I was at Harry’s last night, ostensibly for a quick glass of wine. Instead it turned into a few over many hours and a rare experience of the ‘regular’ identity. It was relatively quiet when I arrived and none of the owners were there. David [a regular] was DJing; we only vaguely acknowledged each other. He was playing great music though, and I was enjoying being there by myself for the first time in a while - looking about at other customers and trying to categorise them, and occasionally chatting to the girl next to me. My friend Angie came to join me about an hour later, and then Paul, a regular, arrived. He sat on my other side and alternated between talking to me, David [they are close friends], the staff, and other customers he knew who passed by.

As the evening progressed a few more regulars arrived; the most ‘unconnected’ regulars I can recall seeing at one time. We were sitting along the bar, making jokes about whether the manager for the evening would let us have a lock in. None of us thought so, however the joking seemed to engender a shared identity — that we were a collective of regulars, with specialised knowledge and expectations of privileges. Perhaps it only arose because we were faced with the possibility of having those privileges refused. Or because just for once there were more than one or two of us present. Evenings like that put the effort and pain of the work I put into gaining that identity into context. (Research note, 18th June, 2011)

Being a Harry’s Regular

Harry’s is my favourite bar in my neighbourhood. It is a small wine bar, owned by three men in their late thirties and targeted at people like them; my gentrifying inner city neighbourhood’s 20 to 40 something urban middle class. Harry’s has seats along
the bar, booths inside, and a courtyard out the back. The seating arrangements mean
that larger groups tend to gather outside, groups of two to four spread around the
location, and people by themselves, or in groups of two, tend to sit at the bar. I usually
sit at the bar.

Over the three or so years I’ve been patronising Harry’s I’ve developed quite an
attachment to the place. It is somewhere I feel comfortable and secure, where I have
met and continue to run into other neighbourhood residents, and that I approach with
an openness as to how the evening may play out. The development of this attachment
and sense of ease has been a cumulative process. The combination of a slow growing
familiarity punctuated by particularly memorable evenings, such as the one described
above, where heightened emotions coalesce into a reflexive recognition of
identification and belonging. As a result I would describe myself as an irregular
regular (Katovich and Reese 317). This is because whilst my patronage is sporadic, I
have a regular’s expectation of recognition, as well as an awareness of the privileges
and responsibilities that this identification brings.

Similar processes of identification and attachment have been described in earlier
ethnographic work on regulars within bars and cafes. These have described the ways
that group identifications and broader cultural roles are continually renegotiated and
reinforced through social interaction, and how physical and symbolic tools, such as
business layout and décor, acquired knowledge, as well as non-regulars, are utilised in
this process (Anderson 33-38; Katovich and Reese 324, 328, 330; Spradley and Mann
67, 69, 84). However the continuing shifts in the manner in which consumption
practices shape our experiences of the urban environment (see for example the work
of Lloyd; Zukin), and of collective identification (see for example Cova, Kozinets and
Shankar), suggest that ongoing investigation in this area would be fruitful.
Accordingly, this paper extends this earlier work to consider the ways this kind of
regular collective identification may manifest within consumption spaces in the
contemporary Western inner city.

In particular this research is interested in the implications for regular identification of
the urban middle class’ use of consumption spaces for socialising, and the ways this
can construct social realms. These realms are not fixed within physical pieces of
space, and are instead dependent on the density and proportions of the relationship
types that are present (Lofland 11). Whilst recognising, as per Amin ("Collective

M. Hall, 2011
M/C Journal, 14(5)
Culture and Urban Public Space" 8), that physical and symbolic elements also shape our experiences of collective identification in public spaces, this paper focuses specifically on these social elements. This is not only because it is social recognition that is at the heart of regular identification, but more significantly, because the layers of meaning that social realms produce are continually shifting with the ebb and flow of people within these spaces, potentially complicating the identification process. Understanding how these shifting social realms are experienced, and may aid or undermine identification, is thus an important aspect of understanding how regular collective identification may be experienced in the contemporary city, and the key aim of this paper.

To do so, this paper draws on autoethnographic research of my consumption experiences within an Australian inner city neighbourhood, conducted from September 2009 to September 2010. Through this autoethnography I sought to explore the ways consumption spaces can support experiences of place-based community, with a particular interest in the emotional and imaginative aspects of this process. The research data drawn on here comes from detailed research memos that recorded my interactions, identifications and emotional responses within these spaces. For this paper I focus specifically on my experiences of becoming a regular at Harry’s as a means of exploring regular identification in the contemporary inner city.

The Shapes of Third Places in Contemporary Inner City

Harry’s could be described as my third place. This term has been used to describe public locations outside of home and work that are host to regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals (Oldenburg 16). These regular’s bars and locals cafés have been celebrated in research and popular culture for their perceived ability to facilitate “that easier version of friendship and congeniality that results from casual and informal affiliation” (Oldenburg 65). They are said to achieve this by offering accessible, neutral spaces, where worries and inequalities are left at the door, and spirited, playful conversation is the focus of activity (Oldenburg 25, 29, 32). This is the idealised place ‘where everybody knows your name’.

Despite the undeniable appeal of the third place concept, these types of social and inclusive consumption spaces are more likely to be seen on television or in property
development marketing than on the shopping streets of our neighbourhoods. Instead many consumption spaces are purely that; spaces in which individual’s consume goods and services in ways that can encourage individualism, segregation, and stifle interaction. This has been attributed to a range of factors, including planning systems that encourage single use zoning, a reliance on cars limiting our use of public places, and the proliferation of shopping centres that focus on individualised consumption and manufactured experiences (Lofland 145, 205, 218; Oldenburg 61). In addition, the fundamentals of running a successful business can also work against a consumption space’s accessibility and neutrality. This is because location, décor, product offering, pricing, competition and advertising practices all physically and symbolically communicate a desired target audience and expected behaviour patterns that can implicitly shape customer interactions, and the meanings we attach to them (Bitner 61; Sherry 4).

More subtletly, the changing lifestyle preferences of residents of gentrifying neighbourhoods such as mine, may also work as a barrier to the development of third places. Research tell us the urban middle class demographic is one who engages in a broad range of lifestyle-based consumption activities for socialising purposes and as part of their identity construction (Lloyd 122; Zukin 7). However this is also a demographic that is said to be increasingly mobile, and thus less restricted by geographic boundaries, such as of the neighbourhood they live in (Amin "Re-Thinking the Urban Social" 107). As I noted above, it was not often that I experienced a critical mass of regulars at Harry’s, indeed I rarely expected to. This is because whilst Harry’s target demographic would seem likely candidates for becoming regular café or bar customers, they are also likely to be socialising in a number of different cafes, bars, and restaurants across a number of different neighbourhoods in my city, thus reducing the frequency of their presence within any one particular location.

Finally, even those consumption spaces that do support social interaction may still not be operating as third places. This is because this sociality can alter a space’s level of openness, through the realms that it constructs (Lofland 11). Lofland (14) describes three types of social realms; public, parochial and private. Private realms are dominated by intimate relations, parochial realms by communal relations, and the public realm by relations with people who are only categorically known. According to this classification, the regulars café or bar is primarily operating as a parochial realm,
identifiable by the shared sense of commonality that defines the regular collective. However naming the regular identification of the third place as the product of a social realm also highlights its fragility, and suggests that instead of being reliable and able to be anticipated, that the collective identification such spaces offers is uncertain, and easily disrupted by the shifts in patronage and patterns of interaction that consumption based socialising can bring.

This is fluidity is articulated in the work of Aubert-Gamet and Cova, who describe two ways consumption spaces can support public collective identification; as anchoring and exposure sites. Anchoring sites are those within which an established collective gathers to interact and reinforce their shared identity (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 40). These are parochial realms in their more closed form, and are perhaps most likely to offer the certainty of the happily anticipated gathering that Oldenburg describes. However because of this they are also more likely to be exclusionary. This is because anchoring can limit collective identification to those who are recognised as community members, thus undermining the potential for openness.

This openness is instead found within exposure sites, in which individuals are able to observe and engage with the identification practices of others at limited risk (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 41). This is not quite the anomicm of the public street, but neither is it the security of anchoring or the third place. This is because exposure realms can offer both familiarity, such as through the stability of physical setting, and strangeness, through the transience of customers and relationships. Furthermore, by hovering at the ever shifting boundary of parochial and public realms, these moments of exposure may offer the potential for the type of spontaneous conviviality that has been proposed as the basis for fleeting collective identifications (Amin "Collective Culture and Urban Public Space" 10; Maffesoli 81). That is, it may be that when a potential third place is dominated by an exposure realm, it is experienced as open and accessible, whereas when an anchoring realm dominates, the security of collective identification takes precedence.

It is the potential of social interaction at the boundaries of these realms and the ways it shapes regular identification that is of interest to this paper. This is because it is in this shifting space that identifications themselves are most fluid, unpredictable, and thus open to opportunistic breaches in the patterns of interaction. This unpredictability, and the interaction strategies we adopt to negotiate it, may also
suggest ways in which a certain kind of third place experience can be developed and maintained in the contemporary inner city, where consumption based socialising is high, but were people are also mobile and less tied into fixed patterns of patronage. The remainder of the paper draws on my experiences of regular identification in Harry’s to consider how this might work.

**Becoming a Harry’s Regular: Anchoring and the Regular Collective**

The Harry’s regular collective is formed from a loose social network of neighbourhood residents, variably connected through long established friendships and more recently established consumption space based acquaintances. Evenings such as the one described above work to reinforce that shared identity and the specialised knowledge that underpins it; of the quirks of the owners and staff, of our privileges and responsibilities as regulars, and of the shared cultural identity that reflects a specific aspect of the gentrifying neighbourhood in which we live.

However achieving this level of identification and belonging has not been not easy. Whilst Oldenburg suggests that to establish third place membership one mainly just turns up regularly and tries not to be obnoxious (35), my experience instead suggests it’s a slightly more complicated, and emotional process, that is not always positive. My research notes indicate that discontent, worry, and shame, were as much a feature of my interactions in Harry’s, as were moments of joy, excitement, or an optimistic feeling of connection. This paper suggests that these negative experiences often stemmed from the confusion created by the shifting realms of interaction that occurred within the bar.

This is because whilst Harry’s appeared to be a regular’s bar, it more often operated as an anchoring realm for a social network linked to the owners. Many of Harry’s regulars were established friends of the owners, and their shared identity definition appeared to be based on those primary ties. Whilst over time I became acquainted with some of this social network through my patronage, their dominance of the regular group had important implications for the collective identification I has trying to achieve. It created a realm that appeared to be parochial, but often became private, through simple acts such as the arrival of additional social network members, or a staff member shifting their orientation to another, from regular customer to friend.
One consequence of these shifting realms was that my perceived inability to penetrate this anchored social network led me to doubt the value and presence of a broader consumption space based regular collective. The boundaries between private, parochial, and public appeared rigid, with no potential for cumulative impacts from fleeting connections in the public realm. It also made me question my motives regarding this desire to identify as suggested here:

Thinking about tonight and Kevin [an owner] and Lucas [staff member] and introductions and realising I feel a bit let down/disappointed about the lack of something from them. But I realise also that is because I am wanting something more from them than the superficial I keep on going on about. I want recognition, as a person worth knowing. And that is perhaps where the thing of doing it by yourself falls down. I have an emotional investment in it.

… Linking back to my previous thoughts about being able to be placed within a social network – having that emotional certainty of being able to be identified as part of a specific social network would reinforce to ME, who I am within this place. That I had some kind of identifiable position — which is not about superficial connections at all — it’s about recognisable strong ties.

(Research note, 2\textsuperscript{nd} February 2009)

As this excerpt suggests, I struggled to appreciate the identification within my interactions in Harry’s, because I had difficulty separating my emotional need for recognition, from the implication that a lack of acknowledgement beyond the superficial I theoretically expected was a social rejection. That is, I had difficulty negotiating the boundary between the parochial realm of the regular collective, and its manifestation as a more closed private realm for the anchored social network. I expected regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings (Oldenburg 16), instead what I got was the brief hellos and limited yet enjoyable conversations that mark the sociality of public collective identifications.

It could be suggested that what I also failed to grasp here is the difference between regularity as collective and as an individual identification. It is the collective identity that is reinforced in the parochial realm, as is evident in the description that opened this paper, and yet what I hoped for was recognition as an individual, “a person worth knowing”. However as the following section will suggest, the regular identity can also be experienced, and actively embraced, as an individual identity within realms of
exposure. And it is through this version of the regular identity, that this paper suggests that some kind of personal recognition is able to be achieved.

**Becoming a Harry’s Regular: Exposing the Regular as Individual**

Given the level of comfort and connection expressed within the research excerpt that opened this paper, it is clear that I overcame the uncertainty described in the previous section, and was able to establish myself within the Harry’s regular collective. This is despite, as noted above, that both the presence and openness of Harry’s regular collective was unpredictable. However this uncertainty also created a tension that could be said to positively increase the openness of the space. This is because it challenged the predictability that can be associated with anchored regularity, and instead forced me to look outside that identity for those reliable moments of easy friendship and congeniality within realms of exposure. That is, because of the uncertainty regarding both the presence and openness of established regulars, I often turned to fleeting interactions with non-regulars to generate that sense of identification.

The influence of non-regulars can be downplayed in ethnographies of cafes and bars, perhaps because they tend to be excluded from the primary groups identifications that are being investigated. Katovich and Reese provide the most detailed description of their relevance to the regular identity when they describe how the non-regulars in the Big Derby Lounge were used as tools against which established regulars compared their position and standing, as well as being a potential pool of recruits (336). This paper argues that non-regulars are also significant because their presence alters the realms operating within the space, thus creating opportunities for interactions at those boundaries that can be identity defining.

My interactions with non-regulars in Harry’s generally offered the opportunity for spirited, playful and at times quite involved conversations, in which acquired knowledge, familiarity with staff or products, or simple statements of attachment were sufficient markers to establish an experience of regular identification in the eyes of the other. Whilst at times the density of these strangers altered Harry’s realms to the extent I did not feel at home at all, they nonetheless provided an avenue through which to remedy the uncertainties created by my interactions with the anchored social network.
These non-regular interactions were able to do this because they operated at the low emotional involvement but high emotional gain boundary between fleeting public realm relations, and more meaningful experiences of exposure, where shared values and identities are on display. That is, I was confirming my regular identity not through an experience of the regular collective, but through an experience of being an individual and a regular. And in each successful encounter there was also the affirmation I had unsuccessfully sought through the regular collective, the emotional certainty that I had some kind of identifiable position within that place.

**Conclusion: Anchoring and Exposing in the Third Place**

This paper has drawn from my experiences in Harry’s to explore the process of regular identification as it operates at the boundaries of social realms. This focus provides a means to explore the ways that regular collective identification may develop in the contemporary inner city, where regularity can be sporadic and consumption based socialising is common. Drawing on autoethnographic work, this paper suggests that regularity is experienced both as an individual, and a collective identity, according to the nature of the realms operating within the space. Collective identification occurs in anchoring realms, and supports the established regular group, whereas individual regular identification occurs within exposure realms, and relies on recognition from willing non-regulars. Furthermore, this paper suggests it is the latter of these identifications that is the more easily achieved, because it can be experienced at the exposure boundaries of the parochial realm, a less risky and more accessible place to identify when patronage is infrequent and social realms so fluid.

It is this use of non-regular relations to balance the emotional work involved in the development of anchored relationships that I believe points to the true potential of third places in the contemporary inner city. Establishing a place where everybody knows your name is improbable in this context. However encouraging consumption spaces in which an individual’s regular patronage can form the basis of an identification, from which one can both anchor and expose, may ultimately work to support a kind of contemporary inner city version of the easier friendship and congeniality that the third place is hoped to offer.
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