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# The Politics of the Neighbour

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the neighbour is a neglected figure in public debate and political theory. Whereas the spatial concept of ‘neighbourhood’ has long been the focus of geographical research, its underpinning concept of the neighbour has received less scrutiny. This paper seeks to address that gap. It takes its cue from recent British policy debates about neighbourhood renewal and the ‘Big Society’. However, it is not concerned with urban policy in a conventional sense, but with the nature of the neighbour relation and of the ethics and politics of neighbours and neighbouring. The explores these themes through a discussion of debates in political theology about the meaning of the Biblical injunction to ‘love thy neighbour’, the etymological significance of proximity to the idea of neighbour, and the importance of radical ambiguity, unknowability and fragility in neighbourly relations. These issues are thrown into relief by *The Neighbour*, a short story by Naim Kattan, that records the fleeting encounters across difference that often seem to constitute neighbourliness in urban settings. The paper ends by using Kattan’s story to reflect on the apparently opposed understandings of the neighbour to be found in the work of Levinas and Žižek.

## Introduction

The Conservative-Liberal coalition government in Britain, formed in the wake of an inconclusive general election in May 2010, has set itself the ambition to ‘roll-back’ the state to a degree never achieved by its 1980s predecessor during the premiership of that arch-anti-statist, Margaret Thatcher. The planned assault on the institutional presence of state institutions in British life is almost unprecedented. According to most commentators, one has to go back to the 1920s and the ‘Geddes axe’ to find retrenchment on a comparable scale. For many on the right the cuts are not a regrettable necessity occasioned by the cost of the public bail-out of the banking system, but a positive opportunity to make a once in a generation shift in the scale and scope of the state. Alongside the proposals for fiscal tightening, Prime Minister David Cameron says that he is seeking to reconstitute the relationship between the individual, the state and society.

Delivering the Hugo Young Lecture in November 2009, Cameron, then Leader of the Opposition, sought to articulate his vision of the 'Big Society'. Couched explicitly as an alternative and counter to 'big government', the Big Society will be one in which 'families, individuals, charities and communities come together to solve problems'. According to Cameron, to bring this about, power and control will need to be redistributed 'from the central state and its agencies to individuals and local communities'. This decentralisation of power and control will supposedly unleash a flowering of innovation and social action, involving social entrepreneurs, community activists, and eventually 'the majority of the population'. For Cameron, the development of the Big Society (assuming it could be brought about) could reverse the erosion by the state of an earlier ethos of mutuality:

When the welfare state was created, there was an ethos, a culture to our country – of self-improvement, of mutuality, of responsibility. You could see it in the collective culture of respect for work, parenting and aspiration. You could see it in the vibrant panoply of civic organisations that meant communities looked out for one another; the co-operatives, the friendly societies, the building societies, the guilds. But as the state continued to expand, it took away from people more and more things that they should and could be doing for themselves, their families and their neighbours. Human kindness, generosity and imagination are steadily being squeezed out by the work of the state. The result is that today, the character of our society - and indeed the character of some people themselves, as actors in society, is changing. (Cameron, 2009)

Critics have pointed out that corporate capitalism and the atomising logics of neo-liberalism may be rather more culpable for such disempowerment than the state. Either way, stories that testify to an apparent decline in neighbourliness appear in the media with depressing frequency. One week after Cameron had delivered the Hugo Young Lecture, *The Guardian* newspaper, Young's long-time employer prior to his death in 2003, carried the story of an inquest into a tragic accident. The report seemed to reinforce Cameron's argument about a lost ethos of mutual aid:

When Mark Wells shouted, "Help me, help me, please!" in the middle of the night, neighbours were too frightened to intervene. One neighbour heard his "pleading" tone, but his friend dismissed it as a drunk. In the morning, Wells was dead: he suffocated after falling head-first into a storm drain metres from his home in Newport on the Isle of Wight. The coroner did not blame residents for ignoring the 32-year-old's cries, saying it

was “a sad reflection on society that people were too scared to venture out of their homes when they heard screams”.<sup>1</sup>

From debilitating problems with noisy neighbours to the tabloid construct of the ‘neighbour from hell’, similar stories abound. They feed the ‘broken society’ society script that the Conservatives deployed in the run-up to the 2010 election in the UK. There are also many examples that call that script into question, including innovative community projects such as the Southwark Circle in London, which puts members in need of assistance with everyday tasks in touch with neighbours who can help.<sup>2</sup>

Both Wells’ frightened fellow citizens and the mutually supportive community whose passing is mourned by Cameron (even though it seems to be alive and well in Southwark), draw attention to a neglected figure in public debate and political theory. Whereas the ‘neighbourhood’ has long been an object of political interest and more recently of intensive policy intervention, the figure of the *neighbour* her- or himself has received much less scrutiny. This paper seeks to address that gap. It takes its cue from the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal produced by Tony Blair’s New Labour government in 2001. However, my arguments are not concerned with urban policy in a conventional sense, but with the nature of the neighbour relation and of the ethics and politics of neighbours and neighbouring. This exploration takes in debates in political theology about the meaning of the Biblical injunction to ‘love thy neighbour’, the etymological significance of proximity to the idea of neighbour, and the importance of radical ambiguity, unknowability and fragility in neighbourly relations. These issues are thrown into relief by *The Neighbour*, a short story by Naim Kattan, that records the fleeting encounters across difference that often seem to constitute neighbourliness in urban settings. The paper ends by using Kattan’s story to reflect on the apparently opposed understandings of the neighbour to be found in the work of Levinas and Žižek.

## **From the neighbourhood to the neighbour**

A decade before Cameron became Prime Minister, the British state, in the guise of New Labour, had placed the neighbourhood at the heart of much of its urban and social policy. In January 2001 the Social Exclusion Unit, based in the Cabinet Office, published *A New Commitment to*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/nov/19/good-samaritan-fear-of-helping>, accessed 9 October 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.southwarkcircle.org.uk/>, accessed 9 October 2011.

*Neighbourhood Renewal*, setting out a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR) for England. In the words of then Prime Minister Tony Blair in the Foreword to the document, the aim of the strategy was to work towards the vision of ‘a nation where no-one is seriously disadvantaged by where they live’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: 6). This vision was to be achieved ‘within 10-20 years’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: 8), in other words by 2011.

The idea that people can be made worse off than they would otherwise be by virtue of where they live is the cornerstone of area-based social policies. It seems intuitively to make sense that if someone lives in a deprived neighbourhood they will have poorer life chances than they would have if they lived elsewhere. However, the relationship is not straightforward. Are residents deprived because they live in deprived areas, or do areas show up as deprived because they are home to deprived households? As one of the official evaluations of the NSNR pointed out, “there has been a long-standing debate about whether place matters and, in particular, whether neighbourhood conditions have an additional or independent impact on people’s life chances” (ECOTEC Research and Consulting, 2010: 109). As the ECOTEC report notes, drawing on Lupton (2003) and Buck (2001), a variety of mechanisms have been proposed to account for the effects of place on individuals, leading to the formulation of different models:

[an] institutional model, relating to the quality of local resources and services; [a] physical model, relating to isolation and barriers to opportunity; [an] epidemic model, relating to peer influence on behaviour; [an] expectations model, relating to role models on aspiration and achievement; [and a] collective socialisation model, relating to the impact of adult behaviour on children. However, the evidence from the literature on the validity of these models remains mixed often with different conclusions drawn depending on the theoretical and methodological approach adopted to neighbourhood research. (ECOTEC Research and Consulting, 2010: 109)

As the NSNR points out (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: 13), ‘neighbourhood’ is an inexact designation, which is one reason why the evidence of neighbourhood effects on individuals is not completely clear-cut (ECOTEC Research and Consulting, 2010: 109). Nevertheless, the NSNR was predicated on the assumption that neighbourhoods that go into social and economic decline can experience a number of ‘vicious cycles’ leading to combined negative consequences that exacerbate the impact of disadvantage on individuals and households. Such effects include reputational impacts, lack of access to social networks, additional strains on public services,

reduced demand for private sector businesses, and population decline (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: 17-18).

The government's understanding that an area-based policy was necessary to address these cumulative place-effects led to the a succession of policy initiatives in the wake of the publication of the NSNR. These included the establishment of a national Neighbourhood Renewal Unit in 2001 based what was then the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), subsequently the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), and, from 2006, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), which is now the main locus of the Conservative's 'Big Society' drive.

Other New Labour initiatives linked to the NSNR were the establishment of a Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF), the introduction of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) at the local authority district level, which allocated the NRF, and neighbourhood management schemes. Community Empowerment Networks (CENS) were established to encourage the involvement of voluntary and community groups. The focus of much of this activity was to be the most deprived 10% of electoral wards as indicated by Government's Indices of Deprivation, places which were found to be heavily concentrated in 88 local authority districts, approximately one quarter of the total.

This notable surge in area-based policy-making served to constitute 'the neighbourhood' as a key object of government. Despite the difficulties of defining them, neighbourhoods were to be renewed, regenerated, subjected to joined-up government and in the process given hope, improved economic opportunities, a stronger social fabric, a better environment and the expectation of a brighter future. Yet within all these governmental discourses, policy initiatives and considerable on-the-ground activity, little explicit mention was made of the seemingly more fundamental idea of the neighbour.

Perhaps tellingly, the only instance of the words 'neighbour' or 'neighbours' in the NSNR, appears in the contact details for the City of Manchester's 'Neighbour Nuisance Strategy Team'. The document prefers the seemingly less loaded term 'resident(s)', which is used 67 times. A similar pattern appears in the ECOTEC evaluation of the NSNR, where the term 'neighbour(s)' appears only once and the term 'resident(s)' 280 times. At the same time, the figure of the

neighbour haunts these documents and numerous others relating to neighbourhood-focused social policy. For example, several of the arguments in favour of area-based policy reviewed by the ECOTEC report related to question of socialisation, peer influence and the effect of role models (positive or negative). In addition the NSNR put great emphasis on engaging members of the community in the process of regeneration and renewal, including at the level of the neighbourhood. There would be 'genuine opportunities for residents to get involved in designing local strategies' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: 31) and a Community Empowerment Fund would provide resources to 'helps residents participate' in the new Local Strategic Partnerships (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: 51).

The NSNR was careful not to 'blame the victim' by attributing severe levels of deprivation at the neighbourhood level to the shortcomings of residents themselves. Problem neighbourhoods were not seen officially as the product of problem neighbours, although the concept of a 'cycle of deprivation' can all too easily become aligned with that kind of logic as was seen in debates about the notion of a 'culture of poverty' in the 1960s (Harvey and Reed, 1996; Lewis, 1963, 1969; Roach and Gursslin, 1967). However, other social policy initiatives undertaken by New Labour, which were strongly supported by Tony Blair and the then Home Secretary David Blunkett, did target 'nuisance neighbours' quite forcefully. These included the development of novel legal instruments, such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders and the propagation of the so-called 'Respect Agenda' championed by the Blair in particular. At this harsher end of the social policy spectrum the figure of the neighbour appears as a source of trouble rather than a resource for renewal. In 2003 Frank Field, a Labour Member of Parliament, but recently appointed as David Cameron's 'Poverty Tsar', published *Neighbours from Hell: the Politics of Behaviour*, in which he sets out the case for strong state intervention in individual behaviour. Professional-looking websites including 'Neighbours from Hell in Britain' ([www.nfh.org.uk](http://www.nfh.org.uk)) and Problem Neighbours ([www.problemneighbours.co.uk](http://www.problemneighbours.co.uk)) have been established by private individuals to provide help and advice on coping with anti-social neighbours.

In British public discourse during the 2000s it seems that while 'neighbourhoods' were seen as sites of potential renewal through action by the state in partnership with 'communities' and 'residents', '*neighbours*' were more likely to be cast as problems or nuisances. Despite this intense anxiety about neighbourliness (or the lack of it) the neighbour remained an under-theorised figure in social and political thought (Stokoe and Wallwork, 2003). This lack of attention to the

idea of the neighbour matters, not least because it turns out to be a more complex concept than it might appear at first sight.

## Love thy neighbour?

In the summer of 2001, riots took place in three northern English cities involving violence that was widely regarded as at least partly racially motivated. In the wake of these events the government commissioned Ted Cante, then the Chief Executive of Nottingham City Council to investigate and report on the causes of the disturbances and their future prevention. The Cante Report on *Community Cohesion* was published in December 2001. Among many practical recommendations, it enjoined Britons to be more properly neighbourly:

It is unfashionable to speak of loving one's neighbour, but unless our society can move at least to a position where we can respect our neighbours as fellow human beings, we shall fail in our attempts to create a harmonious society in which conditions have changed so radically in the last 40 years. (Community Cohesion Review Team, 2001)

Fashionable or not, the reference to 'loving one's neighbour' is certainly unusual in contemporary official discourse. Even in secular Britain it seems likely that most readers of the report would have been alert to the religious roots of the phrase, though for some it may have more readily called to mind the controversial 1970s television sitcom *Love Thy Neighbour* which focused on the tension and mutual intolerance between a white couple and their black neighbours.

Of course the programme's title was itself an ironic reference to the Old Testament injunction to 'love thy neighbour as thyself'. Now Christianity by no means has a monopoly on ethical thinking about neighbourliness. As Ajay Skaria demonstrates, during the struggle for Indian independence the institution of the Gandhian ashram was based on a distinctive understanding of the neighbour grounded in the Hindu concept of *ahimsa*. For Gandhi, 'neighbors shared nothing less (or more) than the kinship of all life; beyond this the neighbor was marked by an absolute difference that could not be overcome by shared history or culture' (Skaria, 2002: 957)<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, in the Western tradition much of our understanding of neighbours and

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Mustapha Pasha for drawing Skaria's paper to my attention.



neighbourliness comes from the Christian Bible. The instruction to 'love thy neighbour' is sometimes known as the Great Commandment. It makes its first appearance in Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18:

18 Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

The implication here, is that the category 'neighbour' is restricted to 'the children of thy people,' which is to say, fellow Israelites. This has been called the 'particularist' idea of the neighbour.

By the time we get to the New Testament, this particularist view appears to have been replaced, or at least supplemented, by a more universalist understanding. The two key New Testament passages are the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5 and the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10. In the Sermon on the Mount, which is often seen as Jesus' commentary on the ten commandments, we read:

43 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

45 That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

In fact the commandment to 'hate thine enemy' does not appear in Leviticus. As Kenneth Reinhard points out,

Jesus cites Leviticus 19:18, the commandment to "love thy neighbour as thyself," but adds to it something not present in the Hebrew Bible, a directive to "hate thine enemy," in order to make it seem that he is undoing a piece of legal vengeance and, in proclaiming Love your enemies, is asserting its opposite. In fact, the biblical passage in Leviticus Jesus refers to has just specifically forbidden vengeance. Jesus acts here as a sovereign, in declaring an exception ("love your enemies") to a law ("hate thine enemy") that he himself has confected; Jesus's commandment to love the enemy must be perceived as not merely new, but antimonian, in violation of preexisting legal code. Jesus's act of

suspending a law that did not previously exist is not merely his exercise of the sovereign prerogative of exception, but an act of political-theological creation *ex nihilo*, truly a polemical “miracle.” (Reinhard, 2005: 18)

According to Morton Smith, Matthew 5:43 ‘has long puzzled historians of Judaism’ because, unlike the other five maxims in the Sermon on the Mount, there is no Old Testament source for the injunction to ‘hate thine enemy’ (Smith, 1952: 71). Smith argues that the word ‘heard’ in Matthew 5:43 is significant. Jesus’ statement that ‘ye have *heard* that it hath been said’ indicates, according to Smith, that ‘both Jesus and his audience probably derived most of their knowledge of the Old Testament from hearing it read in services’. Smith infers that a liturgical text, used in Galilee at the time of Jesus but now lost, probably ‘glossed the words “thou shalt love thy neighbour” with the words, “and hate thine enemy”.’

Jesus’ ‘polemical miracle’ appears to move the commandment away from the particularist reading in Leviticus (in which ‘thy neighbours’ are understood as ‘the children of thy people’) towards the universalist definition that Christian tradition holds to be the import of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Like the injunction to ‘love thy neighbour’ the idea of the Good Samaritan has gained a popular currency far beyond the ranks of the religiously observant. For example, in the previously cited newspaper report of the man who died after falling into a drain outside his house, the reporter, reflecting on the implications of the coroner’s comments, wrote that ‘we seem to believe that any modern good Samaritan will be stabbed if they don’t walk on by’.

Certainly the parable contains a powerful message. In chapter 10 of the book of Luke, we find Jesus questioned by a scholar, whom he answers by reiterating the Great Commandment:

25 And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

26 He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?

27 And he answering said,

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God

with all thy heart, and with all thy soul,

and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind;

and thy neighbour as thyself.

28 And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.

(Luke 10:25-28)

This response fails to satisfy the questioner who asks Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ (Luke 10:29). Jesus responds with the famous parable:

30 And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

31 And by chance there came down a certain priest that way; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

32 And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

33 But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

34 And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

35 And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him: and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

36 Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

37 And he said, He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.

(Luke 10:30-37)

By identifying the Samaritan – a non-Jew – as a neighbour whom we should love as ourselves, Jesus is widely understood to have turned the category of ‘neighbour’ from a particular one (‘the children of thy people’, people like us) to a universal one encompassing, at least in principle, all of humanity. Peter Winch endorses the universalist definition in a textual and philosophical commentary on the parable of the Good Samaritan, entitled ‘Who is my Neighbour’ (Winch, 1987). Winch says that ‘neighbour in this context might be rendered as *fellow* human being’ and that the commandment to love thy neighbour as thyself ‘is clearly to be taken as applicable to all human beings’ (Winch, 1987: 155, emphasis original). Winch’s interpretation relies on the Samaritan being seen as Other, and as an outsider. I would venture that this reading is the

conventional one for most Christians and has become a central part of Christian teaching: the commandment to ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’ is treated as an injunction to love all human beings equally.

However this reading is contested by Hebrew scholars and Jewish theologians. Berel Dov Lerner (2002), for example, criticises Winch’s arguments and claims that the ‘standard Rabbinic understanding of the Hebrew *re’a* (neighbour) in Leviticus 19:18 is “fellow Israelite”’ (Lerner, 2002: 153), and that Jesus’ discussion with the lawyer concerning the parable of the Good Samaritan should be seen as a debate about whom should be recognised as Jewish. Lerner argues that there are ‘strong textual foundations’ for interpreting *re’a* in particularist terms. He cites Deuteronomy 15:2-3 which ‘explicitly contrasts obligations due to a *re’a* to those due a *nokhri* (“stranger”)’ (Lerner, 2002: 153), implying that the category of *re’a* cannot therefore extend to the whole of humanity. Lerner suggests that Jesus, as a Jew, would have shared this particularist understanding. But what of the Samaritan? Is not the role of the Samaritan in the parable precisely to extend the meaning of *re’a* to include non-Jews? For sure, that is how the parable is typically read (and taught) today, as Lerner appears to acknowledge:

At this point it might seem that Jesus is determined to demolish the underlying particularist foundations of the scholar’s [i.e. the lawyer’s] question. The scholar is only concerned with Jews, while Jesus forces him to open his eyes to the universal love deserved by all human beings. (Lerner, 2002: 154)

‘However,’ Lerner continues, ‘another bit of Jewish context makes this interpretation unlikely’ (2002: 154). Lerner argues that Winch is mistaken in likening the relationship between the Samaritan and the Jew to that between a Palestinian Arab and an Israeli (Winch, 1987: 156). Why? Because,

far from constituting clearly distinct ‘races’, nations or religious communities, each group, the Jews and the Samaritans, identifies itself as constituting the most legitimate spiritual and historical continuation of biblical Israel. More importantly, each party grudgingly recognizes the partial legitimacy of the other’s claims. (Lerner, 2002: 154)

For Lerner, this means that ‘Jesus is not talking about universal ethical duties, but rather about duties between members of a common community’ (Lerner, 2002: 156). A more detailed analysis

of this argument is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that there must at least be some doubt about the validity of using the parable of the Good Samaritan to justify a universalist reading of the central Christian instruction to 'love thy neighbour as thyself'.

The Biblical idea of the neighbour thus operates in relation to ethno-national belonging. This applies whether we follow Winch, who assumes the Samaritan is ethnically other, or Lerner, who argues that Jesus was encouraging his interlocutor to see the Samaritan as a member of the Jewish community, whereas 'the priest and the Levite [...] denied their Jewish identity by refusing to help a fellow Jew' (Lerner, 2002: 156).

## **Locating the neighbour**

Although it is impossible to eschew the Biblical roots of Western understandings of what it means to be a neighbour, both the universalist and the particularist interpretations present problems. The universalist injunction to love all of fellow humanity equally would result, Lerner argues, in such a utopian extension of the social contract as to 'completely undermine any expectation of its actual observance' (2002: 156). On the other hand the particularist interpretation risks limiting neighbour-love only to the in-group – to those who are already pre-defined as part of the nation, tribe or other political community.

An alternative approach, which casts the neighbour as a more ambiguous and more interesting political figure, is to focus on the Anglo-Saxon origins of the term 'neighbour'. The word has one of the longest pedigrees in the English languages. The OED lists over 250 variant spellings between the original Old English and the present day: not bad for a word with nine letters. The word comes from the Old English 'neahgebur' meaning 'nigh-dweller'. Cognate words for 'neah' ('nigh' or 'near') can be found in all Germanic languages. 'Gebur', which means dweller, husbandman, farmer or countryman, is derived from 'búr' meaning 'dwelling, house, cottage or bower', which in turn comes from the verb root 'bu', to dwell. Related words include the German 'bauen', to build (but also to cultivate), the Dutch 'boer' (farmer), and the English 'boor', meaning peasant or rustic and, by association, ill-mannered.

By implication, therefore, the word ‘neighbour’ initially connoted no particular social relationship beyond dwelling nearby, and not necessarily very nearby; ‘near’ was originally the comparative form of ‘nigh’ (near = nigher), ‘next’ (‘nighest’) was the superlative (nigh-near-next).

In one of the few book-length empirical studies of neighbours (as opposed to neighbourhoods), the sociologist Philip Abrams wrote that the idea of the neighbour is ‘neither universal nor specific; it is framed by propinquity and in general terms by little else’. He went on,

Being a neighbour, then, is a matter of location. Unfortunately, in common use the term has become saturated with emotional and normative connotations which obscure this simple truth. In seeking a definition of neighbours and neighbourhoods *one must begin by eliminating these prescriptive moral and evaluative overtones* that have come to surround everyday notions of neighbouring and neighbourliness. Neighbours are quite simply people who live near one another. Living near to others is a distinctive context for relationships – nothing more. And the most obvious special feature of nearness as a setting for relationships is the exceptional cheapness with which it can permit good relationships and the exceptional costs it can attach to bad ones. (Bulmer, 1986: 18 emphasis added)

Abrams’ own study of neighbouring focused mainly, though not exclusively, on urban areas. However, the Anglo-Saxon etymology of ‘neighbour’ speaks to the rural origins of the concept, as Lewis Mumford noted in the *The City in History*. ‘Before the city came into existence’ wrote Mumford, ‘the village had brought forth the neighbour: he who lives near at hand, within calling distance, sharing the crisis of life, watching over the dying, weeping sympathetically for the dead, rejoicing at a marriage feast or at a childbirth’ (Mumford, 1966: 24). This characterisation of the village neighbour is intriguingly gendered – although Mumford uses the masculine pronoun, the activities of neighbouring that he mentions are ones that we might assume to have been undertaken typically by women.

Mumford’s account suggests that the affective connotations to which Abrams objects are not to be easily shaken off. Their roots are deep: Mumford cites the early Greek poet Hesiod to lend historical (and pre-Christian) force to his argument. And given the pervasiveness of the Christian ethic of the neighbour, it may be that Abrams’ efforts to strip away the emotional resonances of the term are doomed, though he is not alone in his criticisms. Sigmund Freud (1961) was

famously antagonistic towards the universal prescription to ‘love thy neighbour’, as Ernest Wallwork explains:

What Freud opposes in the love commandment is the promiscuity that appears to be involved in the Christian attempt to extend love of neighbor to all persons alike, including strangers and enemies. His incautious use of language in [*Civilization and its Discontents*] is, in fact, partly a product of his animus against Christianity, an animus that is triggered in this context by Christianity’s claim to cultural superiority over Judaism on the basis of its universal reading of the neighbor as every person in the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Freud is determined to puncture this grandiose assertion of the superiority of Christianity. “Reciprocity” in the covenantal sense, not universal love, is the key to Freud’s own ethic. The centrality of reciprocity explains why for Freud it is unfair to disregard special obligations to family and friends by treating strangers on a par with them. In this ethic, too, reciprocity determines responsibilities to strangers, but it is significantly qualified by nonmaleficence, as well as by principles like promise-keeping. (Wallwork, 1982: 266)

We might follow Freud in rejecting the extension of the concept of the neighbour to all persons including strangers and enemies, but nevertheless recognise that the idea of the neighbour as near-dweller has the potential (not always realised) to draw us into close relationship with persons outside our immediate networks of family and friends. Those relationships, arising from the particular pressures and opportunities of propinquity, need not be loving of course, but that is precisely the point. By freeing us from the strictures of the Great Commandment, the etymological route/root, with its emphasis on proximity, opens up the concept of the neighbour, and by extension the neighbourhood, to ambiguity, difference and agonism.

From this perspective, we know nothing of our neighbours a priori. In highly urbanized societies the neighbour as near-dweller is typically neither a friend, nor a stranger, nor an enemy, but an unknown – one whom we approach somewhat warily. Indeed *wariness* is perhaps the principal affective trope involved in neighbouring today. At the outset we do not know if our neighbours are like or unlike us, whether we will be inclined to love or hate them, how they will feel about us, or how far they will be knowable at all. The imperative to act that we find in the parable of the Good Samaritan, stems from the suffering of the traveller who has been attacked. Yet is not

the usual first response in such situations to *enquire* and *listen* rather than to *act*? “Are you alright?” we might ask, “Would you like some help?”.

## **The ambiguous neighbour**

One implication of this approach is that it permits a distinction between the idea of ‘neighbourhood’ and the idea of ‘community’. ‘Community’ is one of the most contentious and widely debated concepts in the social sciences, but most commentaries acknowledge a contrast between geographically defined communities based on residence or co-presence in space, and communities of interest, affinity, ethnicity or identity. However, in everyday usage these two notions are frequently conflated, as the OED reveals when it defines ‘community’ as, among other possibilities, ‘a body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity’. Unlike the notion of the neighbour, ‘community’ implies commonality. The Latin root is ‘communis’ which may derive either from ‘com + unus’ (= together one) or ‘com + munis’ (=bound together in the sense of being under obligation). In either case the emphasis is on being together, and thus always already in relation with one another. As we have seen, the origins of ‘neighbour’ carry no such connotations of a common bond.

By presuming a certain commonality or shared understanding, the notion of community seems to assume mutual knowledge. There is always the temptation is to ‘speak for’ rather than to ‘listen to’. By contrast the initially unknown neighbour is potentially a destabilising and ambiguous figure, which encompasses difference and allows for radical otherness, albeit in indeterminate ways. Neighbours after all can be hostile as well as friendly, indifferent as well as interested, passive as well as active.

Musicologist Ian Biddle has argued that the ambiguity of the neighbour arises precisely at the intersection between the sphere of private autonomy evoked by the idea of the ‘near-dweller’ and the communal/public sphere. In his striking account of the anxiety associated with living with noise from next door, Biddle draws attention to the protean character of the urban neighbour. ‘The neighbour’, he writes,

is a figure that has proven itself able to operate variously as a cipher (holding together in a singular instance both the devastating ambiguity of community and its fullest and most



enticing promise (of succour, mutuality, reciprocity)), and as a representation both of the possibility of ethical friendship and of the probability of hostility in equal measure.

(Biddle, 2007: par.18)

Biddle several times stresses the distinctively urban character of this ambiguity. The city brings unknown neighbours into particularly close proximity, and because noise is no respecter of walls we are rendered vulnerable within our dwellings: “when the neighbour speaks, makes noise or plays music behind the wall, that wall seems to fall, to reveal a malevolent intent, to open out and to fail to hold safe, to fail to protect” (Biddle, 2007: par.18). Biddle sees this as example deterritorialisation in the Deleuzian sense, with sound flowing through the boundaries between nominally discrete units.

Biddle’s dystopian view of urban neighbouring counsels against replacing the nostalgia for community with an equally nostalgic understanding of the neighbour as the modern incarnation of a self-effacing English yeoman, as my emphasis here on etymological origins may tempt us to do. While it is certainly important not to burden the figure of the neighbour with political expectations that it cannot fulfil, there are other approaches to neighbouring as an everyday practice that offer a rather less bleak reading than Biddle’s. The ambiguity that Biddle highlights need not be construed in starkly binary terms as a choice between the promise of fully reciprocal community and sturdily autonomous privacy. Ambiguity here can equally be understood in terms of a range of more finely shaded uncertainties.

A good illustration of such nuanced ambiguity is provided in *The Neighbour*, a short story by the Canadian novelist and essayist Naim Kattan. Kattan was born into a Jewish family in Baghdad in 1928. He studied law at the University of Baghdad before moving to France to study literature at the Sorbonne. He emigrated to Canada in 1954, where he lives in Montréal and writes in French. Kattan’s biography suggests he is better placed than most to testify to the experience of migration, exile, and hybrid transnationalism.

*The Neighbour* was originally published in 1976 under the title ‘Le Voisin’, appearing in translation in a collection of Kattan’s stories six years later (Kattan, 1982). In English, the single word ‘neighbour’ has come to combine both the idea of simple proximity (the ‘near-dweller’) and that of warmth and cosy intimacy (‘the good neighbour’). French by contrast has two words for

neighbour.<sup>4</sup> *Voisin* – the title of Kattan’s story – comes from the Latin *vicinus* (‘near’), which in turn derives from *vicus*, meaning village or quarter of a town. On the other hand *prochain*, which in modern French means ‘nearest’ or ‘next’ as well as ‘neighbour’, derives from the Latin *prope*, which also means ‘near’, but without the etymological connotations of ‘village’. Interestingly it is *prochain* that is used in the Bible in the Great Commandment: ‘tu aimeras ton prochain comme toi-même’.

*The Neighbour* is told in the first person by an unnamed narrator of unknown gender (though the deliberately stilted dialogue suggests the conversation of two men) and unknown ethnicity. We infer that the setting is Montréal, which seem to be confirmed by a single reference to the city at the end of the narrative. The story describes a series of encounters between the narrator and his Chinese neighbour, who, unlike Biddle’s noisy neighbours, is unobtrusive and initially silent:

I used to see him several times a week, a brown briefcase under his arm. We lived in a building on Durocher Street and his apartment was next to mine. I never heard him, no visitors or music. He was small, thin, alert and bright-eyed, with a high-pitched Asian voice. Was he Vietnamese? Chinese? Burmese? I didn’t dare ask, nor did I feel the need to know. It often used to happen that we would be going up or down the stairway together. He would greet me briefly with a nod and a barely perceptible smile. We crossed paths by either speeding up or slowing down. We always avoided speaking to each other. Were we afraid to break the silence and, in so doing, destroy an intimacy we were obviously determined to protect? (Kattan, 1982: 11)

This account seems to pare neighbouring back to simple proximity, to next-ness and near-dwelling, yet the final sentence raises the possibility of intimacy and in doing so hints that silent proximity can itself involve a certain affective sensibility. Eventually a rainy morning and a shared taxi allows the silence to be broken, the neighbour introduces himself as Mr Young. The narrator suggests that Young is ‘a very English name’. “No,” he said without a smile, “it’s a Chinese name. I’m Chinese.’ (11). The narrator is curious, but inhibited and embarrassed to question his neighbour. At the end of the journey ‘he took my hand discreetly and thanked me without any warmth’ (11). Over the course of the story, the two neighbours meet one another intermittently. Kattan’s sparse prose tells of a disconnected series of awkward and seemingly

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Etienne Balibar for highlighting this point.

uncommunicative encounters. On one occasion the narrator is, unusually, disturbed by sound from next door:

I never heard any sound through the wall separating us. I even wondered if he had a television set. So I was quite astonished when one evening, returning from a film, I heard clamorous, incomprehensible voices coming from my neighbour's place. Were they arguing or were they expressing their joy at being reunited? They were Chinese, there was no doubt of that. Then, all of a sudden – silence. The following day Mr. Young was wearing his fixed smile. Neither of us referred to the incident. (14)

Then the two neighbours start to run across each other away from their apartment block at a succession of public meetings, first at a lecture 'by Malcolm Muggeridge, the British writer', then at 'a meeting on the government's urban policy' and once again at an election meeting. At the last of these, the narrator tells us that 'I meant to meet him when it was over, but when the time came he had disappeared into the crowd' (15). When he receives a flyer for a further meeting ('a well-known lecturer from the United States was to speak on pollution') the narrator on impulse rings his neighbour's bell – for the first time, or so we infer – and suggests that they go together. The neighbour, however, has other, and slightly unexpected plans: "No, I'm sorry but I've decided to go to a feminist meeting. If it's over early enough, I will meet you there." The narrator tells him not bother: "I think I'll just spend a quiet evening at home." (15)

Over the course of five or six years, the neighbours gradually become more comfortable with one another without their relationship ever progressing beyond that of distant acquaintance:

We had tacitly agreed to stick to the customary trivialities. I was always glad to see him on the stairs. Life was following its immutable course. The embarrassment had vanished from our relationship. We were neighbours, perfectly courteous at all times. (16-17)

Then as the story reaches its climax, if so mundane a series of events can be said to have one, Mr Young calls on his neighbour, agrees to take some tea, and announces that he has come to say good-bye as he is leaving Canada and 'going home to China'. The narrator is taken aback, the more so when Mr Young tells him that this is no sudden decision, but one made twenty years before. It has taken him that long to save enough for the journey and to provide 'a little money to live on over there' (18). The narrator feels irritated by this revelation: 'I had a vague feeling he

had deceived me.’ It seems that imperceptibly over the years of their neighbouring, the two have formed a bond that goes beyond mere acquaintance. And now, at the last, the neighbour speaks ‘endlessly’, explaining that he has accumulated a store of notes from the lectures and meetings he has attended that will provide him with the basis for years of study and learning in Peking. He also wants to see and smell the city of his birth again and check whether the sky is the same colour as in Montréal. The story closes with a final exchange. “I will miss having you next door.” “And I will miss you. You have been an excellent neighbour.” (19)

## **The politics of the neighbour**

Kattan’s story, it seems to me, captures quite precisely the nature of a particular form of urban neighbouring in late modernity. Here is a relationship that crosses ethnic, linguistic and possibly class lines. It is marked by awkwardness, embarrassment, wariness and apparent lack of interaction. We see none of the hostility and conflict evoked by the idea of ‘neighbours from hell’, but equally nor do we see evidence of the communal warmth implied by the commandment to ‘love thy neighbour’. To a (middle class) British reader the reserved and stilted exchanges between the narrator and Mr Young seem remarkably familiar, yet the story is set in Francophone Canada and one of the two characters is Chinese. This is not so much the working out of a stiff-lipped national cultural stereotype as an illustration of a more widespread feature of contemporary urban life. On the surface Kattan’s tale seems neatly to exemplify Georg Simmel’s thesis that social life in the modern metropolis is marked by indifference and detachment. Yet as the events unfold it becomes clear that rather more is going on. The narrator is far from indifferent to his neighbour – on the contrary he is deeply curious. While his interest is not initially reciprocated, the neighbour is deeply engaged with the life of the city in another way as his search for knowledge takes him to the numerous meetings and lectures that he carefully records.

In this case attachment builds slowly. Proximity matters, not because it forces the neighbours to interact, but because it gives them the opportunity to do so. Their relationship is so fragile and episodic that it is hard to imagine it developing at all without the accident of propinquity. The rhythms of urban life are also important here: the stairwell meetings occasioned by the timing of the working day, the intermittent absences; each successive encounter generating an incremental increase in mutual regard, scarcely apparent at the time, but evident enough with hindsight. The dialogue between the two highlights both the promise and the pitfalls of neighbourly

communication. On several occasions the narrator's efforts at small talk fail to elicit the hoped-for response, yet without them there would be no relationship at all. The seeming trivialities of phatic communication across cultural difference are the resources that lead Mr Young in due course to see the narrator as an 'excellent neighbour'.

The neighbour in Kattan's story is enigmatic and apparently unknowable. Only at the end does he reveal himself, leading the narrator to feel vaguely deceived. Throughout the story the narrator seems to desire a closer acquaintance and to be drawn towards his occasional interlocutor, yet unable to reach out quite enough to develop a fully neighbourly relationship with him. The figure of unknowable neighbour is central to Emmanuel Levinas's conception of ethics. Levinas's account of the obligation to love one's neighbour evokes the biblical injunction. Whereas Kattan uses the word *voisin*, which is the usual French term for a near-dweller, Levinas uses the alternative *prochain*, the standard translation of the biblical terminology in the Great Commandment, and a word that connotes fellow human being in a way that *voisin* does not. However, that does not mean that figure of the neighbour in Levinas's thought maps neatly onto the neighbour of the Talmud and the Old Testament (Newton, 2001: 63). As Anna Strhan puts it,

Instead of a commandment to love imposed from outside, Levinas suggests that our responsibility to the neighbour is always already there, even if we choose to ignore it. According to Levinas, I do not hear a command to love addressed to me from outside, it is rather in that moment of responsibility to the neighbour that I am: I could not be were that responsibility not already there. (Strhan, 2009: 146)

Moreover, in relation to the earlier discussion about the universalist and particularist interpretations of the commandment, it is clear from Levinas's emphasis on radical otherness that his idea of the neighbour is not restricted to those who already belong to the tribe or national community. Indeed, for Levinas, the neighbour is always radically Other, and it is the encounter with the Other/neighbour that gives rise to the possibility of ethics: 'my relationship with the Other as neighbor gives meaning to my relations with all the others' (Lévinas, 1998: 159).

The relationship with the neighbour is radically asymmetrical, involving an infinite obligation to the Other. It is a relationship grounded in proximity, which is to be understood not in

geometrical terms as simple spatial nearness, but as a 'restlessness' (1998: 82) and a constant approach to the Other (Strhan, 2009: 150). 'Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self' (Lévinas, 1998: 46).

For Levinas, the obligation to the Other/neighbour is inescapable and arises prior to experience or knowledge, and thereby forms the condition of possibility of ethical subjectivity (Strhan, 2009: 151). According to Levinas:

The neighbor concerns me before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused. I am bound to him, him who is, however, the first one on the scene, not signalled, unparalleled; I am bound to him before any liaison contracted. He orders me before being recognized. Here there is a relation of kinship outside of all biology, "against all logic." It is not because the neighbour would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely other. The community with him begins in my obligation to him. The neighbor is a brother. A fraternity that cannot be abrogated, an unimpeachable assignation, proximity is an impossibility to move away without the torsion of a complex, without "alienation" or fault. This insomnia is the psyche. (Lévinas, 1998: 87)

Levinas's notion of an unbounded obligation to the neighbour has been used to underpin the idea of unconditional hospitality to the stranger (as new neighbour), such as that to be found in the work of Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1998; Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000). Hospitality has become an important trope in debates about urbanisation under conditions of globalisation. As in Kattan's story, urban neighbours in global cities come from all over the world, (as well as from around the corner). They come as refugees, as entrepreneurs, as family members, and as seekers of better lives. The obligation to extend hospitality to the other stems in part from the fact that the self is never full at home (Yong, 2008: 118-121), but is always 'restless' as Levinas has it. For Derrida, while unconditional, unreciprocated hospitality is an impossibility, it nevertheless gives meaning to other forms of conditional hospitality or to hospitality based on exchange and the economy of the gift.

Non-reciprocity is explicit in Levinas's idea of infinite obligation: 'the face of a neighbor signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every

contract' (1998: 88). For Kenneth Reinhard, this 'radically asymmetrical and nonreciprocal relationship' to the neighbour means that there is a sharp disjuncture between Levinasian ethics and politics, the latter involving a 'reciprocal and symmetrical relationship among *fellow citizens*' (Reinhard, 2005: 48 original emphasis; see also Žižek, 2005: 149).

However, the idea of politics as a relationship between equals is difficult to sustain. In September 1982 Levinas participated in a controversial interview about the massacres that took place in that month at the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila in Israeli-occupied Lebanon (Lévinas, 1989). The violence was perpetrated by Lebanese Phalangist militias, but it was enabled by the Israeli Defence Force. A subsequent official Israeli enquiry found that the Israeli government was indirectly responsible for the atrocities and that the then Israeli Defence Minister Ariel Sharon bore personal responsibility. During the interview Levinas is asked, 'Emmanuel Levinas, you are the philosopher of the "other". Isn't history, isn't politics the very site of the encounter with the "other", and for the Israeli, isn't the "other" above all the Palestinian?' Levinas replies:

My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong. (Lévinas, 1989: 294)

As Howard Caygill puts it, this response 'opens a wound in [Levinas's] entire oeuvre' (Caygill, 2002: 192) by appearing to revoke the principle of infinite obligation to the neighbour, and to define the neighbour in particular rather than universal terms. A full discussion of the debate sparked by the interview is beyond the scope of this paper (see for example Campbell and Shapiro, 1999; Caygill, 2002; for a defence of Lévinas see Schiff, 2008), but it draws attention to challenge posed by the presence of multiple and potentially competing neighbours.

Two aspects are worth noting in relation to the politics of urban neighbouring. First, the intrusion of a third party into the self/other relationship opens up the space of politics and justice as distinct from ethics (Strhan, 2009: 154). Second, the neighbour may not be benign. Indeed the neighbour may be quite monstrous. Žižek (2005) places the potential monstrosity of

the neighbour – “an inert, impenetrable, enigmatic presence” (140) – at the core of his critique of Levinas. Drawing on Lacan, Žižek unpacks the notion of the o/Other as follows:

First, there is the imaginary other—other people “like me,” my fellow human beings with whom I am engaged in the mirrorlike relationships of competition, mutual recognition, and so forth. Then, there is the symbolic “big Other”—the “substance” of our social existence, the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our coexistence. Finally, there is the Other qua Real, the impossible Thing, the “inhuman partner,” the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Order, is possible. And it is crucial to perceive how these three dimensions are hooked up. The neighbor (Nebenmensch) as the Thing means that, beneath the neighbor as my *semblant*, my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be “gentrified.” (Žižek, 2005: 143)

Žižek’s argument points up the terrifying capacity of neighbours to exact appalling violence on one another. Echoing Žižek, Naida Zukić makes this explicit in her account of the violence of the 1992-1995 Bosnian war:

Ethnic cleansing, neighbor-on-neighbor violence, and dehumanization of the Other read as the portrayal of humankind at its worst. Complicating Derrida’s notion of ethical hospitality are narratives of mass atrocities within which lurks the neighbour—the unfathomable abyss, the radical otherness in all its intensity and inaccessibility. (Zukić, 2009: 2)

An important aspect of the Bosnian case, and of war crimes and atrocities in many other ethnic conflicts, is the fact that the violence was perpetrated by neighbours of long-standing. In most cases neither the victims nor the perpetrators were strangers recently arrived from elsewhere. While deeply troubling in its own right, this does suggest that the boundaries of the existing national or urban community provide no guarantee against hostile Others. Hostility is not only out there, but also in here.

Žižek’s argument is a powerful one. The potential for violence between neighbours cannot be denied, and the idea of the monstrous neighbour clearly resonates with popular understandings of the ‘neighbour from hell’ described earlier. However, while the politics of otherness in the city



clearly has to contend with the possibility of the monstrous neighbour, Strhan (2009) argues that there may be less of a gap between Žižek and Levinas than appears at first reading. Moreover, both highlight the fundamental unknowability of the neighbour as other. Žižek draws on Judith Butler to add that, faced with the Other, we are also non-transparent to ourselves (Žižek, 2005: 138). A politics of the neighbour that takes full account of this mutual impenetrability must thus differ radically from the nostalgic appeals to a lost community of shared identity and common culture that haunt David Cameron's idea of the Big Society.

Where does this leave the possibility of neighbouring in global urban places? How can I begin to know my neighbours without domesticating them and making them the same? In the first part of this paper I argued that part of the answer involved a move from the ethnically-framed biblical notion of the neighbour to the simple near-dweller revealed by the Anglo-Saxon etymology of the English word. In their different ways, Levinas and Žižek reveal the extent to which both the ethics and politics of the neighbour are indebted to the biblical commandment and that it is impossible to entirely disavow the neighbour's religious connotations.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the notion of near-dwelling can offer something distinctive here, which Kattan's story helps to reveal. Recall that the -bour in neigh-bour derives from words related to cultivation and building. This draws attention to the materiality of neighbouring. Elsewhere in this issue Martin Coward argues for an account of the urban citizen that takes seriously the materiality of the city. Urban citizens should not be understood as autonomous political subjects bound together in community by something external to them. Rather, citizens are 'cyborg assemblages' of human and non-human materials, such that the fabric of the city enters into the constitution of the political:

Being a political subject in the cities of the contemporary global north means being articulated together with vacated, decaying property, or with superfast fibre optics, or with water/electricity pipes (or lack thereof). (Coward, this issue)

The materiality of the urban environment is integral to the relationship between the narrator and Mr Young in Kattan's *The Neighbour*. It is a downpour and a shared taxi ride that enables their first encounter. Thereafter 'our paths crossed now and then at the entrance to the building, in the halls or on the stairs' (Kattan, 1982: 12). Like the concierge in a Parisian apartment block the stairwell is a longstanding cinematic device for staging encounters, hostile, indifferent, or loving,

between neighbours. Likewise, in Kattan's story the stairwell is the setting for most of the limited interaction that takes place between the two characters. The outbreak of fire effects a further encounter. Because the fire brigade – a central component of modern urban infrastructure – is in attendance, the neighbours have nothing to do except to wait, embarrassed in each other's presence, while the fire is extinguished. The conversation is stilted and the narrator tells us, with perhaps a faint echo of Žižek's monstrous neighbour, that 'I thought I detected a shadow of dread on his face' (Kattan, 1982: 13). The materiality of sounds through the wall is also important, recalling Ian Biddle's discussion of his noisy neighbours. The thinness of walls is also significant for Coward's account, not because of their patency to sound but because their fragility matters politically at a time of financial crisis engendered by a bubble in the housing market (Coward, this issue). The social infrastructure of the city matters too, witness the lecture halls where Mr Young acquires the knowledge that will accompany him back to Beijing.

In Kattan's story the neighbours are initially impenetrable to one another. Over time, very slowly, they start to acquire a degree of mutual knowledge and they do so through sporadic encounters in which the materiality of the city matters as more than a simple backdrop. Without the rain, the taxi, the stairwell, the fire, the cooking smells, the thin walls and the lecture rooms they neighbours would not have come to know one another at all. Of course the possibility of these contingent, but repeated, encounters depends in part on the relatively long duration of these two neighbours' near-dwelling. For migrants, refugees, exiles and travelling peoples – those whose lives are marked willingly or otherwise by restlessness and mobility – neighbours are often transitory, unknowable, or actively hostile. However my point is not to suggest that some notion of tolerant near-dwelling should form the ethical basis for all forms of other-regarding conduct in urbanized societies. That would be to heap further expectations on the already over-burdened figure of the neighbour. The principal purpose behind my discussion of Kattan's story is not to draw out a model of good neighbourliness for all. Rather it was to highlight some of the complexities of neighbouring in practice that do not conform to a binary division between hellish neighbours on the one hand and loving neighbours on the other. Kattan's narrative suggests that neighbouring in practice may be too chancy and too contingent to carry the hopes that are being placed upon it, not least in Britain under the guise of the Big Society.

## Conclusion

This account of the politics of the neighbour has necessarily been partial. For one thing, it has focused on the Western tradition, albeit in ways that seek to problematise the dominant universalist interpretations of Judeo-Christian ideas of neighbourly love. Nevertheless, the emphasis on reticence, self-effacement and quietude in Kattan's story seems to accord closely with conventional understandings of neighbourly ethics in those national cultures that have been particularly shaped by Protestantism and/or Enlightenment humanism – despite the story's Quebecois setting. In cities where the lines between the private sphere of the home, the semi-public space of the garden, yard or balcony, and the public world of the street are less marked and less policed, other forms of neighbouring – noisier, livelier and more agonistic – that enrol the materiality of the city in other ways, may be taken for granted and seen as largely unthreatening. Of course Kattan's neighbours do communicate, eventually, across ethno-cultural difference, but in doing so they seem to settle on the kind of modest and moderate ethics of urban civility whose ethnocentrism and class bias may undermine any claim it might have to universality.

I began this paper by reflecting on the fact that, in comparison to the neighbourhood, the neighbour has been a relatively neglected concept in discussions of urban politics. If, as Coward argues, and as Kattan's story illustrates, the materiality of the city matters to urban politics, it is worth noting in conclusion that the neighbourhood, though often hard to define, is integral to that materiality. Under New Labour the expectations placed on neighbourhoods were high, as Anne-Marie Fortier has argued in her discussion of the political imaginaries associated with multicultural intimacy (Fortier, 2007: 107). The question for debates about the Big Society is whether the notion of the neighbourhood operationalised in UK public policy is likely to furnish the wherewithal for the kind of modest, hesitant, but affirmative neighbouring across difference to which Kattan draws attention, or whether neighbours and neighbouring have become burdened with political expectations out of all proportion to their fragility in practice.

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