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Thrown-togetherness in the context of Brexit: Diverse community spaces in the East End of Glasgow

Anna Gawlewicz 

The 2016 UK's vote to leave the European Union (i.e. Brexit) has evoked a sense of insecurity and non-belonging among EU citizens and other migrant and minoritised ethnic communities in British cities. Against this backdrop, little is known about how migrant and established populations produce inclusive community spaces, in particular in areas with a history of deprivation. In response, this article explores how Polish migrants and the long-settled residents 'come together' in the East End of Glasgow, a rapidly changing area with a history of poverty and multiple inequalities, to work on community food projects and create inclusive spaces of thrown-togetherness. Methodologically, the article draws upon 40 interviews with the long-settled residents and more recent Polish migrants in the area, 10 interviews with representatives of community organisations and associated fieldwork (e.g. occasional participant observation). The article finds that in 'throwing together' diverse local populations, the East End food spaces are conducive to positive encounter against the backdrop of a wider hostile environment. By conceptually engaging with the Masseyan notion of

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throwntogetherness, the article re-thinks those spaces as continuously becoming and overcoming difference.

Introduction

In this article, I explore how migrant and established populations make everyday, local efforts to create sustainable, healthy and inclusive community spaces in the context of political turbulence. To this end, I focus on Polish migrants and the long-settled residents in the East End of Glasgow, UK and how they 'come together' to work on food-related projects in the disruptive era of Brexit.

Ever since the UK's vote to leave the European Union (EU) on 23 June 2016, debates on immigration and Brexit have primarily looked at tensions and fractures within diverse urban communities. Indeed, a deeply worrying rise in racist and xenophobic hate crime was noted in the aftermath of the referendum (Devine 2018), followed by a body of work on EU nationals' experiences of precariousness, discrimination and non-belonging in urban environments increasingly marked by anti-immigration populism and 'neo-nationalism' (e.g. Botterill and Hancock 2018; Duda-Mikulin 2018; Guma and Dafydd Jones 2018; Ranta and Nancheva 2018; Rzepnikowska 2018; Yiftachel and Rokem 2021). While the significance of these experiences should never be underestimated, surprisingly little attention has been paid to positive experiences of urban throwntogetherness (Massey 2005) and everyday acts of solidarity and inclusion in this unfolding context. This is reflective of wider scarcity of work on positive togetherness in turbulent times, despite recognition of the 'good' encounter (Wilson 2013a) and its importance in the broader scholarship on urban diversity (e.g. Askins 2016; Neal et al. 2019; Watson 2009). In this article, I address this gap by looking at 'throwntogether' community spaces in the East End of Glasgow. With a history of poverty, health inequality and deprivation, this area is undergoing a dramatic change (Grey and Mooney 2011) and has been increasingly attracting new populations, including Polish migrants (Kay and Trevena 2019).

Crucially, I look at food spaces, in particular urban agriculture in its diverse forms from community gardening to community meet-ups 'over food' to food-related social enterprises (Horst, McClintock, and Hoey 2017). Such projects have been argued to have a range of community benefits including fostering a sense of inclusion and strengthening social ties (Horst, McClintock, and Hoey 2017). In addition, they have been shown to play a vital role in migrant integration (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017).

In the article, I contribute to the Special Feature on throwntogetherness in hostile environments by re-thinking the inclusive nature of throwntogetherness (Massey 2005) in the context of the institutional and political 'hostility' expressed by Brexit (see the Introduction to the Special Feature). In doing so, I also provide an original contribution to debates on urban diversity, migration and Brexit by showing how everyday food projects are conducive to mutual recognition and positive social relations between the long-settled residents and the newly arrived Polish migrants in the East End.

In what follows, I first look at the nature of diverse community spaces in contemporary cities and the significance of food projects in fostering sustainable and healthy community ties. Then, I discuss the East End of Glasgow as a research site and outline the research project that this article is based upon before focusing on findings.

Diverse community spaces and the significance of food projects

There is an extensive scholarship on diverse urban communities (including in this very journal, see Vieten and Valentine 2015). This work has expanded substantially since the early 2000s thanks to Doreen Massey's theorisation of thrown-togetherness as a quality of space characterised by 'multiplicity of trajectories' (2005, 5) and 'coexisting heterogeneity' (2005, 10) (for a detailed definition see the Introduction to this Special Feature). It has been further advanced by the associated scholarship on the urban encounter (Valentine 2008; Wilson 2016) and convivialities (Gilroy 2004; Wise and Noble 2016). As part of this work, meaningful contact with difference across ethno-national and socio-economic boundaries has been repeatedly shown to be key in disrupting prejudice and contributing to inclusive communities (Valentine and Sadgrove 2014).

A subset of this research has focussed on migrant-'host' encounters involving incoming immigrant populations and the long-settled ones (Askins 2016; Cook, Dwyer, and Waite 2011; Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Simonsen and Koefoed 2015). Matejskova and Leitner (2011), for example, have looked at encounters between Russian *Aussiedler* and local German residents in eastern Berlin and have shown that a lot of contact in (quasi-)public spaces remains non-meaningful, often reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes. However, sustained and close encounters in community settings are far more likely to engender mutual empathy and positive attitudes. Whether these translate to a wider respect for the whole group is contested, however it does seem to make a difference on a personal and local level.

It is important to note that space remains central to claims about diverse urban communities and specific spaces of encounter such as workplace, school, community centre or park have been increasingly under academic scrutiny (e.g. Neal et al. 2015; Watson 2009). The neighbourhood has also been argued to provide a vital context for intergroup relations (Cook, Dwyer, and Waite 2011; Matejskova and Leitner 2011) and Glasgow has had its fair share in this work (Bynner 2019; Peterson 2019; Wiseman 2017). However, following Nayak (2017), this research has been undertaken in predominantly multi-ethnic spaces and we know far less about thrown-togetherness in mainly White localities such as the East End of Glasgow.

While the celebration of togetherness in the city has a long history as noted by Massey (2005, 149–162), research has tended to primarily focus on what could be described as 'thrownapartness', a process of urban bordering (as outlined by Abuzaid & Yiftachel in this Special Feature), and to explore exclusionary practices involving colonial, racist, xenophobic or otherwise 'problematic'

encounters. In doing so, existing scholarship has paid significantly less attention to the more inclusive aspect of throwntogetherness that may involve positive relations and practices. This is understandable, of course, and I am far from downplaying the significance of the encounters that build on unequal power relations and oppressive hierarchies. However, in doing so, I recognise that the inclusive or the ‘good encounter’ (as proposed by Wilson 2013a), i.e. an encounter that is underlain by openness to living with difference, is interesting in its own right. I agree with Askins (2015) that it needs more academic scrutiny to better understand the conditions that engender sustainable urban communities, in particular in the current context of political turbulence. While Massey warned against ‘over-excited celebration of openness’ (2005, 172–173), she emphasised the open-ended and unpredictable nature of throwntogetherness. It is this open-endedness and unpredictability that make the ‘good encounter’ inherent to urban throwntogetherness and equally crucial to look at (see also Yiftachel and Rokem 2021).

Existing research suggests that community projects can create a fertile ground for the ‘good encounter’ (Askins 2015, 2016; Mayblin, Valentine, and Winiarska 2016) and community food projects have been argued to have a range of benefits for strengthening a sense of togetherness (Horst, McClintock, and Hoey 2017; Marovelli 2019; Traill 2018). Whether they involve food production, consumption or exchange, they *go beyond food* and generate possibilities for interaction and connection, and build community capacity and civic responsibility (Davies and Evans 2019; Horst, McClintock, and Hoey 2017). Although they have been critiqued for sometimes becoming exclusive projects defined by (middle) class lines and privilege (Horst, McClintock, and Hoey 2017), they have the potential to create a positive affective atmosphere and ‘nurture collective spaces of encounter’ (Marovelli 2019, 190).

Importantly, community food projects have also been shown to facilitate migrant integration by offering controllable ‘home-like’ spaces (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017) and fostering a sense of community, which is key for developing local ties (Kearns and Whitley 2015). Yet, despite their capacity to assuage anxieties related to encountering difference (Marovelli 2019), they rarely feature in wider work on migrant-‘host’ encounters. This is particularly striking given the widespread ritualisation of food within migrant populations (Rabikowska 2010).

East End of Glasgow

The East End of Glasgow, covering several neighbourhoods on the eastern side of the city of Glasgow, is a place of contrasting forces. On the one hand, it has a long-standing history of deprivation, poverty and health issues (with parts remaining among the most deprived areas in Scotland, SIMD 2020), on the other—a more recent history of extensive regeneration and investment (Grey and Mooney 2011). While derelict land still marks the local landscape and some of its neighbourhoods have been described as ‘food deserts’ (Corfe 2018), there are emerging gentrifying areas (if scarce) with growing food and music scenes. Although it is predominantly a White lower-income locality with some sectarian tensions and youth gang activity in the past, it has been increasingly attracting

more diverse populations, including ‘new’ immigrants from continental Europe and beyond (Kay and Trevena 2019).

Polish nationals, who constitute the largest non-British national group in Scotland and the UK more broadly, have been argued to contribute significantly to the population gain in the East End since the mid-2000s (Freeke 2015). Following their settlement, Polish delicatessens and a variety of other businesses (e.g. hair and beauty salons), have been visibly transforming the area. Polish language is also oftentimes heard in local public spaces as well as housing estates and schools.

The area is also an interesting one against the backdrop of Brexit. In the EU referendum, its residents voted overall to remain in the EU similarly to Scotland and Glasgow as a whole (62% and 67% respectively). Yet, compared to other constituencies in the city it clearly had most Leave voters (40% compared to 22% in Glasgow North, 28% in Glasgow South and 30% in Glasgow Central, Paterson 2016). Nonetheless, this is likely to be a reflection of a wider affluence/poverty split in the city and the disenchantment with the EU, rather than an expression of a collective anti-immigration sentiment (Gawlewicz 2019).

Study outline

In the article, I draw upon 10 months of fieldwork conducted as part of the project *Living together in the context of Brexit: Migrant-‘host’ encounters in the East End of Glasgow* (2017–2019) funded by the Urban Studies Foundation and looking at the interplay of community relations, migration, political hostile environment and the city (Gawlewicz 2019; 2020; Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2020; Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021). The fieldwork included 10 expert interviews with 11 representatives of community organisations (e.g. community councils, housing associations), 40 interviews with 41 residents of various East End neighbourhoods (20 interviews with Polish and 20 with the long-settled ones), a focus group with 5 EU nationals in the area, documentary analysis (e.g. neighbourhood profiles) and occasional participant observation at local community events. While the article mostly draws upon the expert and resident interviews, it is also informed by this wider pool of data. Both types of interviews explored everyday living in the East End, community issues in the area, attitudes towards migration and Brexit, and accessibility of community spaces, services and support (although from different perspectives).

The resident participants included 26 women and 15 men between their mid-20s and late 70s. They were diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion/belief, sexuality, class as well as attitudes towards Brexit. They also had different education levels and employment statuses (although the overall sample was skewed towards the better-educated and employed). The long-settled participants were predominantly White Scottish, but this group included also an Asian Scottish person, a few people born in other parts of the UK (e.g. England), one Italian-British and one Irish person. In the Polish sample, all participants were White Polish and migrated to Scotland as adults. While several worked below their actual qualifications, this group also included highly-skilled professionals, business owners and students.

Expert participants (7 women and 4 men) were recruited by being directly approached via email/phone, in person or through referral. Resident participants were recruited via leafleting, gatekeepers, community organisations, social media (e.g. Nextdoor, Facebook) and snowballing with selection criteria including Polish nationality/migrant status (in case of Polish participants), and the UK-born status and the long-standing connection with the East End (in case of the long-settled participants). They came from different neighbourhoods within the East End (although half of them lived in Bridgeton, Calton and Dennistoun). In targeting specific neighbourhoods, I was guided by the presence of Polish migrants in the area (including in terms of visibility of Polish businesses and audibility of the Polish language).

As a bilingual researcher, I conducted the interviews in English (with expert and long-settled participants) and Polish (with Polish ones with one exception). These were subsequently transcribed and analysed in both languages. The quotes from the English interviews are verbatim and the ones from the interviews in Polish have been translated for this article. I used data analysis software NVivo to code the interview material and narrative analysis to explore it in depth to generate knowledge about community spaces in the East End.

Diverse community spaces in the shadow of Brexit

Across resident and expert interviews, the East End was described as increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, nationality, religion and language. There was also recognition that the recently settled Polish (and other) migrants had been significantly contributing to this growing diversity. This is reflected below in one of the long-settled resident's account:

It's a bit of a melting pot. (...) I'm surprised about how visible our Polish community [is] to me here. (...) There are some French people on it [allotment] and the Italian couple. It's a coming together actually, and it's a really nice spot, you know? (Kevin¹, long-settled resident)

While the diversification of local community spaces was largely seen as a positive process, instances of the post-Brexit-vote hostility were, indeed, noted reflecting wider UK patterns (Guma and Dafydd Jones 2018; Rzepnikowska 2018). Research participants were broadly concerned that this hostility, alongside a widespread sense of Brexit-related uncertainty (that I have discussed together with Tiina Sotkasiira elsewhere, Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2020; Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021), had the capacity to erode community relations in the East End.

From the police reports, there's been no racially aggravated crimes, in the sense of damage to property or people (...) but I've seen Muslim women (...) being cat-called from cars, Polish businesses being cat-called. (...) [But] Feedback from residents [is that] the biggest thing is certainly this uncertainty. (representative of community council)

Interestingly, however, participants reflected on these tensions outside the context of local community spaces. This may be partly explained by the fact

that the East End community spaces were typically discussed at the end of the interview when participants would already have elaborated on Brexit (oftentimes extensively). Nonetheless, the striking absence of Brexit may expose far deeper meanings attached to these spaces. By being produced as diverse and inclusive, these spaces were cherished, almost fetishised, as known, intimate and safe and hence irrelevant to and perhaps purposefully shielded from wider political turbulence. The absence of Brexit in these narratives may reflect unwitting efforts taken to protect these spaces. While beyond the scope of this paper, this politics of absence seems very suggestive of how these spaces might be seen to embody inclusive thrown-togetherness in contrast to the divisive hostility of Brexit.

Importance of food spaces

In exploring these diverse spaces, I was interested in *what* brings people together or in what type of space people different from each other in terms of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, sexuality, age and disability come into contact most often, and *why*. Essentially, I was interested in spaces that are conducive to repeat encounters, in particular positive encounters leading to greater sense of recognition, solidarity and belonging, or greater capacity to live with difference in other words (Valentine 2008). Research participants identified a range of such spaces including sports spaces (e.g. gym classes), children spaces (e.g. playgrounds), dog-walking spaces (e.g. parks) and online spaces (in particular Nextdoor, a social networking service for neighbourhoods, but also Facebook). However, the spaces that were mentioned most frequently, in nearly every interview, were food spaces. Specifically, these included: allotments in the East End neighbourhoods, community growing projects (whether structured ones or more informal), 'community meal' meet-ups provided by some of the local community centres, and social enterprises established locally around food and drink. The quotes from interviews with Polish and long-settled participants below capture the centrality of food spaces:

A step towards getting to know people here is through community groups. (Jadzia, Polish resident)

There's a lot of community groups popping up (...). And people becoming self-sufficient growing their own fruit and veg. (...) You'll get people that just don't bother about their health. (...) But more are becoming health-conscious. (Maira, long-settled resident)

I'm sure there are people who prefer to alienate, but there are also those who enjoy doing things together. (...) We're not the only Poles with an allotment here, there are others. (Kinga, Polish resident)

We have an allotment just up the road. (...) And there's lots of different nationalities. (...) It's reflecting what's going on in the community. (Tony, long-settled resident)

Across the interviews, there was a widespread recognition that food spaces created opportunities for people to get to know each other in a relatively unsupervised and relaxed environment. Most participants also spoke of the health benefits of food projects (Horst, McClintock, and Hoey 2017) and of enjoying the company of others over growing, preparing and eating food. Clearly, these spaces were viewed as not only healthy, but also spontaneous, friendly, and fun. As suggested by Marovelli (2019), they not only enabled repeat encounters but also generated affective conviviality, a sense of intimacy and belonging. It was the combination of these qualities of the East End food spaces—their open-ended, unpredictable and, indeed, inclusive throwntogetherness—that made them particularly attractive to research participants and helped in nurturing positive encounters.

Importantly, I found that locally-based Polish migrants actively contributed to co-creating, maintaining, improving and expanding these spaces. In migration and diaspora literature, there is a tendency to look predominantly at ‘migrant’ or ‘diasporic’ community spaces. For example, in Polish migration literature, a subset of work investigates Polish ‘ethnic’ organisations including Saturday schools (Drozdowski 2007; Ryan 2010). However, what I found in the East End is that rather than building up specifically ‘ethnic’ spaces, Polish participants were interested in contributing to local and place-based community spaces. This is not to say that Polish spaces were absent (indeed, the East End is a hub for Polish produce and services, there is also a Polish Saturday school). Rather, there was a combination of both with a desire among the local Poles to look beyond the ‘ethnic’ space and be active in their local neighbourhoods. For instance, one of my Polish participants, Hanna—quoted below, started a ginger beer social enterprise in her local Bridgeton. The initiative was community-led, as Hanna explained, with the aim to tackle poor access to healthy food and the need for a meeting space. In doing so, it was drawing upon Bridgeton’s history of producing fizzy drinks.

I noticed that there was no place for people to meet and eat. (...) Bridgeton is (...) a food desert: there’s no access to fresh food. (...) Bridgeton and the East End in general (...) have a history of producing fizzy drinks. But there’s also a huge problem with consumption. I think twice the national average of soft drinks are consumed there. So, we wanted to produce drinks. But we also wanted them to be healthy and wanted an educational aspect ... (...) and [to] involve the community and culture and heritage, and health and wellbeing. (Hanna, Polish resident & founder of social enterprise)

It was also interesting to find that East End community spaces involved children. One of the community growing projects that I investigated had opened a kids group for 8-to-12-year-olds from the area. At the time of my fieldwork, half of the children in the group were Polish and the coordinator of the group spoke at length about informal education that was taking place in the group. Polish and the long-settled children were actively learning from each other while ‘being kids’ at the same time. In the coordinator’s opinion, the initiative was hugely successful and provided a much-needed positive space for children in the area.

Almost half the kids who come to the group are from the Polish community. (...) We get the Polish kids to teach the Glasgow kids the Polish names of all the vegetables. All through informal education that the Glasgow kids don't even know they're doing it, and then the Glasgow kids will teach the Polish kids that slang for potatoes is spuds. (representative of community growing project)

It was evident across the interviews that everyday, local efforts (whether intentional or not) were made to create and maintain community food spaces. Whether this was in response to the scarcity thereof, to actively contribute to the local community or simply to relax, these spaces were considered as effectively bringing people together. In doing so, they were clearly *going beyond food* and were 'becoming' in a truly Masseyan way as spaces of interconnectedness and possibility (Marovelli 2019). While not all encounters taking place within them were discussed as meaningful and 'good', and there were instances of prejudice and clashes, they were overall viewed as spaces of positive togetherness in the area.

Given the argument that community food projects tend to attract more 'privileged' (higher-income and middle-class) groups (Horst, McClintock, and Hoey 2017), I was initially wary about the significance of these spaces. However, while some of my research participants were clearly more privileged than others, I found the East End food spaces to be diverse in socio-economic terms and to create a local 'harmonious environment' (after Woods and Kong in this Special Feature) in the context of institutional and political 'hostility' of Brexit (as well as other everyday adversities). While Brexit is not particularly visible in the empirical material quoted here, this is because what it represents was, as noted earlier, largely dissociated from the East End food spaces. Nonetheless, it is important to reiterate that it was heavily discussed in wider interviews (cf. Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2020; Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021) and strong concerns about its capacity to undermine urban communities and disrupt social ties were, indeed, voiced by research participants.

Conclusions

In this article, I have found that the East End food spaces, including community gardening, meet-ups 'over food' and food-related social enterprises among others, are conducive to positive encounter. I have also established that Polish residents (as a newly settled migrant population) actively partake in these spaces and work towards improving the quality of everyday living and social ties.

I have intentionally foregrounded the 'good encounter' (Wilson 2013a) to better understand which spaces are key to inclusive thrown-togetherness, and why. But this is neither to suggest that Polish-'host' encounters in the East End nor thrown-togetherness more broadly are always positive. Indeed, some research participants reported instances of discrimination or hate incidents. There is also overwhelming evidence that spaces of urban togetherness are both sites of inclusion and exclusion, solidarity and tension, connection and conflict (see contributions by Carta and Bodden in this Special Feature, and Amin 2002; Cook, Dwyer, and Waite 2011; Neal et al. 2019; Simonsen and Koefoed 2015). It

is also important to stress that these spaces are necessarily produced against the backdrop of key structural ‘forces’ as Harvey (2005) famously argued: they are created in their ‘shadow’. In the case of Glasgow’s East End, these include not only Brexit but also the recent shift towards more restrictive immigration regimes in the UK (Burrell and Schweyher 2019), the global revival of ethnic nationalism and Scottish independence efforts. Their combined effect on local community spaces is yet to be researched. Meanwhile, it is clear that such ‘forces’ have the capacity to erode or even destroy urban communities. This might explain the dissociation of Brexit and the East End community spaces. Perhaps unwitting efforts are made to preserve them by disengagement?

In the article, I contribute to the re-thinking of throwntogetherness in this Special Feature by making the case for the more ‘optimistic’ throwntogetherness *despite* and *against* the unfolding turbulence of Brexit. I also offer original input into wider debates on migration and urban diversity by illustrating how everyday food spaces contribute to positive social relations between the long-settled and the newly arrived migrant populations. These everyday spaces, and their inclusive potential, require further scholarly attention to better understand how urban living together can be facilitated, maintained and improved.

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Note

- 1 Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to maintain participant anonymity.

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