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Collaborative ethnographies: Reading space to build an affective inventory

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Collaborative ethnographies: reading space to build an affective inventory

Abstract

Collaboration in qualitative research is increasingly encouraged and rewarded in many national and global funding schemes. Collaboration in by scholars in (radically) different disciplines using different methods is becoming customary, however less attention is given to collaboration using shared approaches across closely-related disciplines. This paper considers the ethnographic insights of four researchers from different (but related) disciplinary backgrounds who conducted collaborative fieldwork in one site—West Coast Park (WCP) in Singapore—over two periods of fieldwork. We conducted an experimental collaboration to study emotions, affect and mundane space through sharing and comparing our interpretations of everyday life in WCP. We ask, how do researchers capture or speak to the affective properties circulated during collaboration? Second, how should researchers approach the affective properties of mundane activities in space? Our paper develops a four-fold ‘affective inventory’ consisting of: a) multiple-attunements to the (un)familiar; b) attentiveness to affective affordances and their governing effects; c) attentiveness to involuntary affective charges, and; d) awareness of how our diverse affective biographies affect the (im)perceptibility of affect. We propose that such an inventory functions as a valuable guidepost in navigating collaborative ethnographies of space in a range of research projects.

Keywords: affect, emotions, collaboration, ethnography, mundane space, Singapore.

Highlights:

- Collaborative ethnographic research on emotions, affect and space is challenging.
- Reading spaces affectively *and* collaboratively is crucial for deepening understanding of urban (built) environments, nation-building and community-making.
- Collaborative research on affect and emotions is bolstered by a shared ‘affective inventory’.
- Research on affect and emotions is essential in mundane spaces as well as in spectacular or fraught spaces.

Collaborative ethnographies: reading space to build an affective inventory

I. Introduction

Reading spaces affectively *and* collaboratively is crucial for deepening understanding of how the urban (built) environment is implicated in processes of nation-building and community-making in multi-cultural societies. As Low argues, the study of emotion and affect ‘when employed in the study of the built environment, access the transpersonal domain and allow ‘feeling’ to affect, circulate and infect more than one person.... [Emotion and affect bring] together the social, linguistic and cognitive dimensions of everyday life with the material environment’ (2017: 145). The importance of emotion and affect to reading space (Thien, 2005), however, creates particular methodological challenges during collaborative research. Affect may be transpersonal, ‘formed through encounters and relations that exceed any particular person or any particular thing’, but are nonetheless ‘personal in the sense that they are expressed in a specific person or specific thing and change in that process of expression and qualification’ (Anderson, 2014: 102; see Richard and Rudnycky, 2009).

Reading affect and emotions collaboratively is therefore wrought with difficulties, as we cannot claim an ‘authentic experience’ of a scene that is shared with others (Blakely, 2007). As soon as affect is captured and articulated, it is shaped by personal experience; as soon as we draw upon cultural-linguistic repertoires to identify a feeling as emotion, emotions then become embedded within power relations. We can read the discursive and symbolic elements of ‘affect’ and ‘emotions’, but our interpretations will always be shaped by our own affective biographies and cultural linguistic memberships (Wetherell, 2012). We are interested in working with, rather than against, these challenges.

At the heart of this paper is thus a concern with collaboration as method, especially collaboration in ethnographies of space and place. Collaboration in the humanities and social sciences is often across disciplinary and methodological boundaries: an historian and an anthropologist, a GIS specialist and a cultural geographer, a sociologist and a film-maker. Despite numerous precedents (see Lassiter, 2005) collaboration is more limited *among* ethnographers ‘who may traditionally have been disposed to working alone’ yet who now find themselves ‘welcomed by institutions and funding agencies’ as collaborators (Bunnell 2018: 185). Collaboration has become a requirement of national funding bodies, research measurement and performance evaluation, and tenure and promotion criteria, especially at universities where the spectre of STEM disciplines looms large (Davidson, 1999). Working alone is more difficult, especially in academic systems that prioritise large grants. The

emphasis on collaboration has hazards too, notably the ‘subcontracting’ of ethnographic research and the systematic rewarding (usually as grants) of ‘ghost [research] produced by foreign research assistants’ (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2019: 665). Collaborative ethnography is often comparative or drawn from multi-site projects, a different ethnographer looking after a different site before stitching these together in a larger project. In contrast, we turn our attention to collaboration in a shared space, a single site. We approach analyses of affect and space with two puzzles in mind. First, how do researchers accurately capture or speak with some validity as to the affective properties *circulated during collaboration*? Second, how should researchers approach the study of affective properties of mundane activities *in space*?

To address the above puzzles, we conducted an experimental collaboration to study emotions, affect and mundane space through sharing and comparing one another’s interpretations of West Coast Park (WCP) in Singapore. We sought a space where none of us had extensive research experience—a neutral space—and selected WCP after conducting initial ethnographic work in various potential spaces, ranging from shopping malls to government offices. The West Coast region where the park is located is a microcosm of Singapore’s housing and urban planning. WCP is a transnational space that draws citizens of Singapore of different ethnic backgrounds (‘racial’ in local parlance), expat residents, and migrant workers. Our ethnographic fieldwork in WCP led us to develop a four-fold ‘affective inventory’ that focuses attention on: a) multiple-attunements to the unfamiliar; b) affective affordances and their governing effects; c) involuntary affective charges, and; d) how our diverse affective biographies affect the (im)perceptibility of affect. We argue that this inventory functions as a valuable guidepost for navigating collaborative ethnographies in a single site, especially when there is no single event, crisis or spectacle to draw our shared attention.

Despite some disciplinary variance, all four authors have experience researching emotions and affect in what we consider highly fraught spaces shaped by dramatic events, crisis, displacement, refuge, hope and rupture (in sites as diverse as Australia, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Myanmar and the United Kingdom). In those spaces, emotions and affect can be more easily identified. For this project we chose to research space characterised by mundane activities of daily living to consider how collaboration might augment our capacity to read ordinary urban spaces where not much seems to be happening. We have common interests in analysing gender, race and ethnicity, in the transnational forces shaping local contexts, and in the mobilities of people and things that shape our field-sites. All four authors have collaborated extensively with other colleagues in various projects and publications, and

see collaboration as an opportunity to provide comparison, peer-to-peer learning, mentoring and inter-disciplinary insight that is not possible in solo research. We also consider friendship to be an important part of our rationale for collaboration. Friendship is why we wanted to work together in the first place and it undergirds the collaborative experience, what Lund et al. identify as the benefits of ‘chit-chat’ among research collaborators (2016: 23).

Section II presents an overview of our study context and methods. The article is then divided into four further sections, each representing the experiences of one author in WCP. After an initial round of fieldwork in 2018, each author chose a specific focal point for follow-on investigation in early 2019, based on the observations that resonated most with each author. Sections III to VI depict the authors’ four different observations of space and the affects registered within: running, migrant food and leisure, share-bikes and children’s play. These vignettes provide additional observations about WCP, social relationships, materialities, and Singapore more generally as a transnational hub manifested in local encounters. We continually slipped between the representational and affective, even in our debriefing with one another we found maintaining clear lines between the two difficult in practice. Section VIII concludes by drawing together the four vignettes to argue for the importance of developing an *affective inventory* that would enhance collaborative readings of emotions and affect in space.

II. Methods and Study Context

The West Coast region contains a mix of public housing and private properties (both condominiums and landed). Central to urban planning in Singapore are the Housing Development Board (HDB) flats, where nearly 80 per cent of the population reside and which Singapore citizens and permanent residents (PR) can purchase for a ‘lease’ for up to 99 years, at a heavily subsidised rate. Since public housing purchase in Singapore is restricted to Singapore citizens and PRs, foreigners can only purchase private property. The area around WCP is popular with foreign professionals. While some are ‘expats’ who command higher salaries, others are mid-skilled professionals. The area is popular with both groups because of its proximity to an international school and tertiary institutions. The facilities at WCP, as we

observed, cater to a range of age groups and nationalities. From a large children's playground to camping, barbequing, running and cycling, WCP offers it all¹.

WCP is what we classify as a mundane urban space. It is a space of the everyday, of routines and forgettable encounters. Much of the literature on affect draws on places or events that provoke clear emotional responses, producing noticeable bodily modifications, or that are affectively charged, a tense atmosphere for example, or a national feeling of excitement (Wetherell, 2015). A growing body of work emphasises the significance of emotions and affects generated in and by everyday spaces (e.g. Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Walsh, 2012; Wise & Velayutham, 2017; Wood, 2013). Williamson, for example, argues that 'studying everyday mobilities [in space] enables a nuanced picture of how the city is experienced from the body outwards and the affective and relational dimensions of inhabiting urban space' (2016: 2332). Our fieldwork in WCP was driven by three questions. First, given that the study of emotion and affect is deeply personal, how might we collaborate to read space? Second, how do our own personal identities, backgrounds, preferences and experiences refract the way we read space individually and collectively? Third, how does our research experience in different contexts shape the ways we read emotion, affect and space in WCP? And how we contend with slippages in and out of the affective? As a multi-ethnic and gender-diverse research team, we sought a space where our presence as a group and as individuals would not mark us obviously as insiders or outsiders, though clearly we are each labelled in some way, just as we label those we encounter, consciously or not.

We conducted fieldwork in WCP individually and collectively over two periods in 2018 and 2019. During these periods we also met as a group to share our observations and findings, and narrow down individual areas of focus, and, echoing the approach of Fitzpatrick and Longley, we sought 'to foreground the emotional experiences we each had as researchers, and the affective feeling states that were produced by the disruptive and challenging elements of cross-disciplinary collaboration' (2014: 49). We each approached emotions, affect and space slightly differently, as will be seen in the sections below. This is a crucial contribution of the paper: given that there is no prescribed formula for reading emotion and affect, collaboration brought out divergence in approach rather than uniformity.

¹ A map of WCP published by National Parks Singapore is available at: <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/-/media/nparks-real-content/gardens-parks-and-nature/parks-and-nature-reserve/west-coast-park/west-coast-park-map.jpg?la=en&hash=F9286FA5297E9E972ECC9168E67C5880F1F7DFE6> Accessed March 3, 2020.

We have chosen not to smooth out these variations, rather we work with them, keeping them in the forefront of the paper as these illustrate some of the challenges in collaborative readings of emotion and affect in space.

III. Running

18 June 2018 5pm: I (Tanya) am itching to go for a run. I start slow, no pressure to run fast, allowing me to enjoy the changing vista....I take 'field-notes' in my head, following the letters of the alphabet so that I can recall the scenes I encounter when I get back to my room: a picnic with Tupperware; beats from a bike; cricket in casual clothes... I feel like I am plodding, but I am not caught up on 'performance'. I am happily exhausted as I straggle to the end of my second lap. I feel really good: a sensation that I carry for the next few hours

I first developed my enjoyment of running in Singapore as an exchange student. Growing up I attended a high-school in Australia that was heavy on sport and light on academics, I am attuned to gain satisfaction and enjoyment from physical activity. When I don't exercise I feel grumpy, restless, I have a nagging sensation. These feelings associated with exercise are undoubtedly part of the reason I love Singapore, with its exercise facilities, running tracks, and national discourse around the importance of exercise. When I encounter fellow runners in the park, I assume the activity engenders similar feelings in them. I do not share the same sense of similarity when exercising in India or Indonesia, where exercise is less a part of national discourse. My friends there say they find my exercise routine admirable, but also find the compulsion and regularity of it incomprehensible. How could I enjoy running?

Part of the answer lies in my affective pedagogy, my cultural training in evaluating the sensations of the body as positive or negative. I evaluate the raised heartbeat, the heavy breathing, the lengthening and exertion of muscles as 'feeling good'. The way the body communicates to the mind may be physiological, but that communication is interpreted in ways that are also social and cultural. As people undergo different sensorial training, collectives—including national collectives—share an 'affective pedagogy'. My interpretation that my fellow runners in West Coast Park feel as good as I do, is based on my reading of a similar national emphasis on fitness and affective training.

I am not suggesting an equivalence nor a generalizable 'national' affective response to 'running'. My personal affective biography also plays a role (Wetherell, 2012). Attending a school where children poorly skilled in sports were bullied, teenage years spent on the netball court as an escape and refuge, and the quotidian rewards girls and women receive by being slim, all drive the anxiety, grumpiness, satisfaction, pleasure, that I get from exercise,

or its absence. This affective biography is personal, but not unique, with many commonalities for people ‘like me’. My white skin and ‘born and bred’ status afford me many social and economic privileges in Australia. I suggest that they may also afford me certain affective privileges, in that what makes me feel good, is also what is seen as being an admirable quality. I am aligned with an affective community (Ahmed, 2010), in that my personal objects of happiness are culturally valued. The affective dimensions of space are therefore productive of certain politics (Highmore, 2010).

11 Feb 2019, 5pm: A storm has just passed and there is a stillness in the park. There is no breeze, a solid humidity hangs in the air, and the temperature is a pleasant 28 degrees. It is a perfect day for running. Immediately I feel good. There are fewer people in the park, and I get a sense of comradery with my fellow runners. The flat terrain is conducive to the steady hum of an even pace; the kilometre markers and the clear pathways enable a sense of destination and duration. Nearing the end of my run, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, a slight wave of goose-bumps. I reach the end-point. I feel exhilarated. A runner’s high.

Exercise scientists explain the runner’s high as caused by a release of endorphins that dampen pain and provide that ‘feel-good’ sensation. Continuous and rhythmic exercise, such as flat terrain running, are particularly conducive to such highs. Like other impacts of exercise, the ‘runner’s high’ is achieved through regular training. The body’s generation of new physical sensations come together with an affective pedagogy in which we are trained to evaluate these, and other sensations, in a positive way. Our affective training sustains us through the steady slog, keeps us going as our muscles tire, our breath is laboured, our heart beats faster, until we can get to the physiological high. The materiality of the park, its flat terrain, its size with long circular paths, enables the activities that generate this high.

The sensations I feel are not solely a result of physiological processes; they are heightened by the transpersonal circulations in the park. Anderson (2014: 87) argues that ‘bodily capacities are mediated through forces that exceed the person’, or in other words, ‘a body’s ‘force of existing’ emerge through...the press and presence of the multiplicity that make up an encounter’? The multiplicities I encounter on my run include the envelopment of the humid air, the electric atmosphere of the passing storm, and the markers that signal to me progress made and duration yet to run: the water bubbler, the underpass, the lakes. Then there are the affects generated in my encounters with other human beings. The ‘sense of comradery’, the way my step lightens as I approach another runner, the warmth of a shared smile. I run past a woman doing tai-chi. As I watch her rotate her wrists, a warmth emerges in

my own wrists. Her actions are suggestive, encouraging me to sub-consciously register the same movement in my own body.

The press and presence of these encounters, my affective training and the physiological processes in my body all contribute to the ‘runners high’ I feel in the mundane space of WCP. In this way the park offers certain affective affordances: the possibilities and capacity to be affected that arise from particular materialities, human and non-human encounters. The possibilities for being affected are in part personal, on account of my affective training and pedagogy, but these capacities are also mediated through the multiplicities available in the park itself.

IV. Migrant Food and Leisure

The lingering aroma of barbecued food caught our attention as we absorb the sights and sounds of WCP on a Sunday afternoon. We wandered to the BBQ pits, which are adjacent yet demarcated from one another by design. Having grown up in multi-cultural Singapore and being sensitised to reading migrant bodies in space through years of research, my (Ho) affective biography leads me to identify four different types of users in that space. The BBQ pit to the furthest right from us appears to be hosting a company function comprising of male workers from South Asia possibly, employed in the construction industry as we had noticed a coach in WCP’s parking bay that would ferry the workers to their dormitories located in the peripheral areas of the city.

Although Tamil migrants from yesteryears had settled to start their families in Singapore, this group of South Asians, I can tell, are not Singapore-born Tamils. The way they dress and conduct themselves, and their very presence in that public space, signal they are ‘guest workers’. Public green spaces like WCP—outside of the city centre—are popular during Sundays amongst migrant workers. Use of such green spaces is free, except when BBQ pits are rented from the National Parks, a government agency. Securing permission to use a BBQ pit in Singapore’s public parks costs only \$20 for a period from 12 noon till 4am the following day. Twenty dollars may seem like a modest sum but booking a BBQ pit can present difficulties for migrant workers; the online booking site is in English and payment is by credit or debit card, or in person through self-service machines. Low-paid migrant workers in Singapore with poor English language skills may not feel confident making online payments, even if they have a debit card.

The de facto spatial constraints faced by low-paid migrant workers is one that I read intuitively, and feel a mixture of resignation and indignation toward when contextualised in my past experience of participating in a civil society initiative called The Working Committee 2 (2002-2003), now known as Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). More than a decade later, government policies have formalised days-off and work contracts where they used not to exist, yet in other ways the marginalisation of migrant workers in Singapore's urban space remains.

The BBQ pit next to the male migrant workers has a group of Filipino women and amongst them, two Chinese women and a few Filipino men. They are undoubtedly the liveliest party, punctuating the air with loud laughter, noisy banter, strumming on a guitar and singing, and at one point, dancing too. The other park users seem unbothered, carrying on with their own activities. The women appear to be celebrating a birthday with a slice of cake, bursting into birthday cheers. Holding up a mobile phone, one of them—with the others behind her—made a video-conference call, presumably to a loved one in the Philippines. The users of the third BBQ pit, another group of Filipinos, are subdued in comparison.

The afternoon seems a relaxing one for the group at the fourth BBQ pit, likely international students and/or professionals from China, taking turns to barbecue and enjoy eating the food. Moments later, two Caucasian men walked to the BBQ pit and showed them the screen of a mobile phone. Possibly the two men had booked the BBQ pit. One of the Chinese pointed to an empty BBQ pit on the opposite side, perhaps suggesting that the newcomers use that pit instead. The negotiations fell through and the atmosphere in the fourth BBQ pit changed within seconds as the young Chinese hurriedly packed their food and belongings. One of them tried to use a cardboard to transfer the hot embers from the BBQ pit to an empty pit on the opposite side; the cardboard caught fire, creating mini mayhem which fortunately settled as the fire was quickly extinguished. The other BBQ pit users seem unrattled by the incident.

Food and its associated aromas can be read as actants that provide insights on migrant lives (Low & Ho, 2018). There are different registers of socialising around food, depending on the motivations that bring people together and their relations with one another (contrast the company employees' gathering with the first group of Filipinos for example). Sharing food (largely between co-ethnics in parallel groups) creates conviviality amongst those partaking of it, yet it can also reflect social and spatial segregations between different social groups. The migrants using WCP varied by nationality, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and the types of visas they hold. Migrant's use of public space like the BBQ pits speak to the

demographic changes in Singapore; where once these BBQ pits were meant to cater to HDB dwellers as a communal space for socialising in large groups to circumvent the limited living spaces of HDB flats, and to protect against fire hazards, the BBQ pits today are also spaces for middle- and lower-income migrants to socialise in, juxtaposed against the gated condominiums surrounding WCP, many of which are inhabited by wealthier migrants (known locally as ‘expats’). As a Singaporean researcher born and bred in the country, and a witness to the demographic and spatial changes that have taken place, WCP may seem a mundane space but the emotions and affects captured within reflect wider sentiments about differentiating the local Singaporean identity from those of migrant workers, even if the latter come from the same source countries as the ‘pioneer migrants’ did (i.e. from China and India to Singapore).

IV. Share-Bikes

Between the Wu Tai Shan temple and the food court at West Coast Market Square there is a parking bay for share-bikes. At least, for one company: Ofo. Their slogan: ‘share more, consume less’ is emblazoned on the basket that sits between the handlebars, reflecting the mantra of share-bike schemes around the world (Fishman, 2016; Karki and Tao, 2016). Here the black and yellow bikes are packed in an orderly row; their colours matching the bollards that stop cars from driving onto pedestrian ways. I barely notice the bikes in their orderly row, but just to the right there are bikes strewn on the grass. They are not just the yellow and black of Ofo, but there are orange bikes, green, red and grey bikes—all with QR codes and serial numbers. I can’t help but start following the trail of share-bikes, a trail that spreads through WCP, and through Singapore more generally (Shen et al., 2018).



Images 1 & 2 here: On the Share-bike Trail. Photos McDuié-Ra.

For days I followed those bikes. Not just during one period of fieldwork but during the next too. There are bikes everywhere: against the wall behind the Sheng Siong Supermarket, propped up against the fence along the mangroves in the park, on the tak-raw court under a block of HBD flats abutting the market complex. I started to look through photos I had taken of other things in the park. In almost all of them there is a share-bike somewhere in the frame, an inanimate photo-bomber. I wondered if this is temporal: a season of share-bike madness. Temporalities seems to characterise WCP, as my co-author, Somaiah, discusses below. The space appears mundane but is constantly staging some new configuration of people and objects. I started to browse street view images of WCP and the Food Centre on Google Maps. Even here the share-bikes are in almost every frame. Most of these photos were gathered in early 2018. The faces of people moving through the landscape are distorted, a blur, but the share-bikes stand in high resolution, easily identifiable by company. These sanctioned experiments in mobility demonstrate global flows of an idea—loosely share-bikes are equated to a more sustainable form of urban living, technologies—cheap bikes and apps that control their hiring and location, and localised versions of these flows—notably the use of these bikes by migrant workers and temporary residents of the city.

On my share-bike trail there were more abandoned bikes than people. The bikes connected the market to the foreshore to the Pasir Panjang Terminal. They witness children playing in the playground, the semi-permanent park dwellers in tents, and the maids walking

dogs. At the foreshore, posters preach vigilance for suspicious activity on the water, yet the only sentinels along this stretch of coast for most of the day are discarded share-bikes.



Images 3 & 4: Permitted Wasteland on the Share-Bike Trail. Photos: McDuié-Ra.

While some share-bikes stood upright, neatly placed in their assigned racks or parking stations, there were many more that stood isolated in an empty patch of park, twisted at the bottom of an embankment, left at a barbeque pit with half a can of Anchor beer in the front basket. I saw one in the middle of the bike path standing perfectly upright, with not a soul to

be found anywhere near it. As if the rider just vanished or maybe their share-bike account froze and the pedals locked.

Occasionally I would see someone riding a share-bike. But only occasionally. Once I saw a group of eight men riding share-bikes from down near the Pasir Panjang Terminal through the park heading north-east. They all wore identical polo shirts; dark blue with a yellow trim. They must have been riding back from work. I was happy about this. It seemed like a valid and productive use of the share-bikes. They seemed to be sharing more and consuming less. Mostly though, it was just share-bikes without people. They were like debris, tainting the otherwise pristine park, until someone grabs one and starts riding. Their presence was even more visceral on weekdays when the park was mostly empty, especially at its southern end. Maybe the park was a graveyard for share-bikes. Unlike other rubbish and debris, these are sanctioned experiments in mobility. And there are seemingly always more migrant workers that can be hired to clear them away.

When I revisited WCP in February 2019, I found that the share-bikes had competition from share scooters. There were fewer personal mobility vehicles like these scattered about the park, but it also seemed a regular troupe of workers were collecting and moving them to large trucks that rattled along the roads. One afternoon I positioned myself in a patch of the park thick with abandoned bikes and scooters, and watched the workers. The truck pulled up on the road and the two workers wearing plastic boots and matching blue pants and long-sleeved shirts got out and collected only scooters, no bikes, and only from one company. As with Somaiah's time in the park, the presence of migrant workers managing the landscape is prominent through the middle of the day. They hauled them into the back of the unmarked truck and drove away. I figured that this might be clean-up day and I waited to see if anyone came and collected any of the other bikes or scooters. After a few hours a new crew arrived, but they were just there to trim grass with motorised trimmers. When they were done, they moved their sign reading 'works in progress' to the front of a small shelter, piled their tools on the floor, and lay down to rest. Some slept, one watched a video on his mobile phone, the other appeared to be on a video call that kept cutting out. After a few tries he put his phone away and closed his eyes too—sneaking in moments of leisure amidst the workday, another temporality only possible in the early afternoon lull. I felt guilty spying on these workers. It was time to go; languor had taken over in the afternoon heat and I thought: 'If only I could find a bike'.



Image 5: Works in Progress. Photo: McDuié-Ra.

VI. Children's Play

The playground at WCP caught my attention. It is the busiest part of the park, aurally and visually, and where I gravitated most naturally as a parent and avid park-goer. Apart from English, the languages I heard at the playground included Bahasa, Tamil, Mandarin, a Chinese dialect, Japanese, French and what I assume is Russian. Little footsteps, the shrieks of children playing; the babbling of toddlers—‘Amah, amah, amah, amah, LOOK!’; the exchanging looks between a pair of parents tag-teaming for a temporary respite from intensive parenting (Hays, 1996)—a father entreats a son, ‘Your turn to play with me okay?’ while the mother takes a time-out and watches videos on her phone; ‘Mummy! I’m the winner!’; children banging on metal parts of equipment; laughter; crying; a birthday song from a children’s party; gurgling; dogs on leashes barking; the background murmur of many conversations; screams of ‘Higher! Higher!’ from the swings; music from a passing cyclist blares ‘Footloose’; something in Chinese from a transistor radio is caught in the breeze; the wailing and stomping of shoes in anger when it is time to go home....This could be a playground anywhere in a cosmopolitan city, but the honk from a nearby container ship reminds me this is WCP, near the second busiest port of the world (*Straits Times* 2019).

I overhear an expat, White mother comforting her pre-schooler who has stumbled down and is sniffing – ‘I have a magic spray for you to feel better. A magic dragon spray’. My

thoughts wander to the contingency plans that parents seem to need while parenting in risk society (Lupton, 2012). In a reverse dynamic, a Singaporean-Chinese child seems too scared to explore to his full capacity... 'Father: Try, try, everything must try / Son: Wait I break my hand / F: Haven't even try have this negativity...' I think of risk and the other playgrounds I have been in outside of Singapore, some of which had rusty equipment, questionable items in the sand pit, or which were sometimes absent altogether. In Singapore, litter (from children's parties) and the occasional dog off its leash seem as 'risky' as things go.



Image 6: A young (Singaporean-/)Indian park cleaner with metal tongs and garbage bags (including one tied around her waist) picks up litter around the playground. She has a towel over her head kept in place with a baseball cap to fend off the heat. Photo: Somaiah.



Image 7: Indian park workers prune some trees in the distance. Among other things, I wondered too about a honey-crested eagle who flew away from this tree one noisy morning. Does it have a nest in the tree? Photo: Somaiah.

One morning while seated on a bench by the playground with my notebook, I was unexpectedly asked by a shirtless, smiling Singaporean-Indian older man, if I was waiting for my boyfriend. When I laughed off a no, he asked, was I waiting for him? I laughed some more and replied smiling, no. I was suddenly painfully aware he might be homeless as he appeared to be preparing to bathe (holding 2 large pails of water) from the nearby toilet facilities closest to the campsite. He was making conversation, recognizing me, a stranger yet perhaps a fellow Singaporean-Indian at the park. It seems hard not to self-racialize in Singapore. The politics of race and social inequality (Balanchandran, 2018) is so stark, as is the management of ‘labour’

Apart from the divisions within the umbrella racial classification of ‘Indian’ in Singapore among citizens and permanent residents and its attendant issues around access, networks, opportunities and disadvantage, guest workers from South Asia are also inadvertently racialized. The official labour management and salary bands for 3D (dirty, demeaning, dangerous) work is organized and differentiated by nationality and is subsequently racialized on-the-ground. On weekdays park workers were on the peripheries of the play spaces. On weekends, the park’s busiest, they were noticeably absent here, having no children or family of their own present amidst heavy Ministry of Manpower regulations against bringing or creating families of their own in Singapore. I see inequality play out in the everyday, including within this park. Domestic workers (from the Philippines) were clearly marked as an ‘Other’ in the playground spaces, trailing along behind local Singaporean mothers, children and other family members. Are (a national narratives of progress which often contribute to the

myth that there is no homelessness in Singapore, (b) clean and green parks, and (c) imported, hands-on support for everyday care-work for Singaporean families and children worth such daily indignities and social exclusions between citizens, and between citizens and non-citizens?

My experiences at WCP were a constant interplay of double-consciousness between temporalities (now and then), space (here and there), and being interpellated midst ‘bad affect (diminishing-closing-down) and good affect (flourishing-opening-up)’ (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2018) experienced viscerally and vicariously by and for some, and not others. As I moved from bench to bench around the playground, trying to make sense of my reading of space through my personal affective biography, and in relation to other places and playgrounds I have been to, I realised that my affective responses and emotions were more conflicted and motley than I had anticipated.



Image 8: An instalment in the children's playground. Photo: Somaiah.

VIII. Conclusion: Building an Affective Inventory

Each of our interpretations of the affective dimensions of WCP are distinct. Not only do these interpretations focus on different objects and activities of the park, they also take diverse approaches to reading affect and communicating that reading through text. While the difficulty in arriving at common accounts can be seen as a challenge in collaborative writing, here, it is precisely the point we seek to engage. We concur with the MWRG that ‘(s)trong collaboration has the potential...to sharpen the senses, facilitating that acute, shape-shifting

discomfort’ (2009: 200). Although affect is transpersonal, formed in the relations between but exceeding any one body, they are experienced—and hence interpreted—through the individual body. These experiences are read from a particular positionality and articulated through our own cultural-linguistic repertoires. Each researcher brings their own affective biography into reading the space, revealing dimensions that may be unnoticed or imperceptible to our collaborators. In bringing together these accounts, we build an affective inventory of WCP that more comprehensively accounts for the diverse experiences of park users.

We experimented with ways to build this inventory during the two stages of fieldwork. We visited the park individually, choosing a variety of ways to capture our experience of space—written notes, photos, audio, mental lists—and collectively, recording our conversations in the park itself. As Bunnell notes, ‘[s]uch reflections are helpful for ethnographers working as part of collaborative teams as much as for the lone ethnographer, not least because efforts to work comparatively...are likely to build upon material initially collected by individual researchers (2018: 186). We brought this empirical material together in our frequent discussions outside WCP, a means of ‘ethnographic echolocation’ (MWRG, 2009: 202) between us, where we teased apart each other’s interpretations, interrogated the pathways from affect, to feeling and thought (Hickey-Moody 2013) in order to identify the role of affective pedagogies and biographies. In this way we could disentangle sensations that are individual, particular to the person, and those that arise from our belonging to different affective communities (Ahmed, 2004). Reading through each other’s longer observations on a single theme (compressed versions of which appear in this paper) sparked further interrogation and contemplation of our individual interpretations of the park. We thereby built an inventory of the affective dimensions of WCP to inform our shared findings of the how the park is implicated in processes of nation-building and community-making in multi-cultural Singapore.

We now outline four ways that our collaborative approach to reading emotion and affect in space deepened and broadened our understandings of space. The first is the multiplying of *attunements*. Our attunement to our social worlds shapes the ways our attention is drawn to certain things, while other things go without notice (Throop and Duranti, 2015). When the social world is unfamiliar, one’s attention becomes drawn to things that might otherwise go unnoticed or are taken for granted by its occupants (Throop, 2018). At the same time, there may be things that stand out—breaking the ‘norm’—and draw the

attention only of people who are familiar with that social world. The different ways our attention was drawn to various aspects of the park speak to these diverse attunements.

The bikes in McDuie-Ra's section is the clearest example. The bikes grabbed the author's attention because of how they were arranged, or misarranged in the orderly landscape. And perhaps because they juxtaposed starkly with a notion—perhaps falsely derived—of WCP and Singapore more generally being a place of order. As McDuie-Ra started following the bikes, photographing them and talking about them with the group, they became harder to ignore; we became 'multiply attentive'. This feeling of being mutually affected holds across the experiment, which is perhaps the most valuable outcome for undertaking collaborative research on affect and mundane space. We are drawn to objects and encounters individually, but upon sharing our observations and affects, we entangle those objects and encounters in our continued experience of the space. We built an affective inventory through sharing our multiple attunements.

Second, our different ways of using the space broadened our *affective affordances* of the park. The material environment makes possible the engendering of certain affects, as Jakimow's section on running demonstrates. The physiological connects with the affective; the paths, duration markers, and size of the park enable a physical activity that engender sensations registered by the body, translated into 'feel good feeling'. By sharing these possibilities to be affected we all became more conscious of our movement through WCP, and how these modes of moving through the space were entangled with the ways we experienced the park. By connecting these experiences to national discourses of fitness, Jakimow points to how the 'freedom' to pursue activities facilitates the governing of citizens through 'intersubjective affective enactments' (Rudnyckyj, 2011: 64). That is, the types of feelings engendered through the shared activity of running are in part due to affective biographies developed within national discursive contexts. That none of the other collaborators shared the desire to run, nor its 'feel good' affective afterlife, points to the uneven effectiveness of governing through affect (anonymised reference).

Third, a user of a space may affect and be susceptible to being affected by the ascribed characteristics of other users of that space. McDuie-Ra, sticky with affect (Ahmed, 2004; Fanon, 1967), could have engendered suspicion in others in the children's playground as a lone man. Knowing he potentially has this affective charge makes him *feel* uncomfortable. In a national setting highly untuned to race and categories of citizenship, we are also racialized and self-racialize, as Somaiah shows. Reading the space through these lenses attunes her to the subtle dynamics of race and labour that are 'normalized', that

become perceptible only when one consciously attunes to them. Our discussions about these dynamics helped us to read the ways bodies in the park were sticky with affect, starting from the affective charges we felt our own bodies engendered. Being in a multi-ethnic, multi-gendered collaboration helps to make these *involuntary affective charges* perceptible to the research team.

Lastly, personal biographies shape both observation and translation of a space to one's collaborators. Ho's section on migrant food and leisure is read through her experiences of growing up in Singapore. With personal context the reading of the inter-racial exchanges took a deeper meaning and transmuted to the ways the rest of the group viewed inter-racial encounters at other points during the research. As in, once discussed and narrated, it was difficult to shake this reading given the legitimacy of the biographical, and by implication the limitations, or at least particularity, of an outside reading. By discussing how certain 'affects' went unnoticed by the Australian researchers, we underline the 'limits of affective contagion and indeed the crucial sociality of affective communication' (Wetherell, 2012: 146). Our different *affective biographies* gave us access to multiple 'unconscious storehouses of possible personal associations and patterns' (Wetherell, 2012: 153) through which we read the affective dimensions of the space. Not only is there a difference in our readings on account of our different (un)familiarities within affective communities, there is arguably a hierarchical order in which one's affective biography becomes a part of one's cultural competence to research and fully understand a society.

In sum, our reading of WCP as a shared fieldsite was deepened and broadened through a purposeful strategy of: a) multiple-attunement; b) attentiveness to affective affordances and their governing effects; c) attentiveness to involuntary affective charges, and; d) awareness of how our diverse affective biographies affect the (im)perceptibility of affect. The model of collaboration we developed here enables richer, reiteratively built accounts of the affective dimensions of space. Sustained engagement with a fieldsite over a longer period, perhaps several years, through the same methods will reveal changes in the lives of those living and working around that fieldsite, transformations of the landscape, and shifts in the affective atmospheres sketched above. Longevity through episodic engagement may prove to be the most fruitful avenue for collaborative ethnographies of space, allowing authors to mark changes individually, collaboratively, and to switch focal points with one another, pursue new focal points, and compare a fieldsite with similar sites and divergent spaces. We embraced the jagged edges of collaboration on emotions, affect and space. In resisting the

temptation to smooth our experiences into a single voice we retain the varied ways in which a space can be experienced before and during fieldwork, individually and collectively.

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