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# **Bowling Together? Practices of belonging and becoming in a London Ten-pin Bowling League**

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## **Abstract**

This paper uses the case of an ethnographic study of a London ten-pin bowling alley to propose a framework of 'practices of belonging and becoming' for understanding convivial participation in urban space. Drawing insights from the bowling league, the paper puts forward four propositions for rethinking belonging through bowling: as a practice that embeds people in place; as a relational practice experienced across time and place; as a performance that acts on the sense of self and the body; and as a theatrical performance that enriches and resonates through a scene. The paper proposes that these four intertwined registers can be used beyond this example to advance dynamic theories of belonging and to enrich an understanding of the production of convivial urban spaces in the contemporary city.

**Key words:** Belonging, bowling, cities, community, conviviality, ethnography, leisure, performativity, urban

## **Practice Time**

*It is Tuesday night at 7.30pm and the bowling league are taking over the upper floor of a North London bowling alley and setting up for their half hour of practice before the league games begin. On ascending the stairs to the upper floor, the atmosphere changes. The music hasn't yet been turned on, lending a more serious air than the on the lower level. But there's something else too. A palpable feeling of preparation. Bowling balls and shoes are retrieved from the cupboard at the side of the lanes in roller bags that are pulled out across the waxed floor. There is a low buzz of conversation as bowlers catch up with each other. 'How was your holiday?', people ask John and Claudia. As lynchpins of the league, their absence has been noticed. 'Lovely! How's your arm?' Claudia replies to Steve who is suffering from a sports injury.*

## **Introduction**

This paper takes insights from an ethnographic account of a ten-pin bowling league in contemporary London to propose a framework of 'practices of belonging and becoming' for understanding such convivial participation, bringing together work on community as practice (Studdert, 2006; Walkerdine, 2016; Blokland, 2017), overlapping in a scene (Blum, 2003; Young, 1990) and performativity (Butler, 1990, Bell, 1999). Moving away from the moralising account of the function of bowling leagues offered by Robert Putnam (2000), the paper puts forward an approach that is better suited to capturing the dynamics of urban multiculturalism as they unfold in place.

Robert Putnam is not the only American sociologist to turn their attention to the social uses of bowling. William Foote Whyte (1943) explored how social status and hierarchy was reflected and confirmed through bowling performance as part of his famous Boston-based study 'Street Corner Society'. More recently Douglas Harper (2004) has examined how bowling cements relationships between working class men in a rural community. But Putnam's (2000) intervention is the most well-known and makes claims that go far beyond the specificities of bowling. Putnam argues that while more people than ever are going to bowling alleys in the USA, this is done with people like themselves on an irregular basis, rather than in a league where they might regularly meet people who are

different from them. Putnam's argument is that 'bridging' across social groups produces a form of social capital that can broaden individuals' identities, strengthen bonds across social groups and provide social and economic opportunities. Therefore, he argues, a decline in participation in bowling leagues suggests a decline in American community.

While the central argument of *Bowling Alone* is not really about bowling, the use of bowling as the book's hook is not accidental. Bowling is used as shorthand for a particular ideal of American society, reflecting a successful rebranding of ten-pin bowling – an activity previously considered disreputable and associated with bar room basements – in post-war America (Hurley, 2001). In doing this Putnam glosses over bowling's tumultuous social and cultural history which includes bowling alleys being among the last leisure spaces in the USA to desegregate on the basis of race (Bass and Nelson, 1996). Within his framework, the histories of exclusion that haunt organisations such as ten-pin bowling leagues in the USA are left unexamined.

In Putnam's understanding, community is a noun that is achieved through a narrowly defined set of organised practices. Groups that create opportunities for forging ties that bridge between social groups are framed as more valuable for accruing social capital than chance encounters or forms of 'bonding' within already formed social groups. These ideas have influenced a large body of neighbourhood-based research focused on whether people have 'meaningful' contact or not across forms of difference. Within this framework, diversity, particularly ethnic diversity, is framed as a problem that needs to be solved.

For example, Putnam draws on a case of two people who meet at bowling league, one of whom donates a kidney to the other ('Boschma is white and Lambert [kidney donor] is African American. That they bowled together makes all the difference.' 2000, 28). This is framed as extreme 'bridging' across a racial divide through bowling, it is a visceral and corporeal example of body parts moving between 'races'. While the London bowling league discussed here does facilitate contact between people from different social, ethnic and national backgrounds

who might not usually meet, some of these rarely speak to each other, let alone hand over bodily organs. Rather than judge the bowling league on its capacity to facilitate bridging, this paper explores how such micro-spaces provide the opportunity for conviviality – defined by Gilroy as ‘the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of urban life in Britain’ (Gilroy, 2004: xi) – to flourish. This paper’s ambition is not in evaluating the impact of participation in a bowling league on social capital, but in teasing out a multifaceted understanding of what bowling in the league means to people in terms of belonging and becoming, and using this to understand the mechanisms that create the bowling league as a convivial space.

The study discussed in this paper takes the bowling alley, used by people of a range of ages, ethnicities, genders, social classes and dis/abilities, as a lens on the intersecting processes of urban change and practices of belonging in London. In a previous paper (Jackson, 2019), I explored how the bowling alley became a contested space after it was earmarked for demolition, a move opposed by local residents on the basis of its social diversity. This paper focuses more closely on what happens within the bowling alley, rather than its local context. I propose that participating in the bowling league can be understood as both a practice of belonging and a process of becoming, offering four registers through which this takes place 1. How attachment to place and to a group is ‘done’ through league participation 2. How bowling is a relational performance, linking this space to others across time and place 3. How bowling as a performance of belonging acts on the sense of self as well as the body of the bowler. 4. How bowling as a theatrical performance enriches and resonates through a scene. These four intertwined registers have resonances beyond bowling in advancing a dynamic, embodied and unfinished approach to studying practices of belonging.

### **From community’s ‘moral projects’ to practices of belonging and becoming**

Dissatisfaction with the ‘moral projects’ of community (Back, 2009) has led to a move in sociology towards understanding community as a verb, rather than a noun (Studdert, 2006; Blokland, 2017, Neale et al, 2018). Rogaly suggests,

'community is best understood through the concept of micro-sociality, as a verb, as ongoing social relations in action, rather than a thing to be possessed, lacked or lost.' (2016, 657). Community is cast in this body of work as something performed through a variety of registers and intensities, a smile or one-off interaction as well as participation in a more structured group.

This move away from focussing on community as forged only through particular forms of civic engagement and towards community as 'a set of public doings' (Blokland, 2017, 12), is better attuned to grasp the coming together of people in the bowling league. However, rather than 'practices of community', in the discussion that follows, I use 'practices of belonging and becoming'. It is not my intention to underplay the significant meaning that coming together on a weekly basis has for the league members and the forging of lasting friendships through league participation (see Traill (2018) on the difference between the experience of community by participants and its analytical usefulness). Rather, I use 'practices of belonging and becoming' to better capture both the diverse range of attachments that are forged and re-enacted through participating in the bowling league (practices of belonging) and the ways that such participation also reshapes the person and the scene in which it takes place (practices of becoming). In forging this approach, I bring the work of Young (1990) and Blum (2003), alongside theorists of belonging and performativity (Butler, 1990, Bell, 1999, Fortier, 1999, Yuval-Davis, 2006) into dialogue with the newer work on community as practice.

Long predating the recent turn to rethinking community, Iris Marion Young points to how in cities people frequently 'interact with spaces and institutions they all experience belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity' (1990, 137). This is helpful in delineating how a focus on belonging provides a different lens to that of community. Her description of 'side-by-side particularity', where groups exist but overlap and sometimes intermingle seems apt for a bowling alley where the side-by-side layout of the lanes shapes social interactions and is more compatible with Gilroy's (2004) concept of conviviality. In his work on 'scenes' Blum encompasses the different intensities of

engagements involved in Young's overlapping, arguing 'It is a mix of Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft and their impossible reconciliation that makes for the lure and excitement of the scene.' (2003, 176). Following Young and Blum, this paper examines the practices of belonging that unfold through the bowling league, but within the context of the scene and atmosphere of this specific bowling alley and of the associations that bowling holds for individual league members.

Participating in such a scene is not only about how people act on a space but also how practices and atmospheres of spaces act back on people. Judith Butler's (1990) work on performativity provides conceptual tools for linking forms of practice and becoming. Following Butler, Bell argues:

'the performativity of belonging 'cites' the norms that constitute or make present the 'community' or group as such. The repetition, sometimes ritualistic repetition of the normalized codes makes material the belonging they seem to simply describe.' (1999, 3)

Bell is writing this in relation Fortier's (1999) work on Catholic mass but as I argue below, this can equally apply to ten-pin bowling.

By taking forward this Butler-inflected approach to making material belonging through repetition, and pushing Blokland's (2017) argument that community is done through performance further, I argue that practices of belonging and participation in scenes shape a sense of self, and in the case of a sporting activity, shapes the physical body (as my larger right bicep at the end of the research project attests). For many bowlers, this is about honing technique and practice. As Malbon reminds us in his work on clubbing, 'play does not necessarily come easily ... play often needs to be worked at.' (1999, 136). In the context of the bowling league, the practice of bowling both embeds people in place and a social group – as such it is a practice of belonging – but also acts back on the body as a set of embodied competencies are learned and practiced – thus it is also a process of becoming.

## Methods

I began bowling with the league in March 2015 as part of a larger multi-method ethnographic research project ('The Choreography of Everyday Multiculture: Bowling Together?' Economic and Social Research Council (ES/L011360/1)) focusing on the bowling alley and remained part of it after the research had officially ended. The research was designed based on an iterative relationship between data gathering, analysis and theory building (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009), with each stage informing the next. The methodological approach was inspired by Back and Puwar's (2012) call for a 'live methods' approach that utilises the senses and develops new forms of sociological research.

The research began with a period of archival research and a close reading of relevant policy documents and community resources. This analysis was used to inform the selection of local stakeholders for interviews (including an ex-councillor, community activists, business owners) and the topics covered. I then began ethnographic fieldwork, attending community meetings and spending extended time in the bowling alley. Throughout the research period (January 2015-January 2018) I attended the bowling alley between one and five times a week at different times of the day and throughout the year, keeping a field diary and participating in the league almost every Tuesday until July 2017. As well as becoming part of the league community, this also provided insights into the corporeal aspects (Wacquant, 2015) of becoming a bowler – the thrill of getting a strike<sup>i</sup>, the nerves involved in a trios' competition, feeling comfortable enough to bowl alone. These experiences offered insights into bowling as a sport but also into bowling as a practice of belonging that works back on the body of the bowler.

My ethnographic notes have been complemented by interviews with league bowlers, bowling alley regulars and more casual bowlers. After two months of participant observation, I used a thematic analysis of my fieldnotes to generate



questions for semi-structured interviews with league bowlers. These took place either in the bowling alley or in bars and cafes and focused on how bowling – and this particular bowling alley – fits into individual biographies, into weekly routines and the meaning for individuals of taking part in this space and with this group.

After nine months of ethnography and interviews, I began making a short film about the bowling league with film-maker Andy Lee (Lee and Jackson, 2016), using my fieldnotes and interview material to inform the questions for a series of video interviews. Andy attended the league across a 12-week season, filming ambient shots and interviews. While envisioned as a stand-alone output, the resulting short film can also be viewed as complementary to this paper. As well as capturing what people say about their experiences, the film provides another way of telling this social space (Bates, 2015) and the intertwining stories that coalesce there. The biographies of the bowlers leave traces in their voices and gestures that challenge the simplistic clunky descriptors of the sociologist, which, as Back (2009) has noted, make film particularly useful for rendering visible forms of urban multiculturalism. Film can also pick up material cultures – the circulation of objects, prizes, score sheets, the balls – capturing the performance element of bowling that can be difficult to translate into writing, although I attempt to do that in this paper.

After the fieldwork period, I again returned to the data and further refined the key themes by reading across the different materials. This combination of more traditional ethnographic methods and visual methods has been key in shaping my analysis and allowing a focus not just on what people say they do and feel, but on atmosphere, interaction and embodiment.

### **Introducing the bowling league: ‘I don’t want to use the word community...’**

The bowling league is international in its make up, at the time of fieldwork comprising bowlers originating from countries including Ethiopia, Slovakia, Finland, Malaysia, USA, Australia, Guyana, Hong Kong, the Philippines and

Sweden. Bowlers range in age from 21 to 75. It is roughly 75% male. League members' occupations range from shop assistants to communications professionals. Many league members start coming to the bowling alley for fun, find out they are good at bowling, then discover the league – often through the league's 'public characters' (Jacobs, 1961) who spend a considerable amount of time in this place outside of league nights and will approach promising bowlers. Others were proficient bowlers seeking a league that is 'not too serious'.

While ten-pin bowling in the USA has an association with white blue-collar workers, in the UK its foreign-ness makes the space easier to claim for a wide variety of people. No one can claim the bowling alley, with its neon, chrome and American ephemera, as authentic in a way that affirms Britishness and excludes others (see also Jones et al (2015) on franchise café spaces). A contrasting example came from one of the league bowlers, Pete, an entrepreneur originally from Guyana. He told me how he had tried as a younger person to participate in lawn bowls but was frozen out of the group in a rather 'polite' way: ('I was in my mid-20s and I didn't fit in very well! I couldn't get another friend to join me but these poor old whites were very accommodating ... So I didn't take it on for long because I didn't have a bowling partner ... I used to bowl on my own and people would be polite rather than friendly.')

In contrast, this ten-pin bowling league is not only more socially and ethnically diverse but is also a 'singles league', meaning people bowl as individuals rather than in teams. A season comprises 12 weeks but a bowler only has to attend six Tuesday night sessions to be counted in the league table. This flexible singles model suits the work patterns of league members who work irregular hours in bars, as musicians and in the catering industry alongside those with more 9-to-5 jobs. Just as the industrial leagues of America were related to industrial relations and work patterns (Hurley, 2001), we can see the needs of the contemporary worker reflected in this flexi-league. League bowlers receive weekly emails featuring up-to-date stats, a rundown of outstanding performances and league tables that include each bowler's handicap – calculated to ensure all abilities

compete fairly. At the end of each season there are prizes for the man and woman with the highest cumulative score (their best six scores out of 12).

All interviewees have pointed to the league's friendliness, with many stressing how they have made new friends through bowling that they would not have otherwise met due to their different ages and backgrounds. On my first night of attending bowling league, I met with Amy and her group of bowling friends. Over chips and beer in the pub next door, they described what the league was like. Al tried to find the right words for communicating how the league functioned as a group, saying, 'I don't want to use the word 'community' because it sounds like town hall rubbish but...'. Here Al seizes on how community is used as a 'warmly persuasive word' (Williams, 1985, 76) in policy settings but while rejecting community he struggles to think of an alternative to communicate what the league is.

My contention here is that within this relatively small group, 30 on a busy night with a regular core who meet weekly, bowling in the league is interpreted and enacted through different registers and practices of belonging and becoming. Nevertheless, the coming together of these different practices weave together to produce a convivial scene. The league does facilitate contact between people from different social, ethnic and national backgrounds who might not usually meet. Yet bridging and bonding, strong and weak ties seem inadequate descriptors to capture the mix of deep friendship, casual contact across lanes, and participation in the same space that unfolds on the first floor of the bowling alley on a Tuesday night.

### **Practices of Belonging and Becoming in the Bowling League**

#### **'If Found Return Me To... Lane 17': Bowling as belonging in place**

For some league bowlers, bowling as a practice of belonging is not just about belonging to the league. The bowling alley is also used as a pub or social club throughout the week or on special occasions. The importance of these spatial ties is neatly captured in t-shirts worn by three bowlers that read 'If Found Return

Me To... Lane 17'. While in theory, anyone can bowl on any lane during league nights, in practice people have favourite lanes and gravitate towards their preferred spot. Wearing this jokey t-shirt can be read as a practice of belonging, to a particular bowling alley but also a specific lane.

To take a lane is to take your place in the scene. The middle lane, 17, is where the top league bowlers gravitate towards. To bowl from there is to claim centre stage. Beyond their placing in the scene, each lane also has its own personality and quirks. Joe, the chief technician, described looking after the lanes as like looking after 24 vintage cars. His skillful backstage work keeps this idiosyncratic 1950s technology up and running and underpins the scene.

As is often the case in ethnographic fieldwork, the ownership that the bowling league feel over the space becomes most visible when the rules are broken. One night, after meeting up with a couple of bowlers at the bar downstairs, we went up to the league space and walked directly into an Italian wedding reception.

'Nikolas stares at the lanes in despair, while Pete (also known as 'The Champ') suggests we go back downstairs for a drink. We leave Pete's bag at the top of the stairs with my bowling shoes perched on top. 'We can leave them here', he squeezes the bicep of a nearby member of staff security. 'He's my bodyguard!' Chico is at the bar and looks really pissed off. 'They are supposed to finish at 7.45' he says. Nikolas shakes his head 'It's so depressing. This is meant to be a place for sport.' He isn't joking, this wedding is getting in the way of bowling. After 10 minutes we go upstairs. While the party is officially over and thins out, guests are still milling about ... We start our practice anyway.' Fieldnotes

As well as demonstrating Nikolas's commitment to bowling, this vignette also captures the space sharing and rhythms of the bowling alley. One reason it can accommodate different groups is the rhythms of activity that change throughout the day and week. Weekday evenings are popular with local families, teenagers playing on arcade games and football fans who come for the big screens.

Weekend evenings – which have more of a party feel due to the presence of a DJ and a lively dancefloor – are dominated by people in their twenties, an increasingly whiter and more affluent crowd. On a Tuesday night, the league take priority on the first floor, which separates them from the more inexperienced or rowdy bowlers who do not follow the same rules, such as allowing the person on the right to bowl first. On the evening of the wedding, this normal rhythm is interrupted. But the league members' special status is still hinted at. The familiarity with which Pete interacts with the security guard is an example of his status as 'The Champ', a flamboyant public character and regular. He demonstrates his sense of belonging and feeling comfortable in the space, leaving his expensive bowling equipment out in public.

For many league bowlers, repeating the ritual of bowling on a Tuesday embeds them in a group and in a place. This was stressed by Marie, who at 21 was the youngest league bowler. Marie was originally from the Philippines and started coming to the league to watch her boyfriend, Lee, who had dreams of making it big in bowling. She gradually started participating in the league and describes a strong sense of attachment to the bowling alley:

M: It became part of my life, I treat it as my second home ... here it's like I have brothers, sisters, uncles, and like a dad basically, John, so it's like home and that makes me feel you know, let's go Tuesday ....

L: We belong. We're part of the family.

In this interview Marie mentioned longstanding regular bowlers who had made the effort to talk to her and her boyfriend providing reassurance that the 'serious' bowlers didn't think they were 'silly teenagers'. Marie compared the experience of being in this home-like space to going to different bowling centres, stressing the affective aspects of being in a dis/comfort zone:

'It's a small place and so you know people because they are regulars as well. You can feel at ease when you're talking to them.... At some point, we

went to [bowling centre] and I only feel at ease because Lee is with me but if I'm going there by myself ... I even forget how to speak in English. I lose my words in English.'

These examples demonstrate how 'the performance of the community ... produces an attachment of the group to the site of its performance' (Bell, 1999). For The Champ and other regulars, the performance that produces space attachment goes beyond the act of bowling and is also enacted through displaying this allegiance on t-shirts, writing belonging onto the body, and through familiar interactions with the staff. These performative repetitions further embed them into the league and make claims on the space, shoring up their special status. For a newcomer like Marie, it is the friendliness of the group that helps her form an attachment to the place and dispel her anxieties about being judged as not fitting in. The league illustrates how the edges between performing belonging to a group and belonging to a place can be fuzzy. Enacting being a league member also has the effect of embedding people into a place ('If found, return me to Lane 17'). However, this relationship between person, practice and group does not happen in a vacuum.

### **'I feel like a kid again!': Bowling as a relational practice**

While the experience of becoming embedded in place is a much-repeated story across the bowling league, bowling in this particular London alley can enact other connections across space and time that are valuable for this international group, illustrating Massey's (2005) argument that spaces are experienced relationally rather than in isolation.

One Tuesday, the lanes had been freshly oiled after the bowling alley purchased a new oil machine. On observing this unusual occurrence, Robert, an American man in his forties, exclaimed: 'It's time to break out my 1988 shot'. On successfully executing a strike with grace and style during the practice session he exclaimed 'I feel like a kid again!' The physical sensation of bowling a particular kind of shot on a newly oiled lane transports Robert to another time and place. Earlier on in the project, Robert had expressed to me his feelings of

disconnection with the USA where he had frequently encountered homophobia before moving to London more than 20 years ago. However, bowling provided a way of connecting with his cultural heritage ('it helps me ... to remember where I'm from') and childhood.

For another bowler, Kate, who had only been participating in the league for two months at the time of our interview, returning to bowling was part of reconnecting with herself after a break-up. She had originally got into bowling as a teenager and told me her story:

'When I was about 14, my sister and I started doing some Saturday club. We started off going to ballet lessons ... I had flat feet and my mum thought ballet would be really helpful. I didn't enjoy it ... You were doing it with these girls who had been doing it since the age of three and gangly 14-year-olds didn't really fit in. Every time we'd go there, we'd walk past the bowling lanes because it was all in a big centre. And I was like, that looks really exciting, I'd much prefer that! So we started doing that every Saturday and joined the league ... I got really into it and won a couple of trophies and it felt really good to do something I felt good at.'

After a long gap and 'a really difficult few months', Kate decided to reconnect with bowling. As she evocatively put it: 'I wanted to go to *piece myself back together*. I thought "this is who I am" (emphasis added). Bowling provides a way of reassembling herself through practicing something she is skilled at.

In both examples, it is the act of bowling as an embodied practice that reenacts connections to other places or times. This resonates with Goodall et al's (2009) work on the performative functions of fishing in the Georges River in Sydney. For their Vietnamese participants, fishing had become 'almost a ritual which would demonstrate a link to the past' (2009, 184) while also embedding them into the environment of the river. Similarly, bowling as a practice of belonging that

embeds an individual into a specific place – even a specific lane – can simultaneously reenact these links to a different time or place. However, while for some bowling enacts links to the past, working on bowling can also be about setting future goals.

### **‘It needs to be in the backbone’: Becoming a bowler**

For more casual bowlers, a trip to the bowling alley may be a fun Saturday night, an obligatory work’s night out or an occasional birthday party. For the league bowlers, bowling is a sport. Since 2016, John has taken responsibility for administrating and organising the bowling league. In an interview, he described how keeping ‘the book’ of statistics is a way of showing people how they are progressing with bowling. It helps people to go beyond the feeling of a bad week, he said, if they can see this overall improvement. John’s labour as league organiser – it is perhaps no coincidence that he is a trade union organiser by day and is skilled at banding people together – feeds into the formation of the group, encouraging bowlers to return week-after-week. In his carefully compiled statistics, John traces the process of someone honing their bowling and becoming a bowler.

While for some the motivation for improving at bowling is what brings them to the league, for others this is secondary to the social side. For most it is a bit of both. Tom is a member of the ‘London Rockin’ Bowlers’ (LRB), a self-contained subset of the overall league based on a friendship group emerging from the London psychobilly music scene. He explained how he takes bowling seriously (‘You can’t do it half-assed’) while also stressing the importance of the social side of league nights (‘You have a reason to leave the house ... people come over and say ‘oh, how’s it going?’). Tom holds John in high regard as ‘the Sensei of the place’ and greatly respects his advice. He recalls:

‘I had this period of time I was so frustrated. Nothing was going my way. And John came to me and was like ‘the thing is about bowling you need to get around ten different things right to have a perfect shot and if you have something on your mind, something stressing you out outside of this, you



are not relaxed.' And it's absolutely right. Some of the best nights are [when] you are relaxed and haven't planned anything in your head. Don't think about your shot ... and that's where it happens.'

As well as receiving advice from John, Tom had also made use of online resources, watching YouTube videos to improve through copying the experts' tips and techniques. However, in his recollection of John's useful advice, Tom draws out the process of honing a skill until it is unconsciously embodied: 'It's not about remembering, it needs to be in the backbone so you do it every time the same way.' As Tom is a professional guitarist in a punk band, I was curious as to whether this was akin to playing an instrument. He replied 'Yeah, absolutely ... you play your best shows when you are, when you don't have... when you go on that stage and you're relaxed.'

Tom's discussion of honing his skills to a point where he can forget about technique is reminiscent of Malbon's description of 'play as flow' (1999, 138), the pleasure and sense of vitality that comes from the embodied practice of skills. While this may seem like a highly individualised experience, Malbon, writing about the experience of those on the club scene, emphasises its communal aspects. Similarly, becoming a bowler is in some ways an individualised pursuit (watching YouTube videos at home) but sharing tips and advice that enable people to improve is an important element of the social life of bowling. Improvement is encouraged and being taken seriously as a bowler embeds a person further into the group. Moreover, just as Malbon argues that 'Being together with many others in the clubbing crowd can reinforce the vitality experienced through experiencing of flow on an individual scale' (1999, 155), the effect of a good individual performance can also transform the atmosphere of the bowling alley.

One night, I was bowling on the same lane as Abraham. During our first game, something extraordinary happened:

Abraham has a very singular bowling style, creeping up really far on the left, he strays into the next-door lane. And then he releases the ball, his arm quickly swinging upwards to his shoulder to create an extreme hook. The ball goes perilously close to the gutter but then - usually! - curls round to hit the pins between the 1 and the 3 pin. This is one of those games where everything comes together. Not immediately, he gets two spares<sup>ii</sup>, a strike, then a seven before he gets a Turkey<sup>iii</sup>. And then a Hambone<sup>iv</sup>. The strikes keep coming. After the fifth strike, people start gathering. First, it is just those in the lanes nearby but word spreads, and once a few people have stopped to watch, others follow. Given the noise of the lanes when everyone is playing, the pronounced drop in volume increases the feeling of intensity and pressure. But Abraham keeps going. Once he gets to the final frame and gets a strike (thus giving himself the opportunity to get two final strikes) he doesn't turn around between frames. He just bowls them, strike, strike. When he turns around at the end of his game, he looks surprised to see everyone standing there. He is locked into the moment. As he often tells me 'focus is everything.' After the final strike everyone is cheering, high-fives are dispensed, handshakes, slaps on the back. Someone shouts Abraham's oft repeated mantra 'Never give up!' Fieldnotes

Through this execution of embodied skills and competencies, Abraham not only achieves 'play as flow' and personal satisfaction but this also has a tangible effect on the atmosphere, illustrating how feeling spreads through the lanes. Therefore, participating in order to become can simultaneously work on the body of the bowler through training the body, embed an individual into this multicultural group, while also having a tangible effect on the atmosphere that can enhance the feeling of belonging to the group for others who are present.

### **'Showtime!': Theatricality and performance**

As is hinted in the story of Abraham's dramatic high-scoring game above, the performance of being a bowler also lends itself to theatricality. This is part of what lends the scene of the bowling alley its pizzazz and sense of escapism.

People routinely give themselves 'bowling names' on the scoreboards. Some in the league also bowl using nicknames or bowling names. These range from abbreviated surnames, to tributes to famous bowlers, to jokes that have just stuck, to self-proclaimed greatness such as 'The Champ'. The sense of creating a bowling character also comes through the use of catchphrases. Some of these are personal, for example Abraham's 'Never Give Up!' or SuperSam who shouts 'unluckiest man in the game!' on missing a shot. There are also more general expressions such as the conciliatory 'There's always next week!'. For the quieter bowler, there are also a range of common hand signals used within the league – the double high-five to celebrate a strike, a single high-five for a spare<sup>v</sup> and a fist bump for a missed shot are common on lanes. Grasping these repeated embodied rituals are part of becoming a bowler and part of the league.

If John is the 'Sensei of the group', then The Champ is the showman (catchphrase 'Showtime!'). For him, the playful side of bowling is important ('I always say, tenpin bowling is the only game where adults can behave like kids and get away with it. If you get a strike or a spare and you start dancing. You would never do that anywhere else.') As described in the earlier wedding vignette, the bowling alley is his domain. As well as using the bowling alley as a place to relax, he also plays the role of public character bringing new people into the league through talking to promising bowlers and performing bowling feats on regular nights, such as taking shots from far behind the usual line. He also runs his own monthly trophy night for bowling league participants that takes place outside of the usual league slot and in amongst casual bowlers, who observe the league bowlers and often get into conversations with them. My notes from one of these nights describe:

“The big event of the night is a casualty. The Champ has a tough shot. A split<sup>vi</sup>. He bowls one ball and then another, fast. The second ball smashes into the other. It cracks. When it comes back it has a chunk missing out of it. It's The Champ's ball. It cost £297, he says. The ball is placed on the middle of the table ... The commotion draws attention from the birthday party next door. A young woman with a plate of birthday cake comes over

to inspect. 'It looks like the skin came off!' she says ... As the night goes on the high fives between our group and the neighbouring groups become more frequent. Pete congratulates our neighbours on strikes and I notice he also goes over to help every time someone nearby is struggling to input the names on the scoreboard.' Fieldnotes

Thus, the league members demystify the rituals and technologies of bowling by talking to neighbouring groups, while reaffirming the league's special connection to the space of the bowling alley. Performing the league beyond league nights also brings in others, providing a stream of new people. Four of the regular league bowlers recalled in interviews how they came along to the league after talking to Pete when bowling downstairs.

This is an example of how thinking through practices of belonging together with the looser idea of 'the scene' is helpful. In the bowling alley, practices of belonging unfold in a place where indifference and one-off interactions with strangers are also part of the context. In this example, the league's performance also has an impact on the atmosphere of the bowling alley as a whole, as it overlaps in space with the practices of the other bowlers. The co-presence of different kinds of groups and practices feeds into producing a particular atmosphere in the bowling alley. This atmosphere is generated by a combination of the assembled bodies in this particular space and its spatial configuration, with its lane formation, characteristic lighting and sound (see Anderson, 2009; Böhme, 2006). As Anderson (2009) argues, atmospheres are always unstable and unfinished. Alongside – for the bowling league – a sense of familiarity and ownership that comes with regularly meeting in the same space, it is this 'unsteadiness' (Amin, 2002) of the bowling alley that is part of its allure. This offers us a way of thinking through how these more casual engagements with a space brush up against more intense forms of spatial and social practices, putting some flesh on the bones of Young's idea of 'overlapping without dissolving into unity' (1990, 137).

## **Conclusion**

Jumping off from recent work on community as a 'set of doings' (Blokland, 2017), I have examined the interplay between bowler, practices of bowling and spaces of bowling to offer an ethnographically rich and more complex account of what it means to take part in a bowling league. Rather than exemplifying an idealised – and two dimensional – account of community that happens within a group apart, as in Putnam's work, in this paper the bowling league is analysed within the spatial and social context of the bowling alley and as a product of the various practices and histories of league bowlers. In this way, the paper uses the example of bowling to advance an understanding of how taking part in such an activity is to engage in dynamic processes of belonging and becoming.

This paper aimed firstly to advance the discussion of conviviality by examining the practices of belonging and becoming that feed into its production. Secondly, the paper has argued that practices of belonging are not just about performing a relationship to place, or embedding into place, these practices actively feed into producing space and also act back on the person. Thirdly, the paper has argued for a contextual and relational approach to understanding performances of belonging and becoming. Each bowler brings their own relational understanding of bowling as an activity which has an impact on how they experience participating in the league.

In order to break down these connections I offered four different registers through which we can understand bowling in the league: a practice that embeds people in place; as a relational practice experienced across time and place; a performance that acts on the sense of self and the body; and a theatrical performance that enriches and resonates through a scene. These four registers could be used beyond the bowling alley to analyse other leisure practices as they unfold in and through specific places and to highlight how micro, individual processes of play are tied to broader processes of belonging and the forging of convivial spaces.

While I have separated these out for the purpose of analysis in practice, they cannot be so easily disentangled. In Kate's story – the league member who came back to bowling to 'piece myself back together' – at least three of these elements combine. Returning to bowling is about reconnection with herself through an embodied practice. She had aspirations to improve as a bowler while also meeting new people at a difficult time when many of her friends were moving out of London. Robert enacts his 1988 shot but is also highly motivated to improve at bowling and sets a specific goal for each season.

However, in some cases these registers do not line up neatly, or one comes to outweigh or interfere with the others. For example, the youngest league members, Marie and Lee attended the bowling alley every week for a period of about six months until Lee's ambitions of becoming a professional bowler outgrew the confines of the league. As he moved on to more professionally focused bowling competitions, Marie stopped coming to the bowling league. Even deeply felt connections can be temporary. This shows how what it means to be in the league does not only vary between people but can change for an individual. If, as Studdert argues, 'it is more fruitful to understand community as a verb: communing: being-ness produced as an outcome of ongoing action in common' (2016, 623), then an ethnographic approach is uniquely positioned in offering insights into the social meaning of these practices as they unfold in place and through people's stories over time.

Finally, commercial spaces of leisure have largely been overlooked in studies of belonging in the field of urban sociology in favour of public spaces or the scale of the neighbourhood. This paper suggests that such spaces have much to offer in terms of providing insights into how spaces of conviviality are produced and sustained through mundane practices in the contemporary city.

### **Packing up**

*The end of the league night has a distinctive sound and a different rhythm. As each lane of bowlers finish and leave, the volume and the frequency of the sound of bowling balls hitting the pins gradually reduces. Most people leave after their third*

*game, although a few stay in an attempt to improve on a disappointing performance or to celebrate a good score with one more game. Balls are polished and packed away into the cupboard for next week. The previous frenetic sound of Dizzee Rascal is replaced with a dream-like instrumental tune. The red-t-shirted staff gather up glasses in plastic holders and push around large mops. The stage is set for another day.*

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<sup>i</sup> A strike in ten-pin bowling is when all pins are knocked down with the first ball of a frame.

<sup>ii</sup> A spare in ten-pin bowling is when all pins are knocked down with two balls in one frame

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iii A turkey is when a bowler gets three strikes in a row.

iv A hambone is when a bowler gets four strikes in a row.

vi A split is a situation in which the first ball of a frame knocks down the headpin but leaves standing two or more non-adjacent groups of one or more pins.