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

## Journal Item

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**1. Introduction: Everyday encounter and café spaces**

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

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

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

These findings arise from our two year ESRC funded[i] research project, discussed below, which investigates the changing configurations of multiculture and social relations within different areas of urban England and draws on Amin's contention that 'much of the negotiation of difference occurs at the very local level through everyday experiences and encounters' (2002: 959). We begin by examining some of the sociological thinking around café spaces and sociality, before examining the micro-geographies of café spaces and their relationship to place. We present data from a series of participant observations in three chain cafes in three places to expand empirically on how 'conviviality', in the sense of 'living together with difference' (Gilroy, 2006; Hall, 2000) works in time and space in these informal environments.

## 2. Multiculture, conviviality and café spaces

In her ethnography of a London street the urban sociologist Suzanne Hall (2012: 52-53) introduces Nick's Caff, 'a small meeting place in a large and rapidly changing city'. Hall cautions that 'to relegate Nick's Caff solely to the status of an eating establishment' would be to miss the point because the cafe space, used by a mix of migrant, local, long-settled and newcomers, 'provides a base to consider the complexities of belonging in a local place like the Walworth Road'. In using Nick's Caff to examine the often micro encounters and exchanges between diverse populations Hall's work echoes the sustained emphasis that sociologists have given to public space; from Goffman's (1963) concept of civil inattention emerging from his analysis of behaviour in public space to Habermas' (1989) connections between public spaces and public discourse to Zukin's (2010) exclusionary cities. Public spaces (whether coffee houses, parks, squares, streets, buses or shopping malls) as sites of sociological intrigue have been identified as markers of social change and formations of belonging. Like Suzanne Hall we share a concern with how local cafés might be sites within which people encounter one another to negotiate, use and define shared space. Where we depart from Hall is

in our focus on franchised rather than independently owned café space.  In order to understand how franchised spaces may operate as places of multicultural mixing we start by examining briefly the well-known claims about McDonaldization and the 'non-spaces' of globalisation.

*Non-space, corporate space*

Corporate chain cafes have generally been dealt with by social scientists as problematic. Most notably, Ritzer (2006; 2008) examined 'McDonaldization' as a process of Weberian rationalisation in which the principles of the fast food restaurants increasingly permeate other areas of life. His fourfold framework - efficiency, calculability, predictability and control - explain how the design of human and non-human technologies creates global phenomena with remarkably similar features with the interior design of the restaurants functioning to speed people through the eating process and become normalised into the conventions of fast food establishments. Engagements with, and critiques of, Ritzer's thesis are widespread (For example, Turner 2006) but his broad framings of the process do identify why such disciplined spaces are so popular. McDonalds and the like are attractive (even enchanting) to a broad range of consumers (Waters, 2006), which suggests that forms of power other than coercion may be at work (Allen 2003).

Ritzer's thesis echoes Augé's 'ethnography of non-places' that 'create solitary contractuality' (Augé 1995 [1992]: 94) in contrast to more communal experiences of place. Like Ritzer, Augé postulates that the anonymity of things like superstores and hotel chains can create familiarity through its very globalised and decontextualized nature. Both Ritzer and Augé have been criticised for their assumptions that such anonymous places are without context, history, or social relationality (Miller et al 1998; Merriman 2004; Goidanich and Rial 2012; Sharma 2009; Muhr 2012). As Merriman puts it, 'places such as supermarkets, Internet chat rooms, airports and motorway service areas do act as 'meeting places' where all manner of social relations are performed… (2004: 151-2). We take the 'McDonaldization' argument in a different direction, asking whether the very predictability of such corporate leisure and consumption spaces enables mixing of

diverse lives, and contributes to Gilroy's (2004) elaboration of conviviality as living together. Our research suggests that the cultural blandness, the 'ordinary cosmopolitianism' (Skribis and Woodward 2007) of these leisure and consumption spaces may facilitate an equality of presence in which Goffman's (1963) notion of civil inattention is the most pronounced mode of social interaction. Goffman's work on public behaviour emphasised disinterested (but not indifferent) forms of interaction (1963: 84) and we suggest that Goffman's 'delicate' inattention directly relates to the banal (rather than celebratory) forms of multiculture that are central to Gilroy's (2004) concept of conviviality.

Moreover ethnographic accounts of food and coffee chains in diverse geographical settings show that the meanings of these spaces is fluid and intimately attached to locality (Muhr 2012). For example, in their work comparing independent and branded café spaces Woldoff et al (2013) found that although the 'independent coffee houses offered local flavour that Starbucks does not' (217) the Starbuck's cafes offered higher levels of sociality and were places in which staff chatted with customers 'on a first name basis, were familiar with their regular orders and knew significant personal information about them' (209). In their ethnomethodogical study of café space Eric Laurier and Chris Philo (2006a and 2006b; Laurier 2008) suggest that cafes are 'a place where an individual can be left alone in relative comfort by others, even as she is in their presence' (Laurier and Philo, 2006a: 204). Their study raises questions about gestures, conversations, temporal rhythms, the layout of cafes and people's choice of seating, all of which we pick up on in our own ethnography of 'uneventfulness'. This comfortable co-presence is pertinent to our work and a far cry from the solitary world of Auge's non-places. However, such locally-contextualised studies tend to focus more on the meanings attached to these chain and/or particular intimate café spaces, their amenities and products, socialities, practices and etiquette rather than as spaces of ethnic diversity and mixing.

*Corporate café spaces and multiculture*

The way in which franchised semi-public spaces offer and generate inattentive forms of sociality is reflected in Amanda Wise's (2011) explorations of multiculture in Australian shopping mall food courts. Wise brings corporate space and ethnic mixing into direct focus as she examines the boundaries of what it means for food to cross between the exotic and the everyday in the food courts of suburban shopping malls. Noting the range of ethnic speciality foods consumed alongside one another, Wise observed customers 'sitting alone but apparently enjoying the light-touch company of others occupying this public space' (2011: 87) arguing this 'light-touch' sociality occurs 'precisely because they slide beneath the "Otherness radar" of the average suburban consumer (of whatever ethnicity)' (2011: 88). This is a slight and slow-burn multiculturalism made possible by the anonymity of the spaces. Wise connects these processes to an unfolding 'space of hopeful encounter' relating to both the malls and their relationship to their surrounding neighbourhood, arguing that that we should not read all chain restaurants as essentially the same. Wise's main emphasis is on the specific foods being consumed as part of 'becoming multicultural', in a reworking of bell hooks' (1992) critique of 'eating the other' as a form of cultural appropriation.

The proximities of ethnic diversity among customers in consumer environments are also part of Elijah Anderson's (2011) work on semi-public spaces in Philadelphia. Anderson argues that the ethnic diversity of the city's Reading Terminal indoor market is distinct, since 'the many lunch counters encourage strangers to interact, as they rub shoulders while eating. At certain counters in particular, talking with strangers seems to be the norm' (2011: 34). Anderson contrasts this with experience in other urban spaces, suggesting that 'The Terminal is a neutral space in which people behave civilly, whatever their ethnicity, usually will not be scrutinised, as would likely happen in the city's ethnic neighbourhoods if an unknown person were to pass through. In these neighbourhoods taking notice of strangers is the first line of defence but the Terminal is not defended in this manner' (2011: 34). Laurier and Philo's cafés, like Anderson's Terminal and Wise's shopping malls, are constituted locally in space

and time - 'this café (in this neighbourhood in this city' (2006a: 204, original emphasis). Each of these studies attempts to understand the relationship between the local social geographies and the micro-geographies of encounter and negotiation inside the café spaces. This relationality also shapes our own research. Unlike Wise, we are less concerned with the unspectacular consumption of 'multicultural food' than with the use of apparently homogenous spaces by multicultural populations. Unlike Anderson, we want to extend the consideration of how consumption space is shared by a variety of bounded cultural 'types', to think about what makes the apparently bland places we have studied seem conducive to mixity and sharing.

**3. Researching living multiculture: the project**

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

Three areas in England were settings for our multi-method study: Milton Keynes, a 'new city' in South-East England; Oadby, a small town and now suburb of Leicester; and Hackney, a borough in North-East London. Within each place, we carried out repeated participant observations and a series of in-depth, repeated individual and group interviews with users of public parks; 6th Form and Further Education college students; members of local leisure organisations (e.g. gardening, football, coffee morning groups) as well as conducting repeated

participant observations in local libraries and corporate cafes. In each area we conducted regular participant observation in a branch of an international café chain over a nine-month period. This ethnographic work allowed an engagement with the cafés' sights, sounds, smells, atmosphere, practices, uses and rhythms. In this article we principally draw on our field note data, and on some data from interviews with local café users. The issues of methods and the dilemmas and challenges of this qualitative approach are discussed elsewhere (Author B et al 2014).

*The project's geographies*

In Milton Keynes we studied a branch of McDonald's in the city centre. Milton Keynes is a 'new town' established in 1967, incorporating a collection of small urban settlements, which has grown rapidly in population since then to 248,821 people in the 2011 Census. It is, in other words, a city created through in-migration (around 90% of its residents were born elsewhere in the UK and beyond). This population growth has increasingly incorporated a growth in ethnic diversity. In the 2011 Census 26% of residents identified themselves as an ethnic group other than White British. Central Milton Keynes is a series of largely indoor shopping malls, entertainment and leisure complexes, housing a range of national and global outlets. The wider geography of the city is made up of neighbourhoods, organized into grid squares defined by fast dual carriageways (Clapson 2004; Charlesworth and Cochrane 1998). 'Our' McDonalds is on a busy spur of the main shopping mall, the large yellow McDonald's 'M' sign visible from the outdoor market down the road. It is divided into two floors: downstairs, where orders are placed and the atmosphere is often frenetic; and upstairs, where it is usually more relaxed and leisurely though still difficult to get a table at lunchtimes and at weekends.

Oadby is a small town in the East Midlands, effectively a suburb of Leicester though administratively it is not part of the city. It is a relatively affluent suburb and has seen in-migration from within and beyond the UK, and movement of Leicester residents seeking larger homes outside the city centre. The largest ethnic

groups in the local authority area (Oadby and Wigston Borough) at the 2011 Census were White British (71%) and Indian (18%), though for Oadby itself the latter figure was higher. Many Oadby residents retain a sense of it as distinct from the city of Leicester. Participants spoke of Oadby 'being village like', different from Leicester in having a slower pace of life, being friendlier, cleaner, quieter, nicer houses, good schools and so on. Underpinning some of this is the sense of a largely affluent, middle-class identity in which most people are employed, many in professional occupations. At the heart of the suburb is the Parade, a row of traditional shops (butchers, greengrocers, pharmacist, pubs) running alongside a road, and on which the Costa Coffee café we studied is situated.

Costa has a small outside seating area that overlooks the road and pedestrian crossing. Inside there is a serving bar, offering coffee, tea, cold drinks, pastries and a few sandwiches. There are two rooms downstairs including one that can be booked for meetings, blurring working and leisure spaces (Laurier 2008, Woldoff et al 2013). The main room where the serving area is located is most widely used as it has floor to ceiling windows looking onto the street and mixes dining chairs and tables with a bank of sofas and armchairs around lower tables. Imagined geographical roots of the café are evoked through sepia prints on the walls of mediaeval Italian hill towns and iconic cityscapes.

Our final setting is Hackney, a borough in inner London, an established site of migration and mixing. 36% of the population identified as White British in the 2011 Census, with large proportions of Other White (16%), Black African (11%), Black Caribbean (8%) and 'Any Other Ethnic Group' (5%). Like Oadby and Milton Keynes, Hackney is experiencing rapid population change in terms of class and ethnicity. New international migrants including from Eastern Europe, Central and South America and Sub-Saharan Africa are part of new population mixes, as are changing class dynamics: Hackney has some of the highest house prices in London while also having a large proportion of social housing (Jones, 2014). In Hackney we studied Nando's, a chain chicken restaurant. It sits on a busy junction in a grand three-storey Victorian building that was once a pub. With the pub's elaborate

Victorian tiling still in place Nando's both accommodates this distinctiveness and combines it with its own branding which emphasises the chain's African-Portuguese roots. Along the main road are small discount shops, grocery stores, the occasional basic chain store, and many Turkish and Kurdish eateries, alongside a more recent proliferation of trendier bars and cafes.

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


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

It is immediately apparent from our participant observation and field notes that each café attracts a diverse group of customers, in terms of ethnicity, age, gender and class. In all our visits to McDonald's in Milton Keynes its clientele seemed very ethnically mixed and more ethnically diverse than the other cafes in central Milton Keynes, and more diverse than the population in the shopping mall in which it sits. The following extract from Kxxxxx's fieldnotes captures this combination of diversity and also of a relaxed sociality:

*I arrived at 1.20 and … the place was packed with families and teenagers, and three older South Asian women in headscarves, immediately obvious in the centre of the main seating area. I took my burger upstairs and sat on the only free table I could find, next to the window overlooking the taxi rank on Midsummer Boulevard. I noticed a South Asian man watching as his son (?) tucked into a burger that was almost the size of his face. An elderly white [English?] couple came in and sat next to them and shared a burger and fries […] next to the elderly couple sharing a burger and fries, I noticed a group of girls who looked about sixteen or seventeen. They were an ethnically mixed group – two of them looked South Asian, one East Asian and the other was white [English?].* (Milton Keynes, 23rd November 2012)

While McDonald's is associated generally with a younger teenage crowd, this note illustrates how we saw young parents and elderly couples sharing the space. The informality of the fast food system (self-service, queuing, eating with fingers, self-clearing) adds to the sense of a busy, ethnic-, gender- and age-mixed micro world. Kxxxxx's lunchtime description of Nando's conveys a similar sense of business and mixing:

*In the middle of the restaurant next to the drinks refill station was a white woman by herself eating sweetcorn and reading The Guardian, a young South Asian woman working on a laptop and a black (African-Caribbean) mother with two young sons who kept on getting up to get another drinks refill. Another woman – Turkish, I guessed – came in by herself and seemed to know the staff, going straight up and ordering without a menu and saying, 'I'll sit wherever you want me'. The restaurant had some technicians in fixing the lighting – white, with south London accents – and they smiled and joked with some of the customers. A couple of white [English] guys in business suits, one with a goatee beard walked in,*

*and there was a white chef – Spanish, I thought – who winked at me and told me that my food was 'coming in a second'.* (Hackney 16 August 2012, 12.30 pm)

Noticeable in these field accounts is not only the ethnic diversity of who is in the cafe, but also the mixed use of the café spaces and, related to this, the solitary and sociable nature of the café population. These are café spaces which people are using in multiple ways – to work, escape, restore, eat, catch up, be alone, pass time – and these are part of daily routines, meaning customers become recognised and known by staff. For example, Hxxxxx observed some of this in early morning visits to McDonald's - *at different times of day the mix of customers change – at 8 a.m., less full but still ticking over with customers mainly adults in their twenties, thirties and forties, eating breakfast before starting work or waiting for a bus in the relative warmth. Staff recognise regulars at these times, anticipate what they might order, sometimes have a short chat*. Hxxxxx's note continues:

*At a table next to the inside window, in front of me, a nineteen-or-so-old thin white man was tucking into a complicated breakfast with great concentration. Others in the place were mainly adults in their twenties, and not many were eating a lot – some seemed as if they were rather waiting in the warm as they had arrived for work too early, or for a bus to arrive at the nearby bus stops, two black women seated at different tables both looking outside regularly towards the bus stops, and also looking around defensively, as if to tell a staff member who might challenge them that they had already finished their food, I imagined. I overheard part of a conversation between a customer and staff member at the tills, the server saying 'we have a lot of people come in here, day in, day out'. A white woman holding hands with a small child [...] clutching a lunchbox headed upstairs with a tray, I supposed they were stopping in here on their way to school, mirroring the similar*

*duos I had previously seen in here doing homework/Happy Meal*
*games after school.* (Milton Keynes, 5th December 2012
8.30am)

Here McDonald's is a stop on the way to work or school, and populated by ethnically diverse, regular and casual users. The use of the space is not just about eating, but in some sense also a waiting room and meeting space. It blurs the line between leisure and work (or school) and becomes part of that daily routine. Like us, Woldoff et al (2013) observed multiple practices in café spaces and especially their recent transformation into places to work and to interact online. For Woldoff the corporate space of Starbucks offered a working as well a leisure environment. Many of our fieldnotes mentioned 'people with laptops' who are not engaged inter-personally with anyone in the café space, but appear comfortable in their solitude or immersed in online worlds; the laptops and smartphones that feature as props in these settings suggest connectedness to multiple elsewheres and others. But the corporate nature of the space is never far away. In Hxxxxx's description above there is a sense of expectation among those present that they are required to buy something in order to occupy the space, even as people use it as part of these daily routines. Ritzer (2008) discussed how part of the control of people and space in a fast food restaurant is about socialising them into the norms of the process. Ordering at the counter, self-clearing of tables, sharing tables and the like are one way that the chains keep customer numbers high and costs down by pushing the labour of serving onto the customer, but they also demand social proximity as people have to share tables with strangers, wait in queues, navigate around others, and so forth.

The sharing of proximate space, and practices within them, may generate social interaction and create possibilities of encounter with unknown others. This material and social closeness comes out in this Oadby note recorded by Hxxxxx: *when it is really busy, people cram together on small tables along the back where customers have to slip through narrow gaps between tables to sit down, or negotiate around small children and bags with their trays of hot drinks to find a*

*spare seat. It's noisy, with the constant sounds of the coffee machine, steaming and grinding, the background of unchallenging pop music, and the chatter of multiple conversations all around.* For some, this sort of close environment can be most successfully managed by unfocussed attention strategies. Goffman argues that the balance between enough – but not too much – social notice being given to others is key; such interactions encourage amicable engagements which show there is 'no reason to suspect the intentions of others present and no reason to fear the others, be hostile to them or wish to avoid them' (1963: 84). We would suggest that corporate café spaces, with their recognizable brand and blandness are particularly conducive for civil inattention and undemanding conviviality. An example of this is apparent in the following extract from Kxxxxx's fieldnotes in Costa:

> *The background music was a mixture of Christmas and contemporary pop music. John Lennon's 'So This Is Christmas' was followed by a Moby song. It was much quieter in Costa's at that time, compared to later in the morning when it really starts to fill up with parents and babies and pensioners. The staff were chatting and laughing loudly behind the counter. They were talking to a young South Asian girl in front of me in the queue, who I think I've seen working there before. 'I'm not Greek', I heard her say, laughing. 'I'm Asian! You've got the wrong continent!' (Oadby, 11th December 2012 9.30 am)*

Skrbis and Woodward (2007: 745) argue that 'ordinary cosmopolitanism is […] a negotiated frame of reference for dealing with cultural difference. This negotiation is brought to mind as this description captures the connections between the corporate environment (the music, the queue), being at ease (laughter, banter), and the ways in which ethnicity/ethnic identity is part of this ("I'm Asian! You've got the wrong continent!").

The sense of these cafés being at once highly managed environments, and yet having a relaxed informality appears to create a social confidence about being in them. The routine practices of knowing what to do and what is on offer in

franchised café spaces is also part of this confidence. It builds senses of familiarity and it incorporates customers into its world. This etiquette, of 'knowing what to do' does have to be learned as evidenced by Hxxxxx's initial confusion at the way Nando's worked,

> *I had clearly forgotten the main protocol this involved, which was to pick a table before ordering - instead of sending me away he asked which part of the restaurant I would like to sit in, ran over and stuck one of the sticks with a rooster on that shows an order has been placed in the table I chose, then came back and took my order… Once I had finished my meal, a waitress took away my dishes and brought me a coffee and dessert menu, which always confuses me in Nando's as I can't remember if at this stage you can order at the table... I had probably got the etiquette wrong again, and that they were taking pity on me as a fish out of water* (Hackney, 20th September 2012)

While this might fit with corporate control worried over by Ritzer and others we would suggest that this familiarity with the routines and practices generates a confidence in visiting and being in such spaces. Knowing the routines of a place like Nando's makes you something of a regular, and is knowledge which you can carry to other branches. We noted people who were greeted with familiarity by serving staff, as well as noticing the same people as we hung out during participant observation. Laurier also (2008) discusses how café regulars provide a sense of continuity for other customers. You do not know these others but hearing someone else recognise them, affirms a sense of sociability and togetherness without leading to direct interaction. In other words McDonald's, Costa, Nando's – and similar franchised cafe spaces – are knowable and immediately recognisable. In this way they become accessible and invite senses of easy belonging. While the corporate and brand recognisability of these cafés can be seen to deliver an easy cosmopolitanism or highly regulated environment, the paradox seems to be that these are also malleable spaces defined through the

behaviour of those who use them, creating ways of belonging and entitlement to be in them.

## 5. Not all cafés are the same

The ethnic diversity of the clientele of the chain cafés we studied contrasts with other cafes in our field sites, and often in ways that sit uneasily with the critique developed by Ritzer and others in their call for resistance to the McDonaldization. While our research did not intend to be comparative the distinctions between different café spaces became apparent both from our participant observation and in our interviews with local residents. We did not ask about café use specifically, but many participants mentioned the role of cafés as social spaces. For example, in both a group interview with park users and another with 6th Form students in Oadby, participants spoke of how pleased they were to have a Costa and how much friendlier it was compared to the other local cafés. In our café time in Oadby there did appear to be a broad but consistent difference between an older and mostly white café population in the more obviously 'local' cafes compared to the younger and more ethnically diverse population in Costa. Sxxxxx's fieldnotes describe some of this difference between the cafes,

> *I'm so happy to see the Costa as it is raining and cold […] Hxxxxx hasn't arrived yet so I order a coffee – there is a bit of a queue and there is a conversation between us all about the weather and how horrible it is. A Muslim woman about my age chats to one of the two staff behind the counter and two young women – both South Asian, about 18 or 19 – debate what to have to drink. As I look round […] I see people reading newspapers, an older white (English?) man on his phone, a black woman (African/African-Caribbean?) is busy on her laptop and there are a young white (English) couple talking on one of the squashy sofas. There is music on and an atmosphere of general comfort and shelter from the weather […Later] we go to a small café which is quite sweet and much smaller than Costa, but with a few little tables and a nice*

*lunch menu but it is quiet – no music – and completely empty apart*

*from me and Hxxxxx. There is just one person serving. There are*

*the same posters and adverts on the notice board [as in Costa]. As*

*we finish our lunch – talking in hushed tones as it is so quiet – an*

*older white (English) man and woman (a couple?) come in for lunch*

*too. But other than them no one else comes. (Oadby, November*

*2012).*

While the contrast between the diversity/non-diversity, business/quiet is obvious in this note it is the distinction between the familiar, 'brand atmosphere' of Costa and the more 'teashop atmosphere' of the small café that is striking. The teashop feel resonates with the way in which some participants spoke of Oadby – as being a village or town – and in this way the small café can be seen as having a particular social ('villagey') and spatial (Oadby) character. The way in which place and geography is inflected in the types of café spaces was as apparent in Hackney and Milton Keynes. In Milton Keynes the consistently mixed and ethnically diverse population of McDonald's contrasts with other chain cafés that make up the majority of central city's 'café landscape'. For example, when we went to the department store cafés in John Lewis and Marks and Spencer's there was a different population – mostly older and not as ethnically diverse. Class, taste and generation can be read into these patterns too, although corporate branding can obscure easy class delineations. Our point is to stress the way in which the particular geographies and the nature of places inflect café worlds.

In Hackney the differences between café populations are particularly striking. Some of this difference seems to reflect the rapid processes of gentrification in the borough, which has affected house prices and the wider social life of Hackney. While Hackney has a long history of urban middle class residence (Butler 1997; Wright, 2009; Jones 2013) the accelerated rise of house prices, thriving media, creative and fashion industries and the proximity to the financial City of London have attracted increasingly affluent residents to the area. These population shifts and the social impacts are manifest in the proliferation of independent bars, cafes and restaurants, and were an ongoing part of our conversations with participants

in Hackney. Residents expressed an intense awareness of how the area was changing, often accompanied by anxiety about the implications. While house prices and schools were often the focus of anxiety and exclusion, the appearance of new boutique cafes, bars, and shops was also an issue of concern for some. This excerpt from our interview with a creative writers' group – an ethnically very diverse group whose members nearly all had long-term connections to Hackney - represents this sense of displacement experienced through the lens of café spaces. This conversation involves Muna (a young South Asian woman), Tristan (a middle aged African-Caribbean man) and Solomon (a young Black African man):

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

*Tristan: One extreme to another.*

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

*Solomon: /Their target audience?*

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

*Tristan: [...] it's like every month there's a new coffee shop opening and from Upper Clapton Road going down towards Lower Clapton past Lea Bridge Road past a roundabout it's like I don't know, three or four coffee shops. And Dalston, just before Dalston Kingsland Station, you've got like six lined up and I just think, "Why do you*

*need so many coffee shops?" And again my question is, "Who are*
*they targeting?" because it seems as if it's a very niche thing where*
*the people that are opening them are not local people, they're*
*people coming in from the area and they seem to be targeting their*
*friends and their demographic and this is quite worrying.*

There is a strong sense of exclusion, of being on the outside of the 'dinky cafes', in this conversation. Muna's description of 'feeling thirsty' yet unable or unwilling to go into one of the cafes is striking. Her struggle to articulate what is stopping her underlines the experience of exclusion. The group's repeated question of who the cafes are for as well as Tristan's detailed mapping to show the spread of the cafes across the borough reflects both the sense of the borough's rapid social change, the way in which cafes capture this and shows how the character, image and 'knowing' of a café may work as culture and taste markers sifting and generating (self-)selective populations (Hall 2012: 102).

We suggest the new café spaces in Hackney and independent café spaces in Oadby are far from the cultural neutrality and recognisability of the franchised café spaces. But there were also contradictions and complexities about perceptions and affection for the local. In the Hackney creative writing group there was opposition to chains and brands as well as the critique of the new independent cafes. This local=good is a familiar narrative and we did spend time observing some of the more community-orientated independent café spaces in Hackney. Despite what might be described as their 'sympathetic localism' these café spaces did not have same significant levels of ethnic diversity that Nando's or Costa managed to attract. For example, in Hxxxxx's fieldnotes of a community-orientated space, where the manager had explained to Hxxxxx and Sxxxxx that he explicitly targeted the broad range of Hackney's population and as part of this was committed to 'keeping [the cost of] a cup of tea under a pound' the café population still tended towards a less ethnically diverse user population,

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

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

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Semi-public franchised café spaces demand attention as elective leisure sites in which there are significant levels of locally-configured ethnic diversity, in contrast to their apparent homogeneity as corporate globalised non-spaces. As in earlier work (Author B et al 2013) and like Byrne and de Tona (2013: 3) we suggest that the 'placing of a study' is critical for understanding the nature of interactions, mixings, everyday experiences and practices within particular places. We have

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

We have suggested that the ways in which franchised café space only ask for - and expect - a thin sociality incorporates Goffman's (1963) notion of civil inattention and Gilroy's (2004, 2006) notion of conviviality as the mundane, micro process of 'living together'. The ethnically mixed population of the café spaces we observed suggest that corporate leisure environments are particularly conducive to this level of unfocussed interaction – there is awareness of difference and there may be visual and verbal connections made between others – the "I'm Asian not Greek" banter in Oadby Costa for example - but these are generally fleeting and undemanding. Like Skrbis and Woodward's (2007) ordinary cosmopolitanism this is a banal conviviality in which forms of civil inattention allow cultural difference

to be acknowledged, negotiated and managed, without avoidance, but with differing levels of engagement.

Finally, our exploration has been of quite a different type of consumer multiculture to that of 'eating' or 'consuming the other' (hooks 1992; Hage 1997) as part of a conscious, cosmopolitan cultural capital. As we have argued, the commodification of cosmopolitan aesthetic is not necessarily absent in such spaces. Coffee chains play on a Europeanised sophistication or North American walk-and-talk culture, while chains like Nando's and McDonald's have explicitly used the idea of urban, diverse and multicultural clientele as part of their marketing strategies (see Sawyer 2010). These are marketing strategies that are aimed at and rely on a multiplicity of consumers; though they could be interpreted as packaging the bodies of some 'othered' fellow-consumers as an opportunity for would-be consumers to gain multicultural capital by rubbing shoulders in the burger queue. Despite this lingering ambivalence, there is something distinct in these chain cafes from the *eating* of the other. The experience of sharing space with 'others', who are also part of a shared same, can (contra Ritzer) be enabling. The brand might or might not be about cosmo-consumption, but the experience is of un-claimed space, where food, time and space can be shared with an unfocussed conviviality – together and alone at once.

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i Details of project title and ESRC number omitted at this stage for anonymity.