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## ***2. Convening Publics? Co-Produced Research in the Entrepreneurial University***

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*Abstract:* The public role of the university is today subject to intense debate, with significant concern that the contemporary university in its entrepreneurial form comes into structural conflict with the wider interests of both students and publics beyond its walls.<sup>1</sup> New ideas of the public university, both normative and dystopian, are being articulated in the research literature<sup>2</sup> but there is a need for empirical inquiry into the novel forms of the university that may be being built through the everyday practices of academics.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on theories of publics as dynamic and assembled around matters of concern/care,<sup>4</sup> this paper asks whether the growing practice of collaborative

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<sup>1</sup> John Holmwood, “The University, Democracy and the Public Sphere,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38, no. 7 (October 3, 2017): 927–942, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2016.1220286>.

<sup>2</sup> Carolina Guzmán-Valenzuela, “Unfolding the Meaning of Public(s) in Universities: Toward the Transformative University,” *Higher Education* 71, no. 5 (May 2016): 667–79, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9929-z>. Ronald Barnett, “The Coming of the Ecological University,” *Oxford Review of Education* 37, no. 4 (August 1, 2011): 439–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2011.595550>.

<sup>3</sup> Maarten Simons, “The ‘Renaissance of the University’ in the European Knowledge Society: An Exploration of Principled and Governmental Approaches,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 26, no. 5 (October 4, 2007): 433–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-007-9054-2>.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (January 2004): 225–248, <https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, “Matters of Care in

and co-produced research is contributing to the development of a new form of public university. The paper is based on a six-year participant observation of a major UK program of collaborative research that aimed to “connect communities with research.” Based on 100 interviews and a survey of 309 participants, the paper argues that the publics that are being convened by this program have the potential both to immunize the university against more disruptive and sustained reflection on its public and societal role, and at the same time, to nurture new hybrid forms of public university that are embodied in academic and civil society identities rather than institutions. It concludes by arguing that the new public university might be understood as a place where multiple publics are convened and where the radical latent potential of the institution lies in putting these different publics into dialogue.

*Keywords:* universities, publics, co-production, research, neoliberalism

## ***Introduction***

The public role of the university is subject to ongoing negotiation, taking distinctive forms across different periods, countries and economic and political regimes.<sup>5</sup> The nature of this “public” role is shaped variously by: the financing, ownership and governance structure of a university; its educational mission, in particular its entry and access arrangements; its commitment to research for public or commercial benefit; and its capacity to create a “public sphere” or conscience for critical inquiry independent of state and market.<sup>6</sup> Today, the debate over this public role is intensifying in the context of increased marketization, positional competition and academic capitalism and in response to urgent demands for the university to play a more active role in addressing global challenges such as climate change. There is concern, however, that the contemporary university in its entrepreneurial form<sup>7</sup> may

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Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things,” *Social Studies of Science* 41, no. 1 (February 2011): 85–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312710380301>. Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, “The Public and Its University: Beyond Learning for Civic Employability?,” *European Educational Research Journal* 8, no. 2 (June 2009): 204–217, <https://doi.org/10.2304/eej.2009.8.2.204>.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Marginson, “Putting ‘Public’ Back into the Public University,” *Thesis Eleven* 84, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 44–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513606060519>.

<sup>6</sup> See Guzmán-Valenzuela, “Unfolding the Meaning of Public(s) in Universities.” for a discussion of the different public roles of the university.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Marginson, “Putting ‘Public’ Back into the Public University,” *Thesis Eleven* 84, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 44–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513606060519>.

be becoming more public harm than public good.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the interests of universities acting as corporate entities are coming into structural conflict with the wider interests of both students and the publics beyond their walls.<sup>9</sup>

In response, both nostalgic and normative visions of a new public university have been mooted: such as Collini's defense of the autonomous university driven by limitless inquiry;<sup>10</sup> Barnett's utopian concept of the ecological university working alongside social actors to create a better world;<sup>11</sup> and Guzman-Valenzuela's call for a "transformative" university<sup>12</sup> characterized by reflexivity about its public role.<sup>13</sup> Such proposals, however, tend to lack, as Biesta et al argue,<sup>14</sup> sustained empirical inquiry into how the lived reality of the public university is currently being contested and reimagined on a day-to-day basis. As such, they may not identify the novel or hybrid<sup>15</sup> forms of "publicness" that are emerging through changing practices of teaching and research.

One site in which the concept of the "public" university is subject to intense negotiation on the ground today is in the research arena, specifically in the relationships that are being required and forged between academics and "publics" in the design and conduct of research. In the European Research Area, for example, the practice of "Responsible Research and Innovation" is proposed as a means of building a new relationship between academics and society, in which scientists are variously understood to be responding to "*public values and concerns*," "*bridging gaps between science, research and innovation communities and society at large*," and addressing "*societal needs and interests*."<sup>16</sup> In the United Kingdom, the Economic and Social Research Council's definition of high-quality research makes the case that "*active*

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<sup>8</sup> Stuart Tannock, "Learning to Plunder: Global Education, Global Inequality and the Global City," *Policy Futures in Education* 8, no. 1 (March 2010): 82–98, <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2010.8.1.82>.

<sup>9</sup> Holmwood, "The University, Democracy and the Public Sphere."

<sup>10</sup> Collini, Stefan, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Barnett, "The Coming of the Ecological University."

<sup>12</sup> Guzmán-Valenzuela, "Unfolding the Meaning of Public(s) in Universities."

<sup>13</sup> See also Simon Marginson, "Public/Private in Higher Education: A Synthesis of Economic and Political Approaches," *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 2 (February 2018): 322–337, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1168797>.

<sup>14</sup> Gert Biesta et al., "What Is the Public Role of the University? A Proposal for a Public Research Agenda," *European Educational Research Journal* 8, no. 2 (June 2009): 249–254, <https://doi.org/10.2304/eeerj.2009.8.2.249>.

<sup>15</sup> Simons, "The 'Renaissance of the University' in the European Knowledge Society."

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the long list of EU funded Nanotechnology projects that are setting out to promote "public engagement" in the research process: <http://gonano-project.eu/projects-about-citizens-engagement/>.

*two-way dialogue and collaboration between social scientists and potential users throughout the research process and beyond is crucial.*<sup>17</sup>

What is not yet understood, however, is whether such engagement between science and society, or between academics and “publics” in the research process is leading to the creation of new forms of democratic knowledge production capable of underpinning a new form of public university.<sup>18</sup> Or whether such activities act as a form of “immunization”<sup>19</sup> *against* unwanted interference in the core business of university work. In other words, does it serve as a useful inoculation against the potential incursions of unruly publics into the world of increasingly entrepreneurial universities accountable more to business interests than to wider society.<sup>20</sup>

This paper takes this question as its focus and explores the implications of collaborative or “publicly engaged” research for the development of new forms of “public” university. It discusses, on the basis of a detailed ethnographic study, the example of the UK Research Council’s Connected Communities Programme. This program, which ran from 2010 to 2018, constituted a £40m+ investment in over 300 “collaborative” research projects across the United Kingdom. The paper asks how this program convened publics, what characterized those publics, and the potential of the research practices exemplified in the program to generate new forms of public university today.

### ***Convening Publics***

The “public” imagined in the idea of a public university has been variously understood as: the population of a given country or region represented by the state (as in the governmental tradition of European research universities<sup>21</sup>); the people participating in practices of encounter and dialogue that emerge

<sup>17</sup> See ESRC strategic plan: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/strategicplan/impact/default.aspx>, accessed July 2018.

<sup>18</sup> David Watson, Robert Hollister, Susan E. Stroud, and Elizabeth Babcock, *The Engaged University: International Perspectives on Civic Engagement* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011). See also Richard Watermeyer, “Challenges for University Engagement in the UK: Towards a Public Academe?” *Higher Education Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2011): 386–410.

<sup>19</sup> Simons and Masschelein, “The Public and Its University.”

<sup>20</sup> Jenny Andersson and Erik Westholm, “Closing the Future: Environmental Research and the Management of Conflicting Future Value Orders,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, August 16, 2018, 016224391879126, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243918791263>.

<sup>21</sup> Simons, “The ‘Renaissance of the University’ in the European Knowledge Society.”

beyond state and market interference (as in the concept of the public sphere<sup>22</sup>); as what Collini refers to as those “mythical beasts” the “tax payers”<sup>23</sup> who are invoked by governments as publics to whom universities should be accountable; or simply the body of people who are defined in the negative by *not being inside* the university, in other words, the profane or lay “others” who are distinguished from the priestly caste<sup>24</sup> of the academy (as in much of the literature on “public engagement”).

This variety of interpretations points to the fact that a “public” does not exist ready formed to be “engaged with” as a single body and to whom a university can be answerable. Instead, scholarship deriving both from Dewey and from Science and Technology Studies suggests that publics are better understood as plural and dynamic; as being summoned into being; as gatherings of people, things, objects and ideas convened around a matter of concern.<sup>25</sup> In this perspective, a public is understood as being brought into existence to address unacknowledged issues, this acts as a prompt for learning and the discovery of new information, which in turn brings new actors into the debate. Such publics are often but not exclusively formed by controversy<sup>26</sup> and are understood, in these traditions, to include heterogeneous actors—people and artifacts, processes and ideas.<sup>27</sup>

Drawing on these traditions, Simons and Masschelein argue that a process of convening such publics should be understood as precisely the practice that would justify the conception of a university *as* public university:

[the university is] a place and time where research and teaching can be linked in very specific practices that actually gather humans and things, students and research objects, and constitute a local public exposed to matters of concern. From this viewpoint, *the public university thus is a place where people and things gather to create a public.* [my italics]<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Holmwood, *The University, Democracy and the Public Sphere*. Holmwood draws on Habermas’ theorization of the public sphere in Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (with an introduction by Thomas McCarthy). (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Collini, Stefan, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Nigel Thrift, “The University of Life,” *New Literary History* 47, no. 2–3 (2016): 399–417, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2016.0020>.

<sup>25</sup> Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”

<sup>26</sup> Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes, and Yannick Barthe, *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*, Inside Technology (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”

<sup>28</sup> Simons and Masschelein, “The Public and Its University,” 214.

Simons and Masschelein make this argument in relation to the educational mission of the university, and to the role of the teacher as initiator of such processes. But this conception of a public university might be equally applied to research practices.<sup>29</sup> If we seek to understand the implications of calls for co-produced research in the European Research Area we might, therefore, ask: “what is the nature of the publics that are assembled through these research processes?” and “what matters of concern initiate such gatherings?”

More recently, feminist scholarship, specifically the work of de la Bellacasa, has further developed this theorization of publics as dynamic and assembled by arguing that to identify something as a matter of concern around which a public convenes, must mean also to identify it as a matter of *care*. From this perspective, understanding how publics are convened is also a question of asking: “who is caring for this matter, who needs to be cared for in this situation and what can be done to care for this matter in future?”<sup>30</sup> Such a focus draws attention to the affective and ethical practices involved in convening publics.

In the rest of this paper, therefore, I draw on these ideas in order to interrogate how publics are being constituted by the development of collaborative research partnerships between universities and communities outside their walls. I am interested in who and what is assembled in these processes, what matters of concern and care are identified and by whom, and what insights this may offer us into how the “public university” is being produced through such “collaborative” research practices.

### ***Research Design***

The paper takes as its focus a major research program led by the United Kingdom’s Arts and Humanities Research Council on behalf of all of the UK’s Research Councils. The *Connected Communities Programme* is a ten-year investment in collaborative research activities which has funded 327 projects since 2010. These range from smaller six-month scoping projects (under £100k) to five-year large grants (up to £2m). The projects represent a highly diverse and sometimes competing set of collaborative research

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<sup>29</sup> Arguably, Simons and Masschelein’s conception of convening publics through education is one that reconnects the research and teaching practice of university teachers and conceives of education as a process of inquiry through the constitution of publics. My focus, however, is on those practices that are conceived primarily through the lens of research and scholarship rather than through teaching. There is, of course, important overlap between these two perspectives that would merit further inquiry.

<sup>30</sup> de la Bellacasa, “Matters of Care in Technoscience,” 93.

traditions that include: action research, history from below, participatory arts, co-production, responsible innovation, participatory action research, community arts, feminist and critical disability studies.<sup>31</sup> Projects in the program are equally diverse, having been selected through both open calls and a series of thematic invitations on the topics of environment, health, creative citizenship, diversity and dissent, and co-production. As such they include everything from philosophically informed inquiries with anglers into the utopian community nature of fishing, to collaborations between academics, citizen journalists and national regulatory bodies to understand hyper-local journalism. They include community-led inquiries into the untold stories of the children, women and minority ethnic soldiers of the first world war, as well as partnerships between local authorities, medical practitioners and artists addressing issues of dementia care. They have engaged academics from disciplines across the arts, humanities and social sciences (as well as some engineers and health practitioners) and partners as diverse as youth workers, national ministries, local charities and internationally recognized cultural organizations. The universities involved in the projects reflect the familiar weighting toward research-intensive universities of much high-status research funding in the United Kingdom;<sup>32</sup> importantly, however, a number of post-1992 institutions with long track records in community engagement were also strongly represented in the program funding.

Of particular significance to this paper, this research program can be understood as perhaps the first in the United Kingdom to be bound together not so much by a substantive topic area (the question of research into “community” after all, invites a broad range of focal areas, approaches and disciplines), but by a methodological commitment to building knowledge in partnership between universities and publics. As the program itself proposed, its underpinning assumption was that “*By connecting research expertise, knowledge, understanding, and approaches from across the research base with the knowledge, experience and assets of communities, the Programme generates new research insights and meaningful legacies for communities.*”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Keri Facer and K Pahl, *Valuing Interdisciplinary Collaborative Research: Beyond Impact* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), 5–15.

<sup>32</sup> Claire E Alexander, Jason Arday, and Runnymede Trust, *Aiming Higher: Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy*, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Quote taken from the Connected Communities Festival Brochure, 2014, available here: <https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/crosscouncil-programmes/connectedcommunities/visionandoverview/> (last accessed May 29, 2019).

Understanding the research practices, relationships and institutional changes that emerged in this program, therefore, may help to develop our understanding of the way that universities are able (or not) to convene publics today through such collaborative research practices. The analysis in this paper is based on sustained participant observation in the program as well as more formal reflective data collection processes. The participant observation was conducted in my role as one of two Leadership Fellows for the Connected Communities Programme from 2012 to 2018. Alongside this, over two years, Dr. Bryony Enright and I conducted semistructured reflective interviews, surveys and workshops with program participants. This paper is therefore based upon:

- **Fieldnotes and program documentation**, including funding calls, applications and meeting records from participant observation in the program as leadership fellow from 2012 to 2018.
- **In-depth interviews with 70 academics and 30 “community partners”** who were participants in the Connected Communities Programme. Interviews were semistructured and lasted on average for an hour. Sampling was purposive in order to ensure diversity in participation. Academic interviewees included Principal Investigators, Co-investigators, research assistants sampled from across the program to ensure diversity in research topic, disciplinary focus, geographical location and institutional affiliation, as well as an even spread of experience and a gender balance. Community interviewees included longstanding stable cultural organizations as well as freelance artists and community activists. Sampling was opportunistic for community interviewees. Notably, not all community partners had time to be interviewed. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interview schedule focused on participants’ biography, the development and activities of the project they were participating in, their values and beliefs about research and their reflections on the legacy of the projects.
- **An online survey** that was distributed to Principal Investigators for circulation to all project teams addressing the same topics as the interview schedules. This led to 309 completed responses.
- **Year-long detailed case studies of two projects** selected for their commitment to “deep” co-production and proximity for day-to-day observation. The case studies comprised participation in project team meetings, informal conversations and formal interviews with project participants, site visits to research activities, attendance at workshops and at public performances and exhibitions from the projects.

Project meetings and formal interviews with team members were digitally recorded and transcribed, all other activities were recorded in fieldnotes. The case studies were conducted in the period 2014–2016, but informal observation continued to 2018.

- **Two workshops** held in 2015, one with 40 individuals from independent research organizations participating in the program, such as museums and galleries; one with 59 community partners drawn from community action and heritage sectors. The focus of the workshops was on lessons learned about collaboration between universities and partners. Workshop materials were digitally captured for later analysis, all plenary discussions were recorded through fieldnotes.

The data generated are multimodal: as well as written transcripts of interviews and fieldnotes, they also include photographs of exhibitions, performances and events, copies of print materials and artifacts generated by projects, as well as websites and online materials. This gathering of multimodal data reflects the idea that publics are constituted not only by the people who are convened, but also by, around and through material and technological actors. The analysis for this paper was “iterative-inductive”;<sup>34</sup> in other words, it was both theoretically driven, taking key elements of Simons, Masschelein and Bellacasa’s analyses as sensitizing concepts, and inductively generated, looking for themes and instances in the data that might emerge to shed light on the idea of the public university. The discussion here is organized around two questions that draw attention respectively to: the convening power of the program as a whole; and the convening practices of individual projects around matters of care.

### ***Who Constitutes the Publics of the Connected Communities Programme?***

The constituting of a public relates both to the question of *who* convenes a public around a matter of concern, and to the question of who and what constitutes (makes up) that public. In other words: who or what defines the matter of concern and who and what is assembled?

At the level of the funding program, the identification of the matter of concern—“community”—was initially framed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Far from being a popular democratic initiative associated with an unaddressed concern (as per Dewey’s definition of public formation),

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<sup>34</sup> Karen O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods* (London: Routledge, 2005/2012), 1–28.

the program was in fact launched shortly after a new conservative-liberal democrat coalition government was elected. The conservative party's campaign slogan had invoked the idea of a "big society" in which communities, newly invigorated by a climate of economic austerity, would take on the roles of a receding state. At initial workshops for the Connected Communities program, however, to which predominantly academics were invited, the association of "community" with a governmental and university-led agenda was strongly contested. Academics with a track record of participatory and action research actively challenged the authority of the research council to frame a program researching community without the involvement of communities themselves, specifically questioning whether a definition of "community" as matter of concern could be led from within the academy. In so doing, they reframed the concept of "community" from a cozily hegemonic term to a controversial topic, subject to competing interpretations, requiring debate, different voices and actors, and different spaces and practices of inquiry. In so doing, the question "who researches community and how" itself became a matter of concern for the program.

These early criticisms and this matter of concern led to new actors being assembled around the program. By its final years, half of the participants in the workshops (organized to develop new research proposals in response to funding calls) were individuals working outside universities; two stage funding models where "community partners" and academics were intended to work together to develop initial ideas for joint research proposals had been initiated; and grant applications were assessed by panels including community partners, against criteria of community participation in the leadership and shaping of project proposals. What is notable about this shift is that a small number of academics drawing on long experience and deep intellectual traditions<sup>35</sup> were successful in redirecting the processes of a multi-million-pound funding program and in redrawing the boundaries of who constituted the public concerned with this inquiry. One of the participants in that early workshop recounts some of the changes that took place:

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<sup>35</sup> The practices of collaborative research have deep philosophical, methodological and ethical foundations upon which participants in the programme were able to draw. See, for example, Olav Eikeland, "Action Research—Applied Research, Intervention Research, Collaborative Research, Practitioner Research, or Praxis Research?," *International Journal of Action Research*, no. 8 (2012): 9–44, Michelle Fine, "Just Methods in Revolting Times," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 13, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 347–365, Sarah Banks et al., "Everyday Ethics in Community-Based Participatory Research," *Contemporary Social Science* 8, no. 3 (November 1, 2013): 263–277.

there was a big debate at that [workshop] about how could you pay them [community partners], what could you pay them, why couldn't they be Co-Is. So as time has gone by it's become much more the norm and AHRC is now not only allowing some of that, but actually enforcing some of that. It is interesting. (Stephanie, Senior Professor, PI on large grant)

The publics convened to collaborate on the research therefore now came to include new actors: they included groups and organizations without the economic resources to supply the usual “funding in kind” typically needed as a passport to participation in public research; they encompassed communities and groups who needed small pots of money for travel, for child care, for food to allow them to join research projects; they encompassed institutional strategies for meeting Home Office requirements on who was eligible to “work” in the United Kingdom, enabling those of more ambivalent citizenship or in more precarious forms of employment to participate. Such processes of public formation also aligned and mobilized wider actors within university systems—new online forms, new passport photocopying systems, new petty cash payment procedures, new HR and finance processes.<sup>36</sup> One researcher on the program describes the sorts of material and organizational practices that convening such publics entailed:

So we've got an event [...] for example where we're bringing all our young people in from the different projects together... we have to be crystal clear about the budget... I've got to pay for a carer's shift, somebody to go and accompany the young adults with learning disabilities because they can't go on their own... But then ... he wants to go, and I said “well I don't have a budget to pay you to go [...] Can you afford to get the bus to the bus stop?” “Right no, okay. How are we giving you your bus pass?” (Bernadette, Senior Professor, PI on large grant)

New and demonstrably more economically diverse publics were therefore convened as part of the day-to-day practices of these projects, compared with the publics imagined by such programs before.

Despite this, however, many of the publics convened in and through the program and its projects also had characteristics that reflected the make-up of the university demographic in the UK, particularly in relation to ethnicity, educational capital and economic resource. One community researcher and activist, for example, commenting on the absence of Black and Minority Ethnic participants in research development workshops argued that these

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<sup>36</sup> Katherine Dunleavy, Michael Noble, and Heidi Andrews, “The Emergence of the Publicly Engaged Research Manager,” *Research for All* 3, no. 1 (February 21, 2019): 105–124.

events were “*codified by whiteness*” leading to a “*fetishisation of ethnicity*.”<sup>37</sup> Others who successfully received funding, experienced participation in these “publics” as moments of alienation and exclusion:

Walking into these Connected Communities spaces to find ourselves alone, feeling marginalised, sticking out like sore thumbs, so often being that bit younger, many of us Black people—often the only Black people in the room. We often wondered why we were there ... to meet Connected Communities Programme targets? To perform 'community' for the majority of non-community participants? At its very worst we felt like performing monkeys, the “exotic other.”<sup>38</sup>

Another youth worker, who played an active role in a number of projects, argued that the design and promotion of program workshops necessarily privileged those organizations with high levels of academic capital, resource and existing social ties with the university: “*it was the low hanging fruit that they got—they got the ones that were already around the peripheries of academia. [...] these are groups in the main that would perhaps have known about universities or have had some connection with universities previously*” (Community Partner, Youth Worker). This echoes the findings of the CONSIDER project, which studied all seven European Union Framework Programme projects involving civil society and identified that 50% of the Civil Society Organisation partners involved in collaboration themselves had PhDs and over 60% were participating in other research projects<sup>39</sup>. Equally, 50% of the community partners who completed surveys for the Connected Communities program had themselves worked in or with universities before.

In seeking to make connections beyond these existing networks, a pattern emerged in which community partners who became connected to the program as formal collaborators tended to play a mediating role between the university and the “wider public.” It would, for example, commonly be the partnering civil society organization—such as the local arts organization, cultural institution, community group or charity—who in fact convened a wider “grassroots” public around the matter of concern, rather than

<sup>37</sup> David Bryan, Katherine Dunleavy, Keri Facer, Charles Forsdick, Omar Kahn, Mhemooda Malek, Karen Salt, and Kristy Warren, *Common Cause Research: Building Research Collaborations Between Universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities* (Bristol: Connected Communities, 2018), 43.

<sup>38</sup> Refugee Youth Report to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, quoted in Facer and Enright, *Creating Living Knowledge*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Martine Revel, Emilie Spruyt, and Thomas Soubiran, *Civil Society Organisations in Designing Research Governance, D 2.2 FP7 Survey Report* (Lille: CONSIDER Project, 2013), 14.

the academics themselves. This practice reflects these organizations' typically greater knowledge of grassroots communities and longstanding relationships of trust and engagement. It does, however, highlight the dependence of universities upon such mediating organizations to play this critical role. This "gap" between universities and wider publics, and the use of "community partners" to mediate, moreover, risks positioning universities not as collaborators but as "funders," and means that partnership relationships have the potential to fracture into instrumentalism and contractualism, in which the notional "public" is leveraged and monetized to generate funding:

we were hoping that people would turn up to these meetings in order for them to be enough people to participate to make it worth their while so we could get our money from the University, do you know what I mean? (Community Partner, Independent Arts Organisation)

I'm in the middle and I can't explain to local people what funders and local authorities and subsidisers [...] —how they're couching this experience and the language they're using—I can't reveal that to people. You know I can't say that I'm writing a bid to do a celebration by saying that you're 20th from the bottom of the poverty indices—I can't say that. So there's this invisible line that exists between a funder and the people—there's a triangle. There's a conversation between me and them, and there's a conversation between me and them. (Researcher/Community Activist)

These cases risk reproducing the hierarchies of knowledge, participation and power that co-produced research is intended to overcome, only this time with a limited number of selected (similar, safe) community partners now "included" as formal partners in order to justify the claim that the university is "publicly engaged." In such cases, it is difficult not to see these projects as immunizing the university against more unruly democratic public practices.

That such instrumentalism might occur, however, is not surprising given the institutional conditions in which both civil society groups and universities are working today. Holmwood argues that the concept of the public university that emerged in the mid-20th century was associated with the emergence of relatively stable associational life, with the university as arbiter of professional knowledge and standards, and with a reciprocal partnership between a strong civil society and a collegiate university infrastructure.<sup>40</sup> Studying this research program, the changing nature of both civil society (at least in the United Kingdom) and of university employment practices is clear. The publics that were convened around the projects of the Connected Communities

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<sup>40</sup> Holmwood, "The University, Democracy and the Public Sphere."

Programme were convened on the community side by organizations who are often economically precarious, and if not, at least regularly used to competing for funding and resources and whose engagement with research is often directed toward securing future funding for core activity in a culture of economic austerity. On the university side, a large part of the day-to-day labor of these projects is carried out by research assistants, equally precariously employed, with hybrid identities built through work both in the community and in the academy.<sup>41</sup> The stability and longevity of both civil society and university partners in these collaborations, therefore, can no longer be assumed. Publics are being convened and made in highly dynamic situations in which people are moving, institutions are changing and commitments are short term and shepherded through funding calls or competitive tendering for services.

The matter of concern “who gets to research community?” that became a focus for this program, therefore, was a question not only of knowledge and of power but also of access to scarce economic resources around which there was increasing competition. Structurally different from the associational and professional partnerships identified by Holmwood, then, the publics created by these projects are dynamic, shifting, stratified and evanescent—coming and going with the funding and the matter of concern. When these “new publics” were successfully brought into being, they highlighted the inequalities of wealth, social capital and ethnicity that characterized the so-called “public” university of professional and associational life of the late twentieth century and began to open up new forms of relationship and encounter. But they also made visible the vulnerabilities and fragility of new publics premised upon limited and short-term funding and highly dynamic and fluid staffing in organizations.

### ***Convening Publics Around Matters of Care***

The competition for economic and positional advantage that was evident in these publics, however, does not obscure the fact that projects were also

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<sup>41</sup> Andrew Nadolny and Suzanne Ryan, “McUniversities Revisited: A Comparison of University and McDonald’s Casual Employee Experiences in Australia,” *Studies in Higher Education* 40, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 142–157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.818642>; Bryony Enright and Keri Facer, “Developing Reflexive Identities through Collaborative, Interdisciplinary and Precarious Work: The Experience of Early Career Researchers,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 15, no. 5 (October 20, 2017): 621–634, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2016.1199319>.

convened around recognizable matters of care. Indeed, the civil society organizations who played an active mediating role in many projects, were motivated by deep commitment to people, places, causes, and actions. This took many forms, from the communities congregating around an ancient hillfort in Wales characterized by love and care for the ancient monument and the stories that it told them about their history; to the activist on a council estate in Edinburgh whose 40-year battle to provide good health care and facilities for his community was proudly in evidence as he walked me around the new health-center he'd developed, and who refused to take funding from any project he was involved with given his previous experience of the negative effects of dependence on external and ultimately precarious state funding in the 1980s. Care was also evident in the international community of bird-watchers brought together to create the first international archive of cultural stories of birds tied by their migration patterns; and in the mothers of the Somali community of Bristol working together with community artists to intervene in the food cultures of the city. Such care for people, places, history and community has a powerful convening force that is capable of shifting the logic of research projects from instrumental exchange to deep, affective commitment to an issue that comes to exceed project boundaries.

Here it is helpful to focus on an individual project to exemplify this process: The Tangible Memories project was developed as a collaboration between academics in the disciplines of computer science, history and education in partnership with local artists, and specialists in the care of older adults living with dementia. The funding call invited applications to develop digital tools to support community development. The proposal that this group put together was to explore the use of “tangible technologies” (digital technology embedded in material objects) to support the creation of community in care homes for older adults living with dementia. As the project developed, however, the deep emotional commitment of the Chief Executive of the charity involved in the project, became clear. The problems of adults living in these homes was reframed not only as matter of fact and concern, but as a matter of care. As he explained:

there's people [in care homes] walking round going “These aren't my clothes” you know. And you think, in a civilised society how is this possible? So I started off on the naïve assumption that care homes are measured on all kinds of things, and quality of life is going to be fairly towards the top of that list. And it became apparent that quality of life is not only not on the list, it's not even properly defined. So nobody even has measured it yet, so it's a long way from being on the list ... little elements of it are. So you know I'm fuelled as you can tell by a bit of passion, a bit of injustice if you like. (CEO Community Partner, Arts and Dementia Organisation)

While the group was convened by the university around an initial broad topic and set of technical possibilities, the matter of care at stake in this field was articulated and made real by this partner. He reframed the focus of the project as being the quality of life for residents in care homes and made clear the urgent need to address this given the lack of engagement with this issue by the professionals and authorities working in the field. The project, from this point on, gained an urgency and a focus that came to encompass not only the project team, but the workers in the care homes, the residents involved in the project, as well as a wide range of other interested parties who came to learn from the innovations (only tangentially digital) that the project came to invent. What was noticeable in observing this project, was that a collective common concern—the mutual concern for these older adults—served to equalize relations between all those who came to be involved, and to actively draw out highly diverse sets of skills and knowledge to inventively explore how the issue might be addressed. New knowledge—in fields as diverse as folklore, dementia care, history and gerontology—emerged from this work, alongside tangible and cutting-edge developments of practice.

It is worth returning here to Simon and Masschelein’s definition of the process of convening a public:

People are transformed into a public when confronted with issues that are not being taken care of by the existing private and official institutions and experts. The public, therefore, is a group of people who are exposed to an issue that cannot be appropriated by the available expertise and official (governance) agencies. In other words, something becomes a matter of public concern because it is not and cannot be dealt with in the given order of society. And because within the given order of society no one is able to transform the issue into a problem that can be solved or a need that can be responded to, the public is always a public of equals. [...] such a public is always a public in view of particular issues.<sup>42</sup>

In the Tangible Memories project, as with others that have built relationships of equality around deep commitment to matters of care, it is possible to see the real potential of these collaborative projects, and therefore of universities, to convene a public in these terms.

Such publics of equals, moreover, have other effects; in particular, the formation of deep friendships and trust between the collaborators that facilitates much deeper forms of collaboration. As Chambers has observed elsewhere of her research practice in Canada, working together on matters of care necessarily requires researchers to disrupt and exceed institutional boundaries and enter a world of affective relationships:

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<sup>42</sup> Simons and Masschelein, “The Public and Its University,” 212.

My relationship with the women I work with on this project extends far beyond the boundaries of researcher collaboration into the tentatively more intimate territories of friendship and apprenticeship.<sup>43</sup>

As Claire, a participant in the “Starting from Values” project in the Connected Communities Programme observed: “*The trust we have in friendship is something that is enabling [...] particularly of thought, creating this ability for thought and creative thought and deep thought.*” Such friendships exceed project boundaries, both engendering commitments over long periods of time and creating networks that act as latent resources for future collaboration. As two other project participants on the program observed:

Well like all relationships and friendships, they don’t have to be consistent and still there all the time [...] you’ve built those relationships and that nexus of contacts if you like and friends and people you can dive into pools, amazing pools of knowledge and wealth that can help you and you can help them as well. (Fred, Project Manager, independent national research organisation)

To some extent you go to communities on projects that they have finished, because you develop a friendship and partnership. So I’m still visiting places that the project has already finished. So that’s outside the academic work and outside any ... yes plan. (Austin, PI and Co-I)

Such relationships can be seen as forming the raw material and relationships for the emergence of future publics;<sup>44</sup> fluid and dynamic they are a latent resource for situations in which future matters of concern may become pressing and urgent. Take, for example, the friendship that was developed over several years of project-based collaborations between a leading female community activist in the north of England and a leading female literacy professor. These projects enabled them to develop deep trust and mutually respectful ways of working around girls’ literacy practices in the Muslim community of the city. When a major crisis involving social care, young girls and the “Muslim community” emerged in the region, these two friends were able to act quickly and responsively to convene a group of actors able to challenge the initial public accounts and policy prescriptions emerging from government,

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<sup>43</sup> Cynthia Chambers, “Research That Matters: Finding A Path with Heart,” *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 2, no. 1 (2004): 19.

<sup>44</sup> My thanks to one of the anonymous reviewer who drew my attention also to Danielle Allen’s work on political friendship and the potential for friendship to act as a defining feature of public encounters. See Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

and to propose new approaches that would listen to and respect the ideas and opinions of, in particular, Muslim women in the region.<sup>45</sup>

Understanding the implications for the public university of the collaborative research in such programs, therefore, means understanding the affective relationships that develop and that forge new commitments that exceed the boundaries of funded research projects and institutional roles. Such friendships and the mutual knowledge exchange they generate creates an urgency that engages new actors around an emerging problem. They lay the foundation for a network of resources that can be mobilized rapidly in response to the emergence of future matters of concern.

### ***The Public University Today: Convening Contradictory Publics***

Simons and Masschelein ask: *Do we need time and a place to deal with matters of concern? If we agree that we do, perhaps the de-immunised or com-munised university could be that place and time.*<sup>46</sup> In this paper, I have asked whether practices of collaborative research in which academics are encouraged to partner with communities in the development of research inquiry might form a foundation for such a “com-munised” university. After all, a program called “Connected Communities” seeking to facilitate collaborations between universities and communities in mutual inquiry should, one would hope, offer a route toward a new form of public university.

The analysis in this paper suggests that a new form of “public university” is indeed emerging through these projects, one that has the potential to draw in new actors to the processes of research and to convene new and more democratic publics around matters of concern. This embodied public university can be understood as dynamic, fluid, affective and distributed across relationships of friendship, personal affection and respect. It convenes publics around care, equality and a mutual commitment to learning. Such a public university is well-suited to changing institutional structures and pressures, adaptable and responsive to emerging issues; it has the qualities of fluidity and amorphousness characteristic of liquid modernity. Indeed, the relationships developed through these projects have formed the basis for a wide range of other projects and partnerships, working in similarly embodied and relational ways, under new funding schemes.

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<sup>45</sup> Zaniab Rasool, “Collaborative Working Practices: Imagining Better Research Partnerships,” *Research for All* 1, no. 2 (July 15, 2017): 310–322, <https://doi.org/10.18546/RFA.01.2.08>.

<sup>46</sup> Simons and Masschelein, “The Public and Its University,” 214

The very embodiment of this emerging form of public university in individual actors, however, also demonstrates its potential fragility. In conditions in which the emotional labor of care not only struggles for recognition but is often subject of disdain in the contemporary academy, and in which academic labor is better understood as alienated<sup>47</sup> than autonomous, there is no guarantee that such work is sustainable for the individuals involved. Indeed, exhaustion and anxiety about institutional position were key features of many of our interviews alongside the clear joy and passion for the work. Moreover, as Barnett observes in his analysis of the “liquid” university,<sup>48</sup> such embodied practices, without associated institutional buy-in or coherence, may lead to tensions within the institution. Indeed, there may be profound contradictions between these academics working with and alongside civil society actors and others in the same institution, working with and for elite economic interests.<sup>49</sup>

The public university emerging under these conditions then, might better be understood as a university that is simultaneously convening many, potentially contradictory, publics. The risk that must be recognized, of course, is that given the imbalances in power and funding that different forms of research attract, the sorts of research reported here will simply serve to immunize the entrepreneurial university as a whole against the need to ask more fundamental questions about its corporate commitment to convening and engaging with those publics who cannot pay to participate in research. As a relatively small investment<sup>50</sup> a program like this risks acting as a palliative, a cover for institutions increasingly detached from the communities beyond their walls, and a refuge for academics seeking to embody particular forms of publicness that cannot survive elsewhere in the university.

Such refuges, however, can also be understood as niches for nurturing new public identities among academics and civil society actors who together are beginning to develop the everyday institutional practices necessary for working within and between the precarious, stratified and competitive realities of both civil society and universities today. As one participant in the program argued:

The CC program completely changed the way that I think about research. I was quite new to it anyway, having entered academia in a less conventional way

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<sup>47</sup> Richard Hall, *The Alienated Academic* (New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Barnett, “The Coming of the Ecological University.”

<sup>49</sup> Tannock, “Learning to Plunder.”

<sup>50</sup> The Connected Communities Programme budget of £40m over 10 years pales into insignificance in comparison, for example, with the overall budget of £400m a year for the UK Space Agency and an annual national UK research budget of nearly £8bn.

(experience, rather than a PHD). Being a Co-I [joint project lead] on the large grant project [...] was a kind of 'training' for then being a PI [Principal Investigator] on my own community-involved projects. I designed a couple of GCRF projects since in a very collaborative way. [...] This has worked very well, and people have been interested in this approach for sustainable development. This work has fed into [an] exploration of mobilising indigenous knowledge. I attribute all of this to the CC ethos. Totally transformative, and particularly useful in the fraught area of development! I can't imagine working in any other way now. (Co-I large grant, personal email)

## *Conclusion*

Where might these emerging practices take us? What forms of public university might we see growing out of these fluid relationships of care as well as these institutional practices of immunization? The language of “co-production,” taken seriously, provides both epistemological and methodological challenges and resources to contemporary academic practice. Its adoption, even as a form of lip-service, is potentially a troubling one for traditional patterns of authority in research programs. It may begin, even in science and engineering disciplines (where the difficulties of epistemic access by nonspecialists to complex forms of knowledge is often used as justification to restrict decision-making to “the experts”) to create the basis for competing claims to legitimacy and value<sup>51</sup>.

Where collaborative research programs are cognisant of the fact that they are *convening* rather than simply engaging preexisting publics, when they are attentive to the fact that they are engaged in practices of drawing new lines around new groups of “insiders” to the academic practice, this language of collaborative research may begin to create the conditions for new, rich, diverse and uncomfortable publics to emerge. Such publics may begin to provide a foundation for exploring the plural forms of knowledge and perspective likely to be necessary to address complex contemporary challenges. In contrast, where such programs proceed unreflexively, in particular when “publics” are defined simply as those “not in the academy,” the consequences are likely to be profoundly harmful both to the knowledge that is produced and to the society that emerges in the process. The outcomes will range from the simple reinforcement of existing hierarchies and inequalities in which it

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<sup>51</sup> See Helen Manchester and Gillian Cope’s account, for example, of the negotiations over what “co-produced” research means in a large Urban Smart City Project. Helen Manchester and Gillian Cope, “Learning to be a smart citizen” *Oxford Review of Education* 45, no. 2 (2019): 224–241.

is taken for granted that only those with easy access to the social networks and educational and social capital of university practice are catered for, to the more insidious and intentional capture of university research activities as part of the Public Relations practices of large corporations posing as “publics” and “partners” to the research process<sup>52</sup>.

If the moments of encounter between publics and universities offer both opportunities and threats to the integrity of the search for truth within the academy, so too do they offer potential and risks to the partner organizations, in particular to those civil society organizations who are now beginning to see universities as more natural allies. As has happened when civil society groups are brought in as “partners” to governments in the delivery of services, there is a risk that the core mission and values of these organizations becomes subsumed into the academic endeavor. It is, after all, not the primary purpose of civil society to produce *academic* research, even if they are important producers of powerful knowledge. To paraphrase Penny Waterhouse’s analysis of community organization collaboration with government:

*[universities] do not usually offer a radical home for local action. Collective action for local resistance and alternatives lies elsewhere, within informal alliances of mutual aid, campaign groups, trades unions and between individuals angered and directly affected by austerity and other punitive policies.*<sup>53</sup>

It is potentially, however, precisely in these “informal alliances of mutual aid” between academics as public intellectuals (rather than as representatives of their university) and civil society groups that the potential for new forms of public university may emerge. As a generation of younger researchers, working in conditions of precarious employment, building security through reciprocity and solidarity rather than the search for tenure track positions and developing hybrid careers across many sectors, “grows up collaborative,”<sup>54</sup> what new publics might they convene? And what forms of public scholarship, research, and teaching might these entail? Perhaps, as we watch the emergence of movements such as Extinction Rebellion or Scientists Warning we can begin to see the beginnings of these new publics, convened not within the university but mobilizing the expertise of both civil society groups and

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<sup>52</sup> See Andersson and Westholm (2018) and Tannock (2010) for powerful case studies of how such processes are already working.

<sup>53</sup> Penny Waterhouse, “Homes for Local Radical Action: The position and role of local umbrella groups” NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services, working paper 7 (London: National Coalition for Independent Action, 2014), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Bryony Enright and Keri Facer, “Developing Reflexive Identities.”

academics to “take care of” a neglected issue. Such practices, however, do not guarantee the emergence of a new “public” forum. We should beware of the illusion that liberation from the entrepreneurial university will, in and of itself, be sufficient to create democratic, plural publics. New exclusions necessarily emerge with each practice of public making.

Instead of looking beyond the university, perhaps the challenge now is to create more radical and reflexive experiments with the practices of public formation by universities, experiments that recognize the unruliness of relationships and commitments that exceed project boundaries, experiments that intentionally explore the university’s potential to convene publics around overlooked matters of concern. And in doing so, to work with the knowledge that such experiments always and of necessity only convene a partial public at any time. How such publics might be brought into encounter with each other, how the publics convened by scientists or artists, with civil society partners, industry or grassroots communities, create *different* accounts of the world and how these different accounts can be put into dialogue and *negotiated*, might, instead, usefully become a focus of energy and inquiry in the invention of a new form of public university.

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