

**Suzanne Hall**

## Being at home: space for belonging in a London caff

**Article (Published version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Hall, Suzanne (2009) Being at home: space for belonging in a London caff. [Open house international](#), 34 (3). pp. 81-87. ISSN 0168-2601

© 2009 [www.openhouse-int.com](http://www.openhouse-int.com)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/41633/>

Available in LSE Research Online: February 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.



## BEING AT HOME: Space for Belonging in a London Caff

Suzanne M. Hall

### **Abstract**

*This paper relates migration and home through the experiences of belonging negotiated by both newcomers and established residents in a South London caff. My account emerges out of an ethnographic exploration of Nick's Caff, a small meeting place off a multi-ethnic, inner city Street. Urban change and social diversity are exemplified in the Walworth Road: a place from which one can hear the chimes of Big Ben and catch glimpses of the London Eye, but which remains curiously detached from the image of a prestigious city; where remnants of white working-class culture juxtapose with a variety of cultures brought from across the globalising world; and where emergent cultures are forged across the difficulties and possibilities of cultural difference. Nick's Caff situates the day-to-day and face-to-face experiences of belonging within a shared space in the contemporary city. This paper explores how different individuals reconstitute conventional understandings of 'home' and 'family' through inhabiting their regular tables in the Caff. I expand on 'belonging' as a mode of social interaction through three key ideas: social space, practice and sociability. I analyse the social and spatial dimensions of everyday interactions in the Caff, and examine whether intermingling within the Caff produces alternative understandings of belonging, beyond the binaries of insider/outsider or local/foreigner.*

**Keywords:** *Belonging, Shared Space, Practice, Sociability.*

### **BEING AT HOME: EXPLORING AN INTIMATE MODE OF BELONGING**

This paper explores the relationship between not only transnational and local identity, but also an intimate sense of belonging; the space in which people become know to one another, the space in which they feel at home. Within a South London caff, experiences of belonging span the vast distance of the global migrations of diverse people into cities, down to which table a local customer feels comfortable to regularly sit at. This Open House issue examines interpretations of home alongside the process of migration, and I start with Massey's critical question, "whose identity we are referring to when we talk of a place called home and the supports it may provide of stability, oneness and security?" (1994:167). To relate questions of 'whose identity?', 'whose home?' and 'whose stability?', I explore the altered experiences of home in the rapidly changing context of London, through how both 'newcomers' and 'established' residents reconstitute their understandings of belonging, with respect to one another. By focusing on the overlapping spaces in the everyday lives of migrants and established residents, I seek to avoid the separation of urban citizens into discreet social categories;

either the "homogenous construction" of 'migrant' (Al-Ali and Koser, 2002:preface) or the static conceptualisation of 'community' as fixed to origin or location.

I relate experiences of 'being at home' between individuals and groups in Nick's Caff, a local meeting place off a multi-ethnic street in South London, and draw on ethnographic observations developed over a ten-month period to emphasise experiences of urban change. I focus on how the Caff is ordered by space, time, and social etiquette, allowing for different individuals and groups to appropriate the Caff by claiming places to sit within the rhythm of the day, while participating in the performances that regulate conversation, eye contact, intimacy and distance. I explore how experiences of belonging fluctuate both for the established resident and the newcomer, all of whom, in the context of deep urban change, must deal with notions of being in-place and at home and mis-placed or foreign. The experiences of being at home within the Caff are framed through an intimate sense of belonging that emerges out of sustained social interaction, regularly repeated as part of day-to-day and face-to-face meetings.

In this paper I expand on the social process of being at home, by defining three related modes for interaction: space, practice and sociability. My

explanatory framework is drawn from two sources that approach cultural interaction as a lived and emerging set of relationships, between and amongst different individuals and groups. My first point of departure is the perspective of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' offered by Bhabha (2004:preface), as the intermingling of cultures through the processes of migration and diaspora, as well as the recognition of the role of migrants and minorities in developing different ways of belonging within civil society. Secondly, I relate this idea of vernacular cosmopolitanism to an ethnographic perspective, which respects individual voices and narratives as crucial to understanding the diverse and shifting experiences of belonging.

## BEING AT HOME: SHARED SPACE

The emergence of the London caff required the symbiosis of at least two cultures to forge its qualities for a particular kind of meeting and eating in the city: the initiation of a casual and affordable eating establishment brought largely by Italian immigrants to London in the 1950s; and the take-up of a local, sociable place by the working-class to eat home-cooked food away from home (Heathcoate 2004). The London caff has emerged across the imaginations of cultures, and across the Formica tables and accompaniments of malt vinegar and brown sauce, it has come to encompass other migrant and minority groups, including Greek, Turkish and Cypriot proprietors, and customers from a changing working-class, as well as from changing local areas. Nick's Caff emerged as a social space out of the initial efforts of Nick's parents who immigrated to London from Cyprus in the 1950s. Since then, the demographics of the local Walworth population has changed and diversified considerably, and the Caff is a place in which contemporary experiences of difference can be observed. The loss of public space as places for different people to engage beyond a visual encounter, features prominently in writings about the contemporary western city, (Sennett 1992[1977], 1996). Writers exploring the relationship between difference and the public realm in the contemporary city have also pointed to the location of meeting and communicating between cultures away from such overt public spaces, to the smaller spaces of regular engagement, including schools, workplaces and youth clubs (Amin 2002). It is in the range of interstitial spaces, neither explicitly public nor private,

Bhabha argues, that inter-cultural social life can be accommodated and experienced.

To relegate Nick's Caff solely to the status of an eating establishment would be to overlook its significant role as a local meeting place, situated between the public street and his family's home above the shop. The Walworth Road itself is key to the story of Nick's Caff, and walking along it was one is aware of its vitality and diversity. It is an active street with a large local population within close walking distance from it, reinforced by the proximity of a number of social housing estates, as well as with a broader population passing through this main connection between South London and the centre. Since its emergence as a retail street for small, independent retailers during the late 1800s (Post Office London Directory Surveys. 1881-1950) the Walworth Road has provided a home to immigrants willing to ply their entrepreneurial skills. These early Directories provide a record of tailors, clothiers, cheesemongers and proprietors of refreshment rooms along the Walworth Road, and also indicate a mix of proprietors who emigrated from different places including Greece, Turkey, Italy, Ireland and Eastern Europe.

Of broader significance is that, with structural forces such as industrialisation and urbanisation, colonisation and ultimately globalisation, the cultures participating in the retail life of the Walworth Road has increased and diversified. In 2006 a colleague and I undertook a survey of all the independent retailers along the Walworth Road. At a numbers level we learnt that there were a total of 227 units along the mile length of the street. These units were predominantly retail, with most shop fronts ranging from 4,5 metres wide for a single unit, to approximately 9 metres for a double unit, indicating the small scale and density of the units that make up this retail strip, as was reflected in the historic Directory records. We also learnt that just over 60 per cent of the retail units were independent shops, neither belonging to a franchise nor chain, and that of the 130-odd independent shops, there were over 20 different countries of origin amongst the proprietors, with no single place of origin predominating.

Nick's Caff is amongst these independent shops, and provides a base to consider the complexities of how different people belong by coming together in the city; it is a local place that born-and-bred 'locals' and a range of 'newcomers' use on a regular basis and its sociability extends from the solidarity of an extended family of relatives and

friends, to the singular practices of diverse individuals. The Caff is a fairly old fashioned interior, and feels almost as if one is stepping into the '60s, when Nick's Dad first bought the Caff and named it 'The Istanbul'. There are 16 tables comprised of four unequal rows and a clear designation through routine and preference, of who uses which table. Family and regulars sit up front furthest from the street, while people who come to the Caff for a meal or company, but prefer less engagement, tend to sit at the sides. The positions of the tables and the fluctuating use of the space throughout the rhythm of the day, define personal territories within the larger space of the Caff. Through these smaller terrains it is possible to belong differently: either without explicit interaction, or with talk limited across the table, or by joining in with larger conversations across tables.

Nick is usually at the front counter adjacent to the steps leading up to his family's home above the shop. Behind the counter is a hatch to the kitchen basement, and a few chalkboard signs of home-cooked. These include breakfast variations of chips and eggs, traditional and substantial working-class food such as steak and kidney pie and jam roly-poly, as well as daily specials, usually a roast with potatoes and two veg. The cheapest item on the menu and one frequently ordered is a mug of tea, and for 50p a pensioner or those who pop in during the day, have 'a local', a place to feel at home. The Caff represents the "small localities" within the city that Simmel (1949) had associated more specifically with life in villages and towns. Simmel related the form of social interaction within small local areas as dependent on the individual being known, and thereby located through regular and direct meetings. It is probable in Simmel's analysis of small town interaction, that this local scale of meeting generally occurred between fairly homogenous groups, whose affinities were not only defined within the boundaries of a local area, but also within the boundaries of origin, ethnicity or class. This account of Nick's Caff raises the question of the role of the small meeting place within a local urban area, to incorporate a sense of belonging amongst different groups and individuals.

## BEING AT HOME: PRACTICE

De Certeau (1984) points us to the social significance of how everyday life is lived in the city, placing value not only on individual experiences, but

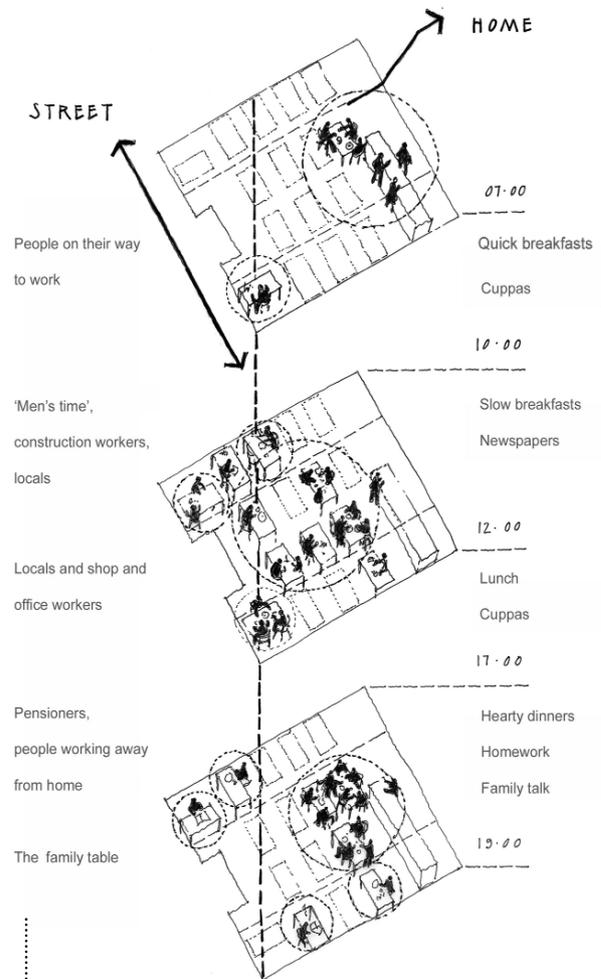


Figure 1. "Sketch of Nick's Caff located between street and home (Author's fieldwork drawing, September 2006)"

also on the cultural accumulation of these experiences when repeated on a regular basis. De Certeau also emphasises the conscious practice of engaging with society through habitual activities, and within Nick's Caff the work practices of Nick and his wife Dorah, as well as the recreational practices that their customers employ, fosters levels of participation in the life of the Caff. The presence of a regular 'family' group, including Cypriot relatives and local friends that gather around their shared tables at the front of the Caff has permeated the sense of place, and has provided a basis for alternative constitutions of home and family. Mark who grew up in a small town on the east coast of England, moved to Walworth ten years ago. He is in his late forties and runs his own computer business. He frequents the Caff daily, often opening his mail and tending to business while he waits for his full English breakfast. Although he is known amongst the regular clientele, he generally sits at

the same side table on his own, with a view to the street. Mark comments that the presence of family life in the Caff contributes to his sense of comfort, "The mix of ages is really good - it's one of the reasons this place feels good - the mix of ages, the associations with family...It's a family place. Nick's family are around." Although Mark has children, they no longer live with him. On many occasions, I have seen his two children meet up with him at the Caff, a place they seem comfortable to spend time in together.

The potential for belonging in the Caff is reinforced by the presence of Nick and his wife Dorah, and by the family-like relationships they have developed with their regulars. As I was leaving one evening, Dorah was chatting with the evening regulars about closing the Caff for their two-week annual holiday. Dorah mentioned her concern for one of the regulars, Freddie, "He's the only one I worry about when we go away...when he walks out of this door every evening, there's no one to go to. That's it." They carry on chatting and when Freddie walks in Sonja, a daily regular who has become like an extended family 'member' to Nick and Dorah calls out, "You're late, where you been?" Sonja was born in Walworth and lives a few blocks from the Caff in one of the social housing estates. She comes in every morning before work, and returns in the evening for coffee and conversation. She met her late husband in Nick's Caff, and it feels like the Caff, or the front table at least, is Sonja's extended living room, the place where she socialises with her family and friends. She is usually joined by her daughter, and teenage grandson who often does his homework amidst the chatter of the family table.

Jack is in his fifties and grew up in and still lives in Camberwell, an adjacent neighbourhood, and has also been coming to Nick's for, "Years, years. Since my divorce, I come here for supper on my way home. It's very much like a social club. What you'd call 'caff society' - know what I mean. Once you've been coming long enough you almost become Nick's family." There are many individuals who use the Caff who no longer have an immediate family or kin as part of their daily socialisation. The Caff provides a reconstituted 'family' both in terms of having a place to go to and a people with whom one feels at home. The sense of Nick's Caff being a home outside of home and a family outside of family is underpinned by changing social relationships and family structures, as well as individual circumstances, where conventions of home as a domestic space, and family as relatives, is rede-

fined.

Not only is the Caff delineated by the layout of the tables, but by the fluctuating patterns of use throughout the day. The Caff opens by 7:00 in the morning and closes approximately twelve hours later. It is open seven days a week, closing earlier on Sundays before lunch. The combination of regular and extended open hours provides a local place that is consistently available to a diverse clientele. The rhythm of the Caff across the day brings both moments of intensity and relative quiet, a fluctuation in the space in its peak periods compared with its quieter moments. A further critical dimension of 'caff time' is the possibility of taking your time. Mustafa is a pensioner who was born in Guyana and grew up in Brixton. He emphasises the underlying informality at Nick's Caff as a quality that allows him to feel relaxed there, "Caffs are better than restaurants. Restaurants are very formal. You can take time, eat, have a cigarette. Restaurants you got to eat your food and get out." Mustafa now lives in Camberwell, a few bus stops to the south of Walworth, and arrives at Nick's in his wheelchair most Wednesday mornings, where he claims his table close to the entrance. Key to its appropriation by its customers, the Caff is a place to go to regularly, either spontaneously or as part of a routine. It is a place where you can do nothing much without any sense of being moved on. One may go through the formality of ordering a cup of tea, but more importantly the Caff is a space where you can spend time and take your time.

Aside from the groups of regulars, there are individuals who frequent the Caff as part of their weekly routines. People on piecework away from home, like Dave who is a forklift operator, use the Caff periodically as a home-away-from-home when they work in London. This is where Dave is assured of a home cooked meal and the comforts of a traditional Caff environment that for him are a familiar working-class reference point in a changing London. Pensioners also have their regular time slots, many coming in the morning for a fag and cup of tea, some coming in for a hot meal at lunch or dinner. Hinga, who left Sierra Leone 12 years ago, slips into the Caff at the same time most mornings and sits upfront, close to Nick. He always orders tea and toast, makes limited eye contact, and glances up to watch the telly, occasionally talking to Nick. Hinga doesn't partake in any of the general conversations, and doesn't conform to any particular groups in the Caff. But this is Hinga's local place and he reserves his space through the

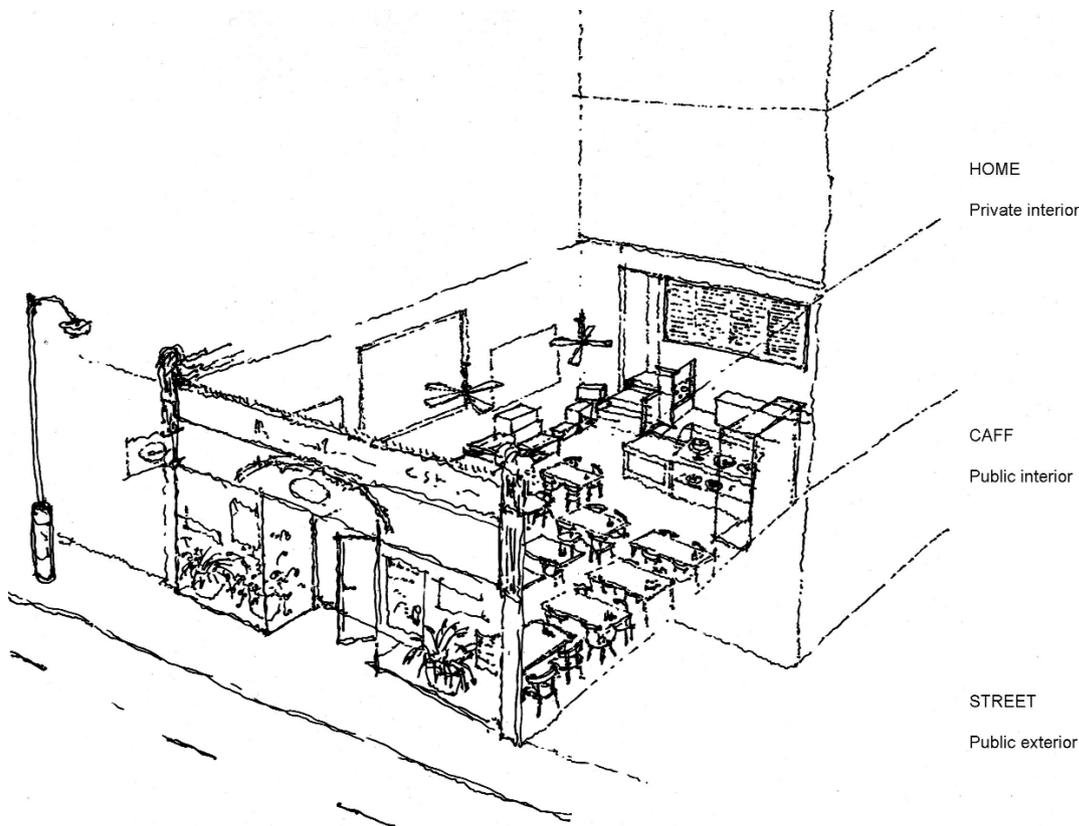


Figure 2. *The fluctuating rhythms of the Caff* (Author's fieldwork drawing, March 2008)

regular act of sitting. In Nick's Caff sitting is a social practice tied to time and place, where routines and personal spaces are important dimensions of a basic mode of belonging.

## BEING AT HOME: SOCIABILITY

Simmel (1949) describes sociability as a social skill and emphasises the form over the content of engagement. Such responsive etiquette is acquired through the repeated processes of sitting, watching and talking in the Caff, and allows for different people to engage differently, from the side spaces occupied by solitary individuals, to the central space claimed by an extended family. It is through regular use of the caff, and not only social or cultural background, that the social codes and etiquette become more refined. The social regulations within the Caff emerge from the practices of proprietor and customers - where regulars sit, where the loner sits, who talks to whom, and what people talk about. Caff culture for the most part is convivial in its nature - different people entering a local establishment to eat, talk or observe, and there is

little that is conflictual in its inherent sociability. This is not to say that the Caff is a place without tensions. Like in any 'home' conviviality was at its peak when occasions contrived to encourage people with different interests to meet over common ground. One such event was the Soccer World Cup 2006 and during this period, different individuals and groups talked over tables and counters, shifting the normal boundaries of individual and group space. Talking about football in general, before, during and after the World Cup, provided an entry point into greeting or conversation across individuals, and "See the game last night?" was simply an easy way of saying hello, or of opening up further talk.

The acquisition of social skills also needs to be extended to how Nick and his family have engaged with other social networks outside of the Caff. Nick was 5 or 6 when his dad brought the shop, "This place (the Caff) was owned by another Cypriot fella, one thing lead to another. This one happened to fall in the right place probably because of it being a Cypriot fella." Nick's Dad came to London on his own, fifteen years before he had resources to buy the Caff. His entry into the

country was by invitation, granted on the basis of a working permit.

*"When he first came he was in North London. The restaurant he was working for was in the area. He had a job in the 'Trocadero'. He worked up to sous-chef. Then he got lots of jobs for the other Cypriots. That's what our boys did. All the foreigners now days work in the kitchens."*

While Boyd (1989) defines the domestic unit as "a sustenance unit" and "socialising agent" for migrant families, Wallman's (1984) research of eight diverse London households living within the same housing estate in South London, emphasises the role of social networks outside of family in supporting family mobility. In Nick's Caff, mobility from kitchen to Caff to professional directions to be pursued by his daughters has been made through the combined resources of family effort and imagination, as well as the support of ethnic networks, which were later reinforced by local networks. While the Caff is the first and only workplace for both Nick and Dorah, they both place great value on education, and have sought out private education for their daughters' secondary schooling. The Caff has served as a financial platform to assist in sending their children to private schooling, and a combined work-home base where Nick and Dorah could work extended hours without being separated from the daily lives of their children. The acquisition of their social skills extends from the day-to-day etiquette of 'caff society', to ethnic and local networks that support Nick and Dorah's family, to their recognition of the role of formal education in enhancing the prospects for their daughters' mobility, and for a broader extent of social interaction beyond the caff, and ultimately beyond family, ethnicity and class.

But while Nick expresses a strong sense of his Cypriot heritage and equally his local, working-class sensibilities, his sense of a multiple identity is complex and reflects an on-going negotiation between being local and being foreign, or what Bhabha describes as "the migrant's double vision" (1994:5). One morning, after six months in the field, I asked Nick what it was like growing up in the Walworth area with his Cypriot heritage:

**Nick:** "I've never faced any racism on the whole, directly."

**Suzi:** "Why do you say you're foreign?"

**Nick:** "Cos of my colour. The English people are lovely right. But bottom line is I'm foreign."

And what's worse, I'm a foreigner in my own country! In many ways our culture is like the 1950s. We've still got the traditional ways, like being in a time warp. We're old-fashioned, even our language has stayed the same. They (Cypriots in Cyprus) see you as English Turks!"

Nick manages his identity between place and time; between South London and Cyprus, between his work and social practices in the Caff and his inheritance of cultural traditions. Within the Caff there is space for the coexistence of these different affinities. There are also particular identities that Nick and others in the Caff relate to, as being more inclusive of managing these complexities. Defining oneself through categories that assert an association with a way of life, such as "working-class", or a "South London person" was entirely separate from being an English national. Being a South Londoner seemed to partially accommodate contradictions or was less categorical - like Nick you could live in London, even be born London, and have strong connections to another place. Perhaps as a 'Londoner' you could be tied to individual sensibilities, occupations or preferences that are not constrained by nationality. In the space of the Caff, these layered experiences of home are not only formed by an affinity with origin and kin, but also by a regular association and engagement with others.

## CONCLUSIONS

A primary question for this paper has been: What accommodates a sense of home in a context of urban change? The question has expanded within Nick's Caff to how 'newcomers' and 'established' residents are able to be at home with respect to one another. London is a place where different groups and individuals gather, and the contemporary dimensions of gathering in cities is heightened by the scale and pace of migration. Today the greater proportion of London's population was either was born elsewhere, or has parents who were born elsewhere (Hamnett 2003). In the context of profound urban change, experiences of local place, family or home are neither clear nor stable, and the issue of how different people are able to belong amongst one another, is critical. The paradoxical identity of 'the London local' is lived out through various modes of belonging and this paper has emphasised the role of Nick's Caff and the combination of shared space, practice and sociability as ways of

reconstituting home. The Caff is also a meeting place where conventional understandings of what it means to belong are contested. What matters is not that these tensions are necessarily resolved, but that they encountered and shared.

I return to Bhabha's concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism to ask what is different, in this ethnographic account of social interaction in Nick's Caff, from the binary distinction between insider/outsider and foreigner/local. Firstly, the account is situated in a space of intermingling across different groups and individuals, where both the migrant or newcomer and the established resident or local, share the predicament of being rendered fragile by change. However, it is not only the predicaments but the possibilities of change that are shared, and the London caff as a cultural space born out of the combination of different cultures, is testimony to this. Secondly everyday life as lived and practiced allows for a face-to face scale of engagement. In Nick's Caff inclusion happens either in the fluctuating daily rhythm of the Caff, where individuals use the space differently throughout day, or in the regular and sustained period of meeting over the years, where family becomes reconstituted on the basis of regularity and not simply on the basis of kin. Thirdly belonging occurs as a process, one not only regulated by class, ethnicity or race, and is dependent on shared forms of sociability, ranging from etiquette to social networks.

## REFERENCES

- AL-ALI, N. & KOSER, K. (eds) 2002, *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational communities and the transformation of home*, Routledge, London
- AMIN, A. 2002 'Ethnicity and the multicultural city: living with diversity' in *Environment and Planning A*, Vol.34, pp. 959-980
- BHABHA, H.K. 2004 [1994], *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London
- BOYD, M. 1989 'Family and Personal Networks in International Migration: Recent Developments and New Agendas' in *International Migration Review*, Vol.23, No. 3, pp. 638-670
- DE CERTEAU, M. 1984, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley
- HAMNETT, C. 2003, *Unequal City. London in the Global Arena*, Routledge, London

HEATHCOATE, E. 2004, *London Coffs*, John Wiley and Sons, London

MASSEY, D. 1994, 'A Place Called Home?' in *Space, Place and Gender*, Polity Press, Cambridge, pp. 157-173

SENNETT, R. 1992, *The Fall of Public Man*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York [first published in 1977]

SENNETT, R. 1996, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, London, W.W. Norton and Company, New York

SIMMEL, G. 1949 'The Sociology of Sociability', in *The American Journal of Sociology*, 55(3), pp. 254-261 [Translated by Everett C. Hughes]

SIMMEL, G. 1949 'Fashion', in *The American Journal of Sociology*, 62(6), 1957, pp. 541-558 [first published in *International Quarterly*]

WALLMAN, S. 1984, *Eight London Households*, Tavistock, London

### Author's Address:

Suzanne M. Hall  
Cities Programme,  
London School of Economics,  
London WC2A 2AE  
s.m.hall@lse.ac.uk