Disrupting the hierarchy of knowledge production: the case of documenting social theatre in Palestine

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ABSTRACT

The field of social theatre is founded in community-engaged creative processes. It is inherently political, embedded in its geopolitical and social environment. Yet existing methods of documentation – the distribution and gathering of data and its output - do not always reflect this tradition. Methods related to documentation raise various concerns around consistent ways to gain and share knowledge if the meanings that we cultivate are not approached as an active, non-hierarchised exchange with and among communities, activists and practitioners we serve. In general form, these concerns are: a) What are the implications of needing to document social theatre; and b) What becomes of this knowledge? These two questions are demonstrated within the case of documentation in the occupied Palestinian territories. In a region containing the most documented and recorded conflict in the world (Debray 2007), academic research serves arguably to impose structure on a given phenomenon. Yet ‘imposing’ structure – or what one considers as such – raises additional concerns of perpetuating dynamics of colonial occupation amidst a population that is increasingly denied self-representation. Using this example, I argue that the future of our field risks data fossilising if it does not retain creative flexibility in crossing disciplines, in protecting grassroots and practice-based forms of knowledge cultivation, and in taking risks in permitting inquiries to test our scholarly expertise. This piece argues for an epistemological shift in our knowledge production – both its collection and distribution.

INTRODUCTION

“A book about ‘us’ is an indirect acknowledgement that we are no more … Things cease to exist the minute we become aware of the need to document them.”

Palestinian writer Suad Amiry on her book Menopausal Palestine (2013, 60)

Saud Amiry’s words have led me to question the role of academic documentation, and my responsibilities as a researcher engaged in theatre for social change. Working on a geopolitical context that represents the ‘most documented’ (Debray 2007) conflict in
the world, I have been wading through piles of documentation on Palestinian cultural analyses and youth work. This has brought me to wonder whether academic documentation is a form of perpetuating knowledge; whether it marks the beginning of an end to a phenomenon or event, that we are trying to understand; and how it contributes to already existing forms of knowledge, that are not necessarily legitimized within scholarly literature.

I am a theatre practitioner who has returned to academia after working in the field of social theatre – an umbrella term that identifies theatre practice done primarily among communities of non-professional actors, in sites that are not conventionally associated with theatre (in my case, for instance, these include refugee camps, community centres, streets and prisons).\(^1\) I had often felt that, as a practitioner, I couldn’t easily formulate or find answers to challenges that I was faced with. These ranged from technical concerns with facilitation, to ethical dilemmas when trying to satisfy the needs of both organization and participants, to overall political challenges as an activist, community member and practitioner. Today as an academic, I suddenly see that a lot of my concerns from the field had already been raised, and many have, in part, been answered too – and yet such segments of knowledge, contributing to my better understanding of this field, have only become accessible to me now that I’ve entered the world of academic journals, conferences, professional forums and academic ‘language’.

If we, professionals of socially engaged theatre practice, are to agree that the origins of social theatre are founded in community engagement and grassroots organising, then it follows that our field is inherently political, embedded in its geopolitical and social environment. However, our methods of documentation – of gathering data and disseminating its analysis – do not necessarily reflect this tradition. In other words, we can question how theatre practice engages with society – its ambiguities, fluctuations and paradoxes – if the knowledge that we cultivate is not approached as an active, non-hierarchised exchange with and among the communities, activists and practitioners we work with. Recognising all forms of meaning-making processes in social theatre surely serves to both build meaning, and interrupt previously determined constructs. The question here is whether academic knowledge is an accurate reflection of the complexities of social interactions that our work stems from; and whether it is sufficient to meet the needs of such interactions. Can knowledge cultivation remain fluid in its process or, as writer Suad Amiry implies, does the task of remembering and preserving knowledge imply a stiffened and petrified end to an event, phenomenon or people?

The research I am conducting in the Palestinian territories serves as an example to demonstrate and further explore the question of hierarchy in knowledge cultivation and its dissemination. In the beginning of my study, I quickly became aware of apparent discrepancies: documentation on Palestine was vast, but predominantly written by researchers from the global North. Documentation on youth initiatives existed, but few contained direct references to young people’s own words and interpretations of the study. I am proposing a case study on the Palestinian territories, in order to trace and highlight imbalanced participation that is occurring in the knowledge that is produced from its lands. The intention is to demonstrate what can happen in the process of documentation – what may be left behind, dismissed and marginalised, in an effort to focalise academic knowledge. Research about Palestinian, socially engaged youth theatre initiatives serves to better our academic understanding of its nature and challenges on the
ground, and arguably contributes to larger conversations regarding Palestinian socio-cultural preservation. But outside these academic conversations, how could the research be dedicated to building knowledge with and for the communities involved directly in the study? Although the intention may be there, there are far more mechanisms of knowledge hierarchy in place that would require critical dismantling before such an objective could be seriously considered.

**What does it mean to document?**

**What it is**

Academic documentation in social theatre is best defined by its three distinguishable challenges:

1. The challenge of documenting lived experience, and the complexities of preserving and studying an ephemeral artform.
2. The challenge of documenting something that does not have a linear narrative: how does one organise, classify and catalogue something that inherently stems from dynamic community-based work, that is engrained in everyday relations, and is tangled in power dynamics situated within shifting geopolitical contexts?
3. The challenge of documenting for the purpose of both preserving the artform, and of supporting the disruptive nature of our discipline. In other words, the challenge here refers to the ability of social theatre to push the boundaries of the cultural *status quo* and institutional models of neoliberal practice. This third, defining feature is becoming more pertinent – see, for instance, the continual funding difficulties in the UK (see the Arts Council recent EU Exit Guide for 2020). As scholar Thomas Docherty (2019) put it, universities are at an age of regulated ‘quietism’ with a tendency to censure instead of encourage critical thinking – we’ve become the silent crowd who ignores the boy pointing out the naked emperor. Documentation is therefore a process that exists in tension between preservation and progression, the need to contain, but also to disrupt.

Documentation continues to develop as a methodological framing device, through the various ways these challenges have been answered.² What I am interested in understanding more is, in short, what happens next. This is where the third challenge comes into perspective: once we are able to (however) successfully situate the process of documentation within dynamics of community involvement, it is not only the outcome that should be preserved – in published and archivable formats, and in accordance with academic regulations. It is also the dynamic integrity of the research that is to be preserved, in relation to its practice. What this process requires, is to distinctively ask who we are documenting for in the first place.

**Why it is**

Perhaps the most obvious justification for documenting social theatre is to perpetuate knowledge in our field and our practice. The implied understanding, however, is that we
are contributing to largely academic knowledge. Palestinian theatre scholar Samir Al-Saber defines documentation as a chronological narrative (2013). Although he seems to be justifying documentation rather than defining it, his formulation strongly reflects that of Richard Schechner, who claims that ‘the principle task of scholarly writing is to find discipline within or impose it on seemingly anarchic phenomenon’ (2013, 91). In other words, part of the thrill of documentation is in finding the fitting strategy to construct one’s inquiry. It is a hunt for an explanation, but according to methodological and theoretical frames that assemble thoughts into a format that is validated and legitimised by institutional norms.

Jenny Hughes offers a critical reflection on documenting community work and suggests that it is perhaps more a ‘process of memorialisation’ (see her blog on Poor Theatres, and the post “Documenting precarious theatres - precariously”, 2016). The need to remember is accompanied by one to create a fossilised imprint that shows community work existed and continues to do so. Yet the act of preserving includes connotations of potential rigidity that can undermine fluctuations and elasticity in community practice. Interestingly, the socially engaged Situationists of the 1960s also saw scholarly documentation as a constraining urge for memorialisation, interpreted as a commodification of knowledge. In their famous Manifesto, they called for an era of ‘mass creativity’, resisting ‘the need to leave traces’ (1960) and consequently appropriate these moments rooted in the present. The drive to conserve moments in our field, however, relates to concerns over longevity and to wanting to capture these instances before they disappear ‘like soap bubbles’ (Hall in Reason 2006, 238). Remembering ‘lest we forget’ – this acknowledgement of a possible end is what Suad Amiry, quoted in the beginning, hauntingly refers to: ‘For “documentation” in itself recognises the end of a reality: the end of a generation, the end of an era, and the end of the norm’ (2013, 61). After all, social theatre initiatives that work toward social change are, by definition, transitional, on the way to the transformations they advocate for. One could even argue that social theatre should strive toward not existing at all, toward a time when it is no longer needed. But the idea of documenting an end is especially relevant in the context of documenting work in areas of armed conflict and political violence.

Theatre scholar Laura Edmondson (2007) combines and moves beyond both ideas of documenting in order to leave a trace, and to create structural order. In her striking piece ‘Of Sugarcoating and Hope’, she explores the implications of dominating narratives that reduce social theatre practice to themes of victimhood and resilience. Edmondson critically navigates the scholarly tendency toward ‘academic sugarcoating’ (2007, 7) when leaning on conclusions of hopefulness, especially within the analysis of African work by Western/Northern academics. She explains that academic documentation, especially its interpretation, can be a form of ‘hermeneutic violence’ (2007, 9). This violence exists in imposing an interpretation and in considering it as superior. But there is also violence in the motivation behind wanting to document in the first place: the scholarly urge to make order, to iron out the creases, to frame and to explain. ‘To produce scholarship is to assert one’s domination over the subject,’ she writes, ‘to contain its alterity, to “show it who’s boss” (Taussig 2006: viii)’ (2007, 9). The task of establishing an academically ordered inquiry therefore, raises various implications; and, in addition, becomes far more complex within a highly studied and recorded region, such as the Palestinian territories.
These three defining challenges to documentation serve to identify approaches to knowledge production that, in an effort to progress our field of expertise, may reveal tensions between a wish to preserve a sense of intellectual order, whilst potentially neglecting a complex web of other existing meaning-making processes that might disturb a structured hierarchy of knowledge. This is evidently seen in current documentation in the Palestinian territories, where local, ground-up knowledge structures are not necessarily taken into account.

**Documentation in Palestine**

The specific documentation of social theatre initiatives is mostly identifiable in what is called the post-Oslo era, after the peace accords of 1993. International and development organisations started to highly invest in using arts for socio-political means, in an effort to assist in (re)building the Palestinian territories. However, by the time the second Intifada (‘uprising’) occurred in response to the Israeli occupation in 2000, the heightened political violence and armed conflict meant that international involvement shifted from development funds to emergency funds (Nguyen-Gillham et al. 2008; Dana 2015). This led to what is now referred to as a ‘tsunami’ of trauma relief programs (Marshall and Sousa 2017, 3), criticised by Palestinian scholars as involving Western-centric assessment tools that serve to quantify human suffering (Jabr et al. 2013, Jabr 2019). It is in the context of this merging of cultural and artistic programs with biomedical interventions that social theatre initiatives are still documented today. Based on the evaluation of trauma through the measurement of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), individual and community experience of the occupation is widely understood through a medicalised and individualised approach to suffering. This move toward emergency interventions is still largely in place and qualifies a dominant ‘aesthetic of injury’ inherent in the practice models of most international and local aid organisations, as well as in research projects centred on young Palestinians.3

Another factor that influences the ways in which participants’ experiences are approached and documented, is the dependency on external funding. Many international and local, grassroots initiatives working in community arts have had to turn toward external support to continue their work (Wickstrom 2012; Dana 2015). This move, in turn, has to adhere to a discourse largely relating to trauma studies and an aesthetic of injury. This culture of dependency, therefore, serves to re-establish an instrumentalised and heavily medicalised representation of what it means to be Palestinian living under occupation. The activist and scholar Aisha Mansour refer to this culture as a ‘second occupation’ by ‘the international development community [since the Oslo accords] that tells people what they want’ (in Gray 2017). She believes it is a ‘deliberate strategy’ that undermines and disempowers the communities it is supposed to help’ (in Gray 2017). Similarly, writer and scholar Nora Murad has spoken out about the need to decolonise international response, which she labels as haaky fadi – ‘empty talk’ (2012). She argues that US AID, a funding that exists behind multiple cultural programs, is a ‘weapon to maintain conflict rather than resolve it’ (Murad 2012, 34). Furthermore, this dependency reinforces a documented representation of Palestinians as, ultimately, helpless victims – made hyper-visible, but not necessarily heard as expressing emotions beyond pain.
Today, young Palestinians are speaking out against their representations in mainstream media, their voices made louder thanks to social media platforms like PYALARA, Multaqayat Nadi al-Shabab or Diwan Gahzza, on which youth activists like Yasmeen El Khoudary claim exhaustion at over-simplified images: ‘the world needs to see us’ (El Khoudary 2012, 47). These platforms work, in part, as forms of media activism which contribute to, and balance out, an international perspective on what it means to be a young Palestinian living under occupation.

The contribution of research on the Palestinian territories, stemming largely from institutions outside Palestine, is based on de-politicised knowledge detached from its contextual reality. The conditional politics connected to external funding since the 1993 Oslo accords have demanded that cultural and civil organisations engaged in community work be politically impartial – some funding bodies have even ‘criminalised resistance’ (Dana 2013). Although the experiences of many Palestinians remain framed in ways that bring attention to the violence of the occupation, the resulting documentation “depoliticizes suffering and sidesteps [the conflict’s] political context” (Dyer and Georgis 2017, 432). The documentation of social theatre initiatives rests strongly on the reports of such organisations; this “depoliticisation” of our knowledge construction represents a colonial form of biopower that serves to paradoxically maintain the conflict, and possibly undermines communities’ own strategies and collective modes of adjustment and knowledge production (Nguyen-Gillham et al. 2008; Giacaman 2018; Wessells 2009). The idea that local, grassroots-based knowledge is disqualified also appears in Munir Fasheh’s work, activist and founder of Tameer Institute of Popular Education in Ramallah, who condemns the ‘occupation of knowledge’ (2011) that is imposed on Palestinian education through Western institutionalisation. He defines this occupation as the act of replacing grassroots knowledge already in place among communities, with top-down meaning-making, deemed superior in accordance with standardised, Western neoliberal culture.

It is important to note that I am not demeaning the valuable work of groups, individuals and organisations that work within the narrative and conceptual framing of psycho-social interventions. Similarly, my interest is not to dissuade scholars from taking into account and documenting theatre initiatives in the Palestinian territories, but to question how we write about these instances, for whom, and what voices we might marginalise and erase by centering our knowledge constructs. There is a need for a more nuanced analysis, especially when taking into consideration what narratives we discard in order to consolidate such a centre, the audience of our research, and possible preconceptions they may already have of Palestinians’ experience of the occupation.

The implication of documenting work in Palestine is thus twofold: first, it potentially reinforces hegemonic narratives of victimhood, rather than enabling a more complex understanding of living under occupation. Second, documentation that relies on a political language restrictions, often reducing social theatre to a psycho-social framing focused on individual well-being, risks lessening the complexity of the local context and replicating an imperialist dynamic. How much harm are we doing – and are we reinforcing colonial violence in our data selection, in our ‘mining for stories’ and in the production of knowledge relating to Palestine?
Documentation as activist-researchers

These questions imply a large amount of responsibility. In fact, they incite the researcher toward the role of activist-researcher, a term which often creates a sense of unease and controversy in academic circles. The term activist, often connected to supporting reactionary and dialectical oppositions in political actions, is well complimented by scholar activists like Marcelo Svirsky (2010), Charles Hale (2001, 2008) and Ian Maxey (1999) who argue that activism exists in the decisions that help build knowledge toward new social constructs. Considering that our current social constructs are shaped by our everyday contributions in actions and thoughts, activism is in fact this ‘process of reflecting and acting upon this condition’ (Maxey 1999, 201). When contributing and consciously placing ourselves in relation to our world, in the aim to challenge power dynamics rather than impose them, we are all activists. This form of academic activism is less loud than mass protests but more ‘invasive’ (Svirsky 2010) – it explores and tests alternative realities, encouraging a more deep-rooted, long-term examination of existing power dynamics in knowledge production. As researchers, our activism is inherently about investigating – i.e. researching – a situation with the aim of transforming it (Colectivo Situaciones 2003). We can choose to produce knowledge that investigates and experiments with social power dynamics, that questions and problematises the ways in which we create meaning in our world. A researcher ‘as activist’ is one who strives toward engaging with co-produced knowledge, and who voluntarily enters a space from which to preserve a dynamic and ‘live’ connection with our constantly shifting cultural, economic and political realities. It relates to what I had previously suggested as the third, defining challenge in academic documentation in our field: the need to both preserve knowledge, but also to continuously disrupt and challenge it.

Documenting social theatre initiatives in the Palestinian territories challenges the idea of objectivity in research. We’ve moved away from a colonial idea of an absolute knowledge; it is not something that needs to be ‘uncovered’ or ‘obtained’, but rather collectively built, critically amassed, and compiled within a hive of different ways of understanding the world. Our documentation-driven contribution is not absolute, but non-linear and scattered among the many other forms of meaning-making: the challenge is to connect these different forms within a larger network of information, so that ‘when you step back and squint … you start to see it nevertheless’ (Fischer 2015). Palestinian theorist Fasheh brings attention to the dangers in the idea of objective, or universal, knowledge – it presupposes a colonial hierarchy and inevitably leads to fragmentation, and disruption of the social fabric that keeps communities together (in Sukariek 2019, 8). The practice of academic research is arguably based on acknowledging one’s bias in research, not in refuting it, and on responding to how social and political beliefs shape our understanding. Regardless of what terminology is chosen (activist or not), if we, scholars and practitioners, were to seriously approach academic research as an equal contribution to other knowledge cultures then we would inevitably have to consider its connection to other constructed realities around us: to other bees in the hive.

My continuing relationship with documentation in the Palestinian territories has made me want to demystify the task of situating academic research within dynamics of community involvement by contributing with a compilation of beginnings.
Suggestions

Collectivising knowledge

Knowledge produced in our field only makes sense if we bring it forward to serve the practice of communities, practitioners and activists. Our academic responsibility is arguably to put our resources at the disposal of the communities surrounding us and the university (Salt 2019). This is, essentially, about collectivising knowledge, and therefore about distributing both the ability and the power to inform long-term, sustainable change. In research, we continue to develop methods of documentation (Practice-as-Research) in response to the challenges of engaging with the 'lived' experience of the art form. In the same vein, we could continue to develop methods of documentation to respond to the challenges of engaging with long-term, social change.

In the case of documentation in Palestine, this means cultivating local and grassroots knowledge by both gathering and disseminating information in close connection with the communities at the centre of the research. The prospective of completing a study on community-based work that is limited in access – through format, structure and language – to most scholars, and those largely outside Palestinian borders, seems both counteractive and damaging. This can appear especially injurious in light of the ongoing bureaucratic constraints placed by the Israeli Authorities on institutions in the West Bank and Gaza, whose access to international partnerships, collaborations and academic exchange is severely limited.  

Involving different ways of exchanging knowledge

Working towards collectivised knowledge requires a sharing of knowledge that involves a non-linear, non-hierarchical appreciation of its production. I am arguing for the importance of involving all knowledge-creators in the process. It is an exchange, based on the age-old ‘I have something you want, and you have something I want’ model (Hughes and Waterfield 2017, 133–134). Without wishing to trivialise, knowledge exists only when it is shared – otherwise, it is just ‘knowing’.

A particular example of such an exchange is widely supported and practically implemented by Munir Fasheh. In reflectively exploring grassroots educational models of practice, Fasheh is continuing to develop and apply the Palestinian notion of Mujawaarah (مُجَاوَرَة) to his work. The term roughly translates as ‘neighbouring’, or neighbourhood committees, that are organised in a non-hierarchical form. These groups come together to share, reflect, discuss and apply knowledge to daily life. During the first Intifada (1987–91), these committees formed organically to organise food supplies, respond to health needs of the wounded, care for the children, offer education on the streets, in homes and in mosques, and alert the neighbourhood in case of a raid or incoming danger (Fasheh 1990, 31). Fasheh encouraged Mujawaarah when he founded his centre for popular education, in which young people came together to read, discuss and reflect around questions they themselves wanted answers to. At the centre of this structural format is the idea that knowledge is based on personal experience and its sharing, all equally worthy ‘in the sense that they cannot be compared along a vertical line.’ as Fasheh explains in his blog Mujawaarah. Furthermore, one element of Mujawaarah is al muthanna (المثناة) – a term that, again, lacks a direct translation
in English. The essence of the term lies in the pluralistic thought that inter-relationality between two people is essential for knowledge to exist. The Palestinian notion sheds critical light on a rationale that is at the centre of meaning making. Fasheh further clarifies the distinction from traditionally western philosophy; here, ‘the other person is a “you” rather than a non-I or a copy of I . . . It is also different from Descartes’ logic: ‘I think, therefore I am’; the logic of muthanna can be expressed as ‘YOU are, therefore I am’; my existence depends on my relation with you’ (in Sukarieh 2019, 7).

Fasheh’s work points to an interweaving of knowledge structures that takes into consideration its different manifestations. In an effort to decolonise the Palestinian education system – or, as he prefers to say, ‘unplug and heal’ it – Fasheh poetically points to the untranslatable (or mistranslated) quality of certain concepts: he reminds us, for instance, that there is no equivalent for ‘research’ in Arabic but that the word commonly used is baath (بَث) which means ‘search’; rather than re-searching for the sake of reaffirming institutional knowledge, Fasheh draws attention to a search based on seeking wisdom, and a holistic understanding of the world. Another example is that of the word ‘identity,’ huwiyaa (حوَيْة). The word contains the term ‘he/she’ (huweh/huye), and so traces the focus of one’s identity as being once again turned outward, not inward. The complexity of these notions, he suggests, is lost in translation, and in an occupation of educational models serving neoliberal practices. Fasheh is urging for a recalibration where institutionalised knowledge production through research is replaced with a reflective search for wisdom; which involves a non-hierarchical exchange that effectively brings us closer to understanding ourselves and our position in relation to our environment.

A practical example that may be more familiar to Euro-American institutional settings is the model of Open Space. Although it does not serve as a direct translation of the idea of mujawaraah, it nevertheless demonstrates a focus on non-linear, non-hierarchical reflection and discussion. It enables practitioners, community members and scholars to meet in a space beyond academic structures. The idea of Open Space meetings, also known as Open Space Technology (OST), was developed by Harrison Owen in the 1980s when he realised that people exchanging thoughts through a conference format (where most panels, discussions and speakers are predetermined) did not foster the emergence of new and different perspectives. As he puts it, ‘it was during the coffee breaks where the real juicy stuff happened. All the rest (featured speakers, panel discussions and the like) seemed almost an interruption to the core activity’ (Improbable 2016). The model is self-organised, participant-led (Owen 2008a), and structurally involves participants bringing forwards their own sub-topics or concerns. Break-out groups emerge that participants join, leave, and break off from, all in the conscious effort to actively engage in discussions. The knowledge thus produced is fluid, organically collected, documented (by pre-organised note-takers), condensed and shared at the end of the event. The structure presupposes that self-organisation exists within an initial environment where knowledge provided by different individuals seem to have few to no connections, at first glance. As Owen rephrases it, ‘If everything is hardwired in advance how could it self organize?’ (Owen 2019). There is a clear relevance here to the conversation on collective, non-hierarchical knowledge production: the more diverse (professionally and/or otherwise) the participants involved, the wider the flow of information and intellectual resources provided to tackle it, and included in the research.
Both examples detailed here, although largely different in context, arguably reflect Sally Mackey’s call for a polyphonic approach to knowledge production (2016). Her suggested allegory of ‘polyphonic conversations’ sees various voices occasionally grinding or meshing – reflecting a polyphonic dynamic of knowledge cultivation. Her proposed shift from ‘researcher-as-knowledge-holder’ to ‘researcher-as-knowledge-sharer’ (2016, 488) celebrates an ‘ecumenical pluralism of people and concepts’ (489) that is necessary to retain a dynamic inter-relationality in our field of social theatre.

**Towards a model of un-disciplinary knowledge**

For documentation to be a perpetuation of knowledge, we must assume an outward movement: not just from private to public (from the researcher as ‘analyst’ to ‘activist’), but one that specifically applies to the distribution of collected and/or interpreted data. This outward gaze is one that includes the ‘for whom’ this data is meant for in the first place. Building on the previous suggestions, this could arguably emerge as a movement that seeks to connect, involve and engage with participants and their appropriate constructs across and beyond disciplines.

Before offering an example of such a model in the context of Palestinian work, let me first clarify this movement. I’d like to introduce you to Sherry Arnstein, whose thoughts enable a critical perspective on the inclusion and distribution of knowledge cultures. Working in the U.S. Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare (HUD) throughout the 1960s, she became disturbed by the lack of citizen involvement in structural decisions.

Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969)
made within the public sector. Arnstein wrote an extraordinary article called ‘A Ladder of Citizen Participation’ (1969), widely referenced today. In this piece, she offered valuable insight into the importance of the public’s participation in research projects, by breaking down the degrees of partnership into a visual ladder, from research that employed citizen ‘manipulation’ at the bottom, to higher levels of ‘citizen control’ at the top (217).

Her fundamental argument, was that participation was only truly meaningful if it was defined by the participants’ power to make decisions within initiatives, be it in the building of public infrastructures, health policy, educational reform, etc.

I propose a model of non-linear knowledge production that roughly combines Sherry Arnstein’s ‘Ladder of Citizen Participation’ (1969) and artist Suzanne Lacy’s functional ‘arrow’ from private to public artist (1995). Lacy had a similar concern for positionality, in what she saw as a scaled, horizontal sliding role of the artist to artist/activist (1995, 174–177). In Lacy’s proposal, knowledge that is produced is contextualised, and re-problematised, but collaboratively. The relevance in the combination of both thoughts is that Arnstein’s ladder focuses on the degrees of participants’ power to influence research, and Lacy’s scale refers to the positionality of the artist who instigates participation and co-production for the purpose of social change. In other words, both women look at positionality in relation to social change, but from different angles: the citizen’s and the artist/researcher’s.

The proposed model aims to create an outward spiral, starting with research that serves as ‘witness’ (with little to no inclusion of participants’ knowledge constructs) and research that involves participants’ contributions as ‘tokenism’ – in which they are heard but not necessarily heeded through ‘informing’ and ‘consultation’ (Arnstein 1969, 217). The spiral continues through degrees and forms of participation, such as co-design and co-creation, based on partnerships and collaborations within, for instance, Practice-as-Research. This spiral represents a movement that finally stretches and expands to include a knowledge cultivation that is not just cross-disciplinary and cross-practice (researcher-practitioner) but, towards the final curves, un-disciplinary, involving the experiences of community members, activists, neighbourhood networks or workers unions, that contribute to building a stronger recognition of our social make-up, and of our research within it. This approach to meaning-making sees knowledge as non-linear and scattered. Not as chaotic, but as an intricate network of connections (and disconnections) that generate concentric relations that never return to their initial point of departure and spiral organically forwards. The following examples of documented work in the context of the Palestinian territories aim to illustrate this approach to knowledge construction.

I recently watched the Irish artist Katy O’Kelly perform her one-woman show The Olive Tree as part of the European Theatre Festival (2019) in Beirut, Lebanon. As an active BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement in support of Palestine) supporter, her political piece was centred on social justice for displaced Palestinians under occupation. Although her work was based on extensive research and documentation, the artist had not directly involved Palestinian participants in the process. This research-based work was one that served as an indirect ‘witness’ and her aim was to raise awareness of the conflict and of the BDS movement. It rang in line with the intentions of Caryl Churchill’s Seven Jewish Children, performed at the Royal Court in 2009, and described as a ‘political event’ (Nathan 2009) in its contribution to British public knowledge about Israel’s attacks on Gaza.
Moving further along this spiral, we have the clown-based interventions of the Spanish Payasos en Rebeldía (‘Clowns in Rebellion’) in the West Bank in September 2019, who delivered a mostly pre-set production in Aida refugee camp with prior consultation with the Markez Lajee (the ‘refugee Centre’, also called Lajee Centre) community organisation in the area. The participants the interactive show was intended for – young residents – were not directly involved in creative or structural decisions but were central to the work’s mission and success.

Stretching further along the spiral is an example of participant partnership with the work of the Palestinian Circus School, which involves young participants in its program and organisational decisions. Here, responsibilities are distributed among the artists, most of whom are themselves graduates of the circus’ program and offered employment. The ‘team’ section on their website reiterates this publicly:

The school is a very versatile and fluid environment, where roles and responsibilities can be the most diverse: it can happen that the director is also the driver and the sound engineer, the artist deals with finances, the accountant helps in assembling parts of the stage.

The Circus School aims to function in tight partnership with its community of artists and students who come from various regions of the West Bank, and where meaning is built dependent on the range of abilities and ideas suggested by those directly involved or concerned by the organisation. Their knowledge and experience can be argued as constructed from within their community and widened with every new neighbourhood they travel to. Similarly, Markez Lajee in Aida refugee camp represents a model of work based strongly on co-management and design with the resident youth it serves. Originally started up in a garage in 2000 by a group of young residents from the camp looking to serve their community, the organisation found its home a few years later in a 300 square metre space built by local volunteers. Initiatives are proposed according to the cultural, educational and artistic demands of the centre’s participants who have made it their second home, as well as the skills of its members who co-facilitate these programs, and who include young residents, activists, professionals in health and education, unemployed, family members and artists. The Centre is run by residents of the camp who have decided, by consensus, to avoid funding opportunities that require ‘political neutrality’ (the irony being emphasized by the looming West Bank wall on their doorstep), and the space thus functions with the upkeep of multiple volunteers. Although the centre is consequently struggling to develop further, it stays firmly driven by their community’s decisions and ‘the belief in Palestinians deciding and building their own future’ (as seen on their website). In addition, authorship is further delegated to young members aged 11–22 since 2008 through Radio Lajee, a series of podcasts created to challenge, in part, the bias felt in knowledge produced by international media coverage about Palestinians living under occupation, and to delegate the responsibility of these stories to the residents themselves.

An example I’d like to end the spiral on is an initiative demonstrating an ‘undisciplinary’ approach to building knowledge by anthropologist and photographer Vivien Sansour. The Palestine Heirloom Seed Library is a collaborative project between her and her community that comprises of a collective library of tools – specifically seeds – for farmers to use, spread and replenish in an effort to save Palestinian agricultural heirloom. The project encourages non-hierarchical organising and co-produced
sustainability through collective knowledge. The Library is not limited to the farmers and agricultural professionals. It also serves occasionally as a travelling kitchen, where people come together and share the fruit of their seeds in a community meal (Sansour 2019). This example of non-hierarchical meaning making is all the more significant in its resistance to a dependency on external aid, and its hopes to consolidate a long-term solution cooperatively. The Library also falls poetically in line with Munir Fasheh’s own efforts to interrupt and recalibrate knowledge production: in the educational community gatherings, ‘we spent time and energy in watering seeds that are already within us’, he writes on his blog, Mujaawarah, ‘rather than importing new seeds’.

The examples mentioned here are an attempt to consolidate and highlight a suggested model of knowledge cultivation. They are intended as a brief glimpse at the various elements within this model that deliberately seek to, on one end, include constructs built by those involved in the initiatives at the root of this knowledge production, and on the other to distribute its findings across its practices.

Re-politicising knowledge

The final suggestion serves to re-iterate more directly what is evident within the previous examples listed, which is to approach the distribution of knowledge through an activist discourse. As I have argued previously, ‘activist’ is not a notion to shy away from. It is a form of intentional positionality that depends heavily on self-reflection. This responsibility implies the acknowledgement that academic research in social theatre effects grassroots communities involved in its process. As applied theatre scholar Peilin Liang argues, our social reality is constructed on ‘the subjectivity of an understudied or underprivileged community’ (2019, 451) and on its documentation. Rather than risking side-stepping the issue of power relations in our research in relation to communities we study, actively seeking ways to engage with them suggests a political shift in knowledge construction. Liang proposes approaching documentation as ‘docuvention’ (2019), a form that both documents and intervenes in an effort to generate knowledge that serves both the demands of the relevant community and academia (450–1). It is a process also suggested in the move toward data activism, a relatively new term where data used in technology and communication is considered politically active if serving as a mouthpiece, or spotlight, for social injustices (Milan 2016).

An engaged documentation, therefore, involves both active inclusion and contribution. Actively including different forms of knowledge-making means recognising their potential to interrupt hegemonic narratives and dominant, social constructs. And contribution refers to a means to serve communities by ensuring the distribution and circulation of our research outcome.

In his famous ‘Permission to Narrate’, Edward Said reflected on the imbalanced representation of the Israeli/Palestinian history in western media (1984). He argued that a Palestinian narrative has rarely been allowed on its own; indeed, an Israeli counter-narrative has usually been imposed ‘for the sake of balance’. ‘Permission to narrate’ the Palestinian experience is primarily a demand for self-representation but also one for a space to speak out and be actively included in the story that is told, in a research narrative and in its outcome. Actively seeking out and including different forms of assembling meaning could be argued as part of rigorous documentation; further
contributing to knowledge by making the research accessible and at the disposal of its subjects is engaged documentation.

Conclusion

This reflection is a call for an epistemological shift in the production and exchange of knowledge. It’s about finding methods and process for research (in data gathering, interpretation, and dissemination) that allow a fluidity of knowledge cultivation – and that allow for surprises. This reflection is also about knowledge produced in particular by Western scholars in a context that has been continuously subjected to colonialist dynamics – politically and academically. The balancing point that could enable such a shift in knowledge cultivation, is in the researcher’s positionality in relation to who and who they document for. The current epistemological expectations of the overall structure of scholarly research (which, in my current environment, is dominated by the UK/US doctorate structure of literature review/fieldwork/data analysis and interpretation) leave little room for exchange, cross-disciplinary connection, uncomfortable questions, and uncertainties.

As I navigate my own research and desire to include as many participants as possible, complications of ownership appear (after all, it is my name on the project and its publication) and assumptions of empowerment that, as Maxey also reflects in his own practice (1999), are potentially distorted. There are others who have expressed such challenges; Mackey similarly raises her honest concerns with negotiating her focus and the community’s needs in the research project:

> Is it . . . possible to co-initiate performance practices that offer research opportunities for the applied theatre practice as researcher as well as satisfy the needs of the community – who may simply want a community arts event? (2016, 486).

In other words, an overly objective-driven approach to our work as social theatre practitioners and researchers might neglect the aesthetic qualities of how we build knowledge (Jackson 2007) and the meaningful interactions within the ‘little changes’ we create (Balfour 2009).

Knowledge cultivation in the field of social theatre depends on a dynamic combination between the intention of the research and the seeking out of different ways of making sense of the world. Knowledge lives in people, not archives. And people are messy, disorganised, contradictory, non-linear. I believe the combination of both intention and of seeking out different meaning constructs offers space to engage with a social theatre practice that reflects the complexity it serves. The combination enables us to relate our own findings to collective knowledge that is built, added to, deconstructed and re-shaped continuously.

Samer Al-Saber reflects on the rigidity of knowledge production in the context of Israel/Palestinian history. He questions the unchallenged legitimacy of written scholarship and calls for reflective pause, for a moment of interruption from the notetaking. ‘Narrate the whole story,’ he says, ‘let it stand on its own’ (Al-Saber and Taylor 2014, 99). See what happens. In wanting to preserve academic knowledge around an event, how does one document such a moment, memory, collective act whilst retaining its elasticity
and resilience to potentially over-simplified narratives? The philosopher Wittgenstein offers perhaps an idea on how to start:

Sometimes, we go into a man’s study and find his books and papers all over the place, and say without hesitation: ‘What a mess! We really must clear this room up’. Yet, at other times, we may go into a room which looks very like the first; but after looking around we decide that we must leave it just as it is, recognising that, in this case, even the dust has its place (Wittgenstein’s remark recorded in Janik and Toulin 1973, 207).

Sometimes things are better left as they are. As researchers, we often face a similar moment, where we must learn to recognise when to stop imposing so-called order and leave the room.

Notes

1. For a more detailed and historical definition, see Thompson and Schechner (2004) ‘Why “Social Theatre”?’
2. There is growing literature on methods of incorporating practical knowledge through Practice-based research (see Kershaw’s online platform on Practice as Research in Performance, PARIP; Kershaw and Nicholson 2011; Nelson 2013). Much has also been written in response to the second challenge; discussions continue on the ethical implications of approaching and working with communities, on authorship, power dynamics and conducting interventions (see Nicholson 2005; Preston 2009; Barnes and Coetzee 2014; Saxton and Prendergast 2013) and important discussions are emerging on re-orienting academic constructs away from ‘white knowledge’ to better include the voices of ethnic minorities (Ali 2016; Ahmed 2012; Andrews et al. 2019). These conversations are essential, timely and continue to critically question our processes of practice.
3. The term aesthetic of injury refers to a consistent focus on the suffering of participants. Criticism of such a trend has been made by scholars documenting social theatre, such as Thompson, Hughes and Balfour (2009), Wickstrom (2012), Marshall (2013, 2014), Nasser (2006) and by practitioners in the field such as Abdelfattah Abusouror of Al Rowaad (notably in his interview with Wickstrom 2012), Samir Al Saber (in Al-Saber and Taylor 2014), George Ibrahim (notably in Thompson, Hughes and Balfour 2009).
4. see USAID’s 2002/2007 ‘anti-terrorism clause’, for instance, which prohibited funding to civil organisations that were perceived as being involved or supporting terrorist groups. The more recent clause in EU funding, applied in 2019, resulted in a campaign led by Palestinian NGOs to ‘reject politically conditional funding’ (December 2019). The campaign argued that the clause was politically motivated to screen and vet members of civil societies; that it institutionalised fragmentation and racism in ways that contradicted the objectives of NGOs; and that ‘terrorism’ was wrongly defined as any political party or forms of non-violent and cultural resistance to occupation.
5. see the public letters by the Committee on Academic Freedom of Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) addressed to political leaders, August 6 2018 and 15 July 2019. For more details, see news coverage by The Independent (2018), University World News (2019), Times Higher Education (2019) and Inside Higher Ed (2019).
6. For more information, see Devoted & Disgruntled community events run by Improbable Theatre Company (UK) which offer a clear written and video explanation of this process on their website.
7. For a clearly defined example of data activism and research applied to theatre practice, see theatre company Power Play (UK).
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