Experts by Experience

The Scope and Limits of Collaborative Pedagogy with Marginalised Asylum Seekers

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> For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not patho-
> logical but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real
> power is discovered.
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> —Audre Lorde, 1984

On a December evening in 2018 our group sat together in a seminar
room at the University of Manchester waiting for friends and family
to arrive. We distracted ourselves by picking at the food prepared and
brought along by members of the group. We commented on how each
one of us looked in our posh clothes. The feeling in the room was
a mixture of excitement, apprehension and a touch of tension. The
women were excited to showcase how far we had come with the re-
search project and to have their families attend the graduation. There
was apprehension about how the event would unfold. Who would at-
tend? Would it go according to plan? We were tense as our work was
out for public scrutiny and our colleagues were going to be in the audi-
ence. On the day, our tension was heightened by the fact that our Chief
Guest had not arrived till 6:55 p.m. and we were meant to be starting
at 7:00 p.m. and we had an audience of almost seventy people that we
wanted to impress. This evening was the culmination of two years of
engagement and knowledge exchange between members of the activist
group Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST) and anthropologists
Rubina Jasani and Jack López. A cross-section of organisations that
WAST works with along with the trustees of the organisation and key
workers were present in the audience.

The ceremony was an emotionally charged event with a powerful speech by WAST founder Farhat Khan, who described a personal time-line of events that began with years of neglect and domestic abuse in Pakistan, from which she fled to the UK with her children to seek asylum. Her own narrative of the challenges and rejection she had faced while seeking sanctuary in the UK resonated deeply with the women, family and friends in the audience. Her account moved the audience and the women and there were many tears. Each one of the ten women graduating that evening had faced forced displacement, rejection, homelessness and animosity from the Home Office and re-mained to that day under the imposed condition 'No Recourse to Pub-lic Funds' (NRPF).[1] Aside from excluding people from employment, benefits, social housing and secondary health care services, the NRPF (combined with a rejected asylum application) creates major barri-ers for adults to access education and training, and as such gradually strips these individuals of their social and intellectual worth. On the odd occasion that women do enter the educational environment, they do so as an object of study rather than individuals with specific exper-tise and knowledge to offer.

In this chapter we retell our experience of organising and running col-laborative research training with women from WAST. This programme was conceptualised by the two anthropologists to challenge the idea of 'giving voice' in anthropology and using peer ethnography as a method to train asylum-seeking women to tell their own stories. This entailed designing a research training programme and training them in basic research skills. This programme was delivered by the anthropologists with support from two other feminist academics from the university. An independent consultant was hired for our first session, who helped us in laying down intentions from both sides and helping us think through the smaller details of the programme. Ten research training sessions were delivered, with a follow-up practice session on interviewing and transcription skills. Skills in research governance were also provided. The Peer Ethnographic Evaluation Approach (PEER) is an innovative method derived from the anthropology of health approach to fieldwork (see Price and Hawkins 2002; Elmusharaf et al. 2017). The method is based on the principle that peer researchers already have an established relationship of trust and understanding with the people they interview. The peer researchers collect data (interviews, observations, pre-exist-ing interpretations) among their own social networks, and this is col-lectively analysed to explore issues prevalent to the peer researchers' community.

We use text and image to reflect on how we took a combined pedagogy of peer ethnographic practice and self-advocacy activism to *open up* the university as a site of action learning. Our intention was twofold: to interrupt the exclusionary and hierarchical space of the university and begin a project in which the agenda would be directed by the participants as opposed to the dominant narratives within the discipline. Inspired by the empowerment pedagogies of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, the activism of groups like WAST, Southall Black Sisters, Right to Remain and anti-racist activist scholars (see Johnson et al. 2018; Bhopal 2018), our aim was to take a leap of faith into a space of a more honest academic co-production. Our (López and Jasani) only standpoint at the outset was that collectively we were experts in ourselves and we had much to learn from each other. The process was messy and often chaotic from the outset, often mirroring the lives of the women who participated in the project. As academics we had to learn to unlearn our pursuit of perfection, be ready for constant surprises and help each other unpack those surprises in our debriefing sessions with the aim to move the project further.

The following paragraphs reflect on our pedagogic practice and the challenges and compromises that the group faced in the first eighteen months of the project. Our approach to research as activism mirrors the WAST philosophy of the activism of coming together. We take this approach into the creation of our outputs, whether written or multi-media. Though Jasani and López have organised the words and paragraphs that make up this chapter, the content is derived from the collective work of the group who took on the task of making this chapter happen (Jasani, López, Nyang, D., Mango, Mwoyoweshumba and Afhsan). The ideas, reflections, observations and comments come from the seven people who came together one warm, stuffy day to structure and discuss the contents. It seems ironic that on the day we worked together to create this chapter we were in a first-floor classroom in the Samuel Alexander building of the School of Arts and Languages, an early twentieth-century building with an impressive white Roman facade, a prime spot for graduation photos. Our classroom window looked over a lawn area where families and students were gathering to celebrate their newly awarded degrees. As described in the opening paragraph, we did hold our own graduation ceremony, but we were unable to mark the occasion with gowns and public recognition, something that the group had felt missing. Such actions are a reminder of the limitations of academic activism within institutions where we are often restrained by the established rules of *how things should be done.* A similar accusation

can be made of authorship and writing as something restricted to words typed on paper. When we write our seven names as co-authors, we are moving beyond tokenism to fully acknowledge that the labour involved in knowledge production was undertaken by all of us and these words would not exist without that collective labour.

Peer Ethnographic Practice with Socially Abandoned Populations

People with rejected asylum applications remain in limbo, homeless and without recourse, trapped in what medical anthropologist Joal Biehl (2013) terms 'zones of social abandonment', where neither legal authorities nor welfare or medical institutions directly intervene.[2] Biehl refers to these zones as the space of social death, where those who have no place in the social world, yet who are living, are left until they die. Marrow and Lurhmann (2012: 495) extended the concept further to describe a space that is 'absolute and universal, beyond culture and society, a bleak existential otherness'. Not all adults seeking asylum in the UK are provided with accommodation. This depends on whether they have dependants, whether they are in between appeals and whether or not they are known to the Home Office (undocumented, trafficked or escaping removal). There is no recorded data of what happens to refused asylum applicants in the UK who are not deported or detained by the state. Our own research shows that many women sleep on floors and sofas within their asylum community network, though they drift in and out of homelessness. Directed into these transient migrant zones by the state (via rejection or appeal status), 'individuals are sure to become unknowables with no human rights and with no one accountable for their condition' (Biehl 2013: 4). Black women and women of colour (and minority genders) who make up just under half of the known asylum-seeking population (Walsh 2019) are made more vulnerable as 'increasing numbers of people who are not part of mapped populations' (Biehl 2013: 4). The most significant issue for our project was to interrupt this daily experience of racialised abandonment and in doing so challenge institutional structures. We did that by opening up the university, a site where their subjectivity was a part of academic interrogation, but their bodies could never make it into institutional settings with the aim of gaining skills of the very process that creates their subjectivity in the first place.

Asylum-seeking and refugee women are often the subject of research or classroom analysis but they are rarely the protagonists in the conversation. Moreover, UK higher education institutions tend to make in-

visible overt questions of race within their new social diversity and widening participation agendas (Bhopal 2018). Though questions of gender, class and disability arise from the ever-increasing institutional strategies, race is a factor that comes to the forefront whenever diversity and widening participation are linked. Bringing women stripped of their scholarly identity and citizenship into the university, we hoped to shine a light on the types of knowledge silenced through the exclusion and oppression of specific communities. As feminists committed to intersectionality, we understand social reality as multi-dimensional, lived identities as intertwined and systems of oppression as meshed and mutually constitutive. We followed epistemic and political recognition of different ways of knowing and living and changed social relations via coalitional dynamics rather than notions of sameness underlying liberal notions of equality. Intersectionality calls for epistemological and political transformation and makes space for alternative notions of subjectivity, agency and equality (May 2013).

As first-generation scholars and anthropologists, we are committed to the idea that ethnography as pedagogy serves as an important tool for engaging with people new to applied participatory research. With little time to give the group a strong grounding in the ethnographic approach, we needed a practical classroom method to teach as we went along. In our context, because the peer researchers were associated with WAST for varying periods of time and the organisation was user led, there was empathy for what they had been through and a belief that they would all get through this together. Every milestone was celebrated at the weekly drop-ins and every downfall was sensitively dealt with, which meant that there was trust between the women and hence the assumption was that the interviewing process would become easier. This is not to say that there were no hierarchies of class and race within the group, but the fact that they were all asylum seekers meant that they had some recognition that they were all in it together. In post-interview reflections, the women spoke about the differences they felt in being in the 'outsider' position. The group was aware this may happen as it was covered in the initial training sessions. Positionality and power dynamics are often reported as a negative in auto-ethnography or anthropology 'at home' texts. In the case of the WAST researchers, the group reported the positive feeling of being shifted out of their role of WAST member to researcher. Comparing the interview transcripts of Jasani, López and Afhsan also demonstrated an openness (in those of Afhsan) that would not necessarily take place with a true outsider.

Over the duration of the project the peer researchers in effect become key informants by virtue of their recognised status. We adapted this method for use in the classroom as a way to guide the initial training workshops with a group of twenty women. It gave us a way to introduce ethnographic research practice to the group without pre-defining the agenda of the research. Before reaching the stage of data collection, we were attempting to create a democratic community of learning with the group that drew from their strengths and knowledge as individuals. In this way we took an ethnographic approach to teaching the group using what we learnt from them and our own reflections at each stage to plan the following workshop.

We were concerned not with pre-supposing the research questions but with observing and listening in workshops to identify the core issues touched upon by the group. Devising a structure of workshops to meet the needs of a research project, while creating an open transformative space to assess knowledge and ideas, to be led by the group but also to take the lead when appropriate. Over months we played with structure, delivery, timescales and materials to see what worked best. As democratic educators we took for granted that anyone who 'knows how to read and write has the tools needed to access higher learning even if that learning cannot and does not take place in a university setting' (hooks 2003: 42). Yet part of this commitment to democratic learning is acknowledging that the conditions for empowerment require other forms of support and environmental understanding if a learning community is to have any measure of success. We had to learn to be reactive to tensions in the group, chaotic and precarious lives, our own lack of focus (due to other teaching and institutional commitments), constant revision of our intentions as a group and how we explained this to the institution housing our project and bodies that were to eventually fund us.

In formalised education and learning there is a focus on the past (what is known) and an obsession with the future (knowledge judged on its ability to predict or be applied to an imaginary timeline). 'Most of us teach and are taught that it is only the future that really matters' (hooks 2003: 167). But what happens when you perceive the future to be unknown in a way completely beyond your control? When you understand that lulling yourself into thinking about the future only makes the precarious present unbearable? The lives of women in the group were and are given to the here and now, a present in a process of perpetual renewal and at risk. Through embracing the immediacy of the present in the classroom we see how teaching and learning are both constantly taking place and under revision. This immediacy and ex-

change of world knowledge in the few hours a month we had to work together forces an intense practice of critical thinking unconstrained by academic norms. In the following section we invite the reader(s) of this chapter to explore the words and images of the group as we reflected on the activities that led us to our first instance of empirical data collection – a study on self-advocacy and the impact of activism on precarious individuals by being a member of WAST. The 'artefacts' below arose from a collective writing workshop used to plan this chapter. The words below offer a description in the group's own words of the educational process, including what the different spaces and activities meant to us at the time. Our use of unedited outputs within our co-authorship embraces the group's commitment to experimentation and documentation of learning in action.

Creating a Community of Learning

After spending around four months getting to know women in WAST's own environment, consisting of attending meetings at their office base
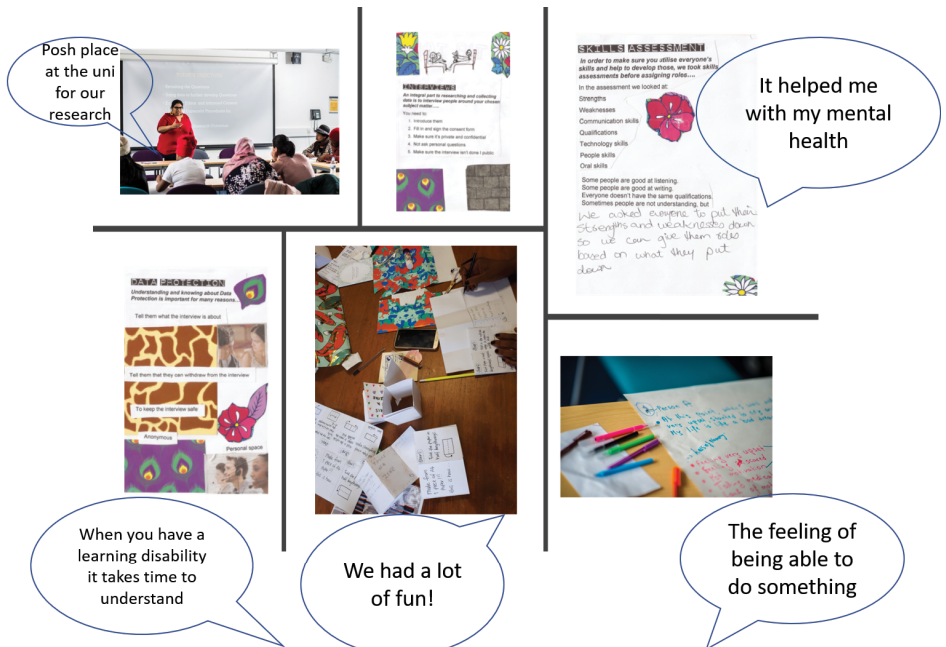
Figure 7.1. Training and workshops: the women attended training in the formal setting of university classrooms and creative workshops at the project building. We reflected on working in both settings. Photos by the authors.

and calling into weekly drop-in sessions, we felt ready to recruit potential community researchers. We held a series of workshops at the university teaching the fundamentals of social research, including ethics, design, qualitative field methods, transcription and analysis. The workshops were initially attended by twenty women, but this quickly reduced to a committed group of ten. We decided from the outset to use the university campus to give the group a sense of place and purpose in their work. Our intention was to create a learning space that felt comfortable yet official.

Many of the women had visited classes that we taught on degrees in Humanitarian Conflict Response and Global Health and were familiar with university spaces. But almost all of them were experiencing university as a learning space for the first time in the UK (some of them were trained teachers and had held NGO jobs in their countries). We realised within the first few sessions that we could not plan sessions and run them, coordinate the logistics and do our job as ethnographers in this space. Once we had conducted a few sessions, we invited colleagues working within the university to teach. We observed that our peer ethnographers were more attentive when external facilitators were in the room. This freed us up for participant observation, understanding the space, the people and the learning dynamic better. The group constituted of African, South Asian and Eastern European women who ranged between twenty-two and fifty-five years of age. There were interesting racial, caste, cultural and community dynamics at play in the classroom settings that were reflected in the WAST drop-ins on Fridays. What brings WAST women together is their experience of forced migration and inhabiting 'zones of abandonment' in the city. Understanding the class, race, community and caste dynamic was extremely important for quelling unrest in the classroom and understanding the difference between entitlement to knowledge and space. We also observed that to keep the interest of the group and for them to connect with the learning, long breaks in between sessions were not a good thing. This was hard on the academic diary as we were constantly fire-fighting between the two different worlds of learning and teaching that we were straddling. We also had to unlearn using academic jargon and instead use language that was clear and simple.

Collaborative Methodology

Based on our group discussions and observations from the workshops we gradually formulated a research design and pilot project to test out

Figure 7.2. Transferrable skills: the group experimented with visual methodologies, learning skills in film, photography and zine making. Photos by the authors.

our data collection skills. We were aware from the information that was often shared among the group that our first attempt at recording data and interviewing had to stay true to the core social research principle of 'do no harm'. We wanted to explore unknown aspects of the lives of WAST members, but we also had identified early on that it was important to avoid framing our participants as victims of circumstance. Over time we were able to compromise on issues and topics that the group thought were important to study, such as mental health, children, resilience and access to support. The group wanted to focus on the strengths of people in their community who were thriving despite being abandoned by the system. We settled on the research question 'What does WAST mean to you?' and the research objective of exploring how a transient population can organise, campaign and support each other while living under the threat of deportation or abandonment. From here we needed to test out the appropriateness of classic qualitative methods and see if they were flexible enough to capture moments in the lives of people whose circumstances shift from one day to the next.

While formal research training took place in university classrooms, data collection took place at the WAST drop-ins, a weekly support and self-help group that takes place in a city centre Methodist church. It is a hectic and animated environment that can be attended by up to eighty women and their children. In this space women exchange information and ideas, organise support for each other and campaigns, eat food, sing and dance. The wall of sound that meets you upon entering the large room, the coming and going, the exchange of clothing, food, spontaneous music and women self-segregating in groups defined by nationality makes it all seem, to an outsider, like utter chaos. Yet, in between the noise and movement there is organisation and community action, a place where women can relax and, for some, feel safe for perhaps the only time in that day. Although the drop-in was a familiar space for the researchers, embodying the 'researcher' role within this space was not easy as some of them struggled with the formal role of explaining information sheets, getting consent and then speaking to the women about their lives 'objectively'. Peer researchers found meetings and participant observation at the drop-in incredibly hard, find-

Figure 7.3. Analysis workshops: group analysis of interview and observation data was critical to the peer ethnographic evaluation approach. Photos by the authors.

ing it too difficult to concentrate with the noise, struggling with small children and numerous other distractions. Because they were so implicated within the asylum process, they found it challenging to separate their own experiences from those of other women. We attempted to get around this through listening to tapes and individual feedback sessions that we organised with each of the researchers. We also moved back into the university and the classroom structure to complete transcription work and to attempt collaborative analysis. Trying to translate our thoughts and observations into 'findings' became a major stumbling block and exposed the impractical nature of reducing the incoherent mess of daily life to some 'key points' for learning.

We decided to experiment with different ways to think about understanding what we were learning as a group. The classroom environment began to feel like a hindrance to creativity in this sense and we swapped once more to the community environment to see what would happen if we reflected upon our learning through the art of zine making. The zine workshops were held at the WAST office, where the aim was to chronicle their journey of learning to do research, and were facilitated by an external artist. The space was familiar, informal and

Figure 7.4. Zine making: creativity and art making as method flowed more freely when we held workshops in a community setting. Photos by the authors.

the task at hand creative. While they enjoyed the creative process, we found it difficult to sustain their enthusiasm and wondered if the engagement would have been different if these sessions were conducted at the university. In these spaces, we also wondered if we were turning into yet another NGO that they were engaged with in the city. Asylum seekers were engaged in various activities with a few organisations within the city, some of whom provided practical support and others engaged with them creatively. Most organisations reimbursed bus fares and provided a warm meal and sometimes the women would attend more than three meetings in a day. When we found their engagement wavering, we wondered if we were also yet another group trying to engage with them in the city. Spatially our learning community had moved beyond the borders of the university and the classroom; it had moved into their 'everyday' spaces. How they read learning in each of these spaces was different, but what we observed over time was their growth in confidence and ability to question processes related to research ethics, governance and conducting interviews.

Conclusion

University represented different things for each of us. While as academics we are critical of the university as a neoliberal space that perpetuates white supremacy and exploitation of ethnic minorities (Joseph-Salisbury 2018), our peer researchers associated university with freedom and empowerment. The encounter with the university brought an element of hope into their lives. Members of the group reported that being part of the project gave them a purpose and excitement of doing something new and useful and being visible in a space that was beyond their imagination. Comments and evaluations with the group implied that they felt legitimised by the space and our fieldnotes evidence the use of the word 'hope' in many conversations. The graduation ceremony brought this legitimation full circle when other WAST members expressed a desire to 'come to uni' and be trained as community researchers. Marking the end of the training with a graduation ceremony and certificates meant the group had evidence to use for their asylum claims and future job applications. It is a sad irony that asylum applicants must demonstrate forms of good citizenship and societal engagement in the UK when their situation renders them excluded from social structures and community.

In doing this piece of work, as scholars, we realised that our idea of collaborative knowledge production came from a place of privilege. We

need to interrogate our deployment of the term critically as the process of conducting peer research meant deployment of invisible emotional labour from our peer ethnographers who worked on their social capital to recruit women whose stories they would be drawing on for analysis. It made us think about how the pursuit of authenticity takes the social capital of the most vulnerable people for granted and how that fits in with peer ethnography as a method. The larger questions for the academy are: can the subject ever be the student? and what would it take for higher education to embrace true communities of learning?

On a final note, the research subject/student/expert positioning brings us to the question of authenticity. The traditional and exclusionary approach of higher education scholarship works to remove authenticity from non-scholars as experts. Authenticity, of course, is dependent on context, such as when members of WAST performed as a choir at a conference on migration scholarship organised by our colleagues, or speaking of trauma to our students learning about precarious lives. In those spaces the group members are legitimated as *authentic asylum seekers or survivors of trauma*. The women's very presence as black women and women of colour and their acts of testimony leave that authenticity in this context unquestioned. Yet, in the Home Office reporting centre, the authenticity of their same narratives is doubted, charged by the courts as something to be proved. Can we say the same about their active roles as campaigners, researchers and expert witnesses? How much harder must they work to become community researchers in their own right, and why does this matter? In the group's own understanding, authenticity is defined by audiences positioning them as the 'experts' and wanting to tap into their lived experiences of forced migration and displacement. But when they were carrying out research and training they kept looking to us as academics for answers as we were the 'authentic academic experts' in that space.

Since we were dealing with failed asylum seekers who had NRPF and who were at the periphery of race and class hierarchy, their reading of race and gender reflected understandings of race and class that they had internalised through their encounters with the asylum system and the NGO world in the city. While they acknowledged Rubina's presence on the project, it was always presumed that there was a hierarchy and group members often joked that she worked for Jenna. It was only during the data analysis sessions, when they saw Rubina in her office, that they realised that she was also staff. For Lorde, regardless of what we do or do not say, we will always be marked as bodies out of place (Puwar 2004). By marking Rubina's body as out of place in the uni-

versity system, the women were showing us how they saw their own bodies as students within this system. The respect that some of our white colleagues commanded in terms of effectiveness and efficacy was also an extension of the marking of legitimate bodies of knowing and imparters of knowledge.

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Notes

1. NRPF is a condition imposed on a person due to their immigration status. Section 115 Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that a person will have 'no recourse to public funds' if they are 'subject to immigration control'. See http://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/.
2. Biehl's ethnography, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, is centred in an unregulated (psychiatric) asylum community in Brazil, a place where families abandon mentally ill, disabled, incurably diseased relatives when they do not have the economic or social resources to care for them.

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