

## “We can do it imaginatively first!”: Creating a magic circle in a radical community education setting

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### Abstract

Working with Social Haunting was a community-based participatory research project that aimed to investigate how contested pasts carry affective meanings in ways that defy conventional forms of knowledge representation. The project illustrated the potential of the use of playful approaches within adult learning, and specifically within a radical community educational approach that draws on transformative learning theory. This article reports on a workshop (or Ghost Lab) in which members of Unite the Community in Barnsley used the medium of comics to explore and re-imagine serious political themes. In this context, the Ghost Lab method established a ‘magic circle’, within which it was possible to circumvent ideological differences and allow for the exploration of fictional realities that, while they have a basis in the real world, are not limited by conventional codes of practice, rules or structures. This approach appeared to allow participants space to explore not just the ‘as if’ or ‘what if’, but also what Bloch (1986) has called the ‘not-yet’, thereby conjuring with both personal and political historical alternatives that could have been taken, but were not. By transforming their personal and political experiences through the creation of comics, participants were able to reflect on these experiences and consider how they might be interpreted in different ways within a ‘fictional reality’.

Keywords: radical community education; play; magic circle; political education; comics; social haunting

## 1. Introduction

This article discusses the use of playful approaches, in particular the creation of comics, with a group of adults in a radical community education context as part of 'Working with social haunting: Past- and present-making in two changing communities of value' (WwSH). The aim of WwSH was to investigate how contested pasts carry affective meanings in a way that defies conventional forms of knowledge representation<sup>1</sup>. These meanings reside at the "cusp of semantic availability" (Williams, 1977: 134), giving rise to a collective "intuitive and affective" knowledge (Edensor, 2005: 164) that is apprehended through something "like a sixth sense" (Stewart, 2010: 4). In 2015-16, this AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council)-funded project worked with two partner communities: the Manchester-based Co-operative College and the South Yorkshire community branch of the trade union Unite. A key theoretical construct underpinning the project was that of social haunting, defined by Avery Gordon as the sense that all is not as it seems and something is happening that cannot be detected by our empirical senses. A social haunting, Gordon (1997) suggests, is "one prevalent way in which modern systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with...or when their oppressive nature is denied" (xvi). Thus, social haunting is a fundamental component of modern social life, and a way in which repressed or unresolved events from the past make themselves known to us in the present. While social haunting is not a visible presence, it is felt nonetheless. Gordon (1997) describes social ghosts as, "haunting reminders of lingering trouble" which notify us "that what's been concealed is very much alive and present" (xvi). Their presence makes it difficult to reflect on our society without considering the impact of what is missing or ignored.

The approach taken in WwSH sits within the traditions of radical community education, having an active involvement in social movements; concern with removing social and economic injustice; and a process of active involvement and outreach work in local working class communities. In broad terms, a cultural action model was adopted. Drawing on Freire (1972), this stresses the need to engage

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<sup>1</sup> For more about the background to the development of this project, please see Bright (2016).

working class and other oppressed groups in a process of discussion, dialogue and reflection about themselves, their cultures and ways of life, which might encompass personal and family issues as well as employment, politics and so forth. There is an emphasis on illustrating how 'culture' is related to wider social, economic and political structures. A cultural action model is often suited to value-, rather than issue-, based groups and organisations (such as those in WwSH) where it can reinforce ties of culture, trust and community, possibly as a prelude to any form of community or social action. From a research perspective, the method employed in this project was a form of community based participatory research (CBPR), "a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each bring" (Fariz et al, 2007). At the core of the research design was a process space playfully called a [Ghost] Co-Lab (commonly referred to as a 'Ghost Lab') which was the key community engagement platform for the project.

### 1.1 Unite Community, Barnsley

This article focuses on a Ghost Lab involving members of the South Yorkshire community branch of Unite the Union. Unite (n.d.) has recently begun to establish community branches for people who are not in employment but wish to join a union and access "a structure through which people can use their political voices to campaign for change". Representatives from Unite were involved in WwSH as project partners from the development of the funding proposal and the initial design of the project. In Barnsley, Unite operate out of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) headquarters, which was at the centre of the UK national miner's strike in 1984-85. The strike left a lasting impact on the area, not only due to the subsequent closure of all collieries and many associated industries, but also because South Yorkshire saw some of the worst violence of the dispute, most notably at British Steel's coking plant at Orgreave. Members of Unite Community branch are actively involved in the Orgreave Truth and Justice campaign for a public inquiry into policing during and after the incident.

## 1.2 Methodology

The group we worked with was not an established one. A local Unite organiser played a crucial role in sending out information to local members and bringing the group together. Participation was open to any local members of Unite Community branch and around eight to ten participants attended each session, ranging in age from their 20s to their 60s. Some were highly engaged in branch organisation and campaigns, but others had more ad hoc involvement with Unite. The series of Ghost Labs included a walk around Barnsley led by a landscape archaeologist and a poetry workshop led by poet Andrew McMillan. However, it is the final Ghost Lab, a comics workshop, attended by eight local Unite members and led by comics artist Jim Medway, that is the focus of this article. This workshop was also attended by an audio documentary maker who recorded the event; a sound artist; and two researchers. All members of the team participated in the group discussions. The comics artist and I were the only members of the team without strong connections to the locality. During the drawing activities, I therefore supported people, especially those who lacked confidence in their drawing skills, and discussed their comics with them, as well as observing and listening to participants' conversations. At the end of the workshop, there was a group discussion about the comics created. Participants agreed to be recorded (audio only) and for their creative work to be shared by signing an agreement based on an oral history clearance form (the main points of which were restated at the beginning of each session). This gave them the option of being named as the source of their words/creators of their work, or remaining anonymous (Oral History Society, 2012).

Following a consideration of the Ghost Lab as a magic circle below, the particular role of comics creation in such an environment is discussed. Examples of comics created by participants are then described to highlight some of the themes to emerge.

## 2. The Ghost Lab as a magic circle

According to Barnett (2007: 955), “Playfulness is the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment” (955). However, play can be defined as having much wider aims and benefits. Huizinga (1955) views play as “different from ‘ordinary’ life” (4); he describes it as “a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (8). In a similar vein, Van Leeuwen and Westwood (2008) discuss Winnecott’s (1971), view of play as occupying a transitional space in which “attributes of objective reality are combine with attributes of imagination leading to the creation of a transitional reality in which one can experiment with different ways of relating to the external world” (154). Thus, “play is not just an activity but a state of mind” (Van Leeuwen and Westwood, 2008: 154), or what Suits (2005) has referred to as a “lusory attitude”. Play allows for social bonding through shared experiences; experimentation and discovery; the practice of skills; and fantasy fulfilment (Brown and Vaughan, 2010). Furthermore, according to Huizinga (1955) culture is interlaced with play: “genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilisation” (5). In addition to games and children’s play, he refers to “higher forms of play” (7) in which he includes performances, pageants, dancing and music.

Play is, therefore, not necessarily a frivolous, inconsequential activity. Nevertheless, as Barnett (2007) points out, seriousness is often regarded as “the antithesis of playfulness, and it has been especially prominent in definitions specifying what playfulness is not” (956). Indeed, Glynn and Webster (1992) use an assessment of ‘seriousness’ to indicate when playfulness was absent. Yet, as Huizinga (1955) makes clear, this dichotomy is fluid and “some play can be very serious indeed” (5) and, on occasions, “play may rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far behind” (8). Play has been described as “an essential method of learning” (Remmele and Whitton, 2014: 113). However, adult learners can be reluctant to play games because they see them as frivolous or inappropriate; adults need to be convinced that a game is an appropriate and effective way to learn (Whitton, 2007). It is this more inclusive, multi-layered definition of play, as the

adoption of an alternative, playful state of mind that may be light-hearted, but can also be serious, that was evident in WwSH.

Huizinga (1955) calls play-worlds “temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (10). The term ‘magic circle’ is commonly used to describe such temporary play worlds in games literature; however, this notion has rarely been explored within an educational context. Remmele and Whitton (2014) describe the magic circle as “a metaphor for the common creation of a specific social situation, in which participants cross a virtual boundary into a secondary world or ‘playspace’” (120). More poetically, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) call the magic circle “a finite space with infinite possibility” (95). It is a safe space, which affords the freedom to make mistakes and to push at the boundaries of everyday ‘rules’. The rules; codes of practice; moral and ethical structures; and ways of behaving in the magic circle are intentionally different from those of real-life. Harvianen (2012) claims the magic circle has a “fictional reality” (506). It is a place when the frame of reference changes from the real to the “as if” (Remmele and Whitton, 2014: 113), or the ‘what if’.

The magic circle has been configured differently by various authors. For Huizinga (1955), the magic circle is a concrete place that is “marked off beforehand” (10) such as a stage or playground. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) take a different view; for them, it is an agreement between the players (or participants) that makes a certain space a magic circle. Remmele and Whitton (2014) view the magic circle as a “fuzzy social process” implying that “the circle is neither a thin line or a solid handrail but that it is rather a thick and squashy, perhaps somewhat foggy, rim or band one stumbles onto, around on and off” (121). Salen and Zimmerman (2004) discuss a similar idea in more concrete terms; they describe how, when a child plays with a doll, “The boundary between the act of playing

with the doll and not playing with the doll is fuzzy and permeable” (94). It is often not possible to determine precisely where play stops and real life begins.

The Ghost Labs that formed such as integral part of WwSH required what Harviainen (2012) calls a “porous magic circle” (511); they had goals that exist outside of play. This quality sets them apart from magic circles more usually found in games contexts that are, for the most part, considered to be autopoietic (Harviainen, 2012) or self-contained. As Montola (2012) writes, “The circle is not impenetrable: It selectively filters and transforms exogenous meaning to endogenous meaning (51). It is this process of filtration and transformation that is key to interpreting the activities of the Ghost Lab described below. In addition, in WwSH, the magic circle was not seen as a fixed location “marked off beforehand” (Huizinga, 1955: 10); the Ghost Labs were deliberately intended to be mobile spaces in which a group of people came together and agreed to enter into a space with its own codes and structures co-determined by the group. Furthermore, for Unite participants, this was a liminal space between the known and the unknown; the Ghost Lab took place within their community, but allowed them to explore it in ways they were unfamiliar with. According to Harviainen (2012), magic circles are, “a step outside mundane reality, yet exist in continuity with it, and have the capacity to facilitate significant social and cognitive changes such as life transitions” (508). This description has clear resonances with notion of social haunting and its emphasis on the power of that which is normally hidden from view to produce something different from what has gone before.

While the Ghost Lab was a shifting location, place was, nevertheless, a highly important component. The Barnsley Comics Ghost Lab took place within the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) headquarters, surrounded by trade union banners and ephemera, in a room with an almost religious atmosphere and reminders of that community’s past (see Figure 1). This location patently fulfilled Huizingen’s (1955) definition of play-grounds as “forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain” (10).

**Figure 1: Barnsley Comics Ghost Lab depicted by comics artist Jim Medway**

## 2.1 Creating comics in the Ghost Lab

During a day-long Ghost Lab facilitated by comics artist Jim Medway and members of the project team, Unite participants were supported in developing basic drawing skills before designing their own comics. This was the third time this group had met, so many of the ideas for their comics were based on issues discussed during the previous Ghost Labs and closely related to Unite goals and concerns. However, it is important to bear in mind that, while all members of Unite will be supportive of the union movement and share common political ideals (such as the importance of solidarity, organisation, fairness and equality), and therefore form a 'community of value' in very broad terms, as individuals, they are likely to espouse notably different ideologies.

Comics were identified as appropriate medium to explore notions of social haunting in WwSH because, as Danziger-Russell (2012) argues, they "create the perfect space for the expression of voices that have been previously marginalized" (92). Through combining text and visual methods of communication, comics offer a means for the expression of interior, or silent, voices, especially of those who cannot speak for themselves or are usually ignored. Furthermore, as Gerde and Foster (2007) argue, comics provide "alternative universes in which alternative consequences can be explored" (254), thus allowing for the exploration of counter-narratives and alternatives to conventional interpretations.

Comics are often associated with play in its most straightforward sense, as defined by Barnett (2007), of providing humour, amusement or entertainment. As McNicol (2016) points out, for those who do not regularly read them, the very word 'comics' can be misleading or confusing: can a medium whose name suggests it is funny address a serious issue? Nonetheless, there are many examples of comics that do tackle important and complex issues and, crucially, the majority do so in a manner that retains an element of playfulness. A famous example is *Maus* in which Art Spiegelman



(2003) describes his father's memories of the Holocaust by representing Jews as mice, Nazis as cats and American soldiers as dogs. It is, perhaps, the fact that comics lack the constraining expectations of more highbrow art forms that gives them this freedom to explore in more playful ways. They may be able to challenge perceptions by requiring the reader to suspend common disbeliefs and allow for the possibility of seeing the world in very different ways.

In one sense, the reading of a comic can be seen as creating a magic circle between the author and reader. The comic book reader has been described by McCloud (1993) as the author's "silent accomplice" and "equal partner in crime" (68), suggesting that comics require an agreement akin to that between participants in the establishment of a magic circle. In order to enter the comic world, the author and reader agree to suspend normal rules and to accept the imaginative rules of the comic. For example, in a comic, a bubble represents a person's thoughts and streaked lines indicate an object is moving at speed. This active participation in the comic world demonstrates Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, in which a literary work is conceived not as an object, but as an experience shaped by the reader under the guidance of clues in the text. Rosenblatt (1994) proposed that a "literary work exists in a live circuit set up between reader and text" (25). In reading a comic, however, the situation is more complex as there are three components: reader, written text and visual language. Each reader creates an overall meaning by relating both the words and images to their own experiences. As a result, there is no single 'correct' or absolute meaning, but rather a series of more or less equally valid alternative interpretations. Moreover, for the reader, meaning is not fixed; it can change during the course of reading and can be modified after the comic has been read. This is an important consideration in discussing the comics created during the Ghost Lab as it was evident, as described below, that individual participants constructed, and made sense of, the comics in relation to their own experiences.

### 3. Illustrations from the Ghost Lab

The following are some examples of the comics created by Unite participants in Barnsley; they have been selected to demonstrate how the idea of a magic circle manifested during the Ghost Lab. Three key themes to emerge were: the development of political awareness and beliefs; division and disconnection in society; and imaginings for a better future.

#### 3.1 Using fictional realities to explore the development of political beliefs

John's comic is one that provides a strong example of the ways in which the boundary of the magic circle of the Ghost Lab was 'fuzzy' and constantly shifting between the real world and the play-world. He created a fictionalised story, but one that was closely based on his past experiences working in town planning. When talking about his comic, John started by describing the images and the imaginary world he had created, but he was quick to link to this to real communities and people he had known:

*The first square and the last square, in the foreground have the little kid basically playing in a gutter poking a stick down the grid cover of a drain and so he's doing exactly the same thing, but the point is...he started off doing it in his urban context and he's finished up doing it in his suburban context. In between you've got a kind of professional landscape architect proposing to the local council a scheme based on a whole new landscape of play...the underlying message is that nobody actually asked the kid...or found a way to get him imagining a different future...In terms of the kind of people who make decisions in our society for the people who don't, there is quite a disconnect...there's still people, essentially, invisible in the process.*

Interestingly, John continued to blend fiction and reality, discussing the character he had created almost as though he were a real child and imagining how a child's early experiences, as depicted in the comic, might impact on his political beliefs as an adult:

*I like to think that when this kid grows up, he'll be angry in a kind of indignant, righteous way and he'll seek to change things...*

Stuart also explored the ways in which political beliefs might develop, but he took a very personal approach to the task, making himself the main character of his comic. But in doing so, he created a story of growing political awareness that resonated with many of the group (Figure 2):

*It's about class really, and background, and social mobility and me. So the first panel is about my parents living in a housing estate...an industrial area near Liverpool in the '60s and '70s. And no one in our family had ever been to university before, or even left the estate...so I was the big hope...I was good at school...“Our Stuart's going to go to university and be a success”, which means a white collar job and your own house; that's what being a success means to them...So I'm thinking, “Yeah, that sounds kinda good”...So, then he goes university and they're really proud...And then that's me today: “What you doing today?” “Oh, I'm going round some flats leafleting”. It's not a happy ending, not a sad ending, but it's the way that things have gone for me.....What they [my parents] wanted for me and what...I wanted for me. And it's a story that quite a few of us share here in different ways...*

**Figure 2: Stuart's comic (first panel)**

McCloud (1993) describes how the simplicity, or abstraction, of a comic (such as the stick figures drawn by Stuart) allow for universal viewer identification, “When you enter the world of the cartoon...you see yourself” (36). Other Ghost Lab participants were able to see their own journeys, from working class backgrounds to activism, represented in certain ways in Stuart's drawings. This led to a discussion between Stuart and another member of the group about ‘transcendence’, the need for a collective solution, rather than individual social mobility. This had the effect of bringing

the temporary play-world of the Ghost Lab back into contact with the real world of Unite's political campaigns.

### 3.2 Representing current reality: Divisions and disconnections

All participants were provided with an outline for a conventional three-panel comic strip (as common in the cartoon sections in newspapers for example). Jan, however, decided to subvert the format suggested and rearranged the panels to create a 'map' representing her community which was made up of three disconnected estates. Within the Ghost Lab, she produced an exaggerated form of reality in order to highlight the problems she had witnessed in real life:

*So each of these estates have stereotypical ideas of the people who live in the other estates...This has always been considered a rough area; full of feral children, youths and the police don't go there, that kind of thing...And they've all got these stereotypes. And for some reason, parents in the different estates traditionally have said, "Whatever you do, don't cross the road", so these stereotypes have reinforced the instruction not to cross the road.*

#### **Figure 3: Jan's comic**

Crucial to Jan's concept was the idea that the characters representing each of the three estates (which she drew as stick figures) were, in fact, identical, 'normal' people. Despite this, when they looked across at the neighbouring estates, they saw a "larger than life character" of an armed drug dealer or vandal based on exaggerated and distorted stereotypes that represented their worst fears of residents of the other estates.

In comics, the gaps between the panels, or gutters, have a crucial role. Readers need to "read between the panels" (Brenner, 2006: 125) and imagine what takes place in the gutters in order to complete the narrative. It has been argued that what is omitted (left in the gutter) is just as significant as what is included within the panels and it is the reader's interpretation of these 'gaps' which allows them to make sense of the story. It is therefore interesting that Jan chose to make

creative use of the gutters in her comic. Rather than simply leaving them as gaps, she used them to represent the roads between the three estates. As she explained, she named these streets (fictitiously) to poke fun at the types of idealistic names adopted by the local council, which were a long way from the reality of life in these communities:

*We've got the streets, Mandela Road here and Rainbow Street, the council's airy fairy idea of how unified and integrated we are!...Even though they've got those lovely names, the roads actually act as boundaries.*

Boundaries was also one of the main topics in discussions that took place while participants were planning their comics, specifically Boundary Road in Sheffield. This is the road that divides Sheffield University and the area surrounding it from a 1960s' council estate; as local activists, Unite members were highly aware that these two areas are occupied by very different communities. Tim used humour to illustrate the differences:

*There is actually three Sainsburys...and they stock different food, right? The university one's more kinda like hummus and all that [laughter]...the one on the council estate is slightly different...you get more processed products, so there is definitely a class distinction between one side of the road and the other...it's weird because they're not even far apart.*

Geoff suggested how Boundary Road could be used as a visual metaphor, a common device in comics, to consider how the boundary it represented was not simply a geographical one. He made the case that exploring Boundary Road more imaginatively as a comic might help to clarify thinking around Unite's role as a political campaigning organisation in this situation:

*Boundary Road drives right through the centre of Sheffield politics; it drives right through the centre of real communities that we have to find a way of working across. That cartoon seems to sum up a place in which this community can think about the divisions over which it works.*

### 3.3 Transformation: Reimagining the future

As described above, the magic circle of the Ghost Lab was a porous one in which there was constant switching between the play-world and the real world. When discussing Jan's comic for example, a participant commented that finding a way to solve a problem imaginatively might be the first step towards tackling it in real life:

*Jan: If you'd like to come and do something about that boundary I'd be very grateful!*

*Geoff: But we can do it imaginatively first!*

The Boundary Road discussions mentioned above also opened up possibilities for a reimagined future that might start as an artistic and imaginative process, but could lead to change in the real world beyond the temporary magic circle of the Ghost Lab. This represents what Freire (1972) described as the relationship from "*speaking the word to transforming reality*" (31, emphasis in original):

*Geoff: ...us sitting and talking about these things opens up the possibility that things can always be different; that nothing is given; it can be re-made because it can be re-imagined...Boundary Road, we could redraw it; there could be no Boundary Road...All you need to do is picture it...*

Other participants joined in this playful speculation, exploring 'what ifs' that, although they might be farfetched, allowed participants to consider how fictional realities might help their community to think about political struggles from a new perspective:

*Jan: You could have developers coming in and the bulldozer demolishing Boundary Road so it all becomes one and see what happens there.*

*John: I liked it when Geoff said you'd have to be a space traveller to get between these two things that are actually cheek by jowl. If that could be somehow in the comic strip that you've got these conventional situations, but there's a kind of space travelling going on...*

*Stuart: I was thinking more Tufty Club<sup>2</sup>! I just saw a little red squirrel.*

While some participants, such as Jan, chose to represent current reality as they saw it, albeit in an exaggerated or playful form, Mark chose to imagine an alternative, better, world in his comic. Rather than “denouncing reality”, he was “announcing the future” (Freire, 1972: 77). Again, this comic had a basis in reality as it retold a situation Mark had witnessed many times in his career as a teacher. The large building in his comic represents a university building that is on one side of Boundary Road in Sheffield, facing the council estate on the other side (Figure 4). Mark’s comic tells the story of a child from the estate crossing the road to go to the university, but then returning back to the estate to contribute to the community. The first panel shows a small child looking up at the imposing university building. In the second panel the child leaves the estate to go to university:

*So he crosses the road...tiny, growing, bigger and now big...so what happens is that they go back to their community and they take what they’ve learnt at the university...they go back more powerful. Because I think that’s what education is...It’s not you aspire to escape where you’re from; you’re proud of where you’re from and you want to go back and put in what you took out.*

**Figure 4: Mark’s comic**

As another participant pointed out, this notion of personal growth and the impact of education could be expressed particularly powerfully through images, as the character grew in size physically during the story demonstrating their intellectual and emotional growth in a more tangible way:

*Stuart: ...it’s good showing it as a graphic because you can show someone bigger can’t you?*

However, as other participants commented, Mark’s vision was not a utopic one:

*Geoff: They’re still the other side of Boundary Road...*

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<sup>2</sup> A road safety campaign for children in the 1960s and 1970s in the UK, see <http://www.rospa.com/about/history/tufty/>

*Mark: Yes, we haven't got rid of the boundary...And equally I haven't said how that process occurs.*

*Jan: Once you've crossed that boundary through social mobility are you necessarily accepted as part of what's on the other side? And if you wanted to go back, would you be accepted where you started from?*

This was, therefore, a reimagining that raised many additional questions for participants. Mark had taken advantage of the possibilities of the magic circle to break the boundaries of everyday rules; his comic ignored certain social realities in order to explore new possibilities. However, it had not disregarded these completely; the possibilities presented here were finite, limited by the continued presence of Boundary Road. There were clearly further 'what ifs' that might be explored.

#### 4. Discussion

As van Leeuwen and Westwood (2008) point out, in the case of adults, play is most usually studied in therapeutic contexts. In contrast, WwSH has emphasised an alternative conceptualisation of play within a radical political context. The concept of social haunting is explicitly not a therapeutic project, but a political one. While the comics created address serious political topics such as class mobility and community cohesion, they use the medium to do so in a more playful way than is often the case. It is important to note that the type of play encouraged through the Ghost Lab was not an imposed form of play that might make adults feel uncomfortable; it was a form of play that arose naturally from being within a magic circle that permitted challenging topics to be discussed in more novel and thought-provoking ways.

The magic circle of the Ghost Lab could certainly be described as porous; it was never completely sealed off from the outside world and the boundary between playing and not-playing was fuzzy and constantly shifting. Nevertheless, the Ghost Lab was successful in establishing a space in which participants with differing experiences and political views could come together in a spared spirit of



exploration that permitted mistake-making, make-believe, creativity and lateral thinking to attempt explanations and solutions that otherwise might not have been considered possible.

There was evidence of social bonding in the Ghost Lab as participants shared both personal and political experiences and discussed ideas such as the impact of social divisions and possible collective solutions in ways that allowed them to set aside fixed ideologies. Issues that might expose sectarian splits within the group were collectively filtered and prevented from entering the magic circle. As one of the participants described, the Ghost Lab enabled “a supporting environment of solidarity” (WwSH, 2016a). The setting of the Ghost Lab therefore allowed for a safe space to be established that gave participants the freedom to challenge the ‘rules’ of everyday life in their communities and consider possibilities within a “transitional reality” (Van Leeuwen and Westwood, 2008: 154) that was not completely fictional, yet not restricted by the perceived structures of the real world. Everyday meanings were transformed and reimagined as they entered the magic circle of the Ghost Lab. For example, the use of Boundary Road as a metaphor to represent social divisions rather than simply as a geographical feature.

Information from the real world was therefore able to enter the magic circle through the process of ‘transformation’ and ‘filtering’. Harviainen and Lieberoth (2012) present this as a rule-bound process that acts to limit external influences on the magic circle as it “makes information either fit within the frame or disqualifies it before it can properly enter” (536). However, the filtering and transformation processes witnessed during the Ghost Lab were much more creative. For example, Jan transformed her estate by using exaggeration and humour to demonstrate how engrained stereotypes she had witnessed within her community had no basis in fact. She also wanted to point out how problems such as this are largely ignored by local councils, but she did so implicitly in the playful way in which she named the roads on the estates. Stuart transformed a highly personal experience into a universal narrative that resonated strongly with other Ghost Lab participants. The medium of comics therefore made it possible for participants to transform information more creatively. While Jan

played with space in her comic; Mark played with perspective; and John and Stuart played with the cyclical nature of time as their characters finished in similar situations to those where they had started. All these types of transformation were possible within a very simple three-panel comics format.

While playing, Huizinga (1955) claims, “the child is *making an image* of something different, something more beautiful, or more sublime, or more dangerous than what he usually is” (14, emphasis in original). This is an apt description of the comics created during the Barnsley Ghost Lab. Participants were able to create and explore alternative beautiful, sublime, dangerous, accepting or just worlds, but worlds nevertheless grounded in the reality of their lives and their communities. In WwSH, the magic circle of the Ghost Lab appeared to allow participants space to explore not just the ‘as if’ or ‘what if’, but also what Bloch (1986) has called the ‘not-yet’, thereby conjuring with both personal and political historical alternatives that could have been taken, but were not. The creation of ‘fictional realities’ (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004) through comics encourages the suspension of disbelief and supports the development of counter-narratives. Comics allow for the exploration of possible futures that may not be achievable in the world as it currently is, but can still be constructed imaginatively. Within a community of value such as Unite the Union, this re-imagining through comics has powerful potential and can, as Capous Deyllas and Sinclair (2014) have argued in the case of zine-making, be viewed as a form of transformative learning.

Mezirow (2000) defines transformative learning as “the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (7-8). As Lau-Bond (2016) argues, “Transformative learning therefore involves change in the way we see ourselves and our world” (86). The basis for Mezirow’s (2000) theory is the idea that we all have frames of reference, or the “structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense

impressions” (16). In the case of Ghost Lab participants, these frames of reference included longstanding political and social beliefs. According to Mezirow (2000), “The justification for much of what we know and believe, our values and feelings, depends on the context – biographical, historical, cultural – in which they are embedded” (3).

Mezirow (1990) argues that learning happens through critical reflection, or “reflection on presuppositions” (6). This reflection can be internal or achieved through critical discourse with others, but it ultimately leads to some type of reflective action, such as reordering a problematic frame of reference to accommodate new experiences. It would appear that this is what participation in the magic circle allowed Ghost Lab participants to start to do. By transforming personal and political experiences through the creation of comics, they were able to reflect on these experiences and consider how they might be interpreted in different ways within a “fictional reality” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 506). As described above, however, the role of comics reader is considered no less important than that of comics author. It was not just through drawing their own comics that participants began to reflect on their frames of reference, but also through discussing these comics as a group. In this context, the simplicity of comics is perhaps their greatest strength; the abstract drawings allow readers to identify with the stories and to read their own experiences and possibilities into the comic. Comics such as those described here give readers the space and freedom to shape the narrative and use it as a vehicle for reflection on their own presuppositions, whether personal, such as their path to activism, or collective, such as ways to reimagine their communities.

Aalsburg Wiessner and Mezirow (2000) discuss the issue of making space for transformative learning, which might be an actual space or a figurative space that “invites exploration, imagination and wonder, and allows people to leave their day-to-day life settings and roles behind for a time” (336). This is an apt description of what occurred within the magic circle of the Barnsley Ghost Lab.

## 5. Conclusion: There is another world, but it is in this one (attrib. Paul Éluard)

WwSH has illustrated the potential of the use of playful approaches within adult learning, and specifically within a radical community educational approach that draws on transformative learning theory. The establishment of a magic circle in the form of a Ghost Lab was a method of circumventing ideological differences and allowing for the exploration of fictional realities that, while they have a basis in the real world, are not limited by conventional codes of practice, rules or structures. This method has demonstrated considerable promise as a technique for working in communities affected by division and discontent. Indeed, following this initial phase, the project team (including community partners Unite and the Co-op College) is building on the exploratory Ghost Lab practice described above and starting to work with other communities similarly affected by contested pasts, in particular the trauma of the miners' strike and consequent deindustrialisation (WwSH, 2016b).

While there was plenty of humour during the Ghost Lab, the forms of play that it enabled to take place were more meaningful and powerful than that. The WwSH Ghost Lab, and the comics created themselves, offered participants "a finite space with infinite possibility" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 95) where the boundary between the play-world and the real world is fuzzy and permeable and transformative learning may be possible.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Unite Community South Yorkshire, in particular all members who took part in this Ghost Lab and John Taylor who was instrumental in bringing the group together. Thanks also to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) for the use of their premises. 'Working with Social Haunting' was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), grant number: AH/M009262/1 and led by Dr Geoff Bright, building on his PhD research 'An inter-generational ethnography of school

disaffection in a post-industrial coal mining area (Sheffield Hallam, 2013). Thanks to community broadcaster Max Munday who recorded participants' conversations in the Ghost Labs and to Jim Medway for leading the workshop, as well as fellow project co-investigators Dr Angela Connelly (University of Manchester), Andrew McMillan (Liverpool John Moores University), Dr Toby Pillatt (University of Sheffield) and Dr Cilla Ross (Co-operative College). Finally, thanks to Nicola Whitton (MMU) for her helpful comments on a draft of this article.