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**Contact zones: participation, materiality and the messiness of interaction**

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## **Contact zones: participation, materiality and the messiness of interaction**

### **Abstract**

Recent debates around urban encounter, integration and cosmopolitanism and renewed engagement with contact theory have raised questions about the spaces of interaction that may enable meaningful encounters between different social groups. Reflecting on a participatory art project with young people of African and British heritage in north east England, we argue that discussion and practice around participatory action research, including the deployment of contact zones as theory and method, can cast some light on what fosters transformative spaces. Through analysis of two different approaches to community art used in the project, we show how elements of each enabled and disabled meaningful interaction between young people. We draw attention to the materiality of art (the tools) within participatory practices (the doing of it) in contributing to a space where interactions might take place, emphasising a complex interplay across/between actors, materials and space that frames encounters as emergent, transitory, fragile yet hopeful. We examine the potential of a focus on the material in thinking beyond moments of encounter to how transformative social relations may be 'scaled up', before considering the implications for research and policy.

### **Introduction**

Recently, increasing attention has been given to the spatialities of interethnic encounters, focusing on how the settings of contact between different groups, as well as their wider political and social contexts, play a key role in the experiences and outcomes of encounter (e.g. Amin 2002; Askins 2008a; Laurier and Philo 2006; Valentine 2008). At the same time, policy debates around community cohesion and integration have renewed engagement with 'contact theory' (after Allport 1954), focusing on the spaces of interaction that may enable 'meaningful encounters' between different social groups, particularly because separation and hostility between existing and newly arrived groups is a key current social and political issue of concern in the UK and elsewhere.

While in this paper we emphasise that there can be no quick fix for 'integration', our perspective is a hopeful one. We discuss an example that begins to map out the detailed practices and spaces that might move beyond the reiterative and exclusionary processes that largely constitute 'emotional geopolitics' at present (Pain 2009), towards more transformative social interaction in and across places of encounter (Askins 2008a). Our project ran with young people of African and British heritage in north east England, two segregated groups within one neighbourhood, and set out to use participatory art to explore emotional

topographies, everyday exclusions and notions of belonging. At certain points in the project, young people began to interact with each other, while at others, specifically after a change in direction, these interactions stalled. This led us to question what it was about the setting and the activities that facilitated or foreclosed interaction.

We aim to make three main contributions to academic and policy literatures in this paper. First, we wish to make an explicit link between spatiality, encounter and the notion of contact zones, emphasising contact zones as *method* as well as theory. We suggest that feminist and participatory epistemological perspectives are critical to conceptual work on contact zones, if we are to develop a more nuanced and ethical approach to research, policy and practice in this area. Secondly, we highlight the role of the physical nature of encounters in fostering or foreclosing interaction, suggesting that alongside enabling spaces for intercultural encounter, attention must be paid to the materialities of such encounters – or more specifically, the *epistemological deployment of materials* within arenas of social interaction. Finally, we argue that paying close attention to these ‘geographies of matter’ can help us think through issues surrounding the translation of positive encounters across wider social and spatial contexts. While acutely aware of the complex politics and power inequalities caught up in such processes, we remain tentatively hopeful of positive social change.

### **Integration, interaction and ‘meaningful contact’**

#### *Community cohesion versus social divides*

Since the century’s turn, a number of inter-related issues - the war on/of terror, urban ‘racial disturbances’, immigration and hostility to new arrivals - has marked a tension-filled watershed for UK domestic policy; on the one hand leading to more repressive policies on immigration and human rights, and on the other to the acceleration of efforts to bring different communities together. Among the latter, the notion of ‘community cohesion’ has become a central theme for social policy in the UK. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) (2005) outlines community cohesion as the attempt to build communities with four key characteristics: a common vision and a sense of belonging for all; the valuing of diversity; similar life opportunities for all; and strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds and circumstances in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods. While it is increasingly acknowledged that gender, age, class and so on must be addressed within this cohesion agenda, it is race, ethnicity and religion that have been given primacy. Policy rests on the premise that the integration of visible ethnic minority communities is desirable (Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) 2007).

These goals of 'community cohesion' and 'integration' are pursued across diverse areas of local and national government policy. However, there has been significant critique of both terms and the political approach that accompanies them, surrounding the ways in which the onus for integration lies predominantly with minority communities (especially refugees and asylum seekers) and how they 'integrate' with established communities, rather than how existing communities adjust to new migrants (Amas and Crosland 2006). Furthermore, it is argued that community cohesion should not be divorced from wider social issues of socio-economic inequality and institutional racism (see Kundnani 2007).

Meanwhile, a series of barriers to interethnic interaction have been identified, including physical segregation, lack of opportunities, differences of language, mistrust, anxiety about saying something 'culturally inappropriate', and lack of time. Initiatives must ensure that:

interactions do not seem forced or false, because people are unlikely to be motivated by a scheme that deliberately tries to promote inter-ethnic interaction. Interaction must grow out of the things that people have in common (CRE 2007, 1).

Likewise, DCLG (2007) highlights the *quality* of interaction, identifying elements for 'successful' community cohesion initiatives including participation, which operates as a lever as well as an indicator of cohesion; engaging young people; building projects around activities that interest participants; and developing a sense of commonality through concentrating on real life issues. The UK government currently places high priority on the promotion of integration and development of resilient communities, through The Cohesion Delivery Framework and Guidance on Meaningful Interaction (DCLG 2009), although there remain concerns regarding the policies involved and the movement of resources from elsewhere (Travis 2007).

However, much policy work on community cohesion problematically aligns a spatial segregation of communities with lack of social integration: recent geopolitical events have reinforced the tendency for segregation to be imagined as a danger and a sign of non-belonging (Phillips 2007). Unease about divides on ethnic and racial grounds have recently been overtaken by discourses around growing residential segregation between Muslims and non-Muslims in western cities; while popularly identified as evidence of a wish to be separate, these discourses are more a product of discrimination and Islamophobia (Phillips 2006; Hopkins and Smith 2008). In fact, diverse communities may often be geographically integrated – sharing streets, schools and local facilities - but with minority groups still experiencing a high level of prejudice (Dwyer and Bressey 2008). This resonates with communities in our research.

*Contact theory and the spaces of urban encounter*

The search for explanations and solutions to these issues is longstanding. 'Contact theory' was first developed by Allport (1954), who argued that where social groups experience conflict or discrimination, relations can be improved through increased everyday contact. He stipulated a number of conditions for positive change, including equal group status within the situation, having a common goal, cooperation, and the support of wider authorities and customs, but warned that if broader conditions of inequality continued, everyday contact was not likely to be enough to resolve individual prejudice.

Pratt (1992), a language scholar interested in the in-between spaces of colonial encounters, developed these ideas through the notion of contact zones. She describes these as social spaces where different cultural groups meet and interact, often in conflict, emphasising 'how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other' (Pratt 1992, 7). The concept has since been deployed widely in anthropology and postcolonial studies, while geographers have utilised it to suggest that migrants construct contact zones that are both embodied and metaphorical (Yeoh and Willis 2005), emphasising interconnections as well as conflict, and destabilising overly simplistic representations of bounded geographical worlds (Morrisey 2005).

However, this idea of contact zones has largely been absent from recent debates about the spatiality of urban encounter and integration, which foregrounds specific political, economic and social contexts as critical to integration initiatives (eg. Amin 2002; Laurier and Philo 2006). Amin (2002, 969) argues that spaces of habitual engagement can foster interethnic understanding, but 'there is no formula here...any intervention needs to work through, and is only meaningful in, a situated social dynamic'. He recommends multiethnic ventures grounded in the heart of residential areas. However, while many community cohesion initiatives are just so positioned, it is often difficult to address the complex and shifting intergroup relations that cross a range of spatialities (Askins 2006; Neal and Agyeman 2006).

Indeed, Valentine (2008) has recently criticised a 'cosmopolitan turn' in human geography and the idea that mundane everyday encounters and practices in public space have the potential to be scaled up to build inclusive and tolerant cities. She argues that courteous encounters do not automatically translate into respect for difference or alter dominant social values. As she suggests, intergroup contact may not be desired by minority groups, contact may be difficult because of previous discrimination, and initiatives need to deal with intersectional identities as well as ethnicity. In support, the stakeholders consulted for DCLG's (2007) review identified that ignoring the structural factors that affect individual choices about interaction is unwise.

Next, we draw attention to participatory action research, partly because it is through our epistemological commitment to such approaches that our findings regarding materiality

transpired, but also because these literatures have a valuable contribution to make to theoretical analysis and broader policy approaches regarding meaningful contact.

### **Participatory research and the contact zone**

The core aim of participatory action research is that people who would be research subjects in more traditional approaches become producers of knowledge in research processes, in policy development and in moving towards positive social change (Chambers 1998; Whyte 1991). Such work is grounded within communities, and a central issue remains tackling the unequal power relations within social groups to enable the participation of each individual (Cahill 2007; Pain 2004; Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2007). Key to deconstructing dominant discourses and social hierarchies are the methods used (for example participatory diagramming, community mapping, art, video, drama: see Cieri 2007; Kindon 2003; Pratt and Johnston 2007), but the wider deployment of ethics, politics and relationships is crucial to ensure that research progresses through dialogue and co-ownership rather than simply attractive methodological moments (Kindon et al. 2007).

As such, the practices and theories of participatory action research have some parallel aspects to, and much to inform, efforts to understand and foster intercultural encounter. However, participatory action research is not unproblematic: critiques informed by poststructuralist theory (e.g. Cooke and Kothari 2001), censure participation as a modernist and instrumentalist project, guilty of entrenching rather than destabilising traditional hierarchical relations between researcher and researched (or 'developer' and 'developed'). Counter-responses have redeployed aspects of poststructuralist theory and their own accounts of participatory practice that acknowledge its complex relationships to power while emphasising its *potential for* shifting these power relations (see Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Kesby et al 2005; Williams, 2004).

Torre, Fine and colleagues (Fine et al 2007; Torre et al 2008) have drawn on contact theory to develop the notion of the 'contact zone' to analyse the psychologies of intergroup relations, questioning the contexts, conditions and consequences of contact, and the processes that may bring about change. Their special interest is in the understanding of interaction between and across power differences. Moreover, they use the contact zone as a method as well as a theory, attempting to create:

a politically and intellectually charged space where very differently positioned youth and adults are able to experience and analyse power inequities, together...we work on and through power inequities, and across and through differences (Torre et al 2008, 24).

This notion of research within contact zones, involving productive tensions and discomforts (Pratt 2007; Somerville and Perkins 2003), is especially useful in intercultural research, foregrounding questions about difference, power and privilege, and developing nuanced consideration of the nature of particular settings, events within them, and the ways that intergroup relations play out. Such a research approach involves working collaboratively with those who are conventionally situated as research subjects, seeing themselves as part of the changes they are documenting. Reading and relating to the research context as a contact zone, then, necessitates working with and through issues of voice, agency, power and desire, *alongside* all participants in the process.

For us too, the processes of research are as important as the empirical and knowledge outcomes, and are inseparable from them. Such approaches are grounded in well-developed feminist literatures (eg. Bondi 2002; McDowell 1997; Moss and Falconer-Hindi 2007), and resonate with issues around integration and the kind of initiatives to promote community cohesion outlined earlier in the paper. More specifically, feminist praxis has long incorporated grounded, self-reflexive research in which the role and position of researcher is considered as (in part) constitutive of social relations in place (Sharp 2009). Contact for us on this project was multiple and complex: contact between 'different' participants; contact between researchers and participants; contact between participants, researchers and professional artist; contacts which were often overlapping and simultaneous. We suggest that participatory action research approaches inherently place researchers within contact zones, and that more theoretical attention to these will help in the development of richer, more nuanced and ethical approaches to research, policy and practice.

## **Methods and moments: participatory art in practice**

### *Fostering contact through participatory art*

Art has been employed within research as part of growing interest in visual methods since the cultural turn in the social sciences (Cant and Morris 2006; Nash et al 2002; Rose 2007; Pink 2007). Recently, participatory researchers have begun to draw on a long tradition in community development of using art as a method for participant self-representation, within a framework of co-production of knowledge for social justice: working *with* participants, to capitalise on the 'unique communicative and social power that the arts can exert within the public sphere' (Cieri 2004, 2; see also O'Neill and Hubbard forthcoming; Tolia-Kelly 2007; White 2009). The use of art can fit the aims of participatory research well, as it offers the potential for cross-cultural exchange; art is recognised as a successful method for generating greater cultural understanding and social cohesion (Kay 2000; Matarasso 1997; Mulligan et al 2006) that is able to 'create a space for embodied, multilingual, marginalised experiences to



be expressed in visual form' (Tolia-Kelly 2007, 133). Further, Tolia-Kelly (2007: 135) suggests that the use of art allows an 'attempt to capture alternative vocabularies and visual grammars that are not always encountered or expressible in oral interviews', with importance given to the physical activities of doing. As O'Neill reflects from her work on refugees' transnational identities, home and belonging, for eventual audiences 'knowledge is produced forcing us to abandon instrumental rationality and reach towards a more sensuous understanding that incorporates feeling involvement as well as cognitive reflection' (O'Neill 2008, 7).

However, a wide range of goals and practices exists. 'Participation' is interpreted variously in the multidisciplinary literatures on participatory art (see Roux 2007). It varies from participants observing or engaging with art; to being consulted by artists about their lives or the form of art (eg. Drummond 2007); to having a role at the data collection stage where art is used as part of a research project (eg. Tolia-Kelly 2007); to approaching the whole process of art/knowledge construction jointly and sharing the development of project aims, methods, analysis and outputs (eg. Cahill et al 2008). We share the ethos behind this last interpretation, and have oriented our work towards it. We recognise that there are tensions as well as benefits in using participatory art in research, many of which are grounded in issues of contact, power and knowledge-through-art production and the broader issue that any 'gold standard' of participation as an equitable sharing in knowledge production rarely works out in predictable ways (Kesby et al 2005; Pain and Francis 2003).

Our project took place at the African Community Advice North East (ACANE) centre, in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne in north east England. ACANE is a refugee-led community organisation that aims to support African asylum seekers and refugees through a philosophy of whole-community integration. The research reported here was part of a larger participatory action research project<sup>1</sup> conducted by Rachel with refugees, asylum seekers and British born young people in the north east of England, exploring local emotional topographies in light of a series of broader geopolitical issues. The first stage involved developing the research agenda with young people and organisations working with them (see Pain et al 2010), and the second stage involved exploring emerging issues on in-depth projects. The art project discussed here was one such project, carried out over several months with a group of 21 young people aged between five and 15 years old from both African refugee and white British-born backgrounds.

Both of us were directly involved in undertaking the research reported here<sup>2</sup>. Our key goals initially were that the project would explore and build upon issues that young people had already identified as research priorities, and produce findings that resulted in outcomes that would be useful to the organisation and contribute to the policy arena. ACANE's manager, who was closely involved throughout, hoped that there would also be benefits in terms of interaction from the process itself, as the African- and British-born young people who used the community centre led highly segregated lives although they used the same streets, schools and public spaces. Thus interaction was part of the collaborative framing of what the project

was about, and this became stronger as it progressed, but the research was not specially designed to facilitate it. Our research goals were articulated to the young people involved from the start, but we also communicated the open nature of the process and the role that they might (and did) play in influencing its direction. As ever, the young people came to the research with their own, varying, motivations.

Young people are often placed at the forefront of efforts around integration and community cohesion (DCLG 2007, but hold a paradoxical position: on one hand being amongst the most marginalised people in UK society, posing perhaps a greater challenge for 'integration' work, and on the other being viewed as the locus of hope and potential for more harmonious social futures. Such discourses are exposed by the body of work on youth participatory action research, which also deconstructs young people's supposed lack of maturity and expertise through its practices (Cahill et al 2008). While there is a tendency for the use of arts to be seen as particularly appropriate for research with children and young people, the association of art (fun, hands-on, creative) with childishness reiterates a binary between children and adults which we feel serves neither group well. In parallel, there have been debates in human geography around 'child-centred' methods which uncover similar issues around age-d identities (Punch 2002). While our research was 'child-led' in being conducted in collaboration with young people, and 'child-centred' in that it was cognisant of young people's ages (and associated power relations) in framing processes, the two approaches to art in themselves were not, we would argue, particular to use with children.

It was clear was that the research project would provide 'a messy social space' where we would be working with 'differently situated young people' (cf Torre et al 2008, 25): none of us could predict how we would all interact, or where the research would go. We offer here a reflective account that emphasises the messiness of the research, in three senses. First, messiness refers to the materialities of doing participatory art, the physical 'stuff' involved in how people and things interact. Second, it refers to the suggestion that both methodological practices and the social realities that they co-construct are messy, uncontrollable and unpredictable (Law 2004), especially where processes are participatory and jointly shared with participants (see Kindon et al 2007). Third, messiness refers to the complex and irresolvable politics of interaction, in that these interactions - while they are brief moments, transient interfaces and situated connections - also held the potential to cross space, place and time in unforeseeable ways. We also recognise our own roles within this messy contact zone, placing ourselves as part of these complex, irresolvable and unforeseeable encounters. Although we try to read some order through the mess here, our conclusions remain tentative and emergent.

*Different approaches to art practice*<sup>3</sup>

In this section, we describe two parts to our art project, which ended up reflecting different approaches, levels of participation and effects. The first approach was designed by the two of us with input from the young people involved. We invited them to the community centre one evening after school each week, to focus more closely on the themes that they had developed for the wider research project (the emotional geographies of racism and bullying) in an open-ended way. We worked iteratively, evaluating each session and discussing with the young people what to do next: the operating principles were participation and fun. Not all of the 21 participants were present every week, but numbers grew as word spread. We moved, over time, from developing ideas through discussion, diagramming, cartoons and sketches, to painting practice and then final pieces using acrylics (see Figures 1 – 3: we leave their interpretation open). Based on the themes that were emerging, the paintings were an attempt to promote positive images of Newcastle and of African countries and some of the connections between them. These paintings, and more importantly the processes and discussion that went into producing them, began to identify points of similarity between the young people from different backgrounds. The resulting art display was exhibited in the local library, and included a piece from every young person. A report for policy makers, other young people and those who work with them was also produced.

**Figure 1: The Tyne Bridge**





**Figure 2: Girls in Newcastle**



Figure 3: All different Newcastle faces



This stage was extremely hands on. We laid plastic sheets over the floor and tables of the community centre, and young people worked where they wanted, with who they wanted. It was disorderly, messy, noisy, mobile; young people alternately concentrated, talked, shouted, played. We felt that this approach worked in creating a participatory space, as the young people began to interact with us and each other to develop the key themes and produce artwork around them. It is critical that we emphasise there were negative encounters as well as positive ones, and often it was hard to separate these out: they were not always separate. Certainly, it was not the 'safe' space for sharing narratives that O'Neill and Harindranath (2006) document in their art work with refugees and asylum seekers, or the 'safer' space that Cahill et al (2008) created in their participatory video project with undocumented students. On our project, the divisive social relations that were problematic for young people in their everyday lives were fully present on site. Exclusions were evident: at times we were drawn into negotiating between conflicting views and behaviours, never as neutral observers but as actors within the group dynamics. On the other hand, as young people began to explore *shared* themes about their separate lives in the neighbourhood, unexpected new alliances began to form during this part of the project. The oldest white male, who had displayed and verbalised racist attitudes in the early weeks of the project, became in the ACANE manager's words 'almost like big brother' to several of the youngest refugee children, giving them

piggyback rides and playing chase. The four white female teenagers, who had been the most wary about their involvement at first and stayed in their own small group, became committed to the production of the painting display, liaising with all the other participants about completing and arranging the paintings.

The second approach to art on the project differed, and although we did not intend it to be so, it was distinctly less participatory. It arose when Rachel took young people's paintings to a local authority arts development officer in pursuit of wider public dissemination. In her audio diary she noted that:

*when I went to see him and I took in the paintings that the children had done, he was very interested in the ideas and the images but he said that, you know they need to be done professionally, they're too messy, they need to have a professional finish to them. And of course 'professional' is being elided with 'artist', with 'art' and 'artist'. Ok, so what is proper art is something that is professional and tidy, and obviously not done by children.*

Keen to continue working with the young people, and maximise the dissemination and impact of the ideas and images they were producing, Rachel agreed to liaise with a local professional artist, supported by funding from a number of agencies, to produce a display at an established public art site in the city. Again, young people were invited to come back to ACANE one evening a week to develop their work further.

Professional art may have considerable value, as Tolia Kelly argues of her own work:

The collaboration with a professional artist enabled rigour in producing visual materials that are socially and culturally recognised as 'Art', and provided essential advice and skills necessary to avoid the risk of participants viewing the research process as naïve, 'experimental', unethical or patronising (Tolia Kelly 2007, 133-4).

But for our project, there was considerable tension between the perceived need for a professional product (art for consumption) and our goals in knowledge co-production (participatory art as process). The artist had a clear vision about what the themes, media and shape of the end product would be. None of these related closely to the previous artwork, and they included some elements that we came to find troubling.

The installation was to be made up of digital photographs of objects that 'meant something' to young people (and that they were initially asked to bring in to sessions), alongside photographs of parts of young people's bodies. While some young people were initially enthusiastic, the artist did all of the photography and editing, while young people watched. Their numbers, and their participation, dwindled as the weeks went by, as the process offered little involvement or activity, nor engaged with ideas that as researchers they had previously

suggested and developed. Thus the ways young people used the space at ACANE changed significantly: they had little to do, hold or make. Instead of participating on their own terms, they seemed to us to be in danger of being objectified and passive in the process.

Moreover, relations between young people that had previously begun to shift from avoidance to interaction to positive encounters seemed to be reverting back to longer held and enacted exclusions. For example, when photographs were taken of young people's bodies (mostly faces, hands and feet) and then shown to the group, other young people's comments were predominantly negative, based on (perceptions of) physical difference – the quintessential marker in constructions of difference - leading to arguments or evasion. We felt uncomfortable with these changes, and the representation in the final artwork (for these reasons, and for issues regarding anonymity, we do not include this final piece here).

In short, in the first stage the focus moved from issues surrounding difference and conflict (especially bullying and racism) to establishing points of similarity, identifying positive connections between places, and more hopeful geographies of encounter (see Pain et al 2007). The second approach, while still an attempt at exploring identity, ended up highlighting and reinforcing 'otherness'. In the next part of the paper we question what it was about the two practical approaches to art that fostered or hindered this move, and enabled/disabled (positive) interaction between African refugee and locally born young people, drawing on conceptual work around materiality.

### **Messy materialities**

As outlined above, the art sessions in the first approach could be described as 'chaotic': shouting voices, moving bodies, a whirlwind of activities, not all directly related to 'doing art' but happening in and around the doing of art. At the centre of this art, or rather weaving through it, was the 'stuff': the pens, pencils, paper, tubes of paint, pots of water, plates for mixing paint, aprons - and the hands, fingers, eyes, mouths and other body parts that engaged with them. It seemed to us that these material objects were central to what transpired over this part of the project: the pens, paints, etc. appeared to suggest interactions, demand communications and enable conversations across and between the research participants, and researchers and participants – they were *part of* our contact. In the second approach, the lack of tactile material engagement with the objects of art production equally affected encounters, appearing to forestall new or progressive social relations. Our reading of what transpired across the project, then, suggests a need to carefully consider the deployment of matter within research methodology and social policy.



There is an increasing body of work in human geography and across the social sciences responding to Jackson's (2000) call to 'pay attention to the object' again and in new ways. This growing literature has, as Anderson and Tolia-Kelly (2004, 669) remind us, led to 'multiple encounters' with the more-than-human world, which challenges 'any simple postulation of matter or materiality'. Rather there is a need 'for specificity as we encounter a material (re)turn that twists in numerous directions' (ibid.). Mindful of this, we need to position our work here carefully. Specifically, we want to address *the role of things in social relations*: their capacities in encounters; and particularly how material engagement may dis/enable difference.

Over 20 years ago, Appadurai (1986) urged us to pay attention to 'the social life of things' arguing that the very materiality of an object – its physical attributes/characteristics, and its latent potentiality outside that ascribed to it by humans – must be appreciated in order to understand processes of inscription and the social relations attuned to them (also Mattern 2004). Latour (2004) examines how objects (or 'technical artefacts'), are not simply intermediaries, but rather they actively mediate relations between people: and importantly that when objects are 'everyday', they become invisible while (still) making social practices, processes and relations *routine*. Indeed, it can be the very mundaneness of objects that engenders specific social relations, which direct us in ways we barely notice.

However, the contact between actors evidenced at the start of our project appeared to stem, instead, from the objects *not* being mundane – the socio-economic position of the young people meant that these objects were unusual, and access to them was perceived to be valuable: young people had to share materials around the larger group. Many early interactions were negative, with young people taking what they wanted from others rather than negotiating use, inevitably drawing us as researchers into specific kinds of contact with participants.

In particular, small, ethnically homogenous 'cliques' clustered around 'their' art materials, and defended them territorially – white British-born and black African young people kept to separate tables and different parts of ACANE space, staying in 'their' group except when they needed another resource not available on 'their' table. Resources on 'other' tables were not requested but demanded and, while arguments were not overtly racist, an observable hierarchy quickly became established, based first on ethnic and then age lines. Dominant social groupings and power relations were played out through the use/control of objects. Nevertheless, the objects demanded interaction of some kind, and, as the project progressed, young people began to engage positively with each other – crucially through each other's work. In the process of negative interaction described above, young people came into contact with each others' art and practices, and two key points of connection began to emerge.

First, the young people began to find connections between their place in Byker and the wider world through material practices of art. One example is that several participants painted football scenes, with Newcastle United (the local team) supported by both British-born and refugees young people. This led to discussion about the 'best' players, how football is played in the UK and African countries, and the fact that Newcastle United has several players of African ethnic origin. Another example is a painting that included palm trees in a remembered village of origin, which raised questions for an indigenous participant around where bananas come from: we can think here about critical consumer geographies that draw upon materialities to excavate the interconnectedness of lives across the globe (eg. Cook 2006).

Second, there was interest in *how the material objects were being used*. Many questions were asked regarding the *doing* of the paintings: 'How did you get (mix) that colour?' 'Which brush did you do that bit with?' The materials were also used in 'non-art' ways: painting on hands, using the aprons as capes in 'run-around' games, etc., and this also led to communication and interaction as the objects themselves were discussed, explored, utilised. New relationships began to form, and racialised divides began to break down, specifically through the use of the 'stuff' of the art project. This suggests consideration of phenomenological perspectives, and their focus on the ways in which we are made through and in our contact with the physical world.

While literature around phenomenology often focuses on landscape (eg. Macpherson 2009; Wylie 2005), we believe that its conceptual work has much to offer thinking about how participatory action research and intercultural interaction initiatives may unfold. There is a need to extend notions around visual identification and discursive interaction, commonly at the forefront of work on integration and contact theory, to deliberate the role of material objects in effecting encounters in embodied and affective ways. For us, as participatory action researchers, this requires a closer interrogation of how objects function within methodological process - crucially without invoking non-human objects as external to social relations (see Bakker and Bridge 2006 regarding the risks of 'object fetishism').

Through engaging with materials, then, interaction among the young people increased *and changed* – subtly, but there was a tangible shift in individuals' behaviours with each other. Schwanen (2007) writes that matter can 'introduce uncertainty and novelty'. As Hinchcliffe (2007) explains, objects are both *made of* relations *and make* relations, and we need to think in terms of these co-constitutive relationships across objects and subjects. Thus, Hinchcliffe argues, rather than a simple 'ontology of force' in which objects act on actors and vice versa, we should hold on to the notion of *multiplicity*: objects are never simply of their current relations, and the reality of entity is never, can never, be exhausted. Instead, we should work with a model of creativity, to better capture and understand the transformative potentialities of matter in social life. This creative model resonates with the first approach in our project: the material 'art' objects appeared to intercept and mess with the usual, dominant social relations

within this group of young people, through processes in which materiality and social relations were being mutually constituted.

Specifically, material engagement within the first approach shifted emphasis from discourse to doing, and tactile encounters with things were caught up in renegotiating Selves. Through the mediation of material objects, the young people enacted relationships of difference along ethnic and age lines, *as well as* relationships of similarity in which they were *doing the same* things, whether representing themselves and their identities, and appreciating the difficulties involved in this task, or painting on their hands and playing sword fights with the paintbrushes. One young woman said of this stage, 'I liked this best because it was good fun', and it seemed that the doing-with-stuff enabled fun, while having fun was a common desire shared among members of the group – and researchers.

We need to be clear here that it is not our intention to universalise sameness nor essentialise difference: indeed, difference and similarity were simultaneously evident. There was diversity in ethnic background, identity and cultural practices; and also shared interests, activities and everyday living places. The key point is that, while the project involved young people exploring their differences, similarities were also realised and enacted through the material objects involved in the first approach.

And this was observably not the case in the second approach to art on our project. Indeed, the lack of engagement with materials was as constitutive of the social relations in the group as the paints, brushes, paper etc. had been in the first approach. Without 'stuff' to mobilise around, fragile, emergent relationships appeared to slip, old habits and relations re-emerged. While we are not suggesting a complete reversal, transformations that had occurred were tentative and tenuous, and rather than becoming more routine, previous power geometries regained a little ground. Ironically, given that this stage set out explicitly to interrogate 'things' of importance to young people, its emphasis on *end product* ultimately foreclosed (re)enacting the new, emergent social relations through those material objects.

One participant said after the project 'I felt shy because [the artist] was taking pictures of everyone and I didn't want my picture taken'. There are issues here regarding embodied geographies of material culture in which construction of social and cultural identities is, in part, through material objects (eg. Gregson and Beale 2004). Furthermore, feminist work importantly highlights the embeddedness of physicalities of the body in (unequal) social relations (see Butler 1993; Colls 2007; Grosz 1994; Longhurst 2005). The focus in the second approach on bodies, hairstyles, clothes and personal possessions served to reinstitute the physical differences among the young people as well as their culturally-grounded choices of self-presentation through possessions and fashion, especially for the participants in their teens for whom body/personal image was a highly complex and sensitive topic.

Moreover, there was general dissatisfaction about 'having nothing to do', which the young people resisted by complaining, becoming disruptive or leaving the project not to return. As Rachel's audio diary describes:

*it's very much about a piece of artwork. It's not really so much about the process and it's not really about what the kids are actually doing, or even what the kids are thinking and feeling about all this and how they're responding to it...all they're asking all the time, is "this is boring, can we paint? Can you bring the paints in, can we do some more of that?"*

When Rachel suggested to the artist that the young people needed more hands on involvement, and asked if they could paint as part of the artwork or even as an aside to it,

*[the artist] told me on the phone she had organised something else for them to do. This turned out to be measuring up a scale replica of the final piece, and working out how many photos could be fitted onto it. The white girls' reaction when offered this activity was to leave the project. After that they hung about outside ACANE and talked to me, but they didn't come in when [the artist] was there.*

We felt that this was a key moment in shutting down contact, between young people, between young people and the artist, and between young people and us as researchers in the community centre. However, it is *not* our intention here to suggest any binary between the two approaches adopted within the project in the sense of 'amateur' versus 'professional' community art (see footnote 3), nor between the medium of painting versus digital art. Rather we wish to emphasise the *ideological use of materials* within art production. Photography, video and other digital technologies can be employed in participatory, 'hands on' ways, with multiple actors working on ideas, taking the camera, editing visual outputs through facilitated negotiations with each other (Hume-Cook et al 2007). Likewise, professional artists may utilise pens, paints and a diverse range of materials with community groups as part of their work process.

Crucially, our argument is that we believe this tension around the presence/absence of matter offers up productive ways to think about fostering transformative or meaningful encounters. As mentioned earlier, a key focus within participatory approaches is on 'doings': material-based hands-on methods can be effective tools enabling people to speak without necessarily using their voices. It has been suggested that power geometries are more difficult to enact within participatory approaches (Guijt and Shah 1998), and we wish to explicitly tie such analyses to the materiality of encounters. Paying attention to the role of objects in social relations exposes how they may positively and creatively mediate power imbalances attached to imaginaries regarding Self and Other, remembering that participatory techniques are not

always emancipatory at the site of 'participation' (see Askins 2008b), can also be productively analysed by considering material geographies.

This brings us back to issues regarding integration and urban encounter more broadly: might the effects of contact travel beyond the immediate spaces of a research setting, and what elements might influence this movement? We now consider how 'moments' may or may not become scaled up into more significant social changes.

### **Beyond moments of encounter: extending 'meaningful contact' to community cohesion**

'Successful' participation, however defined, is highly dependent on context and the detail and texture of what happens within spaces of encounter: as the full effects of participatory encounters are always unknowable, then, what relations do the micro-practices and spaces of contact have to what happens next? And what potential is there in the current interest in facilitating interaction to create more enabling spaces? We agree with Valentine (2008) that there is a pressing need to address broader societal inequalities, and fuse debates about prejudice and respect with questions of socio-economic injustice: material issues of a different order. Indeed, within participatory literatures there is deep concern that 'scaling up' from the detail of local encounters must link interventions with wider struggles for social justice, in order to 'deploy (carefully) the resources of participation in attempts to effect empowered human agency and facilitate socio-spatial change' (Kesby 2007, 2828; see also Cameron and Gibson 2005; Kindon et al 2007).

We suggest that thinking through recent work on participation together with the role of matter can shed light on debates around integration and transformative spaces. Kesby (2007) has explored the assumption inherent in many participatory initiatives that the (positive) effects of participation travel beyond the time and space of the immediate arena. Drawing on drama, used as a method of popular education around HIV, AIDS and risky sexual behaviour in Southern Africa, and engaging with Cornwall's (2004) work on 'popular' and 'invited' spaces of participation, he highlights the complexity of the nature of power and geographies of participation, arguing that:

We need to identify which resources have been successfully redeployed, normalised, and distanced beyond the participatory arena, enabling agents to repeatedly mobilise them to enact their empowerment elsewhere. We must identify how wider geographical settings have been reworked to make them conducive to the stable reperformance of empowered forms of agency (Kesby 2007, 2825).

The materialities of participation, we suggest, are one of the 'resources' that can help in developing this understanding. The physical and embodied experiences of making art and using art-related materials may prompt or enable new social relations, and these encounters are both remembered reflectively (discursively) *and* reflexively (through the body). Contact with and through objects in the first approach on our project mediated points of connection and similarity, opening up the potential for new social relations to be enacted. As such, contact with and through objects was repeated in that setting, new social practices became more usual and, we were told, began to be translated to other places outside the project. We have learnt from ACANE centre staff and young people themselves that some of the relationships forged during the project have lasted.

It was not the objects themselves that were found elsewhere, but the potential of connection through tactile engagement that materials opened up. So, for example, the young people did not do art outside ACANE space (that we heard of), but some of the African boys started playing football with another locally-born boy outside the project; this had never happened before. And in more recent research in another community centre in the area, Kye observed some of the girls who participated in the art project, from African and British backgrounds, painting each others faces and nails and braiding each others' hair.

For the centre manager, the project contributed to a series of efforts to bring local communities together, heralded as far more successful than more formal initiatives. He told us that:

it used to be that black and white kids were not mixing very much. But I'm happy because we start to have those activities where they can come together and let the community know about the things that are important to them - to try to break this ice between those communities.

Building upon Torre et al's (2008) discussion of research space as contact zone, we suggest that where an activity (in this case art) *is* the contact zone, objects as conduits may facilitate transformative social relations to seep across spaces of encounter. As we previously emphasised, any distancing of new relationships is caught up with wider processes and conditions. While the role of encounter and objects of engagement may be important, conflict and tension are also present in contact zones, and a degree of openness on the part of participants is critical: it is important to be aware that 'following the thing' offers no easy panacea for community cohesion. Policy and practice must involve careful and committed labour within a long term framework, drawing on a 'suppler form of politics' that is open to the constant becomingness and 'proliferation of events' (Lorimer 2007).

## Conclusion

We believe that paying close attention to the materialities caught up in the messiness of interaction offers much to conceptualising the current resurgence in contact theory and the geographies of meaningful encounter, as well as to wider debate surrounding community cohesion policy. Specifically, we suggest there is a need to connect understandings of creative arts methodologies with current debates on materiality, to interrogate more closely how participation may be dis/enabled, and to theorise 'real' issues regarding integration in everyday lives. It also demands a (re)consideration of research methodologies, and we conclude here by briefly addressing these issues.

It is widely agreed that successful community cohesion initiatives require some form of engagement of local communities, building projects around activities that interest participants (CRE 2007; DCLG 2007). Our research shows that the ways in which material objects are deployed/employed may be critical within planning and implementation of activity, art or otherwise, and we cannot simplistically assume that activity will enable meaningful encounter. Careful attention should be paid to how materials may be utilised and involved in activity/event spaces, being mindful that the role things play remains contested, embedded both in cultural and social understanding of identity and their normalised use. Thus one off events are not without potential for facilitating new social relations; but rather policy should recognise the need for repeated activities and use of things if any transformative changes in relations between people are to become routinised and a new norm<sup>4</sup>.

The community art literature suggests that projects are most effective when owned by the local community (Kay 2000), with policy implications regarding enabling practice *within* community groups who often do not have the resources for material-led projects, particularly around 'delivering' community cohesion initiatives. In addition, whether it is outside agencies, local voluntary bodies, council staff or community members themselves who 'manage' or facilitate any such projects, concerns around power relations (inter and intra groups) should be extended to think about how these play out in and through ideological approaches to practical implementation.

These concerns have implications for human geography too, with a resonance across the doing of participatory action research and integration initiatives regarding community cohesion. These include the need for closer attention to be paid to researchers' own involvement in research; for working towards reciprocal relationships outside of the academy; and for a commitment to fluid processes that are open to people and events (Townsend et al 1995; Cahill 2007; Wright 2008). A key issue regarding some of the literature on cosmopolitanism in geography is exactly that lack of engagement with the people whose lives are being discussed. In our own work, we try to challenge this distanced stance, by theorising more transformative geopolitics (Askins 2008a) and by enacting calls for a more emotional

geopolitics that critically examines our own relationship with scholars with social change (Pain 2009). Thus we suggest that academic-community engagement might go beyond empirical interest to fuller collaborations, developing shared interests, pooling skills and resources, and rethinking the usual limited role of research to foster an ethic of care itself. We have suggested here that researchers working on intergroup contact might pay attention to the use of materials along the way.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Working with youth workers, refugee organisations, and a number of groups of young people from varied ethnic and national backgrounds living in Newcastle and Middlesbrough, Rachel spent a preliminary period negotiating an agenda for the research through discussion, participatory diagramming and group analysis (see Pain et al 2010). Some groups went on to choose a long term project on which to work, refining the research focus, and selecting methods which included art, drama, creative writing, web design, policy reports and an awareness-raising workshop (see Pain et al 2007). Efforts were made to include young people in every stage of the project, and to work reciprocally with them and their organisations in planning, providing resources, transferring skills through training, jointly disseminating findings, and so on.

<sup>2</sup> ACANE's manager had initially invited Rachel to extend her research to ACANE as the project matched his interests and aims, and Kye had previous contact with the centre through her voluntary work and activism in the area. Rachel organised and facilitated all of the sessions reported here (a professional artist came to direct the second set of sessions more closely), and Kye helped to run many of the sessions. Rachel has since followed up the work reported here with other projects with some of the same young people, and Kye retains contact with ACANE through other research activities.

<sup>3</sup> It is tempting to label these two approaches 'amateur' and 'professional' art. We are grateful to audiences to whom we have presented this work, who pointed out that this experience with a 'professional' artist is not necessarily typical of community art; and that 'good practice' in participatory community development often adopts the more open and experimental approaches we stumbled upon in our first approach.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, support for longer term community projects appears under even greater threat, given a shift in the political economy of the UK under a new Conservative-Liberal coalition government and in a global climate of 'austerity' succeeding the financial banking crisis.



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