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Special Issue

Rethinking Dialogue in the Age of New Challenges and Opportunities

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The Editors appreciate comments and feedback from readers. They also value any help in increasing circulation in order to fulfil the Journal's objective, which is to bring together a body of original scholarship on the theory and practice of dialogue that can be critically appraised and discussed.

Aim and Scope

The Journal of Dialogue Studies is a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed academic journal published once a year. Its aim is to study the theory and practice of dialogue, understood provisionally as: meaningful interaction and exchange between people (often of different social, cultural, political, religious or professional groups) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increased understanding. The Journal is published by the Institute for Dialogue Studies, the academic platform of the Dialogue Society.

Submission and Editorial Correspondence

Manuscripts submitted to the Journal for publication must be original, meet the standards and conventions of scholarly publication, and must not be simultaneously under consideration by another journal. Manuscripts should be presented in the form and style set out in the Journal's Style Guide. For further information and Style Guide please visit www.dialoguestudies.org. To get in touch please email journal@dialoguesociety.org.

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The Journal of Dialogue Studies is a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed academic journal published once a year by the Institute of Dialogue Studies, a subsidiary body of the Dialogue Society, which undertakes the Society's academic work including research, academic workshops and publications.

The Dialogue Society is a registered charity, established in London in 1999, with the aim of advancing social cohesion by connecting communities, empowering people to engage and contributing to the development of ideas on dialogue. It operates nation-wide with regional branches across the UK. Through discussion forums, courses, capacity building publications and outreach it enables people to venture across boundaries of religion, culture and social class. It provides a platform where people can meet to share narratives and perspectives, discover the values they have in common and be at ease with their differences.

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Special Issue Editorial Introduction: Rethinking Dialogue in the Age of New Challenges and Opportunities

We, children of the twenty-first century, are witnessing another great transformation, which is creating gaps in meaning. This recalls the famous quote from Gramsci: 'The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.' Utilizing the gaps in meaning, 'monsters' are haunting politics, society, and dialogue, which we define as 'meaningful' exchanges between members of the wider society. Concepts like multiculturalism, diversity, and even democracy have not only been consumed but also have been loaded with negative connotations within these haunted 'gaps.' 'Populism' is on the rise across the world and presents a serious obstacle for meaningful dialogue. It harbours racism and breeds xenophobia, polarising people, creating factions and hostility. As a form of yearning for the past, making nations 'great again' has become the cry of the masses. Nonetheless, we are also in an age of opportunities for rethinking and expanding dialogue. The emergence/creation of new 'spaces' allows us to generate and exchange meaning to begin to close the gaps, and this has become faster and easier than ever before. New tools for conversation and dialogue have emerged from the explosion of new technologies, creating spaces for discussion and debate. Here, people belonging to different faiths, social, cultural, political, and professional groups can engage in meaningful dialogue and generate conversations.

In this special issue of Journal of Dialogue Studies, addressing this new context, we have 13 papers, clustered under four themes. These are:

1. Citizens and Institutions in A Dialogical Setting
2. Dialogue: New Opportunities and Challenges During the Covid-19 Pandemic
3. Learning in and through Creativity and Critical Engagement
4. Dialogue in the Age of Populism

In Part I, 'Citizens and Institutions in a Dialogical Setting', we have three papers.

In the first paper, Anna Vainio contributes an article titled 'Designated Spaces for Designated Imaginaries: The Cruel Optimism of Citizen Participation in Post-Disaster State-Citizen Dialogues.' Vainio, using Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia,' discusses the emergence of 'heterotopian' spaces during the social and environmental

crisis and the political participation of citizens in such 'heterotopian' post-crisis contexts. Within this discussion, drawing on ethnographic research she carried out in 2015 and 2016 among individuals who took part in spaces of state-citizen dialogue after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, she contributes to critical debates on participatory governance by examining the non-critical acceptance of citizen participation as a universal social 'good'.

In the second paper titled 'Miscommunicating Across Borders: Ethnographic Reflections on EU Techniques of "Better Communication" From Brussels,' Seamus Montgomery critically analyses discourses surrounding 'dialogue' and 'better communication' inside the European Commission in Brussels, drawn from extensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out within its office spaces. Through participant-observation and in-person, semi-structured interviewing with civil servants, he explored the ways in which they seek to fill the dialogical spaces currently occupied by populist voices in order to reaffirm the legitimacy underpinning the existence of the EU and of a supranational, imagined community of Europeans who identify with and belong to it. His findings suggest that the achievement of 'better communication' with citizens by the European Commission is made all the more intractable by its struggle to define an institutional European identity that is inclusive, coherent, persuasive, and distinct.

Suzanne Goodney Lea and Eirliani Abdul Rahman contribute to the discussion with a paper titled 'Fourth-Track Diplomacy: Its Time Has Come.' In the paper they discuss the challenges and opportunities the emerging Covid-19-related context poses for a reimagination of diplomacy and democracy. They critically engage with the 'my country first' understanding in diplomacy and highlight 'the need for collaboration rather than for competition.' Addressing this need, they offer 'four-track diplomacy,' which 'could *engage citizens in diplomacy*.' Much of the article deals with possible ways/techniques of facilitating the engagement of citizens in diplomacy.

In Part II, under the theme of '**Dialogue: New Opportunities and Challenges During the Covid-19 Pandemic**' we have three papers.

Andrew Smith, in his 'Dialogue During Lockdown: Online Dialogue and its Lessons Amidst Rising Populism', reflects upon his personal experiences during the lockdown imposed by the UK government in an attempt to halt the spread of Coronavirus. Andrew discusses the measures that came into force overnight causing people to adapt rapidly to a new and unprecedented situation. He also analyses the response of faith groups to the lockdown and explains how they set up broadcasting services online and systems of support for members of their community.

Then, Bassam Kassoumeh, with 'Online Peace-Building Dialogue: Opportunities and Challenges Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Emergence', deals with the challenges and

opportunities during the Covid 19 epidemic in terms of conducting dialogue and peace talks – both formal and informal – as well as dialogue on online platforms. Bassam discusses the effects of restrictions put into place to ensure a safe space on these dialogue initiatives and analyses the shift towards more online options becoming more prevalent.

Rafael de Araujo Arosa Monteiro contributes to the special issue with a paper titled 'Virtual Dialogues: A Method to Deal with Polarisation in a Time of Social Isolation Caused by Covid-19.' This article is an attempt to answer the following question; 'How can a method of dialogue stimulate the learning of dialogic principles and practices in a virtual environment and contribute to the confrontation of social polarization?' Drawing on the ideas of David Bohm, William Isaacs, and Paulo Freire, he puts eight virtual meetings under the microscope and seeks an answer to the question above.

In Part III, '**Learning in and through Creativity and Critical Engagement**' we have four papers.

Aireen Grace Andal, drawing on insights from relevant literature and focuses on children's dialogue in diverse classroom settings, argues the potential of using a phenomenological approach and lived experience to establish a bridge between Philosophy for Children, critical reflection, and understanding differences in the classroom. She also discusses the implications of academic discussions focusing on the classroom setting for facilitating dialogue in linguistically diverse classrooms, intercultural and interethnic classrooms, and digital classrooms.

Sneha Roy, drawing on Bohm's ideas about appreciating 'incoherence' and embracing multiplicity in narratives during dialogic exchanges, examines the tension between 'self' and 'other' in Myanmar. She first provides a background of tension between the Buddhists and the Muslim-Other and then embarks upon a discussion of gender and 'determining the other within one's own faith tradition and emphasising the needs and possibilities of engaging with them.' She highlights that 'female religious leaders are often the innate other in many religious traditions, and their stories, experiences, and recommendations are disproportionately discounted, and that necessitates redressing.' She argues that the lack of the voice of Buddhist nuns in construction of narratives in relation to the significant-Other, in this case Muslims, is the biggest challenge before meaningful dialogic involvement.

In her paper, Jenn Lindsay discusses creative dialogue, a distinct form of interfaith engagement, which revolves around artistic collaboration and the engagement of interpersonal, artistic, and literary methods for increasing civic interaction, civic discourse, and awareness of diversity. Her analysis of creative dialogue is grounded in data that is derived from an ethnographic study of Confronti, an interfaith magazine

and program office located in Rome, Italy.

Her study of creative dialogue that extends the boundaries of the standard construct of 'interfaith dialogue' is grounded in a postsecular analysis of religious diversity and pluralism that shows that interfaith dialogue is fluid, relational, embodied, creative, and socially embedded.

In his piece titled 'Notes from a Black and White Island, Personal Reflections on Dialogue and Black Lives Matter', Reverend David Wiseman reflects on his identity as a White person, and discusses racism, the Black Lives Matter protests and the efforts to create a safe place in relation to Interfaith dialogue and the issue of racism during the Covid-19 epidemic. 'As we listen to the experience of victims of racism, we must hear both the pain and anger of past memory and present reality,' he says and concludes that 'we still have a long way to go for a grace-filled world of reconciliation.'

In Part IV, '**Dialogue in the Age of Populism**', we have three papers:

Yahya Barry examines the rise of right-wing populism and the Muslim minority's perception of it. Yahya, in this article, reflects upon his small-scale study of second-generation and convert Muslim responses to right-wing populism in Edinburgh, Copenhagen, and Malmo. Through narrative analysis, he focuses on the theme of 'role-model natives', unravelling how intergroup contact and relationships influence Muslim perceptions of right-wing populism.

Deborah Dunn and Rachel Rains Winslow's article is titled 'Learning to Listen Agonistically: Dialogue Encounters on the Eastside.' In this case study they explore a multi-stakeholder process of listening as a first step toward dialogue among community members in the midst of the controversial siting of a homeless shelter. The authors discuss creating a safe space to speak, bearing witness, and confirmation that one has been heard through concrete action toward social justice using agonistic dialogue during the Covid-19 epidemic.

Amedeo Varriale rounds off Part IV with a paper putting under the lens the populism of the Italian Five Star Movement and the League Party in Italy. This piece untangles the two distinct versions of heartland that exist within the *forma mentis* of the two Italian populist parties, and compares and contrasts them, contributing to the literature that has presented little evidence until now on how Taggart's relevant concept can be identified in populist discourse, monologue, and ideology. Varriale concludes with advice on how to deal with the new populists worldwide in a way that involves dialogue that is both constructive and inclusive.

Designated Spaces for Designated Imaginaries: The Cruel Optimism of Citizen Participation in Post-disaster State-citizen Dialogues

Anna Vainio

Abstract: Environmental disturbances, pandemics, or social crises often lead to the emergence of 'heterotopian' spaces (Foucault 1998; Boano 2011), that give rise to emergent debates on alternative imaginations of the future, even utopianism (Solnit 2010). At the same time, modern governance increasingly emphasises the active participation of citizens in processes where these alternative imaginations are turned into actionable plans (Bherer et al. 2016). In particular, the intensity of development needs in post-crisis contexts (Olshansky et al. 2012) can see the prolific spread of participatory spaces designated to facilitate dialogue between authorities and citizens. From creative workshops to citizen committees however, the results and experiences of citizen participation in these 'designated spaces' have remained consistently inconsistent (Davidson et al. 2007; Curato 2018; Cleaver 2001). Drawing on ethnographic research carried out in 2015 and 2016 among individuals who took part in spaces of state-citizen dialogue after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, this paper contributes to critical debates on participatory governance by examining the non-critical acceptance of citizen participation as a universal social 'good'. The paper focuses on the paradoxically high degrees of optimism and voicelessness reported by disaster victims in Tōhoku, arguing that this paradox reflects the wider patterning of dialogue and governance as a form of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011), where the optimism represents just another form of voicelessness. The paper concludes that to overcome the 'cruelty', more focus needs to be paid on improving the process through which the content of dialogues is determined and shaped together with the citizens in the participatory spaces, rather than used as venues for promising a better future.

Keywords: Participation, Hope, Imaginary, Cruel optimism, Post-disaster decovery, Japan

Anna Vainio is an Anthropologist working in the context of East Asian, with a specific focus on contemporary Japanese society. She gained her doctorate degree from the University of Sheffield in 2020, with her thesis exploring the post-disaster recovery in north-east Japan, and the disconnect in the framing and narration of post-disaster plans for the future between the authorities and victim communities. The work draws attention to the importance of affective elements in communal sense-making and articulation of experiences and life plans in socially disruptive contexts, contrasting their stories with the formal recovery policies and institutional frameworks where these elements are largely missing. Her overall research interests are related to the exploration of lived experiences in the context of sociological ruptures, bordering trauma and memory studies, while maintaining a commitment to ethnographic methods.

Introduction

Since the onset of the 'participatory turn' in the 1960s, actively engaging citizens in decision making has become a key principle of 'good governance' (Bherer et al. 2016). While perhaps most actively adopt d by civil society organisations and NGOs in the fields of community and international development, participatory practices are equally prevalent at the level of local government, where the participatory practices were seen as a way of deepening the relationship and cooperation between the citizens and authorities at the level of everyday communal life (Ganuza et al. 2016; Polletta 2016; Leal 2007). Despite the popularity of participatory practices, their outcomes across multiple fields have remained consistently inconsistent (Cleaver 2001; Davidson et al. 2007; Moini 2011), with there being little consistent evidence of their impact on social change and democratisation of decision-making processes (Cleaver 2001; Gaventa 2004). In light of these critiques, we should resist the non-critical acceptance of citizen participation as a universal social 'good'. However, while there are undoubtedly many problems with participatory governance, its relevance as a point of inquiry persists, as the importance of citizens' inclusion in decision making as a core principle of democracy cannot be denied.

In this paper, I focus on participatory governance processes developed for the post-disaster recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disaster of 2011, discussing the operation of the spaces for state-citizen dialogue that proliferated as facilitators to a 'community-focused' recovery (Reconstruction Design Council 2011). The paper draws from a thirteen-month ethnographic fieldwork carried out in four disaster-affected towns in the Tōhoku region in 2015 and 2016, where I carried out 45 semi-structured interviews with local residents on their views and experiences of the recovery efforts. The interviews were carried out in the context of people's daily lives in the localities in order to be able to 'place' what people were saying into the concrete context of their surrounding reality. I also developed long-term continuous relationships with a number of residents in the communities that enabled me to gain a better sense of the stability and strength of people's views and arguments. The interview process was highly qualitative and flexible, focusing primarily on people's experiences of the disaster, their engagement with the recovery process, and dreams for the future, with all interviews carried out in a conversational manner.

Based on this material, I found that the majority of state-citizen dialogues were carried out in institutionalised spaces that took many forms, ranging from town-hall meetings, creative workshops and working groups and committees that required physical participation, to asynchronous methods such as surveys and consultations. 'Space' in this paper therefore encompasses both physical and non-physical sites of dialogue, referring rather to the extended institutionalised opportunities for dialogue

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that emerge between citizens and authorities, with the paper exploring them in the context of post-disaster recovery where such opportunities often proliferate. Space is a key element in participatory practices, linked overwhelmingly to the notions of agency, purpose, and agenda of participation as a 'transformational act' to reform the foundation of the relationships within the space (Cleaver 2007). However, space is often overlooked as determining the *shape* and *meaning* of information that forms the foundations upon which mutual dialogues in these spaces are built, and outcomes and decisions that emerge from them. While focusing on the role 'space' played in the establishment of dialogue between the key partners in participatory governance, the authorities and the disaster-affected citizens in Tōhoku, this paper argues that 'space' also often becomes the determinant of the *content* of that dialogue.

The paper shows that the majority of institutionalised participatory opportunities in Tōhoku were experienced as silencing by the citizens, devoid of mutual deliberation of content, with the citizens' voices being heard and recorded while not forming or impacting the foundation upon which the vision for the future was built. In this way, I argue that participatory spaces have become rendered what I call 'designated spaces' for the advancement of 'designated imaginaries' of the authorities. While these fixed imaginaries did provide hopeful momentum and an emotional resource for local populations, the paper concludes that because citizens could not impact the shape and content of the debates in the participatory spaces, this optimism turned 'cruel' (Berlant 2011), rendering hope and optimism just another form of voicelessness.

Designation of Spaces for Dialogue in Post-Disaster Heterotopia

The focus on post-disaster contexts to explore the spaces of state-citizen dialogues may seem specific for the reader, but as more sociological ruptures such as environmental hazards and pandemics are impacting populations across the world, our intimate experiences of 'the post-disaster' are increasing. Despite being anomalous and atypical sociological settings, disasters can 'lift veils' (Curato and Ong 2015) by revealing points of vulnerability in social systems. Most importantly, they expose the uneven distribution of everyday risks that often further marginalise those with the least say in decision-making processes in the first place (Pelling et al. 2004). On the other hand, post-disaster contexts open opportunities for sociological imagining, even utopianism (Solnit 2010), where through imagination the 'collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge' (Appadurai 2000, 6). Through these functions of revealing, diffusion, and challenging, the post-disaster contexts can thus offer apt environments for exploring existing norms and visions as well as relationships between different actors involved in human and social development.

Disasters create what Foucault (1998) calls a 'heterotopia', where the normal

relations, representations and designations of the space have been neutralised, and where traditional time has broken down (p. 178). Through their existence as 'spaces apart', heterotopias are contesting the order and form of the external, accepted and familiar 'normalcy' from which the disaster has emerged (Boano 2011), while simultaneously contesting the return to that 'normalcy' by enabling the imagination of a different future and alternative political visions. Disaster defies comprehension, with 'unimaginable' or 'unprecedented' being the words most commonly used by the residents to describe the events that took place along the North-Eastern Japanese coast on March 11, 2011. In a cataclysmic disaster like this, familiar life suddenly loses its rational order (Weick 1993), breaking the familiar shape of the space and chronology of time, disrupting the established patterns of sense-making. A heterotopia is therefore always a deviation from the surrounding familiar and accepted 'normalcy', containing a possibility for the past to be renegotiated and re-understood through the space and an opportunity to re-envise the future. (Collins and Opie 2010; Boano 2011). As 'spaces apart' they are, however, more a reflection of the space that surrounds them (the familiar space) than of themselves.

On the side of practice too, post-disaster development contexts are often described as 'blank slates' or 'windows of opportunity' to 'build back better' (Becker and Reusser 2016; Mochizuki & Chang 2017; Edginton 2017), a description that in itself refers to a state where the promotion of renewal and new possibilities are unencumbered by the physical and mental boundaries of the past society. The various participatory spaces, ranging from town-hall meetings, creative workshops and committees to surveys and asynchronous methods of consultation and opinion gathering, are quickly mobilised to open up and facilitate dialogues and cooperation in post-disaster settings between authorities and citizens (Dimmer 2016). Participatory spaces are often promoted as opportunities to discuss and develop post-disaster visions and ideals emerging from the 'blank slate' of the destruction into mutually agreeable and tangible plans for a 'better' future. These spaces encapsulate the spirit of sociological imagining, that is best seen as taking place through participatory governance, where the micro-level experiences on the ground can influence the macro-level policy making (Goulding et al. 2017). In principle, these spaces contain the impression of an exciting institutional environment, 'designated' for the deliberation of the alternatives and untested paths to the future, encouraged through local engagement and citizen-centred practices.

There is of course a great deal of evidence to support the positive impact citizen participation has on policy making, such as improving relations between public authorities and civil society actors (Fernández-Martinez et al. 2020), upscaling civic skills and competencies (Geissel 2009), and raising public accountability and civic responsibility (Michels and De Graaf 2010). Despite participatory practices and emphases of community engagement gaining popularity in development

processes and the positive impact it is having on some governance processes, general dissatisfaction toward post-disaster recovery outcomes has nonetheless persisted (Davidson et al. 2007; Curato 2018). The simultaneous proliferation of participatory spaces and mounting popular dissatisfaction therefore presents a paradox. One of the key explanations for this paradox resides in the question about sociological imagination, with some authors arguing that despite participatory spaces promoting themselves as spaces for deliberation and mutual dialogues on alternative possibilities, these processes are not translated into practice (e.g. Smit 2004; Fischer 2006; Hamdi 2014). However, rather than accepting that imagination is entirely evacuated from participatory spaces, I argue that it is more a matter of *what* citizens are invited to imagine in these spaces.

Imagination is a social fact and a process through which ordinary people are engaged in the organisation of collective social life (Appadurai 2000; Crapanzano 2004; Abram 2017), and as such cannot be easily negated. Imagination develops into an 'imaginary' when it attaches itself to values, norms, institutions, and laws that provide shape for imaginations within the social reality that is felt and experienced (Strauss 2006). However, imagining, and imaginaries, are also mechanisms through which 'modern citizens are disciplined and controlled – by states, markets, and other powerful interests' (Appadurai 2000, 6). Through the allocation of resources, establishment of administrative policies and legislative structures, for instance, authorities can direct the likelihood with which certain visions become more realisable than others (Oguma 2013; Barrios 2017), and in this way reduce the spectre of imaginative possibilities and fix development onto a specific trajectory. Despite 'designated spaces' fostering sociological imagining, these spaces are simultaneously limiting the scale and boundaries of what is possible to imagine. Such limitations are leading to the state-citizen dialogues taking place only within the predetermined remit of 'designated imaginaries' that the state deems desirable and realisable.

This narrowing down of imaginative possibilities is problematic, as the designated spaces do often genuinely promote inclusion, community engagement, and unhindered expression of ideas at the local level (White 1996; Poletta 2006), but also function as settings where the new ideas citizens are invited to express are attuned and altered to fit the existing institutional frameworks and agendas (Grindle 2012).

In this way, the spaces for dialogue themselves are moulding the shape and meaning of the information and ideas that are expressed in the spaces, rather than merely facilitating the process of expression and dialogue, with the 'designated space' becoming an integral part of the establishment and enforcement of the 'designated imaginary' itself. Institutional spaces that are designed to enforce existing agendas are of course not transformational, while this is often something that citizens expect as the outcome of their participation in decision making (Fernández-Martinez et al. 2020).

Expressing transformational ideas in spaces that themselves are not transformational results in the attunement or silencing of new ideas and imaginations, leading to a sense of voicelessness within the overall process of development.

The sustained ascendancy of human societies can be attributed to the ability humans have to adapt to and after traumatic events (Van Der Kolk & McFarlane 1996), often leading to post-disaster growth after adversities (Linley & Joseph 2005; Janoff-Bullman 2004), with optimism and hopefulness playing a key role in the recovery and psychological coping of Tōhoku, the site of the disaster discussed in this paper, for instance. In the absence of real opportunities to express their voices, local residents were often left with few options other than to hope that the 'designated imaginaries' would eventually deliver the promises that they contained. Paradoxically, therefore, I argue that it is the 'designated imaginary' that emerged as the source of optimism rather than endogenous forms of sociological imagining, thus rendering the hopefulness in communities a form of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011).

Sociological imagining and the proliferation of optimism

In Japan, the cataclysmic events of 2011 reverberated from the disaster-hit regions, with immediate consequences on the national economy and social and political debates. The post-disaster reality quickly gave rise to emergent discourses about the directions of travel that should now be taken. New debates about the future opened up across multiple sites in society. While the national leadership was calling for the re-discovering of national strengths, peaceful coexistence, and harmony for the twenty-first century, reminiscent of the golden years of Japan's economic success, the grassroots movements, local activists, and increasingly the disaster victims themselves, were calling for actions to challenge the conventional order and contesting the visions of the national neo-conservative regime (Morris-Suzuki 2017; Shaw 2017; Brown and Mackie 2015). While seemingly in contrast with one another, the imagined outcomes of the recovery process were nonetheless remarkably similar across the different visions that were debated. The collective sentiment both nationally and locally was for the recovery to function as a vehicle to create a more physically and socio-economically resilient communities and propel Japan onto a path of growth (Hirano 2013; Ubaura 2018; Murakami et. al. 2014), thus reflecting the well-established national imaginary of economic growth, strength and collective well-being that has dominated Japan's modern national history (Ivy 1995). I argue that it is the familiarity and attachment to this imaginary that formed the main source of optimism in post-disaster Japan.

The disaster primarily impacted a region of Japan that for decades had suffered from socio-economic and demographic decline, with the impact of the disaster rapidly exacerbating these trends (NIPSSR 2013) and in a concrete way revealed the catastrophic consequences of Japan's post-war social and economic policies and the

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regional vulnerabilities they had created (Hopson 2012; Cho 2014). The Fukushima nuclear accident, for instance, was a direct result of deliberate economic policies that aimed to peripheralise the undesirable trade-offs of rapid economic growth into the rural regions (Aldrich 2008), with Tōhoku in particular being sacrificed for the development of technologically advanced and highly urbanised metropolitan Japan (Hopson 2012). Locally, the sense of urgency to turn the tide of decline was acutely felt, and the key priorities of improving resilience were equally highlighted in the local discourses and imaginaries that were emerging in the affected communities, among the citizens living in intimate contact with the altered spaces.

The individual stories of personal changes and transformation I heard in Tōhoku reflected not only the typical processes of post-traumatic growth (Linley and Joseph 2005; Janoff-Bullman 2004), but the sense of 'awakening' and recognition of new possibilities that was prolific in post-disaster Japan (Shaw 2017; Samuels 2013; Geilhorn and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2017). A number of citizens reported the disaster as a stimulus for personal changes such as moving back to the disaster-affected town from metropolitan Japan, changing forms of employment, or becoming more involved in communal affairs through volunteering, for instance. While motivated by a diversity of factors, residents noted that through these localised and personal actions they were also advancing the overall goals of the recovery in their own small ways. Ms. Mori, a young woman who had recently moved to the Town of Minamisanriku, for instance, dreamed of starting a family soon. While a personal goal by its very nature, Ms. Mori nonetheless explained that '*raising kids in the countryside is easier, and that way I can also support the development of this town.*' Equally, Mr. Yoshida, who was living in Sendai while waiting for the time he could return to his native Onagawa, emphasised '*even though I live here* [in Sendai]*, I maintain my residence in Onagawa because I want to pay my taxes there. It's my small way to help the recovery effort.*' Whether it was having children or starting a business and creating jobs, in the stories of citizens these personal actions became integrated into the broader communal aspirations of economic prosperity, population growth, and general socio-economic resilience.

The broad vision of resilience was therefore a widely compelling one, drawing on the long-term anxieties over rural decline and stagnation of the national economy, while simultaneously promising their reinvigoration. In the months after the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, the Japanese government commissioned a report called 'Hope Beyond The Disaster' that was authored by a handpicked group of cross-disciplinary academic and political experts to outline the vision and key principles for Tōhoku's recovery (Reconstruction Design Council 2011). The report holds a seminal place in the projection of Tōhoku's future, forming the foundations for the formal principles, visions, and language for the recovery process, both nationally and locally (Ubaura 2018; Murakami et al. 2014). Through

the report, the government established a vision for the recovery, with specific goals of aggressively promoting development of new industries and employment opportunities in order to support a stable population base and rebuild safer habitats that not only protect people from future environmental hazards but also enable the flourishing of the region's cultural and social assets (Reconstruction Design Council 2011). Despite the desires for change and broad calls and commitments to ideas like sustainability and de-growth that emerged as responses to break the cycle of structural vulnerabilities and inequalities (Dimmer 2016), the collective goals reflected both nationally and in local narratives were remarkably conventional and static.

The endogenous actions and desires among the citizens strongly mirrored the desires and goals included into that promise. Mr. Takeda, a native of Onagawa with whom I formed a long-term collaborative relationship during my time in Tōhoku, for instance, explained to me in an excited tone how the disaster could be a '*real chance*' for his community to recover and rebuild in a more resilient and prosperous manner. When I asked Mr. Takeda what kind of a town he wanted Onagawa to be in five years' time, he painted a picture of a vibrant growing community bustling with tourists and visitors, new businesses, and job opportunities that would attract more people to move in, and where everyone would feel safe and comfortable. This optimism was detectable in the energy and vibrancy of the towns I visited more broadly, with local residents starting businesses, reinvigorating local festivals and changing their personal life courses as a result of the disaster experience, motivated by the collective desire to create a better and more resilient community.

However, against the socio-economic realities of ageing, overall depopulation, and economic stagnation, the imaginary that was promoted by the state and drawn on by the local citizenry was proclaiming promises of resilience and prosperity that could not realistically be delivered. Onagawa for instance had lost 40% of its population in the tsunami, either directly in the disaster or to the outmigration that ensued (Takano 2016). With Japan's economy lying stagnant for decades and the overall population now in a state of absolute decline and rapid ageing (Statistical Yearbook of Japan 2019, Ishikawa 2017), the chances of the Onagawa, or any of these peripheral rural towns recovering some, or even any, of their lost populations seems extremely slim. This paradox was not lost on the local populations, with points of anxiety and uncertainty increasingly rising to the surface of the narratives the more time I spent in these communities and with these individuals. '*How long can we manage our lives high up on the mountainside when our bodies grow old?*', Mr. Takeda wondered, worrying over the practicality of daily life for him and his ageing neighbours in the new residential areas that were now mandated to be relocated on higher ground, separated from the shops and services that were now pooled together below in the bay area to better facilitate the fostering of tourism, all in the name of physical and socio-economic resilience.

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The optimism in Tōhoku, therefore, did not amount to blind naivety, as the local populations were painfully aware of the realities within which their communities were trying to reinvent themselves. However, it was the moments in which the locals articulated the concrete presentations of their anxieties when the familiar social imaginary began to break down, revealing the points of contestation from which dissatisfaction toward the recovery revealed itself. Much of the dissatisfaction that people articulated, culminated in the feeling that the authorities lacked understanding of the localised communal conditions in which the recovery was taking place, with local citizens noting on the government or city officials only rarely 'descending' into the communities. These details, I argue, pointed toward a break-down in dialogue and communication between the authorities and citizens on delivering a recovery that would 'respect the needs of local residents [and to] duly reflects their various opinions', as outlined by the government as a key principle at the beginning of the recovery process (Reconstruction Design Council 2011, 18). These problems of dialogue were curious as post-disaster Tōhoku had witnessed a mushrooming of participatory spaces and processes, with a strong emphasis on the recovery being carried out in close engagement with the victim communities, thus following the international 'best practice' on community-based development (Bherer et al. 2016).

Designation of imaginaries through the designated spaces

It has been argued that participatory processes as a method of 'good governance' merely seek consent and commentary from citizens, rather than provide them with the tools and resources to control their own circumstances (Bherer et al. 2016). This typical orientation and emphasis toward consensus was also strongly present in the participatory spaces for state-citizen dialogues in post-disaster Tōhoku, often marginalising local voices in the process (Cho 2014; Dimmer 2016), and thus leading to feelings of voicelessness and dissatisfaction. I argue that while the imaginary of more resilient and prosperous communities did resonate with local residents, it was the national goals and objectives for the recovery that were emphasised in this imaginary over the priorities of the region and the local towns themselves.

The government placed a specific emphasis on the 'community-focused' nature of the recovery process, with the aforementioned 'Hope Beyond The Disaster' report concretising this objective by promoting the establishment of 'forums where residents will be able to discuss the future of their own communities' (Reconstruction Design Council 2011, 21). This approach is not unique to the Japanese context, closely echoing the prevailing emphasis on localism and community-based approaches within international disaster recovery and risk mitigation communities (e.g. the Hyogo Framework for Action). The practical establishment of these 'forums' in the Japanese context was left to the discretion of the municipalities, thus ensuring proximity of

the recovery process with the recovering citizens, but their primary purpose was nonetheless to facilitate dialogue between the authorities and citizens.

Overwhelmingly these 'forums' took the shape of participatory planning meetings, citizen committees and workshops, that in many municipalities were organised within months of the disaster, often in cooperation with existing civil society organisations (Tsuji et al. 2007; Cho 2014; Dimmer 2016). In my fieldwork sites, local residents reported the use of surveys, action groups, and committees to establish dialogues for more diverse opinion gathering, alongside the more typical 'designation' of physical spaces for public meetings. These various methods developed a diversity of institutional spaces where dialogues between citizens and authorities were taking place, resulting in detailed and concrete development plans for local disaster recovery as well as other measures through which the recovery would reflect the views of the affected communities.

While municipalities in Japan hold the legal responsibility to carry out emergency response disaster recovery, due to the scale of the disaster the capacities of the local municipalities were reduced, thus leading to additional assistance being required from the central government (Oguma 2013). Equally, the disaster had a huge impact on the national economy, political discourse, and regional dynamics, despite the immediate impact being limited to a relatively contained area. The simultaneous emphasis on the regional and national impact was noticeable in the central government's approach to the disaster response. The 'Hope Beyond The Disaster' report, for instance, states that 'Japan's economy cannot be restored unless the disaster areas are rebuilt. The disaster areas cannot be truly rebuilt unless Japan's economy is restored [...] we shall simultaneously pursue reconstruction of the afflicted areas and revitalisation of the nation' (p. 2), thus firmly intertwining the fate of the region and Japan together.

Through this interconnectedness the central state was able to justify its own strong role in the recovery that effectively undercut its simultaneous emphasis on citizen engagement and the 'community-focused' principle of the recovery. The government's position is illustrated by its strong role in the structural organisation of the recovery, which permanently altered the established dynamic between the municipalities and the central government by turning the hierarchy of local control over disaster recovery on its head (Murakami et al. 2014; Dimmer 2016; Oguma 2013). By dictating the availability of resources and the legal and administrative structures the state was already effectively guiding the direction of development and shaping the meaning of goals and objectives to its desired direction without citizen input (Satoh 2012). Despite being promoted as forums where citizens can discuss the future of their communities, the imaginative framework imposed upon these spaces of dialogue by the fiscal and legislative control measures was often so narrow that it left very little room for genuine deliberation on the meanings embedded into the imaginary of a

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more resilient future, and how they reflected the meanings emerging from the context of the recovery and citizens' lived experience.

The solutions to improve safety against natural hazards provide an illustrative example of the dissonance between the different meanings embedded into this objective by the authorities and by the affected populations. The government offered the disaster-affected coastal towns only two centrally sanctioned and fiscally backed options to increase their physical resilience: either move communities to higher ground away from coastal regions, or erect tsunami walls to protect coastal habitats (Murakami et al. 2014). Both of the options were, however, seen as problematic by the local populations, because they broke the physical intimacy and visual connection with the sea. Despite having experienced the immense power and danger of the sea, it was also central to the communities' way of life and something that the locals wanted to recover. '*The sea got angry with us, but it has always given us more than it takes*', said Mr. Takeda, continuing to explain how a degree of risk is always present when living with forces of nature, but that these communities would not exist without the sea. Likewise, Mr. Ono, a local fisherman in Ishinomaki, worried about the dangers of the government-imposed tsunami walls that were breaking the residents' visual connection with the sea in many places. '*Not seeing the sea is dangerous*', he stated, alluding to the experience that people in these coastal towns have gained from living in close proximity with the sea and have the ability to recognise oncoming dangers (e.g. storms and tsunamis) just by looking at the sea. On the side of socio-economic resilience too, due to the disruption the walls are anticipated to cause on the coastal ecosystems they will likely impact the abundance of catches (Dionisio and Pawson 2016; Littlejohn 2018), while local entrepreneurs and residents worried about the walls destroying the natural beauty of the Pacific shoreline as a resource for their budding tourism industry (Littlejohn 2018).

For the locals, it was the intimate and unrestricted connection with the sea that provided the foundation for resilient lifestyles and livelihoods, where the physical risks of tsunamis and storms were offset by the resilience gained from the knowledge and understanding of how to live with the risks, and the abundance, of the sea. Even though local populations reported strong support for improved physical safety, given their traumatic experiences with the tsunami in 2011, neither of the two options that the state made available to their communities seemed to facilitate the realisation of local impressions and meanings of resilience. By imposing fixed solutions to the problem, the government was effectively erasing the possibilities to negotiate alternative meanings of resilience that emerged from the local context, thus eliminating the possibilities to imagine alternative solutions that would match the local conceptualisations of safety and resilience beyond community relocations and tsunami walls. The purpose of the 'designated spaces' for dialogue was therefore to

offer a 'designated imaginary', complete with ready-made and financed solutions, not to stimulate conversation on what the problems were that needed solving in the first place.

This function of designated spaces as merely seeking approval from the citizens was reflected in the local commentary with regards to the people's experiences of participating in them in Tōhoku. When I asked local residents about their experiences and desires to take part in the dialogues that were regularly organised in their towns, I was regularly met with either neutral or negative expressions, noting the lack of interest or the overall pointlessness of participation. Mr. Ishikawa, a local resident of Minamisanriku that had experienced wide-scale damage from the tsunami, was one of the few people I met in Tōhoku who was still a regular participant in the participatory spaces. He reported his own observation about the dwindling numbers of participants and how hardly anyone attended anymore. He explained that '*many feel there's no point in going, everything has already been decided. You can only comment on the existing plans, not propose anything new*', indicating the lack of opportunities for sociological imagination within participatory spaces.

Over the years it seems that local populations had become increasingly frustrated with the authoritarian space of the recovery, with the designated spaces in the municipal localities often viewed with bitterness and indifference. Mr. Ishida, a local resident of Onagawa, exclaimed that '*there are too many meetings, they* [the authorities] *should just get on with it* [the recovery],' He elaborated on his comment by explaining that the authorities in his town had asked for their views and invited citizens to participate in the deliberations, but noted that '*sure, we said our opinions, but whether they were reflected upon or not* [by the authorities], *I do not know* [...] *they say they hear our opinions for building a new town, but maybe it's just what they say*.' Mr. Ishida's comments reflected the overall atmosphere where local residents had become increasingly disillusioned with the designated spaces for dialogue, the very forums where residents were supposed to 'discuss the future of their own communities' according to the government. In this way the act of participating in dialogues itself becomes meaningless (Picton 2018), as the sense of futility local residents in Tōhoku felt toward participation stemmed not from the act of taking part itself, but rather their inabilities and restricted opportunities to control the meanings and directions set to reach the goals of the recovery.

While the main points of friction resided between the central government and the municipal actors as legislative and fiscal mandate, these frictions became increasingly polarised in the relationship between citizens and authorities in general, manifesting in a sense of voicelessness and powerlessness at the local level. The built-in inflexibilities within funding, legislation, and administration of the recovery were further replicated and strengthened down the line in the relationship between the municipal authorities

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and the local citizens, whose endogenous ideas and visions regarding reconstruction of the tangible local reality the municipality was unable to fully support. No matter how innovative, creative, or empowering the participatory work would be within the designated spaces for dialogue in close proximity to the communities themselves, the municipal decision making and resource allocation was nonetheless shackled and severely restricted by the institutional framework of the recovery that was externally dictated (Oguma 2013; Dimmer 2016). When the tsunami walls were being erected despite vocal opposition, local residents directed their anger and bitterness toward the municipal actors, who were nonetheless often equally powerless to offer alternatives.

By holding the legal and fiscal power to control resources, the authorities were narrowing the scope of debates within the participatory spaces. However, they were simultaneously promising to deliver a fixed imaginary of a more resilient future, with the designated participatory spaces becoming an integral part of the designation of that imaginary. Arguably, the emotional response of optimism in Tōhoku seemed to be propelled precisely by the firm and strong fixing of that future by the authorities, drawing on the innate desires for future prosperity that the resilience narrative reflected, with this imaginary being enforced and administered to the citizenry through the participatory spaces. While providing a source of optimism, the spaces for participation were limiting, merely offering people a chance to engage with the designated imaginary, but not to reorient or redesign it.

Despite appearing as fixed and unmovable, serving the agenda of the state, and upholding the status quo, the designated spaces for designated imaginaries nevertheless played a central role in delivering a 'promise' of a better future that resonated with citizens' own innate desires for resilience, growth, and prosperity and provided them with points of attachment. The acceptance of participatory spaces as simultaneously fostering optimism and voicelessness offers an opportunity to explore participatory spaces and processes beyond being simply transformative *or* enforcing the status quo. In post-disaster Tōhoku, people's optimism did not inherently emerge from their abilities to participate in the dialogues, but rather from the hope that the promised 'designated imaginary' would eventually deliver a desired future. In a way, the fixed and designated imaginaries exhibited a degree of 'care' from the authorities, thus critically showing that top-down directed visions do have some societal value.

While the future of Japan as resilient and prosperously growing nation is an ever elusive one, especially in the context of Tōhoku's exacerbated socio-economic and demographic decline, the promise of a better future pushed forward through the 'designated spaces' for 'designated imaginaries' was therefore a comforting one, providing hopeful momentum to keep moving and rebuild lives that had been unimaginably changed in an instant. This optimism was nonetheless 'cruel' in nature, as the designated imaginaries relied on familiar and conventional solutions

to problems that could not be responded to with familiar methods. Despite general agreement on the overall abstract goals of increased resilience and prosperity, local dissatisfaction and voicelessness resulted from the restricted opportunities citizens had to outline the nature and shape of their needs and problems as the foundation of their dialogues with the state.

The cruel optimism of 'designated spaces'

The emphasis on participation, citizen engagement and empowerment reflected by Tōhoku's 'community-focused' disaster recovery and reflected in the dynamics of the 'designated spaces' for state-citizen dialogue arguably mirror the wider patterning of the failures of contemporary governance practices, increased frustrations toward participatory processes (Fernández-Martinez et al. 2020), and mounting dissatisfaction (Davidson et al. 2007; Curato 2018) that can be seen as reflecting the distancing of citizens' lived experience from the outcomes of political processes. Yet, modern governance continues to emphasise the virtues of active citizen participation in processes through which alternative imaginations are supposedly turned into actionable plans (Bherer et al. 2016). In particular, the intensity of development needs in post-crisis contexts (Olshansky et al. 2012) can see the prolific spread of participatory spaces designated to facilitate dialogue between authorities and citizens, as was the case in Tōhoku. Despite declining numbers of participants and mounting dissatisfaction, authorities nevertheless continued to promote and push forward the participatory agenda.

While sociological imagination was prolific in post-disaster Japan, with alternative imaginations being produced both nationally and locally, through legislative, fiscal, and administrative control measures the state nonetheless established clear boundaries for imaginaries that can be debated within the designated spaces for state-citizen dialogue, thus fixing the content of discussions in place. The 'designated spaces' for state-citizen dialogues become representations of pockets of enforced 'normalcy' within the post-disaster heterotopian 'spaces apart' and can thus become part of the overall trend where 'participatory forms of governance can be folded into the logic of hierarchy and coercion' (Penny 2017, 1352). However, this notion is not only related to authorities' desires for tangible control and maintenance of the status quo but, I argue, was also motivated by the existential understanding of the democratic principles embedded into ordering of the relationship between the citizens and the authorities, reflecting what Lauren Berlant (2010) calls 'cruel optimism'.

Berlant argues that as humans we have the innate capacity for optimism, manifesting itself as a desire to induce conventionality in patterns of change, or find forms of predictability within the change that we desire. This capacity to generate optimism, however, turns 'cruel' when it draws us toward attachments that are actively hindering

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the achievement of our aspirations. In Tōhoku's disaster context, the citizens' belief in the better future through the recovery, represented by the tangible goals of increased safety and socio-economic prosperity, remained compelling despite the long history of rural decline, depopulation, and decline of industries, along with decades of evidence of revitalisation initiatives that had failed to rectify these problems (Love 2013; Knight 1997). In the disaster context, people's attachment to the idea that the tide of decline could be turned, was combined with the idea of the disaster functioning as a 'window of opportunity' for the newly emerging discourses and alternative visions to be realised. Berlant argues that optimism is a force that moves people to engage with the broader world and society in order to get closer to satisfying *something* that citizens and communities cannot generate on their own (Berlant 2010, 1–2, emphasis original), but this force of optimism can be further reinforced by the self-promotion of authorities to be in a position to generate the change that is collectively desired.

Therefore, despite reducing and in some cases entirely taking away the opportunities for deliberation by citizens, the authorities in Japan were simultaneously making a 'promise' to deliver a more resilient and prosperous future for their citizens, reflecting the 'something' in Berlant's notion above, while also speaking to the high expectations in Japan placed upon the central state for care and action in case of crises (Dionisio and Pawson 2013). State planning and interventions are seen as mechanisms that compensate for the inability of citizens to solve large-scale structural and embedded challenges that ironically are often produced by the state itself (Abram 2017, 79). Through the institutional, legislative and fiscal structures imposed by the state, the path to the future became fixed in place, or 'frozen' to use Crapanzano's (2004) denomination, with the 'designated spaces' for state-citizen dialogue becoming an integral part of the state's 'designated imaginary', or promise, itself. By fixing the future of communities onto a specific trajectory, the promised future could only be attainable through the specific context and set of circumstances that were embedded within the promise itself (Abram 2017; Wallman 1992). The fulfilment of the promise can only be observed from the future, with citizens being simply asked to (or expected to) place their trust in the oncoming of that promised future, thus justifying an atmosphere of opaqueness in the formal recovery process between the now and the promised future.

The opaqueness of the process placed citizens into a liminal condition where they could not return to the past while lacking the power and resources to generate the future that they desired. All they could do was '*hope that everything will turn out ok*', as Mr. Takeda noted when I asked how he felt about the progress of recovery and the future of his community. This hopefulness has propelled a great deal of action in Japan but can often only be measured as the pulse of optimism, without an instrument or scale, in the absence of real opportunities to deliberate efforts to imagine a different kind of society (Kelly 2012). To understand the abundance of hope in Tōhoku,

Stephen Robertson (2016) offers a powerful conceptualisation of hope as a method to sustain daily efforts by providing 'momentum' without necessarily providing tangible capacities or agencies to reach the future that is desired. Hope as 'momentum' is therefore inherently 'cruel' in character, as it still follows the patterns of established attachments to fantasies of resilience and socio-economic growth and prosperity and is not a force of transformation itself.

In this way 'hope' becomes just another form of voicelessness that was otherwise also apparent in Tōhoku, representing 'cruel optimism' embedded into the fundamental dynamics of governance between the state and citizens. Hope has multiple functions, it can be a resource, a stimulus for action, or a disposition internal to and fostered by the individuals and communities or driven by the context and situations from which it emerges (Kavedzija 2016) and has often been associated with post-disaster dialogues around the world, along with other sociological coping mechanisms ranging from social capital to utopianism (Aldrich 201; Valaskivi et al. 2019). Aside from situational and fostered hope, evidently hope can also be externally administered through familiar hopeful narratives and visions for the future, irrespective of their potential for realisation. Both the state's promise and the people's attachment to that promise of a more resilient and socio-economically prosperous society were after all based on a false premise, due to the stagnant state of the economy and absolute population loss in the context of Japan. The illusion of the 'promise' nonetheless remained a compelling one, despite the mounting evidence that the state cannot deliver on its promise that will constantly elude citizens. As hope can be associated with the loss of specificity that diffuses the clarity of directions one can take toward the future (Kavedzija 2016), the proliferation of optimism can help to fill the gaps in the opaqueness of the recovery process.

Conclusions

In this paper I have outlined that disasters generate heterotopian spaces that help to uncover vulnerabilities and inequalities in existing 'normalcy', while also giving rise to alternative imaginaries to transform society. Disasters are contexts where resurrection of life and the development of that life to a better direction are urgently emphasised, with the role of citizens in deciding their own life courses seen as equally important. New spaces for state-citizen dialogues to negotiate and determine the course of development rapidly emerge in disaster contexts but are often reduced to venues where citizens' voices remain marginalised in favour of the visions of the authorities, therefore resembling pockets of enforced 'normalcy' within the heterotopian landscape. However, despite disrupting the emergence of alternatives, through the empirical material presented in this paper, I have shown how these pockets of normalcy were still providing the most hope for disaster victims.

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This proliferation of hope was nonetheless 'cruel' by nature, as the goals of resilience and prosperity presented in the state's designated imaginary are unlikely to be realised, with people's attachments to the predictabilities and familiarity built into that vision standing in the way of deliberation on genuine alternatives. Despite hope in this way representing another form of voicelessness, it is not meaningless, nor something that should be critiqued outright in the process. While this lack of control of collective and structural means makes 'hope' insufficient as a resource for transformative participatory governance and development of genuine alternatives, the positive impact of hope as an emotional resource, or 'momentum', cannot be overlooked. Equally, hope provides an analytical window through which to explore the spectre of voicelessness, enabling us to move away from discussing participatory spaces as either good or bad, against or for citizens, democratic or non-democratic, but also to see their functions as much more complex and complementary than literature on development practice of participatory governance would indicate.

Consideration of the role of these spaces in communities, societies, and state-citizen relations as existential, comforting and reflective of our ideas of democracy, even when these spaces fail to provide us with the outcomes that we desire, needs to be included in the discourses about participatory governance and the spaces through which it is carried out. It is therefore perhaps unfair to say that participatory practices and spaces for state-citizen dialogue amount to 'tyranny' as Cooke and Kothari (2004) have noted; however, it would not be correct to say that they are transformational either. What we need to do is recognise that developing social imaginaries and visions for the future is a process, not a goal, where the objectives of the dialogue need to fluctuate as the recovery advances. If the goal of the recovery is to create physically and socio-economically more resilient communities, then the premise of these dialogues between the state and citizens always needs to return to and start from the question of what resilience looks like for each community now and in the future. Elements of sociological imagination, deliberation, consent giving, opinion taking. and sharing of information all have a crucial role to play in these spaces and dialogues at different times of the recovery process. What the empirical, material, and residents' testimonies indicate, however, is that citizens want to be able to see their individual and communal experiences reflected in the broader plans and visions for their communities, which is the foundation that state-citizen dialogues should be built on.

What was evident in Tōhoku was the disconnect between the shape of the localised problems, and the solutions offered to them as part of the state's vision. While both the citizens and authorities agreed that a physically and socio-economically more resilient future was necessary for both the localities and Japan as a whole, the way citizens experienced both risks and resilience in the localised context, often did not match the structural and financial solutions offered by the state. Despite offering

hope, these fixed imaginaries which proliferated through the participatory spaces were therefore ultimately silencing, stemming from the inabilities of and the lack of opportunities offered to people in these spaces to explain the shape of their local issues to the authorities. The institutional spaces for state-citizen dialogue were not designed for these types of dialogues to take place. To overcome the 'cruelty' in participatory governance, the focus on participatory spaces as facilitators of dialogue needs to shift from simply offering a greater number and more innovative opportunities for citizens to debate fixed content, to improving the process through which the content of dialogues is determined and shaped in these spaces together with the citizens, rather than used as venues to simply promise a better future.

Acknowledgements

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Miscommunicating across Borders: Ethnographic Reflections on EU Techniques of 'Better Communication' from Brussels

Seamus Montgomery

Abstract: Whether stemming from rising inequality, economic stagnation or technological disruption, global processes of transformation are changing European societies. With distrust in EU institutions at an all-time low, a perceived absence of a European demos or polity is attributed in part to the nonexistence of a European public square, a forum for direct communication between EU institutions and EU citizens. So-called 'hearts and minds strategies', such as Citizens' Dialogues and the European Citizens' Initiative, aim to go beyond the rhetorics of convergence criteria, stability mechanisms and bailout packages that dominate weekly news cycles. In contrast with liberalist discourses of idealisation and universalisation, a reactionary populism fetishises a return to an age when fiscal and migration policy were the sole province of national capitals. This paper critically analyses discourses surrounding 'dialogue' and 'better communication' inside the European Commission in Brussels, drawn from extensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out within its office spaces. Through participant-observation and in-person, semi-structured interviewing with civil servants, it explores the ways in which they seek to fill the dialogical spaces currently occupied by populist voices in order to reaffirm the legitimacy underpinning the existence of the EU and of a supranational, imagined community of Europeans who identify with and belong to it. Its findings suggest that the achievement of 'better communication' with citizens by the European Commission is made all the more intractable by its struggle to define an institutional European identity that is inclusive, coherent, persuasive and distinct.

Keywords: European Commission, Dialogue, Bureaucracy, European identity, Crisis

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Introduction: Being Political in Times of Crisis

The European Commission is among the largest, oldest and most central fixtures of the European Union (EU)'s institutional architecture. As the executive power it proposes new laws, policies and initiatives in areas within its jurisdiction. It oversees the implementation of decisions by the Parliament and Council, monitors budget spending and safeguards the integrity of the treaties. In a more limited capacity, it acts as the EU's public face, representing the collective 'European interest' of its members in foreign policy matters. Just before being elected President of the Commission in July 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker stated his intentions for an EU executive that would be 'more political' than those before it. 'The Commission,' he said, 'is not a technical committee made up of civil servants who implement the instructions of another institution. The Commission is political. And I want it to be more political. Indeed, it will be highly political. Its make-up must reflect the plurality of the majority of ideas which take shape' (European Commission 2014b).

The political return in the Commission occurred at a time of adversity for the EU and high distrust in its actors and institutions, when global dynamics and processes of transformation are changing European societies fundamentally. Whether stemming from rising inequality, economic stagnation, or technological disruption, a reactionary populism oriented towards nostalgia appeals to working class voters who feel left behind by globalisation and alienated from mainstream institutions. In contrast with liberalist discourses of idealisation and universalisation, far-right parties fetishise a return to a time when fiscal and migration policy were the sole province of national capitals. With distrust in EU institutions at an all-time low, a perceived absence of a European demos or polity is attributed in part to the nonexistence of a European public square, a forum for direct communication between EU institutions and EU citizens.

This paper critically analyses discourses surrounding 'dialogue' and 'better communication' inside the European Commission in Brussels, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in and around the European Commission over 18 months. It explores the ways in which the institution seeks to fill the dialogical spaces currently occupied by populist voices in order to reaffirm the legitimacy underpinning the existence of the EU and of a supranational, imagined community of Europeans who identify with and belong to it. Specifically, it focuses on initiatives such as 'Imagining Europe: A New Narrative' that aim to reproduce social and cultural forms of Europeanness and disseminate them among EU citizens from above. Its findings are based predominantly on data collected from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews carried out inside Commission buildings. A total of 56 interviews were conducted in 16 policy and external Directorates-General (DGs). Interviewing methods were complemented by discourse analysis of official texts, speeches and press briefings. Its

findings suggest that the achievement of 'better communication' with citizens by the European Commission is made all the more intractable by its struggle to define an institutional European identity that is inclusive, coherent, persuasive, and distinct.

Context: The Discourse of Crisis

My arrival in Brussels roughly coincides with the commencement of the Juncker Commission's 2014 term in office at a time of adversity for the EU and high distrust in EU institutions. Since the 2008 international financial crisis and ensuing eurozone debt crisis, economies have been strained as unemployment rises, living standards decline, housing bubbles burst, and structural weaknesses in labour markets reveal themselves. The incoming President Jean-Claude Juncker began his mandate by announcing that his was a 'last-chance Commission' beginning its term at a 'make-or-break moment' for a European Union preoccupied with multiple and overlapping crises. Upon settling in, I gathered the impression that something was wrong. In theatres, seminar buildings and cultural centres, events were organised to discuss the future of the European project. They were given portentous titles like 'Europe on the Brink' and 'A Turning Point for Europe?' and 'A Europe in Crisis: What's Next?'. A sense of low-humming dread was palpable, and a pallid cloud leaden with uncertainty loomed steadily overhead.

Annabel[1] spoke of her work in the cabinet of Frans Timmermans as 'a very sort of niche part of the structure, but pretty nevralgic at the same time.' The second adjective, nevralgic, is a neologism that was unfamiliar to me. It derives from the French word névralgique [neuralgic], often used in the phrase point névralgique meaning 'nerve centre'. Her use of this term evokes the way the Commission is centrally located, at the core of things, as well as being a site of anguished intensity. 'It is at the same time pretty messed up as well. You've probably picked that up in some of your discussions.' A second definition is listed in the dictionary as, 'In extended use: painful, distressing; (esp. in Politics) particularly sensitive or crucial; capable of causing a sudden, extreme, or far-reaching reaction; (also) characterised by such a reaction' (Oxford 2009). She continued:

> Particularly, there's a general sense of anguish around. It was already there when I joined in 2011 with the financial crisis because we had all these waves of crises since 2005. The first blow was with the French and Dutch referendums on the Constitution – that feeling of, 'how do we connect with people?' It's the question of the legitimacy of the project, the whole vocabulary around project-building, all these construction metaphors, et cetera. You don't talk about 'the France project' or the 'UK project'; you talk about 'France' and 'Germany'. Europe is still not an entity; it's a sense of direction. It's something that you

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1   Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of informants.

work towards, that we're constantly building but we're not entirely sure what it consists of.

The years 2015 and 2016 were anni horribiles for the European Union. There was the Greek financial crisis, the refugee or migration crisis and terror attacks in Paris, Berlin, London and Barcelona, as well as in the European Quarter in Brussels. There was also the Panama Papers affair, the 'Luxleaks' scandal and decisive resistance to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. Far-right parties promoting nationalism and nativism gained unprecedented support in Hungary, Poland, Finland, Denmark, Sweden and France, while left-wing Euroskeptic parties did well in Greece, Spain and Portugal. As voices critical of the EU advocating measures deeper than institutional reform gainrd mainstream acceptance, arguments for 'more Europe' and 'ever closer union' began sounding fanciful, old-fashioned and elitist to many of those listening.

The period reached its nadir with the Brexit vote in Britain, signifying a moment at which this tidal wave of disillusionment reached new heights inside the EU-28.The decision of a slight but decisive majority of eligible UK voters to end their country's membership of the European Union marked a new milestone in a history of lost plebiscites on 'the EU issue'. The British are the first national electorate to formally end their membership by referendum.[2] As the EU's influence wanes on the global stage, it stands to lose around 15% of its economic weight, one of two nuclear-armed military powers and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. At least as much as economic realities, the phenomenon concerns what it means to embrace, reject or passively disregard belonging to the EU. The phenomenon controverts a basic principle of the European idea – that 'the movement toward closer supranational integration is irreversible' (Haas 1968, 449), and once the project is put in motion, the arc of history will bend inevitably and unidirectionally toward greater social and political unification among countries and persons in Europe. The affair proves it is possible for Europe to shrink over its lifetime as well as enlarge.

To examine the discursive construction of dialogue and communication within the Commission, this research employs a discourse-ethnographic approach (Unger et al. 2014; Wodak et al. 2012; Krzyżanowski 2011). Building on linguistic anthropology, the anthropology of organisations and critical discourse studies, the method supplements fieldwork-based ethnography in institutional spaces with discourse-oriented analyses. Conceiving discourses as forms of social practice and workplace settings as complex sites for their production and reception, it confronts the immediate micro-analytical level (what occurs within institutional spaces) with events unfolding

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2   Since the days of the European Communities, Greenland, Algeria and the island of Saint Barthélemy in the West Indies have withdrawn from the project.

on the macro-contextual level that impact the day-to-day work-lives and practices of EU civil servants (Wodak 2013). Grounding the micro-analytic within the macro-contextual establishes a 'contextual micro-macro mediation', revealing different multilevel language ideologies' (Krzyżanowski 2011, 286). The internal dynamics at play between organisations and those who run them are mutually constitutive: social actors shape through discourse-practices the institutional spaces they navigate and are shaped by them in turn (Heller 2001). In line with Marc Abélès's (2000) insistence that anthropologists study European institutions at the level of the language and models their informants employ, analysing discursive practices provides a means of understanding the influence of particular institutional logics on performances of Europeanness.

Europe Between the Political and the Technocratic

The induction of the 2014 College of Commissioners heralds a return to politics and the political within the EU civil service. President Juncker stated that he was 'not an anonymous bureaucrat or a putschist who would have forced the doors of the Berlaymont' (Maurice 2018). Rather, he was, by virtue of the Spitzenkandidat procedure, a political leader with a 'triple legitimacy', having won one mandate from voters, another from the Council, and a third from the Parliament. The 'Spitzenkandidaten' ['lead candidate'] procedure awards the presidency to the nominee of the parliamentary group who wins the most seats. Making the formation of each new College an indirect function of the outcome of the vote will, it is hoped, strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the incoming Commission's mandate. It will also give candidates the possibility to connect and communicate better with members of the public. Thus, Juncker's College positioned itself as the first to take office with the formal endorsement of the citizens via their political parties in Parliament and the first to be quasi-democratically elected.

In common usage, politics often refers to 'party politics', the realm of campaigns, elections and events depicted in news media as distinct from the profane realm of day-to-day life. By this metric, one would have thought that an institution such as the EU Commission was political already. By a 'more political Commission', the President refers more specifically to his Cabinet and the College of Commissioners, who steer the Commission's engine room from above. In the daily institutional life of the Commission's halls and corridors, however, the duality identified by McDonald (2012) of the political and the administrative remains salient in the ways in which civil servants conceptualise their roles. Both terms are used, though technocratic and bureaucratic more often take the place of administrative to connote the esoteric, highly specialised areas of expertise on which officials focus for long periods. 'We have this hybrid function', explained Arnaud, a top civil servant in charge of humanitarian aid. 'Work is quite technical. It's very technocratic, but it's highly political at the same

time.' Officials understand the two poles as existing somewhat in opposition to one another. One meaning that 'technicality' takes on here connotes the limited and highly specialised areas of expertise into which permanent officials are trained and on which they remain focused for long periods. By contrast, the political dimension of the civil service is what is shared in common, a collective endeavour that effects something greater than the sum of its administrative parts.

When expounding on what a more political Commission looks like, officials cite one of the President's other mantras: 'I want to be serious about being big on big things and small on small things.' The trend of slimming down its legislative output by submitting fewer and fewer proposals each year started with former President Barroso and his vision of 'better regulation', viewed by many as a measure taken to appease the UK. In the previous Commission, when the single market was being set up and citizens were less pessimistic about the global economy and political institutions more generally, there was simply more being done. In 2015, 55 EU laws were adopted by the European Parliament, compared with 64 in 2010. In being big on the big things and small on the small things, the Commission commits itself to achieving results on a limited range of issues that are of the greatest import and retreating from certain fields where it is perceived to be ineffective or unfit for purpose.

The 'big things', as far as the College is concerned, are laid out in 'the Ten Priorities', a list of guidelines for areas of action on which to focus. In matters of industry, the Commission's 'small things' are regulations considered to be superfluous. A Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and 'Doing Less More Efficiently' is established to identify policy areas that might be abdicated to national administrations, 'ensuring that as much work as possible is left in the hands of Member States' (European Commission 2017). Timmermans, who is its chairman, provides some needed context: 'People all around the EU are telling us they want change. They want Europe to focus more where it can help solve the big problems: jobs, growth and fairness in our societies. Citizens want Europe to improve their lives, not meddle with them. Businesses want Europe to enhance their competitiveness, not burden them with red tape' (European Commission 2014b). 'Better regulation' is thus an extension of the 'fundamental principles' of subsidiarity and proportionality enshrined in Article 5 of the Lisbon Treaty, which ensure that actions taken at the European level are restricted to no more than what is necessary to enforce what is laid down in the treaties; it is a check on the power of the EU executive. What can be done at the member state level should be done at the member state level, and the Commission that governs best is the Commission that governs least. To be political is also to be in fewer places, where it matters, rather than everywhere at once.

Towards 'Better Communication'

Habermas and the Emancipative Potential of Supranational Dialogue

In theorising dialogue and discourse ethics in the EU context, one could do worse than engage with the work of German philosopher, public intellectual and social theorist Jürgen Habermas. In the pioneering work The Theory of Communicative Action, he outlines a systematic theory of discourse and deliberation based on a conceptual distinction between 'systems' and 'lifeworld' (Habermas 1984). The former denotes the economic and bureaucratic structures of modern states that are oriented towards the completion of functional tasks for society as whole. By contrast, the lifeworld embraces culture, society and personality – structural domains that are mediated through dialogic action and based on the necessity of achieving a consensus of mutual understanding on matters under consideration between participants. Based on the three claims to universal validity of the 'ideal speech situation', wherein what is said is propositionally true, normatively correct, and spoken with sincere intention, each should be able to justify their argument through rational reflection. Herein lies the 'universal pragmatics' of language and social behaviour.

Participants engaging in a dialogue, whether they be individuals, communities, or institutions of governance, are thus presupposed to be rational actors. Communicative rationality is a process 'oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing consensus— and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims' (Habermas 1984, 17). The links drawn between discourse and rationality, as well as those between discourse and democracy (1992) provide a basis for Habermas's disciples and critics to analyse the idea of dialogue within an EU context. For Habermas, the EU represents a prototype for the achievement of democracy on a supranational scale. In his article 'Toward A Cosmopolitan Europe', he argues that 'discussions have to be synchronised within national public spheres that are networked across Europe – that is, conducted at the same time and on the same topics – so that a European civil society with interest groups, non-governmental organisations and citizens' initiatives can emerge' (Habermas 2003, 98). Social change aiming for human emancipation through the creation of a 'democratically constituted world society' is achieved by dialogue as a process of 'legitimation' (Habermas 2008). Dialogue between EU 'social partners' is said to be 'fundamental to the European social model; a means of both initiating and directing social reform, and of securing good governance' (Dukes et al. 2012, 20).

Ultimately, dialogue is a social practice that is seen as a vehicle for European integration: 'The long-term goal must be the steady overcoming of social division and stratification within a global society, but without damaging cultural distinctiveness' (Habermas 2003, 99). The EU's motto of 'united in diversity' encapsulates this vision

of integrating disparate social communities without erasing those qualities which render them mutually distinctive. Through the establishment of free and inclusive dialogic relations at the European level, citizens of an increasingly globalised world begin to gradually adopt the perspectives and understandings of their respective interlocutors. These multifarious perspectives coalesce to form a collectivised 'we-perspective' that becomes a standard against which heretofore foreign norms can be measured (Habermas 1995, 117). If they prove fit for purpose, they might become the basis of newly shared social practices. The integration project of 'ever closer union' among Europeans is thus a social, cultural, and cognitive process in addition to an economic and territorial one.

A Democratic Deficit

Enumerating the Commission's roles on the EU stage, informants often include one that is not in the treaties: the way it acts as a scapegoat. It is the primary target of 'Brussels-blaming', the whipping boy on whom the causes of crises that member states face may be pinned. In their communications with members of the public, national-level presidents and ministers have a habit of speaking highly of the institutions when in Brussels and speaking lowly of them once they return home. 'There's a lot of blame-shifting. National governments will use the European Commission maybe as a scapegoat for certain initiatives' (Marie-Christine). 'Brussels' has become a metonym for an oppressive political system which nations were tricked into joining and which tolerates little dissent. The 'democratic deficit' is a particularly strong criticism that signifies an overreach of power by EU institutions and a lack of participation and representation of citizens in the European project. 'A lot of Europeans don't think that European institutions are democratically legitimate institutions. It's a difficult situation. It's hard to try and show leadership because people might be questioning your authority.'

As the 'unelected technocrats' bemoaned from national capitals, officials readily acknowledge that no member of the College is directly elected by voters: 'The European Parliament is directly elected, and the Council has sort of indirectly elected members, so you have a strong democratic basis. I know that Commissioners are not elected politicians. They don't have to go back to the voters every four or five years' (Arnaud). The system may be not be perfectly democratic, but what is lost in terms of democratic legitimacy is gained in the form of accountability:

> It's a good thing because when the policy is launched, they can keep busy on the agenda. Again, I'm profoundly democrat, but sometimes you need to have an institution or a body which reminds the newly elected government, 'Hey, you committed to achieving that.' For me, that is really the unique institutional feature of this architecture. And by the way, if you do a bit of comparative

politics and look at other regional entities, all of them failed because they did
not have this inbuilt structure.

For Arnaud, the unelected nature and unaccountability of the Commission is not
a bug but a feature of the system, a marker of its excellence as an executive. Keeping
Commissioners in place for the long term allows them enough time to bring projects
to completion, unhindered by political pressures arising from below. It also enables
them to hold national administrations to the commitments they once made.
Maintaining this state of affairs is what allows them to get on with their work without
having to change jobs prematurely or devote their time to ensuring their re-election
in the future.

Elfriede chairs 'Social Dialogues', where she engages different 'social partners':
employers and unions of hairdressers, deep-sea fisherman, and representatives of 41
other sectors, soliciting their perspectives on the challenges in the economic and
employment spheres. If the Commission cannot engage citizens directly, it does so
indirectly via the various lobbying and interest groups around them:

> As a slight compensation for the democratic deficit, we will talk to anybody.
> Anybody who comes to us to talk about education, culture or anything like that,
> they're fully entitled to talk to us. People elect themselves, appoint themselves
> to fill the gap, and that's part of what you see around Brussels in all the plethora
> of lobbyists and interest groups, which is second only to Washington in
> those terms. They are welcomed at the doors of the officials simply because,
> in the absence of clear democratic mediation of political signals, we will take
> anybody's ideas. We will dialogue with anybody. [Arnaud]

That he cites the lobbying culture in Brussels as an antidote to the deficit is interesting
given how the industry in general is widely viewed as a barrier to democracy,
symptomatic of an oligarchical, pay-to-play politics that works in the interests of the
wealthy and the few.

> It may well be a barrier, but it's also a sort of substitute for it. I think it's both
> things. It's not just Google and Microsoft who have lobbying offices here;
> it's Friends of the Earth (FOEI), the European Gay and Lesbian Association
> (ILGA-Europe), everything. All of human life is in this town.

Not all officials are as sanguine as Arnaud about the 'instinct to repoliticise the College
and the institution and give himself and other Commissioners political visibility'.
'Quite frankly, it was a PR move', says Jörg. 'By now, it's all about PR. I'm afraid of
this marketing slogan. There is a place for politics, but law enforcement should not be
politicised.' As an institutional rebranding exercise, it is a talking point that is trotted
out in press releases each week, providing a 'media hook' with which politicians at

the national level can engage their constituents. For Jörg, these techniques of public relations are effectual in achieving institutional visibility but do not go far enough. As solutions to the deficit, they are more cosmetic than invasive, more symbolic than real, amounting to a minor tweak to a profound flaw and therefore little more than empty gestures. They do not make the institutions *democratic* and *political*; they merely succeed in making them *more democratic* and *more political* than they were before.

Absence of demos

Collective identifications with and belongings to a shared community of citizens, such that 'in the minds of each lives the image of their communion', is a critical source of legitimacy for democratic institutions of governance (Anderson 2006). Social identities are generated from multifarious sites and subjectivities, but they are championed and disseminated foremost from institutional power centres in capital cities. Self-consciously engineered to engender supranational identities, the EU executive is an institutional locus for the production of European identity and belonging. The Commission exists as 'a site of identification for a continentally dispersed supranational community' (Bellier 2000).

Identity was a predetermined ethnographic category for this study, though in the field the topic was very much in the air. Looking back over 2015, the New York Times pronounced it 'the year we obsessed over identity' (Morris 2015), while the website Dictionary.com (2015) awarded the term its Word of the Year. When President Juncker announced that his would be a 'last-chance Commission', he would go on to clarify that it was its last chance 'to regain public trust'. 'Our European Union is,' he said, 'at least in part, in an existential crisis'. The official diagnosis of the crisis paid lip service to matters of identity: 'I am convinced that the European way of life is something worth preserving. I have the impression that many [Europeans] seem to have forgotten what being European means' (Juncker 2016, 6). Vice President Timmermans went some distance further: 'We have fallen into the trap of identity politics. If the driving force of the European construction is national, cultural or ethnic identity, then it will not survive' (Lefranc 2016). These sentiments are ones to which Commission officials largely subscribe – namely, that European social identity as a mode of self-recognition and belonging is integral to the health, vitality and longevity of the European project.

Underlying the democratic deficit is a perception that the EU is undemocratic in the way that it is a democracy that lacks a coherent and identifiable European demos or populace. 'People need to take ownership of the European Union. It's the European citizens that are Europe. We need to make people understand that it's not that the European Union is in Brussels for some institution, it's them' (Isla). 'There's usually no problem in getting people to feel European if they're somewhere in another continent, that's fine. But feeling European, feeling a supranational identity when they are at

home, that's more difficult' (Olivia). Embracing the idea of Europe as a mode of self-recognition and belonging can prove to be a challenging prospect within national and local contexts where lingering attachments to nations and nationness endure. 'People probably feel that the most important aspect of their identity is their national identity. It's definitely the case. You're concerned about people in your home and in your own country more than others. So, it's national interest; it's "your country, your people"' (Marie-Christine). Sixty years after Europe began its inexorable march towards 'ever closer union', a shared, pan-European demos remains conspicuously absent.

The nonexistence of a European demos is attributed in part to the nonexistence of a European public square, an open forum where dialogue among different members of an imagined community can take place above and across national borders. Media outlets covering the day-to-day developments in Brussels reach limited audiences, while national media foreground domestic issues and debates.

> As long as the first pages of the newspaper, and as long as the first minutes of the TV news will still massively be dedicated to domestic issues, you can say there is no such thing as a European demos. That's what it boils down to. That's to say, a space where genuine European issues are discussed, taking into account the European dimension of it, for what it is. [Arnaud]

When the European dimension is accounted for, reports in national broadsheets confine themselves to dry, technical analyses of legislative proposals or reiterate 'another boring press release'. As a result, 'miscommunications, misunderstandings' ensue, and 'to the extent that [citizens] engage with politics, they engage with it at a national level.' Indeed, voter participation in European elections, currently at an all-time low of 43%, has decreased consistently after reaching its peak in 1979. The crises on which the College fixates remain meaningless to most members of the public. 'If it were a real problem in the minds of ordinary Europeans, surely there'd be some grassroots campaign. There is no groundswell opinion. It's not something people talk about.' The conditions under which national institutions dominate debates on the 'EU issue' preclude the establishment of direct channels of communication between EU institutions and EU citizens, a silence that perpetuates these conditions in turn. There is no supranational, Eurocentric news broadcast available for widespread consumption.

There is likewise a temporal issue with the European Semester cycle. 'The European timeline is totally at odds with the communication timeline', Eloise says. Those in the DG for Communication get in at 06:00h every morning to prepare the briefing in time for the noonday press conference. If a proposal for a new policy has been adopted, this will get a mention. By the time the policy is fully implemented and 'made real', most citizens will have forgotten all about the announcement, if they had

ever heard about it in the first place.

> On the news this morning, I heard a journalist say, 'Yes, the Commission adopted a regulation' and, 'the Commission condemned this and that company.' No, it cannot do that. This is the wrong word. We adopt a proposal, the proposal gets negotiated, then it gets adopted, then it gets transposed and then it becomes real for people. Before it actually does something to the people, you may have five years, six years. So, nobody communicates because it's impossible.

The European Semester cycle clashes with more internal day-to-day rhythms that obstruct the institution's ability to represent itself and its actions to the outside world. 'There's this mismatch between the work we're producing and people seeing the need for this work to be done. We come up with something and we haven't really explained to people what the problem was in the first place' (Maja). As a result, citizens remain oblivious to the concrete achievements or 'added value' of the Commission's work. 'If they don't see it as necessarily adding value, it's more difficult for this idea to sink in' (Olivia).

The absence of a European demos centres around an emotive and moral question rather than one that the logics of economic self-interest would demand. To address the felt 'lack of connection' with citizens, officials feel it is incumbent on them to communicate 'the EU vision'. Such a vision transcends the economic concerns of the concrete, reaching something nearer the spiritual. 'The economic union? But it's more than just that,' Marie-Christine assures me. In formulating their orientations to the EU, 'people will use economic reasoning – people often use economic arguments, actually. But it's a shame that you have to use economic ones.' Arguments which invoke 'not the Europe of institutions and rules, but the Europe of the peoples at a human level' are 'actually incredibly important in my eyes, but don't work so well because people don't feel them.' It is loyalty that is at the heart of the appeal of Europe's new populism: 'What populists promise their voters is not competence but intimacy' (Krastev 2017, 91). As Delors lamented, 'You don't fall in love with a common market; you need something else' (Laffan 1996, 95). The Commission's efforts to produce a demos from above are inadequate because they are 'artificial'. 'You can't try and make someone feel emotional about something they don't feel [themselves]' (Marie-Christine). Lacking in the salience and tangibility that nationalisms traditionally enjoy, identifications with Europe as a sociopolitical entity tend to come across, even to those who hold them most passionately, as comparatively more rhetorical and abstract in character. Invocations of a distinct, continental, pan-European demos are relatively shallow, inflated and superficial things: more cerebral than bodily, more thought than felt, more imagined than real and irrelevant to the concerns of citizens.

The Invisibility Crisis

The institutions that organise societies make considerable efforts to define their identities in ways that reimagine the bonds of belonging that hold themselves together and the boundaries that distinguish themselves from other institutions. By formulating and formalising in basic terms a coherent identity that is distinctive and delimited, social organisations reproduce narratives explicating the reason for their initial coming into being and the purpose of their continued existence in the present. The EU is a 'soft, ideational power' that uses its visibility to exhibit and promote its ideas and initiatives. 'Soft power' has been understood as the power to get what you want through methods of attraction and persuasion, as opposed to those of fiscal or military coercion (Nye Jr 2008). The Commission's political dimension emphasises public diplomacy through soft power projects such as allocating resources for international aid and 'strategic communication' projects. These social and symbolic 'technologies of legitimation' (Biegoń 2017; Calligaro 2015) seek to establish what Geertz (2015), in a religious context, described as 'powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations', ones imbued 'with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic'. The concurrent and interrelated crises of democracy, legitimacy and visibility in the European Union intersect at the inability of institutional Europe to define a coherent and viable identity for itself.

There have been several attempts by the European Commission to carve out a supranational identity that is delimited yet inclusive of all citizens within its dominion (European Community 1973). A Soul for Europe (2006), the Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe (2004), and A New Narrative for Europe (2013) were attempts led by the previous Commission 'to define this philosophical basis for looking at Europe in a new way' and 'articulate what Europe stands for today and tomorrow' through 'the encounter between European policy makers and artists' (Battista et al. 2014). These projects aimed to 'discover or to reveal a soul for Europe' (Feargal). Soul-searching was carried out during workshops where 'cultural authorities' convened to construct narratives that 'revive a European spirit through art and science' (Battista et al. 2014). The campaign gathered much publicity that included 'many nice moments on podiums'. However, its ability to 'bring Europe closer to its citizens' was overshadowed by louder criticisms coming from other areas of the creative industry concerning negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership:

> It came a cropper really when the whole culture world hated the proposals for the TTIP [Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership]. There were particular French filmmakers who felt that this was going to collapse the ability of a country like France to subsidise its film industry and were absolutely vehement in denouncing that. Barroso was left not quite standing on a stage all his own as all the intellectuals deserted him. (Feargal)

Within the scope of the New Narrative actions, the Commission organises events at BOZAR, the modern art gallery in Brussels. One of these productions, organised in the context of the Dutch Presidency, was entitled 'Imagine Europe: In Search of New Narratives'. Artists, scientists and other members of the intelligentsia were tasked with performing a re-examination of the EU story, bearing in mind the complications of the present circumstances, in a timely and imaginative fashion. Between the presentations and panel discussions, audiences were invited to explore an exhibit titled 'Images for Europe', a series of 12 large statements printed on 12 large posters. For one entry, architects Max Cohen de Lara and David Mulder van der Vegt write how 'the Justus Lipsius building embodies the problem of an invisible Europe. A Europe seen as governing technocratically behind closed doors, only emerging to soothe yet another crisis' (European Commission 2014a). As an EU institutional space, the building symbolises a 'power that nobody knows'.

Central to the political turn is a concern with institutional visibility. The Commission is not simply 'more political', it is 'more visibly political' (Arnaud). A visibly political commission is one which presents and represents itself more effectively to public audiences. Officials are supportive of initiatives that seek to increase the visibility of the EU through 'being there' and fostering direct, personal engagement to become 'closer to the realities on the ground'. Working on behalf of 500 million people rather than any single local constituency at any one time has meant that Commissioners have traditionally had only infrequent contact with European citizens. Initiatives promoting 'better communication' call on the institutions to 're-engag[e] with the general public'. The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), which facilitates the involvement of civil society in EU decision-making, has been a formative strategy of legitimation for EU institutions. Until the late 1990s, the Commission set the agenda during interactions with such organisations. The innovation of the ECI is that such actors are now permitted to set the agenda during these dialogues themselves. A report, titled 'Reaching out to EU Citizens – Seizing the Opportunity', calls on institutions to adapt to the digital transition by diversifying their presence across a wider array of forums (Van den Brande 2017). On Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms, official communications inundate followers with posts and tweets 'with more graphics, images and numbers on them' (Jörg). Each member of the College maintains his or her own personal account, which they use to promote their portfolios, congratulate the winners of elections, send thoughts and prayers to victims and share group photos taken at the end of meetings.

As Europe is conceived as an amorphous entity, an unfinished project perpetually coming into being, European identities tend to be more abstract in character than are identifications with nations and regions rooted in blood and soil. 'I do think there's such a thing as European identity. But it's a weaker identity than your national identity

because it's more abstract. It doesn't have the strength of a structure like the nation state' (Bram). This is the case even in the mind of the most 'convinced European' and is especially so in that of the generic EU citizen, for whom the idea of Europe appears 'far away' and 'less obvious'. The phrase 'convinced European' betrays such an abstractness, suggesting that European identity is a set of rhetorics that requires an effort of persuasion (Carrithers 2005). 'It's difficult to jump to something that is immaterial—as the European Union is. If you have to jump to the European level, it becomes quite abstract and much more complex. So it's not evident to the normal citizen' (Diego). Becoming European 'normally' requires a bit of a 'jump', a conscientious effort. The identity lacks concrete reference points for anchoring itself to—a language, a history, visual symbols, a sovereign government and a territory with discrete borders: 'If you want to build identity, you have to build identity around something' (Stefan).

The problem of how to better engage citizens with the European project is made all the more intractable in light of its elite-driven and top-down origins. Its success has been 'something we owe in large measure to the boldness and breadth of vision of a handful of men' (Monnet 1978, 525). Since the beginning, it has proceeded by 'permissive consensus': decisions are made by the stroke of the pens of these 'Wise Men' and citizens are notified about them afterwards. In October of 2016, I was sitting in the audience of a crowded theatre when I heard Vice President Timmermans speak of a need to 'recreate a feeling of European citizenship' on the continent. He felt, however, that

> this is not something the Commission should do... Many modern European states were created by precisely this kind of top-down campaign – think of the unification of Italy or Germany in the nineteenth century, or the resurrection of Poland after World War I. And yet, the Eurosceptics there still think of their national governments to be more democratic.

Officials in the permanent administration share his reticence about being the mediator of a European sense of belonging: 'I don't think it's something that can be top-down. People either develop it in their own mind or they don't' (Olivia). A European demos must originate organically, so to speak, from the bottom up, when 'people all over Europe see the value added that the EU can provide in the very concrete things. If one doesn't have that, then the more spiritual thing will not fly either' (Morgan).

Perhaps Europe is so close in proximity to citizens that it appears out of focus and banal:

> People see Europe as probably a good thing after all, and they forget about this – which means that at the end of the day, they don't care about Europe. I think there is a European demos, but most people don't even realise it. Maybe

we take things for granted and can't see the positive aspects of everything that's
been done in Europe. (Marie-Christine).

Such an assertion raises the question of whether or not it is possible to identify and
belong to a community without ever noticing it. Any community in which this is
possible must be barely visible indeed. Because it is beautiful, the reality of the EU's
invisibility as expressed here contains an element of tragedy: 'A near borderless
Europe at peace constitutes the great achievement of the second half of the twentieth
century. That you can go from Germany to Poland across a frontier near effaced
and scarcely imagine the millions slaughtered seven decades ago is testament to the
accomplishment. The European Union is the dullest miracle on earth' (Cohen 2015).
Beauty that goes unseen is beauty that is wasted and without value.

Conclusion

The repoliticisation of the EU executive under Juncker, with its discourse of 'more
democracy, transparency and efficiency', constitutes part of a set of efforts by the
European Commission to refashion its image in the face of a crisis of legitimacy
within EU institutions, one which is itself linked to weak levels of identification with
them among citizens. Such exercises in institutional rebranding aim to redress the
balance in the political-technocratic dialectic in order counteract an image of the EU
civil service as one staffed by unelected technocrats. 'The biggest criticism everyone
has of the EU is that it's about processes, that it's about some faceless bureaucracy.
You have to confront that stuff, not run away until something like Brexit blows up
in your face' (Jörg). Instead, Commission officials are politicians who operate in
a way that delivers concrete results that have relevance to the lives of EU citizens.
The self-politicisation is as such a kind of self-humanisation: to be political in this
context is to be more humanlike and less technocratic. Contrary to an 'anti-politics
machine' (Ferguson 1990), the EU civil service is composed of 'political people'. In its
retreat from the minutiae of everyday life and its commitment to taking stronger and
more engaged positions on 'the big things', the political turn reaffirms the legitimacy
underpinning the existence of the EU and of a supranational, imagined community of
Europeans who feel they benefit from and belong to it.

This paper has explored some of the challenges faced by the EU as an emerging
institution of governance and evaluated the strengths and limitations of the potential
for dialogue in this context. Notwithstanding its capacity to create real social change
(Habermas 2003), dialogue alone cannot be relied upon as a mechanism to overcome
the democratic deficit and the practical steps toward a way forward remain unclear.
Indeed, an important distinction must be maintained between communication
– as a tool with which institutions of governance communicate with stakeholders
– and dialogue as conceived by Habermas: a non-coercive process that allows for

negotiation and aims for the growth of mutual understanding between partners. Commission officials seek to fill the dialogical spaces currently occupied by populist voices in order to reaffirm the legitimacy underpinning the existence of the EU and of a supranational community of Europeans who identify with and belong to it. In doing so, it highlights the importance of taking seriously what European civil servants think and say about themselves in their attempts to connect with citizens where it matters. Its findings suggest that the problem of engaging and achieving 'better communication' with citizens is exacerbated by the Commission's image as a soulless and faceless bureaucracy that trespasses on the minutiae of domestic affairs. Officials feel that such an image profoundly restricts the institution's capacity to define itself in a way that that is inclusive, coherent, compelling and distinct. As a result, the EU asserts its identity only in terms that are broad enough to encompass all the varieties of social and linguistic life into a single supranational rubric. The resulting identity stretches itself too thin and falls apart in its efforts to elide difference and combine unlike with unlike. The absence of EU identity thus inhibits the establishment of platforms for transnational dialogue between institutions and citizens, and the absence of such direct channels of communication, in turn, obviates the formulation of a dialogical EU identity.

In a shrinking, interconnected world of mass migration and democratised information and communications technologies, dialogue spills over national borders. Social anthropological approaches are well-suited to tackling issues surrounding communication and persuasion that are too steeped in the entanglements of lived social realities to be solved by facile technical solutions. Applications of the micro-social methodology and specialism of anthropology to EU institutions speaks to the relationships human beings have with the institutions that organise our societies. It likewise concerns the modes of belonging that connect individuals to the communities of which they are members and the boundaries constructed to separate the foreign and familiar from the near and dear.

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Fourth-Track Diplomacy: Its Time Has Come

Suzanne Goodney Lea and Eirliani Abdul Rahman

Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic highlights both the challenges to and opportunities for a reimagination of diplomacy and, by extension, democracy. Traditional views of diplomacy assert that each nation should negotiate from a 'my country first' perspective. But the modern social problems we face internationally, with Covid-19 being arguably a 'dry run' for more global management of climate change, are characterised by a need for collaboration rather than for competition. A collaborative approach would likely help to ensure that more resources reached the poorest parts of the world. We contend that a new form of diplomacy is needed. Second-track diplomacy emphasised the engagement of non-state actors, and third track combined that with traditional diplomacy, but we argue that a fourth track is now both urgently needed and quite viable. This fourth track could *engage citizens in diplomacy* by using dialogue and digital technologies. A range of dialogic techniques could be leveraged to facilitate the incorporation of a much broader array of voices into the public sphere, infusing more diverse and outside-the-box perspectives into the creation of policies that directly affect citizens and their communities. Such engagement could also be global, connecting people from various countries with their counterparts around the world to explore how nations might work with one another to solve global and regional problems. One nation could help another to solve even a local problem. A massive disruption to routinised lives across the planet provides an unprecedented opportunity to create new ways to meaningfully include a much wider range of voices and perspectives within the way the People – of the global citizenry – do business.

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Introduction

We have reached the long-promised postmodern age, which aspired to upend authoritative constructs of Truth based within cultural perspectives tainted by White supremacist, Global North, and patriarchal systems (Schneider 2004; Susen 2015). However, as is the case with most imagined worlds (Slaughter 1998), the reality is unveiling itself to be more nightmare than panacea. It can be challenging for humans to imagine in advance the downsides of the 'promised land.' And while a non-negotiated frame forces too many people to live within ill-fitting norms and mores, the gradual eclipse of that framework has resulted in thousands of Rorschach ink-blot representations of 'reality' – each driving a variant truth that its adherents too often loudly assert to be the *only* possible Truth (Hiebert 1999; Randall and Phoenix 2009; Gavins et al. 2016).

For some, the absence of a collectively identified authority figure together with an inability to assess the expertise of someone who is advocating a particular point of view has resulted in the rise of bizarre ideas, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and questionable but highly influential lay 'experts' (Cheal 1990, Gergen and Joseph 2003; Pavić 2013). We have exchanged the appointed, traditional authority figure for a tower of Babel – lots of things being said but little of it coherent, useful, or based upon systematic interrogation. That said, however, direct access to massive amounts information via the phone in one's pocket has also made it possible for many people who are bright and curious but lacking in access to formal education to become much more informed about the world around them (Lukes 2005).

Covid-19 has underscored the importance of a coherent and agreed-upon scientific method. In the United States of America, in particular, common agreement cannot be achieved to enact something so simple and rudimentary as mandatory mask-wearing in public spaces to help flatten the spread of Covid-19. Scholars have long been sounding the alarms warning that our democracy is struggling and drifting in an authoritarian direction (Offe 2011; Jebril et al. 2013;Taylor 2019), and the failure of urgent policy to be broadly adopted because many people no longer feel a part of a social corpus suggests that democracy needs a new agent. We contend here that digital technologies and social networking herald the possibility of a 'Fourth-Track Diplomacy,' a plausible antidote to the woes of postmodernity as it makes possible a collaborative, deliberated governance process by which people could come together to collectively discern and build upon a shared reality.

What Deliberation Does to Activate Democracy: Pathways to Empathy

When people engage ideas directly with others, particularly in small, facilitated groups

in which they have a chance to more deeply explore one another's views, they connect as *humans* with their co-explorers and can thereby begin to genuinely understand other people's perspectives (Gundersen and Goodney Lea 2013). This process provides an engine for the *verstehen* that Max Weber explored in his work, which is to say a deep knowing and appreciation – an *empathetic* understanding – of the other person's perspective (Elwell 1996). Weber's work was a response to the positivist world in which he found himself, but we arguably now have a means by which to actualise his vision. Practising dialogue and deliberation hones the citizenship skills that empower people to explore a range of views and to ascertain where they themselves stand, that is, what is my view (Offe 2011)? Essentially, dialoguing with others is the modern, digital version of the political pamphlet: instead of one person framing the argument for others to then discuss in a pub or town hall, everyone collectively has a chance to raise issues for exploring in a common, directly shared setting. This is true whether conducted in person or on social media such as Instagram. Through the process of co-exploration and co-construction of a shared understanding, democracy is collectively manifested.

Such engagement has been documented to impact participants' behaviours – they vote more, talk about issues with friends and family more, and write op-eds and letters to their political representatives (Gundersen and Lea 2013; Taylor 2019). This approach to discourse has a particularly significant impact on the views of conservatives, who tend to find themselves drawn towards more rigid, traditional ideas – if they can be motivated to engage, as conservatives are less inclined to be open to new experiences, which is what direct dialogue often feels like in societies that have emphasised passive observation of 'experts' debating in town hall meetings and on television news shows (Carney et al. 2008; Gundersen and Lea 2013; Zmigrod 2020).

Facilitated deliberation essentially prompts us to examine our values and how we might align with others around those values, which provide the structure for creating bridges to those that look, at first perhaps, to be diametrically opposed to our own way of thinking. While conservatives have been problematised as being too rigid, inflexible, and extreme in their views, and liberals like to think of themselves as enlightened and progressive, the reality is more complex: liberals must also examine their own biases (Theoharis 2020; Blake 2020). Fortunately, people are highly capable of engaging in such discourse with one another and often achieve significant self-reflection exactly because they are forced to interrogate another person's reality, examine how it differs from their own, and thereby understand the lived complexity of the other's perspective. We tend to construct 'the other' as some sort of two-dimensional avatar. Facilitated dialogue demands that we see and engage the complexity inherent in every person.

While dialogue in itself can help broaden people's views and empathy, it is much more powerful when that understanding can inform policy making. So, the next challenge

is to get municipal entities and policy makers to accept and incorporate citizen input, which is a process we regularly engage in courtrooms via a jury system. Often, though, government entities are otherwise resistant to engage citizens as partners in policy deliberations, seeing citizens as sources of passive input and votes but not as partners (Taylor 2019; Robinson-Jacobs 2020). However, we are at a tipping point, and some cities are trying new approaches. Pittsburgh, as an example, has created a system of 'Community Deliberative Forums' to help choose a new Police Chief and has now published guides to help other cities do the same (Cavalier 2018). How many different voices could be heard *before* a significant policy decision is made? Denmark has engaged citizens in virtual dialogues in direct interaction with politicians, but they found that politicians over-dominated the exchanges and that there tended to be a pretty consistent array of citizens that engaged (Jensen 2003). Those citizens were more likely to engage and to be more progressive in their views but, judging from the impact noted on more conservative citizens, efforts to recruit a wider array of participants is a good idea – both in terms of the impact of the dialogue but also with regard to the quality of the engagement. Dialogues are much richer when they incorporate a broad array of perspectives and life experiences.

The Current Moment: A Means to Respond to a Will

The current global moment lays bare the challenges before us as a global civilisation. Traditional diplomacy promotes a 'me-first' emphasis: advocate for your nation and what it needs and wants. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, demands that we work collaboratively to battle an unseen but deadly virus. As populations have grown, governance has become more distant and less representative of the people (Warren 2003; Warren 2009; Offe 2011). Corporations, political corruption, and lobbying efforts have more direct impact on the many system functions than do 'the people' (Schmitter 2000; Crouch 2008). The people have grown cynical as a result, causing them to be that much less engaged (Dalton 2004; Torcal and Monterro 2006; Jebril et al. 2013). But right now especially, we need reliable national and international guidance – from national and local health agencies as well as from entities like the WHO. A significant number of individuals, especially in the United States of America, are immovable with regard to not 'being made to wear' masks and are convinced that the pandemic is being overblown. They are dubious of their government and suspect it (or parts of it) has a nefarious intent. Some people even venture the possibility that the pandemic is all a ruse to keep us at home and move us online, as if we were at the doorstep of entering *The Matrix*. The characterising aspect of those who come to embrace conspiratorial theories and other controversial ideas is that they tend to be persons who have less access to *deliberative education and opportunities* that might allow them to actively explore and better understand the world in which they live and their stand on the issues it presents (Offe 2011).

Habermas (1962) described the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century public spheres as ones of extensive deliberation at cafés and salons by well-heeled citizens who were well informed by their reading of newspapers. That elitist enclave of erudite discourse gave way, he contends, to an era of industrialisation which produced a much larger, consumer-oriented society. Eventually, we were *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000). But then everything changed again halfway into the first decade of the new millennium: social media began to emerge. Eventually, this created vibrant online communities, and they were not so elitist. Indeed, they were wildly democratic – at first. However, as computing power accelerated, algorithms emerged and changed everything (O'Neil 2016; Noble 2018). Suddenly, the information traded on social media could be manipulated by corporations, governments, influencers, and hackers. Full democracy demands a strong capacity for *discernment* – the sort of skill one is likely to acquire when engaging in deliberation (Dahlberg 2010; Offe 2011; Black 2012).

Efforts such as The American Democracy Project (https://www.aascu.org/programs/ADP/), organised by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, attempt to broaden the reach of deliberative-based learning, but few Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are represented in its spaces, and those schools comprise a population that is often removed from such opportunities. Without adequate effort to engage *all* groups in direct, dialogic, representative democracy, you get what many around the world have been watching unfold in the United States of America: people on the streets for *months*. The system is clearly not inclusive if some people are relegated to protesting in the streets for so long *just to be heard*. If they cannot breathe, the rest of us cannot (or will not) hear (Florido and Peñaloza, 2020). Organisations like the National Issues Forum (https://www.nifi.org/) recruit everyday citizens to create guides that explore a policy realm that can then be used to subsequently engage other citizens to explore the topic via direct, small-group, facilitated dialogues.

We are also now at a point in the evolution of our technologies where they can provide many more informational resources to those outside post-secondary educational structures (Lukes 2005). Some groups have been very intentionally disconnected from the information that would allow them to better understand their political locations and interests, but now they can readily access extensive information even from just a smart phone (Anttiroiko 2003; Amelin et al. 2016). Such powerful mobile technology also equips us, at this point in human history, such that we could have much more direct democracy. It is ironic that we have been debating the use and security of mail-in ballots here in the United States of America as the November election approaches, when we could be using digital technologies to facilitate a safe and secure election (Laukkonen 2020). But more than that, we could also be using such technology to garner direct input from citizens to provide guidance on policy-making decisions,

though the methods by which best to do this are still being explored (Dahlberg 2010; Black 2012; Participedia, 2020). *Deebase* and *Consider It* are two online platforms in which anyone who would like to can explore and deliberate various issues.

Still, while we have the means (smart phones, social media) and the human capital (a wide array of experts and organisations dedicated to facilitating dialogue and deliberation), not every nation or municipality has the political will to integrate citizen input within our governance systems. Some municipalities make a special effort to engage citizen input, but too often the mindset is to have a town hall meeting or city council hearing as a means of allowing citizens to be perfunctorily heard. Typically, rules are deployed to ensure that not all views get equal time to be heard, which can allow lawmakers and others to manipulate the results of such deliberations towards friends or patrons they favour. But what if we could engage citizens directly in providing input on policies?

Reconceptualising Diplomacy for the Twenty-First Century: A Fourth Track

Traditional definitions of diplomacy have either stressed its main purpose – the art of resolving international difficulties peacefully – or its principal agents – sovereign nations, or its chief function – the management of international relations by negotiation (Stanzel 2018). Such a definition assumes state actors, symmetry of information, and clearly identifiable stakeholders with clearly delineated roles and responsibilities. However, today's postmodern world is messier. The interlocutors of today's diplomats are not necessarily their peers but instead comprise a wide range of people that may be affected or impacted by international relations.

Garrett Mattingly (1955) has argued that it is very striking how little diplomacy has changed from Bernard du Rosier in 1436 to his own time. From a white, masculine model that is premised on 'country first', changes in the structure of the international community have necessitated continual adaptations in diplomatic tactics (ibid.). Track 2 diplomacy includes civil society and academia but often those in the room are men and/or come from elite backgrounds. Track 3 diplomacy is a combination of the first two. Not only is there now greater public interest in diplomatic activity, but also growing demand by the public to participate in what has traditionally been the purview of diplomats and governments (ibid.). In addition, the advent of technology and social media now allow for non-state actors to also have a role in influencing foreign policy, putting pressure on state actors to act on shared intelligence and insights in real time (ibid.).

In terms of diplomacy work involving citizens, citizen diplomacy traditionally refers to 'how citizens as private individuals can make a difference in world affairs'

(McDonald 1991, 119). Conceptually, scholars have debated the differences between 'citizen-led' (Black 2010, 13; Sharp 2009, 287; Tyler and Beyerinck 2016) and 'state-led' (Gregory 2011, 351–352; Tyler and Beyerinck 2016) forms of citizen diplomacy. To overcome this strict dichotomy, others have proposed a variety of options such as 'network diplomacy' to depict the greater number of actors involved (Heine 2013, Thakur 2013); 'a jazzy dance' of coalitions to achieve specific goals (Khanna 2011, 22); 'communication technologies' to reconstruct traditional diplomacy such that it addresses citizens' concerns (Hochstetler 2013, 188; Seib 2012, 106); and 'convergence' through the acceptance of citizen diplomats as 'citizen ambassadors' in fulfilling official engagements (Copeland 2009, 169; Sharp and Wiseman 2012, 172). However, as Lee (2020) has highlighted, such representations restrict the conceptualisation of citizen diplomats to them being individuals whose existence is 'fixed' within the geographical limits of a single nation-state sovereignty. While scholars have explored and argued for the imagined, contested, fluid and multiple identities emerging under globalisation (Anderson 1983; Butler 1990; Hall 1987; Ong 1993; Storey 2003), this gap persists (Lee 2020).

There is a need for a new normative framework, as evidenced by the significantly changing world environment and the way in which we conduct political discourse. It is necessary to reconcile the interests of all stakeholders and build trust. This needs to be done in a way that allows governments to operate as sovereign actors but at the same time harnesses the influence and potential of other actors, including global citizens, as a new track in order to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We also need to go beyond the prism of the US and the anglophone world, as is usually associated with public diplomacy especially since September 11, 2001 (Melissen 2005).

At the Global Diplomacy Lab, a think-and-do tank turns diplomacy on its head by including non-traditional actors and using innovative methodologies to facilitate dialogue. We call this new track *Diplomacy 4.0.* The core of Diplomacy 4.0 is to link global and local opportunities. We are in an age in which ALL citizens could participate directly and *globally* in shared governance – governance that would be decentralised, non-authoritarian, and collaborative. What would that world look like? As we explore what values people might have in common across the planet, how might that change political and policy divides that now seem intractable? As Nye argued, countries that are likely to be more attractive in postmodern international relations are those that help to frame issues, whose culture and ideas are closer to prevailing international norms, and whose credibility abroad is reinforced by their values and policies. But this would likely radically change who is influencing our world's policies. If the merit of ideas and values were the guiding principles, would it be Donald Trump or Tsai Ing-wen; Jacinda Ardern or Jair Balsonaro?

We can see this process in motion already, as reflected by people erupting in protest

around the planet to support the Black Lives Matter movement and, in so doing, challenging the prejudicial behaviour evidenced within the United States' system of justice. The people of many nations banding together around common values can challenge the dominance of massive political entities like the United States of America and can potentially shame it into reforming itself by underscoring how its values just simply do not align with those of much of the planet. This is essentially what happened to help end the apartheid system in South Africa. The first author can vividly recall shanties across the 'diag' (centre) of the University of Michigan's Ann Arbor campus, erected there and on campuses around the globe to shame South Africa into reform. That eventually caused them to be banned from world cricket matches, which some say finally prompted the necessary change. That is fourth-track diplomacy, but in its nascent form. We now have the means to empower the people as global citizens to collaborate in a way that aligns more nations and peoples to common values that embody an elevation of everyone's humanity and human rights.

Some Successful Efforts that have Engaged Direct Citizen Deliberative Input

Some communities have experimented to this end. One of the most robust is a state-wide effort in West Virginia: the West Virginia Center for Civic Life (http://www.wvciviclife.org) actively engages citizens throughout the state to help understand and shape policy issues in partnership with non-profits and local financiers. Inclusive Dubuque (http://inclusivedbq.org) engaged citizens in exploring how to make their community more inclusive of all, and that initial effort has been sustained so that citizens continue to have input and involvement in many of the issues impacting their community. Horizon Foundation designed Speak (easy) Howard County (http://www.speakeasyhoward.org) and has used this programme to discuss mental health, nutrition, and even end-of-life planning in the county via direct engagement with its residents through faith communities.

The Baltimore Police had been developing a robust community engagement unit until the unrest after Freddie Gray died in police custody thinned resources, which was arguably precisely the time when citizen engagement might have made a profound difference in police-community relations. However, even where police agencies have reached out for citizen input, they do not always do a good job translating such input into policy. Minneapolis police had consulted with the NAACP, who had engaged community members for input and who advised the department to curtail their permitted use of choke holds well before the death of George Floyd in their custody, but the agency did not take heed of the suggestion (Robinson-Jacbos 2020). The National League of Cities (https://www.nlc.org) has a similar focus on direct civic engagement and open data and has had some impact on communities based upon this data-driven input. RDFG (http://www.reddotfoundation.org) manages the largest

open-source crowd map in the world, plotting incidents of sexual harassment and abuse and then identifying clusters of incidents on a global map (which allows one to zoom in to see incidents anywhere in the world at the street level). They leverage the data they collect to engage communities, their residents, and their local governments and policing entities to identify and address the reasons behind a cluster of incidents in a particular neighbourhood or community.

One notable aspect of all of the approaches described here is that they use small-group facilitators (at a table, if in a larger forum) to help draw out a range of views. People are fully capable of themselves facilitating a dialogue, but experienced facilitators can help. An adept facilitator does not dominate or script or otherwise try to control a dialogue. Ideally, they simply provide a little bit of oil to keep the interaction smooth and flowing, drawing people into the conversation and gently moderating those who might be inclined to dominate until the group itself reaches a rhythm. There are now hundreds and hundreds of groups all around the world with trained facilitators and even topical content that could be leveraged to build the civic muscle required to enact a fourth track of diplomacy. If we could develop a broad capacity to engage citizens in deliberation within each nation, we could then create spaces where everyday citizens could engage with other citizens from among the global community to understand and propose policy approaches and positions for addressing *global* challenges. What would the Covid-19 response have looked like if citizens from around the planet had been able to interact in ways that built empathy for the big, world picture? Would the poorest 25 per cent of countries be struggling in so many associated ways because the economic impact was so much more pronounced in places where families have no margin at all, or might people from richer countries have insisted that more aid go to places such as Yemen (*The Guardian* 2020)?

A Genuinely Democratic and Inclusive World: Build the Playing Field and They Will Come

It can seem a fool's errand to try to engage civil discourse in societies in which political discourse has been so vitriolic. Where is the common ground when some will outright deny the existence of any impact of an overtly racialised past while others live still oppressed by it? But, arguably, this is precisely when such efforts should be engaged. Some in the dialogue field discount some individuals as irredeemable. If your ideas are too 'extreme,' then you must not even be allowed a seat in the circle. Some contend that we have to use certain phrases and follow certain procedures in order to ensure that everyone is 'safe' in the circle. But this creates a circle of 'Whos,' to reference a classic Dr. Seuss tale. Everyone is happy and agreeable and properly engaging the talking stick. But how does the 'Grinch' then join the conversation? As noted above, *all* can benefit markedly from exploring a range of ideas with other people.

Deliberative spaces must be:

1. *Radically* inclusive: No avatars where you 'imagine' alternative views, nor suggestions that some people just cannot behave 'properly' enough to participate. Set ground rules and expectations, but ensure the spaces include a range of backgrounds, experiences, ways of thinking, and attitudes. It will be harder, but that is what makes it radical.

2. Facilitated: Municipalities and other entities must expect to pay for, *de rigueur*, a competent, trained, seasoned facilitator to facilitate each small group or table in a larger group. The facilitator is less traffic cop than inclusion companion: they should be actively seeking ways to ensure all have space and can be heard. One need not agree but all must at least consider all views.

3. Tolerant: Everyone must be coaxed and reminded that ALL views are welcome to be aired. One must be civil, but civil does not mean using the 'correct' language or otherwise stepping gingerly around controversial topics (Gundersen and Lea 2013). It means digging into hard topics in a way in which everyone can be genuinely heard, hence the need for a competent facilitator. If someone is outright abusive to anyone else, then they must be reminded of the ground rules and dismissed if they again ignore the ground rules. Facilitators must be mindfully non-partisan and not advocate for any particular view while they are facilitating.

4. Attentive to the inclusivity of partner groups: Municipalities will need to engage partner organisations in the dialogue and deliberation space, and there should be a stated, mindful process for doing so. Do not, for instance, engage a group in which all of the leaders are White and/or men. If an organisation does not engage or prioritise diversity within its own structures, how well will it be able to engage it in communities or projects? Universities could also be great partners under the umbrella of efforts like America's Democratic Promise. Those like the University of the District of Columbia or Berea College, that are anchored to a marginalised community that is under-engaged by deliberative opportunities, are great partners for bringing in a much broader array of voices.

5. Incentivising: Citizen engagement efforts should offer childcare and some kind of incentive to participants. Some undertakings, such as Washington, DC's *Communicating Across Cultures* initiative to explore the intersection of gentrification and culture, a partnership between the DC Arts Council and Howard University's communications scholar, Natalie Hopkinson, provide a meal, entertainment, and a small gift card to participants, which people appreciate – especially now. People *want* to

participate in dialogues, but a little push makes it more likely they will opt to try this than to stay home and watch Netflix. Providing a small acknowledgement of the value of their input can help to encourage and normalise this activity.

Concluding Thoughts

Sociologists have long argued for the exposure hypothesis, which contends that exposure to the 'other' promotes knowledge and acceptance. The 'other' becomes known and, we find, much more like us than not. The challenge is to provide spaces for people to come together and engage – *off the streets*. When people are on the streets actively protesting for three continuous months, then democracy has failed to incorporate a sufficient representation of voices. That said, one might also observe the Black Lives Matter movement as example of a sort of spontaneous fourth-track diplomacy. People from around the world are standing up for Black Americans because they can see the hypocritical legacy that has grown within and alongside the United States of America. This is a powerful example of other nations being able to join together to elevate their voices to challenge one of the world's largest and most powerful countries. Imagine what could be done if that energy were cultivated and routinely engaged. It will not be an easy path. The autocratic turn in leadership around the globe underscores how upsetting a concept true representative democracy is. Elites detest it as it holds them accountable. Even citizens can sometimes be convinced to lend their vote towards the elevation of an autocratic administration in hopes that the autocratic energies will be applied only to those they wish to marginalise, but autocracy rarely incorporates internal limits.

Still, municipalities around the planet are well positioned in our age of social media to engage their residents directly and, in so doing, build a twenty-first-century railway: a fourth track of diplomacy. An entity such as the United Nations[1] could help immensely with this. It would be a messy, decentralised process – democracy tends to be, but facilitators are widely available and up for the job. They will also learn a lot by doing this work. Some may try to 'control the chaos,' but they will, with practice, eventually learn the *zen* of facilitation: you cannot control it, but you can hold it and give it just enough structure so that people can really see and hear one another. Once they do, their own curiosities will sustain it.

Deliberation builds in all of us the capacity to genuinely consider a range of views and can make it harder for any of us to accept marginal ideas as they do not typically

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1   In full disclosure: The first author is CEO of Red Dot Foundation Global (RDFG), which is an ECOSOC contributing member to the U.N. RDFG also holds an Executive Committee seat overseeing the Social Development Groups.

endure against real people, who come from a range of views and experiences, actively exploring together. By engaging in deliberation with our fellow national and global citizens, we begin to figure out or *formulate* (Offe 2011) what we think, why we think it, and what we might want to do about it. Creating that in any nation would be transformative but doing it across nations and networking the planet – *that* would be revolutionary. That is the fourth track that we call upon all of us to begin building, together and deliberately.

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Dialogue in Lockdown: Online Dialogue and its Lessons Amidst Rising Popularism

Andrew Smith

Abstract: In March 2020, the UK government imposed a national lockdown in an attempt to halt the spread of Coronavirus. The measures came into force overnight causing people to adapt rapidly to a new and unprecedented situation. Faith groups responded quickly broadcasting services online and setting up systems of support for members of their community. In Birmingham, a number of interfaith events were initiated using online meeting platforms such as Zoom. This paper will analyse three online interfaith dialogues that I was involved in. The first was a series of weekly dialogues I hosted, the second was an interfaith iftar hosted by the Bishop of Birmingham, organised by myself and the third were youth dialogues run by The Feast youth organisation. The events will be described and analysed taking into consideration their structure, content and philosophy, drawing on dialogue theories to explore their methodologies and intended outcomes. The analysis of the events considers the challenges and opportunities of developing constructive group dialogue online, power dynamics that were exposed and how access and familiarity with software raised issues of inclusion. Safeguarding is discussed with reference to the intersection between safeguarding and power to control conversation. The paper was written as Black Lives Matter protests took place challenging the effectiveness of online activity to counter popularism and prejudice. The physical protests came shortly after several major religious festivals were obliged to be held online, consequently, the paper will conclude with a reflection on this phenomenon and the connection between online and off-line activity.

Dialogue During Lockdown

The year 2020 will always be remembered as the year of the global Coronavirus pandemic, a new and deadly disease that spread rapidly across the world during the first few months of the year causing governments to enact drastic and far-reaching legislation curtailing the free movement of citizens in order to stop the disease spreading. On 23 March 2020 the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced that the country was going into a 'lockdown' with the following information:

> From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction – you must stay at home.

Canon Dr Andrew Smith has been involved in faith-based youth work and interfaith dialogue since 1988. He brought these two disciplines together in 2000 by developing a model of youth dialogue that forms the basis for the work of the charity The Feast. Dr Smith is a regular speaker on interfaith issues both in the UK and overseas.

Because the critical thing we must do is stop the disease spreading between households.

That is why people will only be allowed to leave their home for the following very limited purposes:

- shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible

- one form of exercise a day – for example a run, walk, or cycle – alone or with members of your household

- any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person

- travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home.

That's all – these are the only reasons you should leave your home.

You should not be meeting friends. If your friends ask you to meet, you should say No.

You should not be meeting family members who do not live in your home.

You should not be going shopping except for essentials like food and medicine – and you should do this as little as you can. And use food delivery services where you can.

If you don't follow the rules the police will have the powers to enforce them, including through fines and dispersing gatherings. (Johnson, B. 2020)

In Birmingham, where I live and work, faith communities responded quickly by providing prayer and worship online and caring for the most vulnerable through foodbanks and preparing hot meals that could be delivered to those unable to get out. It became apparent, however, there was very little engagement between faiths, despite having been a number of interfaith activities in Birmingham for several decades. I decided to explore the idea of running some interfaith dialogue sessions online whilst we were unable to meet face to face, this paper will outline three different models of dialogue and analyse the way that engaging online differs from face to face meeting and what challenges or opportunities it presents. The common factor in all is that they used the online conference platform Zoom which was being widely used for work meetings and social activities (Sherman 2020). While other similar products were available, Zoom was chosen for all three case studies so will be the one described and reflected on, although the reflections would apply to alternative products such as Skype or Microsoft Teams.

Before describing the specific dialogue events, I will outline the way Zoom worked as it was available at the time of writing as this description is applicable for all three scenarios. Each Zoom meeting is set up by the organiser, whom Zoom refers to as the

'host', who sends an invitation to participants with a web-link to the meeting and a password required for them to gain access. When participants log-on they are asked to enter their password and then are placed in a 'waiting room' while the host decides whether to permit them access or not. Once in the meeting, other participants appear in a series of uniformly sized rectangular boxes, and up to twenty-five people can be seen on a computer screen at one time; this is significantly lower if being accessed on a smartphone. People can choose whether to have their camera on and be seen – the usual option – or turn it off and just have their name or a static picture visible. People can choose to have a 'virtual background' which masks the real backdrop they are set against (usually their home during lockdown) and their microphone can be muted either by themselves or the host. The other participants can be displayed in 'gallery mode', where all can be seen in equal size, or 'speaker mode', where the person speaking fills the screen. Participants also see themselves unless they switch off the 'self-view', which means others can see them, but they can no longer see themselves. There is a 'chat' function where comments can be typed. This can be set by the host so that comments are always seen by everyone, are only seen by the host or where people can send private messages to anyone in the group. Meetings can be recorded, which is indicated for everyone by a small red light and there is the facility for the host to send people into small breakout groups during a meeting. Finally, the position of people on the screen is set by the Zoom algorithms and cannot be manipulated by the host or participants. Furthermore, the position on the screen varies from person to person so each participant's view of how the other people are arranged on the screen is unique to them.

Case Study One: The Birmingham Conversations

My current role is Director of Interfaith Relations for the Rt Revd David Urquhart, Anglican Bishop of Birmingham, and I have been involved in interfaith work since the mid 1990s running a great variety of dialogue activities. It was this experience that I used to run two distinctive dialogue events which I shall be using as source material for this paper. The first is the Birmingham Conversations – a series of dialogues that have run since 2014 and which have encouraged people to meet regularly to discuss issues relating to life in Birmingham[1]. The second is an annual iftar meal that I co-ordinate and that Bishop David hosts for Muslims and Christians during Ramadan. Finally, I shall be reflecting on the dialogue led by the youth organisation The Feast, which I founded in 2009 and is based on the youth dialogue I described in, *The Role of Young People in Christian–Muslim Dialogue* (2004).

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1   Birmingham Conversations. Available at https://www.fncbham.org.uk/birmingham-conversations/

There are many different philosophies and theories of dialogue; some of the main reasons people engage in this task are succinctly summarised by Graham Jarvis as friendship, understanding, challenge and co-operation (Jarvis 2016, 13). The online Birmingham Conversations sought to fulfil all four of these in different measure. They were set up as an opportunity to strengthen existing friendships, although new friendships were made during the process. The themes discussed led to new understanding, and ideas were challenged, particularly around beliefs of God's activity regarding the pandemic. Finally, hearing how different communities were responding to the pandemic meant that we could support one another by reducing the chance of false rumours or suspicions growing that people were not obeying the 'lockdown' procedures properly. There were reported instances of far–right groups doing just this, and the conversations were one channel where these could be discredited (Commission for Countering Extremism 2020, 3).

The Birmingham Conversation meetings ran for nine weeks from 1–2pm every Tuesday. The time was chosen arbitrarily, recognising that many people were no longer in a regular work pattern so would, possibly, be free for an hour's conversation during the day. The initial invites went to people who had participated in the various Birmingham Conversations programmes that had been run over the previous five years. The overall theme for the series was 'Inspired For...' and sought to open up opportunity to reflect on themes and ideas pertinent to the enforced lockdown. The topics for the nine sessions were Hope, Endurance, Solitude, Grief, Joy, Despair, Freedom, Trust and Peace. People were invited to bring any thoughts or ideas they had from their own faith tradition that spoke into this theme. Each week a speaker would explore the theme with a brief talk before opening it up for a general discussion, the speakers came from Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh backgrounds and included male and female presenters. Participants were not chosen as representatives of their religion or community: it was made clear that everyone, including the speakers, were participating in a personal capacity relating their own perceptions and experiences. Leonard Swidler points out that most dialogue takes place between people with no formal religious status and that this is often more fruitful than seeking representation, which is hard to quantify or guarantee (Swidler 2014, 23). Participants also came from a wide variety of theological perspectives including those with an exclusivist or absolutised theology of religion. It was made clear what the aims of the dialogue were and the people with a more exclusivist theology contributed fully by listening, speaking and being empathetic to the views of others. Our inclusion of people who hold views that might be described as exclusivist is in contrast to Swidler's approach in which he argues that 'only those who have a deabsolutised understanding of truth will in fact be able to enter into dialogue' (2014, 24), or, as a caricatured critique of Hickian pluralism describes it, 'you can only be nice to people if you agree with them' (Cheetham 2013, 43). Creating an 'ethical space characterised and created by meeting

and encounter' (2013, 149) where individuals meet open to the possibilities in the encounter with the other while maintaining their own ontological and theological integrity is fundamental to the Birmingham Conversation project, whether taking place online or face to face. This philosophy encourages participation from those who believe their faith to hold absolute truths, enabling them to articulate them constructively, while being open to hearing beliefs or truths espoused by adherents of different faiths.

Focusing on themes that started from an emotional base and from there sought to explore religious teachings and personal experiences resonates with Karen Armstrong's philosophy of Socratic Dialogue which is fundamentally based on relationships and understanding rather than trying to win heated arguments (Sleap and Sener 2013, 24). In their description of Armstrong's philosophy, as described in her 'Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life', Sleap and Sener highlight the need for this approach to dialogue to be conducted in a spirit of conversation between friends, which takes patience, understanding, and generosity (2013, 25). The Birmingham Conversations embodied this approach although, as with any group, the friendship dynamics were varied as some participants had known each other for many years, others for a short time and some met online for the first time. However, the sessions were run with the notion that we seek to build and strengthen friendships even if we are unable to meet face to face and are meeting for the first time. Armstrong's vision for dialogue includes the importance of listening, trust, and empathy. All these were embedded in the Birmingham Conversations approach, and conversations around experiences of loneliness, grief, and despair required trust for people to share their stories. Furthermore, the dialogues worked best as people listened attentively to the experiences and religious perspectives of others and were willing to empathise with the lived experience of the contributors. The online methodology changed the dynamic of relationships in comparison to face-to-face encounters as it was much harder to tell if people were attentively listening and it required a degree of trust that the participants were behaving according to assumed good behaviour in meetings such as including other people, out of view of the camera, who might be disrespectful of what is being said.

Case Study Two: An Online Iftar

Each year during Ramadan, Bishop David hosts an iftar meal for Muslim and Christian guests. These have been taking place since 2014 and have always been held at his residence with space for up to twenty-five guests made up of approximately equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. The approach has always been that Bishop David invites clergy from across Birmingham who can attend on the condition that they bring a Muslim friend or neighbour with them. This has enabled people from across the city to be involved and to ensure the inclusion of people who rarely get

invited to formal receptions with the Bishop including good numbers of women and young people. The usual format is for there to be time for socialising followed by an informal discussion chaired by Bishop David usually around themes such as fasting and spiritual disciplines. At the appointed time, the fast is opened with fruit, traditionally dates, and a drink, which is followed by a time of prayer. Space is provided for Muslims and Christians to pray separately so that they can remain faithful to their tradition, although they are invited to observe the prayers of the others should they choose to. The evening concludes with the sharing of a meal together. It has been part of my role to organise these iftar meals each year, often linking with organisations such as The Ramadan Tent Project[2].

In 2020 Ramadan occurred during the lockdown and Ramadan Tent encouraged people to run virtual iftars, I worked with Bishop David to develop that idea in Birmingham. Recognising the difficulty of building friendship and having conversation with people unknown to you online we decided to invite people who had been before and use the opportunity to renew and strengthen relationships rather than attempt to build new ones. In discussion with Muslim friends, it was decided to finish the online meeting before the prayer time so that people could pray at home and then eat together with their family, rather than eat whilst watching other people. Consequently, the programme was presentation-led with a welcome by Bishop David followed by reflections from a Christian and a Muslim on how they had kept up their religious observance and practice under lockdown. This was followed by a *nasheed* sung by a Muslim and a video of the *adhan* (call to prayer) was shared so that all could hear it. The evening concluded with us opening the fast by eating fruit and drinking water before Bishop David offered a blessing.

This form of dialogue differs from many approaches as it is explicitly hosted by Bishop David, yet is organised as part of the Muslim celebrations during Ramadan. Whilst these iftar meals have been appreciated over the years, the idea of a Christian hosting an iftar is critiqued by some who raise questions about the messages being given out by a Christian organising an Islamic event (Wilson 2019, 105). Many theorists also argue that people of different faiths should be engaged in planning dialogues (Swidler 2014, 28). The iftar meal was planned by myself in liaison with the Bishop's staff and while I did discuss ideas with a Muslim friend, it is clearly an event hosted by Bishop David. The iftar, as organised by myself, is a lived example of the 'theological depth of the host-guest relationship' encountered in the Christian scriptures (Anglican Communion Network for Inter-Faith Concerns 2008, 13). The document 'Generous Love' which sets out an Anglican theology of inter-faith relations describes this relationship thus:

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2   The Ramadan Tent Project. Available at https://www.ramadantentproject.com

> The challenges to the practice of hospitality are many and serious. Our guests may be suspicious, fearful, or hostile, as we may be when we are guests. There may always be failures to reciprocate on either side. It is possible to use the practice of hospitality, not truly to accept and to recognise one another, but rather to suppress difference through a superficial bonhomie. We have to learn that being embarrassed, perplexed and vulnerable may be part of our calling as both guests and hosts, for it is when we welcome one another in all our differences that we are truly enriched by one another. (Anglican Communion Network for Inter-Faith Concerns 2008)

While there is a connection with friends, and the discussion and activities during the evening lead to greater understanding – the first two of Jarvis' motivations for dialogue described above (Jarvis 2016, 13) – the evening is focussed around the ritual and practice of opening the fast and sharing an iftar meal together. During the event there is an active and fluid dynamic in the relationships between the Bishop as host and the Muslims as guests; the host-guest relationships are not static but 'oscillate among participants as various gifts are offered and received' (Wallis 2012, 107). In this instance the Bishop of Birmingham is the host of the event but the guest at the iftar rituals, while the Muslims are guests of the Bishop but take on the role of hosts as the opening of the fast takes place. This willingness to be both host and guest has the potential to enrich through the practice as well as the verbal dialogue element of the occasion.

The online iftar sought to keep those elements in the evening, with Bishop David clearly the host of the event and there was a sense of shared participation through the use of the adhan and eating fruit and drinking water. This shared participation enables participants to encounter and understand the beliefs and practices of others in a different way to purely textual encounters through discussion or text-based study. John C. Maraldo explores this connection between textual and experiential encounters in his study on inter-monastic engagement between Benedictine and Buddhist monks demonstrating how their experience of living together and sharing in, or being present during, religious ceremonies deepened their understanding of the faith of the other as well as their own faith, arguing that

> Practice not only enhances but also transforms understanding in the alternative sense. Engaging in practices may not only increase the amount of content understood; it can change the way that one understands. (Maraldo 2010, 114)

During the iftar, both online or in person, we share in the ritual of opening the fast and listen together to the adhan. At that point prayers are offered separately, recognising the distinctiveness of each faith. Maraldo acknowledges the depth of understanding that can be gained by participating in the practices of others, but that this is done not by a total suspension of one's own background beliefs (112) but by

entering into those practices rooted in one's own faith but ready to remove barriers not distinctions (115). This describes some of the process taking place at the iftar, where barriers are removed and new levels of understanding are reached, while participants stay rooted within their tradition. This type of encounter opens up the possibility of understanding through presence, observation, and participation rather than simply through discussion which for some people is enriching while for others it feels like a step into the unknown. Careful use of reflective practice can be helpful for people new to this type of encounter (Gaston 2017, 12). Although that is difficult to facilitate in an informal gathering, it can be encouraged through the use of thoughtful questions during the meal at the end of the event. This becomes much harder online and is one of the ways in which the face-to-face encounter enables deeper connections between people.

Case Study Three: The Feast

The Feast is a Christian charity working in Birmingham, Luton, and East London. It was founded in 2009 with the aim of bringing together teenagers from different faiths and cultures to 'Build Friendships, Explore Faith, and Change Lives'[3]. The face-to-face programmes take on a number of different forms but typically involve a small group of young people from different faiths and include social activities that build a fun and constructive environment for faith-based discussions focused on the interests of the young people. The work of The Feast seeks to equip the teenagers for a meaningful ethical relationship with peers who are radically different to themselves in terms of religion and culture and to do this whilst maintaining their own integrity of identity. Barnes develops this philosophy in his rich and complex work 'Theology and the Dialogue of Religions' wherein he posits the question, based on the philosophical works of Levinas, 'How can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?' (Barnes 2002, 68). Within the activities of The Feast this is played out by helping the young people explore and articulate their own cultural and religious identity whilst encouraging them to see how their identity can be informed and enriched through the encounters with others, where they can grasp that their identity is not 'the 'achievement' of an isolated self, but the product of an inter-subjective process' (2002, 119). The formation of friendship between the young people as a significant part of this identity formation is fundamental to the work of The Feast and the structuring of encounters to enable this is planned carefully. The way and means of meeting, the place and atmosphere are all considered so as to enable the young people to meet in ways that affirm and welcome every participant. Bohm describes the importance of a dialogue group sitting in a circle to create the environment which does not favour any one person (Bohm 2004, 17). Whilst many activities of The Feast are physically active and do not require anyone to

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3   The Feast. Available at www.thefeast.org.uk

sit, this principle of creating the environment which does not favour any single person or group is a basic tenet of the work.

The conversations between the young people are structured, contrary to Bohm's philosophies of dialogue working without a leader (2004, 17) and that it is crucial that the group is not going to decide what to do about anything but to be an empty space where anything may come in (2004, 19). The nature of youth work requires leadership and some structure in order to ensure safeguarding and to ensure that all the young people are able to participate fully and equally. The experience of The Feast is that structure combined with a light-touch leadership and clear outcomes is attractive to young people and the gatekeepers who authorise their participation. There is some overlap with Bohm's theory as the leadership of the discussions is carefully facilitated so that the voices of the young people are prioritised over the adult leaders. There is, however, a framework to the discussions described as 'The Guidelines for Dialogue' a readily available and widely translated document which underpins the nature of all the conversations and concludes with the instruction that anyone can ask for a discussion to be stopped if they feel uncomfortable. This injunction has rarely been used, yet is often cited by the young people as something they appreciate as it helps them have confidence in the process (Smith 2018, 72) or to use the language of Levinas that their self will not be crushed in the process of encountering the other.

The online activities of The Feast have included discussions using the Zoom platform, and this has also allowed for a meeting between Muslims in the UK and Christians in Australia and another between Muslims and Christians in the UK and Muslim, Christian, and Jewish young people in the USA, with many in both meetings experiencing their first interfaith encounter. Other activities have included quizzes, games, and a baking activity where ingredients were sent to each person's house and then people cooked 'together' whilst being online receiving instruction and having conversations whilst baking. The online experience enabled the work of The Feast to continue during the lockdown and created new opportunities such as the international gathering. However, it also raised some new challenges, primarily the divide between those who could easily access the online meetings and those for whom it was difficult or impossible due to limited access to computers or smartphones or lack of data to allow them to be online for an hour or more for the activity. This 'digital divide' was more pronounced than was first expected with the common trope of the twenty-first century teenager as someone constantly online with unlimited access to the internet. It became apparent that, while this was the reality for some, many teenagers are cut off from this online existence – a fact now recognised by other charities and statutory bodies. The example of a mother reported in The Guardian newspaper was typical of many families connected with The Feast:

> One woman living in London said she was having to choose between food and
> data. She spends almost half of her weekly household budget on top-up credit
> to allow her teenage daughters to access home-schooling resources. "We only
> have one phone between the three of us and I have to limit the time that they
> are online because I can't afford any more." (Kelly 2020)

The second challenge was around parental consent ,as the safeguarding policy of The
Feast requires parents to consent to their children participating in the activities and
for them to be the point of contact for registering with the online meeting. Some
parents, happy for the children to participate in face-to-face activities were reluctant
to give permission for them to participate in online activities, expressing concern
about online safeguarding despite The Feast having a robust safeguarding policy,
that includes specific measures for online activities. These concerns were widespread
enough to limit but not curtail the online activities.

Democratisation of Dialogue

Having described the three online dialogue activities and reflected on their
philosophical and theological approaches I will now turn to a reflection on the
process of using Zoom for interfaith dialogue, drawing lessons and reflections from
each of these experiences. The reflection will consider how to create the environment
for dialogue online and the complexity of the power dynamics in play when using
Zoom, or similar platforms, for dialogue.

What became apparent as we started to use Zoom for the Birmingham Conversations
was that, for those with access to the internet, it provided an easily accessed and
relatively simple-to-use way of meeting. This was especially important at a time when
meeting face to face was prohibited and people were anxious about feeling isolated from
family, friends and across communities. The use of technology meant that there was
no requirement to book a venue with all the challenges of finding one in a convenient
location, within budget and that is conducive to good conversation; neither does it
require the organisation to shoulder the cost of providing refreshments. Furthermore,
participants only had to give an hour of their time as there was no travelling to and
from the venue and it was easy to include people whatever their physical location,
including participants from overseas. The result was that it became possible to run
a nine-week dialogue programme with an average attendance of 12 people, most of
whom lived in Birmingham, but it also included people from London, Canada and,
on one occasion, the Caribbean. This way of meeting did create a sense of community,
one of the aims of dialogue described by Jarvis at the start of this paper (Jarvis 2016,
13), with people choosing to continue to meet and set aside an hour a week to meet
with others. The need for community at a time of physical isolation was acutely felt
and creating and sustaining those relationships through the online meeting was a
valid reason for dialogue alongside the desire for understanding and sharing of ideas

(Bohm 2004, 37). Lederach explores the importance of relationships in peacebuilding after conflict. Whilst the pandemic was neither caused by nor resulted in conflict, the sudden and total disruption to everyday life meant that Lederach's observations are pertinent. He states that, 'When relationships collapse, the center of social change does not hold. And correspondingly, rebuilding what has fallen apart is centrally the process of rebuilding relational spaces that hold things together' (Lederach 2005, 75). This sense of collapsing relationships due to physical limitations and the desire to create a relational space reflects clearly the sense of what the problem was and how the Birmingham Conversations could be one 'relational space' that would help to hold things together for the participants.

These factors meant that the Birmingham Conversations were attended by a wider variety of people than the face-to-face series that have been held previously, including people with limited mobility, and they were able to be held more frequently and over a longer period of time. The nature of the software resulted in all participants being displayed in the same way with no distinction for status, gender or ethnicity, and these combined elements led to a 'democratisation' of participation with people able to attend from any location and being present as equal to everyone else in the meeting. The only restrictions were online access and availability. The latter was of little concern to many people during the first few weeks of the lockdown as the suddenness of the government announcement on 23rd March meant people's diaries were cleared and new patterns of work had not been established. One reason for concluding the conversations at the end of June was that people were noticeably busier and attendance was starting to decline. This 'democratisation' was in evidence at the iftar meeting which usually takes places in the grand surroundings of Bishop's Croft, the working home of the Bishop of Birmingham. While many people appreciate the invitation to such a beautiful building and to be with the Bishop in person for the iftar, it reinforces the power dynamic inherent in the host-guest relationship with some people feeling privileged but overawed by the invitation. During the online iftar people still got to see and talk to the Bishop but the visible divide between host and guest was significantly reduced and the Bishop was visually presented in the same way as the other participants.

This ease of access enabled The Feast to run youth sessions between young people in the UK and Australia and in the UK and the USA, with the time zones being the biggest obstacle once internet access had been established for all. The universal way that people's images appear diminished divisions between different groups. In face-to-face encounters with groups of young people new to the work it is common for them to enter the room and sit together at a distance from those of different faiths. With the online encounter each person was in their own home and saw everyone else presented equally and in a, seemingly, random position on the screen. However, the

algorithm that Zoom uses means that no one can control the position of people on the screen and that the view each participant has is different to how others are viewing the meeting. Also, people's images move around the screen depending on whether they are speaking or if their camera is turned off or switched on. This can affect the way people perceive what is happening and was evidenced during The Feast meeting with the group from Australia. I had been tasked with recording the meeting and when it was viewed people commented that the Christian young people were on one side of the screen, the Muslims were on the other and the leaders were displayed in the middle between the two groups. Visually it ran counter to everything The Feast is aiming to achieve with the young people divided and appearing to be kept apart by the adults. However, no one else in the meeting had that view of participants they all had the groups mixed and the adults spread around the screen. In creating a dialogue environment in which all participants feel equal it is important to inform participants of this issue and to be aware of any implied divisions that might occur for them due to the software's positioning of participants. How people perceive meetings and respond to the positioning of people would benefit from further study if this type of online dialogue is to continue and grow.

The visual presentation on Zoom where each person, usually just their head and shoulders, appears in a small box alongside the other participants has a flattening effect as if one is looking at a wall of faces and is a far cry from the circle shape for a meeting espoused by Bohm and others. In many of the meetings it was hard to get a flow of conversation with people uncertain as to the etiquette of how to indicate they wanted to speak and often delayed as microphones were still switched off. 'We can't hear you, you're still muted' might be a defining sentence of the pandemic for many people as this was said at the start of many contributions in whatever setting they were using Zoom.

Creating a good atmosphere for discussion is always important but takes on a new urgency online: the limitations of technology and the distractions of being in one's own home make it harder to become 'immersed within the practice', which Hedges, drawing on Gadamer's philosophy, argues is important for dialogue (Hedges 2016, 9). For example, as only one person can speak at a time and everyone in the meeting can hear them, casual greetings between friends are public and the small informal groups that tend to form before a meeting are unable to happen, thus creating a more formal atmosphere. Some of the solutions we developed to create a more immersive atmosphere included asking participants to turn off their 'self-view', as it was apparent that people were constantly drawn to look at themselves during the meetings rather than focus on others. We encouraged people to sit back and at a slight angle to the computer to create a visual more akin to how people sit at a meeting, the use of breakout groups where people were only meeting with six or seven others created

a more informal environment and encouraging people to keep their microphones on, rather than muted, resulted in conversations flowing more naturally. The Feast used a variety of games at the start of their online discussions to break through any awkwardness and formality. These enabled all participants to contribute and to start the meeting with activities that the young people found entertaining and created an atmosphere similar to the face-to-face events The Feast run.

Power Dynamics in Online Dialogue

Bohm articulates a clear description of his ideal of non-hierarchical dialogue free from authority where anything can be talked about (Bohm 2004, 49). The work of The Feast has, as described above, worked counter to this and run its events with facilitators and leaders. In a youth work setting there is a clearly defined power dynamic between the adults and the young people which is required and needs to be moderated with robust safeguarding policies in order to prevent the power of the leader being used to exploit participants.

The online environment for dialogue continued the need for strong and clear safeguarding with new protocols implemented by The Feast to keep young people safe, for example making sure that the young people were in a family room rather than a bedroom when taking part, having a minimum of two leaders online at all times, and ensuring direct contact with parents for each activity. However, meeting online exposed power dynamics in both the Birmingham Conversations and the iftar, some of which exist in face-to-face meetings, while others are unique to the use of Zoom and the online meeting space.

In any dialogue where people seek to meet with an 'ethos of mutuality' (Sherto 2015, 21) there is an inbuilt imbalance between the host who has organised the meeting, booked and paid for the venue, set the agenda and sent out the invitations and the other participants who accept the invitation and hospitality. While there can be a planning group drawing on different faiths, as happened with the face-to-face Birmingham Conversations, the power and influence is spread amongst that group but they still have access to the planning and invitation list that others are not party to. Meetings might be lead with a light-touch facilitation, but that person retains the power and responsibility to ensure that guidelines for ethical dialogue are adhered to, meetings are kept to time, and that everyone is able to contribute fully. All these aspects remain in the online environment; as the host, I had arranged payment for the Zoom account and retained control of the invite list while also trying to ensure a wider representation of faiths. The reason for retaining control were twofold, firstly if the number of attendees exceeds twenty-five the images are not able to all be displayed on one screen, so no one is able to see all the participants at the same time, making group discussion difficult. Secondly there have been a number of reported incidents of

'Zoom-Bombing', where meetings were hacked by people posting violent and abusive images (Paul 2020) and I was concerned to avoid this happening.

The host of a Zoom meeting has power that exceeds that of a facilitator in a face-to-face meeting. Zoom meetings have a default 'waiting room' so each participant has to be let into the meeting by the host. There is no way for participants to circumvent this. The host, therefore, has complete control over entry. Perhaps most significantly, the host has the power to control who is speaking, not just by giving them permission to speak as they might in a face-to-face meeting, but they have the ability to mute the participants at any point of the meeting. Participants can choose to mute or unmute themselves, but only the host retains the power to mute others or allow others to be unmuted in order to contribute. One way that we sought to undermine this power was through the use of breakout groups where the host loses the power to mute people and encouraged everyone to remain unmuted so that they could talk to one another without seeking permission from the leader of the breakout group.

The host also controls the 'Chat' facility where participants can send written messages. These can either be sent to everyone, just to the host or to specific participants depending on how the host has set the meeting, giving them additional power within the group. The host can choose to set the chat so that people can only contact them, which places the host at the centre of all written communication. If the host sets the chat function so that messages are seen by everyone, the result is that there can be communication within the group. However, whenever a comment is typed it is flagged up on everyone's screen. This potentially distracts people from what a speaker is saying or allows people to disagree with or criticise the speaker while they are presenting, shifting power to participants in a way that is unlikely to occur in a face-to-face dialogue. Finally, if the setting is such that people can send direct messages to one another it can create some conversation between people, but this takes place aside from the main discussion, which rarely happens in a live meeting as people can be heard if they are chatting and are usually called into line by the facilitator. The ability to send messages privately to other people means that participants can be contacted by members of the group they might prefer not to speak to, a situation some might find intimidating. Each of these settings favours those who can listen and type simultaneously and who feel comfortable putting thoughts and questions into written form. Each setting has both a positive and negative impact on the discussion and the power dynamics of the group which needs to be considered and which will influence the flow of conversation.

Participants in an online discussion exercise different levels of power in the group. This will vary depending on their familiarity with interfaith dialogue, how well acquainted they are with other people in the meeting ,or their proficiency or ease of use of software such as Zoom. Those familiar with technology might send messages

to the host or other participants throughout the meeting or attract the attention of the host by using the virtual hand raising feature easily identified by the host. Others, less familiar with the technology, might just physically raise a hand or wave hoping that the host will see them as they would in a 'live' meeting. Participants can also choose to turn off their cameras which creates an imbalance between themselves and those able to be seen. Conversation flows more naturally if people can be seen as participants can easily indicate their intention to speak and can communicate non-verbally revealing their feelings and opinions of what is being said within the group. This gives them greater power within the group to contribute more fully. However, they might also feel a degree of vulnerability that they, and their homes, are being looked at by participants unwilling, or unable, to show themselves or their locations.

Finally, participants maintain the power in a meeting to simply leave at the click of a button. To walk out of a room requires a degree of courage and is a visible statement of disapproval or deep unhappiness. To leave a Zoom meeting simply means clicking on a button without any requirement to explain, apologise, or even be seen to be leaving by some of the other members. Consequently, it is much easier for people to opt out of discussions if they encroach on sensitive or difficult topics. While The Feast gives young people the option for a discussion to be stopped, only in the online setting can they just walk away at any point. Working in an online environment requires facilitators to understand group dynamics and manage the process and agendas to create learning (Beale, Thompson, & Chesler 2001, 231) but also to understand and respond to the new power dynamics inherent in the online format that can significantly impact the collaborative nature of the dialogue.

Online Religious Activity and Face-to-Face Protests

The iftar hosted by Bishop David was one of many examples of how religious communities migrated their worship and festivals into the online sphere. The period of lockdown from 23rd March until 4th July coincided with Lent, Passover, Easter, Vaisakhi, Hanuman Jayanti, Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr festivities, which were celebrated by all the major faiths in Birmingham. Usually, these would include congregations gathering in places of worship and large outdoor events including Walks of Witness on Good Friday, Vaisakhi parades, iftar meals and Eid prayers in local parks. None of these were permitted or took place in 2020, but all the faith communities found creative ways to facilitate these online often with great success (Mill 2020). On 25th May the news broke of the death of George Floyd, a black man living in Minnesota who was killed after being arrested by three white policemen. The nature of his death, caused by officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on his neck for over eight minutes, sparked outrage and protests across the world under the Black Lives Matter slogan (Brice & Timmons 2020). There were a number of protests across the UK including Birmingham (Spare-Cole 2020). These protests took place after some lockdown measures had been eased

but while large outdoor gatherings were still not permitted. Although the organisers encouraged people to adhere to the social distancing guidelines of staying two metres away from other people, wearing face masks and regular use of hand sanitiser, not all the people gathered were able to or chose not to obey these instructions. People's desire to meet publicly and to engage in acts of protest and solidarity challenged the notion that online activity could, or should, replace real-world encounters. Although, *in extremis*, the online environment could provide a platform for significant events to take place providing different levels of inclusion and participation, it was clear that the Black Lives Matter protests found an urgency and connection that could not be replicated in a meaningful way online. This is perhaps all the more surprising as many of the protesters were under thirty, an age group characterised as 'digital natives' having grown up with the internet and mobile connectivity as a reality. Whilst the protests highlighted the need for people to make public statements, the enforced lockdown demonstrated that meaningful dialogue and religious activity is possible online in ways that many would have probably rejected at the start of 2020.

Conclusion

The enforced lockdown of 2020 triggered by the Coronavirus pandemic created the conditions and opportunity for new forms of online dialogue and religious experiences. An analysis of the Birmingham Conversations, Bishop David Urquhart's iftar meal, and the youth activities of The Feast demonstrated that a wide variety of meaningful encounters were possible and opened up these opportunities for a range of people. The minimal cost of organising the events enabled them to be run more frequently and to include participants from a wide geographical area. Moving to online activities highlighted the digital divide between those easily able to access the technology and those for whom it was too expensive or difficult to use. The use of Zoom as the software for each of these activities enabled a level of democratisation as people were displayed uniformly with no distinction based on status, age, gender or ethnicity. However, it also raised new power dynamics, with the host in particular having a degree of control unseen in face-to-face encounters. Although the online environment created new possibilities and allowed creative responses while public gatherings were prohibited, the spontaneous public protests over the Black Lives Matter agenda were a clear statement that meeting online did not satisfy people's desire to publicly mark their outrage or solidarity.

The change from these activities being held face to face to moving them online happened in a matter of days with little time to reflect on the issues, challenges, and opportunities they present. All the existing dialogue theories and theologies presume face-to-face encounters and have not yet considered the impact of such meetings being held exclusively held online, with the attendant issues of power, democratisation, and group dynamics. While it is likely that people will return to face-to-face meetings

over the coming months, the experience of The Feast's international dialogues, or the frequency with which we were able to run the Birmingham Conversations suggests that online dialogue activity will form part of the work of dialogue organisations in the future. It would be beneficial for there to be further study into the process, structure, content, and impact of such dialogues, providing academic rigour about the implications of people encountering one another exclusively or primarily through this means.

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Online Peace-building Dialogue: Opportunities & Challenges Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Emergence

Bassam Kassoumeh

Abstract: While peacebuilding dialogue would normally take place face to face, restrictions in ensuring a safe space and travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the geographical dispersion of participants necessitated the move towards an online platform to avoid its collapse. The shift towards online platforms has presented new opportunities and challenges to peacebuilding – both official and unofficial. Online peacebuilding dialogue is cheaper, quicker and easier to organise than face-to-face meetings. These advantages have allowed for the inclusion of wider and typically marginalised groups. Online tools have also made it simpler and indeed possible for those groups to join peace talks from their homes allowing a wide geographical coverage of participants. Despite these advantages, there are challenges to whether Online Peacebuilding Dialogue can replace in-person dialogue. Furthermore, the shift has presented facilitation challenges to peacebuilders due to the increased number of participants and the nature of online dialogue. Moreover, online tools can amplify existing marginalisation leading to dialogue domination by certain classes. This paper aims to understand the challenges and opportunities arising from this shift to conducting dialogue and peace talks – both formal and informal – to online platforms due to the spread of COVID-19. The paper concludes by proposing a set of facilitation recommendations to those organising and facilitating peacebuilding dialogue to ensure the successful creation of a safe online communicative space suited to conducive peacebuilding dialogue.

Keywords: Peace Talks, Peace and conflict, Dialogue, Participatory dialogue, COVID-19, Peacebuilding dialogue

Introduction

This research explores the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on dialogue for peacebuilding. It adopts a participatory research methodology, allowing the researcher to work closely with those facilitating formal and informal peace talks in Syria, Yemen,

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and the South Caucasus. The pandemic, which has forced peacebuilding work to move into virtual spaces to avoid the suspension of talks, has presented new challenges and opportunities within the peacebuilding sector. While COVID-19 can be seen to have offered exhausted conflict parties a 'way out', especially when obtaining victory is costly, arguably this has, at least temporarily, resulted in reduced conflict indicators, and in some cases, ceasefires like those in Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Cameroon. This has paved the way for genuine peacebuilding on a local and grassroots level.

While the theory and practice for dialogue in its in-person setting are developed, the understanding of the impact and performance of dialogue in online settings, especially for peacebuilding, is still pre-mature. Furthermore, most research on peacebuilding focuses on formal peace talks, while limited attention is given to peacebuilding on local levels. As such, this article aims to expand the conceptualisation of online and virtual peacebuilding dialogue by summarising the new challenges and opportunities from an empirical perspective. The article will conclude with a set of recommendations for peacebuilders to ensure their Online Peacebuilding Dialogue (OPD) is effective, inclusive, and can have real, tangible results.

This article is divided into three sections: the first aims to present definitions of peacebuilding, dialogue for peacebuilding, peacetech, and online dialogue. This will allow us to define a newer concept, OPD, as the participatory dialogic process between conflicting parties with different and opposing perspectives to build genuine and sustainable peace in an online virtual safe space. This article aims to address the knowledge gap of this new OPD concept, as it will form the heart of this study.

The second section will present the opportunities and challenges arising from the shift from in-person to online peacebuilding. It will focus on three case studies: Syria, Yemen and the South Caucasus, each preceded by a brief contextual background to each conflict. The article will then explore the opportunities and challenges in each context to produce a summary.

The third section outlines a series of recommendations for OPD facilitators to ensure conducive and effective peacebuilding in the virtual world. The aim is to contribute to the wider peacebuilding community as part of its actions on how to effectively run OPD and improve its quality. It will be concluded that adopting a participatory approach, ensuring a safe virtual space for discussion, and involving hard-to-reach groups by adding an offline component in such processes would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of online peacebuilding. Further, online tools can provide anonymity to participants in divided communities. Anonymity can simplify the adoption of intergroup dialogue and promote dialogue instead of debate to improve social cohesion and lasting reconciliation.

While the implications of COVID-19 on peacebuilding continue to develop, this study's true power is in its complementarity of theory and practice to provide an accurate and up-to-date summary. It provides an entry point for further research on scaling up local-level OPD and improving its links to official peace talks.

Methodology

Participatory Action Research

Given the geographical scope, the impossibility of having face-to-face dialogue due to COVID-19, and the scant literature on the subject, this research adopts a participatory action research (PAR) methodology to expand and improve the current knowledge and understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by the shift to online peacebuilding.

PAR is succinctly defined as a process for action-oriented research that involves researchers and participants collaborating and co-producing instrumental and practical knowledge around a problem, and potentially an action for a better outcome (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005; McKay 2011; Beaton et al. 2017). Participatory research entails the participation of those affected by the research (those involved in organising peacebuilding dialogue, referred to henceforth as co-researchers) in the entire research process as opposed to purely interviewees. Alongside the author of this article, co-researchers were also involved in identifying the research problem and engaged effectively in the formulation of recommendations (Guzman et al. 2016;Kemmis & McTaggart 2005; McKay 2011; Beaton et al. 2017; Marzi 2020; Kindon et al. 2007). The selection of PAR as the primary research methodology can also serve to encourage those involved in peacebuilding dialogues to adopt PAR as a method to increase the quality of participation and inclusion in their work.

This co-production research aims to add validity and accuracy, while also giving ownership of the research to the co-researchers. This stands in contrast to traditional research methodologies as such methods often force those most affected by the research to relinquish control of it (Guzman et al. 2016; Cornwall & Jewkes 1995). Furthermore, this process of co-production ensures the timeliness of collected data and increases its relevancy by capturing an empirical perspective from those directly involved in peacebuilding dialogue throughout the research cycle. Such advantages are not typically available in other more conventional research methodologies (Beaton et al. 2017). This is especially imperative given the limited understanding of the ramifications of COVID-19 on peace talks.

Data Collection

To ensure timeliness and relevance to our current context, interviews were conducted

between April and August 2020, and, where possible, have been compared to the available literature. The researcher conducted interviews with three interviewees on Syria, three interviewees on Yemen and one interviewee on the South Caucasus. The strength of this research stems from its involvement of interviewees who are former human rights ministers, members of gender-based working groups, university lecturers, members of UN constitution-drafting committees, and INGO professionals. This has added relevancy to the research and improved its empirical accuracy. For security reasons, all names of persons and organisations have been anonymised.

Interviewee	Context	Profession	Method
Anonymous	Yemen	Former human rights minister	Interview, Whatsapp messages and Voice Notes + Follow up Interview
Anonymous	Yemen	Member of Gender-based working group	WhatsApp messages + Questionnaire + Follow up Interview
Anonymous	Yemen	University Lecturer	WhatsApp messages + Questionnaire
Anonymous	Syria	Project officer – Syrian Constitution	Interview + Follow up Interview
Kholoud Helmi	Syria	Member of Gender-based working group	Interview
Bassam Al-kuwatli	Syria	Member of a political party	WhatsApp Interview
Anonymous	South Caucasus	NGO Project Manager	Interview

One of this research's strengths is its participatory problematisation of the research questions, especially as interviewees are directly involved in peacebuilding. The interviews relied on the guiding questions below:

1. How did the formal and informal peace talks and dialogue change after being moved online due to COVID-19? Is it more/less effective? Promising? Or is it creating more challenges to peace?

2. Would you say the reduced costs of hosting such dialogues can include more people who were not typically sitting on the table, especially as some of them were not able to travel and participate?

3. For women's participation, would you say that their participation is tokenistic, or was the dialogue actually effective, and were their views and opinions captured?

4. Do you think online peace talks created a safe space for anonymity, where

people can discuss sensitive issues freely as opposed to in-person talks?

5. Did online dialogue improve intergroup dialogue, especially in terms of identity dialogue?

The data was also analysed in a participatory way, where arguments and findings from one interview are shared in another interview to check their relevance across contexts.

Online Tools

This research was facilitated remotely to overcome issues of social distancing in the context of COVID-19. Online tools, similar to those used for online peace talks, were used to conduct Key Informant Interviews and provide high levels of anonymity and privacy compared to physical meetings. Consequently, complementing PAR with the use of online tools allowed the researcher to open a virtual communicative space through an emancipatory process, reducing potential biases and empowering marginalised groups by balancing power relations.

Research Limitations

As with all research, this study has its limitations given both the complexity and novelty of the topic. Conducting PAR and collecting data online poses significant time challenges since building relationships and creating the safe communicative space necessary for genuine dialogue is tedious and time-consuming (Pearson et al. 2016; Beaton et al. 2017). These conditions are further accentuated by the non-tangible characteristics of this safe space due to the pandemic. This lack of physical presence may result in reduced understanding of participants' intentions, level of honesty and ambiguity, especially because direct interaction between participants is lacking (ibid.)[1].

This has been the case in this research, where the time constraint is the biggest challenge. Although this research relied heavily on seven interviewees who are directly engaged in peace talks and peacebuilding, it could have benefited from a wider perspective if sufficient time was available.

Additionally, given the novelty of the topic, there is limited literature available to refer to. As the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic and political ramifications continue to develop and mutate, this poses additional challenges to researchers attempting to assess its effect on peacebuilding and conflict more broadly. Furthermore, access to literature in libraries was considerably limited by pandemic restrictions, meaning that, largely, only online sources could be consulted. Despite these obvious limitations, by relying on broad empirical perspectives and experiences

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1   By using audio and/or video solutions, extra-linguistic limitations are effectively minimised.

the researcher hopes to provoke a fresh dialogue on this issue between practitioners, academics, and conflict parties.

Online Peacebuilding Dialogue: Towards A Definition

The literature on peacebuilding and dialogue in online settings is scant. However, literature that discusses issues and topics of close relation to the theory that forms the core of this study is available. As such, this section will endeavour to summarise literature regarding dialogue within peacebuilding, the importance of dialogue within peacebuilding processes, peacetech, and theories and assessments of online dialogue. This will allow the presentation of a broad definition of OPD which will form the basis of the following sections.

Dialogue

This article conceptualises and defines dialogue as a process of interaction, collective learning and trust-building between different parties that encourages and facilitates deeper levels of understanding of the underlying sources of conflict to resolve it (Ballantyne 2004; Saunders1999).

This definition presents a more developed vision of dialogue building on Bohm's (1996) interpretation of dialogue as the process of creating shared understanding and meanings. While Bohm sets a solid theoretical foundation on what dialogue means in a broad sense, Ballantyne and Saunder's definition allows us to focus more specifically on effective peacebuilding dialogue and the *co-creation*, rather than just the sharing and exchanging, common understandings of and solutions to violent conflict.

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding as a process was first unveiled by UN-secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and is defined as the process of understanding the root causes of armed conflict and its recurrence, and contributing to the activities that contribute to long-lasting peace (United Nations1992). Dialogue is imperative to and embedded within any peacebuilding process since effective peacebuilding requires inclusive dialogue on conflict, which presents opportunities for learning and engagement with conflicting perspectives (Bickmore 2014). Dialogue as a key and fundamental peacebuilding action can promote inclusivity of marginalised groups and ensure their voices are amplified and captured (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2019). Further, it is argued that dialogue improves the understanding of the challenges caused by conflicts, especially in fragile contexts (Marah 2015).

While most literature on peacebuilding and conflict resolution focuses on formal negotiations, little attention is paid to micro-level dialogue and how it can lead to

long-lasting reconciliation (Saunders1999). This is translated empirically as the disconnection between macro and micro levels of peacebuilding (ibid.). Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are thought to play the role of bridging various levels of peacebuilding, as they are both active on the ground and involved in Track One peace negotiations (Paffenholz 2006).

Consequently, this article will adopt a micro-level approach to peacebuilding, allowing the identification of knowledge gaps. This is especially relevant as Leonardsson & Rudd (2015) highlight the importance of the inclusion of domestic actors at various societal levels for developing a holistic and effective approach to peacebuilding.

Online Dialogue

Online dialogue is widely utilised in peace education to bring students from across conflict divides to collaborate towards peace. While there are limited studies on online peacebuilding, introducing technology to facilitate intergroup dialogue has long been accepted as an effective method.

Research shows that online facilitation can ensure 24-hour accessibility and can reduce impacts of visual and superficial differences (Basharina 2009; Fournier-Sylvester 2016). Furthermore, online platforms promise a larger, richer, and more diverse group of participants to engage in a deeper and safer dialogue as opposed to face-to-face platforms (ibid.). Moreover, virtual spaces allow participants who are usually unable to attend physical meetings due to travel, conflict, personal engagements, and now, pandemics (Beierle et al. 2016). Lastly, online dialogue can also create a space to free emotional constraints of the past and work towards peace and reconciliation by releasing anger through dialogue (Quintiliani et al. 2011).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, online teleconferencing was utilised for peace dialogue (Mashour 2020). In Afghanistan, a Skype meeting was organised between the Afghan government and Taliban to discuss a potential prisoner exchange – an important aspect of the peace process (Ullah et al. 2020). This prisoner-exchange process was agreed later on, which suggests that online platforms can substitute face-to-face meetings (NPR 2020). In 2010, a dialogue between Cambodian American survivors and Khmer Rouge perpetrators was facilitated through videoconferencing (Quintiliani et al. 2011).

Peacetech

The term *peacetech* was coined in 2015 to refer to the strategic use of emerging technologies that contribute to better peacebuilding by affording greater participation and initiating new forms of engagement (Gaskell 2019; The British Council 2016). In a study in Syria by the British Council and Build up, the research discussed the

broader strategic opportunities and how the concept can be deployed. However, the research highlights questions about the use of peacetech and its impact on conflict discourse (The British Council 2016). Further, little is understood as to how these issues impact conducting peacebuilding dialogue in a broad empirical sense, especially when physical spaces are not available due to pandemics. This study will build on and attempt to address these knowledge gaps.

Online Peacebuilding Dialogue

To do this, this article will utilise the emerging concept of OPD that combines peacebuilding with direct dialogues between conflict parties in formal and informal settings. OPD can be seen as the intersection and overlapping of dialogue, peacebuilding, online dialogue and peacetech.

Accordingly, OPD can be defined as a participatory dialogic process between conflicting parties with different and opposing perspectives that allows the development of genuine and sustainable peace through an online virtual safe space. This differs subtly from peacetech, as while peacetech utilises broader social media campaigns and technological support for activists, OPD conceptualises the utilisation of new online communication tools to facilitate dialogue between conflict parties.

Given the paucity of literature on OPD and the probable and continued reliance on online communication tools to conduct peacebuilding work after COVID-19, the following section will explore and assess empirical experiences of online peacebuilding to contribute to and expand the knowledge of this emerging issue. If practitioners are to fully utilise and adapt to this new paradigm, it is vital that academics, practitioners, and conflict parties themselves can fully harness its impact and address its challenges.

Syria

Since 2011, Syria has been embroiled in a civil war that has cost upwards of half a million lives and displaced over two-thirds of the country's population (Home Office 2020). With its beginning in protests that demanded social and democratic political reforms to address state repression, elite corruption, poverty, and inequality (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami 2016), the situation deteriorated and protesters were confronted with extreme violence. As a result, civilians and defected soldiers took up arms against government forces, transforming the protests into a vicious, geopolitical civil war (Abu-Ismail et al. 2016).

Today, the Syrian regime has been able to regain the vast majority of territories lost to armed opposition groups. This has rendered the peace process impotent as the regime focuses on military gains, recognising that military advances gain far more than peace talks in Geneva and Astana (Seligman & Lynch 2019). Further, peace talks in Syria

still fail to address the main drivers of conflict, and topics such as the excessive use of violence by the Syrian regime are still been avoided (Aljazeera 2016). Moreover, the dialogue is still monopolised by proxy actors, with limited space for Syrians to have a conducive dialogue rendering the official peace talks ineffective.

Despite this, attempts continue to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict and assist communities within Syria's ethnically and religiously diverse society by finding commonalities and bridges to a more peaceful future. While discussions in Geneva have been seriously impacted by the pandemic (Pedersen 2020; Daily Sabah 2020; Thépaut 2020), the shift towards an OPD in Syria has presented a number of opportunities and challenges.

Firstly, shifting to OPD has allowed previously impossible face-to-face dialogue between the warring parties. This has had a particular effect on the Preparatory Constitutional Drafting dialogue which was previously facilitated behind closed doors with neither party ever meeting face to face (Anonymous 2020). The dialogue was conducted by intermediaries. However, during COVID-19, an online session was organised ahead of the Geneva peace talks where, for the first time, participants could see and hear each other, and discuss issues together without the need for intermediaries (Anonymous 2020).

Outside of the Geneva process, COVID-19 has presented mixed opportunities for unofficial peace dialogues. Prior to COVID-19, informal dialogue between NGOs and CSOs typically occurred in online spaces given the geographical spread of participants and the high cost associated with travel and coordination to host meetings in person. However, as OPD become the norm, the diversity of CSOs engaged in the informal dialogue process is improved and spaces for intergroup dialogue are created (Al-Kuwatli 2020).

In contrast, in cases where dialogue is typically held face-to-face, OPD has presented better representation opportunities. In June 2020, the European Union (EU) and the United Nations hosted the fourth Brussels conference on Syria. The conference that used to happen face to face, was hosted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the conference being held virtually, organisers praise the effort as *impressive* as it has reached out to more CSOs through two days of virtual dialogue (Council of the EU 2020). The consultation process, which enabled the participation of more than 1400 organisation, suggests that it has fostered a wider range of perspectives than prior to the use of OPD. This is important because although the locals in Syria are vocal about their opinions, they still fail to reach the peace processes (The British Council 2016). Accordingly, and given the success of the virtual dialogue, 'the EU also launched an online consultative space for Syrian civil society to promote engagement beyond the Brussels Conferences' (Council of the EU 2020).

Furthermore, the participation of women in peace talks on Syria has been limited and largely tokenistic, while women who managed to secure a place on the table had limited roles (Asaf 2017). This necessitated the creation of informal spaces for women to meet face to face at least once a year to work on peacebuilding and address issues of women's representation in peace talks. However, Mansour (2020) highlights the challenges and costs of organising conferences to host dialogues for Syrian women to discuss issues of representation in peace talks. Based on this, OPD induced by COVID-19, thus may present an opportunity to include more voices in these informal talks, as spaces for face-to-face dialogue are restricted due to the pandemic.

However, there are challenges arising from moving some informal dialogue to online platforms. In one interview, it was highlighted that moving some informal talks after COVID-19 to online settings had taken a different format. The dialogue session would be limited to 1–2 hours over Fridays and Saturdays for an entire month. The workshops were conducted for the same people involved prior to COVID-19 and no new participants were added to the dialogue. This format was not received well and resulted in a lot of absences from other members (Helmi 2020).

In summary, while prior to COVID-19, online methods were used to facilitate dialogue between Syrian parties, since COVID-19, OPD has increased the possibility for new participants to join and interact effectively at both formal and informal levels, as physical spaces are restricted. While challenges were experienced when facilitating dialogue, these can be seen as teething issues and not a challenge of OPD itself, but rather the way that these talks were facilitated.

Yemen

The current conflict in Yemen began with the collapse of the national dialogue conference after Yemenis took to the streets to demand change as part of the Arab Spring regional movement in 2015 (Edwards 2016). The failure to implement some of the recommendations of the national dialogue conference, which led to its collapse, was followed by the withdrawal of Houthis, an ethnoreligious Shia group from Yemen's Saada province, from the process (Al-Monitor 2016; Dumm 2010; Edwards 2016; Fraihat 2011; Freeman 2009). Houthi rebels quickly captured the capital Sana'a and placed President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi under house arrest. In response, the Saudi-backed coalition began a military campaign in defence of Hadi and to counter the increasing Iranian influence in the region, rendering the conflict a proxy war (Edwards 2016).

Despite the conflict's protraction, preparations for peace talks have begun, albeit slowly and often interrupted by increased violence. Yemen's peacebuilding dialogue sometimes takes place virtually on online platforms due to the dispersal of those

involved in the process.

Moreover, and more relevantly, issues with physical space and safety encouraged the inception of innovative, interactive, and technology-based solutions to systematically open dialogue between those affected by the conflict in Yemen. These solutions aim to open dialogue between those affected by the conflict beyond combatants and those not involved formally in peace talks in Yemen. The process was always meant to take place virtually and anonymously to increase transparency, participation, reach, and representation to inform the UN's approach in the Yemen peace process (DPPA Politically Speaking 2020; Relief Web 2020; Anonymous 2020).

However, since the emergence of COVID-19, the use of online communication tools has become the primary method of dialogue facilitation. The special UN envoy Martin Griffiths, based in Jordan, has begun hosting all talks with conflict parties as part of the preparatory and consultative process prior to the official peace talks through online teleconferencing (Al-Batati 2020).

Furthermore, and as a result of the pandemic, a unilateral ceasefire by Saudi Arabia, in addition to international calls for local ceasefires, offered conditions for true peacebuilding dialogue (Mashour 2020). To seize such opportunity, the majority of the peacebuilding work shifted from direct and physical contact to online meetings, interviews, and consultations. Interviewees with those involved in these consultations confirmed that the reduced cost of hosting such meetings poses new opportunities. Yet, while OPD is easier and faster to organise, some participants lack the technological capacity to join such nuanced spaces. Further, internet penetration and quality remain amongst the biggest challenges to OPD in Yemen, with many people yet to have access to a mobile phone (DPPA Politically Speaking 2020; Anonymous 2020; Spearing et al. 2020). It is here that peacetech offers a solution to respond to this challenge, as the concept promotes the distribution of technology and training, enhancing the capacity of actors in remote and poorly connected areas to participate in dialogues.

Interviewees also reported challenges when facilitating dialogue with big groups and ensuring a safe space, especially when discussing sensitive topics. However, as participants are dispersed globally with accompanying time-zone differences, dialogue sessions are often broken down into smaller groups addressing issues of dialogue facilitation and space safety (Mashour 2020). In such smaller groups, OPD provided a safe space for participants to discuss sensitive issues openly and freely without restrictions.

Moreover, prior to COVID-19, the number of UN-sponsored peace talks that involved public and notable figures, especially women, was limited and dialogue was often fruitless (Anonymous 2020; Caruso 2020). However, interviewees reported

that OPD promoted the inclusion of participants who typically are excluded from talks. According to participants, as online dialogues became more common, it provided a convenient space for more meaningful and effective women's participation as meetings, interviews, and workshops are now held weekly. They also reported that OPD offers flexibility to mothers with household responsibilities and better reach to remote areas but only for those with a good internet connection (Mashhour 2020; Anonymous 2020).

Furthermore, interviewees on a broader social level argued that some participants' level of engagement with dialogue was not as high as in physical meetings (ibid.). Online meetings impeded dialogue on a personal level, where it is imperative to build a personal link between participants for an effective dialogue (Anonymous 2020). In countries such as Yemen, where tribe and families remain key social indicators, these challenges could present a significant obstacle to dialogue. Further, most online meetings conclude without a written agreement unlike face-to-face meetings, rendering some meetings tokenistic and non-abiding (ibid.).

However, while these challenges are considerable at this early stage, it will take some time for participants to get used to and engage fully with OPD, and if it is facilitated well, it can produce written minutes and agreements. As suggested by interviewees, 'on a broader scale, OPD improved the overall intergroup peacebuilding as participants represent various political, social and religious backgrounds discussing common issues and working towards a positive outcome' (Mashhour 2020).

South Caucasus

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the sovereignty, borders, and geopolitical alignment of some of the territories in the South Caucasus region in dispute (Peterson 2008; de Waal 2010). In particular, the ethnic and territorial conflict over the disputed region of Nagorny Karabakh, a simmering conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, remains unresolved since the early 1990s (de Waal 2010). An escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in July 2020 intensified already aggressive posturing leaving limited prospect for peace between the two countries (Stronski 2020).

In a further example, the 1992–93 Georgian-Abkhaz war, which formally ended with a ceasefire in 1994, marked only the beginnings of a decades-long conflict, with Abkhazia unilaterally declaring independence from Georgia in 1999 (Conciliation Resources n.d.; de Waal 2010). In 2008, Russian forces invaded Georgia in support of South Ossetian separatists with significant impacts on the conflict in Abkhazia. Russia recognised both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, while both regions are considered occupied territories by the Georgian government (de Waal 2018; Civil Georgia 2008).

COVID-19 has significantly impacted peace talks for these South Caucasian conflicts. The official 51st peace talks between Georgia and Abkhazia were postponed mid-March due to the pandemic (Civil Georgia 2020). In Nagorny Karabakh, only high-level online meetings between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan have been organised with more scheduled in the future (OSCE 2020). However, given the limited access to such high-level meetings, this research will focus specifically on unofficial peacebuilding dialogue and inter-community dialogue.

While the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges to official peace talks, the pandemic is providing opportunities for inter-community peacebuilding dialogue in the South Caucasus, a process traditionally facilitated by INGOs. This section is based on a conversation with a non-profit International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) professional, managing two projects in the South Caucasus. The names of the interviewee, NGOs and the INGO are anonymised as requested.

In one peacebuilding project, Abkhaz and Georgian CSOs reached out to their colleagues across the conflict divide to share knowledge on ways to adapt peacebuilding work in the face of the pandemic – an unprecedented step where communication is typically initiated by the INGO facilitating the project.

Initiatives by Georgian and Abkhazian NGOs have encouraged INGOs to organise a wider online dialogue between a variety of local partners across the South Caucasus to share their experiences with COVID-19. According to organisers, OPD has provided a novel opportunity for partners to meet online together, share expertise and work towards a shared and common goal through a semi-facilitated dialogue process. This is especially important as bilateral meetings between the partners are irregular and are limited by the need to meet in third contexts and the risks of being seen as associating with the 'enemy'. OPD then has clearly facilitated the inclusion of some partners from the South Caucasus. Moreover, interviewees reported that utilising OPD in a regional way also reduces tensions and suspicions that can affect bilateral discussions.

Opening such a substitute virtual communicative dialogue space between grassroots journalists from across the region is possible and can be considered a peacebuilding action in and of itself as it encourages effective dialogue, listening, learning, and sharing without judgement.

OPD also presents opportunities regarding the ownership and control of dialogues. Facilitators of OPD in the South Caucasus credit the success of their OPD programmes to OPD's participatory nature. As calls were online, talks were more informal, with no set agenda by the INGO or expected output such as a proposal or a policy. Furthermore, while participants were transparent and critical of some elements of OPD in their respective contexts, they uniformly reported that OPD is

both cheaper and easier than physical meetings, especially as some participants reside in remote and isolated areas where travel is difficult.

However, again, it must be noted that interviewees reported that internet penetration is not the same across all countries in the region. Additionally, some partners reside in remote areas with limited internet connectivity, rendering them marginalised from the dialogue. Facilitators argue that the quality of the internet connection is also crucial to the genuine participation of participants, especially as these calls require high bandwidth due to the number of participants per call.

Summary

In the three case studies above, COVID-19 and the increased use and reliance on OPD have ensured official peace talks are not interrupted or collapsed while providing new opportunities for the inclusion of the typically marginalised in unofficial peacebuilding dialogues. OPD can allow for genuine local and grassroots peacebuilding to flourish, potentially bringing communities across conflict divides, especially during times of reduced conflict (United Nations News 2020). Online peace talks have given the opportunity to actors not previously involved in peace talks due to travel restrictions to join these talks (Ansorg & Strasheim 2020).

As discussed by Pinet (2020), and prior to COVID-19, international-led peace initiatives often lack a systematic approach for the inclusion of local actors, which often results in interventions that are not conflict-sensitive and with limited buy-in from the targeted community as opposed to local-led initiatives.

However, OPD can be seen as offering some optimism for local and national grassroots level peacebuilding. While international attention is focused on domestic rather than broader geopolitical issues, OPD can facilitate a safer, holistic dialogue removed from the influence of world politics (Ansorg & Strasheim 2020). This is vitally important as 'a core principle of both democracy and peacebuilding is inclusion, in particular of minority voices and unpopular viewpoints, to offset the dangers of domination and tyranny of majorities' (Bickmore 2014, 556).

Interviewees across the contexts reported in this study highlighted that moving peacebuilding dialogue to online platforms is easier to organise, provides a safer place at times than physical space, and requires little investment compared to in-person dialogue. Additionally, facilitators argue that the reduced costs of running such dialogue online simplifies the replication of such sessions to include more regions and contexts, contributing to a broader peacebuilding process.

Nevertheless, as some have complained that challenges of lost human interaction

could become significant roadblocks, especially in tribe- and family-centred cultures, facilitation methodologies must be adapted (Bell et al. 2020; Ansorg & Strasheim 2020). OPD facilitators are already addressing these challenges by breaking down dialogue into smaller groups.

Additionally, concerns were raised about OPD being dominated by a certain class, further amplifying gender and class divides, which are prevalent throughout the development sector (Hernandez & Roberts 2018).

While challenges are significant, that only speaks to the importance of empirically understanding them and finding novel solutions to them. The recommendations below are an attempt to begin this process.

Recommendations

Adopting a Participatory Approach to Peacebuilding Dialogue

Certain recommendations and preparations are required for conducive OPD. The adoption of participatory methods in conducting OPD and its attention to dialogue and meaningful participation is imperative to address issues of unjust power structures, power imbalances, typical marginalisation of unrepresented and hard-to-reach communities affected by war and conflict (Beaton et al. 2017; Mesa-Vélez 2019; Incerti-Théry 2016; McKay 2011). Additionally, OPD participants should be involved throughout the peacebuilding process in framing questions, identifying problems and proposing potential solutions. This is mean to empower participants and increase their ownership of the process, producing a more relevant outcome.

PAR is considered a critical component of local peacebuilding as it contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics and root causes of conflict (Life & Peace Institute 2016). Further, through collaboration, knowledge-sharing and solution-finding, online dialogue and the acknowledgement of participants as agents of change, peacebuilders can transform the dialogue process, creating a space for listening to others (Beaton et al. 2017; Marzi 2020; Burns et al. 2012; McKay 2011; Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). This gives authenticity and legitimacy to the dialogic process.

Participatory methodologies, however, can be tokenistic and result in failures by some facilitators to address power issues among participants (Cooke & Kothari 2001). The same issue is prevalent in bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding, where social inequalities are replicated, and dialogue and participation are monopolised by certain groups (Olarte Delgado 2019). Online tools can also inadvertently amplify existing marginalisation and disadvantages (Hernandez & Roberts 2018). It is therefore important for organisers to introduce self-reflection sessions to unpack and analyse power dynamics in addition to assessing participation quality (Kemmis & McTaggart

2005). Further, to manage power relations, it is advisable to ensure groups are from the same social status (Quintiliani et al. 2011).

Adopting a Blended Approach

To address issues of power imbalances and concerns about the dialogue domination by certain classes, power imbalances, and potential issues of amplified marginalisation, peacebuilders should focus on the typically marginalised and include people with limited or without internet access. It is thus, recommended to combine OPD with face-to-face dialogue whenever possible, which Hernandez and Roberts (2018, 11) refer to as a 'blended approach.'

Building Capacity of Locals

Given that COVID-19 restricts options for face-to-face dialogue, this blended approach may require building capacities of local peacebuilders so they can engage fully with the various phases of planning and implementation of OPD, increasing their ownership of OPDs (Leonardsson & Rudd 2015). Building this capacity would require utilising peacetech by providing technologies, such as laptops and other tools, as a component of peacebuilding practice. After COVID-19, an initiative by Shift Power for Peace provides laptops and other tools to local peacebuilders so they can move their work online (Shift Power For Peace, n.d.).

Similarly, in the South Caucasus, the project was aligned to respond to the challenges caused by COVID-19 by providing additional funding to partners and provide laptops, internet connectivity, and Zoom and other software licences. It was noted, however, that it is imperative to give local partners the agency to choose internet and mobile providers as they are best informed about the quality in their respective locations.

To improve OPD facilitation skills and overcome some of the challenges raised in the case studies, OPD facilitators and participants should also undergo training on inclusion and effective dialogue such as sharing, listening, and inquiring prior to conducting sessions (Escobar et al. 2014; Quintiliani et al. 2011). Furthermore, facilitators should query their participants' assumptions and prejudices to achieve understanding as part of the dialogical process for peacebuilding (Ballantyne 2004).

Encouraging Intergroup Dialogue to Counter Identity Polarisation

Intergroup dialogue seeks to bring and engage participants from diverse and different backgrounds with a history of tension to promote social justice through building relationships and collective learning (Dessel et al. 2006; Nagda et al. 2012; Frantell et al. 2019). Similarly, intercultural dialogue aims to bring societies, communities, and individuals to enable the exchange of disparities and differences instead of focusing on

commonalities (Ganesh & Zoller 2012; Hardy & Hussain 2017).

Since participatory methodologies, peacebuilding, and conflict transformation all require collective learning and building bridges between polarised communities, it is thus typical to embed intergroup/intercultural dialogue within OPDs in order to increase its efficiency (Phipps 2014). This overlap, although rarely highlighted, can provide limitless opportunities in online settings, as seen in Yemen and South Caucasus case studies.

Further, when intergroup dialogue is used in online settings, it can provide anonymity to participants in divided communities which can simplify the adoption of intergroup dialogue to improve social cohesion and lasting reconciliation. Peacebuilders can promote social cohesion by encouraging participants to rely on problem-solving dialogue, through a creative process of collective learning and exploration of problem and opportunities towards reaching a mutual understanding rather than divisive debates in OPD (Lawson 2015; Ballantyne 2004).

Moreover, since intergroup dialogue assumes conflict is embedded within social structures, the engagement with conflict dynamics between groups can harness an environment of mutual understanding, empower members to work and collaborate together, build bridges across the divide and identify solutions and methods to engage with conflicts (Dessel et al. 2006; Nagda et al. 2012; Frantell et al. 2019). In the South Caucasus, facilitators argue that dialogue can be more inclusive and effective if participants are working towards a specific and common issue.

However, intergroup/intercultural dialogue requires certain conditions to be successful. This dialogue can be meaningless during times of heightened conflict and loss of identity (Phipps 2014). Further, it is argued that intergroup dialogue is likely to fail if it avoids the direct and respectful engagement with the sensitive root causes of conflict (Phipps 2014; Hardy & Hussain 2017).

Furthermore, for successful intergroup dialogue, facilitators should ensure emancipatory participation, participants should also have the will and time to participate (Quintiliani et al. 2011; Mesa-Vélez 2019; Incerti-Théry 2016). However, inclusion and representation should be done carefully as too much emphasis can create a sense of equalness which diverts dialogue on existing exclusions (Ganesh & Holmes 2011).

Ensuring A Safe Virtual Space

Conducive peacebuilding dialogue necessitates the creation of a safe space for participants to freely and collaboratively share and listen. Online and virtual spaces in comparison to offline spaces, provide an added level of unobtrusiveness and

anonymity, empowering vulnerable groups in highly polarised environments and reducing potential biases (Hewson 2015).

In Syria, openly sharing political views can result in arrests; by using online tools, participants can join anonymously using aliases (Al-Kuwatli 2020). However, building trust between anonymous participants would require time. Organisers should thus create this safe space and allow time to build trust between participants. Organisers should also encourage the use of video solutions whenever possible to minimise extra-linguistic limitations and address issues inherent to audio calls such as the lack of understanding over participants' intentions and level of honesty.

In an OPD session between Cambodian American survivors and Khmer Rouge perpetrators, one facilitator granted the success of OPD to participants being patient in building trust, willing to listen to explanations, and refusing to make accusations, which 'provides one model for how dialogue can help (re)humanise those who have committed gross crimes against humanity' (Quintiliani et al. 2011, 506). It was also reported that the success of online dialogue was due to the inclusivity, and involvement of various groups in the process is highlighted among conditions essential for a true and genuine dialogue.

In the South Caucasus, partners from parties involved in conflicts were willing to join online dialogues as facilitators guaranteed a safe space. This safe space was created based on trust between the facilitators and the participants, where facilitators can vouch for other participants. Facilitators argue that online meetings could replace in-person meetings if participants knew each other beforehand, as building and normalising new relationships between conflict parties online is time-consuming, yet necessary.

Finally, the expansion of technological and artificial-intelligence mediated dialogue, similar to that organised for Yemen, which ensures the safety of participants and improves the inclusivity of the peace process to other contexts, is encouraged. The use of artificial-intelligence can also overcome issues of moderation and scaling of large-scale peacebuilding dialogues (DPPA Politically Speaking 2020).

Conclusion

While COVID-19 has resulted in reduced conflicts and ceasefires in some contexts, paving the way to genuine peacebuilding, it has also disrupted peacebuilding work. At the time where the true implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for peacebuilding dialogue continue to emerge, this research provides an early understanding of the implications of moving peacebuilding dialogue to online platforms due to COVID-19. Further, this study fills the knowledge gap in knowledge of the new opportunities and

challenges facing peacebuilders and peace talks organisers arising from this shift.

The case studies in this research allow us to conclude that moving peacebuilding dialogue to online settings because of COVID-19 prevents the collapse of peacebuilding work and provides opportunities for inclusion of some typically marginalised groups. OPDs are effortless to organise and cost less than face-to-face meetings, allowing for expansion. This can contribute to more effective peacebuilding and lasting reconciliation.

By adopting a participatory research methodology, this research's true power lies in its theory and practice intersectionality to produce an actionable and practical solution to those affected by moving dialogue to online settings. Consequently, although this research argues that the pandemic offers some prospects for more inclusive peacebuilding dialogue, organisers and facilitators should follow a set of recommendations to avoid amplifying the marginalisation of some groups – such as those with no internet connectivity. Facilitators should adopt a participatory approach to dialogue and give a concerted focus to the typically marginalised. This also means participants are involved throughout the peacebuilding process, which is expected to increase ownership and efficacy of OPDs.

To address issues of digital marginalisation, peacebuilding organisers should adopt a 'blended' approach to online dialogue by embedding an accompanying offline dialogue whenever possible. This 'blended' approach might require building the capacity of local peacebuilders by providing necessary digital tools such as laptops. Moreover, facilitators should provide conditions to allow emancipatory participation and provide spaces for personal-level dialogue to improve OPDs.

COVID-19 and OPD provide an opportunity for an emancipatory intergroup dialogue that contributes to lasting reconciliation and effective peacebuilding since online tools can ensure the anonymity of participants as opposed to face-to-face dialogue. Further, successful intergroup dialogue requires the promotion of dialogue instead of debates and discussions. Dialogue encourages collective learning, listening, mutual understanding and exploration of problems and opportunities, all leading to better social cohesion. However, while these recommendations are not exclusive to OPD, they could benefit and contribute to better peacebuilding dialogues, especially in online settings, as opposed to debates that can be divisive. These recommendations also offer an opportunity to reflect and improve peacebuilding work.

Although this article presents an early understanding of peacebuilding during COVID-19, further studies are needed to explore contexts where the internet is not widely available, contrary to the case studies of this research. Further, questions on how to scale up grassroots and local-level OPD and improve synergies and links

between different tracks of official peace talks are likely to emerge if physical spaces continue to be restricted. Further studies should also focus on different contexts where COVID-19 resulted in heightened conflicts, which are likely to present dissimilar outcomes to those of this research.

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Virtual Dialogues: A Method to Deal with Polarisation in a Time of Social Isolation Caused by COVID-19

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Abstract: How can a method of dialogue stimulate the learning of dialogic principles and practices in a virtual environment and contribute to the confrontation of social polarisation? This was the question that motivated the analysis and discussion of a project developed in Brazil during the months of May and June, 2020, which were characterised by the creation of three dialogue groups

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in a virtual environment (Google Meet). Throughout eight meetings, lasting one hour and a half each, the seventeen participants could learn and practice dialogue, through a method developed by the first author of this paper, based on the ideas of David Bohm, William Isaacs, and Paulo Freire. To analyse the results, three categories were recognized: learning dialogue; dialogue and the virtual environment; dialogue, social isolation, and polarization. The results found indicated that virtual dialogues seem to encourage the learning of dialogic principles and practices and the promotion of the transformation of interpersonal relations with people of different points of view, showing the possible contribution of such a proposal to the confrontation of polarisation. We emphasise that this article is a first qualitative approximation regarding the method, and there is still a long way to go of scientific deepening in the field of dialogue studies in order to ascertain its effects and challenges. Therefore, we suggest future research on the method, in different application contexts.

Polarisation, Pandemics, and Dialogue

The historic building and constitution of modern western culture was characterised by certain values, which stemmed from the triad science-imperialism-capitalism, values that mediate our form of thinking and acting. Among these, one can find the fragmentation of reality, the separation between human and nature, the domination and subjugation of the other, the incessant search for profit, competitiveness, and individualism (Harari 2018; Santos 2008).

Modern culture seems, therefore, to be characterised by a predominance of anti-dialogic principles, which overvalue the Self and disregard the Other, who is frequently seen as an object to be dominated and used to one's own benefit (Buber 1979, 2014). As a consequence, the separation between individuals, peoples, and nations is reinforced daily, provoking 'chaotic and senseless conflicts, in which the energies of all those involved tend to get lost in antagonistic movements or disputes' (Bohm 1980, 38).

Many countries are examples of this situation, as indicated by McCoy et al. (2018) and McCoy and Somer (2019) in their studies, who advocated the thesis that there are common patterns for the inter-group conflicts in different countries, leading to settings of intense political and relational polarisation.

The construction of contemporary polarisation takes place when one segment of society, previously unorganised, becomes politically united and starts a mobilisation toward common goals. However, this union takes place, among other factors, due to the action of political actors that bring many a discontent 'under the same banner,' generalising the others (McCoy et al. 2018). As polarisation grows stronger, it transcends the political sphere and permeates interpersonal relations (family, school, work, etc.), corresponding to what the authors call a 'pernicious polarisation', in

which there is a process of homogenisation of internal group differences, leading to the creation of a collective identity. The differences between groups also become homogenised, and they become one single identity that represents the 'Others' (McCoy and Somer 2019). Thus, polarisation is a process in which 'the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly allied along a single dimension [...] and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "Us" versus "Them"' (McCoy et al. 2018, 18).

As a consequence, people start to see the opposite side as enemies to be exterminated instead of political adversaries, which constitutes a great danger to democratic regimes, as it leads to growing collective feelings of antipathy, mistrust, and fear of the opposite group (McCoy et al. 2018).

In Brazil, the polarisation has become stronger in recent years. An important milestone for its growth is the manifestation of political dissatisfaction in 2013 (Solano et al. 2017), which Santos Júnior (2019, 49) describes as 'a trigger for the Brazilian political crisis that unearthed a set of repressed dissatisfactions and discontent'. In the following year, the population was polarised between 'Petistas' and 'Antipetistas' (respectively, supporters of the workers' party, and opponents of the same party), culminating in the impeachment of then-president Dilma Rouseff, in 2016, and in the introduction of Jair Bolsonaro as a symbol of political renovation in the 2018 elections (Santos Júnior 2019).

As of the writing of this article, the Brazilian setting is still polarised, and it is possible to show the consequences of said polarisation in this pandemic that is affecting the entire world. In the political sphere, there are dichotomies, such as health versus economy, valuing science versus devaluing it, among others. This situation transcends the political sphere, affecting social relations, as suggested by McCoy and Somer (2019), triggering conflicts and violence, both in more intimate social relations between people who are cohabiting for longer due to social isolation, and in the relations established by social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Therefore, it can be stated that we are in the middle of multiple complex and urgent problems, while simultaneously showing little ability for interpersonal understanding and cooperation. As a result, we believe that encouraging the use of principles and practices that can help to overcome this situation is necessary and urgent, and that dialogue is one of the possible paths to that end (Jacobi et al. 2020). Therefore, we seek to answer the following question in this article: how can a method of dialogue stimulate the learning of dialogic principles and practices in a virtual environment and contribute to the confrontation of social polarisation? To answer these questions, sessions of dialogue training were held, virtually, with Brazilian participants. Below, the methodology used in these sessions is explained.

Methodology

We adopted, as an epistemological inspiration (Becker 1994), an interventional and qualitative research study, which seeks to produce an interventional investigation '[...] of a micropolitical order in social experiences [...] while proposing an action to transform the sociopolitical reality' (Rocha and Aguiar 2003, 67). Damiani (2012) and Damiani et al. (2013) apply this perspective to an educational context, producing a research study of the pedagogical intervention type, in which they seek to plan and execute interferences in the learning processes, aiming to improve them in the test of pedagogical practices, which demands the analysis of the effects that result from performing the intervention.

In this article we seek to perfor m a pedagogical intervention of a micropolitical order to test the effects of the proposed dialogue method, in order to answer the aforementioned research question. To carry out this investigation, it is important to separate the method of intervention from its analysis. First, we describe in detail the pedagogical practice, based on its theoretical framework. Later, data collection and analysis instruments are specified, in order to treat the development of a scientific research study with the adequate rigour (Damiani 2012). These two methods are presented below.

Method of Intervention

Considering the current situation, in which a pandemic is affecting the entire world, those who could promptly start social isolation as a measure to contain the dissemination of the virus increased the time they need to spend together. This, coupled with high levels of uncertainty and insecurity, contributed to a growth in polarisation and populist rhetoric, which led us to create a small manual with dialogic practices that can aid people in dealing with this situation, increasing their chances of mutual understanding and cooperation.

Later, we decided to create a pilot project of dialogue training in Brazil. The proposal was characterised by the building of virtual groups (Google Meet) in which people could practice dialogue under the guidance of a facilitator, who was responsible for mediating the learning process. With this in mind, the first author of this article announced the proposal on the social network Instagram, inviting anyone interested to participate. The seventeen people who expressed interest were selected and divided into three groups: one with seven participants, another with six, and another with four. It should be highlighted that the identity of the participants was kept anonymous in this research. Each is represented here by the letter P followed by a number (e.g., P4 = participant 4).

The course took place from May to June 2020 and was made up of eight meetings of one hour and a half each. The training was divided in two sections:

1. Four initial meetings of introduction to dialogue, throughout two weeks (with two meetings a week):

   a.   1st meeting: presentation of the participants; survey of the expectations for the course; survey of the understanding of dialogue; and presentation of the theoretical and methodological principles of dialogue, according to the suggestion made by Bohm (2005) about the importance of people having previous contact with the theory of dialogue before exercising it. In addition, the themes that were of interest to the actors were surveyed, so they could be codified and become the first subjects discussed in the dialogues, in accordance with the propositions of Freire (2017).

   b.   2nd, 3rd, and 4th meetings: participants were encouraged to start practising the dialogue, according to the course method (which is described further below).

2. Four meetings to further develop the practices learned (one meeting per week).

   a.   5th, 6th, 7th, 8th meetings: participants were encouraged to further develop their exercise of dialogue, which had started in the previous meetings, by sharing experiences from their personal and professional lives, while also dialoguing about what they had learned.

The change in the frequency of meetings was justified due to how important it was to increase the distance between one meeting and the other in the second section of the training, to increase the chance of participants experiencing situations in which to practise the dialogue in their personal and professional lives.

Additionally, the participants were asked to keep a field journal, an instrument to encourage them to record the educational process they were going through, in which they should write down what they learned, felt, and their insights (Mello 2016; Battaini et al. 2017), making it possible for the researcher to monitor the process of development of each individual.

Course Method

The method adopted in the course was adapted and developed from previous works (Monteiro 2018; Monteiro e Sorrentino 2019a, 2019b) and inspired by the methodological ideas about dialogue proposed by Bohm (2005), Isaacs (1999), and Freire (1983, 2017).

The method is formed by four practices, each one made up of a number of features. The first one is *listening*. Listening in a dialogic way comprises: listening to the pauses instead of seeing them as opportunities to interrupt what the Other is saying; listening without interrupting, even if we have an idea that we believe is incredible and that we want to share immediately; listening without making assumptions or judgements; listening even if we disagree with what is being said.

The second practice is *identifying emotions and feelings* that surface as we listen. This practice is characterised by perceiving the impulses that emerge in us as we listen to what is said, without letting them out or suppressing them. The third practice is *re-admiring*, that is, looking back on what one believes one knows, on what seems to be a truth for oneself and for others who think similarly. During this practice, the process of self-questioning is truly relevant for people to identify their most deeply ingrained values and beliefs. Lastly, the practice of *speaking*. Speaking dialogically is speaking in the first person of the singular without generalisations; sharing the sensations in the body and the feelings provoked by an idea; sharing the thoughts about the theme of the dialogue; sharing personal stories.

These practices can happen in different orders. We can start, for example, by listening, seeking to identify emotions and feelings, which can be shared through speaking, and then carry out the practice of re-admiring. We can also listen, identify emotions and feelings, re-admire, and finally, share our thoughts and insights through speaking.

Analysis Methods

Data collection took place through participant observation (Marconi and Lakatos 2003) during the course; document analysis (Ludke and André 1986; Marconi and Lakatos 2003) from the autobiographical records the participants made in their field journals; and through the application of a questionnaire (Marconi and Lakatos 2003) at the end of the course, which was made up of ten open questions, including a pretest.

The analysis of the data collected was carried out through the identification of phrases (written or spoken) and gestures that indicated dialogic and anti-dialogic characteristics. First, the data collected by the three instruments was analysed separately; later, there was a triangulation of the results (Azevedo et al. 2013), comparing the data obtained from each one. To do so, three categories of analysis were recognised, and indicative questions were formulated (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Categories and indicative questions.

CATEGORIES	INDICATIVE QUESTIONS
Learning Dialogue	Is there a willingness to learn a new way to think, to communicate, and to act? Are there signs indicating that the four practices are taking place: listening, identifying, re-admiring, and speaking? Are there signs that the main principles of the dialogue are recognised (the importance of alterity, diversity of interpretation, non-imposition of ideas, the timing of the dialogue, etc.)? Are there signs of the recognition that the other is open for a moment of dialogue? Are there changes in the way of thinking about certain aspects of existence, resulting from dialogic thinking and communication?
Dialogue and the Virtual Environment	What is the potential of the virtual environment for dialogue? What are the limits of the virtual environment for the dialogue?
Dialogue, Social Isolation, and Polarisation	Are there changes in the personal and professional relations resulting from the understanding of the other?

Source: The Authors.

Results and Discussion

In this section, that which was learned by the participants of the course is presented, as well as the challenges that they faced throughout the process. The potential and the limits of the virtual environment are also discussed, as well as the impact of what was learned in the daily relations of the participants during this period of social isolation and polarisation.

Learning the Dialogue

In general, the motivation of the participants to start the process of learning dialogue resulted from a desire to improve their communication abilities, with the aim of confronting their daily difficulties in being understood and understanding the different, which fuel this setting of pernicious polarisation that can be found in many countries in the world (McCoy et al. 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019). This finding becomes evident in P7, who recognises their own 'growing intolerance with opposite opinions, especially involving political subjects, with friends and relatives.' These perspectives are reiterated by P10, who expresses willingness to 'listen more and live with people whose perspectives are different from mine, especially when they can hurt others.'

So, let us continue to the other category of analysis – Learning Dialogue, that is, the learning constructed by the participants. For the analysis, we divided the results found into three other subcategories which feed one into the other: *dialogue practices*, *dialogue principles*, and *identifying the possibility of starting a dialogue*.

Dialogue practices

With regard to learning the practices of dialogue, it was possible to identify that participants experienced and incorporated the 'listening with attention and respect' (P3), 'listening to the silence' (P9), and 'listening without interrupting or showing any type of rushed criticism/approval' (P10). P3 also reported a daily experience that demonstrates this learning:

> In phone calls, I showed more respect to the pauses of the other when I could and, when my speech was interrupted, I listened [...] and waited for the perception of the other about their interruption. It frequently worked. The person, when they finished talking, said: 'I'm sorry, I interrupted what you were saying when I cut in.' And also [when I interrupted and] [...] noticed in time, I stopped and apologised, or said at some point that I had interrupted them [...] and asked the person to continue [...]. I almost found in myself or in the other an anxiety in speaking and the need to impose [...] an opinion about a certain subject.

Still on listening, in the words of P10, it was possible to find signs of their recognition of how important it was to listen without making assumptions: 'I noticed that my immediate reactions, before the other finished what they were saying, in some cases, were not even in accordance to what I was feeling in the end – sometimes they even stopped being true or even necessary'.

About the practice of identifying emotions and feelings, P9 stated the importance of 'analysing and identifying what my relation is to some subjects, that is, having self-

knowledge and control over my actions during a conversation.' Complementing this, P3 mentioned the importance of 'knowing how to assume a position without being reactive'.

It stands out that the learning of these things was not free of challenge. It is difficult 'not let[ting] the emotion speak louder to the point of preventing the dialogue' (P2), 'not reacting, interrupting the statements of the other when entirely disagreeing with them' (P3), and 'waiting for the other to finish talking' (P5).

About the practice of speaking, it was possible to find signs of how important it is to 'expose [...] the way of thinking without trying to impose it' (P7) and knowing 'how to use certain "keywords" which do not attack the other in the middle of the conversation, such as, for instance, "that does not make sense to me," "I suggest that...," and "from my point of view"' (P9).

This practice also represented a challenge for some participants, as shown by P10, who stated that they had 'a little bit of personal resistance in opening emotional problems [...], considered [...] quite intimate.' It seems that, for this participant, the length of the course was not enough to create confidence, which is an aspect of great relevance for dialogue, as suggested by Bohm (2005) and Freire (2017). On the other hand, P12, a member of the same group, stated that 'we created a strong bond of trust.' This situation seems to show how each person has a particular process of learning and getting involved with the group, and recognising this situation is very important for those who are members of a dialogue group, especially for the person responsible for facilitating it.

Finally, there was the practice of re-admiring, which took place to a lesser extent than the others, which perhaps was related to the fact that, according to the participants, it was the most challenging one. An interesting example was the experience presented by P7:

> I live in a student house with five other people. In the beginning of the year, before the pandemic started, the foreign friend (Turkish) of one of the people who live here, spent two months here to finish the backpacking trip she wanted to do through Latin America. Due to the pandemic, this woman could not go back to her country, and she's been here in the house since January. She doesn't speak Portuguese AT ALL, just Turkish and English with a strong Turkish accent. During the quarantine, two women who live here went back to São Paulo, and as a result, there were four people here, including the foreign lady. Of course, the language factor influenced my difficulties in having a dialogue with her a lot, but I was embarrassed and did not have the patience to try and understand what she was saying. With time living together and with the dialogue techniques, I started to talk more to her, and we started to talk more

than just greeting each other. In a long conversation with her about astrology, travels, and professional fields, I worked on how bothered I get with the silence during dialogue. Before the course, whenever there was a moment of silence, I always assumed that the subject was over, and in most cases I would withdraw from the space of the dialogue. During the course, I observed how bothered I got, and noticed that, after the silence, usually another subject emerges, or another observation about the previous subject (P7).

The situation described above is rich in important signs for dialogue. Firstly, the importance of shared linguistic signs (Bohm 2007) for understanding to take place. If that does not happen, the sounds are not accompanied by meanings and signification, and are nothing more than unknown melodies. Another aspect was the reframing of silence, the transformation of the discomfort it causes. The participant had a very well-established reflexive reaction, as suggested by Bohm (2007), when experiencing silence. It was believed to be something uncomfortable, that should be avoided. However, the participant discovered the potential of silence: when 'another subject emerges, or another observation about the previous subject.' Furthermore, it was possible to understand and connect to the other, which took place starting with a conversation about many different themes, such as astrology, travels, and profession.

On the other hand, the practice of re-admiring also brought challenges to the participants, as indicated in the reflections from P1:

I believe that re-admiring from a new perspective is the most difficult. Numerous times I notice that I start 'ruminating' on the situation or someone's speech, but it's quite possible that I am just tripping over my own guesses and forms of thinking and cannot bring new elements to the setting and evolve with the question. Therefore, I see that this is the most challenging issue.

It is interesting to note that they identified the difficulty in the practice and noticed the possibility of 'tripping over my own guesses.' This is an important sign of the process of letting go of one's beliefs. That means that they had already recognised the existence of this habitual and anti-dialogic way of thinking that is present in all of us, this clinging to our ideas, values, and beliefs (Bohm 2005, 2007). This is a sign of the start of the re-admiration process, although they did not recognise it.

Dialogue principles

The learning mentioned above encouraged the recognition of the principles of dialogue. Among them, it was possible to find the recognition of the importance of the other, as indicated by P9: 'we are not "complete" without the other and [...] life only makes sense when we look at the other with empathy, giving meaning to what did not have meaning before.' This recognition of alterity, in turn, indicates how

important it is to be open to what is different, being 'willing to listen to the point of view of the other person, respecting and understanding what makes them think like that' (P7) and 'giving space to the Other, and trying to be open to ideas that are contradictory to the ones in which I believe' (P2).

Learning this aids in overcoming the perspective according to which the other, who thinks differently, is an enemy, a perspective based on the logic of 'Us' versus 'Them' (McCoy et al. 2018). As a result, the knowledge and humanity of the other are redeemed, as becomes clear in the statements of P10:

> I understood that I need to make efforts to see the more human side of people who "err," especially with regard to hurting or being unjust to the other, which is [what] bothers me the most. I started to dedicate myself more to being able to see humanity in places where oftentimes it is too difficult for me to see. The humanity of the failures not only of others but also of my own becomes something even more intense in my reflections.

Redeeming the humanity of the other is a highly relevant element in confronting the depersonalisation of the different, and, therefore, in confronting the vicious cycle of misunderstanding, intolerance, mistrust, fear, and violence, which result from polarisation, as McCoy et al. (2018) suggest. To do so, it is very relevant to recognise the diversity of interpretations, that is, the diversity of truths that exist and were built throughout the pathway each of us went through in the stories of our lives within the social, economic, political, environmental, and cultural context in which we were raised, making it possible for new meanings to be co-created (Jacobi et al. 2020). This learning becomes clear when P11 says:

> I learned that dialogue is the understanding of the truths of others, in the process of building the other and my own truths. I learned that dialogue is an invitation to think together and build new truths, instead of being a conversation in which different points of view are vomited, and there is an attempt to change what another person thinks or to end the conversation with a 'winner.'

Complementing this, P2 professed to believe 'that I still need to practice a lot, to become closer to the ideal, but it was a good start. [... I]t is still challenging for me to deal with some situations and understand other positions, but I can start trying to see things in other ways.' Here, there is an important sign of the recognition that this process is long, as suggested by Monteiro and Sorrentino (2019a). Being open to finding and re-admiring different perspectives about the world requires time and frequency, and, as a result, one must overcome a utilitarian perspective about dialogue, according to which it is a product, a simple tool to be used in day-to-day life.

Identifying the possibility of starting a dialogue

In addition to the principles, the learning of practices also encouraged the ability to *identify the possibility of starting a dialogue*. From the speech of P1 it is possible to perceive the learning to recognise the opening or not opening of the Other to the emergence of dialogue, guiding their way of acting:

> I think that the most expressive experience I had, and that even happened more than once in professional and personal environments was [...] the non-dialogue, that is, listening to the commentary or the position of the other, and not reacting, not complementing, not following a path that was primed to become a discussion, since the other had a set and negative position about the situation. As a result, I perceived that the best course of action was being silent and not continuing to discuss the subject at that moment.

Thus, by experiencing the principles of dialogue, it is possible to acquire the capacity to recognise the possibilities for its emergence, characterised by those moments when reciprocity and communion are possible, as Buber (1979, 2014) suggests, and to avoid situations that could lead to misunderstandings and fights.

Dialogue and the Virtual Environment

With the development of the course, it was possible to identify the potential and the limits of the virtual environment for learning and experiencing dialogue. The potential includes signs that the virtual environment encourages the practice of listening to the pauses, due to the dynamic of opening and closing the microphone in the videoconferencing software, since 'to listen to what the other is saying, in the application, other participants must be in silence' (P5). It is clear that this is also important in person, but it seems to be much more limiting in the virtual environment, since the superposition of voices in the software makes understanding much more difficult, and it is very difficult to focus on what one person is saying and ignore the other, as can be done in person. Also, listening to the pauses was an important moment to digest what was heard, and, therefore, an important moment to encourage the re-admiration. Therefore, it seems that the dynamic of turning the microphones on and off in the virtual environment makes it easier and faster to learn how to listen, especially in the beginning of the process. It works as an almost constant form of encouragement for the confrontation of the usual anxiety experienced by people in dialogue processes, as indicated by Bohm (2005) and Isaacs (1999), which can be an obstacle to starting them.

On the other hand, P7 stated that 'the tools that deactivate the microphone and the screen reduced the flow of the dialogue.' This observation can be interpreted from the situations in which the person feels an internal push to start speaking, a power that moves, and becomes frustrated to realise that they had started speaking, but the

microphone was off. We hypothesise that this situation is the result of the participants' lack of intimacy with the virtual dynamic, which can be developed through consistent use.[1]

Another potential is the promotion of meeting people who are physically distant. In the groups, there were people from different cities from the state of São Paulo, one person from the state of Santa Catarina, one from Mato Grosso, and two from Rio Grande do Norte. In addition, participants reported 'time flexibility' (P9) and that it was 'easier […] to participate in the meetings [since] a meeting in person, in addition to the time spent in the meeting, needs to consider the time I take to get there and the [financial] expenses that I will have just by going to the place of the meeting' (P11).

One last potential found was the inciting of a feeling of safety. 'My impression was that the virtual environment offers the comfort of one's own home' (P3). 'I feel that the virtual platform put people in a place where they feel comfortable and safe to express themselves' (P8). This feeling of comfort and safety may result from the fact that people are in an environment they know, in front of the screen of the computer, less exposed and having a more distant contact than the one they would have in meetings in person.

On the other hand, the lack of physical contact was mentioned by some participants as a limitation of the virtual environment, since 'the physical presence may promote closer connections between the participants, which may be more continuous through time' (P1). According to P13,

> Experiencing this proximity in this space is challenging, since we have to deal with this distance between people. This proximity often originates in conversations after the meeting, or during coffee throughout the meeting. And in virtual meetings, we connect at a certain time and disconnect in another, 'automatically' and we leave no space for conversation that could make it possible for us to know each other better and establish a stronger bond of trust.

This statement indicates the importance of side conversations, that are more intimate and enable the creation of bonds. These situations do not seem to take place in the virtual environment. When someone speaks, everyone else listens. It is different from when we are in a party, for example, and we can bring someone to the side to speak more intimately.

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1   It is worth highlighting that a recommendation was given to all participants to leave their cameras on, so that everyone could see each other. Furthermore, it was decided, collectively, that if someone wanted to speak, they should make a specific sign to the camera, which also justifies the need of keeping it on.

Another reported limit of the virtual environment was the problems with the internet connection, 'which can be unstable and provoke small interruptions' (P2). Furthermore, 'virtual meetings restrict the participation of people who do not have internet or devices to participate in the meetings' (P11).

Finally, the limit to the number of participants should also be highlighted. We tried to work with small groups, with less than ten people, which is the opposite of the suggestions by Bohm (2005), according to whom this work should be done with groups from 20 to 40 people, for a cultural microcosm to emerge, in which different perspectives about the world can meet. Additionally, it was possible to find that there was a certain homogeneity, in general, in the ideas and values of the participants, which can be an obstacle to starting dialogues (Bohm 2005, 2007). This situation may be explained by the fact that all these participants originated from the Instagram of the first author, since the dialogue groups were divulged through this social network, meaning that the bubble formed by its algorithms would have affected the selection.

To overcome these limits, we tried to bring the idea of the different to the reflections, to stimulate the exercise of re-admiring. It seems that the results presented in the previous sub-item reiterate the efficiency of this strategy, since the limits seem not to have been obstacles for the learning of the practices and principles of dialogue. Also, some participants were capable of bringing the learning that was built in the dialogue group, an environment in which the different was not physically present, to their personal relationships, environments in which relations with the different happen daily, as the sub-item below will show.

Dialogue, Social Isolation, and Polarisation

In this category, the relations and contributions of learning dialogue to deal with the social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the confrontation of the polarisation of interpersonal relations, were identified.

It was possible to find signs that the virtual dialogue groups brought, during moments of isolation, emotional embracing, as P2 made clear: '[the course] happened during the quarantine and helped to relieve social isolation a bit and even to meet other people.' In addition, this helped P5 to adapt and reinvent:

> [the group] happened in a stage of the isolation in which I had no objectives or commitments. Due to this commitment, I started reorganising my life, committing to other practices, and getting back in touch with a healthy routine within these crazy times. Being able to meet new people also made me open up in an incredibly positive way, with a lot of listening, no judging, it was very important for my mental health!

Another important outcome was the emergence of the desire to connect with what is different, as the next excerpt shows: 'In these times of social isolation, participating in the course [...] revived my interest in getting in touch with people who think differently' (P7). This interest is remarkably relevant, it is a precondition for the dialogue to start and for the pernicious polarisation to be confronted. Without openness to the other, there is no meeting of the dialogical reciprocity, as Buber (2014) suggests.

It was possible to find signs of the contribution of learning dialogue to interpersonal relations during the moment of isolation. The dialogue can help transform conflicts. On one hand, it can help to avoid transforming a conflict into a fight. On the other, it can help in cases in which the conflict has already become a fight, by resignifying the interpersonal relation. Below, a situation experienced by a participant of the dialogue groups, in their family, in which it is possible to see this interrelation between dialogue and conflict:

> [I was] home with my parents. We were at the table, after lunch, talking about the importance of changing some attitudes and starting more healthy/ sustainable habits. I started talking about consuming meat and how important it was for us to consume less of it, and analyse everything it entailed, especially now, since we are in a pandemic that showed many crises we have been experiencing for a long time (social, environmental, political, economic). I noticed that the statements of my father were bothering me, as he didn't agree exactly with what I was saying and said that we did not need to stop eating meat and that meat was important. Then I gave an example, talking about a friend who is vegan and extremely healthy. At this point, I said that maybe her health was better than his, by the way. Then, he got terribly upset and started saying that this was all nonsense and the conversation started going down a path of pure argument and aggressivity. I got up from my chair, very upset, and left the kitchen. I thought a lot about this situation and about how I became enveloped by the feelings that came to me without being able to stop and think about what was happening and what it all meant to me. I could not practice the dialogue, be it internally or with my father, without letting my internal references be 'shaken.' I wanted to convince him about my point of view and when this didn't seem to be possible, I got completely frustrated. I wanted him to understand how important it is for us to consider the relations of meat consumption to climate change, the destruction of the Amazon, and other issues, for example. I could have talked to him about this more calmly, without getting angry, more peacefully, without trying to convince him of anything (P13).

In this report, it is possible to notice that the conflict was triggered, but not resolved. However, the story continues, with a new situation that took place some days later:

> He [my father] bought candies and I opened the candy package to eat some. He provoked me (I mean, I felt provoked by him) when he said that if I wanted

to keep a healthy diet, I couldn't eat that, and then he started laughing. I laughed too, but I started to feel a bit bothered/sad because maintaining my new eating habits and transforming them into something ingrained was being a challenge. I took a deep breath, and I knew that I did not want to enter that flow of misunderstanding caused by my non-dialogic actions. I did not want to start an argument with my father, who, at that moment, I thought did not want to start one with me either. And I managed, by a second, to hold back the flow, the automated and more 'aggressive' response. I took a breath and thought about what I was feeling. And then I said [...] that he was right, that I was trying to improve my eating habits, but since I liked that candy so much and had some strong affective memories about it, I couldn't resist and ate it, but that it was true that I did not want it to be a part of my new habits for a healthier life. Then, he stopped laughing and said: 'That is true, dear, you are right. I imagine it must have been a long process for you, you should eat it. I am just kidding.' At that moment, I felt that we created a new space between us, even if for a few seconds, a space in which we could genuinely talk to each other. It was interesting. I imagine that in more difficult situations, this first 'breath' is really challenging. However, it is remarkably necessary for the creation of this dialogic space that can grow between people.

In the second part of the report above, it is possible to notice that the teasing based on the earlier conflict was transformed by the dialogic posture of the participant, who encouraged their father to understand their desires and the challenges involved in achieving them. Therefore, it becomes clear that the dialogue is also an invitation, never an imposition. When we act dialogically with the other, there is a chance we encourage them to enter the same relation with us, transforming conflicts, improving coexistence, and opening spaces for cooperation. This is the opening that, corroborating Bohm (2007) and Freire (2017), makes the dialogic process free and, simultaneously, freeing.

Another important report of an interpersonal relation is from P11:

I feel that the greatest difference the dialogue is bringing to my daily life during the quarantine is related to my relations with the people who live with me. Since my thoughts are very different from those of my relatives, confrontations were always common between us, but after I started the course, I felt a change in me in the way I make an argument about something, even in the way that I do not state an opinion I have in moments when I notice that a dialogue would be impossible. I noticed that I am more sensitive to the perception that there should be no dialogue, and to the possibility of starting one.

Then, the participant reported a situation experienced with their mother regarding a controversy that took place in the Brazilian context, about the way artists consume alcoholic beverages in the live presentations they make from their houses and transmit

through YouTube, in events targeted at encouraging food donations.

> My mom, who is against the portrayals of the ingestion of alcoholic beverages
> in the media, stated that she was against the lawsuit that is being carried out
> against the singer Gusttavo Lima for that reason.[2]
>
> She: The singer Gusttavo Lima should not be sued for this. This is unacceptable,
> he is in his house, he should do what he wants.
>
> I: Why?
> She: Soap operas, Big Brother, and other TV shows also do this, and they are
> not sued. The man was at his house.
> I: And are you in favour of alcoholic beverages in these other places?
> She: No, children grow up learning that this is normal.
> I: Should these places be sued?
> She: Yes, children do not know that the soap operas are lies, they think that it
> is real life and will want to reproduce it.
> I: Live transmissions represent the real, daily life, in the house of people, right?
> She: Yes, but the soap operas and other shows are on TV, inside the house.
> I: Do you think that children have access to these technological tools at an
> increasingly younger age?
> She: Definitely, and that is extremely dangerous.
> I: What is your opinion about artists who make live transmissions while
> drinking?
> She: I would prefer that they did the transmissions without drinking, calm, so
> this behaviour does not seem common in daily life.
> I: Why do you think that Gusttavo Lima should not be sued?
> She: I think he should, it is right. The justice system is what is wrong, since it
> does not sue the channels and TV shows that have been doing this for years.
>
> This was one of the first times I managed to use questions to show incoherence
> in the statements of someone.

In this case, it is possible to notice how central moral and political issues are to the
conversation: whether the consumption of alcoholic beverages is acceptable during live
transmissions of artists throughout social isolation, and the impact of this behaviour
on children and adolescents. The mother, at first, believed that 'inside their house,
each one is free to do what they want.' As the questions progressed, she managed to
identify an incoherence between this belief and the one according to which 'children
should not be encouraged early to consume alcoholic beverages,' resignifying her

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2   Brazilian singer and composer of "sertanejo".

initial understanding.

This report highlights the purpose of the dialogue learning method used here: to learn how to understand the other, we do, during the course, the exercise of understanding ourselves. It is like we are our own subjects of study! Since we learned to do the internal exercise of identifying our beliefs and values, their origins in our story, the emotions and feelings connected to them, and our intentions and actions to make them come true, we can *encourage*, through *questions*, these practices in other people, and thus think together, fostering mutual understanding. This idea is also in accordance with Freire (2017), who proposed new questions instead of answers to the questions, reinforcing the process of reflection and dialogue.

This circumstance triggers the possibility of a process of disseminating dialogue. People who learn and start practicing the dialogue can become *pollinating agents* in their daily relations, encouraging others to dialogically exercise their thinking.

Furthermore, these agents can take the role of *insider-outsider*, proposed by Kilmurray (2019), characterised by 'people who have credibility within their group but, at the same time, recognised that the political stagnation in it demands the infusion of the oxygen of external criticism and ideas' (no page number). That means that these agents can oxygenate the dialogic posture of their groups – relatives, friends, work colleagues, contributing to the confrontation and dissolution of the current polarised settings, and creating the conditions necessary for collective and articulated actions to emerge, so they can deal with the numerous challenges that humanity currently confronts.

Final Considerations

In this article, we presented and discussed the application of a method of dialogue made up of four practices: listening, identifying emotions and feelings, re-admiring, and speaking. The results found showed interesting signs that this proposal can help people to start experiencing dialogue, recognising and resignifying ideas and beliefs held, and can lead to transformations in their behaviours about the situations of conflict, and, consequently, their daily interpersonal relations with people who have different perspectives about the world.

In addition, the constant practice of dialogue on the part of the participants can lead them to stimulate the experience of such learning in other people, becoming pollinating agents of the dialogic principles, meaning that the results of a virtual dialogue group, such as the one reported here, are not limited to the participants, but can expand like an invisible wave through the interactions they establish and maintain with people they share experiences with.

It was also possible to identify and discuss the potential and the limitations of using the virtual environment to carry out dialogic meetings. The potential seems to be greater than the limitations, since the process that was started made it possible to learn dialogue and led to cognitive and relational changes.

It was also possible to identify the potential of the method for confronting social polarisation, since it seems to foster in the participants the rescue of others' humanity, the recognition of otherness and the desire to meet with the different. Thus, the method of dialogue, applied virtually during the period of social isolation of the pandemic, presents itself as an interesting and promising way to confront the polarisation experienced in Brazil and other democratic countries.

Finally, we emphasise that the present article is a first qualitative approximation regarding the method, and there is still a long way to go of scientific deepening in the field of dialogue studies in order to ascertain its effects and challenges. Thus, we suggest performing new research studies, in several application contexts, that investigate the hypothesis that the method fosters the learning of dialogue practices, which stimulate cognitive and relational changes in people, enabling the co-creation of collaborative actions that promote structural changes in their socio-cultural contexts.

In addition, we suggest that research be carried out to investigate more deeply the application of the method in a virtual and physical environment, unveiling the potentialities and limits of each one, as well as carrying out research together with social psychologists and political scientists, based on quali-quantitative methods, on the applicability of the method of dialogue proposed here to confront social polarisation.

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Rethinking Dialogue Practices among Children: Philosophy for Children and Phenomenology as Approach towards Conflict Resolution in a Diverse Classroom

Aireen Grace Andal

Abstract: This work takes off from the key concepts of Paul Weller's thoughts on contemporary challenges to dialogue, which it adapts to the context of children's dialogue in diverse classroom settings. The challenge in a diverse classroom is how to adapt a strategy to acknowledge the diversity of participants and reach a peaceful and productive dialogue. This article shows how Philosophy for Children (P4C) together with a phenomenological approach can be used as a tool for addressing the challenges Weller has mentioned to address the issue of children's differences. Then, this article shows the potential of using a phenomenological approach and lived experience to establish a bridge between Philosophy for Children, critical reflection and understanding differences in the classroom. This work argues that phenomenology as an approach is useful for P4C to have a dialogue aimed at understanding diversity, solidarity, and even pluralistic democratic engagement. Such discussions have implications for facilitating dialogue in linguistically diverse classrooms, intercultural and interethnic classrooms, and digital classrooms. Finally, this article identifies key areas for future research. This work seeks to speak and contribute to the literature on dialogic research by problematising children's discursive positions as learners and participants of dialogue.

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Introduction: Challenges to Dialogue in the Classroom Setting

Diversity in the classroom has emerged as a key dimension in pedagogical affairs within and between educational systems and teachers. In recent years, there has been a rise in awareness of the importance of diversity in the classroom, with an emphasis on producing the processes and structures of group cohesion and a sense of unity that cross-cuts various backgrounds (Ungemah 2015; Hyry-Beihammer et al. 2019; Schwarzenthal et al. 2019). Pedagogical approaches have been applied by various educators to teach children diversity through dialogue. However, the persistent challenge is how to adapt a strategy that acknowledges the diversity of participants towards a peaceful and productive dialogue (Bush & Saltarelli 2000). Contemporary classroom settings remain challenged in terms of how to approach the growing diversity in classrooms. For instance, there are an estimated 31 million migrant children all over the world (UNICEF 2017). While not all migrant children attend schools in host countries, schools have to be ready to accommodate students of many cultural backgrounds with a diversity of traditions, values, and beliefs. In such situations, conflict can easily arise given the different backgrounds among students. In most instances, communication is limited because migrant children struggle to express themselves well in the language used in a host country (Global Education Monitoring Report 2019). About two thirds of refugees live in areas that do not speak the language of their country of origin (UNICEF 2017). Moreover, the rise in digital classrooms through online learning has paved the way for a more diverse set of students in a virtual setting (Gallagher et al. 2020). This poses challenges in how to administer a harmonious dialogue among virtual participants who have less personal interaction with each other (Siergiejczyk 2020). As such, facilitating a productive dialogue in a classroom calls for attention to address the growing diversity of classroom interaction.

To discuss the dynamics of diversity and dialogue in the classroom setting, this article has a twofold task: First, it adopts Paul Weller's (2020) key concepts in the challenges to dialogue from the workshop titled 'Rethinking Dialogue in the Age of New Challenges and Opportunities' to sharpen our approach towards facilitating and understanding differences in the classroom. Weller offers a relevant discussion on the dangers of amplifying terror by dismissing the validity of the argumentative approaches of all interlocutors and favouring only some ways to have dialogue. Likewise, these cultural conflicts can be witnessed in the everyday classroom (Hess & Avery 2008). For instance, cultural and historical narratives and practices in schools can lead to intergroup conflict (Bekerman et al. 2009; See also Funk & Said 2004). Second, this work discusses how current practices in classroom dialogue can use Philosophy for Children and phenomenology as a way to realise Weller's approach to conflict resolution. P4C encourages a diverse community of children to think for themselves and have an exchange of ideas (Splitter & Sharp 1995, 245). In addition,

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this work argues that phenomenology as an approach is useful for P4C to have a dialogue aimed at understanding rather than winning. As such, this work discusses the possibilities of achieving conflict resolution through examining how issues could become opportunities for understanding diversity, solidarity, and even pluralistic democratic engagement (Freire 1998). Finally, this article identifies the implications of such discussions to contemporary classroom settings and key areas for future research.

Conflict in a Diverse Classroom

Weller (2020) notes that dialogue disagreements will only be reinforced when the other party is not acknowledged to have an equally legitimate way of arguing about a certain issue.[1] Although there have been efforts to cater for a diverse classroom setting, forming group cohesion still remains a challenge in a diverse classroom. When applied to classroom settings, conflicts can root from culturally shaped competing beliefs, values, and interests (Ross 1993, 2007). For instance, some students' ways to start or keep an on-going dialogue can be repressed; that is, if some subjects and modes of communication are more favoured, valued and encouraged than others. This is especially experienced by minority children. Previous studies have pointed out that students from lower-income families, immigrants or minority groups seem to have fewer chances to engage in critical dialogue and thoughtful discussions in comparison to those with privileged status (Campbell 2007; Dull & Murrow 2008). For instance, dialogue that employs conventional terms from a given culture is privileged while adversarial and overly critical modes from the minority are downplayed. While educators recognise the diversity of student backgrounds, they run the risk of only allowing certain ways of having a discussion among children (Conover & Searling 2000). This reinforces the same danger of amplifying resistance rather than arriving at a productive dialogue among children. This is tricky because what was initially intended to be a platform for dialogue to engage in critical discussions can be transformed into a space that expects only certain forms of dialogue. Not only do schools turn into spaces for manufacturing workers for economic productivity, but also educators themselves expect one mode of critical reflection, discussion and debate: there are privileged ways to be critical, which may impede a greater appreciation of the limits of our dialogical knowledge and capacity. More than the question 'how can students be taught to be critical?', another pressing concern is 'how can both educators and students reflect on the ways of being critical?' Diversity in critical engagements is important because 'to have any meaning, self-direction, like critical thinking, must include being responsible for relating new ideas and experience to previous knowledge as well as actively sharing

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1   Weller's original statement is that 'governments must learn from history that to combat terror with methods that undermine human rights will only strengthen those forces that use terror as a means for advancing their cause.'

that new understanding in order to justify and validate it' (Garrison 1992, 146). The relevance and quality of a critical engagement may be over- or underestimated and pre-judged based on each participant's, both student's and educator's alike, personal background. This, in turn, may deter inclusion of various participants and prevent them from being fully heard because some opinions are marginalised and not properly considered and weighed. Instead, the participants can be encumbered with the complicated task of ensuring that the dialogic process continues without checking the balance and quality of the dialogue itself. As the dialogue continues, it can be limited to meet the short-term demands of the syllabus or lesson, and consequently, the dialogic outcomes can be expected to be also limited.

Weller also points out that failing to acknowledge and to take seriously the reasons of others will not advance a resolution. Similarly, participants of the classroom, educators and students alike, may not be making efforts to understand their differences and may set expectations for each other's way of thinking and expression. One source of classroom clashes is the belief that there is only one method to resolve an issue. This resonates with Weller's (2020) key points on his scale of 'Othering': 'we are different; we behave differently, we are tight; we are right and you are wrong; you are a less adequate version of what we are; you are not what you say you are; what you are doing is evil; you are so wrong that you forfeit ordinary rights; you are less than human; you are evil; you are demonic'. While differences in the classroom cannot be immediately resolved, these collisions can threaten the learning community; thus, some resolutions have to be generated, at least temporarily, to enable the continuity of a healthy learning environment. However, it may be difficult for different participants to arrive at a common understanding if diversity is downplayed in the classroom culture. As van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) argue, in a situation where different parties acknowledge the need to arrive at a common understanding, every part of the dialogue must be contributory not only towards arriving at a shared understanding but also towards settling differences of judgement. Otherwise, dialogues will be either futile and irrelevant or coercive. While opposing sides resolve the current issue, this resolution may not be based on a shared understanding that both parties could agree with.

In recent decades in education spending there have been discussions on re-assessing the standardization of education and criticising the 'teaching to the test' culture, in which lessons and classroom experiences are determined by the requirement to prepare for examinations (See Moon et al. 2002; Jennings & Bearak 2014). In this type of setting, pedagogy is not directed towards open-ended discussion or enquiry, but on teaching what students 'need to know' to meet the requirements of whichever examination is next on the curriculum (Anderson 2012). This has been challenged by schools that have adhered to some experiential learning (Kolb 1984) such as

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problem-based (Savery 2006) and project-based learning (Bell 2010) in primary and secondary schools. These methods help facilitate the conduct of dialogue in school. However, while some schools and classroom settings have already started to open spaces for free enquiry, this practice has led to another issue which is both directly and indirectly related to dialogue. Schools are becoming sites for standardised ways of critical thinking and engaging communication processes. Whether overtly or covertly, the school is imbued with critical undertones and value judgements about what kind of critical thinking is supposed to be demonstrated, and what kind of dialogue should be produced. Students have to adhere to certain standards of being critical. The process of classroom dialogue is affected in the sense that some dialogic cultures can be employed at the expense of others. Alternative forms and styles of engaging in dialogue may overlook some positions. Dialogue plays an integral role in classroom communicative processes, and it is through the distinct process of exchanging and properly weighing reasons that fair and legitimate resolutions can be achieved. In order for a classroom dialogue to be considered inclusive, both students and educators must be able to define the bases on which their correspondence is anchored and treat this as an output of a legitimate discussion in which each participant had equality in voicing their reason.

Window of Opportunity for Dialogue in a Diverse Classroom

For educational institutions, the ideal consequence for children is to have a somewhat nuanced perspective in terms of being able to defer immediate judgement and independently assess given situations. While the literature is loaded with different definitions of the concept of reflection (Zeichner and Liston 1996; Darling-Hammond and Snyder 2000; Loughran 2002), one common attribute can be traced back to Dewey (1933), who understands reflection as an active and intentional action and to learn from an experience is to make a connection through reflecting on that which is both forward and backward in the experience. In a more research-oriented fashion, Moustakas (1994, 74) argues that reflection occurs throughout a phenomenological research approach and it provides the researcher with 'a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience'. As for resolving differences in critical assessments, an important consideration is to 'resolv[e] differences of opinion (its problem validity) in combination with its acceptability to the discussants (its conventional validity)' (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 132). This work discusses combining two approaches to manage classroom dialogue: Philosophy for Children (P4C) and critical reflection.

Children in dialogue towards critical reflection

One approach can be drawn from Matthew Lipman's (1993) Philosophy for Children or P4C. P4C aims to train children in primary and secondary school to be critical and creative and, less commonly, in extra-curricular contexts. Likewise, pedagogical training is at the heart of P4C to facilitate thinking among groups of children in dealing with philosophical situations to arrive at reasonable judgements through thoughtful dialogues and critical reflections. Rather than a conventional introduction of philosophical canonical concepts, P4C educators facilitate semi-structured dialogues or collaborative inquiries that foster familiarisation with philosophical discussions. Kohan (1995) notes that P4C offers a physical and metaphorical avenue to listen, speak, or remain observant, thereby enabling children to see for themselves the consequences of their decisions and actions, however simple or complex they are. P4C is interested in training young citizens to exercise their faculties of reason, as is evident in many of the programme initiatives which support the development of philosophy in schools. As Rainville (2000, 67) puts it, 'Philosophy for Children must be willing to incorporate historical detail and socio-cultural awareness into any programs which are meant to be truly liberatory'. Philosophy for Children has the opportunity to substantiate the previous efforts of education practitioners.

This work argues that Philosophy for Children can be seen as adhering to the reflective practice and experiential learning theories first introduced by John Dewey (1933), who recognised reflection as an active and intentional action. The reflective approach in this work obviously departs from the typical arrangement in the hierarchical school setting, where the dialogic culture of classroom positions is expected to be maintained. The strategy to use diverse ways to be critical for students to express their perspectives through creative means can provide new normative ways to assess students' critical thinking. Following Dewey's ideas, Schön (1983) reiterated that it is via experience that theory has significance, developing the concepts of *reflection-in-action* (reflection during the event) and reflection-on-action (reflection after the event). Given this theoretical frame, this work proposes that the experiences of children undergoing P4C can be used by philosophy scholars as indirect reflections for the purpose of obtaining a better understanding of their own thinking. This design hinges on the challenge for philosophy scholars to uncover structures and agencies that can offer a variety of directions for Philosophy for Children. Rivage-Seal (1987) argues that teaching critical thinking skills is useless unless its use is informed by relevant contextual details.

This is in recognition that children are deliberators themselves (Nishiyama 2017). While children are suspected of being 'not capable of elaborating or reflecting on moral principles" (Christiano 2001 as cited in Nishiyama 2017), assuming that children are 'too young' might be misguided since empirical studies show that children were able to articulate complicated questions which are existential and challenging

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(Hyde 2008). Children therefore can be considered as dialogic agents who have potential to contribute to better dialogic processes as measures of critical credentials of a given classroom. Through children's engagement in dialogues in the classroom, sharing perspectives through guided ways to recognise differences can improve the communicative culture in class as they are able to reconsider their thoughts, listen to others and to assess their own logical skills (Cassidy 2017). This contributes to achieving the kind of 'instruction [that] requires students to think, not just report someone else's thinking' (Nystrand et al. 1997, 72).

Active learning best takes place when learners are able to reflect on their own understanding and are able to recognise when they need more information, time, and strategy (Bransford et al. 2000). Assessing one's own understanding is 'key at all levels of experience' (Balls et al. 2011, 102). Here, reflection can be seen as a prerequisite of intelligence. This work therefore advances that through engaging in children's activities and lessons, philosophy scholars are able to think and reflect on the diversity of philosophical discussions and the manners in which these discussions can be framed. This is anchored in the notion that experience is the main source of learning, which occurs in cycles. Experiential learning is the melting pot of experience, perception, cognition, and behaviour and is a 'holistic integrative perspective on learning' (Kolb 1984, 21). In this sense, P4C can be a legitimate exercise as a critical reflection process while engaging in a dialogue itself and should not only be assessed in terms of students' speaking time. Here, learning and reflecting becomes 'an emergent process whose outcomes represent only historical record, not knowledge of the future', and, further, concepts of learning are 'derived from and continuously modified by experience' (ibid., 26). The cycle of learning is a continuous process based on reflection which occurs before, during, and after. Therefore, P4C is a hospitable ground for this practice because it can monitor children's reflection and progress.

But reflection for what ends? And if P4C is proven not to be helpful, will all the effort for this attempt be futile? Dewey believed that we learn just as much from our failed attempts as we do from our successful endeavours. As such, perpetual learning can be seen as an end in itself wherein '[t]he outcome of the process is changed from conceptual perspective... the shift from one perceptual perspective to another, which... has always been the focus of those who seek to understand human growth' (Boyd and Fales 1983, 101). Practices from the field are instructive in this regard. Evidence, at best, is mixed. For instance, the Lockean understanding of a child in a *tabula rasa* state, which viewed children as future citizens who need training for participation in civil life, is accepted positively in some parts of South Africa (Ndofirepi and Thokozani 2011). This kind of experience is used in democratic citizenship education in post-apartheid South Africa, which argued that Philosophy for Children can be helpful in individual enlightenment as triggers to enhance capacity to think (ibid). However, for

other instances, this may trigger critical thinking but the kind that does little to render emancipation from taken-for-granted dogma. For instance, feminist Marie-France Daniel (1994) attacks the P4C curriculum as a male-dominated arena, especially Lipman's novels in P4C. In other words, experiences of P4C vary, and therefore this makes a case for an agenda to reflect on diversifying ways to be critical in P4C.

Phenomenological approach to critical reflection

While dialogue is given emphasis in P4C, dialogue alone might not be sufficient to make children understand that some identities may be less familiar, and/or less accepted, for the majority in a given classroom. Students' personal understanding of a subject matter is to be taken into consideration in order to create a plurality of ideas to brood over in class. The classroom dialogue here becomes a process jointly achieved by each student in order to acknowledge not only ideas but different ways of expressing them. Here, using a phenomenological approach to critical reflection (Brocki and Wearden 2004), participants of a dialogical process can explore and make sense of the P4C experience. This approach maintains that 'human beings are not passive perceivers of an objective reality, but… come to interpret and understand their world by formulating their own biographical stories into a form that makes sense to them' (ibid., 88). This is in line with Heidegger's existential phenomenology wherein human beings create meanings in a reciprocal, mutual relationship between subject and object which are inseparable Zimmermann 1996). Moran (2000, 13) extended this notion by arguing that 'Humans are always already caught up in a world into which they find themselves thrown, which reveals itself in moods, the overall nature of which is summed up by Heidegger's notion of "Being-in-the-world". In other words, the aim is to place the scholar's 'subjectivity in touch with the knowledge of what it is to be-in-the-world' (Brown 1992, 48). The phenomenological approach has an overlap with narrative accounts of lived experiences, that is, keeping solid students' critical narratives as told from their perspectives and in their voice (Elbaz-Luwisch 2005; Riessman 2008). Central to the arguments and critical thinking are narrative inquiries in which stories are sources of meaning (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). As Freire and Macedo (2000) claim, when dialogue sparks in each participant's personal experience and in the classroom, one is led to apply and acquire valuable insights.

Combining P4C with a phenomenological approach may serve as a vehicle for students to share their critical position, fostering others to understand their views better than when setting up a detached and carefully constructed logical argument (Sanders 2001). Also, distanced and 'rational' dialogue that may often be privileged may be a disservice especially if unmonitored with jargon as a way of excluding others in the discussion. A critical take on narratives can facilitate classroom conflicts because students are allowed to judge others' critical thinking while understanding where they are coming from. This is to thwart some classroom norms that have very

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fixed goals but may also be driven by an impetus toward crossing out a checklist rather than serving as an intervention to resolve misunderstandings. This suggests that classroom norms are subject to either being informed by fixity of dialogue norms or flexibility thereof, which can ascertain how particular classroom norms can build a context to resolving or exacerbating differences in critical opinions. Opening up to alternative perspectives, however, is different from Rational Choice Theory, which assumes a stability of alternatives. The phenomenological approach rather considers beyond self-interest in evaluating and (dis)agreeing with critical assessments of peers. It prioritises a plurality of exchanges of reasons and the opportunity to defend and reconsider perspectives and reasoning. Instead of having preferences and arriving at a categorical evaluation, the phenomenological approach considers a perpetual accumulation of fragmented reasoning and knowledge.

Finally, after reflection comes processing reflection and documentation through writing. Firstly, writing can provide guidance on the kinds of arguments delivered during dialogue for critical reassessment. This can give space for other potentially pertinent critical thoughts to emerge. While students can choose not to document their critical engagements as they feel that conversations must be based on trust, writing helps them to further reevaluate their thoughts and the dialogue even after the encounter. Documentation also serves as a factor for extra caution among those who engage in dialogue especially in keeping an eye out for inconsistencies in the dialogue and to ensure that opposing sides' narratives are fairly represented in the process of dialogue. Aside from documentation, writing enables the thinker to process reflection for which Van Manen (2001, 127) notes that '[w]riting separates the knower from the known, but it also allows us to reclaim this knowledge and make it our own in a new and more intimate manner. Writing constantly seeks to make external what somehow is internal'. Writing is deeply reflective of the experience of reflection. It transforms not only the experience but also the thinking process into an external, communicable medium. This can only occur after the reflection stage. And it is crucial that the scholar reflect first and foremost, within the questions posed to children, prior to the attempt to write and communicate. The process of writing solidifies the reflection from children's answers. This gives rise to a 'a philosophy that would give credence to ordinary conscious experience and would not dichotomise appearance from reality' (Ehrich 2003, 48).

Implications and Key Areas for Future Studies

Having an understanding and recognition of the various legitimate ways to have a dialogue among children can resolve some pressing issues in a diverse classroom of contemporary times. First, acknowledging differences will help in linguistically diverse classrooms. Lack of academic language and literacy skills limit the participation of students (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit 2014; Ernst-Slavit & Pratt 2017). To acknowledge

linguistic diversity means to pave the way for the 'rich and diverse array of cultural and linguistic resources that are currently vastly underutilized and systemically devalued in schools' (Alim et al. 2015, 80). Language awareness not only on the side of the teacher but also among students themselves can make a well-informed dialogue in the classroom. As such, future studies are encouraged to seek to establish long panel research that observes changes in how students engage in dialogue for at least 5 or 10 years after the students have left the classroom. Such studies can also examine how diverse classroom contexts are related to one's dialogue engagements later in life such as in higher education or in the workplace.

Second, intercultural and inter-ethnic classrooms can benefit from recognition of diversity. As previously pointed out, when diversity and differences are neglected, conflicts in classroom discussion and pedagogical strategy may be particularly consequential for minority students. Differences in the background of students contribute to conflicts, which can escalate to discrimination (Sturgis et al. 2014; Titzmann et al. 2015). But when students acknowledge the perspective of others from a different upbringing and belief system, it can facilitate openness, enhanced empathy (Miklikowska 2017), and even close friendships (Bagci et al. 2014). Thus, for further studies, two specific areas would benefit from more research on dialogues in intercultural and inter-ethnic classrooms: first, more research is needed on identifying specific situations in which conflicts arise in a heterogenous classroom. This information will enable educators to anticipate specific conditions to be dealt with. Second, dialogue strategies that support the success of students from a variety of cultural, ethnic and economic contexts are needed. Heterogeneity in classrooms also serves as an opportunity to observe whether intergroup interaction can actually contribute to improved dialogue exchange between in- and out-groups in the classroom (Stark et al. 2015).

Finally, the coronavirus pandemic has propelled the use of digital classrooms, which can be both beneficial and challenging in terms of dialogue and conflict resolution. Technology-assisted learning allows for a diverse set of students to develop intercultural competence (Elboubekri 2017). Yet this is also challenging because managing an intercultural digital classroom calls for informed and adaptive pedagogical strategies (Gallagher et al. 2020; Siergiejczyk 2020;) without non-verbal cues (i.e. understanding emotions; See Frühholz et al. 2016) that are normally found in offline classrooms. Similarly, there is a concern that immersion in digital classrooms might foster social isolation and apathy (Leek 2016) and that students can be 'passive consumers of data rather than agents of creation and change' (Upchurch 2014, 31). Thus, further research is encouraged to pay attention to investigating effective online educational designs to foster dialogue among children from diverse lifestyles and contexts. For instance, it is critical that digital textbook publishers and learning technology developers allow

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for diversity and representative reading materials. Students of diverse backgrounds themselves should be consulted through participatory action research so that their perspectives are included in the discussion. Ultimately, this work also makes an appeal for collaboration among philosophers, educators, learning technologies experts, IT specialists, web designers, students, textbook publishers, and policymakers because successfully meeting the needs of increasingly diverse students in a digital classroom requires interdisciplinary and collaborative action from people committed to both educational quality and equality.

Conclusion

The modest attempt to take on the task of this work and the related debates is by no means comprehensive or in any manner definitive. The goal is to set the scene for the questions to generate further investigations by locating these concerns in the field of dialogical studies. It aims to spark reflection and spur dialogues among scholars of philosophy of education about the ways in which the norms of dialogue should be judged in different contexts. This process of engaging students in dialogue borrowing the skills from P4C and phenomenological approach 'is intended to serve a heuristic purpose, not to be translated into a checklist to which teachers are required to conform. If that were to happen, its dialogic intention would be defeated' (Alexander 2017, 41). Indeed, much has happened in dialogic research in terms of education. For instance, the inflation of academic merits, the transformation to the digital age and the post-truth era demonstrate the susceptibility of education. Observers now speak of the crisis of dialogue in schools, reflect on what educators could have done differently, and imagine possible ways forward. Philosophy for Children and phenomenology are just two of the many ways to lead students to 'make an effort to get their facts right and make explicit their evidence behind their claims or explanations' (Michaels et al. 2008, 283). While there are contesting notions on the dialogical processes in schools, what is clear is that it makes a case for the relevance of continued discussions, at the same time also acknowledging the limits of fixation to what can be done with it. This situation leaves enough room for reflection while politically viable agreements are reached on what can be done, albeit for different reasons. The activities proposed by this work are just partial potentials of P4C and phenomenology together, suggesting that the dialogical process can borrow more approaches from different fields of studies. This work thus argues that dialogue rests on an advantageous, normative position by virtue of becoming a venue for merging different approaches in pedagogy. Moreover, expecting a reflection to arrive at a particular end is problematic to say the least. The connection of thoughts is typically not a straight line but a long, fragmented and complicated route.

Dialogue is a fluid affair and can be haphazard, requiring a reasonable sense of judgement to ensure which dialogic processes are relevant for a given classroom. It is

through engaging into deeper reflection that that the process of dialogue continues which helps students to 'recognise that knowledge is not only transmitted but also negotiated and re-created' (Alexander 2010, 399). But this dialogical development takes time, and time for constant critical reflection might be scarce if all that occurs in the classroom. This approach facilitates inclusion in dialogue that encourages different kinds of critical ethos, rendering respect to students' views that might be disregarded in traditional dialogical engagements. Note that this can be traced back to Habermasian classical deliberative theory (1998) wherein inclusion, especially of those who have to deal with the consequences of decisions, is at the heart of discussions. What is needed is to be able to reflect on how and why accepting or rejecting a specific argument occurred. It will provide a space for nuanced dialogue and will serve as a leveller, considering a diversity of levels of reception of ideas and different ways to acknowledge various sides. It is also worth pointing out that the form of exclusion that students may experience can be ascertained because by examining the classroom conditions, culture and the different communication styles used by students.

These discussions go on to show the continued relevance of diversity in dialogue and the role of the schools in it. As schools welcome new generations of students, it is hoped that dialogue continues to flourish with more participants, optimistically children. In line with this, one also ought to consider that there are stages of learning and maturation and that dialogue is not the first thing to start with in educating children. Yet it is encouraged to engage younger participants to join dialogical processes. Dialogue is worth the endeavour just as it has always been done in a community of participants, making progress one person at a time even if some participants successively struggle with much the same subjects, with no answers ever labelled as the 'right' ones. Theories alone do not and cannot create a great classroom dialogue and critical thinkers, just as mere colours do not immediately generate a sublime painting. Content, classroom culture, dialogic strategies and pedagogy have to be orchestrated well enough to produce valuable minds. Classroom dialogue is most worthwhile when there is a well understood reason to participate in it, and when the most effective means to manage new methods of dialogue are understood. This sort of understanding is enriched best by educators who understand the importance of classroom context and the corresponding pragmatic circumstances at hand, in order to invoke the most promising dialogue results. The students will, as well, know if they had understanding of critical thinking and of how to marshal their minds in the dialogic process. The challenge of stimulating insightful perception from a generation with speedy access to information is genuine; that is not to say it is impossible, though. But an unmindful management of classroom dialogue may only result in pointless abstractions of ideas, rampant in the work done during previous decades. In the same manner, P4C and the phenomenological approach can be also practised and understood otherwise. Dialogue, resolution and communication are just several words that may represent

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a way by which human beings can hope to understand each other. That 'knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other' (Freire 2001, 71–72) implies that dialogue is not formulaic and can continue trying new ways of reflecting.

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The Buddhist Nuns and Dialogue in Wartime Myanmar: Understanding the 'Banality of Othering'

Sneha Roy

Abstract: This paper contends that dialogue must be understood dispassionately with the aim to appreciate what David Bohm (2013) called 'incoherence', and the need to embrace multiplicity in narratives, even if that implies incongruence in the understanding of dialogue. Using ethnographic methods and findings, I situate the politics of self and the other, and argue that determining the other and acknowledging the 'banality of othering' need to be examined in discussions around dialogue. I present a background of the interfaith tensions between the Buddhists and the Muslim-Other in Myanmar and by means of ethnographic anecdotes unpack the underplayed importance of determining the other within one's own faith tradition and emphasise the needs and possibilities of engaging with them. Female religious leaders are often the innate other in many religious traditions, and their stories, experiences, and recommendations are disproportionately discounted, and that necessitates redressing. In a first, this study reports the role of Buddhist nuns, or the lack of it, in transitional Myanmar in the belief, practice, and scholarship of dialogue, and emphasises the need for their meaningful involvement.

Contextualising Dialogue: Postmodern Approach to Premodern Questions

'Interfaith dialogue' (IFD) or 'dialogue of civilisations' received significant momentum after the tragic September 11, 2001 attacks. The world since then has become more conscious of the identities they ascribe, and the boundaries and fears that come with that. Dialogue is, as David Bohm maintained, 'a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us' (2013, 7). Dialogue is subjective, and inherently means different things to different people and contexts. One can derive what dialogue means to them, rather than the system imposing the perceptible sense of the term. Modular forms of dialogue can blur boundaries, can sometimes create them, and given the

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context, can embody the boundary itself. Theological and political influences have enabled and limited the manner in which these boundaries and fears are produced, propagated and protected. The process of ascribing and acquiring identities enforces the phenomenon of self and the other, where the members of the in-group or out-group are valued (or de-valued) on the basis of who they are; and by logical extension, our *becoming* involves who we include or exclude in the process. The process of othering is highly significant in the discourse of religious consciousness and practice, and in this article, using the concept of 'the banality of othering', along the lines of 'the banality of evil' by Hannah Arendt, I discuss how IFD is founded on the principles of the self-other continuum. This continuum, not binary, is socially and politically constructed, and when engaging in productive IFD, it is important to be mindful of these socio-political undercurrents. IFD has undergone several radical changes, and today, it has implicit and explicit manifestations of politics and power, while the purported objective it serves continues to be highly valuable. In this article, I not only aim to critically examine dialogue as a possibility in a transitional country, but also raise questions about the epistemological, structural and relational subject of dialogue itself. This paper contends that dialogue must be understood dispassionately with the aim to appreciate what Bohm called 'incoherence' (2013, ix), and the need to embrace multiplicity in narratives, even if that implies incongruence in the understanding of dialogue. The 'grand narrative' of the dominant modernist theories that monotonised the non-western other is pervasive in the field of dialogue as well, and both Said (1979) and Derrida (1984) were critical of the tendency to essentialise these concepts. Therefore, it follows that this article has adopted a postmodern framework to address questions around dialogue.

In order to illuminate the complex trajectory of dialogue, I draw on my ethnographic exposition and exploration of working with the female monastic community in transitional Myanmar. It is important to note that much of the scholarship around dialogue is theologically examined and debated. While theological discourses indeed offer insights and methodologies to deeply consider intertextuality and challenge the linear totalities in the field, ethnographic studies bring in synergies among complex lived aspects of dialogue. I am persuaded to argue that Myanmar as a field site and Buddhist nuns as research participants can offer novel and thorough insights into the problematic portrayals and undercurrents of dialogue. The fieldwork in Myanmar was conducted from September 2019 until January 2020, across five cities – Mandalay, Meiktila, Mingun, Sagaing and Yangon.[1] During this study, I spoke with about a hundred and twenty Buddhist monastics and about a score of religious leaders from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim backgrounds. I had in-depth conversations with eighty-eight Buddhist nuns who belong to a wide-ranging age group – from

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1   These cities were chosen on the basis of the number of Buddhist nuns and accessibility, and
     also that most of these cities have a history of communal tension.

21 to 91, and of them, about fifty percent were between 40 and 50. The research participants were selected mostly by the process of 'snowballing', and the methods were observational, participatory, and conversational. Semi-structured interviews helped with biographical information of the Buddhist nuns, while conversations helped to probe deeper and engage lived experiences. As Walton (2017) rightly suggested, in regions like Myanmar, where conflict is widespread and ongoing, people are scared to talk about their casual experiences and it may be difficult to conduct interviews. Conversations ease the pressure of the need to be precise and allow for a 'free-flow' of discussions and are less structured, permitting the speaker to express more spontaneously and the listener to grasp emotion and experiences that are not merely responses to questions, rather, are whole stories that the person has lived. Conversations and anecdotes are central to my methodologies. This has allowed me a good range of flexibility and helped me get access to original and authentic experiences and expressions.

Ethnography of or in violence is fundamental to my methodology. Nordstrom and Robber (1995) argued in their seminal work Fieldwork Under Fire that in order to study violence, one must go to the place where the violence is taking place. 'Fieldwork and violence' is a unique subject because it presents more questions than it has answers for. Issues of ethics and risk envelop the entire process, and the ethical dilemmas are concurrent with this line of study. We as researchers talk to victims and agents of violence and listen to the lived experiences and dire consequences that the research participants are probably sharing for the first and only time. It is our ethical responsibility to handle the information with the utmost care and respect, and to represent their voices justly. Methodological underpinnings in ethnographic studies pose concerns in form, practice, and interpretations, and these concerns swell when the fieldwork is in spaces submerged in tension. It follows that distinct methods emerge and evolve from the mediations and negotiations of the processes that constitute the tensions. In my study, I have examined the methods both within and outside the discursive traditions which feed into or offer alternatives to the existing frameworks of anthropological methods of ethnography of/in violence. I lived in nunneries throughout my study and participated in their everydayness. It is only with the full consent and enthusiasm of the research participants that this study is progressing.[2] In the past few years, Myanmar has experimented with several formats of inter- and intra-faith dialogue facilitated by the government or non-state organisations; however, the prolonged economic instability, geo-political influences, and the government's political will continue to pose difficult questions about the discourse of dialogue.

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2   This paper is a result of my doctoral studies, and I am still in the process of writing my thesis. Broadly, my research examines how Buddhist nuns in Myanmar affect and are affected by the communal conflicts, and how their agency can meaningfully shape the conflict reconciliation processes.

While I present a background of the interfaith tensions between the Buddhists and the Muslim-Other, the core intent of the paper is to index the underplayed importance of determining the other within one's own faith tradition, and to examine the needs and possibilities of engaging with them. In the course of this article, we not only unpack the politics of the other, but also what constitutes the self; and how dialogue not only helps to combat violence, but also how the discourse of dialogue may awaken latently expressed forms of violence. In a first, this study reports the role of Buddhist nuns in transitional Myanmar, or the lack of it, in the belief, practice and scholarship of dialogue, and emphasises the need for their meaningful involvement.

The Banality of Othering and Dialogue

Hannah Arendt, who witnessed the war crimes trial of Adolph Eichmann in 1961 for spearheading the transportation of millions of Jews and others to various concentration camps in the execution of the Nazis' Final Solution, asked a question: Does one need to be evil to do evil? She was astonished to see that Eichmann was 'terrifyingly normal' and in 1963, she titled her case study 'A report on the banality of evil'. She noted that evil often surfaces from 'mechanical thoughtlessness' and that the perpetrator, in this case, Eichmann, was 'not aware of what he was actually doing' – and this, she argued is the commonplace (Arendt 2000, 47). She underpins and underlines the notions of unawareness, and the abundance, and the large extent of normalisation. Borrowing her framework, I propose the idea of 'The banality of othering', by which I imply that othering as a process escapes conscious culpability and is often involuntary. I am aware that the context in which she contrived the phrase is distinctly dissimilar from the manner in which I deploy it; however, I must clarify that the prime focus here is not the context, rather the 'banality'. In her writings, she expressed the magnitude of the 'evil' that remains unobtrusive, and the danger in how it is a commonplace. Othering, too, is a commonplace that thwarts acknowledgement and examination. As a process, othering is easy to be left unattended and unaccounted for because it is naturalised to a great extent, and the everydayness and the blanket-effect of the process makes it a flashpoint of banality. In discussions around inter- or intra-faith dialogue, it is pertinent to be mindful of the continual process of othering and the banality that comes with it.

Stephan and Stephan's (2017) theory leveraging the understanding of othering and Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) has gained understandable momentum. The ITT posits that othering stems from perceived realistic and symbolic threats. Realistic threats comprise economic, physical, and political compromises that result in intergroup competition over material and economic conflicts of interests. Symbolic threats are outcomes of perceived group differences in values, beliefs, and practices. The core concept is that these resources and values are threatened by the out-group, leading to anxiety and uncertainty in the in-group. Drawing on the ITT framework,

Alorainy et al. (2019) argue that othering is a process and a tool to convey divisive sentiments and antagonistic or subtle hate expressions where 'send them home' or 'we need to teach them all' become justifiable. Similar to ITT that is centred around threat, this threat can come from someone who may be a member of the in-group, but due to their challenging and opposing ideologies, they too may form a subset of the Other. Understanding and engaging with the in-group other is sometimes more difficult, and other times, it defies sustained examination. This may occur due to the insecurities of the in-group (Alorainy et al. 2019) and the potential struggles the group may need to cope with the insider's perceived threats, especially those that challenge the central dogmas and narratives within the in-group.

The identities of self-other and the threats are culturally defined myths (Sémelin 2007), and may offer a robust gateway to understanding the relationship between conceptualisation and actualisation of different forms of violence. In addition, culturally propagated imageries shape the collective practices of violence and are key representations of othering. Linked to imageries is the term 'radicalised othering' that Bailey and Harindranath (2005) deployed to describe how news media captures and portrays the other, and how the othering curates politics of controlling the other. While othering as a process has links to violence, the gulf between othering and actual actions of violence is often not elaborately addressed (Holslag 2015). An example is Holslag's discussion of Claude Lanzmann's movie *Shoah* (1985). In his 1986 article on violence and memory, Holslag describes the journey from 'desire to kill' to 'the act itself'. Ervin Staub (1989) calls this journey 'the continuum of destruction' (1989, 17) and Gerd Baumann (1999) theorises that the gulf between desire and act is bridged by consolidating the identities of the other as demanding destruction in gradual steps, whereby both the in- and out-groups somewhat estimate and anticipate the radical outcomes. For Holslag, the desire to kill and the actual act are not dichotomies, rather facets of a process that culminate in a genocide. He clarifies that the process of building the bridge starts with the *sociale imaginaire* where the imagination creates the other, and slowly, this other is given a more tangible form that can be destroyed. He further argues that the objective of the process is not just destruction of the other, but the creation of a 'new self'.

Kiblinger (2017) studied Buddhist attitudes towards the religious other and argues that each religious community is aware of the existence of the other, and it is up to their willingness to decide how would they respond to the other or something that is the other's. It is important to address that Buddhism has demonstrated considerable inclusivity. There are scholars who have documented their concerns regarding Buddhism being overtly tolerant and inclusive. Hakamaya (1977) in his studies of critical Buddhism, suggested that Buddhism should be wary of too much compromise and mushy tolerance. Hans Kung (1986), a world-renowned scholar and philosopher

known for his efforts on pluralism has written that Buddhism can be in danger of 'easy and cheap' tolerance. Furthermore, Monier-Williams (translated in 2014) has cautioned that Buddhism may not be able to survive intact if it continues to be so liberal and tolerant. Charles Elliot (1962), after studying the religious exchanges between Buddhism and the West found Buddhism to be 'dangerously tolerant'. Deliberations around Buddhism and its perception of the religious other have taken the centre stage since the Rohingya repression that has startled the world. There is a worldwide clamour to exhort peace-making initiatives between the Buddhists and the Muslim communities in Myanmar in order to ease the communal discord, and chart peaceful possibilities for the country's future. These peace-making initiatives may tend to overlook important contributors and actors, whose absence can spell failure for the dialogue projects. While Buddhist men, more centrally, Buddhist monks, are seen as leaders of dialogue, Buddhist nuns continue to occupy peripherical spaces within the discourse of dialogue. The Buddhist nuns, in many ways, embody *otherness*, and as a result, their stories are not substantially understood and annotated. Buddhist nuns in Myanmar navigate through the crossroads of gender and religious imparities and understanding dialogue from their frame of reference can yield meaningful and nuanced insights into the discourse of dialogue.

Contextualising Communal Tensions in Myanmar

> 'What will you do if your home/place gets filled with dirt & garbage due to dirtstorm? Simply, you'll remove dirt to clean your home. Otherwise the place becomes disgusting for you & family. Islam is the dirtstorm. May be, you weren't able to stop it, but now you can remove it.'

This was posted on Twitter by the leader of the ultranationalist organisation MaBaTha[3] Monk Wirathu[4] in June 2020. The profile was reported and blocked in four days, but it was retweeted over 1000 times and liked over 2600 times before it could be taken down. His usual tweets are emotive and are used to mobilise people in order to penalise the wrongs Muslims have allegedly committed. He is often seen validating violence and greatly emphasising 'reactionary violence', 'just war' and 'punishment' as ways to 'teach' the other a lesson. He ensures that the communal hostilities are in line with Buddhist teachings, contingent upon recognising that these actions help in protecting the religion and the country. This viewpoint in Myanmar today is so pervasive that it has made its way into religious rhetoric and cultural axioms and has wracked the country since 2012. My definition of communal violence in the context

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3   MaBaTha is the Burmese acronym for *Ah-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shaung Ye a-Pwe which is translated to English as Association for Protection of Race and Religion*

4   Monk Wirathu is infamously known for his brazen interview with The Times Magazine in 2013, where he was called 'The face of Buddhist Terror'.

of Myanmar draws heavily from Cheesman (2017) who categorised 'communal violence' as comprising 'recurrent, sporadic, direct physical hostility realised through repeated public expressions that Muslims constitute an existential threat to Buddhists' (2017, 335). The communal conflicts in the country are animated by an array of factors ranging from historical to socio-political, and have led to the largest and fastest growing group of refugees in the world. The factual data are significant, but in this article, I present experiences that are lived and the narratives that are generated and how that enables violence. Uncovering impetuses and justifications capacitating violence or warranting its motifs and outcomes are effective methods to engage in constructive dialogue.

Communal violence in Myanmar, especially since the 2012 riots in Rakhine, has ranged from local inter-group agitations based on ascriptive identities to nationwide organised violence, some events that are known to have been actively supported by actors from the government or the military. Rakhine, or the Arakan state is populated largely by the descendants of immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal, which is present-day Bangladesh. They migrated into Arakan after the state was surrendered to British India under the terms of the Treaty of Yandabo (Chan 2005, 397). The anti-Muslim sentiment that has been erratic and decentralised through much of Burmese history has been mobilised under the current alliance between Buddhism and politics, particularly enhanced by the leadership of eminent Buddhist monks who have championed the narrative of protecting their land and religion from the Muslim outsiders. The 969[5] movement, which became popular only after the 2012 Rakhine war, has roots in the 1990s and the 1988 revolution, where several nationalist monks came together in the hope that Myanmar could be made into a Theravada Buddhist country, and gradually Monk Wirathu became the de facto face of the movement. Since the demolition of Buddhist temples in Afghanistan by the Taliban, and the 9/11 attacks later that year, Wirathu has been known to have taken 969 to grave levels (Marshall 2013). Wirathu, in his speeches, called for the Buddhist people to unite and resist the Muslim adversaries. For him, 969 is a grassroots movement, that pits itself against the influence of Islam and Muslims on Myanmar which he considers an essentially Buddhist homeland. He has urged Buddhists not to marry outside their religion, to boycott Muslim businesses, and not to hire Muslims in government positions or in Buddhist-owned workplaces. He has accused the Muslims of terrorism and rape and often cited examples from Myanmar and outside. Mosques have been categorised as 'enemy bases' (Marshall 2013). 969 has given rise to MaBaTha which has become virtually synonymous with Buddhist nationalism and anti-Muslim discrimination and violence in Myanmar (Walton 2017) and is widely misunderstood

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5   969 is the nationalist movement that aims at protecting and promoting Buddhist values in Myanmar and refers to the 9 virtues of the Buddha, 6 core practices of Buddhism, and the 9 principles of the Buddhist community.

by the people inside and outside the country, including the Burmese government (Crisis Group 2017)[6]. MaBaTha is the Burmese acronym for Ah-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shaung Ye a-Pwe which is translated to English as Association for Protection of Race and Religion and was established in 2013. After having foregrounded their ideas and teams, MaBaTha launched several nationwide campaigns after June 2013. Most of these campaigns addressed the four pillars that the organisation embodied and were termed 'religious protection laws'. It aimed at addressing and monitoring i) interreligious marriages; ii) polygamy; iii) religious conversions; and iv) family planning. In 2015, these four 'religious protection laws' that were demanded by MaBaTha were passed by the government and enforced as law. Once their mandates had been transfigured into law, they publicly expressed their opinions about political parties and representatives to the Parliament.

Many of the active members in MaBaTha are Buddhist nuns, or the thila-shins.[7] The order of Bhikkhuni in Myanmar was interrupted around the thirteenth century (King and Queen, 1996), and since then, the country has struggled to reinstate the complete ordination of the nuns. Today, the female renunciants of Buddhism in Myanmar are best known as 'thila-shins'. Thila (or 'sila' in Pali) means morality, and shin refers to those who embody and practice the morality. The thila-shins follow the 'Ten Precepts'[8] instead of the 311 rules that are to be followed by the Bhikkhunis. They are not fully ordained and are not complete members of the religious order; however, they are seen as 'in-between' laity and the monks, making their position more crucial for facilitating understanding and dialogue within the Buddhist community. The thila-shins see a purpose and value in their agency by contributing to MaBaTha and their motivation is twofold. One, the organisation values their contributions and their agency is taken seriously; and secondly, they find common ground between the narrative where the country is seen as being oppressed and their own oppressions, making them essential to the cause of protecting their country's honour (Roy 2021). The thila-shins in MaBaTha occupy intriguing socio-political and religious spaces and are role-models for the thila-shins who view the MaBaTha members as changemakers. I was told by the de facto leader of MaBaTha that they do not have systematic registration of members, but at any given time, the women range from 40–60% of its members, and of them, a

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6   https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar [accessed on 6th August, 2020]

7   Throughout this paper, I use the terms 'Buddhist nuns' and 'thila-shins' synonymously and interchangeably because this journal and the contributions cater to the English-speaking audience where the term 'Buddhist nuns' eases the manner in which we conceptualise this community and helps us to relate better. However, etymologically, these two terms are different and imply different socio-political and religious spaces.

8   Ten Precepts, or *dasa-sīla* in Pali, refers to the ten (dasa) morality (sīla) codes that the thila-shins must vow to abstain from, and this is the core of their spiritual existence.

large percentage comprises the thila-shins. In conversation with an abbess thila-shin from Sagaing, I learnt that on one end, many thila-shins are indebted to the MaBaTha because the organisation makes donations to the nunneries and builds schools and colleges for the nuns, and on the other end, being members of the MaBaTha, the nuns learn leadership qualities, help in community services, and most importantly get to serve their country and protect their religion, which is their foremost duty. It is important to note that the thila-shins' 'in-between' status puts them in a perpetual state of becoming. Thus, they are willing to perpetually participate in tasks that value their agency and contributions. While their incomplete-ordained status brings with it a host of gender dynamics and imposes socio-cultural hierarchies, their 'on the edge' status sometimes helps them to navigate boundaries and identities. Their roles are less explored and even lesser understood in terms of contributing to communal violence, and it raises the question why. Their agency from both sides of the divide, in facilitating and preventing communal violence is barely studied, and I implore in this article that addressing this gap can advance the dialogue not only between Buddhists and Muslims, but also within the Buddhist communities.

Politics of Inter-faith Dialogue in Transitional Myanmar

An independent report by the government of former President Thein Sein documented that communication between Buddhists and Muslims and IFD, among other educative and economic exchanges and opportunities, were key to the reconciliation and peacebuilding processes of Myanmar (Walton and Hayward 2014). At a high-level diplomatic forum in 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi, even though defensive in her tone, underscored that dialogue is the way ahead for conflict management and mitigation, (Gonzales 2017).[9] There has been a series of IFD – international intervention, state-organised and also local community-driven (Kyaw, 2019) – and the need for continual IFD for the country's better future is established (Hlaing Bwa 2015). Monks, who personify the spirit of Buddhism and nationalism in Myanmar, are seen as the 'natural representatives' and spokespersons in dialogue forms. Interestingly, Walton and Hayward (2014) noted ambiguity in the discourse of IFD in the country, where influential monks are front liners in MaBaTha but, quite contrastingly, also take part in dialogue proceedings.

In conversation with a nationwide known interfaith activist who is a professor at Yangon University, age 48, and a Christian pastor by vocation, he explained to me the grassroot dynamics of dialogue.

> 'Muslims in Myanmar, generally speaking, are sincere and hardworking. They are aware that they have limited options of livelihood given the blatant

discrimination by the government starting from schooling to securing jobs, so they work hard, and mostly focus on small-scale businesses. This is why the ultranationalist movements initially targeted the Muslim businesses, urging the Buddhists to not collaborate with them or buy goods from Muslim shops. Despite the structural discrimination and physical violence, the Muslims try to carry on…. No matter which interfaith gathering I go to, no matter who the stakeholders are, I always see the Muslim participants, especially the Imams, being the most active participants. They utilise these opportunities to engage in dialogue, to tell their stories, and to clarify their positions. They are almost always apologetic in their bodily gait and tone and are compassionate listeners and speakers. Contrastingly, the Buddhist religious leaders, are the most complacent ones, and in most cases, they do not participate in interfaith dialogues. When asked, their reasons are simple – they see 'no need' for dialogue.' (Conversation, Yangon: January 2020)

A fifty-four-year-old Buddhist monk who is an abbot of the Vibhissa Monastery and monastic school in Mandalay and is highly revered in the region for advocacy in interfaith understanding, shared his concerns about the future of dialogue in Myanmar after the recent turn of events.

'Not too long ago some of us started persuading extremist Buddhist, especially eminent religious leaders, to participate in dialogue and follow the 'middle path', as per Buddha's teachings. Many hardliners had only started to understand the importance of dialogue, but, with the international rage against the Burmese Buddhists, as read and seen on the news, many of these Buddhist hardliners have turned further hostile. In their opinion, Muslims have garnered sympathy from other countries given their power and their ties with the Islamist nations. There is an overwhelming narrative that the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has influenced other countries to defame Myanmar and its Buddhist people, and that OIC funds the media that reports false or half-true news. The allegations of genocide and the legal jurisdiction at the International Court of Justice has further aggravated the aggressions against the Muslims in Myanmar because several Buddhists perceive that the Muslims are responsible for denigrating Myanmar and Buddhism in the global framework. Some of us are trying to educate our peers and encouraging them to engage with those who they frame as the other. But we have a long way to go. The disparities within Buddhism in Myanmar are such that we can barely think of presenting a united front in conversation with the other.' (Conversation, Mandalay: December, 2019)

From the aforementioned anecdotes, it becomes clear that i) the majority of Burmese Buddhists are not yet ready to engage in dialogical conversations with 'the religious other'; ii) much needs to be discussed within the Buddhist communities before engaging with the 'Muslim-Other'; and iii) while monks are representative of authority and the 'Buddhist way of life' (Walton 2015; King & Owen 2020), Buddhist nuns,

though a significant number of more than 60,000,[10] are barely recognised as leaders who are needed in the process of dialogue or can affect changes. Female monastics who carry untapped and transformational potential in terms of facilitating inclusive and sustainable peace (Saf 2019, 1) are often excluded from these processes. Not many studies address the influence of the female faithful on the processes of dialogue and the influence of dialogue on the female faithful. When understanding intra-faith dialogue in Myanmar in the next section, we assess why these influences are critical in the light of religion, violence, gender, dialogue, and the politics of 'self' and 'the other'. Monks, given their position in the society and the respect they command, have been prominent in dialogical processes. In contrast, the Buddhist nuns mostly assume supportive roles (Kawanami 2015). Buddhist nuns occupy a unique position in discussions around IFD. They belong to the religion of the majority in Myanmar, and yet in some situations, they experience subjugation.

A forty-two-year-old Buddhist nun from the Dhammakaya nunnery in Yangon who is known for her IFD work in Myanmar and abroad held that Myanmar is essentially a patriarchally structured society, the gender hierarchy is found in all realms, and the distinction swells in the institution of religion. The androcentrism in the interpretation of religious traditions and in the practice of dialogue deters placing feminist frameworks within these matrices of experiences.

> I have studied dialogue, and I am a trained facilitator of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In several high-level meetings, including that hosted by the United Nations, I have presented speeches on issues of communal harmony and have received delightful feedback. But, given the social make-up of our society, despite trying hard, I am often not accepted as a participant or a facilitator for inter-religious dialogue. Not too long ago, in an inter-faith dialogue between Buddhists and Muslim religious leaders in Yangon, monks held that they would not share the dialogue tables with the nuns, because it negatively impacts their religiosity. Not just the monks, we nuns receive resistance even from the laity. They perceive monks as "the authority" on the subject of religion and dialogue, and nuns are welcome in the audience or as supporters, but not so much in the formal dialogue processes. After years of experience in this field, I am convinced that interfaith dialogue cannot be successful or sustainable without intra-faith dialogue. Even though the latter is more difficult, we have to engage in it more often. (Conversation, Yangon: November 2019)

One of the drawbacks of the IFD is its inability to include women's voices and their experiences in formal processes (Kwok, 2014). While side-lining women has proven

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10   http://www.mahana.org.mm/en/religious-affairs/the-account-of-wazo-monks-and-nuns-in-1377-2016-year/ [accessed on 14th August 2020]

harmful, what is further distressing is the manner in which women's expressions are misappropriated. This was explained well by a thirty-six-year-old nun[11] I spoke with in Meiktila, a city which has experienced grave communal tensions since 2013:

> Our nunnery hosted several families who were affected by the communal riots in March 2013; some of them were Muslims. They lived with us for a few days until they could return to their homes safely. We were aware that giving refuge to non-Buddhists could be dangerous for our nunnery, but the situation in most of the city was such that we thought it is our duty to protect those we can, irrespective of their religious identities. Also, many years ago, we had Muslim families who were our regular donors; this is to say that we have had close ties with the Muslims.... In 2016, there were local efforts to address the communal tensions and our abbess was invited for a dialogue event. Several eminent monks and local politicians were to grace the occasion. We were pleased and thought it would be an appropriate occasion to share our experiences and add to the ongoing efforts of interfaith engagements. At the gathering, only male Imams and monks were given the due time and respect to speak and they spoke on behalf of our abbess and later presented a token of appreciation for our abbess' welfare works. What they said on behalf of us was not untrue, but only half true, and that is dangerous on two accounts. One, half-truths are factually incorrect after all; and secondly, it continues to impose power hierarchies and snubs several diverse voices. (Conversation, Meiktila: December 2019)

This anecdote highlights what Rita Gross called 'inappropriate appropriation' (Gross 2001, 89). It is an underestimated and even lesser understood phenomenon where the people in power assume that they can express on behalf of others, and the institutions and societal structures enable these misappropriations. Unpacking these complicated layers that denote symbolic and structural violence, it is important to acknowledge the power imbalances and the epistemic privileges that render violence in the field of dialogue. Gendered practices within religious institutions are intricately wired into discourses of hierarchies and dominations that implicate inequality, subjugation, and control. Egnell (2003) argued that the 'patriarchal exploitation' and 'malestreaming' (2003, 116) of dialogue escapes attention and critical examination often, leading to failure of the process of dialogue. Ursula King had long argued that a feminist approach is the missing link in the dialogue of religions (King 1998), but even to this day, we have addressed this gap mostly in formats of lip-service, and not much in action-oriented ways. Analysis of the scholarship and practice of dialogue raises questions on issues of the representation and agency of women in dialogue. It is safe to assert that every society and religion unevenly distributes epistemological and ontological privileges among its people. Despite the development of feminist theology, Gross (2001) noted,

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11   I deliberately do not mention the name of the nunnery here because the information shared is highly confidential. I ensured her that I will write the story, but not the details about the nun and the nunnery.

that interreligious dialogue has been unwilling to embrace it, while also critiquing feminist theology itself. Gruber (2020) lamented that in fact, interfaith dialogue continues to be premised at the crossroads of white, male, Christian privilege. Thus, the road to dialogue itself is discriminatory and unfair to say the least.

Politics of Intra-faith Dialogue in Transitional Myanmar

In studying the microcosm of peacebuilding structures in Myanmar, it becomes evident that several structured and semi-structured programmes are operational in order to combat tensions within and between communities in the country which are dialogical and mediative in nature. Kramer (1990) long established the existential interdependence between intra-faith and interfaith dialogue, and that all interfaith dialogues should have elements and opportunities of intra-faith exchanges. For Kramer, intra-faith dialogue has distinct steps, and usually commences with texts or transitional religious encounters common to the participants. Both these types of dialogical exchanges should hold to its foundation that there is no pressure to reach a defined objective (Panikkar 1999) and that each of the two 'implies, requires and may sometimes directly stimulate' the other (Cheetham *et al.* 2013, 3). The scholarship and practice of dialogue make sense when intra- and interfaith dialogue are understood in relation and in support of one another. But often, in discussions around religion and dialogue, negotiating with the religious other shadows the importance of negotiating within the religion. As Jonathan Smith (1985) has explained, the ontological basis of the 'other' is not a descriptive category, rather, a political and linguistic one. The otherness in intra-faith dialogue could stem from an array of socio-cultural reasons, from diverse hermeneutical understandings of the same texts to one's political standing in a society. This otherness manifests in not just people 'like us' versus 'not like us'; it occurs equally between people who are 'too much like us.' Ricouer's *Oneself as Another* (1994) offers a robust framework to understand the 'self', 'other' and the relationship between the two. He indexed that a person's view of their subjectivities and the hermeneutics of the self and identities that are associated with selfhood are constructed by socio-cultural parameters. Ricouer's untangling of self and the other allows for understanding identities are defined by the interplay between self and the other, that are conceptualised on the basis of the sameness and the differences consciously perceived by a person. The self and the other may or may not exist as dichotomies; they may be relational, contextual and exist as a continuum. Ricoeur (1990) suggested an epistemological and ontological paradigm of understanding self and the other where he hypothesised that 'selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other' (1990, 3). As Kiblinger (2017) rightly suggested, 'the real orientation of the religious other is hard to define' because the imagery that we mostly draw upon is what interreligious scholar David Tracy (1990) calls 'the projected other' or philosopher Thomas Kasulis (1991) calls 'the displaced other'. The self projects the other in relation to itself. These

complexities are further problematic when the other is within one's own community. While the politics of the other belonging to the out-group are unconcealed, the politics around the other of the in-group reveals symbolic exclusion that is more difficult and complex due to its inconspicuous nature and the tendency of the in-group members to deny the existence of exclusions. When discussing otherness and intra-faith tensions within the Buddhist monastic community in transitional Myanmar, I explore two issues: i) dissonance of practised gender hierarchies; and ii) dissonance on their take on the Muslim-Other.

To examine the two questions, I draw on my experiences from the field study. I took part in intra-faith dialogues and facilitated some; most of these dialogues involved only Buddhist nuns, and there were a few with monks as well. As Panikkar (1999) suggested, intra-faith dialogue involves conversations about people rather than conversations about religions. In the section below, I present how people orient themselves in the discourse of dialogue, and how they respond to it. The two most prominent concerns that emerged from the conversation with the Buddhist nuns were, firstly, how they often felt that they were 'second-class' citizens, and their positions were continually inferior to the monks; and secondly, how Buddhist nuns' perception of the Muslim-Other were diverse, and there is evident dissonance in the extent to which they wish to engage with the Muslim-Other.

Intra-faith dialogue and dissonance of practised gender hierarchies

An eminent seventy-two-year-old monk from Kalaywa Monastery in Yangon accompanied me to meet with a thila-shin because he was very curious to learn about her experiences and motivations for being a Buddhist nun. She is in her early fifties, is well-educated, and heads the Shwewo nunnery in the outskirts of Yangon. Usually, thila-shins gather alms to run their nunneries and look after their basic everyday needs; however, this thila-shin had adopted an economically backward village, and collected donations not only for her nunnery, but also for the entire village. She helped in bringing electricity and institutional education to the village. The monk knew of her but had not had the chance to meet her before. After an hour of initial conversations and tea, he asked her if and how he could help her in the good work she had been doing. In response, she said, '*Please can you convene a meeting with the local Sangha*[12] *monks and request them to be open to listen to me and a few more thila-shins in this village? I have been working in the field of community development for years but am never allowed to participate in any formal decision-making processes.*' She explained that her village has people of different faith traditions, but she has had the most difficulty

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12   Sangha is the monastic order that traditionally comprises four pillars: monks, nuns, lay men and lay women. In today's times it oversees socio-political and general management of the Buddhist communities and holds at its core that a Buddhist community is four-fold and each of the four parts have essential roles to play in keeping the Buddhist community whole.

in conducting conversations with the male Buddhist clergy, simply because her socio-religious status is viewed as inferior. This inferiority is expressed in Saba Mahmood's (2011) elucidations that systematised how social structures control women in a way such that they have limited access to the society's symbolic and material resources. The Buddhist nun further narrated that '*the monks, who I respect a lot indeed, refused to speak with me on several occasions because they said I was apparently doing the work that male clergy are responsible for, and that brought dishonour to my religion.*' Religious interpretations may be linked to deliberation of gender inequality (Abu-Lugodh, 1986), and the deliberation is socially constructed and reproduced.

In an all-nuns dialogue space where the participants and facilitators were all Buddhist nuns, there emerged stories where the nuns had experienced symbolic and structural violence from their very own faith denomination, some subtle, many not. Two thila-shins from Yangon who had been invited for an interfaith dialogue event organised by the government shared that the monks who were co-participants threatened to leave if the nuns were included, citing religious reasons. The nuns obliged by leaving, but this was not addressed by the organisers or the participants of that forum. Another thila-shin expressed that her spiritual and monastic vocation was questioned in public when she voiced her concern regarding Buddhist intervention in dealing with the non-Buddhist other in everyday encounters. She lamented that many thila-shins in the gathering discouraged her and were of the view that the Buddhist nun faltered when she spoke in the midst of highly venerable male clerics. This feeds into the argument of Kumkum Sangari (1993), who held that patriarchy successfully flourishes by the coercion and consent of women, who hold considerable responsibility for not just maintaining patriarchal ideologies but also are in charge of resisting forces that challenge it. Gender in every religion is disproportionately discriminatory to women; however, addressing this and enabling gender inclusivity should become a mainstream format of dialogue.

Intra-faith dialogue and dissonance on their take on the Muslim-Other

Religious discrimination and apathy are usually discussed in relation to the other of a different faith tradition. The religiously informed responses to these discussions also focus on the specifics of the other religion. However, often, the in-group fomentation of disagreements is left unattended, and in the long run, these divergence can turn hostile, creating cracks within sects and denominations within the same religious school. In the case of Myanmar, almost all Buddhists are from the Theravada school of thought; however, depending on their vocation, aspirations, and political influences, their lens for viewing the Muslim-Other greatly varies. On one side, there are Buddhist monasteries that are founded and funded by Muslim families, and the polar extreme is where the mosques are vandalised as a result of perceived disrespect or threat to the Buddhist community. Below, I present an example where we see how the Buddhist

nuns occupy different shades within the spectrum of their perception of the Muslim-Other, and how incongruences within them do not just deter interfaith dialogue but also problematise it.

A teacher at Chekavati Buddhist University and a head nun of a township in the Sagaing region commented on the topic of International Court of Justice proceedings of the genocide of the Rohingyas while she sat reading the newspaper.

> 'As much as I am against the use of the term 'genocide' and the shame it is bringing to our country, I cannot deny that the Buddhist community has had blood on their hands. I do understand when people are angry and some of the violence is truly reactionary; however, this is not the reasonable way. Disproportionately harming a community on the basis of their identity is wrong… but you know Burmese Buddhists paint all Muslims with a single brush. For them, a Muslim who vandalised a Buddhist temple in Afghanistan is the same as the Muslim living across the street; hence, they treat the Muslim across the street with suspicion and contempt. I have been a teacher for three decades. I have studied the relationships of people within and between communities and can tell you that debating with one's own is far more difficult. I engage with Hindus, Christians, and Muslims often, and explaining my viewpoint to them is easier. When I explain my position to Buddhists, some think I am way too intellectual and impractical, others think I am superficial, and there are still some who think I'm a traitor only because I have compassion for the religious other. Plus, the social media has become a weapon in disguise. A Buddhist sharing a story of a personal unpleasant experience with a Muslim swiftly mobilises people to unite against the entire Muslim community. I use social media only to read, and barely post anything… Only some weeks ago a lay Buddhist donor shared a story of her divorce with her Muslim husband, and there were so many people who wanted to avenge this using phrases like 'all Muslim men are…' or 'Islam is..'… I try to educate my fellow thila-shins and ask them to keep an open mind, but I am aware this is not taken in the right spirit. Some thila-shins are willing to understand the other, but for several others, "if the Muslims cannot live in our country following our culture, they should leave" attitude is pervasive. I have had warnings from the monks in this region that I should step down as the head nun if I continue to spread messages against the welfare of the Buddhist Dhammā [13] and Sāsana [14]… I have tried to speak with those monks, but to no avail…' (Conversation, Sagaing: January 2020)

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13   Dhammā in Pali and Dharma in Sanskrit refers to a host of meanings that are be loosely translated to English as righteousness, fundamental path, or the most important principle in the life of a Buddhist. Literally, the word is derived from 'to bear, support or hold together'. The Dhammā is the natural law that holds together the cosmos physically and morally, which the Buddha is believed to have taught.

14   Sāsana is the Pali and Śāsana is the Sanskrit word for doctrine, practice or tradition.

This conversation underpins the layered complexities that situate and surround inter- and intra-community relationships. The thila-shin here reveals that 'the other' is not an essentialised entity, rather, 'other' is ontologically constructed and is relational. The relationality assists in charting the diverse ways in which the other can be understood, accommodated, and respected. Wingfield (2013) argued that the other is fundamentally distinct from us/we and is a part of the process of symbolic exclusion. This 'other' is anyone who is usually marginal and exists at the edge, or sometimes even beyond the edge, of civil contracts. These marginalities are marked not on geographical coordinates, but on cultural discourses. The thila-shin in the aforementioned case is at the margins of her own community and may be perceived as the other because of the stark difference in opinions. As a part of a core identity, the other is obliged to carry the marginality, which is typically loaded with stigma and disadvantages and may gradually become what Crenshaw (2010) called 'the moral enemy' who we should be wary of.

Conclusions

In the seminal text 'Of God Who Comes To Mind', Emmanuel Lévinas sought answers to the phenomenological concreteness of staging and expressing what one means by 'God'. In his quest, he asserted that in order for a society to have meaningful and spiritual experience, the I has to engage with the distinct You; and what lies between the *I* and *You* is dialogue. For Lévinas, dialogue is a philosophy that insists on a dimension of meanings that is built on the interrelations of human beings and has an original sociality and a spiritual authenticity of its own (Lévinas 1998). Religions by nature are not inclined to understand one another (Cornille 2008), and by extension, in knowing the religious other, the other is viewed as a challenge, as a mystery, as a new resource, or an entity that can inform about the self. On one polar end, the other is expected to be an entity which is not self, yet the inference from all meanings to the purposeful life implies that the other is understood as an alterity to the self, that is constituted in me and by me. This self is instinctively predisposed to othering because selfhood presupposes incongruence with the other. The other typifies the nonrelative or absolute exteriority that remains a fiction unless studied in relation to what Lévinas (1987) defined as 'ego'. The genesis of narratives and portrayals depicting the other are rooted in the juxtapositions of experience and in the sense of identity that underpin the social contracts. The manner in which we imagine and respond to inter- and intra-communal relationships is guided by sets of ideas that emanate from presuppositions of the self the other.

Myanmar is undergoing transitions of several sorts that have precipitated into transformations in tangible forms and have offered symbolic promises for a better future. Given the current political instability and religious tensions across the country, it is imperative that their future policymaking strategises on principles of negotiations

and mutual borrowing in and between communities. The phenomenon of 'us' versus 'them' will continue parallel to human existence; however, it is important to acknowledge the other and the otherness while trying to be open about the complexities the differences bring with them. It is equally important to address the conceptual and methodological concerns that threaten the socio-cultural fabric where both the 'us' and 'them' cannot share mediative relationships and find ways to redress this. In this journey, the state, non-state and local actors have to cooperate and collaborate to enable sustainable relationships between people and communities. Though international interventions, especially since 2012, have been somewhat helpful, constructive and lasting change can come about only when the policies are drafted in close partnership with the people at the grassroots and the actions are community-driven. The monastic community in Myanmar is highly revered, and it is true that their influence in the country is irreplaceable. Therefore, the monastic community should all the more be included in the formal peace-making and community-building processes, while being inclusive of the female faithful. The thila-shins of Myanmar are pious and judicious and are devout servants of their religion and their country. It is important that their agency is utilised efficiently, not because their participation in dialogue processes shall illuminate and empower them, but because the thila-shins can illuminate and empower the process of dialogue itself.

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Creative Dialogue in Rome, Italy: Thinking Beyond Discourse-Based Interfaith Engagement

Jenn Lindsay

Abstract: *Creative dialogue* is a distinct emergent form of interfaith engagement that should be accounted for in any typology of interfaith dialogue methodologies. Creative dialogue features artistic collaboration and the engagement of interpersonal, artistic and literary methods toward increasing civic interaction, civic discourse, and awareness of diversity. In this article, the analysis of creative dialogue is grounded in data derived from ethnographic study of an interfaith magazine and programme office located in Rome, Italy, and then parsed with scholarly literature about the benefits of engaging in non-discursive modalities. Creative dialogue is shown to allow for the analytical inclusion of dialogue that is neither discursive, nor overtly religious; one that is chiefly experiential, yet often yields a concrete product. This study of creative dialogue – which extends the boundaries of the standard construct of 'interfaith dialogue' far beyond institutional contexts with high-ranking clergy and religious elites – is grounded in a post-secular analysis of religious diversity and pluralism that shows that interfaith dialogue, like religious practice, is fluid, relational, embodied, creative, and socially embedded.

Introduction

The term 'interfaith dialogue' should not be taken too literally. It is neither always religious, nor always between different religions, nor is it always dialogic (conversational). Indeed, it is possible to embark on interreligious engagement that never overtly involves religious conversations or symbols. 'Dialogue' can involve humanitarian collaborations, for example: Baha'i and Christians operating a soup kitchen together; Sikhs and Hindus planning an Indian cultural festival; Jews and Muslims working together to ensure safe healthcare provisions for circumcisions.

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These humanitarian projects often emphasise a cooperative project over religiously themed discourse. Participants attend on the basis of their religious social ties and identities, and along the way they may – or may not – discuss the religious values, experiences or sacred texts that motivate their presence. Creative dialogue emerges in the same collaborative, non-discursive spirit, which does not require the explicit presence of religion-themed discourse in order to be considered interreligious dialogue.

Creative dialogue is a distinct emergent form of interfaith engagement that should be accounted for in any typology of interfaith dialogue methodologies. Creative dialogue is a non-discursive form of interfaith interaction, usually centred around a shared, exploratory artistic process and the engagement of interpersonal, artistic, and literary methods toward increasing civic interaction, civic discourse, and awareness of diversity. In this article, the analysis of creative dialogue is grounded in data derived from ethnographic study of an interfaith magazine and programme office located in Rome, Italy, and then parsed with scholarly literature about the benefits of engaging in non-discursive modalities.

Background

Each modality of dialogue speaks to discrete problems and solutions to the challenges of religious diversity. This article proposes the following typology of dialogue forms:

- Discursive (Theological and Academic)

- Social-Relational

- Spiritual

- Humanitarian

- Creative

Previously, interreligious dialogue methodologies have been categorised into the 'dialogue canopy,' a typology presented by Eric Sharpe (2005). The typology can be applied to a range of activities promoting religious pluralism in Rome and elsewhere, both institutional and grassroots level. Sharpe designates the following 'branches' on the canopy of dialogue forms: *Theological-discursive dialogue, Human/Buberian dialogue, Spiritual dialogue*, and *Secular dialogue*.

Sharpe's categories are defined as follows. 1) *Theological-discursive dialogue* is a largely scholarly enterprise of theological expertise in a public forum; discursive dialogue can also be purely academic. In this research, I call this form of dialogue 'discursive', specifying between Theological and Academic discourse about religion.

2) *Human/Buberian Dialogue* is Sharpe's term for encounters between unique individuals and recognises dialogue as an interpersonal, existential need. In this analysis, I call this form 'Social-Relational' dialogue. 3) *Spiritual dialogue* consists of communal spiritual or contemplative practice through worship, prayer and meditation, or shared devotions. 4) *Secular dialogue* features diverse entities joining forces to incite change and address practical issues of common concern.

After ethnographic research I have determined Sharpe's typology to be incomplete for a full understanding of dialogue methodologies. Going beyond Sharpe's 'dialogue canopy,' I subdivide secular dialogue into two subcategories. 1) Humanitarian dialogue occurs when diverse groups collaboratively serve their common community or the larger civil society, helping each other with practical challenges, legal processes, and collaborating on service projects. 2) Creative dialogue is centred around creative output such as publication, filmmaking, and various artistic collaborations. The central argument of this article is that creative dialogue is a distinct modality that should be considered part of the canopy of dialogue forms. To my knowledge it is a distinct addition to Sharpe's canopy of forms.

A typology of interfaith engagement methodologies is useful as a heuristic tool, in order to establish a framework for analysis. Sharpe's notion of the 'dialogue canopy' of interfaith methodologies reflects scholarly understandings of dialogue. But the lived experience of interfaith engagement in communities and between individuals is always more fluid, messy, and elastic than typologies can possibly convey. *Creative dialogue* allows for the analytical inclusion of dialogue that is neither discursive nor overtly religious; one that is chiefly experiential, yet often yields a concrete product. It allows for the shifting role of religion in interreligious affairs, the reality of multiple religious belongings, the presence of non-religious participants in interreligious spheres, and a shifting of emphasis away from religious leaders and texts, toward grassroots interpersonal engagement.

Methodology

This analysis of creative dialogue is based on eighteen months of ethnographic participant-observation at interfaith organisations in Rome, chiefly the interfaith magazine and programme office Confronti.

Confronti caught my eye because, while they practiced some of the same methods of dialogue I saw in other organisations – social events, academic panels, informative publications about minority cultures, public discussions, socialisation, travel seminars – they also incorporate a robust *creative and artistic* palette into their practices. Up until this point, interfaith dialogue research has leaned on Sharpe's (2005) dialogue 'canopy' to categorise the methods engaged by dialoguers. Ethnographic immersion

at Confronti, and my participant-observation at other artistic, musical, cinematic dialogue events throughout Rome, revealed that 'creative dialogue' is a distinct modality that should be considered part of the canopy of dialogue forms. In this way Confronti has allowed for a distinct research contribution.

In addition to 18 months of participant-observation in the magazine and program offices of Confronti, I also attended meetings and events of about twelve other interfaith dialogue groups in Rome. In both English and Italian language, I conducted 69 two-hour semi-structured interviews, meaning that questions were often asked out of order, delved into more deeply if needed, or discarded if they seemed irrelevant. I engaged ethnographic methodologies of participant-observation, interviews, and photo elicitation. Interview questions, developed both in the pre-research preparation process and during fieldwork in a reflective and interrogative stance (Agee 2009), were asked during approximately two-hour interviews at the beginning of the eighteen-month research period and then again at the end for a sense of change. Interview questions centred around the Confronti organisation and its sociology, history, principles, and methodology; about the broader field of interfaith dialogue in Rome; and about experiences of religious diversity and daily life in Rome, personal identity expression, interreligious relationships in plural contexts, and constructs of transformation. In addition to these questions, I also gave interlocutors the opportunity to raise other issues they believed to be important to the study of interfaith dialogue.

The study of creative dialogue is best grounded in sociological study of 'lived religion,' a qualitative and ethnographic approach to religion scholarship which is less focused on institutional elites and dominant paradigms, and more focused on communities and relationships (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008; Spickard et al. 2002; Hall 1997). This method is able to capture and consider 'street level' data about religious lives and identities and to consider how the creative actions of religious pluralists 'are fundamentally shaped by the world they are making as they make these worlds' (Orsi 2003, 172). An emphasis on daily practices, experiences, and relationships exposes aspects of religious diversity, interreligious encounter, complicated and multifaceted identities, and intentionally wrought religious pluralism that quantitative and survey methods have not allowed scholars to see.

Theoretical Framework

Jürgen Habermas's notion of the *post-secular* (2008) is useful for this analysis, since it allows for a discussion of interreligious dialogue that neither explicitly invokes religion, nor is strictly dialogical. In general, the notion of post-secularism refers to the presence of religion in the secular public. Post-secularism provides a 'third way' in response to the all-or-nothing opposition of 'religious' and 'secular' described by

early sociologists. It is no longer correct to argue that the world is 'secularising,' just that secularisation has occurred in certain sectors, namely Western state governance. Post-secularism acknowledges that religion is not disappearing, but its function is changing. In post-secular society, for example, Pope Francis can address atheists, stating that it is better to be an atheist than a hypocritical Catholic with a 'double life' (Pope Francis 2017), or, in his Urbi et Orbi message on Christmas Day in 2013, 'I also invite non-believers to desire peace with that yearning that makes the heart grow: all united, either by prayer or by desire. But all of us, for peace' (Pope Francis 2013).

A post-secular framework accounts for a dynamic between 'secular' and the 'religious' that is interdependent, inseparable, and mutually referential. The post-secular stance expresses the reflexivity, fluidity, and ambiguity of high modern collective life and personal meaning-making in particular local contexts. A post-secular analytical framework can support inquiries into how religious fields are affected by high modernity (Giddens 1991), religious diversity and pluralism, communications technology, and the fluid boundaries and identity expressions of contemporary urban spaces. A post-secular method is able to accommodate non-traditional dialogue that isn't just religious people talking about religion in a religious setting. It recognises that 'interfaith dialogue' can be civic action, artistic collaboration, and inclusive of 'multiple belongers' and non-religious people. 'Interreligious dialogue' can be conducted through seemingly 'non-religious' methods such as journalism, media projects, and daily life in diverse communities. That is because religious pluralism is a natural part of modern life and civic engagement, where the secular and religious are blended and mutually influential. As the enactment of religion itself is revealed by post-secular methods to be far more encompassing than solely belief systems or ritual commitments, it makes sense that approaches to religious diversity and pluralism could be similarly revealed as embodied, creative, and socially embedded. The confluence of changing methods in both the practice and study of religious diversity and pluralism reveal the very sort of interconnectedness that post-secular scholarship attempts to understand (Giddens 1991; Bender 2012). This study of creative dialogue – which extends the boundaries of the standard construct of 'interfaith dialogue' far beyond institutional contexts with high-ranking clergy and religious elites – is both a symptom and analysis of such changes.

Context of the Study: Confronti, A Magazine and Programme Office

Confronti is an interfaith magazine and programme office in Rome, Italy. Its practice of creative dialogue makes a distinct contribution to the range of activities encompassed in the interfaith space. It offers a case study of intentional interfaith encounter that not only draws religious 'others' together in creative cooperation, but also describes and reflects on those encounters publicly. In this section, I will chart the

history and mission of Confronti, and describe its creative dialogue activities.

In addition to running a programmes office, Confronti publishes an ecumenical magazine launched in 1989 that is now a multi-platform intercultural enterprise promoting interreligious cooperation through media, artistic and academic collaborations, and cultural encounters. This Protestant Christian non-profit organisation coordinates a diverse community of journalists, activists and intellectuals who promote pluralism through education and meaningful social encounter. Confronti's staff, volunteers, and participant network include Christians of multiple traditions, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Muslims, agnostics and atheists. Its monthly magazine issues present diverse religious perspectives on central social issues such as the large Italian immigrant population and religion in public schools.

At the heart of Confronti's mission is an affirmation of the values of 'memory, peace, hospitality and solidarity – and to building a more collaborative democratic society.' Layout Editor Marco specified that Confronti was founded to provide a platform for 'the dialogue between the religions, of course, of all faiths, and ecumenism among Christians but also dialogue with all other religions.' In interviews, staff members said that 'pluralism' is the primary value promoted by Confronti, and their way of advancing dialogue is to give voices to religious and cultural minorities in Italy – that is, non-Catholics. Programme Officer Emma asserted, 'Given that most Italian newspapers, and the majority of television stations, still give most of their relevant space to the Catholic religion, I think that, despite being a small publishing sector, Confronti has a very large worth within the context of Italian journalism.'

Confronti pursues pluralism along two primary trajectories: 1) the monthly magazine publication and publishing cooperative, and 2) the programme office, founded in 1998, which offers public seminars, conferences, study tours and travel seminars, creative projects like musical collaborations and film festivals, and community engagement with local initiatives for women and refugees.

Dialogue in Print: The Monthly Magazine

Confronti's monthly magazine of 'politics, faith and daily life' publishes news reports, editorials and reflections on topics covered infrequently by the mainstream media. It reports on religious practices and contexts that are not often mentioned in the mainstream Italian press, and it presents a platform for minority voices and perspectives on mainstream topics. It is also a printed laboratory for discussions of secularism and pluralism, in which collaborators experiment with various approaches to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. The forms range from narratives from marginalised faiths, to 'call and response' interviews juxtaposing divergent beliefs and practices, from reporting on interfaith initiatives such as theatrical workshops

or fashion shows, to dialogues tailored for teenagers. Its monthly issues have been anchored by 'cover story' themes since May 1995, spanning topics such as Migration, Church-state relations, or the Holy Land. The magazine not only approaches pluralism across many sectors of society, it also attempts to include articles and columns relating to different cultures and religions.

Creative Dialogue in Vivo: The Programme Office

> For years now, Confronti has not been just a text. In fact, Confronti also promotes cultural initiatives, conferences and travel seminars, all of which constitute a more and more important sector of our activity. The programme office is also available for the consulting and organisation of historical and teaching trips, advancement courses, and local seminars on the themes of our magazine: ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, intercultural education, peace, development and still more. Do not just skim through Confronti!

Creative dialogue is embodied by the programme office of Confronti. Founded in 1998 by Confronti director and political scientist Paolo Naso – who recognised that the magazine alone did not sustain the mission of the organisation – the initial aim of the programme office was to enhance subscriptions and develop a network of contacts for the magazine, but also to educate participants about other parts of the world. It began with a series of projects supported by the Waldensian Protestant Church which were called *Semi di Pace, Sentieri Di Pace*, and *Il Rete Tra Campanile*. Travel seminars were added soon thereafter and were judged to be successful. The programme office's collaborations bring vitality to magazine content and allow for more active, grassroots-level cultivation of religious and cultural pluralism. Confronti director Alessandro stated, 'It's fascinating to always have a concrete monthly project and not just unending tasks in abstraction.'

Interfaith experience is perhaps most vivid when participants leave the comfort of familiar Roman territory. Over the years Confronti has led travel seminars in Bosnia, Russia, the United States, Ireland, India, Ethiopia and Oman. Especially important have been trips throughout the near and Middle East: Israel and the Palestinian territories, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Georgia, Armenia and Jordan. In each of these countries, Confronti travel groups meet with journalists and politicians, as well as with representatives of religious communities and civil society. These direct encounters are seen by Confronti as the primary tools for approaching and beginning to understand the complex social, political and religious aspects of the various contexts. These projects make their way into the pages of *Confronti Magazine* with photo essays, descriptive narratives and participant interviews, bringing Confronti's global work back home to the Roman interfaith society.

Unlike other organisations in the Roman interfaith constellation, Confronti also introduces a distinctively creative element. It draws on art forms that span photography, fashion shows, film festivals, distribution of choral albums, jazz and choral concerts, and videos. There are also active collaborations with other NGOs that produce music, clowning, creating art from recycled objects, and more. In Fall 2014 Confronti promoted a contest for illustrations expressing the immigration crisis and published two covers with the winning entries (Illustrations 1 and 2 below).

There is a long list of artistic and creative activities sponsored by Confronti. They sponsor local film festivals and photography exhibits; introduce new flavours and images of interfaith collaboration by participating in the Bosnian-Serbian women's raspberry canning collective; and promote the Israeli-Palestinian cookbook *Jam Session – Recipes for Friendship, Jams and Remembrance*.[1] In 2013 Confronti released the *Note di Pace* choral album as a form of musical dialogue. A fashion show in 2015 celebrated designs by local immigrant women, embodying pluralism visually

Illustration 1: 'Twilight for Humanity,' December 2014 cover

Illustration 2: 'Our Blood,' March 2015 cover

and strengthening Confronti's partnership with the International Women's House. Confronti Magazine's 2016 conversion into a full-colour magazine opens more opportunities to share photography, visual artistry, and illustrations.

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1   Published by Israeli-Palestinian Parent's Circle/Families Forum. (Hovav et. al. 2014)

Creative Dialogue: A Non-Discursive Form of Interfaith Engagement

Confronti affiliates practice some discursive and social-relational methods of dialogue – social events, academic panels, informative publications about minority cultures, public discussions, socialisation, travel seminars – but they *also* extend traditional dialogue practices into the multi-sensory, playful, artistic realm. Confronti, particularly the activity of the programme office, embodies *creative dialogue* as a distinct modality that should be considered part of the canopy of dialogue forms.

In *Art and Belief: Artists Engaged in Interreligious Dialogue* (2012), Ruth Illman defines creative interreligious dialogue as 'the practice of using art as a platform where persons of different religious backgrounds can meet and discuss in open, respectful and inventive ways.' Illman notes that most academic studies on dialogue have emphasised the discursive dimension at the expense of the spiritual, practical and interpersonal aspects of interreligious dialogue. She further argues that through art, 'the whole person' can be engaged in building interpersonal communication. By using creative and artistic practices, dialogue can 'transform our ways of thinking, provoke and inspire new possibilities; cause us to pause and reflect' (Cheetham 2010, 83).

Confronti's rich artistic agenda reaches beyond the typical conversation-driven scenario of interfaith dialogue whereby participants simply teach or narrate their diverse religious experiences. These *creative* Confronti practices invoke sights, sounds, tastes, collaborative energies, events, objects and performances – culminating in a multi-dimensional, imaginative approach to religious diversity that is multi-sensory, holistic, visceral, non-rational, and relational in nature. It engages the body, the imagination and the emotions, inviting people into fresh modes of interaction that can be humorous, surprising and novel. Intellectual discourse can be competitive, alienating, or just plain boring; but artistic collaborations – such as playing in a band or singing in a choir together, or responding to call for immigration-themed artwork with a colourful, provocative illustration – can lead people into the realms of faith, relationship, emotion, physical senses, comedy, intuition, and memory.

These are all non-rational 'ways of knowing' about the world and each other. Artistic practices generate forms of knowledge and understanding – and interpersonal affections – that are qualitatively different than rational appraisals, and that transcend a mindset that insists on the 'results' of dialogue and refocuses instead on the 'process' of dialogue. Creative dialogue makes sense of something an interviewee said when I asked, 'What is the product of interfaith dialogue?' She replied, 'The product of dialogue *is* the dialogue.' Creative dialogue is shown to be inherently experience-based and process-driven – and explicitly *not* results-oriented.

Creative Dialogue: Dissolving Boundaries Through Shared Personal Experience

Confronti affiliates often remarked that dialogue ideally fosters common ground across social divides and 'humanises' dialogue partners through experiencing shared sentiments, cultivating empathy, or reflecting on common structures of human relationality such as parenthood or friendship. It follows, then, that certain methodologies of interreligious dialogue are more likely to foster shared experiences and spontaneous interpersonal connection than others. Interviewees agreed that methodologies such as theological and academic discourse are less effective, in comparison to relational and social dialogues, for changing minds and forging lasting bonds. Discursive methods are less likely to provide a paradigmatic shift of self- and other-awareness that can be the ground for a changed orientation and behaviour. Confronti contributor Maria noted, 'Rational discourse is useless when it comes to changing your mind. It takes humour or friendship, something to take you out of yourself.' Institutional interfaithing, especially at such a high level as the Vatican where event participants do not interact much and listen to formal panels, showcase the difference between 'discourse on connecting' and 'connecting.' 'Corrective relational experience' (Sandage 2008) is unlikely to take place during these events.

Indeed, according to most of my interviewees, changed attitudes and increased openness to 'the other' emerges chiefly from practical, personal encounters, not in theoretical discussions. It is a subjective experience, a process to share more than a concept to grasp. One interviewee recalled his travel seminars with Confronti and said the trip 'was important because it wasn't theoretical. It was practical.' He saw how people actually live, what they eat. 'Now I can understand them in a new way.'

While an exchange of words – particularly the exchange of personal narratives – can foster an experience of the humanity of the other, sometimes elite discourse can obscure meaning-making and relationship building. The creative dialogue form of interfaith engagement, such as artistic collaborations or even shared humour, can potentially draw forth a spontaneous encounter of authentic humanity. One dialoguer reflected, 'We can't limit dialogue to 'words' because the whole concept concerns the attitude to other, the attitude of relating to other with respect…to develop genuine friendships that don't lean on concepts, but good sincere feelings and hopes for each other.'

In the same spirit, Confronti promotes musical collaborations such as the annual *Note di Pace* choral album recordings. A musician at a Roman 'Concert for Peace' with Christian, Jewish and Muslim themes, spoke of music as a 'universal language of unity and peace [that] offers experience that needs no mediation and can be shared. Through music, human limits leave. Music can push humans further.' She also made a powerful comparison between music and dialogue.

> Music is an important metaphor for dialogue. Musicians have to develop discipline, respect, and freedom to improvise--they must develop equilibrium of these qualities and between each other in order to achieve harmony. They have to listen to each other. They provide interpretations with constraints and only express themselves personally in moments when there is structured space and consensual agreement and expectation. Some have talent, others develop themselves through will. Some belong to different types of music styles, play different instruments, have different goals, are involved in different ways. Music is a dialogue.

In this way, creative dialogue is shown to dissolve boundaries, thus encapsulating the highest vision of pluralism.

Welcome to All: A Lower Threshold of Entry

Creative dialogue is inclusive: it has a lower barrier to entry than elite discursive dialogues which presume a high level of education about theology, sociology, philosophy or law. It attracts a new audience to interfaithing – not just intellectuals, but also people interested in art, culture, music and aesthetics. Artistic practices often draw on skill but can welcome a broad palette of backgrounds and experiences. By evoking sacred values and multiple modes of awareness and interactions, creative dialogue embodies pluralism. It expands the plurality of dialogue forms, offers greater accessibility to the interfaith society, and gives centrality and importance to the process of dialogue itself. Dialogue 'is not merely a cognitive capacity, but also an emotional engagement striving towards empathetic recognition of the other as having fully and distinctively another – different but equally legitimate – perspective on the world. The arts as arenas for dialogue are increasingly recognised, also within the academic sphere, as complements to rational discussions and rhetorical debates' (Illman 2012, 7).

The Liminality and Playfulness of Creative Dialogue

This explanation of the features of creative dialogue will be enriched by putting it in conversation with other writing on creativity and play. As we have seen, interfaith dialogue draws on the potency of the liminal 'in between' space described by Victor Turner (1969). In their practices, interfaithers aim to actively challenge social structures, hierarchies and divisions. In their place, interfaithers hope to make room for creative interplay between members of their society, for relations unbounded by the divisions of the outside world. As Turner distinguishes between structure and anti-structure (or *communitas* or liminality, as he variously calls it), he builds on Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage*, arguing that a dialectic between structure and anti-structure is present in all of our lives and all societies, and that alternating fluctuation through both elements are integral parts of human life. Turner describes this universal psychosocial dynamic

– the tensive interplay between a rational, hierarchical, analytical structure, and a holistic, communal, sacred totality – and contends that the balanced personality and society give space to both principles.

The intentionally liminal space of dialogue – particularly, the practice of *creative dialogue* – allow for the emergence of the playful, generative qualities of unguarded, unmediated relationality. In these moments, 'profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down' (Turner 1974, 59–60). In this setting, the 'seedbeds of cultural creativity' arise (ibid., 60), allowing for the people present to engage in spontaneous play – a state of 'leisure' which Turner sets apart from the realm of work. He wrote, 'Leisure is ... freedom to transcend social structural limitations, freedom to play with ideas, with fantasies, with words... and with social relationships – in friendship, sensitivity training, psychodramas, and in other ways. ... Leisure is potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual or communal, either to criticise or buttress the dominant social structural values' (ibid., 68).

Leisure and play, like liminality, symbolise the 'betwixt-and-between, a neither-this-nor-that domain' (ibid., 71) when persons, groups, sets of ideas, et cetera, 'move from one level or style of organisation or regulation of the interdependence of their parts or elements to another level.... There is an instant of pure potentiality when everything trembles in the balance' (ibid., 75). In unpacking the difference between the objectifying, obligatory structures of work and structured human encounter, Turner also draws on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 2009), a contented state of creative absorption, to distinguish the freedom found in moments of play. Creative dialogue, in its potential to access such states of internal, relational freedom, embody Turner's liminality more readily than other forms of dialogue.

André Droogers (2015) draws heavily from Victor Turner when he advocates for a more playful approach to religion and society, invoking the universal, diverse enterprise of human meaning-making. To Droogers, the human capacity to deal with multiple ways of knowing and seeing the world is most obvious in our playful modes, when we recognise 'the resemblance between poetry and worldview' (ibid., 159) and 'learn to wink' at our meaning-making process. Droogers (ibid., 8) understands play as *the human capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality* – and later specifies that 'the term 'subjunctively' is taken from Victor W. Turner (1982), who in discussing play, 'distinguishes between the indicative and the subjective moods, respectively the domain of 'as is' and 'as if,' the latter expressing supposition, desire, possibility, and hypothesis' (Droogers 2015, 95). Droogers (ibid., 5) contrasts play against power, *the human capacity to influence other people's behaviour, even against their will*, as when power mechanisms 'tend to restrict the believers' tendency to play with meanings as they seek answers to existential

questions' (ibid., 9). Exertions of power are displayed when authorities insist on monolithic worldviews, only one way of seeing the world.

Droogers (ibid., 3) shows how such power mechanisms can limit cooperation in the interfaith ambit: 'Interreligious dialogue proves to be a fraught enterprise, with even conciliatory believers experiencing great difficulty in establishing common ground'. However, he argues, when play is engaged and people learn to deal simultaneously with multiple ways of classifying reality, alternatives arise and 'previously ignored questions regarding diversity, the God debate, religious power, and global problem areas, can be raised afresh.' This is when a playful dialogue, a genuine dialogue, can allow both parties to perform meaning-making and de-emphasise unilateral interpretations of life, 'showing a way out of the digital yes-or-no stalemate…of stereotypical contrasts' (ibid., 11).

Droogers's ideas about engaging 'wild and playful meaning-making' apply more apply to creative dialogue than to dialogue's other forms, which, being structured, institutionally sanctioned and often quite formal, are less likely to access the same imaginative flexibility that is available to the practitioners of experimental explorations of religion and diversity. Creative dialogue takes itself less seriously than the high-profile discursive interfaith summits seen in the Vatican, driven more by flexibility and collaboration than the similarity-seeking 'common ground' talk seen in formal dialogues. For Droogers, the versatility of creative dialogue is key for paving the way to the world dialoguers dream of building.

In *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, authors Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon address the 'subjunctive space' of ritual (Seligman et al. 2008), which permits enactment of new relationships and new modalities of interaction. The subjunctive play of ritual allows for new possibility, for emergent ritual forms to be developed by people with different affiliations and intentions. Ritual can define and create boundaries, but the authors emphasise that 'crossing boundaries is just as inherent to the ritual process.'

It is reasonable to consider the discursive rituals of the interfaith society in these terms – and *creative dialogue* is especially well-described as a subjunctive field that allows for a temporary yet transformative alleviation of dominant social hierarchies and norms, which can be restructured temporarily to reflect the principles and ideals of the collective. The temporary 'play space' of creative dialogue clears associative habits and introduces new relations and new visions for future relations. It is in this subjunctive mode where dialoguers ritualistically inhabit the change they wish to see in the world, imaginatively infusing the ritual moment with the structures and relations of their hoped-for civil contract.

In *The Grace of Playing* (2016), Courtney T. Goto also advocates for creative play, which – like Turner, Droogers, and Seligman et al. – she sees as a modality that can disrupt, de-centre, and then re-centre relationships and thinking. For Goto, play is a medium for 'revelatory experiencing,' which 'causes in learners a destabilising and re-orienting shift in awareness or feeling that allows them to encounter divine mystery, themselves, and others in new, life-giving ways' (ibid., 3). Such moments transcend words just as creative dialogue aspires to do, provoking participants to begin 'living into deeper and more authentic ways of being and being with one another' (ibid., 4).

Although in her book Goto describes the practices of medieval holy fools and Rheinland nuns playing with devotional dolls, her psychoanalytic and theological reflections also pertain to the playful nature of creative dialogue practices, which, through their musical, photographic, cinematic, choral, and theatrical modalities invite a dialoguer into 'finding and losing oneself, acting and believing as if, and a world of possibilities' (ibid., 16). The play of creative dialogue, in contrast to more structured dialogue forms like formal lectures and panels, evokes a 'counter environment' not unlike Turner's anti-structural *communitas*, which leads to deeper interrelation and spontaneity or creativity. Goto draws on the psychologist D.W. Winnicott, who describes the playful being as the *true self*, 'which he believes is central and instinctual to being human' (ibid., 34). Outside the liminal space of dialogue – and sometimes within the more routinised sectors of dialogue – the risk is that 'freedom and authenticity are impinged upon…[and] true self will not play because it is not safe' (ibid., 131).

Using Goto's logic, among all the methods of interfaithing, *creative dialogue* has the most potential to disrupt social hierarchies and cultural biases, because it alleviates the player's dependency on socially inculcated rationales of division and competition. Goto says, 'The truth of one's life cannot be sought directly by reason and logical deduction alone, but indirectly by 'losing it' in playing with it. By becoming lost in the upside-down, surprising world of play for the sake of faith, it is possible to entertain what seems impossible' (ibid., 81). Goto argues that the 'revelatory experiencing' accessed through play can form the basis for a more just and peaceful world. In this light, creative dialogue offers a way for interfaithers to usher their cosmopolitan vision into reality.

Creative Dialogue: A Multi-Dimensional, Experiential Embodiment of Pluralism

As an agent of *creative dialogue*, Confronti promotes civic collaboration and diversity awareness through embodied, unstructured, imaginative practices. Creative dialogue resists strict definition as a type and in its enactment, because the playfulness and spontaneity at its heart defy the limits inherent in categorisation. Nevertheless, the

dimensions of creative dialogue explored in this article suggest that this category is a distinct contribution to previous dialogue typologies which account exclusively for discursive, humanitarian, and spiritual interfaith exchanges. The multi-sensory and multi-dimensional nature of creative dialogue, its ability to 'welcome all comers' through a low threshold of entry, its liminal nature and the generative playfulness that drives it, and its emphasis on process and experience over results, all set it apart as an aesthetically distinct and experimental form of engagement across social divides.

By revising common typologies of interfaith dialogue that focus only on discursive, traditional, or institutionalised forms of interreligious expression, and expanding categories of dialogue to account for the fluidity and complexity of multireligious identities and experiences in a post-secular world, our analysis of this practice will be more grounded in the lived realities of diverse dialoguers.

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Notes from a Black and White Island, Personal Reflections on Dialogue and Black Lives Matter

David Wiseman

During the first lockdown, the decision of the Diocese of Hereford to initiate discussions entitled, 'Racial Justice and the Church', as a response to the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement was heartening. As a priest in the Church of England ,who came to Craven Arms, a small agricultural town in the Hereford Diocese, after over thirty-six years' stipendiary ministry in urban and inner-city ministry in diverse communities and congregations, it was encouraging to realise that less diverse communities were addressing the same issues. The third of these sessions was with Dr Joel Edwards and called for the creation of safe spaces where white people could be set free from 'White liberal nervousness of getting things wrong'. I write as a white liberal with plenty of experience of getting things wrong. I write as a Christian involved in interfaith relations for many years and am aware that issues of intolerance and racism are encountered within and across different faiths, not least the long history of anti-Semitism within the Church. These comments and reflections on my personal journey explore a vision of a safe space.

During this pandemic, creating a safe space has taken on a different resonance; social distance, shielding the medically vulnerable, and preventing infection have been priorities. Before this, a safe space has often been associated with offering somewhere where victims/survivors of abuse, particularly women, children, minorities, and vulnerable groups can come together to find support, build resistance, and share experiences with confidence and without judgement. Interfaith dialogue has not, in my experience, sought to be a safe space in this sense, rather a place of trust, exploration and growth in understanding – not always comfortable but a place of challenge and change. Among the reasons that the Interfaith Network lists for being involved in dialogue are 'tackling prejudice and countering hatred' and 'looking for ways to work together for the common good on a sound foundation of understanding'. Faith identity is part of who we are, and so is the experience of racism and prejudice.

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As I reflect on my identity as a white person, my earliest memories growing up in a working-class area of Luton include black people living in the next street, friends of the family who were black and seeing black people in and around the town centre. In the 1950s I do not remember any black children at school with me. Moving to my father's home village in rural Essex in my senior school years meant there were few black people to be seen. The Civil Rights marches and music in the 1960s provided my first consciousness of racism. I remember listening to Josh White singing 'Strange Fruit', a song about public lynching of black people in the USA, but it was not until a black work colleague loaned me a copy of the prison letters of George Jackson, 'Soldad Brother', that I began to think about my racism. The TV series based on Alex Hayley's book, Roots, was being shown at this time and was raising black consciousness among young people I was working with in Wolverhampton; there were stimulating discussions in the classroom and fights in the playground!

As a Christian, I was aware of the experiences of Caribbean migrants who had experienced racism in the churches and I met some of the leaders of what was then the largest of the Black Majority Churches, the New Testament Church of God, (National Overseer Oliver Lyseight, Curtis Gray, Ira Brooks and Rocliff Joseph) and attended their Annual Convention at Bingley Hall in Birmingham. While they had their own stories of encountering racism in the churches in England, it was listening to the experiences of Black Anglicans that made me aware of the deeply entrenched racism in the Church.

Few Anglican Churches were safe spaces for these Anglicans! They challenged me to look at myself, my church, and my faith through listening to their story. Seeing their resilience, their faith and their willingness to help me begin to understand how racism works was and is one of the deepest and most unsettling experiences in my Christian faith. Their long experience of racism and insights were summed up in the words of one church member who said to me, 'David, we have been watching white people for five hundred years.' It was not just their experience of racism, but their lived out Christian faith that I could not fail to notice each time we met. This became more apparent when I was ordained and served in parishes where many Black Anglican were present.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Black Anglicans often described being caught in the middle – spoken of by some Black Christians as not real Christians or worshipping in the 'Master's' church and often perceived as not real Anglicans or simply ignored in Church of England churches. By the time of my retirement from stipendiary ministry in 2016, many urban churches faced new issues in Black and White encounter. In my last congregation most younger Black families were from Africa, though the different generations of those who had arrived from the Caribbean were still present in church. We also had families from Eastern Europe, particularly

those who had no obvious connection with churches elsewhere in the town.

John Wilkinson in, 'The Church in Black and White', contends that Black and White are terms in relation to racism and in particular to colonial history, transatlantic slavery and present racism experienced by Black people in White-dominated society. It is in this context that, I see colour: it matters whether someone is Black or White because of racism. It is not a term about humanity, which is one human race and 'The Race Gallery' by Marek Kohn in the 1990's and more recently Adam Rutherford's 'How to Argue with a Racist' expose the pseudoscience that racism is based on.

As terrible a wrong as racism is, it is not undefeatable. While it may be easy to say this as I do not experience racism, it is not easy to continually be aware of how insidious racism is in our lives. That racism exists makes me less of a person. Many black people are rightly tired and angry of waiting for change. In dialogue we have to show our commitment to challenge all human diminishment, of which racism is a part. Our personhood is bound up with the personhood of others. To not act in a racist way is not enough, we must challenge racism and we must change. If there is the experience of racial disadvantage, and this is one of the things that racism does, then the corollary is that there is racial advantage. This too I must challenge.

A friend recently put it this way

> 'I am from _____ where for most of my life, especially in my youth, most places I lived or went to I was one of the only Black people. I was attacked several times in primary school by white children who hated my skin.
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> There were some parts of our town where, as mixed-race Black children we knew we were not welcome (often Swastikas and National Front signs were painted on walls and garden gates), and we walked through those areas in fear. You never ever forget that feeling, you just learn to live with it, like grief.
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> When I first visited my London cousins, I could not believe there were so many people who looked like me just going about their daily business. It felt so nice not to stand out and I felt 'normal' for the first time in 18 years.
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> I went to a club in London with my cousins and a guy who worked with them. The club was almost entirely black people and the guy was white. As we were going in the guy said he felt really weird being the only white person he could see. We reassured him and I said, 'That feeling for you is just in one club, for one night: welcome to my life.' If you are wondering, I think this is what people mean by 'white privilege' – how lovely it must be.
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> I'm not looking for sympathy or to take anything from your own experiences – that won't bring back a childhood blighted by racism or stop the doubt in the

back of my mind that I try to suppress even now as a fifty-odd-year-old every single time I walk through a village or town I don't know; but to my white family and friends I would say this: please challenge racism when you can. Don't leave it for me, as the only black person in the room, to do it.' Mary C

While it is important that as a white person, I own the reality of past and present racism, it is not a place to stay. This is not a guilt trip, rather I have to critically evaluate myself, society and its history, resist racism now, and build new relationships. I draw on the Christian understanding as experienced by the disciples of Jesus after they had forsaken him at the Cross. His appearance to them in the Upper Room begins with the word, 'Peace'. He does not say, 'I forgive you'. There is no recrimination. He is offering a new relationship, not founded on their past failure, nor on forgetting what has happened but on the possibility of a new beginning. While we cannot expect that many Black people will greet this possibility with great enthusiasm, for many are tired of hoping for real change, it can be a shared hope. What might this mean in terms of racism today? Rowan Williams defines oppression as the transaction that leads to exclusion, to the severance of reciprocity. In the possibility of true mutuality, I will need to listen, learn, and continually develop a critical awareness of racism. Any safe space must lead to inclusion and restore reciprocity so that in the context of Black and White encounter the accusation of racism does not become a trump card that ends all further discussion but one that looks for change, growth in understanding, and the pursuit of a just outcome. Rowan Williams writes that Christ's action on the Cross, is 'an act of self-displacement in which the ultimate source of sacred power declares itself free to restore any and every breakage of relationship, irrespective of what human beings try to do to mend things.' This is a place, Williams continues, 'where the act of God and human reality are allowed to belong together without fear or rivalry... a place where human competition means nothing ...a place where the admission of failure is not the end but the beginning, a place where no one is excluded in advance.'

The use of 'place', rather than 'space' in this quotation may be particularly telling in the current pandemic. The restrictions on people meeting, worship and prayer being held online, and loss of communal life appear to diminish the importance of place.

> David Haney observed, 'the continuation of turning places into spaces – and the manner in which they enriched people's lives is lost'.
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> Walter Brueggemann said, 'The sense of being lost, displaced and homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture. The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place is a deep and moving pursuit. Loss of place and yearning for place are dominant.'

A sense of place remains important. Though there is considerable academic debate regarding the meaning of 'place' rather than 'space', Ken Leech in 'Prayer and Prophecy'

offers an understanding that is useful: 'I see space as a scientifically measured location, while place involves the encounter between space and the human interpretation of its significance.' It is the interaction and the association of people and place that gives it significance.

Dialogue between people of faith can be the safe space that Joel Edwards asks for. It is not an easy nor short journey and will include seeking to establish equality with justice. It is my hope that in dialogue we will take up this challenge with renewed vigour. Personally, this encounter continues to give me some of the richest experiences of my life, some of the deepest challenges to my faith, assumptions, cultures and values. It has been a journey of getting things wrong, rebuke, humble learning, and the discovery that my liberation is bound up with the liberation of all people.

Joel Edwards encouraged those responding to Black Lives Matter to find out the historic background of racism. With it may come the realisation that something of our spiritual foundation has been built upon racism. For some this has led to exposing a new culture, history, and identity that would open the way for God's purging of our spiritual roots and bring a different identity where these gifts could be shared.

As we listen to the experience of victims of racism, we must hear both the pain and anger of past memory and present reality. Miroslav Volt's book, 'The End of Memory', wrestles with his memories of having been tortured under the former Yugoslav regime. Its emphasis on his theological reflection of being oppressed left me thinking of how memory and being part of oppression is part of the Black and White journey. Much of what he writes has application to both oppressor and oppressed – the duty to remember, to remember truthfully, to remember to empathise, and to remember for a redeemed future. It means we still affirm the claims of justice but hope for the repair of the damaged relationships: 'Right remembering, remembering that is truthful and just, that heals individuals without injuring others, allows the past to motivate a just struggle and a grace filled world of reconciliation'.

We still have a long way to go for a grace filled world of reconciliation.

Role-Model Natives: Influences of Intergroup Contact on Muslim Perceptions of Right-wing Populism

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Abstract: Right-wing populism has risen from the periphery to govern centre politics. According to some scholars, the status quo is an apocalyptic ultimatum to Muslims in Europe; Is it going to be an Islamised Europe or Europeanised Islam? But with Muslim voices almost absent from the literature, this article critically addresses such tropes by questioning the extent to which such matters relate to the everyday lived contingencies of Muslims in Europe and the relationships they establish in society. By giving Muslims a voice, they tell us not only what is really affecting them, but also how they relate with significant 'others' in society as they negotiate their senses of belonging and citizenship. Scholarship has highlighted role models as important to minority communities or disadvantaged groups because they provide a template of behaviours for achievement, success and social acceptance. How do Muslim youth who come into significant contact with non-Muslim mentors through educational and vocational trajectories relate to them? This study contributes to the outlined literatures with a small-scale study of second-generation and convert Muslim responses to Right-wing Populism in Edinburgh, Copenhagen, and Malmo. Through narrative analysis, the article focuses on the theme of 'role-model natives', unravelling how intergroup contact and relationships influence Muslim perceptions of right-wing populism.

Keywords: Islam, Muslims, Right-wing populism, Citizenship, Role models, Europe, Integration

Overview

The spectre of the rising crescent of Islam in Europe/the West is undoubtedly going to cause some reaction. The flurry of recent literature on Right-wing Populism has focused on structural effects/consequences, such as agenda-setting policies (Minkenberg 2017), cross-party influence and impact on national electoral systems (Akkerman 2017; Mudde 2017). Research studying responses to Right-wing Populism has followed this structural focus, outlining the adaptations of political parties within the electoral systems, the 'new alliances' forged with mainstream governing parties

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and how the political discourse in specific national contexts has reacted (Art 2017; Mudde 2017; van Donselaar 2016).

No matter to what extent the literature has attributed the tectonic changes of the political landscape to structural forces, one very clear matter is that such groups and networks at their embryonic phases were responding to the everyday concerns of people at the microsocial level (Arzheimer 2017; Goodwin 2011). The article asks: are these 'concerns' and the apocalyptic scripts foretelling the end of Islam or Europe shared by people going about their normal lives, and especially the targets of anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia, or is this script one that is being 'written by established scholars and commentators' (Zuquete 2017, 117)? Do these scripts reflect a reality or are they mere dramatised fantasies conceived in certain circles only to disappear when another apocalypse appears? Do they have any significance to the lives of Muslims?

With its focus on macro-structural issues, the literature has ignored the micro-level. A literature review of scholarship studying the consequences of and responses to right-wing populism returned no results as far as Muslims are concerned. The literature on Islamophobia is relatively more developed (Allen 2014; Bleich 2011; Garner & Selod 2015; Meer 2014). As yet, however, it has focused on arguing for the recognition of Islamophobia as a distinct 'discriminatory category' (Meer & Modood 2010; 2012), or on specific aspects such as identity politics and gender (Elshayyal 2018) or statistics, institutions, and organisations are the empirical and analytical focus (Meer 2014; Sheridan 2006).

Is academia complicit in the marginalisation of Muslim voices in the right-wing populist debate? If we are to come closer to understanding intergroup dynamics and conflict, we must look at the voices of people and communities at the microsocial level. With a complex globalised world, modes of communication have opened possibilities for individuals and minority groups to exercise their social agencies and influence global human discourse. This interest in the individual, microsocial level is tallied with methodological choices favouring a qualitative, small-scale, interpretive approach.

Research Outline and Method

Conscious of the complexity of the topic and individual subjectivity, I did not assume *a priori* that the apocalyptic scripts featured in the everyday contingencies of the study's participants. I consequently articulated my study in terms of looking at 'change' and its causes among Muslims in Europe. I informed the participants that I was interested in studying the influence of right-wing populism; however, the main topic of engagement was change. Framing the study in this way opened the space for

them to reflect on the changes within their senses of identity and allowed them to express these in narrative form. This enabled me to look at how relevant right-wing populism was in their everyday lived lives by looking at when, where, how, and why it featured in their narratives – if it did.

As this was an exploratory study looking at a phenomenon spreading across Europe, there was rationale for a multi-site comparative approach. I found the 'Most Similar Systems Design – MSSD' (Anckar 2008) useful in delineating the study's locations. Literature documenting tensions/contestations of public space between Muslims and the non-Muslims who view themselves as 'indigenous' of certain European cities (Eade 1996; Mandel 1996; Nordin 2005; Schmidt 2011) outlined Copenhagen and Malmo as fitting into an MSSD bracket in terms of size, economy, and the Muslim demographic presence. With the literature indicating an active and relatively strong current for right-wing populism in Scandinavia, it was rational to compare the region with another context where right-wing populism is more temperate. Here, Edinburgh, with scholarship highlighting its 'benign' reception of Muslims (Bonino 2017) emerged as a good fit in terms of MSSD.

To enable detailed interpretative analysis,[1] it was crucial to ensure that the small-scale nature of the study tally with a small number of contrasts so that what participants share is given due analytical consideration. I used purposive sampling 'where participants are selected on the basis of having a significant relation to the research topic' reflectively without necessarily being representative of the population of interest (see Seale 2013, 237). The focus fell on second-generation Muslims and converts. A theoretical justification exists for this selection. Muslims born and/or raised in Europe are more likely to have a stake in belonging than the first generation who had/have a 'myth of return' (Anwar 1979; Jeffery 1976). Due to this greater stake of the second generation, their responses to right-wing populism are likely to be more pronounced. Another group of Muslims sharing this present/conscious stakeholder status are the converts to Islam.

The empirical material focuses on a subset of 28 participants from a total 45 who participated in Edinburgh, Copenhagen, and Malmo. The fieldwork took a period of thirteen months through March 2017 with follow-up interviews terminating in April 2018. Having framed my study as one looking at when, where, and how right-wing populism features in the everyday lives of my participants without assuming it *a priori*, the data is presented to foreground the factors they highlighted as being important. Two key narratives emerged from the two cohorts. One of the prominent narratives

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1   One way which scholars using qualitative methods strive towards validity is through detailing, high-quality analyses and 'thick descriptions' (see Chamberlayne *et al.* 2000: 21 and Brink 1993: 238)

in the accounts of the second-generation participants is the 'growing-up story' of being Muslim. Within these narratives of growing up, the theme of 'role-model natives' emerges whereby Muslim youth who come into significant contact with non-Muslim mentors through educational and vocational trajectories relate to them. The next section in the article presents and analyses these narratives before discussing the findings and concluding.

Conflicted Upbringings and Role-Model Natives

Conflict, in its multitude of forms, was one of the overarching themes of the participants' narratives of growing up. The sources, provocateurs, and reasons behind the conflicts ranged: from disagreements with parents and family to run-ins with authority figures at school; and from crises in self-identity to contesting definitions about what it meant to be Muslim. The conflicts exposed the participants to new milieu and brought about profound crises which had to be resolved. One of the major challenges encountered by the young participants was the conflict some had with significant others – parents and family members particularly. For some, this conflict continues. Being a teenager brought about its fair share of adversities. These problems and issues were not necessarily connected to their sense of Muslimness and being Muslim. Beyond 'just being a teenager', however, Islam featured in these conflicts, albeit in different ways. For Mustafa – whose narrative I will dwell on for some time – it almost seemed as though Islam was momentarily suspended. He knew that the religion exhorted kindness to parents, but he was a teenager.

> I remember... the Muslims in the mosque always taught me that you must be good to your mother, you must... never say anything bad to her, even Uff [...] It stuck in my head you know. So at puberty, it changed in my body. I became more angry more easily. I had mood swings, I had problems, I didn't even know who it was. So, in my family [...] I started to feel more, you know, strange. (Mustafa, unemployed, early-20s, Malmo, Turkish background)

This excerpt resonates with scholarship on Muslim identity and youth: Islam is not necessarily the default mode to which Muslim conduct is set (Bonino 2017; Hopkins 2007; Jeldtoft 2012; Meer 2010; Otterbeck 2012; Schmidt 2004). Muslims, like others, choose when to switch religion (Islam) on and off. If this is the case, their responses to rhetoric which targets their religion – right-wing populism, as such – could be contingent upon this factor.

Mustafa's participation provided some interesting insights along these lines. He grew up in Rosengard, a renowned tough area with a segregated migrant-background population. Mustafa commenced his schooling in the area, but when he started getting into trouble, his mother made the decision to pull him out and send him to a city-centre school. Here, Mustafa stood out, in terms of his ethnicity at first, and

then his conduct. He had a role to act out – 'the tough kid from Rosengard'. Despite Islam's appeal to him as a youngster, it was neither the religion in and of itself nor its adherents that Mustafa would turn to for help in resolving his school crisis.

> Mustafa: I had a very great teacher […] He had been in the military, he was a bodybuilder, and he was very cool, and he was very motivational as a person.
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> Yahya: Right! And he was a Swedish native?
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> Mustafa: Yea, he was Swedish native. He helped me and he was helping another guy I was with too, he was also from another background, so we really didn't fit in the class [….]
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> Yahya: OK, was that after the tough guy was broken down?
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> Mustafa: Yea […] we really clicked with him because we're also into training and martial arts… he started to help us weightlifting, gave us tips on what to eat. He became like a role model [….]
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> Yahya: You were going through these changes in puberty. So when would you say you started to become more stable?
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> Mustafa: I think it was … when I got this teacher at the end in the seventh, eighth grade, that's where I felt like it was very stable […] I thought, all these years, he helped me now to get a more stronger identity you know, so we started believing in ourselves.

Mustafa's narrative bears the hallmarks of resisting the stigma of being 'the dumb kid from Rosengard' who could not fit in. He had to prove his critics wrong. Erving Goffman made a piercing analysis of segregated environments as graveyards where the marginalised live until they die their social deaths. An individual unable to 'sustain' one of their social roles is effectively 'losing one of his social lives and is about to die one of the deaths that are possible for him' (Goffman 1952, 451–63). Mustafa's narrative was one of a young man who was resisting this social death. What happened to Islam, however? When it did feature in his narrative, it seemed to be in the periphery, and at times, it was a result of my probing.

> Mustafa: There is actually one change that I noticed when I was a kid like 8 or 9 years old. I went to the mosque, some of my friends went there and […] we had people that were like role models. They were raising us [….] I felt there was something that was good, I had something that appealed to me [….] It continued towards 10, 11, 12. But then I started to [see]… it interfered much with my school.
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> Yahya: It interfered?
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> Mustafa: Yea. I had these ideas about how a Muslim should be. But when I went to school, you know, my friends were also Muslim. But I saw […] they were talking with girls […] go[ing] out and party[ing] […] They wanted to do like what the society tells them to do […] I can say I felt a little bit confused [….]

Yahya: Was there any point in the lectures in [the mosque] that would be, let's say, advice to someone like you on how to live Islam in a realistic way in school? So that it might clear up some of the conflict you had?

Mustafa's mosque mentors 'did not go to school [anymore], they had jobs and started families'. Despite some being born and raised in Sweden, and therefore expected to be able to relate to Mustafa's predicament, guidance did not come from them in this matter. To his advantage, he had recourse to another role model – his schoolteacher. When I remarked to him 'it seems as though you almost Islamised his influence', Mustafa laughed, saying 'yes' twice. At this point, I bring into focus some of the theoretical frameworks which inform my study.

Intergroup Contact Theoretical Framework

In studying the intricate processes involved when terms like citizenship, integration, and Islamophobia are evoked, I recognise that I am ultimately dealing with cognitive definitions and redefinitions of social groups and social identity (Turner 2010; Tajfel 2010). The theories that have emanated from this field of study and from cross-cultural research (Wetherell 2010) are therefore significant to this study. I will highlight some of this research and briefly discuss how it illuminates my study.

Social grouping occurs when individuals perceive themselves as belonging to the same social category (Andersson 2006; Risse 2001); they share 'a collective perception of their own social unity' (Turner 2010, 15). This 'minimal categorisation' is powerful enough to induce effects such as intergroup discrimination and competition (Jahoda 1978; Whiting 1968; Vaughan 1978 cited in Wetherell 2010). Substantial empirical studies have also been conducted within the field of social psychology to show the complex nature of social group relations and interactions (Gaffié 1992; Kelman 1958; Sampson 1991; Bagozzi & Lee 2002; Fein et al. 2007). Although this study is not located within social psychology, some of the insights do benefit us in terms of theory development and data analysis.

The dynamics of intergroup behaviour (Brown and Ross 2010) comprise a range of interesting processes and interactions which may well apply in studying Muslim responses to right-wing populism. And from this comes the perspective that power relations and contestations between groups create relationships of domination and subordination (Deschamps 2010, 88–91). These produce perceptions of superiority and inferiority (Brown and Ross 2010) where certain battles for acceptance are fought. And within these battles, certain tactics are deployed by group members, what Brown & Ross (2010, 170) termed 'social creativity as a response to threat'. Here, group members respond to perceptions of threat or superiority by altering the 'attachment' they place on certain values and qualities.

It would be interesting to see if, how and when my study's participants engage in these 'social creative responses' – both as individuals and group members self-identifying with the Muslim community (potentially). Intergroup contact theory (Allport 1954, Pettigrew 2007, Zajonc 1968) is certainly helpful here in explaining how Mustafa came to Islamise his native Swedish teacher's influence to the point he became a source of guidance over and against his Rosengard Muslim elders. Simply put, increased contact enhances liking and relatability. Had Mustafa remained schooled in Rosengard, such a process would, most probably, not have taken place.

> I looked up to this guy because even when he was our age, he was always taking care of his body [...] and always training [...] So I felt from another point of view that OK, you can also be cool and you don't have to drink, you don't have to party because he didn't do it. He always said, like: when I was a kid, I didn't go out and do that, and I didn't go party 'cos I had tournaments [...] [He] couldn't drink and then next day, he wouldn't sober up. He gave us like that focus [...] saying: you should stick with the right people around you that can help you to focus on your goals.

On his own admission, Mustafa has always been motivated by a drive to 'prove people wrong'. He excelled in school to show his classmates that the 'dumb kid from Rosengard can fit in'. The help he received from his mentor(s) at school was crucial to his fitting in, and this has led him to securely self-identify as Swedish more so than Turkish. By comparison to his Rosengard peers, Mustafa demonstrated a secure sense of belonging to Sweden. The effect of his education outside 'the ghetto' had been profound.

> There are people born in Sweden, but they couldn't even speak like good Swedish [...] Maybe they even use like sign language [....] I was hanging with kids in Rosengard, and they were a little bit embarrassed to call themselves Swedish people. They always said: I'm Arabic, I'm Turkish, I'm Albanian [....] proud! If you said you were from Sweden, you would like get, like, 'geek' or something. Now when you ask me, I say I feel more Swedish because I have more Swedish values. I don't know if it's correct to say but, I maybe have more Swedish values than Turkish.

We saw in Mustafa's case, when Islam was not available, or, when it was partially available, role models played an important role in the process of identity production. This factor appeared in the other participants' growing-up experiences, albeit in different ways, causing quite different outcomes. The literature places role model[2] as a concept within social learning theory (Kemper 1968 cited in Brown 2012).

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2   Kemper (1968, 33) defined a role model as someone who 'possesses skills and displays techniques which the actor lacks...and from whom, by observation and comparison with his own performance, the actor can learn' (cited in Brown 2012, 306).

Scholarship has highlighted role models as important to minority communities or disadvantaged groups because they provide a template of behaviours for achievement because they are perceived as embodying success (Basit 1996; Brown 2012; Dagkas *et al.* 2011; Jouili 2013; Lockwood 2006). The body element is certainly key; and while some research has documented a positive correlation (e.g. Lockwood (2006) finding gender as a determining factor for the positive impact of role models for female students), it has been contested. Brown's (2012) study of African American male teachers provided compelling insights challenging what he outlined as:

> a discursively sealed construct, one theorised solely as the father figure, mentor, and role model for the at-risk and in-crisis Black male student. What is striking about this discourse is that Black men were presumed – by default – to possess the pedagogies needed to fulfil these roles. The roles, capacities, pedagogies, and expectations of Black male teachers were, therefore, set in place before they ever entered the classroom (Brown 2012, 307).

The association between 'black male bodies' and pedagogy fed into cultural narratives which fetishise the black male body by reducing (essentialising) its performance 'through explicit and subtle discourses of deviance and difference' (Brown 2012, 308). The frenzied advocacy of the US Department of Education, political organisations, activists, researchers, and even Oprah Winfrey to increase African American male teachers from the 1990s to 2010 missed one key detail: 'the practice of teaching the Black boy is pedagogical, and not just an outcome of their race and gender' (Brown 2012, 312). While there exists literature shedding light on the importance of Muslim role models for: state-civil society relations (Jouili 2013, 71), upward social mobility (Basit 1996, 234) and inclusive education (Dagkas et al. 2011, 236), I was not too convinced by their uncritical application of the term 'Muslim role model'.

Was Islam being reified into Muslim bodies? I found it interesting to see if the question of body compellingly articulated by Brown (2012) tallied with some of my findings. African American males were constructed – by the sociological literature – as embodying 'special cultural knowledge and understanding that would make them ideal role models for African American male students (Brown 2012, 306). How about Muslim young men and women, did they need Muslim male and female bodies?

In the absence of Muslim role models, Mustafa Islamised his non-Muslim Swedish teacher's influence to the point he became a Muslim role model. I highlight that this occurred in the context of schooling in a non-segregated area. Had the same teacher worked in the Rosengard School, could he have played a similar role? Probably. But we must recognise that Mustafa's move to the city-centre school exposed him to a milieu where he was challenged to confront his otherness – something his Rosengard friends did not have to do. They found it less problematic to 'proudly' self-identify

as 'Arab, Albanian or Turkish' and difficult to see themselves as Swedish. Mustafa benefited from a supportive relationship in this crucial transition period of his life. He was able to survive the crisis and even subvert the stigma by showing he could fit in and achieve his goals. Opposite to this experience of supportive teacher-role models was Riem's case.

> When I was in third or fourth grade, we had a parent-teacher meeting about me [...] after gym class to [not] shower with the rest of the kids, because – you know – Muslim rules and stuff [laughs]. I remember the teacher [...] at the end [...] [saying] [...] 'ok, fine.' The next time we had gym [...] she said [mimicking derogatory tone] 'Oh! Riem [...] it's not going to be possible. You have to shower with the [others].' I still remember [emotive tone] ... what I was wearing, where I was, everything, because [...] I felt like someone slapped me twice [...] Authorities were like [...] [gestures with hand up]: you can't say nothing.
>
> (Riem, mid-20s, Teacher, Copenhagen, Syrian background)

This negative experience had a profound impact on Riem's trust in authority figures, both within the school/academic context and out-with. She lamented the 'injustices' she has encountered as a teacher working within the Danish education system and narrated the negative experiences of some Muslim colleagues.[3] Her voice echoed the two other Muslim teachers I met – Salim (Malmo) and Momina (London) in expressing serious concern for the wellbeing of Muslim students/youth educated in such institutions.

> I'm really scared for the next generation and their future in this country because right now, they have this anti-radicalisation programme and it's really targeted towards children in elementary schools. So you have teachers who are told to focus: [...] do you see anything radicalised about this kid [mimics serious tone in sarcasm]? You have stories about a kid [...] playing with a banana as a gun [...] they were afraid he was going to be radicalised [...] If they say anything about Israel or Palestine, they're going to be radicalised! You're not allowed to be a kid anymore, and that's really scary. (Riem)

When I compared Riem's responses to right-wing populism with Mustafa's, I could see a difference in the focal points of their narratives. Mustafa's immediate focus is on the grassroots. He talked about how 'normal people' could became afraid of peoples and cultures they had not encountered. This led to him differentiating between racism and xenophobia. For this reason, he was able to come to the conclusion that,

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3   'I have friends who experience that [...] They work in a school with a high Muslim population [...] One of them went to pray in the same place as the students prayed and she got told: 'Oh! You cannot pray with them because people will think you're pressing them to pray [irritated tone] [...] It [became] a case.' (Riem)

like crime in society, xenophobia will always be around. It is not something of major concern to him.[4] His role model teachers yet again significantly contributed to his reaching this conclusion.

> Yahya: Can I ask, are you basing this on the fact that you've mixed with Swedish people and […] not everyone is acting along this ideology?
>
> Mustafa: It was something that stuck in my head from my teacher in school […] she said that during her grandmother's years in Sweden […] xenophobia was bigger because there wasn't that many people from other backgrounds. But when they started to mix up, it became more and more accepted. And, she said that it's mostly because of fear of the unknown.

Riem's response on the other hand focused on the political (macrosocial) level. The distinction she made essentially categorised Danish society into 'two spheres' – the general population as one, and the politicians and media as the second. Her focus on the power wielded by the latter group and its impact on people's – especially Muslim youths' – everyday lived experiences became a major concern for her.

> I see it like […] two different spheres [gestures with hands]. You have all the people in Denmark who go to school, work […] we all live in harmony. Then you have the politicians and media! They live in their own little world […] where all the Muslims are out to get them, and everything is bad […] I see a really, really scary development in Danish politics […] Before, we only had Pia Kjaersgaard.[5] It was [only] the Danish FolkeParti who had these really outrageous thoughts […] about Muslims. Now, it's every other party as well […] The only politician we know who stands for what they feel is Pia Kjaersgaard! Everyone else […] one day they believe this and the [next] day, they believe something else because they're only out for the votes […] You voted for them […] then when they got elected, they totally turned on you [laughs]. (Riem)

Had Riem benefitted from supportive role-model teachers in school, would her responses have been different? Would she have expressed similar views to Mustafa? What her narrative does show is her clash with 'authority' stimulated relatively more insecure responses to right-wing populism when compared with Mustafa's trusting relationships with his role-model teachers. Furthermore, her position as a teacher/mentor to Muslim youths has given her clear insights into the substantial nature of the challenges that face them from a number of institutional levels: academic, political,

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4   'I haven't really cared about the[m], as I said I didn't really see them as a threat, but I know there will always be stupid people who attack people, you will always see that. I don't think you can eliminate it completely, it's like saying we want a country that has no crime whatsoever. We will always have crime, you can decrease it, but you can never eliminate it.' (Mustafa)

5   The founder and ex-leader of the Right-wing populist Danish People's Party (FolkeParti).

social, and the media. She shared this position with the other teachers. They all voiced the serious concerns they have for the welfare of Muslim youth in the circumstances.

When I look at the stories of the participants, with role models in mind, I could not help but see its huge importance. I saw this as necessary to convey, even if the space does not allow for in-depth analysis of each narrative. Farid was born and raised in Copenhagen, where he currently resides. By the age of fourteen, he had become deeply involved in the Copenhagen gang scene. Farid narrated how Muslim youth who could not find role models growing up in Copenhagen went away from 'education', resorting to alternative resources like hip-hop and rap culture or, even, to more destructive resources such as gang culture and street violence. It resonated with some aspects of what Brown (2012) described when African American youth living in matrifocal homes would 'seek validation of their manhood through distorted constructions of masculinity from peers and other African American men outside the home' (Brown 2012, 303).

> MTV [...] the different channels, these gangster movies [...] when they showed that to us, that was what we could relate to because we had always problem with the cops, and there was a racial problem. (Farid, mid-20s, Copenhagen, Iraqi-Iranian background)

The ability to reconcile aspects of Islam with everyday life featured as an important factor in the participants' narratives. Within the growing-up narratives of the participants, there was an observation that at certain points, they encountered scenarios and moments where Islam – in their perception – either limited them or was limited in what it could offer in terms of resources. They were conflicted between Islam and their daily lived realities. We see that Mustafa's ability to reconcile the elements of his Muslim identity with everyday life gave him a sense of 'stability' in the midst of conflict. This translated into secure identification which led to fitting in. This in turn enabled him to relate with 'Swedish values' as he responded to right-wing populism.

Reconciling Islam with Everyday Life

Some of the participants, like Sahra, faced considerable difficulty in reconciling Islam with the lived reality of youth. This section compares their narratives to shed further light on this issue. Sahra is a Danish-Somali woman in her mid-twenties. She is a trainee social worker in Copenhagen. She was born in Somalia but came with her family to Denmark at kindergarten age. She had a lot of things going on – on her own admission – as she grew up in her new home: she was 'fat', the only Black Muslim in a white-Danish school. She had an absent father figure and a mother whose struggle to raise a lot of children under one roof compromised her ability to explain Islam beyond a redundant simplistic framework.

> I noticed when I was in school, I was this kind of person, and when I came
> home to the society I was living in, I was another kind of person… OK, should
> I be more Danish, or should I be more Muslim Somali? [It] was like an identity
> crisis for me…At this point, I'm like 16…I had Hijab on…I was like OK, I don't
> want to have this on…I just want to be myself because I felt being yourself
> would be more Danish, like be more the people around you…I started to not
> go with my Hijab…and I was a bit rebellious with my mother…went partying
> all that…I thought that was the life for me. (Sahra)

Considerable research has shown that when young Muslims are able to coherently 'live'
their 'Islams' in their everyday lives, they become more secure about themselves, their
relationships and their citizenships; and this security manifests when their claims of
belonging are questioned (Bonino 2017; Elshayyal 2018; Finlay et al. 2017; Hopkins
2018; Jeldtoft 2012; Otterbeck 2010; Schmidt 2011). We see this with Mustafa
during his schooling. Sahra was initially unable to attain this. She lacked relatable
role models at school and parental support at home. She rebelled against her Islamic
upbringing in a bid to be 'more Danish'. This, according to her, only accentuated her
non-Danishness.

> Sahra: When I was 20, I start to think about the creation around me, and I
> started to think: the more I was trying to be this, the more I feel like I was
> betraying myself with sins. So I was like, I can never be like them […]
>
> Yahya: The Danish?
>
> Sahra: Yea, the Danish people. I could never be like them because I was
> believing in the creation and how, I was like, how can these people not have a
> religion in any kind of way like? It's all about your desires, desires, desires. So I
> was thinking a lot, and I stopped partying…I noticed like many of my Danish
> friends at that time cut me off.

A gradual return to Islam took place for Sahra. What deserves highlighting is that it
would take a reconciliation between her new-found practice of Islam with her everyday
life for Sahra to become secure about herself, her relationships, her citizenship, and
her belonging to Danish society. This security manifested itself in her responses to
right-wing populism. Having seen her in a counter-demonstration against PEGIDA,
I directly asked:

> Yahya: So how do you see these far-right groups […] like this PEGIDA-
> Denmark, how do you see them, do you feel affected by them? Do you feel
> threatened by them?
>
> Sahra: I don't feel threatened. Yea, I don't feel that, and I just feel more sorry
> for a person. I feel [that] because I've been there […] I don't have all knowledge
> like now, but […] I've been to a place where I was living in my own zone […] it's
> all about me, and my desires and how I see things before I became more like:

ok, let me learn things, other cultures, let me learn about how these people
are seeing me [...] I just feel sorry about that: the people don't go and seek
knowledge, why [do] you stand for this kind of propaganda, about Muslims
[...] I can feel sorry for you that you're following this kind of way. You can like
develop yourself for your own sake, and for your children's sake, because you're
just creating a hate, and hate [...] hurts more than anything else.

This ability to reconcile Islam with one's everyday lived reality appears to be a
crucial factor in the participants' staking claims to belonging. I was able to make this
observation when comparing Mustafa and Sahra's narratives to Dwayne and Tariq
– whose narratives I briefly share next. I found in their case that some participants'
responses to right-wing populism were framed within discourses of absent
stakeholdership, that is, in terms of inactive citizenship and belonging (i.e., we're
not too bothered by right-wing populism, but we're also not too interested in taking
active part in society). Dwayne and Tariq, like Mustafa and Sahra, faced the dilemma
of being Muslim, yet growing up in Europe. Unlike them, however, they were yet to
reconcile their versions of Islam and their daily lived realities.

Dwayne, like Sahra also went through life-changing experiences in moving from
one context to another during childhood. He likewise experienced conflict with his
parents around Islam. Dwayne was, however, a convert and the transitions in his life
were many. Born and raised in Hackney, he had to move to the Caribbean when he
was two to live with his grandparents while his mother finished her university degree.
Growing up in an extended family with limited socio-economic resources enabled
Dwayne to appreciate family values and 'built' his character. Moving back to the UK
to live with his mother at the age of twelve brought its fair share of change, and later
on, conflict, as he went into his teens. Although encountering racism was a part of
his growing-up experiences, Dwayne shared (performed) a narrative of positivity
and strong-mindedness which enabled him to pull through –whether that be during
school or later on when he reached seventeen and found himself in the 'hostel system'.
He had moved out of his mother's house by this time and it coincided with his
conversion to orthodox Islam having been raised by his mother as an adherent of the
Nation of Islam.

Dwayne found it hard to find balance and stability in his life after converting to
Islam at sixteen. His impressionability together with the bad company he was around
while growing up in Hackney stifled his faith. He needed a complete 'fresh start',
and this is what Malmo offered. This time round, he was determined to 'hold fast'
to his religion; the priority lay in 'safeguarding' it. His narrative was a performance
of redemption, and the identity he produced in his participation emphasised a
distinct conservatism outlined by Geoffroy (2004) as one of the 'religious positions'
in response to modernity. Dwayne's prioritisation precluded the 'reconciliation'

between his practice of Islam and his lived everyday reality in Malmo. For him, it was the same whether right-wing politics took hold of Sweden or not because it did not matter much. He was on a mission to make his 'Hijrah'. This constituted a different kind of response to right-wing populism – one rooted in an unwillingness or inability to reconcile Islam with everyday life in Europe.

> Yahya: Is there any direction that these changes are going towards? [...] You've seen changes in yourself, in your thinking as an adult, what about in terms of [...] politics or economics or how society in Sweden is changing? Do you pick up on any of these?
>
> Dwayne: Yea, it's come lately now that Romania has joined the EU, obviously now we see a lot of Romanians on the street that are begging or busking [...] But for me realistically that doesn't really [...] affect me even in the politics [...] I don't really care about those stuff to tell you the truth cos I know what I need to do for myself personally and where I'm going and where I want to go, so what, I mean [...] It's not permissible for a Muslim to live in a non-Islamic country whether it be having children, because verily even in the way I was thinking about it, obviously, safety is an important issue, even to the whole of mankind. I don't think there's no one individual that would say: I'm not worried about safety, everyone's worried about safety, and in the aspect of safety, at the head of safety is safeguarding my religion. (Dwayne, late-20s, personal assistant, Malmo, Afro-Caribbean background)

Tariq was raised in the deprived Saughton area in Edinburgh. One of the earliest memories he invokes in his narrative is being told that everyone around him was a 'junkie'. It was a powerful briefing because it pretty much shaped his outlook and social relations in that crucial, formative stage of his life. Before religion would feature as a resource for identity construction, Tariq's narrative told a story of racialised gender roles and social relations. He was not allowed to play with the other 'white boys' even though he wanted to. And when those white boys looked at his sisters, he was given instructions to beat them up.

To reinforce these racialised social relations, Tariq was taught that the values being instilled in him were his 'culture'. At this point, a perceivable syncretisation of Islam with cultural norms featured in Tariq's narrative. This amalgam became a resource for identity production albeit in an Islamic dressing: negotiations around gender – masculinity in particular – occurred within an Islamified framework. Tariq was consequently raised with the values of 'izzah, sharaf and ghirah' (pride, respect and protective jealousy) epitomised as 'Muslim' values.

> I was given the impression that my family were saved. Mum was proper. Dad was proper [...] uncles were proper. I had to be proper: '[Tariq], don't talk to girls!' [serious voice] Haram! OK I won't talk to girls. And then at 17, I see

my mum talking to a guy [...] so what the fuck is going on here? [...] I was
sugar-coated, moulded, covered [...] and almost programmed [...] Don't talk
to girls! OK. Don't fight your family. OK [...] Go beat up that boy who looked
at your sister! OK. That's what it was right. Up until I was 17. (Tariq, mid-20s,
Security officer, Edinburgh, Moroccan-Tunisian background)

Tariq shared with Dwayne this absent-stakeholder narrative in terms of his sense of
belonging and social participation. Like Mustafa, Sahra, and Dwayne, Tariq's Islam
was also conflicted in his growing up, and he continues to struggle with reconciling it
with his everyday life. Exposure to discrimination as a part and parcel of growing up
in Saughton and Stenhouse resulted in an unreconciled sense of identity, especially in
the absence of role models. We saw something of an 'us versus them' narrative when
he spoke about his early childhood experiences such as in him not being allowed to
play with the other children, and how he saw them as 'white boys'. Tariq's narrative
was extensive. His conflicted Islam stemmed from the upbringing he received at home
with his family. It suffices here to summarise the relevant parts of his narrative as it
pertained to the topic of reconciling Islam with everyday life.

Discussion

The participants' narratives have shown that they exercise individual agency in
choosing when to switch Islam on and off. Their perceptions of anti-Islam discourses
are therefore likely to correlate with this: that is, neither Islam nor right-wing populism
determined the production of narrative identities definitively. I was interested in
studying the participants' narratives around their images of self and constructions of
identity when – at some point in their lives – Islam was not necessarily an active agent
or resource. We saw that the participants used other resources available to them in
order to construct their identities and configure images of who they saw as some of
the participants; and on the other hand, we saw how the absence of role models made
challenges faced more insurmountable.

We saw in Mustafa's case how contact with a non-Muslim role model became a defining
episode in his identification. The combined factors of a secure sense of belonging and
identity stemming from positive relations (contact) with indigenous Swedish people
produced highly secure responses to right-wing populism. Tariq's narrative showed
that although a segregated upbringing exposed him to experiences of discrimination
and prejudice, he did not produce his narrative identities as a response to right-wing
populism. Rather, they appeared to be resisting the stigma of being Muslim (Bonino
2017).

Both Sahra and Tariq, like Mustafa faced a crisis in reconciling aspects of Islam with
everyday life at school and in Danish and Scottish society respectively. Unlike Mustafa

though, they did not narrate the presence of a role model who could help them with this. When the clash with their parents came, they both took on the Danish/Scottish youth party lifestyle as a resource for producing identity. This also served a means of rebellion against their parents' Muslim background.

Referring to the theoretical frameworks, the explanatory model best suited to explaining and accounting for the above outlined empirical manifestations is intergroup relations and social identity theory. Sahra attached value to 'knowledge' and it became a means for her reconciling her Islam with her left-wing activism; Mustafa recognised the Islamic values inherent in Swedishness. These could be viewed from the theoretical perspectives of 'social creativity as a response to threat' (Brown & Ross 2010, 170), or tactics-strategies (de Certeau 1984) in response to perceptions of threat/superiority by altering attachment placed on certain values and qualities (Cairns 2010). Intergroup contact theory (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 2007) has also provided a useful framework to explain the 'in/exposure leading to non/liking' (Pettigrew 2007, 188) narratives shared by Mustafa, Sahra, and Tariq.

When comparing the participants' responses to the literature on intergroup conflict and other minority (stigmatised) groups, I saw a number of similar coping measures manifest in the narratives. The suppressed 'dissident identities' of the first generation (Walter et. al. 2002) resurfacing in the second generation as a 'rediscovery of cultural roots' (Bradley 2006, 1193) was something which Sahra's narrative expressed. The 'downplaying' of Irish identity (Ullah 1985) and 'avoidance' as a coping strategy for members of the African American community (Utsey et. al. 2000) are two responses which avoid confronting the source of prejudice/discrimination. This could be seen in Dwayne and Tariq's responses. For both, the apparent difficulty of reconciling Islam with everyday life appeared to inhibit their claims of collective belonging. Their responses to right-wing populism were framed in terms of an absent stakeholdership, that is, not being too bothered, while disengaging from civic participation.

Growing up Muslim, unfortunately, entailed growing up with conflict, often involving family, friends and identities. Regarding how this theme related to Muslim responses to right-wing populism, it was observed that when such conflict is resolved through the reconciliation between Islam and other aspects of identity such as ethnicity, nationality, and gender, it tended to produce secure responses. The presence or absence of role models was a significant factor in this process of reconciliation. It may have been expected that Islam would be an inhibiting factor stimulating more defensive responses. The participants, however, reconfigured Islam in ways which complemented active civic participation in their local and national contexts. Rather than become inhibiting, Islam provided a basis for exploring, considering, and – where necessary – countering narratives and discourses of exclusion. We saw this particularly in the cases of Sahra and Mustafa.

Conclusion

This article looked at the growing-up narratives of second-generation and convert Muslims. It has provided empirical examples showing a range of factors (migration, socio-economic, and individual) producing distinct perspectives and experiences which the participants used in narrating their identities. Three major factors were found to be challenging to the participants in their growing-up experiences: (1) segregation, (2) lack of role models and (3) the inability to reconcile Islam with everyday life. While each of these factors could be variably linked to the participants' perceptions of and responses to right-wing populism, being Muslim in and of itself does not appear to determine the nature of these responses.

The article focused on Muslim responses to Right-wing Populism from the prism of intergroup relations between Muslim youth and 'role-model natives'. This small-scale, explorative-comparative study of Muslim voices in Edinburgh, Copenhagen, and Malmo has shown that although the participants exhibited a range of 'social creative responses', these were in response to stigmatisation primarily. The data showed no 'reactive' Muslim identity emerging as a response to right-wing populism. The participants perceived other factors as having a far greater impact on their everyday lives and growing-up experiences than right-wing populism.

We saw in Mustafa's case how contact with a non-Muslim role model became a defining episode in his identification. The combined factors of a secure sense of belonging and identity stemming from positive relations (contact) with indigenous Swedish people produced highly secure responses to right-wing populism.

Segregation inhibited meaningful intergroup contact. This was vividly portrayed in Mustafa's narrative. His secure responses to right-wing populism, his ability to discern between racist ideology and xenophobia, and positive self-identification with Sweden as his country were a product of the intergroup contact outside Rosengard (Malmo). I cannot, however, conclude that a correlation exists between segregation, contact, and the nature of responses to right-wing populism because the data has not shown this. We have seen, however, that growing up in ethnic enclaves and/or socio-economically deprived areas exposed participants to prejudice and discrimination from the majority ethnic group. But instead of stimulating insecure or hostile responses, this contact with discrimination produced narratives of relating to right-wing populism and seeing things from the other side.

As surprising as it may be to see the participants being able to relate to and look at matters from the right-wing populist perspective, the narratives they shared about their attempts to relate not being reciprocated by the majority social group is deeply concerning. Equal citizenship represented both an aspiration of this sense of belonging

as well as an obstacle to it. To feel at home and belong there – to a significant degree – was to be made to feel at home and belong there. The presence of role-model natives has a significant potential in facilitating such sentiment.

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Learning to Listen Agonistically: Dialogue Encounters on the Eastside

Deborah Dunn and Rachel Rains Winslow

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.

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Learning to Listen Agonistically: Dialogue Encounters on the Eastside

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

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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

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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 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,

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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

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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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Neo-Populism: Applying Paul Taggart's *Heartland* to the Italian Five Star Movement and League parties

Amedeo Varriale

Abstract: In the early 2000s the British academic and expert in the field of populism, Paul Taggart, conceptualised the heartland – which he defined as 'a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of imagination.' The idea is that populists envision this return to an almost utopic, laborious, morally pure, and culturally homogenous 'place' where professional political administration is not completely rejected but certainly kept at a minimum. Applying Taggart's heartland to leaders and parties allows us to build on an efficient comprehension of specific uses of populist dialogue, as well as their general discursive styles and political narratives. Those who have capitalised on the current populist zeitgeist (a term Cas Mudde often uses), such as the American President Donald J. Trump, have mobilised masses by implicitly calling for a return to the heartland with slogans such as 'Make America Great Again'. However, Trump is not the only politician who has discursively framed the concept of heartland in the twenty-first century. Interestingly, the heartland can also be applied to 'right-wing' national-populists and 'left-wing' techno-populists in Italy. The League, believes that with their involvement, their country can return to be a safer, more stable, hard-working, producerist society. Similarly, the Five Star Movement pressures the elites for a more virtuous, honest, and transparent way of doing politics through the digital web and direct democracy practices. Those values are the ones that shape their idea of heartland. This piece untangles the two distinct versions of heartland that exist within the forma mentis of the two Italian populist parties, compares them, and contrasts them in the hope of contributing to the already existing literature that has presented little evidence so far on how Taggart's relevant concept can be identified in populist discourse, monologue, and ideology. Also, some advice is given on how to deal with the new populists worldwide in a way that involves dialogue that is both constructive and inclusive.

Keywords: Heartland, Populism, Nation-statism, League, Five Star Movement, Territory.

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Introduction

The scope of this piece is to elucidate not only the role that heartlands play in allowing political figures to frame the particularistic idea of 'the people' through monologic exchange but also populism itself. However, this task will be carried out with the premise that providing the reader with an exhaustive taxonomy of populism is not necessary, given that sort of work is readily available elsewhere (See Margaret Canovan 2004; Cas Mudde 2017; Pierre A. Taguieff 1995; Marco Tarchi 2015; Kurt Weyland 2017; etc.). Moreover, the theories exposed in the next few paragraphs are consciously non-empirical, in the sense that they are yet to be tested using a psychometric or gradational instrument, but the strength of my methodology resides precisely in the fact that it is both open-minded and open-ended. In fact, specifically, this approach involves an analysis of how the Five Star Movement and League have managed to discursively and ideologically formulate their corresponding heartlands. In the humblest manner, I must stress this pursuit is both interesting and essential, mainly because it has never been done academically before. The speeches I use in this article are taken by statements made at rallies, in blogs, party newspapers, and parliamentary proceedings. All the material I have collected to produce this piece has been made easily accessible by Five Star Movement and League politicians (mainly MPs) who have openly expressed their opinions (in the form of speech as both 'monologic expression' and 'dialogic confession') from 1994 onwards.

The article relies on a *synthesis* (Creswell and Creswell 2015) between *theoretical exploration* and *discourse analysis* in order to address the social reality of two Italian populist organisations that have used what Ronald C. Arnett (2012, 105) refers to as 'petite narrative' to communicate their raison d'être to an audience within a monologic framework. Taggart's idea of heartland is tied to a wider context (where the perspectives of relevant authors such as Ronald C. Arnett, Adam Ferguson, Nadia Urbinati, and others are also taken into account) to ultimately address whether constructive approaches to populist agents are possible in order to make the case that if we are unwilling to hear and legitimise monologic exchanges, then it becomes virtually impossible for dialogue to be heard. In worst-case scenarios, the failure to embark on dialogue (and the delegitimisation of populist monologic demand *a priori*) results in the further weakening of the social fabric of already polarised post-modern liberal democracies in which paramount tenets like freedom of expression and freedom of association seek to be redeemed (Arnett 2012, 113). In this paper, an analysis of the ideology of populism and the idea of heartland will take place before assessing structural design, methodology and qualitative potential of the research. As

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already hinted earlier, examples of how heartlands have been, until now, constructed discursively through monologue and an interpretative discussion on whether it is possible and sensible to engage with a more 'mature' populism will also be provided prior to the conclusive remarks.

Making sense of how heartlands are naturally built-in populist dialogue obviously also contributes to a fairer comprehension of the 'ideology', 'discursive style', 'performative act', 'mentality' or 'political strategy' of the populist phenomenon. So far, a limited amount of literature has been produced to attempt to somewhat expand on Taggart's *heartland* conceptualisation; among those we find the scholars Duncan McDonnell (2006, 126-132) and Aristotle Kallis (2018, 285-302). Unfortunately, it seems that they have largely failed because they decided to work vaguely around the concept, treading far too lightly and with extreme care, perhaps because deep down they feared it would be intellectually impossible to discuss populist nature by relying on a populist trait that only Taggart acknowledges completely. Unsurprisingly, even Taggart himself – apart from briefly touching upon the examples of 'Middle America' and 'Middle England' – carefully avoids distinguishing between different American or European heartlands belonging on either side of the political spectrum (Taggart 2002, 97). Thus, it is time to take on the challenge, and shed some light on 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' populist heartlands in Italy. In any event, before this is properly done, I urge the reader to make the best out of the next few lines I provide on ideological populism which will set the basis for the body of this work and also hopefully motivate further investigation in the future.

Making Sense of Populism

In Taggart's own words, 'the concept of the heartland allows us to see the commonality across different manifestations of populism, while at the same time allowing each instance of populism to construct its own particular version of the heartland' (Taggart 2002, 98). Both the League and the Five Star Movement construct their own particularistic version of heartland, usually with monologic performances that derive from their leadership. In the former case, this constructivist task has been carried out by Matteo Salvini, while in the latter it has been done by Beppe Grillo, Luigi Di Maio, Alessandro Di Battista and other medium to high-ranking members of the party. Populist monologue is not just a means used to protect and promote a given worldview (one that reflects a populist *mentalité* defending the identity and sovereignty of 'the Italian people' with an emphasis on what Arnett correlates to an attachment to 'local soil' – especially in the League's case) but it is actually embedded in the personalist and paternalist-style performance of these communicative agents. Hereby, the existence of monologue in the discursive-performative acts of the Italian (neo)populists, their appeals and those of their vociferous supporters need to be heard and seized as they are an opportunity to open dialogue. They certainly unwittingly

create a dialogic possibility. If one dismisses once and for all the superficial notions that give a pejorative meaning to monologue – as Arnett (2012, 107) correctly advises – one can finally strive to treat monologue as the first step towards dialogue which brings revelatory content to the table by involving different persons with different worldviews and narratives (ibid., 106). The League and the Five Star Movement were chosen as a focal point of discussion and related to heartlands because they embody a visibly populist *weltanschauung,* and both appear to have as an objective the creation or re-creation of a place (e.g., for the League the heartland is a 'place of the past') without political conflict or great division. Other parties and movements in England, France, Spain, and elsewhere (some of which will be named in the coming paragraphs) have a strong populist political identity; however, their pursuit of Anaximander's (610–546 BC) One, which Arnett reminds us is a 'place of origin that we cannot see or touch' (2012, 76) and somewhat descriptively relatable to the nostalgic idea of a monolithic territory of imagination, is much harder to identify in their discourse. The two Italian neo-populist parties instead have throughout the years coherently attempted to give their own meanings to their ideal society through attachment to certain rituals and myths elaborated throughout their discursive/monologic patterns. On the right, the annual ritual of the League's Pontida ceremony is a way of concretely giving shape to the heartland in the collective imaginary of its adherents, where the myth of Alberto da Giussano – a twelfth-century local hero who defended Northern Italy from the imperialist Frederick I – is still very much indulged in (Lauria 2020). On the left, the ritual is instead the citizen participation on the web through Rousseau, which is a Five Star official website where important policy-decisions are made through the supposedly egalitarian practices of e-democracy (Urbinati 2018). The prevalent populist myth is that of what Urbinati calls the 'myth of objectivity' because Grillo's monologues often centred on the prospect of overcoming 'partiocracy' to create a non-partisan democracy by relying on the expertise of citizens who will resemble a crypto-technocratic and non-political task force (ibid) . Therefore, whether the heartland exists or not is of no importance, it serves the purpose of building a petite narrative which Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) deciphers as 'fundamental to human identity' (Arnett 2012, 116).

That being stated, we cannot develop a significant academic-level understanding of heartlands (and the populist monologic expression that comes with its conceptualisation) if we do not first understand populism, at least in its broader sense. The reason why populism is still a contested concept when looking at it from its 'supply-side' – rather than 'demand-side' where Roger Eatwell (2018) and Matthew Goodwin (2018) have enrichingly discussed all the causal and societal factors – is because scholars such as Mudde, Laclau (2005), Ostiguy (2017), Tarchi (2015) and Weyland (2017) disagree on whether it is a thin-centred ideology, performative act (or simply a 'way of doing politics'), mentality, discursive style, or political strategy. I

myself now overlook these disagreements and prefer to treat it instead as an ideology
that does not necessarily have to be separated from its fixed discursive and strategic
elements.

For example, if one were to take an all-encompassing view on contemporary populism,
it could possibly be defined as a polymorphous ideology with an anti-elitist ethos that
heavily relies on antagonistic discourse and a set of particularistic strategies to get its
message across to its potential supporters and perennial opponents. Whenever I must
'unpack' this definition I begin by stating that populism is truly of polymorphous
(or 'chameleonic' as Taggart prefers) character. Its recurring ideological themes,
which are generally anti-elitism, 'un-politics' (another term Taggart uses in 2018),
sovereignism, anti-globalism, producerism and reformism, and all those leitmotifs,
can be sporadically adopted by both left-wing and right-wing formations. It must be
recognised, however, that anti-elitism is its primary component, being central to its
ethos. There can never be any successful populist message without the attack on a
parasitic class of elites that does not belong to the heartland of 'the people' (Taggart
2012). Having said that, it must also be considered that it is widely accepted that
there are very many different forms of populism (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013, 3–5).
Political scientists originating from distinct schools of thought have treated populist
phenomena as very disparate from one another, from Le Pen's Front National, through
Grillo's Five Star Movement, all the way to Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Tsipras's
SYRIZA (ibid.).

All populist leaders (regardless of whether they are right or left leaning) use colourful,
direct, and unmediated language that is often more antagonistic than agonistic
towards opponents (Engesser, Ernst, Esser and Büchel 2016). Additionally, they are
also usually brought together and categorised as 'populist' because they are more
consistent than mainstream actors in discursively appropriating the term 'the people'
to reach out to their electorates (Council of Europe 2017). What renders populism
polymorphous, though, is that it does not have a well-defined set of economic and
social values (Taggart 2003, 13). Some populists can be more economically and
socially liberal than others. Berlusconi in Italy and Borisov in Bulgaria are perhaps
liberal-populists but perhaps more socially conservative than those populists found
in the left-leaning Italian Five Star Movement, Greek SYRIZA and Spanish Podemos
(Zankina 2016, 182–199). Alternatively, leaders like Le Pen, Farage and even Trump,
have distinguished themselves for their even more staunchly anti-immigrationist and
anti-globalist territorial sovereignism and are economic reformists who wish to re-
evaluate forms of protectionism (Fratzscher 2020, 1–2). Le Pen, Farage and Trump
are not less populist than Berlusconi, Grillo and Tsipras but they perhaps better fit
under the marker national-populists (Goodwin 2018). The former are different from
the media-savvy techno-populists of the Five Star in Italy, or the environmentalist

and egalitarianist democratic-populists from Podemos and SYRIZA (Bickerton 2018). In truth, after the financial crisis of the last decade the free marketeer and classically liberal populist variation has declined into irrelevance. The new populist tag has been appropriated either voluntarily or involuntarily by anti-immigrationist and protectionist national sentimentalists in Europe (Hedetoft 2020, 1626).

In summary, populism is a truly polymorphous ideology, that in the last two centuries has been both right-wing and left-wing. According to Canovan (1982, 544–552), it has also been both agrarian and political. In the former case, it has presented itself in the shape of anti-political protest movements, some examples would be the Narodniki, Occupy Wall Street, and rural movements of peasants scattered across Eastern Europe (Taggart 2002, 47 and Mudde 2014, 600–629). In the latter case, it has been occasionally adopted by 'insider-outsider politicians' of the recent age, namely the Silvio Berlusconi's, Pim Fortuyn's, Ross Perot's and Donald Trump's. Almost all populist leaders have been criticised for using antagonistic discourse, being hostile to the press, hostile to the independent organs of representative democracy, demonising perennial opponents (especially transnational institutions) and scapegoating certain minorities. They have certainly used people-centric political strategies such as the call to mobilise against a self-serving elitist caste, victimisation, and personalisation through media to get their message across to their potential supporters in a time of crisis. What we learn from demand-side literature on populism, guided by Eatwell (2018) and Goodwin (2018) in their works, is that when distrust for professional politics and the establishment meets socio-economic and socio-cultural deprivation populist movements and parties become a viable option for the lower strands of society (2018, 20–25). Once again, this article does not wish to expand so much on textbook populism and its characteristics or how provocateurs and charismatic leaders have successfully launched their offensive against political and financial elites, but one of the objectives is rather to explain how they have managed to discursively construct the narrative of the heartland. Taggart's heartland is important when studying populism because it is essentially a sub-theme of the already present and prevalent themes. The heartland is principally correlated to the populist attachment to the values of anti-elitism, 'un-politics' (not anti-politics but scepticism towards elitist political professionalism), sovereignism, anti-globalism and producerism. In the next section, it will become clear why.

Making Sense of Heartlands

When Taggart (2012, 1) tells us that the heartland is 'a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of imagination', he is essentially telling us that this is both a pre-ideological and post-ideological component of populism. In most of his work, and certainly in his milestone text from 2002 which he simply named 'Populism', he pushes forward the idea that populist

themes can vary (Taggart 2002, 10–22). Either way, while Taggart (2003, 7,13) is certain that these themes include elements of quasi-religious leaderism, a lack of core values or 'empty heart' (the only element in the author's framework that we do not fully recognise as we acknowledge that heartlands manifest a set of general populist values) and a predisposition for conspiracy, at the same time he really emphasises that the populist rhetoric of 'the people' does not derive from a deep-rooted loyalty to the republican principle of democracy but rather from their attachment to the heartland (Taggart 2002, 95) . Populists really do believe that the heartland is the territory that the 'pure' or 'virtuous' people inhabit (Marquand 2017). Nonetheless, this imaginary heartland needs to be constantly evoked for electoral reasons too because it allows populists to build what Kallis (2018, 296) calls the *panegyric redemption* narrative. Panegyric redemption is part of a political performative act (or *Bordieuan habitus* for the more classic scholars) that allows them to identify their friends and foes because, as already stated, populists have potential supporters and perennial opponents. When they come out openly on the political scene, in the most theatrical but also unmediated way possible, arguing in favour of border restrictions, economic protectionism, redistribution policies, and large-scale tax cuts, it becomes very clear who they are reaching out to and who will support them or not. Undoubtedly, just as the pioneer of the political-strategic approach Kurt Weyland (2017, 55) suggests, populism aims to become a mass political movement, somewhat of a 'catch-all party' which is ironically the definition that Robert O. Paxton (2004) gave to 1920s fascist organisations. This can sometime lead us into erroneous analogies. Significant differences between the fascist and mainly Hitlerian *heimat* ideal and the heartland (more common among non-fascist and sometimes anti-fascist populist organisations such as the League and Five Star Movement) will become evident in the next few paragraphs.

In the heartland there lives a hard-working producerist community of homogenous people who just want to 'get on with their lives', a phrase that the English politician Jacob Rees-Mogg –who is sometimes accused by journalists of being a pin-striped populist – uses often (The Economist 2018). The archetypical populist expects to find himself in a peaceful and protected environment where they do not have to deal with displaced immigrants, the lazy unemployed that sponge off the welfare system, and other social groups that live alternative lifestyles (Taggart 2002, 94). Accordingly, these out-groups could be a threat to the homogeneity and safety-net of the heartland. Studies have shown that the 'silent majority' populist voter feels aversion towards those who he perceives to be different from him and beyond his comprehension, such as 'rowdy' feminists, dangerous beatniks or punks, 'bossy' intellectuals, overprivileged aristocrats, eccentric 'fat cats' and others who they find unpleasant or immoral (ibid). Taggart (2003, 9) explains that populists mobilise only when they feel their own heartland is under threat, usually in times of crisis. They are indeed likely to protest when their quiet and serene heartland – which he compares to the Hobbits' Shire

from J.R.R Tolkien's literature – is put under threat by the out-groups I mentioned above (Taggart 2018). More importantly though, those who represent the real threat are the internationalist elitist cliques which operate in a shadowy manner and conspire against the heartland and its people behind closed doors (ibid). It is mainly for this reason that old-guard populists like Umberto Bossi from the old Northern League spoke against the politics carried out in the 'corridors of power' (Bossi and Vimercati 1992, 187).

Taggart is very clear when he delineates that populists are obsessed by the fact elites are constantly and consistently trying to intoxicate the heartland (Taggart 2003, 16). A heartland which seems to be predominantly composed of ordinary working men and women – artisans, craftsmen, fishermen, peasants, other *petit bourgeoisie* tradesmen, and so on. At the same time, it would not be too far-fetched to say that what makes the heartland different from a utopia is not so much that it draws inspiration from the past (rather than the future) but because it is perceived as something that has already existed and is according to its proponents both credible and desirable (Taggart 2006, 269–288). According to populists like Trump, the endgame is to 'Make America Great Again' meaning that America was once 'great' and can indeed return to being great once the elitist utopic vision involving cosmopolitan and progressive values is scrapped and replaced with a monolithic form of nation-statism (Taggart 2018). The populist heartland can never resemble what Kallis describes as a 'post-modern nation state' (Kallis 2018, 289). Forbye, there are invocations of heartlands on both left and right (Taggart 2018). An example on the right would be when the League's sustainers gather at the Northern Italian town of Pontida to celebrate local folklore, consume local products, and drink pints of beer while chanting against the detached politicians that rule from Roman institutions (Bagnoli and Cerantola 2019). The closest one can get to an example on the left is when the Five Star supporters (the *grillini*) mobilise at the annual *Italia a Cinque Stelle* event and call for an all-Italian egalitarian e-democracy, and political decisions are made in a simpler, quicker, and unmediated fashion (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 118–122). In a potentially left-wing heartland (just like in their rightist counterpart) there is individualism, privacy, liberty, worker flexibility, and above all else the homogeneity that comes with equality. In a truly egalitarian and anti-elitist society – promoted by the Five Star – *'uno vale uno'* as their guru Beppe Grillo claims, and everyone's opinion is worth the same (Movarelli 2016, 213–221).

It should be clear by now that heartlands are more prevalent amongst national-populists to the right of the spectrum. This is especially due to the fact that even though 'left populism is down but not out' –as the writers Giorgos Venizelos (2020) and Yannis Stavrakakis (2020) both point out – the recent rise of populism has actually been mainly a re-territorialisation of politics very popular on the right. This sovereignist

backlash is a direct reaction to cultural and economic globalisation which is seen by populists as a large-scale elite-driven project and therefore anathema to the heartland (Kallis 2018, 287–289). The opposition to the European Union's integration project is a perfect illustration of this attitude (Taggart 2003, 11–12). However, one must consider that the key to understanding heartlands is also in their lack of strict racial boundaries and in their tribal crypto-libertarianism. For evident reasons, inhabitants of this heartland will always be sceptical about politics as a legitimate way of solving internal conflict. For the most utopic populists, of course, there can be no conflict in the heartland, as it is so homogenous, stable, and virtuous that 'common sense' (Rosenfeld 2011) is enough to resolve small quarrels among the people.

Taggart might or might not agree with the following point I shall make – but after extensive reading on the subject – there is still unfortunately too much room for confusion between populist heartlands and fascist *natural homelands.* The Hitlerian concept of *heimat* (homeland) of the *blut und boden* (blood and soil) obviously draws inspiration from the nineteenth-century German *volk*ish romanticist movement (Kaes 1992). While agrarian populism also borrows part of its character from the *volk*ish, given many of them idolise the bucolic nation as much as fascists and diverse pan-Germanic nationalists, we cannot ignore the fact that the *heimat* is actually a forcefully racially purified and homogenous state (rather than land) but also a far too politicised idea to be a populist heartland. After all, the idea of the '3000-year Reich' that developed directly from the Fuhrer's oppressive psychology was meant to link Germans with glorified historical European figures like Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Empire, and Bismarck (Paulus 2017, 2–3). Fascists are elitist and expansionist, while populists are anti-elitist and isolationist (Eatwell 2017, 365–380). Apparently, the populist ethical nationalist slogan is 'taking back control' but not 'let's take control and rule over others'. Hitler's *heimat* and Mussolini's *patria* were ardently and purposely political visions. The occupation of the state carried out by fascist parties and their encroachment on individual freedoms does not fit well with what the generally anti-statist, libertarian, and reformist populists want (Tarchi 2015, Table 2.2). Populists only reinstate hard borders, perform deportations, put up walls, push for militarisation policies, or mobilise in protest, when they feel under threat. This usually occurs in times of crisis such as when external powers have infiltrated the heartland (e.g., EU or World Health Organisation elites), when they perceive immigrants are coming their way, or when they believe that a significant change that does not have popular consensus will negatively affect the heartland (Taggart 2003).

The reactions of Five Star and League leaders Beppe Grillo and Matteo Salvini who gathered crowds to oppose immigration during the refugee crisis are demonstrations of these populist attitudes. However, they only react when their own heartland is under threat and unlike a lot of totalitarians do not try to sympathise with the causes

and fights of others. Neo-fascists want to internationalise racial politics; militias of far-right men from all over the world have not only intellectually but militarily involved themselves with the projects of Milosevic and the Kosovo war, not to mention their operations to support communities like those of the white Boers in South Africa and the Karen people in south-east Asia (Sempione 2018). Neo-communists have instead zealously backed Palestine, Venezuela, and Cuba and are obviously ideologically predisposed towards internationalism given their main aim involves uniting workers worldwide and solidarising with those whom they consider to be oppressed (Hetland 2019). Those behavioural patterns are inconceivable to populists: the heartland cannot exist within a totalitarian nanny-state, and their political causes are temporary at most. A fascist state aims to forge new men and new elites that will find a common destiny for a new nation (Eatwell 2017, 365–380). Populists instead ideally think there is no real necessity for elites in the heartland and commoners know best to apply their *common sense* during times of important decision-making (Tarchi 2015, 76–77). Once the immigration problematics are solved, taxes or welfare are dealt with properly, and the heartland returns to being prosperous and free from corrupters, the leader can retrieve himself (Tarchi 2015). In the next section, we briefly discuss the methodological approach used so far and throughout the entirety of the paper, which will then allow us to look at specific and differing versions of heartland in detail.

Research Design and Methodology

Layna Mosley (2013) confidently exposes the idea that the political world is a reality. In fact, it is a reality that is 'socially made' (ibid.) by several communicate agents with varied political identities. In our case, we know that the League and the Five Star Movement promote their *weltanschauung* through a monologic expression in which the return or an arrival at a *crypto-utopic* (but not entirely utopic) heartland is central. As we have seen, their petite narrative is generally inspired by a mixture of anti-immigrationism, anti-partyism, productivism, justicialist reformism, sovereignism and a version of post-modern personalised popularism (i.e., Five Star direct democracy through 'horizontal' web practices). This populist narrative is in a way a dwelling from which they welcome other (political) guests into the possibility of future dialogue (Arnett 2012, 114). Dialogue can only occur, though, if one is willing to acknowledge their monologic confession by keeping in mind a series of non-negotiable terms that should have become evident from the theoretical exploration in earlier paragraphs:

1. Even if the heartland is a territory of imagination, it is fundamental because it is constructed through the collective consciousness of 'the people'.

2. The heartland is an un-politicised space where a community functions due to its inhabitants' successful use of common sense, which is sufficient to resolve day-to-day problems given it is a place of great homogeneity

(civic, cultural, or ethnic bond).

3. In a heartland 'the people' have a right to their individuality and have the right to be free from the corrupting nature of the political sphere.

4. A heartland is a producerist community of hard-working persons defined by labour and shared sacrifice.

5. The heartland should and will be defended by intruders and outsiders who interfere with its economic, popular, and territorial sovereignty as well as its general well-being.

For a theoretical exploration or framework to be solidly finalised it is essential to tie it to further investigative methods that serve the purpose of moving away from theoretical abstraction and generalisation. An efficient way of doing so, would be to construct a methodology which relies on synthesis between background theory and discursive analysis. The advantage of this or any *qualitative* multi-method process resides in the fact that any classification related to populism or to the distinctive traits of the heartland can further prove its great ability by moving away from its purely theoretical and taxonomic quality. What is needed is a better application that involves the identification of recurring monologue directly relatable to Taggart's conceptualisation within discourse. It is precisely for this reason that discourse analysis provides a greater heuristic qualitative potential and stands out as part of our methodology.

Structurally, the *first* step undertaken in this piece has been treating populism as a kind of ideology and evaluating its narrative ground (heartlands being an important factor if not central component of this narrative ground) through theoretical exploration. The *second* step is using discourse analysis to identify and interpret the 'heartland ideal' within samples of politician conversations, speeches, media, and published party literature (Hodges, Kuper and Reeves 2008, 571–572). Eternally inspiring subjects like Michel Foucault (1926–1984) have used discourse analysis in the past to study madness, keeping in mind that the word 'discourse' goes back to the fourteenth century and derives from the Latin root of *discursus* meaning 'conversation' (ibid., 570 and Drid 2020, 21). Furthermore, in the contemporary era Hormuth (2009, 147–165) insists that discourse analysis enables researchers to reconstruct and describe the actual communicative processes and this is essential if we want to comprehend and acknowledge new social realities that make authentic use of monologue that will be needed to create dialogue which builds much needed bridges amongst communities.

From Hodges, Kuper, and Reeves we learn that 'discourse analysis is about studying and analysing the use of language' (2008, 570). This means that this form of analytical method is not desirable but actually almost compulsory within a wider research design

or intellectual framework that aims to untangle the hidden (or less hidden) meaning of common populist wording such as 'the people', 'the silent majority', 'national sovereignty', 'detached elite', 'homeland', 'territory', 'true democracy', 'community' and others that exist within populist speeches. Regardless of whether they come in the form of monologue or dialogue, it is beneficial for us to investigate what interaction they have among themselves and also their relevance given they hold the important role of keeping vivid the imagery of the heartland which upon psychological construction requires a political, stylistic and monological performance of its own.

In short, the next section will employ *critical discourse analysis*, also known as Foucauldian analysis (ibid., 571) by using samples of written or oral language/texts and dates pertaining to the League and the Five Star Movement as sources of data to identify the 'uses' of those texts in particular social settings where institutions (the two parties) or individuals (parliamentary representatives from the parties) have produced this language or texts (Ibid). It will allow a macroanalysis of how discourses (in all their forms) construct what is possible for individuals and institutions to think and then say as confirmed by Hodges and colleagues (ibid.).

League and Five Star: A Heartland of the Past and a Utopia for the Future?

The League and the Five Star Movement at first sight give the impression of being very different to each other. However, they share more than meets the eye (Panebianco 2020, 1). Their scepticism towards independent bodies and transnational institutions led by techno-managerial elites is mostly what brings them together and has allowed them to form for a brief period a very flexible and very populist coalition that oscillated between national conservatism and welfare chauvinism (ibid). Their anti-systemic origins have, of course, been lost through processes of institutionalisation that have taken many years, especially in the former case, but still moderately influenced their behaviour during their governmental phase and ultimately resulted in a generalised form of anti-elitism. On occasion this has led them to re-politicise systems that have been previously de-politicised by neoliberal elite-actors while at the same time paradoxically calling for more individual freedoms and economic liberties through flat taxation (Galbo 2020, 51–63). What has been consistent throughout their legislative era together, however, has been their absolute dedication to the re-territorialisation of politics (Agnew 2019, 1). On many occasions, Salvini (30 July, 2020 and la Repubblica, 24 February, 2018) has told his multitude of admirers that 'the defence of the homeland is a duty' and that he will be 'loyal to his people'. Similarly, back in 2007, Grillo wrote in his blog that 'once borders were sacred, but recently politicians have desecrated them' (www.beppegrillo.it, 7 October, 2007). Both are examples of this new form of re-territorialisation. While the League's heartland was epitomised by a British documentary (Channel 4, 'Face to face with Matteo Salvini, Italy's far-right

Deputy PM', 2018), in which the interviewer spoke to medium ranking members of the party (and Salvini himself) during the Pontida celebrations, that showed how many Italians are still keen to protect their local towns from immigrants, the EU and central government encroachments – applying the heartland concept to a bubbly movement like the Five Star one – are definitely more complicated.

Starting from the League, one must note that the old charismatic strongman Umberto Bossi, whom Salvini later replaced, made a very provocative statement and theatrical manoeuvre in 1996, when during a Pontida rally he called for the secession of the northern Padania region from the rest of Italy. At the time of that infamous speech the theme of the heartland was already noticeable in the discursive patterns of high-ranking members of the party. Bossi's televised secessionist statement in the late 90s cannot but be understood as a form of monologue because it rallied a minoritarian segment of highly perceptive *northerners* behind an exclusivist sentiment. While Adam Ferguson in his old essays spoke of 'rude clans' and 'rude nations' as territorially isolationist peoples with an attachment to their local soil juxtaposing them to the supposedly more civilised, commercialist, and cosmopolitan world order, he thought of the division that existed within Scottish highlanders and the rest. This idea of his is, after all, not so distant from the militant wing of Bossi's early Northern League. With anti-southern, anti-immigrant, anti-establishment, anti-statist monologic exchanges, they managed to first construct and then reflect a narrative that at least to them represented a political reality. They were defending their own localist way of life and their community in what they saw as a heartland under threat of foreign influence. At Pontida, in front of his crowd of supporters, Bossi clearly stated a centralised and bureaucratic colonial regime in Italy was *oppressing* Northern Italian locals with its economic and political authoritarianism (Bossi 1996). Once again, Taggart's idea that the people of the heartland are being *infiltrated*, *oppressed* or *threatened* by an outsider or even 'alien' force recurs (Taggart 2002, 73–98). In more recent times, the monologic discourse of League politicians is filled with explicit or implicit references to heartlands. One illustration would be Salvini's constant reflection that immigrants are 'bringing war to our homes' ('*la Guerra ce la portano a casa*') (Stefano Venturi on Facebook Watch 2020). Another would be Maroni's speeches such as, 'Rome is the home of politics conducted in corridors, in the drawing rooms of the elite: it is the hushed politics of hidden plots. Pontida is the exact opposite: it is the revenge of ordinary people' (McDonnell 2006, 128).

The League's main priority as a territorially localist, regionalist, federalist, and sovereignist party has been protecting the groups of petit bourgeois and entrepreneurs that make up the base of its electorate. These groups, supposedly unlike immigrants and fat cats, are very much part of the heartland according to League politicians like Matteo Salvini, Roberto Maroni, Daniele Belotti, and Maurizio Borghezio. The

message is clear: evil nests in the corridors of power, not in the heartland. In such uses of 'monologic confession' (rather than 'dialogic confession') communicative engagement is situated within an environmental, historical and social narrative (Arnett 2014, 75). This allows us to see things for what they are; when dealing with monologue originating from the League or Five Star Movement, scholars have to keep in mind that those two political formations have been shaped by the environment and time they have experienced: post-crisis Italy. Italian politics has been extremely volatile for the last twenty to thirty years, as low growth, high unemployment, and general economic stagnation sparked by the last recession of 2008 and consistent corruption scandals from the 1992 'Bribesville' (*Tangentopoli*) have directly played in favour of anti-system and anti-establishment forces coming forward and they understandably call for change through monologic demands (Verbeek, Zaslove and Rooduijn, 197–222). Urbinati, unlike the author of this piece, is cautious in labelling the Five Star Movement as 'populist' (for a number of reasons we shall not delve into here) and prefers to associate Casaleggio's and Grillo's strange political creature to *'gentismo'* – a word that translated to Italian comes closer to 'popularism' than to populism. He also reminds us about the need to understand the monological anti-establishment argumentation of these phenomena by considering the centrality of their environmental, historical, and social narratives (2015, 1 and 2018, 1–3). Urbinati postulates that Italy is 'an interesting crucible of an epochal change in representative democracy, a party system that has reached the line separating it from factional politics and populism' (2018, 2). One cannot but agree with Urbinati once recognising that post-Crisis Italy is the only context in which the Five Star Movement or Salvini's *new* nationalist League can be situated.

With the League's rise right after the Bribesville scandal and the Five Star grandiose electoral showing during the recession in post-Berlusconi Italy, monologue has not yet 'clenched truth in its fist', as Arnett notices (2014, 88), but instead housed the sentiment of many people and forged a new political identity that demands attention from others. The civil, and civic, positive form of dialogue that not just Arnett but many others have called for cannot occur without 'a respectful honouring of what matters to another' (ibid.). For instance, protesting political professionalism matters because through the lens of their ideology, the mainstream political establishment is always seen as corrupt. Anti-establishment ideology is really the backbone of populism (Urbinati 2018). In the heartland, values such as those of being virtuous and honest are understood as values that only exist among ordinary people (Tarchi 2015, 76–77). Salvini often makes claims that *honesty* is a value which has been long forgotten, and only a party with an army of ordinary working men and women can bring back honest politics to the Italian sphere. This is done especially by getting rid of the *corruttori*, the corrupt self-serving elites that have infiltrated and intoxicated Italian politics and subsequently the heartland itself (Palermo Today, 14 July 2020).

Those allegations can be very vague, however, and it is not always evident who the corrupters specifically are. After all, Salvini did refer to a restoration of what he likes to call the 'politics of the heart', which sounds like a quasi-religious purification and moralisation of politics which perhaps finds its roots in a distant Germanic ideal of a producerist work ethic. His peculiar politics are manifested as he shouts to a Milanese crowd after winning elections:

> From today onwards there will begin a process of ten years of construction, of beauty, of labour and honesty that I will bring from my *heart*, in the name of autonomy, of federalism, of the scents of the beauties reflected by the 8.000 towns that compose this country. Before doing so at an institutional level I shall do it here with you, I will do so pouring my *heart* out in front of you. (Salvini, 24 February 2018)

In a few phrases, Salvini has essentially exalted what a typical populist considers to be all the moral values of *the virtuous people* belonging to the heartland. Perhaps, what he was trying to do overall was to give a whole new aesthetic meaning to the ideology of populism which, unlike fascism, has so far never been looked at as an 'aesthetic experience' (Robert O. Paxton 2005).

In similar fashion to the League, the Five Star Movement envisions a fairer and more honest and labour-driven Italian society composed of civically engaged and duty-bound ordinary citizens (Tintori 2018, 552–554). Hence, they share many political opponents (or *perennial opponents*) with their former coalition partners. Deceitful bankers, arrogant academics, and badly behaved immigrants are not welcome in the heartland of the Italian neo-populists, regardless of whether their host ideology belongs to the left or right of the spectrum. Although in a recent piece on populist foreign policy the Italian academics Fabrizio Coticchia (2020) and Valerio Vignoli (2020) describe the Five Star Movement as being inherently pacifist (possibly given their reluctance towards cooperating with NATO, their criticism of the arms industry and overall American interventionism in the Middle East), this is only partially true. The *grillinis* (a nickname for Five Star members) hold a very Manichean outlook on the world, which is typically populist not only because Cas Mudde (2004, 541–563) suggests so but clearly because of their discursive antagonism towards mainstream politics and their policymaking between 2013–2018. In fact, much of their state-level dialogue with the League was made possible by their agreements over tough immigration measures and staunch defence of the *Ius Sanguinis* (Italian citizenship by blood). When in power, the Five Star Movement has also demonstrated that they can be a ruthless force determined to push an at least partially nationalist/sovereignist agenda (Tarchi 2014, 31–49). This does not mean that the Five Star Movement (or even the League) is a radical anti-systemic force that promotes aggressive nationalist expansionism or anything like that but defining the party as pacifist makes it appear as

a feeble and moderate centrist party, which it probably is not now and most certainly has not been in the past.

The main difference between the discursive and monologic conceptualisation of the League's and Five Star Movement's heartland is that the latter welcomes the coming of a future digitalised society and this appears to be far more utopic than Taggart's heartland allows (Taggart 2018). The Five Star Movement's vision – inspired by the what is known in academic circles as the mid-90s *Californian ideology* of Silicon Valley's Andy Cameron and Richard Barbrook – appears closer to a 'utopia of the future' rather than a 'heartland of the past' (Tintori 2018, 559). It is a given that heartlands are considered accessible and desirable by populists because they represent a society which has already existed. The heartland is perhaps now only a territory of imagination because nation-statism has been defeated by globalisation, but this is not good reason to give up re-constructing the heartland, starting with discourse and performative acts as we have seen with Bossi's declaration of independence in 1996 and Salvini's ode to the beauty of Italian towns in 2018.

As utopic as the Five Star Movement's ideal sounds, it is not so distant from an actual heartland. If we consider that in a heartland ordinary people are naturally inclined to get on with their lives and to work in peace without being bothered by an overly bureaucratic nanny-state and by 'those who do not belong' – who accordingly engage in anti-social behaviour – we can easily relate this to the digital utopia which originated from the Five Star's founders and funders Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio (Musso and Maccaferri 2018, 98–120). The Five Star Movement's request for referendums and elections to be carried out online (also known as *direct e-democracy*), and promotion of s*martworking* is representative of the techno-populist model outlined before by Chris Bickerton (2018). It shares the traits of libertarianism, anti-conformism, and some free-market values that can also sometimes be found on the populist right. Not coincidentally, the League supports direct democracy, relatively free markets (with the occasional protectionist policy that might limit free trade from competitive Asian markets), free speech and generalised ideas of individual liberty as much as the Five Star Movement, with the only distinction that the latter believes this should all be happening online in the near future (Moschella and Rhodes 2020, 1–14). For left-wing populists in Italy, and even in Spain perhaps (e.g., Podemos), the internet might be more of a positive than negative tool in tackling authoritarian state bureaucracy, xenophobia, and capitalist monopolies given 'the people' will be finally able to choose for themselves what to buy and not to buy and whose ideas to follow and not to follow as online everyone's opinion is worth the same (Musso and Maccaferri 2019, 98–120). While pragmatically it is likely that the negative aspects of web democracy trump the positive ones, mainly for transparency reasons, it makes perfect sense for a strange creature like the Five Star Movement, which mixes so

many ideologies together (e.g., libertarianism, environmentalism, sovereignism and socialism), to envision its own peculiar heartland. Its own heartland is therefore a place of the future, a territory of imagination that is at the same time non-territorial because it ideally all takes place online. Nonetheless, Five Star voting patterns in parliament have somewhat conflicted with the key tenets of leftist emancipatory ideologies. Grillo's group has often voted in favour of limiting immigration and defending Salvini's security decrees that involved strict border control, and all those actions are certainly not in line with the politics of the progressive left that many of their supporters online claim to support.

At least in theory, egalitarianism and anti-globalised capitalism are central to the Five Star Movement's heartland or utopia, however one prefers to view it (Tintori 2018, 152–159). Also, with Roberto Biorcio or Nadia Urbinati, one could say that 'anti-partyism', also plays an important part in giving the movement its identity, and for years the Five Star managed to bring ordinary people that did not previously have party affiliations into the Italian parliament (Biorcio 2014, 37–53 and Urbinati 2015). The overwhelming majority of them have never been career politicians; they had ordinary jobs (like the ones found in the heartland) before joining the movement and winning their mandate in 2013 for the first time (ibid). The grillinis have brought to their movement people as different to each other as construction workers, teachers, musicians, fishermen, accountants, and the unemployed. This is typical of a protest, anti-systemic and anti-partyist organisation. This all leads us back to the digital web: it was thanks to these new forms of social media, their blog, and their online party operator *Rousseau* that Grillo's invention took off, bringing together people from very different backgrounds and giving the opportunity to women and ethnic minorities to be more represented (Deseriis 2017, 47–67). As Marta Musso and Marzia Maccaferri (2018, 99) point out, 'the M5S (Five Star Movement) built its image of not being a party precisely *because* it operates on the web rather than through offices, congresses, and the other standard tools of Italian parties.' Still, it would be daring and far-fetched to assume that the Five Star Movement's own heartland is only online. Nonetheless, it would be hard to completely cast aside this possibility.

In kindred fashion to the League's, the Five Star Movement's more utopic heartland is clearly constructed through discourse. Grillo's fondness of equality and appeals to the 'virtuous people' are evident when he suggested that he wants a mother with one salary and four children to be mayor of a city (Tarchi 2014, 41). The former comedian maintains that ordinary men and women from the heartland would be able to administer a city and that it would be desirable to have a president who was once a manual labourer, or possibly a teacher, or even an electrician (ibid). In addition, he has said that he is guarantor of the Movement and he will always be in charge of 'checking who comes in' (and perhaps who goes out too given he has suspended several of his

own) and this can be interpreted as the populist wanting to avoid having those alien to the movement and to the heartland *infiltrate* and corrupt this safe, virtuous and pure space (Italian Chamber of Deputies Channel on YouTube, 2014). What Grillo's movement truly wants is to differentiate themselves from the other Italian mass parties and to distance themselves from the external pressures of the European Union, which their MP Daniele Pesco (June 2015) identifies as a great threat to the heartland because it is 'strictly tied to finance, banks, big powers, to this absolute technocracy' (Gianfreda and Carlotti 2018).

The obsession with maintaining their movements and parties clean from corruption is another recurring theme for populists. This is probably because by their own standards populists view themselves as a moral force for good in the world. They are convinced that they are the 'real democrats', not their opponents (Jan-Werner Müller 2017). This is an example of the Manicheanism intertwined with a quasi-religious self-defining feature of which Taggart (2018) has spoken. Akin to Ferguson's (1767) 'rude clans' (but in a different century and hence a completely different historical context), the Italian populists will go to war to protect their pure heartland against foreign powers that pressure them with occult private interests if they must. Taggart was also not wrong when he identified the fact that a lot of populists see politics as an ultimate necessary *war* to be fought before returning to the peace (Taggart 2018).

The statements from Grillo and Gianluigi Paragone MP below serve as my final examples of the points I have made above:

> The challenge of the future is between sovereignty and negative internationalism, which is eroding most of the social rights and social achievements obtained at the national level during the past years...In this great battle between sovereignty and negative internationalism, the traditional 'left' has betrayed its own historical electoral basis and thus it is necessary that other actors, post-ideological, put on the helmet and step down into the trench (Grillo, 14 June 2014).[1]

> ...And therefore, from warlike rhetoric we have turned to mild language, that warlike rhetoric we used against the financial establishment, the fiscal compact, the great international deals decided upon by lobbyists, and against that European Stability Mechanism which now with your mild language (of acceptance) you will allow Italy to be captive of, given Europe has already intellectually corrupted all of you with its deceptions (Paragone, 10 September 2019).

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1   The statement made by Beppe Grillo (2014) was also reported in a piece by Arthur Borriello and Nathalie Brack. (See 2019, 842 for further reference.) The full source is also readily available in the Works Cited section of this paper.

On Populism as Monologue: To Engage or not in Dialogue?

A monologue is usually defined as a speech given by a single entity in a narrative (www.
literaryterms.net). As a rhetorical device traditionally used in theatre it is commonly
used to speak *at* people rather than *with* people (ibid.). Contemporary populists
embody this monologic tendency. However, this top-down leadership style is often
combined with petite narratives (and other themes which we have briefly touched
upon earlier) such as a possible return to a homogenous community of origin, a
heartland. This call for a return to a closed community and secure territory appears
as a reasonable offer and it is especially successful with disenchanted voters in times
of economic hardship and widespread social and cultural malaise. However, experts
like Cas Mudde (2019) have for a long time tried to argue that populist success is not
only determined by financial crisis but also by the fact that parties with such anti-
establishment ideological proclivities are perceived as the only ones still speaking up
for certain sectors of the population (Mudde, YouTube, 2019). Populist electorates,
like far-right ones, are mainly *male* and *white* and European communities that are still
politically motivated by an attachment to small government, local roots, nationhood,
ethnic and cultural identity, some of which still have a bucolic and paleo-conservative
understanding of the cycle of life (ibid.). In one way or the other, as we have seen
in the paragraphs above, the heartland reflects most, if not all, these traditional
values. Potentially, even if some populists speak *at* 'the people' rather than *with* them
(especially characters like Beppe Grillo, who still determines most of the agenda-
setting for his sustainers on Rousseau) and frame their political agenda monologically,
recent global events clearly have shown that there *is* a demand for populist politics
(Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Populism is a reality, a reality that is first national then
local. Undoubtedly, one must learn to acknowledge the local (that local that carries
the meaning of a nostalgic imaginary of a heartland through the self-perception of a
compact rural community) even if such acknowledgement, as Arnett states (2014,
73), does not necessarily mean approval.

Therefore, before concluding, I think it is useful to share with the reader a few
thoughts on how not only scholars but also politicians, public intellectuals, pundits,
and policymakers in general could deal with confrontational populism and use
what R.C. Arnett (2009), J.C. Fritz (2009) and L.M. Bell (2009) define as 'dialogic
theory' (Holba 2009, 546) or even *communication ethics literacy* to start to engage
only with mature forms of populism that are more likely to be democratic rather than

competitively authoritarian.[2] Arnett and colleagues suggest that in an 'era of difference' monologue needs to start to be viewed as something that can potentially be positive because when there is an invitation to communication or a *dialogic starting place* (which there can certainly be in monologue) this opens up the possibility for dialogic exchange (ibid.). Still, as populism is most certainly not a passing phase in the Western (and not only Western) political sphere, it is important that anyone civically oriented and with a keen interest in improving cultural and social relations understands that one must have a 'thick skin' and remain somewhat stoic and pragmatic when debating populists. One way to do so is to consider Martin Buber's (1878–1965) advice and to reconcile monologue with dialogue, insisting that it is *more* ethical to recognise difference through 'communication ethics praxis' and invite someone with a different view to communicate openly (ibid., 546). This helps to create an environment of openness, understanding, and change rather than a hegemonic power structure that does not benefit anyone in the long term (ibid.).

One can perhaps reconsider some of the classic literature on dialogue by Arnett and colleagues (2009) in order to relate to their theory of a 'pragmatic lens'. Since the authors acknowledge that there is 'no *one* way to the ethnical engagement of the other', being pragmatic is key, and this also comes with recognising that populist politics might have some valid arguments (ibid.). Strictly pragmatically speaking, those who identify as 'populist' and say they speak in the name of 'the people' are not merely alluring to citizens tormented by irrational fears but are often also addressing relevant issues that have been shown to be relevant to the majority of voters belonging the proletariat and middle classes scattered across the globe (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 25). One must keep in mind that in an era where economic and cultural globalisation has shown its weaker sides, and where nation-statism, re-territorialisation politics, and the overall re-articulation of heartlands appears to be a future possibility, we absolutely cannot afford to ignore or censor populism (Kallis 2018, 286). It would be deeply damaging to the social fabric of democracy to delegitimise opinions that are becoming more and more popular by the day. Giving a fair hearing to populists and attempting to build bridges of dialogue is a necessity if we want to strengthen Western, secular, liberal democracies.

Other commentators, such as the expert Jan Werner Müller (2017) have already hinted that there are ways in which moderates from all over the spectrum (irrespective of whether they reside on the conservative right or liberal left) can engage in constructive dialogue with populists. This is obviously nothing but healthy for democracy. While

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2   'Competitive Authoritarianism' is a concept enabled by Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser in their recent work *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* published by *Oxford University Press* in 2017, where they discuss populism's relationship with democratisation processes.

I certainly agree with Müller that deliberately choosing to ignore and not debate
with populists is almost as bad as censoring their rights of speech, I would also add
that challenging them when they claim that they and only they represent 'the will of
the people' (or *volonte general*) is a good step forward but is not enough (ibid.). Of
course, populists are not the only 'real democrats' (as they often claim) and they do
not hold a monopoly in popular representation given there is hardly even a suitable
and homogenous idea of 'the people' as analysts like Robert A. Dahl (1982) and
others have countlessly demonstrated. It is important to let populists know that if
they want to participate in the game of democracy they need to play by the rules and
their political message needs to prove to be 'mature'. We can only debate, negotiate
and recognise as part of the political game those mature populist forces that do not
hold that that they are the only ones that represent 'the people'. Unfortunately, as
Arnett again asserts, 'dialogue is not possible with everyone' (2012, 118). In politics,
actors which claim that after winning a referendum or an election they are entitled to
'full powers' (without checks and balances), those that hold a monopoly on violence,
and those who use their media popularity to claim that democratic systems are rigged
(without presenting obvious proof) cannot be included in any state-building or
community-building activity and dialogue.

Making sure that while invoking majoritarianism, populists also abide by
constitutionalism and do not ignore the rights of the individual that have been won
over decades of liberalism is essential (Galston 2018, 5–19). Evidently, while electoral
decisions shaped by popular majorities – such as referendums that take place to leave
trading blocs like the EU – should be respected and not demonised, populists should
be reminded regularly that it is irresponsible to argue that when they come to power
democratically, they should rule without intermediate institutions. Superficial anti-
elitist and anti-systemic outcries are unrealistic and can be unnerving to the seriously
politically engaged person. A society without elites has never existed and populist
parties themselves are often a demonstration of this because charismatic populists of
the past like Umberto Bossi have been elected by their own party members as Federal
Presidents 'for life' (Saita 2019). Correspondingly, the many Beppe Grillos, Jean
Marie Le Pens, and Salvinis out there have been unquestionably elitist protagonists
within their own circles and parties, with major decisions regarding the direction of
the organisations not being able to be enacted without their approval. We should also
explain to populists that the real issue is not so much the fact that elitism is widespread
within political professionalism but more the fact that elites will every now and again
attempt to rule without checks themselves. Throughout history, elites have been
known to be loyal to private interests and have a proclivity to push forward sectarian
agendas in the most non-transparent way. That is not acceptable, and for this reason a
lot of what populists say resonates with the lower strands of society.

In defence of some of the more reasonable populist demands, I should stress that it is actually legitimate to complain that in the last twenty to thirty years decisions concerning security, immigration, welfare, and economic reform have been introduced with limited popular involvement or consensus (Spannaus 2019, 7). National parliaments have devolved a significant amount of their power to transnational institutions and this has frustrated the many not the few (ibid.). Institutions like the European Union are often overly hierarchical, opaque, and slow due to their own bureaucracy. A democratic deficit that involves a Council and a Commission which is largely unelected needs to be discussed with seriousness before adopting drastic measures. A sensible thing to do, perhaps, would be to consider the possibility of reforming those structures from within, rather than leaving the bloc entirely without a thorough investigation into the matter. However, most populists seem to prefer the second option. I would go so far as to say that the detached elitism we are witnessing globally should be something that not only populists should be worried about but should concern anyone from a liberal background and with a democratic mindset. Once you have unelected bodies which make important decisions at a supranational level and have overrepresentation from characters like Guntus Oetthinger, who openly stated that 'markets should teach Italians to vote the right way', it really becomes a problem (Anderson 2018). These sorts of statements made by individuals who are not politicians but technical administrators are not healthy for democracy and actually play into the hands of actual authoritarians who are averse to any cultural and economic vision of Europe, like Putin, Xi Jinping and others who lurk outside the Union.

Populism and people-centric politics need to mature rather than disappear. Being worried about mass immigration, and about the fact that in times of crisis member states act independently without respecting treaties and failing to communicate over redistribution policies and failing to use authoritative action to deal with human trafficking on the coasts of Africa is a legitimate concern. Believing that a population shares a cultural identity in a given territory (a homeland or a heartland) and being proud of one's history can be positive if the state in question does not pursue a domestic policy that is ardently exclusionary and a foreign one that is aggressive and expansionist. Unfortunately, because of the discursive style populists use and how they phrase their concerns, they often come across as aggressive, simplistic, and antagonistic (rather than agonistic). Their language can be disappointing for centrists and moderates who also want to find a solution to the many problems without having to engage with the theatrical pressures of post-modern democracy.

Moreover, the populist obsession with anti-globalism sometimes results in them advocating for full-blown isolationism, random closures, and unnecessary militarism, and those are all ideas with which one must be very cautious in embarking upon in

a modern and dynamic society. Thankfully, most do not want illiberal tendencies to pave the path for xenophobia and the return of one-man dictatorships in the Western hemisphere. Populists also should be more precise in their speech, be more confident in outlining the differences between illegal mass migration, which does not benefit anyone, and controlled legal immigration which benefits essentially everyone. Dialogue can begin between liberal democrats and populists by placing emphasis on the things that they have in common. For instance, a good place to start with a dialogic possibility would be by encouraging participation and by giving each other communicative ground on the fact that, in a democracy, sovereign popular majorities elect their representatives (something almost everyone agrees on), who in turn have the responsibility of representing their electors by carrying out politics in the most transparent way possible.

A sign of political maturity usually occurs when populist forces stop demonising their opponents and calling them out as illegitimate *a priori*. Furthermore, when populists consider coalitions with mainstream formations in order to put their nation's interest first and work with their rivals to pass bills in parliaments on a case by case (or 'policy by policy') basis this is undoubtedly positive. This has occurred on several occasions in countries like Austria, Britain, and Italy where populists have shown that they are able to use their heads and not only their hearts. After all, the heartland is likely to remain a territory of imagination. I have pointed all of this out not with the intention of arrogantly finding a solution to the complicated problems we face as a society but as a starting point for *dialogue*. As historical events have shown in the past – such as when Obama's tenacity allowed the USA to strike a nuclear deal with Iran to delay military confrontation or Trump's hazardous but surprisingly helpful decision to meet with Kim Jung Un for peace talks – dialogue is almost always possible and is almost always a force for good. Thus, even if in populist monologue, we might find an element of 'provincial primitivism', that does not mean we have to demonise it. Moreover, *civic dialogue* (a concept Arnett utilises with great care) exists with the purpose of comprehending the fundamentality of monologic conviction. Without bringing each other's monologic conviction into the picture it becomes virtually impossible to seek to learn from one another and when this occurs, we can ultimately forget about dialogue all together.

Conclusion

Throughout this article I have shown through both theoretical exploration and discourse analysis that one of Paul Taggart's most interesting and relevant aspects of cultural (or ideological) populism, the *heartland*, can be still used today to distinguish various forms of right and left populisms and can be applied to two in-vogue Italian parties. I have also discussed the relationship that exists between monologue, dialogue and contemporary forms of populism, with the hope of fuelling more rigorous debate

in the future. It is likely, that the only way forward in the study of heartlands is to scrutinise discursive elements belonging to not only populist leaders but populist politicians in general. Those types of politicians will always at some point invoke their preferred version and vision of heartland and they are likely to do that by making use of long monologue. For the League, which is now an essentially national conservative party, we have seen how the heartland is a peaceful rural community where a blurred and unspecified homogeneity is a primary aspect along with the key tenet of freedom. For right-wing populists, freedom is being free from the sphere of influence of the decadent multicultural/metropolitan lifestyle, which they say is today embodied by financial institutions and transnational political bodies. For populists of the left, the critique of multiculturalism and the urban lifestyle is less obvious when present. Rather, I have shown that the heartland concept is more difficult (although not impossible) to apply to the Five Star Movement that envisions a utopia where every political decision-making dynamic takes place on the web. Regardless of whether one chooses to identify this digitalised abstraction as a utopia or heartland (or a somewhat paradoxical return to the future that resembles both), it is important to understand that in the left-wing populist imaginary, homogeneity and liberty are equally important. To them, territorial nation-statism remains a secondary element, and their denouncements of the immigration business, EU, and corporate world originate from a socio-economic standpoint rather than a socio-cultural one. All the agents that Grillo denounces are denounced because they are seen as obstacles to his promised land of e-democracy. In conclusion, and for future reference to those who choose to embark on a similar journey and study populist heartlands I staunchly recommend ethnographic research in which scholars interact personally through direct contact with 'the heartlands' and their inhabitants. Whether field work should take place in the Padanian Plateau of Northern Italy, the rust belt in the United States, or the valleys of the Basque region is entirely up to the political scientist.

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In this special issue, The Journal of Dialogue Studies addresses dialogue through the lens of the challenges and opportunities brought about by the current age of new technologies, populism and new dialogue spaces under the title of **"Rethinking Dialogue in the Age of New Challenges and Opportunities"**.

The world has always been in an orbit of change, generating new meanings in a perpetual cycle. Our current time and age have seen various changes, and the regeneration of meaning is perhaps the biggest challenge of ours and future generations. As a result of the phase of change and the gaps caused by these "new spaces" (in which 'meaning' itself has been in constant transformation) are also created that allow and require new types of dialogue. The erosion of open and meaningful dialogue is also evident even in non-conflict settings. Concepts like multiculturalism, diversity and even democracy have not only been consumed but also loaded with negative connotations within the 'gaps.'

Nonetheless, we are also in an age of opportunities for rethinking and expanding dialogue. The emergence/creation of new 'spaces' allows us to generate and exchange meaning to begin to close the gaps, and this has become faster and easier than ever before. New tools for conversation and dialogue have emerged from the explosion of new technologies, creating spaces for discussion and debate.

Contributors to the special issue were invited to take the opportunity of this created space for discussion and debate and consider questions such as the following: How can dialogue be utilised to deflate tensions in non-conflict situations? What are the fresh challenges brought about by the current pandemic, Covid-19, which has driven people to online platforms? What are the challenges of doing dialogue in new spaces, e.g., on online/virtual platforms communication channels?

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