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Immigrant parents’ everyday encounters with exclusion and public space mobilities: ‘Some type of force field’

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores everyday feelings of exclusion experienced by Western immigrant parents of preschool aged children in public park playgrounds in Tokyo. These parental feelings of exclusion and unbelonging arose from negative encounters with the majority population where children’s visible bodily differences led to unintegrated play. The paper argues that this sense of exclusion is socially problematic as immigrant parents feel negative emotions when using public playgrounds, turn away from local public space mobilities towards online play dates with their countries of origin, and focus more on private home centred play through a style of self-segregation as coping techniques.

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Introduction
Young children’s mobilities are strongly tied to their parent’s decisions in their role as gatekeepers. These decisions include factors such as where they play, with whom they play and often the nature of the play activities. Within the private home play activities can be regulated and tailored to include close social networks in attempts to create desired experiences. However, playing in and moving through public space complicates this scenario as encounters with difference enter the field (Amin, 2002; Laurier & Philo, 2006; Mavroudi, 2010; Valentine, 2008). This article reflects upon the complexity arising from public encounters as part of preschool children’s mobility, from the perspective of Western immigrant parents living in the Minato area of Tokyo.

While Western cities have been identified as being of interest regarding interethnic encounters due to their super mobility, superdiversity and everyday multiculturalism (Den Besten, 2010; Nayak, 2017; Piekut & Valentine, 2017; Vincent, Neal, & Iqbal, 2017), the under researched geographies of encounter in Tokyo, and on a larger scale Japan, merit interest due to a high level of ethnic homogeneity even in dense urban areas. Debates regarding ‘inter-ethnic encounters have primarily drawn on research conducted in the United States and Western Europe’ (Piekut & Valentine, 2017, p. 176) and so the study herein addresses this gap.

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Specific research on Japan has shown that integration of immigrants has been difficult (Agyeman, 2015; Burgess, 2007; Kudo, 2014), and that ‘numerous inequalities’ are experienced by immigrant communities there (Chapple, 2009, p. 2). This paper thusly focuses on an ethnically diverse sample of immigrant parents within the minority population, their experiences, emotional/spatial responses and, to borrow a term from Mountz, (2011, p. 382) their associated ‘intimacies of exclusion’. Their feelings of exclusion and unbelonging (Noble & Poynting, 2010) arise in part from observing negative encounters between their children and the majority Japanese population in park playgrounds, where forms of segregated play emerge based primarily on visible bodily differences.

The paper seeks to contribute to the need for ‘more research on grounded everyday interactions into (mis)communication’ (Mavroudi, 2010, p. 229) between immigrants and majority population’s urban encounters, and it reflects on some of ‘the scratchiness and bumpiness that lie in the grooves of many encounters with difference’ (Nayak, 2017, p. 291). Research has shown (Leitner, 2012; Noble & Poynting, 2008, p. 2770) that: ‘we need to explore the links between migrant belonging and processes of inclusion and exclusion in terms of the affective dimensions within and across social domains’. Thus, emotions play an ‘active role’ in encounters and exclusion (Leitner, 2012, p. 828; Pain & Smith, 2008), and there is the need to understand the regulation of belonging for migrant groups as an affective process which shapes their ability to feel ‘at home’ (Noble & Poynting, 2008, p. 2748). The paper gives primacy to these emotional aspects of the encounter as there has been a ‘general neglect of how individuals approach and experience encounters and their subjective reflections on the meaning of such moments for them’ (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014, p. 1980).

In this way the article aims to present the small scale lived ‘realities’ of exclusion and demonstrate that these can have significant and meaningful impacts which ripple far outside of the locations in which they initially occur to incorporate public/private and local/global/online space.

Secondly, it seeks to contribute by exploring the interconnected aspect of what has been identified as one of the ‘most neglected areas of enquiry … namely children’s interethnic relations beyond institutional contexts and the school in particular’ (Huber & Spyrou, 2012, p. 291). For preschool aged children this brings their parents firmly into the fold due to their connected mobilities given their young age, and public park playgrounds as encounter focal points beyond the aforementioned institutional centric context.

The article explores two categories of immigrant parents which emerged within the study. Firstly, those who persevered in using playgrounds as a platform for their children despite persistent feelings of sadness and separation from the majority population. Secondly, those who no longer use public playgrounds due to overriding negative feelings of exclusion. Parental coping techniques for managing exclusionary feelings were manifest through turning away from public space towards virtual mobilities in online space play dates with relatives and friends in their countries of origin, and towards more home centred play.

There are problematic aspects of this private mobility turn politically and developmentally for children and their parents. Politically, in that it lessens minorities’ physical and symbolic visibility and legitimacy in urban public space and ultimately self-segregates immigrant families away from their right to the city (Harvey, 2008; Jansson, 2016; Staeheli, Mitchell, & Nagel, 2009). Research on processes in other international contexts have shown that immigrants become ‘engaged in forms of self-monitoring,
altering their behaviour to “fit” the circumstances’ when patterns of exclusionary feelings occur (Noble & Poynting, 2008, p. 2991), and this in turn can impact on spatial freedom/play patterns for their children. Developmentally in that it reduces children’s opportunities to reap benefits of outdoor play and forming connections with the environment (Chen-Hsuan Cheng & Monroe, 2012) due to more sedentary indoor activities, which in turn generate deficits in ‘fitness and well-being amongst children’ (Frost, 2012, p. 117).

**Everyday encounters and feelings of exclusion**

As Cele (2013, p. 77) notes regarding children’s relationship with public space: ‘a subject’s understanding of the world draws from her everyday practice’. This reciprocal relationship between understanding and practice also applies to parents/adults. For example, in the case of immigrant parents living in the Minato area of Tokyo, their understanding of the city and their place within it draws on their everyday practices and through the associated social encounters in public space (Cresswell, 2004; Noble & Poynting, 2008). As occurs with many immigrant populations, part of these encounters incorporate ‘struggles for inclusion in the public’ (Staeheli et al., 2009) both for themselves and for their children (Noble & Poynting, 2008). The preceding factors pertain to the geographies of encounter.

Research on the geographies of encounter have examined myriad spaces and contexts arising from the ‘throwntogetherness’ (Massey, 2005) of individuals living together in cities and how difference is negotiated on an everyday basis (Nayak, 2017; Valentine, 2008; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014; Vincent et al., 2017). The literature has covered many urban locations where people encounter each other, from cafés (Laurier & Philo, 2006) to buses (Wilson, 2011) to school playgrounds (Wilson, 2013) and a host of everyday spaces, such as libraries and allotments (Askins, 2016; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014).

Crucially, an encounter is more than people simply meeting each other. It has been conceptualized as an ‘event of relation’ where factors such as ‘meaning, power, temporality, ethics and scale’ converge and emerge (Wilson, 2017, p. 452), and further that ‘encounters are fundamentally about difference, and are thus central to understanding the embodied nature of social distinctions and the contingency of identity and belonging’ (Wilson, 2017, p. 452). Concerning the enactment of this politics of belonging in spaces of encounter Leitner (2012, p. 830) states that: ‘it is a politics about cultural and racial boundaries, boundaries of place, and entitlements to economic and political resources. All these elements contribute to defining the boundaries between the “we” and “them” and are at stake in these struggles’. Given this preceding description of the politics of belonging the importance of reflecting upon the encounters between immigrant and majority society in under researched contexts such as Tokyo becomes clear.

The role and transformative potential of public space encounters has been viewed from different positions however. These range from being an effective catalyst for building cosmopolitan conviviality through managed and spontaneous contact via quotidian proximity (Allport, 1954; Amin, 2012; Askins, 2016; Laurier & Philo, 2006), to being considered a weak medium, or providing ‘illusory contact with diversity’ in progressing past prejudice towards social change (Piekut & Valentine, 2017, p. 177), to in some cases containing such ‘negative potentials’ where efforts are actively engaged in to restrict and prevent their occurrence (Wilson, 2017, p. 457). Across the spectrum of viewpoints
regarding the potential for public space encounters a significant argument is that ‘actions are brought forth from encounters’ (Wilson, 2017, p. 455) and thus they are consequential even in small ways as they can alter mobilities, practices and spatialities.

Within the paper I refer to ‘negative encounters’ in public playgrounds and this raises the question of what distinguishes a positive encounter from a negative encounter. Here we need to turn to ‘meaning’ as a form of guidance (Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2017). Because meaning is relational and subjective in the context of public space encounters a range of factors can be incorporated. Borrowing here from both Wilson (2017) and Askins (2016), meaningful encounters have been conceived of as being where a positive change in values/behaviour occurs in relation to difference and towards the ‘other’, and where inclusive notions of citizenship in public space are developed (Askins, 2016, p. 516). Also, where prejudice is reduced, where social cohesion is produced and when empathy is developed (Wilson, 2017, p. 461). These can be connected to short or long temporal ranges. However, Wilson (2017) cautions that rendering encounters that do not contribute to these factors as being ‘meaningless’ is an oversimplification that risks equating meaning with positive experience (Wilson, 2017, p. 461).

Concerns have been raised concerning the extent to which encounters may be meaningful in their potential to ‘reshape social relations across difference’. (Vincent et al., 2017, p. 1976). For the purposes of this paper where immigrants are hoping to integrate their children into playground activities, we can conceive of a positive encounter as being one which touches upon empathy and social cohesion, and where their hopes are achieved. Conversely a negative encounter, while consequential regarding implications in some ways detracts from these hopes. The value of accessing reflective moments surrounding encounters (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014) is evidenced here as interviews allow access to these relational issues of meaning connected to mobility and a sense of (un)belonging as we shall see presently (Den Besten, 2010; Noble & Poynting, 2010).

**Playground encounters**

The locational setting for the public encounters between immigrants and the majority society discussed within this study are park playgrounds in Tokyo. Research in children’s geography has shown that ‘playgrounds are intended to compensate for the daily restrictions that children growing up in urban environments encounter’, yet that ‘ethnicity may well have consequences for the inclusion or exclusion of children in play spaces’ (Karsten, 2003, p. 460). Research within the geographies of encounter on playgrounds has shown that it is an important location that ‘should feature in debates around the development of intercultural urbanisms’ (Wilson, 2013, p. 627). Ethnicity and difference can indeed play a role in spatial and emotional borders of inclusion/exclusion being drawn on playgrounds, not only between children, but also between parents (Noble, 2013; Vincent et al., 2017; Wilson, 2013).

It has been noted that parenting is a spatial practice and that ‘it is unclear why there is little attention paid to the lived geographies of parents’ (Wilson, 2013, p. 627). These lived geographies of the parents are especially important in relation to young children as so much of their mobility is bound together. The playground is a complex site where these bound mobilities merge. As Wilson notes ‘it is where a diligent watchfulness is often practiced’ and that ‘it is also a space where differences are made most acute’ (Wilson, 2013,
While there are ‘obligations to encourage interaction across difference – ethical imperatives towards polite, friendly behaviour towards neighbours and/or fellow parents sharing the same playground space’ (Vincent et al., 2017, p. 1986) the routine structure (Noble, 2013) of the school playground differs from the public park playgrounds in Minato. Within public playgrounds there are less institutionalized routines and wider social catchments which lead to more fleeting encounters with strangers. This potentially removes some of the social ‘obligations’ (Vincent et al., 2017) felt by those utilizing a particular school playground with a more fixed set of parents/children and thus ‘proximity does not necessarily bring meaningful contact’ in the public case (Piekut & Valentine, 2017, p. 177).

Visibility and absence in public space

Myriad research has been undertaken related to the politics and implications of both visibility and absence across different spatial contexts and the significance of both states (Jansson, 2016; Jones, 2012; Miller, 2012; Robinson, 2012; Staeheli et al., 2009). Regarding public space, in addition to behavioural norms, one of the important factors that draw boundaries between those who belong and those who are excluded is being visible. This visibility has two levels of meaning. Firstly, as a political and symbolic statement by being present in/mobile through public space, and secondly in the particular characteristics of the corporeal body (Jansson, 2016; Staeheli et al., 2009). Norms, while not constituting actual laws, ‘set the stage for the relationships within the public sphere at any given time’ (Staeheli et al., 2009, p. 12). Which ‘bodily appearances’ and ‘visual styles’ constitute adherence to or transgression against a norm are geographically, temporally, and culturally dependent (Jansson, 2016, p. 2). Staeheli et al. (2009, p. 11) note that regarding immigrants norms can act as pathways to inclusion and acceptance within the public, or as barriers leading to exclusion.

Research has shown that a form of ‘hypervisibility’ can occur regarding minorities in relation to local populations (Mountz, 2011, p. 385), and that entering the public realm in hopes of participating in social collectivity can be ‘an anxious, fraught moment’ for many (Staeheli et al., 2009, p. 3). Being visible in public space makes a certain embodied political claim to spaces of the city. This political claim is rooted in the politics and practices of everyday life (Jones, Robinson, & Turner, 2012, p. 257). Jansson (2016) notes that there is a ‘risk’ involved when groups become visible in public space in engaging in forms of protest, while Staeheli et al. (2009, p. 3) refer to how immigrant visibility can be ‘dangerous’ as they can be labelled as a cause for majority societal problems. The issues of visibility of immigrant parents and children in Minato’s playgrounds is focused on personal encounters and emotions rather than the organized visibility of a labour protest or rights rally and this allows a glimpse into the daily fabric of urban social existence rather than the spectacle or unusual event.

Linked to being visible and present are the converse states of being absent and invisible. Absence of certain groups from public space has typically been associated with denying claims to space and participation (Jones et al., 2012, p. 257). Research has shown that absence can demarcate ‘territory where acts, people and ideas cannot belong’ (Jones et al., 2012, p. 257). The social mechanics of how the absence of certain groups or sub-sections of groups comes to be is more overt or covert depending on the particular case, and
as we shall see presently, in the case of the immigrant parents, can also be self-imposed as a coping mechanism resulting from overriding feelings of exclusion. Research has shown (Staeheli et al., 2009, p. 3) that 'many of the coping mechanisms used by immigrants “require their invisibility”'.

Methodology

The study is comprised of 19 semi-structured interviews undertaken in the Minato ward of Tokyo in 2014 with parents of preschool aged children. While much influential research within the geographies of encounter (Laurier & Philo, 2006; Wilson, 2011) has deployed observation and autoethnography as the key method for analysing encounters in public/semi-public space this tool has its weaknesses ‘through its implicit reading of fluid moments’ (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012, p. 2050). Conversely, interviews with participants engaged in encounters allow for more biographical and reflexive perspectives to be presented and examined. Thus interviews were selected as the optimum tool in this particular study.

Four of the interviews took place at an international preschool, referred to within as Central Preschool. The school was brought on board via a letter of request which they positively responded to. The school kindly facilitated interviews to be held after school hours on their premises. Six interviews took place at four public park playground locations in the school’s proximity where encounters occurred between immigrants and the majority population. Research has shown that the ‘playground can also tell us a lot about the lived geographies of parents and the spatialities and embodied practices of parenting routines’ (Wilson, 2013, p. 643). The remaining nine interviews took place as in-home interviews. Valentine and Sadgrove (2012) have noted the particular importance of not overlooking the role of the home/private space in people’s approach to encounters. A snowball technique was used to identify the park playgrounds used by immigrant families and to develop contacts to facilitate the home interviews.

Rapport was built with the participants through drawing on a shared experience of myself having personally worked and lived in Japan. This factor counteracted the potential pitfall of being a researcher ‘parachuting’ into unknown contexts. It also facilitated empathy and trust to be built within interview settings and in putting participants more at ease. The names of each the participants have been changed as per standard practice. The interviews were conducted through English as all of the parents spoke fluent English.

The sample of interviewees contained a mix of ethnicities including Black, Hispanic and Caucasian parents. All of the interviewees came from North American and European countries with 13 parents coming from the former and six from the latter. Socioeconomically the parents constitute parts of middle/upper class families. They engaged in managerial/professional work as well as being self-employed entrepreneurs. This factor differs from much migrant encounter research where material resources and financial security of those involved are often precarious/insecure (Askins, 2016; Mountz, 2011).

Negative encounters on the playground

Of the parents interviewed there was a divide between those who had turned away from using playgrounds towards home based/online play versus those who persevered in using
public playgrounds. Those who persevered did so despite feelings of exclusion emerging from unsuccessful play encounters between their children and Japanese children, which arose from visible bodily and linguistic differences. Across both groups of immigrant parents the feelings of exclusion they expressed demonstrated the impact such emotions of unbelonging had in shaping play mobilities and spatialities, and also in stimulating reflections on making/leaving their lives in Japan. For these parents a common theme of sadness emerged at observing their children being unable to bridge gaps to play with Japanese children whom they encountered. Reasons for persisting in using playgrounds were environmentally and socially based. They ranged from being that: it was important to get some fresh air, to be outside to enjoy the weather, and to try to connect with other families. The feelings of sadness were highlighted by parents who were interviewed at Central Preschool.

Charlotte and Aidan were a white American-German couple with two girls aged four and two. Both of the girls had been born in Japan. The potency of visible bodily differences on the playground are notable in the following quote where Charlotte and Aidan consider the topic of exclusion.

Charlotte: I see it all the time.
Aidan: But I guess the question is, is it based on, you know, is it a racial thing? A look different thing? A racial look different thing, or is it that they don’t speak Japanese?
Charlotte: It’s both. I mean. Our kids are bright blonde, you know, nearly white haired and, you know? I got from when the time the kids were two and three years old, I got questions by other children on the playground, ‘why is her hair so white?’ You know? ‘Why doesn’t she speak Japanese, you know? Kids are kids and they just say it like it is. If they see a difference then mainly they just don’t interact.
Author: They don’t interact?
Charlotte: They are completely separate on the playground and that makes me sad. It makes me sad about the experience here and it makes me sad, and it makes me realize, especially how easy when I am back home, and my kids can speak the same language and don’t look different they are instantly integrated on the playground. Instantly playing with other children. And if we go by ourselves and there is another child or family they instantly pick up a game together.
Author: And that doesn’t happen here?

This sadness expressed by Charlotte and the depth to which her perceptions of her children’s separation on the playground frame her feelings towards her lived experience in Tokyo. Tellingly, Charlotte states that the separation ‘makes me sad about the experience here’. Her ‘home’ country of the U.S.A. becomes framed as an inclusive place where the visible characteristics of hair colour and linguistic abilities ceased to hinder integration on the playground. Charlotte’s case illustrates how negative encounters on the playground are not solely bound within to the space of the playground itself, but spill out into the lived experience of daily life and the geographical imagination.

Camila was an entrepreneur from Spain who had a five year old son, Mateo. They arrived in Minato six months prior and despite negative encounters she had kept bringing Mateo to public playgrounds in a hope that one day his public integration would ‘click’
into place. Camila spoke Japanese to a high level while Mateo did not speak Japanese at all. Here she reflects upon Mateo’s playground experiences.

Camila: This feeling, it’s sad to feel like the shine comes off a new place so quickly. At the beginning it felt like a movie. The skyscrapers, the food. But living is different from visiting, less friendly, less welcoming. I keep hoping it will click. Just, Boom! One day we will show up and he will be playing without a care. I hope this will happen. But sometimes I get angry, others I cry. I can keep bringing him for a while (Mateo).

The quotes from Camila and Charlotte demonstrate the depth that feelings of exclusion arising from negative playground encounters can have on an everyday sense of local unbelonging (Noble & Poynting, 2010). Other parents whose children were able to communicate through Japanese encountered similar issues of exclusion on the playground. This indicates that the visible differences between children were a dominant factor in limiting their play together. Larissa, an African American mother, fluent in Japanese, had a five year old girl who had also been born in Japan and raised speaking both Japanese and English. The interview took place in a park located north of Central Preschool.

Larissa: I’ve watched my daughter be left out too many times to count. I feel too many times for it to be a coincidence. She’ll walk over and try to play but it’s like, like there’s some type of force field that surrounds her. And I know it’s got something to do with her skin color because I hear the hushed comments. I hear them. Nobody expects me to speak Japanese and I think people here are even more surprised that she can speak Japanese. She speaks so well for her age. But it’s not enough to get her by here.

Author: How do you feel when you see her being left out like that?
Larissa: I can safely say it feels depressing. Or it feels like a type of a challenge that will help her to be stronger right? 95% of the time it feels damn depressing though. It’s something that stays with me.

The force field Larissa describes connects to both the emotions of the encounter and the politics of belonging in profound ways. In the ‘force field’ we can see the emotions arising around ideas of separation. The bodily differences of the preceding cases acted as a social sorting tool within the playground space and stopped integrative play occurring. In other international contexts research has shown (Noble & Poynting, 2008; Pain & Smith, 2008) that immigrant perceptions of patterns of seemingly mundane ‘incidents of incivility’ that arise from everyday encounters in public space produce feelings of marginalization and disenfranchisement (Noble & Poynting, 2008, p. 2854).

As norms in public space can be both based on behaviours and visible appearance acting as gates to the membership of community (Staeheli et al., 2009), the micro cases of exclusion on the playgrounds in Minato reflect how bodies are classified according to political and cultural norms and the negative experiences of those deemed to be ‘other’ in transgression of those visual norms. As Jansson (2016, p. 7) states; ‘perceptions of corporeal appearance in the cultural landscape are linked with a social order of moral judgments and exclusionary processes’.
Online play and home based play

For other parents, their children’s hypervisibility (Mountz, 2011) and negative encounters led to their absence from playgrounds. The parental emotions surrounding negative encounters perhaps reflect what Jansson (2016) notes as being part of the ‘risk’ of minority groups being visible in public space. Ultimately these parents turned away from public playgrounds and towards home and online space. This self-segregation represents a spatial outcome of a self-consciousness of local unbelonging (Nayak, 2017; Noble & Poynting, 2010).

The following quotes from Mary, an African American mother of a four year old son presents her experiences that led to using online play dates and how they function utilizing software like Skype™. They involved established networks of relatives or close friend’s children of similar age dwelling back in the country of origin.

Mary: I found it upsetting to be honest with you. Because, because we are viewed so differently here. I mean, I’ve had Japanese parents look scared when we would show up at the playground. I thought that it would be a one-time thing, but after a number of occasions, well. I decided it wasn’t a good atmosphere for me or my son. Now I tend to organise more things at our apartment and I started doing little online get togethers at weekends too.

Author: Could you tell me more about the get togethers? The online ones. How does that work?

Mary: Well, sure, that’s with my niece who’s back home and around the same age to my son. She’s living down in San Diego, so, so when it’s afternoon back there it’s, ah, about morning time for us here. We use Skype and they will decide to paint something together, a giraffe or whatever, and hold it up to the screen to show their progress and talk together. We installed some of the same applications on our iPads too so they can play the same games together and hang out.

The use of online space compresses the distance between the children engaged in the play and allows them to simultaneously draw, paint and even engage in the same game together through tablets like iPads™ in real time. These activities reflect the adaptability of parents in sustaining play experiences and in the maintaining/building of familial friendship networks abroad. However, the shift from playing in real public playgrounds to online play also presents a problematic issue regarding visibility of minorities in public space in Minato, and the underlying political meaning of reductions in such visibility. The less visible immigrants are the greater the risk of a slide towards becoming anomalies rather than accepted and eventual ‘legitimate’ users of spaces in the city (Staeheli et al., 2009, p. 12).

The root cause driving the decisions to go online were negative encounters, rather than purely voluntary decisions. As can be argued in Mary’s decision above, the turn towards home/online space to have her son play with relatives abroad was catalyzed by a sense of exclusion, and thus a type of emotional push factor has altered their mobilities in public space. In this way a form of self-segregation is occurring where an expectation of rejection or discomfort is anticipated by making oneself or one’s child visible due to their bodily characteristics. This reflects how spatial ‘pedagogies of unbelonging’ can diminish immigrant’s opportunities for local place-making and their investment in local spaces and national spaces (Noble & Poynting, 2010, p. 489).
The desire to maintain connections with one’s country of origin does not of course emerge solely from negative encounters. Research has shown that ‘there is a tendency for immigrants to have transnational economic, social, cultural and political connections with their country of origin’ (Mavroudi, 2010, p. 226). Yet, the underlying reasoning for choosing to establish the transnational online play option because of feelings of exclusion not only risks pushing parents out of public space, it also risks causing them to uproot completely from Japan as we will see presently.

Parents also started to use more home centred play involving their networks of immigrant friends but these are not always sustainable. Mark was a white Canadian father of a three year old boy. Here he describes why he ultimately chose to use his home instead of public playgrounds.

Mark: It’s a lot easier to have them play here and meet at my place. It takes out all the awkwardness of me sitting next to him on the playground. Like, trying to engage with the Japanese parents and their kids, because I know they find that uncomfortable. For play to work when they are this young it’s a like a joint exercise between the parents and the kids. You need both the other parties to want to do it. Anyway, it’s much easier to do that at home. I can arrange a particular time. Know who we’ll invite over. It takes a lot of the mystery out of it.

Shifts to home centred play do allow parents to organize particular times, invite preferred children as play companions, preferred parents to socialize with, and reduce the chance of negative emotions arising. Yet, the turn to the private sphere at the cost of being in public space has shared potential drawbacks, as with online space, regarding visibility and absence. As Jansson (2016, p. 6) notes, ‘for bodies to have broad political force, they need to be visible. Making oneself visible in public space has long been an important political tactic’. Again, the nature of the politics in question here is not aimed towards high level political statements, but rather the micro-politics of the everyday encounter with difference (Valentine, 2008). While meaningful encounters are difficult to establish in public space as evidenced in myriad research (Leitner, 2012; Nayak, 2017; Piekut & Valentine, 2017) the political symbolism of embodied visibility/activity in public spaces like playgrounds remains important as ‘mobility in public space is a core aspect of our experience of freedom’ (Noble & Poynting, 2010, p. 489).

**Global connectivity and local anonymity**

An onward migration pattern amongst immigrants in Minato was noted as being present by the interviewees. This national transience made building solid local social networks challenging for some parents that did decide to build their long-term life in Minato. As with Aidan, the father we heard from earlier, who has been living in Japan for over nine years.

Aidan: I meet a lot of interesting people but then they rotate out so. Three years usually, five years almost certainly gone … it’s interesting in the sense that you now know people that live all over the world, but no-one that lives next door. Yeah, so, that’s kind of the challenge to be a long-term expat in Japan.

The image of global connectivity but local anonymity emerged in many of the interviews. As illustrated by Aidan’s statement above ‘you know people that live all over the word, but
no-one that lives next door’. Casey, a white mother of a three year old who is originally from London discussed this sense of global connectivity and local anonymity.

Casey: When we first moved over here from London I was always trying to make friends and I thought, with Ryu (her husband) being Japanese it wouldn’t be too challenging. In my imagination, at least, when I planned out how it would more than likely be for us. I imagined Shelly (her daughter) having lots of little friends. And us too. It definitely hasn’t turned out like that. When I picture her future here, and I just think, I think nah, it’s too hard. People don’t see her as Japanese. It’s like getting blood from a stone to integrate her on the playground or wherever. They call kids who are bi-racial ‘half’, and I find that’s insulting somehow. Do you know what I mean? And now we’re looking to move back to the U.K. in the autumn if we can manage it because in two and a half years here our whole social life remains back there.

For Casey, we see the links between global connectivity, local anonymity, conceptions of where home is, and also negative encounters in playground contexts. Her quotidian experiences of exclusion have led to a desire to leave Japan as imagining the future for her daughter as being that of an ‘other’ or ‘half’ was too much. The feelings of local exclusion smothered feelings of belonging to/in Japan and the country of origin emerges as both future destination and home. Here I argue that a connection exists between Casey’s feelings and Hage and Yuval-Davis’s perspectives regarding home and belonging. Hage (1997, p. 103) states that ‘home is an ongoing project entailing a sense of hope for the future’ while Yuval-Davis (2011, p. 4) notes that ‘part of this feeling of hope relates to home as a safe space’.

For Casey, her hopes for the future spatially and socially have extinguished in Minato through the feelings of exclusion for her daughter. The safe space is perceived to be in the country of origin and thus hopeful space. It also highlights how within the encounter for immigrants there is an ‘intimate link between personal experiences of public space and the larger categories of national belonging’ and unbelonging (Noble & Poynting, 2008, p. 2888). Here, socioeconomic class is a permutation as the desire to move back to the U.K. is both optional/feasible, as opposed to situations where immigrants are faced with a lack of finances/resources or unstable political situations that prevent onward migration to new countries, or a return to a home country. In Casey’s case there was an opportunity to geographically counteract her exclusion by returning home through socioeconomic class.

**Conclusion**

This paper set out to reflect upon the under researched complexity arising from preschool children’s playground encounters from the everyday perspective of immigrant parents living in the Minato area of Tokyo. It has sought to contribute to the geographies of encounter in two primary ways. Firstly by presenting and analysing perspectives on grounded experiences of unbelonging and the reflective meaning of such moments (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014) through research conducted outside of the prevailing United States/Western Europe perspective (Piekut & Valentine, 2017). Secondly, by looking at children’s interethnic relations in public park playgrounds which are outside of institutional centric contexts (Wilson, 2013).
It has demonstrated both the emotional challenges and the coping techniques adopted by parents in response to negative public encounters. Firstly, in the mobilities of parents who persevere in using public playgrounds, and secondly in those parents who cease using playgrounds and turned towards home/online based play with their country of origin. Regarding the first group the spill over effects from negative playground encounters were demonstrated to influence wider perceptions of belonging locally/nationally. This calls for close attention to be given in how to build empathy in the Minato/Tokyo case where visible differences act as a clear social sorting tool between children. Here, Piekut and Valentine’s (2017) finding of the need for more sustained encounters may be beneficial as proximity, as shown in other countries, does not automatically build positive encounters in the Minato case. There remains a symbolic importance for immigrants to be visible in public space however, to lay claim to their legitimacy to exist in the city in some form rather than solely focusing on private space.

For the second group, the development of online play with countries of origin presents both an opportunity for maintaining bonds, but also risks further self-segregation from local space which has consequences for children developing knowledge of their local territories/environment and pushes towards further localized anonymity. Through self-segregation ‘the ability to reach beyond those who are already known to each other and to draw strangers into discourse’ is significantly reduced (Staeheli et al., 2009, p. 11) and due to onward mobility friendship networks are difficult to maintain locally. The paper has shown that socioeconomic class allowed for the creation of an onward migration strategy to counteract feelings of unbelonging and to break out of the sense of living ‘parallel lives’ to the local community in Minato (Piekut & Valentine, 2017, p. 177). This ability to access resources does not diminish the lived experience of parents concerning negative encounters of their children on playgrounds, but it does offer life choices which engender hope. Hope should not be underestimated. It is a luxury which many immigrants cannot avail of as they are more geographically bound.

Future research is needed within the Tokyo context focused on the majority society’s experience of encounters on public playgrounds to examine the issue from their perspective to gain a fuller understanding of the geographies of encounters unfolding there.

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