

This multi-component output supported by contextual information comprises three externally funded pieces of practice research in urban communities (Oldham, Camden, Bexley), three single-authored, peer-reviewed academic writings and a range of talks, papers and symposia. These components overlap and intersect, developing the sustained research enquiry, which argues that, first, performance place practices can facilitate participants' reconsideration of place within contemporary conditions of movement, migration and the breaking up of fixed community. The multimodal research methodologies (applied theatre practice research, philosophical enquiry, theoretical analysis) led to new findings where place was 'unfamiliarised' and re-envisioned by and for participants. Second, this practice research has supported a theoretical reconceptualisation of place and, third, enabled an interrogation of applied theatre practice research as a polyphonic conversation with researcher, stakeholder and participant voices merging.

Within the practice, contemporary tropes of mobility and the liquid — reifications of late postmodern discourse — are challenged. Rather than binarising place and mobility (or liquidity), what has become evident through the research is a conflation, a meshing or something like an *acquiescence* where 'mobility' and 'place' yield to each other fluently and constantly. In using performance practices that subvert and explore locality to improve dwelling with the vulnerable (such as adults with mental illness or migrants) alongside more settled communities, it has become clear that place, locality and 'home' are critical and can be re-formed swiftly, even within complex lives of movement, transition and stasis. The *UnfamiliarEyes* research in Oldham, Camden and Bexley has led to reconceiving contemporary place as 'anatopic' for new and settled communities: that is, always already a disrupted place, insecure and immanently changing.

*UnfamiliarEyes* has included partnerships with arts organisation and local authorities, and further collaborations with many practitioners and community groups. Findings have been disseminated to academic and non-academic audiences through a range of media.

UnfamiliarEyes

Sally Mackey



Physical materials which comprise or support this submission can be found inside the box. For online materials, a live link is provided in a PDF of this publication found on the USB drive  embedded in the box's interior lid. Links are indicated by the symbol .

Within this publication, references for components of the submission are found in the right margin using a lettering system A–N. Items marked with an \* are components of the output, all other items are contextual.

- A Overview document: *Performing Local Places*
- B Booklet: *Performing Places Bexley*
- C Evaluation report (Camden)
- D Evaluation report (Oldham)
- E Evaluation report (Bexley)
- F\* Chapter: Mackey, Sally. 2016. 'Performing Location: Place and Applied Theatre', in *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre*, ed. by Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.106–26
- G\* Journal article: Mackey, Sally. 2016. 'Applied theatre and practice as research: polyphonic conversations', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 21(4): 478–91
- H\* Journal article: Mackey, Sally. 2020. 'A Short Disquisition on Anatopia: Rethinking place and its performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 30(4): 546–558
- I Project flyers (Bexley)
- J Project flyers (other)
- K Contextual document: *Challenging Place: Performing Abergavenny* (also on )
- L Project postcards
- M Education Resource Pack (also on )
- N List of invited academic and non-academic talks and papers (also on )

Items K, M and N are also on the USB  because they contain a number of links.

Further information on these materials can be found on the reverse of the box's interior lid.

Sally Mackey

## UNFAMILIAREYES

Interrogating Performing Place,  
2015–2020

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama,  
University of London

UNFAMILIAREYES: Interrogating  
Performing Place, 2015–2020

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## Overview

*UnfamiliarEyes* is a multi-component output, supported by contextual information, interrogating performing place. In *UnfamiliarEyes*, ‘performing place’ refers to facilitated performance-related activities with residents exploring local authority agendas. Such activities comprise small acts of engagement and discovery undertaken by participants and encouraged by in-role facilitators, inviting a re-viewing of local places. Performing place invokes and interrogates the material and psychological construction of a physical site, ‘performed’ by local residents who are intrinsically connected to this place through their lived, everyday existence.

*UnfamiliarEyes* comprised two conjoined phases, Phase 1, 2015–2017 and Phase 2, 2017–2020, and three sites of performing place practice: in Oldham, Camden (both in Phase 1) and Bexley (in Phase 2). In Phase 1, 2015–2017, ‘Earthed’ was commissioned by Oldham Council and ‘Place’ by Camden Council. In Oldham (Greater Manchester), ‘Earthed’ comprised a week-long participatory, interactive performance narrative taking place in one neighbourhood, Clarksfield, which was experiencing population change. The performing place practice used in ‘Earthed’ was intended to ease relationships between longer-established residents and new migrants (FIG 1).

‘Place’ in Camden worked with a core group of participant adults with a mental illness who lived in 24-hour supported residencies run by the St Mungo’s Housing Association. ‘Place’ sought to increase a sense of ease for these adults within their immediate neighbourhood location (FIGS 2–3, 8).

In Phase 2, ‘Performing Places Bexley’, 2017–2020, experiments in performing place were further developed, working closely with Bexley Council to improve relations between new and settled residents including changing attitudes, atmosphere and behaviours in the main shopping area of Bexleyheath, the Broadway (FIGS 6, 7).

Supporting the practice, evaluation and theoretical framing continued throughout both phases (see IV. Methodology).

Each of the three sets of practices in *UnfamiliarEyes* varied in scale from participation levels of over 8000 in Bexley to a core group of six in Camden. That performance activities could make a difference, and shift people’s perception of their environment, was positioned as research within the

context of local authority strategic objectives for new services users. The research team worked with local councils directly as brokers to their service providers and communities in *UnfamiliarEyes* (the overview document and booklet provide contextual information on *UnfamiliarEyes* in Oldham, Camden and Bexley).

Partners in *UnfamiliarEyes* included Oldham, Camden and Bexley Councils, Oldham Theatre Workshop, St Mungo’s Hostel (Camden), Bexley BID (Business Improvement District), Bexley Library Services, Emergency Exit Arts, Little Fish Theatre and Mash Up Productions. Partners commissioned and co-designed the work with the research team, as well as assisting in delivery.

Collaborators contributed to the research project, helping create bespoke practice aligned with the partners’ overall commission and design. Collaborators included:

- St Barnabas’ Church (and its clubs such as Youth Group, Mothers and Babies), Bilal Mosque, Roma Community Leaders, Salvation Army and two Clarksfield primary schools — all in Oldham;
- Rose Bruford College, Bird College, four Bexleyheath secondary schools, four Bexleyheath primary schools, Bedonwell Alive and Kicking, Bexley Young Carers, Interfaith conference team, St Augustine’s Mother and Babies, Mencap, Age UK, Moorings (youth group for those experiencing emotional difficulties), Mind, Townswomen’s Guild, Belvedere Baptist Church and Erith Exchange — all in Bexley;
- Over 50 freelance practitioners (for the Camden work as an example, such practitioners also worked at organisations such as Clean Break, Half Moon Theatre, Outside Edge and Royal Court);
- Over 200 student volunteers for ‘Performing Places Bexley’ from The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (Central), Bird College and Rose Bruford;
- Evaluation teams from Business Intelligence Service (Oldham), McPin Foundation (Camden), Mel Larsen Associates and Bexley Council (Bexley).

Research and Creative teams worked together, closely; both teams were led by Sally Mackey, the principal researcher. Assistant researchers included Dr Adelina Ong, Maria Ignacia Goycoolea and Laetitia Butler from Central. The research teams focused on the research questions, documenting the work and supporting some of the output components (e.g. the symposia [\[3\]](#)). The research team worked closely with the creative teams throughout *UnfamiliarEyes*. The creative teams comprised practitioners from partner organisations Oldham Theatre Workshop (for ‘Earthed’ in Clarksfield),

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FIG 1 Strangers from another planet smell roses whilst exploring Clarksfield streets, prompting a re-viewing of the neighbourhood by residents (Oldham, 2016)

two leading freelance practitioners (for 'Place' in Camden) and Emergency Exit Arts, Little Fish and Mash Up (for 'Performing Places Bexley'). Together with Mackey, the creative teams led on the design and bespoke devising for each context; each team ranged between three and ten in number. All the creative teams shared the thinking, ideas and history of the performing place research to facilitate an understanding and realisation of the aims of the research. Beyond these named creative teams, together with the student volunteers above, over 50 professional freelance arts practitioners worked on the delivery of *UnfamiliarEyes* under the guidance of Mackey and the creative teams.

During *UnfamiliarEyes*, performing place work and methodology was shared through several media and with different audiences. Research was interrogated in three peer-reviewed essays, together with research papers and keynotes for academic audiences, for example. A range of talks, symposia and documents have shared findings with non-academic audiences such as a TEDx talk [□](#), two symposia [□](#) between the two phases for local authority key personnel and 800 documents sent out to all UK councils.

Phase 1 of the research project was peer-reviewed and funded by the AHRC (Grant reference: AH/N007816/1, Follow-on Funding scheme, 2016–2017, £96,000). In addition to delivering impact, this first phase of *UnfamiliarEyes* provoked original research findings as the performing place practice reached participants selected through local councils and developed bespoke sets of context-based activities. Directly resulting from the findings of and based on the research in Phase 1, Phase 2 was funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (awarded to London Borough of Bexley as part of an 'A Place for Everyone' bid, 2017–2019, £205,000).

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In response to these issues, research questions comprised the following:

- 1 *What can practical performance interventions tell us about how abstract concepts such as place, community, dislocation and belonging, as theorised by key thinkers (e.g., Zygmunt Bauman, Vered Amit, Doreen Massey, Ash Amin), are relevant in the real-life experiences of people in the late 2010s? Can performing place practices aid emplacement for community participants?*
- 2 *How does this practice influence or change our understanding of place in a contemporary, 'disrupted' world?*
- 3 *What characterises performing place practice and differentiates it from other performance practice?*
- 4 *Methodologically, what issues are foreground by applied theatre practice research into performing place with large and small communities?*
- 5 *To what extent might models of performing place be used successfully in conjunction with local authorities?*

Traditionally, 'place' is associated with longevity, continuity, community, the normative and security — as well as boundaries, defence and exclusion. In contrast, contemporary existence is more frequently perceived as place-less, characterised by transience, wayfaring and deterritorialisation. Places can be unwelcoming, and even hostile, to certain groups and people in our culture. Developing beyond previous research into performing place, what was important or urgent about the *UnfamiliarEyes* research was to challenge and rethink contemporary 'place' such that place can be reconceived and experienced as welcoming and open, comforting and reassuring — even if temporary and at times transient. When so many are experiencing disruption to their 'place' in the world, this research seeking to ease relationships in places is significant. In the London Borough of Bexley, for example, there has been an estimated 25% increase in Black and Global Majority residents between 2011 and 2017<sup>1</sup> and the authority consistently ranked 'very low' in community cohesion indicators. *UnfamiliarEyes* asked if place attachment can be facilitated, enhanced or *accelerated* through performing practices, shifting participants' view of place and, where

<sup>1</sup> Greater London Authority 2015 Ethnic Group population projections cited in Bexley's bid for 'A Place for Everyone'.

## II Questions, aims and objectives

*UnfamiliarEyes* asked how we might reposition concepts of place, reconceiving and reconciling a locality of place within a global context of geopolitical turbulence and disruption, working with local authorities for whom such issues are prevalent. It explored how performance practices can be used to reconsider different relationships to place and how feelings of dislocation might be eased through such practices. In addition, it sought to interrogate hierarchies of knowledge and collaboration between researchers and participant.

appropriate, encouraging community cohesion. Place was to be re-envisioned through ‘unfamiliarising’ it (i.e., defamiliarising the everyday such that a place is viewed and experienced differently; FIGS 5, 6-7).

The aims of the *UnfamiliarEyes* research were, first, to understand how participants’ perceptions of their local places might be shifted through performing place practices and, second, to interrogate and reposition place conceptually as a result of reflecting on new performing place practice and associated relevant study. In tandem, I aimed to explore the confluence of applied theatre and practice research methodologically.

In response to the research aims and the research questions, key objectives were to achieve the following over five years:

- a. Work in three new contexts where local tensions or dis-ease exist, developing performing place practices, and making them bespoke for these new contexts.
- b. Demonstrate that models of performing place can meet local council agendas with new service users, building stronger communities and community cohesion.
- c. Together with theoretical study, use the processes and outcomes of the practice research to reconceptualise place.
- d. Interrogate the position of researchers and participants in such applied theatre practice research projects.
- e. Disseminate the findings of the practice research in the public domain to academics (by means of academic papers and talks) and to non-academics (e.g., teachers, key figures in national authorities and wider communities) through various media.



FIG 2 Adults in 24/7 care transformed a triangle of local pavement into a party site (Camden, 2016)

FIG 3 A participant telling a story from her life, ‘staged’ in a churchyard (Camden, 2016)

### III Context

*UnfamiliarEyes* references, develops and critiques a range of fields:

#### Applied and socially engaged theatre; site-based and immersive performance

Performing place is primarily an applied theatre and socially engaged practice yet seeks to expand the discipline by adapting and developing practices more usually associated with site-based and immersive performance. As applied

work, it is intent on working with people in communities, addressing challenges or issues that might exist for these participants. *UnfamiliarEyes* looked specifically at working with local authorities and its research agenda included interrogating the extent to which performing place practice could address particular social needs. In particular, it explored local communities' relationships with their place. Taking an embedded relationship between applied theatre and place as axiomatic (i.e., applied theatre is carried out in participants' localities), *UnfamiliarEyes* took a specific, alternative standpoint where local 'place' was to be challenged and re-envisioned, engaging residents and prioritising a shift in their relationship with their locality through a range of small-scale and local performance-related activities. It makes use of many practices associated with applied theatre such as workshops with a range of different community groups (see chapter 'Performing Location: Place and applied theatre' and FIG 9) in addition to practices of site-based and immersive performance.

Performing place references and draws from site-based and immersive performance work exemplified in seminal work created by artists such as Wrights and Sites (e.g., *The Quay Thing*, Exeter 1998), Mike Pearson (e.g., *Carrlands*, Lincolnshire and online 2007), Grid Iron (e.g., *Decky Does a Bronco*, Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2010), Shunt (e.g., *Money*, Bermondsey 2008–10), Dream Think Speak (e.g., *One Day, Maybe*, Hull 2017) and Punchdrunk (e.g., *The Lost Lending Library*, primary schools ongoing). As with these examples and most site-based and immersive work, performing place is unlikely to take place in traditional theatre spaces but occurs on and in other physical sites and uses the sites for its inspiration. Facilitators and participants are immersed in the local sites.

Rather than the rehearsed, produced and staged pieces of performance more usually identified with the work of the companies above, however, *UnfamiliarEyes* privileged interactive participatory practices with local residents, as images in this document demonstrate. Performance was 'in the moment', relying on facilitation skills, often with facilitators performing in role. Performing place was roving and relatively unrehearsed: there were rarely 'set' pieces and any moments of performance relied on the interactions with residents and participants, whether in the street, in a library or in a school classroom — contexts more usually associated with applied theatre. *UnfamiliarEyes* sought to identify performing place as primarily an applied, socially engaged theatre practice, yet distinguished by its eliding broadly with site-based, immersive performance. Its focus was on facilitating ongoing activities with local residents

in everyday environments (e.g., streets, local retail outlets, schools, parks) to shift perceptions of their locality. The research process sought to expand an understanding of the particularity of performing place such that it is recognisably a practice in its own right, although rooted in both applied and site/immersive work.

### The particularity of applied theatre practice research

The equivocal relationship between practice research and applied theatre has been a key part of the enquiry during *UnfamiliarEyes* (I have presented numerous papers on this, including 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Researcher' at the Theatre Applied Research Group at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama; 'Applied Theatre Practice Research' at The Future of Practice Research conference, Goldsmiths College London (both 2015); and 'Polyphonic amplitudes: practice research in applied theatre' on an Open Panel at TaPRA national conference, University of Bristol (2016)). In applied theatre practice research, the researched are frequently the collaborators in that research. Working with residents at St Mungo's 24/7 supported hostel for vulnerable adults with mental illness, the residents themselves would find that performing place practice research affected their relationship with place, we hoped, and yet they were also participants who collaborated on the choices made for the practical activities that would help realise a change of attitude (FIG 9). In *UnfamiliarEyes*, the conjunction of researcher and participant was noticeably expanded and worthy of interrogation because of the numbers and range of partners and collaborators who were also voices in the research (e.g., arts organisations, local authorities, intermediary figures such as community group leaders). Described as potentially a polyphonic conversation in the early stages of *UnfamiliarEyes* (for example at the TaPRA national conference in the paper 'Polyphonic amplitudes: practice research in applied theatre' and in the article 'Applied theatre and practice as research: polyphonic conversations') this became palpably manifest throughout the work and particularly in Phase 2, 'Performing Places Bexley', where we were working closely with many different members of the local authority and a wide range of community groups.

### Philosophical, geographical and social anthropological discourses on space and place

*UnfamiliarEyes* built on, and departed from, substantial theoretical analysis of space and place research, that began with the space thinkers of the 1960s to 1990s (e.g., Edward

Casey, Pierre Bourdieu, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau). Following these, permeations of Zygmunt Bauman's 'liquid modernity' (2000) were critiqued — adapted to liquid place in this work — together with Tim Cresswell's mobility (2006), Tim Ingold's wayfaring (2011), Doreen Massey's reading of place as the simultaneity of stories so far (2005), Vered Amit's everyday disjunctures (2015), Ash Amin's urban social (2007) and Bauman's later work on 'strangers' (2017). *UnfamiliarEyes* drew from, and expanded, such academic thinking about place, mobility, globalisation and the cosmopolitan, raising questions about how we describe and experience place and 'dislocation' in real, specific, social contexts. The situation is hugely complex as the research from *UnfamiliarEyes* has uncovered. It suggests that whilst deterritorialism has led to geographical dislocations, for example, with all the concerns and problems that displacement can imply, people seek place, community and encounter quickly, despite lives of transience or smaller-scale place-changes in lives more used to stasis. Exploring how the grounded experience of local residents might be shifted by bespoke, wide-ranging performing place practices to enhance place attachment has offered new ways of thinking about space and place, beyond previous theoretical writings.

#### Background practice research in performing place

*UnfamiliarEyes* started with consideration of, and reflection upon, previous performing place practice research, 2011–2015: a useful foundation for *UnfamiliarEyes* research. The Contextual Document charts two projects (*Challenging Place; Performing Abergavenny*) that provide relevant background context in earlier experiments with performing place models. The research of *UnfamiliarEyes* built from and departed from these previous projects.

## IV Methodology

To respond to the overall aim, objectives and research questions, this practice research methodology was multimodal and developed and expanded during the five-year period. Within 'practice research' were several modes of research. These overlapped, sometimes fused, sometimes remained separate and — critically — informed each other. In *UnfamiliarEyes*, 'practice research' included, therefore, experimental practice, reflection on that

practice, desk-based critical reading, theoretical analysis and qualitative and quantitative research methods (used in the evaluations). The conflation and interweaving of research modes within the overall practice research methodology during the period of *UnfamiliarEyes* led to the findings of the project.

Although the methods of research fused, for ease of access, this section is structured as follows:

- 1 Developmental method: planning and collaborating with partners, experimentation;
- 2 Reflection and evaluation: qualitative and quantitative evaluation;
- 3 Theoretical framing.

The developmental method took place across each of Phase 1 and Phase 2. Each piece of practice research (in Oldham, Camden and Bexley) used quantitative and qualitative analysis for the external evaluations. Theoretical framing was continuous from the beginning of Phase 1 to the completion of Phase 2 and beyond.

### 1 Developmental method

To research how performance practices can shift perceptions of place (Research Questions 1 and 2) aligned to local authority agendas (Research Question 5), it was, first, important to experiment with performance practices to identify whether these *would* lead to shifts in perception and, second, consult with local authority partners on their agendas. Discussions and meetings with these partners were integral in the decisions about the selection of practices and the selection of the form of performing place methods appropriate for each location. Performing place practices used in Camden, Oldham and Bexley were bespoke to the context and council agendas, therefore. That the three contexts offered were different was important as performing place practices would be most effective if they were bespoke, meeting the specific needs of the context. Differing practices were developed according to the context. Experimenting with a wide range of forms of practice would expedite enquiry into the specific nature of performing place (Research Question 3). The variety of contexts also enabled research into the complexity of research with so many different 'voices' (Research Question 4): researchers, partners, collaborators and participants.

In Phase 1 in Clarksfield, Oldham, and Camden, we worked with the early suggestion that performing place



FIG 4 Guided by an alien stranger, Clarksfield youth mend walls with Lego® (Oldham, 2016)

FIG 5 As part of exploring the minutiae of the locale, 'buildings' are added to Bexleyheath Broadway (Bexleyheath, 2018)

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practices would be founded in some or all of the following experimental methods (see theoretical framing, below) and, together with partners, practices were selected very broadly from these categories:

- ⦿ Re-experiences: repeated 'low-level' performance-based activities in everyday settings;
- ⦿ Subversions: improvisations in different locations that subvert the normal use of those locations;
- ⦿ Scapes: framing everyday sites through sound, object, crafts or other methods to create an alternative representation of location;
- ⦿ Markings: activities that focus on very precise detail of places and 'home';
- ⦿ Narratives: unusual, imaginary narratives focussed on place and followed throughout a timespan with participants.

### Phase 1

2015–17 Oldham and Camden

Planning took place with partners and collaborators in 2015 and 2016, practical work with collaborators in the second half of 2016 and follow up reflection and evaluation in 2016–2017.

The Head of Stronger Communities, Oldham Council, wished to ease tensions, manifest in aggressive behaviours, between more established residents and newcomers in one of their most socially and economically deprived neighbourhoods, Clarksfield. After consulting further with the Oldham directorate about their agenda, researchers worked with Oldham Theatre Workshop and their associate artists as the creative team, devising and designing 'Earthed' for Clarksfield residents. As part of the research process, we investigated the issues in Clarksfield and, over several months of discussions, decided on establishing a coherent meta-narrative for an intensive week of events, thus focusing primarily on one of the experimental methods identified above. All workshop and other activities would contribute to this bespoke, devised meta-narrative, drawing in a wide range of local residents. The fiction comprised new strangers, 'alien beings', needing help from Clarksfield residents including drawing 'positive energy' from humans and the non-human in Clarksfield (FIG 1). To be played out across an intensive week in Oldham with a whole neighbourhood, this large-scale narrative was developed so that participants from both new and more settled

communities would perceive their neighbourhood through the eyes of 'new', vulnerable and innocent strangers (see *overview of Performing Local Places* and *project flyers*, also FIG 1). They would, we anticipated, see it afresh by helping these newly arrived alien beings. By choosing this metaphor of the arrival of strangers in this form of performing place practice, we intended to meet the council agenda of easing tensions, through enabling a fiction that would encourage collaboration across existing communities and emphasise how a positive response to newcomers can provoke a more harmonious and respectful environment. In addition, it would meet our aim of understanding how participants' perceptions of their local places might be shifted through particular performing place practices.

The experimental practice for the intensive, week-long 'Earthed' project in Clarksfield comprised nine primary school workshops (creating, for example, introductions to Clarksfield for the alien beings), seven family and over-60s' workshops (including, for example, green screen filming and music/singing workshops), a series of pop-up street performance activities Tuesday to Friday and a final mini-festival on the Saturday in the main green space in Clarksfield, where the alien beings were successfully returned to their spacecraft that had been hovering above. Activities from the workshops contributed to this departure including the making of a 'launch pad', undertaken in a number of primary school workshops, and community-led drumming also devised in workshops. Collaborators such as the vicar of St Barnabas and the leaders of Bilal Mosque and the Roma Community engaged with us to advise on the appropriateness of the workshops and final 'festival'. Each of these representatives of the Clarksfield community contributed to the thinking and decisions of the research and creative team, working with us on how best to realise the meta-narrative across the community. Whilst the predominant performing place practice was through playing out a meta-narrative, different 'sub' activities were selected at different points. 'Subversions' proved particularly useful (e.g., alien beings offering model bricks to rebuild walls, FIG 4) and 'Markings' (e.g., a song was devised in a family workshop, sung at the final event, where weeds in cobbles near St Barnabas Church were used as a metaphor for living).

On meeting with Camden Council to discuss the potential for *UnfamiliarEyes*, the Strategic Commissioner for mental health identified a St Mungo's residence as a suitable context for experimenting with performing place activities. There was a need to support their 24/7 adult residents with mental illness to feel located in an area that was, for many, new. Collaborating with two experienced

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researcher-practitioners, and with the manager and workers as well as a core group of six adults in the Camden St Mungo's hostel, a series of workshops were devised to help residents feel a greater sense of location (e.g., FIG 9). Once again, the bespoke nature of this *UnfamiliarEyes* work allowed for experimentation with performing place practices to identify what would most benefit an intended shift in perspective for the residents.

In 'Place' (Camden), seventeen weekly arts work sessions were devised to encourage new residents to feel at ease with the local neighbourhood. With a core group of six, up to twelve residents took part across this period with different workshops each week developing from studio-based arts work to installations and performative moments in nearby streets, shops and a churchyard (May–September 2016). Each workshop was bespoke and experimented with performing place activities that were identified by the research and creative team as appropriate with this new model of client group. By beginning the series of workshops in the residence, exploring ideas about familiarity, change and location, for example, it was hoped trust would be developed between the vulnerable adults and the facilitators leading on to work beyond the doors. Nearby buildings were framed, a party site was established in a triangle of pavement, sprinkles used for icing were sprinkled on pavements marking a route to Sprinkles ice-cream parlour. We anticipated that such subversions and re-experiences would allow the client group to feel a contributing ownership to nearby routes, embedding these adults more quickly into their new location (see *overview document* and *evaluation reports* for further detail of *UnfamiliarEyes* in Oldham and Camden).

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## Phase 2

2017–20      **Bexley**

Planning took place with partners and collaborators from 2017–2019, practical work with collaborators in the summer of 2018 until the end of summer 2019, and reflection and evaluation from summer 2018 until spring 2020.

Methods used in Phase 1 offered new findings (see vi. Findings) and, too, led to further opportunities for research. Both contexts in Phase 1 left many questions such as, could the model of a meta-narrative be expanded across a broader community and still effect change in people's response to their place? Could the fine detail of place work in Camden be effective with passers-by and not just an in-situ client group? Could we transfer methods to meet other



FIG 6 Performing place: sharing dancing in the streets to celebrate visitors from a parallel universe, Par Bexia (Bexleyheath, 2019)

local authority agendas and how could we best improve our practices? Would a shift in reconceptualising place as, potentially, an atopic remain after working on a larger scale?

The Deputy Director and the Policy and Partnerships Officer from Communities, London Borough of Bexley, commissioned 'Performing Places Bexley' to ameliorate tensions in a contested site, the main street of Bexleyheath, the Broadway. Older residents (predominantly white) resented the influx of young people (amongst whom were a majority of recent migrants) in the Broadway in the afternoons, after school. Building on successful methods of Phase 1, the research and creative team for *UnfamiliarEyes* spent several months researching the issues, the location and devising a structure for 'Performing Places Bexley'.

Expanding on experiments in Clarksfield, Oldham, and Camden, Phase 2 of *UnfamiliarEyes* 'Performing Places Bexley', again used a fictional meta-narrative to provoke consideration of how public space in Bexley (and in this case, Bexleyheath Broadway) might more easily be shared between new and settled communities and how those different to oneself might be perceived more favourably in this contested space. Having a continuity between the phases was important for developing the experimental methods used. The artistic director from Oldham Theatre Workshop was a consultant on 'Performing Places Bexley', for example, and assisted in sharing our previous research methods with other Bexley creative partners including Emergency Exit Arts, Little Fish and Mash Up productions. The meta-narrative made use of a fictional parallel universe, Par Bexia, which was deracinated through lack of place-care and community coherence. The metaphorical narrative was significantly expanded from the Oldham model, taking place over eighteen months and including far greater participation numbers and contexts. Activities were bespoke whilst building on work undertaken in Camden and Oldham from Phase 1, such as arts-based activities similar to those in St Mungo's in Age UK, Bexley. The street activities used in Clarksfield (e.g., FIG 1) were significantly expanded in Phase 2 (FIGS 5–7); we wished to re-present the Broadway, saturating it with activities and re-experiences associated with the meta-narrative. Adult passers-by, school children and community groups (e.g., Mencap) were invited to become involved in subversions, re-experiences, scapes and the overarching narrative which concluded during a week in 2018 and again in 2019 on the Broadway.

'Performing Places Bexley' engaged approximately 8000 people, aged 0–90 through more than 75 workshops (including taking a pod around schools in which was a Par Bexian trying to come out and creating an AR —

augmented reality — trail around Bexleyheath), assemblies (updating secondary school pupils on the narrative and encouraging their attendance on the Broadway in the intensive weeks), talks (e.g., to the Townswomen Guild, primarily to encourage their presence on the Broadway in the afternoons) and storytelling sessions (e.g., to zero–five year olds in the Bexleyheath library), and an 'in-role' website [\[1\]](#), an associated production<sup>2</sup> and nine days of street participatory performance. Selecting and embedding an overarching narrative, as with Clarksfield, allowed us to work with the council agenda of engaging new and settled communities by sharing the space through a fictional set of activities as well as gently reinforcing messages of welcoming strangers and supporting 'people' in need. A post-event Education Resource Pack was created for use in the four secondary schools in 2020, reinforcing the messages and narrative of the work (see also the booklet, evaluation report, flyers and postcards for further detail of *UnfamiliarEyes* in Bexley).

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The construction and decisions around the content, breadth of delivery, particular performing place activities, publicising of the events and later dissemination was a lengthy and detailed process for all three works: Camden, Oldham and Bexley. Particularly in Bexley, the research team worked closely with the local authority with Director-level input at monthly advisory meetings, consulting on the choices the research and creative team were making. As indicated in Research Question 4, methodologically, issues were foregrounded by this applied theatre practice research process. Decisions and choices about practice were easier with the smaller community in St Mungo's, Camden, for example, and could be carried out without recourse to multiple local authority departments. In Bexley, considerable time, acumen and optimism were needed to realise an unusual range of workshops, talks and street performance-based activities in the centre of a town. The lengthy process was critical, however, to ensure the experimental work would remain relevant and useful to the key stakeholder — Bexley Council.

<sup>2</sup> This production, *The Bexliest Days of Our Lives*, was attached to the work in its second year. It comprised a 70-person immersive production from Central performed to Bexley primary schools in a converted exchange building. Primary schools had received

workshops in the first year of Performing Places Bexley; colleagues at Central supported the research by bringing this production to Bexley and linked the story of the production directly into the overarching narrative of 'Performing Places Bexley'.



FIG 7 Re-viewing street furniture by labelling what it might be thinking (Bexleyheath, 2018)

## 2 Reflection and evaluation

Reflection was continuous, such that thinking and practice during *UnfamiliarEyes* shifted from day to day during both phases; this was naturally part of the research process. More formal evaluation was also important, however.

At a conference in Brussels after delivering an invited paper (see list of invited academic and non-academic talks, item iv), a European migration officer suggested that in future work, external formal evaluations would be most useful for stakeholders as well as for the ongoing research. Such external evaluations would encourage detailed, rigorous reflection, demonstrable to, for example, funders such as local authorities. Because of this, funding for reflection and formal evaluation was built in to *UnfamiliarEyes*. External evaluators were employed to identify relevant impact of the work for local authorities as well as for the research team (Research Question 5). Recognising the difficulty in assessing such diffuse and ranging arts work, embedding evaluation into *UnfamiliarEyes* from the inception of the practice was intended as a valuable addition to the developmental method of the project. In discussion with the research team and other stakeholders, reflection and evaluation methods were selected by the external organisations and, together, we worked on appropriate ways of gathering reflective material. Qualitative and quantitative methods were agreed between the research team and the external evaluators.

These evaluations were bespoke for each of the practices. Capturing evidence of the impact of 'Earthed' on 1100 residents of Clarksfield included quantitative data collection (e.g., numbers who attend the final 'festival') as well as qualitative questionnaires and ethnographic observation. A specialist research organisation who worked within mental health contexts, the McPin Foundation, undertook qualitative methods of interviews and ethnographic observation for 'Place' in Camden. McPin made use of a Theory of Change model. Mel Larsen Associates used qualitative and quantitative methods for 'Performing Places Bexley' (e.g., observation of workshops in schools, observation of street activities; numbers on the street in comparison to a 'normal' day.) This, too, responded to an overarching Theory of Change model that Bexley had developed for their larger bid, A Place for Everyone. Evaluation reports were produced for 'Earthed' in Oldham by Oldham Business Intelligence, 'Place' in Camden by The McPin Foundation and 'Performing Places Bexley' by, initially, Mel Larsen Associates and completed by Bexley Council.

### 3 Theoretical framing

As indicated above, the practice research process of *UnfamiliarEyes* comprised an imbrication of theoretical analysis, practical experimentation and reflection. Theoretical framing grounded the research from the outset with practical experimentation — and evaluation of that experimentation — responding to such framing, shifting and changing ideas about place and its manifestation in ‘real-world’ contexts as a result. Desk-based critical reading continued throughout the five-year period, influencing the theoretical framing and, in a reciprocal relationship, the practical experimentation. A broad framework was devised for the practical experimentation at the outset of this project and was articulated in the AHRC bid for the work in Camden and Oldham (see above, ‘Re-experiences’ to ‘Narratives’ in Developmental method).

*UnfamiliarEyes* research started with suggesting place could be altered in people’s perception by using performing place practices in community contexts (see chapter, ‘Performing Location: Place and applied theatre’). In addition, I suggested that applied theatre practice research might be considered a polyphonic conversation (see article ‘Applied theatre and practice as research: polyphonic conversations’). These were tentative theoretical frames. As indicated in all five research questions, these ideas warranted interrogation and expansion — through practical experimentation and further philosophical enquiry.

Throughout the project, critical reading contributed to a firmer theoretical framework for the research. From revisiting, for example, Doreen Massey’s interpretation of space and place (2005) and inequalities of space in cities (2007) to new theoretical research (e.g., Trentin 2012; Cresswell 2016; Adey and Squire 2017; Tallis, 2017; Baraitser 2017), a rethinking of place conceptually was forged. Together with the concomitant practice, this critical reading encouraged thinking about the fragility and mutability of place, that place is always already changing and that temporality was therefore important in considering a new theory for contemporary place. One of the aims of the research project was addressed — “to interrogate and reposition place conceptually as a result of reflecting on new performing place practice and associated relevant study”. In turn, such theorising supported the planning and realisation of the practical experimentation (Research Questions 1 and 2), such that in all three pieces of work we endeavoured to build in the temporary. For example, a party site on a pavement triangle was created knowing that it would be there only briefly. The immanence of change became part of performing place practical experimentation.

To understand how performance practices can demonstrate and shift perceptions of place required a reciprocal methodological relationship between theory, practice and evaluation (see article ‘Applied theatre and practice as research: polyphonic conversations’ for a further discussion of this). Theoretical readings and conceptualisation influenced all the practice, and practice, in turn, influenced the theorisation of place and its practices, identified as key to Research Questions 1 and 2. In addition, qualitative and quantitative analysis used in the external evaluations of Phase 1 influenced the choice of experimentation with performing place practices in Phase 2 and their potential success in meeting Bexley Council agendas. In turn, using newly bespoke performing place practices, with different scales of community (from a core group of six in Camden with adults with mental illness, to over 8000 participants in Bexley) influenced an understanding and articulation of place in a contemporary world (Research Question 2).

## V

### Timeline

#### Phase 1

2015–17 Oldham and Camden

This comprised development, planning and implementation of Phase 1; ‘Earthed’ in Clarksfield, Oldham, and ‘Place’ in Camden, London; critical reading and theoretical analysis; publications.

2015–16 Meetings with local authorities in Camden and Oldham, showing public engagement film created from background projects; research questions formed; AHRC bid written.

AHRC grant awarded (Grant number: AH/N007816/1 ‘Performing places: working with local councils to reach new communities and facilitate wellbeing in living environments’).

Theoretical research and academic outputs.

2016–17 Planning with creative collaborators in Oldham and Camden leading to ‘Earthed’ in Clarksfield, Oldham, 6–10 September 2016, and ‘Place’ in Camden, March to October 2016.

Final report written after two external evaluations on ‘Earthed’ and ‘Place’, hosted on webpage added to previous site<sup>3</sup>. 800 copies of the report

sent out to relevant directors (e.g., of Stronger Communities) in all English UK local authorities.

Phase 1 disseminated and promoted through two symposia <sup>3</sup> (in Oldham and Camden) and other materials.

Theoretical research and academic and public engagement outputs (see list of invited talks and papers, items vi–vii).

Reflection on Phase 1 in preparation for Phase 2.

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## Phase 2

2017–20 Bexley

This comprised development, planning and implementation of Phase 2; ‘Performing Places Bexley’ in Bexleyheath, London; critical reading and theoretical analysis; publication.

H

2017–18 Meetings with Bexley Council and bid co-written for grant from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Grant awarded (September 2017).

Planning with local authority and all creative collaborative partners: Year 1 of ‘Performing Places Bexley’, January to September 2018.

Theoretical research and academic and public engagements (see list of invited talks and papers, items viii and xi).

N

Reflection on Year 1 of ‘Performing Places Bexley’, September–December 2018, in preparation for Year 2 resulting in changes and shift of focus (e.g., expanding from fifteen school/community workshops in Year 1 to over 60 in Year 2 to aid dissemination of ‘messages’ within the work).

2018–20 Planning with local authority and all creative collaborative partners: Year 2 of ‘Performing Places Bexley’, January to December 2019. <http://www.performingplaces.org/bexley2.html> <sup>3</sup>

Reflection and dissemination through external evaluation, post-project Education Pack for Bexleyheath secondary schools and a post-project exhibition in Bexleyheath Library.

E M

Theoretical research and academic and public engagement outputs (see list of invited talks and papers, items ix, x).

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FIG 8 One participant from 24/7 care in Camden frames neglected building material, calling the image ‘Fire’ instead (Camden, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> This original website, 2015, is at [www.performingplaces.org](http://www.performingplaces.org) <sup>3</sup>

## VI Findings

A series of findings emerged relating to the research questions for *UnfamiliarEyes* (see Research Questions 1–5); the points below respond directly to those Research Questions.

### Research Question 1

Using a variety of performing place interventions within the developmental method of *UnfamiliarEyes* (see iv. Methodology) demonstrated that abstract concepts such as place, community, dislocation and belonging *are* relevant and important in the ‘real-life’ experiences of people in communities. In addition, models of performing place can ease location among community participants. We found that the performing place practices used in *UnfamiliarEyes* facilitated:

- ⊙ positive forms of engagement;
- ⊙ a broad reach with repeated participant interest;
- ⊙ a clear catalyst for future engagement building good memories of place;
- ⊙ increased feelings of ‘being in place’;
- ⊙ improved sense of wellbeing;
- ⊙ a new sense of connectedness;
- ⊙ a new sense of having a place within the local community;
- ⊙ increased contact between new and settled communities;
- ⊙ surprise, curiosity and an increased positivity about public spaces;
- ⊙ changed attitudes and increased mutual respect;
- ⊙ increased insight of community relations and community assets;
- ⊙ recognition by councils that culture can act as a civic platform to share experiences;
- ⊙ different forms of marginalisation;
- ⊙ new working relationships.

For contextual information offering further explanation and evidence of this, see [overview of Performing Local Places](#) p.8; and [Bexley evaluation report](#), pp. 4–11.

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### Research Question 2

The practice research of *UnfamiliarEyes* changed an understanding of place in a contemporary, ‘disrupted’ world: place can be reconceived in contemporary society and a sense of place, belonging and ease can be achieved even in the midst of transient lives.

Rather than perceived as static or entirely mobile, it became clear through the varied practice, and supported by critical reading, that place itself is mutable but can be quickly forged. Residents at St Mungo’s became swiftly confident with their immediate neighbourhood through ‘performing’ it in activities devised by the research and creative team, whether by telling stories of themselves on false grass squares in a nearby churchyard, by tying purple wool pieces to a local bus shelter or by pre-empting and acknowledging seasonal change by attaching plastic autumn leaves to a nearby alleyway of trees. Clarksfield adults reconsidered sharing their neighbourhood with newly arrived migrants (“They are so lovely. I don’t know why we hate them” was said by a more settled resident adult of Roma newcomers hearing them sing of place at the final ‘festival’ of ‘Earthed’) and Bexleyheath adults showed surprise and pleasure, repeatedly, in sharing a space with previously unwelcome young people when they were given small gifts by the youngsters. As a result of these bespoke devised practices and further critical reading (see iv. Methodology), in addition to recognising place can be newly and swiftly forged, I have reconceived place as anatopic, adapting the term ‘anatopia’ in the process: place that is immanently changing and disrupted but nonetheless can offer positive aspects associated with place.

Findings related to this research question and to objective c. are discussed further and evidenced in: a public engagement TEDx talk [\[link\]](#); the David Bradby keynote (see [list of invited talks and papers](#), item vi) to an academic audience; an academic article on anatopia.

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### Research Question 3

*UnfamiliarEyes* demonstrated that ‘performing place’ can be characterised differently and more specifically than other forms of practice.

In achieving objective a. and working in three new contexts, *UnfamiliarEyes* allowed for a multi-context interrogation of practices, therefore, encouraging extensive experimentation. Practices were bespoke to very different situations, albeit within the original framework for performing



FIG 9 Workshop with adults in 24/7 care creating materials for changing the street scene (Camden, 2016)

place articulated at the start of this project (see iv. Methodology for this broad framework, 'Re-experiences' to 'Narratives'). We worked with between six and twelve vulnerable adults at St Mungo's on a 'Scape', encouraging them to have a tea party with scones and jam (which partly played out childhood memories) in an area of concrete building struts near their hostel, changing an unenticing, utilitarian place into a pleasant picnic site. This was work on a different scale to the overarching 'Narratives' of alien beings in need, in both Clarksfield and Bexley. The variation of performing place practice assisted in affirming its features.

Incorporating aspects of both site-specific and immersive theatre performance, as they are currently articulated (Kolesch *et al.* 2019), and as described (see iv. Methodology), *UnfamiliarEyes* demonstrated that the values, intentions and some practice of performing place are aligned with applied theatre whilst also borrowing from site-based and immersive practice. The result of the conjunction emerges as its own theatre form. The performance of place can be characterised as participant-based and comprising place-focused participatory practices with residents, passers-by and other local non-performers. In-role facilitators contribute to the realisation of performing place, working with local participants, and activities often subvert everyday operations (see [overview document](#) and [Performing Places Bexley trailer](#) and [short film](#)).

#### Research Question 4

At the beginning of the research process, I suggested that there were issues specifically relevant to the methodology of applied theatre practice research into performing place with communities (see [list of invited talks and papers](#), item iii and [article 'Applied theatre and practice as research: polyphonic conversations'](#)). This was key in the practice research interrogation of *UnfamiliarEyes*. I conjectured that hierarchies of power and researcher relationships with the researched — who might also be considered as co-researchers — might be better repositioned as 'polyphonic conversations' to recognise the complex inputs into such research.

Such polyphonic conversations were specifically addressed in *UnfamiliarEyes* and were nuanced according to the context. In 'Earthed', Oldham Theatre Workshop proved adept at conversations and relationships with several partners and collaborators including Stronger Communities directorate at the Council, leaders of community groups and school staff, such that many contributed to the choices and decisions of the work, and advised us. Representatives of the cultural groups in Clarksfield were critical participants

in those conversations; for example, a leader of the Roma community who liaised closely with Roma newcomers and advised us on appropriate communications, even translating written documents for us. 'Place' in Camden was led by two facilitators with rich experience of working in such contexts as St Mungo's and, together, we worked closely within this more intimate group of clients, gaining their trust, engagement and contribution. Advisory Group meetings with members of Bexley Council, Bexley Libraries and the BID were absolutely necessary to ensure a reasonably smooth realisation of the two-year Performing Places Bexley and, more importantly, to ensure that the research and creative team stayed close to the brief from the Council whilst they recognised, and agreed with, our need to experiment with practices.

Whilst polyphonic conversation is an appropriate way of considering the complexity of this research practice, in response to Research Question 5 and objective d., relevant issues were foregrounded as a result of *UnfamiliarEyes*. For example, the research team needed local 'mediators' when working in contexts that weren't their own; experienced practitioners were more able to hear and provoke voices in highly vulnerable groups; high level local politics can be challenging and sometimes contradictory to some research priorities and needed careful management by the lead researcher.

Findings related to this research question and objective d. are supported in the [article 'Applied theatre and practice as research: polyphonic conversations'](#) and in the [list of invited talks and papers](#) (see items i-v and x).

#### Research Question 5

Models of performing place were used in conjunction with local council agendas (see objective b., also, related to this research question), as demonstrated throughout *UnfamiliarEyes*.

Work in Oldham and Camden demonstrated that, to some extent, performing place practices could help make positive changes in the way people felt about their place and community (see [Camden evaluation report](#), pp.3-5 and [Oldham evaluation report](#), p.28). 'Performing Places Bexley' similarly responded to Bexley Council's agenda in ameliorating tensions which was laid out in their Theory of Change (see [Bexley evaluation report](#), p.3).

What was not anticipated was the complexity and reach of the collaborations and the challenge of engaging 'people in place' in work such as *UnfamiliarEyes*. Even at St Mungo's for 'Place', where the group was in situ and therefore, one might assume, present for sessions, it soon became clear in each context that substantial effort and different approaches had to be made to engage people in the practice research.

In ‘Place’, encouragement and the allaying of fears person to person was needed, for example. It became clear that collaboration with local community organisations, often through council contacts, was important — if difficult to realise — for drawing in local residents to the intent and ‘messages’ of ‘Earthed’ and ‘Performing Places Bexley’. In ‘Performing Places Bexley’, for example, the research team worked with eleven different community organisations (including Mencap, churches, Townswomen’s Guild, Mind), eight schools and a large number of retailers in Bexleyheath, in addition to several council departments (see collaborators in the research project description). With the advantage of having two stages to ‘Performing Places Bexley’, over two years, we had recognised the need to engage a wider public and to specifically target organisations (e.g., secondary schools) in Year 2 such that the messages of the work could be more broadly spread. Working with council agendas successfully was a ‘finding’ from *UnfamiliarEyes* together with recognising the challenges involved.

In addition to the points above, and in direct response to objective e., the research has been disseminated to academic and non-academic audiences. It has been shared in the public domain through talks and written papers and through the participation of publics in the practice. Key examples suggesting the achievement of objective e. include:

- ① 1100 residents participated in the Phase 1 practice, ‘Earthed’ (Oldham) and ‘Place’ (Camden).
- ② 8000 residents participated in the Phase 2 practice, ‘Performing Places Bexley’.
- ③ Approximately 250 were in the live audience for the TED talk [□](#), ‘Keeping a Sense of Place in a Disrupted World’ with over 3500 views online.
- ④ 27 local authorities were represented by approximately 90 council officers in the two *Unfamiliar Eyes* symposia [□](#), 2017.
- ⑤ Approximately 350 were in the TaPRA audience for the keynote ‘Performing Places: Anotopia, time and the new global’, 2017 (see list of invited talks and papers item vi).
- ⑥ Approximately 100, 50, 70, 30, 50, 10 and 70 respectively were attendants at talks identified in the list of invited talks and papers as items ii, iii, iv, v, viii, ix and x.
- ⑦ Over 6000 international (105 countries+) views to date for the article ‘Applied theatre and practice as research: polyphonic conversations’.
- ⑧ Very approximately 2000 stopped and viewed an exhibition post ‘Performing Places Bexley’ in Bexleyheath library and a follow-up Education Resource Pack was distributed to the four Bexleyheath secondary schools.

In addition to the numbers of people who have participated in or shared the research indicated above, the influence and importance of *UnfamiliarEyes* is evidenced in other ways. Oldham Council wished to participate in Phase 1 *because* of the perceived impact of a previous performing place project (see *Contextual Document*). Phase 2 was invited by Bexley Council officers as a direct result of two council staff attending the symposium at the end of Phase 1; they perceived a use for performing place practices in Bexley for easing community tensions. Phase 1 of *UnfamiliarEyes* based in Oldham was shortlisted for the National Campaign for the Arts: Hearts for the Arts Awards, 2017, with judges stating: “The embedded research project will help to ensure the findings from this project inform future thinking”. Phase 2 of *UnfamiliarEyes* based in Bexley was shortlisted for the National Campaign for the Arts: Hearts for the Arts Awards, 2020. Judges’ comments included: “The outcomes of this initiative have been immense [...] Performing Places have found a special way of bringing diverse groups together and helping them feel as one. An astonishing level of participation from the community too”.

## VII

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