



TALKING, WALKING AND MAKING IN CHEETHAM PARK REFLECTING ON EVERYDAY PARTICIPATION AS A METHOD AND THE FAILURE OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY COMMONS

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE PRESENTS A CASE STUDY OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECT IN A SMALL VICTORIAN PUBLIC PARK IN MANCHESTER. THE PROJECT WAS A COLLABORATION BETWEEN MANCHESTER JEWISH MUSEUM AND THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER, WHICH AIMED TO FOSTER PARTICIPATION AND A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP AMONGST LOCAL RESIDENTS, PARK USERS AND MUSEUM VISITORS, AND CREATE A SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE TO LOOK AFTER THIS PARTICULAR PUBLIC SPACE. ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS AND AN ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE WORKED TOGETHER USING A RANGE OF PARTICIPATORY METHODS WE SUMMARISE AS 'TALKING, WALKING AND MAKING'. HERE WE REFLECT CRITICALLY THROUGH THE FRAMEWORK OF 'THE COMMONS' TO IDENTIFY HOW AND WHY THE PROJECT FAILED TO PRODUCE ITS INTENDED OUTCOMES. WE FOCUS ON ONE OBJECT, THE PARK'S SHELTER; AND ONE EVENT, THE PARK'S 130TH ANNIVERSARY, AS 'BOUNDARY OBJECTS' (STAR & GRIESEMER, 1989) TO REVEAL THE DISSONANT WORLD-VIEWS OF THE PROJECT'S PARTICIPANTS, CRITICALLY ASSESS ITS PARTICIPATORY METHODS, AND OFFER REFLEXIVITY FROM A MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE.

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Introduction

This paper explores the potential of interdisciplinary research and participatory practice through the case study of a participatory project in Cheetham Park, a small urban park in Manchester, North West England. By combining anthropological and museological practices, such as mapping, oral histories and object handling; and everyday cultural practices, such as walking tours and amateur arts and crafts, this collaboration drew on a variety of methods for an interdisciplinary research practice, the outcomes of which are still unfolding. The project followed on from Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Connected Communities project, *Understanding Everyday Participation – Articulating Cultural Values*, a mixed methods research project (known as UEP) that identified common narratives on participation and local governance.¹ For this project, ‘researchers-in-residence’ worked with community participants at Manchester Jewish Museum and in Cheetham Park to explore connections between the park and the museum through the experiences of their respective and mutual stakeholder communities. These researchers included: Torange Khonsari, an experienced artist and trained architect, who had undertaken previous residencies using gardening, craft clubs and other activities as means of engagement with local communities; Luciana Lang and Jenni Aniston, two postgraduate ‘researchers-in-residence’ from the University of Manchester, the former trained in ethnographic methods, the latter in museological and curatorial practices, and Abigail Gilmore, principal investigator for the project and senior lecturer in arts management and cultural policy. Other participants included staff and volunteers at the Manchester Jewish Museum, interested in developing relationships and evidence to support a capital development project for the Museum; and a number of community group leaders and individuals who had different stakes in Cheetham Park and/or the management of public space in the Cheetham neighbourhood.

To address the relationship between place, community and stakeholders, the project brought together a number of different methods routinely employed in interdisciplinary and single discipline research, and activities described as participatory or participative, often used by artists and activists, and associated with the practices found in community-university collaborative knowledge-making (Facer & Enright, 2016). The use of wide-ranging methods both supported the objectives of the work and led to tensions which failed to deliver other objectives, as we discuss here.

Based on the premise that public parks are community assets which present opportunities for everyday participation and common stewardship (Gilmore, 2017), the purpose of this participatory project was to trace whether the historical and contemporary connections between the park and the museum could re-activate them in order to “safeguard the park’s future by celebrating its past” (Khonsari, 2015). An additional question of how to foster participation in this particular public space was implicit in the agendas of both the university and the museum for whom successful community engagement was a key rationale and potential evidence of the project’s impact or failure. This rationale linked two factors which are part of the background context for the project: firstly, the growing national and local interest in how public parks could be funded and supported through greater community involvement in their day-to-day stewardship and management, whilst helping to alleviate the declining capacity of local authorities (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2016; Nesta, 2016), and secondly, the interests of Manchester Jewish Museum in developing local and cross-community audiences as part of a capital project to extend the former synagogue building.

The project location, Cheetham Hill, was originally identified during a pilot project in 2011. This involved consultation with a range of community stakeholders, including the public art organisation Buddleia, run by Kerenza McLarnan, who, funded by Manchester City Council regeneration monies, had commissioned Torange Khonsari, an architect with activist practice Public Works, to undertake some preliminary research and socially engaged practice in the area. Ethnographic research as part of the UEP project identified an interest in parks as spaces for participation, as was also confirmed by the household interviews and focus groups held in the wards of Cheetham, North Manchester and Broughton, East Salford, one of six UEP case study sites (Gilmore, 2017). Concomitantly, in 2013 Torange developed what she termed a ‘DIY Commons’, a programme of engagement offering free workshops in the park supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Conversations between the various protagonists resulted in the identification of shared interests in both the park and the idea of the commons; and an opportunity to explore how research and engagement activities might provide some benefit to communities in the locality, at a time when austerity and public funding cuts were beginning to bite hard.



Figure 1 Cheetham Park, with original bandstand before it was fenced off
(Reproduced with permission from A. Gilmore)

It was against this backdrop that in 2015 the researcher-in-residence project was created. It aimed to explore strategies for engaging communities in dialogue, communal memory-making and participatory practices in Cheetham Park, drawing on the Museum's collection, oral histories, and on the preliminary findings from UEP. We joined forces with Torange, the Leverhulme artist-in-residence at the Jewish Museum, with the aim to develop social infrastructure for the park's future management and stewardship. The collaboration shed light on the different perspectives over what constitutes research, knowledge and participation. The project produced a number of outputs such as a website, a three-minute film, a printed 'gazette', craft workshops, a series of four lectures, a Heritage Society group, two public events in the park and a park activity with a local primary school. Ultimately, however, attempts to develop a 'Friends group' and highlight the park's plight with local stakeholders such as the local authority and the Heritage Lottery Fund were unsuccessful, although on a small scale different communities were mobilised and came together in the park.

This paper reflects on the tensions between (artist-led) socially engaged practice, academic practice-based and ethnographic research, institutional knowledge (the Jewish museum), and the involvement (and absence) of community participants. Underpinning seemingly disparate approaches are values, affects, reputations, power relations and hierarchical subtexts. Exploring the points of conflict that emerged from this encounter of methods and interests, such as distinct temporal expectations regarding researchers and community relations, and different priorities in terms of outputs, this paper argues that inherent tensions and failures of engagement encouraged critical reflexivity, offering new insights into participation (and non-participation), interpretation and positionality from distinct disciplinary perspectives.

We begin by describing the project's context, outlining the shared theoretical underpinnings of 'the commons' and indicating the boundaries of our field. We then focus on our first 'boundary object', a shelter in the park, to explore how particular disciplinary positions of participants in the project assigned value to this object in relation to the formation of a commons.

Boundary objects are 'heuristic devices' (Candea, 2007, p. 179) through which different viewpoints can be translated, revealing where social worlds interconnect and where further work is needed to help overcome tensions and inform cooperation (Star & Griesemer, 1989). The different values and knowledge of participants in the project are explored through a discussion of what happened when the research team listed this historical structure as a heritage asset. The shelter became a boundary object through which to consider the divergent approaches to the park, its ownership, meaning and future care.

In the second section, we reflect on the participatory methods used to bring members of the local community into conversation with the park and the museum. Starting from the premise that methods are not mere mediating tools but that they have the potential to shape analysis (Candea, 2007; Evans, 2012; Savage, 2013), we approach our methods critically, assessing how useful they were as reflexive tools and for knowledge production.

Finally, we consider the tensions that are symbolised and produced using these methods, through the second 'boundary object', a culminating commemorative event, which involved a walk connecting the museum and the park, through our own critical reflections and other participants' observations gathered through follow-up stakeholder interviews on how success and failure was viewed differently by different agents. Following Facer and Enright (2016), we argue that these tensions reveal distinctions in the worldviews, theories of change and traditions of knowledge-making that we and others brought to the collaboration. We argue that this interdisciplinary process generated a methodological bricolage (Yardley, 2008) allowing for a wide range of outputs over a temporal frame that expanded well beyond the duration of the project. The concept of the bricoleur, who constructs something new by using a range of available things, allows us to think about the objective failure of the project (to create a sustainable commons) as an opportunity to reflect on and flesh out the strengths and limitations of our methods, drawn from distinct disciplinary fields.



Figure 2

*The Manchester Jewish Museum
(Reproduced with permission from
A. Gilmore)*

Setting the field boundaries: the park, the shelter and the museum

Municipal public parks have been designated spaces for community life from the second half of the 1800s, when they were first established in Manchester to offset the impact of industrialisation and improve the physical and moral health of urban population (Doyle, 2013; Lang, 2018) through the formation and regulation of cultural pursuits and class boundaries (Gilmore & Doyle, 2019; O'Reilly, 2019). A carefully designed space full of features for multiple active uses, characteristic of later Victorian park-making, Cheetham Park was formally opened on 26 September 1885 by the Mayor, Alderman J.J. Harwood. It is located at the heart of the textiles industry in the nineteenth century, in an area that encompassed clay quarrying, brick works, and terraced workers houses. It was established and paid for by public subscription for the purposes of providing a place for sports, recreation and access to nature to industrial workers and the poor living in the densely populated area, as a consequence of a local parks lobby, following the Open Spaces Act of 1877 (Jordan, 1994). The land was purchased by Manchester Corporation from Lord Derby in 1884, at a cost of £9,000, and after additional investment fitted out with cast-iron railings and gates, trees and flowers, a park keepers lodge, a pavilion, rockery, tennis courts, bowling greens, male and female gymnasiums, a drinking fountain, greenhouses, a urinal, ladies toilets, a bandstand and a park shelter (Historic England, 2017). Latterly, the park has become run down and its maintenance and future, like many urban parks across the country, is under threat due to funding cuts and competing priorities for local authority. Its more recent history has seen repeated attempts to secure resources whether through community fundraising for children's play equipment, or through a Friends group to formalise community stewardship (Gilmore, 2017; Lang, 2018).

When designing the project, the production and exchange of knowledge envisaged by the University of Manchester researchers in working with the Jewish Museum formed particular expectations about the effects this might have on local stakeholders in the area. The aim of rekindling community and local authority interest in Cheetham Park conjoined with the social mission of the Jewish Museum, which was to make an open, communal space for diverse communities in Cheetham. It combined interests that were linked geographically, as the park is located one block away from the museum, and temporally, as the park had also been in the past a popular communal space for members of the local Jewish community, as evidenced by the many photographic, audio and written records in the museum's collections. Next to the site of a former Jewish hospital, the park holds myriad memories for long-standing local residents, many of which are recognised in artefacts and records kept by the Jewish museum. The objects in the Jewish Museum collections, and their connection to Cheetham Park, expanded the temporal and spatial boundaries of the project, offering ways to elicit memories and conversations by opening a window onto the park's past for the communities we hoped to engage.

The project team was also bound by an interest in 'the commons', both in its historical relevance and as a form of contemporary activism to organise shared resources and to resist enclosure of public space in the city. Enclosure is a strategy of capitalism, theorised by Karl Marx as an instrument for primitive accumulation by displacing the proletariat from the means of production, thus privatising their labour. These processes began through the enclosure of public spaces such as meadows and wasteland, which prevented 'commoning', the collective use and access rights, and have their origins in the Crusades, when peasants were expropriated from the common land (Linebaugh, 2009). Enclosure continues in the contemporary city, through the privatisation and commodification of public service, through gentrification and gated communities enclosing neighbourhoods and increasing surveillance and regulation of pseudo-public spaces such as shopping malls and city squares (Hodkinson, 2012). The rising traction of the 'urban commons' is inversely related to this dispossession (McGuirk, 2015), as a process through which to reclaim public space by taking up access rights to reclaim public space and resist enclosure. "(t)hese commons do not necessarily have to be completely alternative non-capitalist economic spaces but rather form a sufficient composition of security to undermine accumulation" (Hodkinson, 2012, p. 509).

Urban commons are ecological, civic and extra-economic (Gidwani & Baviskar, 2011); they act as both an environment for the extraction of resources and the tool through which to realise this extraction through collective action (Linebaugh, 2014). They evolve over time, providing long-term stewardship of resources through "a fabric of relations that is built and rebuilt and renegotiated over generations" (Hine, 2015, p. 34). Located within social relations, they are "the object of a set of use rights, multiple owned and embodying or reflecting the fact that communities have many interrelated members with many interrelated needs" (Hyde, 2012, p. 19). However, as both process and environment, the open-ness of access to commoning is also arguably its potential downfall, or 'tragedy', through over-exploitation and depletion (Hardin, 1968). In response, Ostrom (1990) recommends the regulation by commoners of the use of common-pool resources, creating common rules for participation that establish protective boundaries.

The primary rationale for establishing Victorian municipal public parks was to give the working classes spaces for public walks as this access had been displaced by enclosure, urbanisation and industrialisation (Gilmore, 2017). Like other public parks, Cheetham Park continues to act as a common-pool resource that contributes to broader urban cultural and natural ecologies. In the researcher-in-residence project we wanted to explore how participatory methods could both encourage participation and form attachments which might help promote and protect this public space from primitive accumulation and depletion. The built structures within the park, an original early wrought iron bandstand and accompanying shelter, remain standing but are in poor repair. During the project, these structures became boundary objects, pivotal to understanding and facilitating participation, both symbolically and practically. The bandstand was fenced off, ostensibly for structural repairs, so the shelter was used for outdoor craft-making activities, and as a meeting place for tea-drinking; however, by the end of the project it too was fenced off. This act of enclosure highlighted an interesting opposition between heritage asset and common resource. Present in many narratives about the park's past, memories of the shelter and bandstand ranged from their use as public spaces for social life, staging Salvation Army bands, teenage romantic encounters, and singing rehearsals by schoolchildren (Lang, 2018) to finally becoming a marginal type of common resource in the seventies. Participants gave accounts of how both buildings were used for drinking and sexual encounters as the park became peripheral to community life. The council's response to this morally questionable form of commoning was to fence off the bandstand and shelter on health and safety grounds.

The relationship between parks, heritage and social infrastructure is complex and challenging. Since the 1990s in England, parks have benefited from heritage funding, such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund (previously Heritage Lottery Fund). However, these funding models are now changing, exacerbating local authority austerity (The Parks Agency, 2017). Restructuring of city councils and leisure trusts has led to extremely constrained capacity for park maintenance as with other non-statutory services, particularly for Manchester, a city with a large number of parks. A meeting held with the local authority officer responsible for Cheetham Park was constantly being interrupted by phone calls regarding other pressing problems, with recent budget cuts placing parks, libraries and leisure hubs under the same umbrella. Our experience unveiled divergent expectations of the rights and responsibilities over protecting these spaces, and confirmed the different status of specific parks within a hierarchy framed by Manchester City Council's Parks Strategy, as some are endowed greater value in terms of returns on public investment because of their location and perceived public value (Gilmore, 2017; Manchester City Council, 2018).

In an attempt to bring the council's attention to the park, the resident artist, Torange, made an official request to list the shelter as an historic monument, with the anticipated corollary of ensuring the shelter was preserved, boosting the park's capital by having its heritage value formally endorsed. The description that persuaded Historic England to list the structure made a case for its architectural merit and contemporaneity to the bandstand that had been listed some years previously. The process was relatively straightforward because there was a precedent, as well as a threat of demolition. The park shelter was formally listed as Grade II on 15 August 2017, supported by its historic and social significance as a strategy for improving the health and well-being of the urban working classes; architectural interest, because its original materials and craftsmanship; its degree of survival, having retained the main outlines of its original plan; and its group value, offering a complementary and functional group value with the similarly designed listed bandstand (Historic England, 2017).

However, we were informed by the local authority officer that listing could hinder the shelter's repair since the council would need to meet the more costly conservation standards set by Historic England. This would further damage the fragile case for investment, already perceived as weak since the bandstand and shelter were subject to regular vandalism and assumed not to be valued by the surrounding community. Whilst aiming to create positive impacts, through engaging with heritage preservation mechanisms to legitimise and endorse the value of the shelter, we had unwittingly added to the problems of the hard-pressed local authority, since the official accreditation of heritage value endorsed on the park structure was no aid to maintaining access to the shelter (and bandstand) as communal resource. Rather, the city council needed more convincing evidence of community commitment to stewardship than the heritage listing or community memories. The role that local communities play in times of austerity cannot be overstated: to apply for external resources to develop, preserve and maintain public parks (for example, the then Heritage Lottery Fund awards), a community-based management group is required. The fact that there was no Friends of the park group was taken by the local authority to mean that the community did not care about this public space. Whilst the attempt to list the shelter was a success, its immediate effect was to highlight the failure of the project to cohere different communities around stewardship of the park. Thinking about the park as an urban commons sheds light on the multiple perspectives of park stakeholders and their lack of alignment with the rules for participation, a critical aspect of maintaining

a commons and preventing tragedy (Ostrom, 1990). Graham (2017) explores the role museums play in holding heritage collections in trust for participative and communal sharing as common-pool resources. She explains that in order to maintain access to collections as public goods, museums must provide access that is both 'non-excludable' and 'non-rival': the owner must promote common rights to use the property, and cannot 'rival' this potential use through their own use. Museums manage this to some extent by regulating access to objects, ensuring they are not damaged by conserving them and displaying them in protective cabinets. However, the participatory turn for museums (Simon, 2010) presents a further challenge where this use-as-access 'look-don't-touch' approach does not permit all publics to handle and use objects or to participate in their heritage in generative ways which identify them as commoners, for example in the playing of specific folk instruments. Graham acknowledges these tensions, stating "community participation in a commons requires exclusions" (2017, p. 163).

As the owner of the park, the local authority is responsible for keeping it in public trust and preserving the right of the public to use the shelter which is non-excludable and which does not rival this use. Public parks have rules for their use in order to promote the maximum public benefit and extend this right to all, on the basis that certain activities (sexual conduct, vandalism) are regulated and prohibited. The users of Cheetham Park require full access to the use of the shelter in order for it to satisfy its purpose as a public good; however, the failure by members of the community to abide by the rules offers the grounds for the local authority to withhold public access by fencing the shelter off. Through listing, Historic England hopes to monitor and support common rights to heritage assets held in trust by regulating the ways in which heritage value (once identified in this way) might be diminished or rivalled through conservation. The listing of the shelter for heritage conservation has arguably prevented a tragedy of the commons, however as the local authority lacks the resources to maintain the shelter to heritage standards, it remains shut off, access to participation is rivalled, and this commons is lost.

Drawing directly on the Charter of the Forest, the first documented articulation of the commons in 1217, Standing (2019) sets out guidelines for sustainable commons. These include the need for well-defined boundaries, democratic governance and monitoring and penalising of agreed infractions, which may include suspension of access and mechanisms for resolving conflicts. Like Graham (2017), he acknowledges the need for rules and regulations that may actively exclude users. However he also proposes that "high level administrators and managers must respect commoners' rights, including their right to help make the rules [and] while local commons may be part of a national system they should be allowed to adapt rules to local conditions and traditions, a version of the principle of subsidiarity" (Standing, 2019, p. 35). In this case, further dialogue and engagement with the communities of Cheetham Park is required to establish the boundaries for local participation and exclusion, and to explore how the shelter can be cared through common use, although subsidiarity from the regulation of Historic England's conservation framework may now be hard to achieve.



Figure 3

*Commoning in the
park's shelter
(Reproduced with
permission from A. Gilmore)*

‘Talking, walking and making’: the agency of methods

Research methods have a social life: they are a ‘fascinating object of enquiry’ (Savage, 2013, p. 5) which mediates agency and affect. The research methods of the project drew on four specific disciplinary and practice-based perspectives, which brought their own agency to the project and its outcome. These were: *cultural management approaches*, which took qualitative research findings as evidence through which to critically evaluate the policy context and governance of the park; *anthropological methods*, using ethnographic research, primarily participant observation, peripatetic interviews, oral histories, photo elicitation, and volunteering; *museological practice*, focusing on artefacts and on how their acquisition and curation within collections articulates wider social values and relations, and film-making; *socially engaged arts practice*, using slow engagement and participatory architectural methods, working with crafts and in public spaces to engender conversations and reveal connections with space and site.

The process involved us thinking together about ways of reaching out to local communities, in order to understand their commitment and stakes in Cheetham Park, to engage them in the Jewish Museum’s collections and to further their sense of ownership and attachment to both spaces. In what follows, we will describe how we used our multi-disciplinary toolkit and assess its success and/or failure in engaging the target public and fostering participation. The methods discussed are identified as ‘walking, talking, and making’, and the emphasis on the gerund is motivated by our shared interest in commoning and in the process rather than the outcome.

Talking refers to all the networking, liaising, meeting and negotiating with stakeholders, talking on the radio, giving presentations, inviting guest speakers to give talks, getting locals to talk about their relation with the park, and exchanging life histories. As part of the activities that the project ran with the museum was a set of history talks with guest speakers from the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester. These talks attracted a small but loyal group of local residents and led to the formation of Crumpsall History Society. We also collected oral histories from local residents, which not only fostered the relations between researcher and participants, but also provided valuable data about the park. Over two months, we managed to build a substantial network that ranged from grassroots health, cultural and environmental organisations to stakeholders such as the local Housing Association, a local primary school, and the council representative in charge of parks. A radio interview by a local community activist and presenter, Reverend David Gray, with the project’s artist in residence on North Manchester 106.6 FM, a local radio station, helped to disseminate news about the project and promote further discussion.

Walking was the peripatetic tool that helped to situate the park geographically within Cheetham Hill and in relation to other local landmarks such as the museum and the local school, and historically, as we walked around and talked about the ruins of the park’s golden age, such as the band stand, the water fountain and the park gates. Participants talked about potential park improvements, the herb garden, and the renovation of both the bandstand and the shelter. Temporally speaking, walking proved useful to elicit information about the past, the present and the future. Discussions with the urban collective Sow the City about a possible orchard at the top end of the park helped people to imagine a future scenario that was an alternative to both their nostalgic memories, and to the sense of apathy they felt about the current state of the park. There was also a bird walk with the Greater Manchester Local Record Centre, which contributed to new understanding of the biodiversity within the park through the identification of birds. Another activity that yielded present perceptions of the park was a local history walk with Year 5 and Year 6 pupils from St Chad’s Primary School in Cheetham Hill which was conducted in collaboration with an organisation called *Living Streets*, whose ‘Walking Doctor’, Simon Harrison, was promoting regular walking as part of an initiative sponsored by the Department of Transport. Walking was also a key strategy for capturing the sounds and images for the film.

Making was the heuristic device that fostered a sense of collectiveness, and the craft workshops we held proved to be an effective method to bring people to the museum. The long history of using crafts in community engagement and integration is best known through the work of the Hull House in Chicago, the settlement house organised on the basis of cooperation within shared spaces and “influenced by Ruskin’s beliefs in the unity of hand and head” (Sennett, 2012, p. 53). Settlement houses functioned as community centres, encouraging social mixing and cooperation, through hands-on activities, lectures, concerts and cultural production. In Manchester, the University Settlement which continues today began through association with Thomas Horsfall’s Manchester Art Museum, initially housed within Queen’s Park (Eagles, 2009). This ethos of craftsmanship and cooperation informed the participatory activities in Cheetham Park, which resulted in material outputs, in turn informed by our distinct disciplines. If audio and film materials were hosted on the website, the Gazette was a material medium through which we published

the immaterial memories of different participants. By contrast, the singing in the park, as part of the Connected Communities Festival Weekend, added to the ephemeral outputs of the project. A further making activity led by the researchers was the *Trash Curiosity Cabinet*, which collected and exhibited objects of detritus to trace their social life in and around the park.



Figure 4
*Curated trash exhibited
in the park
(Reproduced with
permission from L. Lang)*

But how useful are those methods in terms of engaging the target public, fostering participation in collaborative research and co-producing knowledge? How were they generative in developing a sense of shared ownership and prospective stewardship of the park? In this final section we consider the tensions that arose during the project, through critical reflection and auto-ethnography concerning a second 'boundary object', a public event in the park, to explore cross-disciplinary motivations and underlying assumptions concerning theories of change of the different participants involved (Facer & Enright, 2016).

Beating the bounds: assessing the limitations of interdisciplinary research

While the reflexivity turn in anthropology has led to greater awareness about the impact that the researcher has over the social actors she is interacting with and her own positionality in the field, less attention has been given to the limitations the researcher may experience when interacting with other disciplines and the traps of the disciplinary bias of our own academic fields (Wacquant, 1989). To foster a reflection on what is gained and what is lost in interdisciplinary production of knowledge, we critically assess our methods and voices in this conversation by analysing auto-ethnographic accounts of the event that marked the end of the project.

From a cultural management point of view, the values attached to participation in the park by different stakeholders and the ways that these are articulated through policy-making were of interest. The research practice revealed the different perspectives on the management of parks as cultural assets in the city, and raised further complex questions. How does one develop strategic marketing for a park? What is its business case and how is this articulated in terms of cultural value? Does shining a spotlight on the memories and feelings attached to participation in the park help engage others, outside of the local authority, in its longer-term management? From this point of view, a successful event would be one that galvanised this stewardship, by

presenting the park as a place where cultural participation of all kinds was possible and valuable to the neighbourhood's diverse communities. From an ethnographer's point of view, because the world and its symbolic interactions are always under construction, the project became one of tracing relations involved in the everyday. Engagement required contacting many different community groups and networks who have different stakes in the park, and successful networking meant many hours in front of a computer, exchanging dozens of emails and engaging with a variety of individuals and organisations that were not necessarily local. From this point of view, success would be indicated by these engagements resulting in a richer understanding of the lived experience and networks of relations that comprised commoning in the park.

From a cultural management point of view

For me, the walk between the Manchester Jewish Museum and Cheetham Park was more a connecting thread between a series of creative elements taking place on that day, rather than an event or procession in its own right. These elements had been planned into the project design; they were intended to articulate the voices and experiences of participant communities, and mark the heritage associations that local residents held with Cheetham Park. Drawing on the traditions of Settlement Houses, we also wanted to explore whether encouraging people to participate in arts and crafts activities in the space provided a pathway to longer term cooperation, attachment and commitment.

The elements connected by the walk were a) an exhibition of craft and copies of the Cheetham Park Gazette, presented in the museum against the rush screens which Torange had used to make the shelter in the park more enclosed; b) the short film which Jenni made based on objects in the museum's collection and oral histories gathered through Luciana's interviews; c) the parading of a digital printed 'banner' with emblems relating to the park produced by Torange; d) an outdoor exhibition of 'cabinets of curiosities', framed tableaux made up from the litter pick, designed and made by Luciana; and e) a 'birthday party' honouring the 130th anniversary of the park, with craft activities, snacks, cake and other refreshments, a banner-making discussion led by the Working Class Movement Library, culminating in a performance by Sacred Sounds, a women's multi-faith community choir.



Figure 5

*Fenced-off shelter with banner
in Cheetham Park anniversary
(Reproduced with permission
from L. Lang)*

People were invited to attend the free event via printed and email flyers, designed by Torange and bearing the same distinctive yellow design elements of other 'products' from her residency, such as the Gazette and the banner, which were circulated to stakeholder contacts and distributed locally. I was uncertain if they were going to be effective as they were not affiliated to any existing community group. I applied for a license with City Council to cover the liability and risk assessment of holding a public event, and as the license holder, I became increasingly concerned as 'audience figures' were really uncertain. Would there be

an overwhelming amount of people who might be disappointed by what we had to offer them? Or would there be no one there and we would be left frustrated and disappointed? Someone (I can't remember who) kept calling it a festival, after the Community Fun Day Festival held in the park during the Olympic year, which was a raging success, and I was concerned that by comparison our planned event would not match up.

The walk between the museum and the park passed uneventfully. We left a small group of mainly elderly people who had come to watch the film and who remained in the Museum's exhibition room, to go up the hill and round the corner to the park, which had tables and chairs set up for craft activities and food. I was less concerned about walking along a main road in North Manchester with a slightly unwieldy metal-framed banner than whether there would be anyone or anything left in the park when we got there. At the same time, I was worried that we didn't have enough plates, cutlery, cake and crisps for a proper birthday party.

In the end, the 'event' passed reasonably well. Attendance figures were low, but those who did engage with the birthday party stayed with us for many hours, taking part in drawing, talking, eating, playing. There were others in the park who ignored the collection of tables and people, but some did drift over. It was not a 'festival'. The choir was great and the weather was fine, and we sang 'Happy Birthday'. So it felt like a set of small, low-level interactions between people that was unlikely to have a lasting impact, or to support the ongoing stewardship of the park by community members. It was a nice way to spend a Sunday in a mundane place, marking the time the park had been there and giving space for different people to get together, chat, look at the grass, the trees and the surrounding buildings, and breathe.

From an ethnographer's point of view

Cheetham Park was going to complete 130 years since its creation and given the rationale of our project, it seemed like a fitting moment to bring attention to the park. Organisation started three months before and involved the four project researchers and the Jewish Museum. Together, we had decided that we should do a collective and symbolic walk from the museum to the park, carrying the banner that had been made by Torange. The walk would symbolise the connection between the museum and the park, the past and present, and the close of a short project that was coming to an end just as we were starting to scratch the surface of this fascinating part of Manchester.

The day was cloudy and cold but there was a sense of congeniality between the organisers. The banner was heavy and the whole experience felt very far removed from the images I had seen in the Manchester Central Library archives of the circus parading along Cheetham Road in 1955 with crowds watching. By contrast, there was no sign of local residents as we walked up Cheetham Road, past the car wash and the entrance to a B&Q store, and through the residential streets that lead to the park. As I walked, the urban landscape made me awkwardly aware of how familiar I had become to the area and to its streets, which were both empty of people but full of stories. Over the past few months I had heard people reminiscing over being children and walking up these very streets on the way to the washhouse that exists no more. I had seen their faces changing as they remembered being on the swings in the park, being told off by the park keeper, or waiting under the trees for the time of their appointment at the Jewish Hospital over the road. The park, and the area we were walking through right now, had become a chronotope, a spatio-temporal whole in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), and our walk also marked our attempt at grafting this day to this place.

For many days I had sat on the park's benches and observed the few visitors who came here to walk the dog, play football, or have a smoke. The often noted absence of people and of a caring local authority were relevant data in my observation of this urban space. And now, as we entered the park through its top gate on Elizabeth Street, it felt like going through a friend's door. The park had become an entity; a familiar territory with special heritage apples, hidden water fountains, a cryptic graffiti signature on one of its big boulders, a herb garden, and a band stand pregnant with stories. We propped the banner against the fenced off park shelter as a final symbolic act on our attempt to reclaim a commons on behalf of others, but which in the process had also become our own.

Simon, the walking doctor with whom I had organised a historical walk with the local primary school was there to advertise the work by the Living Streets organisation, and the Archaeological Trash Cabinet of Curiosities made with rubbish from the park, now hung from the trees. Mick, a local who had been involved with commoning in Cheetham Hill since the 1970s

was attending the fire and tea urn, providing warmth, a good chat and an atmosphere of conviviality in this grey day. The Manchester Working Class Movement Library had sent someone to give a talk about banners; Torange had set up a stall with some craft activities for children; and Abi had brought a birthday cake with candles for the park. As a final act, Sacred Sounds, a choir made up of women of all ages, faiths, and cultures made the park once again resonate with music.



Figure 6 Sacred Sounds Choir singing at the park's 130th anniversary (Reproduced with permission from L. Lang)

Unpacking failure: participation, commoning & threshold anxiety

The analysis of an event can serve as a snapshot of a lived situation and produce knowledge by highlighting idiosyncratic aspects of the process. The two narratives reveal subjective perspectives and expectations of the professionals involved, the juggling and forging of relations and hierarchies, and the forms of solidarity that emerged from collective efforts. They help frame the criteria through which we assess the project as an attempt to engender a sense of ownership and responsibility for a one-hundred-and-thirty-year-old commons, if only temporarily. Most importantly, they test the methodological commitment to participatory research and reveal its potential flaws. While the walk was meant as a celebratory event that would mark the end of our endeavour to call attention to the park, in practice it was marked by absences and failures, in particular the small number of participants, echoing the moment of crisis the park is experiencing as a public space. While the two accounts above show different ways of telling a story and framing the intentions of the collective endeavour, the lack of tangible outputs is present in both accounts. In a similar vein, both researchers are intensely aware of the ethical implications of their positionality in field and their limitations as 'outsiders'. The banner, the film, the procession to the park, all reflected the elusiveness of our attempt

at community engagement, while the ventriloquism (Spivak, 1988), implicit in the efforts to safeguard a commons that was not ours, struck an awkward note.

As discussed in section one, the interdisciplinary research methods chosen aimed to honour an ethical commitment to participatory methods that might lead to the sustainability of public goods and commoning. There were tensions throughout the project, however, over whether these methods should be producing data and findings, or particular outputs and outcomes demonstrating impact and change. There were also divergent expectations regarding art-oriented approaches, participatory practices, and social research methods. The range of stakeholders, which included the artist, the researchers, the local authority, community members, and the museum, translated into a wide array of assumptions about what was possible from a short project.

The temporal frame was an important factor, as the different elements of participation and the expectations that surrounded them required far more on-the-ground time and resources than that was available. In addition, impact was not immediate, and longer-term effects can only be seen with the benefit of hindsight. There was a mismatch between the desire for slow and durational participation, ethnographic observation and the development of relationships with communities of stakeholders, and the short time-space of the project. While there were a number of synergies between participants, including a collaboration to foster commoning, there was also a divergence between top-down and bottom-up approaches and perspectives that did not align.

Throughout the project we were struck by the absence of participation: no Friends groups; few communal uses of the park; little interest from the council; and no council representatives in the meetings that we organised. As Linebaugh maintains, the commons cannot be maintained without taking part:

“[the commons] requires participation. It must be entered into” (2014, p. 15).

While as researchers we were particularly interested in methods that foster people’s participation, non-participation can be equally illuminating, revealing invisible boundaries that hinder participation. For example, a Muslim participant explained she felt uncomfortable in the Jewish Museum as a space for those of a different faith, as she had memories of being called a ‘savage heathen’ by the nuns at a local school whenever her ball fell in the school grounds. The threshold anxiety (Heumann Gurian, 2005) of people uneasy about entering into a project with the Jewish Museum was also felt in relation to the park by locals, who perceived it as a polluted and polluting space. In that sense, the absence of people in our interventions in the park was also pregnant with meaning. Our attempt to produce an open accessible space for participation had not taken into account the associations that different communities hold concerning the park and the museum, the boundaries reserving their participation, as the intervention and its failure helped to reveal.

Facer and Enright (2016) consider the ways in which researchers work with communities and the knowledge this work might co-produce. Temporality, different world-views on reality, intentions of collaborative research and what counts as positive legacy are all included in their summation of tensions, acting as “critical indicators of the nature of the collaboration that will be created between academic and public knowledge” (2016, p. 90) and establishing a common basis to inform decision making about methods, resources and outcomes. In creative practice, there are also long-standing traditions of co-production methods and design across a variety of art forms, such as site-specific performance and applied theatre. The underlying assumption is that by valuing practice as well as theory, the process of knowledge production is more symmetrical. Different degrees of participation from spectatorship to co-production are enacted through socially engaged practice, which may constrain or empower depending on the position and interests of each of the actors involved. The focus on process rather than product renders the participation itself as the artwork, similar to Guy Debord’s understanding of art as “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (1994, p. 12).

In our case, the museum’s collection played a key role in providing a medium for these relations, presenting a process through which to share and co-produce common knowledge and understanding of the priorities of the project. The museum’s records, objects and photographs, and the rich textiles heritage of Cheetham Hill that underpinned many of the life histories, added diachronic depth to the ethnographic present. Besides the objects, photos and maps from the Jewish Museum, researchers and participants also reflected on the trash found on the park grounds, on the abandoned bandstands, on the boarded up factories on Cheetham Hill road, and on the images provided by our guest speakers from the Working Class Movement Library and the Museum of Science and Industry. These media helped to create a historical collage of Cheetham Hill, and to

materialise the intangible. The participle form of 'talking, walking and making' emphasised process rather than output. The tensions inherent to multidisciplinary participatory research fostered reflexivity, revealing the dynamics of political, social and cultural relations between different participants and the researchers-as-participants.



Figure 7 *Commoning in the park at the 130th anniversary event anniversary (Reproduced with permission from A. Gilmore)*

Failure as a permissive outcome

In conclusion, the convergence of researchers and disciplines brought together in this project used participation as a method (Graham, 2019) led by an ethical commitment to community engagement with the material culture of the park and the museum through everyday practices. The multi-disciplinary approach allowed for a more democratic articulation of world-views, and forged and enhanced networks, drawing attention to the environmental capital of the park, and providing useful evidence of the value to participants that this particular urban space has to offer. It highlighted the accessibility of the Jewish Museum's collections, and presented an opportunity to engage with different faith communities through the medium of everyday participation. The knowledge produced included video, audio and print materials that illustrate the continuities and changes of a public common: text, sounds and images which are layered and textured and which aim not to represent but to mediate the social relations bound to the park through past and present cultural practices. We argue that this interdisciplinary process generated a methodological bricolage (Yardley, 2008) allowing for a wide range of outputs over a temporal frame that expanded well beyond the duration of the project.

The methodological approach, however, also highlighted tensions and absences. Participation as method requires a

different politics and orientation, avoiding claims and representations on behalf of any object or actor, and an attunement or 'leaning-in' to the complexities of participatory ontologies (Graham, 2019). These complexities emerged during this short project and overturned prior assumptions about what was achievable. The divergent perspectives of those involved about who would and could provide stewardship of the park meant the attempt to create sustainable social infrastructure (such as a Friends group) failed. Furthermore, the Grade II listing of the park shelter, a significant success from a heritage perspective, may have unwittingly complicated the opportunities for participation, or commoning, in the park. However, the tensions inherent in interdisciplinary participatory research encouraged reflexivity often confined to specific discipline areas, creating a fertile space to critically assess methods and consider the criteria for success within broader parameters. Failure was both instructive and permissive, opening up epistemological strictures and reinserting the need to consider multiple perspectives and agencies in future participatory research practice.

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Endnotes

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