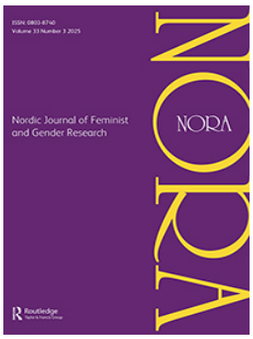

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Intimate Moments on the Block: Times of Rupture and Affective Elastic Intimacies Among Neighbours in New York City and Helsinki

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ABSTRACT

Neighbours are typically not intimates, but "intimate moments" sometimes emerge among neighbours. While doing cross-cultural ethnography in active neighbourhoods of New York City (NYC) and Helsinki, I testified many significant intimate encounters and care bred by times of rupture, such as 9/11, loss and illness. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, this article makes sense of such moments of closeness on four different blocks in Brooklyn, NYC and Helsinki. Intimate moments are emotional, embodied and often short-lived, but may affect people and their sense of belonging for years. In order not to become too sticky, neighbours need to maintain the freedom to pull back. Transformative intimate moments are studied drawing on personal narratives and ethnographic observation, but also on multi-sensory and affective co-presence with study participants. The article suggests that, in order to capture multi-sensory ways in which intimate moments affect people and their sense of belonging requires "sensing" and "sensuous knowledge", which should be further developed within feminist methodology.

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Introduction

This article is about the ways in which residents of four blocks in active neighbourhoods of Brooklyn, NYC and Helsinki become momentarily close with their neighbours. Times of rupture foster unexpected moments of intimacy which may contribute to a long-lasting sense of safety and of home on the block. Intimacy has often been associated with family or other close relationships, but it can be seen as a relational quality constituted by several dimensions, such as trust, practical caring and sharing in any setting (Törnqvist, 2024).

In this article, I ask how do especially "intimate moments" involving closeness, sharing and care emerge among neighbours and how are they fostered by times of crisis. Neighbours are typically not intimates (e.g. Morgan, 2009; Savage et al., 2005), but, as

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I will show in this article, momentary experiences of intimate sharing may, in certain circumstances, solidify into a long-term sense of belonging and of home.

I draw on a cross-cultural sensory ethnographic study of two neighbourhoods in Park Slope in Brooklyn, NYC and Kumpula in Helsinki, both of which have residential blocks in which neighbouring is especially active and at times personal. Analytic comparison of "similar" neighbourhoods in two very different societies is utilized to see more clearly the similarities and distinct dynamics, which may partially be mediated by the differences in the public support system. In the Nordics, the role of the welfare state has been expansive in offering people care, while, in the US, the absence of such a system may mean a need to rely more on informal support systems. How may this be reflected in neighbourhood-based support and care among neighbors?

Harding and Blokland (2014, p. 179) maintain that livable neighbourhoods cannot be anonymous. Morgan (2009, p. 26) suggests that, in neighbouring, the fine-tuned dynamics of appropriate closeness and distance are central, as neighbours should maintain not to be "in each others" pockets. Becoming a neighbour is a process of trial and error, finding out what the appropriate degree of openness and distance in each setting is (Morgan, 2009, p. 21).

On the blocks I studied, I testified a sense of local belonging strengthened by block parties, personal sharing and everyday practices of care. Brownlie and Anderson (2017) suggest that acts of kindness, such as unobligated help and support, make a friendly city. Ecological aspects and physical settings—for example street, sidewalks, gardens, stoops or stairwells—are crucial in making sense of how help actually happens and how people make moral sense of it (Anderson et al., 2015). If good neighbouring is about negotiating appropriate closeness and distance (Morgan, 2009) and about mutual kindness (Brownlie & Anderson, 2017), through what kind of circumstances and encounters do neighbours become momentarily closer than usual? How can short-lived intimacies with neighbours be understood?

Where exactly one lives and moves daily matter greatly, as do other everyday orientations and affinities. In the studied neighbourhoods, the everyday local community was organized largely based on the place of residence and close proximity. The block, its people and other elements, were right there and small enough to become truly familiar (cf. Calhoun, 1999) and to carry people's affects and personal affinities (Mason, 2018).

Even in close proximity, moments of closeness were not part of the everyday but often followed *the logic of rupture*. By disrupting the benign order of everyday life, a rupture such as 9/11, personal loss or illness, breaks out the vulnerability inherent in life (author). Major crisis, whether collective or personal, opens space for immediate relational and intimate needs of others. In the past and in many places of the Global South still, community has been necessary for survival. In affluent neighbourhoods of the Global North, and in particular in the Nordics where the generalistic welfare services offer support, intimate sharing among neighbours out of need is not ordinary. However, times of rupture break "the capable actor" and force people to rely on others (Ketokivi & Meskus 2015). This opens space for unexpected bonding and intimacy.

In this article, I analyse intimate moments among neighbours as moments of closeness, sharing and caring that affect the participants and their sense of belonging (cf. Jamieson, 2011, p. 151; Sadowski, 2016, pp. 49–52). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Park Slope, Brooklyn and Kumpula, Helsinki, I ask how intimate

moments emerge among neighbours residing on the same block. In studying moments of vulnerability and emerging care, I felt I needed to take part in some moments, not only as an external observer, but as an embodied fellow human. American ethnographer Andersson (2012) once said that ethnography is about "putting your body in the field". For me, this meant not only observing, interviewing and documenting, but getting involved in the corporeal, relational and affectionate space of the field. I participated in intimate moments sitting in people's kitchens and living rooms hearing and sharing stories of love, loss, vulnerability and resilience. I take a feminist stance and use these embodied moments and experiences as a source of knowledge (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). I analyse this material through multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 2009) with a focus on sensory ethnography in which embodied and affective sensations are used as research materials (Culhane, 2017).

I first specify my theoretical stance and then briefly describe the studied neighbourhoods, after which I present the study. I will first analyse the ways in which times of shared collective rupture may enhance sharing and unexpectedly intimate encounters among neighbours, and then move on to examining personal ruptures, which among already affiliated neighbours may, through especially intimate moments, deepen the sense of belonging. Then, I consider the ecological and rhythmic aspects and the ways in which affinities and socio-atmospherics (Mason, 2018) contribute to the making of intimate moments. In conclusion, I draw together my findings, specify the concept of "the intimate moment" and consider how it may contribute to a wide scope of social and cultural studies interested in intimacy, belonging and interaction.

Theoretical Perspectives

In order to specify my understanding of intimacy, I draw on Jamieson's (2011, p. 151) definition of intimacy as "the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality". I pay attention to the process through which unlikely intimacies unfold. Jamieson (2011) suggests that being close can be emotional and/or cognitive, and involve feelings of "mutual love", of "being 'of like mind'" and "special to each other", but closeness may also contain bodily intimacy, although an intimacy need not be sexual (Jamieson, 2011). As Törnqvist (2024) has pointed out in her ethnographic study of strangers living together in a domestic space, a bodily co-presence evokes transgression of personal borders and pushes the limits between intimate and distant others. When people embody the same space, they develop bodily knowledge and orient themselves towards others in various ways (ibid.). This happens to some extent among close-by neighbours, as well, especially at times of rupture and of heightened vulnerability.

I develop and synthesize Jamieson (2011) and Törnqvist's (2024) work and see intimacy as *a sense of closeness involving bodily co-presence, personal knowing, sharing and caring, as well as physical expressions of closeness*. Intimacy, may it happen in passing encounters or more permanent settings, also typically involves a crossing of intimate boundaries, whether of the intimate domestic space or of the embodied self in ways that *affect* participants modifying them and their relationship (Sadowski, 2016, pp. 45, 49–52, cf. Deleuze & Guatarri, 2004). This transgression of boundaries and the aspects of physical closeness and personal care differentiates intimacy from other kinds of social togetherness. Intimate moments studied in the article have affected people in such

profound ways that they share stories about these encounters years after. *What happens in these moments and how do they transform people and their sense of home and belonging in the long-term?*

I connect intimacy and neighbouring with a sense of home in the following ways. "Home" was used in at least three ways by the study participants: 1) specifically in relation to actual *home as an intimate space* that was sometimes opened up to neighbours, 2) as a space extending beyond the actual home to a *home territory* where one feels a sense of control and of intimacy (e.g. Lofland, 1998) and 3) in a more abstract, but highly personal *feeling of "being at home"* on the block or the neighbourhood (cf. Antonsich, 2010). The markers of home are not simply inanimate objects (a place with stuff), but the presence, habits and effects of intimates (Wise, 2000). What makes home territories different from other territories is their connection with a process of identification, of articulation of affect or "affinity" (Mason, 2018). Home is a place we are (Wise, 2000).

In understanding temporal negotiation about appropriate distance and closeness among neighbours, I draw on Torres (2019) concept of "elastic ties" and Lefebvre's (2014) theory of the moment, which I use to develop understanding of particularly meaningful "intimate moments". While doing ethnography among older residents of NYC, Torres (2019) noticed how intimate confiding, support and sharing sometimes occurred between persons who did not visit each other's homes or know each other's families, or sometimes even first names, but still shared significant moments of closeness. To capture such relationships, Torres (2019) refers to "elastic ties" which, like a rubber band, stretch to accommodate participants' needs for connection and freedom to pull back.

Neighbour relationships I studied were elastic as well—at times close and other times more distant. I testified how neighbours offered a significant support in times of crisis but pulled back in the everyday. Torres' (2019) notion of elastic ties offers insight to understand the versatile character of neighbor relationships.

Within the elasticity of neighbour relationships there were especially transformative intimate moments which are vividly described in the narratives even after years. For Lefebvre (2014, pp. 642–652) "moments" are "significant affective spaces" that stand out from the muddle flow of everyday and may become durable, as they transform the fabric of everyday life (cf. Lefebvre, 2014, pp. 639–640). The everyday life of the residents and shop-keepers was typically friendly and familiar, but not intimate. In this article, I focus on times of crisis that lacerate this everyday social order, as they do to people, creating openings for unfamiliar closeness.

The Neighbourhoods

I conducted over four months of field work in two neighourhoods, Park Slope in Brooklyn NYC and Kumpula in Helsinki, partly living on the blocks I studied. Despite the differences in culture, size and location, both neighbourhoods are gentrified to the extent that developers play a significant role in the neighbourhood—even more so in Park Slope. They both have desirable historic houses, green areas and some rent-controlled or subsidized housing, which enable some lower income residents to still live in the neighbourhood. The residents of the blocks I studied were mainly middle class, but the blocks still had a social mix of

old-timers and newcomers who represented different socio-economic positions. Ethnically and racially, the blocks were predominantly white. Despite the gentrification of the neighbourhoods, my interest lies in tiny moments and lived experiences which do not often come forth in the gentrification framework (Zukin, 2010, p. 221).

Politically, residents in both neighbourhoods vote more left than right (in Park Slope Democrats, and in Kumpula left wing and green parties). In all blocks I studied, residents referred to their neighbourhoods as having a feeling of "a village" or "a small town" within a larger metropolitan area. They also both have lively local life, active residents and local celebrations, such as block parties. Moreover, many residents highlighted the personal sense of belonging in the neighbourhood and more specifically mentioned the block.

I chose Park Slope and Kumpula for the study because of their extraordinarily active local social life. I first selected Kumpula that was known as one of the most community-oriented neighbourhood in Helsinki. Based on tentative ethnography I made in Brooklyn, Park Slope fit the idea well, too.

Park Slope is a historic neighbourhood in Northwestern Brooklyn. It is a mixture of Brownstone town houses and apartment buildings, local businesses, transit, green areas, and active residents. Many residential blocks have old four-story townhouses with stoops, old trees and a peaceful atmosphere. After the Second World War, Park had a lot of abandoned buildings and a strong presence of mafia. This development gradually weakened after gentrification started to take place from the 1960s. Park Slope began to interest families with higher incomes, a development still continuing today. While many old-timers could no longer afford living there, others stayed in rent-frozen or own apartments that were acquired when prices were lower. On the blocks I studied, ex-hippies, social workers and investment bankers lived side-by-side as neighbours. Especially families value Par Slope for its "best public school" in NYC. The typical household size is still just two adults.

Kumpula in Helsinki was originally built for the workers of the tableware manufacturing company Arabia (founded in 1873). At the early days there were social problems like poverty, poor living conditions and the black market of illegal alcohol. However, in Kumpula, the historic atmosphere, location and robust housing stock began to attract so-called creative types from the 1980s. Over time, houses were renovated and attracted residents who were eager to rally for their neighbourhoods against, for example, the city initiatives that have threatened the old wooden houses.

Kumpula is located 3 miles from the Helsinki city centre. The heart of Kumpula consists of rather good-sized, colourful wooden houses and small apartment buildings built in the 1920s and 1930s, which include both privately owned and rental apartments. The wooden part of Kumpula is a peaceful pocket of almost a rural feeling surrounded by a highway, urban nature, and residential blocks. On the small commercial street there is the local village house, a cafe, pizzeria, grocery store, kiosk and a few shops. Even if the visible character of Kumpula is dominated by wooden houses with gardens, the most typical household size is just one or two people. Kumpula has about 4,300 residents.

The Study

I conducted multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 2009) between 2013 and 2015, during which the research questions evolved and directed me to follow interlinked relations to different public, semi-public and private settings. In all, the study involved a multi-method qualitative approach with a combination of ethnographic and narrative analysis (Andrews et al., 2013). For this article, I draw on participant observation and fieldnotes, qualitative in-depth interviews of residents (19 in Park Slope and 18 in Kumpula), including a systematic mapping of everyday relationships and daily routes in the neighbourhood. Interviews lasted from an hour to nearly three hours and were mostly transcribed verbatim. The field work consisted of several periods which together lasted between four and five months in each neigborhood, part of which I lived in the neighbourhoods. In other times I spent time in the life of the blocks participating in their daily life and spending time with the residents.

As Mason (2018, pp. 7–9) maintains, all life is lived in and through sensory-kinaesthetic registers. We experience others via our senses, but also sense less obvious atmospheric energies, like good vibes between people, or an atmosphere that one could "cut with a knife" (ibid., p. 8). In this article, I utilize sensory aspects of ethnographic field work. Sensory ethnography views both the ethnographer and the study participants as embodied beings who experience each other and nonhumans through lived experiences and relationships (Culhane, 2017). It considers sensory knowledge—that is what is "non-verbal", "tacit", "felt", "invisible", "mundane" or "intuitive"—as relevant in understanding people's lives (Culhane, 2017, p. 47). In doing ethnography, I used my sensory experiences as bodily ways of connecting to the multisensory and intersubjective daily lives (cf. Lefebvre, 2004, p. 30).

Drawing on sensory aspects of ethnography enables an embodied sense of the local life. This is valuable, as a sense of home is not something one can fully verbalize, but something one senses as a multisensory experience of easiness, safety and comfort. The sensory approach draws on the ethnographic aspect of "putting your body in the field" (Andersson, 2012) which is also how we live our daily lives as embodied beings. Verbalizing everything is artificial. Drawing analytically on senses can relate to experiences which would otherwise stay silent. By taking into account the lived embodied experiences of people, sensory ethnography enables developing feminist understanding of "sensuous knowledge" (Salami, 2019). Instead of europatriarchal knowledge, which is often hierarchical and keen on measuring things from the outside, sensuous knowledge means humanizing knowledge to something that, instead of objectifying, feels alive and intimate (Salami, 2019).

The cross-cultural study design is not a strict empirical comparison, but the different locations are used as analytical lenses through which to see common patterns and cultural or local peculiarities more clearly. (Gómez & Kuronen, 2011). I analyse materials from both neighbourhoods as one dataset focusing on the disruptive times and the elastic dynamics of intimacy they created. I did not enquire about especially intimate moments, but my interest turned to them, as some participants vividly shared stories of distinct embodied moments of intimacy that had happened over 10 years before and changed their sense of belonging on the block. It is then likely that, although some time has passed

since the fieldwork, such meaningful moments and the ways in which they affect people do neither change so quickly. All participants cited in this article were informed about the study and filled out a form of informed consent. Participants' personal information is protected via using pseudonyms and other measures, including not following a person's story through various phases, which might make it easier to identify the person in question. More unique stories, on the other hand, are so commonly told as testimonies of local care and support on the block that those who might recognize them already know of them.

Sense of Home and Social Life on the Block

In all four blocks I studied in Park Slope and Kumpula, many interviewees talked about "feeling at home" that extended from actual homes to their block and sometimes beyond. Home is a place that matters (Cresswell, 2015, p. 53). Home is where people share an embodied co-existence (Törnqvist, 2024).

One woman who had separated and lived with a child in Kumpula said "I was taken by the feeling of a small village—that even if I didn't know the people, for some reason I just felt safe." Another resident, an elder woman, shared the feeling: "It is so nice and cozy here. I just walk the streets in my robe." Home is where you feel an embodied sense of familiarity, intimacy and safety. When the sense of home expands into a "home territory" it becomes as "a fuzzy relational realm" for locals (cf. Lofland, 1998, pp. 69–70). On the blocks I studied, the home territory meant safety and comfortable dwelling and co-presence with neighbours. The exact place of residence mattered a lot and the immediate neighbours on the same side of the street were often indicated as closer than those living on the other side, even though personal relationships did in some cases reach to the other side of the street. Home territory was then more than a feeling, it was about embodied practices of chatting, sharing and visiting.

Community can be seen as a dense web of familiar relationships (Calhoun, 1999). A block may have characteristics of such community in the sense that people run into the same familiar faces and via repeated encounters learn to know each other. Over time, some develop some personal knowledge about their neighbours—and sometimes deeper relationships. Alice, a youngish and queer university professor, shares how Park Slope feels so homy for her that it is what she pictures looks like in heaven, too. She distinctively describes a scene where she comes back from a live music gig after having played live songs she wrote—an ambitious leisure activity of hers—and her neighbours sit on the stoop and ask about her gig. That is what a sense of community feels like for her. The significance of familiarity is, however, not only about humans, but also nonhumans. A Jewish woman who has lived in Park Slope her whole life says: "When I walk around, I like the feeling of familiarity of the surroundings, I like that a lot . . . it's like seeing different layers of things in the same place."

Home is about "a sense of attachment and rootedness" (Cresswell, 2015, p. 39) and embodied daily co-presence with both humans and nonhumans that matter. It is about milieus, cultural ways and habits that participate and respond to our spaces (Wise, 2000). Many residents were daily present on the block. Some were journalists, freelancers, academics, therapists and other people working already then—before the COVID-19 pandemic—remotely from home. Others were stay-at-home parents of small children,

unemployed, housewives and retirees who stay in the neighbourhood for the most of the day. They are stepping in and out of their homes, running their errands, playing with kids, walking dogs, sitting in cafes and so forth. I sometimes stood hours in a window observing people on the street and noticed that, with the exception of the few business people who left early in the morning to work, many people did not seem to be busy or passing through but simply living their lives locally. Participants contrasted their neighbourhood with the urban mentality in which people maintain a blasé attitude towards others (Simmel & Wolff, 1950, pp. 409–414). Instead, they emphasized that people on their block really care about their neighbours and that is what makes the block-based community.

9/11 as a Collective Rupture and the Elastic Formation of "Us"

In Park Slope, 9/11 was vividly present as a shared past that had an impact on how people felt about their block and the city as a whole. The abstract sense of safety had transformed into a lived experience of belonging and care. 9/11 had wounded the neighbourhood, because everyone knew someone tragically affected. The mark it had left was still very clear and striking when I was doing field work over ten years later.

The locals describe the time as extremely difficult for the whole city. They told me how every street corner had several signs asking "did you see this person" with a picture. Ben (a married man in his fifties) was out of town celebrating his father's birthday when 9/11 happened. When he got back home, he vividly described how he walked home from the subway:

> It was emotional getting home after that. So, I walk down the street, and we're walking in front of the pharmacy and all of a sudden the door goes flying open and the owner of the pharmacy, came out and, gave me this huge hug. She never hugged me before, ever. And what she said was that Bob [a mutual acquaintance] had a dream that I had been in the World Trade Centre and died. And that he was convinced because he had not seen me all that week, that I had died. And she saw me and realised that I was okay. And we walked another block, and somebody driving by in the car, jumped out of the car and came up and gave me a hug because he thought that I had been in the WTC.

Ben's story is filled with emotion. He is someone neighbours dream about. After worrying for him, the moment of reunion transforms into an intimate moment in which people on the block run out of stores and cars giving him "a big hug". Even if they interact regularly and feel at home with each other, they usually never hug.

Emotions, touch and caring were outpouring in a way that still moved Ben into tears:

> So that was quite the experience coming home and getting that kind of emotional response from people that ordinarily you would never hug. And of course you know, the neighbourhood was, the local fire station, lost I think 11 firefighters. And so, the street was filled with candles and flowers and what not. So, I had this feeling that I was really glad to be home. I was glad to be back and part of this larger family.

Even if 9/11 happened long before, it is what Ben starts sharing about when I ask how he feels about the neighbourhood. It transformed his sense of belonging to what he now describes as "this larger family". He places this family on his block: "I identify very strongly with my block". When people recognize a neighbour and

run out to give someone a hug, they enact an embodied "us" that matters. Bodily intimate boundaries are momentarily transgressed, creating a moment, "a significant affective spaces that exhausts itself" (Lefebvre, 2014). Some of the feelings Ben shared could not be captured by words only, but the affective impact was embodied and shared while he was sharing his memories. We both had tears in our eyes.

Neighbour relationships may have an elasticity that enable both intimacy and distance (Torres, 2019). May et al. (2022) suggest that, much like friendship, neighbour relationships are elastic as there are fewer norms and expectations than e.g. in family relationships. Lofland (1998) and Kusenbach (2006) maintain that norms associated with neighbouring are less demanding, such as greeting neighbours and being friendly. There are no norms about intimate encounters. A collectively felt catastrophe, such as 9/11, made ordinary boundaries momentarily vanish. Ben was a regular customer at the pharmacy and a certain level of personal knowing and physical co-presence (cf. Törnqvist, 2024) was already there to be actualized. For Ben, the extraordinary moments of hearing people dreaming and worrying for him—and then showing physical affection when they see each other solidified bonding and solidarity on the block that he locates identifies as "his larger family". This is how "moments" stands out of the muddle of everyday and transform it (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 638).

In one of the blocks in Park Slope, a family lost a father and a husband in 9/11. There was a fundraising organized for the kids who had lost their father. Several neighbours shared the same story. Some women of the block used to gather at the widow's house just to be there and help with everyday matters. Sometimes they would cry. The kids of the block got used to "the moms" being there. I was shared this story by a neighbour who felt moved hearing the children of the block later noticing out loud that "the moms have stopped crying". "the moms" joined their forces and formed an "us" who carried the family through the loss. A collectively felt crisis that hits someone one identifies with (as another mom, for example) may draw to step in an intimate space of home to be there for a neighbour, as happened in the widow's case. Those moments "the moms" shed tears together embodied the kind of intimacy that had not only helped the family but transformed the moms on the block into a durable safety net that many of them still later refer to.

9/11 ruptured "the benign order of everyday life" (Maynard, 2003, pp. 182–4) and pushed locals into an accentuated awareness of vulnerability as a shared condition that could have hit anyone. It disrupted the ordinary expectation of bodily integrity and containment. The threat of loose bodies that ordinarily need to be secured again (cf. Longhurst, 2001, p. 1) were not in place. In a collective crisis it is comforting to hug a neighbour and shed tears together. 9/11 momentarily ruptured the idea of contained modern individuality and brought out relationality at its barest form. Getting intimate is also about crossing boundaries of the embodied self and discursive norms (Sadowski, 2016, p. 45). This very crossing, when done sensitively, may turn into a durable and enduring *moment*, weaving and transforming the fabric of everyday life (cf. Lefebvre, 2014, pp. 639–40) into highly significant local belonging.

Personal Times of Needs, Care and Intimacy on the Block

Also, personal times of need may foster intimate moments and care with those living close. Saila lived in a small apartment building in Kumpula with her child. Her building is socially mixed and includes both privately owned and rented apartments. She shared a story with me of her and other women in the house taking care of an older, lonely man who had no intimates. He suffered at the senior home, so these neighbours took him back home and took care of him. They organized a circle of care at his house, in which they cooked and cleaned for him and eventually buried him after his passing. They were the only people present in his funeral, which she talked about with such warmth. Through caring moments, "a cranky old man" was turned into someone loved and cared for.

Also, in Park Slope, neighbours sometimes helped taking care of ill family members. An elder woman on one of the blocks had Alzheimer's disease and could not be left alone. Her husband, Mike, had created an email list of neighbours who had offered to help when he needed to run some errands or take a break. Several of my study participants were on that list and told me they would take turns to help him at their house.

A similar care pattern took place in Kumpula where a father of three, Antti, was diagnosed with spread cancer. When many offered to help, he organized an email list of people wanting to help their family to go through the difficult time of treatments. Some neighbours helped taking care of children, some cooked and cleaned the house and some helped him figure our treatment options and accompanied him to the appointments.

In all three cases, neighbouring involved elastically transgressing the intimate boundaries of home and moments of embodied intimate care. In contrast to collective ruptures, personal times of need require openness and deliberate sharing of sensitive personal information with others as well as a caring orientation from others. Care has a cementing nature that may not always work so well with the expectations of neighbours not being "in each other's pockets" (e.g. May et al., 2022; Morgan, 2009). Spreading care among enough people via an email list or another arrangement works as a way of not asking too much of any specific neighbour and to maintain the freedom to pull back (cf. Torres, 2019).

Sometimes emotional turbulence and moments of intimate sharing among neighbours rise from heart-felt acts of politically motivated crises between different groups of people. I often visited Miriam, a liberal Jewish woman in her late 50s. One time she was in agony about the heightened conflict between Israel and Gaza. It tossed her into an identity crisis about being Jewish as, although she was not for the Israeli politics, she identified with the Israeli Jews. She talked about this ambivalence at length. Miriam's good neighbours were from Gaza and, after agonizing some days she walked across the street and rang their doorbell expressing to these neighbours she felt terrible about what was happening, suggesting "we" should talk about this and not let it divide us up. Her neighbours took her visit well and they re-connected.

All analysed intimacies between neighbours involved transgressing personal boundaries between households and bodies that are ordinarily in place. Yet, the lack of demanding norms regarding care (Kusenbach, 2006; May et al., 2022) enable an elasticity that organizes the intimacy only to personally suitable moments. In intimate moments affects and sensations flow more freely among participants than usual. Intimacy is

embodied, sensory and affective. Randall Collins (1990, p. 29) has suggested that, what has in classical sociology been understood as solidarity, is in fact made of emotional energy that emanates even in transient situations. Interaction can be seen as a ritual that is made of all kinds of emotional ingredients, which, in turn, produce a certain kind of emotional energy. Intimate moments connote high-solidarity rituality, which generate feelings of membership that outlive the interaction (Collins, 1990, pp. 33–34). This may be one of the logics through which intimate moments transform into a more durable sense of home and belonging.

In Park Slope, where I did fieldwork, I met Sara, who had an advanced chronic illness that made her at times housebound. Sara was a petite woman of approximately 60 years old. Her tiny figure was contrasted with an intensive presence and a determined mind. When Sara needed to visit the Doctor's office during the day when her husband was working, one of the neighbours usually took her. Once when she had an appointment, I offered to go. When supporting her outside from her house to the taxi, her grip on my arm was very firm. I could feel how her bony fingers squeezed my arm. The bodily sensation of Sara's firm grip was, for me, a sensory memory lane. It brought back sensations related to my late grandmother who I often took to doctor's appointments when she had cancer. The embodied intersubjectivity was opened from feelings emerging from interacting together in social relationships (Culhane, 2017, p. 56). My grandma had passed years before, but suddenly I remembered vivid images and sensations of her.

Sara's grip further made me reflect on affects related to gripping. Both Sara and my grandma were bodily frail but with high-energy and a desire to belong. It felt that their strong grip to other people and furniture was a way to persevere and not let go. However, Sara practiced the kind of elasticity expected from good neighbours and let others pull back when they needed to. Sensory memories of the combination of frailty and gripping gave me reflective space to understand the vulnerable position and associated embodied practices of Sara in Park Slope.

Ecologies, Rhythms and Socio-Atmospherics of Intimate Moments

How do certain neighbours come to encounter each other more often than others? How do affinities develop between some people, but not others? What kind of role do places, rhythms and "socio-atmospherics" (Mason, 2018) play in generating intimate moments? I develop my argument, suggesting that connective forces and flows that enable intimate moments are firstly enabled by ecological connections related to place, the physical proximity of neighbours, daily rhythms of movement (Lefebvre, 2004), as well as the socio-atmospherics (Mason, 2018) that transform a block into a home territory (Lofland, 1998).

In doing ethnography, I systematically mapped participants' relationships and daily routes in the neighbourhood and beyond. It was clear that people had repeated encounters that in some cases developed into deeper relationships. Much like the city, also a neighbourhood, and especially a block, can be seen as an ecology of human, built and natural forms that accumulate encounters between certain people—albeit in smaller scale (Tonkiss, 2013, p. 115). Most affinities with neighbours had developed on the same side of the street—even if streets were very narrow and had so little traffic that people crossed over anywhere. Community formation is about certain people engaging with one another

in repeated interactions, which makes community not a quality of people or places, but of their relationships (Neal 2012, 14).

How do local relationships develop? Synchronization of time–space routines and rhythms can bring people together in a variety of ways which promote, define or signify affinities and a sense of belonging (Bennett, 2015, p. 958). Looking through the window in Park Slope during different times of the day, I noticed how different residents moved in different times of the day. Professionals who left early in the morning, walked rapidly straight towards the subway station, but people moving later in and out with their shopping bags, dogs and kids, were often present, encountering and chatting with each other and those who liked to sit around on stoops or chairs in front of their houses. Weather played some role as well, as the sun brought people out to sit on the stoops and snowing meant shovelling side-by side with the next-door neighbours (cf. Bennett, 2015).

In Kumpula especially, where many houses have a garden, weather and the cycle of seasons mediate house and yard maintenance and hence interactions (Kuurne & Gomez 2019). People moving back and forth on the block during the day all seemed to share an affinity to the block. They liked to be around. Block-based daily relationships can form tangible relationships which embrace an affective, intersubjective attachment to people and place (Bennett, 2015, p. 965). This can be called the "socio-atmospherics" which Mason (2018, p. 179) defines not only as a feeling of what is going on, but the goings on themselves; the living in the world and the liveliness of that world. Socio-atmospherics are the mix and the weave from which affinities rise and take shape, including an enigmatic aspect difficult to verbalize (ibid.). Some residents share an affinity to the socio-atmospherics and an interest to connect with others. A shared affinity may be the love towards the historic milieu—be it the historic brownstone buildings or colourful wooden houses and old trees, or the local lifestyle, which is creative and easy-going. Or it may be something else difficult to pinpoint exactly, but one can sense it is there.

Intimate moments are often spontaneous, rhythmic practices. Rhythm is regulated time, governed by certain rationality (think of the time when professionals need to leave for work), yet in the centre of it are organic and multisensory aspects: the lived realities and moving bodies (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 18). Rhythm reunites then "quantitative" aspects which mark time and distinguish moments in it, and "qualitative" aspects which in people's lived experiences link these moments together and make them lasting memories. Bennett (2015, p. 965, cf. Lefebvre, 2004) suggests that, from the viewpoint of rhythms, places are integral to belonging as part of a meshwork of connections to the past and future, as well as to other people.

In some cases, the crossing of ecological, rhythmic and socio-atmospheric aspects generates repeated encounters which may in some cases foster an affinity to develop. In times of rupture, these affinities are often perhaps already there, ready to be actualized. Ben, for example, had over a long period of time shared some of his health concerns with the pharmacist who ran out of the store to hug him after 9/11. When some personal knowledge and vulnerability have already been shared, in certain circumstances intimate moments may happen organically, transforming the block from a place of residence into a home territory (Lofland, 1998), or even "the larger family", as Ben put it. The deepening of the sense of belonging through extraordinary intimate moments appears rather durable, as the study participants often referred to moments that had happened long before as presently significant.

Sticky Closeness Among Neighbours

Examining positively affective intimate moments highlights the fact that neighbour relationships are ideally *not* intimate most of the time. Not all embodied co-presence and intimate knowing (cf. Törnqvist, 2024) generate a good feeling of home, but just the opposite may take place. May et al. (2022) suggest that most neighbour relations are defined by enforced physical proximity, which emphasizes the need to negotiate emotional propinquity. Smart (2007, p. 45) has described family and kin as "sticky", as it is hard to "shake free" from them at an emotional level. May et al. (2022, p. 4) maintain that developing closeness with neighbours is easier than (re)creating distance. Hence, developing a close relationship with a neighbour may also be risky. It is difficult to shake free from people who live next door.

There were some stories of keeping distance via not sharing personal information with neighbours. In Kumpula, for example, one woman never told the neighbourhood actives that she was a professional community organizer, because she did not want to get too much involved. Another male resident said he kept to himself, because he had run into difficulties with a neighbour in his earlier neighbourhood. A young father in Park Slope said they had moved into the neighbourhood only because of the good public school, but he is not interested in developing any closer relationships with neighbours.

In Park Slope I testified a laden quarrel about sticky closeness concerning sub-letting and house maintenance. Roz had long ago transformed her house into a co-up that now had three apartments. There had been good faith in the building. Now some residents wanted to sublet their apartments and the issue was about the building maintenance, which fell on the few permanent residents. She had already earlier wanted the building to have a policy for situations like that, but her perspective had not gained support. Now the situation was on the table again, and she felt resentment about being disregarded earlier. She was very upset and asked for my opinion and support. My field notes describe the situation:

> When bringing up the situation two years ago, her neighbour is not even responding to her email and now another neighbour wants all absence of house owners being compensated. Roz is often away but does not sublet. She is really upset and hurt. She read me the email out loud trembling. She always wanted to get along with people and has a hard time being the difficult one, and now she feels that there is this bad faith. (Field notes, August 2014)

This quarrel illuminates the sticky closeness with neighbours, which may become difficult (May et al., 2022, p. 6), as there really is no chance to pulling back (Torres, 2019).

There are two kinds of stickiness in this story. Firstly, one is trapped with the same neighbours with whom one needs to find an agreement. Secondly, the issue concerns unsettling affects, which make solving the practical issue difficult. This story further exemplifies how important elastic intimacy between neighbours is, or else it becomes what Mehrabi and Straube (2024) discuss as "unsettling intimacy". It might compel us to react or run away, but when staying and enduring this unsettlement, we share affective vulnerabilities with "the Other" and come face to face with the other within ourselves (ibid.). This is not easy, and neighbours are not always the people you want to do this with, despite it possibly being exactly what Miriam in Park Slope did when ringing the doorbell of her neighbours from Gaza.

in both keeping distance and sticky closeness there is no rhythm that enables elastic movement between closeness and distance. Such intimacy with neighbours quickly becomes unsettling. Life situation and socio-demographics, however, did not seem to be an explaining factor of keeping distance. Some participants who preferred to keep distance described themselves as private persons. Others had experiences of sticky and unsettling closeness with their neighbours, which made them cautious.

Conclusion

In this article, I began drawing on Torres (2019) concept of elastic ties that are neither strong nor weak but have the rubber band-like quality of stretching from close to more distant and back. Intimacy among neighbours in Park Slope and Kumpula took many forms of affective sharing of emotions and care to embodied co-presence and closeness in times of need.

When the sense of ontological security is collectively shaken, as in 9/11, spontaneous and extraordinary intimate moments may take place. Such moments are short-lived, but as moments they may become enduring, transforming belonging. Sometimes intimate moments last longer—until needed, as in the case of "the moms" crying after 9/11. There were many stories of personal times of need, in which neighbours acted as the safety net, taking care of quite intimate matters, such as bringing their neighbour to the Doctor's office, shopping groceries, cooking, and cleaning the house. As Horak and Vanhooren (2023) have pointed out, local community of neighbours is a significant avenue to practical help in crises like COVID-19, but how is such bonding organized temporally and relationally?

Elasticity of intimate encounters among neighbours meant the possibility to pull back and take distance. It was often accomplished via dividing the needed support among so many neighbours that they did not feel stuck. Elasticity of intimate encounters and sharing among neighbours did not only seem to be a lived experience, but also a social norm. Care was not to be taken for granted. The elasticity of intimate encounters captures well the relational capability of neighbour relationships in some circumstances to accommodate both closeness and distance. Not all elastic ties (Torres, 2019) involve intimacy, but all relationships involving intimate moments are elastic ties.

Vulnerable times of rupture created the circumstances for unexpected intimate moments that were more than just kindness (Brownlie & Anderson, 2017). These extraordinary moments of intimacy appear more spontaneous than intentional. However, often times it seems that underneath there were *already created* affinities ready to be actualized. The social ground from which intimate moments rise, is hence multi-layered and ambiguous involving embodied co-presence, social openness for sharing, repeated encounters and shared affinities. Crises have a lacerating quality. They crack the person wide open. Intimate moments often involve sharing of intimate knowledge and transgressing personal boundaries of the home and/or the body, which are afterwards put back in place. However, the moment may already have affected the deeper feelings of home and belonging.

Turning elastic closeness into a more durable sense of belonging on the block may at times require what can be called belonging work (Kuurne & Vieno, 2022). Managing

closeness and distance can in fact be seen as a crucial aspect of belonging work (ibid.) via which neighbours negotiate the conditions and relational consequences of their embodied co-presence. Many participants testified how the sharing with neighbours carried them through the crisis and transformed their sense of belonging. The ways in which neighbours acted as an informal safety net in times of crisis appeared to be less related to different welfare systems in the US and Finland, and more related to a similar community-oriented local culture and residents' willingness to interact locally.

The analysis of intimate moments highlights how life-altering encounters may be short-lived. They can happen between virtual strangers or people in certain institutional roles. Neighbour relationships are just one example of relationships in which intimate moments may take place. For example, workplaces, health care encounters, education and support groups are all settings in which intimate moments and personal sharing may be highly meaningful and affective.

As Sadowski (2016, pp. 45, 51) points out, transgressing boundaries also presents risks, as embodied intimate encounters modify participants' bodies and affects. To successfully relationally negotiate the appropriate level and kind of intimacy requiring *sensing* (Mason, 2018; Pink, 2013) the other person's embodied and affective orientation in the moment. Likewise, studying and accomplishing such sensing requires active use of embodied and affective "sensuous knowledge" (cf. Salami, 2019).

The greatest risk in getting close with neighbours is stickiness: it is almost impossible to get fully rid of neighbours. Some unsettling intimacies (cf. Mehrabi & Straube, 2024) may end up becoming transformative, as in case of Miriam and her neighbours who reconnected during heightened violence between Israel and Gaza. Most times stickiness, however, forces us to confront the dilemma of how to manage distance when you are stuck being too close with no space to pull back.

The concept of intimate moment stresses the *affect*, the *sensory experience* and *"the essence of the moment"* (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 643). Much like any significant relationship, neighbouring is not an intellectual affair, but about sensory bodily co-presence (cf. Mason, 2018; Törnqvist, 2024). Lefebvre (2014, pp. 641–2) suggests that a moment is "the attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility". Intimate moments transgressing personal boundaries *affect* the participants in multi-sensory and memorable ways.

Moments that transgress personal boundaries and discursive norms sensitively may affect us positively, but, as cases of sexual violence so clearly show, short-lived intimate moments may also violate our boundaries in traumatic ways and break us. To understand the different ways in which short-lived intimate moments—from life-changing meaningful intimate encounters to violent transgression of boundaries—*affect* us, requires further research. In such endeavours, the concept of intimate moments may be useful.

This article has been an attempt to draw on "sensuous knowing" (Salami, 2019; Pink, 2013; Culhane, 2017) in doing ethnographic field work and analysis. Multisensory and affective ways of knowing are not only valuable for studying gender, but for much broader critical endeavours. Åhäll (2018) suggests that feminist knowledge is about affectively imagining how things could be different. Hence, in order to fully take into account "sensuous knowledge" as indispensable and a valuable way of knowing requires

developing multi-sensory and affective feminist methodology. It may help us think, act and know in new ways not only about intimacy, but about a wide variety of lived and embodied experiences and situations that cannot be captured by words only.

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