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Article:

The University as the 'Imagined Other': making sense of community co-produced literacy research

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that the university needs to be understood as an 'imagined other' in constructing collaborative community literacy research. This involves a realization that the area of study that universities research is not always what is necessary in communities. There is a dialogic relationship between universities and communities that can be positive and but at the same time, it can also produce conflict. As difficult as it might be, conflict can be generative and can produce new insights. Drawing on research experience from a number of studies of literacy practices in one community, I explore ways in which research processes can be reflected upon collaboratively and I suggest methodologies that allow for uncertainty and unknowing in order to make sense of this process. I argue that combining collaborative ethnography together with methodologies from arts practice can be helpful in grounding collaborative research within epistemologies of uncertainty and hope.

The University as the 'Imagined Other': making sense of community co-produced literacy research

The motivation for working together is really less to do with bringing different skills to bear on a common problem but rather it is this immediacy of response encountered in the discussion of ideas combined with the consummate otherness of thought which the collaborative partner brings.[i] (Nick Crow and Ian Rawlinson (Artist newsletter 1996)

Writing with or without 'the other': what is there to know?

Collaboration can begin with a conversation. 'Listening voices, telling stories' was a project that engaged women from ethnic minority backgrounds in reading poetry from a number of different cultures, located in a community library in Rotherham, a city located in South Yorkshire, in the UK. Zanib Rasool was one of the community researchers who had developed this project. Zanib is from a British South Asian background, and is passionate about the need for women to recover their heritage through poetry. She suggested that together we could read Urdu women poets from Pakistan who were often overlooked in school poetry teaching. As an activist in the community, she was also determined to support women and work with them to create spaces for them to organize. I had a conversation with Zanib which took place in a community library, which I recorded in my fieldnotes in March of 2015:

We arrived early, as I was planning to talk to Zanib about the safe spaces for women and girls project. We talked about the ways in which it was important for women to do things for themselves. Zanib talked about a mother and toddler group run by women volunteers which closed when paid workers took it over. She mentioned a toy library that had been very successful. She talked about how informal ways of getting together – like her group at school – enabled different kinds of conversations to happen.

Here, Zanib's focus was on the need to work informally to create safe spaces for things to happen with a focus on women and girls. She was working through her

experience of community development through organizing a literary project. This made sense to me.

I have always been interested in change in communities. This interest emerged from my own history. From 1987 – 1994 I worked as an outreach worker for an adult literacy scheme in Hammersmith (London) as an employee for the Council for Racial Equality. This was a neighborhood project that included a commitment to a student-led vision of what would happen within the adult literacy project, and it emphasized community writing and participation. I worked to support parents to set up groups in order to write and to publish their life stories and compose poetry, and was concerned to construct spaces for women where they could address their experiences. I carried this involvement in working informally and locally, not as a professional, but as someone who is committed to the goals of anti-racist practice within communities, reversing and shifting sites of power to lever change as, and when, it was needed (Bird and Pahl 1993).

Our shared history of community development work created a space where we could rely on collective understandings and visions. Over the years, Zanib and I had planned and developed projects together, Zanib in her role as community activist, and mine in my role as academic, now working in a School of Education at a local university. Most recently, our work had focused on the cultural context of civic engagement, and the need to engage women in projects that were self-directed and owned by the women, themselves, in community settings. This particular project was undertaken in the context of what was then known as the 'Imagine' project, part of a national initiative called the 'Connected Communities' programme, which was funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This was a radical new funding initiative that asked university researchers and academics to write proposals that were co-designed with community partners. The program was run by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK (see Facer and Enright 2016).

'Imagine' is a unique project which sought to create research that was co-produced, with, not on, communities, with a focus on civic engagement and imagining better communities and making them happen (see www.imaginecommunity.org.uk). When we co-wrote the proposal for funding from

the 'Imagine' project, a group of community researchers, artists and academics met in a community center to plan the project together. Collaboratively constructing the 'Imagine' project involved a process of drawing on shared histories and repertoires of practice. Our projects were concerned with hope, understanding cultural practices in communities and surfacing tacit knowledge and ways of understanding the different literacies in the community. This might include valuing literary heritages from multilingual contexts as well as considering the ways in which language is used within different communities.

Rotherham is a small town in a post-industrial area of the UK, previously known for its coal mines and steel industry. Now in the grip of economic decline, the area struggles to retain some stability and it continues to be a site of poverty and inequality. The area hosts a small but significant British South Asian Muslim population, originally from Pakistan, who migrated to the region in the 1950's and 1960's to work in the steel industry. The Pakistani community now lives in the center of town and is well settled, with families stretching across three and four generations. This community has begun to document and record its own history and has become involved in local expressions of civic participation.

More recently, a child abuse scandal in Rotherham led to a great deal of negative publicity about the town. A report, commissioned by the government, called 'The Jay report' called for more women-friendly spaces, and argued that many Muslim women had been side-lined from addressing issues around child and domestic abuse in discussions. This was the context for our work. (see http://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1407/independent_inquiry_cse_in_rotherham) This scandal made it even more imperative that we use the support of the 'Imagine' project to create a safe space where women and girls could share their experiences.

Collaborative ethnography revisited

Here I try and make sense of the work that Zanib and I did together on the 'Imagine' project. I also try and make sense of my own role within the project. This article is concerned with a revisiting of the past, in order to further unsettle the paradigm of the present. The site for this encounter is my fieldwork, which is focused on literacy practices in one community. The community literacy research that I do

tries to create congruence between theories of literacy and everyday activities such as knitting, textile production, dancing, playing, and making crafts. Rather than impose linguistic theory derived from edifices of knowledge based on university understandings, I try to build an understanding of community literacies from the ground up, as seen through the lens of the people I work with (Pahl 2014). This then creates a change in perception from the idea of the university academic as expert, to a recognition of how everyday perceptual schemas can contribute to ways of knowing about literacy. As Wissman, Staples, Vasudevan and Nichols (2015) observe, the field of literacy studies needs to be informed by the literate 'knowings' of those who practise literacy.

Community collaborative research leads to an awareness of the importance of paying attention to the cultural framings of literacy and identifies how partial an academic understanding is of how people communicate in the real world. This can enable an awareness of how limited 'academic knowing' and ways of understanding the world could be. Literacy knowledge within universities continues to rest within disciplinary parameters; for example, it is often situated in academic frameworks such as the New Literacy Studies (e.g. Street 1993; Barton and Hamilton 1998); the question here is whether, or how, academic knowledge about literacy can be re-framed through a reflexive process of recognizing where the limits of this knowledge lie.

Engaged community collaborative research can be understood as a form of 'praxis', an encounter with the world that is rooted in the here and now. It constitutes a situated encounter with people and places to make change happen. Research activity is threaded through the everyday, and is situated, messy and contingent on practice (Koro-Ljungberg and Mazzei 2012; Law 2004). This mode of inquiry has affinities with arts-informed methodologies that link experience to situated, aesthetic and material forms of knowledge (Carter 2004). Methodologies focused on practice as research and based on a phenomenological view of the world tend to be more connected with valuing perception and experience (Pink 2012; Barrett and Bolt 2007). Juggling arts and social scientific approaches to community situated collaborative research involves opening up to relational, dialogic and emergent modes of being. There is potential for a more egalitarian mode of inquiry that results from this process.

Collaborative ethnography as a methodology emphasizes bringing a collective voice into research. The work of Campbell and Lassiter has helped me situate my work in a field that allows for relationships to be honored, and for insights to emerge through conversations with people (Lassiter 2005, Campbell and Lassiter 2015). It is a deeply personal, creative practice that requires an absorption and attention to the everyday but, at the same time, it is also hermeneutic and creative (Campbell and Lassiter 2015: 7). In this way, it has similarities with arts practice. Bringing these two perspectives together (relational arts practice and collaborative ethnography) as methodologies, but also as orientations towards uncertainty and mess, creates a space of possibility, a spectacle of disorientation that contributes to the resulting dis-ordering of the knowledge structures of the university. This can be productive, but it can also lead to failure and collapse. The possibilities of failure are often not completely articulated within academic writing – the shameful consequence of not 'doing it right' can trouble a claim to 'academic knowing'. Failure, however, can also be generative. Discussing this issue with Steve Pool, who is an artist, in a personal communication to me (dated 8.8.2016), he wrote that, 'the space of failure is the space of possibility, of something different happening, part of the emergent space of knowing and acceptance that things may not turn out as planned – a place of contingencies.' Here I explore the notion of mess and disorder in research concerning literacy in communities more closely.

This perspective has led to the consequent emergence of a critical eye on the role of the university in community co-produced literacy research. Rather than see the university as a central site of knowledge production, the university, itself does not own the right to make sense of the field or to claim a coherent or definitive narrative as to what is going on here; the constructs, 'community' and 'university' can exist in a dialogic relationship to each other. Dialogical encounters can open up participants to the limits of boundaries and to a reciprocity that is located within an inter-subjective encounter with the 'other'. If the university is seen as an 'imagined other,' then it is possible to conceptualize the research that is done in its name very differently. Universities then are able to recognize their place in the world so that they, not the communities they work with, are then placed within the category of 'other'(Tuck and Yang 2014). In so doing, university knowledge is then folded back in on itself and it becomes an object for enquiry from the outside in (Facer and

Enright 2016). Tracing the threads of the encounter between the 'university' – an abstracted concept that involves a constellation of disciplines, practices and values -- and the 'community' - which is an equally complex constellation of people, practices and values - is here presented as a kind of dialogic dance between self and other which de-stabalizes the certainty of research as a legitimate mode of enquiry that rests on the relationship between social practices and the discourses that uphold them (Van Leeuwen 2007:111). Seeing the practices and discourses of research as linked to structures of production also raises questions about the ways in which this epistemic knowledge base is constructed.

Writing this article raises troubling questions, also of 'who knows'. This reflection is single authored, but a great many people have read this article, commented on this article, suggested I re-write it, suggested I don't publish it, suggested that I do publish it and many have also argued with it and disagreed with it and recommended that I take things out. The article is a trace of that collective process. Research collaborators Steve Pool (artist) and Zanib Rasool (community researcher) have especially helped me understand the issues presented in this article. I recognize my own authoring process but also am conscious of the threads of conversations with many others that run through the article. I am not claiming a field, but rather, arguing for a contingent understanding of the field based on my own fieldwork experience as an ethnographer of community literacy practices.

Here, I return again to fieldnotes where I situate my thinking, and re-encounter the research field where I constructed them in order to think about how I have understood literacy over time. This encounter is therefore between myself and the research field I constructed, and it is an encounter that I re-think, sometimes every day. In the process of writing, I am able to, 'see relational patterns between myself and others' (Lockford 2012: 164). As part of this journey, I encounter ethnography, arts practice, collaborative ethnography and co-production as ways in which to make sense of things with people. I also write things down. As an ethnographer, I am accustomed to writing fieldnotes at the end of each day. These remain long after the projects collapse, fold or are simply finished. I also write a joint research blog with artist Steve Pool, with whom I have collaborated on numerous projects. Many of my encounters are also through emails, sent quickly at the end or beginning of the day, to community co-researcher Zanib Rasool. Revisiting these written texts and fieldnotes

produces a rupture in the process of finishing a project, and creates a disturbance in the pool of settled reflection.

One of the challenges of longitudinal ethnographic research is never fully knowing what you 'know' through fieldwork; not knowing then becomes the 'not yet' within lived experience (Daniel and Moylan 1997). Through the process of revisiting and re-encountering fieldnotes, invariably, interpretative ways of knowing and seeing are eroded by a renewed encounter with the field. This results in a slow process of 'unknowing' (Vasudevan 2011). The field constructs its own refusals and becomes resistant to understanding and interpretation. Interpretations previously perceived as settled and 'valid' are gradually overtaken through discussions with people in the field, and lead to realizations that not all was as it seemed. This writing is part of a longer process of opening out what 'could be', and what is 'not yet' in the research domain (Daniel and Moylan 1997).

This has been particularly clear when something has happened in a project that turns previously assumed ways of knowing upside down. It is also a critical point in situations where the research project is shared and its ownership and direction is contested; rather than 'own' the research direction, the emphasis shifts to a focus on practice, and 'being' in the world. Making sense of this process is an activity that is very different from 'traditional' processes of research as a straightforward linear notion of, 'what is going on here'; instead, the sense-making is embodied and felt rather than 'thought' (Hughes 2014). This process of engagement is one way of learning that unseats the ways of knowing derived from universities. This has the effect of turning the University into an 'imagined other' in the research process. Everyday knowledge is a different way of knowing, that is often intergenerational, situated, and learned through practice, stories and craft (Hymes 1996; Sennett 2008). This unsettling process precipitates a question over how knowledge is framed and why.

The process of revisiting can create a new layer of reflexivity as researchers grapple with the ways in which the data were originally constructed. This might reveal new layers to the story that then unsettle the version previously produced. This unpeeling process places the researcher within the sub-stratum of experience, lessening the authorial voice as the eye is turned back on the architecture of research

to reveal the cracks. Tracing the threads of this encounter is a kind of unraveling of a tangled weave of voices and experiences, where the research is merely part of a much wider tapestry of activities. Looking at the field anew, therefore, involves a re-visioning and re-evaluating in the mind of the researcher. Studies that have revisited projects have then produced new kinds of knowledge in the re-visioning process (e.g. Crow and Lyon, 2011; Sefton-Green and Rowsell, 2015). These have illustrated the pull of revisiting, and reflecting on projects, and in some cases, involved a re-thinking of the project with participants, who were able to amend or shift previous research framings.

Unknowing then becomes the focus of the encounter. Rabinow (1977), in his book, Journeys Through Fieldwork, explicitly comes up against the limits of his understanding of the people he encountered, recognizing that his understanding of the field was mediated by key informants who themselves were compromised in different ways. Allison James (2013) has also explored what can be known through social anthropology by engaging in a detailed re-visiting and re-imagining of her own datasets, thus throwing up new challenges and issues as she re-revisits and re-encounters her own data with a new analytic imagination. Recognizing this kind of work as part of the 'craft' of research, she argues, also means being open to change, uncertainty and revisioning.

In this process, the researcher experiences a kind of doubling back, in order to further understand ways in which such accounts and narratives have been constructed. One word commonly used to describe this process is reflexivity. When this re-considering or re-thinking is written up, it too becomes solidified into a text often with its own genealogy and history. However, in so doing, a kind of objectification of that reflexivity occurs so that it becomes subjective and also the object of study at the same time. Pierre Bourdieu's work was continually concerned with reflexivity, and he frequently returned to the need for the researcher to explore the roots of his or her own discipline, a process he described as, 'tracing the epistemological unconscious' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:41). This process required a kind of objectification of reflexivity so that it, too, could fall under the logic of practice. Grenfell (2015) argued that the concept of 'reflexive objectivity' from Bourdieu provided a grounding framework for the whole of Bourdieu's approach to his work, whereby reflexivity becomes both objectified and subjective, and is, crucially, invested in practice. Here I

explore my own reflexivity, drawing on my own fieldnotes and conversations with co-researchers in order to locate the 'objective reflexivity' within the work that is co-produced. I then consider how the university, as the 'imagined other' in the relationship between the world and the research, is constructed through that lens.

Co-produced research: knowing together

Co-production as a field has expanded recently, from an initial definition that focused on the co-production of services, often used in town and regional planning contexts, initially in Chicago by the economist Elinor Ostrum (1990), to include a wider definition which includes co-production of knowledge through collaborations between a broad range of people interested in doing research together including artists, university funded academics, community co-researchers, and people who work outside the academy but are interested in finding things out. Part of the challenge of co-production is that the process of making knowledge claims to create knowledge structures that facilitate ways of knowing that come from outside the University. While university knowledge structures rely on hierarchical and strongly classified forms of knowledge production, ways of knowing outside the university can be both contingent, specialist and differently articulated than university knowledge. A communities of practice approach to university/community partnerships has been pioneered by Hart and her colleagues and community partners at the University of Brighton, UK, where their resilience workshops are attended by people outside the university and knowledge is collaboratively constructed with parents, young people, practitioners and academics in a community of practice together (Hart et al 2013, Hart and Wolff 2006). People bring experience to a forum where they can be heard, as academic knowledge is not necessarily as useful as are the experiences brought to the floor by parents, young people or practitioners.

Another way of creating forums where everyone can bring knowledge to the table are dialogic co-inquiry spaces of the nature pioneered by Armstrong and Banks (2011). This methodology makes sure that knowledge and experience are not codified by academic references, and language is shared and equitable. Michelle Fine and colleagues have also drawn on techniques from Participatory Action Research in order to think deeply about ways in which it is possible to 'hear' and then act on the voices of those who participate and co-research together (Cammarota and Fine 2008).

Collaborative ethnography as a methodology combines an in-depth study of a community with a more equitable way of conducting research that draws on insider knowledge as the starting point for the research questions. This is exemplified by the work of Beth Campbell and Eric Lassiter who worked with students at Ball State University and with the local Black community to create an alternative history to the dominant academic corpus of work on "Middletown," which had omitted accounts of the local African-American experience in the town of Muncie, for which Middletown had been a pseudonym; their resulting book The Other Side of Middletown, filled in the pieces of that missing history (Lassiter et al 2004; Campbell and Lassiter 2010). Joanne Larson and colleagues attempted to create equitable spaces where people wrote and planned research projects together (Larson, Webster and Hopper 2011). Ways of knowing outside the academy also can be situated within schools of thought that privilege open-ended, participatory and situated ways of being and doing, including listening in a much wider, more emplaced way (Back 2007).

These changes in ethnography mirror changes within arts practice, and here I am interested in the crossover and synergies between the two. To ground this kind of enquiry requires an attention to being in the space, to listening and to embracing a radical openness to emergent practice. Community co-produced research can lead to moving in unexpected directions thus creating the conditions for a level of disorientation which can lead to university-constructed research faltering (MacLure 2011). This faltering can create a space for a more open and dialogic form of research. Relational aesthetics as a field forms a platform for conversational enquiry incorporating such activities as walking tours, visual methods and engaged scholarship with, not on, communities as a starting point for co-produced research. Artists can mediate or direct this process, providing a lens for diversifying approaches and can create provocations or new turns of enquiry that open up research to a new lens and approaches. People can learn from each other to create a joint enquiry that is led through concerns outside university disciplinary parameters.

Tying these forms together could be achieved by a team of artists, academics and community partners, who work in a 'studio' space, that is, in a space loosely defined by having a common purpose and common goals, but made up of very disparate people. Structures for knowledge creation that lie outside university spaces tend to rely on such loose affiliations, moving in and out of the kinds of

collaborations and co-existences that are recognized as salient by universities; on the other hand, because these forms are unfamiliar and do not confirm to the conventional space of academic conferences, meetings, seminars or presentational styles, they can also remain unobserved and unrecognized as sites of knowledge production. Language, too, becomes a field that is contested. Difficult language and jargon from particular academic disciplines can exclude people who themselves might have areas of expertise that academics are not able to comprehend. Writing can be a burden on people who might not recognize that format as being useful or instrumental in effecting change. This is a difficult space to construct and yet it needs to be kept open for knowledge production to happen equitably.

Reflexivity – a way of knowing?

A feature of longitudinal ethnography, in my case, lasting just under ten years, is that it produces an increased ability to reflect, over time, on how ways of knowing have been constructed, both collaboratively, and in one's own practice. Many of the community partners with whom I worked have been involved in these studies right from the start. I have learned to develop a shared lens with these partners that also enables me to examine my own practice. Campbell and Lassiter argue that the ethnographer has to learn to shift and change positions both within the academy and within community contexts. This way of working can powerfully challenge the role of the university as principal knowledge producer, and can lead to ways of working that, "may have enormous potential for theorizing new kinds of multi directional and multi vocal collaborative pedagogies." (Campbell and Lassiter, 2010: 381). Part of that process is a requirement is to reflect on the value of the university as a producer of knowledge, and consider possible other roles, for example, the construction of new kinds of social action in community contexts.

Histories of knowing

'Imagine' was funded through the 'Connected Communities' programme which encouraged community partners to be co-investigators on projects. The programme had a commitment to funding community co-research teams and to blending and merging disciplinary knowledge in order to create and support ways of knowing across communities and disciplines that questioned the stability and

certainty of academic generated knowledge (Facer and Enright 2016). Long standing relationships underpinned these projects.

Many of the projects I worked on over the years were long in duration and stretched back to 2006. My commitment to the place in which the projects were based, Rotherham, and its people was important, so that projects were not time-specific but continuing. A focus on working with artists was able to open up different ways of seeing the world. Zahir Rafiq, a contemporary artist, also shaped and guided the projects and his involvement led to a re-thinking the face of British Muslims through a portraiture project. With artist Steve Pool I was able to explore how joint thinking could potentially create new ways of working, drawing on artistic methodologies. Zanib Rasool, community co-researcher on the 'Imagine' project, guided my thoughts and ideas on the community literacy work in Rotherham with a focus on writing in the community. These relationships are threaded through my fieldnotes, research diary and email exchanges and my experience of the projects and the joint knowledge we created has constructed the research.

Revisiting the field

Here, I reflect on the process of collaboratively constructing research questions, collecting data, analyzing data and disseminating data, in a context where by the concepts of 'research, and 'data' are fundamentally unstable, and the concept of 'the field' is itself folded back on itself, and 'speaks back' to the academic (Spivak 1988). This then places that process under a lens that questions its settled certainties. I argue, instead for a focus on lived, everyday experience to make sense of what people know and how they come to know it together. I take my own history as a touchstone for understanding this process.

Campbell and Lassiter argue (2015) that personal relationships, along with shared values, are the bedrock of the collaborative ethnographer. When constructing community research projects, my own histories came into play. When I was working as an outreach worker, I was aware that networks, and their histories, were vital in situating project development and support (Gilchrist 2009). Looking reflexively at my own practice, this underpinned the assumptions I made about how to construct projects with people. One of the key ingredients for project development was my long standing relationships. I had worked with Zahir Rafiq since 2006 when we

collaboratively co-constructed a museum exhibition together (Pahl, Pollard and Rafiq 2009). In planning our projects, we drew on a shared repertoire of understanding and histories. These personal histories matter, and this commitment to a wider purpose and shared understanding informed our work. In 2009, as part of a community literacy project, I encountered community worker Deborah Bullivant. Passionate about literacy and a key supporter of women's activism in the community, we shared a focus on sustained work that could create change on a community level. Likewise, literacy community development worker Zanib Rasool inspired the thinking that I gave to the projects. When collaboratively constructing projects, the resources I used to make sense of what was needed was embedded in histories of practice as well as histories of knowing and understanding. The projects' construction was relational as much as purposeful; it was contingent on ways of knowing that had been heard in conversations over a period of time, often years, often shared discussions, debates and processes of co-presenting, co-writing and learning together.

Making sense of the field together

The projects focused on community literacy. From 2009-2011, I worked with community literacy leader Deborah Bullivant on a literacy project called 'Inspire Rotherham'. Deborah's work was grounded in a shared focus on literacy in the community which led to the eventual foundation of an innovative literacy project, 'Grimm and Co' in the town centre (http://grimmandco.co.uk). It was through this partnership that I first encountered Zanib Rasool. When we worked on the 'Imagine' project, Zanib developed practical projects that situated writing and literacy in community contexts: in a community library, a school and within a home. She understood the ways in which literacies were located within diverse contexts, and drawing on her understanding of the groups she worked with, she drew on the literary heritage of women poets from India and Pakistan in order to develop a shared repertoire of understanding. Together, these projects drew on entwined histories and understandings that were contingent on practice and located spatially within sites that made sense to the participants.

Analysing data together

In order to make sense of what we were doing, we met regularly to discuss what was going on and to reflect on the process of collecting and analyzing data

before writing up our projects. Making sense of the field together has involved conversations and discussions over time. Drawing on the idea of dialogic co-inquiry spaces, we would meet and discuss the projects. These meetings were often fraught with anxiety for me. Coming to a meeting I rarely had a sense of who would come, what would happen, and how it would turn out. Part of the challenge of making sense of the field was that people did not always agree. I realized that I had to find a way in which issues of voice and participation were recognized, but also that enabled us to find a way to understand and incorporate failure into our projects. One of our challenges was to respond to emerging issues within the community. Zanib Rasool wrote a piece on 'Emotions in Community Research', which she presented at an 'Imagine' conference held in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire in fall 2015. Our projects had included a women's writing and reading group in a community library, a girls' poetry group and a group for parents within a school. The collaborating team responded to an increase of racism within the town with a focus on 'safe spaces' for women and girls. Within the groups, there were different perceptions of what a 'safe space' was. Did this lie in texts, in the poetry and writing the groups were reading and generating, or in the buildings where we met, themselves? Did it lie within the knowledge the women created together or in the texts they read? Opinions were different as to what a 'safe space for women' was. Some of the team disagreed with the idea of 'safe spaces', and did not want this concept attached to the project. A project on literacy practices in communities became entwined with questions of what community members needed and wanted. The town we were working with was going through a an intensely difficult period in terms of media scrutiny with respect to local race relations and issues of safety overtook some of the projects' initial purposes. Literacies, texts, practices, identities were interwoven but, at the same time, relationships were broken in the process. Emotions became the subject of research. Our work had a wider urgency in that the government became interested in the implications of our work for empowering women in communities.

To make sense of different understandings of what should be done, I began to read the work of Chantal Mouffe (2007) to help me understand that disagreement was important and that there were issues surfacing that we could neither resolve nor take account of. Mouffe called the process of engaged, purposeful disagreement 'agonism' and argued for a politics that incorporated difference as well as similarities.

This involved a process of recognizing what 'difference' was. We began to present together accounts of our project that were not fully congruent, but were situated within different positions and ideologies. Making sense of this together required attention to those ideologies, but also understanding our differences in a respectful way. This might involve, as Steve Pool suggested in one of our conversations, "not so much consensus finding, but instead about the relational interpretations of the same dataset co-existing in the same space of research." (8.8.2016). Therefore, instead of using one interpretative frame, we worked across multiple frames as a way of unsettling the notion that 'evidence' and 'findings' were singular and uncomplicated.

Writing up data together

Our current project involves writing up our research. We are writing a book (in progress) on Rotherham and about its communities, which is also about the research process, itself, its context, histories and identities, and futures. We know that this process will be hard. In the case of the 'Imagine' project, what emerged was a focus on voice, identity, aspirations and cultural knowledge that was not led by me but by the groups. This then precipitated a change in a focus and a call to action. Perhaps, in the end all that remains are hard answers:

> Once the inevitabilities are challenged, we begin gathering our resources for a journey of hope. If there are no easy answers there are still available and discoverable hard answers and it is these that we can now learn to make and share. This has been, from the beginning, the sense and the impulse of the Long Revolution. (Williams 1985:268-9)

In writing this reflection, I have had to be selective. Buried within the project's histories are disagreements and moments where we did not think we could carry on. However, the urgency of our task, and the importance of doing the work propelled us forward. When we wrote the book proposal we were able to articulate a shared vision of hope,

> *'Re*-imagining *Contested Communities'* is a book that challenges *contemporary images of 'place'. Too often we are told about 'deprived neighbourhoods' and 'contested communities'. But rarely do the people who* live in those communities get to shape the agenda and describe, from their

perspective, what is important to them. In this book the process of re-imagining comes to the fore in a unique, contemporary and fresh look at one town, Rotherham. Using history, artistic practice, writing, poetry, auto-ethnography and collaborative ethnography, this book will, literally, and figuratively, re-imagine a place. ...This book provides a detailed, historically rich and collaborative tapestry in voices that communities and researchers can learn from. It is about universities going into the beating heart of communities, listening, learning and living the experience. (From the book proposal written 19th October 2015)

The construction of the book involved also some differences and divisions. People did not always agree about the focus of the women's writing group, about the 'safe spaces' project, and or about ways of representing community. We needed to find a place to locate shared and disparate visions, that could inform policy and practice in communities. The process of co-constructing the book proposal levered voices into the space; on racism, on British Muslim identities, on histories, cultures, identities and futures, that are different, fresh and outside the experience of many of the academics. We have begun to construct resources for hope.

Imagining Knowing Differently

This paper began with an account of collaborative ethnography and about relational arts practice and reflexivity. I then began to look critically at my own practice. The university as an, 'imagined other' is left exposed within that process. However, I also wanted to offer a lens that imagines the university as an, 'other' not so much in order to lighten the load of knowledge production but, rather, to argue for a relational understanding of the university versus the outside world. If the university processes are collaborative, dialogic and are open to being wrong, this provides a structure for joint knowledge production. There is also something that is useful about university knowledge – it codifies knowing, creating objects (books, articles) that we can cohere and argue around. This requires a process of building a methodology of tools that allows a re-shaping of knowledge to take place – a crafting, like a bricoleur, of different kinds of practice (Rogers 2012). Re-thinking community university partnerships through this lens might require a re-positioning of the university as a more fluid, provisional and emergent body that has a number of different, related and

possibly useful functions within community constructed research. This might be practical, as well as intellectual. Part of this process also might involve a re-thinking of what 'research' is.

The product of this process could be a new kind of knowledge creation, which re-thinks literacy 'from the bottom up' This might incorporate the literacies of making, doing, multilingual and situated forms of literacy production, but require us to articulate them differently. Making situated and embodied knowledge visible is also a practice that involves a process of listening to the meanings and ways of knowing that lie in different contexts. This way of listening is active, situated and involves a commitment to the sites and spaces of everyday life. While universities offer a way of being that is constructed around the production of knowledge, much of the knowledge is actually produced elsewhere. In these processes, new cultural framings emerge and grow. Listening to ways of knowing and cultural framings outside university spaces is an urgent task for people who think and write in the spaces of the academy. To do that, however, it is necessary to leave those spaces and abandon many of the disciplinary constructs, habits and ways of knowing they offer. This might require a re-situating of knowledge. It also requires a radical unknowing and de-centering of academic practice. In community literacy research my focus is to create a new lens for literacy that incorporates knowledge that is situated, literary, ephemeral and located in histories and ways of knowing that are culturally located. I have brought together two disparate fields, collaborative ethnography and relational arts practice, to argue for a re-situating of research methodology that pays attention to where knowledge is within that process of lens building. I have come to see that much of my thinking happens in conversation, in emails, in research blogs and in a shared trust that has built up over the years. Putting this process into language and calling it a name is hard but I think it is worth continuing with is only to ask more questions and, in the process, to confront some hard answers.

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NOTES

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