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

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The difference that place makes to understanding the nature of social relations has had an 'on-off' presence in research on ethnicity and migration (Neal et al 2013). 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 which 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 multicultural and green public spaces**

The Living Multiculture research project is organized around a bundle of interconnective puzzles that emerge from our interest in the changing geographies of diversity in England since 2000 (see Neal 2009; Neal et al. 2013). These changes are a result of complex, highly diverse migrations as well as reflecting the social shifts that have taken place within established migrant and minority ethnic communities as well as majority communities (Office for National Statistics 2012). In short, ethnicity in England is becoming more spatially and socially diverse and in some urban areas to the extent that Vertovec's (2007) description of this as 'super diversity' has become a widely used descriptor of the more complex 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 possibilities of convivial encounter (e.g. Gilroy 2004; Wise 2009; Askins and Pain 2011; Wilson 2011), drawn attention to the emergence of the unpanicked, ordinary or 'commonplace' nature of contemporary multiculturalism (e.g. Wessendorf 2010) and to the ways in which culturally mixed populations develop competencies (see Wise 2009; Neal and Vincent 2013) identifying

what Richard Sennett (2012:6) has called 'skilled co-operation' to manage, and even thrive, in increasingly heterogeneous urban environments. Our approach recognises that tensions and joys exist in everyday complex diversity but emphasises multiculturalism as the ordinary 'is' of social relations rather than as 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 is 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 is 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 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 often very different populations may 'come together'. As the Commission of Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) argue that, '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 and longstanding set of debates regarding the importance of public space for the flourishing of democratic, representative, heterogeneous cities (Young 1990; Sennett 2000; Mitchell 1995, 2003; Iveson 2007). Iris Marion Young notes that 'city dwelling situates one's own activity in relation to a horizon of a vast variety of other activity (1990: 238); Sophie Watson (2006: 6) argues it is in these public spaces that pluralities and differences are 'negotiated with civility, urbanity and understanding'; and John 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 basis of informal and loosely organized mutual interests such as playing football' (2009: 489).

These debates highlight 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 Mitchell (1995) rarely talks about the park environment itself. In short, 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) engagement with the notion of enchanted and magical urban public spaces offers a helpful way forward for thinking about the interdependencies between public spaces and social dynamics and interactions, reminding us that 'contra Habermas and others, the public is not just about 'talk', it concerns bodies and their micro-movements' (2006: 6). This

echoes the emphasis that NRT thinking has given to practices, emotions, to the more-than-human and to multi-sensory worlds (Thrift 2007; Lorimer 2008). Goodall et al (2008: 181) touch on similar 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 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 builds 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 (Rishbeth 2006; Goodall et al 2008; Neal 2009) as well as wider work on ethnicity and the countryside (Neal and Agyeman 2006).

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, Ravenscroft'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. Some care is needed, then, 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. 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 capable of generating social and emotional - as well as place - connections. They are able to 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 super-diversity**

### *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 to each of the parks.

In each park we worked with a group of ethnically diverse participants. We (briefly) introduce 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 Oadby 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 which do the opposite 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 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 the notion that there are stable, uncontested national,

white identities against which the unstable, contested identities of migrant and black and minority ethnic communities are identified. They work as shorthand for stressing all identifications are contested, partial, 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 CABE (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 CABE 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 notes that, '*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 [I] noticed a [...] group of older South Asian woman in glittering saris sitting on a picnic blanket and clearly enjoying themselves*'.

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. Fussy 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 [...]. (12<sup>th</sup> 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 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?* (Hannah's fieldnotes, Springfield Park 1<sup>st</sup> 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 intense familiarity; spaces which participants felt they knew intimately through the repeated, routine of 'being in' them. Having favourite walks, much visited 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 physically challenging exercise to people going simply to relax, sit and be alone. But these practices have a rhythm and a repetition to them that can produce place confidence as well as affection and recognitions. 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. Aw, 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 fieldnote description 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 (Hannah's 26<sup>th</sup> 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, playing with their children. 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 (22<sup>nd</sup> 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) arguments of enchantments that ordinary urban spaces can generate. 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.

Some of this mixing and interaction – living side-by-side and negotiating space – happened in more organized park based group activities. For the project Katy joined the popular, ethnically mixed 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', tells me that she got my messages; 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, has croup. As we run back round towards the car park we start to warm down, do stretching exercises. Lou talks about arranging a Christmas do for Fitness Campers (15<sup>th</sup> October 2012)*

While the ethnic diversity of the group is apparent in 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 convivial sociality.

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 may. 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 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 and are shaped by often 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 were not specifically or explicitly ethnically inscribed affections but occurred across ethnicity as well as facilitating place and community belongings amongst newly migrant, never migrant, once migrant participants. This makes the emotional content of participants’ accounts important. Some of these convergences can be heard in the interview with Fahad, who had

recently moved to Oadby, is of South Asian origin and runs one of the football groups in Knighton Park:

Fahad: I mean, 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, the environment and sociality become bundled together and generate a strong sense of belonging. And for Grace too, while her relation to Springfield Park is marked by longevity, her affection also relates to the Park as an ongoing relationship and a social 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 actually... 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 there.

In both these extracts there is a joining-up of parks, place and community but it is the emotional intensity of this – for both Fahad and Grace, it is the choice of love to describe the park spaces that stands out. 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 [...] Um, I've known that park for 40... 43 years [Laughter]*

*Sarah: So it's a special... 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 ('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'. The evocative power of the park materialities stand out – the buttercups, the field – as does the tree in Gabriella's account. The tree in Gabriella's narrative was also described by many in the Springfield Park interviews as 'special' or as their 'favourite tree'.

While Pat, Grace and Gabriella has well-established relationships with their parks Lucy, a young Indonesian-English woman, who has only lived in Hackney for three years had only recently 'discovered' Springfield Park but also loved this tree and spoke of the contradiction of Springfield Park feeling to 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 does 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, informal election 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 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 is 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 the extent to which these 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 was 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 practices - the spread of picnic groups and dog 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 debates of encounter and debates of 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 and green urban spaces parks in particular 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 suggested that park spaces are particularly adept at 'bringing together' multicultural populations because their materialities generate emotions and animate social practices that increase possibilities of encounter, contact and sharing. These affective encounters were expressed around the sharing of the park space, and sometimes the ethnic mixity of the park spaces was explicitly valued and celebrated and part of participant's affections, as Akash's, Grace's and Lucy's accounts show.

However, we also suggest that understandings of encounter these can be extended through a focus not so much on actual interactions and dialogue between ethnically diverse populations and any potentially transformative possibilities of such contact but more on the routine, repeated use and being in parks which generated senses of familiarity and affection for those park spaces. 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 the ways in which they are used. Like buses, streets, shops and shopping centres and so on parks are routinely engaged with multicultural public spaces in urban environments. 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 enchanting and comforting 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 and even sinister spaces and landscapes (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 the 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' nature of contemporary multiculturalism but also to place. In Springfield and Knighton Parks in particular the ethnic diversity of those using the park spaces was established, unremarkable and commonplace (Wessendorf 2010). This would seem reflective of the super-diverse and suburban multicultural geographies that these parks were located within. Ethnic difference in the park populations in Milton Keynes was less an established and more of an emergent ordinariness reflecting a mix of the more recent migrant and newly multicultural identity of the city but also the city's generally smaller park population, the 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 and emphasised the ways in which the research process and research findings are not easily disentangled. 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 writes of how, when she is walking through Springfield Park, past some of the landmarks that have come up in the interviews – the hilly slope, a pathway, a set of trees – and the stories that participants have been told us about Springfield Park swim into her 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 (participant observation, one-to-one walking interviews, repeated group interviews) is an attempt to respond to this. In particular it was 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 the contact and coming together that testifies to the ways in which the research process has 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 – an affable 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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<sup>i</sup> **Living Multiculture: the new geographies of ethnicity and the changing formations of multiculturalism in England** is a two-year ESRC (ES/J007676/1) funded project exploring everyday negotiations of social life in three differently multicultural places. Details of the project can found at [www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/living-multiculture/](http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/living-multiculture/)