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Ethnographies of urban encounters in super-diverse contexts: Insights from Shepherd's Bush, west London

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Introduction

In this chapter, I take the opportunity to reflect on some of the challenges I faced while researching both conviviality and transnational connections in an urban area. I draw on ethnographic material collected during research in a super-diverse context, mainly in the ward of Shepherd's Bush Green, in the Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, west London. More specifically, during fieldwork, one question became prominent: how can I look at conviviality in a localised context while also remaining alert to transnational connections? Put differently, how are everyday local encounters embedded into transnational dynamics?

My intervention here lies at the intersection of two strands of research. The first is the recent convivial turn in urban studies that, drawing mainly on Paul Gilroy's (2004) work, looks at super-diverse contexts and the ways in which people negotiate lived diversity in localised urban spaces (Gidley 2013; Neal et al. 2013). The second is the transnationalism paradigm in migration studies, which emerged in the early 1990s (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Glick Schiller et al. 1995). This turn has moved away from binary understandings of migrants' movements to highlight the multidimensional and cross-border aspects in which migrants' practices are embedded. Here, I want to emphasise the interlinkages between these two strands of literature, and reflect on the ways

migrant transnationalism informs modes of living together in localised urban spaces. The underlying premise is that a transnational perspective that looks at the mobility of people and their complex transnational networks will help us go beyond a lurking 'methodological neighbourhoodism' (Berg et al. 2019) of the convivial turn.

In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss the almost total absence of a transnational lens within studies of conviviality and their focus on the 'locality of relations'. Drawing on some examples from my ethnographic engagement in Shepherd's Bush, I argue that the 'transnational variable' does play out in the way people relate to each other locally. This forces us to reconsider the neighbourhood as a plural and relational space where diverse residents interact (Cattacin 2009). In the second part of the chapter, I will introduce my fieldwork and discuss some of the methodological questions I had to grapple with practically and conceptually when looking at both practices of conviviality and transnational connections. More specifically, I explain how certain nodes have emerged as preferred research 'sites' (Olwig and Hastrup 1997), and how mobility and transnational connections intersect in the urban area. In the third and final section, I offer some reflections on the ethics of doing research in diverse urban contexts and the many challenges that still remain. Here, I also come back to the link between conviviality and transnationalism, and outline how a combined approach holds the potential to rejuvenate migration research.

Beyond methodological neighbourhoodism: Conviviality, transnationalism and the missing link

Much of the sociological, anthropological and geographical work emerging in the last decade within the 'convivial turn' places the city – and most particularly the neighbourhood – at the core of its analysis, following the path traced by urban sociologists, and in particular those within the Chicago School in the early twentieth century. By bringing into focus other markers of social differentiation, research conducted within the convivial turn has allowed a shift in the focus of analysis from studies of specific ethnic groups in specific places to studies of localised forms of diversity (Vertovec 2006; Beck 2011; Berg and Sigona 2013; Meissner and Vertovec 2015). In this regard, many ethnographic studies of conviviality do not focus on ethnicity at all. Laurier and Philo's (2006, 204) ethnography on 'gestures of conviviality' in cafes, for instance, is not at all concerned with ethnic groups and shows that these are places where it is possible to

detect 'unremarked dimensions of how the work of conviviality is actually accomplished on a momentary, situated and improvised basis'. In the same vein, many studies of conviviality frequently result in the analysis of mundane encounters at a neighbourhood level. Yet, convivial studies often remain confined within the spatiality of neighbourhood analyses (Berg 2014). More broadly, by focusing on mundane local encounters, and by favouring the study of micro-politics and the micro-dynamics in a particular space, the study of conviviality in diverse contexts tends to leave out the transnational aspects of people's lives. With the exception to some extent of the work of Heil (2014) and Nowicka (2015), the diasporic and transnational variable has not been fully explored by scholars of conviviality, despite the fact that migrants' transnational practices significantly contribute to shaping the dynamics of people's interactions at the local level.

Such transnational practices have been emphasised by scholars who outline that migrants maintain relations across vast distances, both in time and space, beyond national borders (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Glick Schiller et al. 1995). In the early 1990s, the transnationalism paradigm emerged in particular through the work of North American anthropologists Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc, who moved away from binary understandings of migrants' movements to highlight the multidimensional and cross-border aspects in which migrants' practices are embedded. The word 'transmigrant' was introduced to refer to people who develop and maintain multiple relations beyond cultural and geographic boundaries, whose identity is linked to networks running simultaneously across several nation states (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Portes 1999; for a critical evaluation of this literature, see Monsutti 2004, 27–54). In a 'transnational social field' (Faist 2000), transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations – familiar, economic, social, religious or political – that cross state borders. It is thus possible to observe the multiple mobilities and the creation of 'circulatory territories' that form a system where localised social relations may be less meaningful for individuals than the ones developed across distant places (Tarrius 2002). Transnational connections that migrants maintain upset the idea of hermetically sealed neighbourhoods and situate diverse inhabitants in multiple, interpenetrating scales of relationality (Glick Schiller 2012). Here, the contribution of Glick Schiller (2012) in trying to establish a link between urban studies and migrant transnationalism has been particularly important. In her work on transnationality and the city, she shows how urban life is actually informed by migrants' transnational practices and, conversely, how migrant pathways of settlement

and transnational connections are shaped by the position of cities within neo-liberal processes of local, national, regional and global rescaling. In her words:

> Analysing cities through a comparative and global lens defines migrants and people of migrant background who live in a city as local actors rather than within binaries of native/foreign or citizen/outsider or legal/illegal. People of migrant background live within configurations of wealth, power, education, family and forms of cosmopolitan sociabilities that are part and parcel of the varying transnationality of cities.
>
> (Glick Schiller 2012, 28)

In Shepherd's Bush, urban life is visibly informed by transnational practices. People inhabiting the area navigate through multiple relations that span across the locality of the ward. Indeed, transnational connections play an important place in people's daily activities. Let us take, for example, the numerous money transfer agencies located in the area. Alongside Uxbridge Road – one of the two main roads that shape the topography of the ward – I counted five Dahabshiil[1] branches, ten Western Union agencies and one Amal Express[2] service point, to name just a few. Many shops have small painted signs in front of them that recall their link with the homeland, such as Jubba Express, Damas Gate, Lahore Spice and Nepal dining.[3] Transnational connections play out significantly in the way people relate to each other locally. Tensions in the area have sometimes been a reflection of dynamics that characterise relations across communities in their respective countries of origin. For instance, as argued by one of my interlocutors, there have been cases where tensions have arisen between Somali and Ethiopian residents due to the territorial and political dispute over the Ogaden, a region in the Horn of Africa contested by both Ethiopia and Somalia. This example clearly shows how conflicts happening elsewhere influence local conviviality and the way people negotiate everyday encounters.

Overall, incorporating a transnational perspective into studies of conviviality not only directs our attention to the highly complex, fractured and multilayered relations that people maintain across various places, but also helps to overcome what Berg et al. (2019) have called 'methodological neighbourhoodism', referring a strict and sometimes limited focus on the neighbourhood level as the context of analysis in the study of conviviality. Going beyond 'methodological neighbourhoodism'

entails taking into account the ways in which certain sites in the neighbourhood are marked by mobility and transnational connections. The examples outlined above emphasise that, if we want to understand urban dynamics of living together in a localised space, we need to be ready to look beyond this space – which changes continually and whose inhabitants are mobile – and start our analysis from the people and their practices *in* a territory, not *from* the territory itself. Transnational scholarship teaches us to perceive local communities as open. In urban contexts, then, this means to look not only at the practices people perform in their interactions with local encounters, but also at the multiple ways their transnational connections influence their daily activities and practices. This equally means to pay attention to, and to be more explicit about, the intersection between different levels of containment – local, national, transnational. At the same time, as Berg and Sigona (2013) argue, one should not forget that transnational connections are always located in time and space, and that localised interactions in sites of settlements are part and parcel of migrants' everyday encounters. These reflections lead us also to reconsider the neighbourhood as a plural and relational space where diverse residents interact (Cattacin 2009). This plurality invites us to go beyond integration assumptions and localised practices in favour of a more fluid conception of the city/neighbourhood that considers the transnational relations as playing an essential part in people's everyday encounters.

Researching conviviality and transnational connections in Shepherd's Bush

The theoretical reflections discussed above have outlined the importance of incorporating a transnational perspective into studies of conviviality as a way out of 'methodological neighbourhoodism' (Berg et al. 2019). Yet, how can this be applied concretely? How can we look at conviviality in a localised context while also remaining alert to transnational connections? These are the questions that I had to deal with during my fieldwork in the neighbourhood of Shepherd's Bush, west London. Doing research in a super-diverse urban context characterised by increased mobility presents particular challenges for researchers. Not only is a spatially localised site of research difficult to identify, as migrants operate in complex and interconnected contexts, but mapping the transnational practices of diverse communities might be problematic in terms of time and resources. I began my fieldwork in the area with the intention to analyse how everyday

conviviality is embedded into transnational dynamics. This research nicely links with my doctoral work on Somali transnational practices. In my PhD, I focused on the voluntary return of Somali migrants to central Somaliland and explored how such a phenomenon is intrinsically embedded into transnational sociocultural, economic and political fields. In the course of my investigation in Hargeisa, I came across many Somalis who were living as 'part-time diaspora' (Hammond 2013) in their cities of residence. The majority of people I met came from London, and so I started to conduct a multi-sited research that also included an exploration of their lives in this city. Little by little, I became curious about the ways their transnational practices related with their everyday encounters in London. This has pushed me to start this research, which fits within a larger field of study that explores urban encounters in super-diverse contexts, most specifically where no majority group can be found. In this regard, Wessendorf's (2014) study in the London Borough of Hackney represents one valuable exploration of how people of various religious, ethnic, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and different legal statuses, negotiate social relations and develop intercultural competencies to get along in the neighbourhood. Yet, there is little space in her account to analyse how these local encounters are embedded into transnational connections. My work explores the ways and modes of interactions between human groups in the city, while also staying attuned to transnational connections. With its diverse socio-migratory configurations, a great diversity of origin of migrant populations, but also of their socio-economic status, their conditions and forms of mobility, Shepherd's Bush is probably one of the most suitable places to address this topic.

The neighbourhood belongs to the ward of Shepherd's Bush Green, in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. It has an estimated population of slightly over twelve thousand people out of almost one hundred and eighty-two thousand for the entire borough.[4] This is where the majority of the council housing stock is concentrated. Indeed, the estates around Shepherd's Bush and White City contain some of the biggest pockets of deprivation in London, with twice the average levels of unemployment. Historically, the population of Shepherd's Bush has mainly been white and working class, with big communities of Australian and Irish. With time, diversity has increased, first with the arrival of Caribbean migrants, then of those of African, Middle Eastern, Polish and Asian backgrounds. Over the years, the area has undergone tremendous change. Visible examples of gentrification are the multimillion-pound Westfield development built in 2008, as well as the recently renovated Bush Hall, which stands close to the local mosque located on Uxbridge

Road. Traders and local associations have been particularly united to resist the ongoing gentrification process. They have worked together to fight against a £150 million regeneration plan sponsored by private development investors and the local council to construct two hundred new flats next to Shepherd's Bush Market, in nearby Goldhawk Road. This form of resistance and antagonism towards the local council, who backed the proposal, united traders, residents and migrant associations. This has helped to boost a sense of community and attachment to the area, which is well expressed in the account of many of my interlocutors.

One of the main methodological challenges I faced at the beginning of my research was how to identify a spatially localised site of research, that is, how to define and get access to the field. I started a preliminary exploration of the area through regular weekly visits, when I observed the spatial and socio-economic morphologies of the neighbourhood. I was able to identify and select the places of ethnographic enquiry. I focused my investigation along the Green, which divides the topography of the area into two sides: Uxbridge Road on the northern side of the Green, and Goldhawk Road on the southern side. These are the streets with the largest concentration of commercial activities and local associations. From Uxbridge Road, it is also possible to get access to Shepherd's Bush Market, the 102-year-old permanent market known for its fabric shops and stalls, which hosts over ninety traders from a variety of backgrounds. In the first phase of my research, I observed, counted, photographed, sketched, listened, smelled and recorded. Over time, certain nodes emerged as preferred research 'sites' (Olwig and Hastrup 1997). On the one hand, these sites met pragmatic requirements for doing fieldwork (in terms of access and facility to meet people), but they also reflected a dynamic space where exchanges and relationships among different migrant communities and their transnational connections take place within the neighbourhood. The sites identified were small owner-run businesses – cafes, restaurants, groceries and money transfer shops alongside the two main streets – and social support organisations. In particular, I found migrant associations in the area acting as spaces of conjunctions and flows. This is the case, for instance, with a local non-profit organisation that provides a range of services to people affected by social inequalities, whether they are unemployed, members of black and minority ethnic groups, refugees or other local residents. The association has its own office close to Shepherd's Bush Market, and is run by Somali migrants. It also serves as a communal space for various communities to organise their own events. For instance, during the Iftar prayer in the holy month of Ramadan, the organisation gathered Eritrean and

Sudanese communities who wanted to break the fast together. Another example where the association served as a place of community gathering was in the aftermath of the fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017. On this occasion, the association opened its doors and offered support to affected families who had lost their place and belongings. Little by little, I have been able to follow the trajectories and everyday practices of the people who inhabit these sites, and concentrate on the cross-cutting links between and across these communities. The snowball method proved to be the best way to make contacts with people. In fact, through people met in these sites, I have reached out to other migrants who were willing to meet me and talk about their everyday life and activities in the area. Alongside participant observation, one of my main research strategies was shadowing (McDonanld 2005): talking to individuals on the move and following them throughout their daily routine for a given span of time gave me the opportunity to observe practices, relationships and connections unfolding in space.

Urban life in Shepherd's Bush seems to be informed by migrants' transnational practices, as the everyday lives of many people continue to be embedded into 'transnational social fields' (Faist 2000). This is the case of Amina,[5] a Somali woman aged 22 who lives with her family in one of the council flats located along Goldhawk Road and works part-time as a project manager for a Somali association. She was born in 1995 in London and grew up in East Acton, an area predominately made up of white Irish people at that time. She moved to Shepherd's Bush when she was 7, as there were tensions between incoming Somali refugees and the established community. She went to high school in White City, and then to college in nearby Hammersmith. She felt at home there as everyone looked pretty much like her. The school was predominately Somali, but there were also other African and Caribbean students and a very few British. She was 13 years old when the imposing Westfield Shopping Centre opened its doors in the area. She would spend much of her free time hanging out there with her friends. Then she discovered a Somali charity organisation, and started going there every afternoon. As she came along with them, she started learning more about her origins and was somehow forced to learn about her identity. Today, Amina cannot imagine living anywhere else in London than in Shepherd's Bush. As she says:

> People always tend to talk about racist attacks that happen in London and I tend to think this will never happen in Shepherd's Bush. I actually remember one case when I was walking on Uxbridge

Road with an Iraqi friend, just behind a Somali man wearing the Kamiz. Suddenly, a British guy standing nearby looked at the man and said, 'Hey you Muslim, you have to go back'. The Somali man did not pay attention to him as he was on his phone, but I walked back and said, 'How can you say this? First of all, Shepherd's Bush is diverse, this is not accepted here'. I was shocked because this is like my home, I never thought it was going to happen. Then other locals came to me and asked what was going on. When the guy saw people coming together, I think he realised that this area was different. This is why I cannot imagine living anywhere else in London, this is home to me.

(Interview with Amina, April 2017)

Yet frictions across communities exist. For instance, while the Somali community rubs along quite well with the Eritrean and Moroccan communities, there are tensions with people of a Caribbean background. Again, this is nicely elucidated by Amina:

If you look at Somali groups, you will always see a Moroccan friend with them. The biggest thing I have seen is dating! The majority of those who get married are Moroccans and Somalis. Usually the woman is Somali and the man is Moroccan. If I would bring a Moroccan man at home, my dad would be fine. It would be different with a Jamaican. A couple of years ago, we had huge problems. Jamaicans were here for many years, so when the Somalis came, there were some tensions. I remember at college and high school, there were so many fights between Somalis and Jamaicans. Somali parents were saying to their kids, stay away from them, and vice versa.

(Interview with Amina, April 2017)

Amina's involvement with the local association has shaped her transnational engagement a lot. In fact, although her daily activities focus on community-level support, she is very active in fundraising to sponsor projects back in Somalia, particularly in times of crisis. She is also engaged in the remittance economy, as she sends small amounts of money back to her extended family in Mogadishu. Amina has recently decided to enrol in a part-time master's degree course in conflict and peace studies, as she wants to make concrete contributions in Somalia. Through the numerous fundraising activities, she realised she wanted to visit Somalia, and

see it with her own eyes. So far, she has been to Mogadishu twice in the last four years. The first time, she spent a month, in summer, as a volunteer for a local organisation. It was hard, and confusing too, as she never felt really accepted. People called her *dhaqan ceelis*[6] – they thought she had been brought back forcibly by her parents because she was not behaving well in London. At the same time, people insisted that this was her home, and they wanted people like her to come back and rebuild the community. The second time, she was doing an internship with an international NGO. On this occasion, she was more prepared and aware of the social gap between her having a British background and those who had never left Somalia. Since she visited Mogadishu, other friends of hers back in London thought about doing the same. This is the case of Fardus,[7] another Somali woman in her mid-twenties, who visited Somalia in the summer of 2016 for the first time in her life. After this journey, her life in London has been revolving around preparing for her next visit to Somalia. In fact, she is studying to take the English teacher certificate so that she will be able to teach English at schools in Mogadishu. Such transnational practices and mobility not only influence their daily lives but also the way they relate to others in their local encounters. For instance, as has already been briefly introduced, Amina gets along quite well with Ethiopians except when discussions turn to politics. Tensions about the situation in the Ogaden region are reflected locally and, since she became more involved with Somalia, her relationships with the Ethiopian community have worsened. She has got into discussions with some of her Ethiopian peers, and has decided to avoid going to Ethiopian places for a while. Most of the time, she prefers to hang out locally with other Somalis who live in the area, who she met at high school and has therefore known for a long time. They get along quite well with Arabs, as she calls them. They go to Somali restaurants and to the mosque, but also to shisha places, a social practice that is becoming quite popular among the young generation. The two shisha cafes she goes to are run by Lebanese and Egyptian men. They go there to enjoy a dessert and sit outside to smoke.

So far, the stories of my interlocutors highlight how certain places in the area emerge as spaces in which people experience intense conviviality but also exclusion and tensions, be they schools, shisha cafes or local migrant associations. While ethnic identity continues to play a role in how people co-inhabit the spaces of their everyday urban lives, there are many different dimensions of social relations that make up local encounters in Shepherd's Bush. Patterns of mobility, country of origin and length of residence seem to emerge as categories of difference in shaping relations across communities too. At the same time, these

stories also highlight how certain transnational practices intersect with local practices of conviviality. From the accounts just mentioned, certain areas emerge as local sites of transnationalism. These sites testify to the porous nature of urban neighbourhoods, as here multiple local and global dynamics overlap. Adopting a relational approach to neighbourhoods that points our attention to processes of mobility and global flows challenges ideas of urban places as local, cohesive and fixed (Appadurai 1996; Cattacin 2009). This helps us researchers to go beyond analyses that focus on the locality of relations, and to account for the high degree of mobility of people's lives. Yet, ethical concerns about how we actually do this remain.

On the ethics of doing research in diverse urban settings

As other scholars in this volume highlight (see Lisiak and Kaczmarczyk, Gidley, and Phoenix), ethnographies of urban encounters in superdiverse contexts present methodological and ethical challenges for researchers. Gidley, for instance, argues that participatory and convivial forms of research come with ethical and epistemological risks. In particular, he develops four propositions – about the injunction to participate, the reification of community, the political economy of participation, and the political economy of knowledge production. He describes these risks as ways in which convivial research is destined to 'fail'. He then proposes to cultivate intellectual humility and to value contention as strategies for 'failing better'. In my own experience of doing research in urban diverse contexts, I have been particularly concerned with the challenges of accounting for, and giving credit to, the variety of practices of my interlocutors. More specifically, when researching multiple migrant communities sharing specific locations, connecting such local encounters to their respective elsewheres (Gidley 2013, 369) might require a huge effort in terms of both time and personal and financial resources. Also, the emerging call for 'slow' research emphasised by other authors in this volume (see Lisiak and Kaczmarek, and Gidley) clashes with the time frame of many research projects. This is often tied to academic career expectations, which demand fast knowledge production. Taking the time to build trust with research participants, to develop in-depth knowledge and to account for the multiple variables that affect the entire research process comes with a cost in terms of academic career. This is especially so for young scholars, who navigate into the precarity of today's academic market.

Some ethical concerns may also arise from the way we do research. Working with groups of people might quickly imply the reification of these very groups as bounded entities. As Pastore and Ponzo (2016, 11) argue, in most of the empirical literature on migration, ethnic boundaries are often treated as an independent variable, that is, something used to explain. With the term 'groupism', Brubaker (2002) exactly refers to the tendency to take discrete and bounded entity for granted in the study of ethnicity. All in all, it seems to me that one of the challenges of conducting research on conviviality in diverse urban contexts is the tendency to reify ethnic groups, even when ethnicity is apparently not the main category of differentiation relevant for people in their daily lives (Brubaker 2002; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Talking about how ethnic difference has become ordinary is certainly good, but it still presupposes that there is 'an ethnicity', which might be reconfigured, but that is basically the same. Such acts of framing with which we as researchers operate do not simply interpret difference: they constitute it as ethnic. We can thus easily fall into the ethnic lens trap, which ignores differences within ethnicised groups and conceives of them as single and homogeneous communities (Glick Schiller 2012; Glick Schiller, Çağlar and Guldbrandsen 2006). In my own research, the identification and emergence of specific research sites as units of observation have allowed me to avoid clustering individuals into ethnic groups and reifying them as bounded entities. Yet, there are other challenges with which I am still struggling. Issues of power and authority, representation and 'othering', and the relation between power and knowledge, need further attention in our work as researchers. These issues challenge our way of knowing the world. In particular, they require us to acknowledge the power asymmetry in our relations with research participants, as well as in our representational practices. This directs our attention to the fact that the accounts we provide structure and create reality as much as they portray it. In the case of research conducted in urban neighbourhoods, then, this aspect is even more emphasised, as our work plays a significant role in shaping urban policies that have direct consequences for the everyday lives of the people who inhabit the area.

This chapter has engaged with both methodological and ethical concerns with which researchers are faced when looking at the ways conviviality in localised urban contexts intersects with transnational connections. It has shown how a combined approach that explores the modes of interactions between encounters in the city, while also staying attuned to the mobility and transnational practices of people, holds the potential to revitalise migration research in urban contexts. In particular, such an approach allows us to go beyond what could be called

'methodological neighbourhoodism' (Berg et al. 2019), and to account for the multilayered scales of relationality that characterise social life. This also pushes us researchers to advance our understanding of the complex and various dimensions that make up societies. Adopting a combined approach thus seems more suitable for capturing people's practices in the urban setting. However, as already mentioned, this does not come without methodological and ethical implications. With regard to methodology, doing research in contexts characterised by increased mobility still poses particular challenges, not only in terms of identifying research sites, but also in terms of mapping the transnational practices of diverse communities. Looking at the ethical challenges, this research has shown how accounting for the multiple voices that populate these sites without reifying groups still requires further analysis.

Notes

1. Dahabshiil is the main Somali money transfer agency that operates within the Horn of Africa.
2. Amal Express is also a Somali company, with a worldwide network of agencies in the USA, the UK, the Middle East, Africa and Australia.
3. See the work of Blommaert (2013) for a detailed ethnography of how multilingual signs can be read as chronicles documenting the complex histories of a place.
4. According to the 2011 Census (see: https://www.lbhf.gov.uk/councillors-and-democracy/about-hammersmith-fulham-council/census-information/population).
5. This is a pseudonym.
6. *Dhaqancelin* is a Somali verb that literally means 'to return to culture'. It is a label that people in Somalia use to refer to young Somalis who come from abroad and have been brought back by their parents because they have got into problems in their country of residence.
7. This is a pseudonym.

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