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Part III

Ethics, relationships and power

7

Failing better at convivially researching spaces of diversity

Ben Gidley

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

Samuel Beckett

In this chapter, I argue that participatory and convivial tools are always destined to fail, but, with a certain ethical courage and intellectual humility, we can learn to *fail better*. It reflects on a series of (in some senses failed) attempts to use participatory and action research tools, including peer research training and various visual methods, in conducting research in urban contexts, mainly in inner south London, with heterogeneous research participants. The chapter explores the ethical and epistemological challenges involved in this kind of research.

There are two overlapping contexts for my intervention. The first is the *participatory turn* in the social sciences. This turn, starting in the 1990s, has seen a growing emphasis on the co-production of research, the handing of the tools of representation over to subjects previously understood as passive informants, the growth of peer research, and the development of new methodological tools that enable the subjects of research to become active participants in the production of knowledge. The second context is the *diversity turn* in ethnicity and migration studies, in which, since the turn of the century, researchers have highlighted the forms of banal, commonplace intercultural encounter that flower in thrown-together super-diverse neighbourhoods, with a growing emphasis on qualitative research in public and parochial spaces in urban sites where populations are increasingly demographically complex, and diverse along a multiplying number of axes (Berg and Sigona 2013).

The diversity turn and the participatory turn have both led to an interest in *the convivial*, as a mode of living together in places *and* as a mode of doing research (Gilroy 2004; Nowicka and Vertovec 2013). This chapter is written out of long-term ethnographic engagement with diverse urban areas, where I have observed the fragile promise of mundane conviviality, even among neighbours who publicly articulate exclusionary discourses, and even in the shadow of everyday racism and grinding poverty. And it is written out of an ethical commitment to conviviality as a mode of research. But I will argue that participatory and convivial forms of research come with ethical and epistemological risks. And I will conclude that we need to supplement the vocabulary of conviviality with a vocabulary of *contention*, as a way of navigating these risks.

More specifically, in this chapter I will reflect on working since 1998 on a series of research projects that have tried to use participatory tools, mainly in inner south London. These were based at the Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR) at Goldsmiths, where I worked from 1998 to 2009, and the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at Oxford, where I worked from 2010 until 2015. These included commissioned or competitively won research and consultancy for local authorities and NGOs, as well as more respectably 'academic' research funded by research councils or philanthropic trusts.¹ Most of this work focused on place-based (rather than on, for example, identity-based) communities, which drives my interest in place-based encounters with difference, the conditions under which conviviality does or does not flourish.

In the first half, I argue that the political economy of academic knowledge production blocks collaborative research and convivial tools; that the politics and political economy of fieldwork sites can make collaborative research ethically risky; and that 'super-diverse' contexts defined by the proximity of incorrigible world views generate infinite incommensurate perspectives that inevitably elude capture by social scientists. I describe these risks as ways in which convivial research is destined to 'fail'. In the second half, I argue for alternatives to the epistemological hubris that marks traditional forms of social science: cultivating craft skills, cultivating intellectual humility and valuing contention, which I characterise as strategies for 'failing better'. These strategies foreground the embeddedness and positionality of the researcher, and they insist on a different – slower – pace of research.

The term 'failing better' comes from Samuel Beckett, but I take it from Michael Keith (2005) and Les Back (2016), who were my teachers when I was an MA student. Lisiak and Kaczmarek in this volume take

the same Beckett quotation as their starting point, and similarly argue for a critical engagement with failure as an enriching participatory and convivial research process, which necessitates inventiveness and opens up a space and time for reflection, if the researcher is animated by radical hope. They also similarly argue that such an engagement forces research to *slow down* and thus make time for a more meaningful conviviality. My argument differs in that I identify structural aspects of contemporary society – the interlocking realities of demographic diversity and socio-economic inequality, the neo-liberal imperatives that shape the political economy of both urban neighbourhoods and social research – as structuring the inevitable, but nonetheless productive, labour of researching (and researching with) diverse communities.

Part 1: Failing

The injunction to participate

Sometimes I telt the truth, sometimes ah lied. When ah lied, ah sometimes said things that ah thought he'd like tae hear, n sometimes said something which ah thought would wind him up, or confuse him.

Renton, *Trainspotting*

Based on the body of participatory urban research in which I have been involved, the first part of this chapter will develop four propositions – about the injunction to participate, the reification of community, the political economy of participation, and the political economy of knowledge production. My first suggestion is that the *injunction to participate*, which we impose on our research participants when we do participatory research, is an *effect of power asymmetry*.

The participatory turn in the social sciences undoubtedly has a progressive, even transformative or emancipatory, potential linked to a commitment to give voice to the relatively voiceless. But precisely because it insists on eliciting the voices of those with less power, it is always problematic. Chris Haylett talks about the working-class experience of ‘an injunction to tell’. She adds that “*not telling*” (to welfare professionals, to the Department of Social Security, to the police [and, yes], to researchers) is a *strategic defence against confession and exposure*’ (in Munt 2000, 74, emphasis added). She quotes the passage that opened this section, where the character Renton in Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* describes his

interactions with his counsellor, sometimes confessing, sometimes strategically and artfully defending himself against exposure.

The New Labour period in the UK, 1997–2010, which coincided with my time as a researcher at CUCR, saw the blossoming of initiatives to encourage the ‘socially excluded’ to participate; it was a time when there was considerable funding both for participatory forms of urban development and for the social scientific evaluation of such work (Amin 2005; Tooke 2003). Programmes such as Sure Start, New Deal for Communities, and the Single Regeneration Budget constituted a massive government investment in deprived localities in the UK in the late 1990s and the 2000s – as well as a boom period for researchers working in programme and project evaluation, who were contracted to assess and learn from the evidence on the efficacy of the investment. There was an elective affinity between this localist form of regeneration and the participatory turn in social sciences; methodologies for eliciting participation, often drawn from the global South, were shared across New Labour urbanism and participatory social research (Anastacio et al. 2000).

In the neighbourhoods of the poor, there was a proliferation of community forums, participatory budgeting, peer research and community-led regeneration. Thousands of people living in relative poverty gave hours of their lives, unpaid, to participate in the management, governance and improvement of their neighbourhoods. I still think that the positive social, political and psychosocial impacts of this work make it one of the great untold achievements of the Blair/Brown years. But it is also the case that the injunction to participate was imposed from above, alongside a classing gaze (Finch 1993) that understood working-class, migrant and minority communities in terms of a *lack*. Middle-class neighbourhoods were not expected to devote time to attending these kinds of meetings; and middle-class people who attended as professionals (such as myself) were paid to be there (if not always especially well).

I was reminded of this more recently, as one of my MA students, Emilia Öhberg, attempted to do a participatory action research project with urban Sámi participants in Stockholm. Her brilliant dissertation (Öhberg 2016) is essentially an account of what she learned from what she understood as her failure. Her participants – her co-researchers, as she understood them – express great interest in the work, but when the sessions are scheduled, no one turns up: there are reindeer being born back home up north that have to be protected from predators; there are jobs and care obligations to juggle in the city; lives to live. While the rural villages of the global South, where participatory action research was developed, provide researchers with essentially captive

audiences for their participatory projects, complex urban life creates both *obstacles to participation* and *opportunities to not participate* – to not tell. Öhberg conceptualised the non-participation as a form of agency for her co-researchers – and a form of learning for her in how to become an *ally of*, rather than *researcher of*, her co-researchers, and how to understand and begin to undo the structures in the academy that block a more equitable and reciprocal collaboration. Becoming an ally, an accomplice, being ‘academically disobedient’, as she puts it, is perhaps a way of failing better.

Reifying community

... ‘community’ stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would dearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess.

(Bauman 2000, 3)

My second proposition – drawing on the critique of the concept of community developed by Richard Sennett (1970), Iris Marion Young (1990) and Vered Amit (2002) – is that *the aspiration to participatory research can serve to call into being, or to reify, putative ‘communities’, and that these communities are structured around exclusion as much as inclusion*. While different theorists of conviviality have different conceptions of community and cohesion, I argue that the particular modalities of community reified by some forms of participatory research can reach too quickly for cohesion, and thus inhibit the possibility of more meaningful forms of conviviality.

By definition, the areas targeted in area-based initiatives have borders, which include some and exclude others. When funding is allocated to some areas and not others through competitive bidding, as with Sure Start, New Deal for Communities and other such programmes, there is always an adjacent population not included, who fall outside the definition of need that underpins the newly designated place. And when the available resources are scarce, whether because of unjust allocation or because of generalised austerity, the question of who is included and who is excluded becomes politically contentious.

This can be illustrated in one project I worked on, Local Knowledge for Local Solutions, training residents as researchers to design resident-led ways of investing central government Neighbourhood Renewal Fund money in multiply deprived Southwark neighbourhoods. This project started from the assumption, common to most participatory

approaches to research, that local people are those who best know local places, and that knowledge of such places requires hearing their voices.

In one of the project neighbourhoods, Camberwell in south London, we recruited an extremely heterogeneous resident research team, diverse along many axes, including class, age and ethnicity. But one thing they shared was a strong conception of a problem of 'antisocial' behaviour in the area, embodied by a cast of failed citizens or disreputable others: 'substance abusers', 'aggressive beggars', 'junkies', 'street drinkers', 'squeegee merchants'. Such individuals were defined as an outside presence who threatened the cohesion and well-being of the area. In researching the views of what they understood as '*the* community', the researchers we trained insisted that these others were *not* part of the community whose views they sought. The resident research team concluded, unsurprisingly, that various local treatment facilities associated with these categories of behaviours should be closed down, and that the local state should take a more 'zero tolerance' attitude to the 'antisocial'. When local rough sleepers tried to give their own views at our forums, the peer researchers attempted to exclude them.

In this example, both through participatory governance structures and through our participatory research, a very particular narrative of community was being established, one that was exclusive rather than inclusive. The term 'antisocial' was used to legitimate the exclusion from the category of 'community' of those residents seen as deviant. The researchers reproduced what Norbert Elias (Elias and Scotson 1965) would term an established/outsider figuration, in which the community was defined against its constitutive outside, the 'antisocial'. This dramatises an authoritarian dimension in the participatory ethos, which privileges the voices of local people in the name of community, but is open to narrow and exclusive definitions of who counts as local, who counts as 'the community'. Learning the craft skills of participatory researchers and of community development work is to learn how to navigate this challenge – but it is often almost impossible. Fail again, fail better.

The Camberwell case, though, was promisingly unusual in one crucial respect: the 'community' defined by co-researchers was self-consciously multicultural; the predominant lines of exclusion and inclusion were not racialised. More often in my experience of working in south London, that has not been the case. As I have argued elsewhere, community is often experienced through a pastoral imaginary narrated in terms of a remembered affective geography rooting particular bodies in places – a pastoral imaginary that mirrors the ecological fantasies of many social scientific representations of urban sites (Gidley 2013).

Where neighbourhoods are divided from each other along real or imagined lines of race and ethnicity, the tensions generated by this can be particularly poisonous. For example, it is not uncommon in deprived areas, particularly in the inner city, that neighbourhoods perceived as, for example, 'white' and areas perceived as 'Asian' are located adjacent to each other, because of histories of de facto segregation in the housing market or allocation policies, or because of accidents of settlement. If the 'Asian' neighbourhood is given resources through a programme such as Sure Start and the 'white' neighbourhood is not, or vice versa, a politics of competition can become a politics of resentment (as, for example, in the case study of Newtown and Aston in Birmingham, in Anastacio et al. 2000). As Les Back (2009) has described, community's 'moral project' is often anchored in lament. In Elias's (Elias and Scotson 1965) established/outsider figuration, nostalgic attachment to memories of a more homogeneous lost golden age produces cohesion, but also boundaries: those who do not share these memories do not belong (cf. Blokland 2001; Meier 2013).

This in turn can fuel 'white backlash', expressed in far-right activity, or the type of desperation that leads to urban violence, as in the Oldham riots of 2000 (Ritchie 2001; Hewitt 2005; Rhodes 2010). In many of the south London neighbourhoods in which I have worked, many residents' concepts of community can carry an insistence on indigeneity, and a nostalgic evocation of a homogeneous past. Richard Sennett (1977, 223) uses the term *destructive gemeinschaft* for this, describing how white working-class Chicago residents in the 1960s organised on the basis of community to protect a segregated urban order from multicultural drift.

In many London neighbourhoods, a 'real' local is locally understood as a white British person. 'Community' is defined against a gallery of diverse constitutive outsiders, including migrants, minorities and newcomers – but sometimes also community workers and researchers, who are often seen as prioritising the voices of these outsiders over those of the presumptive indigenes, for reasons of 'political correctness'. In such contexts, research using participatory tools that seeks the participation of those *not* deemed to be the 'real' Bermondsey people, for example, is a priori deemed inauthentic by those who see themselves as 'representing' or embodying the truly local. Here, the notions of the local and of community that underpin the participatory ethos push against the multicultural drift of contemporary London.

In a context in which demographic diversity and population churn continue to multiply incorrigible world views, the task of finding participatory tools that give weight to all voices can feel impossible. But at

the same time, *only* a form of knowledge production that allows incommensurate voices to be heard, which reflects the multiplicity of perspectives in a super-diverse site, can begin to do justice to representing life in such a site. Such a form of knowledge production could be thought of as convivial in the sense defined by Nowicka and Heil (2015, 15), who suggest it ‘encourages an analysis of situations in which people bridge all kinds of socially significant differences [and thus] directs our attention to precarious socialities that are fragile and subject to contestation and change’.

Implicit here, I think, is the tension between two different modes of ‘representation’, one associated with representative democracy and quantitative research, and one associated instead with both ethnography and the participatory turn. The former is based on a logic of sameness or identity, in which representatives are presumed to *resemble* (statistically or racially) the constituencies they supposedly represent, or to *stand in for* those constituencies. The latter is about actually attending to the content of the contentious voices arising from those constituencies. In the identitarian mode of representation, constituencies (such as ‘the community’) are understood to be unanimous, whereas the participatory mode of representation recognises that constituencies are multiple and that each voice is partial. In the participatory mode, representation is always incomplete, partially failed – but convivial tools, such as those practised by community development workers and ethnographers, enable us to fail better, an argument to which I will return in the conclusion.

The political economy of participation

My third proposition is that *the political economy that structures participation can also undo its transformative potential*. This is the case, for example, at the local scale, where the injunction to participate comes as a condition for the allocation of funds, as with New Labour regeneration programmes, such as Neighbourhood Renewal or the Single Regeneration Budget, or the Cameron government’s attempts at localism under the banner of ‘Big Society’. As noted above, such programmes often draw almost arbitrary borders on a map around zones earmarked for the allocation of scarce resources, thus calling into being new ‘communities’. Competition for these resources, in a context in which the border between the inside and outside of a community is racialised, leads inevitably to racialised competition, and the power to define authentic belonging can become toxic.

Michael Keith (2005), building on Sennett's (1977) insight, uses the term *cannibalistic gemeinschaft* to describe the poisonous racialised battles over resources resulting from this. Researchers working in such fieldwork sites cannot be innocent in these battles, and often find the products of their research being used as weapons in them. I experienced this, for example, working on the evaluation of regeneration projects in Deptford, where activists who claimed to speak for 'the community' praised my work as providing an objective, scientific validation of their claims when my findings concurred with them – but criticised me as a partial, inauthentic outsider when my findings were at odds with their narratives (cf. Seetzen 2006).

In the face of this kind of cannibalistic *gemeinschaft*, the white coat of a positivist model of knowledge production – the claim to be objective or to have access to scientific 'representativeness' that trumps that of local activists – can be a defence of a researcher's independence: researchers can hide behind the cloak of 'science' to avoid the naming of ways in which their work is complicit. (For example, they – or, rather, we – will emphasise our 'robust' methods and our sampling techniques, and often pick 'models' of evaluation that come with rigorous-sounding capital letters, such as 'The Behavioural Objectives Approach', 'The Four-Level Model' or 'Realistic Evaluation'.)

But that protective cloak is less available to researchers working with ethnographic or participatory epistemologies. Convivial approaches, as Nowicka and Heil (2015) argue, emphasise the fleeting and the contested, and therefore the relative, contingent and unfixable nature of reality, which goes against the grain of the positivist will to grab hold of social reality and hold it in place. This was a lesson I learned when I was commissioned with colleagues to evaluate a Sure Start local programme on a south London estate. The management board of the Sure Start programme was dominated by white working-class women residents, but our research team was commissioned by their middle-class (and more ethnically diverse) employees to deliver a participatory research project that would engage and elicit the voices of some of the more marginalised mothers in the neighbourhood. We worked with the latter to jointly identify research questions about mothers' experiences of Sure Start services, then to jointly gather and analyse qualitative data and write up the findings. But when we presented it back to the resident management board, it was dismissed as 'unrepresentative', as 'just opinions'; because it was qualitative and not quantitative, it was not seen as 'real' research. The report was never published. Fail again.

The political economy of knowledge production

If, as Back (2009, 204) puts it, ‘research itself gets enmeshed in the process of enacting community’, academic labour can contribute to the narratives that reify community in exclusive ways, or it can subvert that reification. *The political economy of knowledge production itself can work to undo participation’s transformative potential.* We can see this when participatory research is funded as part of a time-limited social policy programme – for example, by the local or national state, as with Sure Start or Neighbourhood Renewal in the examples I have already mentioned, or by the EU.

Genuine community development and meaningful local participation take time to embed, while annual and quarterly funding cycles and project delivery milestones work against this, making it impossible to involve co-researchers in an equitable and reciprocal way in determining research questions, analysing data and framing findings.

And there are a number of ways in which the political economy of the space of academia specifically can work against a participatory ethos. The slow, difficult work of building reciprocal relationships in the field is undermined by the imperative to publish rapidly. The definitions of academic excellence that ‘count’ in the scholarly labour market remain saturated with positivist conceptions of what constitutes ‘real’ research. And, as Les Back (2016, 155) puts it, ‘the price of academic failure is increasing’ in the context of the audit culture of the neo-liberal academy. Thus, for instance, the ethos of co-production and multiple authorship emerging from truly participatory and convivial tools is thwarted by the individualised quantification of academic success, including the valorisation of sole-authored outputs in particular disciplines.

Part 2: Failing better

Cultivating convivial craft skills

How, then, can we fail better? I will conclude this chapter by offering three possible strategies: cultivating craft skills, cultivating intellectual humility and valuing contention. First, I suggest we need to have *the patience to cultivate the craft skills of participatory research.* These are often craft skills practised more artfully by non-academic researchers, who draw on the repertoires of community organising and community

development or the creative arts, more than on social science methodology protocols. As with other elements of research craft, they start from everyday human capacities, particularly the capacity to listen.

The most vital of them in a context of urban diversity – because there is no meaningful conviviality without encounter across lines of difference – is the capacity to use the research process to hold – and hold open – a safe space in which competing and incommensurable claims to truth can be spoken, and where differences can be worked through. This is an argument that resonates with that articulated by Lisiak and Kaczmarek elsewhere in this volume, who suggest that failure can enable the researcher to make space for a more meaningful conviviality. My example here would be a piece of research I worked on with Sue Lelliot, Alison Rooke, Debbie Humphry and Martin Myers that we called the Newtown Neighbourhood Project (Gidley et al. 2008; Gidley and Rooke 2010). In the project, a team of both researchers and community workers in a housing estate with a large settled Gypsy/Traveller population² set out to use research to understand local priorities for change in the area, funded by the Housing Corporation. In this area, interethnic relations had been a central concern for residents, but utterly taboo in community forums. When we gave people permission to talk about these issues in a research context, there were difficult conversations, but out of these came a more cohesive, convivial neighbourhood.

Early in our project, we ran a Your Neighbourhood – You Said It focus session with a mixed group of Gypsy/Traveller and non-Gypsy/Traveller origin students at the local secondary school. When asking them to draw and describe their neighbourhood, several alluded to problems being caused by a group of people that they tagged with ‘pikey’, a term that is used as a derogatory description for people of Gypsy/Traveller origin. This term was used by both the students who identified as being of Gypsy/Traveller origins and those who did not. The discussion was passionate, and we were told ‘*We are not usually allowed to talk this way in school!*’

The session gave us a glimpse of subtly constructed interrelations between and within the (interwoven) Gypsy/Traveller and white English³ populations, and that these played out through an assigning of blame for the perceived ‘state of the neighbourhood’. We realised this discourse needed to be recognised and accounted for in our work, avoiding the taboo suggested by the comment that ‘We are not usually allowed to talk this way’. While our funders and their stakeholders were interested in the project precisely because of the Traveller dimension, it was clear locally that a project badged as a Gypsy/Traveller project would contribute to

the competitive culture of blame – of cannibalistic *gemeinschaft*, to use Keith's (2005) phrase. Instead, we allowed the complex range of local discourses about identity to emerge organically in the research process, making it clear that no issues were taboo.

As we worked with resident participants, making it clear we valued their voices, we noticed a shift in these discourses: residents who had previously articulated a racialised blame discourse began to insist that the full range of voices on the estate be heard through the research, and then increasingly focused on what desires and hopes for the area residents shared in common, rather than on identities that divided them. This transformation was only possible because of the convivial craft skills in the research team. These craft skills included both established youth work and community development repertoires, and more contemporary participatory methodologies: an emphasis on oral rather than written contact, mobilising family networks, working in local neutral and familiar spaces, training peer researchers, drawing on local workers' 'ethnographic sensibility' (Berg et al. 2019) and local knowledge, and a developmental and inclusive ethos; but also peer research, participatory mapping, photovoice sessions, film projects, storytelling and interactive forums.

Deploying these skills takes time and patience, a point that resonates with the emerging call for 'slow' forms of science and scholarship (Back 2016; Berg and Seeber 2016; Goldstein 2012; Martell 2014; Mountz et al. 2015 – see also Lisiak and Kaczmarek in this volume).

Cultivating failure

Slowness, I suggest, is a form of intellectual humility that goes against the grain of the epistemological hubris embedded in both positivist forms of social science and the accelerated temporality of the neo-liberal academy. Thus, my second suggestion is that we need the courage to *cultivate and valorise forms of intellectual humility*. What might this look like? For one thing, it means insisting that *partial truths are truer to the reality of urban diversity than the hubristic claims of positivistic social science*. Positivist studies of urban diversity that claim to be able to stand above the messy metropolis to count and map its diverse populations inevitably miss the analogue fuzz of how people actually identify or actually interact in real time in real places. As Lisa Jane Disch (1994, 1) notes, positivism's 'Archimedean standpoint' is a fantasy; we all write 'from a specific location that affords only a partial perspective on his or her society'.

Attempts to capture the totality of any social space, and in particular highly complex, fractured, multiply diverse, multilingual sites characterised by incorrigible world views, will necessarily fail. These attempts can nonetheless be productive, but only if researchers have the humility to admit to the *partiality* – the located, perspectival nature – of their understanding. Arendt (1982, 42) spoke of a form of understanding that ‘is not the result of some higher standpoint that would then actually settle [a] dispute by being altogether above the *mêlée*’, but is instead ‘obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account’ – or, as Disch (1994, 13) paraphrases it, venturing into a world to ‘regard it from a plurality of unfamiliar perspectives’. Being honest about being partial tends closer to the truth than any fantasy of omniscience.

Similarly, valorising intellectual humility means insisting that *slow research is usually better research*. Long-term ethnographic immersion, building up an (albeit partial) understanding of each of the multiple perspectives on sites of diversity, is the only way of productively working with the necessary failure of such research. As the literature on conviviality shows, it is in ‘local micropolitics of everyday interaction’ (Amin 2002, 960), in banal daily habits (Sandercock 2003, 89), in ‘the routine ways in which people live and negotiate cultural difference in everyday social and geographical settings’ (Neal et al. 2013, 310), that we find the secrets of living together. Attending to the subtle rhythms and textures of quotidian life, the ever-changing patterning of interaction in time and space at a nanoscale (Berg et al. 2019) – in short, taking the time to research sites slowly – is required. Academic career expectations today, with the imperative to deliver a regular supply of research outputs, take a punitive stance towards such slow research, but it is surely an ethically better way of failing, despite the cost in career terms.

Valorising intellectual humility means insisting that *participatory and ethnographic notions of representativeness are valid on their own terms*. Statistical representativeness – what Hannah Pitkin (1967) called ‘mirror’ or ‘descriptive’ representation – cannot be the gold standard for all social science. Hubristic positivism judges ethnographic accounts and lay knowledge as ‘anecdotal’, as mere ‘opinions’, as in the example above of the research co-produced with Sure Start mothers. As Disch notes (1994, 13), though, derogatory references to ‘story-telling’ hubristically assume the possibility of the ‘Archimedean standpoint’. Participatory and ethnographic notions of representativeness, which valorise the subaltern (or humble) art of storytelling, follow a different logic. In John Stuart Mill’s terms, quantitative modes of representativeness – which he

called 'arithmetical' – are Platonic, while ethnographic and participatory modes – which he called 'rhetorical' – are Socratic: in the Socratic view, no one holds the right solution, human knowledge is fallible and 'knowledge is a searching enterprise without an ultimate end' (Urbinati 1999, 23).

Valorising intellectual humility means insisting that *the stories told by non-academic practitioners count as knowledge too*. Hilary Wainwright argues that this was a key insight of the 'in and against the state' social movements that emerged in the 1960s (such as second-wave feminism) and helped shape community development, community organising and youth work: these movements, she writes:

were built on sharing the practical, everyday knowledge of their members ... That knowledge was by its nature fragmentary, rooted in intuitions, emotions as well as ideas, in the things people do rather than only those they write down ... Much of what women talked about at this time had never previously been considered 'knowledge', and yet it led to an explosion of criticism of existing public service and economic policies.

(Wainwright 2003, 23)

In my work over the last two decades with street-level bureaucrats and middle managers in the public and voluntary sector, I have been struck again and again by the depth and nuance and granular detail of their knowledge of the populations they serve (Gidley 2007). While they may not use this language, many public and voluntary sector workers cultivate an *ethnographic sensibility* in relation to the sites where they work (Berg et al. 2019). This qualitative knowledge is threatened in an age of austerity by cuts and restructuring that remove workers from the sites in which they are grounded, which diminishes both their professional practice and the store of knowledge we have about urban diversity.

In a context of super-diversity, and its proliferation of incorrigible world views, we need modes of academic production that do justice to this multiplex reality, to its contradictions and paradoxes, to its contentious voices. Valorising intellectual humility means exploring the possibility that academic publishing needs to change to enable shared forms of authorship. Multilingual research teams, for example, or collaborations between academics and non-academics, are required to better attend to the diverse voices present in urban areas (Gidley 2013).

Valuing contention

What they [the demos] bring to the community strictly speaking is contention.

(Rancière 1999, 9)

Attending to contentious voices is at the heart of my final suggestion. We need to *embrace forms of conviviality and cohesion that have space for contention*. For Arendt, ‘it is not consensus but the activity of interpretative contestation that sustains both the integrity of the public realm and its plurality’ (Disch 1994, 104).

Hirschman argues that contention *produces* cohesion and trust (cited in Urbinati 1999, 26; cf. Honig 1995, 160). The New Deal for Communities programme in Marsh Farm, Luton, provides an interesting example. When issues of race were raised at neighbourhood forums, local authority officials tried to close this down, for fear of politically incorrect comments that would cause offence to minorities; resident activists insisted on letting people be heard, and residents with competing perspectives and grievances felt listened to and valued, and soon moved away from racialising discourses; the cannibalistic *gemeinschaft* described above was addressed, rather than allowed to fester (see Wainwright 2003). Similarly, in the Newtown example quoted above, we used the research process to hold open a space for contention, in which competing and incommensurable claims to truth could be spoken. Instead of closing down inappropriate voices and forcing the community to speak unanimously, thus producing silences and exclusions, we worked *through* difference. By airing grievances and resentments, by allowing for difference, residents found a more meaningful form of cohesion.

Supplementing an ethos of mixing or of conviviality (Wessendorf 2013; Simone 2004) with one of contention better captures the ambivalence of diverse sites. Meaningful contact is not always immediately amical. Mundane forms of reciprocity and trust, and the dexterity in navigating linguistic and cultural differences – hallmarks of conviviality and commonplace diversity – can thrive without challenging negative representations of others (Jensen and Gidley 2016). Convivial parochial spaces and public familiarity can be accompanied by private segregation (Blokland 2001; Wessendorf 2013), or even be predicated on the exclusion of others marked as not buying into an ethos of conviviality (as in Wessendorf’s account of Hackney, where Orthodox

Jews and hipsters appear to be the constitutive outside against which convivial locals define themselves). Contention, in contrast, recognises the messiness, ambivalence and contingency of such places, the fact that togetherness is always accomplished in real time, and is not a programmed feature of places.

Returning to the four arguments I made in the first part of this chapter, valorising contention offers a way out of the ethical risks of participatory tools: a way of failing better. First, the injunction to participate – the tyranny of participation, as Cooke and Kothari (2001) called it – is mitigated when we value contention. If those participating (in neighbourhood projects or in participatory research) are permitted – or even expected – to be contradictory, to sometimes remain silent, participation might not be experienced as an injunction. ‘Real dialogue’, as Bauman (2016, n.p.) noted, ‘isn’t about talking to people who believe the same things as you’. Second, the reification of community is prevented when places are understood as inherently mixed and messy – as contentious – rather than as unanimous. Third, thin structures of participation imposed from above as part of area-based social policy programmes led by specific policy objectives are challenged when contention is opened up. Contentious participatory spaces allow for resistance and refusal, for residents to reorient the objectives. Fourth, when academics attend to contention in their representations of place, they cannot wear the cloak of scientific neutrality; the polished performances of positivist representation are subverted, and multiple-authored, co-produced and collaborative research finds its value. Valuing contention alongside conviviality allows participatory tools to fail far better.

Notes

1. Almost all of the projects on which I draw here involved collaborative research teams, and the empirical material on which I draw was produced through this collaboration, so I want to acknowledge my colleagues on whose work this chapter draws: Geraldine Blake, Anan Collymore, Debbie Humphry, Ole Jensen, Sue Lelliot, Michael Keith, Marjorie Mayo, Alison Rooke, Imogen Slater and Jess Steele.
2. These residents of Roma and non-Roma English and Irish Traveller background, often of mixed heritage, identified in several different ways, including as Gypsies, Romany and Travellers. Although some Roma people see ‘Gypsy’ as an inaccurate or derogatory term, this was the most commonly used self-identification locally. We used ‘Gypsy/Traveller origin’ as a generic and relatively neutral term for several possible permutations of identification. Although it was hard to produce accurate numbers, up to 40 per cent of the neighbourhood population fell into this category, and the area had a half-century history of Gypsy/Traveller resident presence.
3. White English was overwhelmingly the most common self-identification among non-Gypsy/Traveller origin residents.

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