

## Research Article

Natalie Dixon\*

# Stranger-ness and Belonging in a Neighbourhood WhatsApp Group

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0046>

Received July 25, 2017; accepted December 6, 2017

**Abstract:** The messaging application WhatsApp is often adopted in urban neighbourhoods to distribute and discuss information as part of neighbourhood watch programmes. In this context, certain notions of information sharing and the cherishing this implies, are often entangled with ideals of protection in the neighbourhood. Using the case study of an enclosed neighbourhood in Johannesburg, this essay draws on theories of affect and mobility to introduce the concept of affective mooring. That is, that a neighbourhood WhatsApp group constitutes an affective mooring—an established practice and point of fixity—that generates a sense of being held in a community through feelings of collective presence and safety. Notably, these feelings of presence and safety are hinged on acts of resistance and alienation towards strangers. In this way, WhatsApp as an affective mooring in the neighbourhood is also a site for negotiating ideals of belonging.

**Keywords:** affect theory, WhatsApp, mobile, affective mooring

Mobile phones have become part of the processes of information exchange and control in many neighbourhoods. More specifically, the messaging application WhatsApp is often used in neighbourhoods to distribute and discuss information about security. Some neighbourhood watch programmes use WhatsApp to connect to local community policing forums in cities such as Johannesburg (Hattingh). Similarly, in London many residents have joined WhatsApp neighbourhood watch groups, prompting some journalists to describe the phenomenon as “Neighbourhood WatchApp” (Avis-Riordan). In the Netherlands, the WhatsApp logo appears on signage in neighbourhoods in cities such as Amsterdam to alert people to mobile surveillance in the area. These examples point to the popularity of the application amongst citizens and security institutions alike, as a platform for coordinating surveillance. While surveillance is a term most often used in the context of law enforcement and is associated with the state, it seems that mobile phones are part of (but not the cause of) more complex relationships of surveillance where populations also watch themselves and each other “in the course of intimate and interpersonal everyday relations” (Green 33).

Surveillance, as a part of everyday life, is the cornerstone of neighbourhood watch programmes. More specifically, these programmes necessitate an emphasis on surveillance, where ordinary people work with the police to report anything “out of the ordinary” (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 28). The concept of neighbourhood watch originated in the United States in the 1970s as a way for residents to cooperate with the police in order to prevent crime (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 26). As Anthony Minnaar writes, “the broad notion of community safety was premised on the assumption that this would lead to greater participation in crime control and crime prevention from all sections by ordinary members of communities” (10). As already noted, nowadays, this kind of community vigilance often takes place via social media platforms such as WhatsApp, where neighbours report on suspicious people, vehicles and activities as well as alert the community to new crime tactics (Hattingh). However, the discourse about neighbourhood watch often includes notions of neighbourhood vigilance as a dimension of community cohesion, even

---

\*Corresponding author: Natalie Dixon, Department of Media & Communications, Goldsmiths College, London, SE14 6NW, UK, E-mail: patsydixon@gmail.com



**Figure 1.** Neighbourhood Watch ('Buurtpreventie') sign on the outskirts of Amsterdam (Photo: Antal Guszev).

neighbourliness. As an example, Marie Hattingh notes that social cohesion is enacted through the same social media platforms that neighbours use for surveillance, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, where communities offer support and advice, circulate information and share relevant media articles. In this way, notions of information sharing and the caring this implies are often entangled with ideals of protection in the neighbourhood. Indeed, as Martin Heidegger offers, the very essence of the word neighbour—as a person who dwells (“near dweller”)—implies acts of cherishing and protection; a neighbour preserves and cares for the dwelling (349).

This essay examines these notions of so-called neighbourliness through the prism of a WhatsApp group chat. Specifically, what is at stake in these acts of protecting the neighbourhood? Furthermore, I suggest that these neighbourly acts implicate affect—as a binding force, essential to a sense of belonging in a community, between people or to a place. More accurately, I am concerned with what work affect, and affect theories, can do to examine how a neighbourhood is produced in a political sense, using a concept I term “affective mooring.” I borrow the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of mooring as: “an established practice or stabilizing influence.” In addition, mooring is a term often used by urban geographers to describe a point of fixity – whether spatial, infrastructural or institutional—that configures and enables mobilities. In this sense, geographers often make reference to transmitters which enable the flow of information; or train stations and airports which enable the international and domestic flow of travellers (Hannam et al. 3). The central argument in this essay is that a WhatsApp group chat offers a sense of rootedness amongst the flows of people and things in a neighbourhood. This sense can be understood to hold, even stabilise, a community through feelings of collective presence and “being in this together.” However, as examples will illustrate, this very process of collective holding and being is also premised on acts of alienation.

My analysis of mobile phones is premised on the claim that we engage with the technology through, and with, our bodies. As Valerie Walkerdine succinctly notes, “new media is bound up with the body” (20). In a similar vein, Sadie Plant describes mobiles as intimate technologies of the body (51). Following these claims, I consider what kind of bodily sensations take place during mobile practice and what they might mean. I adopt Walkerdine’s claim that “when we perceive something we also feel it” (22). Mobile practice is by no means a disembodied practice but rather relates directly to issues of the body and its technological mediation. Vivian Sobchack describes this phenomenological approach as “making meaning out of bodily sense” (1).

Therefore, to examine bodily sense in mobile practice, I rely on these particular affect theories to understand the body experiences outside of only cognition but also in terms of sensations and feelings. Following this, I allude to the affective dimension of mobile practice as “a corporeal aspect of new technologies” (Slack, Macgregor Wise 495). Therefore, in examining mobile practice, I consider a person’s affective response as an embodied response—where embodiment is a vibrant process resulting from interactions between body, mind and the environment (Hayles 297). As Walkerdine argues, the “central idea of affect is both sensation, or what bodies feel, and the sensational and ideational relations it fixes both within and between bodies” (21). Notably, I use the term body in a Spinozian sense, adopted by Deleuze and Guattari, where the body is not defined not merely by its humanness—organs or functions or subjects or substance but, but rather as a set of longitudes and latitudes (304). By this definition, the neighbourhood itself can be perceived as a body, and so too can the ideas that circulate on WhatsApp. Drawing on accounts of affect as both an embodied response and the socio-cultural relations this entails, I am interested in the kinds of relations that are produced between bodies in a neighbourhood context.

Following this, I employ the concept of affective mooring to examine suburban ideals of belonging. Considering these ideals, I pay close attention to acts of resistance by neighbours towards strangers, as people who supposedly do not belong to the neighbourhood. This resistance hinges on what makes a stranger, and the danger this allegedly implies, in terms of movement, appearance and acts of interpellation. Strangers are, according to Sara Ahmed, not just people we simply cannot recognise, but rather they are constituted a priori to any encounter with them through various discourses and techniques (37). Through the discourses generated on neighbourhood group chat the stranger is produced as having particular traits or bodily dispositions—where bodily dispositions include ways of walking, talking, eating and conducting oneself (Blackman 62). Indeed, social, symbolic and cultural capital are “marks of status and social differentiation and manifest through bodily dispositions” (Blackman 62).

In this sense, the stranger is someone who is out of the ordinary in the neighbourhood, which is signalled by their clothing, their gait or appearance. Strangers loiter. Strangers are dirty. Strangers are drunk. Strangers are noisy. Strangers are too quiet. Strangers are people who appear to have no purpose and who cannot be “located in the present” (Ahmed 8). Space is produced by a “multiplicity of perception and inscription” (Farman 13). This claim is well exemplified in the context of a WhatsApp group chat where notions of stranger proximity and danger are often negotiated and defined within the normative ideals of the neighbourhood.

Larissa Hjorth and Sarah Pink note that in relation to place, mobile communication provides an additional electronic-social layer to the material-geographic one (148). However, I would like to expand this idea further, to consider not only the addition of a so-called mobile layer “to” a physical place, but instead to consider the co-constitution of mobiles, places and people. Therefore, in the first part of this essay, I consider WhatsApp and its unique features as a way to better understand how the formation of a kind of virtual neighbourhood presence may be constituted within WhatsApp. This presence is often enacted through neighbourhood stories, where a mobile chat group can be considered a teller of those stories. In part, my choice of a neighbourhood as a case study is due to the fact that it provides a potent microcosm of society at large.

Equally significant, neighbourhoods have also been likened to “tiny underdeveloped nations” that protect their borders and communities (Morris, Hess 16). In this way, neighbourhoods are described as being defensive and static, even turning to violence in order to maintain ideals of harmonious and pastoral life. Here, aspects of trust and surveillance can perhaps be understood as necessary parts of the concept of a neighbourhood, especially if the neighbourhood is already imbued with certain political valences. That is, a neighbourhood is not simply a piece of demarcated land where people share communal space and information, but it is also a place that often has a class, religious or ethnicity base (Morris, Hess 6) that carries very particular histories of resistance and assimilation. Furthermore, in the context of neighbourhood watch, the neighbourhood is often premised on, or rather imagined as, a “pure and organic space” in need of protection (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 26). These programmes tend to be more prevalent in middle-class areas where property values are higher, and residents are more likely to co-operate with police on issues of community safety (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 27). This tendency may point to neighbourhood watch as

part of a larger dynamic of maintaining middle-class homogeneity, where space is shared amongst “those like us.” Following this, I borrow the idea from David Morley that the neighbourhood becomes a particular form of privatised interiority, even a place of transcendence, that must be protected against an infiltrating alien presence (218).<sup>1</sup> As such, “[i]t is symptomatic then of the very nature of neighbourhood that it enters public discourse as a site of crisis” (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 26).

## WhatsApp

WhatsApp is an instant messaging application launched in 2009, that, as of 2016, had one billion users globally, making it one of the world’s most popular communication channels (Statt). In their essay “Everyday Dwelling with WhatsApp,” Kenton O’Hara and his co-authors claim that while the relatively low cost of the application and its rich feature set are indisputable factors for the application’s popular adoption, it is the “quiddity of the experiences sought for and enabled” by WhatsApp that present scope for further research in mobile studies (2). In this vein, the authors point to certain themes for consideration, such as people’s faithfulness to maintaining connections, forms of social bonding and the way in which people dwell and “do friendship” with smartphones (O’Hara et al. 2). They argue that intimacy and togetherness are enacted through the activities of WhatsApp. For example, the way people chit-chat, exchange phatic content, or share images and information that creates a sense of being together or closeness (O’Hara et al. 1). In other words, people tell stories about what they experience, what affects them and where they are, which make up the felt-life of their everyday existence with others through WhatsApp. The flowing, ongoing, conversational style of WhatsApp, coupled with its features such as “online” status, “last seen online” and message notification ticks, also come to represent a kind of presence for users of the application (O’Hara et al. 12).

However, O’Hara and his co-authors take this concept of mediated presence even further, to say that WhatsApp exchanges, sometimes performed in groups and sometimes one-on-one, represent the comings and goings of people’s everyday activities and, in this way, can be seen as constituting a kind of “digital dwelling” (3). Here, the concept of dwelling, is forged in movement and experience and not simply the occupation of a place (Ingold 147). “Dwelling is not simply a place but a ‘doing’ and needs to be seen as constituted by things done and felt, endlessly in the moment-by-moment of togetherness and directionality” (O’Hara et al. 11). These doings become part of the everyday fabric of the neighbourhood, where neighbours share information, seek advice from each other, ask favours or share jokes.

WhatsApp extends beyond simply being a tool for communicating, but also relates to a way of being with technology. As Martin Heidegger claims, “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological” (*The Question Concerning Technology* 3). So too, technology is not something we should regard as neutral. Following the Greek etymology of the term, Heidegger offers that technology is a kind of “bringing-forth” (*The Question Concerning Technology* 7) which “is therefore an inherently world-forming process, both on a biological and cultural level” (Kember, Zylinska 14). Employing Heidegger’s definitions in their broadest sense, WhatsApp can be seen as a technology that brings forth certain ways of feeling and thus being in the world. Forming a community is a process—both technological and affective—that is configured through WhatsApp and entails some feelings of relief and calm. The neighbourhood is thus revealed as a dynamic and complex set of relationships and processes where the distribution, storage and transformation of information through mobiles are understood as ways of revealing. In the next section I will discuss theories of the neighbourhood that pertain to mobile phones and mobility, as a way to set up my argument that a WhatsApp chat group constitutes a site that produces a certain affective notion of the neighbourhood.

<sup>1</sup> David Morley’s examination of alienation in a domestic setting uses the home as a starting point, not the neighbourhood. I am therefore borrowing and adapting his ideas about the home quite liberally, perceiving the neighbourhood as a collection of homes, that assume similar dynamics of interiority and fear of aliens.

## Neighbourhood

Mobile theorists have raised questions about how the neighbourhood can be conceptualised in the age of mobilities. Specifically, theories that link forms of social bonding and geographic proximity have been radically disrupted by various communication technologies, most recently mobile technology and chat applications like WhatsApp (Van Kempen, Wissink 101). Ronald van Kempen and Bart Wissink argue that questions about the relevance of the residential neighbourhood in urban studies continue to persist with the introduction of these technologies that allow people to maintain social relationships at a distance, and outside of the neighbourhood, “creating additional alternatives to social relationships with neighbours” (101).

This emphasis on mobility in neighbourhoods emerges from a broader theme amongst scholars that pertains to the flows, movements and connections of people, things and ideas, often termed as a “mobility turn” (Sheller, Urry 209). In their essay “The New Mobilities Paradigm,” Mimi Sheller and John Urry argue for how neighbourhoods can be theorised, eschewing what they describe as “sedentarist” theories that privilege and normalise aspects of social research such as stability, meaning and place over other aspects, such as distance, change and “placelessness” (208). Broadly speaking, the turn to mobility “emphasises that all places are tied into at least thin networks of connections that stretch beyond each such place and mean that nowhere can be an ‘island’” (209). In this networked and relational paradigm, topics such as shipping routes, traffic flows, SMS messages and the movement of images in the media present topics of interest (Sheller, Urry 212). In a new mobilities paradigm, Urry and Sheller argue for “going beyond the imagery of terrains as spatially fixed geographic containers for social processes” (209).

Similarly, Doreen Massey urges theorists to think of place as a process, not a thing. She too articulates her concept of place, in part, through social interactivity. She writes that these ‘interactions themselves are not motionless things frozen in time. They are processes’ (29). This notion of place as process is re-affirmed by Manuel Castells in what he terms the “space of flows,” which he articulates through the “dominant practices of the Information Age” (442). Castells defines the space of flows as “the material organisation of time-sharing social practices that work through flows. By flows, I understand purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society” (442). Castells’ argument is that the “network of communication is the fundamental spatial configuration: places do not disappear, but their logic and their meaning become absorbed in the network” (443). In Castells’ “space of flows,” he posits elites as “those who form their own society, and constitute symbolically secluded communities, retrenched behind the very material barrier of real estate pricing” (446). In this sense, a gated community can be understood as a “spatially bound, interpersonally networked subculture” (Castells 446).

I am borrowing these two ideas: namely, that place is considered a process, not a thing, and, that the configuration of space emerges through communication networks. Further I am adding another dimension to these ideas: that while networks include data and information exchange, they also entail a wide array of affective attachments. In *Networked Affect*, Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit argue that “the fluctuating and altering dynamics of affect give shape to online connections and disconnections, to the proximities and distances of love, desire, and wanting between and among bodies” (1). Networked communication is far from a neutral process but, as a form of cultural practice, is “underpinned by affective investments, sensory impulses, and forms of intensity that generate and circulate within networks comprising both human and non-human actors” (Hillis et al. 1). Affect theory offers “ways to understand and explain the implications of the particular technological conjuncture at the which the ‘networked society’ now finds itself” (Hillis et al. 2). Similarly, Imogen Tyler argues that “affect is channelled within and across media with political consequences and we need to theorize these affects as not only unpredictable . . . but also as strategic and performed” (89). Following these claims, to pay close attention to, even foreground, the affective dimensions of a communication network offers a way to further examine its political dynamics.

In the context of the neighbourhood, these political dynamics pertain to various acts of social inclusion and exclusion as well as the maintenance of a boundary line to maintain forms of homogeneity and so-called order. Notably, models of mobility are often only applicable to a privileged affluent few in

economically developed parts of the world (Tomlinson 132). Similarly, Morley asks in *Home Territories*: “[i]f we take mobility to be a defining characteristic of the contemporary world, we must simultaneously pose the question of why (and with what degrees of freedom) particular people stay at home and ask how, in a world of flux, forms of collective dwelling are sustained and reinvented” (13). Sustaining this question of the politics of mobility, the neighbourhood may be re-imagined as “the location of the moorings of many mobilities with very different scales” (Van Kempen, Wissink 104). A WhatsApp chat group is one such mooring, where a mooring is understood as both a fixed form amongst flows but also an affective source that creates feelings of stability, perhaps even safety and comfort. Through WhatsApp group chat, the neighbourhood becomes a particular virtual anchor for the community, based on the group members’ investment in a particular location.

Valerie Walkerdine argues for foregrounding affect in examinations of communities. Indeed, aspects of affect theory provide an entry point for theorising the dynamics of WhatsApp group chat; specifically, the concept of “holding” from Walkerdine’s case study of a community in a Welsh town undergoing enormous change due to the closure of their local steelworks. Following a psychoanalytical approach based on infant studies, she articulates emotional holding as an embodied, relational and unconscious process, analogous to a baby being held close to a warm body and being fed (95). For infants, this holding is performed through inter-related physical and psychic registers (Walkerdine 96). The latter “provides the bedrock for being able to experience oneself as whole and therefore as safe” (Walkerdine 95). Extending this theory to her case study in Wales, Walkerdine claims that over time the town envelopes itself in a metaphorical skin that “provides a feeling of ontological security for a community beset by uncertainty and insecurity” (91).

For Walkerdine, a sense of holding is an affective process enacted through certain practices, such as neighbours who hang washing and “have a natter,” play hopscotch or simply ask for advice (99-100). Through these practices—as a collection of neighbourly “doings”—people experience feelings of being held or contained, countering other “feelings of the fear of being uncontained, unsafe or dying” (Walkerdine 95). The idea of holding is particularly pertinent in a neighbourhood that often experiences instances of panic and fear about potential crime, but what is missing from this concept is how it relates to the movement and flows that seem inherent to a neighbourhood. The neighbourhood would appear to demand a slightly different articulation of holding, one that emerges out of the discourse of flows and movement of urban studies. So, while an affective mooring may enact some of the same dynamics as Walkerdine’s practice of holding—such as stability and safety—it is located in a paradigm that is more attuned to the affordances and politics of mobility.

Information sharing in the group chat potentially generates fear and paranoia, which can be amplified by others who feel the same way. In this sense neighbours begin to feel like they are “in this together,” in a shared experience of fear of the outside world of crime and criminals. Therefore, in the space of flows of the neighbourhood, there is a kind of mutual co-constitution of neighbours and WhatsApp on a sensory level—for example, as neighbours experience the sensation of something proximate and foreboding—as well as the emotional level, where expressions of fear and paranoia emerge in the chat group. However, it can be argued that amidst this sense of precarity in the neighbourhood, neighbours also experience feelings of being held or contained in the safety of a collective presence in WhatsApp in the same vein as in Walkerdine’s case study. Therefore, both feelings of insecurity and containment are seen to emerge through WhatsApp group chat. Most notably, this concept of containment is complex, as it implies not only certain instances of protection and care but is also premised on particular ideals of exclusivity of place and expelling alterity.

## Neighbourhood A\*

Neighbourhood A is a leafy, affluent area in north-western Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa. The neighbourhood is characterised by its vantage point, located on a small ridge with impressive views of the city. Properties have high-perimeter walls and an omnipresent private security company patrols the streets in large black utility vehicles. Neighbourhood A is an enclosed neighbourhood which means visitors can only enter by passing through one street entrance, using a security controlled boom where a

security guard is stationed 24 hours a day. Much like other enclosed neighbourhoods in the country, all in-roads to the suburb have been closed off with palisade fencing in an effort to prevent crime (Landman 3). Various gates allow pedestrians to enter and are required to be left unlocked, even at night, by the city of Johannesburg. When the traffic increases another road is opened and then locked again. With limited traffic flow, the streets are quiet and neighbours can be seen walking their dogs and children riding their bicycles.

Nowadays, Neighbourhood A, like many other areas in South Africa, experiences significant levels of crime. In a period of one year, neighbours reported 13 burglaries, 17 robberies and 10 car thefts to their local police station.<sup>2</sup> In some of these instances, neighbours cry to the WhatsApp chat group for help, fearful of being attacked in their homes. In other instances, group members report a car hijacking in the neighbourhood that involves children. Neighbours anxiously recount scenes of housebreaking. Often, messages are sent to the group to verify strange sounds and account for cars and people in the neighbourhood. However, in the early set-up phase of the group, members also express feelings of safety. One group member remarks, “Feeling more comfortable and at ease already,” another says, “It makes one feel a little better knowing everyone is on watch.” Group members often avail themselves of others in the neighbourhood. In one instance, a group member writes: “I’m quite far away from home just seen my fence alarm go off. I got security to go out but if anyone else is able to just drive past and see if okay I would appreciate it and owe u one.” Various group members reply to this call for help, showing the group’s responsiveness to its members.

Notably, another often-cited aspect of contemporary South African society is a persistent economic inequality (Landman 4). To illustrate this point, Neighbourhood A has four times the median annual income of its immediate neighbouring ward, where 23% of that ward’s population have no household income according to South African census data in 2011. While private security is not new or unique to South Africa, South African private security companies, alongside residents, have come to determine how notions of space and movement are reconfigured in the neighbourhood, facilitated by the neighbourhood’s mobile communication. This reconfiguration creates a certain privatisation of urban space (Minnaar 41). However, in South Africa, the practice of privatising urban space can be more uniquely considered. As a result of the pressure of maintaining a presence in all neighbourhoods of post-apartheid South Africa in 1994, police were redistributed to previously under-policed black areas. As a result, wealthier, formerly whites-only neighbourhoods turned to private security to manage access control and crime prevention (Minnaar 33). Returning to Ahmed’s idea that the very concept of a neighbourhood enters public discourse as an entity “already in crisis” can almost certainly be better understood in the context of Neighbourhood A’s history and current situation. But, more significantly it also problematizes the concept of the neighbourhood as simply being an entity delineated and bound by economic and class commonalities. Beyond those parameters, the neighbourhood is also bound together as a site of shared resistance.

The WhatsApp conversations of Neighbourhood A reflect the general sentiment of South Africans who report feelings of insecurity and fear about crime (Minnaar 24; Lemanski 105). More transparent crime statistics and media reports on violent crime contribute to a siege mentality, where South Africans “retreat” into private ‘fortified enclaves’ and are willing to submit themselves to a comprehensive range of security measures and procedures, under constant security surveillance and control and more often than not giving up individual freedoms such as open access, free movement and privacy” (Minnaar 8). However, some theorists argue that this enclave living only further contributes to aspects of mistrust and paranoia in neighbourhoods, as residents limit social mixing (Lemanski 108). The Neighbourhood A mobile group exemplifies the panicky potential of neighbourhoods driven by both the threat and perpetration of crime. It is important to emphasise that fear of crime in South Africa is not a uniquely white affair, as it is “equally prevalent across all socioeconomic and race groups” (Lemanski 109). Notably, panic comes at a very specific time in Neighbourhood A, as the neighbourhood is experiencing a significant level of crime and is in the process of trying to close off streets to the neighbourhood to further limit and control access. Therefore, issues of controlling the so-called breached boundary lines of the neighbourhood are directly related to feelings of anxiety and fear expressed in the group.

---

2 Statistics retrieved from the South African Police.

## Movement

As discussed in the first section, a mobilities paradigm insists on the study of a neighbourhood with consideration for certain flows and movement of bodies and information. As security studies in South Africa note, criminals tend to travel to wealthier neighbourhoods where the returns for their efforts will be highest (Demombynes, Özler 265). In this sense, movement is therefore already an implicit part of that which constitutes criminality. In Neighbourhood A's WhatsApp group, members describe cars that “hang around” or “drive slowly.” Accordingly, movement is not only a marker of stranger-ness but also of criminality. As Ahmed writes, “[c]ommunity is not just established through the designation of pure and safe spaces, but becomes established as a way of moving through space” (34, original emphasis). Indeed, certain ways of moving through the neighbourhood are more accepted than others in the community. As Massey notes, issues of power are always implicit to flows and movement. She writes: “[d]ifferent social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it” (Massey 26).

In this sense, a kinetic elite<sup>3</sup> emerges as those “in charge,” to use Massey's phrase, of assessing movement in the neighbourhood, where WhatsApp becomes part of systems of surveillance. Members of the WhatsApp group evaluate movements—where the chat group can be understood as a cultural site of mutual negotiation—and determine what is accepted as normal and/or ordinary. In one instance in Neighbourhood A, a resident raises concern about a parked car in one of the streets: “three black males in white honda [sic] outside no 7 Congo, anyone know anything.” Members of the group respond by calling the security company to “check it out.” The resident continues “1 is now walking up tugela [street], anyone around?” A few minutes later the security company reports to the group that the men “are builders collecting their tools.” While some group members seem satisfied with the response, another asks, “Are we sure? Did they check with the owner of the house they are ‘building’ for?”

Racial profiling has, in many contexts and throughout history, been implicated in policing, where young black youths are often pre-formed as suspects of crime. As Lemanski argues, in South Africa, “whites have long used fear of crime as a euphemism for fear of blacks” (109). These so-called markers of difference (or crime?) and stranger-ness are further given semiotic form through codes in mobile-mediated surveillance in neighbourhood WhatsApp groups where neighbours describe people using coded phrases such as “bravo male” or abbreviations such as “BM” to indicate black males (Farber). These assessments of movement and race serve as markers to objectify subjects in the neighbourhood. This practice, which hinges on what makes some people more suspicious than others, is part of what I argue is a “dividing practice” where the subject is divided from others: such as the “criminals” from the “good boys” (Foucault 208). The ideological function of interpellation is that individuals are transformed into subjects (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 23). Interpellation assigns certain people “different value in social contexts,” and the “subject comes into being” through being recognised and thus produced as a stranger (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 23–24). “The recognition of strangers brings into play relations of social and political antagonism that mark some others as stranger other others” (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 25, original emphasis).

In one instance a stranger, allegedly drunk and stoned, stumbles into Neighbourhood A and a response from neighbours is coordinated via the WhatsApp group. Neighbours are able to pinpoint the movements of the stranger as he walks through the streets passing by their homes, circulating this information to the rest of the group. The person who comes to the rescue is figured as a hero, protecting the neighbourhood from imminent danger and cementing the notion that the streets are vulnerable to the threat of strangers. Ahmed argues that this form of neighbourhood policing alongside the heroic tendencies it evokes figures the “good citizen built on the image of the strong citizen” (31). This act constitutes a performance in the group chat as ordinary neighbours become extraordinary people, keeping up the moral good of the community. More so, “the good citizen is figurative primarily as white, masculine and middle-class, the heroic subject who can

3 ‘Kinetic elite’ is a phrase used by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas during an interview with journalist Gary Wolf for *Wired* magazine in June 2000 for a feature titled ‘Exploring the Unmaterial World’.



protect the vulnerable bodies of weaker ones” (Ahmed 31). In both instances, the immediacy of feedback about whether danger is contained or not is established in the group chat, reconfirming the group as a site of collective decision making. More so, the WhatsApp group serves as an apparatus of legitimation and consent, where the presence and also actions of people come to be determined as acceptable or not. As suggested in this essay, boundaries and the surveillance entailed in maintaining them often implicate class, race and economic relations. Therefore, in the context of the neighbourhood, one that is patrolled and under surveillance, “the stranger takes on spatial function, establishing relations of proximity and distance within the homeland” (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 3). I consider this notion of Ahmed’s further: mobile technologies, as embodied and spatial technologies are part of locating, confining and/or resisting strangers and as such, they might also be used to theorise how neighbourhoods establish certain practices of community and ultimately belonging.

-----  
**5:45:31 PM: Kate: Did anyone just hear a gunshot?**

**5:46:04 PM: Jane: Sounded like one for sure**

**5:46:33 PM: Peter: Yes did hear a loud bang—not sure it was a gunshot**

**5:46:57 PM: Claire: Heard it**

**7:22:58 PM: Dave: Chill, it’s fireworks**

**(Neighbourhood A WhatsApp Group - 19 November 2013)**  
 -----

**9:01:25 PM: Dave: Everyone ok out there? I hear shouting ????**

**9:01:54 PM: Steve: Nothing here**

**9:03:08 PM: The Hamiltons: I heard fireworks?? I think it was fireworks.**

**9:08:55 PM: Dave: I’ve been outside to listen. Fireworks and kids playing Marco Polo! Sounded like people screaming but all ok!**

**(Neighbourhood A WhatsApp Group - 5 January 2014)**  
 -----

**Figure 2.** Extracts from a WhatsApp exchange in Neighbourhood A.

## Neighbourliness

Despite the core premise of the mobilities discourse, people still have the need for some sort of attachment, even rootedness, “whether through place or anything else” (Massey 26). I closely consider this attachment in this essay, through the lens of WhatsApp group chat, which I argue constitutes an affective mooring point for a neighbourhood community. As an established practice and a stabilising influence, WhatsApp group chat offers neighbours a sense of being metaphorically held in times of precarity. Importantly, mobile phones and WhatsApp are not incidental to this experience but are central to producing the environment of the neighbourhood as people affirm their feelings of fear, paranoia or safety about a particular place, as illustrated in the highlighted message excerpts. Therefore, this practice, one that can be paradoxically termed “mobile mooring,” is felt through experiences of symbolic proximity and a sense of collective presence generated through the affordances of the technology. Perhaps, this practice can, therefore, be understood as a producing a certain mobile affective notion of place. In this view, mobiles, as part of a close and intimate relationship with the corporeal body and its environment, are at the centre an examination of the neighbourhood, as the vehicle through which neighbours experience a sense of place.

However, as discussed in the introduction to this essay, the very concept of neighbourliness involves a somewhat complex entanglement of ideals of protection and acts of cherishing. As James Clifford asks, “What does it take to defend a homeland? What are the political stakes in claiming (or sometimes being relegated to) a ‘home’?” (36). I argue that neighbourliness, enacted and enabled through WhatsApp group chat, is also a form of politics that is hinged not only on experiences of being held but is also based on acts

of exclusion—that is to expel those things and people who do not belong to the neighbourhood. Indeed, the concept of neighbourliness has been used to obscure acts of exclusion in the name of so-called “good” neighbours who recognise differences between each other as a means to supposedly live both ethically and separately. This concept has problematic political antecedents, as Prime Minister of South Africa, Hendrik Verwoerd once claimed in 1961 that apartheid was merely an act of “good neighbourliness” (Hahn 10). Significantly, WhatsApp group chat, as an affective mooring point, can be seen to produce a certain notion of the neighbourhood. This notion reinforces and normalises ideals of neighbourliness that assumes differences in movement and race as the basis for marking the exclusivity of place.

\* I refer to *Neighbourhood A* as a way to protect the identity of its residents.

*Extracts from the Neighbourhood A WhatsApp chat are published with the consent of the group, and all names have been changed to protect the privacy of members.*

## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- , “Who Knows? Knowing Strangers and Strangeness.” *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol.15 No.31 (2000): 49-68.
- Avis-Riordan, Katie. “Is Social Media Making Our Homes Safer?” *House Beautiful*. (4 February 2017) Web. 24 July 2017.  
 <<http://www.housebeautiful.co.uk/lifestyle/property/a1253/social-media-neighbourhood-watch-home-security/>>
- Blackman, Lisa. *The Body: The Key Concepts*. Oxford: Berg, 2008.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, (1996) 2009.
- Clifford, James. *Routes*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Deleuze, Gilles. and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury, (1988) 2013.
- Demombynes, Gabriel. and Özler, Berk. “Crime and Local Inequality in South Africa” *Journal of Development Economics* 76 (2005): 265-292.
- Farman, Jason. *Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Farber, Tanya. “Growing discomfort with neighbourhood watches ‘racial profiles’” *Times Live*. (November 2014). Web. 5 October 2016. <<http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2014/11/30/growing-discomfort-with-neighbourhood-watches-racial-profiles>>
- Foucault, Michel. “The Subject and Power.” *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Eds. H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982.
- Green, Nicola. “Who’s Watching Whom? Monitoring and Accountability in Mobile Relations.” *Wireless World*. Eds. B. Brown, N. Green, R. Harper. London: Springer, 2002.
- Hahn, Matthew. *The Robben Island Shakespeare*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Hannam, K., Sheller, Mimi., Urry, John. “Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings.” *Mobilities* Vol. 1, No.1: 1-22.
- Hjorth, Larissa. and Pink, Sarah. “Emplaced Cartographies: Reconceptualising Camera Phone Practices in an Age of Locative Media.” *Media International Australia* (2012): 145-155.
- Hattingh, Marie J. “The Use of Facebook by a Community Policing Forum to Combat Crime.” Published in *SAICSIT ‘15*, Proceedings of the 2015 Annual Research Conference of the South African Institute of Computer Scientists and Information Technologists. Article 19. Stellenbosch: ACM, 2015.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. “Flesh and Metal: Reconfiguring the Mindbody in Virtual Environments.” *Configurations*, Vol. 10. No.2 (2002): 297-320.
- Hillis, Ken., Paasonen, Susanna., Petit, Michael. *Networked Affect*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Building Dwelling Thinking*. Harper Colophon Books: New York, 1971.
- , *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. William Lovitt. London: Garland Publishing, 1977.
- Ingold, Tim. *Being Alive: Essays on Movements, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Kember, Sarah. and Zylinska, Joanna. *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.
- Landman, Karen. “An Overview of Enclosed Neighbourhoods in South Africa.” Special report for the CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research). Pretoria: CSIR, 2000.
- Lemanski, Charlotte. “A New Apartheid? The Spatial Implications of Fear of Crime in Cape Town, South Africa.” *Environment & Urbanization*, Vol. 16 No. 2 (2004): 101-112.
- Massey, Doreen. “A Global Sense of Place.” *Marxism Today*, June (1991): 24-29.
- Minnaar, Anthony. “Private-Public Partnerships: Private Security, Crime Prevention and Policing in South Africa.” Inaugural Lecture. Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2004.
- Morley, David. *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*. London: Routledge, 2000.

- Morris, David. and Hess, Karl. *Neighbourhood Power*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.
- O'Hara, Kenton., Massimi, Michael., Harper, Richard., Rubens, Simon., Morris, Jessica. "Everyday Dwelling with WhatsApp." Proceedings of CSCW'14 February 15-19 2014, Baltimore.
- Plant, Sadie. "On the Mobile: The Effects of Mobile Telephones on Social and Individual Life." Special Report commissioned by Motorola. (2001) Web. 20 November 2013. <<http://classes.dma.ucla.edu/Winter03/104/docs/splant.pdf>>
- Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Sheller, Mimi. and Urry, John. "The New Mobilities Paradigm." *Environment and Planning A*. Vol. 38 (2006): 207-226.
- Slack, Jennifer D. and Macgregor Wise, J. "Cultural Studies and Technology." *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs*. Eds. L. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone. London: Sage, 2002.
- South African Census data 2011. Web. 3 May 2017 <<https://wazimap.co.za/profiles/ward-79800088-city-of-johannesburg-ward-88-79800088/>>
- Statt, Nick. "WhatsApp has grown to 1 billion users." *The Verge*. (February 2016). Web. October 7 2016. <<http://www.theverge.com/2016/2/1/10889534/whats-app-1-billion-users-facebook-mark-zuckerberg>>
- Tomlinson, John. *Globalisation and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
- Tyler, Imogen. "Methodological Fatigue and the Politics of the Affective Turn." *Feminist Media Studies*. Vol. 8 No. 1 (2008): 85-90.
- Van Kempen, Roland. and Wissink, Bart. "Between Places and Flows: Towards a New Agenda for Neighbourhood Research in an Age of Mobility." *Geografiska Annaler: Series B*, (2014): 95-108.
- Walkerdine, Valerie. "Communal Beingness and Affect: An Exploration of Trauma in an Ex-industrial Community." *Body & Society* Vol.16 No.91 (2010): 91-116.
- Walkerdine, Valerie. *Children, Gender, Video Games: Towards a Relational Approach to Multimedia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.