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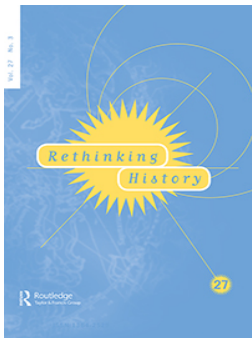
Fraught spaces: the risks, challenges and failures of collaborative public histories

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Fraught spaces: the risks, challenges and failures of collaborative public histories

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ABSTRACT

Throughout this article, we examine the potential pathways towards failure in public engagement projects as well as specific experiences of failure. Our aim is to identify some core reasons why attempts by historians to work with people beyond the campus contain risk and might fail. To do this, we focus on the types of relationships that are formed as a result of collaboration and emphasise the role of dialogue: of speaking and, more importantly, of listening. In writing this article, we therefore set out to explore the implications of sound and space for socially engaged public history. Throughout the article, we develop the idea of 'fraught spaces' as a way of recognising the feelings, especially of anxiety and insecurity, that all participants might experience as they enter what are sometimes complex relationships. We also suggest some practical steps to support collaborative research.

Introduction

Two voices speak to each other in this article. We were strangers until we met in January 2019, at the Bristol conference from which this article emerges. The thoughtful invitation later that year to collect and compile our reflections together necessitated dialogue, written and spoken. However, it immediately made us think about our differences. Sarah was directing large public history projects at a post-1992 university, following a more conventional career as a scholar of 18th-century Britain. For her, collaborative, co-produced research is an opportunity to democratise history and understand its material and emotive power in contemporary Britain. It is also an extension of her much earlier

involvement with activist histories of gender and sexualities. At the start of their collaboration, Gary was halfway between early- and mid-career and a lecturer at a post-1992 institution. It was his post-doctoral work that had initially led him into public engagement, so his early experiences of academia were of balancing research, teaching and forming collaborations beyond the campus. Those experiences involved trying to create his academic identity and position. His public engagement work was a key element of that process, shaping the types of projects he pursued with a desire to move away from what he saw as a conventional approach to public engagement: the 'dissemination' model. So, two different people. But we do share one other key characteristic: we are both early modernists. It remains unclear how precisely our academic training shaped our experiences. It may provide us with a certain type of historical imagination, attuned to difference and familiarity in particular ways. More obviously, we have both moved beyond our period specialisms to explore the phenomenon of public history as much as its specific period content.

Sometimes, our voices have intersected, working towards a shared purpose to explore the failures and the challenges of public engagement activities that centre on historical research and collaboration. At other moments, our voices diverged, revealing our different intellectual impulses and historical interests as well as our specific experiences of public history projects. Our collaboration was formed because our respective conference talks emphasised 'failure' as worthy of analysis in and of itself and not as something that was overcome and led to an eventual story of success. Our case studies in failure illustrate how we have both worked alongside communities in exploring and researching their histories. But how we have made sense of our experiences is quite different. Sarah aims to locate public history in its broader social and historical contexts. Gary explores his experiences autoethnographically. We have not elided the differences between how we have spoken about our experiences. Our article remains essentially polyvocal, retaining the distinctiveness of our focus, tone and language. Those differences in perspective have taught us that the analysis of failure requires different lenses. Whether by design or serendipity, the tensions caused by our collaboration have encouraged us to think carefully about points of convergence. What we share here is an attention to relevant (but not uniform or equivalent) relationships of power and a concern to acknowledge academic and, sometimes, personal failure. Our observations are closely related in attempting to unravel the entangled dynamics of public history.

To accomplish anything, we needed to appreciate how each other worked, organised themselves and, above all, listened. In other words, we had to create a collaborative relationship from nothing. Apart from the Bristol conference, we have only ever met online and communicated via email or through the comments on article drafts. Our collaboration has therefore been hybrid and so has the delegation of tasks and responsibilities, which were rarely formalised and more ad hoc, fitting in with our different workloads and personal lives. We worked separately and together, trying to find common ground. Over the months of our work, we gradually realised that our care for each other's voice, which sought to avoid overpowering, undermining or silencing either, complemented and even represented, in microcosm, the critique and discussion of the relationship between collaboration, knowledge production and public history that follows.

Throughout this article, we examine the potential pathways towards failure in public engagement projects as well as specific experiences of failure. Our aim is to identify some reasons why attempts by historians to work with people beyond the campus might contain risk and might fail. To do this, we focus on the types of relationships that are formed because of collaboration and emphasise the role of dialogue: of speaking and, more importantly, of listening. Both of us ponder the problems of privilege and hierarchy that can be embedded in the relationships that come to form public engagement projects and how both can manifest themselves in the dynamics of how those projects can fail. Although the respective parts of this article discuss very different contexts and experiences, the themes of dialogue, privilege and hierarchy are present in both. Sarah focuses on the challenges faced by public historians when they try to identify, care for and respect the multitude of voices that can arise from specific, sometimes traumatic events. In the first part of the article, she explores the difficulties of listening for 'under-heard' voices and of telling stories that appear hidden only because hegemonic narratives have come to shape and frame the remembrance of particular pasts. While Sarah's work on the First World War centenary provides key insights into the value of listening for the polyvocality of the past, it simultaneously highlights why such listening might prove problematic for those stories that have previously been privileged. For Sarah, that dynamic is the one that public historians in particular must negotiate when managing the sometimes fragile relationships that lead to collaboratively produced historical accounts of the past. Meanwhile, in the second part of the article, privilege, hierarchy and dialogue, especially around race, are important

elements in Gary's reflections upon his experiences trying to develop relationships between his *Stories of Activism in Sheffield, 1960-present* public engagement project and SADACCA – the Sheffield and District African Caribbean Community Association. His account rests on a realisation that the acknowledgement of privilege and hierarchy within collaborative work, and how they are manifested in the geographies and spaces that encompass, frame and underpin them, is essential when engaging with communities whose stories may be under-heard. Central to his experiences, and those of the project's collaborators, was a grappling with the positionality of participants, all of whom had unique expertise and knowledge to share but came from specific backgrounds with different levels of resources. Like Sarah, Gary posits the importance of listening and dialogue to manage the positionality and polyvocality that inherently and necessarily exists within public engagement projects.

In more general terms, the concepts of sound and space draw all these issues together. Again, our separate perspectives provide different emphases, but in combination, our respective sections offer important suggestions for how to think about and acknowledge the dynamics of power and hierarchy that can pervade the work of public historians. While we both describe our specific approaches in what follows, a brief overview will help outline our core concerns. For Sarah, the idea of 'acoustic politics' helps to describe how voices are heard differently (if at all) in particular contexts and, more importantly, whose voice is elevated and, as a result, whose stories, or version of events, get to be heard. Using acoustic politics in this way also ensures that we are attuned to how the authority of the speaker and the listener can shape hierarchies of knowledge and knowledge production. For his part, Gary focuses on 'space' to think critically about where public engagement projects occur. More specifically, he ponders the question of how participants might imagine and construct the spaces of public engagement in ways that obscure the hierarchies and the structures of power that work and exist within them. Paying attention to the spatial and geographical backgrounds of all participants prior to the start of public engagement projects while also recognising that as those relationships change so might those arrangements helps, he suggests, to mitigate against unvoiced assumptions that can undermine potential collaborations.

For both of us, as we discussed these ideas and wrote this article, a more general notion emerged to help our thoughts coalesce, that of 'fraught spaces'. Without a keen ear to the acoustic politics of our work or a clear view of the spatial contexts that can inform collaborations and

their creation and manifestation, relationships can become fraught and frayed. Questions about who owns a story, or who gets to tell their story, are either underplayed or ignored altogether. 'Fraught' can have many meanings, and here we use it in two ways. First, we take 'fraught' to be a spectrum of feeling, from discomfort to conflict, that can be felt or experienced differently by participants, depending on their positionality. We are aware that, in this sense, we are using 'fraught' euphemistically to cover a range of feelings. But, by using it in this way we do not intend to diminish or dismiss the severity of feelings or experiences that different individuals can have in a specific context. Likewise, despite using 'fraught' as a general concept, we are not trying to draw equivalences between different emotional responses to a situation or elide them altogether. In fact, the very act of trying to ascertain the potential range of emotions that exist in a context can itself be a source of uncertainty. That uncertainty is also part of what might make the process of listening or inhabiting a space 'fraught'. Second, we use 'fraught' analytically to explore the dynamics of specific contexts and the factors that contributed to them being fraught. Variously, this analysis involves examining how different actors engage with each other to create tense situations that can escalate towards conflict. Or it allows us to interrogate how specific historical narratives, which are deeply embedded in ideas of nationhood or self-identity, can silence or downplay under-heard stories that have not been privileged. The process of recognising and acknowledging these other narratives can therefore become fraught. As a final point of analysis, 'fraught' is also deployed to help examine the complex emotions generated by experiencing new and unfamiliar spaces.

Since the original conference in early 2019, the global coronavirus pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement and the process of writing and revising this article have sharpened our thinking about the politics of presence and of being heard, the nature of collaboration, the spaces of social interactions and the emptiness of public space. These contexts have reshaped our reflections and have convinced us that our core concepts and tools are especially useful when approaching collaborative public history, especially when, at the time of writing in 2023, some of our shared recent pasts appear to recede from memory. It could go without saying that public history projects and collaborations evolve over the course of their lifetime. Of greater importance, though, is the realisation that such projects, which involve numerous participants from different backgrounds experiencing multiple demands on their time, energy and resources, are potentially susceptible to changing contexts. Public history

is particularly situational in this regard, with many projects responsive to specific contemporary problems. Over the next few years, as communities attempt to pick up the pieces of their lives and relationships from the difficulties of the recent past, attentiveness to the voices and spaces of public history work may become more, not less essential.

Acoustic politics: is there anybody there?

Sound conveys meanings that are culturally specific (Schafer 1977). From the tolling of bells in the early modern city to the silent skies of coronavirus lockdown in the British spring of 2020, people interpret the world, generate knowledge, share meaning and establish a sense of themselves through their ears (Smith 1999). Those ears differentiate, discriminate and judge, shaping historical 'formations of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, community, and class', and of cognitive and physical capacities, including that of hearing itself (Keeling and Kun 2011, 446). Over recent decades, attention to noise, sound, silence and 'auditory perception' has challenged the primacy of visual and textual expression in a range of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology and history (Bull and Back 2016; Erlmann 2020). Sonic reconstructions and representations of increasing complexity and sophistication also offer scholars, heritage practitioners and broader publics new routes into historical experience (Cailloce 2015; Popperwell 2021). But what have been less well explored are the embodied, contextual implications of this auditory awareness for understanding how people relate to the past, as well as to one another, and for historians' engagement with the contemporary world.

Within both social and physical spaces, powerful hierarchies of knowledge, authority and expertise create sounds and silences, demarcating insiders from outsiders. An 'acoustic politics' determines who speaks, 'who gets to finish other people's sentences' (Izzy Mohammed, pers. comm., July 29, 2021), who is heard and who listens. Acoustic politics is implicit in public history, in official accounts of the past and in shared heritage, wherever and whenever an *audience* is desired or required. It often determines who owns the past, the story. It underpins key concepts such as contested histories, hidden histories and untold stories, all of which are predicated on a need to articulate the previously unspoken, lost or repressed. In a crowded and stratified soundscape, historical neglect arises as much from failures of listening – including to marginalised experiences and communities – as from problems around telling particular stories. Acoustic politics is complicit in the active recycling of

familiar heritage stories, so tenacious and 'sticky' that they pop up again and again (Lloyd and Wood 2020), and in indifference or open hostility to alternative perspectives. Acoustic politics is unavoidable whenever academic and community histories connect; it is a factor in co-produced research and in failures to engage. It permeates the ways in which we practise history, organise narrative and collaborate with other people. It expresses and reinforces institutional power in 21st-century Britain and, for that reason, opens it to scrutiny and challenge.

In the closing decades of the 20th century, philosophical discussions of truth and representation collided with political struggles around global expropriation, race and sex. Cultural critics informed by post-structural, post-colonial and feminist theory debated the extent to which it was possible to understand fully another's situation or experience. Given those difficulties, enmeshed within power relationships, was it appropriate for the privileged to speak for or about the oppressed; was a refusal to speak, a retreat into listening, an abnegation of the responsibility that comes with privilege (Alcoff 1991–1992; Táíwò 2020)? Listening was a theme dependent on the louder claims of speech. Public historians with a commitment to activism, inclusion and social change occupy the same terrain. Now, the complexities of speaking and listening are further complicated by hopes that heritage can be a benign social force and by the pressures of academic institutional cultures. Within those complexities, both the risks of failure and creative possibilities are to be found.

In general speech, terms derived from the verbs 'listen' and 'hear' are used interchangeably. The *Oxford English Dictionary* makes 'listening' a more attentive act than 'hearing', but, as we shall see, what really matters is the listener's responsiveness, which creates in the speaker a feeling of being 'listened to' or 'heard'. The following section asks what it means to listen and to hear and probes investments and assumptions that often go unremarked. It begins with a stark reminder of why acoustic politics matter: the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire. In its aftermath, the dynamics of speaking and listening are intimately connected with power and therefore also with systemic inequality and injustice and fractured relationships. While these processes vary in scale, impact and form, they surface in my other examples, many of which originate from experience of working with community-based historians, especially during the UK's First World War (FWW) centenary. Acoustic politics is broadly pertinent to the discipline of history itself, to its authority as a system of knowledge and to participatory research in general (Moore 2018, 36). There is an additional

pressing reason why we should, as historians, pay attention to the politics of silence and noise: the conditions in which we speak and think are themselves historically produced. In my own period of research, the revolutionary politics of late 18th-century Europe and its colonies shaped a new 'right' to speak, while late 19th-century technologies reframed the concept of 'sound' as a perceptible energy travelling through space (Ouzounian 2021; Rosenfeld 2011). Both developments have practical implications for how we use and connect with the past.

London. It's the evening of Tuesday, 25 July 2017, 6 weeks after the Grenfell Tower fire, which killed 72 people. Survivors and local residents are attending a public consultation about a government inquiry into the disaster. 'Listening' is a recurrent theme. Zeenat Islam, junior counsel to the Inquiry, explains their purpose:

> we're really interested in building relationships with the community, with all of the people that have been affected, and really listening and getting your voices as part of this process to make it a truly meaningful one. (Grenfell Tower Inquiry 2017, 3)

Many of those attending the meeting already associated social equality with listening: 'People in inadequate and unsafe housing, they're not listened to because of who they are.' (19) Or: 'How much do I have to earn before this Local Authority will listen to me?' (20) One contributor from the floor summed up the attitudes of an uncaring society as follows: 'Don't listen to them. Don't hear their voices. Shut them up.' (64)

Others echoed comments heard in the very first reporting from the scene of the fire, when long-standing safety concerns emerged (Booth and Wahlquist 2017; Kennedy 2018). The problem was not one of silence, therefore, but of attention: 'I want the panel to consider this question: had the people been listened to? In the event that the ... residents were listened to, [to] get a hold of the demands, would this have been avoided, this disaster?' (Grenfell Tower Inquiry 2017, 64)

At one point, legal counsel intervened into a particularly tense exchange between local residents: 'you don't make a difference if you don't listen to each other ... I think of all the people who can't speak for themselves anymore, the only way their voices can be heard is if everybody else who has a voice makes themselves heard. So, I want to hear those voices and I would be really grateful if you could all just do that.' (29)

But for some residents, such words were not enough: 'Hi there. I think one of the reasons why there's so much distress and discord is because I personally, for whatever reason, don't have much confidence in you. I'm sorry, I don't know enough about you . . . to inject confidence . . . that you are going to actually hear the voices, and I know there's a lot of noise, but actually really listen and hear the voices of this 'community.' (33) Others were frustrated by the Inquiry team: 'Why can't you listen now? This is a good time to listen.' (65) Another resident addressed the lawyers: 'There has to come a point where you actually honour what you actually say, if you are listening.' (75) To which the Inquiry's Leading Counsel responded: 'Let me just explain the way we're sitting here quietly – please be quiet – please give me the courtesy of listening to me, I've had the courtesy of listening to you.' (76)

The transcript of that meeting crystallises the role of listening in contemporary public life: it is highly charged and contested; it is political and urgent; it reflects access to institutional power; it is more often absent than present, a frustrating, apparently unbridgeable gulf in communication. The fraught dynamics of speaking and hearing are implicit in many of the 21st century's defining features, from social media to 'culture wars'. In the UK, 'being heard' is both a rallying cry and an explanation for political realignments, including support in 2016 for leaving the European Union and the fall of the 'red wall' northern Parliamentary constituencies to Conservative Parliamentary candidates in 2019. New quasi-sociological groupings – those 'left behind' or 'forgotten' – are often imagined through a lack of voice and the channels that give it substance.

So, let us think about the place of listening and its particular implications for historical investigation, beginning with researchers working in those powerful institutions, universities. Over the past decade, the impact agenda in higher education has created formal opportunities to develop collaborative projects that bring together academic and public knowledge in response to social concerns. Significant funding has encouraged exploratory research *with* (in preference to 'on' or 'for') communities, including projects that value horizontal relationships of trust and diffused, sustained transformation (Facer and Enright 2016). However, the sector's normative understanding of 'impact' as something flowing from an academic's prior 'underpinning' research continues to prioritise vertical, linear dynamics of speaking, attracting audiences and media attention as evidence of influence in the world. These contrasting models mirror both the ethics of public responsibility that connects

academics with diverse communities and the neo-liberal university's commercial preoccupations with markets, competition and brands, coupled with the imperative to justify its receipt of recurrent research funding from the state through the mechanisms of the Research Excellence Framework. Cultural organisations and voluntary groups set agendas too, with funders valuing participation as a means to foster feelings of belonging, empowerment and identity through expression and story (National Lottery Heritage Fund n.d.). History-from-below, 'a tradition of work in which ordinary people constructed, narrated and distributed their histories', has long prioritised the 'voice' of the people; more recent critiques of the ways in which 'heritage' is constructed assert that people 'can speak for themselves' (Myers and Grosvenor 2018, 10, 22; Smith and Shackel 2011). Oral history flourishes in community settings. Significantly, re-use of material, which involves listening to previously collected material, is much less prevalent with the result that older recordings languish in dusty boxes (Severs 2022, 18). So if everyone is talking, who is listening? Who is *expected* to listen, and what does that entail? How does the speaker feel heard? What place does listening have in debates about representation that focus primarily on visual experience and inclusion (Waterton and Watson 2010)?

The Grenfell survivors' anguish intensifies the politics of listening. But this politics is present in numerous settings, including heritage ones, where it operates laterally as well as vertically to reinforce ideas about value and significance (Smith 2006). A willingness to share the excitements of discovery, for example, does not necessarily create a reciprocal interest in others' findings. During the centenary of the FWW, this tendency blocked opportunities to make productive connections between otherwise separate community histories. The prospect of listening generates fatigue and impatience when time and resources are in short supply. Intense commitment to a specific past can also limit the possibility of hearing other histories, even – or especially – ones that are contiguous. As this speaker at an afternoon of 15-minute talks from local history groups explained:

> listening to others talk at length about the stories of their individual men [is] a little tedious. Please don't get me wrong - the sacrifice of those men is something that must be honoured and their stories told - but those stories lose a lot of relevance outside of that particular area. All researchers, including myself, value in the highest of regards 'our own men' because these are most likely individuals we have drank, slept and ate [with] for the past few years. But

it just doesn't travel well to spend fifteen minutes talking about them with people who - quite rightly [-] believe their 'own men' deserve as much, if not more, publicity. (Pers. comm., July 2016)

Here is a commitment to remembrance that detaches the act of telling from the act of listening. As an approach, it was not unusual. Also noteworthy in determining this commentator's (un)willingness to listen were context and relevance, two key devices from the historian's toolkit.

Acoustic politics has a more than incidental connection with the Western discipline of history, which has a professional commitment to text and to generating authoritative narrative. Until very recently, academic historians valued documentary evidence above oral testimony, and even now, the transcript often takes precedence over orality, the interview itself (Severs 2022). A dynamic of telling and listening, of speaking and hearing, parallels scholarly practices of writing and reading. It drives a desire to recover forgotten and untold histories, which feature in genres aimed at academic and non-specialist audiences alike. In public history, this formulation may demonstrate a commitment to social inclusion in 21st-century Britain. In some circumstances, hidden histories mobilise social activism and community development with the explicit aim of addressing historical injustice (Banks and Hart 2019). In many settings, however, hidden histories appeal simply to public curiosity. Far from straightforward descriptions, these categories derive their power from a claim to be speaking about what has previously been lost, secret or unsaid. But harnessing that rhetorical frisson can also mislead or conceal. It is important to remember that in reclaiming the past and challenging the foundations of history in the lives of elite white men, Black historical studies and women's history long pre-date their entry into the academy during the 1970s and 1980s (Aslam et al. 2019, 187). In mainstream contexts, what one person discovers as a hidden history may be another's familiar, ever-present story. Describing it as 'forgotten' may inadvertently impose amnesia a fresh time, now erasing those who have carried and lived with the memory. Stories that are not (yet) heard, not integrated into public engagement with the past, are not necessarily historical 'silence'. They can be noisy, already there in plain sight, multi-voiced, 'layered' within experiences and leaving complex traces in time and place. A focus on the drama of the 'story', therefore, displaces difficult questions about terms of engagement and accountability: who gets to have a voice; whose story is told; who is left out? Listening – literally, paying attention – is crucial to understanding these dynamics, recognising how the past is

mobilised or used, by and for whom. Viewed from this angle, listening comes before telling or talking, before dialogue.

Academic historians are familiar with processes of 'reading between the lines', interpreting silences in the historical record and reclaiming the 'voices' of the dispossessed, poor and neglected. Again, it is worth noting the auditory metaphors: the voices and the silences. But while history from below has stimulated theoretical explorations of experience, plurality and subjectivity, and deconstructions of 'voice' (Spivak 1993) and activist historians have critiqued the practice of speaking for others (Charlton 1998; Myers and Grosvenor 2018, 36), the response often called for – 'a more inclusive approach to the past, one that listens to and respects marginal voices (Myers and Grosvenor 2018, 26)' – is relatively under-theorised (Rosenfeld 2011, 328 note 52). Crucially, the figure of the listener remains shadowy and elusive. Generations of school children in England, and further afield, learnt Walter de la Mare's poem 'The Listeners' (1912).[1] '"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller/ Knocking on the moonlit door'. The only response to his call is a strange and silent emptiness:

> But only a host of phantom listeners
>   That dwelt in the lone house then
> Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
>   To that voice from the world of men. (Boas 1938, 519-20)

Every 'new' or revealed history requires a listener and therefore risks the Traveller's fate: 'Tell them I came, and no one answered'. To be heard requires a response, an 'answer'.

In comparison with voices 'from below' and with methods of source analysis, scholarly interest in soundscape and auditory environments is more recent (Johnson 1995). Much of the work still takes place in the social sciences, where *historicising* cultures of sound or inequalities in agency and voice is not a priority (Bassel 2017; Carlsen, Doerr, and Toubøl 2022; Dreher 2012, 2018; Kassabian 2013). This is significant and leaves historians ill-attuned to the politics and practices of listening when they engage with the past in the present. But set in temporal perspective, those speakers from the floor of the Grenfell Inquiry meeting were part of a longer 'history of efforts *to be heard* or *to get a hearing*[,] a fundamental aspect of the story of the emergence of modern political culture' (Rosenfeld 2011, 327). As Sophia Rosenfeld goes on to observe about the French National Assembly in 1789, 'the right to talk had not been translated into a right to be heard. ... . [N]ew citizens tried

repeatedly to force the experience of listening on others'. (329–330). In response, ruling elites attempted to control this changing environment by placing informal limits on speech and on 'what gets actively heard and attended to in the first place' (333; Navickas 2022). For the Grenfell residents, listening required a two-fold response from those in authority: 'yes, you were right when you raised concerns about fire risk, and you should have been listened to' and 'we are paying attention to what you have said and will take these practical steps in response'. That is, the residents would be heard and what they said would be acted on in a defined way. An alternative 20th-century model is the South African Truth and Reconciliation process, where it was made clear in advance (and was widely accepted) that people's experiences would be heard and acknowledged and that a line would be drawn under the past (South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission n.d..). In both cases, response alone can 'ensure that the offer of "voice" is not an empty promise' (Dreher 2012, 165). The same principles of speaking, listening and response underpin any commitment to democratising knowledge about the past. As historians we might benefit from recognising the historically produced conditions in which we work, including long-established regulatory environments that determine who is entitled to speak and who should listen.

It is a principle of co-produced history to respect expertise that develops through different life experiences and to recognise that participants learn from one another (Grosvenor et al. 2020, 4). When the Grenfell Inquiry Counsel intervened – I've listened to you, so now listen to me – his response was inadequate because it ignored the presence of power and authority in an institutionally unequal relationship; it lacked empathy and care; it failed to grasp what was on people's minds and their feelings. But do we know what good listening – and perhaps less talking – involves for historians, especially university-employed ones; how do we convince others that we really are listening? Building relationships, being sensitive to power relations and their material expression are integral to collaborative research (Hepworth et al. 2019). As Gary discusses below, spatial dynamics are also crucial. Consequently, we need to consider carefully what is specifically required of us in listening. Does 'hearing' always lead to 'understanding' (Barney and Voegelin 2018, 83)? Counselling, conflict resolution and radical pedagogy deploy techniques of 'active listening' forged in contemporary experience (Higgins 2011). Are such techniques a useful model for tuning into the past and its resonance today? Are appropriate modes of listening determined by the present moment or by

some quality of the history itself, in which case hearing a story about convict transportation requires a different approach to one about the FWW? If so, might further research into the historical 'ear' and its place in past sensory worlds and spaces suggest new ways of listening (Champion 2019)? Again, we can usefully start with the Grenfell residents. They saw through and rejected the 'performance' of listening, which the Inquiry team attempted. Trust and what we might characterise as 'ear space' depend on reciprocity, which was so lacking in the aftermath of the fire. Listening therefore is more than a technique or practice, an art or gesture; it requires us to respond actively to the content of what is heard. And that, to return to an earlier question, is a process wholly located in the present.

Historical modes of hearing may help historians to understand sources and evidence better, but in the practices of public history, through which history is constantly renewed, contested and reconstructed (Kean 2012, xvii), the social relationships of now are crucial. Speaking can be an assertion of ownership and listening an acknowledgement of that right, as those First World War historians, each with their 'own men', demonstrated. Contested histories develop when rival voices sound, each with a claim on the past. So how can we situate the ways in which people inhabit their histories, the material circumstances that shape them in all their particularity? Heritage approaches that shift emphasis away from singular identities are an important start, demonstrating how place and time, then and now, are polyvocal (Graves and Dubrow 2019). There is more than one voice and story to hear.

Equity, truth, justice, inclusivity and kindness all recommend an ethical commitment to listening. But listening also has a practical dimension, which in my experience begins simply with paying attention to what people say about themselves, their interests and their commitments to the past. It may start with a conversation along precisely those lines, or themes may emerge – be (over)heard – when people talk in formal and informal settings. As Gary goes on to discuss, creating a comfortable, trusting, vulnerable space for listening and paying attention take time. Sharing family histories, or telling stories evoked by specific objects, is often full of insight, so is time spent researching alongside one another. The aim of listening is to know more at the end of the conversation than at the start. What emerge are both histories we live *with* and those we live *by* (Lloyd and Moore 2015).[2] The histories we *live by* are those that inspire or reassure, stories of identity, becoming, belonging, heroism and survival. Simultaneously, however, we all live *with* histories of

place, community and family. These can be disturbing, unstable and awkward, or ordinary and mundane, neither tragic nor uplifting, at odds with national narratives and the histories that others expect from us. Amongst a dozen or so people who brought family military memorabilia to a FWW community event, one woman arrived with a pair of candlesticks to tell a story about her grandfather, a military chaplain and family tyrant, who had blighted his daughters' lives. She did not join others, preferring a corner of the room and speaking to a single (academic) listener. Her fragility in the face of a dominant narrative, which was itself defensive and closed to evidence that might challenge it, was palpable. Histories we live *with* can leave long legacies. Histories lived *by* can heighten sensitivity to alternative interpretations, signalled in FWW conversations about ensuring 'respect' for 'the fallen'. Recognising the difference matters for subsequent conversations.

Hearing that distinction also elucidates a process through which a remarkably robust set of public narratives about the FWW dominated British centenary activities, both official and community-led. Soldiers, death ('sacrifice' by 'the fallen'), nation and willing volunteers were centre stage in numerous iterations. Other historical angles never gained traction, including evidence of a significant number of appeals to the Military Tribunals for men to be exempted from conscription on grounds other than conscientious objection (Sokoloff 2017). Why was the 'Home Front' in a global conflict invariably white and British? Few dealt with unpalatable pasts – systems of colonial extraction, attacks on Anglo-German communities, race riots in 1916, 1917 and 1919, forced repatriations to Africa and the Caribbean, and indifference to war (Stewart, Sahota, and Myers 2021). Those themes are 'failures' of the centenary. They mark the limits of what can be done with public investment to broaden a commemorative agenda when acoustic politics contribute to a hierarchy of remembering: stories are heard, they stick; others never catch the ear, never gain the weight of perceived relevance. Hierarchies of remembering inversely map the legacies of colonialism and the contours of social disadvantage in the present. One group of young people with experience of the UK care system asked in vain where their own experience was reflected in museum displays, electronic media and publications. Their deceptively simple question, 'Who cared for kids?', revealed a whole research theme (Investing in Children n.d..). Listening can require catching and attending to the fragmentary, as well as to the extended account. In both this instance and that of the woman with her candlesticks, academic historians had something specific to offer. They

deal in context, which highlights broader significance and accommodates separate details, creating points of connection between researchers. They are often called upon, through the operation of acoustic hierarchies, to recognise and to 'validate' community research. The distanced space they occupy, alienating in some settings, becomes neutral ground in others: a safe ear for an unsafe story.

Amongst a range of good, ethical practices, talking less and listening more can ease the relationships of research co-production and build a culture of enquiry, generating new questions and ways of knowing, as well as new knowledge. It can reveal history's powerful emotional legacies, the stories people live with and the stories they live by, which require a different response. This approach can sit comfortably with speakers' expectations, hopes or demand that they are believed. But in order to make room for others' experiences, their 'truth', and to depart from familiar narratives, it is necessary to empower one another to acknowledge difference, to foster open-mindedness and curiosity and to move past simple binaries (Bassel 2013; Mac Bride 2018, 4). In this account, listening and responding enriches rather than diminishes us: my own history might change on hearing yours or through finding new evidence, and that is alright. But listening's double aspect also requires follow-up, which could be an invitation to collaborate or participate, a sharing of resources, material acknowledgement of presence and a demonstrable change of stance.

None of this is straightforward even in a context like the well-resourced FWW centenary, which brought people together to engage with one historical period through a shared commemorative purpose. If, in the post-1789 world, citizenship qualifies a person not only to speak but also to be listened to, the devastating Grenfell fire and ongoing public enquiry demonstrate that the right to be heard *and* 'attended to' remains incomplete. Sustaining relationships beyond the university benefits from institutional commitment although in practice that work often falls back on dedicated individuals; high hopes of university support are often disappointed, whether community access to online services, financial subsidy, a space to meet or a long-term repository for material. Experience from the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Connected Communities programme, which funded my own work on the FWW centenary, suggests that academics could cede the right to talk a bit more often, and think less about the individual ear/audience and rather more about the (unequal) paths along which sound travels; they might extend their interest in historical agency to the agency implicit in

aurality in present-day relationships. When we rush to speak, we miss something important. But there is no guarantee of consensus or comfort from the conversations that ensue (Barney and Voegelin 2018, 82). Communities are multi-stranded and polyvocal; the temporal distance between past and present is not fixed by chronological measures (Lloyd 2021). Failure is a certain risk, especially when acts of telling and listening are already detached in a wide range of social environments. Paying attention does not necessitate agreement with what is heard: observing that distinction is also precarious and can be dangerous. Having said that, historians from all walks of life have specific skills and insights to address some of the issues already raised in studies of media, politics and sociology. Listening is a historically specific, socially constructed practice, dependent on context and situation, on the spaces in which it happens. More can be done, first to bring the listener out of the shadows, second to understand how acoustic politics determine which histories are told and valued and finally, to attend to 'voices' saturated in time as the basis for historical redress in the present world: 'where the words . . . are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognise our responsibility to seek those words out' (Lorde 2017, 5; Sriprakash et al. 2020).

Positionality and space in collaborative public history

In this section, I want to develop the idea of 'fraught spaces' to consider the issues surrounding 'positionality' in collaborative public histories. Here, I aim to illustrate how the careful positioning of projects, along general and well-intentioned principles designed to ensure equity and inclusivity in collaborations, can also create significant blind spots when transposed to new contexts where different and inadequately accounted for intersectionalities emerge (Soedirgo and Glas 2020). With reference to the work of *Stories of Activism in Sheffield, 1960-present*, which I co-directed between 2010 and 2019, I will reflect upon some of the problems that I, as a white male academic, faced when the project attempted and failed to develop projects with a minority ethnic group in Sheffield: SADACCA – the Sheffield and District African Caribbean Community Association.

Issues of positionality play out in all collaborations, regardless of the demographics of the groups involved (Myers and Grosvenor 2018; Pente et al. 2015). However, my focus on this specific failure, one which centres on issues of race, allows for a more pointed discussion of the problems of positionality and foregrounds a set of experiences and interactions that

I suspect were 'unseen' in other attempts to create partnerships where race had a less overt or unacknowledged presence (Milner 2007). I am aware that this choice of case study to explore positionality has risks, not least for the potential to mindlessly equate this specific failure as necessarily linked to race. I should emphasise that *Stories of Activism* also failed to work with predominately white groups too. Importantly, SADACCA was not the only minority ethnic group we engaged with over the course of the project's lifetime. We also developed a collaboration with a quite different minority ethnic group, Roshni, a South Asian Women's Refuge. Together, we produced what eventually resulted in an unsuccessful Heritage Lottery Fund application over 18 months. Even though we failed to receive funding, the partnerships we created can be considered a success. In preparation for the application, we developed infrastructure, roles, modes of communication and principles for collaboration. In contrast, the relationship with SADACCA never reached any of these stages. Of course, I should not discount the possibility that structural issues or organisational and personnel resources factored into the failure. Nonetheless, I do think it is worth considering how my own behaviour and feelings affected my interactions with SADACCA to reflect upon the issues it raises for how positionality is conceptualised when trying to establish collaborations.

To explore the positionality of *Stories of Activism,* my experiences are conveyed, in part, autoethnographically. Given the breadth of this type of writing, my own specific use of this genre needs clarifying (Chang 2008). In this section, I use some of my experiences and biography to reflect upon and analyse the contexts in which I engaged with SADACCA to interpret the possible reasons for failure. The autoethnographical approach itself has implications for the discussion of positionality, collaboration and public history because it is quite often the principal genre of writing that is deployed to reflect upon and analyse the relationships and interactions that occur during projects. The approach has its shortcomings that will become more apparent as my account develops (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Knott 2019). An initial problem is that the events I recollect occurred, at the time of writing, over 10 years ago, in 2012 and 2013. Ever since, and on many occasions, my memories of these events have floated to the surface. The conference that prompted these current thoughts was the first time I attempted to analyse them more formally. Through the writing of this article, and the numerous conversations with Sarah and the comments of editors, colleagues and anonymous reviewers, I have had to find another register to present my

memories and make them instructive. I have been constantly aware and fearful, therefore, of the possibility that I may have misremembered the events, or forgotten important details, or while writing about them contorted them to fit my aims here.

But, most problematically, this approach centres upon *my* reflections despite the project's ambitions to decentre academic knowledge-making practices in our engagements with community groups beyond the campus. Such issues become even more salient in the context of how I made efforts to form relationships with some of Sheffield's more marginalised groups. This self-centring takes on even more complexity during the process of trying to understand our failure to work with SADACCA and how, then, these reflections can be used to contribute to wider debates about collaboration and public history. As this section proceeds, my account wrestles with what I call a 'negated decentring' that has occurred at least twice: first, during the events themselves and, second, during my attempts at reflection in initial versions of this article.[3] In the latter instances, this negated decentring will quickly become apparent in the entire absence of the voices of those people with whom I interacted with at SADACCA. In addition, I have decided to reproduce some quotes from my earlier renderings of my experiences rather than revise them. At odds with usual academic practice of silently revising articles after a peer review, this approach emphasises my ongoing attempt to figure out this failure. So, while I have foregrounded these problems to draw attention to the limitations of this section, I also want to highlight how this article is part of a continuous and never complete process of reflexivity, rather than a final or settled statement on my experiences.

Our project was hypersensitive to issues of positionality, a feeling that can be traced back to its origins and continues all the way down to the writing of this article. We took seriously the idea that the positions of contributors in a project shape the types of historical questions that are asked, the kinds of information that is collected and the forms of knowledge that are produced and privileged (Haraway 1988; Rose 1997). Considering the positionality of projects that connect people from different backgrounds is an integral part of any collaborative public engagement project, especially when differential relations of power in the production of knowledge might exist (Hardy 2021; Neufeld 2006). Identifying the positionality of all participants might take many forms. It might involve honest reflections about the different backgrounds of all actors within a relationship to establish the different subjectivities that will be involved in a project and how they might transform as a result of

their participation (Cahill 2007; Hall 2021). Discussions may include how the asymmetries in the levels of privilege, knowledge, expertise, wealth and resources may affect the dynamics of a partnership (Pain 2004, 656–657). It could include efforts to overcome assumptions shaped by the binaries of 'us' and 'them' (Browne, Bakshi, and Law 2010).

From the outset, some elements of these issues were present in how the co-founder, Michael S. Foley, and I aimed to shape *Stories of Activism*, albeit in far less theoretical terms.[4] One of our main ambitions was to challenge ideas of 'official' and 'unofficial knowledge'. Or, put differently, we wanted to avoid the othering of so-called non-academic knowledge and the potential for the creation of divisions between 'us' and 'them' when designing and pursuing projects. Following Raphael Samuel's oft-cited discussion in *Theatres of Memory*, we consistently monitored and sought to challenge hierarchical structures of historical knowledge production (Samuel 1994). Throughout our projects, we aimed to decentre the university academic from conventional models of public engagement and public history, situating every person or group on the same level. We wanted to recognise the obvious fact, drawn from Samuel's discussion, of the importance of the expertise that exists beyond the campus. We were fiercely aware of our status as university academics and the privileges our positions had and communicated. Our approach towards potential partners was therefore cautious and open-minded. Our general idea was to record and promote the stories of Sheffield's activists. Our main aim was then to develop that idea alongside our partners to see where they wanted to take it. We never presumed that by virtue of our positions that our research ideas or expertise had value for the communities, groups or organisations with which we wanted to engage. Even after long periods of negotiations, we were always happy for people to decline our idea if it turned out that it was not feasible or was incompatible with a specific agenda. We worked to decentre ourselves as much as possible to soften boundaries, dissolve hierarchies and promote collaboration between groups that had differential levels of privilege. Stating our positionality in these terms was, ultimately, intended to produce new knowledge and engender what Paul Ward and Elizabeth Pente have advocated for: a 'blurring of the boundaries between academic historians and communities in exploring history [that] enables multiple voices to be heard' (Ward et al. 2017, 94). There was also a more practical underpinning to this approach that helped to challenge presumed hierarchies of knowledge as our collaborations progressed: our own lack of expertise.[5] We lacked a knowledge and understanding of Sheffield's history of activism

and the people, groups and networks that were – and continue to be – integral to the vitality of the City's politics. We were also wary of stepping into networks and relationships that had at some points in the recent past been fraught. Finally, we needed help identifying the stories that activists in Sheffield thought were important to tell, rather than the ones we considered significant. From the beginning of the project, then, we were aware of our shortcomings and aimed to collaborate as closely as possible with activists to draw upon the deep wells of organisational experience, knowledge and expertise that already existed in Sheffield (Pente et al. 2015).

Our principle for collaboration was to horizontalise hierarchies as far as possible. Our project therefore fell somewhere between two elements of public history and public engagement. The first was Ronald J. Grele's description of public history in an early issue of *The Public Historian* which stated: 'the goal [of public history] is to help people write, create and understand their own history' (Grele 1981, 46). The second was something close to a recent and helpful definition of co-production: 'research undertaken collaboratively by several parties that values multiple perspectives and voices, contributes to creating and developing communities of place, interest and identity, builds capacity for action; and works towards social change' (Banks and Hart 2019, 1). For much of the project, we never used the precise terminology of horizontalism to describe our working and collaborative practices. However, it now helpfully expresses the working commitments and relationships we wanted to have at the centre of our projects. There is no pure form of horizontalism, and attempts to define it in general terms have the effect of diminishing the very specific contexts in which it has existed and the many different variants that have developed. A translation of the Spanish *horizontalidad*, horizontalism emerged in Argentina in the late 1990s and early 2000s to describe and guide forms of self-organisation that served as alternatives to top-down, institution-led types of political action and legitimacy. In very general terms, Marina Sitrin describes *horizontalidad* as embodying 'new social arrangements and principles of organisations ... [and] implies democratic communication of a level plane and involves – or at least intentionally strives towards – non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian creation rather than reaction. It is a break with vertical ways of organizing and relating' (Sitrin 2006, 3). As a guiding principle, horizontalism aspires to the acceptance of the other and has an emancipatory impetus. Such principles share a great deal with the practice and experience of direct democracy and particular forms of anarchism

(Graeber 2013). Like them, horizontalism is not an end itself. As one contributor to Sitrin's work stated: '*Horizontalidad* . . . has concrete limits that have to do with our various human characteristics. I think that at first it's sort of a utopia, which is a good place to begin the walk, the walk towards *horizontalidad*. I also believe going on this walk towards *horizontalidad* is one of the intentions of *horizontalidad*' (Sitrin 2006, 46–47).

Stories of Activism was constantly on this journey, and our main aim was to horizontalise hierarchies of expertise and knowledge and to foster equality in decision-making. Relying upon expertise in the form of local knowledge of activist stories, networks, forms of organisation and campaigns was essential for our version of horizontalism. Academic outcomes were only discussed if they were co-produced and made available to the people and groups that provided their expertise and knowledge. Finally, and importantly, *Stories of Activism* aimed to privilege the process of public engagement, including skills development, oral history interviews and discussions about the types of activist pasts the project should identify, as opposed to clear and tangible outcomes, another nod to *horizontalidad* (King and Rivett 2015; Sitrin 2006, 49). In addition, this approach to public engagement was part of our attempt to explore and develop new ways for academics to pursue public engagement projects. In around 2010, 'dissemination' remained one of the predominant models for engaging the public in historical research. Co-production of historical knowledge based upon collaborations between academics and communities was less common, although throughout the 2010s, this would change dramatically, particularly in response to the impact agenda of the Research Excellence Framework. The AHRC's Connected Communities programme was also highly effective for driving these types of emerging collaborations (Banks and Hart 2019). However, we still felt that centring public engagement projects around the research interests of an academic while also measuring impact by the outputs produced had the potential to limit the scope of projects and overlooked the impacts that could emerge from the processes of public engagement and not just what was produced (King and Rivett 2015; Loughran, Mahoney, and Payling 2022). Identifying a form of organisation and methods of dialogue and decision-making that would open up opportunities for more collaborative projects became part of how *Stories of Activism* evolved. So, we had gradually developed a specific positionality towards our collaborations. Through conversations with activists from a variety of backgrounds and interests, enthusiasm for the potential of the

project was high. Our principles were, we hoped, resilient and adaptable and able to generate partnerships across Sheffield regardless of the specific issues of gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity that we might encounter.

As I set out to work with SADACCA, I thought that this established set of project principles would help prepare me for the process of negotiating with a potential partner. In my mind, the ambitions they represented – to overcome the possibility of othering that could occur when integrating so-called academic and non-academic forms of knowledge production – were enough to cope with any context. However, as I began my first walk to SADACCA's community centre building on the Wicker, in the city Centre and entered their spaces, I felt unease and uncertainty. I was uncertain about not only how I would be received as a white male in SADACCA's space but also how I would be perceived as an academic who wanted to learn more about *their* stories. My thoughts played with the idea that I could be perceived as reproducing a historical theft or at least some semblance of one. When I arrived at SADACCA, I was guided through several corridors and led to a large, multi-purpose hall where an impromptu triangle of chairs was arranged for myself and two others. For a wonderful three hours, I listened to a former volunteer teacher describe the importance for young people in the community to learn about and advocate for their black history, the history of the organisation and the current activities of the centre. Not only did I convey our project's principles, relying upon them to build trust and confidence in our intentions, but I realise now I also used them to comfort me and soften my uncertainties. After that initial meeting, I walked around the rest of the building, with its library and recreation room and bar, where members were gathered for a mid-week drink.

I felt that it was important to always hold our meetings at SADACCA. I wanted to demonstrate the sincerity of our principles, indicating that I was mindful of my role as an academic and aware of my privilege and wanted to behave in a way that I thought would be conducive to a successful collaboration. I wanted to show I was respectful of their stories. Being in SADACCA's spaces was supposed to represent all these principles and aims. However, those spaces where we met came to produce two conflicting impulses within me. My presence there was important because I wanted it to be emblematic of the project's desire to reiterate and demonstrate its principles and positionality. Equally, my presence also generated insecurities that did not diminish with time and continued to create a hyperawareness about the structural, institutional and organisational privileges, inequalities, hierarchies and disparity in

resources that I felt I represented. After several meetings, fewer constructive ideas emerged and our meetings became irregular before dwindling and stopping altogether without any concrete plans.

These sets of recollections are partial, and I am uncertain about their reliability. I am sharply aware, though, that they continue a longstanding process of attempting to account for this failure by thinking spatially about these experiences. What is especially clear is that I have chosen to narrate these events in a way that uses space to Other SADACCA. This approach is intentional because it attempts to reproduce those feelings I had and how I was trying to manage them. The use of space in the process of Othering SADACCA has been a feature of my past efforts during the writing of this article to interrogate my positionality. Consider how I attempted a similar activity in an earlier version:

> In my mind, as I walked, our project principles rang repeatedly, a kind of ritual. As I walked further away from my usual habitat of university buildings, I passed along streets that marked my transit across the city. I now realise that the journey represented a process of transition while the project principles allowed me to leave one space and enter quite different ones. Maybe this experience is common. When I crossed the boundaries in the mental maps that I had created of Sheffield's local geographies, I used the project's principles as a guide that kept me on track. But more than just crossing imagined and physical boundaries, my ritual preparations—the walking, the principles— helped me to cross social, economic, gender and race boundaries. In doing so, though, that journey actually obscured those boundaries, and hid hierarchies behind the one I was most comfortable confronting: the hierarchies that created divisions between 'official' and 'unofficial' knowledges. Meanwhile, hierarchies of privilege, especially, race remained obscured.

The events I recalled here suggested that I had used the act of walking and the journey between the university and SADACCA to manage my anxieties and insecurities. It was comforting. But I also think my effort to convey those feeling and experiences, which continued to Other SADACCA, was itself about trying to allude to, without really addressing, the main issues I think were at stake here: that the space of SADACCA had forced me to confront the issue of race. In this earlier version, I was still uncertain – uncomfortable, even – with how to think about and evaluate race as part of these experiences. This narrative was problematic because it also reproduced an 'us' and 'them' binary, which the project's principles had attempted to dissolve. Equally, the lack of other voices in this earlier version of the article – an absence that remains still – also

means that our attempts to decentre our voices were and continue to be seriously undermined.

The space was fraught for *me*. My presence in the space *may* have been fraught for the members of SADACCA, but this was not communicated to me. Nor did we discuss these issues. My spatial discomfort, my inability (or unwillingness?) to raise the issues of race and my culpability for allowing the collaboration to fall into abeyance might be described as a variant of what Robin DiAngelo calls 'white fragility' (DiAngelo 2011, 2018). DiAngelo provides a suggestive guide for thinking about these emotions and behaviours, although I am cautious of using her analysis to evaluate my experiences because they constitute a further example of privileging my account of these events over those of the other participants.[6] She suggests that such feelings are 'the result of the reduced psychosocial stamina that racial insulation inculcates' (DiAngelo 2018, 101). Upon entering SADACCA's space, my racial identity – my whiteness – was challenged in ways that were uncommon in my everyday life, especially in the last couple of decades. DiAngelo makes clear that such experiences have less to do with the actions of people from a different racial background and everything to do with how white people are often insulated from racial stress. Consequently, white people lack the stamina to endure the 'disequilibrium' that occurs when that which is familiar and taken for granted is 'interrupted'. One response to these situations is defensiveness, which in my case resulted in me 'exiting' the space and the attempt at collaboration.

All these problems can mostly be traced back to how *Stories of Activism* conceptualised its work. We embraced a general positionality that became a comfortable way of approaching different people and organisations. But through repetition of usage, it also became less adaptable because we failed to adequately consider what Lissette M. Piedra describes as a fundamental aspect of positionality work: 'it is a dynamic marker – a shifting analytic building block – that can deepen understanding for how the context shapes and constrain people's beliefs, their choices, and the far-reaching consequences of those decisions' (Piedra 2023, 2). While we, as historians, made every effort to consider the contexts in which *Stories of Activism* worked, there was one where we had a blind spot: space. For me, SADACCA's spaces were a trigger for my insecurities and fragility. But in the formation of our principles, we rarely, if ever, tried to interrogate how the different spaces we entered might affect our behaviours and attitudes and how, in turn, this might inflect our positionality. This admission may seem surprising. Public

engagement frequently requires participants to travel to, walk into, sit in and move around sometimes unfamiliar spaces. Gillian Rose's pithy acknowledgement that to use a term like 'position' is to think in spatialised ways, makes the omission even more glaring.

Positionality and space are intricately linked. Generally, as different people enter specific spaces, they also bring with them social relations and hierarchies, and what Doreen Massey has described 'as a simultaneity of stories-so-far' – their ongoing biographies – ensuring that those spaces are always being made and contain relations of open-ended multiplicity and possibility (Massey 2005, 9). Regardless of the location of those spaces, they embody social relations that are constituted by power, meanings, expectations and ideas and are constructed by the people who use them and they are always dynamic (Lefebvre 1991; Low 2016). They can become 'fraught' because the nature of power, meanings, expectations and ideas can be unacknowledged, unvoiced or misunderstood by different participants. Even spaces that are usually 'mundane' for some, say a social space frequently used by service users at a community centre, can develop into fraught spaces when new or unexpected people enter them (McDuie-Ra et al. 2020). More specifically, race, like gender and class, is deeply implicated in the construction of space. As Caroline Knowles suggests:

> Space is an active archive of the social processes and social orders. Active because it is not just a monument, accumulated through a racial past and present—although it is also that—it is active in the sense that it interacts with people and their activities as an ongoing set of possibilities in which race is fabricated. (Knowles 2003, 80)

With this in mind, and given that public engagement usually occurs in numerous, unfamiliar spaces, *Stories of Activism* should have accounted for the dynamism of space. Furthermore, as my earlier attempts to describe my journey to SADACCA suggest, I was also inadvertently racialising the spaces of the city, Othering SADACCA further in the process (Heikkikla 2001).

To compensate for this lack of spatial awareness, and to comfort me as I encountered SADACCA, I think I constructed and then inhabited a racialised 'spatial imaginary'. Spatial imaginary combines the geographer David Harvey's discussion of 'spatial consciousness' and 'geographical imagination' to think about how, in his terms, it 'enables the individual to recognise the role of space and place in his [sic] own biography, to relate to the spaces he sees around him, and to recognise

how transactions between individuals and between organisations are affected by the space that separates them'. It also allows people 'to fashion and use spaces creatively and to appreciate the meaning of the spatial forms created by others' (Harvey 2009, 24). By contrast, my spatial imaginary was crude and underdeveloped as I approached SADACCA. I did not adequately consider some key spatial contexts for our initial engagements, and the issues were starkly realised as I entered their buildings. I took with me a spatial imaginary that arose from my own status as a university academic and my feelings of anxiety and insecurity about my privilege. This personal biography was then combined with my preconceptions and expectations about the very specific geographical locations of SADACCA, which I then reproduced in earlier versions of this article. I had fallen into the trap Harvey identifies as a difficulty when thinking about space: 'the qualities of space are often thought to be obvious and unproblematic when they are complicated and fraught with hidden dangers'. In particular, 'each form of social activity defines its own space' (Harvey 2005, 213–214). Finally, into those spaces, we bring, as Henri Lefebvre suggested, representations which, in turn, can be shaped by our fears and emotions, among other factors that inform our lived experiences (Lefebvre 1991).

I have focused my case study of failure upon race because it raised problems for me far more fervently than those spaces that were inflected by gender or class. Nonetheless, any space that requires our presence in collaborative public history may have similar issues. When *Stories of Activism* attempted to work with SADACCA, we failed to acknowledge that positionality is never fully settled; it is always fluid and complex (Browne, Bakshi, and Law 2010). As the spaces of different collaboration change, their specific dynamics, shaped by numerous factors, including race, gender and class, require that the positionality of participants is re-evaluated. Jessica Soedirgo and Marie Glass make this point particularly clear when describing 'active reflexivity':

> Given the particularities of context and the intersectional nature of positionality, scholars must accept that interpretations of positionality are always contingent and likely incomplete. The foundation of active reflexivity, then, is humility, meaning that we accept the complex, contingent, and human-ness of the research enterprise and allow this recognition to shape our research designs, interactions, and interpretations. (2020, 529)

In collaborative public histories, all voices must be heard during this process of evaluation and reflexivity, which also means being attuned to what Sarah describes as the acoustic politics that exist in a space, to ensure that the dynamics of power, privilege and hierarchy are negotiated in a careful and thoughtful manner. Early and ongoing dialogue and listening are essential when starting collaborations regardless of how uncomfortable they might be for *some* if not all participants. My experiences with SADACCA suggest that I lacked a humility about the causes of my uncertainty and insecurity. My reluctance to acknowledge these issues or to create opportunities to raise them arose from a discomfort about discussing race. Importantly, then as now, emphasising my own feelings, only served – and continue to serves – to negate the decentring that had underpinned the principles of *Stories of Activism*.

Closing Remarks

We began our own collaboration with a shared preference for a type of public history that addresses the stultifying presence of hierarchy and inequality through a commitment to inclusivity, mutuality and relationships of trust. Through the process of writing together, we realised that a concept of 'fraught spaces' encompassed our varied experiences of the acoustic and spatial dynamics of collaborative projects and offered a way of analysing why projects in this mode often feel risky and incomplete: listening is subordinate to talking; powerful assumptions about the spaces we enter remain unexamined and unspoken. Both features reflect structural and institutional dynamics that permeate a vast range of social interactions, rather than purely individual shortcomings or specific difficulties with the past. For this reason, acknowledging and understanding 'failure' matters. Crucially, the idea of 'fraught spaces' gives us a way of recognising the feelings, especially of anxiety and insecurity, that all participants might experience as they enter what are sometimes complex relationships.

In writing this article, we set out to explore the implications of sound and space for socially engaged public history. We have suggested some practical steps to support collaborative research. Some of these echo protocols of good, ethical practice, for example respecting participants' time and expertise. Others derive specifically from paying attention to the dynamics of 'fraught spaces', such as listening more, noticing the anxieties that come from not being listened to and responding to what is heard. Moreover, it is helpful to recognise that how we imagine the spaces

where our encounters occur might hinder the possibilities of successful collaborations. We realise that these will be provisional, partial measures and sensitive to context. Our own experiences, particularly of failure, demonstrate the importance of recognising acoustic politics and spatial imaginaries as an inevitable presence within public history and with material effects. Even when we consciously decentre academic authority to make room for diverse knowledge, we take our bodies and voices into fraught spaces.

Notes

1. Audre Lorde (1934–92), feminist, Black activist, poet, recalled reading 'The Listeners' as a child in Harlem Public Library, 'I will never forget that poem' (Lorde 2017, 56). Another staple of school poetry, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798), requires a passer-by who is forced to listen (Boas 1938, 175–9).
2. The formulation draws on John Gillis's distinction between the families we live with and the families we live by.
3. I am grateful to the reviewers of this article for drawing my attention to these problems.
4. I should admit to a degree of naïveté in the early stages of the project as we searched about for the best approach to incorporating different people and groups into a such a wide-ranging project. Furthermore, my present use of a more theoretical language represents a part of the process of coming to terms of with my experiences.
5. Despite working on different historical periods, Mike Foley and I came together because of our respective research projects at the time. I was the post-doctoral research fellow for the Leverhulme Trust-funded project, titled 'The Comparative History of Political Engagement in Western and African Societies', which ran from 2010 to 2013 at the University of Sheffield. Meanwhile, *Stories of Activism* allowed Mike to fulfil the requirement for 'impact' as part of his Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowship studying grassroots politics in the USA.
6. I am also aware that DiAngelo is writing about race in the USA, and legitimate questions can be raised over the direct applicability of her ideas to a British context. Nonetheless, I find the general features of her analysis an instructive heuristic.

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