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Walking the Elephant: Drawing as Enactment of Community

Abstract

The Elephant and Castle neighbourhood in London is well known as a centre for the Latin American community in the UK. The drastic demolition of the site threatens their continued presence. This article chronicles my work as an illustrator on a project that sought to represent this migrant community, their vibrancy and vitality on the cusp of the site's erasure. Through a series of participatory, creative workshops a range of illustrative documents were produced that, ultimately, became archival records. Working on the project enabled a reflection on the role of the illustrator in the context of cultural devastation, and retrieval and preservation of the relationship between migrants and the spaces they occupy. This gave rise to a deeper set of questions about the nature of community as such. Drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophical work on community and Hannah Arendt's writing on the public realm, I argue that this illustration project visualises and materialises experiences and expressions of community at a moment when this sociality was itself under threat.

Keywords: community, illustration, representation, participation, regeneration

1. Introduction

As with many creative arts inquiries my investigation started with an irritation. I work as an illustrator and academic, and my practice-led research combines philosophy and action – or, some might say, 'philosophy in action' (Barrett 2007:1). The vexation that originally drove my research was the unreflective use of the word 'community': The casual assumption that the existence and cultivation of community is both undisputable and self-evidently desirable is apparent in everyday parlance, but also – more pertinently – in language that laces itself around contentious urban redevelopment projects and their accompanying creative commissions. Illustrators are increasingly employed by real estate investors to fulfil their so-called Section 106 requirements – planning obligations imposed on property developers by local government authorities in the UK. The employment of artists is intended to counterbalance the potentially unsettling impacts of regeneration, with commissions that require the illustrator to 'engage the local community' in the creation of artwork related to the site and its inhabitants. Invariably, these artworks are called on to highlight and celebrate 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism' when building projects are often actually destroying layered formations of community that have been built up over time. A debate in the illustration journal Varoom (Jost & Whadcock 2018: 58-63) rehearses the pros and cons of illustrators accepting this type of work[1].

This article reflects on the potential of illustration to do more than fulfil a developer's brief to design colourful hoarding or artwork 'involving the community'. I examine how illustration can prise open a space for reflection on the nature of community itself. Migrant communities whose rights to 'belong' to a particular place

is often questioned or placed under threat during urban regeneration projects present a particularly urgent challenge for illustrators working in this arena. What role can the arts play in the formation and recognition of migrant communities? Can collaborative illustration projects be a space for asserting greater recognition and visibility for marginalised groups? What actually is the nature of community? Is it something that exists 'out there', that the visual arts can represent? Or is it something that is enacted in the moment of its inscription in visual form? How can participatory illustration help us reflect on this?

While colloquial use of the word 'community' continues without much reflexivity as a positive albeit nostalgic term, it has garnered more complex debate amongst philosophers in the past few decades (Devisch 2013: ix). In the aftermath of the Holocaust, and the various repressive and murderous totalitarian communist regimes, the idea of community – as a totalising whole and essential 'we' – had certainly taken on an unpalatable dimension. In my discussion I draw on the work of Hannah Arendt and Jean-Luc Nancy, philosophers who sought to think about plurality, multiplicity and co-existence afresh while wrestling with the dark shadows of European history.

Besides the notion of 'community' there are cognate terms that offer different, possibly more nuanced inflections to everyday formations of collectivity: For example Susanne Wessendorf's use of the word 'conviviality' suggests 'acting with civility towards diversity' (2014: 392) and Anna Tsing's 'assemblage' brings to mind 'open-ended gatherings' in more-than-human landscapes (2015:23). However, it is precisely the word 'community' with its powerful affective dimension and its unreflective everyday use that formed the starting point for my inquiry. Working as an illustrator with a specific community – the local residents and traders in an area around a popular South London shopping centre, many of them from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds – did indeed offer the possibilities of making sense of the term afresh.

The goal of 'increased visibility' is seemingly unequivocal in the context of working with marginalised migrant communities, with the visual arts presenting an ostensibly obvious method to achieve this (Román-Velázquez & Retis 2021: 5 and 157). I too made this straightforward connection when I first embarked upon the work discussed in this article. However, aiming for 'visibility' delivers us directly to the thorny question of representation: What are adequate methods for the representation of community, especially of migrant communities? This challenge becomes even more pronounced if the person tasked with creating the representation is not a member of that community themselves. The question of acceptable forms for representing 'the Other' is a much-rehearsed debate in anthropology, ethnography and the social sciences. The publication of James Clifford and George E. Marcus edited volume *Writing Culture* in 1986 marked a watershed moment in these discussions (James, Hockey & Dawson 1997:1) – foregrounding questions of objectivity, reflexivity and regimes of representation. These debates concerning the intricate relationships between knowledge production and its form, i.e. epistemology and representational practices, is lively and ongoing – as evidenced in the publication of two further volumes building on Clifford and Marcus' original publication: *After Writing Culture* (ed. James, Hockey & Dawson) in 1997 and *Beyond Writing Culture* (ed. Zenker & Kumoll) in 2010.

An increased awareness of the conventions of rhetoric and genre obviously exist in the visual arts too, although this has not received the same level of in-depth analysis and reflexive attention that textual practices of representation have. Stuart Hall explores the vicissitudes of visual signifying practices and their relationships to

power and ideology in *Representation* (1997 and 2013). As a white, European illustrator working with a Latin American organisation on a project that was aiming to counter the erasure of a distinctly Latin neighbourhood, I was acutely aware of questions regarding the adequate means of rendering this community's claim to the city. In this article the tension between the seemingly straightforward goal of helping a marginalised migrant community achieve greater visibility on the one hand, and possible methods to accomplish this intertwine with my questions around the nature of community as such.

Representation – re-presentation – presupposes the existence of something prior to its rendering in visual form. If illustration is a representationalist practice, that is able to show us what exists, this implies that community exists 'out there', and it is our task to find the appropriate visual form to render it as picture. However, as I will argue in this article, through working on this project I came to understand that there were more productive ways for illustration to draw out collective worlds. Rather than attempting to represent something pre-existing, participatory illustration can be thought of as a process of collective sense making, where community is enacted as part of an encounter, instead of something that existed prior to the meeting or the project. In this article I will use my work with Latin Elephant, a charity promoting the inclusion of migrant and ethnic communities in processes of urban regeneration, as a case study that helps examine ideas on the nature of 'community' and the possibilities of illustration practice, not to represent it, but to play a role in enacting and recording it.

Illustration is generally understood as a commercial practice whereby individual illustrators craft a reproducible image, usually in response to a commission. *The History of Illustration* defines illustration as '[an] artwork […] in service of an idea [that] seeks to communicate something particular, usually to a specific audience' (Doyle et al. 2018:xvii, emphasis in original). Illustration often, although not always, stands in relation to written text. In projects for property developers illustrators are often asked to generate imagery for the hoarding that surrounds a building site, or to produce artwork that otherwise sits in or in relation to the newly constructed real estate. Commissions often have short turn-around times and are viewed and consumed at a similarly fast pace. Illustrators have long bemoaned the fact that their work is frequently undervalued and indeed, they have a point: illustration is often viewed as an auxiliary to understanding something else, an afterthought in the fast-paced environment of the creative industries, rather than a method of knowledge production in its own right.

In my own practice I build on illustration's agile responsiveness, its light-footed relationality, but reframe it not as a product of an individual artist in response to a commission or a written text, but as a collectively negotiated object of material culture. I often collaborate with community groups through participatory workshops and collaborative projects. The project and research I articulate in this paper is a form of practice-led research, defined as 'research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems and challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice' (Gray 1996:3). In other words, I am not using participatory visual art projects as a method to answer a research question that arose independently from the creative practice. On the contrary: I use theory in the formation of reflective spaces that allow me to draw out the various facets of my illustration practice. In this article illustration, in the form of co-created visual documents, presents itself as a site where we can reconsider, record and reflect on the relations that occur in our everyday experience of community.

2. Into the Maelstrom

I wrote to Latin Elephant in 2017 with a suggestion to collaborate on a project that brought people together to visualise the rich social and cultural networks of the South London neighbourhood known as Elephant and Castle. I approached them because I knew they were already engaged in a campaign to assert the right of local residents, many of the Latin American migrants, to remain in their neighbourhood despite an ongoing threat from a large-scale property development. Latin Elephant is a charity representing the interests of the Latin American and other migrant communities in this area. As their website makes clear – it is an organisation that has a thorough understanding of the slings and arrows of nefarious urban regeneration processes and an appreciation of the arts as one of many possible forms of contestation[2].

The Elephant and Castle neighbourhood in London is well known as one of the biggest clusters of Latin American businesses in the UK, where they share their space with other migrant and ethnic businesses (Román-Velázquez & Hill 2016). The area has been undergoing an intensive process of regeneration and gentrification for a decade now which has already displaced a large number of low-income residents from local housing estates (BBC 2013). Prior to the most recent phase of the far-reaching urban redevelopment project currently underway there were around 150 Latin American and minority ethnic businesses in the area. The Elephant and Castle shopping centre, which was cleared and demolished after a long legal battle in 2021, was the home of many of these businesses. In her book *Narratives of Migration, Relocation and Belonging* (2021) Román-Velázquez and her co-author Jessica Retis chart the development of London's Latin neighbourhoods: Latin American retailers, predominantly from Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia started setting up businesses in the early 1990s and over time have contributed to the formation of a distinctive and vibrant Latin American neighbourhood (2021:163-164).

At the time of my project with Latin Elephant (2017 – 2019), the shopping centre was still standing and largely operational. Although the proposed development was ominously looming, it had not yet been fully confirmed, being held off by various challenges, objections and appeals that were playing themselves out through their respective channels. Latin Elephant, alongside a number of other community initiatives, were key players in the fight to preserve the place as a community asset that fosters a sense of belonging and identity amongst Latin Americans and other migrant groups. A recent report by Latin Elephant (2021) highlights the importance the businesses in this area had as vital touchpoints for Latin Americans in London: according to research carried out in 2011, 85 percent of Latin Americans in London regularly frequented Latin American shopping areas such as Elephant and Castle, mainly to visit restaurants, buy cooking ingredients or make currency remittances (Román-Velázquez, McIlwaine, Peluffo, Perez 2021:7). At the time of our collaborative project it still maintained its importance as a vital centre for the Latin American community and many other groups and individuals, although it was in a critical state of disrepair. With its iconic pink elephant statue at the front, the shopping centre sustained its somewhat troubled presence in its liminal state of existence.

When I contacted Latin Elephant in 2017 they were particularly concerned about local small businesses, who are especially vulnerable to reckless regeneration projects – at risk of displacement and loss of their livelihoods. They were therefor keen for me to develop a visual project that would highlight the importance of these businesses for the local community. My ambitions as an illustrator at the time were to create images that would capture, visualise and represent the lived experience of groups of migrants whose concerns were being overlooked; an illustration that drew into focus the otherwise invisible intensities and delights, the palimpsest of memories, the network of relationships, and the nuanced internal logic of a site that had taken shape over time. This would stand in contrast to what an outsider would be likely to see on photographs of the site, or the impressions of a fist-time visitor to Elephant and Castle: They would probably notice the timeworn, crumbling architecture overlaid with an incongruous tumult of market stalls, shops and traders offering goods and services that might well be obscure or unknown to them. I hoped that illustration could use the potential of crafted images to depict what lens-based perception (e.g. photography, but also our own ocular perception) cannot grasp. And this depiction of the unseen, would, I figured, support and materialise claims of the importance and vitality of a site under threat by insensitive top-down urban development.

Over the following months we collaboratively designed the project - *Walking the Elephant* - or *Recorriendo Elephant* in Spanish. The project was to unfold in several stages. The first step was to run a number of participatory workshops. Through previous experience of facilitating participatory arts workshops, I knew that adults often harbour strong feelings of resistance to most forms of drawing or mark-making. We therefor settled on the idea of working with maps and inviting participants to draw habitual walking routes and their most common stopping off points. This presented itself as a response to a number of concerns: On the one hand we thought this task would feel manageable for most people (the task to "draw a route" is generally less anxiety-inducing than to draw anything else) and on the other hand we anticipated that this would give us rich results that would visualise the liveliness of the site and show how it is inhabited and woven into people's daily routines. During the following phase I would process and reformulate the outcomes of the workshops into visually more legible illustrated outputs, that would result in a collectively produced representation of the site. The third phase was loosely planned to be concerned with the distribution of the material.

Latin Elephant has used a number of different methods to understand and defend the interests of the local community in the face of the regeneration project, including community mobilisation and protest, dialogue with developers, publication of reports and recommendations, and creative methods of asserting collective presence (see Román-Velázquez, McIlwaine, Peluffo, Perez 2021:11-24). They understood the value of the arts as a tool for opposing gentrification – both as a method to create spaces of self-representation and collective assertions of belongingness (Román-Velázquez & Retis 2021:2) as well as presenting the results of creative projects as evidence to planning authorities, the developers and the wider public to support arguments about the need to recognise the value of migrant and ethnic economies in Elephant and Castle (Román-Velázquez et al. 2021:18). *Walking the Elephant* was one of a number of projects they co-organised with these aims in mind.

I held my workshop four times at various locations in and around the shopping centre throughout 2017. The workshops were designed for participants to drop into and contribute to at any time. For each workshop I prepared a large-scale map of the site, where I sketched out the area roughly in pencil and tape. I supplied stickers, tapes, variously designed post-it notes and pens and invited participants to share their habitual walking

routes by drawing them on the map and adding their stopping-off points with a short note about what they did there. Most participants were keen to study the emerging map and see what previous residents had added. When there were multiple participants contributing to the map simultaneously, spontaneous conversations and discussions emerged. Each workshop produced a colourful and heterogeneous map, full of stickers, lines, and notes in both English and Spanish.

[Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7]

I transcribed the participants' notes and identified the most frequently named places. As part of my analysis I produced an interim output in the form of an A2 poster that visually highlights some of these. This poster was displayed at subsequent workshops.

[Figure 8, Figure 9]

After an eight-month period of parental leave in 2018 I returned to find the situation in Elephant and Castle substantially altered. The redevelopment had now been approved, with one final judicial review challenge pending. Latin Elephant had succeeded in negotiating concessions for some of the local traders. The aim of *Walking the Elephant* had thus changed: In this situation any material I produced would no longer be an actor in an agonistic situation, but instead take the form of a record or an archival document – although it would take me a little while to recognise these as a valid alternative goals.

In this period a number of crises crystalised in my project: Firstly, as the original raison d'etre of the project had evaporated, I had to reconsider the potential use of the materials I was planning to create. Secondly the creation of the materials themselves delivered me into a maelstrom of questions regarding notions of expertise and processes of translation and representation: I had been planning to reformulate the workshop outcomes into visually more legible illustrated outputs using my expertise as an illustrator and designer but was paralysed by a sudden uncertainty of how to do this, in particular without a clear purpose in mind. When working with groups of people towards a collaborative illustrative document, is visual coherence even possible? Even though the dispersed ideas and visions of participating individuals are clustered around shared concerns – the sense of Elephant and Castle as a place that enables a social and cultural networks of familiarity and belonging, especially for groups of migrants – their material-visual rendering on the maps remained mercilessly heterogeneous and visually incoherent. What exactly was my role in drawing together the scattered contributions? How might I do this without suffocating the rich vitality of this undulating and overlapping flow of lines and systems of annotation evident in the maps? Wherein precisely lay my role and expertise as an illustrator and how could I harness it in the service of this migrant community that I myself was not part of?

After much indecision I opted to produce a concertina-folded, long strip of an illustration titled *Enter/Entrar* – an edited interpretation of the data collected on the maps – that strung together, in a fictionalised route across the site, the most frequently mentioned places from the maps. The backdrop was comprised of architectural elements found at Elephant and Castle such as steps, ramps, platforms and arches, with the route itself suggested by two in turn overlapping and diverging lines of coloured tape. The places (such as cafes, bars and shops) were represented through their names, with quotes by the workshop participants transcribed from the original maps scattered around them. A key problem I confronted was the question of how to represent humans in the

illustration. Initially I wanted to avoid drawing figures altogether. It felt crude to do so. Their physical and sartorial characteristics as well as the connotations of whatever drawing style I used were at odds with my developing ideas around community. Ultimately, I found myself unable to resolve the illustration without the use of figures, as the piece looked lifeless without them. I settled on simplified characters without facial features, but I remained somewhat unsatisfied with this solution and the cartoonish (and face-less!) sensibility they brought to the piece.

[Figure 10, Figure 11, Figure 12, Figure 13]

Working on this illustration I experienced at first hand the tensions and contradictions discussed in Clifford and Marcus' *Writing Culture* (1986): In the introduction, appropriately entitled 'Partial Truths', Clifford argues for an acknowledgement and foregrounding of the partial and fragmentary nature of ethnographic texts. The practice of ethnography was reconsidered: no longer simply a scientific description of peoples, cultures, their customs and habits, but as a reflexive process concerned with the production of text. This focus on textual production brought about an awareness of the contingent processes of decoding cultural phenomena by the researcher, and their subsequent re-encoding in the form of writing. Written accounts that hitherto had been regarded as neutral were now framed as a literary construction, shaped by conventions of rhetoric and genre, thus bringing into focus the 'constructed and artificial nature of cultural accounts' (Clifford 1986:2).

Ethnography's renewed sense of a discipline 'writing about, against and among cultures'[3] (Clifford 1986:3) has obvious overlaps with my work in Elephant and Castle, where I illustrate about, among and with people, their concerns, habits and experiences. Rather than observing the world with some reserve or distance, I had been keen to insert myself into the social fabric of a situation. Reflexive ethnography acknowledges that the writing is not a straightforward depiction of a reality 'out there' and is aware of and continuously reflecting on power dynamics, acknowledges partiality and takes into account the subjectivity of the ethnographer herself. This way of working foregrounds the fact that knowledge can be an intersubjective production, a mythopoetic invention, that arises from the interplay of researcher (or illustrator), participants and place.

Even though it was useful to reflect on *Enter/Entrar* as a form of collaborative, mythopoetic invention, these reflections did not assuage my concerns. I was still unsure about the processes of editing and reinterpretation I had submitted the original contributions to; and the mode of visual translation I had employed here. Prominent translation scholar Lawrence Venuti speaks of the 'ethnocentric violence of translation' (1995:18): He takes issue with the privileging of fluency in an attempt at creating the illusion of transparency in translated literary works. He calls for greater visibility of the translator, not only in furtherance of greater respect and appreciation for their work, but also so that they might take responsibility for the various forms of reduction and exclusion they inflict on the original text. While Venuti's choice of words ('ethnocentric violence of translation') feels somewhat extreme and punishing, I agree with the basic principle of an ethics of circumspection when re-interpreting other people's creative contributions. Venuti's writing eloquently articulates aspects of my discomfort while working on the piece and my desire to have found a better way to integrate participants' contributions in *Walking the Elephant*, by foregrounding them more directly in the final output, rather than redrawing them in the dominant values of the 'target language', in this case my understanding of

'communicative illustration', which had undoubtedly been shaped by my own European heritage and design education.

As a way to somewhat remedy this, I decided to include the maps themselves as part of the package of outputs: The two pamphlets *The Maps/Los Mapas 1* and *2* present a photographic record of the workshops and the resulting maps. The pamphlets were mailed to participants and given to Latin Elephant to use as they saw fit, but the fraught situation on the ground regarding the pending demolition, followed by the Covid-19 outbreak, effectively meant that a launch or public presentation or celebration of the material never took place.

[Figure 14, Figure 15, Figure 16]

Instead, I decided to partner with design studio See, Also (Lucy Maria and Mike Stevens) to develop a webpage about the project. This webpage was launched in November 2019 and sits as a tab on the main Latin Elephant website. The webpage is now the most visible and significant output of the project. It combines a description and documentation of the workshop process, the maps and my illustrated outputs in an engaging and impactful manner. It exists alongside other material that Latin Elephant have collated to record the life of the Elephant and Castle shopping centre before its demolition.

[Figure 17, Figure 18]

As the shopping centre was cleared and the bulldozers were moving in, the potential value of the material I had created became clear: While it had never fulfilled its original aim to act as a piece of evidence in an agonistic situation, it had become evidence of a different kind: a form of historical evidence, a documentation of a place that is now destroyed. I submitted the webpage to Layers of London (2016-ongoing), a map-based history website that showcases a place-based social history of London through multiple layers of digitised historic maps containing a multitude of community-generated resources and records. This project was initiated by historian Matthew Davies alongside multiple other project partners and has steadily grown to its current state as a dizzyingly rich, geographically situated, montage of stories, photos, maps, memories, and all manner of cross-referenced historical documents and accounts. Their innovative approach to historical content creation – crowd sourcing information through specialist interest groups, bolstered by a range of public engagement and community outreach initiatives (as evidenced in their evaluative report, Cullum, Jarvis, Unitt 2020: 29 – 34), its inclusive and easy-to-access character, as well as its digital format made it an obviously good fit for a project such as *Walking the Elephant*.

[Figure 19, Figure 20]

While working on the project, the seemingly opposite demands of preserving the vitality and heterogeneity of contributions, that speak of the same qualities in the group of people who made them and my desire to produce an illustration that 'made sense' and would be able to communicate with a range of audiences and publics, had become a key tension. In some ways my synthesising illustration obscured the very liveliness it sought to portray – through an attempt at re-presentation. The maps that resulted directly from the workshops communicated their vitality directly through overlapping lines and a multiplicity of notes, while *Enter/Entrar* is an attempt at subsequent re-presentation, an effort to visualise a complex enactment of routes and routines, a

nimble set of relations and kinship after it had taken place, with me – an outsider – trying to retrospectively create coherence and fill the gaps. Looking at the maps resulting from the workshop I saw the possibilities for a different strategy: rather than pursuing adequate means for representing community – an approach which assumes community to be something pre-existing and with at least some degree of consistency, perhaps collaborative illustration projects could achieve something else: create the conditions for people to meet and make something new together.

While reflecting on questions regarding the adequate means of representing community in general and figures in particular in the illustration, it became apparent that the notion of representation itself might be the problem. Illustration is often casually assumed to be a representational practice, where 'something out there' is represented, i.e. shown again, in visual form. The 're-' in 'representation' suggests that something exists prior to its pictorial rendering. In his essay 'The Age of the World Picture' Heidegger highlights the presumptions that underpin a representationalist world view, where 'the world is set out before oneself and set forth in relation to oneself' where man [sic] becomes the masterful subject standing apart from the world he is endeavouring to know. (Heidegger 1977: 132–33). While the appeal towards much greater levels of self-reflexivity in ethnography and translation studies go part of the way of addressing this dilemma, these don't yet directly tackle the other set of questions I was asking in my research: What actually is the nature of community? Is it actually 'something out there', that exists in a bounded, and continuous form? How can illustration help us reflect on this?

3.   **Tracing Expressions of Community**

The word 'community' has an almost visceral power. In contemporary vernacular the notion of community is used by both the political left and right to conjure a romantic dream. To 'live in community' is projected as a normative ideal, something to be reclaimed in opposition to those forces that have supposedly interrupted what was once the 'natural' way of life. On the left the idea of community is held up as an alternative to the competitive and alienating individualism of capitalist society. On the right the term carries overtones of ethnic identitarianism and is used in opposition to the supposed intrusion of disruptive alien bodies into what is believed to have been a hitherto harmonious unity. On both sides the term is tinged with nostalgia for an unspecified bygone era, when society is believed to have been structured in more 'organic' clusters of small face-to-face groupings. To speak of community is often to express a longing for something that is experienced as lost. Reflecting on the term, Jean-Luc Nancy says that speaking of community 'is like referring back to a lost love' (Nancy 2017: 51).

What is often missing from these conversations is a consideration of the more fundamental question as to the nature of 'community' itself: What does it mean to think of our existence in terms of multiplicity (rather than singularity)? How can we sidestep the traps laid out by the romantic and nostalgic overtones the word carries without throwing out the term completely? Could my problems that arose from my attempts to represent community be resolved through a different concept of the nature of community?

Reflecting on *Walking the Elephant* gave me the opportunity to think about how collaborative visual arts interventions might be a vehicle through which community can be enacted – rather than represented – without the burdensome dose of nostalgia that often accompanies this term. It made me realise that these kinds of participatory illustration projects can be thought of as generating a form of assembly around shared matters of concern – a socio-material frame that gathers up the relevant parties and, in doing so, creates the possibilities of individuals to encounter one another in an expression of community.

Nancy is considered an influential philosopher on questions of community, social relations and the possibility of collective sense-making (Devisch 2013, James 2006:1). He offers us a way of handling difficult notions such as community without mythologising them or dismantling them completely in the process of critical deconstruction. Through his complex and occasionally guarded manner of developing his thought he sidesteps the traps of a 'deluded proposal of a 'solution'' (which he also calls 'myth') on the one hand and the abyss of nihilism on the other (Librett in Nancy, 1997: xii).

As an illustrator and designer, the hasty lurch towards a 'deluded solutionism' feels all too familiar. When I set out on this research it was my aim to establish a set of tools and methods, perhaps a list of recommendations for illustrators and other visual artists of how to work with communities caught up in vertiginous urban regeneration projects. But through working on *Walking the Elephant* I realised that rather than proposing any particular course of action – a kind of prescriptive and closed solutionism – another way of working might also be possible: that is, illustration may present itself not as a solution to a problem, but as a method of coming to understand something about the nature of sociality itself. Instead of attempting to re-present communities affected by disruptive urban change, an approach that takes the existence of community as self-evident, it could start with an endeavour to bring people together in a way that enacts community, rather than representing it. Enacting community carries the potential for sociality taking new forms and manifestations in the face of cultural devastation. But in order to realise this, a more nuanced understanding of the nature of community was necessary.

Nancy's work on relational subjectivity builds on his reading of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Devisch 2013: xii). Heidegger is often credited as being the first contemporary, Western philosopher who put forward the now familiar idea that existence is essentially social in character, thereby breaking with the philosophical tradition of the Cartesian subject, who is encapsulated in their own sphere against an objective, external world (Schatzki 2005:233). Heidegger rejected these kinds of theories of subjectivity that present the self as an isolated, self-enclosed individual. Instead, he proposed a radically new characterisation of self-hood: there is no human self in absence of another. To be is always already to be in the communal world, to be with others, responsive to it and them. In this view others play a necessary role in the constitution of one's own being: we are dependent on each other to institute and maintain the shared world.

Despite Heidegger's existential structure of existence as co-existence, his philosophy has been characterised as solipsistic (Devisch 2013:79) and monadic – concerned with sociality only insofar as it is a feature of an individual life (Schatzki 2005: 236). For example, in his description of 'the 'Others' he writes that 'By "Others" we do not mean everyone else but me – those over against whom the "I" stand out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself […]' (Heidegger 1973: 154). In contrast Hannah

Arendt foregrounds plurality and difference in her political philosophy. She writes that '[…] men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. […] [t]his plurality is specifically the condition […] of all political life' (Arendt 1998:7), adding that '[…]we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live' (ibid :8).

Plurality and a free public realm were key concepts for Arendt. In *The Human Condition* she sets out her thesis that the political is something that arises between us in the space of the common world where humans can appear to one another and experience their plurality (Arendt 1998:52) through the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives (ibid: 57). The public realm gathers us together and yet prevents us from falling over each other (1998:52). This is made possible by a 'world of things [that] is between those who have it [the world] in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it' (ibid).

Arendt's metaphor of the table that gathers us up while preventing us from falling over each other is a powerful one. The table draws us in, in our plurality, while also holding us at an appropriate distance. It sets us in relation to one another and provides a surface, an arena, on which to display, share and elaborate on common concerns. Arendt's repeated use of the word 'things' in this context is intriguing. Bruno Latour in his essay on 'How to make things public' reminds us of the etymology of the word 'thing': before it came to mean 'object' or 'entity of matter' it stood for a 'certain type of archaic assembly', or an 'issue that brings people together' (2005: 12-13). Rather than focusing on our many political disagreements, opinions and passions, Latour suggests we should concentrate on the 'hidden coherence in what we are attached to' (ibid:5). In an expansion of Arendt's point, Latour's 'Things' (capitalisation in original) appear as complex socio-material assemblies that allow 'matters of concern' to occasion the gathering up of relevant parties. Building on Latour, contemporary Swedish scholars of participatory design Bjögvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren put forward the term 'design Things' which they describe as 'Things that are modifying the space of interactions and performance and that may be explored as socio-material frames for controversies, opening up new ways of thinking and behaving, being ready for unexpected use' (2012:102).

Both the Latourian and the designerly expansion of Arendt's 'things' resonate with the workshops I set up for *Walking the Elephant*. While my work was less concerned with being an arena for controversies, it can be understood as a 'socio-material frame that modifies the space of interactions', a 'Thing' that occasions the gathering up of different parties around a common 'matter of concern'. The workshops assembled groups of people with a shared interest and overlapping experiences: the lived experience of and concern for the site of the proposed urban transformation at Elephant and Castle. People were gathered up by the emerging manifestation of their overlapping worlds on pieces of paper and were invited to contribute their individual perspective to an emergent, polyvocal manifestation of their common world. But it was also those large pieces of paper, alongside the rules/ framework of the project, that prevented them from falling over one another.

This ability to gather while simultaneously preventing a collision is the first of three key observations on the possibilities of participatory illustration projects that grew out of my work on *Walking the Elephant*: The potential of these kinds of projects to transform a number of privately held interests and experiences, scattered amongst individuals, into a common, public 'thing' that assembles these individuals in their plurality and difference. Collaborative illustration has the capacity to act as a catalyst for a public encounter.

3.1. Drawing Community Together

While one of Arendt's main concerns was the importance of a free public space, in which people in their plurality can speak and act, Nancy's work foregrounds our ontological condition of being together and the possibility to rethink the notion of community as such. This difference also registers in their distinct approaches to multiplicity. For Arendt, the plurality of our shared world can only be realised in public, where public space acts as a safeguard for plurality, while for Nancy every kind of being is always already inherently relational and therefore social (Devisch & Vandeputte 2005). Building directly on Heidegger's concept of 'Dasein' (human existence) as dispersed in matters of the world and in relation to one another, Nancy sees a fundamental directedness towards others as the basis of the ontological condition in which we find ourselves. Heidegger's concepts of 'Dasein' and 'Mitsein' become Nancy's 'being-toward' and 'being-with'.

In *The Inoperative Community* (1991) Nancy suggests that community is not something that has been dislocated because modern subjects have become separated or ripped apart, but that our very separation, this rupture, is precisely the condition that makes community possible in the first place. He thereby rejects the nostalgic idea that 'community' is something that we have lost and must recover and suggest a need to rethink the concept on wholly new terms. Nancy dismantles the idea of community as an organic, unifying fusion of individuals predicated on a shared essence or self-realising identity (1991:15). Quite the contrary: community, according to Nancy, becomes possible in the very moment of our dispersal and rupture.

In a move that has some overlaps with Arendt's 'table in the public realm' that enables an encounter while ensuring the necessary separation for this to take place, Nancy proposes to think community as an encounter between singularities who are exposed to one another through their separation: 'The being of community is the exposure of singularities' (1991:30, emphasis in original). In this exposure, communication is essential. In *The Sense of the World* (1997) he writes of a 'seizure of speech' that would include all of the 'singular decipherings' that comprise the 'wandering labour of sense' (1997:115) and calls for a 'politics for the incessant tying up of singularities with each other' (1997:113). What specifically is communicated is less important than that there is communication at all: '[…] each communication is, above all, communication not of something held in common but of communicability' (1997:114).

This image of singularities exposed to one another, engaged in the 'wandering labour of sense' by 'incessantly tying up [their] singularities with each other' is a fitting description of the workshop scenarios in *Walking the Elephant*. The 'singular decipherings' of a particular neighbourhood became intermingled with each other on the shared piece of paper. I noted also how spontaneous conversations emerged when various people were taking part at the same time – they often chatted about their overlapping and divergent views of Elephant and Castle. New arrivals were keen to study how previous participants had marked up the map, and then added their own view in relation to what was already there. In Heideggerian terms this might recall the image of a common world: '[…] the world is always the one that I share with Others' (1973:155). However Nancy's nuanced thinking suggests a slightly more complicated picture – one which resonates with the results of

this projects more powerfully : there is no world, bar the sense we make in our collective being-towards something (1997:8). A world is something to be collectively made, not found.

Nancy's focus on communicability correlates with illustration. In *The History of Illustration* the authors describe illustration as 'visual communication through pictorial means' (Doyle, Grove, Sherman 2018: xvii) and in *Illustration Research Methods* the desire to communicate is posited as one of several key principles of illustration (Gannon & Fauchon 2021:16). However these general definitions are intended to characterise a finished piece of work. I am here concerned with the communication that can take place during the processual engagement with a project. The social and material framework, namely their immaterial set of agreed rules, structures and prompts ('draw your habitual walking route around the Elephant and Castle area!'), as well as their material manifestations as a large, shared piece of paper, occasioned the 'incessant tying up of singularities with each other'. On the maps the lines overlap. It becomes clear that 'my' neighbourhood is entangled with 'yours'. That which lies between us appears on the paper that we share. I see and acknowledge your neighbourhood and position my version in relation to yours.

This is particularly poignant in light of the intermingling of different groups of people that has taken place in Elephant and Castle more recently: Latin American retailers are no longer exclusively serving a Latin clientele but are supported by wider networks of local residents who have come to value the richness and multicultural character of the neighbourhood (Román-Velázquez & Retis 2021: 171). My workshops were not only attended by Latin American migrants, but by a range of different people, who expressed their attachments to migrant businesses as well as the area more generally. For example a white-British workshop participant noted down where he would go to eat his beloved 'helado de lúcuma', a Peruvian ice cream speciality. Another workshop participant noted how the area had changed for the better with the influx of Latin American migrants bringing liveliness to a previously neglected neighbourhood.

These reflections led me to the second key observation: that collaborative illustration projects are not only the catalyst for an encounter, as argued above, but can also act as the focal point for the duration of an encounter. 'Community' is here reconceived not as a pre-existing, stable group or identity, but as a continuous process of individuals 'exposing themselves to each other', through acts of communication and processes of collective sense-making. These processes continuously unfold in everyday life, but collaborative illustration projects have the capacity to – quite literally – delineate these. The process of gathering around a large piece of paper and jointly bringing about the emergence of a shared world through overlapping lines and notations brings materiality and focus to the otherwise immaterial and fleeting 'wandering labour of sense'.

3.2 Ex-posing Community

Nancy believes that plural sense-making unfolds in its most lucid and unambiguous form through linguistic modes – either in different forms of speech acts, or, what he terms 'literary writing' (1991:64). According to him, literature is 'where the sharing of human voices and community occurs; it is where the new and the different can be affirmed' (James 2006:196). It is surprising that Nancy doesn't consider collaborative or

dialogic forms of praxis to a greater extent for evidence of this sharing of human voice and affirmation of the new and different.

The workshops I organised for *Walking the Elephant* revealed themselves to be doing just that: to manifest and materialise the exposure of singularities to one another. The maps evidence a sharing of human voices and the affirmation of the new and different. The criss-crossing lines and overlapping notes function both as evidence of the processes that led to their creation and also offer new and different vistas of Elephant and Castle. They are a far-cry from pre-existing collective topographical imaginaries that I had wanted to capture when I set out on this project. Nobody had imagined Elephant and Castle to look like *that*! Instead, they are non-totalising, intertwining manifestation of divergent routines and common concerns, exposed and revealed at the moment of their sharing. They are material manifestations of the worlds that arise in-between people, a visible record of Nancy's 'praxis of sense'.

I have reflected on participants' exposure to one another, but of course, I too, revealed and exposed myself in this project. The struggle to create the synthesising re-interpretation of participants' contributions in the illustration *Enter/Entrar* was a turning point that helped me re-conceive my research. It is possible to reflect on this moment in the mode proposed by self-reflexive ethnography or translation studies: acknowledging the partiality of the illustrator and foregrounding their contribution to the 'mythopoetic invention' that is the nature of the work. But those sets of ideas can also lose their friction and vitality if not handled thoughtfully, and give licence for listlessly slumping towards the banal claim that because all truths are constructed by the ethnographer/ translator/ illustrator anything they might produce is equally valid, thereby escaping critical scrutiny. An alternative way to phrase it is to think of myself being exposed in that encounter – as a research and illustrator grappling with a set of ideas and concerns. The illustration is a record of that which was able to appear between the participants and me at this particular moment in time.

The third and final observation that arose from my reflections on *Walking the Elephant* is this: Collaborative illustration projects do not only function as a catalyst and focal point of a series of encounters, they can also act as a trace of these encounters thereafter, because illustration, unlike spoken language, creates a material record of itself. The outputs of *Walking the Elephant* are logged on Layers of London as a 'record' (the site allows for 'records' and 'collections') and in this new context they are gathering up new sets of intertextual relations. This has now become part of an accessible archive of social and cultural life in London. It is a co-constituted artifact – an illustrated document of Latin American migrants and other residents asserting their existence as community at a particular moment in the history of Elephant and Castle.

4. Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated how illustration practice can offer more than what is usually expected of visual artists when they are drawn into community regeneration projects. The Latin American migrant community in South London was confronting the radical dissolution of a site of their cultural production. My initial engagement was to collaborate with a local charity and draw up a series of participatory, creative workshops that engaged traders and residents in a collective mapping project visualising habitual routes and

routines in the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, which was being demolished. They resulted in a series of large heterogeneous maps which I then sought to translate into a more coherent and visually legible and communicative format. This involved the creation of a new illustration, which drew on the data presented in the maps. It was, however, precisely this process of translation that prompted a series of questions concerning the representation of the community. There was a tension between the notion of visual legibility on the one hand and the liveliness I was seeking to represent, and there were also further questions about visualising a community that I myself am not part of. However, the most poignant question that presented itself to me was the problem of representationalism itself. The visual arts are often assumed to be in the business of re-presenting something 'out there', a pre-existing entity that is subsequently rendered in pictorial form. Through working on this project I came to see that illustration practice does not necessarily need to be mimetic or representationalist.

I have argued here that collaborative illustration projects such as the one I describe in this article offer us an alternative: Rather than focus on the best methods of how to translate the materials that emerge from the participatory workshops after they have drawn to a close, the spotlight needs to be on the workshops themselves. Conceiving them as a form of 'data collection' misses the point. It is during the workshops where community can be enacted. The large pieces of paper gather people up around a shared concern – and invite them to contribute their version of Elephant and Castle into an undulating collective presentation. The drawing tools and paper become tools to bring people together, to offer them a mode of rendering a world they share, and to subsequently emerge as a documentary trace and record of the encounter. Illustration thus has the capacity to present a framework to reconsider, record and reflect on the relations that occur in our everyday experience of community.

This grows out of a Nancean conception of community as a 'community of communication'. Nancy describes our fundamental ontological condition as singularities directed towards one another. These kinds of illustration projects can act as a gesture of affirmation of this social ontology, by exposing and illuminating processes of co-existence.

Following this realisation I altered my approach to designing collaborative illustration projects. Subsequent projects had a stronger focus on the workshops themselves as a locus for enabling memorable experiences of collectivity and producing results that can be woven more directly into final outputs. The details vary, depending on the group and the circumstance. The key is to assemble parties around a shared concern, coax them into picking up a pen and move it across a sheet of paper. As they start drawing their lines, they are drawn in and drawn together.

Notes

1. Emily Jost (member of Artists Against Social Cleansing) and Ian Whadcock (Senior Lecturer in Illustration with Animation at Manchester School of Art) debate the merits and pitfalls of illustrators working with developers as follows: Jost argues that developer-led 'artwashing' is a highly contentious practice which ultimately harms the communities that the illustrator is asked to work with. Ian Whadcock maintains that positive outcomes can be achieved by illustrators building bridges and educating commissioners.

2. The organisation was set up by Patria Román-Velázquez in 2014, a Puerto-Rican academic and community activist, in order to increase participation, engagement and inclusion of migrant and ethnic groups in processes of urban change in London. They advocate against the displacement of minority ethnic groups in regeneration projects and call for greater social and spatial justice with a particular focus on Southwark – the South London borough where Elephant and Castle is located. See www.latinelephant.org for more information.

3. The problematic understanding of the anthropological concept of a bounded 'culture', based on notions of organic unity and traditional continuity (Clifford 1988), has parallels with similarly disagreeable interpretations of the concept of 'community', which is the focus of the next section.

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FIGURES LEGEND

Figure 1. Preparation for *Walking the Elephant* workshop, April 2017

Figure 2. Participants at *Walking the Elephant* workshop, 27-28 April 2017. Photograph by Cristina Errea

Figure 3. Participants at *Walking the Elephant* workshop, 27-28 April 2017. Photograph by Cristina Errea

Figure 4. Participant at *Walking the Elephant* workshop, 27-28 April 2017. Photograph by Cristina Errea

Figure 5. Participant and author at *Walking the Elephant* workshop, 7 July 2017. Photograph by Daniel Hopkinson

Figure 6. Participant at *Walking the Elephant* workshop, 7 July 2017. Photograph by Daniel Hopkinson

Figure 7. Map made up of the combined results from two *Walking the Elephant* workshops

Figure 8. Interim analysis of the results from two *Walking the Elephant* workshops in the form of an A2 poster

Figure 9. Participants at *Walking the Elephant* workshop, with the interim analysis poster on display, 10 July 2017. Photograph by Daniel Hopkinson

Figure 10. *Enter/Entrar* illustration

Figure 11. *Enter/Entrar* concertina-style booklet

Figure 12. *Enter/Entrar* concertina-style booklet

Figure 13. *Enter/Entrar* concertina-style booklet

Figure 14. An overview of all printed outputs: *Enter/Entrar*, *Los Mapas 1* and *Los Mapas 2*

Figure 15. *Los Mapas* printed leaflets

Figure 16. *Los Mapas* printed leaflet, unfolding to reveal documentary photos and map

Figure 17. Screenshot of *Walking the Elephant* webpage, designed with See, Also studio (www.see-also.com, Lucy Maria and Mike Stevens). This webpage sits as a tab on the Latin Elephant website: latinelephant.org/walkingtheelephant

Figure 18. Screenshot of *Enter/Entrar* as displayed on the *Walking the Elephant* webpage. The illustration reveals subtly animated elements when the user scrolls along.

Figure 19. Screenshot of the *Walking the Elephant* record as it appears on Layers of London: www.layersoflondon.org/map/records/walking-the-elephant

Figure 20. Screenshot of *Walking the Elephant* alongside other records on Layers of London