Cultural geographies of participation – why do places matter?

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Cultural geographies of participation – why do places matter? Abigail Gilmore

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1. Introduction

This presentation considers the rudimentary question of why places matter to participation and engagement in arts and cultural activities and why it might be important to revisit this question now. This has been a niggling problem for me throughout doctoral and postdoctoral research – how do we connect what places are with what people do in the arts? What qualities of place are represented in artistic content? How do particular aesthetics and behaviours resonate with places and in some ways produce them? In particular in my own doctoral research I was concerned, always naively, with how cities and music are dialectically related? Like the chicken and the egg, I was trying to ask whether the city made the music or the music made the city (answer of course both, and reciprocally).

So when I heard about the subject for this seminar then I stuck my hand up quickly and put in an abstract. Actually, when I looked at this abstract last week I was a bit worried about what I’d committed to do, so I’m hoping to rather lower yours expectations to align with my own. (2) So I’m changing tack slightly and rather than presenting a wide range of case studies and focusing on the concept ‘local structures of feeling’ as suggested, I’m going to consider a number of different conceptual apparatus that might be useful for thinking through the relational qualities of ‘place’ in participation. I will also discuss some of the recent policy research tools and instruments for understanding and measuring participation in terms of their efficacy when considering Place. And I’m going to attempt to consider them and by considering them through a couple of loosely defined cases - somewhat autobiographically driven choices. Of more later.

Thinking about the ‘place of place’ in our understanding of participation and engagement in the arts implies a broad view of potential factors which might interfere and intervene: the geographical, geological and topological, the social aspects of places, the narratives of their
histories and demographics, their political structures, cultures and identities - their cultural geographies as well as the delineations and physical characteristics of built and natural environments. Having a micro perspective – a localised, situated understanding of the factors and drivers behind participation – is, it seems, important, perhaps because of and in spite of the general supra-level acceptance of the role of arts and culture in the national psyche. Being mindful of the local, at the moment, rocks.

(3) Place and policy - why is it important now? Sectors and economic development

In UK cultural policy over the last ten years, we’ve seen the gaze on participation in the arts grow exponentially – to the point that it could almost be considered a constant glare or spotlight, particularly in terms of research and data collection instruments favoured by policy in the last few years. From the start under Chris Smith, New Labour’s cultural policy expanded aspirations which explicitly signalled culture’s utility to a range of policy goals – including regeneration, economic development, social inclusion and health – and solidified them through extra investment and accompanying targets and measures, enshrined in Public Service Agreements. Increasing participation and engagement in the arts was crucial to achieving the goals, backed up by Policy Action Teams, social commentators and think tanks who argued for the social, cultural and economic impacts that participating in the arts could produce. To make the case for continued and growing subsidy – later investment – in arts activities, indication was sought that taking part in the arts is good for your health, the economy, for communities, as part of education, for quality of life, as a positive activity and so on. Arts organisations and case officers working within local authorities and development agencies had to show that they were reaching targeted audiences and groups as well as potentially producing these effects, and after some negotiation – often in relation to sport which is traditionally envied for its causal evidence of health benefits and its comprehensive research regimes, particularly in terms of participation – finally the arts has won their own indicators for arts participation at a local level.

At the same time, there has been considerable focus on the kinds of industrial organised activities associated with arts and culture, and the newly formalised identification with creative and cultural enterprises blossomed from the 1980s and the GLC, and enshrined in the Mapping Documents of 1998, the creative industries become a sector in their own right.
There has been a lot of energy and working attempting to map, scope and value creative industries as a sector, and to identify the specific needs for sector skills development.

This has proved important for positioning culture and creativity within territory-based strategies, as the new regionalism under New Labour saw the development of structures for looking after large territories, such as the Regional Development Agencies, Cultural consortiums and so on. In the mid-2000s policy has become increasingly place-based – and sectors have been examined not only in terms of their innate economic value but also in terms of the externalities – the agglomeration effects they bring to places.

Over the last two decades we have seen Arts and creativity become part of an endorsed lexicon of economic development strategies, from Creative Cities to Creative Class thesis of Richard Florida. The arts have become the way of making places distinctive and competitive, and used in place making and marketing.

Culture, the arts and creative industries had been given a structure and mandate for territorial development in 1999 through the recommendation for local cultural strategies. Later the sustainable communities programme reiterated a comprehensive and shared approach to embedding culture and sports entitlements in planning processes, to encourage community cohesion, health and wellbeing, design-led regeneration of public realm and animation of public spaces, through the Living Places and Places Matter initiative.

We now have “Total Place” – from 2009, where 13 pilot urban places have signed up to share information on how they can more effectively deliver services through place-based policy. Place-based policy proposes specific targeted interventions, to help economies which might be lagging or which require investment to become more competitive.

And most recently we have the even newer localism of the Big Society, and the Localism bill introduced in December 2010 which promised to revolutionise the English planning system by getting rid of the regional tier of administration and making neighbourhood plans “the new building blocks of the planning system” – allowing for both greater freedom and diversity in local decision making (Epsom, 2011).

(4) So how have cultural policy makers have responded & interpreted these agendas?
We have been entranced (me personally!) by portentous growth in information, knowledge, research and evidence base frameworks which, under the auspices of New Public Management, have been developed to support decision making in localities. Fitting with the logic of the logic chain approach to outcome and impact assessment, data is desired which can map input and output, supply and demand, investment onto participation within localities.

When Taking Part was first being designed it irked me that there was no specific form of questioning which allows potential place-based differences to be taken into the accounts offered by the resulting statistics. We can see some broad differences in regional participation rates across different

The cross sector initiative Living Places, led by MLA and including the DCLG and CMS championed role of culture and sports in growth or housing market renewal areas: after extensive consultation between consultants and planners it produced the Cultural Planning Handbook and Guidance with a range of methodologies for assets mapping, and for prioritising investment according to potential outcomes from these assets. These were to culminate in recommendations of standard charges to facilitate investment in arts, sports and libraries assets base on a per capita basis. The Case programme has followed up on this with a range of local and regional-level tools and data workbooks, which include investment and engagement data. These approaches situate participation, and continue policy aimed at increasing it by providing for supply side. And of course we have the National Indicators, which are helped Arts Council decide about priority areas for investment.

6. We’ve even seen recent analysis which shows us cross cultural comparisons across the Euro nation-states through the European barometer.

7. Similarly another CASE report out last week declared, winsomely:

In some instances, residing in a particular region had a significant role in explaining the likelihood of participation and engagement. In this context, the region is not just a geographical marker but may also reflect the relative supply of cultural activities across the country (CASE 2011)
Despite this, these still feel like blunt instruments in knowing places and understanding the meanings and values of participation and engagement in the arts in relation to place.

9. Of course, places can be considered as the vessels for supply, the containers of provision, the hosts for infrastructure. But this does not explain how they can become so linked with particular kinds of cultural practice, participation and production. Which is why I am interested in looking at conceptual tools which might bring a little richness to the debate – thought it might be worth going to back to Ian Curtis’ Eye.

10. Conceptual apparatus from music: Music seems to have overt relational ties to place, perhaps more than other art forms it finds it hard to untie those aprons strings. Countless popular music scholars, critics and enthusiasts have tried to identified the place within the music – the Liverpool-ness of the Liverpool Sound, what makes Madchester Mancunianly so. As Gibson & Connell succinctly put it:

   *in one sense the uniqueness of local music scenes is straightforward; music is made in specific geographical, socio-economic and politics contexts and lyrics and styles are always likely to reflect the positions of writers and composers within these contexts...the idea that a deterministic relationship between place and culture exists – as musical styles and sounds emerge from different locations and musicians relate to their environment – remains powerful*” (Connell and Gibson 2003: 90).

Popular music studies are concerned with semiotics, anthropology, sociology, musicology of popular music – its performance, production, reception and political economy, therefore all forms of participation.

Some of you may know Sara Cohen’s work, which has considered in intimate detail the place of place in music, through her ethnographic studies of Liverpool and its music scenes. She outlines three overlapping ways in which ‘locality’ can be approached in popular music studies.
it can be used to define discussion of social networks and relationships, practices and processes within a particular site (Cohen 1995b: 66).

- It can be used as a methodological bracket in which relationships between factors such as space and time, individuals and groups, contexts and ideas are examined in a particular, rather than general, fashion.

- Looking at localities can also be a way of examining the production and interconnection of identities and identity issues such as sexuality and ethnicity (op cit.).

11. Music - Scenes & Communities, Logics of practice

Thinking about the music scene & broader music communities encompasses all of these approaches.

Finnegan’s detailed study of local music practices in Milton Keynes in relation to the wider structures and experiences of urban life. Finnegan finds that, in opposition to the impersonal anti-communal properties associated with MK, local individuals follow ‘habitatual routes’ and create networks and communities in their musical practice to construct music pathways, often inspired by family connections with music as well as traditions of music-making in the locality.

Cohen examines the practice of music making in another site in her book ‘Rock Culture in Liverpool’ (Cohen, 1991) and maps the relationships and practices surrounding a music scene in Liverpool, and continues her account of the city in work which examines music's role in urban regeneration and tourism.

Shank's account of the rock'n'roll scene in Austin, Texas presents another detailed ethnography of a local music scene, which races the socio-musical heritage of Austin, to show how the commercial production of popular music in this locale is grounded in cultural tradition of the honky-tonk and the legacies of ‘cowboy lore’ (Shank 1994: 37).

Will Straw considers the relationship between scenes, differentiated by location and by musical terrain, and social groups primarily organised around class, gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity. His discussion of the ‘systems of articulation’ and ‘logics of change’ in
popular music examines relations between music and place in the context of globalisation, and the specific logics of different urban musical cultures.

Scenes - ‘for the relationship between different musical practices unfolding within a given geographical space’; by contrast, musical communities are relatively stable and are fixed within the given trajectory of the particular musical form or idiom they are based around; musical scenes however are concerned with a mixture of practices, constructing their own terrains symbolically from the activities associated with production or reproduction of musical styles and forms, the creation of musical taste and value and identity demarcation.

The ‘logics’ of particular systems of articulation situate the characteristics of scenes diachronically and in terms of their geography and temporality, for example in the differences between alternative rock and dance cultures. Some scenes have logics which override local differences e.g. the logics of rock are relatively homogenous across locations but act powerfully to "produce the local" (Straw) where the the networks of distribution and sites, practices and units of consumption of dance music are very differently organised. The connections between different locations – places - and dance styles are linked to these practices and act to define particular movements within dance music’s rapid history (think Chicago, Detroit, Sheffield ‘Bleep’ music and so on).

Particular urban infrastructures, demographics and communities appear to lean towards the production of particular music scenes – for example, port cities as creative milieu for ethnic fusions - and university cities for independent, alternative scenes.

And at the same time there is the problem of ‘mythologised’ authenticity of the local – where the derivation of local sounds rests within specific networks, actors and practices that make up these scenes and the verification of practices and their provenance from with these scenes. Who is an authentic Mancunian music-maker? Does it matter that you’ve come from elsewhere to university stayed and formed a band? Is this actually what makes you Mancunian?

Local musics are contingent on place and people – audiences who are active agents within the negotiation and making of meaning. These meanings, this construction of place through
relation, can be challenged through processes of negotiation: “through infrastructure and performance, ‘local musics’ - usually distanced from substantial commercialisation – are a result of co-operation as much as competitiveness. Such local links engender credibility and pose problems for authenticity in the event of success, the migration of performers elsewhere or the choice of a more global language for lyrics. In the conflict of commerce and creativity, the most local music is likely to remain almost unknown” (Connell and Gibson, 2003 115)

So – what about Macclesfield’s most famous sons? Are they specifically Maxonian?

[Slides 12, 13, 14 - Joy Division on Something Else 1979; The Macc Lads – the rudest, crudest band in Christendom – “Sweaty Betty” 1986; The Virgin Marys, Unconvention, Macclesfield Heritage Centre]

15 I now want to look a little bit closer at Ian Curtis’ other eye – Macclesfield. Apologies to those of you who may have heard this before, but this personal anecdote provides a useful for the question at hand. There is a sub-question too – Does Macclesfield have a Creative Class?

16 The Bombshell - Times headlines in 2004

Survey by Local Futures Group counted the cultural assets across the nation and assigned their number per square hectare. As a primarily rural borough at the time, Macclesfield was found significantly lacking. Local responses to the bad press were indignant – for local commentators Macclesfield was not without its own charms – citing poetry recitals, morris dancing, brass band concerts – but admitting there was only one cinema and no professional theatre for 150,000 people.

17 The shock was of course even greater for me – working for ACE, expecting to be part of Macclesfield’s resident ‘creative class’. Other measures of Macclesfield suggest why this was such a difficult pill to swallow.

The borough has high quality of life indicators and is one of the most affluent parts of the North West. House prices are consistently high. Recent participation data suggest that
perhaps Maxonians aren’t that uncivilised – For the NI 11 indicator for Arts Engagement: Macclesfield 53% putting it top of the leader board in the regional top 10%, and consistently high sports participation rates.

(NI 11 measures the percentage of the adult population in a local area that have either attended an arts event or participated in an arts activity at least three times in the past 12 months. All arts activities and events are included, not just those funded by local authorities.)

A more recent review of assets in 2008 found that the volume of cultural amenities is still within the bottom 30% nationally, although the town has the largest number of heritage buildings in Cheshire. Macclesfield, and Cheshire East – the new unitary authority – has a history of unparalleled underinvestment – compared with all other places in the NW, for example by the Arts Council in either revenue or capital investment. It has no resident RFOs/NPOs. The local authority – for a long time conservative – appears apathetic about attracting investment through culture and creativity and tourism strategies are weak or non-existent, despite a significant role in the history of industrial revolution, fantastic collections relating to the towns silk industry, a rich heritage stock, and position as Gateway to the Peaks.

However, data sources of creative employment and enterprise show Macclesfield has one of the highest rates of creative industries employment in the NW and amongst the largest creative industries workforce in the country. So Macclesfield is not without its creative class.

All of which beggars the question what is going on?

20 Three further concepts are raised for me by this problem (apart from my own rancour...):

**Mobility and cultural capital** Critical review of the Florida creative class theory has recently focused on the causality of creative people to successful places – the thesis assumes that the creative occupation class are drawn to places which suit their consumption requirements. As flexible human capital they can choose to live where they like, and like to seek out places which provide cafe culture, night-time economies and ‘buzz’. This is why city boosters are urging the creation of these kinds of spaces to attract this inward investment.
Recent study by Bille tested this idea using Danish participation data and found that the composite creative class do indeed participate in arts and creative activities and sports more, they are high users of classical concerts and theatres, museums and contemporary concerts and use libraries more than others.

Clearly the Maxonian creative class may comply with these characteristics, however, they are not doing this in Macclesfield (but presumably in commutable Manchester) suggesting they are living in the town, but possibly not working or playing here. How many other places play host to middle class communities who don’t invest their participation in their own locales?

The importance of the Vernacular  Evans offers a critique of the creative class thesis – in relation to the ubiquity of this strategy to make creative places and their need to be both exclusive places ripe for gentrification through the mobile capital of the creative class whilst inclusive of cultural community development needs. These places – such as creative quarters and zones – make creativity their distinction in both economic development and social inclusion policies. To do so, they require vernacular practices, to support access and provide authenticity. To avoid to critiques of the edge city and formula high street creative spaces (19) “the vernacular is an essential backdrop and condition for the new creative quarter, at least to begin with” (Evans 2009: 20).

Similarly Edensor and Millington in the same volume argue for a broader conception of creativity which encompasses the vernacular – and point out the bias towards the metropolitan away from the marginalised, the mundane and the ordinary: (20) “for every top ten cool city, there is also a ‘crap town’ (Jordison and Kiernan cited in Edensor et al 2009, 5).

They look at creativity in mundane spaces – echoing a general turn back to the everyday, evocative of the radicalisation of common culture found in British cultural studies such as Willis and Hebdige and drawing on Williams.

Local structures of feeling Finally there is the Williams term of structure of feeling – employed to great effect by Taylor, Evans and Fraser in their book Tale of Two Cities to
describe the patterns of social cultural practices, lived experience, including routine, mundane and everyday, ways in which places are differentiated through these experiences, produce differentiation through consumption practices (?) traditions, crafts, linked to industrial histories (Sheffield & Manchester) which – for me links these conceptual apparatus together and provides them with important historical grounding. For Macclesfield – the former silk town who peaked too early – with rapid industrialisation urbanisation and expansion lasting a mere 50 years before the industry rapidly declined – the weavers cottages, looms and factory mills are still part of this locality and written into the lived experience of the place.

Bringing the vernacular histories of cultural practices into focus for the strategic development of places is not new: arts practitioners do this on a daily basis in socially engaged practices – and cultural planning methodologies have long been making the case for qualitative mapping and auditing of local cultural resources and practices, including traditions, stories and images, through participatory processes of consultation and research.

For example, the work of the turn-of-the-twentieth century town planner Patrick Geddes (1904), who provided influential key principles for future planners, including the application of an anthropological definition of culture which encompasses leisure habits, hobbies, rituals and patterns in addition to the more traditional aesthetic conception of culture as art. For Geddes, anthropologists, economics and geographers are all needed to analyse and holistically observe cities in their complexity as places where people relate to each and their environments, and produce a textured, cultural map. Geddes insisted that an archaeological approach should be applied, that we should ‘survey before planning’: ‘we must excavate the layers of our city downwards, into its earliest past...and thence we must read them upwards, visualizing as we go’ (cited in Mercer 2006:5).

In conclusion, I do still live in Macclesfield and I know that it is no cultural desert – despite the continuing lack of formal arts infrastructure, no permanent cinema, art centre, theatre or concert hall, there is a burgeoning visual arts scene, no end of knitting groups, some of the best Belgian beers outside of Belgium and now its own community arts festival. I am beginning to understand its vernacular and find out about its cultural past in order to
undestand the logic of practice and the relationship between histories of place and current scenes and communities. And as a member of its resident creative class I’m also keen to develop its confidence and strategic competence and provision of places and spaces to participate in the arts without leaving the town. (21, 22)

If place is going to be the continuing lens for economic development policy, and increasing opportunities for arts and cultural participation continues as a priority for cultural policy, then it seems that these concepts might be more usefully employed.

23 -end-