**Lost in the 'churn'? Locating neighbourliness in a transient neighbourhood**

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**Abstract**

This article considers the importance of everyday encounters in underpinning sociality, focusing especially on the located and material aspects of social relations. Bringing together debates about social relations, place attachment and population turnover (or 'churn'), and using research carried out in the UK city of Leicester, in an inner city neighbourhood with high population turnover, the article investigates incidences of neighbourliness, probing what happens to social relations between neighbours in a place which could be considered to be unstable in terms of population, and where conviviality could be deemed to be under threat by wider structural economic forces. Three overlapping questions are addressed: how does neighbourliness manifest itself in such conditions, *where* is it practiced, and how do people relate to the material environment around them when the social landscape is apparently so unstable? Drawing on in-depth interviews with inner-city Leicester residents this article considers not only the narrated practice of social and neighbourly relations in a particular setting, but also how important place is to this practice.

**Keywords**

neighbourliness, conviviality, churn, place, materiality

**Introduction: Finding Neighbourliness in a Transient Neighbourhood**

Over the past decade vibrant and probing arguments have been building about the state of social relations in late modernity. Whether couched in political terms such as social or community 'cohesion', or progressed through a focus on sociality and the potential for conviviality in the misanthropic, or even hopeful (Thrift, 2008: 219) or 'good' city (Amin, 2006), the condition of contemporary social relations has gained ground as an issue to be investigated, understood, theorised and in some cases, mended. These debates have been especially influential in illuminating the importance of the everyday encounter in underpinning sociality and in investigating the located, material nature of social relations. It is this social 'locatedness' which is the focus of this article on incidences of neighbourliness in an inner city area of the UK East Midlands city of Leicester – an area which has experienced high levels of population turnover over several years. Bringing together debates about social relations, place attachment and high population turnover (or 'churn'), this article considers what happens to social relations between neighbours in a place which could be considered to be unstable in terms of population, and where conviviality could be deemed to be under threat from the wider structural economic changes of post-industrial unemployment, an erosion of the quality of the built environment and an aggressive rental market, alongside persistent indicators of social deprivation. Three overlapping questions are addressed which seek to draw out the specifically spatial and material elements of neighbourliness 'on the ground' in a context such as this: how does neighbourliness manifest itself in such conditions, *where* is it practiced, and how do people relate to the material environment around them when the social landscape is apparently so unstable? Drawing on in-depth interviews with inner-city Leicester residents this article considers not only the practice (as narrated) of social and neighbourly relations in a particular setting, but also explores how important place is to this practice.

**Social Relations, Place Attachment and Churn**

Existing discussions on social relations, place attachment and churn, while sharing important convergences, can also be seen as relatively distinct strands of argument so it is worth considering each area in turn. Taking social relations first, a useful starting point is the importance of morality to debates about how people do and should behave towards each other, a discussion which has run alongside more politically motivated discourses of social and community 'cohesion', lamenting ‘failed’ communities and neighbourhoods of strangers (Amin, 2000: 26). A central concern of literature in this area, and one which is key to this research, has been the possibility of the 'good city' (Amin, 2006) and whether, despite Bauman's (2000) decries of liquid modernity and the erosion of social ties, sociality is prevalent after all, found in the mundane interactions and everyday 'encounters' of urban life. Concerns with morality also stretch to the more specific ability to tolerate 'difference' (Valentine, 2008). Massey's (2005) much repeated 'throwntogetherness' of cities signals a body of work interested in the pace, proximity and more recently (super)diversity of urban life and the social mechanisms that allow people with different backgrounds to share spaces with each other without too much conflict. In/tolerance has been an important thread in these arguments, and the romanticism of the turn towards cosmopolitanism (Binnie et al, 2006), conviviality and civility (Boyd, 2006) has been challenged for neglecting the resilience of prejudice in the face of difference (Valentine, 2008). As Ahmed (2000) argues, the way *some* bodies are inscribed so deeply with otherness undermines the notion that cities have become a harmonious melting pot of difference – something deftly illustrated in Clayton's (2008) exposure of racist attitudes among young people in Leicester, a city often lauded as a role model for how to create a successful urban multiculture. The notion of the stranger remains pervasive, in 'real life' and in urban theory (Iveson, 2006). Indeed, 'difference' continues to be one of the most salient points of tension in many accounts of social relations, with ethnic difference presented as a particularly resilient social fault line. It is worth warning here, however, against a tendency to imply a corresponding 'sameness' among those who are not ostensibly 'different' to each other. A 'shared' ethnic identity or class position, for example, is no guarantee of conviviality.

The turn to conviviality does offer a welcome move away from the more traditional focus on 'community' as the primary forum for social relations, and with it a more flexible interpretation of the underlying morality of sociality. Short-lived and even irregular encounters can now be taken seriously as an important component of social interaction, (Neal at al, 2013: 316). The recognition of the *transient* nature of social relations is significant for this study, focusing as it does on a 'transient' neighbourhood. Above all, conviviality recognises sociality in all its forms, revealing the possibility of strong social currents and ‘interrelatedness’ (Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014: 342) in the most fragmented of social contexts, as Laurier and Philo's (2006) examination of 'gestures in a cafe' also underlines. One of the key tensions here is the question of how meaningful such encounters really are (Valentine, 2008), and perhaps the tendency to bestow too much moral or celebratory weight on social gestures which are followed more by an adherence to social and spatial scripts, codes and contexts than any great investment in other people.

There are warnings within these discussions then, of the danger of almost essentialising difference itself in the study of social relations (Antonsich, 2010: 121), and of *flattening* the range of social encounters identified, making fewer distinctions between passing smiles in coffee shops between strangers and more prolonged or deliberate social interactions. The move towards encounter and conviviality, however, has been particularly valuable for the more explicit groundedness it offers in analysing and locating social interactions. While few discussions of social relations assertively foreground space and place in a sustained manner, most at least take space and place seriously. The locations of social encounters are readily identified and turned into sites of ethnographic research – the "routine contexts" (Neal et al, 2013: 316) of public space. As Amin (2006: 1011) notes, the 'city' itself is not a discernible place, it is the various locations within it which need to be acknowledged as sites of potential civility and encounter - nurseries and gyms (Cook et al, 2011: 730), school playgrounds (Wilson, 2013), market places (Watson, 2009), public transport (Wilson, 2011; Bissell, 2010). Different case-studies show the different spatial norms of sociality – the contrasting use of street space in Senegal and Catalonia, for example, for neighbourly interactions (Heil, 2014). Laurier et al (2002) similarly underline the distinct social rules of neighbourhoods and neighbourly behaviour.

This significance of place and space, of course, has been pushed much further. Amin and Thrift (2002: 39, 40) caution against seeing space as merely a "dependent variable of social process" – indeed "the smallest spatialities can also have the largest social consequences". This recognition of the non-human as an integral actor also points to the usefulness of the concept of assemblage in bringing into focus the inextricable *interweaving* of human and non-human in social encounters. As Anderson and Harrison (2010: 14) explain, a materialist, assemblage stance stresses that "...everything takes part, and in taking-part, takes-place; everything happens, everything acts". The human is not necessarily de-centred entirely (McFarlane, 2011b: 651), but the scope of acting parts is widened considerably. Assemblage may have become a near ubiquitous term in human geography especially but it remains invaluable for framing a different understanding of the social "which seeks to blur divisions of social–material, near–far and structure–agency" (Anderson and McFarlane (2011:124), drawing on De Landa). Discussions on assemblage also force the perceived *fixity* of social life to be fundamentally reconsidered, framing the possibility of an assemblage which is always "becoming" and "turbulent" (McFarlane, 2011a: 24). The implications for social interaction are far reaching, materially and temporally. For Thrift (2008: 215), any acts of kindness in the city have to be "extended to other kinds of urban denizen". Hinchcliffe and Whatmore (2006: 125) see conviviality as "a more broadly conceived accommodation of difference, better attuned to the comings and goings of the multiplicity of more-than-human inhabitants that make themselves at home in the city". Taking Amin's (2012: 3) warning against "seeing too much of the human in the social", social interaction and conviviality can be understood more holistically through materiality, space and built environment, as well as situated practice, and the changing *interactions* (McFarlane, 2011b: 653) between all these properties.

Place, then, is present in much of the social relations literature, particularly where the influence of non-representational theory and assemblage has been at its strongest. But those interested in social relations should not overlook the mountain of literature which has been focused on place as a starting point for understanding sociality (Cresswell, 2004; Antonsich, 2010). Putting place first may appear to take us away from the persuasive 'constellationary' mechanics of the assemblage arguments, but it is important to note how discussions of place – as opposed to landscape, for example – are also inherently discussions of the social. As Cresswell (1996: 13) notes, places are where we exist and act; "humanity has to exist in place" (Cresswell, 2004: 50). Two approaches to place are particularly relevant here.

Firstly, the social ordering of place inevitably involves degrees of inclusivity and exclusivity (Cresswell, 1996: 161) and associated degrees of feelings of belonging. While the demarcation of insiders and outsiders at a local level will be investigated later in the article, it is worth also noting here the voluminous interest in place attachment which has developed across different disciplines (Antonsich, 2010), along with the reassertion of the 'mutually implicated’ relationship between place and self (Antonsich, 2009: 646). In their overview of the geographies of belonging Mee and Wright (2009), observe that "belonging connects matter to place" (772). It is this belonging which is at the heart of place attachment, something which is difficult to unpick but rests on a combination of physical, habitual and affective connections made between person and place. It is this observation which brings us back to the assemblage argument again, highlighting the "ensemble of objects, human and non-human animals, practices and ideas" (Mee and Wright, 2009: 772) – to which could be added memories (Rishbeth and Powell, 2013) – which make up individual configurations of attachment to place. Place attachment is generated through inevitably mutable assemblages of conditions and actors, some of which will be environmental, some of which will be social. While there is no room here to rehearse all the debates about place and place attachment, the distinction between physical and social forms of place attachment is an interesting context for this research – is it possible to discern which is more important for forging place based feelings of belonging? Hidaglo and Hernadez (2001: 279) maintain that although physical attachments are important, social attachments are more significant in cementing these bonds of belonging. *Situated* conviviality especially may have an important role to play in the creation and maintenance of place attachment.

The second strand in discussions of place particularly relevant for this research is the hugely influential assertion of the openness and porosity of place – that "places are processes, too" (Massey, 1993: 68). Massey's arguments on place are a useful way of framing investigations into churn, illustrating the inextricability of place and people and the capacity for places, as ensembles, to be continually evolving as people move in and out. McFarlane's thoughts on disrupting the "heavy connotations of localism and rootedness" associated with dwelling by recognising the possibility of dwelling *through* the mobilities of urban rhythms are significant here too (2011a: 53), offering perhaps a conceptual link back to the significance of routine practices of conviviality. Fluidity does not necessarily neutralise the emotional capacity of belonging, and especially pertinent for this paper, the desire to belong, more usually correlated with fixity.

These arguments are important to hold on to when faced with discussions of population turnover which conceptually frame high levels of residential mobility as something deviant, characteristically associated with a range of social deprivation indicators and weakened place attachment. Bailey and Livingstone (2007), among others (Hickman, 2010; Bailey et al, 2012), assert that high population turnover has a negative impact on neighbourhood experience, local social relations and place attachment. Churn, it is argued (Bailey et al, 2012), reduces opportunities for social attachments and mutual trust to form, with this social fracturing weakening place attachment; in "the great majority of neighbourhoods, rising turnover is associated with falling attachment as expected" (Bailey et al, 2012: 222). In studies such as these churn is 'expected' to be damaging from the outset, part of the social fallout from liquid modernity penetrating the locality. However, drawing on Savage (2005), Bailey at al do acknowledge that sometimes people *do* form attachments without deep roots; by raising this possibility, the conviviality turn is effectively reinforced. This leads to a significant question. Is churn – with all its accompanying impacts on the materiality of a neighbourhood, through a rampant buy-to-let market, for example, and the detrimental effect this can have on housing stock (see Crook, 2002; Rhodes, 2006; Burrell, 2014a) – always damaging for people and place, or is it something people and place can and do adapt to more readily than 'expected', through practices such as small-scale conviviality and personalised place attachments? Indeed, can churn even generate new possibilities for, and perspectives on, sociability?

This article will draw on these arguments to focus on how people living in a specific place react to churn, considering both the social practices which are used to reach out to neighbours and where they are located, and how these social contexts impact on individual relationships with this place.

**Background to Research**

This article arises from a project undertaken in an inner city neighbourhood of Leicester. Three scales of investigation have been utilised. Firstly, the statistics used to investigate population turnover trends were drawn from those available from the Office for National Statistics for the 'middle layer super output area' of Leicester 016 – an area of approximately 3,200 households. Secondly, this research was further contextualised by the social indicator and 2011 Census information available for the smaller 'neighbourhood' level of Leicester 016C – an area within the larger 016 boundary containing fewer than 700 households. Finally, the main body of the research was based on in-depth interviews undertaken in just a few neighbouring streets within Leicester 016C, covering a smaller geographic area again and corresponding roughly to Kearns and Parkinson's (2001: 2103) notion of the smallest 'home area' of neighbourhood as being the area between five and ten minute walk away from place of residence. Neighbourhood is a notoriously difficult space to define, with official statistics not necessarily mapping easily onto perceptions of neighbourhood on the ground. The use of the term 'neighbourhood' in this article, then, is necessarily flexible, recognising that for different participants neighbourhood may represent different spaces.

Taking the available statistics first, figures for the neighbourhood of Leicester 016C point to relatively high levels of general social deprivation, crime and 'living environment deprivation', with lower than average adult life expectancy and a higher than average unemployment rate of 13.3 per cent (ONS, 2011a). With regards to housing, the 2011 Census confirms the visibly apparent predominance of terraced housing in the area (almost 70 per cent, with just over 20 per cent as flats) and points to a relatively high proportion of social housing – 17.6 per cent of housing as local authority compared to an England average of 7.5 per cent – with overall housing stock otherwise mainly held as owner occupier or privately rented. The figures are especially interesting regarding the social and ethnic diversity of the population. Despite enumerating a lower than average number of skilled workers the 2011 Census still recorded 19 per cent of residents as managers or professionals. In terms of ethnicity, approximately 44 per cent of residents fell outside of the White English/Welsh etc. category, broken down as 17 per cent 'other White', 11 per cent South Asian and 8 per cent Black African/Caribbean as the largest categories, with 6 per cent identifying as mixed with regards to ethnic background (percentages calculated from 2011 Census). This is an interesting finding for Leicester, more usually associated with a large South Asian population (Herbert, 2008; Clayton, 2008). Leicester 016C is not a traditional area of South Asian settlement but instead has become a more broadly ethnically diverse neighbourhood, a process clearly accelerated by influxes of A8 migrants after 2004 (Burrell, 2009).

It is the population turnover rates which really stand out, being the highest in the city (XXXX, XXXX; ONS, 2011b). These figures relate to the larger 016 boundary rather than the 016C neighbourhood level, but still offer an insight into 'churn' in the area. For 2009-2010, population turnover was recorded as 33 per cent, compared to a national average of 20 per cent (Bailey and Livingstone, 2007: xi, referring to 2001). In preceding years, furthermore, turnover had been consistently high, ranging between 29 and 33 per cent – enough for the area to be considered unstable in terms of population (Galster et al, 2000). This instability cannot be solely due to new A8 migration, although this may certainly be significant. Also important is the local housing market and an increasingly active buy-to let market in the area, alongside changes in social housing allocations, bringing new social service recipients in (XXXX, XXXX). Whatever the reasons, when this research was conducted (2011) this neighbourhood could be defined by both the fluidity and social diversity of its population. A neighbourhood like this can tell us a lot about how people cope with change around them.

The focus of this work has been twelve in-depth interviews held with fifteen residents in this area. Participants ranged in age and background, including retired long-time residents and more recent incomers and migrants, renters and owners, professionals and unemployed, with a variety of ethnic/national backgrounds (see Table One). Interviews were generally held in people's homes, and on the three occasions this was not possible in nearby cafes, and focused on the respondents' experiences of home and neighbourhood, allowing the residents to talk at length about how they felt about where they lived. An attempt to get respondents to fill in a weekly time diary, charting their daily movements in, and feelings about, their immediate neighbourhood only yielded two diaries (XXXX, XXXX; XXXX, XXXX, 9-10); the interviews, conversational and informal in tone, proved to be a more natural and less obtrusive way of engaging with the participants. I did manage to use the interviews to ask people to describe their neighbourhood routines, and through this got a good sense of the time-space dimensions of their local activities and sensibilities. To safeguard the richness and nuance of the interview material, transcripts were analysed 'manually', looking for themes across the interviews but also respecting the integrity and uniqueness of each conversation and life story.

It is almost customary in this (now post) non-representational theory age to offer some defence of the use of interviews, to assert, as Hitchings (2012) does, that people *can talk* about their practices (Burrell, 2014b). There is perhaps an obvious contradiction in research which is inspired by some of the ideas put forward by scholars such as Thrift, but which also has to contend with the very bald assertion that "non-representational theory is resolutely anti-biographical and pre-individual. It trades in modes of perception which are not subject-based" (Thrift, 2008: 7). There is no easy resolution to this, and this is not the place to revisit these arguments in any depth. It is important to remember that people are, generally, still part of the assemblages which are proposed in more theoretical texts. What you get with interview based research is an insight into the human subjectivity within any given assemblage and an important acknowledgement of the particular significance of humans as social beings. This tension raises some interesting questions about the possibility of researching the social without these voices, the perhaps moral deficit of decentring the human too much, and the obvious impossibility of academics, as humans, ever forming research *insights* which are not themselves subject based. Interview work can still be influenced by these theories, but there is also an argument to be made for the moral weight of narratives and storytelling, for the empathy and understanding they can promote on a human level. Working in places which may be experiencing particular challenges it seems especially important for people to speak for themselves and not to let the subjective appraisal of the academic researcher shape the entire discussion.

**Living in the Midst of Churn**

'Churn' and its various consequences and manifestations dominated the interview conversations, even among the newer residents. Given the negative associations with high population turnover consistently uncovered in academic studies (Bailey et al, 2012), it is unsurprising that in many of the interviews with longer standing residents narratives discussions about the neighbourhood focused on an array of unwanted impacts apparently brought about by population instability. While Savage et al (2005) point out that not all local belonging is negotiated through the juxtaposition of incomers and incumbents, this particular fault line at first did appear significant in some of these interviews, used as a way of ordering place through 'us' and 'them' (Cresswell, 1996) and belying an uneasiness about new neighbours (Painter, 2012: 524). Some of this discussion invoked memories of a more sociable and secure past. Joan, for example, a retired long-term resident, talked at length in her interview about how the area had changed since the 1960s. The material component of her discussion and the detail given over to this materiality is particularly striking:

"Oh you knew everybody, everybody. And everybody... I mean, when I first moved down here if anybody passed away, everybody came and gave so that there was a wreath or flowers from everyone in the street, and everyone gave. And you would have a chair outside in the street and you would have the flowers on it and everybody would come and look. And everybody would draw the curtains and stand outside. It was that kind of community. Everybody was there for everybody else. If anybody needed anything. That’s all gone now" (Joy, long-term resident, retired).

It is plain that the '*process* of place' identified by Massey can be disconcerting for anybody who holds an emotional attachment to an imagined or remembered, and relatively fixed, *version* of their neighbourhood and what it constitutes socially and materially (Bennett, 2014). Yvonne, in her forties, had this to say about how the area has changed in the last 20 years:

"It’s changed dramatically... It can be quite daunting really to how it used to be, because everybody used to know everybody years ago and you’d go to your corner shop and you’d see Mrs Bloggs from down the road, you’d have your conversation. And it was more of a community when it was like that, but nowadays because you’ve got different people coming in and out, a lot of the area is now privately rented. So you’re getting change of faces every other day, so it’s not so much of a community now as it was" (Yvonne, foster carer, recently returned to area).

In these accounts, Joan and Yvonne both explicitly place themselves at the spatial centre of the neighbourhood, commenting on change *around* them and drawing invisible boundaries between the new 'different' people and more established residents. The same wariness of incomers, this time expressed in terms of familiarity and strangers and the difficulty of being able differentiate between those who live in the locality and those who do not, came through in other conversations with longer established residents. According to Amir:

"There’s a lot of people coming and going and it does bother me yes. Because there’s a lot of sort of traffic around here and *it’s difficult to recognise who should be here and who shouldn’t be here*. My next door house, I think it’s cursed because I don’t think tenants actually live there for very long… there are a lot of people that come and live here for six months and go" (Amir, home owner and service sector worker, lived in area for over ten years).

Within these interviews there was also a palpable ethnicised othering embedded in the narratives which featured suspicious Latvians and noisy Poles. In the words of Andrew:

"We had some Latvians move in about five or six houses down, and they weren’t noisy but you were quite suspicious of them, because they had a charity van and you knew it wasn’t a real charity, so there was something dodgy going on. And they drank a lot of vodka as well and one of them hit a car further down the road and then drove off and parked outside their house" (Andrew, ‘young professional’, home owner, lived in area for five years).

Amir also had this to say about the local Polish population:

"I’m not racist at all but they can get very loud, you know, especially when they’ve been drinking.... The majority of it is Polish that make a lot of racket. I know because I’ve heard it, I don’t really sleep that much and my bedroom is in the front. So every time they pass my window I can hear them. The majority is Polish and sort of foreign communities, I’m not saying it’s 100 per cent Polish because I don’t know who they are, but they are foreign because they speak in a foreign language. English people pass by as well and you can hear them sometimes but it’s not as bad, you know, they don’t go round chucking your bin over or hitting stuff as they walk past the street, especially at 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning" (Amir, home owner and service sector worker, lived in area for over ten years).

In a few of the accounts East Europeans, as unknown foreigners and clear outsiders, are associated with noise, alcohol, hitting stuff and general 'dodgy' dealings, with any 'good' encounters rarely being 'scaled up' (Matejskova and Leitner, 2011; Buffel et al, 2013). They are deemed responsible for various erosions of the built environment, introducing new suspicious materialities and threatening the integrity of existing ones. Having foreign roots in itself was not necessarily the problem - many of these longer settled respondents also had migrant backgrounds, personally or through parentage. At the time of interviewing, rather, it seemed that these A8 incomers were being perceived less as a 'new' population, and more as a volatile one in terms of local mobility patterns. Significantly too, not all of this generalised transience and instability was 'blamed' on A8 migration. A distinctly classed othering was also present in the accounts of some of the more established inhabitants, seen in depictions of the disorderly characteristics of some of those more recent and sometimes transient renters assumed to be receiving social benefits and associated with social services, marked as outsiders by their perceived non-neighbourly behaviour and lack of care. Joel, who has lived next door to several different families on one side, associated 'welfare housing' with poorer neighbourly commitment:

"you get a lot of sort of welfare housing and you get a very transient population, which doesn’t, you’ve got your mainstays but then you’ve got the ones that just come in, it’s a house, it’s not a community. They don’t care, they do their own thing, they don’t care who they upset, they have no regard for other people.... I think if people, the people that own their houses tend to take a bit more pride and, you know, tend to look after them and tend to not want to upset their neighbours... My neighbours, not the current neighbours or the ones before, the ones before that were, I mean they were civil to me but they just made a lot of noise. And they drank a lot, they worked shifts, pretty much every Saturday night they had a fight." (Joel, ‘young professional’, home owner, lived in area for seven years).

In their different forms then, transience and mobility are presented as being at odds with the meaningful construction of neighbourhood and belonging, socially and materially. A powerful dynamic of exclusion, otherness and blame is put forward, all oscillating around the impact of newcomers and movers, but the social and emotional dynamics of churn are more complex than this. Unfortunately the interviewing process did not reach any of this 'welfare' population so there is a significant standpoint missing here, but the experiences of some of the more mobile migrants can start to deepen understandings of churn. Lilia, from Poland, was happy to have made friends with other Poles in the area, but by the time we met she had moved away, unnerved both by circulating stories of crime in the area and by the high levels of street noise. She also spoke about how the transience of the Polish population had made it more difficult for her to maintain friendships there:

"When I was living there, there was a lot of Polish people. I had a lot of friends. But there are a lot of people from Poland who came here for a couple of years and then they go back. I met a lot of students, they lived on the road, but they went back to Poland. It’s not easy to have friends, because you’ve got friends but they can always go back to Poland so it’s difficult." (Lilia, Polish migrant, single mother, moved away during study)

Kasia and Tomasz, living in a recently converted rented flat with their two children, were also uneasy about the safety of neighbourhood and had moved further away from the streets they deemed to be especially dangerous, happier to be living in a complex of flats with added security systems instead of a flat in a converted terraced house. Tomasz spoke about his desire to move out of the city completely:

"Next flat or house which I may rent, I’m 100% sure I rent it outside Leicester, best in a village, a small village, quiet, no problems, yes. Only now I feel very well, I have an enclosed building, I’m sure nobody is walking around here, stranger. I have closed parking, that’s why I go to work and I’m not scared about my wife and kids. Here it’s safer. The first flat that we moved here, my wife went to Poland on holiday for one week and I stayed in England. I went to work and when I come in from work my flat had been burgled. Somebody stole camera, telephone, money." (Tomasz, Polish migrant, lived in area for three years)

What is particularly interesting here is that Lilia, Kasia and Tomasz and the longer settled residents had very similar ideas about what was wrong with the area and also spoke about issues connected with churn such as losing friends as they moved away and being wary of strangers walking around. Their conversations may have framed the impacts and causes of churn and social instability in different ways, but their emotional drive to invest in their neighbourhood and their pursuit of security were markedly similar. It was the need to feel safer and more rooted which pushed Lilia and her toddler daughter away to a flat closer to the town centre, recommended by friends. Tomasz and Kasia responded to feeling unsafe by moving a few streets away. Perhaps their greater ease with mobility had equipped them with the resources to be able to move away in order to become more settled, and as newer migrants they were seemingly less financially and emotionally 'trapped' in the area than the older residents, a typical A8 migrant fluidity noted by Parutis (2011). This brings a more nuanced perspective to these migrant experiences and their apparent utilisation of an 'elective belonging' (Savage et al., 2005, 29). While contributing to churn on the one hand, these three migrants revealed that they had tried but struggled to set down roots in this environment and that they were clearly not indifferent to the social dynamics of the area. These outlooks therefore perhaps complicate the dwelling/assemblage tension McFarlane (2011b) discusses. Openness of place and a related ease of mobility are valued aspects of the neighbourhood for the Polish migrants, and while they are the same aspects which seem so disruptive to any sense of dwelling, they ultimately facilitate very similar longer term goals.

One final commonality to consider here is the alienation all of the interviewed residents felt towards the private landlords in the area, marked as economic insiders but moral outsiders by the perceived abuse of their power in the local housing market (XXXX, XXXX). As already suggested in some of the selected quotes, much of the population turbulence is blamed on landlords disinterested in the social context of the neighbourhood and focused only on their financial returns, a situation which appears to have become more intense in recent years with the national liberalisation of the buy-to let market. Several residents spoke about the increase of rental stock in the area, owned by physically absent landlords, and many pointed to the vulnerability these landlords bring to the lives of their tenants. Tomasz was worried about Polish friends who had been mistreated by their landlords, and Yvonne wanted to talk about the lack of care taken of the rental housing stock by landlords:

"But then the landlords are not taking care of the houses for a lot of the tenants, to want to put care in the properties as well. So I think, as an area, what should be worked on, well the landlords because I’ve seen some properties are in a right state along here… People are living, some people are living in right horrible states, mould and things" (Yvonne, foster carer, lived in the area since 1990s).

Again, the materiality is central here. The problem is not just with the landlords as social actors in themselves, but with their influence over the shared material environment.

So far, these neighbourhood depictions appear very stark. While not articulated so explicitly, these narratives present a place which is under siege by the wider structural forces of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism, affecting the perceived stability and attractiveness of the area by the different residents, all of whom are concerned by the disproportionate power of the landlords. The class and ethnic dimensions are clear, but the broader power asymmetries are palpable too. As McFarlane argues (2011b: 667), "urban assemblages are structured, hierarchised, and narrativised through profoundly unequal relations of power, resource, and knowledge". It is worth re-emphasising here too the precision of references to materiality in these accounts, in the testimonies of historical community (street spaces, chairs, flowers and wreaths, curtains, corner shop), and in the discussions of neighbourhood disruption (charity vans, vodka, windows, rubbish bins, stuff, rental housing, police sub-stations). The neighbourhood as a physical whole is depicted as changed by and under threat from churn, not just the social relations within it. Even when some of the participants resist the mutable character of the neighbourhood environment, their accounts reveal its multi-faceted socio-material nature.

**Locating Neighbourliness**

This next section will consider the glimpses of neighbourliness hiding in these bleak interview narratives, uncovering conviviality and place attachment in various guises, and importantly, revealing the participation of newer and more settled residents in these more neighbourly interactions. The participants did share examples of conviviality in the area and more positive reactions to 'living with difference'. Joy, for example, spoke about her next door neighbours from Zimbabwe:

"Our neighbour next door, he is Zimbabwean, wonderful couple, two good kids. Both go to work. ...they [other kids] were playing football in the street and he has got a nice little car, he’s earned it because he goes to work and everything, ‘cause he was very concerned. That’s a rented house you see and he was on about moving. ‘Don’t you move!’, they are the best neighbours we have ever had…. They went to Africa for three weeks. We used to go round every night and draw the curtains, go round in the morning and open them, check everything, and he bought us that and he bought us that (pointing to Rhino plaque on wall)… And he bought me a lovely bag, a big canvas shopping bag with a photo of an elephant on the front. That was nice. They have been here about seven years now. He will be going out in a bit because he fetches his wife from the hospital because she works at the Royal. So he takes her in the morning about quarter to seven, then fetches her about, she comes out at about 12" (Joy, long-term resident, retired).

There is a lot to unpack from this extract. This family have earned their place as insiders through a combination of being good neighbours, having been next door for a few years and being a *hard working* family. This reinforces the earlier suggestion that any insider/outsider boundaries set up by some of the residents are more porous in practice, with clear scope for relatively recent residents to engage in convivial relations. What is also interesting about this account, again, is the materiality of the neighbourly behaviour. The *nearness* of being next door is key, something Painter (2012, 527) reflects on in his discussion of Canadian writer Naim Kattan's *The Neighbour*, a short story set in a Montreal neighbourhood: "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". Neighbours, their cars, their routines visibly played out on the street outside, their houses, their curtains, the gifts they bring – all these things form the neighbourhood environment. As Laurier at al (2002, 356) observe, "Spatial organisation is still more deeply involved in the actions, language, and sense of their lives as neighbours than offering them the opportunity to make small talk or the challenge of evading one another". And although Laurier et al may underplay this aspect, the proximity of the next door position is crucial, clearly affording enough general friendly chats to lead to a relationship of greater trust between the two households. This trust, furthermore, is performed largely through material goods and related practices, social acts mediated and indeed shaped by things (Amin and Thrift, 2002, 35). Moreover, while there may be moral undertones in the account pointing perhaps to an asymmetrical relationship between the two households, there is little doubt that these neighbourly relations have *meaning* for those involved (Valentine, 2008).

Joel shared a similar story about his next door neighbours:

"My neighbour on the right… we get on well, you know, I’ve got a set of his keys, he’s got a set of my keys and when he goes away he lets me know. My neighbours on the other side are from Uzbekistan, they’re absolutely lovely. I think they’ve kind of adopted me because when they have their special festival events, they always bring me a dish of food round and, you know, I lend them my gardening tools, you know. Across the road, they take my parcels in. So it’s all very civil, you know… they [Uzbek neighbours] had a New Year’s celebration and they cook this kind of, it’s a kind of caramel type paste that gives you strength and energy, you know, I hadn’t tasted it… The odd time that I’ll write something in Uzbekistan [sic] and stick it on my window so that they see it when they’re coming home, because we have facing windows, so when I’m doing my washing up I quite often wave… I just googled kind of thank you for Uzbekistan and so on" (Joel, ‘young professional’, home owner, lived in area for seven years).

Again, the materiality – food, tools, parcels, kitchen window – is integral to the sociality, not an ‘add on’. Here the particular architectural affordances of the terraced houses, with kitchen windows facing each other, have allowed a specific intimacy to develop around washing up. These types of encounters link well with Datta's (2009, 356-7) ideas about everyday localised cosmopolitanisms and the need to treat "cosmopolitanism as a spatial concept". The openness of the interactions between Joel and his neighbours, and more particularly his desire to learn about where they have come from, is perhaps a good example of everyday cosmopolitanism, and certainly of genuine curiosity, arguably an integral facet of any meaningful encounter (Phillips, 2014). However, as with the example of Joy and her neighbours, this is a social relationship of openness built around this family, at this time, in this place. A more general churn in the neighbourhood is not, in the end, intrusive enough to disrupt this level of neighbourly intimacy, at least when there is relative continuity in who is living next door.

There are further significant temporal insights to draw from the interview material too, discernible in discussions of more 'public' convivial encounters. Emma and Andrew both narrated intricate time-geographies of social interaction in their daily routines. According to Emma,

"There is a man at the end of the road who walks his dog…. And I used to see him when I had my old job because we’d sort of walk sort of at the same time by the river. And he was always sort of saying, 'hello' and 'how are you doing' and all that stuff. So that was nice but not many other people… there’s a woman, she wears a head band, I’ve not seen her the last couple of weeks because it’s probably a bit icy…. she always smiles and says, 'morning', like we normally kind of cross the road at the same place, like on the opposite direction. And there’s a guy who lives a few doors up, I think he probably lives in one of the flats because he has to go through the weird doors, on a motorbike, so I say hello to him. But it’s not like, I don’t know them, do you know what I mean? You just sort of smile and say hello to them, sort of people that you see regularly kind of thing" (Emma, ‘young professional’, renting, stayed in area after university).

Andrew recounted the following:

"... the whole knowing people down my street now is because I walk to the park and I see them at the same time. So they’re either leaving for work or coming home from work and you’ll say hello, stuff like that. There’s one woman on xxxx Road who’s got Alzheimer’s and she’ll always say hello to us … And I do make an effort to sort of say hello to her and be nice, especially my dog, he’s very friendly and he wants say hello to people.And like he’ll have his set people that he’ll want to say hello to every time he sees them, so you do strike up a conversation with them. Not that I know their names or where they live, but you see them on a regular basis" (Andrew, ‘young professional’, home owner, lived in area for five years).

Margaret also shared her experiences of walking through the park on her way to work in the city centre in the morning, before she lost her job:"Oh in the morning it’s [the park] very busy and it’s lovely, I used to speak to, you always say, ‘morning, morning’, you always get, it’s a lovely atmosphere in the morning" (Margaret, not working, rented in area for 25 years). These accounts are rich with examples of the sort of small-scale conviviality now familiar in the social relations literature. They are based on friendly encounters, often short chats, but not much more – names are not necessarily known, for example. There is regularity in this sociality but not necessarily great depth, perhaps just a rather warm approach to the following of social scripts (Laurier, 2002); certainly more than the bare minimum of what is expected in public space, but never really leading the more sustained social contact seen in Joy's relationship with her neighbour.

This leads us back to Valentine's critique of aspects of the conviviality 'turn'. Are these types of social encounter meaningful? Or, more probingly, what are they meaningful *for*? Are they meaningful for social relations, or are they meaningful for personal place attachment? To what extent are these social encounters more about nurturing relationships with place than relationships with other people? Reading these extracts again, it is marked how precisely humans are located in the neighbourhood landscape – on the road, by the river, by the weird doors, in the park, and all at specific times of the day. What if these human actors really are just that, part of a flattened assemblage of the neighbourhood landscape, their significance only being that they are *there* at certain times in certain places? What if the real meaning of this social contact is that it makes people feel more secure about where they live, happier to walk through the park or down the road, rather than for any more explicit social purposes? Names are not necessary but the time-space co-ordinates of the presence of these people are key. In another example, Mark's neighbourly conviviality seems to be more about place and practice than the specific people involved: "I usually bring in the bin for the Poles next door too and shove it in their yard if they haven’t already done so for me. This is something that next door started off when it was full of Slovakians and it’s just carried on" (Mark, ‘young professional’, returned to area after university). Habitual, located practice appears to have the power to transcend ethnic and class boundaries; the ethnicity of the neighbours unproblematic here, with newcomers being included in this neighbourly act. This is a practice set to endure regardless of who is living next door. Perhaps then good neighbours are people who make us feel more comfortable in our own homes, their sociality useful primarily for the way it creates a more reassuring experience of place. As Cresswell (2009) argues, practices – in this case the *habits* of social interaction – are key to developing a sense of place. At what point these practices become representational constructions of place, furthermore, is an interesting question. The narratives collected here present a closely entwined relationship between how place, and place based sociality, is practiced and produced, and how these places are given meaning on a more representational level.

It is worth delving further into the relationship between place and sociality here. Much of the place attachment literature is already convinced by the significance of personal relationships with place for individual well-being, but this is something those interested in social relations could reflect on more, thinking about how social relations work *with and* *within* the site of interest, rather than leading with an assumption that they will be the dominant force (Antonsich, 2010, 121). Other questions arise here too. First, is this focus on people as an integral part of the landscape a specific reaction to churn? It is quite possible that some of this conviviality is a response to population instability. Sociality is clearly in evidence in spite of the very negative narratives of churn and neighbourhood impacts, but the small-scale nature of social encounters and the precision of their locality and materiality seem to offer them an important resilience in the face of human population change – pavements, windows and parcels will generally still be there to form social encounters around even if the people have altered. More research is needed to explore whether churn is more likely to push conviviality into these types of spaces or whether this is in fact just a typical manifestation of neighbourhood sociality – a sociality which is about far more than the social. Second, does this question mark over the significance of the social suggest a lack of care at play in neighbourhood social relations? Hall and Smith (2014, 11) provide an interesting discussion of care in their discussion of urban cleaning and repair, suggesting "a sense in which repair could also be described as a selfish activity". We fix our houses because the need is ours, not necessarily a symptom of a greater material or social responsibility. Do we talk to our neighbours out of selfishness, because the need for local sociality is ours? Is there somehow a moral deficit here? I would argue not. The social may not be the driving factor in these convivial encounters but ultimately it is still a part of it. Practices which promote reassurance and familiarity, and in some cases reflect a deep-seated curiosity, surely signal that there is a politics of care present here, social and material. At any rate, people care enough to *want* to arrive and then put down roots, to want to feel at home in their neighbourhoods, and while some of this 'care' revealed by the more established residents might be directed against newcomers, because it is still a kind of care to be concerned about change, it is important to acknowledge the kindness as well as the misanthropy (Thrift, 2008: 219). The pavements, parcels and windows, moreover, do not feel this care at all. There is something special about the human experience within the neighbourhood assemblage after all.

**Conclusions**

There are several conclusions to draw from this research. Firstly, the interviews uncovered a strong resistance to churn and all it entails socially and materially. As I have argued elsewhere (XXXX, XXXX), places may be theorised as ever evolving processes and interactions, but there can be an emotional disconnect between experiences of this fluidity and a human desire for settlement and certainty. Academics may see 'assemblage' where others see 'home'. It is important to emphasise the extent to which these feelings about churn converged among even the most and least 'mobile' participants, and how ultimately it was stability and the ability to feel comfortable in the neighbourhood that was most highly sought after and prized by all the respondents.

The second observation to make is that people do cope with churn. This research suggests that high population turnover does not necessarily prevent social interaction and conviviality. Indeed, a range of social interaction has been revealed, from daily smiles and waves to more sustained cross-cultural, trustful and curious relationships between neighbours. While the local dynamics of power and dominance are apparent (see McFarlane, 2011b: 668), insider/outsider boundaries, at least among those not acting as landlords, appear more porous and much less rigidly drawn in practice than originally presented. Those looking for evidence of social cohesion and wider indications on the future of social relations would surely be interested in the examples of social interaction unearthed here, in this context.

Thirdly, the materiality of these interactions has been highlighted throughout the research. Each example of conviviality or more sustained social interaction has been narrated with an environmental richness and with a very precise locating of people in local landscapes. What is more, the materiality of this social interaction is something which is shared among the different participants, a further common point of reference between supposedly opposing factions. This observation is especially relevant for ongoing debates about assemblage because although the 'neighbourhood' is evidently an unbounded, unfixed, ever changing entity, not everything within it changes at the same pace. The pavements, for example, are relatively constant within the make-up of the neighbourhood. The terraced houses have been standing for over one hundred years. If conviviality seems surprisingly resilient in the face of high levels of human mobility it may be because the infrastructure of conviviality stays comparatively stable. Practices are built around the affordances of the built and natural environment – those facing terraced windows, roads to park on and walk down, bins in side passages – and these practices are able to endure despite a changing cast of human actors performing them. The exact interactions between these 'properties' may ebb and flow but there is a blueprint offered by the materiality of the neighbourhood assemblage which proffers some possible structuring of these more social moments, a structuring which is repeated time and time again. The focus on fluidity within the assemblage discussions may be missing the importance of continuity – of infrastructure, of practice – in the assembling of different components, at least for social coherence.

This leads us to the final point to make, about the relative significance of the social in these social interactions. Given the range in intimacy and meaningfulness, some of the interactions found here appear to have a deeper social element than others. However, whether this sociality more generally is principally about place or about social interaction is not a straightforward call. This is where the interweaving of the social and the material within the assemblage discussions is particularly useful. These social interactions are clearly about *more* than the social; it would be impossible to untangle conviviality and place attachment in these accounts. Being friendly with neighbours may not always lead to rewarding and enduring relationships, but it does help to make the neighbourhood seem a friendlier place. The relationship is with the rest of the neighbourhood assemblage and not necessarily the neighbour. Situated social interactions, therefore, perhaps act as *acknowledgements* of people's presence in place, acknowledgements which can only really be made by human actors, but which rely on, and are shaped by, the immediate material environment.

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**Table One: Research Participant Details**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participants**  (pseudonyms) | **Age** | **Ethnic background** | **Housing** | **Length of time living in area** |
| **Joy and Peter**  **(married couple)** | 65+ | White British | Terraced house, owner occupiers | Over forty five years |
| **Mark** | 20-30 | White British | Terraced, living alone in house owned by parents | Twenty years, returned after university |
| **Pauline** | 50-65 | White British | Terraced house, renting | Over twenty years |
| **Lilia** | 20-30 | Polish | Terraced house, renting | Less than two years, moved away from area during project |
| **Tomasz and Kasia**  **(married couple)** | 30-40 | Polish | Converted flat, renting | Three years/two years |
| **Mary** | 50-65 | White British/Irish | Terraced house, owner occupier | Nearly twenty years |
| **Amir** | 40-50 | British Asian (Indian) | Terraced house, renting | Nearly fifteen years |
| **Emma** | 20-30 | White British | Terraced house, renting | Four years |
| **Daniel** | 30-40 | White British | Terraced house, owner occupier | Over five years |
| **Rosa** | 40-50 | Portuguese | Terraced house, owner occupier | Over fifteen years |
| **Yvonne and Monique (mother and daughter)** | 40-50, 18-20 | Dual white British/  Jamaican heritage | Terraced house, renting | Recently returned to area |
| **Joel** | 30-40 | Black British/  Jamaican/  Kenyan | Terraced house, owner occupier | Eight years |