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Transforming Embodied Experiences of Academic Conferences through Creative Practice: Participating in an Instant Choir at the Nordic Geographers' Meeting in 2019

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Introduction

This paper draws upon the authors' experiences of organising and participating in a session at the Nordic Geographers' Meeting in 2019 (see [session format](#)). The theme of the conference ("Sustainable Geography – Geographies of Sustainability" [NGM 2019](#)) challenged participants to consider not only the oft-critiqued concept of sustainability but also the sustainability of the discipline of geography itself. The session, organised by Parks and Cassidy, and musically facilitated by Currie, sought to explore the concept of social sustainability as it might play out through collective musical practice, by including a singing element. The session format was advertised in the conference programme as including a 30 minute 'instant choir workshop' alongside paper presentations, and participants chose to attend from the 16 parallel sessions offered. This introduction and the following section are written by the session organisers (Parks and Cassidy). The third section is written by the musical facilitator

(Currie). The authorial voice is then broadened in the remainder of the paper to all 9 authors.

The concept of sustainability has been key to much policy discourse, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to end "poverty and other deprivations" while tackling climate change and protecting ecosystems.¹ These goals embed a holistic understanding of sustainable development beyond the three pillars – environmental, economic, and social – set out in the 1987 Brundtland Report.² The environmental pillar had for around two decades received most academic attention and was easiest to define, with the social dimension considered an "empty conceptual space" awaiting population.³ This has led some to describe it as a "concept in chaos".⁴ Increasing endeavours to define social sustainability and to identify its constitutive parts, both within geography and outside the discipline, have focused particularly on equity and social inclusion.⁵ We consider social sustainability here in terms of the inclusivity and self-sufficiency of a distinct community of practice – our collective of conference session participants.

The plan

The format of the conference session emerged from ongoing cross-disciplinary dialogue between community music and human geography in which we as geographers, and community music academic-practitioner Currie, had been engaged. This conversation sought to address the need to interrogate and understand claims of social sustainability and social change often cited in evaluation reports of community music projects.⁶ The session format supplemented two academic papers (the first by Currie and the second by Cassidy and Parks), and

discussion thereof, with an instant choir workshop facilitated by Currie, after the first paper. Throughout the session, by means of Mentimeter, an interactive presentation software, participants used their personal mobile phones or other devices to share responses to our prompt questions and open-comment invitations, which were displayed synchronously and anonymously on the screen at the front of the room.

As organisers, we had various aims for the session. In the immediate term, we wished to establish a culture of participation, enhanced engagement with the conference theme and session presentations, and a differentiated basis from which all participants could begin the conference experience. We sought to make visible, by subverting them, the normative processes, practices, experiences, and structural constraints of geography conference sessions. In the medium term, we hoped to promote a sustainable community of practice. We conceived the instant choir as ‘a method for coming together to reflect upon our research aims and motivations’.⁷ The session further offered the opportunity to challenge the perceived violences and exclusions of standard conference formats, often based on hierarchical systems within and outside academia, such as institutional affiliation (or lack thereof), career stage, educational background, as well as race, ethnicity, gender, and class. It also allowed us to interrogate claims concerning the impact of community music in terms of social sustainability.⁸

We assumed that delegates who attended our session were prepared for the participatory, performative dimension due to our description of the session format in the conference programme. Participants’ reflections ranged from being “invited” to sing, to encountering “the sudden call to participate in a collaborative choir.” One of two student ambassadors who were present to help with the practical aspects of the session, upon learning of the instant choir, expressed doubt that participants would

engage in the singing. Although we emphasized that singing was voluntary, of the 16 people present, only one did not sing, but still participated as an active observer (and subsequently as contributor to this paper). At the end of the session, we invited everyone who wished to collaborate afterwards to leave their name and email address with us, and this was the method of communication used for the production of this paper.

The next section presents Currie's account of the singing event. The remainder of the paper is a synthesis of the experiences of all nine authors, drawn from individual (and in one case joint) reflections written nine months after the conference. We have paraphrased sections of the reflections, as well as providing interconnecting text to draw the perspectives together. In synthesizing these accounts around key themes, we have undoubtedly lost some of the nuance of individual perspectives. However, the emergent themes elucidate important insights for moving creative practice beyond data collection in geography, as recent work has begun to do, to considering its role in disseminating geographical research *through participation* in the most ubiquitous of academic events – the conference.⁹

Coming together to sing

Our session was in a traditional-style lecture theatre. After introductions and the first paper presentation, we invited everyone to move from the front-facing tiered seating where delegates had instinctively congregated, and to stand together at the podium level at the front. As anticipated, not everyone joined; the pedagogic approach underpinning the singing session acknowledged everyone as musical, with the right to interpret, embrace and resist the musical project in their own ways.¹⁰ The

invitation to come together to sing was also opened with an understanding that anything could happen. The process of moving into this traditionally authoritative space was important, as part of the invitation to connect with others and to utilize the space in new ways.

We played a game commonly used in performing arts learning, using three nonsense words, each with an action that signalled to someone in the group. The game was silly; it usually descends into a series of uncoordinated and amusing gestures which can be adapted to suit the accessibility of the group and space. The game opened the possibility for connection within our newly-formed group and offered a way for people to get to know each other through a series of verbal and non-verbal cues. We then worked on the first verse and chorus of a well-known song, 'Stand by me' by Ben. E. King, which has repetitive lyrics and four chords - I VI, IV, V - a common chord progression in western popular music.¹¹ We stood together, in no particular formation, and performed with each other through the process of practising the sections of the song. With lyrics on the large screen, we worked through the song together, all singing the main melody line. As the melody became more assured, a harmony line was added, which mirrored the melody pattern, followed by another to scaffold a 3-part harmony within the small group. Singers identified which part to sing, based on their preference of 'low', 'melody' or 'high', all within a close harmonic range and together. We sang the verse and chorus on repeat, with Currie conducting the group to guide the end of the chorus back into the verse.

Our reflections

Affective, embodied engagement

The instant choir opened up space for reflections on the significance of place-embedded social relations, how the sensual body may transform understanding of everyday spaces.¹² There was an entanglement of materials, processes, affects and emotions arising out of performance that came together to create that place.¹³

Singing drew our attention to how we are connected and co-constituted; it enabled different ways to encounter the topic and each other.¹⁴ We could *feel* our way around the conference theme - explore through doing and feeling, as well as thinking and talking.¹⁵ Such methods are commonplace within community music conference settings.

The call to participate in a collaborative choir challenged us to change from more or less anonymous spectators to embodied, active participants. Engaging in the creation of music is part of communicative musicality, where 'human will and emotion are immediately shareable with others through gestures of the body and voice'; a 'being in the groove together' that has potential to enhance our capacity for sociality.¹⁶ With our own singing still reverberating in the room and in our bodies, and feeling our shared corporeality, we were able not only to think about what kind of socio-affective spaces may be created through making music, but also what the potentials of these spaces might be. Singing together presented an opportunity to feel, rather than just intellectualize over, the intersubjectivity of being a subject in the world, and the deep and defining relationality from which any social transformation may take shape.

Community was created through our short musical introduction to each other; we were energised as a new group. Singing together was an effort to create a palpable

expression of fellowship in which we, as multiple individuals, through eyes, ears, mouths, hands, and feet – as well as all the invisible characteristics we embodied – sought to expand, encompass, and coalesce through music. Expressing ourselves together corporeally in the music and incorporeally in text via Mentimeter, there were glimmers of various aspects of ‘community’: emotion or affect, physical proximity, the incorporation of difference. These glimmers were not confined to an affective register but also shaped the communication emerging in the session and afterwards. In our individual reflections, we contemplated the embodiment of and/ or the involvement of bodies in the singing experience. In addition to the affective and embodied implications of the singing collective, we also considered the ways in which, both during the session and afterwards in writing this collective piece, we were demonstrating the performative aspect of social sustainability.

Social sustainability in and beyond conference settings

Despite their celebratory, social, and ‘networking’ elements being key attractions, academic conferences can intensify feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, and anomie, with little guidance for participants as to how to be wholly engaged beyond presenting and listening to papers. In singing, we disrupted the ‘sensory synchrony that comes through sustained practice’ of conference attendance and challenged traditional frameworks of knowledge production.¹⁷ By relocating the session to a musical space, social alienation was replaced by familiarity and sharing, through the exposition of vulnerabilities.¹⁸ To sing together with strangers paradoxically requires a certain amount of both self-effacement, allowing one to be vulnerable enough to sing in front of others, and assertiveness, to do the actual singing itself. Moreover, by

contributing our reflections to write this paper, evidence of a sustained relationship despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the multi-directional opening up required to enable expressions of difference – and of community - has been sustained. This dialogue is very different to the fragmented, dispersed communicate that often develops following academic conference sessions, often focused on the potential for collective publications. Post-conference collaborations often require an interest, expertise, or influence in the *topic* rather than the *practice* of the session. In our case, collaboration was inclusive because everyone experienced the practice *of* the topic (social sustainability), and so the usual reservations about having something valuable enough to contribute did not apply.

Creative practice offers an ‘opportunity to arouse a slightly different awareness’ and ‘provoke thought’.¹⁹ Community music ‘seek[s] to enable people to find self-expression through musical means’.²⁰ We acknowledge that the transformation of academic spaces through music and other forms of the arts is joyfully political. Developing the notion of the political as a transforming and transformative condition, recent writing has argued (following Voegelin) for the importance of practices that involve invention, creation, experiential change, and multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral collaboration as ways to turn to *the conditions of possibility*, understood as observations and ethics of transformation.²¹ We exposed the transformative and ‘presencing’ power of listening and being heard, the feeling of synchrony in making sound together where inclusivity is a key aim. We challenged the social institutions and frameworks within which we stand in relation to each other, and which provide the structures and limits for what is permissible.²² In listening, ‘recognition of the other is nurtured and relations continually remodelled’.²³

Joy is not to be dismissed as a productive condition for change; as Audre Lorde writes, 'The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference'.²⁴ A politics founded in joyful sharing, and on spaces of shared becoming, is more than a counter-politics – the anti-stance of anti-neoliberalism, anti-globalisation, anti-privatisation, etc. – it is also generative of the conditions of possibility for imagining something radically different.

Conclusions

How we understand transformation in the context of our creative conference practice is important. Perhaps the singing experience was not significantly transformative at an individual level, nor did it necessarily produce an epistemological shift in terms of our individual approaches to or engagement with the conference theme or the papers presented in the session, but it did shift perspectives to see how a discussion can be started on a differently embodied basis. Standing up to address a group of people with whom you have been singing just a few moments before is different to the usual shuffle to the front and rushed charge through a paper that is so often the hegemonic experience of academic conferences. There was a humanising element that allowed us as presenters and participants to see glimpses of each other's frailties, nervousness and uncertainty. In more traditional academic conference sessions, it is the voices of the most confident that dominate discussions after a paper is given. The format of this session brought those of us who might usually feel out of place from doodling in the margins to singing in the centre. The ongoing

collaboration of writing this paper, an extension of this socially sustainable community of practice, involving more than half the participants, is testament to this. As co-authors who have been in regular contact for two years, who have negotiated this collaboration across continents and during a pandemic, who understand what each other took from the experience and how it fits with our research interests, academic practice, and personal lives, we hope this creative, academic, and social relationship will sustain.

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Notes

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² World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987).

³ M.Davidson, 'Social sustainability: A potential for politics?', *Local Environment*, 14, 2009, 607-619, 610.

⁴ S.Vallance, C.Perkins and J.Dixon, 'What is social sustainability? A clarification of concepts', *Geoforum*, 42, 2011, 342-348.

⁵ See Vallance, 'Social sustainability', 342. N.Dempsey, G.Bramley, S.Power, and C.Brown, 'The social dimension of sustainable development: Defining urban social sustainability', *Sustainable Development*, 19, 2011, 289-300. K.Murphy, 'The social pillar of sustainable development: A literature review and framework for policy analysis', *Sustainability, Science, Practice and Policy*, 8, 2012, 15-29. R.M. Shirazi and R.Keivani, 'Critical reflections on the theory and practice of social sustainability in the built environment: A meta-analysis', *Local Environment*, 22, 2017, 1526-1545. J.Cauvain, 'Social sustainability as a challenge for urban scholars', *City*, 22, 2018, 595-603.

⁶ See D.Lonie, 'Measuring outcomes and demonstrating impact', in B.-L.Bartleet and L.Higgins, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 281-300. K.Deane, 'Community music in the United Kingdom: Politics or policies?', in B.-L.Bartleet and L.Higgins, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 323–342.

⁷ L.Gibbs, K.Williams, S.Hamylton and L.Ihle, "Rock the boat": song-writing as geographical practice', *Cultural Geographies in Practice, cultural geographies*, 27, 2020, 311-315.

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¹⁰ See J.Blacking, *How Musical is Man* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1974). C.Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1998). L.Higgins, *Community Music: In Theory and in Practice* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹¹ B.E.King, J.Leiber and M.Stoller, 'Stand by me', Recorded by B.E.King, Atco Records. Released April 24, 1961.

¹² See J.Banfield, 'Researching through unfamiliar practices', *Cultural Geographies in Practice*, *cultural geographies*, 24, 2007, 329-332.

¹³ See N.Wood, M.Duffy and S.J.Smith, 'The art of doing (geographies of) music', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, 2007, 867–889.

¹⁴ See M.Duffy, 'Listening assemblages: Re-sounding place and mapping the affects of sound', in T.Leppänen, P.Moisala, M.Tiainen and H,Väätäinen, eds, *Musical Encounters with Deleuze and Guattari* (New York and London, 2016), pp. 190-203.

¹⁵ See M.S.Carolan, 'Introducing the concept of tactile space: creating lasting social and environmental commitments', *Geoforum*, 38, 2007, 1264-1275.

¹⁶ S.Malloch and C.Trevarthen, 'Musicality: Communicating the vitality and interests of life', in S.Malloch and C.Trevarthen, eds, *Communicative Musicality: Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 12

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¹⁷ See J.Banfield, 'Unfamiliar practices', 332.

¹⁸ See S.Aronson-Lehavi, 'Location', in A.Citron, S.Aronson-Lehavi and D.Zerbib, eds, *Performance Studies in Motion: International Perspectives and Practices in the Twenty-First Century* (London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), pp. 105-117.

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²⁰ B.-L.Bartleet and L.Higgins, 'Introduction', in B.-L.Bartleet and L.Higgins, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 1–22, p. 3.

²¹ S.Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound: Fragments of Listening* (London, 2019).

²² See B.LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London, 2018).

²³ Labelle, *Sonic Agency*, p.145.

²⁴A.Lorde, 'Uses of the erotic: the erotic as power,' *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY, Crossing Press, 1984), p. 56.Quoted in Labelle, *Sonic Agency*, p. 125.