

**Gathering Kilburn: The everyday production of community  
in a diverse London neighbourhood**



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Declaration:

*This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.*

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*It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Archaeology and Anthropology Degree Committee.*

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The view down the Kilburn High Road

## Introduction: Community in 21<sup>st</sup> Century London

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Thirty years after British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously declared “there is no such thing as society.” (The Guardian 2013) concern over social cohesion in Britain has returned with force.

“Britain is more and more often portrayed as a broken society” write Flint and Robertson (2008: 1).

They continue:

“Politicians, religious leaders, media commentators and academics appear increasingly convinced that the social cement that binds local and national social systems is crumbling, and that the established standards and values for maintain civic order are collapsing around



us. The demise of community is presumed, by Left and Right alike, to be the key driver of this breakdown in society.”

This portrait continues to ring true. Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron ran two successful election campaigns appealing to British citizens to turn towards their local communities, which collectively comprised what he called “the big society”. His successor, Theresa May, has continued this rhetoric, appealing to a “shared society [...] built on the bonds of family, community and citizenship” (May 2017). Prior to Cameron, the idea of “community cohesion” formed the central pillar of the Labour government’s approach to addressing diversity, ethnicity and race (Worley 2005).

Such calls for a renewed project of community building are often framed in response to the perceived failures of “official multiculturalism” (Featherstone et al. 2012; Worley 2005). Policies that served to recognise the differential positions of racial and ethnic groups have come to be seen as producing a segregated country, by valorising difference and disincentivising integration. Following the 2001 Oldham and Bradford riots, where tensions between sizable “Asian” and “White British” communities came to a violent head, the Cattle report (in)famously declared that Britain had become a nation of segregated communities living “parallel lives” (Cattle 2001; 2004). Following the 7/7 terror attacks, Trevor Philips, the then head of the Commission for Radical Equality declared: “We are sleepwalking our way to segregation. We are becoming strangers to each other and leaving communities to be marooned outside the mainstream.” (quoted in Brown and Judd 2005). Such declarations have influentially shaped policy agendas and have set the tone of media discourse around diversity (Holohan 2014; Richardson 2004; Sian et al 2012).

Yet this problematizing of multiculturalism relies on two seemingly contradictory notions of community. Community is used both to refer to purportedly bounded ethnic groups, marked by difference and living segregated lives, and to the vision of citizens coming together across difference to rebuild “social cohesion”. It may well be that the latter calls for community cohesion are simply a means of disguising demands for the assimilation of minorities, without addressing the inequalities in power and wealth which produce marginality (Back et al. 2002; Lentin 2012; Robinson 2005 Worley 2005), and as such the latter notion of community is merely political subterfuge. Even if this is true, however, it leaves a lingering problem with our understanding of community, where it is used both to refer to discrete groups, marked by difference, as well as the prospect of coming together across such difference.

It is clear that the idea of community has become a persistent fascination in the UK, for policy makers, the mass media, and the broader public alike (Delanty 2013). Yet, despite its common-sense

connotations, it is much less clear what exactly community ought to entail, and particularly how it is meant to relate to diversity. This thesis seeks to unpack the intersection of these two terms, community and diversity, as understood and lived by residents in the super-diverse (Vertovec 2007) London neighbourhood of Kilburn. In particular, it asks: What do residents of Kilburn imagine community to entail, within their everyday lives? What forms of diversity do they think of as salient, and how do they see community as relating to such diversity?

My argument is here is that these two guises of community – as a marker of difference and as a uniting collectivity – are, in fact, two sides of a single coin. Rather than one eroding the other, as popular discourse would have it, when it comes to the ways in which Kilburn's residents imagine and seek to shape community the two are co-constitutive. As such, community emerges as a *space*, where the marking of certain differences as definitive of community allow community members to overlook other forms of difference, and to collectively renegotiate their meanings. Here, I refer to the aspect of community defined by marking symbolic boundaries as *fixity*, whereas I term the opening up of (other) meanings which this facilitates as *fluidity*. What I found was that, across its diversity, a vision of community created in the balance between these two aspects was widely articulated and valued by Kilburn's residents, albeit in a range of different guises. Moreover this was a vision that was often *set against* official discourses of community and the programmes to which they were tied – which often aimed to de-link these two aspects, or render them oppositional. As such, I also witnessed community as something which people had to *struggle* to achieve. In a context where signs and resources were constantly subject to competing claims, community members struggled both to fix certain meanings as definitive and to ensure other meanings were left open for negotiation.

## **Community and its discontents**

Discussing community may seem misguided in this day and age. Over the last few decades, scholars have developed three broad critiques challenging the relevance of community, either as a theoretical concept or as an empirically observable facet of life. The first of these is that community, as a social form, has radically declined. The second is that notions of community are ambiguous and of little analytical utility. The third is that notions of community are overly loaded and thus fail to capture the complexities of collective life and group formation, particularly within diverse areas. Influenced by such critiques, scholars have advanced a range of alternative terms that seek to recapture valuable elements within understandings of community.

I find these critiques and alternative terms valuable but, as I hope to show, they are not exhaustive. My argument here is that, taken together, these critiques and conceptual alternatives provide an

intellectual foundation for *rethinking* rather than jettisoning our notion of community. Indeed, as Delanty (2013) has noted, Euro-American understandings of community have been closely connected to scholarly framings of the concept for over a century, blurring the line between everyday and analytical usages. In this section, I survey these scholarly approaches to community with a view to better conceptualizing its persistent everyday use in Kilburn.

### *Decline*

Within the UK, the story of community decline has been most influentially told in terms of a tension between the notions of social cohesion and segregation. This narrative, central to the *Cantle Report* (2001) and its successors (Cantle 2004; Casey 2016), pits the ethnically-defined sub-communities produced and valorised by official multiculturalism against the possibility of social cohesion built around common values (c.f. Antonsich 2016). As Bagguley and Hussain (2006) point out, the distinction between (supposedly) segregated ethnic communities and a (potentially) cohesive national community only works when segregation is framed as a matter of individual choice, rather than as the product of inequalities associated with racial and class positions. Treating choice as more determinate than inequality becomes possible because the concept of social cohesion draws on an imagined ideal of rural community, where residence, employment and leisure were spatially coterminous (ibid), thus allowing proponents to imagine social cohesion as a precondition for overcoming inequality. Thus Cantle (2001: 13) argues that community cohesion generates: “common values and a civic culture”, “social solidarity and reduction in wealth disparities” and “place attachment and identities”; provides “social order and social control”; and creates “social networks and social capital”. Here, communities emerge as the site for social life writ large, meaning that “social cohesion requires that participation extends across the confines of local communities, knitting them together into a wider whole.” (Ferlander and Timms, quoted in Cantle 2001: 70).

Even more exemplary of the narrative of decline is Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2001). Despite its suggestive subtitle – “the collapse and revival of American community” – in the text Putnam uses the idea of social capital, rather than community, to bear the conceptual weight of the decline he wants to discuss. Putnam marshals a staggering array of evidence to argue that a wide range of communal activities – from volunteering in schools, to religious participation, to socialization with friends – are on the decline, which might be understood as a loss of social capital. Meanwhile, although he refers to community as the “conceptual cousin” of social capital (ibid: 21), it remains undefined throughout the work. However, his usage of the term, in phrases like “community engagement”, “community commitments”, “community life” and, of course, “community decline” suggests that he sees it as a sort of container for the sweeping range of activities that are generative

of social capital. In later work, Putnam (2007: 138) places at least some of the blame for this decline on proliferating diversity, arguing that, “in the short to medium run [...] immigration and ethnic diversity challenge social solidarity and inhibit social capital” (although he notes a long-term gain). Again, community in this work has a slippery presence, seeming to both be synonymous with solidarity and social capital and to act as the geographic or social container within which such goods can be found and measured.

This narrative of community decline, driven especially by increasing diversity, has been criticized as falsely nostalgic and deeply exclusionary (see below). Nonetheless, many classic ethnographies of London provide first-hand accounts attesting to community decline. Cornwell (1984) argues that the idea of a cohesive community embedded within society was largely a product of post-war propaganda. However, within the neighbourhood of Bethnal Green, this view had become naturalized, so that residents’ views of community were largely expressed through a nostalgic discourse of loss, and contrasted to the diversity of the present which has eroded such community. Such nostalgia, locating community within an imagined history of ethnic homogeneity and close relations between families and neighbours was also a central theme in Young and Willmott’s famous study of Tower Hamlets (1957), and especially in the follow-up study taken on by Young (Dench et al. 2011). Others have presented a more complicated picture. For instance, the work of Sandra Wallman in Battersea (1981; 1984) likewise presents a situation where cohesion is highly valued, but where insider/outsider status was ascribed on the basis of length of residency and the nature of one’s local relations. As such, diversity was seen as troubling only insofar as it was unintegrated into such relations. Even here, however, difference was embraced within a framework of tolerance that privileged local political traditions and identifications which may have been less accessible to certain minorities. Reviewing classic British community studies, Wessendorf (2014a: 36) argues that they saw “tensions between ethnic groups” as arising “out of a history of competition over resources, disadvantage, racism and the creation of a discourse of who belongs and who does not.” Finally, more recently, Evans (2007), working in Bermondsey, has shown the persistence of such localized discourses of belonging and nostalgia for a vision of homogenous community past. In Evans’ study the intractability of class exclusion for white residents of Bermondsey is translated into a belief that racial differences – which are seen both as personally divisive and as implicated in the competition for state recognition and resources – are irreconcilable. Such works reveal the everyday persistence of the notion of community, largely articulated in terms of loss and decline.

Meanwhile other ethnographers narrate a post-decline moment, where London lives are defined only in terms of highly fragmentary, individual-level differences. London, argues Gidley (2013: 368),

is a place where “parallel perspectives, often utterly incommensurate, multiply”, evoking a sense of sweeping potential for living otherwise, produced through ongoing encounters with difference (Sandercock and Lyssiotis 2003; Sennett 1970; Young 1990). The result is the production of increasingly fragmentary difference.

Albrow (1997: 93) writes of the London neighbourhood of Tooting as a place where “Individuals with very different lifestyles and social networks can live in close proximity without untoward interference with each other.” Similarly, in a “North London neighbourhood” Miller (2001) stresses the individuating effects of urban experience, emphasizing how intimate personal projects of self-realization and family care can often be at odds with broader projects of community belonging (see also Miller 2008; Van Leeuwen 2010). Dürrschmidt (2003) challenges ideas that lives in the metropolis might be neatly circumscribed or governed within simple categories, not least due to the proliferation of meaning and experience that comes with diversity in the global city. He claims that this is a part of a historical shift where:

the metropolis as a centre of gravity of a large social universe [...] has started to scramble over the last three decades [...] Thus, we no longer think of the metropolis as an autonomous self-governing polity but rather as an urban agglomeration that is shaped by forces beyond its control. (ibid: 8)

Tracing the complex routes followed by the life stories of eight Londoners, he concludes that these stories “stress the individual’s effort to re-appropriate meaning and familiarity in a world that is seemingly escaping their control, and highlight the biography as the primary frame of reference for generating and structuring lived space.” (ibid: 17) If community remains within such depictions, it is “a vision of community that is about movement and combination” where “patchwork is the key trope of togetherness and collective identity,” bringing together archipelagic subjectivities, into partial collectivities (Coleman 2009: 772; c.f. Boellstorff 2005).

Although these various narratives of community decline vary significantly in terms of the causes and mechanics they posit, there are also certain commonalities, which point to community as a particular Euro-American idea which might be explored ethnographically. On one hand, community is cast as encompassing a wide range of social relations, activities and experiences. Even if the particulars shift across accounts, a highly diverse range of things are imagined to be contained within the idea of community. At the same time, diversity might also be capable of *threatening* community, precisely by eluding such containment. What I find useful here, and what I will return to, is the idea which emerges of community as a container, *as something encompassing*, capable of collecting

together various facets of social life and uniting them under a common aegis, while at the same time clearly being contingent in its ability to do so.

### *Ambiguity*

A second charge against community posits that the term is too ambiguous to have analytical utility. In 1955 George Hillery famously surveyed 94 academic definitions of community and concluded only that “all of the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis, there is no agreement.” (Hillery 1955: 22). Raymond Williams (1985) notes a long and complex history of usage, stretching back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century that has resulted in community coming to refer to a wide range of relationships. The only thing defining community, he suggests, is its “warmly persuasive” tone, which evokes a vague sense of “direct common” concern between individuals (ibid: 76).

Academics have long endeavoured to combat this conceptual chaos, either by arguing for precise definitions or for the dismissal of the term (e.g. Clark 1973; Plant 1978; respectively). However, as Anthony Cohen (2008) has noted, perennial attempts to either clarify the definition of or else abandon community have achieved neither, and the term has persisted despite its confusion. This history has imbued the term with a range of often-contradictory connotations, including “harmony, homogeneity, autonomy, immediacy, locality, morality, solidarity and identity” (Creed 2006: 5) any of which might be evoked in a particular context. As such some anthropologists have come to dismiss community as too “vague, too variable in its applications and definitions to be of much utility as an analytical tool” (Amit 2002: 13; c.f. Baumann 1996). However, for other anthropologists, argues Creed, this conceptual slipperiness allows community to be used to smuggle in implications of group boundedness or coherence, without making such implications overt and open to contestation. As such, Creed ties the critique of ambiguity, to that of loadedness (below).

Again, however, such critiques may productively be read as pointing to an important *property* of community as an emic term – in this case, its *fluidity*. If, as above, community might be seen as an encompassing space, then what these critiques suggest is that the constituent elements or properties of this space are not vital to its construction. By dint of community’s status as *an encompassing space* it is able to collect a range of different elements, and – at least discursively – bring them into relation. As such, elements which may seem to be in tension *outside* of community – such as say, cohesion and autonomy – might be brought into harmony *within* community by dint of their encompassment. Critics have effectively argued that such encompassment is analytically disingenuous. What I will argue, however, is that in everyday life, such discursive encompassment enables people to rethink the relationships between various people and ideas, rendering them fluid and up for negotiation.

### *Loadedness*

A third set of critiques charge the idea of community with being loaded with a set of strong suppositions, which then essentialize those groups described as communities. Such critiques have been directed at community both as an analytical concept and as a social ideal. Critics have argued that notions of community serve to deny in-group difference whilst reifying inter-group divisions, and that they are often used to facilitate particular forms of state and market-driven governance.

Creed (2006) traces a conceptual genealogy of scholarly uses of community back through the early Chicago School Sociologists to Tönnies' famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (c.f. Delanty 2013). For the Chicago School, the idea of community was constructed as a countervailing ideal to the perceived anomie of urban life, and thus came to be imagined as a lost rural setting where values, norms and commerce were embedded in contiguous social relations, characterised by harmony, solidarity and cohesion. Creed argues that both this imagined rural ideal, and its implicit positive valuation, remain pervasive if latent within contemporary understandings of community. Those who don't fit this nostalgic vision of authentic relations are often excluded from understandings of community.

Iris Marion Young (1986; 1990) provides an especially vocal critique of the enduring vision of cohesive community, arguing that even liberal notions of community which claim to encompass diversity and accommodate personal freedom, end up denying difference. Imagining community in terms of close inter-personal connection, she argues, expresses "a desire for selves that are transparent to one another" (1986: 300). This frames distance or misunderstanding between subjects a problem in need of correction. Analytically and politically, this prompts a search for social closure, and the denial of distance, mediation or detachment as forms of relationship in their own right (c.f. Yarrow et al. 2015; Van Leeuwen 2010). Within anthropology, this has been most prominently theorized by Nigel Rapport (1993; 1997; 2012), who has forcibly argued that individual subjectivity continually transcends the grasp of collective identities or even shared language. As such, he advocates for an emancipatory politics where this excess is given space to be lived.

Meanwhile, Amit (2002) has emphasized that just as ideas of community as organic units of solidarity may deny intra-group difference, so too might they exaggerate inter-group distinctiveness and boundedness. She suggests that community is often used in this way, even when deployed in contexts of mobility and change. Back (2009) and Howard-Hassmann (1993) both tie this group essentialism to nostalgia, arguing that community allows for the imagination of pure group identities by locating them in a mythical past from which the present has deviated.

Alleyne (2002) has argued that such discourses of community serve to reify minority and migrant groups as internally homogenous and externally distinctive. As such, they emerge as governable populations, distinct from the main national body (c.f. Hall 1996). For Rose (1999: 167), contemporary community is framed as “a natural, extra-political zone of human relations” between the individual and the state, functioning as “a moral field binding persons into durable relations”. The invocation of such community as the natural site of social life ties the ability to access public resources to the condition of participation in such communities – turning communities into sites of power relations, where self-responsible citizens can be formed.

Others have suggested that the ability of community to create governable populations is often appropriated by activists themselves. Cohen (1985), himself drawing on Barth (1969) has highlighted competition for resources and political legitimacy as central motivations for the invocation of community, while also noting that such invocation may help forge a sense of commonality amongst otherwise heterogeneous group members. This approach has come to be taken up by a range of scholars who have argued that the persistent invocation of community constitutes a form of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 2010), whereby groups appropriate the terms of governmental practices, both in order to direct and shape these practices, and to mobilize otherwise disparate populations.

This is the approach taken by what is arguably the nearest work to this thesis, Gerd Baumann’s *Contesting Culture* (1996). Looking at the London neighbourhood of Southall, Baumann’s concern is how Southall’s diverse residents, many hailing from across the Caribbean and South Asia, conceptualize their group identity. He identifies a dominant discourse where groups are defined in terms of bounded communities each possessing distinct cultures. However, he also highlights a local demotic discourse where the boundaries of culture and community are contested and re-defined in particular circumstances. Within such contestation the term community comes to the fore given its ability to signify “mutuality, cooperation, identification and symbiosis” (ibid: 197), and thus to be applied not only to culturally-defined groups but also to novel coalitions and forms of solidarity. As such, he notes, while the cultures of different migrant groups in Southall do change, “the process of culture-making is more often called ‘developing the *community*’, ‘*community* building’, or ‘changing the *community*’” (ibid: 196). Community in other words is used because it provides an alternative banner for mobilization to those of culture or ethnicity. However, for Baumann the distinction between dominant and demotic discourses lies not in the terms they use to mobilize people, but the extent to which they reify group identity and membership. Community too, he notes, is often constructed as a highly reified entity within the terms of the dominant discourse (ibid: 197).



For Baumann, the dominant discourse dominates not because reification has innate appeal but because on one hand it emerges from a long and subtly-entrenched history of the British governing colonial populations through the creation of reified communities (ibid: 28-30), and on the other hand because people then respond to this structure of governance by casting themselves as reified groups (“communities” or “cultures”), as doing so enables them to capture state resources and organise local politics. He suggests that absent such constraints, a wholly fluid, contestable notion of group membership may come to prevail:

Take away competition predicated on ethnic or religious *community* criteria, and Southallians’ definition of *culture* might well come to parallel anthropologists’ [fluid, provisional] definitions of culture. Yet there is little prospect of this happening. (197)

Ultimately then, Baumann does not see community as *innately* overly-reifying, but he does see much of its contemporary use as such.

From the critique of community as an over-determining term, then, we might identify a few key properties. First and foremost, that there seems to be a tendency for community to entail certain forms of reification, even as other aspects may seem vague. Moreover, beyond simply being exclusionary, such reification can be seen as serving a political purpose, constituting and mobilizing a bounded group that is able to identify itself as such, but also enabling their governance. Finally, when coupled with the charge that community is ambiguous, we might see that such reification can operate alongside continued ambivalence – as Creed (2006) is eager to point out – seemingly in a complementary manner, where certain elements of community become overdetermining, while yet others seem under-defined.

### *Alternatives*

In no small part due to such critiques, scholarly work over the last few decades has come either to abandon the notion of community, or at least to de-emphasize it as a term of analysis, in favour of focusing on a host of other terms. In particular, by suspending the emphasis on community as an identifiable *entity*, a range of partially-overlapping *processes* became more visible. This processual focus is helpful, but as above I want to review it with a mind to how it might help us understand the enduring everyday use of community.

As noted, many have come to read the invocation of community as an attempt to mobilize political collectivities, through the assertion of collective identities which gloss over and mobilize a range of diverse and complex relations. Amin (2002: 959) has referred to this as the “agonistic politics of ethnicity and identity” (c.f. Watson 2013). Alongside Baumann, similar approaches have been

adopted by a range of ethnographers, and have been particularly favoured amongst anthropologists looking at migrant and minority communities in Western contexts. Many such works explicitly frame group identity as a banner for political mobilization (Axel 2001; 2013; Baumann 1996; Fog Olwig 2013; Kleist 2008).

If the invocation of community as a mode of mobilization is one prevalent theme, another is a refocusing onto the production of subjective ties – sometimes termed “belonging” (Anthias 2006; Back et al. 2012; Gidley 2013; Yuval-Davis 2011; Yuval-Davis et al. 2006). As Baumann argued in a later work (1999), group identities can come to acquire a thicker reality as people come to live their lives under their banners, colouring them with their own experiences, relations and aspirations. Gardner’s (2002) study of Sylheti elders in London, and Fog Olwig’s (2007) study of Caribbean migrants in Toronto (but touching down in London and Oxford) both demonstrate how such collective associations might retain their hold, through relationships of kinship and affects of belonging, even as personal narratives may escape them in other ways. Here, situated experiences of childhood and of close kin relations become inescapable parts of migrants’ sense of subjecthood, even as this subjecthood is reinscribed and transformed in new contexts. Meanwhile, work on transnational childhood within this vein has often revealed a much messier and fragmentary relation to group identity, as the same framings of group identity may fail to evoke or contain formative experiences for second generation, transnational youth in the same way it did for their parents (Gardner and Mand 2012; Van Liempt 2011).

This continual remaking of subjecthood has informed a third emphasis on processes of hybridity and syncretism, taking up Kraidy’s (2005) argument that hybridity is the defining trope of a globalized age (see Fog Olwig 2007; Modood 2003; Papastergiadis 2013; Werbner 2004). Such emphasis is also visible amongst those working within the cultural studies tradition, but typically with a greater emphasis on the role of unequal relations of power in producing group identity through exclusion and discrimination. Thus, for instance, Stuart Hall has regretted the proliferation of the term hybridity, despite him having been influential in introducing it, because he has come to feel it flattens power relations and downplays the overriding constraint minority and migrant groups face in a globalized world (2015). Likewise, Back (1996), drawing on ethnography on two South London council estates has emphasized that local invocations of cultural community are just as much used to reject difference as they are to encompass it. Such “sub-cultural” (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 2013 [1979]) communities may be dynamic and creative, but this is not an unbounded creativity. Rather it is constrained within and formed in response to broader formations of race and identity,

which both impel and constrain the formation of localised alternatives. Here, subcultures represent new ways of “mak[ing] life intelligible” within contexts of exclusion and alienation (Gilroy 1991: 154).

Finally, this emphasis on local negotiation has inspired a recent turn towards notions of conviviality. Usage of this term is not coherent (see Nowicka and Vertovec 2013 for a review) but the term is broadly used to capture a notion of living comfortably alongside difference. As Gilroy (2004: 40) puts it, conviviality entails:

a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity, but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not – as the logic of ethnic absolutism suggests they must – add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication.

Wise (2011), Wessendorf (2014a,b) and Hall (2012) have all produced ethnographic accounts of how such engagement with the unfamiliar is developed as a personal competency, situated within particular routines, spaces and relations. Here, living amongst others requires sustained, if low-level, attention to their behaviour. Over time, such understandings become enfolded within residents’ own situated identities. Wise, working in a Sydney suburb, puts the strongest emphasis on the possibility for relations of shared belonging – of strong affective affiliation – to develop out of such habits. Hall, focusing on a London neighbourhood within Peckham, and Wessendorf working in the London borough of Hackney, on the other hand, emphasize the more routine nature of engagement with diversity, and do not posit affective ties to others, or to the concept of diversity itself, as a necessary outcome (c.f. Amin 2012).

These alternative terms are worth noting as they often provide the focus of more recent work touching on everyday uses of community. Nonetheless, both critical accounts and ones which focus on alternatives continue to simultaneously rely on the term community: Amit (2002) criticises the term for its boundedness, but then re-introduces it in later work (2012) when considering everyday forms of social organisation. Rose (1999) deconstructs contemporary discourses of community as heavily shaped by governmental agendas, but concludes by advocating a “different view of community [...] not fixed and given but locally and situationally constructed [...] as mobile collectivities, as spaces of indeterminacy, of becoming.” (ibid: 195). Young (1986; 1990) attacks community but then returns to defending “the neighbourhood clustering of the group” “as an important source of self-organization, self-esteem, relaxation, and resistance” (2000: 217). Amin (2012), Anthias (2006), Back (1996, 2009), Gidley (2013) and Wessendorf (2014a,b) all continue to use community alongside their conceptual alternatives to it, and often seem to use it in a way that suggests it can encapsulate these alternatives, as when Amin calls for “making space and feeling for

a narrative of community that takes the presence of the stranger as given” (2012: 8). Indeed, Werbner (2005: 747) notes that social-scientific deconstructions have done little to shift the popular imaginations where “Community remains a place of amity, mutual support, and homeliness”. Baumann (1996) likewise notes the potential of community to form novel groupings that transcend current, more limited imaginings of the term. In the next section, then, I want to build on the works reviewed here to explore how we might understand popular usages of community in 21<sup>st</sup> century London.

## **Community as a native ideal**

Within the contemporary politicization of community, Kilburn poses a challenging and interesting case precisely because residents continue to insist that the term has importance in ways which seem to partially escape criticisms of the term. This thesis is concerned with recovering an understanding of community as a term used in different ways by Kilburn residents themselves. This diverse usage suggests a view where community refers less to clearly bounded and identified groups, as to certain valued qualities of interaction.

Kilburn is incredibly diverse; whichever basis for defining diversity is taken, Kilburn emerges as highly varied. Vertovec (2007) has coined the term “super-diversity” to refer to such contexts where axes of difference are themselves plural, and where the everyday impression of difference dissolves from one of marked differences between visible groups to a more fluid mix. Kilburn certainly fits this characterisation (see page 63-68). Yet amidst this fluid and often fragmentary difference, and used often in ways clearly meant to encompass it, community remains a prevalent discourse and aspiration.

In understanding the encompassing nature of community, suggested by both popular and theoretical usages, a useful starting point is Marilyn Strathern’s *After Nature* (1992). Strathern is interested in understanding how the British are able to think of themselves collectively when they also possess a strong, historically rooted belief in individualism. Her solution is to suggest that the British have come to see encompassing formations, including society, class, family and, indeed, community, as operating merographically. By this she means that such categories are seen as encompassing social life, whilst *simultaneously* being composed of units that exceed this encompassment. For instance, society is understood both as all-encompassing and as composed of units such as individuals, families, and communities whose definition cannot be reduced to their place within society. Merographic categories, then possess a contingent, *as if* quality; to use a category such as *society*, or *community* is to speak of social relations *as if* they could be united under

such an aegis, whilst also acknowledging that those who comprise such groups possess distinct differences and relations which make them irreducible to such membership.

Recognising community as a native, merographic concept has two advantages. Firstly, it suggests that everyday talk about community may be less about asserting the existence of a stable identity, and more an attempt to actively imagine social relations *as if* they could be brought together under the sign of community. As a merographic concept, simultaneously suggestive of unity and diversity, community has a *gathering* potential – it does not simply point to existent groupings, but dynamically suggests the possibility of coming together within particular circumstances. In other words, community is, as Vered Amit (2012) says, “good to think with” (see Chapter 1).

Secondly, it suggests that the critiques of community as laden or ambiguous actually point to important properties of community; particular instantiations of community will always be partial and parochial, defined in terms of particular relationships and properties, whereas the basic concept of community retains a core ambiguity that allows it to be continually *re-defined* to include others yet to come. As Candea (2010: 6) has argued, this “powerful interplay of ambiguity and certainty” is “at the heart of people’s everyday management of differences”. Candea is interested in the way both ambiguity and certainty are present in nationalist imaginaries. In contrast, here, my central question is how this interplay of ambiguity and certainty give community its power to gather people together and reshape everyday relationships in Kilburn. In other words, I am interested in how ideas of community operate at an inter-subjective and inter-personal level.

Here, I argue that in Kilburn, community was seen as capable of gathering people together precisely because it was characterised by the interplay of *fixity* and *fluidity*. Community was made to feel recognisable, real and compelling through the process of fixing its representation and performance within shared and recognisable symbols and practices. This fixity thereby imbued community with a sense of objectivity stability and familiarity that constituted it as a space of gathering. Yet fixing meaningful relations in this way also allowed community to operate as a space of fluidity, where other meanings and relations were suspended to allow new alternatives to emerge. Here, terms of difference which might be essentializing in other contexts, such as race or class, were superseded by the assertion of common belonging to a community. Yet in these contexts the meaning of community became vague, and thus something for participants to collectively discover *vis-à-vis* their emerging understandings of one another. In other words, assertions of community served to fix certain terms of difference, taking the weight off others, allowing participants space to understand and connect with others, absent such terms. Here, and throughout, I use the term *gathering* to refer to the conjunction of these two processes.

Fixity, then, refers to those elements of community characterised by clearly identifiable and comprehensible symbols, shared practices and a sense of closure and stability. Cohen (1985) famously argued that group identity was created through a set of shared symbolic boundaries. Against a diverse and changing world such symbolic boundaries provided stable grounds for imagining and asserting unity and cohesion, even as group members interpreted and enacted them in different ways. Today, in Kilburn, symbolic boundaries have lost this stability – there is no longer any consistently agreed-upon idea of which symbols or practices differentiate one group from another, much less what the relevant group divisions are, from one day to the next. Nonetheless boundary marking as a practice has retained its importance. Despite the fluid and changing nature of local difference, marking off meaningful differences remains important because it casts community as an object, which can be identified, engaged with and transformed. As particular iterations of community are acted upon, they can, and often do, come to lose their definitiveness. Yet for such action to occur, community must first take on something of a fixed, concrete existence. Only then can it be dissolved. Such dissolution, entailing the loss of fixity, could prevent new people from engaging with forms of community. In some instances this meant that over time, community groups became cut off, precisely because they lost such identifiable fixity. Yet in other instances, it meant that community groups were engaged in a constant process of self-representation – providing an ongoing series of (at least briefly) fixed meanings for others to engage with.

Ultimately, then, fixity entails some form of closure; whether intentionally or not the signifying practices which constitute community as a recognisable object will always be more legible and compelling to some. Again, for some groups, closure was a desired end. Yet for others, closure was combatted precisely through a reflexive re-signification, where meanings of community were re-fixed in relation to evolving understandings of others.

Fixity has been an often-noted property of community, and by and large the anthropological tendency has been to write against it. When community takes the form of an outside imposition or an analytical lens, critics have challenged it as too narrow, and laden with problematic assumptions that do not map onto everyday life. In some cases they have reduced it to a mode of governance. When community appears to be a category used and valued by informants themselves, anthropologists have worked to demonstrate the fluidity, inventiveness and ambiguity of community in practice, and/or have attempted to map its exclusions. All of this notwithstanding, I argue that fixity nonetheless has a role to play in constituting community, even in its most fluid guises. Moreover I argue that the fixity offered by community – however partial it may be – remains desirable even to the residents of super-diverse Kilburn, who may, in other ways live highly

individuated lives. This thesis provides an argument for taking such desires seriously, whilst acknowledging that fixity need not always come with radical forms of exclusion.

Fluidity, meanwhile, refers to the suspension of established understandings and relations in order to allow for new ones to emerge. At first brush, this might sound like a glossing of Victor Turner's famous concept of *communitas* (2011 [1966]; Turner and Turner 1978). For Turner, *communitas* was a moment of inversion (anti-structure) where the system of functionally differentiated relationships that maintained society was suspended, allowing subjects to relate to each other on the basis of a temporary radical equality instead. This notion of *communitas* has often been used by theorists of community to characterise the feelings of horizontal solidarity and belonging often believed to be characteristic of community (Delanty 2013).

Such a notion of *communitas* has some bearing on the concept of fluidity I want to develop here. However a more direct influence comes from work on *ordinary ethics*. As Arendt (2013 [1958]) has argued, communication, and thereby our ability to understand others, is a slippery process. On one hand, subjects seeking to make themselves known to others can only ever do so through rough gestures at a more complex, partially-understood sense of subjecthood. On the other hand, communication is always prone to misinterpretation and unintended effects. Arendt's solution is one of persistent attention that is able both to go beyond the confines of symbolic representation and which constantly revises its assessment of the other in light of new experiences. Lambek (2010) has taken up this idea of an ongoing revision of our understanding of the other in his idea of ordinary ethics. Shared ethical projects, he argues, require a shared sense of morality, as well as a common sense of how to orient oneself towards such moral ends. Yet such morality and the dispositions required to enact do not exist outside particular relationships, but emerge within them, as subjects come to understand one another and orient themselves to the possibilities available for joint action. Here, in addition to Arendt and Lambek, I draw on philosopher Margaret Gilbert – especially as she has been read by the anthropologist Vered Amit (2012). Gilbert (1994; 2000) names such contextually embedded moral projects, where understanding others and the possibility of action are closely intertwined, as "*joint commitments*". Joint commitments, then, might be seen as those projects which emerge from the relationally-embedded ethics which Lambek describes.

In Kilburn, I want to argue that the invocation of community served as a way of suspending other categorical understandings, by subsuming difference within the overarching notion of community itself. In doing so, various community projects, groups and informal gatherings provided venues where close attention could be paid to others, through ongoing mutual engagement, and new understandings and relationships could be forged, providing the basis for new joint commitments.

*Fluidity*, then, refers to the ability of community to dissolve certain categorical understandings so as to allow a more careful intersubjective understanding to emerge. As such understandings emerge, they may come to define new forms of fixity which are felt to better capture or facilitate such emergent understandings. Crucially, then, the idea of community I want to develop here is not a totalizing or static vision characterised by thick solidarity within a predefined group. Nor, pace Baumann (1996), am I arguing that there is a dominant discourse where groups are reified, and an opposing, demotic discourse where they are seen as contestable. Rather, I am arguing that community is a mode of relation, where reification and contestation – fixity and fluidity – are *inextricably* linked in a mutually-constitutive fashion, where together they make it possible for community to gather people together and enable those people to develop mutual understandings and engage in shared projects.

For Lambek, the closely situated interactions across which ordinary ethics unfold provide a site of self-cultivation, but of a different variety than normally implied by the use of this Foucauldian term. Critchley (2007) argues that Foucault's emphasis on reflexivity and self-mastery provides a model of the ethical subject who may be grounded within particular relations but whose ethical capacities are ultimately autonomous, and capable of transcending such relations. In contrast, Lambek's vision locates ethics much more closely within the situated complexities of understanding others, and understanding oneself, as an always imperfect, confusing and limited process. When it comes to community, then, particular forms of fluidity open up highly situated, closely bounded spaces where ethics emerges not as a relation to given moral ideals, but as a process of ongoing exploration. On one hand, this exploration is concerned with the question of how one might relate to others. On the other hand, it is concerned with the question of what sort of person one might become through such relations, and how one might come to know oneself.

As Keane (2015) argues, this emergence of ethical understanding is necessarily grounded in everyday life and everyday environments. The emergent understanding between individuals in close interaction may go beyond the register of explicit meaning, but, it is nonetheless mediated by shared signs, spaces and habits. In turn, over time, particular elements of the everyday symbolic and material environment come to *stand in* for the forms of understanding and shared commitment negotiated within such environments. A slight nod or smile on the street, the consistent presence of familiar faces at the school gate, or the movement to make some space on a park bench, all operate as signs of recognition, speaking to underlying shared experiences laterally and subtly.

As such, community can often turn on small, everyday details, which are invested with complex forms of meaning and used to mediate particular relationships in highly situated ways. Theorists of



multiculturalism have long debated “the politics of recognition” (Honneth 1996; Isin and Wood 1999; Taylor 1992) whereby the official government recognition of minority identities provides a symbolic and legal framework for citizens belonging to minority groups to be treated as full subjects, making it possible for them to participate in social life on a level field. Yet the importance of small, everyday details in constituting spaces of community, and their attendant patterns of fixity and fluidity suggests that much of the politics of recognition plays out at a much smaller scale. It may not be whether a group can make a claim to government support, but whether an individual can make a claim to a park bench, or feel comfortable entering a community centre, or responding to a job advert, that determines the possibilities for locals to build ongoing, attentive relationships. Moreover, such local resources may be subject to competing claims from others, who appropriate and reshape them in particular ways, leading to contestation over shaping the meanings and experiences such resources might afford. To be sure, Kilburn is rife with such contestation, as differing visions of community are articulated in overlapping spaces and as these contending communities make claims to a shared set of resources.

At the same time, the possibility for local forms of recognition to emerge may be constrained by the broader affordances of the symbolic and material environment shaped by wider relations of power, which constrain the possibilities for interpreting them and reshaping their meaning (Keane 2015). As Ash Amin (2012) has argued, embedded within British history, and inscribed throughout state policy and mass-media discourse, is a “vernacular” of essentialized judgement, which seeps into the implicit understanding of British citizens, and thereby comes to shape how they perceive and react to particular forms of difference (c.f. Gilroy 2000; 2004). Local attempts to renegotiate difference must therefore contend with an already-structured material and symbolic environment, and the embodied forms of judgement cultivated within it. A similar point has been made by cultural studies theorists who emphasize the relative inflexibility of broader categories of racial and ethnic difference over the ability of local groups and attachments to reshape these categories (c.f. Hall 2015; 1996). What emerges then is a national order where particular categories of difference are fixed in powerful ways, set against local attempts to renegotiate the meaning of such categories through the iteration between forms of fixity and fluidity. In Kilburn, such contention becomes particularly visible when various local iterations of community come up against the reifying forces of state and market.

Taken together, my argument makes three key claims about community: Firstly, the idea of community allows people to explore how they might relate to one another. In order to do so, community must be inscribed within a particular social environment through forms of fixity which

make it visible and recognisable to others. Such forms of fixity assert the presence of community relations *as if* they already existed, and thus open up space for the actual substance of such relations to be negotiated fluidly within given community spaces. Secondly, as a result, community spaces can facilitate the transformation of relationships, both with various others and with oneself. Third, the need to inscribe community in the world opens it up to contention, as the signs and resources used to fix community in the world are subject to alternative claims. Contention may take the form of alternative visions of community seeking to enrol the same resources in different arrangements of fixity and fluidity. However, contention may occur more broadly between a view of community constituted within the *interplay* of fixity and fluidity, and relations of state or market governance which may operate *only* to fix the meanings of community, and disrupt this interplay. Each pair of chapters in this thesis focus on one of these three claims, yet their logic is threaded throughout the thesis collectively.



Members of a newly-formed community organisation debate  
where the boundaries of Kilburn lie

## **Ethnography in the fragmentary field**

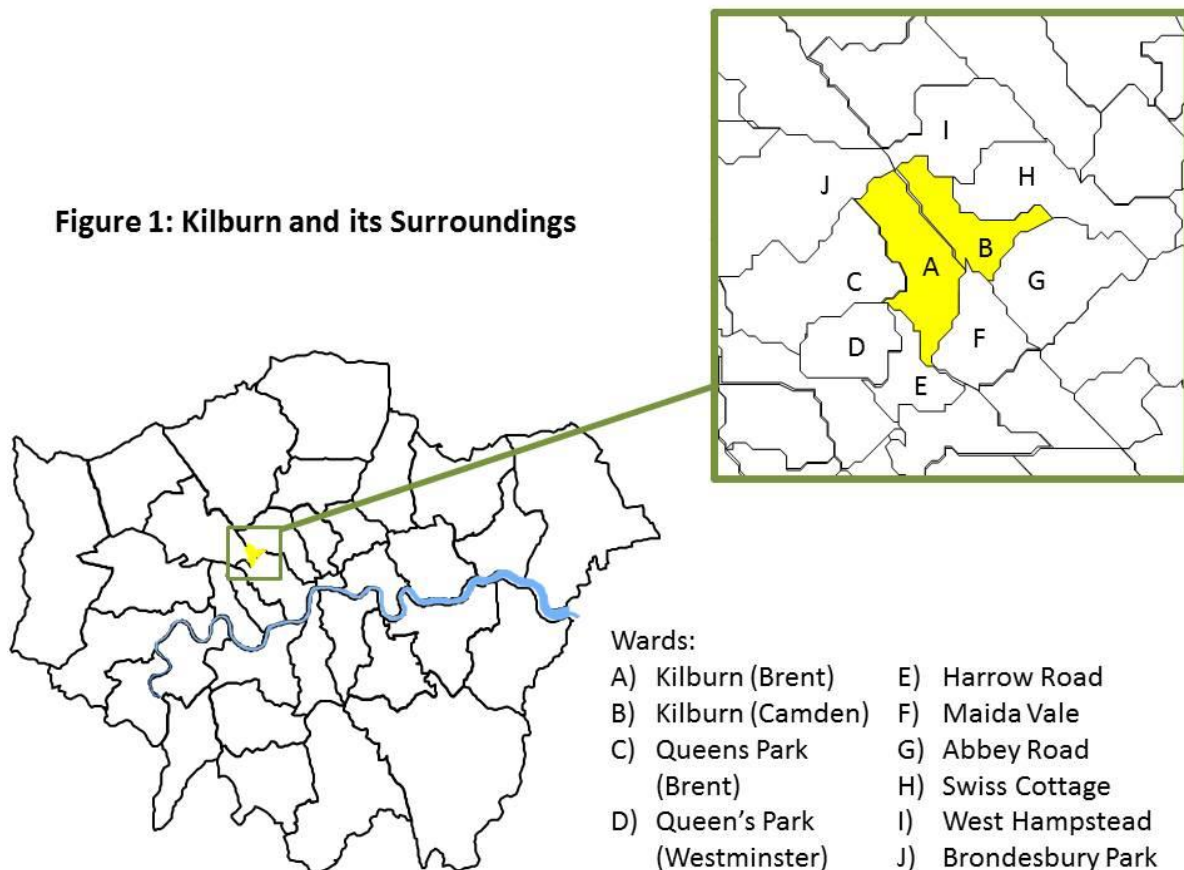
Between June 2014 and November 2015, I conducted fieldwork in Kilburn that came to revolve around understanding what community meant to its diverse residents. However, like many ethnographic enterprises, such was not my initial intent. Rather, inspired by work on novel forms of citizenship emerging out of urban life (Gordon and Stack 2007; Holston 2008; Isin 2000; Sassen 2005), I was interested in how living amidst diversity prompted residents to reimagine what citizenship meant to them. The political moment seemed an ideal time to delve into this question: On one hand, the already-pitched public debate around migration and diversity was intensifying particularly in response to what popularly became known as the European refugee crisis, building on anxieties around particular events and cases such as the 2011 shooting of Mark Duggan and the riots which followed. On the other hand, several years of national austerity measures had seen the withdrawal of government at all levels of life, including significant cuts to local council budgets (Hastings et al. 2015). This withdrawal suggested the opening up of new spaces where relationships with diverse others might be rethought at the local level, in the absence of state governance.

With this in mind, I identified Kilburn as a field site based on statistical data that gestured at local super-diversity (see Chapter 2). Earlier research on Kilburn had depicted locals' sense of place as diffuse and diverse (Massey 1994; Hickman et al 2012). Likewise, both demographic and historical accounts painted a picture of daily life organised not in terms of bounded groups, but in terms of fluid and cross-cutting differences, grounded in an ethic of acceptance towards those of all backgrounds (see Chapter 2).

Kilburn is located at various junctures. It sits just outside the central Zone 1 on London's Underground network, marking it as almost within Central London. It is very well connected, served by five different tube stops along four distinct rail routes, and criss-crossed by a network of bus routes. It has had a history of housing migrant labourers (see Chapter 2), yet its location has also made it desirable as a place to live and as a site for property speculation. On one hand, then, Kilburn is surrounded by much wealthier neighbourhoods, seemingly having resisted a powerful trend of gentrification itself. On the other hand, Kilburn's internal geography is subject to its own stratifications where streets dominated by wealthier new arrivals criss-cross streets where residents moved in when the area was still widely seen as rough, which in turn intersect streets still considered rough today. Physically Kilburn is a wide mix. Mews converted to artists' lofts and trendy homes nestle within streets of brutalist council tower blocks. Streets of red-brick Victorian terraced housing wind into more recent stuccoed and concrete dwellings, some freshly painted, others falling to bits. This patchwork of residential forms is bisected into two halves by the high road, which runs

north-west through the neighbourhood. The high road itself is bustling, and even more eclectic than the residential areas it bisects. Brightly-decorated, multi-purpose multi-ethnic corner stores meet with pound-shops, high and low end clothing retailers, pawn shops, juice bars, greasy spoons, pubs and street vendors shouting over the din. Shop windows boast astroturf, cruises, pawned electronics, sequinned niqab, bulk chocolates and cleaning supplies, instruments, afghan rugs, adult movies, wine. Although many of the street names belie a bygone era when the area was dominated by Irish migrants, who named the new streets of Kilburn after the towns and villages they had left behind, today such Irish names blend into a wider mix where shop windows display an array of scripts, and beckon to a range of nationalities, from calling cards sold in Amharic to newspapers in Cyrillic, to the ubiquitous posters promising to “send money home” for cheap. Together, these intersections suggested there were plenty of local encounters, across varying lines of difference, to be traced.

**Figure 1: Kilburn and its Surroundings**



Although such diversity was enticing, it also posed a methodological challenge, in terms of where to start and where to stop. With a population of over 36,000, it was clear I couldn't study the whole of Kilburn. Yet the theorists I was inspired by were arguing that citizenship could be reimagined in a

wide array of daily encounters – suggesting that such alternative visions of citizenship could be found almost everywhere in urban life.

Going into the field, I decided to initially take a dual focus, on one hand looking at formal community groups operating across the two administrative wards of Kilburn. These, I believed, would give me access to those who were thinking about new idioms of citizenship most explicitly, as well as allowing me to understand how such organisations impacted the everyday life of residents. Such a frame, I presumed, would help me think through such issues in their more implicit everyday guise. On the other hand, I decided to focus much more closely on the “Collishaw” estate, as a site where I might trace these more everyday re-imaginings. Subject to nearly two decades of state-led regeneration (see Chapter 6), I suspected that discussing regeneration on the estate would give me a more immediate and accessible way to ask questions about citizenship. Meanwhile, amidst its tall brutalist tower blocks with their single communal entrances, its profusion of small public squares, courts and stippled strips of green, its two local schools, and the beat-up, sell-everything corner stores, take-aways and internet cafes which fringed the edges of the estate, I thought I might discover the sorts of daily encounters with diverse others I was interested in. Here, the image in my mind was of Suzanne Hall’s (2012) depiction of a London caff where regulars developed an understanding of each other’s habits and lives in subtle ways over time.

Very quickly, however, I found while I may have been interested in citizenship, the people I was talking to very rarely worked to draw out the political implications of their everyday actions and experiences in a way that might suggest any rethinking of citizenship. Nonetheless, it was clear that they remained interested in questions of how they might live together alongside others – only rather than framing this in terms of citizenship, this question was most often articulated in terms of “community”. Intrigued by the continual emphasis put on this idea, my focus shifted towards tracing and unpacking its everyday uses and its relationship with diversity.

Just as the conceptual framework of citizenship quickly slipped out of sight, so too did the social and geographic boundaries where I had thought I might situate the study. To my mind, local networks of community organisations and the Collishaw itself provided “arbitrary locations” through which citizenship – or later community – might be understood. Following Candea’s admonition to follow phenomena rather than adhere to spatial boundaries, however, I quickly had to concede that community was both much more mobile and evasive than I had thought, seeming to be both everywhere and nowhere at once. As such, the boundaries I had drawn for my ethnography began to fragment and to dissolve.

With formal community groups, I discovered a patchwork, where engagement with local residents was often minimal, where residents were likewise often unaware of the groups operating on their doorsteps, and where group membership varied, sometimes remaining largely bounded by people's personal local networks, and sometimes drawing in a wide array of people from beyond Kilburn.

During the New Labour government, community organisations had been treated as an appendage of government, and were supported and shaped as institutions which could bring new political subjects into being (Rose 1999; Worley 2005). Yet by 2014, when I commenced my fieldwork, despite the continued rhetorical emphasis on community, much of this official support had been withdrawn under the programme of national austerity. Within this context, I found that those organisations which had managed to persist were largely those which had historically been able to cultivate their own agenda and funding independently of government support. The result was much less the encompassing constellation of community service providers envisioned in official rhetoric, and much more a patchwork of disparate interests with variable connections to one another or to the lives of local residents.

For instance, in this landscape marked by austerity, the only still-active youth club anywhere near the Collishaw was the one run independently by a Christian charity – an affiliation which kept some parents and kids away. Meanwhile, with the exception of one church where the priest was particularly motivated to engage in community projects, the local churches, mosques or synagogues appeared to do very little beyond prayer services. Meanwhile, other worshippers would hire out local community centres to hold services, sometimes clashing with groups of artists, activists or fitness programmes who had come to think of such spaces as their own, having operated through many years of inactivity where they were able to exert a near-monopoly on such spaces.

On the Collishaw, I found a similar breaking and blurring of boundaries. I quickly learnt that few residents confined their daily routines or their imaginative geographies to the estate. Those who took part in community groups would often whisk me off to venues or events across Kilburn, whilst sometimes overlooking the activity of other nearby groups. Likewise, residents and informal groups, such as the local “gang” (see Chapter 4), would often shift scale in how they located themselves, locating themselves in various statements with reference to the Collishaw, Kilburn or London as a whole. Meanwhile, the public spaces of the estate, when they were used at all, were often used in ways which self-consciously minimized the attention given to others, creating a multiplicity of private bubbles within public space. The result was that my fieldwork refused to stay put. I would follow some into the retreats of private space, while others tugged me across wide geographies. As such this thesis gravitates around Kilburn, and around the Collishaw especially, but neither boundary

serves wholly to contain the lives I encountered, and this thesis is also therefore very much a thesis of London as a global city, continually remade through connection and encounter (Massey 2007).

However, I also learnt that even if lives rarely overlapped significantly, people still often formed strong ideas about one another. Flatmates, friends and members of various organisations would, somewhat unexpectedly, launch into lengthy diatribes about groups they had barely or never interacted with. Or else they would speculate on the lives of such others in detail. Nor were these others generic: mention of “migrants”, “Muslims”, “regentrifiers”, “community types” or other problematic and non-problematic others were often given local referents. Local “gangs” (Chapter 5) were one such referent, but so were specific mosques, community organisations and property-developments. Even if Kilburn didn’t provide a basis for shared relationships, it clearly did shape experience and meaning in certain shared ways, and this could become manifest across a range of accounts.

Moreover, much of this talk of others invoked the idiom of community. Discourses of community were often raised as a means to locate these others: did they fit within the community or were they a corrosive presence? Meanwhile, over time it became apparent that most of the staff and volunteers at local organisations likewise described their work in terms of community, no matter how parochial, fragmented or disconnected they seemed to be. All this suggested a need to take an approach that could trace a single idiom across diverse and often disconnected contexts.

In addressing this challenge, I follow Strathern – this time her work in *Partial Connections* (2004 [1991]), in many ways the predecessor to *After Nature*. Strathern suggests that if “the anthropologist working within ‘English’ society feels fragmented, then perhaps it is because he or she has the fantasy that only in another place is it possible to be a complete anthropologist with a complete society to study” (ibid: 23-24). Against this dichotomy with fragmentation and complex societies on one hand, and holism and simple societies on the other, she argues that the complexity of all human life is such that it always resists neat categorical encompassment. Thus, to describe something in particular terms entails both drawing together commonalities whilst also cutting out dissimilarities. From this perspective, all encompassment is provisional. Thus, on one hand, when anthropologists characterise life in remote places as characterised by particularly unifying features, such as ideas, institutions or structures, we need to understand such description as an inescapable analytical fiction, bringing into focus certain features of life at the expense of denying a range of differences which would fragment this picture. On the other hand, the anthropologist who sees fragmentation at home might nonetheless think about how certain commonalities partially encompass the lives they encounter, whilst also acknowledging that such encompassment can never be complete, and

thus need not deny difference. Here, all anthropological accounts necessarily place certain questions in and out of focus. For instance, although Miller (2001; 2008) expresses scepticism about the salience of community in contemporary London, such scepticism might be seen, in part, as a product of his outcome of his focus on materiality and biographical narrative. This focus has underwritten his ethnographic choices to spend time in spaces like homes over public spaces, or to ask more about objects than ethnicity or kinship, and in turn renders certain threads (in)visible.

In this thesis, then, I have attempted to focus on community – and the dynamics of fixity and fluidity it entails. At the same time, following Strathern, I have endeavoured to be attentive to the fact that the thread of community runs through a range of diverse contexts, whose diversity also suggests different stories to be told in different terms. Here, although I attend to other anthropological questions which manifest in these diverse contexts, such as biographical change, gender or inequality, I do so through the partially-revealing, partially-occluding lens of community, rather than trying to engage with these diverse questions, each implying their own perspectives, in full.

Attending both to the common ways in which community was thought and lived in Kilburn, without occluding the diversity it wove through, thus required a reflexive managing of perspective.

Practically, this required an attempt not only to immerse myself in particular contexts, but also to gain broader perspectives from which commonalities might be traced. The aforementioned strategy of following a range of different community organisations appealed in part for this reason. By the third month of my fieldwork, I was following over two dozen such groups. Over time, I reduced this by over half, focusing on understanding a smaller number in greater depth – but this initial scope helped me establish commonalities in the ways in which community and diversity were conceived. Even more helpful was the presence of six community organisers, three working on the Collishaw, and three working in the opposite corner of Kilburn. Just prior to the start of my fieldwork, all six had been hired as a part of a government programme to build community. Seconded to local community organisations, the community organisers were tasked with canvassing residents on their visions for their local area, and building grassroots projects around such visions (Cameron et al. 2015). Such work entailed endless door knocking, and discussing locals' views about their area. Although little of the ethnography to follow touches on the community organisers, it was through following them, above all else, that enables me to feel confident in the generalizations about residents or locals that occasionally follow below. At the same time, although such door-knocking revealed to me the enduring prevalence of concerns about community, it also made it clear that the majority of residents did not take part in community organisations or events – meaning that most of the ethnography below pertains to a smaller minority of locals.



Meanwhile, I also pursued particular strategies to get to know certain people in more depth. As I came to understand that there would be no closely connected network to move through, nor thick spaces of encounter where I could spend my time, I began to realise the value of pursuing individual connections, getting to know those affiliated with organisations more personally, tapping their personal network, and using events as a chance to meet strangers. Asking for interviews became a key strategy, both in terms of giving me the opportunity to present my project and my interests more clearly to others, as well as to simultaneously solicit initial data and attempt to forge longer-term relationships – the latter of which garnered mixed results. Consequently, some interlocutors became close friends, others familiar faces, and others still passing acquaintances with whom I spoke for half an hour or knew for only a day. While more in-depth relations helped me understand the ways in which forms of community were embedded in daily and biographical lives, fleeting relationships were often helpful in developing a sense of scope or representativeness, or else in unpacking themes across further difference. In this thesis, I therefore draw on both as appropriate.

### *Ethics and reflexivity in the fragmentary field*

The shifting forms of judgment around inclusion and exclusion that pervaded Kilburn also applied to me. My North American accent, Arabic name and Persian surname, and brown skin were all raised by others in attempts to situate me. The same was true of less overt markers. For instance, a young local resident once expressed surprise that I lived on the Collishaw estate, the same as him. When I asked him why this was surprising, he remarked: “but you look educated!” I was taken aback – in jeans, a t-shirt and a non-descript hoodie, we were dressed nearly identically. Whether it was my gait, hairstyle or something else, it was clear I left a distinctive impression on those around me. The impact of this varied: In Chapter 2, I argue that in Kilburn, ethnic, racial and other markers of difference were not treated as inconsequential, but rather that their importance and degree of inclusivity varied across contexts. I would suggest the same was true of the way I was judged. Sometimes my accent was privileged, to locate me as foreign, against the multi-ethnic mix of Londoners. Sometimes my name or appearance led others to read me as Muslim, “Asian” or even Hispanic. And at times this led to reticence or confusion surrounding my presence. Yet at other times, perhaps counterintuitively, these same markers of difference would prompt others to explain their anxiety around “foreigners” and “migrants” to me with more care and honesty, seemingly with the hope that I would agree or express sympathy, and thereby vindicate them of any possible accusation of racism. In other words, just as with other Kilburn residents, the ways in which I was perceived as different often varied, and would often turn on the (in)ability to connect with a particular set of personal experiences, rather than on more categorical markers of difference. In an

attempt to represent this, I endeavour to bring moments of inter-personal uncertainty, confusion and disagreement into the ethnography I present here.

Yet although the ways in which I was read shifted with context, some markers of my ethnicity, race, and especially class were invoked more frequently than others. To some extent the distance that these markers evoked were worn down with increasing familiarity, as might be expected of an ethnographic study. Yet they also served to concretely delimit my research. For instance, in Chapter 3 I focus on a young Muslim community group, where, although I was very warmly received, I did not join in instances of prayer, and so my accounts of faith are largely based around testimony not observation. Likewise in Chapter 4 I provide an account of “gang” life, where the distrust around class difference meant I had to spend relatively more time building trust, and ended up relying on a narrower group of key informants.

Studying diversity also raised a unique set of ethical challenges. I was faced with a highly fluid field, where I constantly encountered new faces, even in familiar contexts, as group memberships changed, or as formal community networks spilled into informal ones. In response, I did my best to make my presence as an ethnographer constantly known. I would make a point of mentioning this in any new interpersonal or small-group conversation, and whenever introductions were made within large groups. Likewise, I encouraged those leading group meetings to note my presence as a researcher at the beginning of meetings, and I made an effort to take notes visibly in front of others. Nevertheless, such efforts periodically fell short of ensuring all those present were comfortable. When I became aware, I would make an effort to seek out such individuals, introduce myself, make clear what – if anything – I might have written implicating them, and ask explicitly for consent. When people responded negatively or ambiguously, I excluded them.

Diversity also posed particular challenges pertaining to the ethics of representation. When referring to particular groups, I have endeavoured to use those terms most used by group members themselves. Yet I also recognise that such terms – such as “black”, “Somali”, or “elderly” – were often imbued with problematic histories, and contested in practice. Here, while I use such terms, I endeavour to take a “constitutive” (Yuval-Davis 2006) or “translocational” (Anthias 2008) intersectional approach to diversity. Such an approach does not take group identities as given, but pays attention to the ways in which such identities are invoked and made to feel real in certain circumstances. As such, although I note details pertaining to (ostensible) gender, race, ethnicity, age, or class, I do not treat these as fixed “properties” of my interlocutors, but rather strive to unpack the experience of such categories in particular moments.

Similarly, my fieldwork exposed me to a range of conflicts. I often witnessed organisations criticising one another or their own funders. I was also exposed to information on criminal activities, ranging from embezzlement to physical assault. I have excluded the majority of such cases from this thesis. Those instances I do narrate are beyond their period of legal limitations, and described only in general terms. More generally, I have changed all personal and organisational names, as well as the names of Kilburn's council estates.

Finally, it's worth making explicit that the collectives to which I ascribe common views are highly conjunctural. They may viably be seen as collectives in terms of the issues being discussed – a particular view of public space, a particular approach to practicing Islam, or, above all else, a shared process of creating community – but would splinter apart within other framings. And indeed, I often focus on individual testimony that is deeply situated within particular lives. Nonetheless a level of generality emerges from this, firstly in the way Kilburn provides a common ground for these range of experiences, which often prompted residents to think about the lives of diverse others. Secondly, across this wide diversity certain processes became apparent as common to the ways in which people thought about and experienced both community and diversity. The dynamics of fixity and fluidity, which constituted community between them, were foremost amongst these.

## **Outline of the thesis**

There are three key pieces to the argument I make: The formation of community through the balancing of fixity and fluidity; the ability of community to remake relations, both with strangers and with oneself; and the intrinsically contested nature of community, both within the everyday micro-politics of recognition and in encounters with state and market forces which may constrain the possibilities for community to emerge. Each of these is unpacked over a pair of chapters.

The first two chapters move between a range of ethnographic examples to unpack how the key ideas of community and diversity were used in Kilburn. The first chapter provides an ethnographic illustration of how particular community groups emerge from particular arrangements of fixity and fluidity. Here, I trace iterations of community across a range of interconnected groups to illustrate how such groups might facilitate the cultivation of mutual understanding and shared ethical projects. Here, the general idea of community plays an important role, by signalling the potential for understanding and shared projects to emerge well before they have. However, I argue that in order for such potential to be recognisable and credible to outsiders, such groups have to signify this potential in concrete terms, which come to provide explicit terms of membership, however minimal. These terms of membership end up excluding and alienating others, even as they work to create spaces where new forms of inclusion and understanding can emerge.

Chapter 2 looks at what diversity means to Kilburn's residents. It picks up on the preceding argument to illustrate the different ways in which individuals mark difference as a means of signalling shared belonging. I show how highly fluid, non-categorical ideas of difference operate *alongside* an insistence that categorical differences often matter. Here, I argue that there is a relationship between the degree of interpersonal understanding expected within a particular invocation of group identity and the exclusiveness of its boundaries. To illustrate this in more depth, the second half of the chapter focuses on the experiences of several black residents and the meaning they ascribe to race. I argue that although power relations and the behaviour of others plays some role in shaping ideas of the enduring significance of race, race is simultaneously used to refer to a range of intimate, highly personal experiences which seem to resist description and which seem difficult to share. Here, an insistence on race as an intrinsic trait works to create space to leave these intimate experiences as taken for granted, as an inner form of fluidity shared amongst a select few. As such, I argue that whether used inclusively and openly, or exclusively and tightly, categorical ideas of difference continue to have enduring value in cosmopolitan Kilburn.

The next two shift to more detailed ethnography of particular community groups and projects, in order to unpack community as a resource for reshaping relationships. Chapter 3 focuses on a community centre run by and for Muslim youth, and explores how this space mediates relationships with unknown others. Chapter 3 focuses on a community centre run by and for Muslim youth, and explores how this space mediates relationships with unknown others. For such youth, engaging with difference has become central to how they have come to understand Islam. Such engagement is given both personal and spiritual significance, with a plural vision of Islam seen both as better able to accommodate their own multi-faceted lives, and as facilitating a greater understanding of the all-present *noor* (essence or spirit, literally *light*) of Allah. Yet in order to engage with this difference, they take part in a constant process of re-signifying such difference within an Islamic framework, giving it a more fixed, knowable and workable form. I compare this to the testimony of volunteers at a local community radio station to suggest that this movement between fixity and fluidity can provide an ethic for living in ongoing engagement with diversity.

Chapter 4, in contrast looks at community as a resource for transforming relationships with oneself. Here I focus on the young men and women on the Collishaw estate who are often portrayed by others as a gang, but see their own affiliation in terms of a street community. I situate the range of legal and semi-/non-legal activities undertaken by members of the street community against a background of increasing economic and social precarity, where the future has come to look increasingly unpredictable and uncontrollable. I argue that in response, the street community

provides a vehicle for a fluid conception of agency and self-formation, where members can pursue multiple projects of livelihood and self-fashioning simultaneously, under the common aegis of taking part in the street community, without having to commit to any one. By fixing the community as an objective entity, members are able to draw on the dynamism within it to explore different future trajectories.

The final two chapters look at some of the ways in which community is contested. Chapter 5 looks at the public realm, and argues that even as public space often remains essential to city life, the diverse claims made upon such shared space can often lead to conflict. Looking at experiences of parks, streets and public squares, I show how public spaces are read as densely inscribed with fixed signs indicating the presence of others, and how everyday routines are shaped by such readings.

Somewhat against theorists who suggest that habits of living alongside difference may be productively cultivated in public space, I argue that such readings often serve to alienate various groups from such spaces, or lead to an invisible tug-of-war between contending users. However, I conclude by tracing examples where residents choose to suspend such readings in order to allow new, negotiated understandings to emerge. These might be seen as small moments of fluidity, playing out in public.

Chapter 6 looks at various attempts to regenerate the Collishaw. Here, I argue that community relations suggest their own mode of valuation and exchange. Fixity, I argue, creates commensurability between meanings and things, and therefore can also be seen as the process whereby certain goods, places or relations are commodified, and made exchangeable within a market system. I thus draw a contrast between residents, who create forms of fixity, but in order to simultaneously open up spaces of communal fluidity, which then gives rise to new forms of fixity, in a cyclical fashion, and the local council who seeks to move from fluidity to fixity in a linear fashion. It is here where I draw the most explicit contrast between the ideas of community I found in Kilburn, and the governmentalized framework of community described by Rose (1999) and often advocated by policymakers. I illustrate this contrast through an ethnographic exposition of the modes of valuation and exchange involved in council-led regeneration projects and resident-led ones.

I conclude by noting that the state and scholars alike have often failed to recognise local forms of community which are plural, ephemeral and dynamic, but which nonetheless collectively do important work in allowing residents to build the ties necessary to live together in diverse areas. I review how the forms of community covered here demonstrate that community value is often emergent, and that contestation is often an inescapable feature of community. Finally, I suggest that a more ethnographic stance towards community can help correct this limitation in perspective.



## 1. One and many: Community in 21<sup>st</sup> century London.

*“Home is the return to where distance did not yet count”*

– John Berger (1984: 91)

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Spotting the jugs of ruby-coloured sorrel<sup>1</sup> laid out on a table, JL became animated. He fetched a pitcher and brought it over for Mustafa and I to try. We were at the opening of the Grove Community Kitchen (GCK) – a local project on the Collishaw Estate with the explicit aim to “bring the diverse community together” and to “raise awareness of issues around food and sustainability” by providing affordable meals and entertainment once a fortnight. For their opening night, Kendra, the GCK’s chef, had dreamt up a rich Caribbean menu, in recognition both of the popular Caribbean café that used to occupy the space and of the large Afro-Caribbean population in the area. JL having

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<sup>1</sup> Sorrel is a herb with a tart, fruity flavour. In the Caribbean sorrel flowers are often used to make a spiced punch-like drink, which is referred to by the same name.

“grown up on this sort of food” was thrilled, while Mustafa, having come from Algeria, and myself, from Canada were intrigued but certainly less familiar.

After a first tentative sip, Mustafa and I both decided that the Sorrel was wonderful. In response, JL, in his typically effusive style beamed: “it’s sharing food, it’s sharing food like this” that has the power to bring people together. A long-time resident of the Collishaw, now in his 40s, and born to parents who had migrated from the Caribbean, JL liked to see himself as the sort of person who brought others together. With a quick sense of humour and a love of meeting new people, he was often right. Continuing, he declared that projects “like this” were precisely what’s needed in “the community” and, by way of illustration, began recounting when his mother passed away, saying it was a time when “I felt I couldn’t get any lower” but that he was really inspired by the support “the community” showed, where “there were people coming out of the woodwork to bring food [...] you thought it would never run out!” To make his point, he listed the range of national cuisines, naming each in terms of who brought it, and which tower block or street on the estate they called home.

Moments later he excused himself to greet another friend, and Mustafa and I continued the conversation. With JL gone, Mustafa reaffirmed the idea that food is “very important” but with qualification. He was less taken by one of the dishes featuring calabash and beans, and he cautioned that food also had the potential to be divisive. “Not everyone is going to agree with what you want” he warned, and, faced with the hospitality of others, people can feel “like you don’t have a choice!” Food “can divide the community also.”

Food is not just nourishing. As a gesture of care, and as a shared substance to enjoy, it can mediate feelings of intimacy and connection (Carsten 2004). Such feelings ground an everyday sense of familiarity and belonging, giving reality to notions of group identity, as well as serving to create a sense of distinction and difference from others (c.f. Anthias 2006; Malkki 1992). Yet, here, for JL and Mustafa, food is a medium not for forming kinship or ethnicity, but community. Community too, is imbued with the same potential to divide, as well as to connect.

Despite their divergent views on the role of food in creating community, both JL and Mustafa, alongside most others I met during my time in Kilburn, insisted on referring to community in the singular – “the community”. Indeed, even as the concept was relativized, to acknowledge divergent understandings and experiences there was an aspiration towards unity. Even as JL anticipated that we might not like the sorrel, and noted the range of distinct cuisines brought to his door, and even as Mustafa noted that differences in taste risked making some people feel unwelcome, both their

statements suggested community was seen as something which ought to be cohesive and encompassing.

In Kilburn, every formally organised group and project I encountered – whether small gardening groups, or nationally-oriented political campaigns – used this language of community in discussing their work and ethos. Beyond this still, the term cropped up frequently in everyday conversation. Even though the majority of those whom I met were not involved in any formal community group or project, such residents nonetheless held strong opinions on what community was or ought to be. In particular, wherever the question of relations with others – often even including friends and family – came up, community was a prominent idiom.

In the introduction I noted a range of literature which has worked to problematize and deconstruct the notion of community. One approach has been to target the ambiguity, and often the incoherence, of the term community, which appears to refer to everything and nothing, all at once. At the same time, scholars have noted a propensity for closure and exclusion that seems equally foundational to ideas of community, and have taken it to task on this basis. And indeed these two critiques have often been brought together to argue that community is a term defined not by any substantive model of togetherness, but primarily through the definition and exclusion of others who do not belong (Balibar 2005; Bhabha 1994; Young 1986; 1990).

This broad critique has proved invaluable in focusing the anthropological lens, helping ensure that scholars are alive to the occlusions, and power dynamics created and sustained through invocations of community. Yet, despite deconstructing the idea of community, I want to argue that such critiques do not exhaust it. In this chapter I want to take seriously the insistence from so many of Kilburn's residents that community continues to matter to them, suggesting that this importance may persist not despite the ambiguity or tendency towards closure of ideas of community, but precisely because of the *work* done to *gather* people together by this paring of fluidity and fixity. In Kilburn, the uses of community are diverse in a way which renders it idiomatically thin, carrying few concrete connotations. Indeed, its use is sometimes ambiguous and contradictory. What does characterise this local use, however, is reference to a common *process* of relations of fluidity, bounded by markers of fixity.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first focuses on *fluidity* and reveals community as a term used to refer to social contexts in which intimate everyday experiences and understandings can be shared. Community, in other words, refers to spaces or situations where varying degrees of mutual understanding with unfamiliar others can emerge over time. As such understandings



develop, participants are likely to discover new ethical orientations, which encompass or relate to others in novel ways. This is not to say that community produces homogenous unity or blanket inclusion, but that it facilitates forms of *mutual transformation*. I argue that this becomes possible because the idea of community itself acts as a sort of placeholder, suggesting that this close understanding and the joint action that may emerge out of it, already exists. By asserting this, members of various communities come to act on this assertion *as if* it were true, and thus come to develop shared understanding and commitments overtime.

In the second section, however, I reverse the lens, and argue that in order for such understanding to emerge, community needs to feel like an *already familiar* venue. This involves not simply asserting it as a place of fluidity where relationships are *formed* but also as a place defined by fixed, recognizable terms of belonging with which residents *already identify*. I look back to work on symbolic boundaries by Barth (1969) and Cohen (1985), to argue for a view of boundaries as the means of signalling cohesion and coordination without specifying the forms these processes will take, and thus as leaving space for these to be negotiated in a more fluid manner.

Taken together, my argument in this chapter is that ideas of community express a sort of psychology of scale, where the bounds of ideas of community tend to overlap with the bounds of our ability to think and communicate intimately with and about others. I hope to illustrate how, precisely by drawing on their boundedness, small scale imaginaries of community allow for forms of mutual understanding to unfold over time.



Tweet from the chef at the Grove Community Kitchen

## The many faces of community

Tracing the uses of community in Kilburn can quickly lead to trouble. Both within and across instances of use, the invocation of community was fundamentally ambiguous and often shifting. Yet, rather than frame this as an issue, I want to try to unpack what work this ambiguity might be doing, and to see if people might be insisting on ideas of community not despite this ambiguity but because of it. To do so, I trace visions of community across four linked but distinct projects and trace the ways in which conceptions of community morph and diverge but also connect and echo across cases. In the chapters to come I will focus on particular visions of community in more depth. But as groundwork for this, this chapter takes a more comparative perspective, and seeks to tease out *fluidity* and *fixity* as dynamics characteristic of community formation in Kilburn writ large.

Kendra and Jane, both now in their late 50s, had set up the Grove Community Kitchen together after many years of working together on other projects, including a club for local homeschoolers, and a permaculture group. Throughout such work, they have built out a network of others who live within or near to Kilburn, who often collaborate on community-oriented projects. Most of these collaborators are women, all are either Afro-Caribbean or White-British (as Kendra and Jane are themselves, respectively), and there is about an even split between those from middle- and working-class backgrounds. From such previous collaborations, Kendra and Jane have come to discover that they, and many of their friends, share a conviction that food can bring people together and make them feel more connected to the local and global environment. In this view, greater awareness of the ecological systems which sustained one's existence and a greater attentiveness to the lives of those around oneself went hand in hand – making running a community café an ideal means of realising this vision. But at the same time, this approach was more straightforwardly informed by local history: in times past a number of lively cafés, including one on their current premises, had served as bustling social hubs, where people came to meet from across Kilburn. Based on the Collishaw estate, where many residents bemoaned the lack of community provisions and what they saw as the consequent decline of care between neighbours, opening a café seemed an evident way to bring people back together.

Indeed, up to this point, the only place on the estate where strangers regularly mixed and got to know one another was likewise closely based around food. The local Salvation Army Centre had a reputation not only for being widely beloved by local parents, who took advantage of the classes, activities and care support on offer, but also for being a space where people came together across a range of cultures and class backgrounds. I would hear this from time to time, but this portrait seemed so much like a caricaturised ideal of multi-culturalism, of the sort that would be likely to be

promoted by a religious organisation hoping to claim to be a broad church, that it took me some time to actually visit and get to know it.

Emma, who ran the centre alongside her husband Jacob, explained to me that they didn't always have good links with the Collishaw community. Having been assigned from outside London to run the centre, they were initially treated with some distance. Occasionally, Emma would joke about how her and Jacob's used to feel conspicuously "white", suggesting that not only their skin colour but their particular dispositions served to single them out. However, when Emma became pregnant early into their tenure, they began to question what it would mean for their children to grow up without a connection to the area they were born in, and they set out to make a decisive effort to connect with what they saw as the local community. Now, with both Emma and David having reached their late 40s with two teenaged sons, they had come to feel very much a part of the area.

When I first told Emma about my project, she was warm and enthusiastic – noting that she had the sense that many of those who visited the centre lacked a sense of community and the support that came with it. She talked me through the extensive list of programmes the centre ran, from mother-and-tot music groups to faith-based children's groups, to fitness classes and health workshops, to social clubs for elders. Largely independently funded by the Salvation Army and free to devise their own programme, most of these offerings seemed to correspond to what the team had identified as unmet local needs – loneliness, nutrition, parenting support, and so on. Nearly every hour of every day had something on offer. But, she suggested that if I wanted to understand how the centre truly worked, I come to the one thing on the schedule that struck me as serving no apparent purpose; on Fridays, from eleven until two they ran a café. It was this, she enthused, that really worked to bring people together.

While the Grove Community Kitchen saw itself as building community by providing thoughtfully made food served with explicit prompts to treat the food as a shared object of interest, reflection and talk, at the Salvation Army Centre the order of the day was cheap and cheerful. They served frozen fish fingers, jacket potatoes, chips, toasties, omelettes, beans on toast etc. – a menu not unlike a traditional British greasy spoon, but based around what the team of volunteers could whip up quickly and *en masse*. Emma sheepishly admitted that they used to have healthier items on the menu but that they had removed these for a lack of interest, and she'd rather have people come and enjoy themselves. Health, she said, was something they promoted with conviction elsewhere, but the café was about connecting with people and making them feel welcome.

Explaining why the café mattered more than most of their other work, Emma argued that the sense of acceptance it fostered necessarily preceded their ability to do other work. As an example she pointed out the fact that debt was a prevalent local problem. From several of the mothers who attended the café, she would hear about how families had tried their luck with the various local support programmes, but tended to find them challenging and unhelpful, as if the advice given didn't really apply to the reality of their lives. Realising that there was a need for a different approach, she and Jacob started doing debt casework, but focusing less on prescriptive solutions and more on talking through personal issues and trying to establish understanding: "you find once you have a connection and trust with people they became more open to you helping with the critical problems in their life." She quipped that debt was often the least of people's problems – from the way people treat their children, to drug dealing "there's a lot of things going on that we wouldn't agree with." "But," she added "if you just keep working with them, you can show them there is another way to live, and they can decide for themselves." As with the healthy café food, she and Jacob were wary to push people towards solutions they didn't feel drawn towards themselves. This, she emphasized, applied to their approach towards religion as well, despite being members of the Salvation Army.

Nonetheless, beyond the ability to facilitate other social work, Emma and Jacob found further value in community – something more than the sum of the individual more concrete benefits or objectives they might associate with it. Illustrating this, in our first conversation, Emma told me two stories: one from that morning, where the daughters of two regular attendees were brought in to show off their new school uniforms. One child was from a white-British family, the other Afro-Caribbean. The latter was beaming in her new uniform, but the former was clearly distraught. Emma asked her what was wrong and she recalls the endearing answer: "But we look the same now!" the girl protested, "How will people tell us apart?" Emma suggested that the café was a space where patrons often found their assumptions about the meaning of ethnic and racial differences to be eroded, as they discovered a shared ability to connect to one another – as parents, as locals, as people facing similar challenges, and so on. The example of the girls, she suggested, showed how such experiences could transform expectations as to which interpersonal differences mattered, rendering skin colour invisible.

The second story involved an Afro-Caribbean woman who once rented out the hall for her daughter's birthday party. The party, Emma noted, only involved other Caribbean families. But through the process the woman learnt about the Army's other activities and started bringing her youngest child to the music group and the café – and through these started meeting other parents.

Emma related how you could see the gradual change in her social circle over the years through her daughter's ongoing birthday parties – up to the point where this past year it involved a thoroughly multi-ethnic crowd.

Intrigued by this, I took Emma's advice, and I began to volunteer at the Friday café. Surveying the hall on my first day, I was struck by the turnout. Aside from one father and one older man, the room was full of women and children, ranging from young mothers, to middle-aged nannies, to doting grandmothers. But between them, the women certainly seemed to validate the impression that the whole world – or at least all the parts of it that have migrated to Britain in any number – had gathered there. The room was a swirl of languages, as groups of women in niqab sat alongside a cluster of mothers chatting in a mixture of Amharic and Tigrinya. Behind them was a table of Filipina women, half with their own children, half caring for someone else's. Elsewhere there were Polish, German, Indian, Afro-Caribbean, Irish, Somali, Nigerian women, most but not all of whom had come with their kids. In one corner, the kids raced around, clambering over playsets and throwing blocks, half-corralled by one or two volunteers and a couple of mothers who had stepped forward to keep an eye on them. Across the rest of the hall, the parents all sat, talked and ate together.

Yet if the café provided a space that felt *open* to people from a range of backgrounds, that didn't mean it *dissolved* all differences. Over time I began to notice that by and large, people would stay within established groups. There was a group of women in one corner – two white English women, two second-generation Afro-Caribbeans and a German – who always sat together. The same went for the Ethiopian and Eritrean mothers I'd met on my first day. Most of the Filipina women always stuck together, as did the women in niqab. Nonetheless, if people mostly stayed with regular groups, they also showed a willingness to move beyond these and connect with others. Oftentimes this would take place around a matter of shared concern. If a child was acting up, her mother might step into the play space to discipline her child, but at the same time would take the opportunity to chat to the other mothers there. Or else, discussions surrounding the local schools, travel or parenting could draw in large and shifting crowds. And oftentimes mothers would stop by other tables and inquire about the lives of the others around them, before or after going to join their regular group of friends. And often longer term connections would develop out of this, as these broader connections would draw parents into projects and social circles beyond the Centre, becoming the basis for birthday party invites, or parents lobbying schools for reform. In short, if the space wasn't perfectly intermingled, boundaries were never perfectly rigid either, allowing new connections and groupings to emerge. This resonates with other accounts of convivial space where shoppers, café patrons, and people strolling through neighbourhoods do not necessarily interact with unfamiliar others in depth,

but nonetheless become attuned towards the presence, behaviour and expectations of others (Amin 2002; 2012; Hall 2009; 2012; Rhys-Taylor 2013; Watson 2013; Wessendorf 2014b; Wise 2009).

Such habits of mutual attentiveness not only allowed people to get to know one another, in moments where their interests or attentions converged, but also to feel like they *could be known* to others. Grace, an Afro-Caribbean mother in her mid-30s with two children, and a regular attendee of the café once explained to me over coffee how “The little ‘hi’ can matter a lot – sometimes it means ‘you’re not invisible’.” She went on to explain how she feels that people are constantly making assumptions about you – for better or for worse. She had recently stopped working, feeling unable to juggle her job and taking care of her children. Yet this left her feeling guilty and somewhat restless. And she felt constantly concerned as to what others were thinking of her – was she being looked at with pity or scorn, or perhaps just disinterest. Mundane greetings – smiles, nods, “hi”s – in the street or at the café provided an opportunity to tell others small pieces of her story, and reshape their perception of her. Here, Grace voiced two common themes: that, getting to know others and being able to feel known to them were intertwined processes, and that the acknowledgment of such developing understandings could be contained within small gestures of recognition. For Grace, the café facilitated both, making it a space where “you don’t feel alone”. As with most others, Grace largely stuck with the same friends at the café. Yet it was this broader sense that one *could be known* that made it a particularly appealing space. As Arendt (1954) argues, such recognition of personal experience, beyond the fixed meanings of language, creates a sense of a shared world, where one’s actions and the actions of others are seen as intertwined. In turn this opens up the possibility not only for mutual understanding, but for mutual attentiveness, collaboration and care.

For most visitors, it was friendship and comfort, rather than self-transformation, which drove them to the café. Yet there was a clear parallel in the ways in which visitors came to develop a sense that mutual understanding with one another was possible, over time, and the approach Emma advocated to helping people overcome personal challenges such as debt. Both privileged the familiar, comfortable and relatable over explicitly pursuing an agenda of change. Moreover, processes of personal change, or processes of connection were approached open-endedly, allowed to unfold over time in fits and starts, rather than being required to progress continually and measurably. As Emma put it: “It’s learning that the mum who may not speak any English might have a *heck* of a lot to give [...] if you can tap into that there’s such a richness in that”. She explained that people often feel excluded and powerless in large part because they do not feel valued. At the same time their value may not be immediately apparent – it may require uncovering and translation, as in the case of migrants whose qualifications are not recognised in the UK or who may face language barriers – and

required sustained attention to uncover. What I want to suggest then, is that in different ways, the café served as a space for visitors to become known to others, and to see this understanding reflected back in the behaviour of others.

For Emma, it was by reflecting back this understanding that she was able to get visitors to trust the advice she and Jacob would provide, in order to provide effective help. But for most, this latent sense of mutual understanding simply made the café into a cherished community space. Indeed, despite not necessarily interacting with everyone equally, regular visitors tended to voice their attachment to the café in fairly encompassing terms. One afternoon, chatting about my research with a graphic designer from Eritrea, who emigrated when she was young, and who often moved between a White-British group of friends and an Ethiopian/Eritrean one, I mentioned I was interested in seeing if the idea of community still had any meaning to people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unhesitatingly, she replied: “This is the community here, you know? This is where everybody gets together – here they are very good at welcoming you – welcoming and accepting. It’s a very good place.” Another woman from India once remarked to Emma and me more simply that “to me, this place is another name for home”. Here, where the idea of community was practiced in the plural, it was nonetheless described in the singular.

As children reached school age and were no longer able to accompany their parents, many parents themselves stopped attending the café as regularly. Yet often they would maintain networks both of close friendship and of broader connections beyond the Salvation Army Centre. And in certain instances connections formed at the café would come to animate projects elsewhere. Such was the case with the Homework Club, which drew together a group of Ethiopian and Eritrean mothers, alongside a group of others, including Mustafa, as well as Aisha, whom we will meet in more detail in the next chapter. The café served not only as a common link, but as a venue where some of the group had come to realise they had a shared concern around the struggles their children faced in keeping up with the curriculum at two particular local schools. Over time these concerns became known to one of the local community organisers, who offered to help set up a tuition group.

On the surface, the business of the Homework Club was fairly straightforward. They employed two teachers to run 90 minute afterschool sessions for 7-11 year old children (Key Stage 2) in a nearby community centre. For the first part of each session, the tutors would review basic concepts – normally those taught in the lower years, with an awareness that many children were struggling because they lacked this foundation but were expected to understand concepts built on it. Following this, they would move around the tables, typically organised by year and ability, as the children did their homework, helping guide children. The group of children attending were fairly regular, with

most of their parents being acquaintances of those running the project. These parents were asked to pay £5 for the service – significantly less than comparable professional tutoring services.

Parents were also encouraged to stick around during sessions and become involved themselves, though it was never clear in what capacity. Occasionally, some parents would assist the tutors. However, the project's team, almost all of whom were first-generation migrants to the UK, recognised that part of the challenge they were trying to address was the inability of parents not educated within the British system, and who often struggled with English, to support their children with schoolwork. Thus they encouraged project volunteers to take on administrative roles, whilst also trying to organize training for parents on how to support their children. Outwardly, then, the project appeared designed to address a visible need to support both children and parents in a straightforward and accessible manner.

Despite this, the motivations of those parents actually running the project were hardly so simple, and tended to change over time. In fact, when people talked about motivations, or about what they themselves saw as the core purpose of the project, improving educational outcomes often only figured laterally, or as part of a grander, more complex vision. For example, for Deborah, with three energetic children of her own and with many of her friends struggling to cope, supporting and empowering parents seemed to be more of a driving motivation. Helping people “be better parents” she argued, would lead to improvement at school as well as at home. This drive didn't conflict with providing tutoring, but it did often pull her in further directions.

Indeed, supporting parents, rather than children became a greater concern for Deborah over time. At one session, whilst the kids were studying, Deborah, an Eritrean mother of three, discussed her desire to use the club to organise a weekly get-together for parents:

Otherwise you build up all this stress and that becomes a part of how you treat the children, you know? You can take it out on them [...] It's like you go home, you shut the door and there's no one else there. But then you go out on the street and with all the people, you don't know who to trust! So you end up feeling like you don't have anyone to support you!

In response, Mustafa suggested running workshops on parenting skills, but Deborah was hesitant. What she felt was lacking was not advice, but people who would “understand”: “Sometimes you need to know you have a shoulder to cry on, you know?” Because of this, not unlike Emma, Deborah became particularly focused on creating a sense of welcome and acceptance. Each session of the Homework Club, she would sit at the cash desk and chat with parents. She explained that to involve



new parents we needed to “know their names so that they feel familiar, they feel at home. Then they can share if they have anything they’re thinking.”

Even further away from tutoring, Mustafa explained that one of his major concerns was around safety. Especially since his wife was mugged on the estate (see Chapter 5) he had been concerned about what could be done to change what he saw as the behaviour of youth who had no sense of purpose. He concluded that helping children succeed at school could help counter the appeal of crime. Yet he was not convinced this was sufficient, commenting that “we will do more in the future but for now we are doing the Homework Club.” In fact, he became involved in the project because both he and Deborah had previously discussed the need to do something about safety in the area.



Flyer promoting the Homework Club

Similarly to Deborah, Mustafa was also interested in creating a broader sense of community amongst parents. But for him, as an Algerian immigrant who migrated to flee the civil conflict of the early 90s, his concern centred around other refugee expatriates and on fathers in particular. At the Homework Club, we would periodically discuss his motivation for volunteering around the neighbourhood, and he would often express concern over the fathers he saw around his children's school who didn't work, yet remained uninvolved in their children's lives. Many fathers who had arrived as refugees, he suggested "just sit around all day and talk politics". To him, they were stuck in limbo, not really living their lives "either here or there". For Mustafa, becoming a more active parent provided an antidote to this, and on a personal level his involvement with the Homework Club was one means to this end. He clarified this one day, when in fact, he had asked to interview me for his job as a pollster and, following the interview, we started talking about TV. I noted the new satellite he had installed and he remarked:

Thousands of channels! I don't watch much either – I think though if you tried to watch all of them – you could use up all day. And actually, some people of our background – that is exactly what they are doing! This is why they are so good at talking politics.

Farhan: Yeah, I remember you saying – some people just sit around and talk politics and watch the news.

You know how it is – you come from our part of the world and there are a lot of political problems – if you're from Yemen or Syria. But these people they can spend all day watching TV – they know everything about these issues. But what do they do? They know everything – how much money went into this deal and how much tax is being collected but all they do is talk about it! They have all the solutions.

Farhan: But only when they're talking. If they actually had to fix anything –

Exactly! If they actually had to fix anything they wouldn't know what to do. They would have no idea. But they tell you. They tell you how to fix the world. It is not for me. And me, I do not need to be thinking about problems abroad – I don't need to fix the whole world. I work in my community – I see my community needs help and I understand what I need to do, so I do it. I do not need the whole world. These guys who talk about the whole world, how are they going to fix anything? I do what I can in my community and (palms out) that is enough. I know I have helped people.

In Mustafa's vision, a general (but geographically delimited) idea of community, rather than the specifics of any one project, is framed as the grounds for empowerment and connecting with others – both for himself and for others. In point of fact, he sees focusing on specific issues and solutions,

as the men who talk endless politics effectively do, as having the potential for detachment and isolation. Instead, for him, it is the *doing* of community – even if vague and open-ended in its intent – that is the most important element. Although the projects he’s drawn towards, such as the homework club, seem to resonate with his particular concerns as a migrant and as a parent, his motivation has little to do with the teleology of any one project, and more to do with a broader idea of community that, through being enacted, generates empowerment, connection and transformation in more open-ended ways.

Across the cases of the Grove Community Kitchen, Homework Club and the Salvation Amy Café, we see a particular dynamic at work. Despite the fluid constellations of membership and the changing and contested ends envisioned by different participants, people tended to speak of them in singular terms, as for or about “the community”. This suggests that community, *despite* this ambiguity, remained something self-apparent. Moreover, people very comfortably made pronouncements on behalf of such a community, asserting what it wanted or needed, as a matter of course. Even when people actively disagreed over what was best for the community, they continued to behave as if they were talking about the same thing, rather than about multiple, divergent concepts of community.

If this assertion of a unitary community may seem presumptive, this presumptiveness, I want to argue, is precisely its merit. In defending the idea of community as “good to think with”, Vered Amit (2012), following the philosopher Margaret Gilbert (1994; 2002), claims that one of the chief goods provided by such a concept is the possibility of generating “joint commitments” – projects of self-formation that necessarily rely on the action and attention of others. For Arendt (1954), this intertwining of action and attention, where people act on the basis of close and ongoing attention paid to others, is the basis for what she sees as politics proper – entailing the shared pursuit of forms of the good. A good example might be Deborah or Mustafa’s respective visions of transforming the attitudes and aptitudes of parents in the area, and thereby becoming better, more able parents themselves. In both their visions, being a good parent is bound up with the willingness of others to also become good parents, as it’s only through their collective action and shared purpose that this goal can be fully realised. This question of joint commitment, however, isn’t only raised in overt community projects, but more quietly and more constantly in everyday life – such as when Grace talks about being understood by her neighbours as necessary for feeling connected to them, or when JL enthuses about the ability of food to bring people together and to act as a vehicle for care.

But how do such joint commitments emerge? How do people buy into them as accessible and credible modes of self-transformation, before having actually taken part in them? Here, I want to

argue that, by positing unity whilst remaining ambiguous, discourses of community allow people to *assert and presume* shared ends and understandings, before these are cultivated. In some cases, as I will explore both below and in the next chapter, communities may be defined in ethnic or racial terms. Yet the notion of community can also serve as an *alternative* basis for unity, superseding terms of ethnic, racial or other affiliations under the sign of a more ambiguous cohesion, characterised by joint commitments yet to come. In other words, the *idea* of community works to *gather* people together, by addressing them *as if* they are already united. At the same time, because this idea of community is largely taken for granted, the actual basis for this unity is left un-defined – fluid – and able to emerge over time. Hence, in leaving community as a taken for granted term, there is a tacit acknowledgment of the range of diversity that may come to comprise community over time. It is this dual connotation of unity and provisionality that makes community a merographic concept. JL articulated this understanding of community most clearly at a planning meeting for a local festival, when he declared that the less people feel “empowered”, the more likely they were to view diversity as a threat, because they are operating on a broad assumption that others have nothing valuable to offer (See page 192). This, he continued was seeing things backwards; echoing Emma, he suggested that the value of what others had to offer could only become apparent after *first* coming together “as a community”.

Yet open-endedness could also generate its own problems. As initial shared concerns around education and, to some extent safety, blossomed into a wider range of ambitions around empowering and connecting parents and building a broad community, the Homework Club began to falter. Mundane tasks of accounting, publicity, the preparation of lesson materials, and finding resources to train new volunteers began to fall by the wayside, seemingly because they fit well with the specific teleology of a tutorial group concerned with educational outcomes, but less well with the wider animating concerns that tended to dominate team meetings. The open-endedness of community, then, simultaneously served to capture a diverse range of motivations and experiences and bring them together, but also to pull against certain elements of more narrowly purpose-driven activity. This is something I saw across a range of groups, where mundane-yet-essential tasks often fell to a small minority of individuals who had come to identify with the long-term viability of the group.

Moreover, even if groups enabled open-endedness within, that didn’t mean they were seen as such from outside. For those taking part in the Homework Club, the value seemed to be in the ways in which the community it provided served as a grounds for imagining new forms of connection and new personal ethical projects. In other words, it enabled a fluid reimagining of oneself and one’s

relations. Yet if participants emphasized such dynamics of fluidity, others took issue with elements of the project which seemed overly fixed, challenging what such fixity implied about who could take part, or who stood to gain.

Fawzia, a mother in her early 30s, who left the Homework Club after only two meetings, illustrates this point. When I asked about the group, she exclaimed indignantly: “Don’t get me started on them! That group has problems!” Expecting a damning critique, I was a bit surprised when she went on to explain that she thought them blinkered for only focusing on Key Stage 2 – her older children, after all, were struggling with many of the same problems. Somewhat defensively I suggested that the group was small and new and that it had to start somewhere, to which she replied that a focus on formal education was too narrow anyway. Coming from Somalia she confessed she was ultimately suspicious of the English school system’s ability to support children from other backgrounds, seeing it as an imposition of foreign values that left them feeling inferior, without direction and wanting to lash out.

Fawzia had been wanting to start a group for Somali mothers for quite some time, and her disenchantment seemed to provide the motivation needed to get this going. Just as with the Homework Club, as this project took shape, others were drawn towards it, and began to see it as a vehicle for working out their own concerns. At an early planning meeting, Fawzia’s friend Astur expressed her conviction that the Somali community simply needed to be brought together, and that she saw Fawzia’s project as a way to begin to address this. Meanwhile, another Somali mother Zahra, who had been wanting to run a Somali elders’ group also joined the meeting, to see if something for the elderly could be woven in.

But just as it was formed in response to a sense of exclusion and inadequacy, so too did the project generate its own feelings of exclusion amongst others, again on the basis of how it was perceived externally. At the same meeting, Fawzia, Astur and Zahra were introduced to Kim, a middle-aged Afro-Caribbean woman, by one of the community organisers supporting the project. Having previously helped run a mothers’ group, Kim had offered to help the three women get going. But when Fawzia explained her vision for a Somali-culture focused project, Kim began to get annoyed, and insisted that the project needed to be more inclusive – “it needs to be open to others” – to succeed. She insisted that the needs Fawzia and her colleagues identified were broadly shared: “there are a lot of [...] people in [the Collishaw] who feel alone, who don’t feel they have a community they can be a part of.” And, she warned, without greater openness to other locals, the project was likely to fail to attract funding or support and eventually collapse. For Fawzia and her friends, the ethnic-exclusivity of the project was seen as empowering, enabling them to focus on

Somali-specific needs, while Kim's focus on local residents seemed to exclude a range of Somali friends and relatives living across London whom they imagined as amongst the project's intended beneficiaries. Yet for Kim, such ethnic exclusivity and unwillingness to focus locally were fundamentally contrary to her own ideas of community and of what made community projects viable.

In other cases, simply the presence of the project was enough to create sense of exclusion – and again community provided an idiom for articulating this exclusion. The Somali Mothers' group was hosted in a local community hall, where Nina, an older Afro-Caribbean woman who worked as a caretaker for the building once expressed her frustration with this. She was aware of many others who, like herself had once been heavily involved in community initiatives, and who had tried to secure the hall for events, but without success. Talking to one of the employees of the charity which managed the hall, she lamented:

You'll give the space to those Muslim women – they can get it for whatever they're doing there but then when others ask you tell them that it's not available. They get it because they are 'well behaved' – but what does that mean? It just means they don't play music – that's discrimination!

She added, challengingly that people already feel that there is “nothing for the community” and that they are being deliberately excluded from what is available – and instances like this didn't help the impression.

The Grove Community Kitchen imagined community in terms of commensality and mutual attention towards food, its production, and the traditions it embodied. The Salvation Army café took a very different approach towards food, seeing it more as facilitating a sense of comfort. This comfort made it seem possible to connect with unfamiliar others, and both staff and visitors valued the feeling that understanding others and being understood by them was especially possible in such a space. This feeling could be the catalyst for new friendships or support networks, as well as more explicit projects of self-transformation, supported by Emma and her team. The Homework Club provides one such example, but its ostensibly unitary focus on supporting children's educational attainment was underwritten by a much more diverse and evolving set of personal motivations, not all of which reconciled neatly. Yet such flexibility was not seen from the outside and Fawzia and her friends, decided that the outward, ostensible focus on “education” was too narrow for their own interests, which were understood less in terms of more-broadly shared disadvantage and more in terms of their specific anxiety about their children's disconnect from their own Somali heritage – motivating them to establish their own project which likewise served to alienate others.

If nothing else, tracing these four linked community projects illustrates the malleability, ambiguity, and diversity characterizing ideas of community. As noted above, for many, such conceptual fluidity has served to illustrate the ultimate hollowness of ideas of community. But we've also seen that people themselves treat community as anything but hollow. Rather, this conceptual fluidity works to draw people together across a range of experiences, backgrounds and priorities. Here community serves as a broad concept, able to encompass a range of differences, and subsume them within a broader idea of something shared. Nonetheless, there are visible limits to this. Even as those within particular community contexts may relate to each other in terms of fluidity, developing mutual understanding and new joint commitments, such contexts nonetheless remain *perceived* externally in terms of fixed meanings. While the examples here have emphasized the ways in which such enduring fixity can serve to exclude, in the next section I want to suggest that nonetheless, it is particular forms of fixity which serve to constitute the spaces in which fluid relations can take place in the first instance.

### **Creating openness through closure**

While some critics have challenged community for its ambiguity, others have found it essentialist – overstating both in-group homogeneity, out-group distinction, and leading to a politics of exclusion and control. Without denying this possibility for exclusion and unequal power relations, I want to continue taking references to community seriously and ask what such tendencies towards closure might accomplish for people themselves. To do so I want to revisit the ethnography above, shifting the focus from fluidity onto three dimensions of closure that have been linked with the idea of community: unity, locality and nostalgia.

At the start of this chapter, I noted that the majority of people in Kilburn did not consider themselves to be involved in community initiatives – certainly not locally – and quite likely at any scale. I got to meet many of these individuals through the Community Organisers, whose job entailed knocking on doors and talking to local residents to get their ideas for local initiatives, or else to try to draw them into such initiatives. In door-knocking Community Organisers followed a script, and the word community was notably absent. Yet it was striking how many non-involved residents nonetheless cited the absence or decline of community as a major concern. And much like those we met above who asserted supposedly unitary communities into existence, these residents also subscribed to a tautology – they had no desire to get involved in making community because community didn't exist.

Often this would be expressed in terms of a belief that, today, people only thought about themselves. Here, I want to suggest that what these residents were trying to express was a

scepticism about the possibility for joint commitments to emerge, much the same way Fawzia or Nina were, when critiquing what they saw as the exclusionary projects of others. As with Nina and Fawzia, community was not to be found in its flawed and alienating iterations but somewhere else, lying dormant but always-already something in which they could participate and to which they could belong. And if the possibility for personal participation and belonging wasn't spotted, then community, simply, didn't exist. Just as Fawzia rejected the Homework Club based on her sense that she couldn't see it as a vehicle for her own priorities, Kilburn's un-involved residents likewise seemed to be evaluating the possibility for joint commitments to emerge, and deciding this was unlikely. Seen this way, imagining community as unitary becomes less about excluding markedly different others, as about identifying those with whom enough commonality can be inferred that projects of joint-commitment can emerge. From this perspective, difference continues to mark the other, but marking this difference is self-constitutive only insofar as it allows for the better identification of those with whom one is more likely to share understanding and experience with. This is a suggestion I will unpack further in the following chapter.



One of the community organisers takes a break gazing out of the window of a communal hallway



At present, however, I hope simply to highlight the persistent intertwining of closure and openness as a mode of creating community spaces. For instance, those markers which differentiated people according to ethnicity, gender, or particular stages along the life course, might be seen in this light not only as exclusionary but also as having the ability to evoke a feeling of familiarity, and thereby gather people together through the suggestion that they might be able to engage in joint commitments. Thus, in the case of Fawzia's Somali Mothers' Group above, the designation of Somali-ness served to draw in a wider range of others with disparate interests, including Astur and Zahra. By gesturing at shared understandings and experiences, without defining these, ethnic labels are able to mobilize particular constituencies. For many minorities, generic invocations of community may seem too vague to encompass the specific histories and power relations that shape their everyday experiences. Ethnicity as a marker of difference, then, serves to add specificity to invocations of community, reassuring migrants and other minorities that they will be understood and accommodated (Baumann 1999; Fog Olwig 2013).

Likewise, at the Salvation Army café, gender and motherhood provided helpful tropes for engaging with strangers. Between mothers from different friendship groups, conversation was most often struck up around the topic of children, husbands and families – topics which provided occasion for laughter or shared sympathy. Likewise, events along the life course provided shared anchors for understanding and connection, so that over time mothers built more enduring relationships in part by structuring conversation and getting in touch with one another around moments they knew they all had, or would, pass through – the first words, the first day of nursery, the first day of school, birthdays, and so on. By evoking common touchstones of experience, mothers found common ground for understanding and being understood. Somewhat less reflexive than how Spivak (2010) describes “strategic essentialism”, such reified self-presentation nonetheless served to suggest bases of commonality without denying the different ways in which the experiences of mothering or gender might be refracted – such as, for instance, Grace's specific choices and challenges around employment and parenting.

Such reification undeniably closed off the space to others – I myself occasionally felt at a loss as to how to respond to talk of “yummy daddies” or nappy changing, and my sometimes-visible discomfort was the source of much teasing. Yet my contention here is that such closure also allowed for more fluid, closely attentive understandings to emerge between those who were present, in Arendt's (1954) unfolding sense, as Grace and Emma both describe. In doing so, it also allowed them to *rethink* gender, and their roles as mothers, in particular ways. For instance, Klara, a German-born mother in her 30s, who was a regular attendee at the café, credits her friends there, as well as

Emma, for encouraging her to get back into work. When she had her children, it was always just assumed that she would be the primary carer. Now, with her children having grown older, she found herself often talking about her days as an architect or as a student in Germany. Picking up on such nostalgia, her regular group of friends would often suggest that she try getting back into architecture, reassuring her that she was not too old to do so, or else coaching her on how to convince her Congolese partner that this was the right move for both of them. They offered Klara an understanding of the dilemmas of gendered expectations that resonated with her own experiences and anxieties, and so felt credible as a basis of change. Towards the end of my fieldwork, Emma was working with Klara to help her in applying for jobs, alongside a group of other women whom she supported in similar ways. As Emma noted above (pg 45), such support was often first and foremost about enabling women to recognise their value, beyond the limitations of categories and experiences based on gender, ethnicity or nationality. As such, even as the café was defined strongly in terms of motherhood, this category provided a taken-for-granted basis of shared belonging and understanding which in turn allowed participants to rethink exactly what their relationship to motherhood might entail.

If ethnicity, gender, or life-stage provided one set of tropes for articulating a presumed unity within community, locality served as another. Kim, for example, articulated her vision of a unitary community this way, when challenging Fawzia and arguing that all local projects ought to serve all those living locally. Nonetheless, ideas of localised community go beyond simply asserting unity and serve to affect a different sort of productive closure.

Notably, every idea of community surveyed above was localized in some way. This isn't to say that they prioritized the *geographically local* but that they imagined community as necessarily playing out within a regular *location* – be that within a hall or across an identifiable network. Moreover, in most of the cases I encountered, this location was imagined as a physical space, regularly and easily accessible across space and time. This was the case for the fortnightly Grove Community Kitchen, the weekly Salvation Army Café, the bi-weekly Somali Mothers' Group, and so on.

If it seems mundane to insist that a regular time and place was important simply because it made scheduling easier, then this is precisely the point – the idea that community had a location made it not something out of the ordinary, but something mundane that could be taken for granted. Imagining the unfolding dynamic of community as playing out in a familiar location made this dynamic accessible. In different ways Emma and Deborah both stressed this point when they argued that the purposes of their respective projects was to make parents feel comfortable, and that comfort was something that had to develop over time. Locating community enabled it to become

familiar, and familiarity allowed people to weave these forms of community in their everyday lives and routines and thus to take part. Grace made a parallel point when she expressed concern with what her neighbours were thinking about her, and claimed to value the opportunity to correct their impressions. In all these cases the location of community isn't imagined necessarily as geographically near, but as proximate and accessible. Although in practice this does mean that community is still imagined as geographically near, more broadly its imagined location varied with respect to one's habits and capacities of mobility. The repeated comparison of community to "home" that runs throughout the ethnography above illustrates this logic of locating community in terms of the proximate and familiar. Indeed, accounts of post-modern forms of community, that either reject unity (Heelas 1996; Hetherington 2000), or which are geographically dispersed, and perhaps wholly or partly virtual (Castells 2001; Jackson 2013) – nonetheless tend to imagine the life of community playing out in specific locations, whether these are meeting halls, cultural sites or online forums.

Finally, community was often imagined nostalgically, again both by those we've met in this chapter but also much more widely, including by many of those who were sceptical about community in the present day. Notably, even younger residents – like the "street" youth who we will meet in Chapter 4-5 – were often resolutely nostalgic, insisting that community had been stronger in the past than in the present. Even in cases where community projects looked to be progressive, this forward direction was sometimes derived from a nostalgic inspiration. For example, Mustafa explained his ostensibly anti-nostalgic project of trying to get refugee fathers to focus on their present lives partly in backward-looking terms. During our conversation he described the awe he felt at the "possibility" available to him when he first arrived in the UK, and explained how his frustration with other refugee fathers emerged in part from a juxtaposition of their present attitudes with this initial awe.

I do not wish, however, to argue for nostalgia as a ubiquitous feature of imagined community. Rather, I want to suggest that nostalgic imaginaries crop up often precisely because they imagine community as emerging from the most familiar or most empowering ground – oftentimes childhood, or other times which serve to set our expectations of the world around us. As with imaginaries of unity and locality then, framing ideas of community through the lens of nostalgia serves to make these ideas, and the others whom they apply to, seem more familiar, closely-known and accessible.

In the instances I surveyed, forms of closure were not being deployed in the first instance to constitute selves through the act of excluding others. Rather, because self-constitution was an uncertain and unfolding process, closure was deployed as a means of making this process seem more possible and stable. At first glance this differs significantly from how community has tended to be characterised as ambiguous or essentialist. And indeed, my argument here is partially a rejoinder

to these critiques. It is true that community can entail both these things, but I have argued that people use these features of community, *in interaction with one another*, to do work, rather than seeing either as goods in isolation.

Yet there are older roots to this way of thinking about community. The works of Fredrik Barth and Anthony Cohen are taken as foundational to the approach that sees community as defined through the marking of boundaries. Their work has often been read to suggest that selves – collective or individual – define themselves by marking difference and otherness (Balibar 2005; Bhabha 1994). Yet both authors are also keen to emphasize that internally, within supposed communities, processes of historical change, the movement of people and the variation between group members makes it difficult if not impossible to define the essence of a community. In this light, the emphasis on boundary marking might be seen as less about drawing self-other distinctions, and more about objectifying the self in particular ways so as to *allow* for change and complexity in other ways. Hence, Barth (1969:6) suggests that marking ethnic-group boundaries signals to group members that they are “playing the same game”. Cohen (1985: 14-15) develops this idea that symbolically marking boundaries serves to coordinate action within the demarcated group:

Symbols [...] do more than merely stand for or represent something else [...] They also allow those who employ them to supply part of their meaning [...] symbols [are] shared by those who use the same language or participate in the same symbolic behaviour [...] But their meanings are *not* shared in the same way. Each is mediated by the idiosyncratic experience of the individual [...] Symbols do not so much express meaning as give us the capacity to make meaning.

For Cohen, marking boundaries asserts the possibility of groups sharing something in common, even when they may in fact lead highly diverse lives. Indeed, he suggests that “the commonality of symbolic form is such that its exponents may be unaware of the strikingly different meanings which it has for each other.” (1986: 2), but that shared symbols “provide media through which individuals and groups can experience and express their attachment to a society without compromising their individuality.” (ibid: 9)

Cohen’s concern is with demonstrating the durability of group identity, even as it encompasses significant inter-individual diversity. My approach here has been to pick up on the idea that particular symbols, such as community, (or else ethnic community, local community or nostalgic community) are *good to think with* and suggest that people see value in them as shared objects of thought, because doing so serves to *gather people together and coordinate their action*. As such, invoking community entails invoking the *possibility* of mediating difference and forming new

personal and collective projects. But to invoke this open-ended possibility, in a recognisable, compelling way, so as to draw people towards enacting it, there is also a need to fix some of the meanings of community more concretely.

The use of closure as a means of *facilitating* rather than denying fluidity, is especially apparent in the case of the Salvation Army Café. Here, even though visitors typically stayed within familiar groups – often based on linguistic or ethnic differences – they didn't see these divided groups as exhausting their notion of community. Rather, seemingly recognising that familiarity was a question of degree, people did move between groups and interact warmly with less-known others, when there was common ground on which to do so. And regular co-presence in the café provided one form of common ground, so that over time bonds would form between regulars even if they tended to stay within different groups of friends. In other words, people were not consciously marking difference from others so much as pursuing experiences of unfolding familiarity, where they started from the most familiar grounds, such as sitting with existing friends, and reached out from there. And as Emma explained, it was this unfolding familiarity that seemed to be the fundamental self-constitutive act for visitors, as it gathered unfamiliar people and ways of living into closer proximity and opened them up as new horizons for self-transformation. In doing casework, it was Emma's emphasis on first building familiarity that allowed others to become increasingly forthcoming about personal challenges, issues and dreams, overcoming their initial trepidation and scepticism.

Throughout my time in Kilburn, forms of closure were widely present and often highly parochial but, in short, the intent behind them always seemed directed at an internal and unfolding sense of understanding, of oneself and of others. External others were figured and excluded insofar as they were seen as eroding this sense of understanding, by bringing too much of the unfamiliar into the taken-for-granted spaces of community. I will unpack these dynamics of closure and exclusion further in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion: Community inside out, outside in**

When we combine the uses of fluidity and the use of fixity, then, we end up with the idea that conceptually, for people themselves, community is a tautology, and as a tautology it is productive. In Kilburn, it signifies something like the group of people with whom one feels there is a possibility of establishing interpersonal understanding. This understanding is not something that can be easily captured in language, but which emerges out of shared experience and practice, which allows for the communication and negotiation of a broad experience of being. As such it can never be taken for granted as pre-existing, but is itself a product of ongoing interaction on a close enough basis to allow this understanding to emerge. Hence ideas of community are not about capturing the *pre-existence*

of this understanding – people do not assume that all those within a given community know them intimately – but rather, they gesture at the *possibility* of it emerging. The idea of community, then, serves as a shared conceit – asserting the possibility of this understanding before it has been established, so that it can be collectively explored in the first place.

Forms of fixity including idioms of unity, location and nostalgia serve to make this conceit more credible. We might imagine contexts where people are already less certain about the lives and minds of others around them – as is often remarked of the (global) metropolis, writ large – as prompting a greater reliance on fixity to make community credible. Yet too much closure, and community ends up as something over-defined, with narrow terms of participation and belonging that are unlikely to compel very many. The open-endedness that facilitates the emergence of close understanding and joint-commitment vanishes. Conversely, we might expect that in contexts where people already feel more familiar with those around them, there may be less reliance on fixity. Indeed, if we look at the cases here, the Salvation Army Centre Café jumps out as an instance both where the idea of community being promoted is particularly ambiguous and where significant time and effort is spent simply trying to cultivate degrees of familiarity amongst strangers, reducing the reliance on fixity. In contrast, other projects with narrower terms of participation must do more to presume shared commitment upfront, and rely more heavily on fixity to do so.

In this chapter, I have argued that different community projects in Kilburn evoked the fixity and fluidity of community to different degrees, but common to all was the attempt to strike some sort of balance between these properties. It was the striking of this balance, I argued, that residents valued, as it simultaneously provided a familiar, recognizable ground for belonging, and allowed for new projects to be developed. In the next chapter, I examine the use of ethnic and racial markers in Kilburn. I argue that the continued use of such markers is closely tied to the desire to open up community-like spaces, where relations of fluidity might take place in demarcated and identifiable ways.



A photograph by artist Sara Shamsavari, on display at a local theatre

## 2. Blacks, dogs and Irish: (Re)markable differences in Kilburn

*“This ain’t a culture, it’s my religion!”*

– *Skeptā, Shutdown*

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Diversity is often seen as the very essence of Kilburn. For politicians and within the popular media diversity is often cast as a problem to be managed, posing a threat to the possibility of social cohesion (Gilroy 2004; Holohan 2014; Lithman 2010; Richardson 2004; Sian et al 2012; Worley 2005). Within such popular discourses, the very question of whether and how people of different backgrounds might co-exist harmoniously already presumes a reality where ethnic or racial categories already exist as meaningful distinctions, and where these distinctions pose significant challenges. In contrast, the novelist, Zadie Smith (2016)<sup>2</sup>, herself a former local, has described how such distinctions, and the problems they allegedly created, vanished amidst the mixity of everyday life in Kilburn:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/12/22/on-optimism-and-despair/>

[A]s a child I did not realize that the life I was living was considered in any way provisional or experimental by others: I thought it was just life. And when I wrote a novel about the London I grew up in, I further did not realize that by describing an environment in which people from different places lived relatively peaceably side by side, I was “championing” a situation that was in fact on trial and whose conditions could suddenly be revoked.

Smith’s childhood experiences echo the Kilburn I came to know in many ways. The story told by Emma in the previous chapter, where a young white-British girl was distraught over her new school uniform, because she was afraid it would make her indistinguishable from her Afro-Caribbean best friend who was wearing the same clothes, epitomizes this dissolving of difference.

In a similar vein, Hana, a close friend who lived near to my building, once remarked on her annoyance with notions of “respect”. Commenting on popular tropes that women must behave or dress “respectably” she then turned to remark upon the expectation of her Pakistani parents that one ought to respect one’s elders, regardless of their own behaviour. Both uses of the term, she suggested, felt disingenuous: “Respect to me is to have another person value you as a human being – regardless of your religion or your skin or your gender – just for who you are.” While Hana’s statement did evoke categories such as gender and race as means of classification, it also bristled at their inadequacy, compared with her own self-understanding. If Emma’s story illustrated the way in which typically prominent categories of distinction often faded from view in Kilburn, then Hana’s illustrated what was frequently taken as the obverse of this fact – namely that what made people distinct could only be located on an individual level, rather than within any overarching group identity.

Such accounts match the prevailing theme of what scholarship exists on Kilburn. Mary Hickman and her colleagues (Hickman et al 2008; 2012) see daily life in Kilburn as characterized by rich experiences of heterogeneity. Although Hickman and her colleagues use the language of social cohesion, with a view to intervening in contemporary British policy debates, they ultimately argue that such cohesion emerges from a shared sense of place which allows residents to cultivate the dispositions needed to “rub fairly well together” (Hickman and Mai 2015: 426). In a famous essay Doreen Massey likewise characterises Kilburn as having “a global sense of place” defined by mixture, multiplicity and movement:

It is (or ought to be) impossible even to begin thinking about Kilburn High Road without bringing into play half the world and a considerable amount of British imperialist history [...] Imagining it this way provokes in you (or at least in me) a really global sense of place [...] [W]hat gives this place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is



constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus. (1994: 154).

Elsewhere in Massey's work, and in the work of others, this idea of a global sense of place is taken up to inform a particular vision of cosmopolitanism, focused on "actually existing practical [cosmopolitan] stances" (Robbins 1998: 21). Massey calls this "grounded cosmopolitanism", Appiah (2010) "rooted cosmopolitanism", Noble (2009) "everyday cosmopolitanism", Radice (2014) "micro-cosmopolitanism" and Werbner (2006; 2015) "vernacular" or "new cosmopolitanism". All these conceptions take the classic cosmopolitan concern with the "transcendence of the particular" (Cheah 2006: 487) and argue that in practice an embrace of transcendence can only be cultivated through situated experiences in particular places, that bring one into encounter with particular forms of difference. Ethnographic accounts in this vein see cosmopolitan attitudes as grounded in particular traditions (Fog Olwig 2010), networks (Werbner 2002) and places (Datta 2009; Wise 2009), which produce cosmopolitan dispositions that are necessarily partial, even as they reach beyond the contexts where they are grounded. The sense of place that Hickman et al. and Massey both ascribe to Kilburn can be seen in such terms; to them, Kilburn is a place where grounded cosmopolitanism takes root.

Recognizing the partiality of grounded cosmopolitanism has prompted scholars to turn towards the idea of conviviality. This has involved a de-linking of what Vertovec (2009) calls cosmopolitan competencies and cosmopolitan attitudes, and a focus on the cultivation of the former, without necessarily presuming they lead to the development of the latter. Theorists of conviviality focus on the naturalization of difference within particular everyday contexts, grounded in the practical need to navigate diverse environments (Landau and Freemantle 2010), and the forms of mutual attunement which might emerge from such navigation over time.

Yet ethnographies of conviviality present a problem they are only partially able to resolve. Even as they illustrate the way categories of difference dissolve within particular arenas, they are nonetheless replete with accounts of people drawing on such categories to describe and organise their social worlds (e.g Hall 2012; Wessendorf 2014a,b; Wise 2011). In other words, people seem to reproduce a world divided up by ethnicity or race *before* going on to ignore such distinctions. This too was often the case in Kilburn.

In this chapter, I want to explore this persistence of ideas of racial and ethnic distinctiveness in an area famed for facilitating their dissolution. I start off by delving into Kilburn's history and demographics, revealing that habits of mutual support and of crossing barriers of difference have significant historical roots. Today this has led to a place characterised by cross-cutting diversity. In

the second section, I show how such transcendence plays out over the course of particular events and life histories. Simultaneously, I show how tropes of ethnic distinctiveness simultaneously persist, drawing shifting lines of (ex/)inclusion, and facilitating particular forms of (dis/)connection. In the third section I then endeavour to explain this persistence by focusing particularly on the experience of self-identifying black residents. I challenge the tendency within some contemporary scholarship to discuss the everyday relevance of racial categories exclusively in political terms. In addition to this, I argue, ideas of race and ethnicity have everyday appeal in their suggestion of highly essentialized identities. Drawing on work in cognitive anthropology I argue that essentialization functions as a mode of thought, which allows locals to make sense of experiences and shared understandings that otherwise resist explication. Moreover, this is a matter of degree – so that more intimate, more complicated intersubjective understandings are often subsumed within more exclusive and innate framings of race or ethnicity, whereas looser invocations of identity encompass less intimate connections. As such, I argue that the extent of fixity given to a particular identity is related to the degree of fluidity it is seen as containing.

## **Mixed heritage**

Hickman et al. (2012; 2015) suggest that the ethos of unproblematic mixing they depict as characteristic of Kilburn was cultivated over the course of Kilburn's history, in the encounters between successive waves of migrants. Indeed, the area's history reveals a pattern of settlement where nationally excluded groups have long formed a significant proportion of the population, and where local networks, which helped mediate access to housing and employment, fostered bonds between newly arrived migrants and more established residents.

Although settlement dates back to the 1130s, Kilburn never developed beyond a couple dozen buildings until the early-to-mid-1800s. This period saw the growth of a tenant farming community, housed in small, cheaply-built houses, and later two-story tenements, as well as a number of larger homes and apartments intended for the London gentry and the rising commercial classes. In 1852, the creation of a railway connection to London, spurred the development of commercial streets and denser housing (Baker et al. 1989, 47-51) as well as the growth of skilled trades (ibid: 119-130). The result was that "There was a greater proportion of the 'fairly comfortable, good ordinary earnings' category in Kilburn c. 1890 than in any other district of Hampstead", with a smattering of both "high-class" and industrial working class areas (ibid: 49).

During this latter quarter of the 1800s, sizeable Jewish and Irish migrant communities began to arrive in Kilburn, alongside a notable "artistic and Bohemian element" (ibid: 49). Through the early 1900s, the growing communities of both unskilled labourers and skilled tradesmen and retailers

became increasingly spatially segregated, both from one another and from the gentry (ibid: 49-50). From its earlier years, then, there have been competing moral and socio-economic geographies of Kilburn. For the upper classes and some skilled tradesmen Kilburn was a place which reflected and furthered aspirations to ascend the social hierarchy, with its poorer residents posing a risk of both economic and moral degradation. For others, including many migrants, labourers and tradesmen, Kilburn represented a space of shared opportunity, partially by dint of its mixed and widely interconnected nature (See Baker et al. 1989; Hickman et al. 2012).

The heavy bomb damage of World War II, coupled with the overcrowding of available housing, prompted a rush of post-war redevelopment. While this served to loosen some of the previous spatial segregations between various ethnic and socio-economic groups (Baker et al. 1989: 50-51), the development of council estates during the 1960s and 1970s began to re-concentrate many of the poorest within the dense tower blocks or tightly-packed tiered homes of Kilburn's estates.

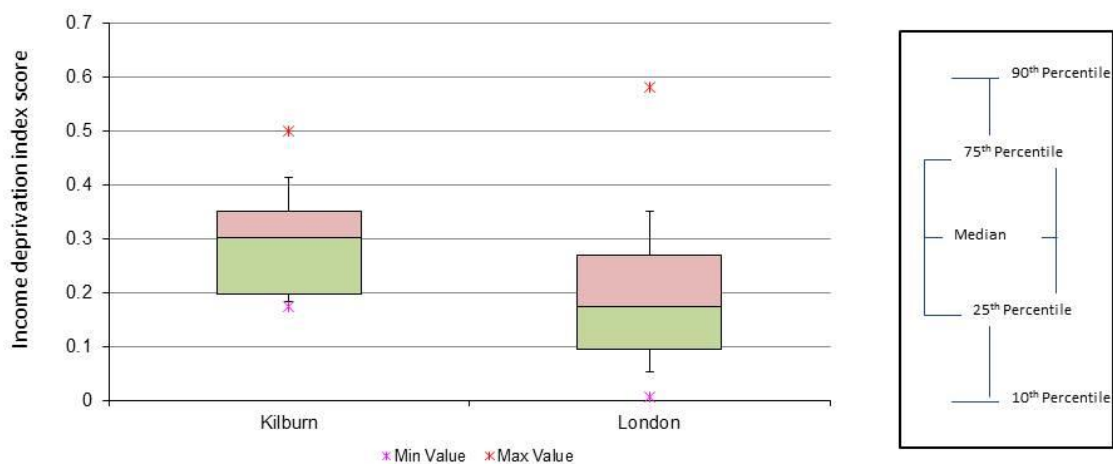
Coinciding with the development of council estates, the 1960s also saw a significant influx of immigrants from the commonwealth. In Kilburn, many Caribbean migrants found a welcome port of entry, as previous histories of migration had created a dynamic of acceptance, especially amongst the working-class communities, and particularly amongst the Irish, who were themselves marginalized on both ethnic and economic grounds within London as a whole (Hickman et al. 2012). During their time in Kilburn, Irish, Jewish and other marginal migrant communities had developed significant networks, which animated a sizable informal economy. In turn, the lively informal economy, and an accompanying ethos of mutual support amongst migrant groups, made it easier for new migrants who were unable to access council housing or formal employment to nonetheless secure accommodation and work. (Baker et al. 1989; Hickman et al. 2012; Wiending and Colloms 1999).

Today, this history has served to shape a place characterised by multiple axes of difference. As London shifted towards a knowledge and finance-driven economic model in the 1980's, many of Kilburn's residents, reliant upon industrial employment, lost jobs (Graham and Spence 1994; Gordon, et al. 2009; Imrie et al. 2009). The higher barriers to entry surrounding knowledge-driven employment have stratified London's labour market, with this stratification leading to a diverse array of professions represented within Kilburn (Hickman et al. 2012; Hamnett 2003). Against the London average, Kilburn residents are not only over-represented in the lower-waged, less-secure service- and retail-sectors, but also education, health, and "arts and entertainment". Meanwhile, while Kilburn residents are underrepresented in the "professional", "scientific and technical",

“information and communication”, and “financial and insurance” sectors, these sectors nonetheless make up over a quarter of employment (BRES 2012).

Data from the UK’s national indices of deprivation reveal that both employment and income deprivation are more extreme within London as a whole, and that income deprivation is particularly concentrated amongst a smaller sub-population, relative to the London-wide distribution (Figure 2-3<sup>3,4</sup>). Figure 4 reveals that such concentrated deprivation has a clear spatial distribution, becoming manifest in particular areas within the neighbourhood. While sizeable and diverse working-class and un-/under-employed populations remains a significant part of the area, Kilburn’s location, nestled amongst some of London’s wealthiest neighbourhoods, has also made it attractive to a better-off middle class, for whom Kilburn represents an entryway into West London life and/or its property market.

**Figure 2: Comparative Distribution of Income Deprivation (2010)**

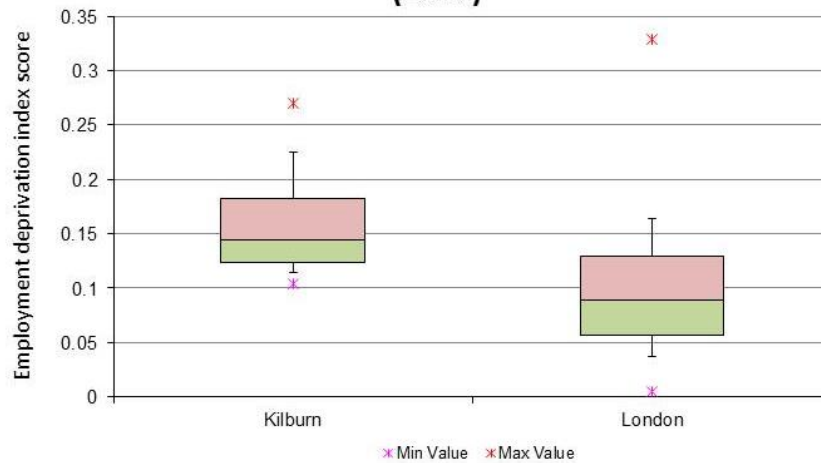


*Source: Department for Communities and Local Government, Indices of Deprivation 2010.*

<sup>3</sup> These figures contain the author’s independent calculations based on the Department for Communities and Local Government data. This data is collected at the level of Local Super Output Areas, small population clusters of between one- to three-thousand, allowing us to measure the distribution of deprivation within Kilburn itself.

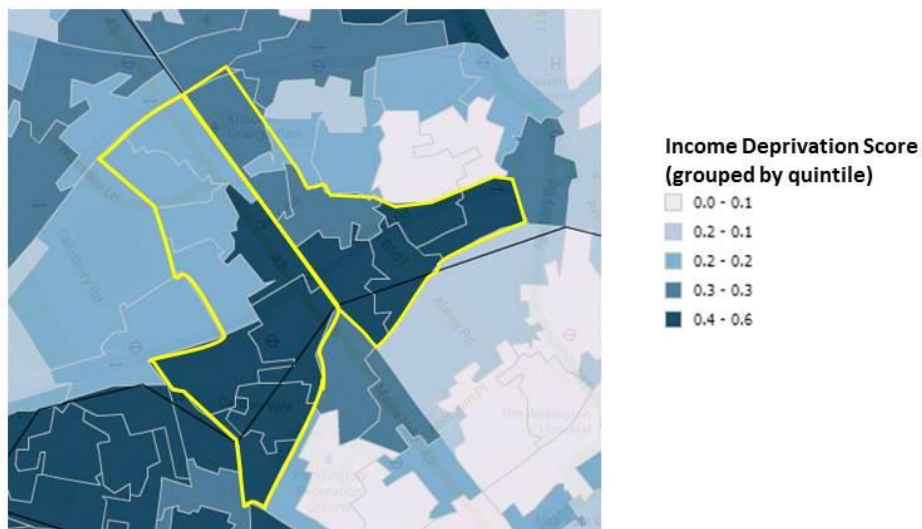
<sup>4</sup> In the two box-and-whisker plots here, the box contains the central two quartiles, with the central line as the median. As there were not enough data points in the disaggregated Kilburn data to determine a robust standard deviation, instead the top and bottom whiskers mark the 90<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> percentiles respectively.

**Figure 3: Comparative Distribution of Employment Deprivation (2010)**



Source: Department for Communities and Local Government, Indices of Deprivation 2010.

**Figure 4: Income Deprivation Distribution in Kilburn**



Source: Department for Communities and Local Government, Indices of Deprivation 2010. Map generated with London LSOA Atlas Tool: <http://data.london.gov.uk/visualisations/atlas/lsao-atlas/atlas.html>

Likewise the distribution of officially-recorded ethnic groups in Kilburn reveals a broad mix, where a wide range of minority groups are over-represented in Kilburn as against the London average, whilst the “White British” population is more of a minority than it is across London as a whole (Figure 5). Yet the very concept of diversity only emerges from various attempts to conceptualize and measure

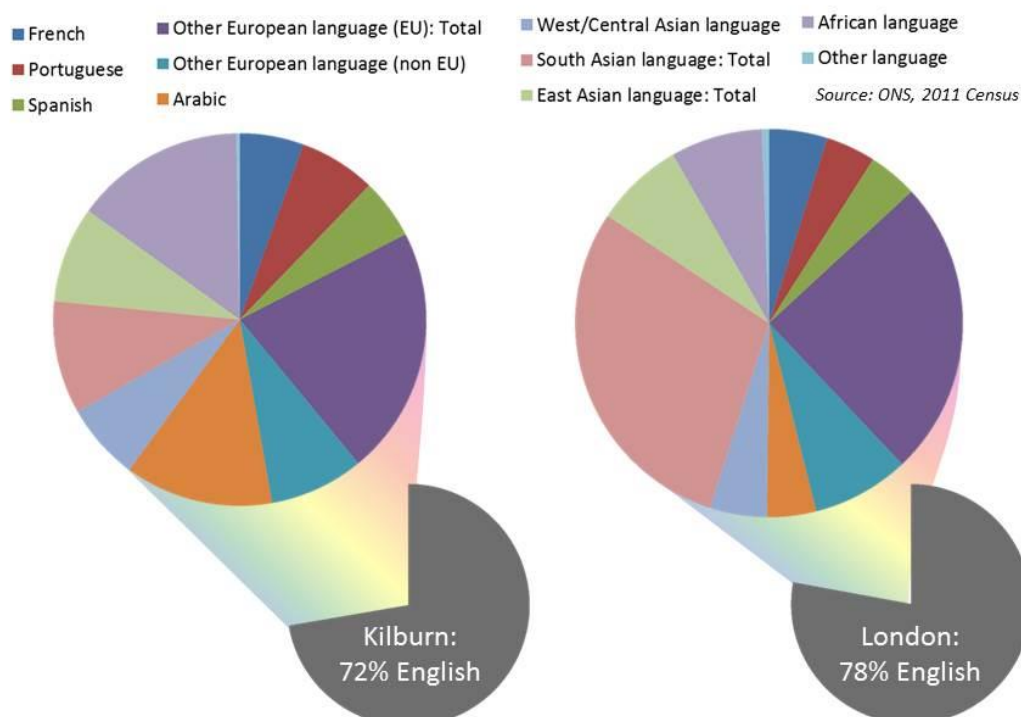
difference (Wastell 2001) and indeed, in Kilburn, different framings of diversity bring out different populations. In Figure 6, the large charts represent the distribution of those whose first language is not English, revealing a disproportionate presence of Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic and African-language speakers, against the London average. Meanwhile speakers of South Asian languages, who comprise the largest non-English linguistic group in London, lose this dominance in Kilburn, instead coming to sit around the middle of the distribution of linguistic groups, at 10%.

**Figure 5: Ethnic Distribution: Kilburn vs London**



Source: ONS, 2011 Census

**Figure 6: Linguistic Distribution: Kilburn vs London**



This demographic picture resonates both with Kilburn's history of migration as well as with other ethnographies of conviviality. Vertovec (2007) has claimed that those living in areas characterised by the presence of significant cross-cutting difference are likely to begin to dissolve categorical terms of difference into a more general impression of diversity. Indeed, such "super-diversity" has been a defining feature of many of the areas in which scholars have traced local practices of conviviality (Gidley 2013; Wessendorf 2014a, b; Wise 2011).

The argument made by both Hickman and colleagues and by Massey is that such intersecting differences – across income, employment, housing, locality, ethnicity, language and so on – have not only become naturalized over time, but that residents have become adept at communicating, interacting and collaborating across such differences. The history of Kilburn certainly lends some credence to this picture.

Yet the history and demographics of Kilburn also make clear that local diversity follows a particular pattern, containing its own stratifications and exclusions. As such, any habits of cosmopolitan transcendence cultivated in the area are likely to remain grounded in local and personal particularities, and contain their own blind spots and limitations. In the next section, I argue that local habits of cosmopolitan-like mixing do not preclude the continued drawing of ethnic and racial distinctions.

## **What's in a name?**

On a frosty November night, I joined Simon and Evylin to attend an "Irish music night" at The Duchy, a local pub near the Collishaw, alongside a number of their friends. Both in their 60s, Simon and Evylin had lived in the area for over three decades, living in the same council flat, and having come to run their local tenants and residents association. Simon had himself moved from Ireland to Kilburn, but during his time in the area he had witness this sense of Irish identity diminish, as other emigrants dispersed across London and pubs and community centres closed. In earlier conversation, Evylin had described the night as a self-conscious attempt to "bring together" and "revive" the local Irish community, and suggested that I might be interested in coming along. As the performer, perched on a stool in the corner, launched somewhat unexpectedly into a rendition of Folsom Prison Blues, I scanned the crowd.

Outside, there stood a plastic-walled marquee, which had been installed in an attempt to turn around the pub's flagging fortunes. With a few wicker couches, high-powered space-heaters and a flat-screen TV, the marquee served as a shisha café, which attracted a lively crowd of young, largely tea-totalling men and women, appearing largely to be of Middle Eastern descent. Inside, however,

the crowd looked markedly different, and somewhat more mixed: Most people were older, and the majority was clearly white, but there were a reasonable number of others as well – a few Afro-Caribbean and a few who looked South-East Asian. Amongst the white majority, judging by the accents and the few people I knew, only half seemed to be Irish. Evylin herself was American, and a good friend of theirs – another Simon, who had organised the night, despite not being Irish himself – was married to a Polish woman, who had brought along two other Polish friends.

Glancing around the room, I nudged Simon to get his attention over the music:

“What percentage of the people in here do you reckon are Irish?”

“Hm? Oh ninety-eight, ninety nine percent, for sure. This whole pub. Totally Irish.”

I looked at him a bit baffled and remarked: “I think there’s a lot of people from elsewhere in the world.”

“Ah, they’re all related. 99% Irish or related! It’s all about the same,” he quipped and turned back to the music.

As the performer started playing *The Fields of Athenry*, a ballad about the Great Irish Famine, our table burst into song. Knowing the song, I joined in, to the surprise of my neighbour, who asked if it was popular in Canada. I told her it wasn’t, but that I personally enjoyed folk music. She nodded sympathetically and shouted over the din:

“Me too! But I’m English. So when they sing ‘freebirds’ I sing ‘bluebirds’!<sup>5</sup>”

When the singer took a break Simon and I talked some more. Still intrigued I asked him if it meant something different to be Irish in Kilburn than it does elsewhere. Mirroring my earlier expression, he looked at me with bafflement, so I elaborated, rephrasing a conclusion I had encountered in social histories of Kilburn:

Farhan: I get a sense that the, you know, there’s being from Ireland, but then that that identity has developed differently *here* than it has elsewhere. Like it means something different to be Irish here if you hadn’t left, let’s say.

Simon: As far as I’m concerned I’m Irish and nothing else! I was brought over, but there’s home – as far as I’m concerned, you’re Irish wherever you go. So no, I wouldn’t say so.

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<sup>5</sup> As far as I am aware, ‘bluebirds’ have no particular significance here, except as a substitute term. A number of English colleagues who were consulted on this share this impression.



He paused for a bit and then remarked that in the 70s, a family that used to frequent the pub were wrongly arrested for involvement with the IRA – and that at the time a lot of people around the area came together to campaign for them. Almost every family in the room was involved –either in campaigning for them, or in supporting them after their release – or at the very least they knew them. He said this in a fairly definitive way, as if the story ought to settle the question of the Irishness of the crowd.

Later in the night I was returning from the bar with drinks when I accidentally bumped into an older man whom I did not know. He turned around to face me and snapped: “are you sure you want to be in here? Wouldn’t you rather be outside with the others?” seemingly remarking on the idea that I looked more like the crowd smoking shisha in the marquee than those drinking inside.

In this one evening, the idea of Irish ethnicity was marked out in a range of different ways. Initially, in characterising the crowd as almost entirely Irish, Simon suggests a notion of ethnicity defined by kinship but also friendship. Later, however, he grounds Irish identity in terms of place of birth and a sense of belonging, but then quickly shifts to define it instead through political solidarity. Each of these bounded group identity differently, but collectively it seems as if, for Simon, Irishness encompasses whatever close personal connections are in question at the moment, even as it remains a bounded identity. Meanwhile, Simon’s English friend avoids singing the same lyrics as her Irish friends, paradoxically showing solidarity by changing her language to mark herself as an outsider, and thus refusing to appropriate the political experience of others. This is a solidarity, then, marked by a sense of the limits of possible mixing. Finally, despite Simon’s initial assertion of colour-blindness, others clearly seemed more interested in phenotypical markers.

Tropes of kinship and relatedness (Carsten 2000; Eriksen 2004; Malkki 1992), shared political experience (Amin 2010; Gilroy 1991; 2004) language (Anderson 1991; Smith 1987), and of course bodily difference (M'charek 2013), have all been theorized as key elements in constructing a sense of ethnic identity, and imbuing it with reality. What is striking, however, is not the invocation of any one of these tropes but the ways in which Simon and others moved between them in a fluid and even contradictory way, whilst continuing to use the fairly singular idea of ethnicity to encompass them. Each of these tropes specified particular terms of inclusion and exclusion and more or less innate notions of identity, yet somehow all of them constituted Irishness.

This coupling, where identity and belonging were simultaneously treated as fluid and as requiring clear demarcation was very common in Kilburn. This was particularly true of ethnic and racial identity, where the notion of a bounded identity remained consistent, whilst the substance of such

identity was often highly fluid. The shifting substance of identity may be re-made in a short space of time, across different iterations – as was the case with Simon. However, transformations in the meaning of particular bounded identities could occur over the course of life histories.

Take Aisha, whom I first met in a meeting organising a hustings event at one of the local schools, during the 2015 election campaign. Over the following weeks I kept running into her at different events – at charity fundraisers and residents-association meetings – and came to realise that being broadly active in her community, centred around her children's school, was important to her. In turn, she seemed particularly interested in my research, having wondered about questions of community and inclusivity herself. As I got to know Aisha she would share her life story in bits and pieces, and I came to learn that for her, the meaning of her Somali nationality changed along the trajectory of her life course. At first an exclusive and encompassing concept, she came to be disillusioned with many of the values associated with it and to resent the way it was used by others as a means to judge her and to assert control. Yet, despite this deconstruction, being Somali holds an enduring attachment for her, something less clearly defined, and more inclusive, but still important.

Aisha arrived as a refugee in 2000, in her late teens, speaking little English, and knowing little about Britain. Yet she moved based on the knowledge that other Somalis had made the same journey, and had appeared able to secure refugee status and build new lives. The purported experience of co-ethnics seemed to signal possibility even before the nature of this possibly had been revealed. Indeed, it was through the loose connections of family and friends that she was able to find a series of places to stay, always with Somali families.

After a few years she got married, having met her future husband at a bus-stop. He had overheard Aisha conversing with a friend in Swahili, and upon asking where they were from and hearing they were Somali, he offered them a ride. Aisha was nervous, but her friend insisted they could trust him – he too was Somali after all.

In the car Aisha and her friend discussed their weekend plans to attend a party featuring a London-based Somali musician. He was familiar with the event – he named names of people and families involved – and asked if they again wanted a lift. Her friend accepted for the pair. Aisha was mortified – what would the family they were living with think? Again, his Somali background helped – the woman of the house was “reasonable about it”, judging him to be trustworthy.

When Aisha realised that he was interested in her, not her friend, she panicked and broke off contact for a bit. But a few months down the line her friend encouraged her to get back in touch, and she did. They met up a few times – first with the friend in tow, then without, always in public

places. And then he asked her to marry him. She was genuinely interested in him – anxiousness aside – but she also very much wanted to stop moving from one host family to the next, and to have a place of her own.

But marriage wasn't what she imagined it to be – her husband quickly became controlling and entitled. They would both work, but at the end of the day he would simply put his feet up, or have friends around to smoke shisha or chew khat. Meanwhile Aisha was expected to cook, clean, take care of the kids, help tutor them, manage the finances, the family remittances, the housing benefit... And she was desperate to make something of being in the UK – but he didn't even want to learn English, and became argumentative every time she mentioned a course she wanted to do, or a programme run by the refugee-support charity she'd been working with.

They divorced, and he started telling others that she had abandoned her faith and heritage. Aisha was startled to discover that many of her friends were willing to accept his account, seemingly trusting him on the basis of his authority as a Somali man, and she found many of them started avoiding her and gossiping about her behind her back.

That was all several years ago. Today Aisha leads a very different life. She works at the local school, is an active and integral volunteer at the local refugee charity which first helped her out, as well as with the local chapter of "Activate UK", a cross-party grassroots campaigning group. She is completing a diploma in therapy, is involved with a group of refugee women running a catering business, serves as a school governor, runs with a jogging group, is learning to swim, and tries to spend as much time with her kids as possible. She has a rich network of friends met through all these various activities, and she often describes her gratitude to those who were able to see past the colour of her skin, her hijab or her broken English. She tells me a range of stories where she would try new things, and would be met with an old anxiety that people would judge her, and her surprise in finding people who were welcoming and supportive.

Some of her friends are Somali, but most come from a diverse range of backgrounds. And she celebrates this diversity, in contrast to the "closed minds" of the Somali community. Confronting both the judgement of other Somalis, and her sense of the limitations of Somali identity, she spent several years after her divorce largely avoiding Somalis, and still sees herself in distinction to them:

For me I think it's the [Somali] parents thinking oh, there's only one community, we always pray together, we always live together – then the kids will only do the same. They're not learning [...] For me, I let my kids have friends, it's not a challenge having them in the house – I don't care if it's boys or girls or Muslim or non-Muslim, they can just play with them, have

movies with them, go to their house. I just want to teach them that it's okay to go out of the community, understand each other better, you see they also are just children like you – they're the same. They also have mums and dads – they're the same.

In 2014, Aisha stopped sending remittances back to her family, saying that they were constantly demanding, never putting in the effort to understand her situation, and never really grateful – simply expecting that she consistently send money as any good daughter would do. But, she said with frustration, they were invoking the expectations of a family structure which she had never received any support back from – even when she was newly arrived in the UK, she wasn't able to stay with her own relatives. In many ways, then, she is explicit about her frustration with the use of Somali identity by others, whether her family, her ex-husband, or her neighbours, as a basis for judgement and control. She argues that those who view the world in this way cannot truly be interested in getting to know you as a person, and she's learnt to avoid them.

Nonetheless, Aisha still feels strongly Somali, especially today. She struggles to say what this essential, enduring Somali identity consists of, but she is convinced it still matters. Sometimes this comes through in ambivalence, where, as in the quote above, she critiques ideas of closed community, and avoids interaction with most Somalis, while continuing to refer to them as “the community”. She is teaching her kids the Somali language, even though she sees no point in taking them to Somalia, asking: “what would be there for them?” And she still feels wounded when other mothers accuse her of being un-Somali or un-Muslim, even though she feels she is personally strong in her faith and identity, and often gets frustrated with such labels. She is especially passionate about the plight of Somali refugees, and especially angry, but also hesitant and defensive, when discussing issues related to her Somali heritage – polygamy and absentee fathers, female circumcision, English-language skills.

As of late, Aisha says, something peculiar has happened. After many years of being shunned by most other Somali women (“they think I'm mad”, she declares), she's now found herself being approached for support or advice from many of them. Previously, she was seen as un-Somali, and a corrupting influence. Now, she says, a lot of them approach her saying – “you are Somali but you are doing things differently, so we need your help”. They've enfolded her once-mad, once-un-Somali choices and circumstances back into a sense of Somaliness in order to make it accessible, as they grapple with the challenges of diasporic life –from marital conflict, to isolation, to wanting to get more involved in their children's education. In the process, what it means to be Somali for Aisha and her friends has also changed; whereas previously Somaliness entailed differing to the patriarchal authority of her ex-Husband's accounts of their break up, today it is coming to mean women leading

their households, not only in terms of domestic labour but now in terms of earning independent incomes and taking charge in managing familial affairs as well.

As with the night at The Duchy, Aisha's story offers a shifting, fluid notion of identity, alongside a persistent sense of its boundedness. She is often very open to the world, and to exploring new experiences, both as a tactical response to present limitations and frustrations, but also out of genuine curiosity and enthusiasm. At times such openness is signified under the aegis of Somali identity, which in turn becomes a pliable category, redefined through new experiences. At other times, however, Aisha's openness to difference is explicitly set against the perceived confines of this identity, and draws instead on the other relations and identities available to her – as a parent, as a local, as a fitness enthusiast and so on.

Gay y Blasco (2010), following Hannerz (2005) notes the “mercurial”, “fragile” quality of cosmopolitanism, as a concept, arguing that its conceptual fuzziness allows it to endure as a stance in everyday life, while varying in “character, intensity and consequence” sometimes framed as “an ideal, even a day-dream, never to be realised, and at others a firm, unavoidable and fully practical way of dealing with the world” (2010: 404). She notes that actually-existing cosmopolitanism is often only ever a partial stance, which is developed and complicated through the exigencies of everyday life. This notion of mercurial cosmopolitanism can help shed some light on Aisha's story – as well as on the night at the Duchy – by revealing how cosmopolitan orientations are drawn out, or suppressed based on what might be thought of as the ethical affordances of a particular context (Keane 2015). Yet it's also clear that cosmopolitan orientations are not the only things at play – categorical ideas of difference seem to persist alongside and despite these.



A mural celebrating local linguistic diversity doesn't sit well with all Kilburn's residents

Theorists of conviviality have argued that if the salience of difference varies, then this variation is grounded in the fact that different domains of social life are often characterised by distinct dispositions and attitudes, and that convivial dispositions cultivated in one domain may not transpose to others. Wessendorf (2014a) divides relations into public, private and parochial realms – the latter referring to spaces of close interaction between members of the public, such as community groups, classes and associations, that may be defined by common interest, locality etc – and argues that the private realm might be especially characterised by more limited patterns of association marked by a greater familiarity than can usually be cultivated with strangers. Meanwhile, Amin (2012) emphasizes the way in which ethnic and racial difference re-emerges as a problem to be solved in media and state discourse, which inscribe bodies with a range of “pre-formed and performed affects” through which they are read and experienced within public- and parochial-realm encounters (c.f. Amin 2010; Hall 2013).

Collectively, such works are helpful in prompting us to think of the ways in which patterns of openness and closure might vary across domains. Nonetheless the picture from Kilburn suggests a different understanding. In both Aisha’s account and at The Duchy, particular forms of openness and closure are clearly present across domains – characterising intimate relations with family and friends, encounters with strangers and much in-between. Different invocations of ethnic identity

draw shifting lines of inclusion and exclusion. This suggests that the continued endurance of forms of categorical distinction do not exist merely in distinction to forms of openness, but are somehow mutually constitutive of such forms. Moreover, these varied uses of ethnic labels are not treated as distinct, domain-specific identities – rather there is a sense that they are all referring to a singular identity, suggesting that essentialism is a tenacious tendency, even as *what* is being essentialized easily shifts. To unpack these suggestions, in the next section I turn towards cases of racial identity, where several Kilburn residents seemed to exhibit a strong desire to both disavow and emphasize such identities. I explore what might be at stake in this double move.

### **“True say”: Race and intimate intersubjectivity**

To reveal the useful entanglement of openness and closure, it helps to zoom in on cases where categorical differences are treated as especially loaded – as was often the case with conceptions of race amongst Kilburn’s black residents. A common discourse from people living distinct and often-singular lives was that race mattered – and being black mattered especially so. And this significance was not simply discursively asserted. Rather, in many instances, the notion of racial difference provided a key organising principle across a range of domains – from how people developed friendships, to their sense of which opportunities might be available to them. There was no single narrative of this racially-structured order that I encountered, but what these narratives had in common was their focus on race/blackness as a decisive social reality.

For instance, in the spring of 2015, I ran into Liron, a local fitness instructor, who we will spend more time with in Chapter 4. It wasn’t long since we had first met and spoken, but he had had a bad day and was in an expressive mood. A recent service given by his Pentecostal church, hosted at a local community centre, was interrupted by a DJ from the local community radio station. Music was playing, and the DJ, according to her own story, jokingly danced along, but did so in a way that was seen by Liron and many others as a racist gesture. Liron reported the incident to the manager of the community centre, but was met with scepticism over whether the incident was genuine, or a simple misunderstanding. When I bumped into him, he had just left a meeting with the manager, and was fuming.

After having described the situation and his annoyance to me, he concluded that if the manager wasn’t going to take action “we will go to [the local council] – we will unite the community around this – because [the Collishaw] is a black neighbourhood.” He went on, and the second time he repeated the claim that the area is “a black neighbourhood,” I challenged him: “I’m sure a lot of people would have a problem with that. There’s a lot of different, diverse – whatever – people who would not be happy.” He responds:

No, you're right, [this] isn't a black neighbourhood – it's got people from all over. But you know why they come here? You meet a Somali family and they're looking for a place down the road, in Maida Vale, and you'll have the estate agents saying 'ohh, hmmm, I'm not sure' – you know what I'm saying? 'Oh I'm not sure – we don't really have homes big enough for families like yours, we're not really what you're looking for'. And what they're saying is that 'we don't want your children – all your children – all your *black* children or whatever, running around all over the place – it's not really the place for them.' Then you come to [the Collishaw] and you ask and it's 'okay, sure, welcome.'

From here, he goes on to talk about other experiences of racism: about how when he worked as a youth worker, people continually questioned his qualifications, wondering how he got the job, or about how local events put on by black communities always seemed to require security as a condition for renting out premises, when others, for instance by Muslim groups, did not, and, finally, how he imagines those in other countries might be even more hostile on the basis of race:

And because of who I am, I can't go some places. I can't go to Barcelona or Spain because there would be trouble. And I know that if I was challenged I would go all the way. They would have to stop my beating heart if I was challenged. So I just can't go!

Paul Gilroy (1991 [1987]) has famously argued that the experience of being black<sup>6</sup> in Britain has been shaped by a long history of power relations, wending through slavery and colonialism, to the present where these legacies remain inscribed within everyday discourses and the governing logic of the state. In fact, he argues, the marginalisation of blacks within Britain is dependent on the very fact that such historical and institutional embeddedness remains unspoken. This erasure allows for blacks either to be blamed for their own marginality, or else for the political causes of black marginalization to be ascribed only to immediate circumstances without considering how such circumstances came about and who they've benefited.

Gilroy's work is powerful because it provides an account of the political construction of race as a salient category of division, whilst also accounting for its naturalization, where race might come to be seen as something factual, rather than as something contingent and contestable. Others have built on this to uncover ethnographically how such conceptions of race are inscribed, responded to and remade within everyday life (Back 1996; Baumann 1996; Benson 1982; Swanton 2010).

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<sup>6</sup> Gilroy uses black to explicitly encompass all non-white migrant groups. Although the argument here emphasizes the variability in how Kilburn residents conceive 'blackness' all the 'black' residents below are of Afro-Caribbean/African descent, and in this chapter I use 'black' in this narrower sense.



Concomitantly, such approaches have tended to focus on shared political experiences when seeking to account for why notions of racial difference might acquire subjective believability. Stuart Hall (1997) has famously argued that race is a “floating signifier”. Yet, for Hall and for the cultural studies tradition he represents, race is taken as most clearly signifying a variety of political experiences that form the basis of shared marginalization, but also the forms of solidarity, localised tactics and novel identities that might emerge in response.

My argument here is not to deny this political grounding of race, but to contest the notion that the subjective component of race, for raced subjects themselves, is comprised wholly of a shared political experience. Rather, I argue that race is very often also used to signify spaces within which close intersubjective understandings might be established – where the dynamics of fluidity described previously might obtain. Since the prospects for such understandings are clearly circumscribed by a range of political factors (as I will go on to argue in more detail in Chapters 4-5), accounts of racial identity are often heavily politicized. Yet, I want to suggest that by paying careful attention to such accounts, and their attendant shifts, equivocations and slippages, we can recognize that there is something else at stake as well, beyond (though connected to) politics. This, I will argue, is the prospect for mutual understanding.

Thus, in Liron’s account, race is indeed a floating signifier, with the meaning of blackness varying fluidly. At times it is clear Liron intends a phenotypical definition of race, when he imagines others reacting to him or other members on the community on the basis of skin. But in other instances he uses it more expansively to refer to a class or outsider status shared amongst a wider group. These various uses might be seen as responding to different political dimensions of racialized marginality. Yet there is also something hinted at in Liron’s use of blackness that goes beyond the focus on shifting political constellations taken by Hall and Gilroy – without excluding it. This is most evident when he refers to how he would react to a potential racist assault in Spain – that he’d fight to the death. Here he seems to lend the likelihood of racist assault, as well as his reaction, a totalizing logic that suggests he ultimately experiences race as inescapably innate.



A local group parades around the Collishaw estate before joining the main parade at the Notting Hill Carnival

This same suggestion, that race is a meaningful category beyond its political construction, is visible in other accounts as well. I met Wyatt (birth name William, rapper name T-Mai) on the streets of the Collishaw estate where he and a friend were shooting a music video. We got to chatting, and the two of them agreed to an interview where they would answer some questions for me and then we would film a more stylized interview for them to use as promotional material. Yet when the time came, we ended up locked out of the community hall in which we'd agreed to meet. Nonetheless, Wyatt encouraged me to turn on my recorder, and we sat in his friend's car for several hours largely discussing race.

In his mid-20s, Wyatt is well-read, well-travelled and pop-culturally savvy. Our conversation was peppered with references to books, movies, TV and music, across genres and nationalities, from anime, to Bollywood, to Nollywood. He has a diploma in teaching but he's particularly passionate about animation, film and music and is working hard to build an international career across these

fields, whilst holding down stopgap jobs to make ends meet. He is reflexive about this eclectic self-fashioning, and sees his broad, globally-oriented aspirations as making him a part of a “Renaissance generation”. But he also talks about the hold of the street life in his life – and at one point confesses to having been in and out of jail several times over the last few years. Cutting and articulate, he switches between street mannerisms and slang, and a polished, almost sociological register.

Our conversation started in the latter register. I had told him I was interested in the role locally distinctive music and slang play in people’s lives, and he responded that he thought it was a question of ownership – that localised, shifting codes of slang and pop-culture gave people – especially black people – a sense of ownership over an identity that is so often commercialized and sold back to them (I return to this point in Chapter 6). But then he seemed to catch himself, reflect for a moment and suddenly row back on what he had been saying:

True say [...] it’s not even a conscious thing, like. Naturally, I just get an uncomfortable feeling when I follow the masses. It’s just like –

Farhan: Well what makes it uncomfortable?

What makes it uncomfortable to go with all of that? Melanin! (He snickers. I laugh, and then his friend also with us, laughs.) And I’m going to explain that scientifically (pauses) Do you know what that is?

Farhan: I know it’s the pigment in your skin, but that’s it.

But do you know where it comes from? [...] You want to know where it is? Ok. What is everywhere – what do people say is everywhere?

Farhan (unsure): Air?

Alright. But have you ever heard the saying that god is everywhere? So is melanin. (All three of us laugh). It’s something *everywhere* in the cosmos – it’s what inspires us. And so you know what, you get this innate feeling that, you know what, this ain’t right fam, this ain’t cool. And I know that sounds – that might sound really crazy, swear down, but certain times it has stopped me from doing real stupid things! [...]

Like there’s this thing that happens yeah, like I could be walking yeah, and whenever I sense another black person, I look up. And whenever I look up, they’re looking at me! It’s crazy! Like, do you do that? [...] Like when you’re walking around and you’re (he sings the refrain from Chief Keef’s “Still”, and imitates a swaggering walk, with his head down, although he is sitting:) ‘Still on the block, still on the block – ’(he stops short and theatrically snaps his head up with a look and a nod of recognition at the imaginary stranger passing by. We all laugh).

One persistent theme for Wyatt is that blackness is *both* an inescapable ascription, produced by the circumstances of history and politics and placed on you by others, *and* an innate inner reality. He remarks that black people can fall out of tune with this inner reality. For instance, “Some black people call other black people Bounty when they act white.” He recognises that this behaviour may come from a desire to be accepted by a dominant white culture, but he also sees it as counterproductive, both because it does not guarantee that one will escape racialized judgements, and more fundamentally because one will be living out of tune with one’s inner reality. He illustrates this by talking about interracial relationships:

Like – real talk, white girls date us, and there’s only one reason they date us and that’s because we’re black. Now ‘because we’re black’ could encompass anything: sexual prowess, they want to be ‘down’, we’re different, whatever. Whatever. And it makes them feel like they’re a part of the experience. And that’s fucked up. Because who we are don’t come into that at all!

[...] If you want the black experience – you know what the black experience is? The people need to learn the black experience because – real talk, real talk –(to his friend) remember when we was having dinner? Remember? And then she started putting her fork in my plate? Black people don’t do that shit! I could be in love with you, we just got married, but don’t put your damn fork in my plate. It doesn’t mean I love you any less, but our mouth, the bacteria in there (in unison with his friend:) is different! Yes! There you go – he knows. It’s the melanin. (They clasp hands and fist bump)

Here, Wyatt contrasts the perceived “black experience” to “who we are”, but then refers to this latter identity as “the real black experience”. He goes on to give a litany of other examples how past girlfriends from different racial backgrounds have failed to understand him, from the positions they slept in, to the way they expressed affection in public and private, to the different nature of their and his sexual appetites. All these seemed to focus on the intimate details of shared life. Yet when I asked him if his concern was that “It’s like you’re not understanding each other?” he disagreed:

No! No, no. I honestly believe – like when you have sex with someone, you pass on something of yourself. You leave something of your spirit, right? I know because certain girls I’ve had sex with, I didn’t think of them before we did, but afterwards it’s like ‘hey, her! How’s she doing?’

It is this transaction of spirits, something seen as more than mere understanding that Wyatt is concerned about. And for him, it has become enough of a concern that he’s decided he doesn’t want to date white women anymore:

So, at this moment in time, I do stay away from Caucasian females. I wouldn't necessarily say – I wouldn't just leave it at the fact that 'oh, you're racially inferior'. I would just say 'oh, your genes are recessive, honestly, I wouldn't want my child to be raised on like, food from Iceland, and you know, like I'm just scared of people who in them have this history of genocide, you know?' (everyone laughs).

Wyatt's narrative is at turns tinged with irony and deliberately bombastic. But it is also evidently deeply sincere – he is energized, and passionate. Alongside questions of power, his use of race seems to grasp at the possibility for close understanding with others. Yet this is very much an equivocal grasping, varying in its encompassment. For instance, I myself was sometimes included within the circle of those who "get it", as when he describes us as sharing a bond of melanin. But when discussing past girlfriends, he grouped "Asian chicks" as amongst those who fetishize, but misunderstand, the black experience. In the next moment he paused, glanced my way, and apologized, in a somewhat equivocal tone, which seemed to express uncertainty as to whether I was owed an apology. On some fronts, he seemed confident I would "get it", and avoided direct explanations in favour of teasing out my own understanding – as with his explanation of melanin. Meanwhile, with questions of intimate life he not only became sceptical that I would understand, but also provided more detail, for instance explaining the "black experience" in terms of taken-for-granted dinner-table habits.

This concern with close interpersonal understanding emerges in other narratives as well, even from those who might conceive race very differently to Wyatt. For instance, Lucien, a forty-year old man, who lived in my building, once talked about ending his longest relationship based on the question of mixed-race children. The decision was his, he explained, as he didn't want to raise a child who, marked out by their physical features, would identify only with their black/African background. But with some probing, he admitted that his fears were not only based on concern for his child, but around the prospect of having a family life. He relates an incident where having once stayed out, and then over, at a friend's house watching films, and having forgotten his phone at home, he came home the next day to find that the locks on the flat he shared with his partner had changed. It turned out that his partner had called her mother, who had always been begrudging about her dating a black man, and her mother insisted that his behaviour could only mean he was having an affair. Following the incident, his partner was deeply and sincerely remorseful, but for him it shook something up – how could he, or his child, possibly have a healthy family life when there would never be *trust* in the family? Lucien viewed his partner's mother and his partners' actions as very differently motivated. Her mother was straightforwardly prejudiced, and that he felt he knew how to deal with. But his partner's willingness to trust her mother over him suggested to him something

deeper – a sense that despite their shared lives they may never be able to see eye to eye on certain issues, and the way such differences would upset the harmony he presumed would be needed to sustain a happy family.

Lucien is the sort of person Wyatt might accuse of being a “bounty”. He was born in suburban Kent, to Senegalese parents, holds a professional job in marketing, and largely rejects racial or ethnic terms of self-description, preferring instead to refer to himself as “English” and “civilised”. He often expressed despair about black “youth” as hooligans and ruffians, wishing they could just behave like “normal” people rather than encouraging the idea that there was something distinct about black people – especially because he felt that such behaviour and the attached judgments both tended to be negative. Yet if Lucien largely rejected a racialized identity, race nonetheless crept back in around questions of intimate life, such as trust within a family or the ability to raise a child.

In all three accounts, invocations of blackness vary between being more or less fixed. Moreover, racial categories are at their most fixed and exclusive when questions of an innate sense of selfhood are at stake. These are the moments where understandings of race become hardest to articulate, and where there is a greater reliance on tacit understandings. Wyatt equates melanin with God – describing it not only as omnipresent, but also as a force that is so fundamental it is almost indescribable. He periodically asserts that people “learn” how to be black, but simultaneously describes being black as innate, and fundamental. Similarly, even while discussing ways in which racial stigma and exclusion are imposed upon him, Liron nonetheless treats blackness as capturing the core of his being, an essential sense of self that he would defend to the death – what Wyatt calls “spirit”. For Lucien too, there is a difference between the judgment of his would-be mother-in-law, which he equates with prejudice, his own notion of race as largely constructed and imposed, and the judgement of his ex-partner, which he sees as revealing a more fundamental, and unbridgeable gap in the possibility for interpersonal understanding.

In the 50s, Manchester School Anthropologists, examining what role ethnic identities played in new, mixed urban contexts, argued that enduring ideas of ethnicity served as a sort of cognitive map, distilling the vast social possibilities of the city down to a few stable and familiar categories (Mitchell, 1956; Epstein 1958). Building on this idea, anthropologists around the turn of the millennium drew on cross-cultural data and attempted to account for the way in which human brains conceptualised differences in “kind”. Gil-White (1999; 2001) has suggested that we think of ethnic or racial differences as distinct “living kinds” – defined by “biologically inherited” and “inalienable” essence (2001: 793). Moreover, he argues that such essentialist categorisations are most likely to be formed

when groups are characterised by endogamy and descent-based membership, which he sees as the essential features of biological species

However, Astuti (1995; 2001; Astuti et al 2004) has argued that categorical essentialism and biological models are separate, and that the latter is just one out of the many ways in which an essentialist instinct is meaningfully elaborated in particular contexts. Looking at the Vezo of Madagascar, she argues that Vezo adults share a conception that ethnic identities are defined by where people live and what subsistence activities they thereby engage in. Despite this socialization-based model of ethnic identity, she finds the Vezo simultaneously treat such identities as inalienable, or at least inert, rejecting the idea that they themselves would change their identity simply by moving or taking up different subsistence practices. Working in a diverse village in rural Ukraine, Kanovsky (2007) makes a similar argument, identifying parallel beliefs that identities are malleable and contingent, and that they contain an immutable essence. These beliefs, he notes, are often discussed in a single language of nationality, ethnicity or citizenship. Such categories are used both to indicate that identity may be up for negotiation and a persistent parallel belief that something of identity must remain fixed and innate. Astuti argues that between the strong cognitivist argument that individuals have innate conceptual ideas about the nature of group identity, and the strong relativist argument that individuals can engage in unconstrained learning, lies the idea that conceptual learning is constrained by “domain-general learning mechanisms,” of which “essentialist thinking” is one example (Astuti et al 2004: 14-15).

This argument for essentialism as a persistent and distinct *mode of thought*, which may operate alongside other ways of thinking, helps illuminate how diversity is treated in Kilburn. Essentialism enables the terms of interpersonal understanding to be *taken for granted*. In turn, different situations produce different forms of understanding which may resist description and which people view as taken for granted. In a pub, or in other highly mixed spaces, interpersonal understandings are likely not only to be looser, but to develop along multiple dimensions. Consequently, even as essentialized ethnic categories persist, they are also used more creatively and flexibly, shifting from one moment to the next as they grasp at multiple forms of connection which resist description. Even as they are essentialized, they are less fixed.

Meanwhile more intimate relations were often seen as demanding a greater level of close understanding, where much more resists clear description. Consequently, categorical identities were used more rigidly and exclusively. For instance, in Aisha’s story, the biggest challenges to her sense of Somali identity come with the breakup of her marriage and her questioning the nature of her ties with her mother and other kin back in Somalia. Likewise, for Wyatt or Lucien, questions of intimate

connection with partners throughout domestic life evoked the most exclusive and innate notions of race. In such instances, where shared understanding was at its most intimate, identities were seen as the most fixed. What instances of loose and tight essentialism share in common, however, is their delineating spheres of fluidity where the sort of closely-attuned, unfolding intersubjective understanding described by Lambek (2010) and Arendt may be possible.

## **Conclusion**

This leads us to the conclusion that the mutually constitutive dynamic between fixity and fluidity, at stake in local conceptions of community, also applies to notions of ethnicity and race. Ideas of ethnicity and race were used locally to signify, at least in part, the possibility for establishing ties defined by fluid forms of understanding which resisted direct description.

This argument does not exclude political and historical factors in shaping ideas of race and ethnicity, but suggests that the enduring use of such categories also has to do with their ability to serve as particularly fixed and recognizable categories of belonging. Signifying such forms of closure helps demarcate spaces of more tacit and intimate understandings – along a continuum, where more fixed evocations of identity correspond with more tacit and intimate interpersonal relations. In this chapter, particular ethnic or racial terms – Irishness, Somaliness, blackness etc. – are invoked in flexible ways, bounding different groups characterised by different visions of commonality, from one invocation to the next.

As such, this chapter has focused on the uses of fixity, both in terms of providing a frame where particular forms of inter-subjective understanding can unfold, but also in allowing certain experiences and other terms of belonging to remain un-spoken, and thereby providing an indispensable way of gesturing at intimate, deeply situated and evolving connections. Yet if signifying fixity is indispensable in these ways, in the next chapter I show that this signification itself could become a dynamic process, making fixity a moving target, and thus making residents more able to engage and connect with a wider range of differences.





Performers onstage at Rumi's Cave Live Lounge

### 3. In the name of... : Ethical exploration and the embrace of diversity

لِلْغُرَبَاءِ فَطُوبَىٰ غَرِيبًا بَدَأَ كَمَا وَسَّيْعُودُ غَرِيبًا الْإِسْلَامُ بَدَأَ وَسَلَامٌ عَلَيْهِ اللَّهُ صَلَّى اللَّهُ رَسُولُ قَالَ قَالَ هُرَيْرَةُ أَبِي عَنْ

*Hadith: "Islam began as a something strange and it will return to being strange, so give glad tidings to strangers.")*

In late December 2014 the Collishaw Hub was packed out. The event was running late, with interminable technical difficulties announced by the screech of microphone feedback creating a delay of almost a full hour. But the crowd of nearly 200 people continued to buzz with lively chatter.

The Hub had been hired out by a Kilburn organization called Rumi's Cave for a special year-end edition of their popular "live lounge" music and poetry nights. "They've got a huge reach." Mia commented. "You don't normally see it, because they're [normally] in that tiny little space, but there

are a lot of people really into what they do!” Mia is a freelance film-maker and journalist, with an office at the Hub. Intrigued by the crowd, she had decided to join in.

That night politics seemed to pervade people’s conversations. At the time the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, unarmed black men killed by the police in the US, were prominent in the news, and race seemed to be a charged issue in people’s minds.

Finally, the two MCs took the stage. Aaden grabbed his mic, bouncing up and down, and shouted a welcome: “Before we get going, I just want to create some energy. So when I say ‘hey’ you say ‘ho’! Hey!” He pointed his mike at the audience, who fired back: “Ho!” “Hey?” “Ho!” “Hey!” “Ho!” “Hey!” “Ho!”. Quick on the last beat, his co-host Yasmin grabbed her mike, and shouted, in the same rhythm: “when I say ‘I’, you say ‘can’t breathe!’”

These were the last words of Eric Garner, who was infamously strangled to death, whilst the incident was recorded. I caught myself wondering whether this was appropriate, but as Yasmin shouted “I?” the response came like a crashing wave “can’t breathe!” “I!” “Can’t breathe!” “I!” “Can’t breathe!” She interjected, speaking quickly, almost rapping:

Because you know it’s sad what’s happening in the world right now, and we’ve got to keep the brothers and sisters who are suffering in our hearts right now! And we’ve got to keep fighting for love, justice and peace, because we know, we know [she slows her pace and exhales] they are *all* the same thing.

Rumi’s Cave is an organisation run by and for young Muslims. Based just off the High Road, their reach and reputation extends much further than the cramped ex-café where they officially operate. And contrary to popular images of British Muslims living segregated, “parallel lives” (Cantle 2001) they are connected globally and locally – highly invested in exploring and shaping a form of Muslim faith and identity that is at home within London and the wider world.

Yet shaping a form of faith grounded in interconnection is never an easy matter. As I will elaborate, it involves an ongoing effort to render a diverse range of experiences comprehensible and to incorporate them into daily practice. Yet it is through these wide-ranging practices of appropriation and incorporation the thriving community around Rumi’s is forged. As such Rumi’s provides an intriguing lens into understanding ethical projects that are imagined and sustained amidst the

buzzing diversity and change of London's streets. Here I primarily focus on Rumi's Cave<sup>7</sup>, but also look at a local radio project – C2C Radio – based in the Collishaw Hub.

In Chapter 1, I argued that forms of community in Kilburn involved an inner space of fluidity, where relations could be renegotiated, created through particular forms of fixity, which served to delineate such spaces. Chapter 2 further unpacked the uses and enduring value of fixity within Kilburn, as a way of making sense of the world, and delineating a range of spaces characterised by varying degrees of fluid intimacy. Here, I would like to shift gears in the ethnography. The first two chapters attempted to present a broad sample of attitudes towards community and diversity respectively, with a view to giving an overview of the interplay of fixity and fluidity in constituting both these terms. In the next two chapters, I hope to unpack how these dynamics played out in particular lives in more detail, and thus trace their power to reshape relations. In this chapter, in particular, I aim to unpack how forms of community might support an open-ended engagement with difference, and an equally open-ended commitment to continually (re)discovering moral ideals.

Lives in the global city are lived in constant encounter with change and diversity. For some, this can prompt a desire to hunker down amongst the familiar, as Putnam (2007) argues. Yet the fluidity within community can also be self-consciously deployed as a vehicle for engaging with diversity. The case studies I engage with here suggest that even as community might be produced through forms of fixity, it also opens up spaces for the suspension of judgement. In turn, people develop habits of constantly reworking the forms of fixity through which community is invoked, creating a mobile concept of community that resists stability in favour of an ethos of dwelling through continually engaging with difference.

## Islam in the Global City

British Muslims are living through a very particular historic moment. Successive events, including the Rushdie affair<sup>8</sup>, and an ongoing series of terror attacks, have fuelled heated public debate around the place of Islam within the UK. In popular media and policy narratives, Islam is often characterised simultaneously as a threat to multicultural co-existence, as well as evidence that multiculturalism has gone too far (Abbas 2005; Allen 2007; Holohan 2014; Meer and Modood 2009; Modood 2006).

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<sup>7</sup> The name of Rumi's Cave has *not* been changed, as its name is central to the ethos I describe here, and the ethnography would not accommodate a change. Personal names have been changed, and to the extent that individuals remain identifiable – for instance in their association with a particular role – I have checked to ensure they are okay with such identification.

<sup>8</sup> The debate that emerged around British author Salman Rushdie's publication of 'The Satanic Verses', and the response of Ayatollah Khomeini, then Supreme Leader of Iran, who issued a fatwa (edict) demanding Rushdie be killed.

Such discourses voice an increasing demand for British Muslims to present a clear and acceptable public identity, even while they may be struggling with questions of faith and identity on a personal level (Mythen et al. 2009; 2012). Concomitantly, those spaces and resources which might facilitate more complex questions of self-discovery particularly pertinent to young lives, have been largely neglected at an official level (Ahmed 2009; Allen 2007), where the preference has been for a delimited set of clearly structured “official community partners” focused around an anti-terror agenda (Fitzgerald 2011). Within this context, Muslim youth face continual suspicion that one can be both British and Muslim (Ahmed 2009).

Meanwhile, the Muslim community in Britain has evolved over subsequent generations. All of those I met at Rumi’s were either second or third generation immigrants, or converts. As Hopkins and McAuliffe (2010) argue, such children of migrants often find their parents’ essentialized Islam to be an ill fit with their everyday experiences. Nonetheless they may still retain an enduring notion of an Islamic identity, grounded in childhood experiences and personal belief. Meanwhile over time Islam has attracted converts from within the British-born population, suffusing the practice of Islam with new experiences and dilemmas (Rushworth 2016). Accounts of the lives of young Muslims seem to capture an acute sense that the experiences of young Muslims themselves frequently fall through the cracks of more established discourses and forms of practice.

In the UK and beyond, the banner of Islam has come to encompass a diverse range of identities and practices (Marsden and Retsikas 2012), and everyday experiences in the UK have led to established modes of belief and authority being challenged or reconfigured (Lewis 1996; Tarji 2014; Werbner 2003). As those who have grown up both Muslim and British seek to make sense of their diverse and often interstitial experiences, particularly at key transitional moments in their life, they often turn to a range of strategies. Some embrace more stringent forms of faith, with strict forms of practice serving to exclude, simplify or mediate a complex world (Inge 2014). Others seek to negotiate the particular tensions and contradictions of their childhood worlds through participating in public groups, forms of artistic expression and activism, whereby new forms of identity might be forged (Barylo 2017). Rumi’s seemed to operate in this latter vein, serving as a place where participants might think through their experiences of both faith and daily life, remaking both in the process.

I first encountered Rumi’s Cave via a local Stop the War event being held there, where I was taken by one of the Collishaw’s community organisers. A month later, I was back in the company of another friend, for a poetry slam. This diverse range of connections, stretching across Kilburn – and indeed, I would later discover, across London and the world – suggested that behind the ostensible veneer of a Muslim centre – of which there were several in Kilburn, but which, I had discovered were

predominantly closed off, and only minimally engaged in any activity beyond worship and scholarship – something different was going on. Pouring over the eclectic schedule of offerings, I decided to follow up on the suggestion of the organisers of the Stop the War event and ask to interview Fareed, who was then managing Rumi's. Through him, and through regularly attending a range of events, I got to know him as well as Khadiija, his predecessor in management, and Imran who both supported Khadiija and succeeded Fareed. Others who appear in this chapter, such as Aaden and Cillian, I met at particular events, or through networks of friends who would suggest others I ought to talk to. All of those whose voices appear in this chapter were in their 20s – ranging from 21-28. In addition, a significant proportion of those I met at Rumi's discussed their experiences there within the context of broader transitions within their lives – whether this was deciding on future employment, entering into marriage, or endeavouring to reconnect with their parents. Here, in particular, I am interested in one such transition in particular – how Rumi's enabled youth to concurrently rethink their relationships to diversity and to the Islamic faith.

Fareed's own parents hail from Egypt, with further Iranian roots. Growing up he would hear from his parents and relatives that Egyptians were his "natural community" – an idea that for his parents drew together ideas about belonging and religious practice. Yet something about this rang false to him. As a "Shia twelver" (*Athnā'ashariyyah* Muslim) this community was small and confined, and he commented always felt "like a minority within a minority"<sup>9</sup>.

Yet, like many of the others who frequented Rumi's, Fareed's childhood was characterized not only by religion and family, but experiences on British streets, council estates and schools – of things such as football, shisha cafés, Dizze Rascal, Call of Duty, school gossip, sex (or wanting sex, or talking about sex), Disney, raves, playing in bands (or wanting to perform music, or talking about music), pot, jail, friends from around the world, the BNP, and so on. His ostensible Egyptian-Muslim identity had little to say about these formative experiences, at best providing a blanket verdict of *haram* (unclean), which, for Fareed, began to feel increasingly suspect.

At University Fareed got his first experience of a livelier Muslim community in the campus Islamic societies, often known as I-Socs in the UK. Yet where he expected to find a sense of belonging, he only found further proscription with the same ring of hollowness: "even there it was like 'this is supposed to be a community', but it was more about telling you what being Muslim had to mean. They didn't understand that people could be in any way different." He added that he felt caught in a

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<sup>9</sup> Although 'twelvers' are considered the largest denomination within Shia Islam, Shia Muslims make up only around 25% of the British Muslim population, making the comment valid in this regard.

turf war, where those of different schools of Islam – the esoteric Sufis and the hardline *Hizbut Tahrir*, and everyone in-between – poured most of their time and energy into publicly denouncing other schools and emphasizing their own righteousness, seemingly turning faith into a competitive public spectacle. Meanwhile the actual practice of Islam – the acts of prayer, and the exploration of the spiritual questions and tensions he had built up – felt thin and formulaic to him – devoid of any conviction beyond the dogmatic assertion that they were the right thing to do.

Left with a bitter taste, Fareed shunned anything that looked like organised Islam, but was coaxed over to Rumi's to perform at an open mike night by his wife. Wondering what to do, he struck upon the idea that the conflict he'd witnessed between campus I-Socs felt not unlike the postcode wars of British gangs – a series of long-running and often violent rivalries between groups of youth from rival London council estates (see Chapter 4) – or the conflict between larger US gang rivals such as the Bloods and the Crips. Feeling equally inspired and reckless, he composed a rap with each verse delivered from the perspective of a different school of Islam, where the claims to superiority mirrored the boisterous and often menacing threats made by certain rappers. This aggressive tone was meant both as parody, and as a legitimate expression of his frustration at being “dragged into” a conflict he didn't identify with.

To his surprise the audience loved his performance. Thrilled, he began to return for other events, and he started to grow attached to the space. In an interview, he remarked:

When I came here, I noticed there was a space where all the different kinds of Muslim were mixing together. I didn't notice the Sufi stuff. So you had Rumi – Rumi's Cave – and some people took that in a very Sufi direction – but to me, I didn't know about Rumi, but I knew he had this complex tradition. I was more interested in the music though – and that was fine!

Khadiija, who was instrumental in founding the Cave, has a favourite phrase to describe the open attitude that Fareed experienced: “come as you are to Islam as it is”. A convert to Islam herself, born to Jamaican, Christian parents, Khadiija grew up with a similar sense of a gap between Islam as preached, and her everyday reality. Only for her, this was more literal. One afternoon hanging out at Rumi's, I ended up chatting with her and her second-in-charge, Imran. When I asked her why she thought the space was important, she recounted with frustration how she grew up across the street from a mosque, but was never made to feel welcome:

No one invited us – no one invited us to goodness. And that troubles me [...] that's why I think there's a need to have a place where you can just walk in off the street and be who you are [...] Because I lived across the street from a mosque for years – before I became Muslim – and no one ever said come in and see what we're about. I lived across from a Mosque and I had to discover

Islam entirely by myself. And can you imagine what would happen if you had a blond girl in leggings walk up to a mosque today? You'd have bearded men diving on her before she ever made it to the door 'Nooo! Unclean! *Haram!!*' (We both laugh)[...] The Muslim community, we have the home and we have the Masjid and everything else is this *kaffir*<sup>10</sup>-y space, you know, like this risk of contamination, so you go between home and mosque – quickly!

This attitude of closure was seen as alienating many from Islam, as it asserted a stark divide between experiences within the lens of Islam, and experiences beyond it. In Khadiija's experience, the spectre of difference and the question of what to do with it was an inescapable daily reality. Whether it was the mosque across the street, which she initially had no connection to, or the discriminatory realities of growing up black and poor in a multi-cultural, post-imperial city, questions of difference could not simply be shut out as too troubling or "unclean". What Khadiija and many others at Rumi's believed in, then, was finding a wider lens.

Taking over from Khadiija, Fareed redoubled the emphasis on widespread acceptance at the Cave. In our interview he explained "What I find interesting about Rumi's is that at the point of contact, at the point of use, there is never a question of do you fit in. You just come for vibes and maybe it is for you, and maybe it's not – it don't matter." Given his own scepticism surrounding Islam when he first came to the Cave, and recognising different forms of uncertainty in others there, when he took over Rumi's, Fareed felt a need to cater to both crowds – people who knew what they wanted, and people who were 'exploring'. "I got quite excited by the idea of Rumi, as a central symbol that couldn't really be defined – that could mean lots of different things to different people" he explained, adding:

The way I saw it, is that you can have these very solid notions of community based on your heritage. But there's also scope and need for people to have a community of their own but also to work out for themselves what exactly that community is about – to work out something that will feel relevant to their lives, wherever they are in their journey.

Fareed's distinction between communities based on heritage and negotiated communities gestures at two transitions shared amongst many of the youth at Rumi's. On one hand, it points to the often-uncomfortable experience of second generation migrants of living with their parents' experiences of migration. Although older generations may negotiate new ways of making sense of changing or complex circumstances just as much as younger ones, the negotiations of their parents are nonetheless likely to feel ill-fitting for many second-generation youth, who may come to see such

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<sup>10</sup> Although the term is generally used to refer to non-Muslim (people or things) it is almost always used in a derogatory fashion.

negotiations simply as traditional. On the other hand it suggests that at certain key periods in their lives, second generation youth may endeavour to renegotiate their relationships to such cultures, alongside their often-complex experiences of growing up in their home countries. Such searching can fuel a desire for new forms of self-discovery and expression, including novel relationships with faith (Gardner 2002; Van Liempt 2011).

During Fareed's time running the Cave, in addition to prayers, talks and courses on elements of Islam and music events, there were also workshops and courses on health, wellbeing, nutrition and on building strong relationships, accessible counselling and listening services, courses on parenting and marriage, workshops on depression and addiction, workshops on creative projects for social change, calligraphy, illustration, climate change activism, permaculture, and inter and intra-faith dialogue, screenings by documentary film makers, guest-hosted art classes and so on. These were in addition to the regular book, film and discussion clubs Rumi's hosted, as well as to the regular meetings of outside groups that used Rumi's as a meeting space.

With prayers that didn't impose gender segregation or any dress-code, events that explored a broad range of Islamic practices and political and social issues, and a high level of visibility in the media, Rumi's drew its fair share of criticism. When this criticism came from other Muslims, who asserted contesting views, they were simply invited in. Yet, Fareed notes, the caveat that Rumi's was defined by openness rather than a singular approach seemed to deter genuine hardliners from running their own events.

Illustrating this, Fareed tells a story of being approached after an event and getting chastised for it being mixed-gender, with the phrase "brother, it is not our religion". Fareed explained that arguing the point theologically would have nonetheless validated the assertion that Islam was a possession – exclusively "our" religion. So instead he replied: "Brother, this is a public place. It is not a place of religion. You know men and women will be mixed on the bus because it is a public space – it does not belong to any of them? Rumi's is like that." In this telling, religion is something which exists in public, rather than superseding it or existing in a dichotomous private sphere. As such, it is inescapably subject to diverse claims (see Chapter 5). This was epitomized, for instance, in both Fareed and Imran's habit of making tea and biscuits available for non-believers whenever an event required a break for prayer. In doing so, they tried not only to make multiple options for inhabiting the space available, but also not to set one option above the other.

This attitude allowed other groups and projects to thrive in connection to Rumi's. For example Sandara, secretary of the local chapter of Stop the War, a national peace-activism organisation,



spoke warmly about how hosting monthly meetings at Rumi's brought an unexpected surge in membership. After a few people wandering into their meetings and enquiring what they were, Stop the War began holding split meetings, with the first half given over to presentations from invited guest speakers, with the idea that this would have greater public appeal. And sure enough this brought a significant number of Rumi's regulars. Meanwhile some Stop the War members were drawn into other projects, such as discussion groups or book clubs.



People spill out onto the street to watch an anti-war documentary at Rumi's

In short, Rumi's was envisioned and run as a space of broad acceptance, a place where the principle of openness trumped any specific doctrinal perspective or claim to belonging. This ethic of acceptance superseded and often suspended judgements based on gender, religiosity, ethnicity or simply around personal interests. It was oriented towards the Muslim community, but not exclusive to it. Here, it was not only the idea of community but the symbol of Rumi and the idea of Islam itself which were capable of gathering together diverse collectives. Partly fixed and encompassing, partly fluid and open to negotiation, such ideas were used not only to welcome a range of strangers, but as ways for regulars to come to imagine ways to connect and accept such newcomers.

Yet acceptance wasn't simply elevated as a principle for its own sake. Rather, at Rumi's, it was transformed into an article of belief. This occurred in two ways. In the accounts above, acceptance

helped make Islam into a broad tent, encompassing those who may not otherwise have had a strong or positive connection to Islam, alongside more assured believers. At the same time, acceptance also emerged as a core facet of religious practice, where encounters with difference were seen less as challenges to be overcome, and more as experiences which carried the potential for spiritual enrichment.

Rumi's was not only seen as a space of welcome, but a space where those involved could broaden their horizons, to encompass other perspectives and lives. In our conversation Imran noted the international profile of Rumi's, and thus the international links it had built: "Rumi's community doesn't fit in Kilburn. Like the people come from all over the globe." But Khadiija countered this, emphasizing that the local mattered too:

But it's important and powerful that those people are coming to Kilburn, from all over because of its poverty – it's one of the poorest places in the UK [...] And what you get here is there's a lot of broken people. And a lot of Muslims, *ma'shallah* have these middle-class backgrounds – you know, study hard, university-educated – and they haven't really experienced the world. But then when they come here there's something undeniable you see about what's happening in people's lives. Like you walk down the street and you see broken people. You see flowers on the corner and you have to realise – that's because that's where someone got shot. That happens over here.

Indeed, Rumi's own regulars represented a diverse range of backgrounds, some fitting Khadiija's stereotype of sheltered, middle-class youth, others having grown up in struggling families nearby, having been to jail, or having recently immigrated. Yet this encounter with other lives, each living Islam in different ways, was often cited as part of what made Rumi's valuable.

Khadiija contrasted this to the attitudes she described earlier, where Islam only belonged within certain spaces, implying that Islam had no space in the wider world – and that those who identified with this wider world "cannot be Islamic." For her this was untenable, and not just on a personal level; living between the mosque and the home didn't simply feel to her like a denial of her broader identity, but a denial of Islam itself. As she put it, she "found my path" not within the walls of either, but through *actively* grappling with issues of identity, belonging, meaning and spirituality thrown up by the wider world. Islam resonated as "truth" precisely because it spoke to these experiences – everything from early experiences of falling in love, to the thorny problem of being stigmatized as black and foreign and of how to respond. As the speech from Yasmin earlier suggests, this was a perspective, which enfolded thorny, real-world questions of love, justice and peace into a framework of faith that offered encompassing answers.

Indeed, Khadiija emphasized that if a core truth of Islam was that everything in creation contained the *noor* (literally, light) of Allah, it seemed strange not only to cut oneself off from the world but also to go about passing decisive judgement on it. Rather, alongside many others at Rumi's, she saw the ubiquity of *noor* as an impetus for engaging with the world. Imran picked up on this to emphasize that if Islam was held up as a truth, then it had to be a truth that encompassed the messy reality of life. Giving himself as an example, he admitted: "I don't pray my five", and suggested that it was likely many other Muslims didn't either, but that if one were to confess this in other places you would be made to feel unwelcome, and un-Muslim whereas "here, it's like – 'that's fine, pray what you want. Pray what feels right to you – whatever you can do.'" And, he adds, being involved with Rumi's has actually made him more regular and sincere in his prayers. Or, as Aaden put it on a different occasion, paraphrasing a hadith<sup>11</sup>, "they say 'who is not grateful to the creation of Allah is not grateful to Allah himself'." He continued:

Allah says 'I created mankind and jinn for no other purpose but to worship me'. Ibn Fareed, *alhamdulillah*, actually translated the connotation – the actual terminology, 'worship me', in reality is to know. Because how could you love Allah without knowing him. And how could you know – and then it links back to the soul, the breathing, the being. And how do we connect? How do we connect with others, because we see the divine in them. That's where the human connection comes from – because we're souls having a human experience. When this body dies, these souls – whatever we are – this physical manifestation, this lens on reality – in reality we're just a lens for the divine!

For Khadiija, Imran, and Aaden, the new encounters and connections made possible at Rumi's cultivate new forms of *awareness*, where the truth of Islam becomes manifest in new ways. As such, acceptance as a principle that expands inclusion within Islam, and acceptance as a principle for personal spiritual growth were closely intertwined. Inclusivity not only welcomed others within the "truth" of Islam, but in doing so, it expanded the scope and resonance of this truth. Essential to this is recasting of both Rumi's and Islam itself as public entities, which cannot be owned but only appropriated and remade through such appropriation. This recasting unsettles the feelings of exclusion or insufficiency that characterised earlier encounters with Islam, and suggests the potential for a broader, more encompassing rendering of Islam that might be discovered through attempts to enact it. Abu Lughod has referred to the Islamic veil as a "mobile home" (2013: 36) – a means of carrying Islamic practices of dwelling into public, and into encounter with new

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<sup>11</sup> A saying of the Prophet Mohammad

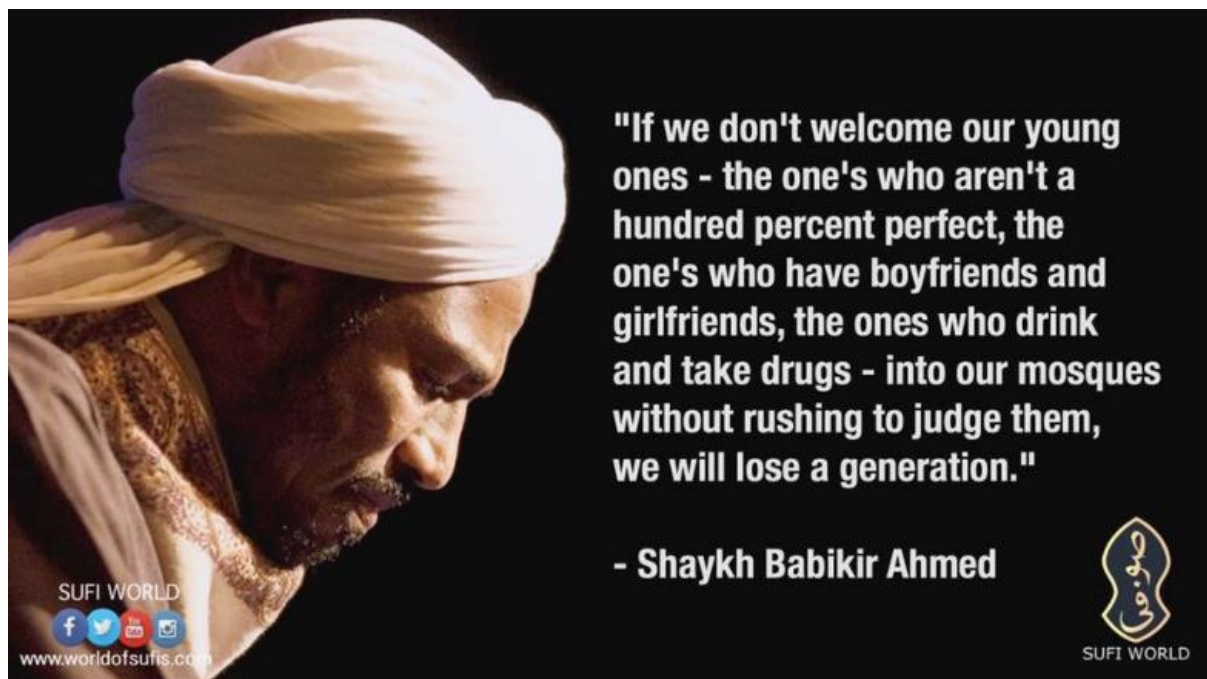
circumstances. I want to suggest that for those at Rumi's *Islam in general* was seen as such a mobile home.

Saba Mahmood (2003; 2004) and Charles Hirschkind (2001; 2006) have influentially argued for the need to view Islamic ethics in terms of "the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated." (Mahmood, 2005: 23). Yet both have encountered criticism for suggesting that for many Muslims, such practices of inhabiting norms involves the practiced extinguishing of ethical reflexivity, subordinating judgement to trained, automatic habits of thought and body. Laidlaw (2013: 166) has argued that such accounts depict the pursuit of "a coherent, consistent and self-reinforcing programme" through the inculcation of habit, that necessarily rejects value pluralism. He questions such assertions of consistency, arguing that the lived world is inherently too complex to navigate through habit. As he puts it "Actually living a life requires doing so with reference to values that make conflicting demands, and managing the inherently irresolvable tensions between them." (2013: 169; see also Das 2007).

Beyond the work of Mahmood and Hirschkind another body of work on Islam has emphasized precisely this complexity, contingency uncertainty and tension (Marsden 2005; Mittermaier 2010, 2012; Schielke 2009, 2015; Simon 2009). Young (2010) following Lambek (2010) traces a mode of religiosity that instead of taking doctrine as absolute truth, locates religious truth in the unfolding "ordinary" ethical relationships cultivated with others – albeit in a Christian context. Here, I would argue that, located in a bustling corner of London, Rumi's is a space where Islam is likewise practiced as a form of ordinary ethics – as relationally embedded and continually emergent, within the crossroads of complexity. As Schielke writes, in unpacking the ambivalent ethical aims that emerge out of daily practice during Ramadan in Egypt, "Piety does not proceed along a unilinear path" (2009: 37). Recognising this, Rumi's credo of "come as you are to Islam as it is" offers a guide to walking this uncertain path, without hollowing out its aspect of truth in a complex world by artificially straightening it.

Where the meaning and applicability of Islam risks being overdetermined, by heavy handed media narratives on one hand, and by certain contending factions endeavouring to speak on behalf of all believers, on the other, those at Rumi's have embraced a sort of indeterminacy as an article of faith. Yet, this embrace of indeterminacy required a balance. In the next section, I illustrate how in order to understand and connect with difference, those at Rumi's had to appropriate and transform such difference to fit within an Islamic framework. Despite being broadly welcoming, including towards diverse interpretations of faith, Rumi's community didn't subscribe to a view of Islam where anything goes. Rather they actively engaged in a process of simultaneously bringing themselves, as

Islamic subjects, into the world and of bringing the world back into Islam. In the language of this thesis, the fluidity of inclusion was only made possible by finding novel ways to tether it to the fixity of Islam. Nonetheless, those at Rumi's approached such acts of fixity in a novel way. Rather than treating Islam as a settled truth, they treated it as simultaneously objective and yet-to-be-discovered. As such, the boundaries of what counted as Islamic could be constantly re-signified – asserting new frames of fixity within which to encompass novel forms of difference.



The Sheikh who founded the Cave articulates his philosophy in promotional material for another organisation.

## Appropriation and Self-Formation

Cillian Hayes is not a Muslim. In fact, when we met at a Rumi's Cave open mic night he was one of the few non-Muslims present. Yet that night, in the packed room, he stood on the makeshift stage reciting a ferocious poem about his experiences with drug use. When we chatted over coffee, a few days after the performance, he told me he used poetry to understand the experiences in his life. As he told of a past filled with petty crime and drugs, followed by immersion in rave culture and then in mysticism, before, now in his late 20s, developing a fervour for poetry, meditation and body building, I began to sense that he did nothing by half-measures. Despite these shifts, drugs never fully left Cillian's life, and his poem juxtaposed scenes of alienation, frustration and confusion – of being called worthless, of being beat up or losing relationships or having no sense of direction in life

– with the release and sense of vastness and clarity of drug use, but also the loneliness of having this feeling apart from others.

This would hardly seem like a subject for a Muslim audience. But the crowd was clearly rapt. And at certain key moments, Cillian's rendition was punctuated by the audience through furious head-nodding, whisper-shouts of 'yes' 'mmm' and '*alḥamdulillāh*' (praise be to God), and the repetition back of particularly poignant phrases. The idea that I was not in fact at an open mic, but in a gospel church periodically crossed my mind. When the piece ended, Yasmin, again as MC, took the mike and offered her own reflections, almost like a small review. "And you talked about loneliness, and I feel you, I felt you. And that idea, that you want a love that goes deeper – that you are limited by your feelings – I know that too. I know that." To emphasize her point, she quoted a hadith on the vastness of divine love.

Thus far, I have argued that acceptance and connection were not only a key ethos at Rumi's Cave, but an integral part of how many there came to view Islamic practice. In this section, I want to unpack this latter claim, focusing on the *processes* by which people came to connect with the unfamiliar and resituate it as a source of spiritual growth. In the sorts of affirmations, repetitions and responses from the audience detailed above, I argue, were small scale acts of appropriation and remaking, which cumulatively served to remake the content of the performance into something relatable from within the ethical parameters of Islam. Talk of vivid visions and feelings of connection received enthusiastic responses – but for the audience they were taken from the perspective of ideas of *nur* and divine love.

To take another example, that same night, another performer sang a song that had a clear tone of lust to it, ambiguously mixing metaphors of human desire and desire for the divine. In the comments that followed the piece, a more religious attendee commented that it made her "want to get married". She had been given a powerful sense of passion and intimacy from the song, but re-framed this sense within her own values and priorities. Another commented on how he thought that an almost frenzied sense of desire was very much an aspect of love for god, and that eroticism was often used as a device to this end by old Sufi poets. Chatting after the performance, Aaden simply remarked that if you were in love, that was a part of who you were, and there was no use in trying to be pious against the will of your heart – better you embrace, work with, and channel these emotions.

Within the responses of those at the open mic night, utterances evoking unfamiliar or uncertain experiences were enfolded within familiar concepts and ways of thinking. This served to

simultaneously transform such utterances, by recontextualizing them, and the categories within which they are enfolded, which are thereby pulled in new directions. This mutual transformation was accomplished through acts of appropriation such as repeating back evocative phrases or connecting others' narratives to one's own. In turn, these acts not only cultivated new forms of recognition between individuals but also new forms of attention to the world at large.

When we met a few days after his performance, Cillian spoke with surprise how he'd been getting text messages and calls all week from people telling him they'd loved his performance, or inviting him to other events. This, he admitted, was unexpected. Commenting that many people living locally seem to be distant from one another, and observing this could really make one feel like there isn't much of a sense of community, he remarked

And you can kind of work out how people are feeling and stuff by observing their body language and their actions and their words [...] I think everybody wants that sense of community – but you know, the way they've designed society is to kinda segregate us in a lot of ways. So it's kinda harder to build that connection. [...] It's like me – I totally prejudged the whole room before I did my poem, you know? I'm all about preaching to get people to get rid of these prejudgements – I walked in there and I saw all these kinda older Muslim men and these – yeah. I was like *shit!* I'm not going to be able to read nothing here – these guys are going to think I'm fucked!

Cillian's point seemed to be precisely that he felt he lacked the forms of attention and understanding needed to connect with the sorts of people gathered at Rumi's. The categories through which he read their presence were too broad, and this coloured his perception of them and of Rumi's as a space holding limited potential for action and recognition. Indeed, despite being avidly into London's open mic scene, and living just on the other side of the Kilburn High Road for ten years, Cillian remarks that his performance was his first time at Rumi's. He adds, "It's funny how your reality changes when your – vibration changes. To think that I was living so close to an open mic event and I never came, once – and as soon as I came, I had *such* a cool time, I had such a cool time!" His experience at Rumi's then, provided a prompt to reshape his mode of attention towards others, and to cultivate new forms of connection.

Cillian's story reveals a difference between his tendency to read signs straightforwardly and reductively, and his audience who are well practiced in finding multiple and creative readings of his performance. With a clear Quranic prohibition against "intoxicants" as "defilement from the work of Satan" (Quran v:90), many devout Muslims would likely see nothing worth engaging with in a piece such as Cillian's. And indeed the reading most took did not condone drug use per-se, but bypassed

the straightforward option of dismissing Cillian outright in order to read his account against the grain, acknowledging that which was relatable and resonant, and only then bringing this within the frame of Islam. And, I want to suggest, that those at Rumi's were well versed in such readings, precisely because of Rumi's ethos of acceptance, which took on the status of a moral project – a form of joint-commitment at the heart of the community. Newcomers would often remark on how impressed they were with how open and accepting others in the space were. Even if they themselves did not engage in such practices, they were met with exemplars that they could learn to emulate. Moreover, for many, it was this very act of acceptance that welcomed them into the space in the first place – as instead of being judged, they were told to “come as you are to Islam as it is” – creating a strong sense of investment in the practice.

Cillian's experience at Rumi's helped him cultivate new ways of understanding and recognising others, and discover new possibilities for action emerging from this. Yet for many others at Rumi's, this intertwined expansion of perception, understanding and action was not only about coming to feel more connected to the city, but also about pursuing spiritual growth through this process. Moreover, because it was grounded in a reflexive, active process of openness and appropriation, people were often very explicit about this. As with Imran and Khadiija above, many others noted not only that becoming involved with Rumi's gave them a greater sense of community, but that this sense of community felt like a form of spiritual growth – making them feel a greater sense of resonance and connection from ritual practices such as prayer.

This link between extending recognition and spiritual growth, however, was perhaps most explicitly voiced by Aaden. If Fareed became involved with the cave because he found a space to explore his disillusionment with organised Islam, Aaden first encountered the cave when he was a devout follower of Salafism, a strict, orthodox school of Islam focused tightly on teachings from early Islam. As a teenager, however, he was renowned for singing nasheeds, unaccompanied devotional songs, and it was his moderate fame as a performer that saw him invited to headline an open mic night at Rumi's. Now, in his early 20s, he is a regular at the Cave.

Aaden is thin, tall and moves with a jittery energy, like he may spring into the air any moment. Chatting at the cave, I had taken out my notebook to write down some thoughts. Soon however, I had to interrupt and ask if I could record him – I simply couldn't keep up – as he described this first experience:

And, um, at that time, I basically went – I went to a few talks and then I performed – they asked me to come to perform – ‘do you want to be the main act one night?’ And I came and the essence and the love in the room (snaps) instantly connected with me. I was young, I was in a bad



place, and it healed the wounds. Rumi's cave has this ethos that says 'come as you are to Islam as it is'. So irrespective of anyone's imperfections, you're walking the path to peace. That's what being a Muslim is, you know? *I-salaam* is the way to peace. That's it. It doesn't mean peace, it means the way to peace. And none of us have attained it, but we're walking the path to – we're making the journey towards it. That's our existence. So irrespective of – whereas other opinions, they wish to work on the external aspects: 'grow your beard, wear the robe, put on the headscarf, do these aspects first, implement these aspects and then everything else comes in – the reverse happened. And it was an amazing sensation to see people who, before they worked on their external appearances were trying to fix whatever was inside of them first.

When I asked about the difficulty he alluded to, he admitted to feeling conflicted and directionless as a teenager. And he links this sense of conflict to his perception of life in Kilburn, growing up surrounded by people from a range of backgrounds all "struggling to get by," leaving him uncertain as to what he himself wanted out of life. Coming out of his Salafi phase he began to see a more expansive, accepting perspective as the potential path to peace:

Whatever you see in the world that you had, or you dislike, you internalise that, you equate that, and you fix the balance within yourself. If you see hatred [...] for example is if I absolutely hate the mistreatment of homosexuals in the Muslim community, for example, and I hate that treatment and it'll kill me in my core – what I then go about doing is – I can't change – I can't walk up to somebody and say 'this is wrong! You must stop what you're doing! You've got to stop it! No, no, no, no, no, no.' I can't – sometimes you have to have a certain wisdom. You can't change the world, you're still a human being.

Farhan: Right –

What I then do is I internalize that. And I internalize and I make sure that if that's what they're going to do, at the very least, in my own existence, I will never manifest that hatred. I would never have that. And by me changing myself, I have inadvertently changed the world – whether you realise it or not! [...] By you creating this safe space within yourself, you've created that safe space outside [...] The second I better myself, I can be a light that can better humanity at the same time. And the more sincere you are to yourself, and your own journey, the more you find people who are on the same journey as you. The more you connect with like-minded people and you realise 'hey, I'm not alone. There's aliens like me out there too.' (We both laugh). Then you meet the people who are like you and you say 'hey! We're not aliens, you know! Everyone else is aliens too, but they've forgotten! Let's maybe start some projects to help these people. And then you start doing good bit by bit. And the same time the more good you do, the more you grow as a person. It's that mind, body and spirit thing – it's about bettering yourself and then giving back,

and then bettering yourself, and then giving back, and everything is a lesson for you. That's the way I really see things, and it came after a long journey, but that's where I am.

Aaden's story reflects both modes of grappling with inter-generational differences in faith and experience noted in the introduction to the chapter; he moves from a rigid interpretation of his faith which endeavours to close out complexity to an attempt to rework his relationship to his faith in relation to this complexity. Yet there remains a difference, for Aaden and for others, between developing an expansive perspective and blanket approval where anything goes. In another conversation, for example, he and Imran expressed their mutual frustration with certain friends who equated other esoteric practices and figures directly with Islam – such as yoga with *sujud* (prostration), or the Buddha with the Prophet Muhammad. Rather, the process of appropriation, or “internalization”, that Aaden describes is key. This is a process whereby one finds the means of recognising forms of difference from *within* existing ethical projects. In this process, one is constrained by the ethical affordances (Keane 2015) of Islamic traditions, and must strive to create space for acceptance within these traditions in a way which does not erode them. For instance, Aaden explains becoming gradually aware that he had grown up with a lot of internalized homophobia. Overcoming this so as to become genuinely “embracing”, he said, required becoming able to see that homosexuality didn't conflict with Muslim ideals of love and marriage.

In these accounts, a model of exploration and ongoing-internalization substitutes for the one given by Mahmood and Hirshkind, where piety is pursued by practices which come to replace ethical reflexivity with automated habits of mind and body. Yet the critique of this sort of automated piety made by Laidlaw (2013) relies on a Foucauldian conception of subjectivation that does not entirely ring true here either. Grounded in an Aristotelian perspective that sees ethical development as realised through practical action, Foucault's concept of subjectivation assumes subjects are reflexively able to identify not only moral ideals that they may wish to strive for, but also what he called a “mode of subjection” or “deontology”, which entails how subjects might come to relate to moral ideals (1985: 27). Yet in the accounts above even if Islam as a moral ideal may be reasonably established, it is not directly knowable. Rather, the *fixity* of Islamic ideals is relative, always available to be re-interpreted and re-signified to include new truths and experiences within it. In turn, one's relation to this malleable moral ideal is less a question of Foucauldian deontology and more a relation worked out in constant movement (Rapport and Dawson 1998).

Having experienced diverse interpretations of the faith claiming a monopoly on truth, many of those who visit Rumi's see or come to see the truths of Islam as something uncovered through *ongoing* reflection, learning, exploration and practice rather than within a single body of received

scholarship. Meanwhile, one's relationship to these indeterminate ideals seemed an even more elusive matter, entailing judgment and sensing but never certainty or stability. These challenge the notion of the reflexive Foucauldian ethical subject in a different way – by means of diversity rather than automaticity (c.f. Mattingly 2014). Indeed, the ability to ascertain a clear morality and deontology sounds characteristic of the more singular interpretations of Islam that those at Rumi's attribute to their parents or their more dogmatic peers. Indeed, it's telling that the narrower world my informants describe, where all the uncertain stimuli beyond the mosque and home are presumed to be categorically unclean is also the world where Islam is much more formalized and routinized. Yet in the much wider world they live in, they face the opposite challenge, where clear ideas of ethical goods and one's relationship to them dissolve into a plurality of possibilities. But if reflexivity is characterized by uncertainty as to *both* means and ends, how do we conceptualize this form of ethics? To explore this question more broadly, I want to step away from Rumi's in the final section.

## **Making Meaning on Air**

Now nearing his mid-30s, Jack has always worked as a radio engineer, building radio stations around the world. He and a handful of friends pulled together Collishaw to Camden (C2C) radio in response to a call for community projects which might be interested in setting up pop-up projects in a disused building due to be demolished. With the opening of the Collishaw Hub in 2013, C2C shifted premises, and has been based at the Hub ever since.

Shows on C2C range eclectically, from one playing primarily political Rastafarian music, to another focusing on Irish history, to a third which alternates between readings of Shakespearean-era theatre and playlists of heavy metal. Yet there is also significant diversity within the shows as well as friends or chance acquaintances knit together disparate interests. One show features British and Brazilian hip hop, interspersed with mildly-surreal improvised stand up, whilst another combines fashion advice, music and commentary on pan-African political movements. A group of friends even came together to host a show discussing Muslim arts, culture and spirituality, on behalf of Rumi's.

C2C enjoys a strong reputation within London's independent radio producers. When a popular independent East London radio station closed down, a number of former hosts began making the long commute to Kilburn to present on C2C instead. And many of its more committed hosts identify strongly with the station, coming to act as representatives at gigs, parties, workshops and cultural and arts events across London.

Jack's focus has been on supporting this array of makers, rather than on building listenership – something for which he has been periodically challenged on, both by funders of the project, and by typically-newer DJs who despair at the lack of audience. Yet he points out that some of the more popular shows attract thousands of committed listeners – and that this happens because the station provides DJs with the medium to build strong relationships to particular audiences. For Jack, *this* is the real value of the station – not in providing a singularly appealing product, but in providing a *platform* for the building of particular relationships and networks within the city. He dubs this “participatory radio”, riffing on the idea of participatory film (see Yang, 2016) where filmmaking is used as a mean of self-exploration, where new insights about oneself and the world are discovered by adopting a new perspective behind the lens – or mic in this case.

And indeed, in my conversations with both experienced and aspiring DJs, there seemed to be a focus on two ideals – self-expression on one hand, and discovery and connection on the other. By sharing one's perspective on air, DJs felt that they were enabling others to connect and respond to this perspective, altering it in the process. When I asked the two women who hosted the British-Brazilian-Hip-hop-and-comedy programme if their show might be a bit niche, one of them responded that this was a potential, but something they would have to see, concluding “I'm confident we can find our community.” Others cited wanting to “connect” more to London, or to the people around them, as key motivations for starting shows. And indeed, new connections and commitments did emerge: the Shakespeare/metal show hosts began to run theatre workshops at a local school; the host of the Rastafarian political music show began to plan events with the Green Party after meeting a member hosting his own talk show; and the host of the Irish music and history show, not from the Collishaw himself, was drawn into debating aspects of the local regeneration scheme at local meetings, trying to stand up for what he saw as locals' rights.

This ethos closely parallels that found at Rumi's – where new forms of attention and connection feed iteratively into personal growth and self-expression. Yet even more than at Rumi's, this ethos lacked a clear sense of explicit ethical ideals, or of one's particular relation to these ideals. At Rumi's, discovering and experiencing the truth of divine light through the teachings of the Quran and the Prophet still provided a moral and deontological anchor, even if these broad goals left plenty of space for interpretation. Conversely, on air with C2C, the iterative combination of expression and connection was held up as creating a non-specific good in and of itself. Many people ascribed ethical importance to their shows, but were rarely specific about what this was. Yet, I want to argue, that it is worth taking this *sense* of ethical importance – defined by intuition and searching over having

clear goals – seriously. To illustrate this, I want to focus in on the example of a particular DJ I met at the C2C studio.

I was introduced to Sara by Jack. In response to me describing my interest in the station and my budding suspicion that it worked as a resource for DJs to connect with the wider world, Sara quickly became animated. We decided to leave the station and grab a coffee to continue the conversation, which soon turned into an informal interview. During the conversation she described herself as “German made”, having been born in Egypt, and raised also in Syria, Nigeria and the UK, with her parents from Syria and Israel, respectively. She is now in her mid-40s, with two teenage kids, and has lived in Kilburn nearly half her life. With such a background, she noted that Kilburn had come to feel as much a home as any place can be. Largely this was tied to the personal history of friendships she had built up around the area. But she also noted the history of diversity, commenting that when early Irish immigrants weren’t welcome, hostels in Kilburn that would take them would paint their windowsills green – a detail still sometimes visible today. And throughout the subsequent shifts from Irish to Caribbean, to African, Somali and Arab, she says there remains a visible history of “welcoming unwelcome people.”

Despite this welcoming attitude, she also felt un-grounded. Her life often made sense not in terms of a broad multi-cultural mix, but in terms of a narrower pan-Arab identity. Yet such an identity was rarely articulated by others, and could feel out of place, even within Kilburn’s mixity. So when she encountered the radio station she saw an opportunity:

The C2C family are very receptive to ideas – and I love the freedom of expression and the freedom to create! And as a second generation Arab living in London, I didn’t really feel there was something for me [...] I recognised that after the last census there was this large population in the UK who identified as Arab, yet we had no public identity of our own.

This feeling of lack, coupled with a lifelong fondness for radio made her eager to start her own show, focusing on Arabic music, culture and politics. To her the template was the BBC Asian Network, where presenters would switch fluidly between English, Urdu and Gujarati, and where this polyglot showmanship felt less about incorporating distinct identities and more about creating a new vibrant Asian identity in and of itself.

Stigma and politics were central concerns of Sara’s show from its inception, informed by her own experiences. Her suspicion was that the lack of a public Arab-British identity coincided with the negative valence such associations typically held, informed by their frequent association with conflict and terrorism – they were not identities that could be comfortably flaunted. And indeed

when she took pride in this identity herself, or when she referred to herself as part 'Palestinian', she felt people often reacted apprehensively, as if such identification was innately polarizing. When people who knew one element of her identification discovered another, they would retract as if they had been challenged:

I think a lot of people feel threatened by people like me because they can't fit them into a pigeon hole [...] I think people feel insecure – because, well, what they see, isn't who you are and that makes them feel betrayed because they're not able to make sense of you the way they want. They don't know what to do so they just become very defensive.

As such, Sara's response was to broadcast these identities out in public, in ways which could be understood, recognised, identified with and appreciated. The show itself consisted of her presenting artists, poets or known figures with Arab backgrounds – often having them appear on the show themselves, through in-person or telephone interviews and performances. Each episode would be based around a figure, idea, event or place – Moroccan love songs, Eid, the refugee crisis and so on. And she would use these episodes as ways to try to explore Arabic heritage and culture within a British context, and in doing so knit them together. For example, she suggested that radio conversations and storytelling simultaneously served as a familiar medium for western listeners, and a re-working of Arabic oral traditions. Likewise, in her daily life she was an ardent supporter of Palestinian independence, supporting a number of grassroots Palestinian charities, avoiding companies linked to the Israeli state and so on. Yet on air, her approach to this politics was simply to make an attempt to "normalize Palestinian life" – to talk about it as a culture and identity as if any other, so that it can stop feeling like a charged and volatile idea.

Yet the experience of making the show itself helped draw out these uneasy experiences for Sara, even in a place like Kilburn. She noted that she's had neighbours and fellow DJs alike challenge her focus: "“Oh, you're talking about *that*? You shouldn't be talking about *that*.”" And while the show had increased her awareness of and passion for Arab culture and politics, she found that this same passion could prompt wariness in others. Naming a fellow DJ with an Anglo-American background as an example, she comments:

I think if you say 'Palestinian' to someone like her, or her friends, they would see that as almost a dirty word. Oh, they're very polite and all, but in their heads they have this very negative, very violent image – so they just don't want to touch it – we need to find ways of changing that reaction and just making it normal!

As such, over time Sara has come to give normalizing increasing importance within her show. As she put it: "I think what I do is put forward a different perspective, a different set of ideas, images, and

lives, and taking those people and showing their journey – to an audience that some of them, they might not see otherwise.” Yet, despite the difference on display, she takes a casual tone with her guests, so that the show simultaneously sounds like “just chatting with mates”. And this attempt to normalize difference doesn’t just inform the content she presents or the aesthetic she presents it in, but extends to the relationships she’s built around the show. On one hand she’s made an effort to play an active role in the C2C and Collishaw Hub communities, asserting her own sense of belonging in these contexts. On the other, she acts as a conduit for guests to connect to other elements of London and the UK in various ways – from helping arrange gigs or events, to even supporting members of one musical group in their applications for citizenship, citing the show as evidence of “participation in British cultural life”.

We might recognise *normalising* as an explicit ethical good that Sara now pursues, with its attendant benefits, such as the reduction of discriminatory action and an increase in feelings of shared belonging, providing key motivations. But for Sara this good emerged over time, departing from her much less specific sense of not having a valued public identity she could attach to. In trying to discover such an identity, Sara found ways of simultaneously exploring these identities and creating and signifying them as she did so, as radio shows and podcasts for others to hear. Doing so brought her into closer contact with the way such identities were perceived, and the depth of stigma attached to them, and in the process she came to see her work less as defined by *creation* of a public identity and more as the *reframing* of existing ones.

In other words, a sense of ethical good and her deontological relation to it emerged over time, through exploring more intuitive, personally-embodied senses of being out of place. Such gradual emergence of the good was also present at Rumi’s. The young Muslims it attracted often struggled with simultaneous feelings of grounding and dislocation, both within Islam and within British life as a whole. For them Rumi’s became a place of remaking Islam to fit better within the world, whilst also reframing their experience of the world to better reflect the truths of Islam. And through this process the “truth” of Islam – its morality that held compelling force – became clearer and more compelling to different adherents in different ways. But the initial appeal of Rumi’s did not lie in the appeal of these processes of mutual remaking, but in the much more basic sense of acceptance and recognition that it offered – again paralleling Sara’s journey.

When set against the Foucauldian approach to subjectivation the striking difference that emerges is in the nature of reflexivity posited. Those at Rumi’s or those taking part in C2C are certainly reflexive, but their reflexivity does not take a clear direction. Nor is it a simple matter of feeling fragmented – of feeling caught between multiple competing or incommensurable moral demands (Mattingly

2014). Rather morality itself is always a partially obscure substance to be discovered through its very pursuit. Here, reflexivity itself is more intuitive and more uncertain, and less imbued with a clear sense of “is”s and “oughts” – not only grounded in everyday relationships, but also treated as a matter for continual exploration. Genuinely compelling moral ideals are not necessarily those which are provided by doctrine or received wisdom, but ultimately those which feel compelling within people’s own lives. It follows that the ethical potential of certain ideas expands and clarifies as these ideas themselves transform and adapt to certain environments, allowing for context-specific forms of ethical good and deontology to emerge.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined how people make personal sense of diversity, and how they imagine and commit to specific ethical projects amidst this diversity. I argued that these processes are in fact largely the same, whereby a greater understanding of diverse others leads to the emergence of clear ethical priorities that feel sustainable, credible and resonant living amidst such others. Talking about diversity necessarily entails drawing lines of difference – whether these are seen as distinguishing individuals or groups. In Chapters 1-2 I argued that such acts of discrimination are not only widespread within Kilburn, but that they serve an important purpose by demarcating spaces where more fluid relations might occur. In this chapter, however, I have argued that despite the persistence and utility of such acts of marking difference such acts do not have to ossify group boundaries.

At the same time, I framed this perspective as an alternative approach to debates surrounding the anthropology of Islam and ethics. Ethics, at least in urban contexts, are unlikely to be entirely automatic and un-reflexive, but nor are people able to reflexively and simply apprehend the different ethical possibilities they face; moral ends and the deontological means towards such ends are not always known in advance. Rather, many in the city experience daily life as an ongoing unfolding both of knowledge and ethical possibilities. Through committing to continually engaging with difference and redrawing the lines between inside and outside, and self and other, it becomes possible to pursue open-ended ethical projects, where moral commitments are not made in advance, but continually redefined through an ongoing process of exploration.

The next chapter continues unpacking the ability of community to remake relations. There, I focus on the spaces of ambiguity within community which facilitate both the ability to get to know others and the ability to imagine multiple possible futures available to the self. As such, I argue that just as community allows for relations to diverse others, it also allows for a plural and open-ended relationship to oneself, which can serve to open up the scope of future possibilities available.





Brunel Tower, my home on the Collishaw estate, in the evening

#### 4. Crossroads: Precarity, street community and self-formation

*“My mother sings One day at a time sweet Jesus, and even Daddy likes to say that, one day at a time, as if it’s some strategy for living. And yet the quickest way not to live at all is to take life one day at a time.” – Marlon James, A Brief History of Seven Killings (2014: 108)*

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Writing in the Guardian, Dave Hill (2012) declared the Collishaw estate to sit at the epicentre of an “alternative cartography” – “an unofficial map of an urban landscape scarred by violence and divided by fear.” This map has allegedly been drawn up by the violent factional lines of London’s so-called postcode wars – a series of protracted and often violent conflicts between groups of youth from rival council estates, centring around drug dealing, retaliatory violence and assertions of control over public space, especially those spaces where those from different areas may be likely to meet. Of these, the Collishaw has been embroiled in one of the longest and bloodiest conflicts.

Scholarly portrayals have been less moralizing than journalistic ones, and have worked to recover both the structural circumstances and biographical diversity that animates street life. Nonetheless, scholarship shares the tendency to depict the street as an “alternative cartography” – existing in opposition to mainstream life, as grounds for staging resistance and reclaiming self-worth. In this chapter, I question this cartographic divide, and suggest that street communities can provide a resource for connecting to normative, mainstream ones as much as they can be a site of resistance to them. And in doing so, I foreground community as a form that can accommodate and empower a diverse range of personal trajectories.

In Chapter 3, I explored how particular communities could serve as venues for transforming relations with diverse others. I explored how the fluidity present within community spaces could serve as a resource for reimagining both the terms on which one related to others, and the ethical projects which were seen as encompassing such relations. On this basis, I suggested that ethical projects might be pursued even as subjects were unsure of the moral ends and deontological means involved in such projects. Building on this, here, I wish to look again at how community might transform relationships, but this time in terms of the relationship to oneself and one’s future. I argue that for many youth living on the Collishaw, the street community provided a means of accessing and juggling multiple open-ended and uncertain ethical trajectories, without having to fully commit to any one. Such juggling multiplied the possibilities for self-cultivation in a context often defined by the foreclosure of such possibilities. As such, the fluidity contained within communities constituted a resource for imagining and accessing possible futures.

In the first section, I argue that for many Collishaw residents marginality is experienced less in terms of material deprivation, and more in terms of the foreclosure of future possibilities, created by a raft of daily uncertainties. In the second section, I unpack how for street youth, a common “road” aesthetic is used to define a collective notion of community, even if much about this community resists definition, or is rendered ambivalent or ironic. In the third section, I suggest that this vague notion of community nonetheless allows joint commitments to emerge, but what members commit to is the idea of community itself, and thus the *possibility* of shared commitments, above and beyond any specific ethical trajectory. This allows the street community to serve as a shared repository of agency. In the final section, I show how this agency might be turned towards a range of ethical projects which do as much to allow people to leave the street, or to connect it up with other domains, as they do to reproduce the street as a distinctive sphere of value. By subscribing to ideas of community that are not coherent, but which incorporate a range of perspectives and ethical

trajectories, people are able to change their lives, precisely because this change is recast as neither radical nor disjunctive, but as emergent from a familiar and valued idea of community.

## **On the Edge in the Ends**

The presence of youth in public was an inescapable spectacle on the Collishaw (see Chapter 5), and as a newly arrived ethnographer, it quickly became clear that such youth self-described as a community. Yet it was also clear that this “street corner society” (Whyte 2012) was far from open to anyone. Although youth often engaged in subtle negotiations over the use of public space, such negotiations did not necessarily facilitate inclusion within such groups more broadly. Often, if I would try to take conversations beyond the public and superficial, I would be met with what felt like a terse performance of indifference, as everyone suddenly had very little to say. Or else conversation would quickly revert to a dense, rapid mix of local slang and references, asserting the boundaries of a speech community (Morgan 2008).

Over time, however, I came to get to know certain individuals within other spaces: at community events or workshops, or through involvement with particular local projects. Through these lateral connections, I became acquainted with a group of friends, some closer, some more distant, who had grown up in the area together. This group ranged from their early 20s to their late 30s, and were mostly of Afro-Caribbean background, though a couple were white British. Quite a number of the men had been drawn into drug dealing and postcode rivalries as teenagers. Several men had spent time in jail, while both men and women had lost friends or siblings in shootings and stabbings. Others had simply become disillusioned with the lack of prospects life “on road” (on the street) presented. In other words, those I got to know had a fundamentally ambivalent relationship to the “road”. It was the site of strong belonging, but it also contained dimensions they wished to leave behind or overcome. As such, the argument I make here isn’t intended to characterise “street youth” or “street communities” in general. Complex and internally diverse, such groups are likely to resist broad depiction. Yet, given that the tendency *has* been to describe them in rather singular terms, I draw on my partial and committed perspective to expose the ways in which such groups can accommodate ambivalent ethical trajectories and can serve as a resource for overcoming the very pathologies they are often associated with.

In describing this community, I adopt the same ironic, playful attitude towards language that they did. Youth referred to street community by a range of terms carrying particular connotations, further inflected by their usage in particular contexts. For instance, the term “road”, *could* be used to refer to the territorial bounding of identity and belonging. One *could* attempt to trace a particular etymology of “road”, stemming from the popularity of the patois term “yard” in London, and its

ability to denote territorial ownership and belonging at a shifting scale (Back 1996: 149), and then further incorporating both the hip-hop inflection of the American hood and street and the reworking of patios into a more distinctive London slang by younger generations. Yet, as Cheshire et al. (2011) note, London slang is less a cohesive dialect and more a broad repertoire, continually modified or inflected with different meanings by different groups. Such language is used and reinvented locally to make particular claims (Baumann 1996; Quist 2008), and so for instance, this definition and etymology obscure the ways in which “road” was variably used to evoke connotations of toughness (being “hard”), cultural savvy (being “legit”), or even abandonment (as in “ghetto”). Nor would it account for the ability of other words, such as “ends” (a slang term for neighbourhood originating from and often favoured in London) to evoke some or all of these meanings. Here, I follow the informants in avoiding a totalizing or fixed definition of the street community and its members, and in retaining a sense of linguistic play and context-dependency. Key terms, such as “road” and street, “ends”, “hardness” (toughness) and youth should all be read with varying degrees of irony, reflecting their use. And, as I will argue here, community provided another richly ironic idea to play with on road.

Such fluidity, however, was not simply a matter of unconstrained playfulness. Rather, my argument here is that this marked degree of fluidity can be seen as a situated response to living in an environment widely defined by uncertainty and insecurity. In this section, I want to briefly outline the ways in which feelings of precarity became manifest in Kilburn. All the accounts here come from individuals associated with the street community which I will explore in more detail in the following section.

Schools have often been a focal site in analyses of how the future prospects of the poor and marginal are systematically curtailed from a young age (e.g. Demie and Lewis 2010; Evans 2006; Willis 1977). Scholars have emphasized how formal learning tends to implicitly privilege middle-class modes of personhood, and how working-class youth who feel alienated by this hierarchy of values strive to upend it by favouring toughness and defiance over educational success. And indeed, in the Collishaw local parents frequently complained about under-resourced schools and disengaged teachers, and about the frustration of feeling their children’s futures robbed from them as they were constantly evaluated (but rarely supported) and found wanting.

Likewise, for the students I met, there was little sense that educational success might matter and pay off in the world at large. For instance, at the local youth club I used to frequent, Ollie, at the time 15, in his first year of his GCSEs, showed up early one day to show the club leader his latest maths’ test. Though he was known for being short-tempered and disdainful of authority, and for dabbling in

low level drug-dealing, he was bristling with barely-concealed pride at the “A” he had received. Yet he confessed to the club leader that both his parents and his teacher had brushed it off as an anomalous result. And indeed, a week later, when I asked him about a subsequent test, he dismissed my interest by insisting “well what’s the point of that bullshit anyway?”

A few months later, I got into an argument with Ollie’s younger sister, Izzi, when we were jokingly comparing skills – who could jump further, run faster and so on. She gestured at a young man of about 16 walking by, who was reputed to be quite violent, and asked “well, could you beat him up?” I tried to counter by asserting that I probably couldn’t, but that didn’t matter, because I was smart enough not to get into a situation where I’d have to. She fired back “no, I’m smarter, because I know how to win in a fight. You’re just an idiot.” Even more than her brother, Izzi often did well in school, but her reframing of intelligence as something that helped you win fights and prove your toughness spoke to which values triumphed within her life. And indeed, at the youth club, an ability to flaunt authority and demonstrate toughness was often highly valued. This was most clearly visible in the fact that during club activities, crowds roughly equal to those of the participants would congregate outside the door, and in an adjoining alley. The youth club provided an appealing venue for people to gather, but many preferred to keep this gathering out on the streets, flaunting their rejection of institutional involvement and the care of the youth workers.

A few months into my fieldwork, I was introduced to Henry, a teacher at one of the local schools, by a mutual friend. Interviewing Henry gave me the chance to gain a broader perspective on the lives and aspirations of the Collishaw’s youth. In his experience, most of his students put a high premium on self-presentation, and on certain material markers of status – cell phones, video games and clothes – these were as much personal possessions as they were objects for public display. Henry talked about how being respected for your attitude, or for your style and what you owned presented an alternative to students’ interactions with their weary teachers, where they were largely addressed as problems to be solved.

Students, he emphasized, were justifiably cynical. It wasn’t just the attitude of teachers they found disillusioning, but a broad range of everyday experiences. Several students have suggested to him, for instance, that if the Collishaw had a reputation for drug-dealing, this was a good indication that there were few other opportunities available. Likewise, many of his students got into habits of using pawnshops to obtain and exchange status-conferring goods from a young age. They were aware that pawn shops made a substantial profit of this enterprise, but they also approached this with resignation – with a sense that there was little in life they could own, so “we may as well borrow”. Moreover, Henry emphasized that such beliefs were inculcated well beyond the school walls. Noting

the number of pawn shops and loan shops along Kilburn High Road (as of early 2017, there were eight and four respectively, within a 0.8-mile stretch), he remarked despairingly: “I look down the high road and think ‘these people have got no chance, have they?’”

Similarly, Lisa once commented with frustration on how self-limiting behaviour seemed to be encouraged in Kilburn. Lisa herself had lost her eldest brother to a retaliatory killing, and spent much of her childhood with her next eldest brother in jail, and had grown herself up determined not to see herself or her family dragged further into the postcode wars. Now 21 and at university, she felt she had begun to escape this history, but she worried for her younger brother, who attended Henry’s school. Her brother played football for his school team, and had begun to compete at quite a high standard. Yet despite his obvious investment in the sport, Lisa could never convince her brother to train diligently and maintain a careful diet, as she’s seen kids from nearby schools in wealthier areas do. Nonetheless, she felt she could hardly blame her brother – he always noted that none of his friends behaved any differently – even if she thought he was compromising his future. Ultimately she claimed he couldn’t be expected to think any differently given the number of cheap, enticing fried-chicken shops on the High Road: “There are all these places around [...] they’re saying to the poor ‘Come eat your dirty brains out!’”

In the next chapter, I focus on how the aesthetics of the everyday environment could invoke a sense of dispossession for many of Kilburn residents, more generally. Here, however, my focus is not on dispossession, but on the related question of how such environments signal future possibilities. What Henry and Lisa’s accounts suggest is that dispossession is just one amongst many future prospects evoked. Certainly there doesn’t seem to be a single, harmonious aesthetic to the area. Nonetheless, many of the accounts I came across emphasized an overarching sense of *limitation* in the way daily experiences enabled residents to imagine their futures.

Oftentimes, this sense of limitation was expressed as a frustration with Kilburn or London as a whole. Damon, in his late 20s, with a mixed history of involvement with drug-dealing and formal employment once commented that “London’s all I know but also I don’t like it”. The city left you feeling constrained, as time flew by, money was sucked up into routine expenses, and nobody seemed to connect with one another. When another friend suggested that other cities were different, and that citizens often felt a sense of ownership, Damon replied: “I don’t feel I own London, but I feel like I own Kilburn”. Even this positive assertion, however, signalled a limited horizon, as Damon would sometimes complain of being “trapped in the ends”.

Likewise his close childhood friend Vince once declared to me in the middle of a long conversation that he was determined to leave London. Given that he had spent the previous hour talking about the way the street community in the Collishaw was wrongly denigrated, and defending his own sense of belonging to it, this caught me off guard. When I pressed him for an explanation, he tied together a range of small everyday factors: experiences of discriminatory, aggressive policing; the constant threat of violence; unpredictable regulations, which left those in social housing feeling like they had no control of their homes or mobility; and his fears for his young daughter passing through the local school system. He concluded that life in Kilburn left you with little sense of control over your future: “Like I know this place growing up here, made me a certain way, and now I’ve got a daughter, you know, and I don’t want her dealing with that kind of stuff.”

This lack of control was partially top-down, produced by daily encounters with the state. Just as residents on council estates “appropriate” the state, interweaving public resources and institutions into personal biographies (Miller 1988), the withdrawal or failure of the state, and the increased policing of personal behaviour, are translated into more intimate narratives, and experienced as the curtailment of personal horizons (Koch 2014; 2015). Other experiences were structured by economic deprivation. And yet others were produced by the experience of living in an area marked by violence and conflict, which left behind visible traces in the public realm (See Chapter 5).

These everyday experiences collectively created a sense of an uncertain future – that, “you can’t plan on road”, as Lisa once declared. Nonetheless, she continued, many young people hesitated to leave the area, as they both felt more empowered and at home in Kilburn than they would elsewhere, and simultaneously feared encountering conflict with youth from other ends. The result was a mixed attitude towards Kilburn, as a locus of both constraint and opportunity.

Theoretical approaches to understanding the marginalization and disenchantment of urban youth have evolved over time. Early studies, such as Willis’ famous *Learning to Labour* saw marginality as neatly tied to class, and classes as fairly objective. In turn, youth subcultures were seen as reconciling youth to such class positions by providing outlets for expression and grounds for self-esteem (c.f. Clarke et al. 1993 [1976]; Whyte 2012 [1943]). Later work within the cultural studies tradition looking at race (e.g. Gilroy 1991; Back 1996) challenged analyses of marginality based on class alone as unable to wholly account for the exclusion of racialized minorities. At the same time, theorists drawing on this tradition highlighted the close intertwining of the history of post-war British immigration and that of the flexibilization of labour (Gilroy 1991; Hatton 1998; McDowell 2013). In conjunction, as the forms of labour more available to working classes have come to emphasize emotional or embodied labour, young working-class men in particular have found

themselves feeling excluded from valued forms of personhood, leading to a sense of what McDowell (2003) calls “redundant masculinities”. Counter-cultural formations, including gangs, are often described as providing an outlet for the feelings of embodied exclusion which underpin this experience (Rios 2011; Vigil 2003). As a result, many street cultures emphasize ultra-masculine tropes of toughness, combativeness and repudiation, as a means to reassert the gendered identities which have been denied and devalued elsewhere. These linked processes multiply forms of marginality and the identities that arise in response, often fragmenting broad solidarities into a panoply of contending and shifting identities.

As insecure livelihoods have become increasingly commonplace, and as the identities through which daily life is lived come to feel as if they have little bearing on the future, scholars have reimagined marginality less in terms of particular categories of exclusion and more broadly as entailing the hollowing out (or evacuation) of the future (Bear 2014a; b; Guyer 2007; Norris and Inglehart 2004). Here a conjunction of “increased economic uncertainty” and “the loss of state (and corporate) provisioning [...] have eroded not just labour and the state but also the possibility of life itself” (Muehlebach 2013: 299). As such, experiences of commonplace exclusion and unpredictable change combine to create an ingrained scepticism that projects aiming for a transformed future will play out. In turn, those facing such uncertainty, may retreat into spheres privileging and valorising the familiar and comfortable, adopting an “ethics of immediacy” (Mittermaier 2014) which limits the social and temporal scope of ethical projects (c.f. Han 2012).

Street communities are often characterised in terms of such immediacy. On one hand, intensely parochial, localised identities seem to offer the only basis for self-worth and mutual support in a context where broader connections and processes of transformation have become suspect and uncertain (Evans 2006; Watt 2006). Street communities constitute alternative social fields where distinct values such as “respect” or “street masculinity” circulate, asserting their own patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Evans 2006; McKenzie 2015; and in America: Anderson 1999; Bourgeois 1995; Messerschmidt 1999; 2000). Such values are often emphasized as highly performative, embodied, and asserted in striking ways – such as tough talk, flashy clothing, and a tendency towards confrontation – demanding immediate recognition (Vigil 2003). On the other hand, conflict between street communities and others, even within the same locality, is explained in terms of structurally embedded inequalities, which narrow the possibilities for survival and self-esteem, and create a focus on taking what one can get (Wacquant, 2002; 2007a; b).

Bear (2014a) however, emphasizes that people rarely passively accept this evacuation of the future, but rather deploy a range of strategies to mediate between different rhythms of time, and thereby



rebuild visions of the future. Within contexts of uncertainty, attitudes of ambivalence have provided one way to reassemble a future (Han 2012; Koch 2015). In the next section, I argue that for many, the street community is seen *both* as contributing towards the limitation of the future in particular ways, but also as capable of opening up new futures. An ironic commitment to the street allows it to serve as a polyvalent base for building diverse life trajectories, and even for moving between these trajectories and experimenting with possible futures. This ironic play and pursuit of multiple selves means that the street community in Kilburn often goes beyond the limited tropes through which street communities are characterised. Those within the street community do express ideas of revanchist masculinity or of the street as a realm of freedom from the exploitation of mainstream employment, but they also problematize or seek to move beyond these ideals in particular ways. Through such irony, I aim to demonstrate that street communities can sometimes open up ethical trajectories *beyond* those immediately available, even as they may remain grounded in the immediate.

## **The Ends of the Ends**

Criminologists, and other researchers have long commented on how the popular media and law enforcement alike conjure the existence of gangs as discrete units out of much messier realities (Alexander 2008; Gunter 2008; Pickering et al. 2012). In the Collishaw, the intersection of a reputation for drug dealing and violent conflict, alongside the visible public presence of youth sporting counter-cultural aesthetics made such depictions commonplace. In turn, youth subject to such labels had become adept in ironizing them.

Damon, his older brother Troy, now in his early 30s, and a group of their friends were first drawn into the Collishaw Hub when Jack, the station's manager was attempting to survey local residents, and bumped into them on the street with a mic in his hand. Finding they had plenty to say about the area, Jack invited Damon and Troy to co-host a show, which they agreed to, despite their vocal scepticism of the Hub as an institution. Over time, the "speakeasy" hosted by the two brothers became a platform to gather, discuss local issues and crack jokes. Each episode would attract a crowd of their friends, who would pass around drinks, swap jokes, and jump onto the mic to throw in their own take. Bombastic and ironic, the show prompted some animated discussions about life in the area, often continuing in the Hub, or behind in the parking lot. In one such instance, following an episode on crime, Troy joked out back amongst myself and his friends:

They think there's some major gang activity going on here? A gang is organised, none of these man are organised! You know how you know there's no gang around here? You know how you know? I'll tell you. If we was hustling big time it would show – if we was successful

we would have left! (Laughing and gesturing at his friends). Do any of these man look rich to you? (Laughing) That's some bare lies there, gang thing!

Earlier, on air, Troy had laughed about how, following a shooting, a rap group he was once involved in had been identified in the press as the official name of the “notorious” Collishaw gang. Having spent time in jail himself, Troy was not without his criminal associations. Yet his comments not only satirized the nervy, moralizing tone of the press, and their rigid objectification of gangs but also popular depictions of gang life as glamorous. He didn't deny involvement in criminality but rather mocked the reductive inadequacy of images of gang life. Troy's joke, simultaneously parodied the paranoid casting of his friends as an ideal-typical gang, as well as his friends' failure to live up to the glamour implied by this ideal. Similarly, although he discusses street life in a masculine idiom, this masculinity is presented as fraught and capable of failure, rather than being simply a counter-cultural locus of power and self-esteem. He asserted an ironic and complex reality against any clear depictions of what life in the ends may be like.

The Collishaw's street youth not only resisted being called a gang; more broadly they seemed to resent and resist definition of any variety. Instead, they preferred to deploy a range of shifting, often tautological terms to account for themselves, the most popular of which was the self-referential *man dem* (or *gyal dem* for exclusively female groups). The idiosyncrasy of this term, borrowed from global dancehall and hip-hop lingo, and firmly associated with the street, made it clearly parochial. Yet without specifying a clear referent, this parochial group of the *man dem* could simultaneously include anyone – and indeed was often used loosely. Similarly, youth were frequently challenged by strangers, relations and law enforcement as to what they were doing on the street, or in other public spaces. Demanding an explanation for such presence rendered it abnormal, insinuating that youth were up to something criminal or anti-social. In response, youth themselves would account for themselves through a range of vaguely aspirational, processual terms with no clear referent; they were trying to “get it right”, “live the life”, “achieve our gold [sic]”, “make it”, “be over there”, and so on.

As a marked exception to this resistance to being named, however, the Collishaw's street youth would often refer to themselves and their friends in the singular as “the community”. Once in a while, in explaining my research, I'd be met with enthusiasm and praise for wanting to talk to people on the street, and thus having recognised “the real community” as something that should be self-evident. Similarly, after managing to organise a pre-Carnival party in a community centre, one of the organisers took to the mic towards the end of the night to make a triumphant speech where he declared: “[T]his is the real community right here! [...] They [the local charity that maintained the

centre] ain't done nothing for the community before, but now that's changing! This is the real power of community, right here!" This statement simultaneously invalidated previous uses of the hall by other groups as not genuinely serving "the community", whilst nonetheless asserting an encompassing definition of community that those at the party were at the heart of. Indeed, the party was widely advertised as open to all, even though the attendees were almost exclusively from a single social circle.

The analysis of community provided so far, where the term is defined by external markers of fixity, but also an internal space of fluidity, suggests that community may well have been a favoured term precisely because it operated merographically: resisting being fully defined, whilst nonetheless having the potential to gather together and encompass a range of diverse lives. As such, it operated in a similar semi-tautological mode as *man dem* – suggesting a parochially bounded group, whilst simultaneously leaving the membership and nature of this group undefined. In particular, as I argued in Chapter 1, community can create the sense that joint commitments – shared ethical projects – are possible, even before the nature of such projects has been defined. This *potential* for ethical pursuit possible within community was most visible in the range of ways in which the markers of the street community – its particular aesthetics, connections, spaces and times – were associated with ambivalent yet pervasive ideas of success and agency.

Here, the aspirational terms used to describe road life ('get it right', 'live the life' etc.) are telling. Such terms were used not only to account for youths' public presence to outsiders, but also to discuss economic enterprise. People would talk about both their legal money-making projects – such as selling used cars, planning events, running an embroidery business or making music – in the same language which was also used to equivocate about pawning stolen goods and selling drugs. In describing the 'hustle economy' within black-British neighbourhoods, Hall (1978) argues that for many what defines the potentials for livelihood is not the line between formal and informal (or legal and illegal) commerce, but the grounding of all such activities within a shared social and cultural context. Such hustling turns local communities into sources of open-ended opportunities, wherein such opportunities can only be identified through engagement in these communities (c.f. Mollona 2009). The aspirational language of road life works in precisely this way – equating the road with a vision of success yet to be defined.

This can be seen more clearly in cases where the meaning of success was directly debated. For instance, Damon once hosted an episode of his radio show on the question of success, phrased as a question of “legacy or lambo<sup>12</sup>?” Initially, he came out vocally in favour of the former:

For me, anyway, success means legacy. So I’m talking about legacy like Martin Luther King, like, I don’t know, people might think like, what you talking about, but like Tupac Shakur. I’m talking about legacy like that. Where you’re always going to be remembered. Julius Caesar. I’m talking about success like that!

The debate initially focused on whether particular rappers can be considered as examples of success. Yet as the audience comes on board with the equation of success and legacy, Damon swung around:

Ok, I’m going to be a scumbag right now and I’m going to say, I’m literally going to say – I know certain people, or I might be one of those people who are going to say, ‘ok, if you ain’t got a chain around your neck, or you ain’t got a Rolex, a car – and when I’m talking about that I’m not talking about a Lambo, I’m talking about a Maybach, because I’ve never been in one, but I’d love to be in one. I love Maybach’s – they got Maybachs! (Laughs and then the audience does). But anyways, if I don’t have a Maybach, a chain round my neck, a Rolex, a bracelet, and a couple of (pauses) *females*, (quietly) instead of – that other word b-ches – anyways – but at the end of the day, for me, if I had all of that, I’d think I was successful. Why wouldn’t you think I was successful if I had that?

Even taking the other side, Damon expressed desire and doubt in the same breath. He acknowledged the allure of a glamorous, wealthy lifestyle, while simultaneously satirizing the one-upmanship in consumption, attitudes towards women, and reliance on external image often associated with such lifestyles. Continuing on, he argued that legacies may be inspirational and impactful, but having wealth means the immediate ability to lift up those around you, and that both forms of success seem to matter in different ways, even as they may also partially be seen as opposed. In all this, Damon probed and played with the potentialities and limitations of both perspectives, refusing to affiliate to one or another. His tone was highly ironic; irony was used to position himself so that he neither fully embraced nor wholly rejected the models of success he raises (c.f. Lambek 2010; 2003). Asserting a plurality of visions of success, then, serves as a way of keeping options open, as their potential is explored.

Throughout the show, Damon also questioned the authenticity of both perspectives – challenging the idea that either was genuinely accessible to “ordinary man on road”. Rappers, magnates and

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<sup>12</sup> Lamborghini – used here to represent material wealth in general.

political leaders may claim humble or even criminal origins, but did this actually mean such trajectories were available to all? In such questioning, Damon asserts the idea that for visions of success to be credible they must be accessible from within everyday life. If such lives are inscribed with uncertainty, singular visions of the future begin to seem tenuous and suspect. In this context, reimagining success in vague, ambivalent and ironic terms, and orienting oneself towards multiple visions of success, becomes a way of credibly linking present and future(s), without denying the uncertainty of the present. This is an argument I will return to in the final section when I focus in on particular venues and projects of self-transformation. In the next section, however, I want to pick up on another implication of Damon's emphasis on authenticity – that the road was not only a baseline of reality against which ethical projects were measured, but that it could also serve as a repository of agency which could be drawn on to support such projects.

## **Surviving Road Life Together**

Vince and I met during the very first episode of the show Troy and Damon came to host. In his early 20s, Vince was navigating his way between formal and informal employment, education and hustling, weighing up different life trajectories. During that first conversation, and ever since, Vince was insistent that if I wanted to understand the Collishaw, I needed to understand why people felt so at home there. One evening, hanging out in my flat, I decided to ask him about this. Trying to be provocative, knowing that this implicated both him and many of his friends, I suggested that many residents felt that the Collishaw wasn't always the safest area, and that the presence of youth out on the streets, acting rowdy, did a lot to make people feel insecure and unwelcome. And, I pointed out that, oftentimes people seemed to be making an active effort to be unwelcoming.

Vince was sympathetic. He'd had experiences of being jumped in public, by total strangers, commenting that he'd always been able to see the incidents coming: "You know when guys look a certain way, acting in a certain way, you know what they're like – it's road culture. And I know it's stereotypes – I know you might say that – but that's how you've got to think sometimes, sometimes they're true!" But he also offered a defence of locals adopting this behaviour and acting tough in public, arguing that locally, it "protects the community". Posturing in public, he argued, makes it clear to those from rival areas that the area is defended – and the tough attitude is meant to put scrutiny on anyone at all unfamiliar and to try to ascertain their motives. When shootings or stabbings occur so suddenly and so frequently, maintaining a menacing public presence becomes an important tool of community safety. I myself had noticed that ostensible outsiders – periodically including myself – were often stared down challengingly on the streets, as if to signal start of a conversation, if not an argument, but without any accompanying words. Vince explained that these

disconcerting prompts to respond were indeed about scrutinising and challenging anyone unfamiliar, whilst also demonstrating that the area was guarded. In this explanation, Vince explicitly recasts youths' public presence from being a threat to a collective resource.

If the idea of community signals the existence of a space where people might gather together and joint commitments might emerge, then Vince's narrative highlights the virtue of defending this space. On the most basic level, such defence might be seen as securing a simple form of negative liberty (Berlin 1969), in that it is aimed at securing freedom *from* attack, thereby rendering an uncertain world somewhat less uncertain. Meanwhile, criminologists have emphasized the importance of territorial identities and the defence of territory within British street cultures (Pickering et al. 2012; Ralphs et al. 2009; Reay and Lucey 2000). Here the defence of particular territories not only allows for the performance and recognition of street-level respectability, but also produces a sense of ownership that again acts as a bulwark against feelings of uncertainty or dispossession. Building on this, I want to suggest that such performances of territorial control could also produce an expanded sense of embodied *agency*, located within the community as a whole, and emerging from the fact that others were likewise committed to such a community. The next story Vince went on to tell illustrates this clearly:

"So I got stabbed once! When I was a lot younger, around 13, 14". Vince told me that he was out with his friends in the summer, celebrating someone's birthday, drinking in Trafalgar Square. They were jumped by some boys from a rival area, and fled, but not before Vince had been stabbed several times in the leg. He only noticed this back at his place, with the adrenaline wearing off, but when he did his friends sprang into action. Someone fetched his mother and helped call a cab, whilst others rounded up a larger group: "they all got angry, so while I was waiting for the cab to take me to hospital, and when I was in the cab, I saw all these calls being made, and people shouting and getting into their cars." Those who didn't go to the hospital raced back to central London, tracked down the other group and "beat the shit out of them". And, I am told, the incident became "legendary", in a way which helped ensure people knew "you don't mess with [the Collishaw]."

I heard this story repeated on several other occasions, and in each instance it was told with a similar tone of triumph. Troy, who was a part of the larger group that returned to Trafalgar Square, once described the incident as "the best night of my life". Alongside the gleeful tone, the story was always told as one illustrating the value of local community. Vince concluded:

So that's what you have here – this community that's going to be there for you through things like that. These people who you know are always going to be there like –

Farhan: They got your back?

Yeah, they've got your back. When shit like that just happens you get the whole area piling into cars and coming out for you.

[Farhan comments that this is not what people normally think of when they talk about community]

Yeah, there's a lot of crime, and it can be unsafe so I do think the area's gotten better, it's changed a lot [in terms of safety]. But then with the change, people ignore this community that's there that – yeah it's tied to crime and everything – but it also gives you support when no one else will. And the people, they really care about you – people forget about that!

A number of elements of Vince's story are important. For one, the idea of community operates flexibly, both in terms of its social scale and its ethical ends. Socially, it encompasses not only his friends who piled into cars to avenge the stabbing but also his mother, and through her a broader network of friends and relations. Here, community is defined collectively as a moral unit – it's the people, whoever they are, who've "got your back". Yet the ethical purpose of this unit remains vague. In Vince's story it refers expansively both to the people who take care of him when he's hurt, but also the people who go out and reclaim a sense of toughness and security on his behalf. The agency of the street community encompasses both violence and care as ethical goods. At stake is not only the reclaiming of masculine toughness, but the possibilities for less violent mutual support as well.

Secondly, at stake in this idea of community is a sense of agency. Although I heard other accounts of successful clashes with those from rival areas, this story seemed to have particular cachet. I suspect this was not for its core narrative but for its symbolism, which also produced a narrative of the streets as sovereign. In Vince's and others' telling, there was a particular thrill to fighting, and ultimately triumphing, in and around Trafalgar Square. Asserting the dominance of the ends in Trafalgar – one of the key spaces where the idea of a British nation is symbolically staged (Kapferer 2007) – symbolically extends the potential contained within the community up to the national level, where street-level toughness gains vaster significance. Here, the disruptive power of violence, staged nationally, is seen as interrupting the sense of risk that usually pervades encounters in public, to create a broad sense of security that extends beyond the particular encounter or rivalry.

Here, street community emerges as repository of a multi-faceted agency, operating at various scales and towards diverse ends. Yet, strikingly this was a collective form of agency, located within the community as a whole and therefore capable of reaching where individual agency could not. Such

collective agency was variously capable of making both local areas and broader geographies safe, and of securing help in a crisis. And this was possible precisely because the very idea of community attracted people's commitment – even a willingness to put themselves at risk – in and of itself.

The notion of collective agency fits well with Willis' (1977) influential argument that street countercultures are grounded in a "collectivist" ethic. Yet others, such as Bourgois (1995) or Anderson (1999), have depicted street cultures as driven by self-aggrandising individualism. Here I hope to bring these perspectives together, and suggest that the street community provided the basis for a collective agency, but that rather than this necessarily shaping a collectivist ethic, such agency was often turned towards individual ends.

Perhaps the best illustration of this is the way in which rap videos made by local artists were made collective productions. As I will detail more in the final section, such videos were often used by local youth as a way of publicly demonstrating their toughness. Yet the markers of success that were displayed – piles of cash, sports cars, and occasionally weapons – often didn't belong to the rapper. Rather, in a performative ritual, these would be sourced from amongst the wider group, and put together. Cash, in particular, was something everyone involved in a video would contribute a bit to, in order to create the appearance on-screen of individual success. Yet, despite this pooling of agency, the reputation and respectability which derived from such performances was unevenly distributed – with such recognition first and foremost adhering to the lead artist. As Tony (whom we will meet in the next section) suggested, the others appearing in such videos might be motivated by a range of factors: from appearing tough, to securing safety through association with tough figures, to a simple love of music.

In a similar vein, youth hanging out on the street would often played a game called "money up", which involved bouncing coins off a wall, to see who could land their coin closest to a target. The winner of each round kept the thrown coins, and it was conventional to increase the number of coins thrown so that one individual would typically end up with all or most of the money in play. Indeed, when I asked Damon about the name, he emphasized "it's about getting rich, that's why it's called money up!" And indeed, the game would often produce triumphant winners and bitter losers. Yet every time I witnessed this game, the winner would promptly use his spoils to buy alcohol for the assembled group, effectively re-collectivizing the winnings.

In both these instances, a performance of individual wealth, toughness and success was made possible through collective effort and pooled resources. If the performance, feeling and recognition of various forms of individual success were the ultimate aims of both cases, then this was



nonetheless predicated on an awareness that such success was grounded in the community. As such, individual claims to success were often seen as reflecting on one's friends and one's area more broadly. Perversely, this collective grounding of agency was illustrated by the fact that, in the ongoing postcode wars between the Collishaw and its rivals, individual conflicts could often lead to the targeting of friends or those from the same area, regardless of their involvement.

Moreover, this meant that there was some recognition that protecting the community, as well as maintaining strong intra-group relations preceded the pursuit of personal success from within this community. This was evident in a final story told by Vince:

Vince's cousin, who was then staying with his family, was suspected of robbing his neighbour – also a part of the street community. Vince's cousin had been making a conspicuous attempt to avoid his neighbour, despite their shared circles, which seemed to be the basis for this suspicion. Vince related, matter-of-factly how this would require some form of reprisal. At issue was the status of the street community as a space of trust and mutual support. Criminal activity was tolerated, even sometimes facilitated within this community, but such activity was meant to be directed outwardly. As such, Vince suggested that it wouldn't be acceptable for his neighbour to retaliate in any way which would result in hospitalization – as this would undermine trust and support within the community as much as the original transgression. But the neighbour might well have the cousin beat up and humiliated – as in a similar incident where the perpetrator was stripped naked and forced to run through the estate. This, he suggested, might be the appropriate sort of act that would work to reaffirm the community as a space of trust, rather than further compromising it.

In both stories told by Vince, even as there may be a specific incident instigating the community's intervention, such interventions were not wholly directed towards a single instrumental end. Rather, both the revenge attack staged in Trafalgar Square as well as the planned act of retribution by Vince's neighbour might be read as aiming to restore the possibility of various joint commitments emerging out of the street community. In the first story, the use of violence is directed at constituting a form of sovereignty that then becomes a store of agency and dignity for various future actions. In the second story, the focus is on the restoration of trust, which would allow the street community to resume functioning as a multivalent resource.

Much like the ethic of "active awaiting" that Clara Han (2012) describes in the slums of Chile, these are ethical interventions made in conditions where the future is uncertain and difficult to act definitively on, but where people nonetheless pursue projects of care. The use of violence in both incidents is particularly indicative of this form of agency, as its arresting power (Scheper-Hughes and

Bourgois 2003) is deployed as a way of reshaping relationships in dramatic, but nonetheless indeterminate ways. By extension, those public symbols and acts that project a street-savvy toughness – such as the production of rap videos, or the staring-down of outsiders on the street – evoke a sense of agency and power not through direct confrontation but through performance. Indeed, Vince and others talk about the street community precisely in these terms – as something that can help you achieve your gold, find success and secure a future.

## **The Road to a Different Life**

Life on road wasn't without its perils, however. If daily life in the Collishaw was pervaded with a sense of uncertainty, then even as the street community acted as a repository of collective potential, it also exposed members to new forms of risk and uncertainty.

On one hand, the reality of gang conflict could serve to constrain the ability to move about the city. As Vince remarked, youth who look a certain way were liable to be called out by those from rival areas, and often ambushed – a problem the director of a local youth programme likewise noted. But things were not entirely safe at home. Vince's account shares a sense with many others that a raid by a rival gang could happen at any moment – and indeed Kilburn's bloody history of drive-bys and ambushes lent credence to this notion. Alongside the "respect" that life on road could provide often came a heightened sense of insecurity. As Vince once remarked, half-ironically of his friends, "these guys sometimes even make *me* nervous."

On the other hand, the police were often experienced as a source of even greater insecurity. Jourdelle, a more distant friend of Troy and Damon, summed up this experience at a planning meeting for the Collishaw summer festival where he was advocating for a workshop on stop-and-search practices. He explained that such a workshop was not about helping people get away with crime but about the fact that:

They give you so much hassle, they don't let you live your life [...] They see these guys on road, they could be doing whatever, but all they're thinking is these guys are criminals – how can we get them and lock them up? They don't understand that some of these guys are just trying to live their lives!

Without denying that people sometimes engaged in illegal activity, Jourdelle argued that *constantly* being treated as suspect negated any distinction between those engaged in crime and those who weren't, and also limited the ability of those who may dabble in crime to pursue other dimensions of their lives. This was a sentiment widely echoed by others. People on road lead ambivalent lives, and

make moral choices, but the level of police scrutiny they face overlooks this ambivalence and choice to instead always-already treat them as criminals.



Top: Police return to their unmarked van after a stop and search.  
Bottom: 'Know your rights!' -Locals attend a stop and search workshop

At the stop and search workshop that eventually materialised, Troy was even more critical:

Like you want to get deep about it yeah? What it is – the police are created for black people. Not like any other people, no other purpose – black people. Because look at the history – you go back to slavery, innit, and how do you keep your slaves. You need force! And look at the role models we have for us – we've got rappers, we've got drug dealers, we've got people who've gotten rich through crime – the role models we're being given are all about turning black men into criminals – and then you can control them!

Troy recasts the street as a mode of control, complicit in police efforts to criminalize black youth. In this he denies the opposition between street subcultures and mainstream society, instead recasting it as a problematic link. His analysis resonates with scholarly accounts which link the construction of criminalized black subjects and the need to maintain such populations as a minimally-socially mobile reserve of expendable labour (Gilroy 1991; Hall 1978; Rios 2011). Damon, picking up on his tirade, suggests that this leaves street youth not with a sense of alternative identity, but one of precarious citizenship, where exclusion from legal protection is itself a legal artifice (De Genova 2002), and where inclusion and exclusion are thus experienced simultaneously:

Even if you feel British, if you look foreign you are treated like a foreigner [...] [Y]ou get trouble at school sometimes 'cuz they think you don't fit in. And you've got the police stopping and searching people on the street, because you look different, or you act different, right? So that's just another way of telling people they ain't really British. And then, did you know, if you go to jail for over two years they take away your passport? They can just take it from you if you end up in jail like that? So how British are you?!

However, because of the non-directional nature of the agency contained within the street community, it could also become a resource to draw on when trying to transform one's life, beyond the confines of the road. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, having become disillusioned with road life in one way or another, Vince, Damon, Troy and many of their friends were engaged in precisely such attempts in different ways – whether this was through pursuing education, formal employment or doubling down on a music career. Yet, crucially, these attempts were never aimed at leaving the road behind. Rather they drew on the transformative potential of the street community to open up new potentials that might transcend the road, and its everyday uncertainties, even while remaining rooted in it. In this final section, I want to explore two such projects: one linked to the production of music, and the other to fitness. In both, I show how road relationships, aesthetics, and the agency that these aesthetics conjured, were all crucial to these projects of self-transformation. Moreover, in both cases, the uncertainty inscribed in present everyday experiences is never wholly

denied. Rather, these forms of future-recovering labour start from realities of uncertainty to produce non-determinate forms of agency.

I have that argued when institutions such as formal education or law-abiding citizenship seemed like uncertain if not outright defunct foundations for a sense of subjecthood, street culture offered what were felt to be more accurate expectations about the world, in which to ground understanding, agency and relationships. Here street culture isn't simply a matter of consciously adopting a more rewarding set of values, but a stance towards the world grounded in embodied understanding and experience.

As such, those forms of self-transformation imagined cleave closely to road realities. Futures which imagine disjunctive breaks with such realities rarely feel credibly attainable, and often they're not even desirable. In this section then, I want to trace two cases in which people pursued open-ended and unfolding projects of self-transformation through taking part in street communities.

The first case is of a recording studio that Troy and others used to frequent. Although it has now closed, during its heyday, and the height of the post-code wars – the term used locally to refer to the violent rivalry between the Collishaw, “Hirst” and “Hume” estates – it served as one of the rare institutions commanding credibility across all sides. This was largely down to the ability of the manager, Tony, to insist on a singular focus on making music, refusing to get caught up in rivalries. Intrigued, and admittedly somewhat incredulous, by the idea of an independent studio straddling what had often been a bloody divide, I managed to get in touch with Tony through a series of mutual friends.

When we met, Tony reiterated his determination to stay above the conflict, but also emphasized that he was aware that the reason his studio once attracted so many aspiring artists was hardly so peaceable: The mid-2000s saw a phase of “call-out” videos being posted to YouTube, where youth from different postcodes would explicitly threaten those from rival areas. Perhaps unsurprisingly the police quickly cottoned on to this practice. Making rap rose in popularity because it became a more subtle way of making these threats – it provided a medium where specific threats of violence could be “subliminally” disguised, as Tony put it, by burying them amongst the generic threats and boasts which were standard for the genre, and through the use of intensely local slang. Tony emphasized that most of those he worked with were visibly uninterested in making music for its own sake. Rap, for them was a means of asserting toughness –and by recycling specific tropes of success and toughness from other local and international rappers, as well as by making threats towards those in rival areas, rappers could amplify their reputation on the streets.

Yet there was never a clear line between “legitimate” artists and those whose intent was to posture. On one hand, Tony emphasized how a number of people making music for the sake of cultivating a street reputation would find the practice transformational. To some extent making a “hard” (tough) track necessitated making a “decent” track. Being played, both by friends and rivals, was the way to amplify a street reputation, and this necessitated some investment in the process of writing lyrics and composing tracks.

Through this process some artists would start to move away from more derivative works, becoming both familiar and invested in the process of composition itself. Tony, as well as Troy, Kylea (Troy’s musical collaborator) and others who frequented the studio, talked about how some artists initially interested in projecting toughness would later return to the studio to explore new ideas – perhaps some rhyme that they had scribbled down that they wanted to develop, or else a melody from some soul, or electronic dance music they wanted to incorporate into a track. At the same time, people would begin to recognise such budding artists less as posturing road men, and more as artists in their own right, even if these identities were never wholly separable.

Artists would respond to this recognition, spending more time in the studio, composing lyrics or at clubs and, as Tony putting it, staying off the road. Troy and Kylea, for example admitted with abashed pride that at one point during the recording of their first mixtape, they were spending so many late nights in the studio that they stopped going out with their friends. But, Troy noted, their presence in the studio encouraged a series of drop-in visitors, thereby pulling others into the tamer orbit of the studio. And, Tony argued, many artists became passionate enough about music, that a day job began to be seen as holding the potential to fund a music career in the off hours, rather than simply as an inaccessible or exploitative dead end. As Bramwell (2015) noted amongst London rappers more broadly, all this could collectively serve to cultivate an ethos of self-discipline based around maximising the opportunities making music afforded.

On the other hand, those who aspired more towards being artists could nonetheless become pulled back into the post code wars. Some artists would deliberately invoke local conflicts, as a way of signalling their authenticity, and getting recognised. But such invocations could lead to both public backlash or challenges from those from rival areas, as well as pressure from peers to make good on threats, and live up to one’s tough image. Consequently, some artists found themselves adopting the trappings of road life that they originally, fictitiously, boasted about in their lyrics, acquiring weapons, engaging in conflicts and maintaining a visible presence on the streets.

According to Tony, Troy, Kylea and their friends, this meant that the studio – and even making music in general – had the potential to transform lives, getting people to pursue less risky or illegal visions of success, but that this was always an ambivalent process. The studio existed in symbiosis with the road, even as it was a space away from it. This was clearly vocalized by Troy, in conversation with Damon over the music he makes. Damon had playfully challenged him for claiming that making music helps the community when he often rapped about violence or other negative themes. Exasperated, Troy responds:

No, no, no, hold on, listen, listen, listen! I don't live a positive life. It's like if somebody right now, listen, somebody in Africa right now – tell me, are they living a good life or not? Because they could turn around and write a book about themselves – what's positive about it when they're writing it? What's positive when somebody's talking about – he's getting raped or he's seeing his family getting gunned down. What's positive about that? I'm talking about what's going on out here! I'm talking about I live life out here! What are you talking about?! What's positive about that? [...] I do music, and I can express myself through music, and people will listen to me, yeah, through music. Because if I stand up, and I talk, not a lot of people will hear me! Now, music gets like publicised – internet everyone – so someone can just type in and go 'hey did you listen to this!' – you know what I'm saying? 'Hey man! Hear this man! Hold your phone!'

In Troy's account, agency and possibility comes out of recognition. He claims that although he lacks other forms of voice that have impact, making music becomes a way of making authentic statements that people can relate to. Making music represents an alternative possibility for livelihood and esteem than hustling on road. Nonetheless it depends on being grounded in everyday authenticity. Troy continued:

Everybody around here, and they see it's tough, you know, it's tough for them. But people see me struggle to become who I am and they understand that's real, because of what they've been through. They see that success and they know you can make it.

This success was framed as a mixture of continuity and change, individual and communal. It challenged the idea that only unfamiliar sorts of subjects can be successful, and made room for ambivalent, conflicted lives on road to nonetheless become worthy of recognition. At its core was the idea that ethical horizons should be visible from one's current stance – and thus that ethical aspirations had to reflect both this stance and the transformative aspiration.

Thus, for Tony as well, welcoming those who wanted a change into the studio meant embracing the values, aesthetics and networks of the road from which musical aspirations emerged. As an artist might while away the night in the studio, their friends might swing by, drinking in the lobby or

hanging out on the street outside. This broader presence fed into the process of music making, making the studio a space of belonging, but it also had the potential to ignite conflict, as stand-offs and scuffles would sometimes break out between people from rival areas passing by. As Tony and some of his fellow artists sought to cultivate a form of artistry that could be a way of moving beyond the conflict, their work also had the potential to generate fresh conflict.

Likewise, during my time in the Collishaw, I witnessed the popularity of a local calisthenics fitness programme amongst the young men of Ollie's generation – those still in school, many of whom were already entangled in road conflicts or low-level dealing in various ways. The programme was founded and run by Liron, a former youth worker married to a native of the estate and who had himself grown up nearby. I got to know Liron through a range of community events, including free fitness classes that he had run for locals. Yet despite his active involvement in the area, Liron was himself grappling with how to live his life and think about success. In his early 30s, with a wife and three children, he had lived a life where he had chased multiple different ways of living: religion, sport, hustling, youth work and volunteerism. At different points in his life, he found fitness provided both an important physical outlet and a source of discipline that he claimed helped him keep away from illegal pursuits when times were tough and cash was short. Hence the programme, took the explicit goal of teaching local youth discipline and cultivating an alternative basis for self-worth and aspiration without necessarily denying the uncertainty and temptations that were often a part of Liron's own life.

The programme's name, 'Rise Fitness'<sup>13</sup>, carried connotations of redemption, but ones which could be easily overlooked as mundane. Yet this rooting of the transformative in the familiar and taken for granted characterized much of the programme. Despite his aspiration to change lives, Liron would promote the programme to local youth on the basis that it would get them "swole" (buff), and thus help them look attractive to girls and tougher to their friends. Moreover, he promoted this pursuit of physical fitness and discipline in a broader sense of community connection. For example, when he discussed his vision for the programme over the summer, wanting to hold sessions out in the Estate's precinct, community connection, and familiar forms of value and belonging were at the fore:

So on Sunday morning you have all the grandmothers who come out to chat, and they could bring their chairs and watch – and on Monday you might have a different crew – the sorts of people who want to get hard –and you can push them harder out there; you

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<sup>13</sup> Name changed: the original had an even stronger religious connotation.



know, make it for everyone! Have it out there! [...] because that's what's really going to get people going!

In this the appropriation of public space and the cultivation of a visible, recognised form of toughness were central to the appeal of the programme. Nor was this limited to the physical training. When out in public, the sessions would attract onlookers, drawn by the pounding soundtrack of hip hop and grime. Those not presently doing pullups on the parallel or overhead bars, or push ups on the ground would mingle with the onlookers and bob along with the music, with the line blurring between participant and spectator. After a fight broke out between some onlookers, Liron became worried about the safety of holding sessions outside, but resented the idea of having to move indoors to a nearby community centre, where he was worried youth would feel cut off. Ingeniously, he managed to get the equipment onto the roof of the centre, where onlookers would often watch us exercise from the stairwells and balconies of nearby tower blocks. This recovered a sense of publicly asserted and recognised value – or as one participant put it “it’s like we own the estate”.



'Get Money!'- Rise fitness pushes participants to get through demanding sets

During workouts, participants were constantly cut down to size, told they weren't hard enough, but that hardness was attained not through seeming tough on the streets, but through physical discipline. Liron would draw on street lexicons of success and hardness, but bring them into the context of fitness, shooting at us to "blast it", "own it" or to "get money" as we hauled our weight up onto the bars to the beat of the music. By turning familiar aspirations and values towards the cultivation of physical discipline, Liron hoped he could also cultivate a broader discipline that would spill over from the workout sessions into everyday life:

You push your body, you push your mind. It's about that discipline. This is hard but I can do it.

This is hard but I can get it – you know what I'm saying? When I train it's hard, and it hurts!

It's a real fight – and it's freeing!

This discipline was meant to give participants the strength to avoid the easy money of dealing and hustling, and to weather the difficulties of mainstream employment, or more legal hustling. Overall, the programme intended not to move youth beyond the street, nor to encourage specific life trajectories, but to turn street values to a range of new ends, and increase youths' capacities in the process. This required a commitment towards open-endedness that was most visible in Liron's attitude towards funding.

During my time in London I saw Rise Fitness restart after a short hiatus, run successfully for several months and then fold. This occurred largely because Liron was unwilling to apply for external funding grants or corporate partnerships, arguing that if he had to sell the programme as working along a set route to a specific end, the programme would cease to be effective. It only worked, he argued (and I'm inclined to believe) because people had the freedom to make of it what they wanted. Liron shared with his participants a wariness of government-led youth-reform programmes, believing them to make heavy demands on road youth without seeming to tangibly better their lives. He recognised that many youth had come to believe that such programmes took advantage, seeking to control or exploit youth (See Chapter 6). And similarly, Liron believed that any government or private funder would only want to fund the programme to claim to be helping street youth publicly, whilst developing a means of surveying and controlling their behaviour. In contrast, the self-discipline he advocated had no particular end, but opened up possibilities in a broad way.

In both these accounts, youth attempt to transform their lives in various ways, but never to wholly leave the street behind. Yet at the same time the street is not taken as directly oppositional to society. Lambek (2010: 27) calls for attention to be paid to the way in which ethical projects might be simultaneously continuous and discontinuous to one's life, and argues that irony – understood, in his usage, as an ambivalent self-positioning entailing neither commitment nor rejection – is key to

mediating such change (ibid 2010; 2015). Here, while street youth do indeed seem to develop a counter-cultural identity that provides the locus of an alternative sense of self-worth, this sense of self is non-determinate and malleable, able to sit both in relation and opposition to mainstream society, to be cynical and sincere, and to reach out in multiple directions whilst remaining grounded in the street. In both these cases, projects of self-transformation worked because, unable to promise certainty, they left space for ambivalence – for different possibilities to remain on the table. For instance, both the recording studio and Rise Fitness embraced tropes of street masculinity, but in order to open up new possibilities within it, rearticulating masculine tropes as about self-improvement or artistic expression rather than physical conflict. In doing so, they also opened up new temporalities. The immediate recognition of street toughness, or the rhythm of back-and-forth acts of violence and retribution were, to some degree, replaced by all-night sessions in the recording studio, or long-term programmes of physical improvement which, in turn, might help youth secure or commit to formal employment. At the same time, these transformations were effective because they were framed ambivalently; bodybuilding or rapping might also hold the possibility of building up street reputations, or propagating conflicts. It was by embracing these multiple possibilities rather than seeking to separate them, that the street could facilitate self-transformation. As a whole, the street did not serve as a singular locus of oppositional self-worth, but as a rich repository of possibilities in a world where so much else was already foreclosed.

## Conclusion

Commenting on the Collishaw's perceived rough reputation, Lisa declared:

Oh, like '[the Collishaw] – that's a rough area – it's a part of the postcode wars and the [Collishaw] gang is really dangerous' – that isn't how it is when you're there. There's a group of people there who are a community and who – there isn't like this proper gang, like 'oh, we're together as a gang' you know? [...] It's not so organised – that's just not what people's lives are like here!

Lisa resisted the depictions of the Collishaw as criminal, but did not replace it with an alternative image. Nor did she deny all the implications of this depiction. Instead she contrasted it to the disorganised much-less-well-defined reality of everyday life.

Lisa's depiction, like those of Troy, Damon, Jourdelle, Vince, Tony, and Liron all evoke a community whose existence seems clear but which refuses to be defined, even as the outside world constantly imposes definitions onto it. In this chapter, I argued that the street community of the Collishaw consciously draws on and plays with the fact that iterations of community can assert unity and shared moral projects without needing to define the nature of this unity or its projects. Street

aesthetics – particular clothing, music, and ways of speaking – alongside the visible commitment of others signify community belonging. Yet if the boundaries of community are clearly signified, its ethical purposes are not. In contexts of everyday uncertainty, community is deployed as an ambivalent resource to imagine and pursue multiple visions of the future, without wholly committing to any one. This ambivalence is evident in discourses of success, and is made possible by treating community as a repository of collective agency, suffused by multiple potentials. Different personal projects become available to the collective as resources, so that one attempt to assert toughness on the street might secure safety for many others, and thus allow other less confrontational projects to emerge.

This chapter, alongside the previous one, explored how community might be used to remake relations – with others and with oneself. In all cases, the ambivalence and multiplicity *within* community was used as a resource of exploring particular modes of relation and discovering their possibilities, without fully committing to a fixed morality or deontology. Across both chapters, I argued that community not only has transformative power, but also that community can be a vehicle for *ongoing, unfolding and ambivalent* transformation. Alongside the first two chapters, my aim here was to build up a case for why community was seen as enduringly valuable in Kilburn. In the final two chapters, then, I turn towards contestations around the possibility for forms of community to emerge. Just as this chapter traced the inscription of precarity into the everyday environment, the next chapter looks more broadly at public space, and at the ways in which the traces of various visions of community are inscribed in, and contested around such spaces.



Elders explore Kilburn as a part of the 'Bench to Bench' project

## 5. Of geriatrics and gangsters: Public space and the problem of recognition

*"It is on the place of aesthetics: in dress, dance, music, in the whole rhetoric of style that we find the dialogue between black and white most subtly and comprehensively recorded, albeit in code." (Hebdige 2013 [1979]: 44-5)*

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I met Jerome not long after moving into Brunel House, the monolithic concrete tower block on the Collishaw Estate which was, and still is, due to be demolished "any day now", as various residents would sometimes quip. Jerome's frame resembled the building; he had strong, square shoulders and towered dauntingly above me. I had seen him around not just in the common spaces of the building but around the public spaces of the estate as well, and he seemed not only to know the area but to get on affably with many others. Now in his forties, he had lived on the estate for over half his life. One day I spotted him in lively conversation and, thinking he might be able to provide a good introduction to the Collishaw, went over to say hello:

“So you’re the new guy?” he boomed, raising an eyebrow. I nodded, explained my project and asked if there’s anything I ought to know about living on the Collishaw’. He replied that there wasn’t much, only to “be careful of the local youth”. His friend laughed, and I feigned bravado:

“Is it really that bad?”

“Nah,” he shrugged, “it’s just like any other area really – y’know, you don’t go doing anything you shouldn’t and you’ll be fine.”

Jerome’s injunction – to “be careful of the local youth” – was one that was frequently repeated over my time in the Collishaw, often with a covert gesture towards a playground, courtyard or corner where such figures might be spotted. But so too was his matter-of-fact attitude towards the threat they posed. Situations which I ought to avoid should be obviously recognizable, and self-evidently threatening. Yet if the idea that the public spaces of the estate were overrun in the evenings by self-evidently dangerous youth was ubiquitous, then so too was the diagnostic; unfailingly I would have it explained to me that “they have nowhere to go”. Such warnings posed a puzzle: if people habitually avoided spaces marked by the public presence of youth, what made them feel so able to comment on the circumstances and motives behind the public presence of these same youth?

Thus far in the thesis, I have focused on the interplay between fixity and fluidity in constituting community as a space, and on the role of community in transforming relations. In these final two chapters, however, I turn to trace the political conditions and contestations which enabled or threatened such processes. In this chapter, I focus on contestations around public space, arguing both that public space is often essential to living a good life in the city, but also that the diverse claims made on such spaces can often lead to particular forms of conflict and exclusion. I start off by suggesting that spaces of fluidity, where new forms of mutual recognition emerge, can be formed through the appropriation of public spaces. I illustrate this through an ethnographic account of “KAT” – a group of pensioners who fight for the development of an age friendly Kilburn.

In the second and third sections, however, I show how such public spaces are often highly contested, and read more in terms of the potential they hold for alienation and exclusion than that for connection. As such, I demonstrate how the appropriation of public space by one group might result in dispossession for another. Against theories which suggest that mutual recognition will emerge over time, I argue that in many instances public space is read in terms of a fixed order of signs which *appear* non-negotiable, and therefore leave users with the impression that there is no scope for such mutual recognition to emerge. Such readings occur prior to interpersonal interaction and often disincentivise it. Here, my ethnography details life on the the Collishaw estate, where many

residents feel dispossessed from public and – often even – private spaces. Such dispossession prompts some local youth to respond by making particularly forceful – and noticeable – claims on public spaces, so as to reaffirm their presence. Yet such appropriation proves alienating, even dangerous to others – resulting in different groups largely avoiding one another.

In the fourth section, I trace two exceptions to this dynamic of groups not interacting based on their symbolic presence. I show how the symbolic presence of others is always open to interpretation, and how residents sometimes do read such presences against the grain of prevailing interpretations so as to open up new possibilities. As such, I show that negotiation of shared uses of public space remains possible, but that such compromises are much more fragile and impermanent than they are often cast. If so far I have shown how community can facilitate various forms of connection and transformation within relatively bounded contexts, this chapter reveals how the boundaries of such projects are often contested, in ways which may render them fragile or uncertain.

## **Shaping an Age-Friendly Kilburn**

Sitting in the audience at an event called the “Kilburn Debates,” with the subtitle “Kilburn: your lifetime neighborhood.”, and surrounded by about 30 people, I was the youngest in the room by at least 35 years. Organized by a group called Kilburn Ageing Together (KAT), the event featured speakers and public debates on the idea of “ageing in place”.

A speaker picked up on this theme to reframe it as a question: “Kilburn: why move anywhere else?” and was met with warm laughter from the room. He continued: “You don’t have to be in one of the extreme situations that one finds in the world to be suddenly on your uppers and find yourself living with a shock that can really limit how you live your life.” He went on to explain that age comes with a new set of disabilities and vulnerabilities that each person must learn to manage. Consequently, older people are expected to exercise caution and care in how they live their lives. But why, he questioned, don’t we think more about how we can create safe and caring neighborhoods, so that people can happily “age in place” rather than expecting the elderly to carefully “withdraw from society”?

The idea of creating safe and caring neighborhoods is precisely what lies at the heart of KAT’s work. During my fieldwork, I came to understand this work closely, volunteering on several projects, attending meetings, and chatting and conducting interviews with several members. Founded in 2001, KAT’s core philosophy is to empower older residents by looking at personal needs and environmental needs as deeply intertwined. This means that they do many things one might expect

of a pensioner's group: they host community film screenings and talks, they get people together for tea, and many members keep a gently watchful eye on one another to make sure that they are healthy and happy. But they also do more unconventional work: they lean on the local council to install benches, add countdown timers on crosswalks, or fix cracked or uneven slabs on the pavement; they make films documenting older people's experiences navigating the daily hazards of the city; they produce and distribute maps of the public toilets available along the Kilburn High Road, whilst working with proprietors to try to ensure they stay open; they lobby the local NHS trust to make podiatry care (nail-cutting service for older people with limited mobility) more accessible and better at listening to people's needs – and so on. As Len, the project coordinator explained, their work is driven by the recognition that “small things can be big things.”

Many of KAT's projects explicitly aim to intervene in public space, and to make particular claims on it. Although it helps to introduce KAT's work in terms of a grand mission of allowing people to “age in place”. Len admits that he doesn't normally think of things “at that level”. Len has bright white hair and equally bright blue eyes, and is quick to smile. Now in his late 60s, he came to KAT through his background in social work, where he previously worked both with youth and the elderly as an individual caseworker. Through this experience, he came to understand how everyday struggles could so often end up hidden or misunderstood. When he was recruited to run KAT, first on a temporary basis, and then permanently, this understanding of hidden experience became central to how he understood KAT's work.

Len explained this philosophy one day over lunch, after a morning of walking around Kilburn mapping out local benches. “When you're doing the day-to-day work you just sort of go along instinctively – thinking oh ‘this could be a good idea’ or ‘that feels like it might make people's lives a bit better’ – and you have ideas but you don't necessarily stop and think about why those ideas seem to be the right ones.” What guides this day-to-day work is a careful attention to the experiences of others. Group members and participants in particular activities are continually asked about how they find particular activities and experiences. They are invited to meetings and talks, and given a sense that their daily experiences not only matter, but have the possibility to become a part of broader change. Members of the community sharing experiences are sometimes referred to as “watchers” – a role that gives a sense of wider value to such daily experience. As Len explained, this is a model where “everyone is able to contribute something and to feel a part of what is going on.”

In terms of their interventions into public space, then, Len described these as about “making the experience of streets or wherever people are going nice.” He explained that this entailed helping people to feel a sense of security, to have a chance to relax and observe things, and to feel more



connected to your surroundings. All of this, in turn also opens up potential for conversation and connection with others, in a way that can push back against a sense of loneliness and isolation that sometimes comes with age. KAT's interventions in public space, then, aim to create spaces "where older people are comfortable but which other people can be as well".

Loneliness and isolation has been a particular focus for KAT as of late. Having long campaigned for more accessible public infrastructure, Len and his colleagues have discovered that accessibility is not only a matter of material reality, but of perception as well. This is especially the case in and around the Kilburn High Road, where the thronged crowds, piled stalls of street vendors and speeding cars, vans and busses can all contribute to an overwhelming environment. At one meeting, Mary, a KAT member, noted "I like the look and people in the area", but the difficulty she has in getting around "makes it hard to like the area" overall. Faced with this challenge, the High Road tends to be a place she avoids, but this also means it becomes harder to connect with those she does know locally – whether in meeting friends or chatting with familiar shopkeepers. Even as the street environment improves, with new benches, crossings, bus routes or traffic regulations, for those who've come to avoid such spaces, their negative perception can endure and continue to reproduce a sense of isolation. Isolation, in other words, can become built into people's sense of place.

One recent project of KAT's to tackle these challenges has been *Bench to Bench*. Len and his colleagues have devised a set of 10 walks around Kilburn and neighbouring West Hampstead, whose routes incorporate benches, marked crossings, toilets, transport stops and cafés – all of which might help to make navigating the city that much more accessible. In some cases, these benches, bus stops or crossings are there because of KAT's work, and the project helps draw attention to these new amenities. For the most part, however, *Bench to Bench* aimed to open up the urban environment by transforming how it was perceived. I myself became involved in the project after the initial routes had already been worked out, but I spent many hours walking these routes with Len and his colleagues, meticulously documenting the amenities along these routes, and, later, drawing and refining easy-to-read maps.

At a meeting of KAT, Len once provoked considerable surprise by revealing that in making the maps, we found 154 benches along the 10 mapped routes. The walks are reasonably short – and one or two benches along the way sufficed to provide sufficient rest for most people to complete the route happily. Yet, as we would later hear from many walk participants, many of the areas simply weren't ones people would explore on their own. With age, the unknown space could quickly be seen as flatly inaccessible, and Bench to Bench was partly an intervention in changing this perception.



**Figure 7**

Top: A sketch of a Bench to Bench route made by Len, based on his feel for the area, and the final published map, adapted from the ordinance survey.

Bottom The Bench to Bench map is overlaid on the ordinance survey map, revealing additions (yellow) removals (black) and alterations in shape (green) made to the standard map. These interventions collectively attempt to make the area more navigable, and highlight what are thought to be key features for accessibility

The project, however, wasn't simply about providing new maps to the city, but about remaking senses of place more thoroughly. In order to assess the accessibility of the walks, KAT ran a number of "test walks" with various members or connected groups. Yet what we quickly found was that above and beyond the routes themselves, which people were always pleased to discover, people valued the ability to go out together as a group. Being with friends, or in a group, provided a base of safety and comfort that made participants more willing to engage with the unknown. Sometimes this meant exploring new areas – whether these were the routes themselves or improvised extensions added on at the end of the walk. At other times, this was about being able to tackle challenging social situations.

During the test walks we found that the benches we had planned to use as rest stops were frequently occupied, often by jostling teenagers, boisterous public-drinkers, or weary homeless people. As part of a group, however, people felt comfortable in asking other users to share the bench, or if they could move along briefly, in a way which many confessed they would struggle to do on their own. And indeed these requests prompted forms of mutual acknowledgement. Getting up to make space for Len and I, who were pushing wheelchairs, one public-drinker remarked: "I was a carer once, now you're a carer, we're all – you're doing good work!"

At the same time, this same sense of collective comfort fed into a more expansive sense of sociality. Joining in on over a dozen walks, I would observe how participants often became bubbly and engaged other bench users in conversation, or would draw others at a café into their group. Spaces which might have been thought of either as closed, challenging or for personal use only were thus transformed into spaces of friendship, conviviality and connection – a transformation which benefited KAT members and their neighbourhoods alike.

KAT's work provides a classic illustration of the importance of public space. Theories of "the right to the city" (Harvey 2012; Mitchell 2001, following Lefebvre 1991) are especially illustrative here, as they emphasize that for different citizens to inhabit the city, they must be able not only to access public space, but to transform it. Such theorists recognize that people are always shaped by and live only in relation to their environment, and that in order to live within the city, they require some ability to transform this environment. At the same time cities bring together diverse populations, which make varied claims on public spaces. This makes it impossible to entirely bring one's environment in line with one's desires, but it does make it possible to temporarily *appropriate* it. As Mitchell (2001: 18) argues, given the "thick heterogeneity" of the city:

[I]n the city, different people with different projects must necessarily struggle with one another over the shape of the city, the terms of access to the public realm, and even the

rights of citizenship. Out of this struggle the city as a work – as an *oeuvre*, as a collective if not singular project – emerges and new modes of living, new modes of inhabiting are invented.

Hence, theorists of the right to the city have argued that as public space is appropriated by different citizens to different ends, they become known to one another, and come to discover new forms of solidarity. Different theories have been put forth as to how such solidarities can form. Susser and Tonnelat (2013: 107), in line with other theorists of commoning (e.g. Corsín Jiménez and Estalella, 2013; Harvey 2012) argue that:

As people experience their everyday urban lives, they begin to collectively recognize and demand a “right to the city” and the streets become the sites of social struggle [...] The city thus brings urbanites a community of experience that not only crosses class lines, but also can, in fact, rework them. This produces a different kind of city belonging based on recognition and interaction and civic responsibility for one’s environment, creating scores of inadvertent political communities organized around shared problems.

Others have placed the emphasis on the sense of shared belonging and hybrid identity that might emerge from such public encounters (Back 1996; Gilroy 2005; Hall 2012; Keith 2005; Wise 2011). Others still express scepticism over a thick sense of solidarity or belonging emerging from daily interactions, and instead suggest that ongoing interaction merely acclimatizes people to difference, rendering it uncontentious. As such forms of conviviality emerge where others may not be closely understood or enfolded within personal senses of belonging, but are nonetheless recognised as subjects in their own right, entitled to live their own lives (Amin 2012; Degen et al 2010; Tonkiss 2003; Watson 2013; Wessendorf 2014). Yet uniting these approaches is the view that shared public interaction engenders *some form* of mutual recognition, whether this is of the other simply as a generic rights-bearing subject, or as implicated in common political projects or forms of belonging.

Whether in the thick solidarities formed by commoning or the thinner mutual recognition of individual rights entailed within the development of conviviality, such theories look to public space as a key site for the development of joint commitments. Across these approaches public space is seen as providing an arena for subjects to come to recognize and value one another, through the sustained attention paid to one another over time. Such sustained presence makes clear the others’ presence as a subject in their own right and allows for this to be recognised and accommodated – in other words, it progressively transforms potentially fixed understandings into more fluid ones.

KAT’s work provides a strong illustration of why the appropriation of public space is important to urban lives, and of the new forms of solidarity it might foster. Faced with the disabilities and vulnerabilities which come with age, certain features in the environment come to matter much more

markedly. The evenness of pavements, availability of benches or consideration of other users of public space become determinate of much more fundamental questions of whether one can dwell in the city – whether one can connect with friends or make new ones, complete daily routines or support others one cares for. Strikingly, here, small details can come to make big differences precisely because they provide a foundation for emergent forms of shared experience or connection, or else because they prevent such processes from taking off. KAT’s work powerfully recognizes the importance of such small details in enabling people to dwell in the city, and focuses on contesting such details when they risk closing off the city and its possibilities.

At the same time, some of the work done by KAT goes beyond supporting people to live their own lives to developing particular forms of common, or community, where people came together around common orientations to shared spaces and resources. Writ small, this is what we see playing out when other bench-users make space available to the elderly. This coming-together is summed up in the grateful letter written by one Bench to Bench participant, explaining her experience. Detailing how, on the walk, she was shown a nearby community centre and pointed towards some other activities which may be of value, she commented: “See what I mean about a sense of community? These people get it. You are happy to know your neighbours. You are not isolated. And as you get older this gathers importance.”

Of course, not all KAT’s interventions in the public realm were welcome. Proposed benches, in particular, sometimes drew opposition from nearby businesses or leaseholders, fearing they would attract public drinking, drugs and unruly youth (those others who also had “nowhere to go”). In these instances KAT never wholly denied these possibilities but tended to insist that over time, living with benches nearby, locals would come to see proof of their value, as well as the opportunity they afforded for forms of valuable connection – such as getting to know the elderly. In other words, they insisted forms of recognition would emerge.

### **Claiming space when you have “nowhere to go”**

KAT may be seen as an exemplary case for why the ability to appropriate public space matters. The physical realities of ageing impose limitations that make the ability to *transform* public space vital to it being accessible at all. At the same time, such transformations open up space to connect with others, and cultivate various forms of mutual recognition. Although it is less obvious, I want to suggest that something similar was at stake for many residents of the Collishaw. Where KAT and its constituents confronted physical disability, Collishaw residents faced a range of everyday experiences of spatial dispossession, threatening their sense of belonging and security. This dispossession was achieved not only by physical force or material neglect, but also by the way

people read the aesthetics of the urban environment. Although pervasive, different residents experienced and responded to this sense of dispossession in different ways. Thus, after detailing some of these shared experiences, I want to suggest that for many youth on the estate, in particular, appropriating public space provided one particular tactic for reclaiming a sense of belonging and security against this everyday dispossession.

The Collishaw Hub sits roughly at the center of the estate. Hosted in former council offices, it both runs a wide range of public events, and encourages locals to bring forward their own ideas for use of the space or to get involved in existing projects. It offers office space, training and lively camaraderie between many of the tenants, and is aimed particularly at younger self-styled artists or entrepreneurs who are just starting out. Yet when poking their heads through the door for the first time several youth recall what they felt to be frosty receptions. As Rachel, a young, Afro-Caribbean mother of two once commented: “They say you can use it but then even you walk in there you get the eyes going round (rolls eyes, sighs and tilts her head back in mock exasperation) and either they don’t really stop to help you or they ask, you know, ‘what are you doing here? What do you want?’” Similarly, Damon reached similar conclusions simply by observing those who *did* frequent the Hub, noting he never felt invited in: “No one has really approached us to tell us what [the Hub] is about [...] I just see people going in and out, mainly people not from the Collishaw. I would say, because I don’t see many people from the community, I would say – It’s for the rich and middle class I would say”

Hardly knowing what the space was for, and largely not identifying with the artwork and materials or busily typing people scattered around the space, these first-time visitors quickly fled – and some came to ignore the space in the future, including the notices of community events and initiatives posted on its outdoor noticeboard. This early experience of disconnection served to transform the Hub from a space of possible opportunity to an exclusionary space of closure.

There were, of course, other means of communicating events. For one, the local social-regeneration charity published the *Connect*: a periodic magazine, delivered to every household on the estate, which included an extensive guide to community events. Yet, much to the exasperation of the charity’s staff, people continued to insist to them that there was never anything on.

The problem, it seemed, was that people often discarded the magazines on sight, based on their appearance – as I came to discover whenever I mentioned the ‘Connect’ to various residents. Covers with carnival dancers smiling beside police officers, or presenting statistics about the area were seen as reflecting a sanitized version of the estate, ostensibly intended for others, who cared about

demographic data or were less ambivalent about the police. There was skepticism that something “so corporate” wasn’t simply an advertisement, or that it held any value for them. One resident scathingly commented: “it looks like those real estate flyers I get through my door [...] saying ‘sell your flat in Maida Vale!’ [...] or Queen’s Park!<sup>14</sup> Who has time for that rubbish?!” This notion, that the magazines might be involved in slowly transforming both the look and the population of the estate to resemble its wealthier neighbors, highlights the sense of dispossession it could evoke.



**Consecutive issues of the Connect. Despite extensive distribution, many residents remained oblivious to its existence.**

The glossy, alien cover of the Connect seemed to several residents to be a part of a broader program of “aestheticization” (Bourdieu 1984; Ley 2003), where mundane objects were transformed into stylized objects for consumption – presumably for wealthier outsiders. Similar scathing comments were directed at one community center which advertised events on a chalkboard signs mounted on the side of a bike. The Hub itself, a shabby aluminum porta-cabin, adorned with stylized graffiti and signage resembling a movie marquee was subject to similar disdain. Indeed, the estate was undergoing a programme of regeneration, where the old tower blocks were being torn down to make way for modern replacements. Given that, in order to fund this, the new buildings were

<sup>14</sup> Wealthier areas to the South and the West of the estate, respectively.

designed to be twice as dense, and to contain 50% private flats for sale on the open market, fears about the area being commoditized and consumed were not unfounded (see Chapter 6).

This spectre of dispossession could haunt and disrupt people's sense of home, in many mundane ways. Sometimes this emerged explicitly, such as in the welcome speech for the estate's 2015 Winter Festival, given by the chair of the local regeneration charity. "Welcome to your homes!" she proudly exclaimed, "it's always a joy to bring this to you!", as if people's homes and senses of community were ultimately hers, to welcome others into. More often, however, this sense that one's home could easily be expropriated was more subtly evoked by the small details of everyday life.

For instance, one resident, whom I met at a tenants and residents' association meeting, and who was about to move from an old, 1970s tower block to a gleaming new flat was complaining bitterly that the council were providing all new social tenants with new white goods. In part, her issue was that this would force her to sell or dispose of the perfectly serviceable appliances she already owned, and in part that the new ones looked to be smaller and less robust replacements. But primarily she was disconcerted by what this implied about the durability of her new tenancy: "It means that if they want to get rid of you, they can just sweep all your clothes into a bin bag, and poof, you're gone. That's it. No fuss!" Likewise residents would point to streaks of mold or mildew running down the wooden panels on the exterior of the new developments as proof that the units had been designed to be trendy and sell, but not to last – and as such that residents could be upended and made to move yet again at any point, when someone saw fit to replace them with an even more lucrative development. Perhaps most marked, however, was the frustration that by moving into new, high-value properties, social tenants were being priced out of exercising their "right to buy". Many had lived in the area for several decades, and had clearly not exercised the right thus far, but closing down the *possibility* of ownership seemed to generate a sense of truncated future possibility and immanent dispossession.

Finally, the history of gang conflict on the estate, discussed in the previous chapter, led to particular responses by the police and local council. Such responses not only disrupted the lives of street youth, but those of their neighbors, family and friends, again compounding a sense of dispossession for this wider group. Lisa Mckenzie (2015) has written about the stigma and measures of control faced by residents of England's council states, who are increasingly seen as both the propagators and victims of national "moral collapse". As worklessness is reframed as a personal, rather than a structural, failing, and as benefits claimants, working class sub-cultures and criminality are all conflated, stricter measures of scrutiny, control and punishment become justified, in a processes



Wacquant (2007a; b) has called “territorial stigmatization”. As Rios (2011) argues, such measures of control are a major factor in generating pervasive everyday insecurity for residents of deprived areas, “delinquents” and “non-delinquents” alike. Faced with such insecurity, such measures can even drive youth into criminal activity, as everyday life is filled with “practices, discourses, and individuals that treated them as failures, risks, or criminals” (154) and failure within mainstream society comes to feel like a foregone conclusion (see also Bourgois 1995). Tellingly, on the Collishaw, such measures had evident consequences for a wide range of residents.

For instance, the police once caused a local uproar by suddenly speeding across the (pedestrianized) central precinct of the estate in a van, in order to get the jump on a young man who they were hoping to stop and search. In the process, they nearly ran over a small girl, provoking a furious confrontation with her mother and her friends, alongside the friends of the young man who was stopped (but let go). For young men, and sometimes women, being stopped and searched were a daily sight on the estate, and such incidents would draw in friends, relatives and bystanders as well. The disruption, danger and stigma of such encounters served to disrupt any sense of ease or belonging in public space; I would often see even older women or young children cross the street, or leave a particular park or courtyard to get away from the police presence.

In private space, the effects of policing left even more traumatic marks. One of the tactics ultimately adopted to deal with the escalating gang conflict was to conduct simultaneous raids on all the tower blocks, and to execute a sweeping series of arrests. This happened once in 2007 and again in 2011. Casting a wide net, these raids battered down once-locked doors, and wrenched a range of people out of bed and away from their families. For some families this was the first they had learnt of the nature or extent of their relatives’ criminal behavior, and purportedly little support was offered to cope with the sudden upset in household relations. Frustration surrounding the disruption caused by the raids reached even more widely, and even for those whose families did not experience an arrest, the raids were sometimes referred to as part of a concerted push to drive out “people like us”, as Lisa once put it.

This wide range of encounters with dispossession made it an everyday reality for most residents of the estate. Yet particular encounters were often more prevalent amongst particular groups. In the previous chapter, I argued that for youth, the everyday reproduction of precarity could create a sense of a closed off future from an early age. Both subject to the general forms of dispossession detailed here, and the more particular experiences detailed in the previous chapter, youth could indeed end up feeling that they had nowhere to go. For such youth, one strategy of response was to appropriate those public spaces which were available – not least because doing so provided a

renewed sense of agency and community. This was a tactic taken not only by those who may have dabbled in criminal activities, but by a much broader and more disparate young population who, often but not always, shared a common street aesthetic.

In many ways, youth being out in public was less of a conscious act and more a default. With the specter of dispossession always looming, any strong distinction between nominally private, secure, space and public, open, space was eroded. People simply claimed whatever they could. Youth may not be able to go to a gym, or be permitted to rent out community halls for events. However, they could work out on playground equipment, play football in parks, and gather in parking lots in large numbers. As these spaces become the spaces for day to day sociality, movements become patterned around them. When I would chat with youth playing football in a cramped playground, or drinking on a climbing frame, if I ever asked why that particular location, I frequently received the same challenge: “where else would we go?”

In other instances, however these practices of appropriation were clearly more reflexive political acts, aimed at reasserting ownership and belonging against the police and the forces of investors, which seemed to conspire to drive out poorer locals. Damon and Troy make this clear when talking about a new building on the Estate, replacing a demolished tower block, dubbed “Queen’s Park Place”, after the adjoining, much wealthier neighborhood:

*Damon (angry): Queen's Park Place, this isn't Queen's Park! They're taking the piss – putting in a bloody Marks and Spencer! (He turns towards the rest of the group) we got to keep this place rough – otherwise anything these man are doing for us will go away. You think they're helping us because they see these boys and they want to help us? Naw man. They're helping us because it's regentrification. They want to clean up the area! Get rid of man like us! [...]  
When this whole place looks like Queen's Park, you think anyone is going to do anything for people like us? No, we'll be gone – because then they want to move other people in!*

*Troy (cutting in, more laconically, pretending to lecture the group): Throw your rubbish on the streets – then when it is a community for everyone then – then we clean it up!*

Like the case of KAT, these stories of everyday dispossession underscore the importance of appropriating public space to living a good life in the city. For KAT’s constituency, everyday realities of disability could lead to isolation and exclusion, unless transformative claims were made on public space. Similarly, here, spatial dispossession can lead to a sense of the foreclosure of the future, as well as of the possibilities of connecting with others. Community centres, public streets and private homes all offer the potential for fostering various sorts of relationships. Yet such spaces were inscribed with a range of signs that also evoked a threat of dispossession which might curtail or sever

such relationships. Friends might lack the space to meet and cultivate such friendships, just as children might come to feel unsafe on the streets and have nowhere to play, or families might fear that the security of the home could be breached at any moment by law enforcement. Tellingly, this potential for dispossession often served to leave people feeling alienated from certain spaces, meaning that whatever potential for connection such spaces might have offered often went unexplored.

Against such immanent dispossession, Collishaw youth fought back by more forcibly articulating claims to particular public spaces. Yet, as I will discuss in the next section, this created a problem: dispossession is something experienced by *a diverse range* of Collishaw residents. However, while for some youth, the appropriation of public space helped combat this dispossession, for other residents such acts of appropriation merely compounded their own exclusion. Moreover, unlike the potential conflicts between KAT and other bench and street users, this conflict was rarely negotiated over time, as many other residents viewed public space claimed by youth as *unavailable* to alternate claims, and thus avoided it altogether. In other words mutual understanding was prevented from emerging because people did not engage in the first place. This poses a challenge to theories which see forms of common, community or conviviality emerging out of the sharing of public spaces.

## **Clashing uses, affects of closure and the limits of the right to the city**

My first several nights in the Collishaw, I slept uneasily, as the silence was repeatedly broken by the sounds of sirens speeding down a nearby road. The concrete towers boasted excellent soundproofing internally, but noise flowed easily between inside and out. In addition to sirens, several nights a week I would also hear angry and boisterous shouting coming from the playground by the entrance to Brunel House, often accompanied by the sounds of even angrier sounding grime<sup>15</sup> and hip-hop. Peering out the window, it was often possible to make out a number of hooded figures, half blended into the darkness below.

Then once or twice a week there would be “gunshots” – loud bangs that rang clear in the night air. I would later learn that I was mistaken about these noises, which were not gunshots, but local kids playing with powerful firecrackers at night. Later still, I realized that if my first instinct was too morbid, that my revised understanding had swung around to being too sunny – as on occasion I would be given news of a shooting that had occurred the previous night, unreported in the news

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<sup>15</sup> A form of rap particular to the UK, with lyrics often providing gritty descriptions of urban life set over aggressive garage-style electronic tracks.

("they only write about it if someone dies!") but traveling fast through local circuits of gossip. Regardless of their source, however, these noises served to paint the night-time spaces from which they came as spaces of conflict and violence.

Many residents pointed to these nighttime noises, and other disturbing affects as the basis for their assumptions about local crime and violence as well as about the general decline of community. These affective traces, manifest in public, seeped into private lives in a way which destabilized everyday senses of security, home and connection. Take the following cases:

Mustafa recalls his wife being mugged and beaten in a park near to his council flat, bringing back groceries. The experience, he said, left him at a loss as to how to be a good parent and husband. He wants his kids to enjoy the area, and have similar childhoods to their classmates, but he's also afraid to let them travel through the estate or hang out in parks alone. He likewise wants to care for his wife – who struggles with English and is already shy by nature. But he doesn't know if he'd be doing more right by her by protecting her indoors, or encouraging her to go out, get to know others, develop her language skills and so on. An Algerian immigrant escaping civil conflict, he has a genuine sense of delight at living in the UK, but he feels frustrated he can't share this with his wife, who is, he says, much more nostalgic for Algeria.

Many people in Brunel House would avoid taking the stairs up to the first story entrance, instead preferring the much-lengthier ramp. The stairs involved two blind corners and a partially-enclosed section, in contrast to the ramp which remained open to the air and offered long views of others heading your way. Many explicitly equated the darker, more-confined space of the stairs with the possibility of unexpected encounters and violence. And as the stairs became avoided, they became claimed for other uses. One would not only frequently find empty bottles or drug paraphernalia there, but everything from urine and excrement, to strewn trash, to animal carcasses. Similar substances were found, though less frequently, in the communal lifts and stairwells inside the building. And on occasion you would hear reports of someone found shooting up or having sex in these spaces. Such instances of physical and human "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966) were associated closely with the presence and influence of the local gang.

Dan, a Brunel resident in his late 20s whom I used to occasionally chat with in the halls and on the streets, once commented, the effect of all of this was not only to create a sense of risk in public space, but to create a sense of restriction on everyday movements. "It felt oppressive!" he exclaimed. It created a "conspiratorial sense that the whole place was against you". Dan cited this as one of the reasons he was reluctant to spend too much time in public spaces, preferring to be in his

flat or “out” with friends. Likewise, Lucien talked about how he no longer cut through the estate to reach the High Road, after once seeing a car abandoned on the pavement that looked like it had had its windows shot out, and experiencing a sense of “terror” at what might have transpired. But even on the High Road, he was often on edge, and adapted his daily movements accordingly:

Sometimes I go out on the High Road and there will be particular individuals who can be a bit [...] they can harass people sometimes. And times like that I think, do I really need to be on the High Road, getting my groceries? Is it really worth it? But then I go only to a few stores – I go to the post office, Sainsburys and Tesco's, Poundland and Computer Exchange – and that's really it – and fortunately you don't really get those sorts of people in those sorts of places.

For Lucien and Dan, signs of neglect, conflict and violence re-shape their everyday geographies. These signs evoke a nebulous sense of threat and oppression, and in response they confine their movements to more familiar and safe-feeling spaces.

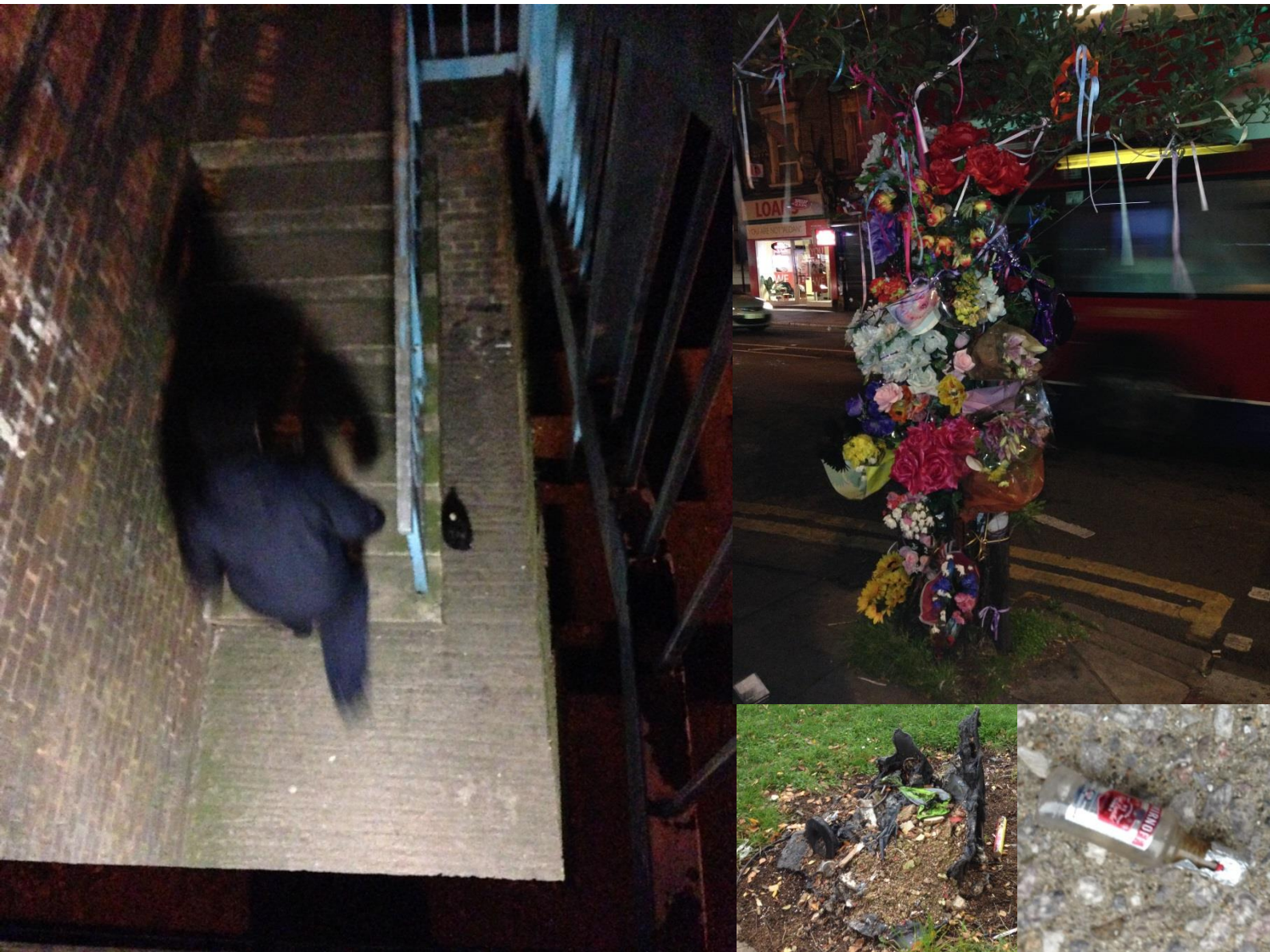
Likewise, Arlene spoke with gratitude about moving from her old flat. A first-generation Afro-Caribbean migrant, she had lived in the area nearly her whole life, since she moved as a child. Now in her 70s, she had spent many years helping out with various local youth programs, and was highly critical of the way police and the popular media treated the area's youth. Yet she also harboured difficult memories of living alongside such youth. She once described to me how daily life in her old tower block was often interrupted by the sounds of arguments and conflict on one hand, and by police sirens and the sounds of doors being kicked down on the other. She commented:

[Y]ou know what it's like seeing the dead bodies outside, right outside your window? I've seen, police come once, and this boy, he running [down the outdoor corridor] – he jump. And his body just lying there in the park, outside my window[...] It change things for you, living here. I go to cook, I look up out my kitchen window, and I see bodies falling, bodies falling [...] it is too much!

A new flat, then means a break with the affective landscape of the old, the violence of which would periodically puncture the comfort and safety of her home.

What is striking in these accounts is the way they echo the sense of spatial dispossession articulated in the previous section. Only, in this instance, this dispossession is produced – or seen to be produced – by seemingly unruly youth, and the ways they themselves responded to their *own* sense of dispossession. This could create frustrating double binds. For instance, if many youth avoided the Hub because it looked too middle class, I similarly heard from older residents or visitors to the area that they would avoid the Hub because of the “threatening” or “dodgy” feeling they would get from

the nearby precinct, where you could often find young men and women hanging about. Problematically, both sets of accounts involve little to no interaction with those who might be thought of as producing these particular senses of dispossession. In the absence of direct interaction, dispossession becomes something sensed in one's surroundings – a spectral possibility, whose reality is only ever inferred. People assume the dispossessing agency of middle-class newcomers or of unruly youth largely not through direct interaction with these groups, but by reading what they see as traces of their presence. In this sense, we might want to think of dispossession as manifest through “affects of ruination” – traces left by absent others, which both evoke the complex lives of those others as well as an inability to initiate or continue reciprocal social relations with them (Navaro-Yashin 2007). However this leaves us at an impasse. If no one is doing much interacting, how might competing claims on public space be worked out?



**'Affects of Ruination' (clockwise, from left):**

- 1) Discarded bottles in the Brunel House entrance stairwell
- 2) A memorial for Sabrina Moss, who was shot on the High Road in 2013 by a rival gang attempting to target her companions. The memorial is, still, frequently overloaded with fresh flowers and tributes, re-evoking a sense of rawness and local anger.
- 3) A vodka bottle in the Brunel House stairwell, adapted for freebasing drugs (likely crack).
- 4) A public trash can exploded and melted by fireworks.

## **Aesthetics and everyday interpretations.**

The theories of the right to the city, commoning, and conviviality surveyed above all place significant emphasis on interactions in public space as a means for diverse populations to develop forms of mutual recognition. Yet when little interaction takes place between parties who believe themselves to be opposed, such theories hit an impasse. When competing claims to public space come to feel mutually exclusive, and when those staking such claims do not interact, there seems to be no way of resolving such contradictory demands, nor any platform for interaction by which forms of recognition which might break the impasse might be cultivated.

Few such theorists assert that common resources simply produce recognition, and most would share Bertho's (2013: 128) claim that "the urban territory does not spontaneously produce a subjective commons." Ash Amin (2012), is particularly sceptical that everyday encounters with difference might cultivate new solidarities, claiming that that "a lot more than the proximate or the human is at work in shaping the feelings of strangers in public space" (ibid: 66). In particular he points to the workings of what he calls the urban unconscious - the conjunction of a city's material environments, infrastructure, available technologies and prevalent symbolic forms – which work to unconsciously shape the judgement of strangers, in advance of encounters with them. He thus argues that only particular spaces, where the experience of unfamiliarity and multiplicity is structured to be one of thrill or possibility, rather than one of stress or conflict, are people capable of cultivating convivial attitudes.

Yet even Amin's approach becomes entangled with questions of difference and recognition. On one hand, he suggests that the workings of the urban unconscious may be countered by making:

the urban infrastructure an object of political scrutiny [...] This requires a campaign to expose, ridicule and neutralize the uses of technology as a weapon of discrimination, to enforce public audit of the city, to experiment with preventative and precautionary forms of order, and to bring the machinery or urban order under democratic control. (ibid: 77).

As such, although he is sceptical of recognition emerging in everyday encounters, he ultimately suggests that the infrastructure that shapes such encounters might come to be contested and transformed because the scrutiny and criticism citizens apply to it will ultimately garner recognition in the public realm. Here Amin ends up closely echoing theorists of commoning (Harvey 2012; Susser and Tonnelat 2013) by suggesting the staging of novel claims on common resources – here the urban infrastructure, or "unconscious" – has the potential to create new forms of recognition and solidarity.



On the other hand, Amin's exposition of the urban-unconscious is not exhaustive, leaving open the possibility that judgements about others are *also* structured in other ways, such as the particular nature of certain claims to public resources. The ethnography here suggests that on top of whatever preconceived ideas people hold, which may shape their judgment of others, not all claims on the commons are equally open and suggestive of the possibility for plural uses. For instance, it is clearly important for youth to be able to assert a sense of ownership and control, as a counterweight to their sense that they have "nowhere to go". Yet the forcibleness of this claim – it's apparent intransigence and scope – clearly also contributes to the fact that other residents read the presence of youth as alienating, alongside any prefiguring of judgment by the "urban unconscious".

Here, theories of the right to the city and of commoning run into trouble. They remain caught between the fact that some form of recognition, on some level, is needed for citizens to be able to mediate the sometimes-competing claims they make on public space, and the fact that diverse claims on public space often appear incommensurable. The problem seems to be that the reading of incommensurability, and thus of exclusion, in uses of public space and the development of forms of recognition entail different dynamics: exclusion upon reading the ostensibly *fixed* signs of the urban environment in terms of readily-available meanings; recognition upon *fluid* processes of mutual attunement that take place in ongoing interaction. In a great many urban encounters, the former processes are likely to precede the latter. The claims made by youth to public spaces, the middle-class aesthetics of new developments, or the public presence of police are not read as inviting negotiation, or even co-presence, but instead evoke a sense of exclusivity, conflict and alienation.

In other words, understandings of others are not formed through interpersonal contact but are *mediated* through signs such as broken bottles and magazine design. From a perspective that emphasizes that people's understandings and competencies are shaped through interaction with both their physical *and* material environment, these particular aspects of the material environment might seem trivial. For instance, reflecting the way in which many theorists talk about the development of mutual recognition in public encounters, Ingold (2000; 2013) emphasizes that understanding emerges through *attentive and sustained engagement* with particular materials. Clearly there's little attentive, sustained or engaged about glancing at some rubbish or ignoring a magazine that comes through your door. Precisely because such signs are seen as indicating a fixed order, they do not invite much reflection, but rather prompt quick, intuitive judgements, according to readily available registers of meaning.

To capture the political stakes of seemingly superficial aesthetics it helps to turn to Alfred Gell (1998), who famously argued that when struck affectively by art (and within this we might include

any object seen as carrying meaning), we tend to infer some form of human agency behind the affect. Gell, saw this inferred agency as the agency of the maker of the artefact – and by extension the body of knowledge and practices brought to bear on the making. Although Gell sees particular forms of agency as evoked by objects, he does not suggest this occurs in a directly causal fashion. Objects are evocative, Gell argues, because they possess indexical properties – that is, they possess particular sensory features that imply or point to a referent (in this case an agent). Yet as Keane (2005) notes, judging the meaning of such indexical properties is always a matter for interpretation. A broken bottle doesn't directly point to the agency of rowdy youth, but rather evokes a range of possible agents and events that might lie behind it. Indeed it is the fact that material signs point to a *partly-unknown* social agency that gives them the ability to be striking and evocative, rather than dryly involved in the straightforward transfer of information.

This leads to two conclusions: Firstly that affectively-striking signs create *non-specific* evocations of agency. The specific actors implied to be the agents, or else the specific abilities and knowledge of these actors, are matters for interpretation, but the evocation of agency is a basic affect. If the source or nature of this agency is vague, people may nonetheless come to form more-or-less specific hypotheses through evocations which seem to bear relation to each other. This we might think of as artefacts coming together within particular aesthetic orders. However, secondly, even as such judgments of agency are largely quick and intuitive, relying on familiar registers of meaning, there is always a degree of ambiguity within them, which leaves space for alternative interpretations. This opens up the possibility for the signs which colour public space to be subject to readings and counter-readings. The actual “affordances” of signs are constantly being worked out in interpretation and then further probed in communication (Keane 2005;2015; see Chapter 2-3).

Turning back to the cases here, then, we might imagine that people feel a sense of dispossession when encountering things like discarded bottles or corporate-looking magazines, because they see in these objects a disconnect from their own sense of agency on one hand, and on the other the presence of an other who has clearly put the object to some use. This signals the other's divergent ends – perhaps even their incommensurable values – and with it the possibility for fundamental conflict and alienation, as different universes of value and meaning collide (Graber 2013).

The operative word, however, is *possibility*. If the coherence of particular affects create aesthetic orders that point to particular forms of agency, there is always also the possibility for alternative interpretations to emerge. Faced with cases, then, where people read closure as a strong possibility and thereby avoid each other, might alternative outcomes emerge from acts of interpretation which read against the grain?

This is the sort of question that requires a careful look. To explore it, I want to look at the micro-dynamics of two encounters in public space: a Collishaw football game, and a KAT member walking her dog during Eid prayers in a Kilburn park:

Brunel House boasts a large, raised, “podium” – a public court several times larger than the footprint of the tower block itself, and raised a storey above ground to be level with the front entrance. The stairs and ramp up to the door both end up in between a narrow bridge leading to the front door, on the right, and the podium, on the left (Figure 8 and photograph below).

This architecture makes it easy to ignore the podium, though not all do. Several years ago a group of local residents lobbied and raised money to purchase some benches and play equipment to populate the then-sparse podium. Part of the logic behind this move was to explicitly invite use by parents, grandparents and younger kids in a way that would serve to crowd out what was seen as the disruptive behaviour of youth who would monopolise the space in a threatening way. In many ways this invitation worked – from around 3:15 until 4:30 each day, the podium would swarm with parents and kids coming home from school. Kids would dart up to the podium and race onto play equipment, leaving parents free to occupy the benches and chat. Yet by the time the sun had set, these uses faded. In the evening, the only use I ever encountered was that of older youth. Even so, in the fading light, there were always still others passing through and hurrying home.

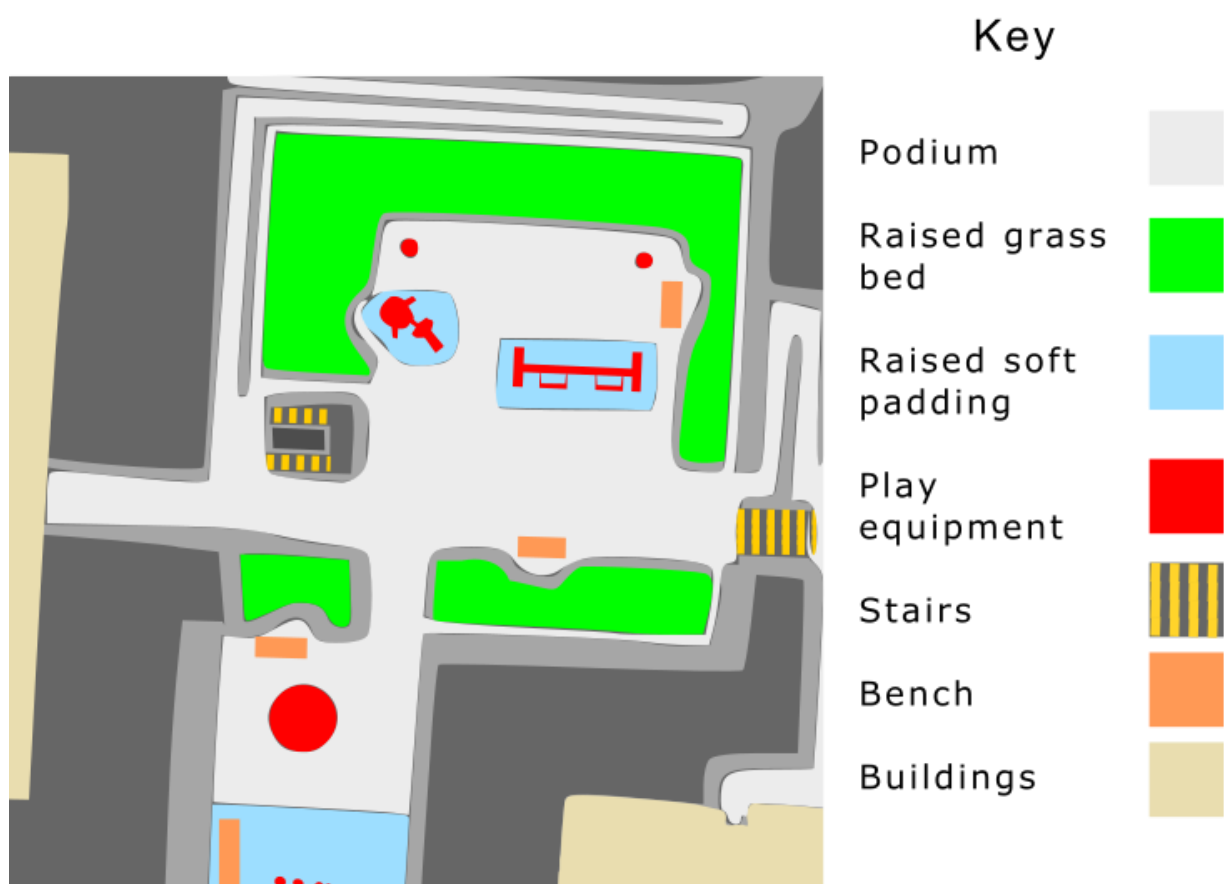
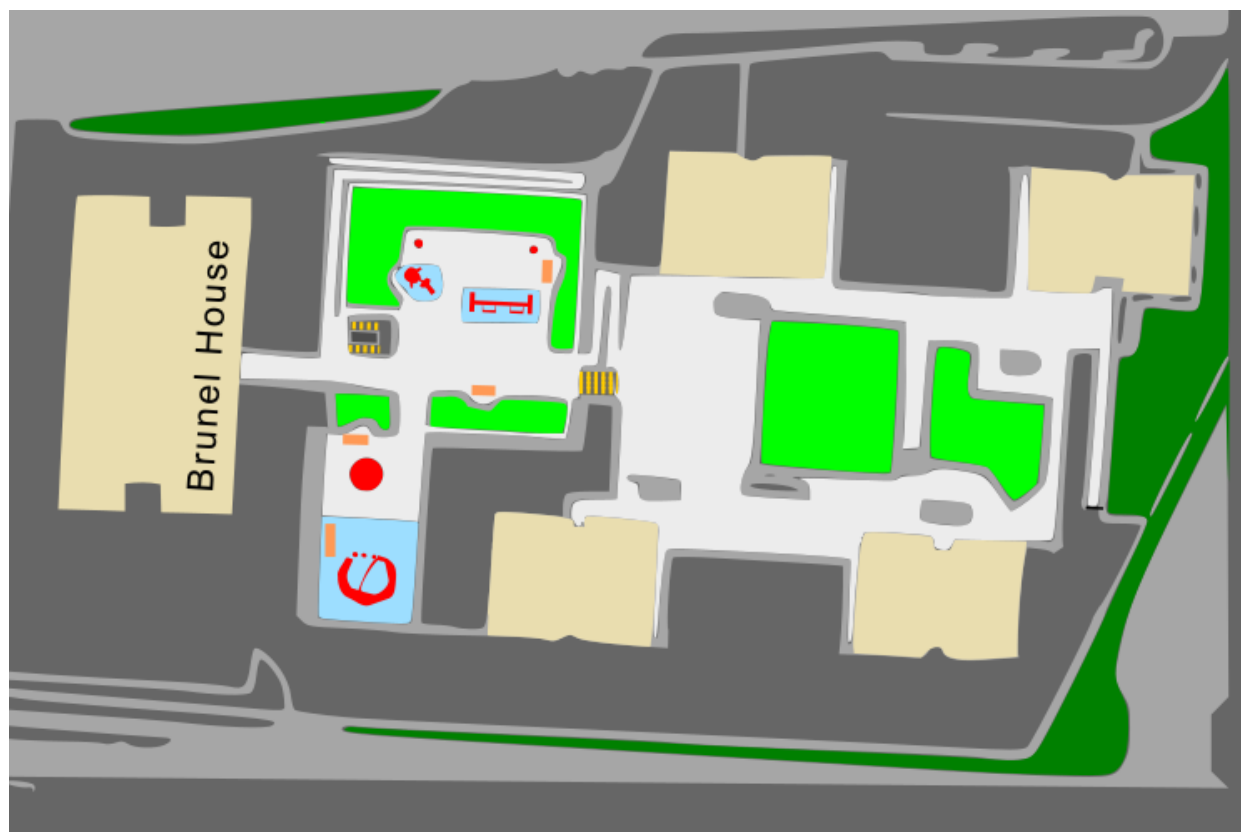


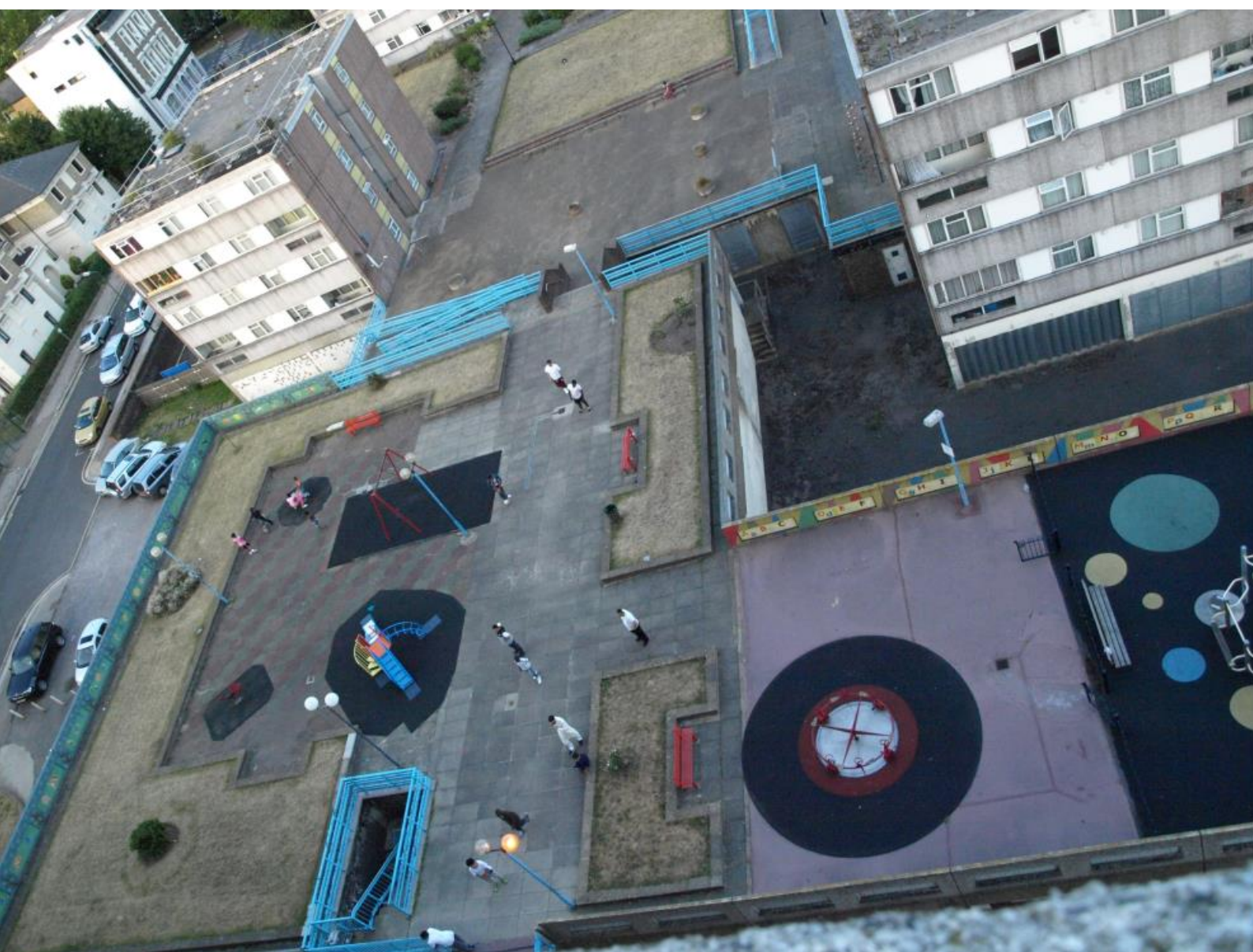
Figure 8: Map of the Brunel House 'Podium'

One such summer's evening, with the sun dissolving yellow-blue into the London smog, I was returning to Brunel House, when I heard shouting and cursing. By then I had learnt the protocol for these situations: Walk up the stairs or ramp, don't look around searchingly, and just head for the door. If you're not disruptive, you're unlikely to be disrupted. Then, two steps away from the door, I was suddenly annoyed with myself and turned around abruptly, to find the noise coming from a group of about a dozen young men, playing football. On a break in play, I walked up and asked if I can join. On a bench someone had a speaker blaring hip hop, and I cast my jacket and bag beside it, and join the group – who seem to range between their mid-teens and mid-twenties.

Having joined the game and unbalanced the teams, the players started negotiating whether certain players should be relegated to certain positions to make things more fair: "You fucking sneaky Somali cunt!" one of the players erupted "You just hang out by the net and try to score points! You're useless!" His friend simply grinned back – "It's not illegal!" "Fucking illegal – I bet you don't even have your papers, you sneaky Somali!" I must have looked taken aback, because the player swearing finally turned to me and broke his furious deadpan with a laugh and added ironically: "You know, some of these guys they're just here for free money, or a free house. What can you do?"

The game was peppered with such self-ironizing mock conflict. One player repeatedly attempted to half-jokingly, half-mockingly sell me weed, turning his offer into a joke whenever I declined. Others insulted the ball handling skills of the same friends they passed to. Players were shoved, only to round on their assailants and find them feigning a stumble and grinning wickedly. Most goals were followed by ostensibly heated arguments over the validity of the kick, yet such arguments were rapidly abandoned the moment some player decided to abruptly, opportunistically resume play. Such ironizing didn't disavow or subvert the original meaning, but rendered it ambivalent – opening up spaces for other readings (Lambek 2015; 2010; 2003; Lear 2003). One could choose to read a lack of aggression or pushiness, even as its signs were still being manifest.

These mock conflicts seemed to resonate across the open space and fill the air, but their resolutions, the little winking gestures or tacit acknowledgements of irony were much more subtle and remained within the group. This produced a significant difference between the affective sense of the game for outsiders – where things may have sounded conflictual and unbridled – and that for those involved.



The Brunel House podium from above

The way the group played, the space was very much theirs to cede. The bridge which led to the main door served as one goal, and the stairs which connected the two halves of the podium provided the other. This meant that anyone who wanted to enter or exit the building, or who wished to cross to or from the far side of the podium, was at the mercy of the group, and risked having a ball launched towards them (see map). Yet as others rushed by us, I noticed that such incidents never transpired. Play was always stopped or, more often, de-escalated as people were sighted by the door or by the stairs. At the same time, it was precisely in these moments where the mock-conflict sometimes escalated, to fill the lull, potentially giving passer-by a heightened rather than lessened sense of danger. In such moments the group seemed to cede the space in part, whilst simultaneously redoubling the impact of their physical presence and the claims such presence made.

In one such instance, an elderly man with a cane, slowly shuffled towards us from the far end of the podium, prompting the game to recede into a contest of ball handling – passes became short and precise, and people tried to retain or claim possession, rather than aiming for the goals. As he passed by, the old man grinned at us, and some grinned back, whilst maintaining a bubble for him to walk through. People didn't stop playing – they didn't cede the space – but they seemed to recognise his willingness to trust them, and they in turn played in a way which accommodated his movements.

All this seemed to voice a subtle recognition that the podium ought to be available for shared use – that it had been claimed because it was what space was available (rather than what might have been ideal) – but that others likewise needed to make claims of necessity themselves. This is reminiscent of the way other theorists of public space have talked about the cultivation of habits of mutual recognition and accommodation amongst those from diverse backgrounds. For instance in Suzanne Hall's ethnography of a South-London café (2009; 2012), she traces how frequent customers slowly become adapted to the movements of others – the tables they prefer, the times of day they arrive, their ways of signalling ease or dis-ease and so on – and alter their habits accordingly – creating everyday practices of acknowledgment and accommodation. Hall sees such practices as forging new, more encompassing notions of home and belonging.

Yet if the football game was reminiscent of this, it was also importantly different: it was less about the development of durable habits of recognition, and more about small, *improvised* moments of accommodation *within* existing habits. As such the mutual recognition in the story is delicate and subtle, subject to misinterpretation or a reversion to mistrust, rather than a clear indication of emerging cohesion. Here, players took a playful attitude towards meanings, rendering them *temporarily* fluid. Intentions were signalled and then quickly ironized or made ambivalent, allowing

novel interpretations as well as ways of accommodating others to emerge. Importantly, however, if others were accommodated, this was nonetheless accomplished alongside other behaviours such as verbal and physical jostling, which some residents would read as making a stark claim on the space.

This suggests that while new possibilities for mutual accommodation might emerge out of the suspension of straightforward meanings, such possibilities are likely to be fragile. They require new claimants on public spaces – like the old man – to read against the grain of dominant local and national registers of meaning, which tend to be dominant often because they are more prevalent, and therefore are often treated as more credible. Another example helps illustrate this:

Nancy is one of the most active members of KAT, having volunteered with them for nearly 10 years, ever since she became a pensioner herself. Although she calls herself “British” (and is herself white) she passionately believes that the term can – and ought – to apply to anyone who has settled in the country. In addition to her work with KAT, she is also involved with the local community centre, and the local “friends of the park” group. This latter group faced a tricky dilemma. Every year, confronted with a lack of space in mosques, a group of Shia Muslim leaders organised Eid prayers and celebrations in the park. Every year, then, the friends of the park group debated whether or not they ought to give their support to the event, and many were always bitterly opposed. As I witnessed in one such meeting, many saw the event not only as loud and disruptive, but as privatizing the park. As one local woman exclaimed: “Surely they must have somewhere else to go – it’s not their park!”

With security guards in high-viz at the park’s entrances, and distrustful looks from congregants, the fundamental complaint was that others were being made to feel unwelcome, despite it being a public space (or even “our park” as another resident exclaimed in the debate). Rumours that people with dogs and perhaps even non-Muslim women had, in previous years, been forbidden from entering the park circulated widely. Dogs were a particular point of conflict. For some Muslims contact with dogs is believed to break *wuḍū’* – a state of ritual cleanliness – and they are stringently avoided around prayer times. For their part, many in the friends of the park group recalled frosty or openly hostile reactions from Muslims when walking their dogs. Such complaints clearly seemed to draw on popular discourses where Muslims are cast not only as a detached community, but also as threatening access to public resources for other citizens.





A family arrives at the Eid celebration, heading to join the crowd in the distance

Frustrated with the pessimistic tone of this ongoing debate, in 2013 Nancy decided to conduct an experiment. A pensioner herself, she describes her experiences with KAT as giving her faith that you could always find common ground with others given time and tenacity. Meanwhile her colleagues, she argued, were simply *assuming* that they would be unwelcome – on the basis of rumour, stereotype and over-generalization – and on this basis not bothering to engage themselves. She admitted that she didn't know whether she would be welcome, but armed with the belief that she shouldn't pre-judge, she harnessed her small, beloved, Bichon Frise on a tight leash and, on the morning of Eid, set off into the park. Later, she recounted her experience story to the friends of the park group:

Now hold on. I went over last year – I was making a deliberate point of it. I even brought the dog – and I was saying, we don't avoid we embrace! And I walked nearby and made it very clear I wasn't going to come into the gathering, I was just walking, and I had the dog on a leash, and no one gave me any trouble. And I talked with a few of the women, and told them how pretty their costumes were, and they thanked me, and a few of the people even told me what a lovely dog she was. I didn't have any trouble.

Yet if Nancy is able to suspend the presumptions of her peers, as well as her own scepticism, and engage in an act of trust, this moment of trust was nonetheless limited. At the meeting, she shares her story to argue that the park retained the potential to be shared – that the celebrations may have had a marked presence, but that they weren't a wholly privatising act. Yet few were convinced. They continued to judge things from the signs available to them from afar: the echoing sounds of prayers over the loud speakers, the imposing sight of men in high-viz vests, the simple crowding of space. Or else they superimposed personal, anecdotal or even perhaps apocryphal stories of encounters with Muslims onto the situation, overriding the particularity of the situation with generalized stereotypes. In the symbolic tug of war over public space, Nancy faced a distinct disadvantage, arguing from personal experience against narratives that are inscribed in broader local and national discourses (on this asymmetry c.f. Amin 2012; Gilroy 2004). Her attempts to convince others were frustrated by the fact that her own nuancing of her views was grounded in personal experience which opened up and challenged pre-established ideas – yet these very pre-established ideas mean few of her peers were willing to seek out such experiences in the first place.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored both the importance of public space in Kilburn, as well as some of the challenges which might emerge when diverse users make claims on such shared spaces. Using the

example of KAT, I argued that the ability to appropriate and transform public space can often be vital to living a good life in the city. KAT illustrate the importance of small details of the everyday environment, such as the design of street crossings or availability of benches, in enabling or limiting the ways in which people can appropriate such environments and thereby dwell within the city. Moreover, they highlight how these little features of the environment might be involved in mediating particular forms of fluidity amongst residents, providing space for shared understanding to emerge.

Yet the significance of small details is both a blessing and a curse. It can mean that something as simple as sharing a bench with a stranger, or having flatter pavements to walk on, can open up new possibilities and connections. Simultaneously, equally small details, such as the presence of broken bottles or the design of a local magazine might signal conflict and dispossession, and serve to close down possibilities for dwelling and connecting with others. In fact, residents of Kilburn more often read the possibility for conflict and dispossession over that for connection within public space. This is because the two readings rely on different processes: conflict and dispossession is often read when the urban environment is taken as representing a fixed order of meanings, and where such meanings tend to index the agency of unknown or unfamiliar others. Connection, meanwhile, emerges most credibly out of the situated processes of fluidity, which require sustained co-presence and closer attention to others.

This problem is made worse by the fact that without such close up, ongoing engagement, uses of public space are often read as mutually exclusive. Thus what might be read as an articulation of the right to the city, or at least to public space, for some, often does not lead to recognition of such claims, but to a feeling of alienation and dispossession amongst others. Here, I have illustrated this dilemma in terms of the contest between youth who assert a forceful presence in public space because they feel they have nowhere else to go, and other residents who feel intimidated by this presence or who are affected by the forms of conflict that such presence sometimes attracts. In such instances groups often remain at odds because they avoid the sorts of encounters which might hold potential for forging mutual understanding.

The final section looked at moments where such dilemmas were overcome. In such cases, those occupying public space made small gestures to partially open up these spaces to alternative uses. Meanwhile, those wishing to share such spaces had to take a leap of faith that they would be recognised and accommodated. Simmel (2011: 191) describes such leaps of trust as characteristic of developing relations between strangers, and as requiring “both less than and more than knowledge”. In public space, such trust involves reading *against the grain* of the predominant

meanings given to the presence of strangers, and acting with faith that mutual recognition will emerge. As such, the interpersonal understandings established within dynamics of fluidity are often difficult to make visible to those who will not take a Simmelian leap of faith themselves. Meanwhile, preconceived ideas of the nature of strangers – what Amin (2013) identified as the “urban unconscious” – nonetheless tend to make many wary of making such a leap. This catch-22 provides an important qualifier to optimism of the range of theories which centre on the emergence of forms of mutual recognition in urban space. It also ought to direct our attention to the ways in which local processes of community formation are bound up with broader processes of contestation over the meaning of symbols. In this vein the final chapter will look at various regeneration projects in Kilburn, contrasting those led by community members and those driven by state or market forces. Here, I will argue that these approaches represent two different modes of value generation, one where value is produced iteratively, through continually reworking the meaning given to forms of community, and another where value is fixed, without being linked to concomitant forms of fluidity that allow for renegotiation.



New and old buildings besides one another on the Collishaw

## 6. Fixing Kilburn: Contesting value in urban regeneration

*“Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories.”*

— Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000: 299)

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This chapter picks up on the previous one in looking at how forms of community become contested. Particularly in the first four chapters of this thesis, I argued that forms of community emerge in the balance between two properties – *fixity* and *fluidity*. I have related both of these to how projects of community, and the goals they pursue, are signified. *Fixity*, I argued, involves familiarity and clarity. In other words, it requires acts of signification themselves presented as clearly legible and unequivocal. *Fluidity*, meanwhile, is created by the suspension of such straightforward signification and interpretations, in order to allow for new understandings to be negotiated. In other words it requires acts of signification to be presented and read as contingent and capable of transformation. Thus far, I have made this argument largely in terms of interpersonal relations, suggesting that the combination of these properties allows forms of community to gather people together. In this final



chapter, I shift to the political economy of fixity and fluidity. That is, I describe how these two properties are given value both at an official and everyday level, and how these values are circulated.

In the previous chapter, I looked at contestations around public space. I showed that particular public resources could be appropriated into projects of community-making, whereby existing relations were opened up to allow connections with unknown others. Nonetheless, such resources were also frequently subject to visible claims which appeared to inscribe them with fixed meaning and thus to seemingly deny the potential for such opening up. While most of the thesis has focused on the productive relation between fixity and fluidity in constituting community, then, the previous chapter highlighted how unfamiliar forms of fixity might actually work to deny space for fluidity.

This chapter develops this suggestion further, suggesting a contrast between two modes of value: On one hand, value within community spaces is often open-ended, where the goods of community emerge through exploration and are continually remade. Chapters 3-4 focused on unpacking precisely this notion of unfolding good. On the other hand, many state and market driven actors are interested in commensurable forms of value, which retain their fixed aspect and therefore deny such unfolding.

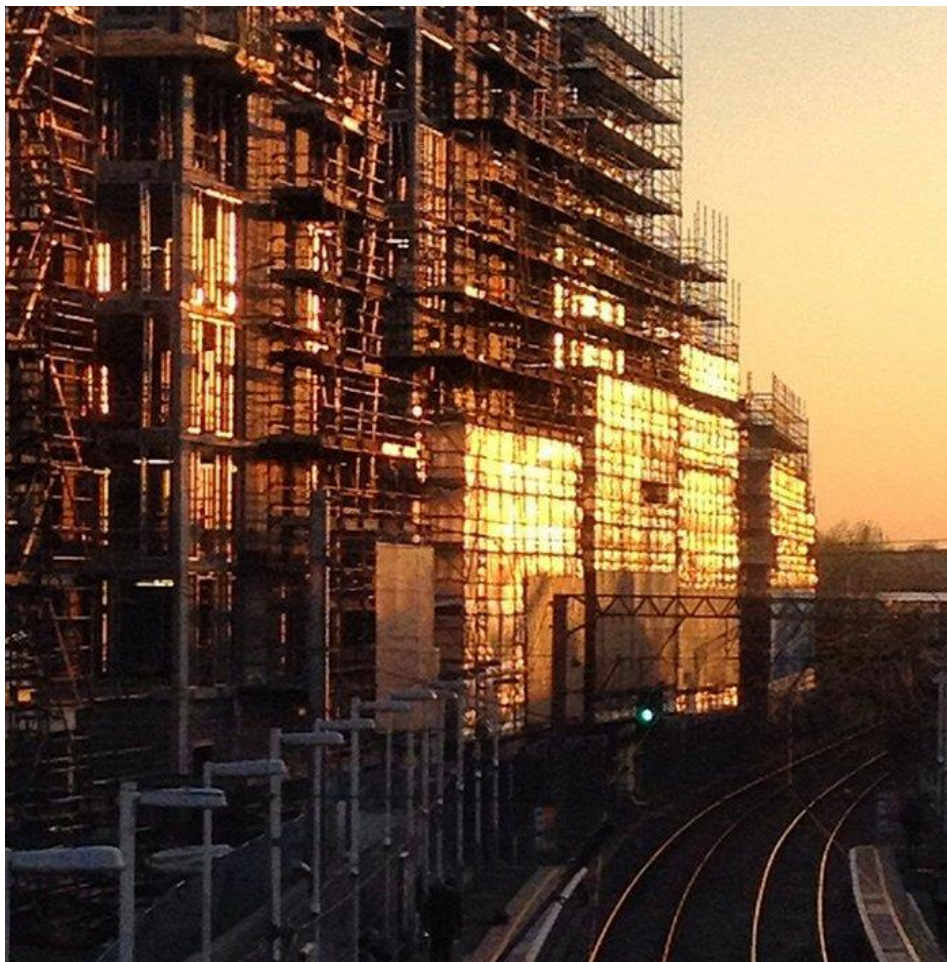
Creating fixity entails reification. Once forms of community are cast in terms of fixed representations, they are made legible to others, and comparable with other objectified entities in the world. They are thus made commensurable and subject to economic valuation or particular forms of evaluation and control. In contrast, I have described fluidity precisely in terms of the opening-up of meaning. As such fluidity entails the suspension of practices of accounting. Parties operating in contexts of fluidity still expect something from one another, but the substance of this exchange is determined through negotiation – and this negotiation may continue indefinitely, so that the good exchanged becomes one of mutual production. Contexts of fluidity, then, can produce relations of generalised reciprocity, grounded in the suspension of the accounting of commensurable value.

Here, I want to explore the struggle between these two forms of value by focusing on urban regeneration projects in Kilburn. In the first section, I look at how residents on the Collishaw Estate have interpreted processes of physical regeneration. I argue that despite the ideal that building mixed-tenure housing will lead to social mixing, the actual dynamics lead most residents to see physical regeneration as a process of privatisation and expropriation instead. And indeed, this is often the case, as the council and developers overlook the processes whereby new communities

might be formed, in favour of a narrower focus on project profitability. In the second section I turn to social regeneration programmes, and ask how residents frame the value of community when *they* are the ones designing or running programmes. Throughout both, I unpack fixity and fluidity as two distinct modes of value generation. Typically residents strive to bring these modes together, whereas many top-down regeneration initiatives have worked to split them apart. As such, I argue that scholarly accounts that depict regeneration projects as disruptive because they involve the wholesale commodification of urban communities are incomplete. Residents themselves take part in such processes, but turn them to very different ends than developers, seeking to use them to create contexts of fluidity which partially resist commodification.

### **The “regentrification” market**

During my time in Kilburn, residents would often talk about regeneration as if it were a pervasive force, rather than one confined to particular sites or areas. The presence of three major government-led regeneration projects within or just beyond the area, coupled with a range of ongoing private developments, created a diffuse sense of continual, intentional change – something residents would often comment on, referencing the closed-up and brand-new shops on the high road, or the cranes and scaffolding which seemed ever-present in the area. Yet, beyond these contemporary referents, regeneration projects have had a long and fraught history in the area.



**The Ballymore at Dusk**

To the North East, where Kilburn merges into wealthy West Hampstead, several private developments are ongoing, dominated by the spectacle of the Ballymore development, which stretches high above the railway line. To the South East, a regeneration scheme is taking place on several buildings that surround the start of London's famous Abbey Road, and to the South, the same is happening on the Tollgate Gardens estate. Both these projects are relatively new, with planning having started in or after the late 2000s and the first construction work only starting in 2013.

Meanwhile, on the Collishaw estate, residents have faced a patchwork-series of social and physical regeneration programmes since the late 90s, weaving cranes, bulldozers, road closures, and the ebbing and flowing presence of council officials into the fabric of everyday life. Since 1998, the local Council has pursued a programme of physical regeneration, attempting to replace the old concrete towerblocks and flats with more modern homes, and hoping to use this as a means of improving residents' standards of living more broadly. To do so, they aimed to double the number of homes in the area, making half of the new units available for private sale in order to cross-subsidise the construction of new social housing. This task was contracted out to a range of Housing Associations, who bid on a development-by-development basis to deliver both the social and private housing, which they would then manage. Alongside this physical regeneration were two prominent social regeneration programmes, which focused on bettering community life and individual welfare: the nationally-coordinated New Deal for Communities (NDC), which I discuss in the next section, ran from 1999 and was wrapped up by 2008. Following this, the remainder of the New Deal funds were placed in a Trust, initially managed by the local council but then later devolved to an independent non-profit dubbed Collishaw Together, which was only really starting to find its feet and deliver new community initiatives when I arrived on the estate in mid-2014.

In this section, I focus in on the *physical* regeneration on the Collishaw – centred around the reconstruction of buildings on the estate – while in the next I turn to the social regeneration under the NDC and Collishaw Together. Both of these programmes, however, shared an overarching guiding logic. The Single Regeneration Budget, which kicked off regeneration on the Collishaw, was established under John Major's Conservative government, but it was under the NDC that work really scaled up. The NDC was a flagship project of Tony Blair's New Labour, and a key vehicle for the "third way" politics he championed. Tracing the conceptual history of "regeneration" projects in the UK, Furbey (1999: 422-423) emphasizes the fluidity of the term, "as an expression of very diverse hopes". Nonetheless, he identifies a currently dominant governmental discourse, "articulating 'regeneration' as the salvation of unregenerate individuals and their 'communities'." Within this,



there is an emphasis on community as a vehicle for personal redemption, but the form of community and redemption implied are both highly specific and targeted:

this formalization of the 'social inclusion' of the poor in urban regeneration is now connected to the mainstream 'Welfare to Work' and New Deal strategies and their emphasis on a 'third way . . . promoting opportunity instead of dependence' (Green Paper, April 1998) delivered through local partnerships to young people, the longer-term unemployed, lone parents and people receiving incapacity benefit. (430)

Rose (1999) argues that the invocation of community by New Labour and their contemporaries is not an attempt to govern a previously uncontrolled domain, but to create a new domain for governing a new sort of citizen (c.f. Finlayson, 1999; Schofield 2002). In this framing community is offered up, instead of society, as the background to the individual's actions, in a way which switches the emphasis of governance from collective social conditions to individual responsibility and choice within elective communities. Governance through community recognizes that life chances are shaped by extra-personal factors, ranging from class to ethnicity, but also places moral responsibility for changing such factors upon communities. Meanwhile, it remains incumbent upon individuals to take part in community to make such transformations possible.

Within this mode of governance, participation in markets was likewise framed as key to self-formation. On one hand, employment is framed as fundamental to responsible, self-realized citizenship, wherein the duty of government is to help break patterns of dependency that impede such self-ownership. On the other hand the individual, having taken ownership of themselves, shapes themselves as a sort of commodity, objectively knowable, characterised by explicit commitments both to a clear set of moral norms (shared within communities called into existence by such policies) and by commitment to a particular chosen lifestyle, as the expression of personal good. Such invocations of community, then, involve a particular mode of valuation, where subjects are not just exhorted to take part in market relations, but where the value of individual actions becomes measurable against particular moral expectations emerging from communities. In turn "holistic" regeneration is seen as achievable through "specific and time-limited interventions" and the measurement of "quantifiable outputs." (Furbey 1999: 420). In other words, such official visions of regeneration called for fixed, unequivocal and measurable forms of value. Here, I want to suggest that on the Collishaw, physical regeneration was often seen in precisely these terms – as trying to produce fixed forms of value, which could then be mediated by market relations. In the following section, however, I will trace some of the other potentials, and forms of value, that residents saw regeneration as offering.

Despite significant cynicism and the frustration surrounding the protracted programme of regeneration, many residents I spoke to did emphasize that they saw potential in the idea of regeneration. In the abstract, people's accounts as to why regeneration mattered bore a striking similarity to more official narratives. For instance, Yasir, a Somali father in his 40s, who I knew from tenants and residents' association meetings as one of the most vocal voices of suspicion around the regeneration at tenants' meetings, once invited me around to discuss his own housing woes. Yet towards the end of the conversation, he confessed:

Living in [Kingsley] House, I see the need. I see the need for regeneration. Because here, in these four towers, I see a lot of deprivation. You know, you'll have kids here, who could have had so many different possibilities in London, but all they know is these four corners – they don't have any aspiration to be elsewhere, or to do anything else. So I think those sorts of people do need to start living in a mixed-income community. And then maybe they'll start to say 'I see my neighbour get up early every morning and go somewhere else. Why isn't my dad going – or why aren't I?' You know? [...] I do think it will help make for a safer area. It'll do a bit for social mobility too.

This fits neatly with the narrative of the regeneration programme given in an interview by a community officer for one of the privately-run Housing Associations involved with one of the new developments:

Regeneration mixed everybody up – that was the fundamental bit [...] It changed their parameters [...] it helps creates a mindset 'can change, need to change' [...] the idea is to mix up the tenure – have some people that can buy, have some people that can't afford it.

Indeed, residents, council officials and community workers alike often expressed support for the idea of mixed tenancy housing, suggesting that it could provide greater dignity, help tackle crime, delinquency and unemployment, and provide greater support to people who may have long felt disenfranchised.

Yet despite often voicing similar *ideals* to officials, almost all residents I spoke simultaneously expressed some degree of scepticism as to the actual *processes* associated with the regeneration. During my fieldwork, the most visible impact of any regeneration scheme was the large-scale demolition and reconstruction of buildings on the estate. Yet this physical regeneration was connected with a broader set of social initiatives. Early in my fieldwork, the head of rehousing at the local council explained to me that this partially involved using empty buildings which were set to be demolished to host "meanwhile" projects – such as the Collishaw Hub – as well as by negotiating with construction firms, housing associations and incoming businesses to provide employment and

skills training for locals. However, most important was the idea of creating “social uplift” through mixed tenancy, using the presence of private owners and renters to make new possibilities and aspirations more visible and accessible to existing social tenants. As such, communal spaces and inclusive community programmes were seen as a crucial means for facilitating such connection and influence.

Yet the ways in which the presence of current or future newcomers was made visible to existing residents often seemed to produce the opposite effect, prompting feelings of alienation and exclusion. Often, residents would express anxiety over the implications of living amidst an increasingly unfamiliar population. In such accounts, the familiar conviviality which had been established over time with existing neighbours was not seen as easily transferable to a new and unfamiliar crowd. People felt that their current neighbours were trustworthy – even if they did not interact with them much, they could still be relied on for a spot of help, a friendly smile, or simply to behave in predictable ways. In contrast the potential behaviours of unknown newcomers, perhaps marked by less familiar forms of difference, could create anxiety.

This became apparent when talking to Sophia, another resident I got to know at residents’ association meetings, as she was moving flat. Having moved from the small Portuguese island of Madeira when she was just out of her teens, she had come to prize the idea of her own independence and adaptability, against a background where most people stayed put. She had made her way through life through a range of enterprises, including working as a childminder, which now, at nearly 40, made up most of her work. Her biggest concern about moving, in fact, pertained to this work. Currently, she found most of her current clients from amongst her near-neighbours. Sophia was anxious, not only about whether her old clients would want to travel the extra few blocks to her new flat to drop off their kids, but also whether her new, ostensibly wealthier neighbours, would frown upon the idea of hiring a childminder who worked out of her own home, or else whether they would judge her flat as shabby. None of this, she emphasised was about whether or not she would do a good job – but without the look of a “proper professional” she was concerned she would no longer be recognised as able and capable. Meanwhile, over coffee, after a meeting of the Somali Mother’s Group, Zahra, herself one of Sophia’s near-neighbours, expressed the importance of familiarity and the difficulty in re-establishing such relationships even more clearly:

You know, you don’t always say hi to your neighbours, but you know you can talk with them from time to time or if you need any help. That’s important [...] I just think a lot of people have changed – a lot of new people are moving in, you know? And you’re always asking ‘who

is that, what are they wearing, what's their face, what are they up to?' – eventually you decide you just can't be bothered!

Farhan: But like the new people coming, are they like friendly – like do they make an effort to get to know people?

Zahra: Well maybe a little bit, but not really, you know? Mostly it just feels like people want to be doing their own thing.

Zahra simultaneously suggests that people in the area have become more insular, whilst also admitting that the pace of change has made it less appealing to get to know newcomers. The model of neighbourly relations she and others promoted was one of easy familiarity coupled with a deeper trust in the possibility for mutual support. Here, rapid change upset this model not only because it challenged the presumed ease or naturalness of neighbourly relations, but because as new tenants moved in, they created a visible sense of difference – marked by new clothing and faces. Zahra feels unable to read newcomers and thereby ascertain what they are up to, and, unable to recognize familiar community-signalling behaviour, she concludes that they must be less communally minded.

In this context, the redesigning of the council estate to double its housing density created a sense that people were being crowded in and that they were losing the spaces in which they might come together and become familiar with one another over time. Complaints about separate entrances or even buildings for socially-housed and private residents were common, and were often used to express doubt that any genuine social mixing or community building would result from the regeneration. However, the most common complaint I encountered was that too much green space (a phrase often used to refer to open space more generally) was being removed from the area. Council officers, as well as some of the tenants who had taken a more active role in inputting into the regeneration process, would often dismiss such claims. Such dismissals emphasized that existing green spaces, spread out in haphazard triangles outside tower blocks and awkward ovals alongside certain streets were almost never used. When they were, people often griped about the presence of dog walkers (and excrement), discarded furniture and rubbish, and noisy children or threatening teenagers. Moreover, there was already one large local park, which likewise went chronically underused, and another custom-designed one coming as a part of the regeneration. Likewise, for every tree to be cut down, the council and developers had jointly pledged to plant four. Overall, the area was certain to remain exceptionally green – particularly for a London council estate.

Residents often responded to such assurances with suspicion and annoyance. During my fieldwork, I attended numerous meetings of Tenants' Associations or Steering Groups representing buildings around the estate. At one such meeting, in response to a Housing Association official discussing a

tree replacement programme, a resident pointed out an instance of a newly-planted tree which had died and was removed without replacement. Based on this story, he accused the Housing Association of not caring for trees, with malicious intent – suggesting that such neglect was perhaps a sign that the Housing Association wanted the land clear for a future development. At the same meeting, in response to a council official discussing plans for the new park, Evylin, herself disgruntled, replied with a counterexample, pointing to a private gated garden that had just been built to adjoin a nearby development<sup>16</sup>. She cited this as an example of what was to come, saying it represented “the thin end of the wedge” that would eventually lead to the privatisation of all public space in the area. Yet, talking to me after the meeting, Evylin admitted herself that the existing green space was underused, or used in antisocial ways, seemingly echoing the concerns of the officials.

Perplexed, after the meeting I pressed Evylin on why she was so upset over the loss of green space. Her reply made it clear that first and foremost, public (or private) green space was about the potential it signalled for residents:

It’s about how people feel when they live here. When you don’t have this ugly brick wall in your face when you look out the window, when you have space – well, before you used to be able to see these lovely Victorian flats, that they tore down, and beyond that you could see St Augustine’s Church, and then you’d have some of the London skyline as well. It felt open. So you could feel like, you know, even though you were in this little corner, in a run-down council estate in [...] Kilburn, you weren’t cut off – that wasn’t all there was.

During the conversation I drifted from Evylin to her husband Simon, who told me that he feared newcomers won’t take part in the community that has developed in the area. This was still early in my fieldwork, and in response, I asked him what sorts of spaces he believed the community to congregate in. His reply meandered, mentioning community centre spaces (like the community hall we’d just come from) for meetings and events, before talking a bit more about the green spaces being lost (where people used to play ball, or bump into each other), before pausing and conceding thoughtfully “But, that’s a good question. You know, I’d really say it’s more a thing of how people behave around each other – in the shops or around the street.”

Green space, in other words was seen as evocative both of personal and social possibility, and fears around its redevelopment had less to do with the loss of well-used space, as it did the feelings of possibility and the habits of low-level daily interactions that had been built around such spaces.

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<sup>16</sup> This was later made public in response to pressure from Evylin and her Residents’ Association

Many residents echoed this sentiment, both with regard to green space, or in terms of the new buildings themselves: the unfamiliar built environment signalled the crowding out of existing habits of dwelling, and their associated feelings of conviviality, with new, unfamiliar ones, which were often felt to be inaccessible. Residents frequently complained that whatever the quality of new spaces, nothing was being done to actively invite older residents to come and use them, and visually they served as an invitation only for wealthier newcomers. Thus, Klara, remarked on the new flats:

Like these new ones they're building here – I'm sure they look great on a rendering – you have it all bright and clean, and you can match the lines of the building to the lines of the street – it all looks very modern – but then you actually see it from the street and it's just these plain boxes – it's almost like it's still a model. It doesn't really fit with the street and it doesn't really appeal to you, you know? There's nothing there for you.

Klara, Evelyn, Simon, Zahra and many others might be accused of jumping to conclusions about the potential for social relations on the basis of fairly superficial signs. Yet such judgements were underwritten by a depth of experience. As I argued in Chapter 5, it's not just that such outwards symbols *represented* the potential for engaging with and coming to understand the unfamiliar, it's that they *provided the initial means* of doing so. Conversely the elimination or redevelopment of familiar spaces and buildings ultimately threatened the means by which connections were created, maintained *and* symbolised as possible in the first place.

At the same time, the question of which symbols were selected as containing positive or negative potential in this way were by no means arbitrary. For instance Klara's distrust of the glossy facades of the new flats was grounded in the way the same aesthetic was used to advertise flats to private buyers. At the Salvation Army, where I often met Klara, as well as across much of the rest of the estate, a brochure had made the rounds, marketing the private-half of a particular development to investors in Hong Kong. Although the brochure boasted "links" between the development and "the local community", all the amenities it named were in adjoining wealthier areas beyond the Council Estate, or further afield within London as a whole. The brochure conspicuously highlighted proximity to London universities and the available transport links, whilst detail on the interior of the flats – beyond general talk of the build quality – was absent. People's judgement was always the same – the flats were clearly being marketed as investments for foreign landlords, to be let back out, quite possibly to students.

Such marketing flatly contradicted discourses of social mixing which framed leaseholders as people who would build local attachments and come to contribute over time. In contrast the population suggested by the brochure was a hyper mobile, rotating series of young, middle-class renters. As

Simon explained: ““If you’re renting, you’re going down the tubes in the morning” will probably eat, shop and socialize elsewhere and just come back to [the Collishaw] to sleep. “There is a kind of community here, you know, and they’re not going to take part in it!” Community, he suggests, emerges through such overlap in daily geographies, which are in turn shaped by class and the forms of mobility it affords and normalises.

Intrigued by these rumours of incoming hyper-mobile landlords and renters, a friend, employed as a youth worker once invited me along to a viewing of a show home she had arranged. At the showing, when my friend asked where the Council tenants would be housed within the development, the realtor replied first by emphasising that building at least 30% social housing was a legal obligation these days, before hastily adding that the social units were mostly detached and isolated at the top-end of the road, and that the buildings were well insulated against noise. Seemingly to draw our attention away from the nearby social housing, she quickly switched topic, telling us how two of the six buildings in the complex were primarily for sale on the Hong Kong market, and that around 90% of one building did indeed sell abroad. This, she said, revealed their excellent investment value. Continuing on, she again changed tack and suggested that such foreign buyers were nonetheless invested in the local community, giving the example of a Malaysian couple who purchased a flat because they had ties to the area and know it well, suggesting that other buyers were similar. She concluded by emphasizing the “exciting” diversity of the area. Overall, her narrative moved between two different forms of value: the desirability of the flats as an investment, and the potential for connection with a “diverse” community if one chose to live there oneself. Yet social tenants were excluded from both these forms of value: as a legal burden, a financial risk and a potential disturbance.

All of this seemed to suggest that even *if* newcomers did value the area, this sense of value would be fundamentally different from that of existing residents. New tenants were not only likely to be more transitory, but more mobile, with greater means available to explore London and its offerings – whether this was in terms of frequently paying for the Tube, or in being able to afford the prices of upscale establishments in neighbouring areas. And relatedly, as Simon, Zahra and others suggest above, they were less likely to use local communal resources, or to develop habits of conviviality around shared space and habits. These anxieties were not simply idle suppositions, but were often grounded in particular experiences.



Inside and outside the show-flat

For instance, the Grove, the largest local community centre, once played host to a range of community events – from weddings, wakes and christenings, to birthday parties and MP’s surgeries. According to Ailsa, the manager of a still-running youth programme there, the centre once catered to a wider range of groups and uses than anywhere else in the area, making it one of the most valuable community spaces on the estate. Yet this bustling atmosphere came to an abrupt end when, following a series of increasingly-irritated noise complaints from residents in a newly constructed building nearby, the Council banned large-group bookings and installed a noise meter. Ailsa recounted how during the consultation for the building she and a number of the Centre’s most active users expressed fear that there may be conflict between incoming residents and centre users, but at the time the local council dismissed these as unfounded. In turn, facing backlash from former users who felt disenfranchised, the Council reversed its ban, but considerably increased its booking fee and imposed stringent requirements around timing, security and noise on any events to be held there. Given these stringent requirements, many residents have come to see the centre as no longer public, and those few events held there as exclusive – and even as aimed at driving out the last of the original users. I discovered this with some surprise after helping a group of residents organise a hustings for the 2015 General Election, and then spending the subsequent week being confronted by a couple of disgruntled residents who had presumed it was an event run for private gain, with no “real” locals present.





Poster for the hustings held in the Grove

Faced with such experiences, many locals had come to see any attempt to promote homes or the area itself as oriented towards outsiders, and as involved in a process of expropriation and the erosion of the potential for genuine mixing. Newcomers both disrupted familiar patterns of conviviality and community-formation and appeared to threaten the resources which might have been used in developing new forms of conviviality and community. On one hand these might simply be seen as commentary on two prominent, parallel trends – clearly patterns of community formation were being disrupted and transformed, and clearly private ownership was on the rise. Yet, pervasively, these two narratives were linked.

The tendency to link the disruption of community with increasing privatisation reveals an opposition between two modes of value formation. In *The Social Life of Things* (1988) Apparurai argues that things can go through different “situations”, or phases of their “social life”. In the same volume Kopytoff argues that oftentimes things will be seen in terms of an indefinable value – as singular or without compare. If such invaluable things are ever exchanged, this can only occur within relations of generalised reciprocity, since there is no way for accounting for their exact value. Yet having inestimable value is only one possible situation, and exists at the far end of a spectrum. On the other

end of the spectrum, things can become commodities, which Appadurai defines “*as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its [most] socially relevant feature.*” (ibid: 13). In other words, things might be thought of as existing along a spectrum between value being entirely equivocal and value being entirely commoditized. When things have inestimable value, argues Kopytoff, this is because they are complexly embedded within social relations. Conversely, rendering something as a commodity involves severing these relations to allow the thing to bear value in and of itself.

Appadurai’s central argument is that value is only created through the exchange of goods as commodities. In the sense that turning goods into commodities is a process of accounting for their value more *clearly*, he’s absolutely right. Yet Graeber (2001) criticises this approach for reducing all value down to such measurable exchange value. He does note Kopytoff’s spectrum, with unique, or invaluable, objects as existing in contradistinction to commodities, but he argues that this former category is poorly conceptualised, in that Kopytoff is unable to argue for how people ascribe value to such invaluable objects. Graeber’s corrective is to suggest that value be taken as an indication of the creative potential indexed by a particular object – what he elsewhere has called the ability of value to “bring universes into being” (2013: 231). The circulation of commodified, clearly-accounted exchange values effectively produces a market system – but such a system is never all-encompassing nor without its alternatives.

From this perspective, we might see fixity and fluidity as two different forms of value, each generating different worlds. Both have their uses. Fixity, as a form of commensuration, allows for outsiders to recognise and value community groups and projects and to assert a neat sense of belonging and of shared purpose prior to either being developed. Fixity simultaneously produces inclusion and exclusion, particularly excluding those who seem likely to jeopardise projects of belonging and shared purpose, even whilst casting a wide net in defining those who may potentially count as insiders. Meanwhile, fluidity allows for the actual work of coming together. It involves the suspension of the practices of accounting that fixity relies on, in order to allow those within groups to discover the possibilities available for understanding and working with one another, and action, and to form new projects around these affordances.

Thus, when people discussed the physical regeneration, narratives often followed a structure where *equivocal* value of community, grounded in everyday practice, were seen as being replaced by *unequivocal* values, which were then expropriated, typically for economic gain. Moreover, it was not that people themselves didn’t sometimes turn the equivocal into the unequivocal, or take part in economic exchanges. However, when they did so, this was seen as retaining the ability to convert

back into equivocal values once more, in an iterative cycle. Thus, for example many residents *did* say they strongly supported the idea of more private ownership if it meant families or others who would not only own property but see this ownership as a reason to become involved and invested in the area. Meanwhile, criticism around privatization centred not around the creation of private homes or spaces within the neighbourhood *per se* but around the idea that this facilitated ownership by foreign investors, or the sorts of residents who would effectively live most of their lives elsewhere in London, and thus who couldn't be reintegrated into everyday practices of community value generation, based around creating spaces of fluidity.

This dichotomy between these forms of value is implicit throughout all the narratives above, but once in a while would emerge as explicit commentary on its own right. Take Rosie, who was evicted from her council flat during my fieldwork. I was introduced to Rosie by a group of local activists, and as near-neighbours we soon found ourselves running into each other frequently and developing a friendship. Rosie was in her mid-30s. Coming from a working-class background, she had fought to gain a funded place at a dance academy in her late teens, after which she built a career teaching dance and fitness classes locally.

Rosie faced eviction for a breach of subletting rules that council officials conceded was largely based around a misunderstanding. She had been abroad, on a trial for a potential job with a chain of holiday resorts. During this time she had allowed a friend to stay in her flat, and had failed to file the proper paperwork. Despite the council's acknowledgement that doing so would have been permissible given appropriate notice, she was unable to get the decision to evict her overturned. After the eviction, as I helped her move her stuff out, she commented, fuming:

It won't be long until there isn't anyone around in council housing here. It's all market forces isn't it?

Farhan: What do you mean, 'market forces'?

Like this whole area is valuable, right? It's valuable to the market because the land is valuable, right? Not like because people like living here or this is their home – it's just the land itself. So it's like this force that's all around you, that's pushing you – 'get out, get out' – because you being here doesn't matter. It doesn't matter.

Likewise, other residents emphasized that the area was being damaged by regeneration not by privatisation *per se*, but by forms of privatisation that largely focused on privatising value *for the sake of non-residents*, thus allowing for the expropriation of such value. The production of such forms of publicly-recognisable value was often entangled with forms governance on the basis of

ethnicity, class and age. Thus, for instance, although I have traced how the young men and women who often socialised on the street held ambivalent motives, life-trajectories and relationships to criminality (Chapter 4), within official regeneration programmes they were unequivocally portrayed as a threat to be contained, neutralized or re-socialized, reproducing popular images particularly of young black bodies as embodying deviancy (Gilroy 2000; 2004; Rios 2011). Thus, for instance, in offering evidence for the success of regeneration on the Collishaw, the community worker quoted at the beginning of the chapter remarked on how the area had become visibly safer, as one no longer saw “certain people” out on the streets as much.

These exclusionary implications of regeneration agendas were not lost on locals, and explicit critiques of the reification of value entailed in regeneration occasionally highlighted their racial dimensions. For instance once, I asked Lisa what she thought of one new development on the edge of the Collishaw Estate being named “Queen’s Park Place”, in reference to the significantly wealthier adjoining area of Queen’s Park, and which had been built with ground floor shops clearly meant to appeal to wealthier shoppers. In her reply she drew a link between the development and the colonial history of Congo, where her parents were born:

Listen, what they done with [the Collishaw] and Queen’s Park was exactly what they done with Zaire – they took away that powerful name and invited other people to come use that power. Because Zaire used to be the name of the kingdom, you know what I’m saying? And when they changed it to Congo, that was a way of taking the name away from the people and turning it into ‘oh, this is the Congo, we’re the ones who made the Congo, this isn’t Zaire anymore.’ Same thing.

Indeed, Lisa and several of her friends would often describe the change in the area as “*regentrification*” – which was often used in a way which suggested an unconscious conflation of “regeneration” and “gentrification”, rather than a deliberate attempt at irony.

Yet, such notions of an economy of fixity and fluidity didn’t simply emerge in discourses about the physical regeneration of the estate. Indeed, ideas of how fixity and fluidity ought to be transacted were *most* clear in instances where residents were involved in regeneration programmes themselves, within the social side of the regeneration. Involvement in various community programmes required residents to recognise and respond to the value propositions put forward by these programmes, or else saw them articulating their own ideas of how to manage value, as they sought to manage budgets and pitch programmes of their own design. In the next section, I turn to such cases to unpack this logic more fully.



The regeneration has created a lively property market

## Regeneration for whom?

What had started as an attempt to beg an interview of an elusive connection suddenly turned heated. I'd met Tayo at the Collishaw Hub several weeks ago, when he presented himself as the only "real" local who'd gotten a spot at the Hub. Barely 20, deeply annoyed with what he felt were the limited and confining opportunities available to black youth such as himself, and bursting with energy, he clearly had an extensive network of local links. These included many street youth whom, at the time, I was struggling to connect with. As such, I was eager to speak to him further. At our initial meeting he was enthusiastic, and we'd exchanged numbers. However, I had since been unable to get a reply out of him.

I was speaking with a few friends, including JL and Grace. The sun was out and the small group was huddled under the awning of the one café on the estate when I saw Tayo walk by and shouted a greeting. He stopped, and greeted both JL and Grace as well, but suddenly turned frosty when I asked him when I might actually get to interview him. Misreading his reaction, however, I pushed against his vague response, at which point he pointedly asked me "who [I] work for." I was perplexed – explaining again that I was a student, but he pushed again – what did I want to do with the information I'm gathering? Write a PhD, I replied, and perhaps use some of the findings to make sure that voices that aren't getting heard do – maybe using it as a basis for trying to speak to some local organisations, or the council and see if I can't prompt them to work more inclusively. But he pushed again – what do I want to *do* with it?

Only then did he elaborate – it wasn't the first time he's been asked to share his experience of the area – what he repeatedly referred to throughout the conversation as his "intellectual property". The most notorious instant was when he was involved in a rather disappointing single-day youth event. A month later, he discovered his face up on a billboard at the intersection linking Queen's Park to the Collishaw with a caption amounting to "'Empowering local youth'". It was then that he realised that sharing such stories had value, not necessarily for those who shared them but to those who solicited them. Frustrated, but also seeing his point, I admitted that, yes, such stories had value for my research, but I wasn't exactly making much money for doing such work at present, and I had no particular plans to use any such stories for gain beyond a few journal articles and perhaps a book that few would actually read. Tayo too met me half way, agreeing that that I didn't sound like I was going to profit, but nonetheless insisting that simply telling your story meant that anyone could "take your intellectual property" and "take advantage" to further their own "agenda". Here Tayo's distrust didn't seem to focus on the particular ends of given "agendas" but on the act of reification itself.<sup>17</sup>

Many anthropologists have written about the harm done by abstract forms of measurement, as official measurements render certain subjects and experiences visible, and others invisible, and channel the possibilities for recognition and action, often within a set of bounded categories that are then treated as naturally given (Shore and Wright 2000; Strathern 2000; Merry and Coutin 2014). Corsin-Jiménez (2011) has criticised such bureaucratic forms of accounting for freezing things within frames of both time and certainty, and thus failing to capture social processes and forms of relation that have an unfolding and non-deterministic logic. What's striking is that although such critiques are usually voiced by anthropologists taking a more theoretical stance, Tayo voiced a similar but more sweeping critique grounded in everyday experience. He suggested that the measurement and evaluation of community workers, and the reproduction of testimony as metrics and advertising formed a part of broader processes of abstraction and expropriation, and that this was a familiar process. Indeed, interceding in our argument, JL suggested to Tayo that he might always be seen as a "youth" to service providers and to researchers like myself, but that this could become a position of

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding the ethics of including an encounter about someone not wishing to be researched, my basis for feeling comfortable including this particular exchange is firstly that Tayo had, prior to the conversation, explicitly consented to both an interview and to helping me out more generally. Secondly, although the conversation cited here suggests a change of heart, it also made the grounds of his objection clear – effectively that he was feeling ungenerous about sharing his 'intellectual property'. This, I feel changed over time. This conversation took place about three months into my fieldwork. Over time, Tayo seemed to grow to trust me more and would offer commentary on social change whenever we met in passing or at events. He continued to mention my status as a researcher in conversation, but would not challenge my presence. He even came to suggest, unprompted, that we two meet up and speak in more detail though this did not pan out.

power from which to speak. He suggested that Tayo simply bill himself as a “consultant” in instances where it was clear there was money at stake, and be more generous when it was something more within the community. Tayo rejected this suggestion, again reiterating that he couldn’t be sure what would be done with such “expertise” once sold, and that he fundamentally didn’t like others telling him what he might be worth.

After Tayo left, I remained riled. Seeing this, JL attempted to explain where Tayo was coming from in more detail, saying that in the last decade there has been a huge effort to “sell” the Collishaw, but that this effort had simultaneously misunderstood and devalued the value of the area. Since the NDC, the area had always had at least a few community projects on the go. Yet, to him at least, and to most locals, he suggested, it was clear that part of the intent behind such projects was to make the area appear more appealing to outsiders who might be enticed to purchase homes, and thus fund the physical side of the regeneration.

Given this tension, it is perhaps no surprise that locals approached many community projects with marked ambivalence. This emerged most clearly in stories people told of the NDC era, when a £52 million fund was made available by the central government for community-led regeneration programmes in the Collishaw. These stories of the local management of resources and projects illustrate a particular economic logic.

Conversations with residents revealed that as early as 1998, there were consultations around potential plans to comprehensively tear down and rebuild the looming slab-concrete towers and squat concrete flats first built in the 60s and 70s. As plans for this physical regeneration advanced, in 1999 the London Borough of Brent was invited by the Labour Government to bid for funding for a social regeneration scheme as a part of Labour’s New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme. The programme represented an attempt to move from a planning-driven model of consultation, where residents were consulted in the second instance to suggest modifications to standing plans, to one where residents would shape the vision of regeneration itself. Nationally, the NDC specified four broad goals – tackling worklessness, improving health, tackling crime and raising educational achievement – but left it to residents to determine how to meet these locally (Foley and Martin 2000).

In the case of the Collishaw this meant that a range of community organisations were able to construct projects and bid for funding. However, alongside the range of community initiatives that sprung up, non-profits from outside of the area and private consultants likewise came forward in large numbers, seizing on the opportunity provided by £52 million of central government funding.

Similarly, the fact that the NDC allowed organisations to define project outcomes over time, rather than needing to sell them upfront, and the decision to measure outcomes on a general level, were seen both as empowering by many residents – who may have lacked the expertise to pitch and run more formally regulated projects – but also as an invitation to many others who constructed projects around parochial concerns, or even primarily for the purposes of personal gain.

According to residents involved with local projects, corruption was endemic. A frequent story I was told was how the first chief executive of the local NDC was caught living rent free in a council flat he'd appropriated for use by community projects, and how his replacement was discovered to be embezzling directly from NDC funds. Official sources deny any evidence of corruption (Brent Council 2007), but many residents responded to this official denial only as evidence of collusion. Late into the project, a scrutiny board comprised of residents and council officials was set up to vet new initiatives more thoroughly as well as to scrutinise existing ones. Grace was a former member of this board and once remarked to me that, by her guess, over half of the projects they reviewed appeared to primarily be vehicles for siphoning money from the NDC pot.

Yet the legacy of the NDC was an ambivalent one. Many residents I spoke to saw in this alleged corruption proof that the overall design of the programme was never really intended to empower residents. The poor fit between so many initiatives and the actual desires of residents on one hand, and the scrambling attempts at regulation that followed, and which created their own set of further exclusions, on the other, were recast by some residents as evidence of coordinated ill intent. Daniel, a local Afro-Caribbean shopkeeper whose greengrocers' store doubled as an informal meeting place for many Collishaw residents, and who was heavily involved in several NDC projects, once quipped of the NDC: "Whatever you said, you could be sure they would do the opposite. We kept saying we wanted more green space and more jobs training. And what do they do? They put all the money into building new homes, crowding the area, and bringing in new people with better jobs!" Tellingly, the (re)building of homes occurred not under the NDC, but under the council-led regeneration scheme that had been running in slow parallel to the NDC's rapid explosion of projects – meaning Daniel's condemnation conflated different programmes together in order to deliver a blanket verdict.

Yet for many others, the NDC was experienced as genuinely empowering in a way that provided a touchstone for comparison against future regeneration projects. The open invitation for groups to imagine and pitch projects led to a proliferation of community initiatives. Rachel, who grew up during the NDC era, explained this to me one sunny afternoon, as she and a number of friends were casually chatting on the chipped concrete steps of a terraced house, somewhat notorious as a drug-dealing hotspot. I was in the company of Meryem – one of the community organisers whose job it



was to meet and connect up local residents in an effort to create and support new initiatives to better the area. Meryem and I approached the flat, drawn by the crowd and several familiar faces, and Meryem put her standard questions about local likes and dislikes to the crowd. In response Rachel was initially dismissive – saying that community support didn't really exist anymore. Meryem pushed back saying that that's precisely why she ought to be getting involved, and Rachel replied that there wasn't really anything people felt like they could get involved with.

Rachel explicitly contrasted this with the NDC era when "There was sports, and singing and acting and modelling and dance classes and music classes, so whatever you felt like your talents were, or whatever you wanted to do, you could just find something you were interested in. And it got kids doing things, and building ambition and not just being on the street with nothing to do!" And, she noted, there were several community centres, at which people could host their own groups, projects or events. At this point Meryem objected again, pointing out that all the community centres Rachel has named still existed and were currently active – in fact, she'd just come from one. In reply, Rachel equated disengagement with non-existence: "Yeah, I know, but does it really do anything anymore? Tell me, what are they doing with most of their space?"

In Rachel's account, as in those of many others, the presence of numerous community projects was seen as an invitation to get involved oneself. In turn, such involvement often evolved from being focused around personal interests or enjoyment to encompassing broader sense of community mindedness. During a planning meeting for the Collishaw Summer Festival, Lisa reminisced on her experiences in NDC youth clubs, remarking that "Every single youth centre had a coach" which would be used to facilitate trips to places like the seaside or Alton Towers at a heavily-subsidised price. These early experiences created a sense of excitement around youth clubs, which propelled children from playgroups and trips to learning skills and completing courses: "It was like it might not be familiar, but why not give it a try." This trust that even unknown or seemingly dry programmes held promise created a strong investment: "Getting kicked out of youth club was like, your friends went 'okay, see you later' – like it was supposed to be this boycott [where your friends would leave with you, in defiance], but your friends just stayed."

Similarly, Lisa noted that there were multiple community festivals each year – at which point Rafi jumped in. A long-time local resident, Rafi then worked for Collishaw Together, which had inherited both the mantle of social regeneration and the remainder of the NDC's funds, after the NDC was scrapped. Responsible for coordinating the Summer Festival, he was struggling to convince his bosses to subsidise prices for food and attractions for local residents. Setting out his case to us, he argued:

We want people to come from all over, but we also want to support our own. And you know what? This [subsidy] is really what the festival is all about. Because let's say we pay for the food to be discounted for a local resident. So he decides to come to the festival because he feels he can afford it [...] And maybe they'll come back, and next year they'll be able to afford it because he or she would have grown, 'cause they would have developed themselves – because of the people they're going to meet there. Because they're going to connect up with what's going on in the area, and meet everyone else who came out, and find opportunities, and that's exactly what we're all about!

In such accounts, the visible abundance of community provision, coupled with the presence of familiar others, is framed as welcoming and empowering. The existence of a diverse range of groups and activities and significant expenditure on events and groups which were broadly enjoyable, rather than geared towards particular outcomes, may, from one perspective, have looked parochial or even corrupt. Yet for Rachel, Rafi, Lisa and many others these same circumstances were seen as welcoming and motivating, capable of drawing people in on the basis of existing priorities, building a sense of attachment and motivation, and then drawing on these to open up new horizons of possibility. In other words, familiar attachments and priorities were gradually made more fluid, and thus remade into new possibilities.

Indeed, consistent with the development of fluidity, such accounts also emphasized a logic of metonymy, where this personal sense of possibility was seen as suggestive of a broader vibrant community, itself full of potential. Similarly to Daniel's statement where the failures of the council's physical regeneration programme were generalised to suggest that the NDC as a whole didn't listen to people, personal experiences of inclusion or exclusion formed the basis of a broader sense of legitimacy or illegitimacy. Hence, Rafi, referring to the community centre in which we had gathered, commented offhand "New Deal ran a whole community out of here, once," despite the fact that the centre had only housed certain programmes. Picking up on this, Lisa concluded our conversation by noting that at the time the sense amongst her and many of her friends was that "New Deal was messed up but it worked. New Deal was functional but it was dysfunctional. Like we all loved it. We didn't see any problems until we were told that all this [corruption] was happening. No one really cared. They stole so much money but we benefited from it, so it was like 'take it' to be honest." And, she adds, at the time it didn't seem to be a genuine problem because with locals running meaningful projects, much of the stolen money was "kept in the community". "But," she concedes to Rafi, "we're feeling it now – like you say, you've only got 40,000 pounds to work with [in running the community centre and supporting its constituent groups]."

As Lisa's comment suggests, this logic of metonymy not only gestured at encompassing ideas of community, but also at different ways in which value could be created and circulated. Lisa admitted genuine frustration at the lack of funding currently available, but also suggested that even if corruption helped bring an end to the NDC, not all corruption was the same (c.f. Haller and Shore 2005). Indeed, for her and for many others, the NDC-era was a patchwork of legitimate and illegitimate initiatives. Yet if people developed a sense of broader community on the basis of being included in initiatives that fit their own personal priorities, this led to a situation where those community initiatives valued by some as inclusive and as indicative of a broader community, were seen by others as exploitative and parochial.

For instance, a digital inclusion scheme to get PCs and internet into homes, was seen by others as corrupt because of the use of Daniel's shop – where he also ran an electronics repair business – as the project's storage and repair centre. Meanwhile, Daniel complained that the resident-run community hall in his block was illegitimately taken out of the hands of residents by the local NDC steering committee. The committee cited improper accounting practices and a failure to provide inclusive access to the hall, but Daniel couldn't help but question the presence of his estranged former partner in the digital inclusion scheme on the committee as suspect – not to mention the fact that shortly after assuming management, the committee upped the rental rates for the hall.

In other conversations, I heard both the co-manager of the local football club and the founder of a social enterprise aiming to get estate residents into formal employment cite their own work as one of the few examples of "honest" projects that aimed to serve "the actual community". Yet others still criticized both men separately for having been able to purchase vans with NDC funds for their respective projects, which they then monopolized, often for personal ends.

Yet although judgements of inclusivity or exclusivity, legitimacy or illegitimacy varied from individual to individual, each category seemed to produce a fairly consistent discourse on value, regardless of what fell within the category. As with Lisa, those projects which were seen as inclusive and welcoming, also served to evoke a broader community, creating a sense that even when funds were being misappropriated, they largely remained "within" the community, continuing to generate future potential. For Lisa, and for many others, more shocking than rumours of embezzlement was the fact that – for whatever reason – the NDC was wound down, having been deemed to be ineffective and mismanaged. The ending of the NDC contradicted an implicit assumption of value continuing to circulate within the community. Meanwhile, corruption was – and remains – a common refrain for criticising the illegitimacy of projects. Here the same logic operates in reverse, as people themselves describe projects which appeared to expropriate value from the area as actually

corrupt. In such cases, those running such projects were often accused as being from outside the area, or else depth of their local ties were questioned. This logic seemed to be largely binary – either value was retained in the community and personal expropriation was negligible, or value was wholly expropriated and community benefit was negligible.

The particular temporality of value-creation evoked within discourses of community even helps explain some instances of embezzlement. Out of all the community groups I encountered in my time in Kilburn, the seniors group run by Georgina, Rachel's mother, was ostensibly the oldest. When she first migrated from Jamaica, Georgina worked as a seamstress. Following an unexpected layoff, however, she began to volunteer in various youth initiatives whilst continuing with informal sewing work. Her experience as a local volunteer prompted Georgina to start the seniors group prior to the NDC when she began thinking about what her own later years would look like, and realised there was little local provision for seniors, especially on the Collishaw estate. During the NDC era, the group was adopted and funded by the NDC. When it wrapped up, it once again ran independently, until 2015, when it was picked up by Collishaw Together, who provided new funding, a venue, and some administrative support.

After the weekly meetings of the group, Georgina and I would often chat whilst hurrying around packing up tables and washing dishes. Through these conversations, I learnt how the group had started as an exercise class, which provided a bit of food afterwards, to compensate for the time it may have taken away from cooking at home. Gradually, however, Georgina saw that people really valued the social aspect around the food, and so the group morphed into a socially-oriented one. The realisation that the group needed to be able to evolve in line with members' priorities, she said always made her very sceptical of outside interference. And in turn, this commitment to responsiveness framed her approach to finances. When the seniors group had funding from the local Council or the NDC, she explained, she always made a point to save a little, despite people telling her that this was corruption and she ought not to. At one point the NDC had asked to take over the formal running of the group and she flatly refused, despite the potential for attracting greater support, feeling that the group would not only cease to evolve or respond to people's needs, but also that it would eventually fold or lose its funding.

It wasn't just a desire to be responsive that shaped Georgina's attitude, however. Drawing on her experience as a youth worker, she often remarked bitterly on the number of youth programmes she'd seen pop up, run through their funding or mandate, and then fold – whilst the underlying issues they were meant to address persisted. This transience gave her a sense that even during the NDC, it was as if "every two years there's a reset". For her, then, embezzling money was precisely

about keeping its generative potential “within the community”, to paraphrase Lisa, ensuring that the project outlasted the more limited priorities of any particular backer. And indeed, prior to being hosted by Collishaw Together, she was running the group off these savings.

For Georgina, then, value wasn’t simply expropriated by people claiming it for themselves, but by the fragmenting of their temporal horizons. Whilst she emphasized longevity and responsiveness, she often condemned other programmes – and the NDC as a whole – which drew people in, but which did not take this sustained engagement as a sufficient reason to keep on running. She would often dryly comment that people would likely have been better off if such initiatives had never existed in the first place, given that when they folded they undermined the future expectations that they had encouraged people to develop in the first place, and often left behind a sense of cynicism.

As noted, the NDC was largely a bottom-up enterprise, absent all but the most general overarching goals. This meant that, for a while, the diversity and scope of community initiatives created a sense of inclusion – given that there was almost literally something for everyone, and that people read their own involvement as indicative of broader inclusivity and possibility. Yet people’s own understanding of community-centric programmes bundled together inclusion, responsiveness and longevity, whereas individual programmes themselves rarely prioritised these elements in an explicit way. In other words, although I’ve tried to sketch out two different models of value circulation here, one community oriented, generative and durable, and the other which is abstracted, transactional and easily expropriated, I have not tried to argue that most NDC programmes explicitly recognised this distinction. Rather, apart from a few exceptions such as Georgina’s senior’s group, I’ve suggested that the generation of community-oriented value was incidental rather than intentional, emerging from the sheer diversity and scope of provision and inferred by participants. Ultimately, however, the NDC in Kilburn collapsed, broken apart by the fragmentation of programmes, widespread mismanagement and a shift in government priority. And Georgina’s assessment was largely apt – although people were often nostalgic for the heady days of the NDC, its largest legacy was arguably creating an enduring cynicism around regeneration that has continued to colour perceptions of social projects on the estate.

Alongside the cynicism it fostered, some residents viewed the collapse of the NDC as contributing to negative attitudes around diversity. Particular NDC projects may have each had their forms of exclusion, but the level of support meant that community could exist in the plural; there was always scope and resources to start other projects, articulating different visions of community. Yet the ephemerality of such potential, could lead some people to be distrustful of unknown others. As JL once put it such a history of disempowering experiences had led to a present situation where:

People look at diversity the wrong way. Because around here, they might not feel very empowered. And when you don't feel very empowered, you are more likely to look at the people around you and think 'what can they do for me, personally?' What good are they to me?' And when people start thinking like that, they start targeting the weak because they feel like people are taking away from them. Not because they're actually being hurt by these people – whoever they're picking on – but because they feel like they should get something out of them and haven't –because they can't! They challenge people who are weak – 'what good have you done for us?' – because they feel they don't have anything. So they turn diversity into something bad, instead of accepting other people and letting the good come to them.

In JL's account, past experiences which themselves felt exploitative – either in terms of the vast expropriation one might have witnessed, or simply in the distrust bred out of a sense of impermanence – led to a narrow accounting of the value of others. What JL describes is an ingrained distrust, amongst many residents, that shared value might emerge through interaction with unknown others. The alternative, then, was to focus on what could be claimed personally. In other words, many residents too had come to think only in terms of fixed value.

## **Conclusion**

Not long after I started volunteering at the community café, Emma and I fell to discussing a recent meeting of hers with the director of a nearby Local Authority-run Children's Centre. Prompted both by cuts to social services, as well as the emphasis being put by the local council on community provision – as a part of the regeneration and beyond – the children's centre was aiming to play a greater role in identifying family issues and offering caseworker support. After some discussion of what the Salvation Army offered, where Emma related that her own priority was not in doing casework but in making people feel welcome, the director grew frustrated and then – as Emma recounted – snapped: “‘We can't possibly compete with you! [...] The problem is it's not a job to you lot, is it?’” Emma continued reflectively, “I think that's huge because that's really true. I don't get paid. I get a living stipend that allows me to be here and do what I do, but that's very different, isn't it?” By not being focused on tallying costs and benefits, Emma suggested, they paradoxically became better able to produce the sorts of outcomes which were desirable to more tight-fisted organisations.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that community is constructed by two dynamics, fixity and fluidity. I have highlighted how each dynamic requires the other in order to gather people within community, but also how each on its own tends to pull in opposing directions. In this chapter, I have argued that both of these dynamics are entangled in particular modes of value generation. In particular, residents saw the creation and maintenance of valued forms of community as emerging

from an ongoing *iteration* between fixity and fluidity. This could be witnessed in many community-led initiatives, where an open-endedness with regards to means, ends and how money would be spent, allowed both programmes and participants to develop new priorities over time. Yet many regeneration programmes, often inadvertently, ended up breaking this cycle, by turning forms of community grounded in the *movement between* fixity and fluidity into fixed, commensurable forms, which were then expropriated, rather than turned back into new forms of fluidity. This occurred in instances where there was a demand to produce clear forms of value, and was most visible in the physical regeneration of the estate, which professed ideals of social mixing, but largely focused on the production of marketable value.

In previous chapters, I argued that there was often a local struggle between different visions of community. The potential for fluidity and inclusion contained *within* forms of community is hard to detect within the fixed signs that are used by particular communities to assert their presence and thus constitute themselves as entities. As such, such external fixity often became the basis for contestation between residents with differing visions of community.

Such contestation is present here as well, as visions of community felt to be empowering and inclusive by some, are seen as alienating and exclusive by others. However, I have also documented a parallel form of contestation – between localised versions of community, which may be plural but which share a common mode of value-generation, and market and governmental modes of valuation. The first form of local-level contestation, highlighted in the previous chapter, often led to the multiplication of different visions of community, but also occasional to negotiated compromises between different groups. In contrast, market and governmental valuation could often stymie the ability to articulate forms of community *at all*. What Emma's encounter illustrates, then, is the commonplace struggle faced by many of the community organisations I worked with in translating what managers and participants saw as valuable about such groups into the refined forms of value demanded by government assessments or market valuations. Alongside Emma, KAT, Rumi's Cave, C2C radio, Rise Fitness and many others reported similar difficulties both in communicating the value they felt their projects held, and in securing funding and official support that wouldn't stifle the production of such value. In this chapter, I have sought to unpack this process of mistranslation and conflict, focusing on the regeneration of the Collishaw. In the conclusion, I recap the argument made through the thesis, in order to emphasize what is at risk of being lost through such mistranslation.



## 7. Conclusion

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The first two chapters of this thesis traced how community was understood and formed within Kilburn, and touched on why it was valued. In Chapter 1, I argued that the idea of community allowed members to see community groups as spaces defined by the possibility of developing shared understanding and ethical projects, even before such outcomes had become manifest. But I also stressed that the invocation of such spaces relied upon particular forms of fixity, which served to make forms of community recognisable and compelling to others. As such, community groups



were always characterised by a paradoxical mix of inclusion and ambiguity, and exclusion and reification. In Chapter 2, I related this dynamic to questions of cosmopolitanism, race and ethnicity, arguing that in Kilburn the value many locals placed upon inclusion and mixing operated alongside the continued use of categorical terms of difference. If fixed ideas of group boundaries were continually present, however, they nonetheless varied in their degree of fixity and exclusivity. In particular, those invocations of community defined by closer, more attentive forms of connection and cooperation, were paradoxically those defined by the tightest boundaries.

The second two chapters built on this understanding of community to unpack how it might serve as a space where particular relations could be reworked. In doing so, they extended the argument about the value given to community. Chapter 3 explored cases at Rumi's Cave, and C2C Radio, where members were able to develop an ethic of openness to difference. Such openness became possible not because members abandoned the notion of bounded community, but because they had become practiced in continually redefining such boundaries. In turn, this helped shape a view of ethics, where moral goods were likewise continually being redefined. Likewise, Chapter 4 looked at how community could provide the means for transforming relations to oneself. There, I argued that the multiple and ambivalent commitments, perspectives, backgrounds and experiences of the Collishaw street community allowed individuals within this community to imagine and pursue multiple possible future trajectories.

The final two chapters examined various contestations surrounding community. Having illustrated how community was formed in Kilburn, and how it could work to remake relations, these chapters turned to focus on the political conditions for such processes, and particularly on instances where such processes were cut short. Chapter 5 looked at encounters in public space, and suggested that while public space had the potential to mediate relations of fluidity, where subjects developed forms of mutual recognition, more often such spaces were only read in terms of fixity – as inscribed with traces of the non-negotiable presence of others. This rigid reading led to a dilemma where many Kilburn residents avoided public space, and thereby reinforced the perception that such space could not accommodate multiple uses. However, some residents were willing to suspend initial impressions of fixity, and enter into such spaces in order to actively negotiate compromises. This involved a leap of trust where residents took a gamble that forms of mutual recognition would emerge, actively, from their presence in public space. In contrast, Chapter 6 looked at the tension not between different visions of place and community but between the unfolding mode of value generation intrinsic to community projects as a whole, and market and governmental forms of value. The first four chapters progressively developed the argument that the value of community was

emergent, produced through ongoing processes of discovery which could continually transform the shared ethical projects of community. Chapter 6 traced the way in which state and market forms of valuation often served to halt this unfolding process, by demanding clearly reified forms of value instead.

As I noted at the end of Chapter 6, a range of community groups in Kilburn often faced difficulty in securing funding and official support without finding themselves feeling overly constrained by the terms of such support, ending up struggling to pursue the projects which made community valuable in the first instance. community today remains a key term of governance and a broader social ideal, within official policy and media discourses, but there is a clear disconnect between these understandings and the everyday communities traced here. Moreover, at present scholarly accounts of community are not able to offer a sufficient corrective to this. By way of conclusion, then, I trace some of the key implications of the argument I have developed in this thesis.

Firstly, the everyday understanding of community depicted in this thesis is inescapably plural and dynamic. As noted in the introduction, the idea of community articulated within UK government policy is closely tied to ideas of social cohesion. This linking implies that a singular vision of community can provide a wholly inclusive idea. A similar assumption is contained within critiques of community as an overly laden term. Such critics have tended to write as if identifying particularly problematic conceptual baggage associated with the idea of community provides just cause for abandoning its usage, as if it were necessarily a singular idea, exhausted by any problematic connotations.

In contrast this thesis has shown that the very invocation of community is irrevocably tied to forms of fixity, which *necessarily* include some over others. These forms of fixity are open to negotiation, but only in the *second* instance, once people have stepped through the door into the community spaces they delineate. Chapter 5 has emphasized that people read potential community spaces from a distance first – picking up on the ways in which they signal at the presence of different groups prior to entering into such spaces and discovering the open-ended potential they may in fact contain. As such the idea of a universally inclusive community may be alluring but is ultimately a contradiction in terms.

Moreover, Chapter 2 highlighted that categorical notions of difference are likely to remain persistent, interpreted as more or less fixed across different domains, but ultimately valuable because they gesture at interpersonal understandings that otherwise resist communication. Against Baumann's suggestion (1996) that reified understandings of group identity may disappear in the

absence of structural constraints, the ethnography and analysis here has suggested that closure may not only be inescapable but a more or less valued element of imaginaries of community, at least for the group included within its bounds.

When Young (1986; 1990) argues that even the most liberal notions of community entail the denial of difference, or when others have suggested that ideas of community may work to obscure forms of exclusion constructed in terms of race, class or gender (Creed 2006; Amin 2012), the issue at stake is universalism. These critics have collectively challenged the call for close interpersonal ties often imagined to be constitutive of community. What I have argued, however, is that such ties are desirable within certain contexts and instances. Community becomes repressive if we imagine such ties are the only valuable form of sociality. Yet we might also imagine a plurality of communities, where each iteration of community is defined by *different* terms of inclusion and entails *different* degrees of social proximity. Strathern's merographic conception of social totalities allows us to recognise that community need not be an objective or stable entity but a suggestive idea, which gathers people together by allowing them to think and act as if they had something in common, and thus to develop this commonality over time. This thesis has thus focused on the various ways in which people have taken up the idea of community, in order to affect such gathering. In each of the instances I have traced, there has been an element of open-endedness, where community is genuinely seen as containing a diverse range of experiences, lives and possibilities, existing alongside necessary forms of closure and limitation. If community is seen as a contingent, suggestive idea, it necessarily must also have limits – and those limits prompt us to think of community not as all encompassing, but as bounded in particular ways in particular instances, and thus as capable of plurality. To see community as characterised only by close, intersubjective ties, then, misses the fact that the creation of boundaries, and thus the marking of difference, is the necessary countermove to foster such ties. Thus community creates forms of difference even as it fosters coming together.

Such a plurality need not reify group identities. Critics who suggest ideas of community often reify ethnic groups as objective entities (Amit 2002; Alleyne 2002) are typically referring to invocations of community within government or scholarly discourse. On the ground, ethnic labels provide only one means of signalling the fixity which defines the parameters of community, and not necessarily the most compelling one. Indeed, chapters four and six have emphasized that externally imposed definitions of community, whether in calling a group of youth a gang or in suggesting that regeneration projects ought to be defined by the production of recognizable forms of value, such as social mixing, are likely to prove alienating for residents. At risk is the possibility of over defining the meanings given to community – of imposing too much fixity – in a way which crowds out the

prospect for fluidly negotiated understandings and joint commitments to emerge. As Vince put it, in response to the frequent references to a Collishaw gang:

People are too quick to categorize, and yeah, there might be a reason for you to want to use that category, you know, it might be you feel scared or people are acting a certain way, but then you forget that they are people – that there's more there than whatever that category says there is –

Farhan: more than meets the eye?

More than meets the eye. Like these guys, sure they might be out here, you know, and they might cause trouble sometimes, but then they do so much to support each other, you know, like they'll do free barbeques, like everybody puts in, but nobody is counting, or if you need something, you're in trouble, they'll get together and they'll make it happen, you know? Like real support.

If the signification of boundaries is fundamental to the formation of community, then so too is the concomitant ability to remake meaning and relationships within the community spaces such boundaries demarcate. In many instances, over time, boundaries come to be re-signified to encompass new relations. So, for instance, Vince's street community comes to encompass making music, or physical fitness as new spaces of community, which are defined by new forms of inclusion and which open up new ethical horizons.

This dynamism, whereby forms of fixity are open to continual re-negotiation, points to a second key conclusion: that within community spaces value is emergent. Consequently attempts to tightly define the value or purpose of community projects are likely to be unsuccessful. Here, scholarly critics of community as ambiguous miss the point, as it is precisely the enduring capacity for ambiguity within ideas of community that allows them to work to redefine relationships and ethical ends. Likewise, official attempts to measure, monitor and assess the value of community often struggle to capture this emergent value.

The gap between official and local valuations of community was illustrated most clearly in Chapter 6, but the emergent nature of local value pervades the ethnography here – manifesting in Emma's attitude towards social work at the Salvation Army, the evolving notion of ethical goods amongst Rumi's attendees or C2C DJs, or the ways in which the Collishaw street community was able to support members to pursue multiple ethical trajectories at once. In such instances, community represented a venue for forming joint commitments, but the ends of such commitments only

became known iteratively, through participation in community. What results is a form of emergent value production, which operates more closely to people's needs, lives and idiosyncrasies.

In the introduction, I followed Arendt's argument (1958) that intersubjective understanding between individuals necessarily requires sustained close attention capable of going beyond a linguistic register. But Arendt's concern was not simply with understanding, but with joint *action* – the question of how people might work together to identify and realize notions of the common good. Arendt's student, Richard Sennett (2013) describes this process eloquently when he refers to "cooperation as a craft". Sennett shares with Ingold (2000; 2013) the conviction that craft work attunes people more closely to the affordances of the materials with which they work. When these materials are *other people*, Sennett's argument is that the shared goals which emerge from craft-like cooperation are much more attuned to the particularities of peoples' lives. The cases of Rumi's, C2C and the Collishaw street community in particular emphasize how community allows ethical goods to emerge over time, particularly in instances where people would have struggled or been fundamentally unable to identify and commit to such goods upfront.

Such cases suggest that community often matters more as a realm of (iterative, unfolding) *value discovery* rather than *value generation*. Demanding that participants be upfront about the value they see in community and make clear personal commitments to pursuing such values is likely to alienate rather than empower them. This suggests that the turn towards community as a mode of governance has been misguided, insofar as it sees communities as necessarily being able to provide *specific* goods which were once the remit of the state. Moreover, much of the policy turn towards community has been taken with a view towards building stronger ties between people from diverse backgrounds. The accounts here suggest, however, that the progressive emergence of mutual understanding between strangers parallels that of value. As such demands for community programmes to demonstrate their potential for building ties, upfront, are likely to stymie the very ability of such projects to achieve such ends, ossifying the terms of inclusion and the joint projects, whose *shaping* may draw people together.

The same might be said of academic approaches which seek to uncover any enduringly stable definition of community. The more general definition of community I have sought to trace here is a processual one, whereby community entails the ongoing balance of forms of fixity and fluidity, and thereby creates space for the ongoing renegotiation of relationships and meaning. This process will inevitably play out differently in different contexts. Those scholars who chart a decline of community, then, are in fact charting a decline of historically particular forms, such as local volunteering or participation in religious groups, which have long been associated with the idea of

community in the Euro-American tradition. As argued, these forms do not exhaust the idea of community, which endures as a suggestive idea that common understanding and joint commitments *might* be formed. Even for those in Kilburn who did not actively participate in local community groups, the question of how such understandings and commitments might emerge in particular ways remained an important one. The credibility of the very notion of community – of connection and joint commitment – might itself be more or less suspect, but this remains a different question than that of the prevalence of particular community forms.

The fact that the meaning of community is so often fixed, or presumed to be fixed, by scholars and policymakers alike leads to a third conclusion: that contestation is an inevitable part of community. The ability to invoke community is tied to the ability to remake meaning and relationships. Yet such meanings and relationships are not conjured out of thin air, but already exist within the world, enrolled within particular social projects, and structured through the materiality and distribution of meanings within the city and beyond (Amin 2012). As such this remaking does not simply produce new forms of understanding and joint commitment from scratch, but entails the appropriation of existing meanings and relations in order to reshape them. The account of street youth given in Chapters 4-5 suggests that when this broader order feels overdetermined, local appropriations are likely to be more forcible, and may risk crowding out other local uses. The presence of youth in public spaces is not directed at alienating neighbours, but at forcibly (re)articulating a sense of belonging and control within spaces and lives marked by dispossession. As scholarly commentary on the 2011 London riots has suggested, there is a need to see localised conflicts, such as the looting of stores, as expressing a range of political aspirations and frustrations, and as contesting broader relations of power, even if such conflict does not appear to fit within a conventional political register (Dillon and Fanning 2015; Millington 2016; Till 2013). If we value community's ability to form shared understanding and commitments, then, we also need to leave space for forms of community to contest the symbolic and material environments in which they are inscribed.

Importantly, here, I have traced two different forms of contestation. Within public space, contestation often takes the form of a tug-of-war between what may appear to be mutually exclusive uses of such space. Yet I have also argued that, if only occasionally, people are able to challenge this image of mutual exclusivity by making their presence known, and prompting others to recognise this presence and accommodate it, even as they seek to extend such recognition and accommodation back to those they wish to make claims on. In other words, locally situated interactions can open up ostensibly fixed relations into more fluid negotiations.

In contrast, market and government forms of valuation often shut down this very process of negotiation, by seeking not only to establish fixed values for places and forms of community, but by then inscribing this fixity within a wide range of relations, making it increasingly harder to contest. It is one thing to make a claim on a handful of others using public space for a football game or Eid prayers. It is quite another to have to challenge the idea that a newly built flat should be marketed towards renters, when doing so would involve challenging the estate agent, a range of buyers and investors, the local council and a range of tenants, each with their own investment in this fixed definition of value. Paradoxically, the increasing recognition of community within government policy risks reproducing this second form of contestation much more widely, and limiting the ability of local communities to pursue emergent projects of value discovery in favour of seeing community as something able to produce a fixed set of outcomes.

Finally, then, this points to the need for scholars and commentators on community to take an ethnographic stance, where they pay careful attention to the ways in which articulations of community play out and are contested within particular locales. The ability of community to open up spaces of fluidity is necessarily deeply localised – though not always within geographic space. On one hand, as discussed, emergent understandings and joint commitments require sustained co-presence – with the need for such presence being proportional to the extent of understanding and joint commitment pursued. Such co-presence is little more than the sum of small everyday interactions. On the other hand, the ability for particular signs to signal the potential for inclusion or exclusion within particular notions of community, as well as the ability to contest the meaning of these signs, is grounded in everyday experiences. In Chapter 5, when residents responded to the DIY image of the Collishaw Hub, or the well-produced covers of the Connect, as giving off a middle-class vibe, such readings were only possible because they lived in an area – and a city – where such aesthetics occupied the peripheries of everyday life, visible enough to be familiar but not familiar enough to be welcoming. Likewise, in Chapter 4 the reason Rise Fitness is able to deter some youth from the vices of the street is because Liron and his colleagues are fluent in the language of the street, recognizing how it provides particular forms of dignity and recognition. By appropriating this language within their fitness programme they re-situated the promise of dignity and recognition within it, and made a convincing argument, resonant with local experiences, that these goods might emerge in other ways.

This was put most clearly to me during an afternoon spent in Daniel's fruit, vegetable and electronics store, where he and I chatted as various familiar faces drifted in and out of the conversation. At one point, Mindy, a close friend of Daniel swung by. With Daniel preoccupied in another conversation,

she and I fell to discussing the regeneration of the estate. I mentioned how I had noticed that many of the charity-workers and council officials appeared to be sincerely well- intentioned but seemed to nonetheless get things wrong. She countered:

I only agree with you part way there. Because they might want to help, but they don't live here. The council's policies and all these plans are made by do-gooders who live far away in nice homes.

F: And they don't know how to listen to the people who do live here?

No. They want to change things but they don't live here so they don't understand what they're doing. Like bringing in all these additional people into the area – they're pushing out any spaces for kids to use – there isn't going to be anywhere left for kids to go, and so they're going to start getting out.

F: Getting out?

Spending their time on the streets, getting involved with crime – it happened 10 years ago, and it's going to happen again.

Amanda's comments resonate with other accounts, such as Evylin's in chapter six, where she emphasizes that the value of green space is often less in whether it is used, and more about the fact that it is often taken locally to indicate possibility, with its physical openness transposed onto an idea of social openness. Interventions in residual-seeming green space risk overlooking this local construction of meaning, and thus unintentionally producing a sense of limitation, fear and ultimately resentment. Feelings of possibility and limitation for living a good life in the city, and for connecting with others, often turn on such small details, inscribed in localised patterns of signification and interpretation.

This suggests a much greater need to take an ethnographic stance, both within scholarly understandings of community and within the shaping of policy. This thesis has been a brief foray into what such a stance might reveal about contemporary understandings of community, beyond the busy academic and policy debate which surrounds it. It has presented a handful of stories, selected from a much wider mix within Kilburn, not with intent to capture this complex landscape in a stable portrait but in order to draw out some of the dynamics which animate it. In doing so, my hope is that we might arrive at a more careful understanding of community, as a social form capable of cultivating rich inter-personal ties and shared ethical projects, but also as something always partially closed and subject to continual contestation. Beyond dire pronouncements that today we are all



“bowling alone”, I hope to have shown how an ethnographic stance might reveal an ideal of community for and of 21<sup>st</sup> century London.

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