routines and rituals although the regulated nature of the space is never far away. Hxxxx recorded how in Milton Keynes Macdonald's, '*many [customers] were not eating a lot [...] two black [African?] women seated at different tables both looking outside regularly towards the bus stops, and also looking around defensively, as if to tell a staff member who might challenge them that they had already finished their food.*' Ritzer (2008) discussed how part of the control of people and space in a fast food restaurant is about socialising them into the norms and requirements of the process. Ordering at the counter, self-clearing of tables, sharing tables and the like are one way that the chains keep customer numbers high and costs down by pushing the labour of serving onto the customer, but they also demand social proximity as people have to share tables with strangers, wait in queues, navigate around others, and so forth.

That those blurring work, leisure, consumption distinctions and practices are ethnically diverse creates a visibly multicultural semi-public spaces. The sharing of proximate of these, and the practices required to do so, may generate actual and/or possible social interaction and encounter with unknown, ethnically and socially different others (see also Cavan 1966). This is accentuated by the material and social closeness of the café spaces noted in Hxxx's description of Oadby's Costa, *when it is really busy, people cram together on small tables along the back where customers have to slip through narrow gaps between tables to sit down, or negotiate around small children and bags with their trays of hot drinks to find a spare seat. It's noisy, with the constant sounds of the coffee machine, steaming and grinding, the background of unchallenging pop music, and the chatter of multiple conversations all around.* Social conduct in this environment of proximate, ethnically diverse strangers (and familiars) brings Goffman's unfocussed attention strategies to mind. Civil inattention requires balance

between enough – but not too much – social notice being given to others; such interactions encourage amicable engagements which show there is ‘nothing to fear or avoid in being seen and being seen seeing and that he is not ashamed of himself or of the place and company in which he finds himself’ (1963: 84). We would suggest that the recognizable familiarities of corporate café spaces, are conducive for civil inattention in that they are non-challenging, ‘known’ gathering places. For example, the non-avoidance and measured directness necessary for civil inattention to work is apparent in the following extract from Kxxxx’s fieldnote on an early morning Costa visit:

*The background music was a mixture of Christmas and contemporary pop music. John Lennon’s ‘So This Is Christmas’ was followed by a Moby song. It was much quieter in Costa’s at that time, compared to later in the morning when it really starts to fill up with parents and babies and pensioners. The staff were chatting and laughing loudly behind the counter. They were talking to a young South Asian girl in front of me in the queue, who I think I’ve seen working there before. ‘I’m not Greek’, I heard her say, laughing. ‘I’m Asian! You’ve got the wrong continent!’ (Oadby, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2012)*

Here is a description of the thin forms of sociality that are characteristic of Oadby’s Costa café. The corporate environment (the music, the queue) and a sense of being at social comfort (chatting, laughter, banter) seem to particularly suited to the limited/light engagement demands of civil inattention. What is striking in the observation is the way in which ethnicity gets folded into these processes; ethnic identification is recognised, claimed and corrected (“I’m Asian! You’ve got the wrong continent!”) but very much within the civil inattention ‘rules’. The correcting and claiming of ethnic identity appears as banal and convivial rather than testing and sanctioning. It is also made through reference to a wider diversity (“I’m not Greek”), which chimes with Skrbis and Woodward (2007: 745) argument that ‘ordinary cosmopolitanism is [...] a negotiated frame of reference for dealing with cultural difference’. The focus on ordinariness works effectively with civil inattention because inattention demands little more than

social recognition and an unpanicked acknowledgment of the presence of diverse others within a particular setting (Goffman 1963: 86)

In the context of corporate café spaces the setting itself never disappears and there is a contradictory sense of these cafés being at once highly managed environments *and* having a relaxed informality. It is this paradox that appears to create a social confidence about being in them. The routine practices - how it works and what is on offer in franchised café spaces - are part of this confidence. This etiquette, of 'knowing what to do' does have to be learned (and we have rather comic fieldnotes of when we forgot/got confused with café systems). While regulated behaviour fits with corporate control worried over by Ritzer and others this familiarity with etiquette and café practice generates confidence in visiting and being in such spaces precisely because they are easy to know and invite in no particular crowd. Knowing the routines of a place like Nando's makes you something of a regular, and the know-how transfers to other branches irrespective of location. In this way these environments are accessible and inclusive creating senses of belonging which work through the thin social demands of civil inattention. While the corporate recognisability of these cafés delivers a packaged cosmopolitanism and regulated environment, the paradox seems to be that these are also malleable spaces defined through the behaviour of those who use them. As Cavan (1966) found in her ethnography of San Francisco bars the predictable practices and familiar rules create particular modes of belonging and an entitlement to be in them. We now consider the ways in which this intersects with multiculture and place.

### **Not all cafés are the same**

The ethnic diversity of the clientele of the chain cafés we studied did appear to contrast with other cafes in our field sites, and often in ways that sit uneasily with the critique developed by Ritzer and others in their call for resistance to the McDonaldization. While our research did not intend to be comparative the distinctions between the corporate café spaces and local, independent café

spaces became apparent both from our participant observation and also in our interviews with participants. While we asked about place we did not ask about café use specifically in our interviews but participants did, nevertheless, talk about the role of cafés as social spaces in their localities. For example, in both a group interview with park users and another with 6<sup>th</sup> Form students in Oadby, participants spoke of how pleased they were to have a Costa on the Parade and how much friendlier it was compared to the other local cafés. In our café time in Oadby we observed a broad but consistent difference between an older and mostly white café population in the more obviously ‘local’ cafes compared to the younger and more ethnically diverse population in Costa. Sxxxxx’s fieldnotes describe some of this difference between the cafes,

*I'm so happy to see the Costa as it is raining and cold [...] Hxxxxx hasn't arrived yet so I order a coffee – there is a bit of a queue and there is a conversation between us all about the weather and how horrible it is. A Muslim woman about my age chats to one of the two staff behind the counter and two young women – both South Asian, about 18 or 19 – debate what to have to drink. As I look round [...] I see people reading newspapers, an older white (English?) man on his phone, a black woman (African/African-Caribbean?) is busy on her laptop and there are a young white (English) couple talking on one of the squashy sofas. There is music on and an atmosphere of general comfort and shelter from the weather [...Later] we go to a small café which is quite sweet and much smaller than Costa, but with a few little tables and a nice lunch menu but it is quiet – no music – and completely empty apart from me and Hxxxxx. There is just one person serving. There are the same posters and adverts on the notice board [as in Costa]. As we finish our lunch – talking in hushed tones as it is so quiet – an older white (English) man and woman (a couple?) come in for lunch too. But other than them no one else comes. (Oadby, November 2012).*

While the contrasts between the scale and interior design of the two café spaces and the ethnic and age diversity/non-diversity, business/emptiness, noise/quiet are all obvious in this note it the way in which these accumulate into a distinction between the familiar, ‘brand atmosphere’ of Costa and the unfamiliar ‘teashop atmosphere’ of the small café that is striking. The small café with its ‘teashop’ associations resonates with some participants’ village visions of Oadby and in this way the small, local café can be seen as having a particular social (‘villagey’) and spatial (of Oadby) character.

The way in which place and geography is inflected in the types of café spaces was as apparent in Hackney and Milton Keynes. In Milton Keynes the consistently mixed and ethnically diverse population of McDonald’s was more evident than in some of the other chain cafés that make up the majority of central city’s ‘café landscape’. For example, in the department store cafés in John Lewis and Marks and Spencer’s there was a different population which was mostly older and not as ethnically diverse. While we have observed how the project’s particular geographies and the nature/imaginings of places was inflected in local cafescapes it is clear that class, taste and generation can be read into these patterns too, although corporate branding can obscure obvious class delineations. These class-taste convergences were most explicit in Hackney where the differences between café populations are particularly distinct.

Some of this difference seems to reflect the complexities of the population and rapid processes of gentrification in the borough (Butler 1997; Wright 2009; Jones 2014). While rising house prices and competitive school places are key gentrification indicators the social changes are very immediately visible in the proliferation of independent bars, cafes and restaurants that have appeared in Hackney’s streets and these were an on-going part of our conversations with participants in Hackney. Participants expressed an intense awareness of how the area was changing, often accompanied by anxiety about the implications. This excerpt from our interview with a Hackney creative writers’ group that the project worked with – a socially and ethnically very diverse group whose members nearly all had long-term connections to Hackney - represents this sense of displacement experienced through the lens of café spaces. This conversation involves Muna (a

young South Asian woman), Tristan (a middle aged African-Caribbean man) and Solomon (a young Black African man):

*Muna: [...] you know what I want to make a little comment about all these dinky little cafes that are springing up and I kind of feel, “Mm, what’s that about?” Just like – maybe this is the reverse of the betting shops [laughter - there had been a long conversation about betting shops in poor areas of the city]*

*Tristan: One extreme to another.*

*Muna: Yeah, but the little dinky cafes that spring up all over the place. Even if I’m feeling thirsty I think, “Oh let me just go in and” – I just kind of feel – I haven’t been into one of them yet (laughs), put it that way. I just kind of thought, “Oh who are they kind of – who are their/*

*Solomon: /Their target audience?*

*Muna: Yeah their clientele. Who are they really targeting? Maybe it’s just me, but you know that’s how I feel [...]*

*Tristan: [...] it’s like every month there’s a new coffee shop opening and from Upper Clapton Road going down towards Lower Clapton past Lea Bridge Road past a roundabout it’s like I don’t know, three or four coffee shops. And Dalston, just before Dalston Kingsland Station, you’ve got like six lined up and I just think, “Why do you need so many coffee shops?” And again my question is, “Who are they targeting?” because it seems as if it’s a very niche thing where the people that are opening them are not local people, they’re people coming in from the area and they seem to be targeting their friends and their demographic and this is quite worrying (Hackney, August 2013).*

We quote this conversation at length because of the strong sense of exclusion, of being on on the outside of the ‘dinky cafes’, that is conveyed. Muna’s description of ‘feeling thirsty’ yet unable or unwilling to go into one of the cafes is both poignant and striking. Her struggle to articulate what is actually stopping her underlines the experience of discomfort and exclusion. Class is part of this and is also there in Muna’s description of the dinky café phenomenon as being the opposite of betting shops (reaffirmed by Tristan). Similarly, the group’s pre-occupation and repeated questioning of ‘who the cafes are for’ and Tristan’s detailed, micro mapping of the rapidity of the spread of cafes across the borough collapses class into particular taste as well as localist distinctions (Bourdieu 1984; Savage et al 2013) - the cafes are described as ‘very niche’ and for ‘not-Hackney’ locals for example. This is an account in which Hackney’s new, independent cafes are part of the borough’s social polarisations but it also shows how the character, image and ‘knowing’ a café may work as culture and taste markers sifting and generating (self-)selective populations (Hall 2012: 102).

It is these taste and elective dynamics that make the new café spaces in Hackney and independent café spaces in Oadby more exclusive and distinct from the corporate openness and familiarity of franchised cafés. Despite being local they do not have the embedded localism of Nick’s Caff nor do they have the accessibility generated through the known etiquette in Cavan’s San Francisco bars.

But there were also contradictions and complexities about perceptions and affection of and for the notion of the local. In the Hackney creative writing group there was opposition to chains and brands as well as the critique of the new independent cafes. This local=good is a familiar narrative and we did spend time observing some of the more community-orientated independent café spaces in Hackney. Despite what might be described as their ‘sympathetic localism’ these café spaces did not have same significant levels of ethnic diversity that Nando’s or Costa managed to attract. For example, in Hxxxxx’s fieldnotes of a community-orientated space, where the manager had explained to Hxxxxx and Sxxxxx that he explicitly targeted the broad range of Hackney’s population and as part of this was

committed to 'keeping [the cost of] a cup of tea under a pound' the café population still tended towards a less ethnically diverse user population,

*In the leaflets in the entrance hall I noticed a ... large sign about infant and toddler activities with an image of a brown cartoon woman and child; and various leafleted activities included a box for 'theatre and accent reduction lessons'. Also present, among dog-walking and tai chi/spirituality, was a glossy leaflet for 'a most curious wedding fair' advertised with a white hipster bride and groom [...] and a photocopied flyer for Folk Dancing, 'English and International Dances for the over 50s' at Stamford Hill Library...The two (Turkish?) waitresses are the only visible ethnic minority people [...] All the customers I see are white,*  
(January 2013)

In Ritzer's (2006) terms this café space would epitomise the 'de-McDonaldization' of society – localised, community embedded, caring. Yet, in our observations, it did not appear to be able to generate the 'hopeful encounter' across difference that Wise (2011) sees as a possibility of consumption spaces and nor did it exhibit the intensely localised inclusion of Nick's Caff in which 'long standing' and 'enduring relationships had been made between the proprietor and customers and where there was a 'high correlation between regular customers and local residents (Hall 2012: 103). Our purpose here is not to simplify or over-claim the inclusive diversity of franchised café spaces but to reflect on why and in what ways the geographies of the corporate consumer spaces may be of particular value for understanding mixing and social interactions in contexts of contemporary urban multiculturalism.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Semi-public franchised café spaces demand attention as elective leisure sites in which there are significant levels of locally-configured ethnic diversity, in contrast to their apparent homogeneity as corporate globalised non-spaces. As in earlier

work (Author B et al 2013) and like Wessendorf (2014) and Byrne and de Tona (2013: 3) we suggest that the ‘placing of a study’ is critical for understanding the nature of social interactions, mixings, everyday experiences and practices. We have argued, through our attention to distinct contexts and different geographies, that the standardisation and homogeneity of local corporate consumer spaces allow people to fill them with their own uses and meanings, which might be inflected by, but are not necessarily determined by, ethnic or national identities. Like Anderson’s (2011) Reading Terminal Market and Wise’s (2011) shopping mall we observed ethnically diverse populations using the same spaces in what appear to be relaxed, mostly unfocussed, inattentive ways - sharing tables, striking up spontaneous, sometimes amicable conversations in the queue to order, or with the staff or at the self-clearing points. In contrast to Anderson’s study, the interactions we observed were not primarily framed as performances of ethnic mixing across pre-defined boundaries; unlike Wise’s study, the spaces we researched were not defined by diverse cultural origins of the foods consumed in them, but by the ways that apparently bland spaces were reconfigured as available for diverse users. The familiarity and homogeneity of the cafés’ layout, menus, and expected practices make it possible for a range of uses to be projected onto them. They act in this way for people of multiple ethnicities, with multiple migratory histories, of different class and life course positions and across gender. The regularity and standardisation of corporate cafés allow them to function as ‘open’ to *confident* use in a way that more boutique, specifically ‘ethnic’ or intensely ‘local’ consumption spaces may not.

The slight sociality which franchised café space require - and expect - can be effectively understood through Goffman’s (1963) notion of civil inattention highlighting as it does ‘courtesy’ and social ‘delicacy’ on the one hand but necessarily limited attention giving on the other. This approach to practices of being public easily transfers to how proximate sharings of tables and sofas, queueing, lingering and familiarity of brand are managed. The ethnically mixed population of the corporate café spaces we observed suggest that corporate leisure environments are particularly conducive to this level of unfocussed

interaction – there is awareness of difference and there may be visual and verbal connections made between others – the “I’m Asian not Greek” banter in Oadby Costa for example - but these are generally of the moment and undemanding. As with Skrbis and Woodward’s (2007) ‘ordinary cosmopolitanism’ and Wessendorf’s (2014) ‘commonplace diversity’ civil inattention allows cultural difference to be acknowledged and accommodated with superficial levels of engagement but without avoidance or sanction. In this way civil inattention also segues into Gilroy’s ‘convivencia’ reading of conviviality in which culturally different populations ‘live together’ not without tensions but with a ‘creative and intuitive capacity’ to negotiate them (2006a: 6). There are limits to what a small-scale set of observations can claim but our research does evidence particular patterns within the specific settings in which we were located. While Valentine (2013) reminds us that urban encounters are unlikely to penetrate into private or interior worlds we suggest, following Goffman, the public behaviour is itself significant because it is how and where social life is experienced and managed. Giving attention to ‘the patterning of ordinary social contacts’ (Goffman 1963: 4) allows insight into the forms of social conduct for being in gathering places, sharing these with ethnically diverse strangers and managing the cultural difference of these.

Finally, our exploration has been of quite a different type of consumer multiculture to that of ‘eating’ or ‘consuming the other’ (hooks 1992; Hage 1997) as part of a conscious, cosmopolitan cultural capital. As we have argued, the commodification of cosmopolitan aesthetic is not necessarily absent in such spaces. Coffee chains play on a Europeanised sophistication or North American walk-and-talk culture, while chains like Nando’s and McDonald’s have explicitly used the idea of urban, diverse and multicultural clientele as part of their marketing strategies (see Sawyer 2010). These are marketing strategies that are aimed at and rely on a multiplicity of consumers; though they could be interpreted as packaging the bodies of some ‘othered’ fellow-consumers as an opportunity for would-be consumers to gain multicultural capital by rubbing shoulders in the burger queue. Despite this lingering ambivalence, there is something distinct in these chain cafes from the *eating* of the other. The

experience of sharing space with ‘others’, who are also part of a shared same, can (contra Ritzer) be enabling. The brand might or might not be about cosmopolitan consumption, but the experience is of un-claimed space, where food, time and space can be shared with an unfocussed conviviality – together and alone at once.

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