Performing Moretonhampstead: rurality, participation and cultural value[[1]](#endnote-1)

Kerrie Schaefer

Drama, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

[K.V.Schaefer@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:K.V.Schaefer@exeter.ac.uk)

Delyth Edwards

Social Work, Care and Justice, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

edwardd@hope.ac.uk

Jane Milling

Drama, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

J.R.Milling@exeter.ac.uk

**Abstract**

This paper is based on a multi-sited ethnography of subjects engaged in performance-based participation – amateur theatre, community-based theatre and Carnival - in the market town of Moretonhampstead on Dartmoor in the South West of England. Given its setting, the case study examines the rural dimensions of participation and cultural value. In addition to understanding the meaning and value of performance-based participation taking place in shared communal spaces, including the parish hall and the high street, this article seeks to understand everyday participation as a fundamentally embodied and emplaced practice. Place is not simply a venue or site for performance (or any other type of) participation. Drawing on the place theory of Edward Casey, who follows the European school of phenomenology, it is argued that place is, rather, the fundamental ground of human experience: embodied subjects and places co-evolve in a dialogic process of inter-animation. The main question we ask is how rurality shapes participation and how participation re-produces material and imaginary rural spaces. A key characteristic of government funding of arts and culture in the UK is extreme inequality in the distribution of funds to the City of London compared to the rest of the UK. While the cultural ecosystems of all UK regions outside London are equally disadvantaged in this respect, economic and cultural development in the South West region exacerbates this unequal situation by focussing investment and service provision in urban hubs, leaving contrasting rural areas doubly disadvantaged. This case study argues that an idyll-ized rural imaginary re-produced in and through everyday participation is only compounded by government deficits. Furthermore, it asserts that cultural policy making concerned with the value of equality must adopt a co-ordinated approach that takes into account complex interdependencies of national, regional and local registers of place.

Keywords: place, participation, rurality, performance, cultural value, cultural policy

**Place and Participation: from a cultural geography of lack to an understanding of embodied and ‘emplaced’ participation.**

A key research question for the UEP project is the relationship between space, place and participation. This question is prompted, firstly, by the place of participation (and non-participation) as a central logic in cultural policy (Miles and Gibson, 2016). Participation is a contested term. It can take on different meanings in diverse contexts (Cooke and Kothari, 2001, Noorani, Blencowe and Brigstocke, 2013). A frequently used buzzword, it is probably impossible to find or agree a definitive definition of the term. In the cultural policy studies field, participation has been closely aligned with a concern for equality of access to publically funded arts and culture. Some cultural practitioners/researchers have extended a concern with access to and participation in ‘legitimate’ (state-funded) forms of culture into the recognition of and support for cultural rights, cultural democracy and cultural diversity (see, for instance, Appignanesi, 2011, Braden, 1978, Gibson, 2008, Hawkins, 2001, Kelly, 1984, Matarasso, 2013, Shelton Trust, 1986; Watt, 2000). Within cultural policy itself, participation is used as an indication of public engagement in official culture (for instance as measured by the *Taking Part Survey*), with state resources re-directed towards improving rates of low or non-participation. Gay Hawkins argues that state systems of subsidy that target constituencies uninterested in or unwilling to engage in a restricted (elite) range of art forms, and that entreat them to ‘take part’, are founded on a model of “cultural deficit” (2001). Miles and Sullivan (2012) argue, further, that this “deficit model of participation” precludes knowledge of other forms of participation, understood as practices of cultural consumption and re-production in everyday life.

With the development of instrumental cultural policy in the UK (and elsewhere) since the 1980s, and a concomitant alignment of economic, social and cultural policy aims, participation has become an even more loaded, ambiguous and problematic concept. Wyatt, MacDowall and Mulligan (2013) have argued that the instrumentalization of the arts is linked to a shift in governance in a post-welfare state from a “disciplinary” mode to a more “collaborative, and consensual” mode of “governing through community” (p. 83). Closely connected to the nexus of place and community (see Miles and Gibson, 2016), cultural participation is posited to have an impact (only and always positively) via the regeneration of economically deprived, (typically) urban areas experiencing high levels of ‘social exclusion’ (see McGuigan, 2005, O’Brien, 2011). Thus, within instrumental cultural policy the “deficit model of participation” is overlaid by what Gillian Rose has referred to as the “geography of lack” (1997). As Abigail Gilmore has noted, places (and, by association, the people who live in them) are designated as “cold spots, crap towns and cultural deserts” (2013) in need of public investment to ameliorate deprivation and social exclusion.

The UEP project aims to reorient the development of cultural policy from a deficit model of participation, and, in the process, to dis-assemble the economically over-determined, instrumental relationship between place, community and (non-) participation. These terms may then be re-assembled in other ways, with participation understood as an embodied and ‘emplaced’ (Lewis, 2006) practice. Lisanne Gibson has highlighted the omission of place from British sociological studies which draw on Bourdieu’s work in *Distinction* (1984) to analyse the social stratification of cultural consumption (2010). Adopting a “cultural ecosystem” approach (Miles and Gibson, 2016), UEP aims to analyse the inter-action of processes of social stratification, particularly as embodied in habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984), and the characteristics of place/s in context. In this piece, we draw on interdisciplinary performance studies literature in which an engagement with place theory has emerged from exploring “the problematic of human embodiment as an essential aspect of performance practice” and the associated realisation that “to be embodied one must be ‘emplaced’” (Lewis, 2006, p. 273). The work of Edward Casey (1993, 1996, 1997) has been critical to articulating place as the fundamental ground of human experience and, at the same time, as “eventmental” (1996, p. 38), multi-dimensional and “rough-edged” (1997, p. 295). Casey’s place theory resonates with a range of postmodern geographies conceptualising space and place as dynamic, open and heterogeneous, summarised in Doreen Massey’s formulation of place as a “constellation of processes rather than a thing … open and internally multiple … [and] not intrinsically coherent” (Massey, 2005, p. 141, see also, for example, Amin and Thrift, 2002, Murdoch, 2006, Whatmore, 2002). This dynamic theory of place as ‘unstable ground’ (see McAuley, 2006) has led cultural anthropologist and performance studies scholar, Lowell Lewis, to assert “a close reciprocal relationship of co-existence and co-creation between places and bodies”. According to Lewis, “both evolve together, in a foundational process of co-development … [or] ‘inter-animation’” (2006, p. 273). After Lewis, we examine the inter-animation of ‘rurality’ and participation: how does rurality shape participation and how does participation enact and re-produce the rural as a material and imaginary place?

Our research focuses on Moretonhampstead (also referred to in the following as Moreton), a market town with a population of 1700, situated in the north east corner of Dartmoor in Devon (see http://www.visitdartmoor.co.uk/dbimgs/DARTMOOR%20MAP.pdf). Designated a National Park in 1951, Dartmoor is an area subject to governmental conservation practices aimed at protecting the ‘natural’ environment. Thus, the study of this particular cultural ecosystem provides an opportunity to explore the ‘rural dimensions’ (Moseley in Cloke, 2006, p. 21) of participation and cultural value. It is given that ‘rural’ and closely associated concepts, such as ‘nature’ and ‘countryside’, are contested. Critics of post-war British conservation practice argue that Dartmoor is a cultural (Beeson, 1991, Beeson and Greeves, 1993, Greeves, 2015) or “anthropic” (Kelly, 2015, p. 2) landscape. In a similar vein, geographer Paul Cloke defines rurality as a “site of conceptual struggle where the other-than-urban meets the multifarious conditions of vastly different scale and styles of living” (2006, p. 18). He notes that in recent times the blurring of geographic spaces has led theorists to question the existence of distinct rural localities, and even to argue for the emergence of a “post-rural”, “virtual” space (Cloke, 2006, pp.21-22). After Mormont, Cloke asserts that rurality is a “category of thought”, rather than a material space, in so far as “social and cultural views attached to rurality provide clearer grounds for differentiating between urban and rural than do differences manifest in geographical space” (2006, p.19). Agyeman and Neal (2006) and Neal (2009) have examined how a particular social imaginary of the rural idyll – a sense of life lived in harmony with the natural world and with similar others bonded together in smaller, close-knit, organic (face-to-face) community - is enacted and, at the same time, acts to exclude. While Neal et. al. focus on the problematics of rural community in relation to the exclusion of ethnic others, Cloke (1997, 2002) interrogates idyll-ized notions of rurality that make it difficult to see and act on problems of poverty, homelessness, criminality and ethnic strife in non-urban spaces. After Cloke, Ageyman and Neal, and Neal, we can articulate our research question thus: does participation enact an idyll-ized rurality reinforcing a problematically exclusive notion of rural community?

# Mapping Moreton and a multi-sited ethnography of participation and cultural value

Following Stark, Gordon and Powell’s reports (2013, 2014) highlighting extreme inequality in cultural provision awarded to the city of London relative to the rest of the UK, Dorling and Hennig (2016) go so far as to suggest that outside of the “cultural capital” of the UK, a process of “cultural desertification” is in operation (p. 35). Given that, as Dorling and Hennig note, the South West region fares “especially badly when it comes to distribution of ACE funding” (2016, p. 36), it would appear that cultural desertification here is an acute risk. However, other significant indicators suggest that this is far from the case, suggesting that the rate of public engagement in sport and culture is actually higher in the South West compared to other parts of England (South West Observatory, 2011, 11.9.4), and that participation in volunteering in the South West is above the English average (South West Observatory, 2011, 11.6.1.6). Further complexity is added to this low (unequal) cultural resource, high cultural participation ecosystem by a regional pattern of economic development which regards growth in urban areas as “crucial” while seeking to “ensure that market towns, coastal and rural areas are economically successful in their own right” (Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership 2014 Strategic Economic Plan 2014-2030, p. 4). Formal cultural provision in the South West reflects this model of economic development. It is restricted to larger cities and access for residents of market towns and rural areas remains largely dependent on private transport to urban hubs. This profile suggests that high rates of cultural participation are linked to relative socio-economic advantage. It strongly implies that people have both the will and means to travel to access cultural provision, and also to maintain high rates of voluntary participation to ensure vital local cultures.

As a distinct(ive) area within the South West region of England, Dartmoor’s profile is one of relative economic advantage. Dartmoor has a higher socio-economic profile, and an older and better-qualified population compared to the South West, and England overall. However, older residents appear to be drawn to more sparsely populated central areas of the park, while younger adults and families tend to live on its edge, closer to education, employment and services (including all important road/transport links). There are higher rates of outright home ownership on the fringes of the park, combined with a mixed private and public rental housing market. Moretonhampstead, located in the north eastern corner of the park between two major A-roads (A30/A38), is largely representative of the overall Dartmoor profile, although it does have a higher proportion of lower managerial and professional occupations (NSSEC2). Devon County Council’s profile of Moretonhampstead highlights the findings of the (national) 2008 Place Survey, which identify public transport, roads (maintenance and congestion), affordable housing and activities for teenagers as “things that most need improving in the area” (see http://www.devon.gov.uk/moretonhampsteadupdate.pdf).

Moretonhampstead was chosen as a case study site for two reasons. First, the town itself supports a range of performance-based participation: amateur, community-based and Carnival. We knew something about these forms of performance (see Milling <http://amateurdramaresearch.com/>; Schaefer, 2012), but hadn’t explored them in the context of everyday participation; that is, in relation to a repertoire of everyday practices carried out in shared communal spaces. Second, Moreton displays the hybridity (Whatmore, 2002, Cloke, 2006) characteristic of rural places with elements of urban settlement (commuting to work, for instance) in close proximity to countryside. This leads us to extend the research questions thus: does hybridity feature in participation narratives and/or practices? Or, does participation reproduce, instead, an idyll-ized image of rural life? If so, do (national and regional) government deficits flow into participation narratives reinforcing an image of rural life as active, enterprising, resourceful, generative, self-sufficient, in(ter-) dependent, and cohesive?

In order to examine performance-based participation within a broader repertoire we adopted an ethnographic methodology. The ethnography took a multi-sited approach to performance-based participation “following people, connections, associations and relationships across space” (Falzon, 2016, p. 1-2). The main portion of the empirical research involved six participants of different genders and ages, and included participant observation and interviews. In the interviews, lasting one to three hours, we gathered data on the biographies of participants and their accompanying “narratives of participation” (Miles, 2016). Because of the timing of the ethnography in the summer months, and the seasonal nature of participation on Dartmoor –Moretonhampstead Variety Club’s pantomime and MED Community Theatre’s play are created and/or rehearsed over the Winter months for performance in late February and March respectively - we interviewed participants about their involvement in performance-based participation while observing as they undertook other activities (for instance, instrumental/vocal group performance, socializing in pub/s - within Moreton and in nearby towns - allotment gardening, walking on Dartmoor, landscape photography, professional theatre-going in Exeter, preparing for a festival of young people’s playwriting on Dartmoor). All the participants engaged to varying degrees in Moretonhampstead Carnival, a week-long series of events raising money for local community groups and culminating in a street parade (of walking and vehicular floats) and party. Our observation of participation was directed towards understanding the movement of bodies in and across space as subjects actively re-marked vernacular places (Edensor, 2006) with layers of meaning and re-inscribed a network of ‘local’ places. Recalling Lewis’s (2006) notion of inter-animation to describe the co-creation of embodied subjects and places, we also draw on geographers, after Seamon (1979), who have referred to this active process of embodied place making as a mode of choreographic performance, characterizing community spaces, such as the pub, the street and the Parish Hall, as the “enduring sites around which routines are performed and communally coordinated as place ballets” (in Edensor, 2006, p. 492).

# Enacting Moretonhampstead: an ethnography of performance-based participation

After a short period of time it became apparent that the research subjects in the ethnographic study had in common that they had moved to Moretonhampstead (or nearby, as in the case of two teenage MED community theatre members) from elsewhere. Cloke (2006) and others have written on the impact of ‘counter-urbanism’ on rural space in terms of blurring boundaries between urban and rural, city and countryside, and in relation to initiating or preventing change via the enactment of an idyll-ized imaginary of rural life. The performance-based participation examined here is thus marked by an awareness of the dynamics of blurring and (re-)affirming spatial boundaries. According to rural studies researchers, participation, or getting involved in existing activities, is important for people who have moved into a place from “outside” and who seek to become members of smaller, tight-knit communities (DuPuis 2006; Phillips 2015). The participatory activities that people become involved in, such as volunteering, can bring objective benefits to the community and can benefit individuals in a more subjective manner, helping to create a sense of belonging to community. As Phillips notes, participation is an investment “socially and economically but also culturally and psychologically” (Phillips, 2015, p. 18).

The ethnographic research subjects valued participation in general as a way of “being known and knowing people” (Ian). There were a number of ways in which incomers might establish social connections and networks in the new place, as we explore in greater detail below. Participation in amateur theatre, via membership of Moretonhampstead Variety Club, an organisation of some 70 years standing which produces an annual pantomime, was noted as an important and enjoyable mode of activity by several interviewees. The research subjects explained their participation in amateur theatre in a number of ways. It was playful in the sense of an escape from everyday life, fun, a way of making friends and establishing a social network, and provided a shared sense of common purpose:

I just really like being somebody else for a bit, I just really like it [laughs]. I especially like being in the company of people who have not necessarily worked with each other before, … there’s a new group of people, a common purpose, … I really enjoy being able to bring something for an audience, I really like that (Rich).

Whereas public performance might seem a socially extrovert, high focus activity, amateur theatre participants felt that their engagement was partly due to Moreton providing a “safe” and “encouraging” environment in which to participate in theatre making activities, particularly in relation to other (urban) places they’d lived:

It seems maybe a safe environment in which to make a fool of yourself or to do something you have not done before. Whereas if you're in the middle of a city maybe you think, well, there are lots of really good people around, and lots and lots of people, I don’t know, who will look down on me. … It just feels a bit more risky to do that. I went straight into it here (Jeremy).

…my experience was, living in towns, you have to have a certain level of ability … here, you know, most activities, with the exception of a few, most people, whatever their levels can join and work up, and particularly doing the theatre here … it’s just an encouraging environment really (Olivia).

As well as ease of participation enabled by what was perceived to be a relatively unthreatening (non-expert) cultural environment, participation was seen as accessible due to its low cost:

A lot of these things don’t cost a lot, like you know, the pantomime I think is £2 to join, for insurance value, and then you have, from October through to February you’re basically, you know, you’ve got an activity, it’s incredibly good value. You know, all these things are, I think More Tones [a singing group] is £1 a session, so actually you don’t have to earn a huge amount of money to join in with these things (Olivia).

While participation in amateur theatre catalysed social relations between existing residents and incomers, and incomers felt connected to an inclusive, extended form of community, participation simultaneously serves to distinguish between different groups of people and, in so doing, describes bounded, contained and exclusive modes of community. One research subject referred to “my neighbours …renting next door”, pointing out that “they’d recently relocated to Moreton from [a city]” and that while “they’ll say hello … they won’t join in with anything, they won’t come and do anything, they keep themselves to themselves, which just marks them out as not one of us [laughs]” (Rich).

In this instance, participation distinguishes “them” (non-participators) from “us” (participators). Rich went on to suggest the ways in which the more recent non-participators might engage in existing activities, which seemed to summarise his own repertoire of participatory activity:

Go and do pantomime, get known for that, go and play cricket, … it doesn’t take long and you’re playing for Moreton. … join in when people are singing in the pub, you know. […] Do the crossword… [in the pub] people ask, people shout, “Give us a clue,” … it doesn’t take long before you’re accepted, it’s not that hard (Rich).

Yet, in a reflective moment, another research subject explored difficulties she had experienced joining in activities when she first arrived in Moreton:

… when I first arrived I sort of helped out on the playground committee and it was awful because it was a clique. There was like Moreton people who, some of them had never moved out of, you know, had never lived anywhere else, and possibly never, ever been up to London, say, or Bristol, or any of the nearby cities, and it was really hard to actually have a common language. I mean we had children together but the values seemed to be so different. And I think, and the pantomime likewise, it was, I went along ‘cause I’d, you know, I wanted to get involved, but I found it really hard work, really hard work, you know, being creative with that group of people … you know, that sort of thing that is deemed to be humour full in a village, which I find personally tasteless… you know, that sort of like, the racist, the homophobic, which you go, “Ha, ha, ha,” you have to laugh, and then you think, well no, actually this is really not funny (Olivia).

This discussion illustrates how participation operates to produce both inclusive and exclusive modes of community, and how a notion of cohesive community is, at the same time, disrupted by distinctions based on participation, or lack of it, and by conflicting personal/moral values and tastes.

The centrality of participation to the operational dynamics of both inclusive and exclusive community is rehearsed in relation to participation in Moretonhampstead Carnival. While its roots may go back to longer traditions of popular pageantry, Moreton carnival was formally established in the early 1920s to raise money for the local hospital. After the NHS took ownership of the hospital in 1948, carnival was reconfigured into a week-long celebration taking place in the fourth week of August to raise money for local community groups. The research subjects volunteered their time and skills over the carnival week. They helped to raise money for community-based organizations by performing in instrumental and vocal music groups in the village hall, and/or attended events such as bingo and quiz night. While only one research subject participated in the street procession on the final day, Rich observed that processing was a “rite of passage” that everyone did at some stage, as was confirmed by the research subjects.

While actively supporting Carnival, the research subjects indicated some ambivalence to the event. A couple commented on the “shonky” (Rich) and “old fashioned” (Jeremy) aspects of the fund-raising events held in the week leading into the street procession and party. The Carnival was also viewed as “old Moretonian” with the organizing committee dominated by people born and bred in Moreton: “nobody new can get into it” (Jeremy). Echoing Olivia’s reflection on barriers to participation (above), Jeremy also noted that: “There is always one float that has a racist element” (Jeremy). At the same time, it was observed that some carnival work lacked volunteers, which was illustrated when the ethnographer was one of only four people to turn up early one morning to help three carnival committee members erect a large marquee on the village green. This led us to question whether the research subjects’ participation was limited to a particular type that was, after Phillips (2015), more cultural and psychological in nature. Although it was not explicitly articulated on the day, we also wondered whether lack of participation in this more mundane activity registered (implicitly) as non-participation and, therefore, served to distinguish between those who participated and those who did not. Here, again, is another instance in which participation might serve to divide rather than cohere ‘community’.

# Conclusion: Questions for Cultural Policy and Understanding Everyday Participation

Our findings are limited largely to an analysis of ethnographic fieldwork as one method within a mixed method approach in a case study of everyday participation and cultural value. As such, these findings should be read as early reckonings within an ongoing and iterative process of analysis. There are three main points we wish to propose. First, while we found high levels of participation in semi-formal (but not state funded) cultural activities, we also found that participation says more about those who participate. In other words, participation in this context is clearly a form of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) serving to differentiate people (‘us’ and ‘them’) and discriminate senses of place (‘being in place’, ‘being out of place’). Our research subjects were long-term residents who negotiated senses of belonging (and not-belonging) in and through participation. However, their participation in this imaginary community tells us little about the participatory practices of other groups, duly differentiated not only by narratives of participation, but also by non-participation itself. We need to explore in greater depth what other forms of participation exist; do they, and how do they, discriminate social subjectivities, and what is at stake in such participation-based distinctions of populations?

Second, people appear to be negotiating increasingly ambiguous senses of place in and through participatory practice. Given the various impacts of counter-urbanism and the increasingly mobile lifestyles of town dwellers (moving between city and countryside), we need to better understand the role of participation in dynamic processes enacting, often simultaneously, inclusive and extensive versus bounded and contained place. This dynamism of place leads into our third point. While there may be a growing advocacy of a (return to) a better resourced and devolved cultural policy, not least to ‘celebrate and mark the distinctiveness of local cultural assets, voluntary activities and everyday creativity that can be found in the locality where [people] live’ (Warwick Commission Report, p. 39), fundamental questions arise. These include what we mean by the ‘local’, how it is defined (as anything less than a “constellation of processes” (Massey 2005)), by whom, and can it ever be purely and simply itself (“there is no there there” (Lewis 2006, p. 275)). The hybridity of rural locales is enacted in participatory performances in terms of the movement away from the urban to an idyll-ized rural. These performances appear to gain traction as a result of government deficits in national and regional (rural) investment. We must keep in view these national, regional and local registers of place and not succumb to the promotion of the local as small, human-scale, discrete, contained, and so on, when, in fact, gross inequity and uneven development, which has long term socio-cultural effects, may be holding back more sustainable models (see Hawkes 2001) of planning.

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