# Learning to Listen Agonistically: Dialogue Encounters on the Eastside

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**Abstract:** This essay describes a multi-stakeholder process of listening as a first step toward dialogue among community members in Santa Barbara's 'Eastside' neighbourhood. Already the site of multiple shelters and outreach programmes, the fragile Eastside coalition of neighbours, business owners, and social service providers fractured when a local agency proposed new housing for those experiencing chronic homelessness. Amid this conflict, our initiative for public dialogue and deliberation was approached as a 'neutral' third party to help guide a restorative process. This essay is a reflection on this work: The interplay between active community engagement and theories of dialogue, alongside complications from the worldwide pandemic and COVID-19 restrictions. Because of pervasive change, fear, and identity politics on the Eastside, we consider the role of agonistic dialogue in creating a haven to speak, listen, bear witness, and take concrete action toward social justice.

**Keywords**: Agonistic Dialogue, Radical disagreement, Homelessness, Bearing witness

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In October 2019 over 150 community members showed up to a public meeting to protest the Salvation Army's building of a 'permanent supportive housing' project on the Eastside of Santa Barbara, designed for chronically homeless people who had gone through rehabilitation programmes. To say the meeting did not go well is an understatement. Many were shocked by the anger, shouting, and name-calling. One opinion piece published after the meeting characterised it 'like watching a car in slow motion take an unexpected turn, careen wildly out of control and then flip repeatedly down a hill until it landed in a mangled burning heap of metal' (Gott 2019). Why wouldn't good people want to house people experiencing homelessness? What had gone so terribly wrong? Some residents who helped organise the session said this was mostly the work of outside agitators; some of the neighbours said it was because city leaders did not really want to hear their concerns; and some homeless advocates glibly wrote off residents' concerns as NIMBYism.[1]

Ramsbotham (2010) writes about conflicts that ruin families and engulf nations, that drag on for years, and that manifest linguistically as radical disagreements. He exhorts scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution and dialogue to pay attention to radical disagreements, as they are the verbal manifestations of intense political conflict and intractability. In the community conflict described here it might seem easiest to simply write off, go around, or steamroll the opposing faction. Others might seek to resolve the conflict via more hearings, democratic deliberation, and a good faith negotiation involving concessions. What would it look like to directly engage the conflict, not just working around, ignoring, or even smoothing over the conflict? We ought not dismiss radical disagreement as a dead-end or something we naïvely hope to simply transform, argues Ramsbotham (2013). He suggests we must engage and interrogate the conflict via agonistic dialogue as a way to both shine the spotlight more fully on the issue itself as well as more thoroughly understand the nature of radical disagreement. How does one engage neighbours and city leaders who see themselves at an impasse yet have not 'signed up for' an agonistic dialogic process? What are good first steps to usher in and make acceptable an agonistic dialogue? In this essay, we demonstrate one way to engage conflict in a community divided, starting with small steps toward listening and speaking from one's narrative ground, bearing witness to the lived experience of others and engaging in shared deeds of reconciliation to build trust, however fragile.

### *Agonistic Dialogue*

It is natural, perhaps inevitable, that strong emotions will likely produce passionate, emotional rhetoric. Eastsiders were angered and offended that their safety and

1 NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard)

livelihood concerns, let alone their rights as taxpayers, were dismissed and demonised. Of course, on the other side of the coin, the leaders of rescue missions, homeless housing initiatives, and city planners dedicated to creating fair and affordable housing for all were deeply offended by hearing people experiencing homelessness[2] dehumanised and reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes. Additionally, the people coming to these encounters experienced strong emotions rooted in their most deeply held values and fears. Paulo Freire argues that we must have the right to express appropriate anger against injustice, while stressing the appropriateness of the anger, 'otherwise it simply degenerates into rage and even hatred' (1998, 45). He continues, 'I have a right to be angry, to show it and to use it as a motivational foundation for my struggle, just as I have a right to love and to express my love to the world' (Freire 1998, 71). Karen Tracy (2008, 2010) proposes that *reasonable hostility* is a desirable norm in local governance during times of strong disagreement, and that 'the right of citizens to express outrage is a central part of just about any notion of democracy' (Tracy 2011, 174). While in theory democratic norms should allow for the expression of disagreement, and even outrage, most writers assume or advocate for civility in ways that discourage powerful negative sentiments. Complicating that further, even when citizens passionately express their opposition, leaders typically experience the disagreement as hostility – and not just hostility generally, but very personally. Tracy notes that calls for civility are not neutral (Herbst 2010) and often seek to 'restrict and resist the expression of an opposing other' (Tracy 2011, 174).

When people care deeply about an issue of local governance, we can expect arguments infused with emotion. The conflicts on the Eastside had been building over the course of a generation and had intensified in the last decade. Characterised by power inequities, questions of justice and safety, and frustration, such conflicts led Eastsiders[3] to feel ignored or silenced or bullied. Societal conflicts are also incredibly complex, contending with overlapping needs, group memberships, identities, and power relationships to contend with. Leaders, working with the best of intentions and under pressure from city residents as well as county and statewide mandates, found themselves not just in the middle, but painted as perpetrators of injustice and silencing. Of course, these meetings were intense: 'In radical disagreement, substantive issues are

2 People Experiencing Homelessness (PEH) is the preferred term here, rather than 'the homeless.'

3 We use the term 'Eastsiders' to refer to those who live on the Eastside, whether renters or homeowners, as well as those who own or manage businesses on the Eastside. In short, Eastsiders are all those who depend on the Eastside part of town to live. More fraught is how to refer to people experiencing homelessness (PEH). Some become residents on the Eastside by virtue of where they were housed before becoming homeless, others by where they currently find shelter or make their beds each night. Since, however, the Eastsiders as defined above are in conflict with the PEH, it makes sense to refer to these groups separately. These are neither desirable nor problem-free categories, however.

surrounded by a penumbra of emotion that chokes off constructive communication and reduces verbal exchanges to a "conversation of the deaf." Conflict parties blame each other, justify themselves, and endlessly repeat inherited mantras' (Ramsbotham 2010, 57). While the local situation has not escalated to violent confrontation, it is experienced as a kind of violence, perhaps an epistemological violence (Bohm 1996), especially when citizens are simply confronted with experts who 'know best' how to cope with homelessness. To be silenced or to have one's identity as a good person called into question, let alone to have a home or livelihood put at risk, creates a miasma of dis-ease in one's own community and a simmering sense of violence just below the surface.

Creating a space where agonistic, emotional clashes can occur between alienated groups is necessary for a well-functioning democracy (Maddison 2015; Mouffe 2005) and enables passionate democratic contestation, especially where differences are fuelled by identity. In their comparison of dialogic traditions and how they connect with activism, Ganesh and Zoller (2012) advocate an agonistic approach which invites a broader range of communication styles (including those emotionally expressive) as well as highlights issues of power and identity while 'simultaneously paying explicit attention to questions of justice and social and material needs' (p.77). While many democratic dialogue traditions focus on finding *common ground*, Ganesh and Zoller present multiple routes toward *openness*, including communication that might typically be viewed as one-way, such as testimony (Porrovecchio 2007) and deliberation (van de Kerkhof 2006). Ron Arnett (2014, 2015), while not speaking of agonistic dialogue in particular, champions dialogue in troubled communities, urging us to acknowledge the narrative ground participants stand on, inevitably fraught with bias and prejudice, yet aligned with tenacious hope. Listening to and attending to that which matters to the other is the act of acknowledgement that invites the possibility of dialogue and addresses the insidious discounting of those different from us. But he acknowledges that this is arduous work, work that requires 'rolling up the sleeves' and a 'demanding labour of care' (Arnett 2015).

So how might one move a community toward openness: the Eastsiders toward openness to engaging with untrusted (and in their views, untrustworthy) city leaders and some service providers, and to city leaders and service providers toward openness to Eastsiders feeling threats to their security, safety, and ability to make a living? Long-time Santa Barbara community organiser Jeff Shaffer sensed that if any progress would be made on the Eastside and in the larger community, the voices of the protestors and resistors could not simply be written off or gone around. It would not be enough to simply document Eastsiders' concerns and then neatly set them aside. Shaffer knew that for real change to happen, leaders needed to listen, and neighbours needed to feel heard.

Here it is worthwhile to delve deeper into the term that leaders found so apt and that neighbours found so deeply offensive: NIMBYism. Geographer Phil Hubbard (2006) argues that the term has some utility, when broadly defined as a neighbour opposed to a facility siting for a range of reasons, for instance, but fellow geographer Maarten Wolsink (2006) rejects the term due to both its ambiguity and pejorative connotations. Any geographical planning is fundamentally social in its reproduction of class, gender, and other social phenomena. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) in his work on space and place notes that 'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value' (p.6), and that it is from the security of our sense of place we become aware of both the freedom and the threat of space. Wendell Berry (1994) writes that if we want to know how to live in a place, we must understand what the nature of a place permits us to do, and who and what are here with us. To know this, *we must ask the place*. Westoby and Dowling caution that an understanding of a community too focused on the geographical space can 'provide a rationale for superficial, technical and depoliticised notions of community development' (Westoby & Dowling 2013, 45). Worse, perhaps, community workers inadvertently begin to see themselves 'not as part of the social relations that make up community, but as separate to 'the community' – and hospitality becomes difficult' (Westoby & Dowling 2013, 45).

On the Eastside, when we consider the circumstances of and discourse about residents' opposition to the siting of a homeless housing project in their neighbourhood, in their *place*, we see peripheralisation in practice (Wolsink 2006). Although typically used in reference to facility placements that pose environmental risk, the term describes what often happens to neighbourhoods without the political and economic resources to refuse siting of activities they find undesirable. Eastsiders were peripheralised in that though they were adamant that the city not site another homeless care facility in their neighbourhood, especially without consultation, their concerns had largely been ignored or simply written off as NIMBYism. It is important to point out that some of the opposition was not to housing a homeless person, *per se*, but to a plan seen as poorly imagined that would set vulnerable new neighbours up to fail. Still, the conflict over the facility siting is linked to the distinctions made between neighbour and outsider, particularly when the presence of those considered outsiders occurs without the neighbourhood's invitation. The neighbourhood opposition must be engaged in regard to both perceptions of power and inclusion, for neighbours as well as others. This is not a conflict that can or should be ignored.

Our initiative for public dialogue and deliberation was approached as a 'neutral' third party to lend some help, and this essay is a reflection on what we are observing and how we are reflecting on the interplay between active community engagement informed by theories of dialogue, while also confronted with an evolving situation

complicated by the worldwide pandemic and COVID-19 restrictions. Rather than 'solving' the conflict, or striving for consensus building, we opted to directly engage the conflict, to enter into the very nature of the disagreement itself. We sought to engage the agonistic dialogue but sensed that the communities were not yet ready to sit down together. This was an ongoing, long-standing wicked problem in a community marked by power inequities and institutional distrust. We believed, along with Shaffer, that the first step must involve hearing from Eastsiders, persuading neighbours to listen to neighbours, working toward openness and respect. We began by addressing the inequities of power, privilege, and access by finding a way for the Eastsiders to be heard, working toward openness. In this we were 'sowing seeds of postdialogue transformative action' (Suransky & Alma 2018, 37). By actively engaging the perspectives of Eastsiders opposed to the housing project, we were actively engaging the conflict itself. Yet it seemed that an immediate dialogue between Eastsiders and city leaders and advocates of people experiencing homelessness (PEH) had the potential to do harm. The expressed hostility, coupled with the mounting crisis and concomitant stress, led us to begin with listening sessions that would result in a report to leaders as a small first step toward the listening/hearing with an eye toward building trust.

Most models of dialogue assume face-to-face interaction. We were not enthusiastic about this as a first step for reasons already articulated. While it is possible that a dialogue for mutual understanding could have been held, it seemed unlikely that neighbours would want to come to such an event given the acrimony following the public meeting. We thought it more prudent to do two things: First, to seek out those most opposed to the housing development and engage them in conversation, and second, to demonstrate to Eastsiders that their concerns had been heard. Arnett (1981, 2014) has identified two major strands of dialogue traditions, one being the therapeutic focus on dialogue as originating in an encounter and with an emphasis on process, and the other being the focus on the narrative ground that precedes any dialogue and which functions as the 'between' relationally. We believed that Eastsiders needed a forum to speak in safety, without fear of being minimised or silenced. We needed to honour the narrative ground that would inform any future conversations. Next, Eastsiders needed to see some sign that they had been taken seriously and that their concerns had been heard and thoughtfully considered. The critical question is how this could be done in a fruitful way without further antagonising neighbours. We suggest that a critical aspect of engaging agonistic dialogue is bearing witness to the agony, to the deep sense of dis-ease experienced by the parties who have felt silenced and minimised. Gadamer argues that understanding our own prejudice begins when we are disturbed or provoked (1992, 299). Following Gadamer, we needed to disturb the narrative of the city leaders and service providers.

### *The Setting*

The Salvation Army had obtained funding to buy an existing home in a residential neighbourhood with the intent to house chronically homeless persons who had gone through some rehabilitation training. The proposal included a social worker who would visit the property 'as needed' to assist with any issues, but there were no plans (or room) to house on-site staff. Eastside residents and business owners were shocked to hear the news, largely because the project was moving quickly and there had been no preliminary meetings to work through questions and concerns. Tino De Guevara, the president of the Eastside Society, believed that residents would appreciate an opportunity to learn more about the project and provide their input, so he invited the Salvation Army and the city director to meet with neighbours at the local community centre. He was surprised by the sheer numbers as well as the intensity of the anger being expressed. He distributed index cards for questions and concerns and promised that even though they would not have time that evening to get through all the cards, all questions would be answered, even after the forum. Attendees interpreted this as an attempt to silence them and shouted, 'Why do you get to cherry pick the questions?' The heated discussion finally ended with the city council member for the district promising that the city would take resident concerns seriously.

Ultimately, there were no further city-wide discussions; the disagreement led the Salvation Army to withdraw its proposal. As one local put it, the community 'won that battle' and the funding went elsewhere. In the eyes of many long-time homeless advocates in town, the Salvation Army missed an opportunity by not working with the community in advance. They also recognised that the original plan underestimated the social service needs of housing the chronically homeless in a residential neighbourhood. Some Eastside residents were worried about parking, but most were worried about safety. One resident worried for the future tenants, that this was not a 'compassionate' plan and that 'taking people with chronic mental-health or addiction issues and putting them in a house with no on-site services is setting them up to fail' (Smith 2019). Some advocates spoke in favour of the plan, but they didn't live on the Eastside. One long-time community and homeless advocate said it was a rushed project and that the Salvation Army had never done permanent housing in the city and did not knock-on doors to fill people in. Jeff Shaffer realised two things: First, that there was an utter lack of trust between Eastsiders and the City; and second, that the language used was a large part of the conflict.

Following the fall debacle, Shaffer and his non-profit organisation SB Act worked with the city to engineer a series of 'all-call meetings' designed along the lines of the Stanford Collective Impact Model, which advocates collaboration among local government, social service organisations, and invested citizens rather than separate, isolated initiatives. The model unites multiple stakeholders under a big tent for

collective success (Kania & Kramer 2011). It also decreases competition for grants and funding among service providers, putting everyone on the same 'team.' It was at this point that we were brought into the conflict as outside, third parties.

### *Listening Sessions*

We began by hosting a series of listening sessions with residents and business owners on the Eastside. We held two sessions open to the public and conducted several one-on-one listening sessions for those unable to attend the group conversations. Undergraduate students learning how to facilitate dialogue and deliberation conducted the group listening sessions at a local community centre and in the public library. Having undergraduate students serve as facilitators works especially well for two key reasons. First, residents see them as neutral third parties without agendas. Second, community members are more forgiving if the students make what residents might view as mistakes because the students are just learning. A lovely benefit for the students is that they get up close with the community and become engaged in issues about which community members care deeply (Winslow & Dunn 2019).

The sessions, from the beginning, were also made complicated by issues of space/place. We consciously worked to find spaces in the local community so that residents would not have to drive, or if they did, they would not have to drive far, and they could park easily. We also wanted Eastsiders to feel safe in their own community. Toward this end we had Spanish-speaking facilitators available so that language would not prove to be an obstacle. The first listening session, held in the public library, went smoothly and was well attended, despite another public neighbourhood meeting scheduled by the city in the community centre located right next door. There was some confusion among Eastsiders as to which space was meant for which discussion. This also highlighted a troubling lack of awareness among city leaders about public engagement in the same neighbourhood on the same night at the same time, despite the best efforts of SB Act to engage city leadership.

The next public listening session was also fraught in that we chose a local community centre that would meet our criteria for a convenient, safe gathering place. What we did not realise, however, was that some Eastsiders saw this space as problematic. While such spatial concerns could easily be dismissed, these seemingly 'small' issues reveal a complex, layered history of the Eastside neighbourhood. A generation ago, the Eastside was a thriving, multi-cultural neighbourhood, home to multiple African American churches. Over time, however, skyrocketing real estate prices, unequal job opportunities, and changing demographics had led to fewer and fewer African Americans living in the city, such that today they make up only about 2% of the total population. One of these churches was purchased and re-purposed as both church meeting space and a community centre that offers event space, a food pantry, and

youth programmes. While the facility serves citizens, some nearby residents have objected to the activities. An opinion piece in the local newspaper published over the summer highlighted the changing racial politics in the city:

> …our low-income neighborhoods that are today predominantly brown and Spanish-speaking. Part of this change is knowing and understanding that Santa Barbara was once home to a vibrant African American community… Unlike today, schools were truly diverse with black, brown, and white students who shared life's challenges and experiences. This placed us on the map as a city that embraced equality. We celebrated our diversity. The true locals that remain know that this quality of our upbringing is no longer a part of Santa Barbara. (Alvarado 2020)

One wonders if the 'true' locals are those being served by the centre, while those objecting to the centre's activities are the less true or newer residents, now gentrifying the area. We discovered the day before the event that some neighbours had advocated a boycott of the listening session via social media. We had fewer people turn up for the second session. It was ironic that the session intended to allow them to air their grievances regarding space in their neighbourhood was itself a contested, and therefore boycotted space. It also highlights the need to be more fully engaged in a community in order to avoid these kinds of missteps. Westoby and Dowling (2013) admonish all would-be community workers who are not deep participants in the communities they seek to develop. Finally, some Eastsiders were eager to be heard, but unable to participate in the listening sessions. We discovered that a number of business managers and owners, although deeply invested in the neighbourhood, lived over 45 minutes away so that they could afford housing. In these cases, we conducted one-on-one listening interviews.

When the listening sessions were complete, we compiled the notes, identified the broad themes, and then prepared ourselves for sharing the results with the service providers and community members involved in the all-call meetings. This was something not to be taken lightly. We were brought in because key players in this arena discerned that neighbours and leaders needed to listen to one another, and that a change in language was required. Our report was, in a sense, the 'voice' of the neighbours on the Eastside to the well-meaning and good-hearted leaders who wanted to solve homelessness in the city. How do you tell the people most committed to doing good that they are also doing harm? That they are part of the problem? We tried to be forthright, to report what we had learned as clearly, as truthfully, and as respectfully as possible. What we reported was that Eastsiders had major concerns with homelessness in their neighbourhoods, including: public drunkenness; public nudity/indecency; public urination/defecation as well as urinating and defecating on private lawns and in gardens; sleeping on porches and on business premises; disruptions such as knocking

on windows, confrontations and altercations, and panhandling; confrontations turning violent after hours that frightened neighbours and discouraged customers and tourists; encampments on beaches, under freeways and in locations that made residents fearful for safety and business owners fearful of losing their businesses or putting staff in harm's way; and forced confrontations involving business owners that were sometimes frightening. This was not news to the assembled leaders. The challenge was in hearing that very real concerns had been casually dismissed and that neighbours had been painted as inhuman or uncaring and written off as a 'bunch of NIMBYs.'

The other major theme had to do with a sense of Eastsiders feeling like the 'dumping ground' for all of the city's problems. The Eastside is already home to some shelters, while most other city neighbourhoods have none.[4] The language of 'stepchild' was used in several conversations. For Eastsiders, it was especially galling that while other, wealthier neighbourhoods did not have to deal with these problems in their own backyards, they were very quick to accuse the Eastsiders who *did* have to cope with these problems as actually *being* the problem. Neighbours also felt alone in their struggles. They had asked to have a city ambassador presence – a popular local initiative in which uniformed 'red shirts' walk the downtown corridor and the main beach/wharf areas to provide a visible, public safety presence for both residents and tourists – but had been told 'no.' Further, they perceived that there was very little help from the city and the police, and they communicated a sense that no one in the city 'really cared' about the problems or the people on the Eastside.

We were nervous to share these results, especially since we thought that the Eastsiders' criticisms of the mayor and service providers might make these 'do-gooders' feel 'called out' in a public forum. Several in the room started to protest that the problem with the language was not 'on them' because they were only reacting to the language and behaviour of the residents opposed to helping PEH. One social service worker, for example, recalled public meetings in which opponents of proposed homeless housing worried about people, first, defecating on their lawns 'like animals' and, second, creating public safety problems because they are 'crazy' and 'a bunch of addicts.' The service providers expressed offence that people without homes are dehumanised as animals and labelled crazy. These initial reactions of the city leaders and service providers were natural. It struck them at a deep identity level. This feedback would interrupt their own carefully constructed and meticulously maintained views of themselves as virtuous citizens, as 'good people doing good work' (Dunn 2007). We saw this as potentially another small step toward engaging the agonistic dialogue,

4 Further, perhaps adding to the energy, just a few months prior to the hearing the city had approved a multi-story condominium development just blocks away, over strenuous citizen objections.

insofar as we had 'disturbed' their narratives, which was part of engaging the conflict at a deep level. Two things happened then to help move past a tempting refusal to truly hear the Eastsiders. Jeff Shaffer, who facilitated the meeting, gently offered his observation about the same meeting referenced as offensive. He pointed out that the meeting had devolved into recriminations and 'gone south' only *after* service providers 'started the name-calling,' accusing concerned residents of being NIMBYs and characterising them as concerned more with their bottom lines and property values than their fellow human beings.

Again, we were not seeking agreement, but a public nurturing of difference. Hannah Arendt (1968, 221) describes what the Greeks called 'insight' and Paine called 'common sense' that gives rise to what Arnett (2008) calls an *enlarged communicative mentality*, where we may grow in the space 'between,' which is the public distance that separates one person from another, the space where 'you and I are guests, not owners.' (2008, 17). Freire (1998) urges that dialogue be based on a respect for the differences between us, and Arendt (1968) establishes dialogue as intrinsic to exercising democracy. The second thing that moved the dial toward openness was a wonderful moment when the mayor 'heard' the voices of Eastsiders and stood up to say that while it was difficult to see the criticisms in print and to feel, at least on some level, deeply misunderstood or mischaracterised, she was also grateful for the feedback. An enlarged communicative mentality requires that one knows one's own position, yet is also willing to meet, to engage the positions contrary or even alien to one's own. Following the larger main report, we broke participants into smaller discussion groups. In these sessions, we emphasised that the system had become self-perpetuating; since the conflict was well underway, pointing fingers and laying blame would not solve the problem. It would be more profitable to look for predictable patterns and boundaries shaping and maintaining particular identities. Or, in Arnett's words, we needed to roll up our sleeves and engage in the hard work of acknowledging both the physical and narrative ground upon which the Eastsiders stand.

In the listening sessions, Eastsiders had not been shy in offering their own analyses as to why the city and various service providers had not been able to 'solve' the problems with homelessness. Some of these included the notion that there was money to be made in non-profit solutions to homelessness, what they called the 'homeless industrial complex.' Some were more personal in their critiques, charging that people had their heads in the sand, were out of touch, or were walking about with blinders on. Others pointed to very specific contributors, including too many liquor stores generally, coupled with too many liquor stores selling tiny bottles of liquor for only a dollar. Still others just felt like the complexity of the problem and the failure of other solutions made this all a hopeless situation, one that city leaders lacked the political will to solve.

Eastside neighbours know what they are talking about. Urban planners and engineers coined the term, 'wicked problems' to refer to complex social problems that involve multiple systems (Rittel & Webber 1973) and require a focus on the obstacles to engagement and tensions inherent in the problem (Carcasson & Sprain 2016). While there are significant challenges inherent to wicked problems, well-designed processes engineered to mitigate the impacts of group polarisation and differing motivations and abilities of citizens can make a difference. There are challenges, however, particularly when there are uneven power relationships or deep structural inequalities. Lynn Sanders (1997) points out that simply involving citizens in deliberation may actually do more harm when powerful elites control the agenda as well as the norm of what counts as 'rational' argument. Kadlec and Friedman (2007) counter that power imbalances may be reduced via proper control (having no single entity with a substantive stake in the outcome control the process), design (both recruitment and framing), and change (both via equipping citizens and change leading to concrete action), though Anna Wolfe complicates this by raising additional questions that emerge 'from the tensional spaces between' (Wolfe 2018, 7) and include questions of who to include as well as exclude based on one's ability to be respectful.

On the Eastside, the power inequities are very real, if contradictory. On the one hand, the district generates about 1/3 of the city's total revenue. On the other hand, most residents are less wealthy, home values are lower, and there are more people of colour, relative to other residential areas. The Eastside has a long history of housing people of colour and newly arrived immigrants (whether Italians many years ago or more currently Mexicans, Indians, and Syrians), though African Americans have largely left the Eastside. Long-time residents mourned the loss of a local man, Mr. Brown, who continued to operate his barber shop almost up to his death. He was one of the last of the Black business owners who could narrate the rich history of the Eastside. As Black residents left the area, more Latinx residents moved in, both as renters and as buyers, as both long-time natives of the Santa Barbara area and as newly arrived immigrants. Unfortunately, there are a number of run-down properties owned by absent landlords. Currently, the neighbourhood is shifting again, toward what some fear is gentrification. Additionally, recent city decisions have, perhaps, increased a sense of feeling disempowered. For instance, the city approved the development of a large condominium complex despite strenuous citizen objections as to its density, placement, height, architecture, lack of parking, loss of views, and a recommendation against the project by the local architectural review board. There are also grievances regarding lack of consultation and relationship-building surrounding use of local parks, forcing local business owners to contribute to an economic business district, and the aforementioned placement of homeless shelters. Mapping the pre-existing and historical conflicts in this neighbourhood would yield a very messy map!

Relationships among business owners, people experiencing homelessness, homeowners, renters, service providers, city officials, outside activists, and law enforcement are replete with tension. While people experiencing homelessness are caught in conflicts with multiple other groups, there are attributes of each conflict unique to the individual conflict parties based upon the conflict parties' proximity (or nestedness) with one another. For example, people experiencing homelessness and business owners are parties in conflict with one another, with law enforcement, service providers, and city officials as sometimes third parties but sometimes drawn in directly. Multiple conflicts may exist at any given time regarding issues that arise from people living without homes. Conflict formations not only include tensions between groups, but tensions within groups. Housed residents are not a monolithic entity – they differ in their judgements as well as in their power within the Eastside and in comparison, with other city neighbourhoods. Some rent, some own, some live closer to the Riviera, some closer to the freeway. In the same way, people experiencing homelessness do not share all of the same life stories, characteristics, and choices, and the differences between the chronically homeless and the temporarily homeless are not insignificant. This just serves to illustrate that there is no one narrative operating on the Eastside, and that the multiplicity of stories in the civic dialogue must be acknowledged.

Once we presented our findings to the all-call group organised by SB Act, we then made the report available to participants in the Eastside listening sessions, emphasising that the city leaders had also been given copies of the report and had discussed the content. Most Eastsiders had not been present for the all-call meeting, but they began to feel seen and heard. Immediately after the all-call meeting and distribution of the report, the County instituted pandemic 'lock-down' orders, which moved future discussions online. What would happen to the agonistic dialogue that had not even had a chance to fully begin? Public fears both for and of the homeless during the pandemic led both Eastsiders and city leaders to take swift action. Again, Jeff Shaffer was at the centre of the next stage of efforts. We followed up on the report with additional calls for feedback and information, asking residents to prioritise what would most make a difference, how the city might most indicate a willingness to truly work with Eastsiders. They identified their top three requests for action, and within a week or two they saw movement on their top two, which spoke volumes. Almost immediately, encampments on major thoroughfares were cleaned up and people without homes were moved into (albeit temporary) shelters and there was discussion about funding to bring in trained workers via City Net[5], who could help people experiencing homelessness with things ranging from finding food and shelter to

5 City Net is an organization providing services and long-term strategies to end street-level homelessness and probably more appropriate to the needs expressed by Eastsiders than the city Ambassador Program.

accessing social services. A cynic might observe that these things happened so quickly due to pandemic fears. But these actions would not have happened so swiftly if leaders and neighbours were not already engaged in conversation.

And the timing was not lost on the Eastsiders who participated in the conversations; indeed, this seemed like confirmation that their concerns were finally taken seriously, that the talk had manifested action. Here we suggest that as part of engaging the agonistic dialogue, a key movement is transitioning from simply hearing the story of another, to bearing witness to the story of another. What do we mean by bearing witness? We mean it is beyond simply talking and hearing, beyond even simply seeing, though these things matter. Jacques Derrida observes that bearing witness is not entirely discursive: 'it is sometimes silent. It has to involve something of the body which does not have the right of speech' (Derrida 2000, 190). Marc Gopin (2003) notes that Westerners honour dialogue, words, and text over deeds, actions, and gestures – a potential stumbling block for dialogue – and urges us to take seriously embodied deeds, gestures, and rituals as critical components of dialogue and peace making. The sequence of events matters here. First, Eastsiders were invited to speak and careful notes were taken to ensure that these voices were heard. Second, Eastsiders were given evidence that they had been heard by the very leaders they felt most profoundly silenced by. Finally, Eastsiders saw the embodied deeds and gestures toward taking their concerns seriously. Tino De Guevarra, the Eastsider who had organised that fall meeting noted that 'you can't just go into a Latino community and tell them what to do. Well, you can't just go into any community and tell them what to do. But you really can't go and just tell a Latino what to do. You have to build a relationship first.' The students acting as facilitators and listeners and reporters bore witness to the pain and fear and anger of Eastsiders. Through these reports, city leaders and service providers bore witness. This was agonistic for the tellers, to ground their narratives in their own painful points of view, but it was also agonistic for the hearers to grapple with the narratives as well as the identity disruptions provoked by their hearing. It is also important to point out that we did not just bear witness to the pain and the fear and the anger. We also bore witness to Eastsiders' actions as human agents, to their ingenuity in caring for their communities, in their commitments to their families, in their deeply felt anxiety in seeing that people experiencing homelessness are both fully human and yet also obstacles to their own sense of safety and ability to thrive. Students bore witness to the expressions of fear, of pain, of anger, of righteous indignation, yes, but also heard well-constructed arguments pointing out the logical inconsistencies in policy and budgeting decisions.

Witnessing, as in perceiving or registering, is not the same as bearing witness. To only see, as Sontag (2004) says, is still just watching. We must see and then bear some responsibility for what we have seen. Bearing witness requires the witness to

own a stance in relation to what one has seen. When city leaders took action, this communicated to Eastsiders that they were not just listening but taking steps to fruitfully intervene. Further, bearing witness may join one to a body composed of both participants and other witnesses. Derrida says that bearing witness 'appeals to the act of faith with regard to a speech given under oath and is therefore itself produced in the space of sworn faith… I swear that I have seen, I have heard, I have touched, I have felt, I have been *present*' (Derrida 2000, 188–189). By first listening to the Eastsiders and uncovering the narrative ground that precedes and accompanies dialogue, by helping all parties engage agonistically with one another, and then by leadership taking action that communicated hearing, seeing, and being in the presence of the other, the conflict was moved into a different space.

This is an ongoing issue, not one handily resolved for the convenience of this essay. The pandemic has complicated our ability to engage the various parties in real time, but that, perhaps, sparked more creativity in how best to engage one another. It also sped up what might normally be a longer timeline with regard to taking decisive action. Social distancing prevented in-person gatherings but encouraged thoughtful planning toward a reconciliation summit being held in a month's time which will feature storytelling, testimony, and reflection of all parties, including the mistrusted city and social service leaders. It would be disingenuous to imply that this arc has been smooth. There have been missteps and misunderstandings leading to mistrust, but we continue to engage the agonistic dialogue, foregrounding the narrative ground of each party, and working toward potential engagement in real time. What we are learning is that the 'dialogic task has no concluding timer as we rub shoulders with local customs and bias' (Arnett 2014, 73) and requires ongoing, attentive engagement. Currently, we are preparing for a 'summit' where all stakeholders will be invited to share their own narrative ground in an online forum, and we are recording video 'testimonies' for sharing with summit attendees to start the dialogue.

Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2002), writing about interfaith and interethnic dialogues says that for change in attitudes to occur, three elements must be achieved: 1) alternative cognitive processes via new information and analysis; 2) positive emotional experiences in meeting the other; and 3) working together on concrete tasks or actions that enforce the positive change. His shorthand for this is change in the head, change of the heart, and change through the hands. Note that we do not claim that Abu-Nimer's (2002) intermediary step, the change in the heart, has occurred. While we are cautiously optimistic that the summit will result in positive emotional experiences, change in the heart, we also propose that when engaging in agonistic dialogue, it may be that one has to demonstrate the acknowledgement of the narrative ground, bear witness, and engage in the proof of having heard, the shared action, before one trusts the other enough to engage in a dialogue that involves the heart. It may also be the

case that agonistic dialogue does not lend itself to neat, linear phases.

The shifting landscape of the Eastside – brought on by gentrification, housing shortages, and increasing disparity – gestures to larger economic and ethnic shifts in urban development and local democratic practices. Heightened emotional discourses of NIMBYism are deeply intertwined with crises over economic inequality and political disempowerment. Our essay draws attention to the tendency to overly simplify some voices, especially 'uncivil' voices, at the expense of others. We suggest here that a critical step toward engaging agonistic dialogue is providing space to share one's story, to stand on one's own narrative ground, and that others must bear witness to such agony, to the deep sense of dis-ease felt by the parties who have felt silenced and minimalised. As our experience highlights, the first steps toward engaging agonistic dialogue must create a mechanism for speaking as well as hearing as a prelude to and invitation for synchronous dialogue among conflicted parties. It required trusted facilitators – both through long-time advocates and organisers well known to others in advance, as well as via helpfully naïve students. It required bearing witness and then engaging in concrete deeds, immersing all in what Martin Buber calls the 'mud of everyday life,' the grounding of the dialogue to come. Starting with fraught and fractured relationships, the community is moving toward encounters where participants will be able to 'embrace the painful past and the necessary shared future as a means of dealing with the present' (Lederach 1997, 35). This illustrated the power of engaging representative citizens in a process to change perceptions and stereotypes: a first step toward beginning the dialogue. The wicked problem of homelessness and affordable housing has not been solved. There is no consensus or agreement or negotiated settlement in place between Eastsiders and city leaders and service providers. But there is conversation.

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