5 The politics of nearness

Why is it crucial to recognise local forms of participation, allegiance and belonging? I turn now to the intimacy of local life on the street to explore a scale of contact from which to consider the urban effects of immigration, disparity and multiculture. I return to Williams’ (1958) premise, that learning is a shared process and a form of contact that happens within everyday life. Against the fluidity of people, economies and objects in a global world together with the increasing networked memberships across space, the question remains as to whether local contact matters when learning to live with difference and change. Does physical proximity have any bearing on social propinquity? The question is as much social as it is political, and in focusing on the ordinary, I aim to deal in the untidy realities of life-worlds and life-chances. The probings of urban multicultures are invoked to distort the cohesive canons of community and multiculturalism that have permeated UK policy discourse and related local government programmes in London (Local Government Association 2002; Jones 2009). The paradox of officiated cohesion is twofold: the first assumption is that tolerance is the basis for experiencing racial, class or ethnic differences; the second is that instituted programmes are able to inculcate the contact that most readily emerges out of the spontaneity of everyday life.

One of Walworth’s residents highlighted ‘a lack of spaces where we can mix and learn from each other’. It is within the realm of local meeting spaces that this chapter focuses, and begins with situated social explorations and physical contact. ‘Exploration’ is, however, possibly an overly generous term for the full range of social interactions within the shared spaces of the Walworth Road. While exchange and testing certainly occurred within these local meeting points, so too were more closed forms of engagement. But this is precisely the point of focusing on ordinary space: that in the banal aspects of everyday life, shared local spaces are shaped by habitual associations rather than outright compatibilities. I suggest that it is through such local associations that face-to-face forms of cultural exchange and social retreat, and conviviality and complacency are brought to life.

Space itself is not typically the focus of recent thinking on ordinary or vernacular cosmopolitanisms where analytic efforts have oriented more towards the flows and transformations of ideas and affinities across time and space, as explored through the fluidity of music (Gilroy 1987), language (Pollock 2000) and literature (Bhabha 2004 [1994]: preface) for example. This diverse body of work challenges the ideals
of cosmopolitanism as a common political project that spans national territories, or as shared moral ideology or cultural acquiescence. Rather, it refers to the dynamic social and cultural exchanges that emerge within an uneven and rapidly changing world.

The spatial departure pursued in this chapter, as situated firmly within the urban margin, is explored through two modes of being public: informal membership and everyday practice. The first point to highlight is that regular interactions in local worlds are ones in which the stakes are raised. For although everyday memberships in ordinary spaces are generally informal, they are often profoundly significant for how individuals access knowledge, grant and gain trust, and affirm their connections within a socially sustained familiarity. Of significance is that for many of those who occupy the urban margins, in particular the poor, the elderly, the young and the newcomer, local worlds are places in which they are not simply dependent, but also highly invested. Further, the full guise of social distance or anonymity is denied by regular forms of face-to-face contact, and in order to secure one’s right to appear and not simply frequent, broad codes of sociability have to be respected. The implications of informal membership, given the variety of individuals who regularly use the street and its adjacent sub-worlds, are that while parochial and cosmopolitan expressions have a daily presence, the means of working out, ignoring, and/or asserting are part of what allows for any one individual’s return the following day. De Certeau (1984: 29–42) referred to this as ‘ways of operating’ within a schema, in which he described the use of tactics as the nimble adjustments necessary for the everyday art of ‘making do’.

In pursuing the social uses of local publics, this chapter develops three perspectives of local space. The first is familiar space and, while I explore how individuals use their coordinates of familiarity to navigate their everyday worlds, the point I aim to stress in a highly disparate urban context like London is that for the vulnerable, familiarity is not simply a tactic, it is, to use de Certeau’s distinction, a strategy for living with inequality. Familiarity can therefore both orientate and limit social exploration. Second is the idea of intimate space that emerges out of face-to-face contact, but that also refers to a form of personal connection within a group setting that allows for communication beyond the perfunctory. Here the trust and confidence associated with social intimacy might support personal as well as political forms of allegiance. Finally, skilful space is the terrain in which imagination and acumen flourish, but unlike the factory, studio or academy, the street provides a public intersection of life and livelihoods where work and leisure are rendered visible. It is through these three tropes of familiarity, social intimacy and skill that I explore the extent to which regular contact within a local margin is a conduit for social adaptation, exploration and renewal.

**Familiar space**

So when I joined the National Film Theatre, it was this middle-class place on the South Bank – Festival Hall, National Theatre and all that. And to me it was, like, not so much for my father, but for my mother, it’s like she’s going to
lose me. And metaphorically she did. Because, once I had joined that place . . . I never forgot she stood at the window and watched me walk to the bus stop. I think she was still probably standing there waiting for me to come home. But I was only going up the road to the National Film Theatre . . . she had the strange feeling that her son . . . It was a big thing for a kid from a working-class family, from a council estate, to make that leap and it was a leap, a big leap. But then I discovered it was a very middle-class place and I didn’t really feel comfortable, although I loved going to see the films. That was really my only motivation for going. I didn’t really feel at ease with middle-class people. I never have, I still don’t. I still don’t. It’s not a chip on my shoulder. Some of my best friends are middle class – know what I’m saying (grins). But I always seem to come back here, as long as I had here to come back to, I could spend as long as I like in the West End, in the cinema bookshop at the National Film Theatre.

(Fieldwork interview 2007)

John, whom I introduced in Chapter 2, was in his forties and lived to the south of the Walworth Road when I met with him. He recalled the day when, at the age of sixteen, he joined the National Film Theatre. Although the direct bus trip from Peckham to Waterloo would have involved only forty minutes of travel, the journey represented a far greater distance for John and his parents. For John it required a cultural crossing from his working-class roots in Peckham into a world of institutions, films and intellectualism, which he simultaneously felt an affinity for and a separation from. His territorial narrative exemplifies the displacement associated with extending one’s horizons. It captures the difficulty of accessing broader opportunities, because of the confines of position inscribed in society and space by both class and locality.

Space is a constitutive dimension of social exclusion, and ethnographies based on socialisation within spatially confined neighbourhoods in the UK have tended to reinforce not only the local nature of groupings but also their segregations on the basis of race, ethnicity and class (see for example Parker 1974 and Alexander 2000). The reproduction of social enclaves within spatial enclaves, whether told through stories of how white working-class children in Bermondsey fail to fit in the educational structure (Evans 2006), or the collision of established and emergent cultures in the London Docklands redevelopment process (Foster 1999), reinforces how territorial communities are entrapped in place.

The diversity of local voices and interactions on the Walworth Road made it apparent that the familiarity of the local was as much socially affirming as it was at times socially constraining. Many of the narratives of belonging were firmly rooted in a confined commitment to locality as expressed through a tiered sense of local boundaries, including the perceived parameters of the River Thames, the Borough of Southwark and the neighbourhood, as well as small territories within the neighbourhood. In these narratives place was invoked to position a sense of self with respect to locality, such as ‘My grandfather was a Peckham person’ or ‘I was born on this side. When we were kids we never went onto the other side. There
[the other side] was a different gang.’ Place was also used to define the limits of personal exploration as described by one local who claimed, ‘Everything is here. For the last ten years I haven’t moved much beyond the borough.’

The comfort of local familiarity, however, also abetted a wide spectrum of social needs, which included convenience as sense of security and sameness. Individuals expressed an affinity for ways of life acquired at a local scale that were accessible, regular and repetitive. The pattern of small spatial distances between home and street supported the regular use of the Walworth Road by its surrounding local population, and the everyday use of the street contributed to the formation of local social connections. Regularity is therefore a component of public sociability reliant on the relative fixity of local places and on repeated participation; of knowing and being known through returning to the same spaces, engaging with familiar faces and, in the case of the Walworth Road, often buying more or less the same goods at the same shops. But what are the forms of social life that emerge out of local place that allow for social exploration, and does familiar space have a role to play in how people mix and learn on the Walworth Road?

The relationship between interaction and integration in local space is contested in the broad arena of urban studies and community studies. In his seminal study of the inner city slums of Chicago in the 1960s, Suttles (1968) defined locality as a proper element of social structure and focused on the effect of spatial boundaries or what he termed the ‘ordered segmentation’ of ethnicity and territory (1968: 23). For Suttles (1972) the interrelationship between local neighbourhoods and local groupings was primarily a constructed one, and his empirical work explored the idea of community as ascribed racial and ethnic groupings within defended neighbourhoods. Gans’ research (1962) of Italian-Americans in New York’s West End in the 1950s defined community as ‘peer group society’, or a process of social association that grows out of an economic and societal structure of which local place is a part. Gans emphasised the individual capacity to exercise choice within a limited range of available economic and social alternatives. He argued that class, as a lifestyle associated with occupational, educational and consumer distinctions, mattered more to the idea of a peer group society than ethnicity or territory.

In contrast, an area of urban studies that incorporates the impacts of capitalist globalisation has focused on questioning not only how fluid and mixed societies orientate in local space, but also whether local place is indeed fundamental to belonging. Massey’s essay ‘A Global Sense of Place’ (1994) is set against the backdrop of profound economic change in the re-organisation of the economy that occurred in the 1970s, and questions what effect the globalisation of finance and communication has for the lived resolutions of being local. In spite of the argued increase in a sense of placelessness or disorientation (Harvey 1989; Augé 1995), Massey emphasises the actual presence of local life, local relationships and local spaces, but rejects a conceptual definition of place that relies on drawing boundaries.

By taking us for a walk down Kilburn High Road in North London, Massey describes the very ordinary global–local connections between Kilburn High Road and the world, through the variegated sense of place carried in diverse bodies, spaces and objects. She calls for ‘an extroverted sense of place’ or, more explicitly, ‘a
global sense of the local, a global sense of place’ (1994: 156). But in seeking to conflate the conceptual binary between global and local, Massey eliminates the analytic significance of local boundaries, and the real impact these have on how people participate in urban life. My fieldwork suggests that Massey’s ‘extroverted’ or connected web of local places needs to be paralleled with familiar space as an aggregation of sub-worlds, many of which are introverted and bounded.

Individuals on the Walworth Road navigated their local worlds through coordinates of familiarity sustained by everyday practices in ordinary spaces – such as going to the caff, the internet café or the pub. Within these familiar spaces, social life tended to emerge from a combination of different forms of ease: the nearness of place, the routine of practice and the everyday or non-specific programmes within a space. Through the collective practices of acquiring familiarity, local social networks and local cultural institutions emerge. But significant changes in the economic structure alters the life and prevalence of these local institutions, and social institutions together with informal social memberships either adapt or disappear. There are far fewer pubs and cafés on the Walworth Road than there were in the 1950s when Walworth was largely a white working-class neighbourhood (Post Office London Directory 1881–1950).

However, there are also new social proxies for the pub and the caff, as is evident in the growth of the independent kebab shops and internet cafés along the street. New technical advancements which sustain a networked sociability less dependent on place, such as Wi-Fi and computer stations, give customers access to e-mail and the internet while eating and meeting, and new ways of being social within a locale emerged from the invested presence of customers and proprietors within their local domain. Passing by Eroma – an internet café on the Walworth Road – one is aware of a different generation of street clientele using and shaping a different generation of everyday meeting establishments. There has been a rapid increase in the number of nail bars along the Walworth Road, and these are places for women to have their nails manicured, and spaces in which women and children socialise. While some spaces were gender specific, others were ethnically or culturally specific, such as the Somali Club, an eating establishment off the Walworth Road, frequented by individuals of Somali connection. User groups and realms of familiarity constantly transform the small spaces along the Walworth Road, and the street in turn congregates the collections of these cheek-by-jowl sub-worlds.

Place was also used as a coordinate for the familiarity of the past, a reference to how things used to be and a physical and perceptual barometer of the extent to which things have changed. Surfacing in many of the conversations that I had with locals who were born in the area was the sense that as their local worlds became increasingly unfamiliar, familiar remnants such as Nick’s Caff became increasingly important. Locals who used the Caff regularly commented on how they valued Nick’s Caff as a place in which ‘little seemed to change’. The focus on familiarity in what was perceived as a rapidly changing world may seem fairly unremarkable – we all have places and spaces to which we wish to return, based on the comfort of knowing and being known. But there remains the important social question of the extent to which local people are captive to locality, and in particular the social
consequences for those whose spatial and social confinement is exaggerated by vulnerability, such as the elderly or the poor. While ties to locality are reinforced by the daily use of local places, these same locality ties can also be asserted through urban economies, political systems and social structures that play a significant role in confining people to place on the basis of class, income and ethnicity.

Local place or locality is therefore also part of a system of power and control, where vulnerability or social exclusion is rendered more prominent by social and spatial stigmatisation. In Chapter 2, I explored how the spatial and social boundaries around Walworth had been historically authorised through official mechanisms such as the administration and allocation of public resources and the institutionalisation of welfare. These boundaries inscribed into the urban landscape through administrative divisions and corresponding physical forms had endured as socio-spatial stigma over time, long past the actual reconfiguration of territorial boundaries or the disappearance of physical structures. The double impetus of the stigma or the symbolic boundary is that it perceptually attaches to both place and people, not only relegating a negative value to a place, but also making it difficult for individuals to feel comfortable about leaving an area of familiarity to enter into new worlds.

In Chapter 4, although Stan, the ‘ageing Mod’, described himself as ‘comfortable in the West End and I’m open to ideas from over the River’, he also highlighted how excruciating he found it going into a shop in Jermyn Street in the West End to enquire about a suit: ‘People don’t realise how hard it is to walk into a place.’ While it would probably be difficult for many people to walk confidently into a shop in Savile Row, Stan’s point is explicitly one of disassociation on the basis of class synonymised as locality. Stan highlighted this by his contrasting experience of walking into Reyd’s Bespoke Tailor Shop on the Walworth Road: ‘Reyd speaks the right language. We would be out of place in Savile Row. When I first came in here I thought, “I could talk to you, I could deal with you.”’ Stigma serves as a parallel mechanism of attachment and detachment: it binds individuals to the familiarity of physical places and associated ways of life, and it detaches them from other places and other people.

However, familiarity is not necessarily only an introverted social form. Through a sense of comfort and everyday contact, familiarity can be used as an adaptive social form to combine different traditions, people and places. As is the case with the diversity of cultural life on Massey’s Kilburn High Road (1994), my fieldwork data revealed that in many instances local people expressed more than one coordinate of orientation on their mental map of local place. Particularly for those locals who had more than one cultural inheritance, their local social worlds on the Walworth Road were navigated by combining it with other familiar worlds. Nick and Dorah’s socialisation at their regular ‘family’ table at the front of the Caff was not only shaped by an entrepreneurial inclination, but by a Cypriot familial and cultural inheritance of meeting around a table, where eating and talking are core to everyday life. Around this table their local London world and Cypriot heritage effectively combined to make a social space for family, friends and locals.

Local places then, are about finding and fixing coordinates of familiarity to navigate everyday life. The individual use of local coordinates varies considerably
with differing processes of finding and fixing: from regularity and convenience to
the effects of stigma and territory, and to inter-cultural combinations of social life.
In a place like the Walworth Road, the contemporary dilemma of what it means to
be a local is therefore not resolved by separating fluidity from fixity, or cosmo-
politanism from locality. Newcomers and established residents use local place to
either narrow or expand their modes of belonging with respect to self and other.
At times the sense of the local, or the everyday experience of belonging, constrains
social and cultural exchange; at times it affords social connections within the
apparently effortless acts of going about daily life. To reiterate, we need to
understand the simultaneity of introverted and extroverted experiences of local
place in the context of global change.

Intimate space

If familiar space is formed out of the orientating processes of daily convenience
and regularity within a local area, intimate space forms out of the personal space
that individuals carve from larger society or group space. Social intimacy develops
through small-scale associations, galvanised by shared social understandings such
as etiquette or discretion, or shared affinities as banal as meeting for a drink or as
pointed as partaking in a political conversation. In his book The Politics of Small
Things (2006), Goldfarb introduces the role of the kitchen table in the Eastern
bloc during the Soviet period as a place to talk freely amongst equals without fear
of recrimination. Goldfarb recalls from personal experience that it was within the
collections of small, private spaces integral to daily life that people met to discuss
the party, poetry and culture. But as Goldfarb’s analysis spans other time periods
and places, he shows that the need for small-scale meetings in which a public is
constituted is not the preserve of repressive societies. In the context of the Walworth
Road, I explore politics with a small ‘p’, to understand the significance of claiming
intimate space within a group space, in which one can think and communicate at
a personal level without being detached from the group.

The small table in Nick’s Caff was an increment of space no more than 1 metre
by 1.5 metres, which allowed for both personal and intimate occupation of shared
space within the hub of the Caff (Figure 5.1). At my table in the Caff I read, wrote
and observed, the table providing me with not only a personal domain, but also a
spatial buffer from which I could elect to manage social distance without social
exclusion from others in the Caff. I had explicitly selected a side table because I
felt that it was a space from which I was less obtrusive and less likely to be required
to join in with general conversations. Joining in could be negotiated by social
nuances such as selecting a more central table, or making eye contact, or going up
to the front counter, passing people at their tables on the way.

I noticed that the occupation of similar intimate territories within the Caff was
undertaken with a level of precision, where social comfort was gained from the
precise occupation of time and place. In the mornings Mark opened his office mail
at his seat at a side table, and occasionally met his children at the same table in the
evening. Hinga regularly occupied a table that was close to Nick’s counter, returning
at the same time most mornings and always ordering the same items on the menu. Our individual routines were central to our occupation of intimate space within the Caff. I noticed that we returned not only to our same tables, but almost always to the same seats at those respective tables. The occupation of personal spaces within a larger social space, akin to individuals claiming a bench in a park, requires a particular form of informal social membership. Informal social memberships depend on learning and respecting the social codes common to the larger space and group, as well as establishing the right to partially retreat or differentiate oneself from the larger whole.

Joseph Rykwert (2000: 133) emphasised the necessary smallness of spatial intimacy for ‘semi-public, semi-private meeting’, by referring to ‘places of tryst’ where spatial intimacy is compatible with social discretion or secrecy within a group space. The scale of inclusion works precisely because of its smallness, and therefore while some are included on the basis of shared etiquette refined by regularity, others are informally excluded on the same grounds. There are many individuals on the Walworth Road who simply by-pass Nick’s Caff, and others still who might feel uncomfortable about entering and using the space. At different stages of their lives, or from the base of different occupations or affinities, individuals select and occupy their regular places, their ‘local’. Laurier (2004) for example, has observed the use of franchise coffee shops by London office workers, where the living-room arrangements of the coffee shops are found to be conducive for business meetings.

Figure 5.1 The intimate realm of table space in Nick’s Caff, with a regular’s reading material.
However, what distinguished the informal memberships in the Caff was that the proprietor was long standing and had fostered enduring relationships with regulars. There was similarly a high correlation between regular customers and local residents. It is also noteworthy that the entry level for membership was affordable—a mug of tea could be bought for 50p.

The idea of ‘intimate anonymity’ and the use of social etiquette to protect a personal preserve is key to small-scale sociability. Haine’s (1992) historic exploration of the Parisian working-class cafés during the period from 1850 to 1914 offers two fascinating insights into the personal and political role of social intimacy within the Parisian cafés. He starts by tracing the historic location of cafés in working-class neighbourhoods, thereby emphasising their role as essentially local meeting places. He then scrutinised the archival records of marriage within these respective areas, revealing a fascinating social relationship: the marriage certificates lodged in Parisian working-class areas during the late nineteenth century show the café proprietor as the most prominent profession represented in the position of witness. The café proprietor, and his key position within a cultural institution, had acquired the cultural status of a public character. Because of the informal nature of membership in establishments like the café or caff, the role of the proprietor is pivotal to social interactions in these spaces. Nick’s role as public character echoes the analogy of Haine’s marriage witness, where Nick had taken on a caring role for his regulars, not only within the Caff but also in their lives outside it, as typified by his assistance in arranging Mike’s access to sheltered housing for the elderly.

Haine also raised the issue of the organisational role of the café in worker politics, by asking how French workers could rapidly organise large-scale protests without, at that time, a strong union infrastructure. His works highlights the role of ‘café friendships’ across locally distributed cafés in Paris, in which workers regularly met, attending to their social and drinking pleasures, as well as their political ones. What is consequential about the personal occupation of this ordinary group/institutional space is that individual lives are not necessarily separated from group or public life. Work, family relationships and political sentiments filter into public life through small-scale social practices, even if limited by the confines of small social groups. Because of the gradual process of becoming known in a local establishment, social intimacy may also allow for a decrease in social distance, or a shift from passive encounter to active forms of engagement. This means that congenial social spaces, as Haine’s research suggests, can be experienced as places of personal and political contact, spaces to be known and looked out for, and spaces to express agreement and disagreement.

In general, conversations in Nick’s Caff were convivial in nature, and often the social entrée was guided around football leagues and matches. There were also occasions in the Caff where conversations led to heated discussions. During the period of my observation, political conversations focused on the Iraq occupation and war and the perceived betrayal of working-class people by the Labour government in general and Tony Blair in particular. Immigrant rights were occasionally discussed, particularly the alleged discrepancies between those seen to be working or contributing to society and those claiming from it. When the subject of the Iraq
war came up, Mike, who had himself spent time in prison, emphatically declared that ‘Blair should be nicked for war crimes.’ Nick endorsed this sentiment and on another occasion spoke of his disappointment in changes to the Labour Party. He drew a comparison between Tony Blair and Tony Benn to encapsulate the fundamental shift from Labour to New Labour: ‘Tony Benn is by far the best leader for many, many years. He rips apart the Conservatives. He rips apart America. He tells it like it is, not as they want to see it.’

Local election results from the neighbourhood wards around the Walworth Road suggest that the area has been a Labour stronghold for a long time. The Labour Party headquarters was, until 1997, located at the northern end of the Walworth Road at John Smith House. Alan, the third of three generations of proprietors of the ‘Walworth Health Store’, talked about the symbolic relocation of Labour in 1997:

The Old Labour headquarters was something that people knew about. But the only time you thought about it was when you saw people going in for general meetings. Of course New Labour didn’t fit very well with its roots, and it changed to a council office.

(Fieldwork conversation 2006)

The formal institutions of working-class life such as churches and working men’s clubs have historically provided a larger social and political structure to everyday life, as well as broader organisational frameworks to belong in, such as the unions and Labour Party. As the impetus and functions of these larger structures have shifted alongside the reorganisation of work and the economy, the fora to collectively discuss and debate political, moral and ethical matters have altered if not altogether dismantled. Although spaces like the Caff allow for political discussion, there was a sense in the Caff that the ability to act on discussions through larger representative structures that are part of social and cultural life had been lost.

**Skilful space**

How do we frame a cultural and social politics of belonging and participation? In Calhoun’s (2002) theoretical exploration of ‘cosmopolitan democracy’, he asks what the basis for collective membership is, and highlights the plural forms of allegiance. His is a political recognition of ‘social solidarities’ and thereby challenges the view that emerged out of the theory of cosmopolitanism in the 1990s, where the primacy of a global democracy was thought to be vested in international forms of governance and global capitalism. Calhoun refers to a sense of the lived obligations and commitments that tie individuals and groups where, for example, locality, tradition, community and ethnicity are essential to the cosmopolitan process. Participation and citizenship are therefore, ultimately layered practices emerging out of a range of small and large associations and interdependencies. Of significance to a contemporary understanding of the local is Calhoun’s emphasis
on the pragmatic resolutions of social, cultural and economic ties within everyday life, and hence the essential recognition of what he refers to as the ‘life-world’.

I explicitly selected the ‘life-world’ of a city street because it represented not only the intersections of diverse individuals, but also the convergence of urban poverty, entrepreneurialism, banality and aspiration. The contrast between the Walworth Road and its adjacent social housing estates suggested very different possibilities for viewing, understanding and representing the social life of the area. My intuitive attraction to the Walworth Road was the cheek-by-jowl arrangement of the independent shops, and the potential roles that individual imagination, agility and acumen play in how the small spaces of the city are shaped.

I was also interested in whether individual occupational skills would result in different kinds of sociability, and whether the social life within the independent shops off the street that were partly public, but not institutional, would engender different forms of belonging. What emerged out of my observations of both Nick’s Caff and Reyd’s Bespoke Tailor Shop were the forms of social contact particular to the combination of workspace, social space and the street. Entrepreneurial agility and social skill on the part of proprietors was often central to initiating and sustaining social relationships over long time periods. In these shops a combination of social skills and work skills had increased Nick’s and Reyd’s capacities to participate in urban change. The forms of participation sustained through interactive work-social practices is not simply a form of exchange – it is ultimately a form of citizenship.

Here I refer back to the notion of sensibility developed in Chapter 4, to emphasise the kind of social solidarity that develops when there is a sharing of expertise and value. In Reyd’s Bespoke Tailor Shop, tacit understanding was the basis of social interaction. In other words, shared affinity was more crucial to the social exchange than shared locale. Reyd’s customers were located across London, and their association was formed by shared cultural affinities as symbolised in the choice of cloth, cut of suit, and image of the sartorial London Mod. Developing a sensibility requires skill, and Reyd’s stories revealed the hours of investment in not only becoming a bespoke tailor, but also in learning about the lineage of American blues, jazz and soul in the evolution of Mod culture. This combination of learning skill and acquiring affinity had allowed for Reyd’s life-world and his associated life-chances to expand beyond its local boundary. But there is a further dimension to sensibility revealed in the social exchanges within his shop: that of recognition. Central to the tacit engagement between proprietor and customer was the highly personalised exchange of respect, negotiated on the basis of the recognition of skill – not only a social acknowledgment of the technical skill of making the bespoke garment, but also for the social skill of wearing it.

Reyd’s shop was therefore a cultural and social microcosm of shared sensibilities where Pickett and Davis commanded wall space together with Sting in the cult Mod film Quadrophenia (1979) together with the adolescent working-class lads captured in a photo of the east London English rock group the Small Faces (1960s). These affinities extended to local associations like Reyd’s picture of the south London Millwall football team adjacent to Coltrane (Figure 5.2), and his photographs of customers including boxers, actors and musicians. The collage of local culture
and Mod culture in his shop was not simply aesthetic – it was deeply cultural and social (Figure 5.3). Further, Reyd’s combination of images suggests that however socially or economically ‘local’ the Walworth Road is, its colours, textures, shapes and influences are interdependent with the global.

Whether spatial intimacy or social affinities are formed through the mundane practice of occupying a table, or the more emblematic practice of commissioning and wearing a bespoke Mod suit, the small scale of these social interactions remains key to how differences are negotiated or shared. Both spaces are regulated by the social codes of informal membership, and both spaces will include some while excluding others. Simmel’s (1949) idea of ‘sociability’ points to the social ability to share knowledge, where conversation, humour and gesture are part of face-to-face engagement. If Simmel’s idea of social reciprocity is extended to include the aggregation of culturally diverse individuals, then the art of sociability can be explored as a multilingual form of communication.

In Reyd’s shop, social understanding was essentially chaperoned by a shared regard for the art of attire, which was firmly founded in working-class cultural styles. Those with an established knowledge and respect of tailoring therefore had access to this sociability. In Nick’s Caff, social etiquette was governed by how individuals occupy space, where regularity enhanced the capacity for sociability. Both forms of sociability required social skills that were acquired over time. The knowledge required to walk into Reyd’s shop was not dependent on local know-

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**Figure 5.2** A convergence of local and translocal affinities: John Coltrane and Millwall Football Club in Reyd’s back room.
ledge, and was inclusive of a wide array of individuals with a shared affinity. The knowledge required to use Nick’s Caff regularly entailed local understandings of ways of life, but the form of inclusion was more wide ranging, allowing for secluded or central occupations of space.

The binary distinctions that are historically drawn between public and private domains as markedly different social, cultural and political realms support a
tendency to ‘collectivise’ public space, or to represent it as an ideological or spatial whole. Through my research process, directed in many ways by walking and stopping, I came to experience and understand the Walworth Road as a highly particular collection of parts. In hindsight, the emphasis on parts was crucial, not only because the social and spatial differentiations within the street have been so central to the research findings, but also because it allowed for the social value of smallness, or the role of cultural and social units of space within a wider public realm, to become apparent. Through this smallness within the larger domain of the street, individuals were able to participate in a collection of sub-worlds that together constitute the collective public life of this multi-ethnic street. Claiming personal space and developing shared expertise within a semi-public space were shown to be key social modes of allegiance, participation and belonging.

Conclusions

[. . .] post-millennial Britain is inextricably and irrevocably multiracial, multicultural, multifaith; living with this reality remains, however, an enduring enigma. Living with difference (Hall 1993) or, indeed, with sameness (Nandy 2001) is the problem of the twenty-first century.

(Alexander and Alleyne 2002)

Ordinary cosmopolitanism is, then, a living amongst and recognition of difference without a convergence to sameness – without an insistence on cohesions such as ‘community’ and ‘ethnicity’ as exclusive or even primary forms of belonging. Sociability, or more precisely the ability to socialise amongst others, is a skill that forms out of being exposed to a variety of social situations, and in the context of rapid urban change it is a skill that requires continual renewal. The social skills needed to engage with difference and change require more rather than less exposure and regular participation over fleeting encounter. The city and its varied locales and sub-worlds matter in accessing space in which to learn and exchange. The street offers one such global-local strip that ‘works’ in its side-by-side aggregation of parts.

I have argued that the local spaces of a city street and its dimensions of familiarity, intimacy and sensibility sustain social solidarities, since they offer the ease of access, comfort of contact and sharing of affinities, which underpin much of social life. The local is also the urban realm in which the vulnerable and the less mobile – the very young, the old, the poor, the newcomer – coexist in an overlap of structural circumstances. The importance of the local is therefore not as an exclusive form of territorial solidarity, but as a collection of spaces outside of the domestic sphere in which to engage in difference, particularly for those whose social mobility or global fluidity is less of a reality.

The analytic difficulty, as explored in this chapter, is that locality or territory is also a defensive strategy used to combat the effects of change or the perceived threats of difference. Place becomes a means for holding on to what is ‘ours’, an insistence on the endurance of boundaries despite, or because of, the persistence
of change. I argue for the recognition of the ordinary combinations of life and livelihoods in mixed neighbourhoods as spaces of social value where individual imaginations and social skills shape, test and alter the routines of everyday urban life. Social interaction across the boundaries of class, race, ethnicity or territory requires active forms of engagement, and through the social processes of participation, the ordinary forms of belonging are constituted. Contact, I argue, refines our skills or capacities to socialise. The recognition of contact as a form of learning about difference requires a disaggregated view: a greater commitment to observing actual everyday life, and a willingness to acknowledge the variability and plurality of informal memberships engaged in the small meeting spaces of the city.
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