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Sites of Protest: Rethinking Everyday Spaces as Sites for Protesting the Marginalisation of Difference

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Abstract

Introduction

Contemporary societies are increasingly becoming sites in which it is more difficult for people to respectfully negotiate disagreements about human diversity. This is exemplified by people who must oppose oppressive social conventions that marginalise them because they identify as belonging to one or more minority groups. One of the key factors in this dynamic is how people's being in particular sites impacts their being as a person. The "fate of the stranger" is shaped by the spaces they inhabit and people are labelled as "insiders or outsiders" (Amin *Land 2*); for many people this means our societies are sites of dissatisfaction. For example, in some sites asylum seekers and refugees are referred to as "co-habitant and potential citizen," while in other sites they are referred to as "impure and threats" (Amin *Land 2*). This process of defining a person's being is also experienced by people who are "multi-abled, multi-sexed, multi-sexual, or multi-faith" (Garbutt 275). This article provides a reading of the Human Library in relation to contemporary understandings of space from human geographers such as Ash Amin, as a way of rethinking our everyday spaces as sites for protesting the marginalisation of difference. It primarily draws on my researching and organising Human Libraries across Australia.

Protest can employ both instrumental and expressive forms of activism. Instrumental activism aims to change law or policy, gain improvements in living conditions, and win important human services. Expressive activism is often understood as a continuum of political acts extending from lawful demonstrations through to violent activities. Recent studies demonstrate that protest has developed beyond such conventional forms (Dalton, Van Sickle, and Weldon). Contemporary protest includes such things as: acts of spontaneity (Snow and Moss); advocating rights via cultural rather than political protest (Bruce); and activating spatial politics by engaging in urban public spaces to highlight long-standing socio-spatial inequalities (Marom).

These examples demonstrate the tension that exists within contemporary protest. While some people accuse expressive activism of being "a thing-for-itself that is not aimed at producing results", others recognise that "both expressive and instrumental activism are necessary and important" (Maddison and Scalmer 69-71). Far from being self-interested, protest that adopts expressive activism offers its practitioners an important tool:

Expressive activism is oriented towards the construction, reconstruction and/or transformation of norms, values, identities and ways of living and being. It is not just about 'who we are' [...] but also about 'how we are' in the world, consequently requiring evaluation of 'what we do' and 'how we do it'. (Stammers 164-165)

This understanding of expressive activism provides a useful lens for reading the Human Library as a means of rethinking everyday spaces as sites for protesting the marginalisation of difference. This is particularly so because the Human Library, as an activist organisation dedicated to increasing respect for difference, is situated within the contemporary anti-prejudice movement (Stammers; Chesters and Welsh; Watson "You Shouldn't Have to Suffer").

Introducing the Human Library

Human Libraries transform the spaces provided by traditional libraries into spaces that challenge contemporary socio-spatial dynamics. Human Libraries provide people (Readers) with a safe space in which they can choose another person (a volunteer known as a Human Book) and engage in a conversation or 'reading' about the way that people perceive and experience difference. Readers choose their Human Books from a catalogue of titles and descriptions which are developed by each Human Book and express something about how they identify. For example, titles include such things as belonging to sexual minority groups, living with physical or mental impairment, or belonging to different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Each 'reading' is defined by three rules: 1) you may raise any topic or ask any question; 2) a 'reading' is a dialogue so Human Books ask their Readers questions too; and 3) each person may decline to answer any question and to end the reading at any time. Using this method, Human Libraries protest the way in which socio-spatial norms marginalise people who are different. They enact a form of expressive activism that reconstructs the way that norms are used in local sites to marginalise different ways of living and being. This reconstruction of the relationship between norms and sites enables people to be "who we are" and "how we are" without having to be inauthentic about "what we do" and "how we do it" (Stammers 164-165).

The first Human Library took place at the Roskilde Festival (Denmark) in the summer of 2000 and as an international activist organisation within the anti-prejudice movement, has since become active in over 80 countries and used in a variety of local community sites thus demonstrating its ability to "transcend borders and be adapted to different situations" (Abergel et al. 13). It now operates in such diverse settings as local libraries, universities, schools, music and cultural festivals and workplaces. Participants' (Organisers, Readers and Human Books) reflections on their experiences of engaging in Human Libraries helps to illustrate how they perceive Human Libraries as sites that challenge socio-spatial norms.

Human Libraries enable people to create sites that reverse our usual social interactions. The following phrases, used by participants to describe their contact with the Human Library, illustrate this. An Organiser, whose local government job requires her to develop projects that encourage interactions between in-groups and out-groups, explains that Human Libraries bring people who usually live "on the margins [...] into the centre of the page" and that "the powerful people [...] who are usually in the centre" are required to listen to different experiences. Likewise, Human Books describe themselves as being "totally open" in order to encourage their Readers to ask about topics that society labels as "taboo". Readers illustrate how they encounter Human Libraries in ways that the other spaces in their day-to-day lives function. One Reader talks about "stumbling upon" a Human Library within a community event and describes this as "a kind of a stroke of brilliance to catch people at a place like that rather than in a more conventional library setting". Other Readers emphasise the significance of this type of encounter when they explain that they "probably wouldn't just go and bother someone in the street" and that participating in a Human Library has provided a type of conversation "that doesn't happen in any other way". The outcome of this is highlighted by a Reader who explains that she pushed herself "to go beyond [...] just a polite social conversation" because the Human Library "lays it all out there and says, we're here to talk" (Watson "You Shouldn't Have to Suffer" 124-132). These descriptions of people's experiences of Human Libraries demonstrate how they perceive Human Libraries as spaces that enable them to have conversations with people they would not normally speak to about topics they would usually feel unable to speak about. Their examples are better appreciated when considered along with the scholarship on the interconnectedness of space and intergroup relations.

The Interconnectedness of Space and Intergroup Relations

A multiplicity of spaces shape people's everyday lives. The everyday refers to the "flow of routine" often defined by such mundane habitual practices as going to work, crossing streets and shopping (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht 495). Who a person is, where a person lives, the spaces a person can enter and move about, and how a person is treated in those spaces are intertwined. Belonging is not an abstract concept; as people move in and out of different spaces they demonstrate how belonging is "experienced differentially, and the pleasures and powers it confers are not distributed evenly but [are] linked to relations of inequality and practices of social exclusion" (Noble and Poynting 490). This warns us against romanticizing the urban space of the city and regarding it over-simplistically as neutral and accessible to all, as a space of open flow and untroubled human interaction and as a natural catalyst for proximate reflexivity (Noble and Poynting; Amin and Thrift; Amin *Land*; Priest et al.).

Acknowledging the negative impacts inherent in the interconnectedness of the city and intergroup relations, some scholars have moved their attention from examining integration at the macrospatial level of society to studying the microecology of segregation (Clack, Dixon, and Tredoux; Dixon, Tredoux and Clack; Alexander and Tredoux; Priest et al.; Thomas; Dandy and Pe-Pua; Dixon and Durrheim; Durrheim et al.). This shifts the focus from a primary interest in the city and the neighbourhood to a closer examination of people's everyday life spaces. This focus examines how members of different groups "share proximity and co-presence" (Clack, Dixon, and Tredoux 2) and engage in informal practices that uphold barriers (Alexander and Tredoux; Dixon and Durrheim). For example, people were observed as they shared spaces such as beaches, school cafeterias and university class rooms and were found to use these spaces in ways that enacted segregation along lines of race, ethnicity, age, and gender. In examples such as these, everyday life spaces are seen to function in ways that (re)instate borders around difference through everyday spatial practices and they act as sites in which "informal segregation practices can be enacted and reproduced" (Priest et al. 32). The shift in scholarly interest to the microecology of segregation serves my interest in how we might use everyday spaces as sites to contest segregation. The following discusses three everyday spaces that serve this interest.

The Space of the Everyday Urban

The macrospatial terrain of the world's cities and towns is increasingly defined by difference and their public spaces are often spaces of "visibility and encounter between strangers" (Amin "Ethnicity" 967). Negotiating difference is a natural part of living in these large urban spaces and it is an increasingly more common experience in, what was previously, the typically homogenous setting of rural communities. This process of negotiation occurs most noticeably within the microecology of the "everyday urban," a context defined by the interconnection of everyday spaces and intergroup relations (Alexander and Tredoux; Durrheim et al.; Dixon and Durrheim). It is here that we find "the micropolitics of everyday social contact and encounter" (Amin "Ethnicity" 959). These everyday spaces include our streets, parks, malls, and cafes, and they are often described as shared spaces of freedom, mingling, and serendipitous encounters. However, while spaces such as these can place people from diverse backgrounds and groups in close proximity, it is important not to overstate their effectiveness in helping people negotiate

difference (Wise; Noble "Cosmopolitan Habits"; Priest et al.; Valentine "Living"). This is the case because urban public spaces can carry a reverse side to the provision of proximity. They are often "spaces of transit with very little contact between strangers" (Amin "Ethnicity" 967). As such, urban public spaces do not naturally serve our need to negotiate our everyday encounters with others (Amin and Thrift; Amin, Massey, and Thrift; Rosaldo; Amin "Ethnicity").

This illuminates the need to rethink our everyday public spaces and start to unsettle and shift how some spaces act to perpetuate negative and habitual socio-spatial norms which encourage avoidance rather than provide spaces to contest inequality and inequity (Alexander and Tredoux; Durrheim et al.; Clack, Dixon, and Tredoux; Dixon and Durrheim; Wise). Participants at Human Libraries demonstrate that they recognise this when they explain that they do not feel able to approach and speak with people who are different in everyday spaces such as the street, public transport and shops. They point out that they feel that socio-spatial norms dictate that it is rude, impolite or intrusive to approach strangers and people who are different in public spaces and to begin a conversation, especially about difference (Watson "You Shouldn't Have to Suffer"). Examples such as this signal how everyday urban spaces embody socio-spatial norms and practices that impede people's capacity to engage in everyday acts that protest the marginalisation of difference. This clarifies why "even in the most carefully designed and inclusive spaces, the marginalised and the prejudiced stay away" (Amin "Ethnicity" 968). This alerts us to the need to better appreciate what occurs in other everyday spaces in which people associate even more closely.

Spaces and the Micropublic

Other everyday spaces in which people spend a significant amount of time are spaces of association, referred to as micropublics (Amin "Ethnicity"; Noble "Cosmopolitan Habits"). They include those places in which we work, study, play sports, and recreate. Micropublics function as spaces of habitual engagement, interdependence and "prosaic negotiations" (Amin "Ethnicity" 969). For example, we attend our place of work on a daily basis which requires us to communicate and interact with our colleagues as well as navigate other forms of elementary social etiquette. In this way, micropublics often bring people from diverse backgrounds and identity groups together in spaces that require them to interact with people who are different to themselves. In practice, however, the contact people undertake in their micropublics tends to be illusory and includes practices of informal segregation (Dixon and Durrheim; Alexander and Tredoux; Clack, Dixon, and Tredoux). This highlights that "co-presence and collaboration are two very different things" and that micropublics do not immediately serve as sites for protesting the marginalisation of difference (Amin *Land* 59).

Participants at Human Libraries share experiences taken from their own work places and schools and suggest that the codes of civility that are enforced within these micropublics make it difficult, if not impossible, to engage in certain conversations. For example, Readers at Human Libraries disclose that they do not feel comfortable discussing issues of physical impairment or mental illness with colleagues who live with disability and mental illness. Similarly, high school students explain that they feel unable to discuss what it means to be gay, lesbian or bisexual with their fellow-students who identify as LGBTIQI (Watson "You Shouldn't Have to Suffer"). Examples such as these demonstrate how micropublics embody "degrees and modalities of familiarity and strangeness" (Noble "Strange Familiarities" 33) and that even though they may embody degrees of collaboration and contribute to a shift in the way people develop various forms of familiarity, they do not naturally lend themselves to protesting the way in which codes of civility camouflage disrespect for difference. These experiences alert us to the way that our everyday spaces and the norms attached to them contribute to defining what it means to be and to belong.

Spaces and Being

People's experiences of marginalisation in public spaces illuminates how people's freedom to be in particular spaces and their being – their humanity – are intimately connected. This happens as people who are made to feel that they should not be in a space are sent the message that they do not have the right to be at all (Noble and Poynting). Valentine ("Prejudice" 531) explains how this is demonstrated by the way some people speak about other people who are different in relation to public and private spaces:

Individuals stated that they believed in individual freedom and were not prejudiced against minority groups and yet saw no contradiction in then expressing hostility towards seeing lesbians and gay men kissing on the street, or women wearing the hijab in their neighbourhood or feeling uncomfortable at the sight of a disabled person in public or being inconvenienced by disabled access provisions.

This response reveals how some people frame acceptance of minority groups using the criteria of invisibility and how spatial norms define "appropriate embodied ways of being in public space" (Valentine "Prejudice" 532). This exemplifies how some people regard it as tolerable for minority groups to express their difference at home but not in public because this would be considered as imposing "their way of life" upon majority people, thus transgressing spatial norms about appropriate embodied ways of being in public spaces.

People who participate at Human Libraries as Readers illustrate this dynamic when they share how, during the course of their everyday lives, they have come in contact with people with disabilities or met people who identify as gay, lesbian or transgender and have recognised negative feelings within themselves such as discomfort, embarrassment, or have refused to recognise a person's authentic identity. They also admit to hiding these feelings in public but expressing them once they return home (Watson "You Shouldn't Have to Suffer"; Kudo et al.). Similarly, people who volunteer as Human Books speak about their experiences of being in public spaces and feeling unsafe or the target of negative treatment. For example, Human Books who identify as gay comment that they need to do a "safety check" before showing signs of physical affection in public; Human Books whose physical appearance does not align with social constructs of gender relate that they have been banned from using public toilets; and Human Books with eating disorders speak about being labelled as "crazy" (Watson "You Shouldn't Have to Suffer"; Watson "Being a Human Book"). Behaviours such as these demonstrate how people who are different are defined and treated as lesser beings in public spaces and are relegated to segregated micropublics such as their homes as well as groups and clubs dedicated to particular minorities.

Conclusion: Rethinking Our Spaces

The above discussion includes a number of findings that are informative when thinking about how our everyday spaces might act as sites for protesting the marginalisation of difference. The following offers a concluding discussion about how we might approach such a project, paying particular attention to what we can learn from the Human Library.

Firstly, Human Libraries exemplify the need to develop sites that protest the way in which our everyday public spaces do not naturally serve our need to negotiate our everyday encounter with difference (Noble and Poynting; Amin and Thrift; Amin Strangers; Priest et al.). Readers indicate that Human Libraries are spaces that make it possible for them to meet people they don't feel able to approach in other everyday public spaces. As such, Human Libraries illuminate the importance of developing sites that protest social and spatial norms by enabling "encounter between strangers" (Amin "Ethnicity" 967).

Secondly, Human Libraries protest the space of the micropublic as sites that are illusory, superficial, and bearers of informal segregation (Clack, Dixon, and Tredoux; Dixon, Tredoux and Clack; Alexander and Tredoux; Priest et al.; Thomas; Dandy and Pe-Pua; Dixon and Durrheim; Durrheim et al.). They achieve this by being sites in which no topic or question is taboo and that welcome and value respectful conversations about difference. Readers are able to speak to Human Books about differences such as what it is like to live with physical impairment, to be lesbian and/or to be an immigrant or a refugee. Their conversations are much deeper than the superficial conversations they feel restricted to within the confines of their everyday micropublics which enables them to protest codes of civility that render conversations about the marginalisation of difference as unacceptable (Watson "You Shouldn't Have to Suffer"; Watson "Being a Human Book").

Thirdly, Human Libraries provide sites that protest the way in which other spaces define people who are different as lesser beings because Human Libraries are spaces in which every person has the right to be their authentic self. They are spaces that make it possible for people to be 'who we are' by authentically being 'how we are' (Stammers 164-165). They shed a light on the way that a person's being is sometimes distorted by how they experience being in a particular space and in doing so protest spatial norms that divide, marginalise and diminish people by marginalising them via the criteria of invisibility (Clack, Dixon, and Tredoux; Dixon and Durrheim; Thomas). For this reason, Human Libraries can be regarded as safe spaces to meet people who are different and bring people from the margins of society to its centre as sites that protest the marginalisation of difference.

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