

NCACE: Growing the Garden of Cultural Knowledge Exchange

Dr Josh Weeks



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Foreword: From Maze to Garden

In Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, the hedge maze behind the Overlook Hotel becomes a chilling symbol of entrapment, a place where escape feels impossible. In *Westworld*, Jonathan Nolan uses the maze to explore the looping struggles of artificial consciousness, caught in endless cycles of trauma and reset. In both cases, the maze represents a closed system: repetition without reflection, movement without change.

These mazes mirror a wider cultural phenomenon: the way that we find ourselves trapped in inherited myths, unconscious biases, and fixed patterns of thought, a cultural maze that feels equally difficult to escape.

But what if we expanded this metaphor? What if, instead of viewing our social scripts as mazes to be escaped, we began to see them as pathways within a living, evolving garden? In Jorge Luis Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*, we glimpse this alternative — a labyrinth not of despair, but of infinite possibility, where every choice opens new directions and every encounter offers fresh meaning.

Josh Weeks invites us into just such a space in *NCACE: Growing the Garden of Cultural Knowledge Exchange*. Drawing inspiration from Borges, Josh invites us to move beyond closed narrative loops and into a richly interconnected garden — a place where narrative complexity is not a threat, but a source of vitality.

Reading Josh's Creative Report felt like walking through a garden of stories. Along the way, I encountered multiple versions of myself — sometimes directly, sometimes as fictional echoes. Like Borges' labyrinth, Josh's narrative reminds us that our stories are not static monuments, but living systems: every choice, every perspective adds new layers, new possibilities.

This approach resonates deeply with a concept I call *Storyfulness*: the practice of tending to the stories we inherit, inhabit, and imagine. *Storyfulness* asks us to pay attention, to listen, to reimagine narrative not as something we consume, but something we cultivate. It reminds us that storytelling is not merely descriptive — it's transformative. It shapes how we see each other, how we live, and how we dream forward.

Josh's work with NCACE embodies this ethos. His collaboration with Evelyn, Suzie, Noshin, and the wider community shows how cultural knowledge exchange can move beyond fixed outputs, and instead grow into living networks, spaces of shared creativity, reflection, and experimentation.

The garden, after all, is never finished. It invites us to keep tending, branching, renewing. Josh's narrative opens this invitation beautifully, and I'm delighted to help introduce it here as part of the *StoryArcs* AHRC strategic programme. His Creative Report shares the adventurous spirit of our Story Fellows — an inspiring group of talented individuals working across different sectors to explore how story skills can shape new ways of thinking, connecting, and co-creating.

As you move through Josh's work, we invite you to wander, wonder, and help cultivate fresh pathways of story, connection, and care.

Bambo Soyinka, April 2025

Introduction

This creative report by Dr Josh Weeks will take you on a journey. It does not have to be a linear journey, although it can be that if you wish. I would encourage you to start your adventure at any point.

Dip in and dip out.

This deeply imaginative and original piece takes on the not insignificant task of telling the story of the National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange (NCACE). Josh came to work with us after being appointed as our Story Arcs Associate, in late 2023.

The Story Arcs scheme is a new initiative supported by the AHRC and led by Professor Bambo Soyinka, the world's first Professor of Story. We applied to host one of associates because, like many organisations, the task of telling our story is by no means easy. And that's the thing; as soon as multiple actors are involved in the making and growing of an entity, the notion of the story is somehow forced to give way, to create spaces for many stories to unfold.

Those five minute Powerpoint overviews that we give to people that don't know our work have their values. They are especially helpful in conveying a shape or an outline and, at the start of new initiatives where things can feel somehow 'bare bone', that's important. Capturing complexity, however, is usually not their strong suite.

In the space of around three years since the start of NCACE, at the point when Josh joined us, we had already generated a lot of materials relating to the field of Cultural Knowledge Exchange, or collaboration between academia and the arts and culture sectors. His task was to work with us to express the values of this work in new ways. We posed our challenge as follows:

We are struggling to articulate the FULL impact/benefit of our work. On the one hand, how can we capture the "life enhancing" and knowledge-building nature of what we do through our diverse events programme and the sense of fulfilling a need for quite diverse constituencies?

On the other hand, how can we encourage the growth and use of our unique collection and evidence repository. This is a major part of the programme and we could do with help to amplify its existence and to support us in encouraging more diverse and imaginative ways of using the content.

So quite the task! It was clear from the outset that Josh was going to enjoy the challenge of working into the materials themselves — our SoundCloud Channel, NCACE Collection and Evidence Repository. Beyond or beneath those archival materials however lies a deep 'soil' teeming with human and non-human energies; support structures and networks of people with amazing skills, knowledge, generosity and drive. Those energies that flow into, out of and through entities like NCACE are crucial to seeding, growing and cultivating new possibilities and new futures for collaborative practices. These energies are however often left invisible or as under narrated traces, obscured by their more material counterparts. I'm delighted to write that they are very pervasive in this piece of work as it shifts and drifts between a speculative fiction and a bringing to attention of NCACE's work through numerous valuable accounts.

Josh asks the question “How to account for the myriad stakeholders, connected through interaction and shared purpose, who together comprise a collective that is far greater than the sum of its parts?”

This work positively encourages the reader to sit with that notion. That it does helps us to somehow better imagine the work we all do collectively, not just as work packages, or key performance indicators or events, or case studies, or blogs but as a more dynamic entity that fizzles with life and energy. In that sense, it transcends our initial wish list and takes us somewhere else, to a garden of cultural knowledge exchange where we can connect with our work and all its entanglements afresh.

Dip in and dip out.

Evelyn Wilson, Co-Director, NCACE

Deep gratitude to Professor Bambo Soyinka and the Story Arcs team, to the AHRC for funding this vital and ground-breaking initiative and to Dr Josh Weeks for this extraordinary and affirming report.

Preliminary Note

What follows is a creative report. Or at least, it's creative and it's a report; maybe there's a more technical name for this form of writing that I've yet to come across, or which has yet to be coined. Either way, it's an attempt to articulate the work carried out by the National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange (NCACE) since its inception in 2021, including my own experience of being a part of the organisation over the last thirteen months.

Going into the project, which forms part of the StoryArcs programme led by Bambo Soyinka at Bath Spa University, I was tasked with braiding storytelling with cultural knowledge exchange. Specifically, my challenge was to narrativise NCACE's role in supporting, facilitating and shaping collaborations between higher education and the arts and culture sectors. While I knew this wouldn't be easy, I relished the opportunity to explore and write about such an exciting field. What I didn't envisage, however, was just how much the experience of working with NCACE would alter my practice, enriching my understanding of research, (co-)production and even writing to the point where the term literary "academic" no longer feels sufficient to describe what I do. I am forever indebted to my NCACE colleagues for inviting me to be part of their team, and for showing me the patience, openness and goodwill that have allowed me to reach this point.

There are four forms of storytelling that I draw on in what follows: experimental (chapters one, three and five); interpretive (chapter two); curatorial (chapter four); and reflective (chapter six). In the experimental chapters, I take inspiration from the 'found poetry' genre¹ to create a novelette about a labyrinthine garden set in space, the dialogue of which has been lifted from a number of NCACE events (presentations; speaker introductions; Q&As; Zoom chat-boxes). To ensure anonymity, I have changed all names and personal identifiers. Thank you to everyone who participated in these events, which have proven hugely inspirational, and which have provided me with a rich source of material for conveying the life-changing experiences that cultural knowledge exchange affords.

Chapter two takes a more analytic approach. Here, I grapple with NCACE's role within the cultural knowledge exchange ecosystem, focusing on what I describe as the organisation's 'subtle positionality between higher education and the arts and culture sectors.' Chapter four, by contrast, focuses on the NCACE Collection. I show how this invaluable resource resists exhaustive narration, and so any attempt to represent it must take the form of careful curation. Finally, in chapter six, I reflect on how my time at NCACE has affected me both personally and professionally, before offering a speculative glimpse into the future of the organisation.

My hope is that — taken together or separately — these chapters provide distinct but complementary lenses through which to understand and appreciate the incredible work that NCACE has carried out over the past four years. In this vein, I owe special thanks to those who agreed to be interviewed for this project. Your insights have clarified and solidified my sense of how vital an organisation NCACE is. From everything that I have seen, heard, read and felt during my time with NCACE, I have no doubt that this vitality will continue to inform the cultural knowledge exchange landscape in the years ahead.

¹ 'Found poetry' involves splicing together fragments of pre-existing texts to create a poetic collage.

Chapter One: *Arrival*

It begins with a realisation. Suddenly, you're in a garden surrounded by stars. You don't know how you got there; have no idea which interstellar threshold you had to cross. But you know — deep inside — that the crossing has been made. You know this is an awakening that can't be undone.

Hovering a few inches above the ground, you feel weightless and light-headed, as if you've just stepped off a fairground ride. A constellation-cum-acronym illuminates the night sky: NCACE. You recognise it immediately; know what it stands for. The National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange. Without it, you think, this place would be ever so slightly darker.

You float your way forward, buoyed by a mixture of curiosity and lifeforce. All around you, people are working on what looks like an allotment, pulling vegetables, weeds and silver capsules from the earth, and placing them in canvas bags. Floating above the buzz of activity, you see a network of hedgerows stretching all the way to the horizon. And that's when it hits you: maybe this is no beginning at all. Just a bookmark between moments in this galaxy of ongoingness.

A female voice draws you back to the allotment. The gardeners have gathered around a brown-haired woman, who is holding a capsule in one hand and reading from a slip of paper in the other.

- *Stories are systems for organising information in a way that is compelling, meaningful and memorable*
- *clapping!!! thank you*
- *Hi Lyra — at Andromeda we're working on something very similar — would be great to connect*

'What's going on?' you ask one of the gardeners — a bearded man in his thirties.

'An idea,' he replies. 'Lyra's cultivated one that could be useful.'

- *Knowing that data can be formed into different narrative shapes and that stories can be told from different perspectives enhances our understanding of complexity, social discourse and diversity*
- *Fantastic clarity and call to action, thanks Lyra*

A woman just in front of you removes a capsule from her own bag. The moment she opens it and removes the slip of paper, the capsule evaporates in a cloud of metallic dust.

- *Arts and culture are good at telling stories [...] that is the meat and drink of art. But perhaps we're not always so good at the rigour of evidence and research, relying more on anecdote than fact when talking about impact*

The woman's words, clear as moondew, spark excitement among the onlookers. After a brief hesitation, some of them begin calling out their names and affiliations:

- *hi all, Adhara, creative arts practitioner, Ursa Major, Northern Celestial Hemisphere*
- *Hello, Janus, Director of Institute of Astronomy at Cygnus University, with institutional Public Engagement remit*
- *hello all, Altair, constellation of Aquila*
- *Hello. Oberon, academic, artist, just outside the magnetosphere, Uranus*

- *Hello all, Vega here, artist, academic, eastern corner of the Summer Triangle asterism*
- *hi everyone, Cassiopeia, Ptolemy Uni, Snr Dev Manager (Partnerships & clear sky thinking)*
- *Hi All, Castor here, Senior Lecturer and Research Lead of ALPHA (Astronomical Learning in Physics, Humanities and Arts) at A Geminorum University; and professional screenwriter*

You turn back to the bearded man: ‘Who are all these people?’

He holds a finger to his lips, waiting to see if there’ll be any more contributions. With the return of the sound of meteorites overhead, he lowers his hand. ‘Inhabitants of the garden. The garden of cultural knowledge exchange, to be precise. Although some of them have been here since long before knowledge exchange was even a term.’

As he floats away, you decide to follow him, eager to learn more. Sensing that you’re in tow, he sighs and tells you to hold onto the backstraps of his overalls. ‘C’mon, it’ll be quicker this way. I’ve got some lifeforce saved up.’

The backstraps feel soft, like the belt of a dressing gown. ‘Ready?’ he asks, glancing over his shoulder. Before you can reply, you’re already screaming across the allotment; you dodge greenhouses and statuary — zooming towards distant hills — before abandoning the horizon and arcing towards the stars, like surfers surfing an invisible wave. In the blink of an eye, you come to a stop beside a satellite.

*‘This is my favourite spot,’ he says. ‘The garden looks incredible from up here.’ He perches himself on the left wing of the satellite, leaving space for you on the right. You take a seat, gazing out onto a planet framed by infinity. You are consumed by a vastness that is both humbling and terrifying. **The garden resembles a labyrinth in motion — a light display that never once reproduces the same pattern. The meshwork of greenery is constantly changing, interwoven with pathways that spiral and snake, as though the landscape were alive.** Loose ends recoil and reattach to form intersections. Cul-de-sacs (or are they crop circles?) become swirling antechambers. Your mind flounders, searching for a way to describe what you’re seeing. You settle on the word ‘sublime.’*

‘Sorry. I haven’t introduced myself. It’s Adrian, but everyone calls me Ari.’

You’re unable to take your eyes off the garden. ‘How is it moving like that? Who’s controlling it...’

‘No one’s controlling it, per se. Although I suppose, in a way, we all are. A single thought or movement could completely alter the landscape, but it’s impossible to factor in all the contingencies. Sometimes, it can feel like navigating a Borges story.

I pictured it as infinite — a labyrinth not of octagonal pavilions and paths that turn back upon themselves, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms... I imagined a labyrinth of labyrinths, a maze of mazes, a twisting, turning, ever-widening labyrinth that contained both past and future and somehow implied the stars — Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ ([1941] 2000: 79)

You’re struck by a feeling of déjà-vu. The word ‘ecologies’ orbits around your brain. ‘Our aim is to be sustainable,’ Ari continues. ‘Both in an environmental and a cultural sense. We want to create a

system where collaboration is not only feasible, but also actively encouraged. Without collaboration, we're all just ploughing our individual furrows. And that gets us nowhere. Or at least nowhere exciting,'

— *Collaborate! [...] Hydra and Telescopium have done great work!*

You crane your neck to see who's speaking, but there's nobody there. 'It's amazing to think we can still hear them,' says Ari. 'There's a delay, of course. But only by a few minutes.'

It dawns on you that he's referring to the gardeners, their voices drifting across the universe, like cosmic dust.

- *I suppose I'm driven by the idea that art or creativity is something that can enhance anything and, in fact, is sort of something quite fundamental as an approach. And often I see some of the problems or inequities in society are, I suppose, caused by a lack of care and consideration, which I would give as a definition of art in the broadest sense*
- *Thanks Orion — I really like the definition of care and consideration as a definition for art*
- *Really inspiring so far.*

Ari tells you that the conversation sounds important — vital even — and that if you don't get back to the garden soon, you're in danger of missing out. 'Hurry!' he says, jumping to a hover and instructing you to take hold of his backstraps. Reluctantly, you do as he says. Over his shoulder, you see a meteorite soaring through the void.

The journey back to the garden leaves you breathless and invigorated. With each passing millisecond, the landscape gained texture, its colours and aromas intensifying until you could almost taste the mineral-rich soil. Now, you find yourself floating beside a fountain, at the centre of which is a limestone dolphin, water spraying from its blowhole. Your surroundings are markedly different from before: flower beds and vegetable patches have been replaced by the undergrowth, the long grass rising up to your hips. As others join you beside the fountain, you spot something engraved into the basin. You have to squint to make it out: 'authentic co-creation is messy' (Shaw qtd. in Kill 2024: 33).

'So, what do you think?' says Ari, eyeing the vegetation. 'The hinterland can seem a little overwhelming at first, but you learn to find the beauty in it. It's also where the majority of our work gets done.'

A woman wearing a lanyard throws a capsule into the fountain. It makes a splash that seems incommensurate with the point of impact, producing a wave that arches ten metres above you.

- *as much as we love the perfect project plan, and that we've got everything laid out in the way that it should be, it doesn't mean that that's going to be the way that it needs to stay. And if we want the project to go ahead, we might have to move away from that and get from A to B by going in all sorts of wiggles and zigzags to get there*

You let the words wash over you, basking in their translucent glow. The sound they make as they settle in the long grass reminds you of popping candy.

- *wiggles and Zig Zags are very important for small scale HEIs working in the Community*

- *I agree — lots of useful metaphors being provided in this session!*

Something flickers behind your eyes. A shadow of recognition. The phrase ‘Rewilding the Stems’ dances by like a ghost, backed by a chorus of ‘relational edges/rhizomatic roots/recovery of almost forgotten knowledge’ (Ferran 2023).

‘The garden of cultural knowledge exchange,’ you whisper. ‘Exploring and narrating...’

Ari flashes you a smile. ‘So you have been listening. It’s about fertilising and stepping out into the unknown; it’s about building relationships that don’t need to be cast in stone to be effective.’

A man carrying a shovel seems to anticipate your next question.

- *that is where NCACE comes along within the particular cultural sector: by providing that forum, by providing that forum for us coming together in an evidence-informed way.*

You follow his eyes as they look towards the firmament. An inverted basin. A velvet ocean, studded with stars. The cresting of an instant sharpens your perspective, illuminating patterns that are at once clear and mind-bendingly complex. The acronym NCACE morphs into a series of moving images. Most of them are anchored in interaction and shared purpose, although it is impossible to generalise, you think, when it comes to constellations. Stars manifest a university building in central London, where the future of dance is discussed in the present (although you realise, given the time lag, that you are also looking into the past). After that, you see Evelyn Wilson in conversation with Suzie Leighton. Their words emerge as silver threads, weaving a space in which the curious can dwell. Some constellations spell out acronyms: REF; KEF; HEIs; UKRI. The space between stars, dormant rather than empty, evoke constellations still to come.

You are so transfixed by the brilliance of it all that at first you don’t notice the quivering. The earth, you realise, has grown taught as if being stretched, and within seconds, a crack appears just below your feet.

The crack widens, becomes a faultline, branches off into tributaries. The lack of commotion makes you all the more panicked; the garden is giving birth — or being swallowed into the abyss — but the gardeners seem calm, as if this were an everyday occurrence. They casually drop their tools and drape their bags over their shoulders. Then, like synchronised divers operating in reverse, they sweep moonward, the momentum of their collective poise pulling you up with them.

Looking down, you see the beginnings of a brick face emerge from the earth. It grows with the speed of a vicious rumour, catching up with and rising above you, reminding you that fear is adjacent to anticipation. Spinning around, you hope to see striated hills, satellites indexing the curvature of the planet. But you’re met with brick upon brick upon brick upon brick — a towering unease. A silo that hems you in on all sides.

- *‘Demonstrating value using traditional financial metrics — that can be difficult in the culture area, but we shouldn’t shy away from it’*

The woman beside you — you recognise her as the gardener who threw a capsule into the fountain — taps you on the shoulder. ‘It’s okay,’ she says, readjusting her lanyard. ‘Silos are frustrating, but they’re not uncommon. Our ability to think beyond them is part of what makes the garden so unique.’

'But how are we going to escape that?' you reply, gesturing all around you at the Mars-coloured cylinder that continues to rise.

'You'd be surprised. Collaboration can push the boundaries of what seems possible. Speaking of which...'

A female gardener wearing a Bruce Lee t-shirt hovers a few metres to your left. The capsule she is holding explodes in her hands, the message it once contained now reverberating through the silo.

- *every day [...] a new challenge is thrown at us. But I don't think we should ever feel defeated, either. We're creative people, we should use that skill set to negotiate those things and not see them as blocks. So my advice to the students and the way that I'm trying to work and embody that is through thinking a bit more like water.*

There is discussion among the rest of the gardeners; they appear captivated rather than scared. The young woman in the Bruce Lee t-shirt picks her moment to continue.

- *I know that sounds a bit weird and abstract, but bear with. Thinking about how water can negotiate any obstacle. And it might come up against something, but it will have to think about it and find a way to go through it. So thinking more laterally about the way that we address things.*

It becomes clear that the collective intrigue has transformed into something else: excitement, hope, joyous defiance. You hear voices from above and below you, echoing off the walls:

- *thought provoking presentations and panelists, thank you*
- *Thank you all, brilliant presentations and lots to think about!*
- *The people who are here are the people who will make the difference*

*With each response, you feel your body become more supple, your sense of situatedness within the world both more intense and more negotiable. **At first you think you're falling, but in reality, you're flowing. Your thoughts are like quicksilver, racing you towards the earth.** Your focus shifts from the stars to the soil. Roots and rhizome. The skin of a shadow universe, bulging with infinite veins. And then, like water, you become fluid, but not formless. You reach the ground of possibility. You seep into tomorrow.*

Chapter Two: *Finding Your Bearings*

The Selectivity of Storytelling

What is a story? And more to the point, what makes a good one? Within academia, there is a field called ‘narratology’ that is dedicated to such questions.² There is also a growing body of popular works, such as *Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell them* (2013) by the British script editor and TV producer John Yorke, which consider the meanings, mechanics and social importance of story in more accessible terms. According to Yorke, ‘[s]torytelling is an indispensable human preoccupation, as important to us all — almost — as breathing’ (2013: xviii). He also suggests that in ‘stories throughout the ages there is one motif that continually recurs — the journey into the woods to find the dark but life-giving secret within’ (2013: xviii). While both of these claims may be true, it is also important to acknowledge the selectivity upon which stories depends, which reflects and informs the various power structures within which we live our lives. As the world’s first Professor of Story, Bambo Soyinka, put it in her keynote speech at the NCACE launch event back in 2021: ‘Knowing that data can be formed into different narrative shapes enhances our understanding of complexity, social discourse and diversity.’ If storytelling provides a form through which to give meaning to our lives, it can also alert us to the slippery, often fragmentary nature of this endeavour — particularly when the story one wishes to tell contains so many possible perspectives. The journey into the woods is not always a singular one.

Suffice to say that my role as a Story Associate, which involves telling the story of NCACE, is riven by this tension. Whenever I sit down to write, I flick through the pages and pages of notes I’ve made on materials ranging from interviews to research reports to case studies to Zoom chat-boxes, filled with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. How am I going to do justice to all of this? I wonder. What are the parameters for inclusion and exclusion? Of course, this quandary is as much a privilege

as a problem; most writers have experienced the agony of writer’s block, when inspiration dries up, and sentences are as patchy as a lunar landscape. My situation, by contrast, is like being caught in a raging current. The river of possibilities, carrying me towards the stars.

They say that when you’re floundering, it’s good to go back to basics. What this means, in practical terms, is: Look for something to cling to — an object; an idea; the very paradigm you eventually want to leave behind. In the dominant three-act structure of story proposed by Yorke among others, we find a protagonist in pursuit of a specific goal, the success or failure of which will leave them invariably altered. The crucial element of this trajectory is *change*, indexing the development not just of plot, but also character. Theseus escapes the labyrinth. Dorothy realises “there’s no place like home.” How would this structure look if we mapped it onto NCACE?

If storytelling provides a form through which to give meaning to our lives, it can also alert us to the slippery, often fragmentary nature of this endeavour

2 Though ‘narratology’ is most often associated with the structuralist approaches to narrative of the early twentieth-century — especially Russian formalism — one of its foundational texts is Aristotle’s *Poetics* (c. 330 BC). As Genevieve Liveley suggests, the term has also grown to include approaches that move away from structuralism (2019: 215).

Is there a narrative throughline, passing through the familiar checkpoints of beginning, middle and end, that holds the organisation together?

There are a number of details that could be included in such an account. For instance, the fact that NCACE is the brainchild of Suzie Leighton and Evelyn Wilson, who, in 2020, secured funding from Research England to nurture, promote and showcase knowledge exchange within the arts and culture sectors. Or, as a kind of overarching plot arc, that NCACE's work covers five key areas: Brokerage, Collaboration Support and Networking; Skills and Capacity Development; Evidencing and Impact Development; Showcasing and Communications; and Evaluation. The problem is that the three-act structure tends to focus on the hero's journey (otherwise known as the quest narrative), privileging inward-looking transformation and growth over plurality, indeterminacy and entanglement. What about the community and cross-sector dynamism that suffuses all of NCACE's work? How to account for the myriad stakeholders, connected through interaction and shared purpose, who together comprise a collective that is far greater than the sum of its parts? As the founder of Furtherfield,³ Marc Garrett, has suggested: we need 'ideas and stories to be recognised with a more generous spirit and social respect [...] in contrast to the overused rhetoric based on the notion of genius and individualist tropes' (2024: 22). Another thing to consider is the fact that NCACE grew out of The Cultural Capital Exchange (TCCE), which in turn grew out of the London Centre for Arts and Cultural Exchange (LCACE). It's not always easy to distinguish between endings and beginnings.

Indeed, NCACE as an organisation is well aware of its own complexity. As one member of the team has put it: 'the bigger picture of NCACE, and what we're achieving. Sometimes that feels like still being **a little bit missed**' (qtd. in Spyriadis 2023: 38, emphasis in original). This sentiment is echoed by other members of the team, one of whom describes NCACE as an '**ongoing conversation**' that is difficult to '**keep track of**' (qtd. in Spyriadis 2023: 41, emphasis in original), and another who suggests that 'we **can't really capture**' that conversation, not even by 'walk[ing] around with a microphone and a recorder' (qtd. in Spyriadis 2023: 44, emphasis in original). In line with these reflections, I've quickly come to learn that the story of NCACE is an unruly one. The organisation's boundaries are at once porous and ever-expanding, encompassing a garden of cultural knowledge exchange that is as rich as it is overwhelming. My job, meanwhile, is less about landscaping that garden than exploring and narrating some of its less visible hinterlands. To quote Professor of 21st Century Writing and Publishing at Northumbria University, Katy Shaw: 'authentic co-creation is messy' (qtd. in Kill 2024: 33).⁴

Garden, Labyrinth or Both?

I take this imaginary of the garden of cultural knowledge exchange from NCACE co-director Evelyn Wilson. At a 2023 Evidence Café, Wilson suggested that evidencing and showcasing work within the sector requires 'a space for seeding and for nurturing storytelling [...]

³ In Garrett's words: 'Furtherfield is London's longest-running centre for art and technology. Its mission is to disrupt and democratise art through co-creation, in-depth exploration, open tools and free thinking' (2024: 3). In addition to being an online platform, Furtherfield has a gallery and a Commons lab, both based in Finsbury Park.

⁴ Also see Kill's (2022) earlier interview with Knowledge Exchange Manager and Project Director of the Innovation Studio at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Deborah Keogh, who describes the sector as 'a brilliant messy space' (qtd. in Kill 2022: 11); and Garrett (2024): 'If we want to delve deeper into a cultural agency, we must get closer to the mess of it all' (2024: 22).

something akin to a “community garden” (Wilson 2023). Accordingly, when I was applying for the position of Story Associate at NCACE, the brief was to create ‘a “community garden” [...] weaving together events, reports, evidence and activities into a coherent narrative, revealing the importance of the spaces and places created’ (StoryArcs 2024). Upon reading this brief, I was struck by the notion that NCACE specialises not just in collaboration, but also *cultivation*. I’ve since come to think of my role as the storytelling version of a recent NCACE micro-commission, ‘Planting & Playmaking’ (2023), in which the actor, director and creative facilitator Polly Tisdall teamed up with Dr. Giulia Carabelli of Queen Mary University to explore ‘the potential of theatre-making to galvanise caring for plants in our communities’ (Tisdall and Carabelli 2023).

As a specialist in Latin American literature, I also see a resonance between this notion of the garden of cultural knowledge exchange and a story by the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges called ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ (1941). As the title suggests, the story revolves around a labyrinth, though not the kind you might expect to find in the grounds of a National Trust property. Rather, the

labyrinth at the centre of the story is an immense, ever-growing novel — one in which all narrative possibilities unfold simultaneously, ‘each one being the point of departure for other bifurcations’ ([1941] 2000: 77). This infinite labyrinth, I want to propose, offers a daunting but compelling model for the relationships, stories and future possibilities that constitute the domain of cultural knowledge exchange. While NCACE may only represent a portion of that labyrinth, the organisation’s commitment to promoting and facilitating dialogue and cross-pollination between higher education and the arts and culture sectors provides an invaluable starting point from which to begin navigating, exploring, unearthing and co-creating within such a space.

My turn to the labyrinth motif in conceptualising NCACE’s aims and activities is not without precedent. Responding to Wilson’s description of an ‘evidence garden’ at the aforementioned Evidence Café, David Amigoni has written of the ‘complex and multiple pathways’ of the NCACE Collection (2023): a digital archive of case studies, research reports, blogs, essays, and toolkits that highlight some of the collaborations and key research findings of the NCACE journey thus far. Amigoni — who in addition to being Professor of Victorian Literature at Keele University is a member the NCACE Collaboration Champions Network — speaks in similar terms about the sector more broadly:

When people talk about ecosystems and so on, I’m always fascinated by that metaphor. And I do think there’s an awful lot still to explore in it. But for me, you know, one of the big story structures that I think of, and it goes back to my field of knowledge and expertise, and that’s the Victorian multi-plot novel. You know, we’re really dealing with labyrinths, and we’re dealing with multi-plot novels and we’re dealing with how to connect up the person who looks totally excluded. [Personal interview 2024]

Not only does Amigoni’s reference to the Victorian multi-plot novel and labyrinths highlight the impossibility of codifying knowledge exchange as a prescriptive, one-size-fits-all practice, it

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motif in conceptualising
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is not without precedent**

also points — as in Borges’s story — to the various perspectives, voices and intersecting project arcs that remain to be either actualised or platformed.⁵

For all of the labyrinth’s mythic associations (particularly the story of Theseus slaying the Minotaur), the forking paths of the garden of knowledge exchange reflect the effort and imagination of an ever-growing collective. ‘There’s heroic work that goes on,’ notes Amigoni, ‘but it’s highly collaborative’ (personal interview 2024). In other words, both NCACE and the sector it advocates for are shaped, supported and developed between innumerable stakeholders and as part of an ongoing process. A pivotal concept in this regard is ‘cultural ecologies’ (Amigoni 2023; Kill 2022; Soyinka 2021), which denotes the material and affective networks that are constructed and inhabited by those working in the cultural domain. The OED defines ecology as ‘the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment. Also, the relationships themselves, esp. those of a specified organism’ (“Ecology,” emphasis in original). In the context of knowledge exchange, biology bleeds into the social, indicating the labyrinth of human and non-human relations within which artists, academics, intermediaries and other key actors operate.

NCACE and the sector it advocates for are shaped, supported and developed between innumerable stakeholders and as part of an ongoing process

Consider the following comments from Executive Chair of the AHRC, Christopher Smith, included in his NCACE blogpost ‘The Power of Common Life: Action, People, Place, Planet’ (2022):

For me, arts and humanities and the work which NCACE brings together speaks to community in a way that opens up our humanity [...] To go to the roots of our humanity, and to do so with the rigour of our most human science, is to think of the ecology of our common life shared with everything in and on this planet. It is to give value to the tangled hedgerow in which we have our roots, to the community which is the only place where we truly flourish. 2022

Smith frames Knowledge Exchange in terms of an essential, life-enhancing reciprocity — a means by which to locate our shared ‘roots’ (note the plant metaphor), and in doing so, to establish the common ground for conceiving and building more liveable futures. NCACE Sounding Board member, Bambo Soyinka, arrives at a similar conclusion, arguing that ‘[r]esearch and development should not be about relentless growth or “progress”. Instead, they should be about supporting communities and ecologies to envisage and facilitate sustainable ways of growing up and growing old together’ (2021). In both cases, the garden of cultural knowledge exchange is configured as a space of coexistence and interaction where the vital work of world-making takes shape. Not only does NCACE prepare the ground for this vital work, it also provides a platform for those who are already engaged in it.

⁵ A similar picture is painted by Ning Baines and Federica Rossi (both NCACE associates), who in the marquee publication ‘REF 2021: Research Impact and the Arts and Culture Sectors’ (Rossi et al. 2023) delineate forms of collaboration that are ‘not ordered linearly from research or development to dissemination,’ but which instead follow ‘pathways that [are] more circular — for example a dissemination activity offering opportunities for further research, a research project leading to the implementation of initiatives with a partner organisation which in turn allowed them to apply for more project funding, and so on’ (2023: 51).

Operating at the Interstices

Given that NCACE's raison d'être is to champion cultural knowledge exchange and collaboration, the story of the organisation is inextricably woven through the story of the wider sector. Such entanglement reflects the interconnectedness of all forms of life, art and culture being no exception. In the words of Ann Light, whose EU Horizon-funded research project CreaTures was the subject of a 2022 NCACE case study: 'If we're not doing it in an ecological way, we're probably not doing proper knowledge exchange because we're not engaging all the different actors and their situatedness that would enable the knowledge exchange to be in any way useful' (personal interview 2024). But how to represent NCACE's connective reach — particularly in the context of its subtle positionality between higher education and the arts and culture sectors? Light's suggestion to me on this point was in keeping with the relational ethos of her design practice:

I think there's a really interesting meta narrative about how you centre this question, which might be really interesting to discuss because: Is NCACE its own hero? Is NCACE really the centre of this? And what happens if you recentre NCACE somewhere else? What happens if you move it around? So potentially you have the story of NCACE, a genealogy of NCACE. But you also have a story that is about NCACE as a cross section of practice at a particular moment.
Personal interview 2024

This notion of combining a genealogy of NCACE with a more expansive exploration of the sector is appropriate on two counts: it chimes with my own sense of the organisation's cultivating role (particularly with regard to building relationships, enabling collaboration and promoting best practice); and it more broadly reflects a consensus regarding NCACE's unifying capabilities. 'It's felt to me like something of a hub and a broker,' observes Light, 'finding and demonstrating what practices are going on, connecting people, arguing for an approach between the Academy and practitioner communities that would enable more exchange, greater understanding' (personal interview 2024). Many of the interviews that I undertook for this creative report reveal similar understandings.

For instance, Professor of Design and Development at Middlesex University and NCACE Sounding Board member, Neelam Raina, views NCACE as an organisation that ties various strands of the arts and culture sectors together: 'It looks like a huge sector. It looks like messy threads of things running through it [...] NCACE has that capacity to not only see across the piece, but also host different movements and ideas coming to them' (personal interview 2024). In fact, Raina, whose work focuses on tacit and embedded female knowledge in post-conflict settings, sees a confluence between NCACE's role and her own positionality. 'The work at NCACE has resounded with me because I stride that space between practice and research and teaching and policy,' she notes. 'NCACE has a very similar structural positionality that needs to be unpicked or unravelled in many ways because it's not an academic space but it is not a non-academic space [...] it's that perfect mix of everybody who's interested in change' (personal interview 2024).

This perception of NCACE as an anchor point within 'a chaotic structure' (Raina, personal interview 2024) is echoed by Rosy Greenlees, who in addition to being an NCACE Sounding Board member was Director of Crafts Council from 2006-2022. 'I would call it a facilitator, a

convener,’ she reflects. ‘It’s that notion of the network and the facilitation of that network [...] there’s no doubt that people come to the events and then they form relationships, they go off and create projects’ (personal interview 2024). This view is borne out by another interviewee — an archival artist and poet — who notes that ‘[t]here are various people that I’ve met through NCACE who have become part of a wider network that I continue to be involved with and continue to communicate with, and that’s been very helpful’ (personal interview 2024). Tellingly, Greenlees uses a horticultural analogy to flesh out this facilitative role, and to articulate the development of NCACE from its previous iterations to the present:

LCACE and NCACE, TCCE, is like a plant [...] The same plant can look very different according to the weather. Is it dry? Is it cold? Has there been more sun? [...] The plant sort of responds and grows in relation to what’s about it, and I suppose, in a way, that’s what LCACE did. It started because there was a particular demand and then it shifted and grew in a very organic way depending on what was the need at any particular time, or what was perceived to be the need, but also what was being asked for by the Higher Education establishment. Personal interview 2024

In addition to reinforcing the notion of the garden of cultural knowledge exchange, Greenlees’s choice of metaphor emphasises NCACE’s ability and willingness to adapt to the conditions of the sector. The story of NCACE, in this sense, offers a window into the environment that has shaped and been shaped by the organisation, like a leaf that reproduces the same pattern on smaller and smaller scales.

Someone else who conceptualises knowledge exchange in terms of vegetation is the writer and curator Bronac Ferran, who wrote a brilliant piece for the NCACE Collection titled ‘Rewilding the Stems’ (2023). Drawing on her experiences at a Norfolk nature festival called ‘Gathering,’ Ferran advocates for ‘a collectivist turning away from an enshrining of monoculture, order, enclosure and bounded-ness’ (2023: 1) — specifically through the ‘cultivation of edges’ and ‘recovery of almost forgotten knowledge’ (2023: 1). She finishes the piece by asking: ‘what would a scholarly recuperation of the relational edges and rhizomatic roots of interstitial practice look like?’ (2023: 12). Bronac’s allusion to the figure of the rhizome, which in philosophy denotes a kind of hyper-labyrinth that ‘has no beginning or end’ (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2013: 26), draws our attention to the wild but vibrant space that exists beyond established knowledge systems. This hinterland, I think, is where NCACE produces its most vital and lasting effects. It marks an ever-evolving zone of encounter, experimentation and mutual learning — an opportunity and an impetus for growing the garden of cultural knowledge exchange beyond what at present may seem possible.

The story of NCACE, in this sense, offers a window into the environment that has shaped and been shaped by the organisation, like a leaf that reproduces the same pattern on smaller and smaller scales.

Knowledge Exchange is Ordinary

From the perspective of many of NCACE’s collaborators and stakeholders then, the organisation represents a crucial bridge between higher education and the arts and culture sectors. Furthermore, it showcases and supports the multitude of ways in which ensuing relationships can manifest themselves, revealing ‘networks and nodes of activity often

overlooked when viewed through the lens of singular disciplinary silos' (Ferran and Fisher 2017: 1). As Head of STEAMhouse (Commercial), Clayton Shaw, observes:

[NCACE is] the part that connects the various elements together. So when you think about the quadruple helix, for example, they're the shell between all of that, they're the glue that binds all of that together. I think that they have quite a unique role in that respect: of drawing out issues among the creative sector and trying to get to the bottom of how academic institutions can play a role within that and understanding the needs and benefits and impact that can be created.

Personal interview 2024

As an example of this mediating function, Shaw highlights NCACE's extensive programme of events, as well as the micro-commissions that it provides 'for small projects to create cases' (personal interview 2024). In both instances, he suggests, the aim is to 'enable us to understand better that kind of connectivity between the academic institutions, the creative sector, how it kind of connects with community as well' (personal interview 2024).

And yet, we must also consider the structural conditions that often limit cultural knowledge exchange, which have the effect of privileging certain forms of world-making over others. Under such conditions, the labyrinth-cum-garden analogy loses something of its splendour, calling to mind an enclosed and striated space in which cultivation is restricted. On a macro level, I am of course referring to a capitalist system that seems hellbent not just on incessantly extracting profit, but also destroying the planet. As Light suggests in her essay 'Ecologies of Subversion – Troubling Interaction Design for Climate Care' (2022): 'we face futures where potentially benign smart systems that run our finance, politics, and social care are actually in thrall to a market that rejects anything abundant (air, water, creative labor, signs of life) and values only scarcity and the price that can be placed on it' (2022: 26). In terms of knowledge exchange more specifically, however, the question becomes: how does this capitalist definition of value delimit collaboration between artists, practitioners, academics and the public? And, even more importantly for my purposes, to what extent does NCACE provide a lifeline in the face of this predicament?

It is important to consider here the question of metrics, which have been widely criticised for their functionality and overall purpose. Systems such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), many of its critics suggest, are emblematic of the marketisation of higher education, or what anthropologists Cris Shore and Susan Wright have described as 'the rise of technologies of audit and accountability and their transfer from the financial domain to the public sector' (2000: 57). In a 2013 article for *the Guardian*, for instance, Peter Scott of the UCL Institute of Education lamented the fact that '[t]he Research Excellence Framework (REF) is nearing its fateful climax [...] institutions and individuals feel they have no choice but to make sacrifices demanded by the REF Minotaur' (2013: n.p.). This dramatic (and markedly labyrinthine) grievance is framed more analytically by Michelle Phillips of the Royal Northern College of Music, who in a recent NCACE blogpost suggested that both the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and the Higher Education Business and Community Interaction survey (HE-BCI) only capture a sliver of the 'knowledge exchange activity which may take place within the very vibrant community of a music conservatoire' (2024 n.p.).⁶ 'Knowledge exchange

⁶ Director of Knowledge Exchange at University of the Arts, London (UAL), Alisdair Aldous, makes a similar point: 'we see knowledge exchange as a social enterprise; universities are there to serve a social purpose. And whilst income remains a primary indicator of performance, income generation isn't why we do knowledge exchange' (qtd. in Kill 2022: 19).

happens all over the building,’ Phillips elaborates. ‘There’ll be violin tutors and heads of vocal studies today who are taking students to schools, and there’ll be masterclasses given by industry professionals [...] So I’m trying to change the perception of it as something that we just report’ (personal interview 2024). At stake here is not necessarily the efficacy and meaningfulness of knowledge exchange (collaborators and stakeholders are more than capable of establishing that for themselves). Rather, the question is whether, under current metrics, that efficacy and meaningfulness *counts*.

There is a resonance, I think, between Phillips’s comments and an essay by the Welsh cultural theorist Raymond Williams titled ‘Culture is Ordinary’ (1958). ‘What kind of life can it be,’ Williams asks, ‘to produce this extraordinary fussiness, this extraordinary decision to call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work?’ ([1958] 2014: 4). In other words: the parameters of what constitutes “culture” are far too narrow, based on elitist notions of artistic value that fail to do justice to the breadth and richness of human expression. Something similar might be said about cultural knowledge exchange. Far from being a new and exclusive practice that depends for its existence on external assessment, knowledge exchange ‘happens all day, every day, something that we actually do as our kind of bread and butter, our daily life’ (Phillips, personal interview 2024). Knowledge exchange, in this sense, is ordinary — not in the sense of banal or insignificant, but rather, as a mode of professional and lived experience that precedes, exceeds and challenges the term’s institutionalisation. Pauline Rutter expresses it beautifully: ‘When did the ebb and flow, the give and take, the thick and thin of experience, of being, and of imagining become cultural knowledge exchange? As if the transmission of a thought could be contained by transactional words’ (2024: 29).

Paradoxically, if knowledge exchange is ordinary, an extraordinary form of storytelling is required to narrate it.

As Astrid Breel, Sian Brittain, and NCACE co-director Suzie Leighton suggest in ‘Making It Count: How Could We Be Measuring the Real Value of Cultural Knowledge Exchange Work?’ (2022): ‘Part of the complexity is of course the huge range of work which comes under the banner of “knowledge exchange” and the challenges that this would present for the sector in the adoption of any one framework’ (2022: n.p.). This, I feel, is where NCACE shines. It is a lodestar — or better yet, an ever-shifting

constellation — that illuminates the stories of imagination, care and resilience that make effective collaboration possible, as well as offering guidance on the various missteps and pitfalls that impede best practice.⁷ ‘That’s where your storytelling work will be beneficial,’ said Amigoni during our conversation. ‘You’ve got to have the underlying metrics sitting there, but it’s actually the stories by which people have those moments of recognition, see insight into how they can develop a relationship’ (personal interview 2024). One of the greatest pleasures of working with NCACE — whether it be attending events, conducting interviews or getting to know those who work closely with the organisation — has been witnessing these moments of recognition materialise in real-time, like meteorites exploding across the night sky.

Knowledge exchange, in this sense, is ordinary — not in the sense of banal or insignificant, but rather, as a mode of professional and lived experience that precedes, exceeds and challenges the term’s institutionalisation.

⁷ See for instance the NCACE toolkit ‘Guidance for Developing Collaborative Projects’ (2023) by Sarah Sigal and Evelyn Wilson.

A Story About Stories

In her essay ‘The Gift of Epiphany’ (2022), literary theorist Alexandra Kingston-Reese writes: ‘The best gifts are those that make the heart leap — the unexpected ones, those that lay despair or exhaustion to rest, those that delight, those that stop time from progressing on and on’ (2022: 1). ‘Epiphany,’ she continues, ‘works in much the same way, too, breathing an eternal timelessness into the onward rush of life’ (2022: n.p.). The specific form of epiphany that Kingston-Reese has in mind comes from modernist literature, particularly James Joyce’s short story collection *Dubliners* (1914). Each story in *Dubliners* leads to a scene in which the protagonist has a sudden realisation — an experiential gift that alters their perception of both themselves and the world. Could it be that knowledge exchange, at its best, induces this kind of experience? That everyone involved goes away without at least a microscopic sense that their relationship to the real has changed?

To give a personal example, the first event that I attended as a Story Associate was an NCACE Ideas pool centred around hybrid performance. The presentations and table discussions were beyond enlightening — especially as much of the focus was on dance, which is a subject that I know little about. But it was an informal conversation at the end of the day, when a visual artist spoke to me about the inequalities that exist between academia and the creative sphere, that circled around my head on the bus home, soundtracked by Nick Cave singing about particles and the apocalypse. It really affected me, I remember thinking. It opened my eyes to an issue that I’d (shamefully) never considered before.

Of course, not all knowledge exchange involves a eureka moment. There are forms of recognition that unfold more subtly and over time, thus challenging the immediacy of Joyce’s model. What the concept of epiphany helps us to grasp, however, are the affective and transformative dimensions of knowledge exchange, the articulation of which in many ways depends on narrative. Consider the following from Rosy Greenlees, who describes a project she took part in while she was Director of Crafts Council:

we raised funds to create these craft packs for children who were living within deprived families. This was when they couldn’t go to school [because of the pandemic COVID-19 pandemic] and they didn’t have access to things. And so, we distributed them through food banks and community groups and so forth all around the country. We distributed 12, 000 packs and they went to this number of areas, you know. But actually, for me, the most powerful bits of it were the images and the comments that we got back from families, the children and the parents. Just these photographs and these kids looking so happy because they had this thing that they were actually going to be able to engage with. It seemed to me that that was a much more powerful way of communicating what the value of the project was. Personal interview 2024

The power that Greenlees ascribes to ‘images and comments’ here suggests that quantitative data alone cannot account for emotions — in this instance joy — that knowledge exchange produces. As such, rather than simply trying to count the number of individuals who may have been affected by a given project, we must also look to draw out *the ways in which they have been affected* (with the aim of giving a more embodied and multi-dimensional picture of how knowledge exchange functions and why it matters).

A similar idea emerged during my conversation with Neelam Raina. ‘The purpose of storytelling,’ she suggests, ‘is to understand the fact that human understanding of facts and challenges works best when narrated. It can be photographed, it can be visual, it can be audible, whatever. When you narrate something it is understood and remembered for longer than when you throw figures at people’ (personal interview 2024).⁸ Raina’s insight left me wondering: is there a specific form of storytelling that resonates with NCACE’s cross-sector mission? And if so, how might I incorporate such a form into this creative report? A starting point may be to consider the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF), which in addition to ‘a database containing several variables measuring HEI’s KE activities’ includes ‘a set of narrative statements, written descriptions provided by HEIs to describe and contextualise their KE activities’ (Rossi et al. 2024: 8).

I have already discussed the narrative statements at length in the NCACE research report ‘Small and Specialist Arts Institutions and the Knowledge Exchange Framework’ (Rossi et al. 2024). My chapter of the report drew on interviews with six individuals involved in knowledge exchange reporting at four HEIs within the ARTS cluster to explore what I call ‘the official story,’ ‘the untold story,’ ‘the emerging story,’ and ‘the future story’ of the sector (Weeks 2024: 39-42). One of the main findings of that piece of work was that the database component of the KEF is too money-focused. As Head of Innovation at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Sian Brittain, put it: ‘The single biggest problem is that the metrics count money into the institution. Knowledge exchange is not about money into the institution. It’s about the impact that you can have in the wider world’ (personal interview). There was also a consensus, however, that the *narrative statements* add much-needed context and substance to this ‘data driven-exercise’ (Brittain, personal interview 2024) — specifically by providing an opportunity to tell ‘the story of the things we don’t get to shout about elsewhere’ (Phillips, personal interview 2024).

The KEF narrative statements are invaluable insofar as they afford a qualitative, on the ground vision of how knowledge exchange plays out. ‘It’s about the connections we make in a storytelling way between projects that are thematically linked,’ said Senior Manager for Creative Partnerships and Knowledge Exchange at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Jo Chard. ‘It’s also about the previous statements as well in terms of a continuation of the story, and how and where projects are developed’ (personal interview 2024). Not only do the statements thus move beyond financial value, but in doing so, they speak to aspects of collaboration that embody and stimulate other values: wellbeing, community spirit, anti-racism, accessibility, to name but a few. This is not to say that the KEF narrative statements are perfect. There are ‘doubts about the narratives’ broader readership, leading to ‘lingering questions over their reach and significance’ (Weeks 2024: 41). In addition, several interviewees note ‘a tension between the steps that would be needed to make the narratives richer and more visible and the extra burden this would create for universities’ (Weeks 2024: 42). What NCACE has done so brilliantly, though, is to ensure that the stories emerging from such institutions reach as wide an audience as possible — not just in response to these difficulties, but in spite of

⁸ As a crucial caveat, Raina also warned me against approaching storytelling as a culturally neutral practice: ‘Storytelling translates to *kahani* [in Hindi]. *Kahani* also translates into gossip, myth, legend, right — so stories for entertainment [...] different cultures understand stories very differently’ (personal interview 2024).

them. In the words of Vice-Chancellor of Keel University, Trevor McMillan: ‘that is where NCACE comes along within the particular sector: by providing that forum, by providing that forum for us coming together in an evidence-informed way’ (‘NCACE Launch Event,’ 2021).

This notion of NCACE as a collaborative forum calls to mind an essay by the sci-fi writer Ursula K. Le Guin called *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1988). Building from her premise that early civilization’s most vital invention was not the weapon but rather the container, Le Guin rejects the idea that ‘the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! Hitting its mark’ (1988: 34, emphasis in original). Instead, she proposes that ‘the natural, proper, fitting shape’ of narrative is that of ‘a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us’ ([1988] 2019: 32). While NCACE cannot be reduced to a mere container, its role in shaping and supporting living relationships points to what I think Le Guin is getting at: a more generous vision of story — a story *about stories*. Within such a story you’ll find elements of conflict, no doubt. But you’ll also find knowledge being co-produced, shared and celebrated, surpassing the aims of any single individual. You might even catch a glimpse of a story associate, finding his own way through the garden of knowledge exchange.

Organic, Equitable, Open-Ended

To recap: NCACE is at once a platform and a support system for cultural knowledge exchange, showcasing and shaping work whose value transcends the purely economic. Through its in-person and online events, as well as its curation of the NCACE Collection (which I explore in more detail in chapter four), the organisation has shown itself to be hugely effective at bringing people, skills and ideas into proximity. It has thus established a crucial site of engagement between higher education and the arts and culture sectors. What is more, NCACE plays an *active role* in this site of engagement, brokering, building and sustaining relationships based around longevity and mutual respect. As one interviewee observes: ‘I trust NCACE with my work, with my words, with my approaches [...] there’s a relational aspect to the work I’ve been doing with NCACE and that I’ve been invited to take part in that has always felt comfortable’ (personal interview 2024).

For instance, someone I was eager to speak to when I embarked on this project was the academic and dramatist Sarah Sigal. In 2021, Sigal was commissioned by NCACE to write a literature review of the sector. The resulting publication, ‘Knowledge Exchange, HEIs and the Arts and Culture Sector: A Systematic Review of Literature in the Field’ (2021), was the first thing I read after beginning my position as Story Associate. It also established a relationship between Sigal and NCACE that remains strong to this day. ‘Suzie and Evelyn has been super supportive,’ notes Sigal. ‘They’ll give me a little work here and there when they can, commission me to write something [...] They’re very good at understanding what I’m doing. I so rarely meet people who really understand what it is I do in all my different skill sets. It’s so rare’ (personal interview 2024). In fact, Sigal’s current post as 2023-2024 Visiting Research Fellow at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama is tangentially related to NCACE. Sigal met Bryce Lease, who is Head of Knowledge Exchange at Central, at an NCACE event in 2022. He subsequently supported her application for the role, which in many ways builds on the knowledge she acquired through writing the literature review.

What I find telling about Sigal's relationship with NCACE is that it challenges the conception of knowledge exchange as something that can be simply audited and boxed away, as though it were a legal file. After all, in Sigal's case, the literature review marked the beginning of a collaborative journey that is still ongoing — a clear example of how the garden of knowledge exchange outgrows provisional (and sometimes artificial) boundaries. A similar journey came through in my interview with David Amigoni, who became interested in knowledge exchange when he began working with colleagues from the Centre for Social Gerontology at Keele on a project about ageing. 'NCACE have been a really great important organisation to work with,' he comments. 'As I've moved more into knowledge exchange and so on, particularly around the cultural field, NCACE has been an absolutely wonderful partner' (personal interview 2024). Like Sigal, Amigoni's relationship with NCACE exceeds the parameters of a single initiative or project. On the contrary, it is characterised by an organic, equitable and open-ended dialogue that continues to flourish.

Apart from the KEF narrative statements, there are very few opportunities for individuals and organisations to convey such relationships. Rather, as things stand, funding bodies seem more concerned with what Director of Research Impact at the University of Bristol, Andrew Wray, calls '[t]he hero entrepreneur stories that impress everyone' (qtd. in Kill 2022: 23-24). 'It's like a success story,' notes Sigal, referring to the tendency to frame and judge knowledge exchange in heroic terms. '[L]ike everything turns out well in the end, as opposed to a lab experiment of let's just see what happens' (personal interview 2024). Not only does this corporate approximation of the hero's journey risk distorting and diminishing knowledge exchange, it also contributes to a predictable feedback loop whereby "world leading" research receives the most funding, leading to more "world leading" research, further funding, and so on.⁹

NCACE's insider-outsider positionality means that it is excellently placed to disrupt this cycle. That is to say, given that the organisation is both an advocate for and a constituent part of the knowledge exchange ecosystem, it is able to negotiate the realities of the sector while at the same time pushing for necessary change. As I suggested in the previous section, perhaps the biggest challenge facing the sector is the conflation of impact with income. As NCACE Sounding Board member Geoffrey Crossick, put it in seminal lecture titled 'Knowledge Exchange Without the Widgets' (2006):

the character of what goes on in the arts and creative industries is repeatedly forced into models of knowledge transfer devised for science and technology. The model may be caricatured as that of the "widget economy", in which a university research team develops a widget, patents it and transfers it out to industrial enterprise. (2006: 2)

In Crossick's view, 'the study of creativity has suffered from being too closely focused on the final creative output' (2006: 16). We should instead be focusing on 'how people move through creative space,' he continues, 'a system to create spaces in which something can happen' (2006: 16-17). While this emphasis on process over creative output fosters an understanding of knowledge exchange that is more malleable and multi-dimensional, there is a risk of taking such a perspective to the extreme by approaching knowledge exchange as a practice that simply

⁹ For instance, in her analysis of Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations, Wilson has shown how 'the majority of top funded NPOs in England are multiply connected with research and research institutions, suggesting high levels of partnership and networking between research and the arts and culture and high levels of capacity to undertake such activities' (Rossi et. al 2023: 84)

cannot be evaluated. We should approach such a development with caution. In the absence of a framework for critically reflecting on collaboration, how would we gauge a specific project's achievements, its difficulties and its scope for improvement?¹⁰ It seems to me that the key is to balance the emergent nature of knowledge exchange with a critical perspective that benefits both the sector and broader society. While such a perspective will pose a challenge to existing metrics, it will not go so far as to reject metrics altogether.

Caring for the Sector/Caring for NCACE

During my interview with Neelam Raina, I asked about 'forms of impact that are a little bit more intangible' (personal interview 2024). The academic and weaver suggested that my question might be flawed:

they're not intangible at all. They are completely tangible. They are completely measurable. But the entry into how we form metrics around that is wrong. We are always looking for the top level figure, the biggest footprint of impact, the highest shocking number I can give you. But if we start looking at exchange that has impact, every individual who has thought differently is impacted. It might count as one person, so it doesn't make a difference in cash metrics. But for that one person, it's a family-led change, it's a community-based change, it's a way of thinking that will never revert back to previous settings. (Personal interview 2024)

From this perspective, just because the current way of understanding impact is too restrictive (i.e. money-focused), this doesn't mean that we should not strive for more nuanced and satisfactory understandings. The difficulty of this process is a sign of its importance. Instead of offering the easy option of "intangibility," such understandings would alert us to the concrete effects of knowledge exchange, even if those effects require patient, detailed and collective analysis to draw out. In Raina's words: 'there is a radical change of the way we think, not what we think about, that needs to take place' (personal interview 2024).

Echoing Raina's critique, another interviewee spoke to me about the dangers of 'thinking that knowledge is a commodity' (Archival Artist and Poet, personal interview 2024). The archival artist and poet, whose work is rooted in black feminism, also notes the importance of 'fund[ing] things that are pushing boundaries and that are stepping into sort of uncharted territory' (personal interview 2024). 'I love the way that NCACE really leans into that,' she continues, 'and speaks to the need to bring forward the things that are going on, which we would say are at the fringe, but in actual fact they might be right at the centre of a theme or a moment or something that's occurring in society' (personal interview 2024). Similarly, during my conversation with Head of Enterprise at Royal Northern College of Music, Michelle Phillips, the music psychologist praised NCACE for raising awareness around knowledge exchange: 'I feel really passionate about advocacy work, and the chance to write blogs like the NCACE blog was fantastic because I think the people who are making the decisions probably aren't aware of the whole sector' (personal interview 2024). As both the archival artist and Phillips intimate, NCACE is in many ways blazing a trail when it comes to advocating for the sector — not just by brokering collaborations, but also by calling for an ethos of care which ensures that those collaborations are inclusive and sustainable.

¹⁰ The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern puts it well: 'as an instrument of accountability, holding out the possibilities of a globalizing professional consensus, audit is almost impossible to criticize in principal — after all, it advances values that academics generally hold dear, such as responsibility, openness about outcomes and widening of access' (2000:3).

This notion of care as an ethical imperative is widely associated with feminist and posthumanist scholars such as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), Donna Haraway (2016), and Joan Tronto (1993). Most famously, in her book *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), Tronto defines care as ‘a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible [...] all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web’ (1993: 103). While the contributions of Tronto and her contemporaries should not be overlooked, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of care has a much longer history — one that stretches back to indigenous ways of knowing. As the botanist, author and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, writes:

In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top — the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation — and the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn — we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. ([2013] 2020: 9)

Kimmerer’s understanding of care is interwoven with what she calls ‘the teaching power of plants’¹¹ — a teaching that illuminates ‘the living systems on which we depend [...] asks us to bestow our own gifts in kind, to celebrate our kinship with the word’ ([2013] 2020: 31). In fact, as I was reading Kimmerer, I was reminded of a project that forms part of Ann Light’s CreaTures initiative, ‘The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025’ (2020–2025), which uses Live Action Role Play to promote biodiversity, interrelational empathy, and interspecies co-dwelling among human and non-human inhabitants of the park (Light and Kemp 2022). The key thing to bear in mind is that care for one’s environment is a condition of collective flourishing. In the context of knowledge exchange, this means shifting our attention from stories of individual heroism to the far greater, continuously emerging story in which all of us are entangled.

NCACE’s role in helping us make sense of this entangled story should not be underestimated. Specifically, in establishing an ‘organisational base’ (Amigoni, personal interview 2024) centred around reciprocity and responsibility, NCACE challenges the individualism that all too often prevails in Western contexts, placing the emphasis instead on the wellbeing of the greater whole. As Sigal mentioned during our conversation: ‘[Suzie and Evelyn are] good at looking at the bigger picture and understanding how things work, both in the art sector and in the academic sector. And that’s pretty unusual’ (personal interview 2024). NCACE, from this perspective, uses its vantage point to arrive at a holistic understanding of cultural knowledge exchange that resonates with the mantra: ‘Not one tree in a grove, but the whole grove; not one in the forest, but every grove [...] All flourishing is mutual’ (Kimmerer [2013] 2020: 15).

Care for one’s environment is a condition of collective flourishing. In the context of knowledge exchange, this means shifting our attention from stories of individual heroism to the far greater, continuously emerging story in which all of us are entangled

¹¹ The full title of Kimmerer’s book is *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (2013).

And yet, in order for NCACE to continue caring for the garden of cultural knowledge exchange, it is equally vital that the sector continues to care for NCACE. In Amigoni's words:

the way in which Evelyn [and Suzie] steered this in a relationship with Research England and said, "This is an important thing to do. Please support us" was absolutely crucial because it gave NCACE that platform, which I think it's used very intelligently and very creatively [...] For me, it's going to be really crucial that Research England recognises the value of what NCACE are doing. (personal interview 2024)

I discuss the next iteration of NCACE in my final chapter. For now, suffice to say that the care NCACE receives and the care it shows are mutually constitutive, and that this dynamic structures the organisation's ability to celebrate, showcase and shape so many incredible projects. Picture it as a solar system in which support and agency, advocacy and possibility, share the same orbit. The location of such a solar system, which is not always visible to the naked eye, is the question to which I now turn.

Chapter Three: Connection

There is a subterranean solar system located beneath the earth. A shadow universe, as chaotic and magnificent as the one above. Dig and you will find mycelium, fossilised rocks, a network of waterways. The soil that shields you is black and cool, like the ashes that remain the morning after a bonfire. But something warms your skin, sets your volcanic blood ablaze. An image burned into the iris of your mind's eye: the garden of knowledge exchange, seen from a critical distance. It is vivid and yet dreamlike, straddling the border between experience and expectation. Like looking up through the domed roof of your own personal observatory.

Still wet from becoming-water, but now back in gardener form, you hover above the crystal clear torrent that rushes beneath your feet. With every gardener that resolidifies — carefully emptying any excess liquid from their canvas bags — the torrent grows calmer, dwindling to a trickle by the time Ari emerges.

'I feel like I've been on a log flume,' you say, shaking the water from your hair like a Labrador. You are in a chamber that resembles a fibrous cathedral, a shaft of starlight filtering through the taproot that serves as a central column. All around you, lamp-lit offshoots lead who knows where.

Ari laughs and pulls a towel from his bag. 'Here,' he says, throwing it to you. 'If you think that was uncomfortable, wait until one of the gardeners suggests becoming-fire.'

A spark in your peripheral vision jolts you into seriousness. When you see a male gardener holding an open capsule, you breathe a sigh of relief and let your shoulders relax.

- *If we want to make a difference, we have to do it by lots and lots of small interventions, packaging them together into big stories that will influence people*
- *YESCALLISTO!*
- *I'm definitely reading up more on your work, Thank you for sharing*
- *If anyone's got any questions, please put them in the Q&A box*

You glance at Ari. 'Go ahead!' he says. Light suddenly emanates from your eyes and mouth, producing a luminescent speech bubble that sits in front of your face: 'Why do these interventions have to be small? Wouldn't it be better to just create one big project together?'

The gardener scratches his cheek and searches his bag for another capsule. Someone else beats him to it.

- *Even though I think everybody would like one solution that would just solve the world's problems, there may be some kind of meta-solutions within it [...] [C]reative work to make change involves staying and collaborating over time, guiding reflection, promoting mutual care and affecting sense of agency in the context of ordinary life and among familiar, or soon-to-be familiar others*
- *Awesome, such a team effort*

The speech bubble empties automatically, making room for your follow-up question. 'You mean creating connections — acknowledging individual contributions while also keeping an eye on the bigger picture?'

Capsule already in hand, the first gardener jumps back in.

- *If there's one problem I feel about our sector, it's that we are a huge number of not very well connected initiatives. [...] By working with NCACE and their partners, we can make a much bigger difference through what we do than working on our own.*
- *!!!*
- *NCACE Midpoint Evaluation — invitation to complete survey. We would really like to hear your thoughts and views on our work.*
- *I really want to try this!*

The reference to NCACE seems to boost the life force of everyone in the vicinity. Within seconds, a fresh set of introductions flood the chamber.

- *Hello, Gamma, Delphinus University, Northern Celestial Hemisphere*
- *Hello, Zeta from the University of Tucana, Southern Celestial Hemisphere*
- *Good morning! I'm Epsilon — researcher at the University of Indus*
- *Hi all, Sigma from NLDL, Octans, dialling in from Polaris Australis*
- *Hello, I'm Eta! Current student at VW Hydri, and multidisciplinary artist :)*
- *Hi everyone, amazing to hear about so many inspiring projects making the world a better place!*
- *Powerhouse Panel of colleagues — lovely to see familiar faces from the sector*

You try to take in all these names and affiliations, but are distracted by Ari rising above the crowd. A gardener standing next to you throws a capsule into his flight path.

- *Genuine interdisciplinary working is really tough, it's really hard because there are different minds and different opinions*

'She's right,' shouts Ari, emerging from a puff of platinum particles. 'But thanks to NCACE, we're better equipped to navigate those kinds of obstacles. Down here, in the shadow universe, the life force of the organisation is carried through the roots. It allows us to get beneath the surface of the story — or better yet, the story about stories — that connects us all.'

*The word 'care' seeps between your lips, but so quietly that no one hears. **You imagine the garden above you: the flowerbeds fizzing with living organisms and intention; the roofs of greenhouses glimmering like beacons in the night.** A cyclone of dust motes spells out the name Robin Wall Kimmerer:*

- *'Some studies of mast fruiting have suggested that the mechanism for synchrony comes not through the air, but underground. The trees in a forest are often interconnected by subterranean networks of mycorrhizae, fungal strands that inhabit tree roots [...] They weave a web of reciprocity, of giving and taking' — Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass ([2013] 2020: 20)*

Ari stops beside an opening in the far wall and motions for you to join him. 'C'mon!' he says. 'There's no point hanging around when there's work to be done. If the last adventure is anything to go by, you're in for a treat.'

'What happened last time?' you ask, floating your way towards him.

*'What **didn't** happen last time.'*

- *I think it really is fair to say that all of this work is actually, literally, changing the world*
- *agreed:-)*
- *There were librarians, there were writers, there was somebody who was trying to grow plants in space*
- *Wonderful people, doing amazing work!!!*

‘As you know, part of our job is to identify and subvert siloed thinking,’ Ari interjects. ‘Each adventure represents a collaborative approach to the challenges we face, which include Placemaking and Levelling Out, Health and Wellbeing, Technologies for Social Good and Environment and Climate Emergency. We mine the underside of these Grand Challenges — explore and address their entangled roots.’

You reach Ari next to the opening in the wall. Below, a gardener with bangs and a tattoo of a rocket ship on her shoulder prises open a capsule. It produces a forcefield that pushes everyone around her back.

- *This space to discover what’s not on the surface of things, what’s deeper within one’s imagination and intention and hope — that word that’s been used earlier — a radical hope, rather than a bland, empty, inactive, passive hope.*
- *Some of the slides used in today’s session are already [available on our padlet](#)*
- *Really informative panel session, thanks!*

‘I think I get it...’ you say, peering into the offshoot. The floor is carpeted with silt, and the walls and ceiling are the colour and texture of licorice. ‘These offshoots lead to different areas of the garden. They allow us to navigate between initiatives and challenges that may appear distinct, but are in reality linked?’

The forcefield catapults three gardeners into the air and holds them in suspension, like medalists on a podium.

- *They are a pathway between really complex concepts and really physical, on the ground work.*
- *One size does not fit all, you have to go where people are in whatever shape or form that requires. So you might need to change; you might need to adapt; you might need to apply different methods and tools.*
- *The singular narrative is convenient for the structures that we live in. It’s convenient because it doesn’t challenge it.*

‘It’s like the swan effect,’ adds Ari, drifting into the mouth of the tunnel. ‘The garden couldn’t exist without all the research and relationship-building that happens beneath the surface, hidden from public view. Just look at all these people, gathered in one space: stories, ideas and lived experiences are what differentiate and unite us. They generate our shared ability to change the universe for the better.’

An approaching light shines from deep within the tunnel. You’re barely able to get out of the way as a gardener skids past you, careening into the chamber like a runaway train.

- *It's really difficult getting everybody in the room at the same time in order to do these things. Effectively, what this means is we become very much a view from within, as opposed to a view from above. We're researching all together, and we have to recognise that we are part of an integrated cultural ecology and economy. We're not just researching sort of looking down.
We have become part of this conversation, and are very, very invested in facilitating it and helping it.*

The gardener is holding a capsule that looks different from the others. It is larger and more cylindrical, resting between his arm and waist like a rugby ball. Its chrome smoothness makes your hairs stand on end.

'Get ready,' says Ari. 'Evidencing and showcasing is dizzy work — especially for newcomers.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just hang on!'

The room begins to spin — or at least something is spinning, maybe your brain — and a feeling like electricity rushes through you. Time and space collapse, as in a blackhole. Except this singularity is bursting with life.

You hear a flicker of Ari's voice straining against the vortex. 'We're entering an event horizon ... if you need something to ground you, just remember NCACE.'

A montage materialises at the centre of the chamber. The actors and ideas that inhabit each scene are distinct, but they also inform one another, like the rotating mirrors of a kaleidoscope. Some scenes are in buildings that look old from the outside, but on the inside seem brand new: glass cubicles; curved sofas; images projected onto pristine whiteboards. Others take place virtually — via laptop screens and in "breakout rooms" — but the ideas being presented are no less vivid, no less vital.

- *It's about harnessing the creative and intellectual talent that resides within the faculty and connecting that to the outside world. It's about civic discourse, but it's also about the whole enterprise and economic development agenda, too*
- *People with lived experience of multiple disadvantages play a key part in more than just raising awareness. If you create positions of power for us, just watch what happens*
- *The need for us all to cultivate qualities of imagination, persistence, collectivity and kindness in the face of the climate emergency. An ethics of care, encouraged and supported by a careful and compassionate writing practice, both individually, alone in solitude, and alongside others*
- *To make work that is greater than the sum of any one of those parts, usually platforming stories of underrepresented voices and narratives that are often invisible.*

*Frames bleed into one another; the montage invites you in. The space between your organs seems suddenly negligible, bursting with veins that multiply like hyphae — a life force that is yours but never yours alone. Roots interweave with tendrils. Tendrils interweave with the stars. **Order and chaos come together and embrace, animated by the jazz of an ecosystem in full swing.** The tiring of either, you realise, would destroy the equilibrium, turn magic into illusion, ruin the organic rhythm. Myopia and self-interest would obscure lived complexity. The spell would be broken.*

When you open your eyes, only you and Ari are left in the chamber. A title and date — ***‘The Power of Collaborative Action: People, Place and Planet’*** (9/3/22) — has been spraypainted in silver above the opening beside you. All the other openings are similarly decorated:

- *‘Collaborations in Creative Health’* (22/6/23)
- *‘Culture, Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange: Technology for Social Good’* (20/6/24)
- *‘Culture and Collaborations on Climate Emergency’* (23/6/22)
- *‘What is Civic Impact Anyway?’* (12/10/22)
- *‘Knowledge Impacts Network (KIN) Launch’* (11/3/21)

‘The event horizon...’ you say, tugging at Ari’s sleeve. *‘Each Grand Challenge is accessible via the others. Everything is connectable — experience; knowledge; kindness; adversity. That’s what the gardener was trying to tell us!’*

‘Not just tell us,’ Ari corrects you. *‘Show us, too. Knowledge exchange involves all five senses. You have to feel it — live it even.’*

A smell of aniseed and compost drifts from the opening. ‘Is that where the others have gone? Up through the roots and back to the garden, to share their collaborations with the world?’

‘Exactly,’ says Ari, smiling. *‘You might just be a natural at this.’*

‘And that’s where we’re headed too, right? Maybe I can tell the world about our collaboration — you showing me the garden and the shadow universe!’

Ari’s face suddenly resembles a waning moon. ‘I’m sorry; I wish I could come with you. I have to stay here in case any newcomers need my assistance.’

*‘But I **am** a newcomer,’* you reply. *‘You said so yourself.’*

‘Not anymore. Once you’ve got a taste for knowledge exchange, there’s no going back. Anyway, there are parts of the garden that even I’ve never been to — that’s saying something considering I’ve been here my whole life. It isn’t about aiming for landscaped perfection. It’s about exploring and getting a feel for the place; understanding where you might be of help to others, and where others might be able to help you.’

Once again, you glance into the offshoot. You picture the battered the sleeve of an old leather jacket.

Ari removes a ball of silver thread from his pocket. ‘Be careful: this is just a navigation tool — nothing more, nothing less.’ He places it in your palm, which appears made of out porcelain in the half-light. ‘The moment you think you’ve finally mastered the labyrinth, new routes will materialise. This thread will dissolve. You’ll realise — in a flash of inspiration that disguises itself as disappointment — that the labyrinth has no outer limit, let alone a centre. Even my great-Ariadne would struggle to fully unravel the garden of cultural knowledge exchange.’

‘Ariadne?’ you reply. *‘You mean from the story about...’*

‘Good luck!’ shouts Ari, disappearing into the opening. As his silhouette fades, you hear the distant hum of gardeners returning to the surface.

Chapter Four: Navigating the Garden

Inventory Curated Snapshot¹²

In his book *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structures in Fiction and Film* (1978), Seymour Chatman discusses the lacunae that make storytelling possible:

a narrative, as the product of a fixed number of statements, can never be totally “complete” [...] [T]here is a virtually infinite continuum of imaginable details between the incidents, which will not ordinarily be expressed, but which could be. The author selects those events he feels are sufficient to elicit the necessary sense of continuum. Normally, the audience is content to accept the main lines and fill in the interstices with the knowledge it has acquired through ordinary living and art experience. (1978: 29-30, emphasis in original)

As Chatman explains, such lacunae are necessary insofar as the potential for adding more and more detail is ultimately limitless, and so the storyteller must decide which details to prioritise. To ignore this reality would be to fall into a kind of narrative abyss, giving rise to what novelist and philosopher Umberto Eco describes as ‘the vertigo of a knowledge so exaggeratedly extensive that nobody could ever capture or contain it in their own individual memories [...] in other words, the vertigo of the labyrinth’ ([2007] 2014: 74). To my mind, however, we should also seek to avoid the opposite scenario — the naturalisation of plot devices and other narrative features to the point where convention becomes all consuming, and we lose sight of the fact that other forms of storytelling are possible. The vertigo of the labyrinth is at once a problem to be negotiated and an opportunity to be explored.

I was forced to come to terms with this predicament during my first week as a Story Associate. I decided to do some “preliminary” reading around some of the individuals and organisations that NCACE has collaborated with, only to quickly discover that the source I was drawing from, the NCACE Collection — a digital archive of NCACE-originated case studies, research reports, blogs, essays and toolkits geared towards collaboration support and best practice — harboured enough material to occupy me for months. If my job is to tell the story of NCACE, I remember thinking, where does the Collection fit into such a project? How can I forge a path through this labyrinthine space in a way that is as truthful, compelling and open (to diversion; development; critique; reappraisal) as possible?

Indeed, the Collection only scratches the surface of NCACE’s long list of activities. As well as collating another digital archive, the Evidence Repository, which contains over 300 evidence sources related to knowledge exchange more generally, NCACE runs a host of online and in-person events (Ideas Pools; Evidence Cafés; Knowledge Impact Networks; Annual Showcases). In light of these other endeavours, it is clear that the NCACE Collection alone is insufficient to provide a full picture of the organisation. It is a telescope that sharpens perspective; more an outlook onto the KE galaxy than the experience of floating through it. And yet, over the course of the interviews that I conducted for this creative report, something that frequently came up was the importance of NCACE’s ‘archival role’ (Sigal, personal interview 2024). To my mind, the Collection is the cornerstone of this archival role, providing a source of

¹² I borrow the term ‘curated snapshot’ from Senior Manager for Research, Evidence and Policy at NCACE, Laura Kemp (‘Collaborations in Creative Health’ 2023).

learning and inspiration that raises awareness of some of the incredible work being carried out in the sector.

During my conversation with David Amigoni, for instance, the NCACE Collaborations Champion marked out one specific aspect of the Collection — the NCACE Case Studies — for praise:

I think where it's been really, really valuable is in the case study work [...] I found it useful to read those case studies because then they were influencing and enabling me to think about my own practice. And I think that's what NCACE does. It says, Look, here's evidence of what other people are doing. You could do something comparable. (Personal interview 2024)

As Amigoni makes clear, part of the value of the Collection is its effectiveness as a space where individuals and organisations can look for guidance regarding their own knowledge exchange activities. In fact, it might be said that NCACE is blazing a trail in this regard, since the Collection is precisely the kind of showcasing facility that is currently felt to be lacking — particularly in the higher education sector. In the words of Director of Knowledge Exchange and Employability at Norwich University of the Arts, Sarah Steed: ‘it would be great to have some kind of nationally recognised opportunity to tell these stories [...] for instance, if there was a website or something that a businesses that wanted to work with universities could go onto to look at the projects’ (personal interview 2024).

But again, the question remains: how to navigate and narrate the Collection? As a dense, highly connected space that is regularly being added to, the Collection is like a mycelium growing deep beneath the earth. On the Collection webpage, there is a filtering system that allows visitors to choose between Sectors, Publication Types, Themes, Keywords and Read Durations. Faced with such options, I am mindful that each of us has our own internal filtering system — a filtering system shaped by a combination of our upbringing, education and lived experiences. I am also mindful of the fact that, as a white, heterosexual, cisgender man, my identity and perspective have historically been presented as the universal standard in this regard.

In storytelling terms, such myopia translates into the belief that narrative form is set in stone. ‘All stories are forged from the same template,’ writes John Yorke, ‘writers simply don’t have any choice as to the structure they use and [...] the laws of physics, of logic and of form dictate they must all follow the very same path’ (2013: xvi). This statement is not only reductive but dangerous; it equates dominance with essentialism, thus reifying the patriarchal gaze that produces and is reinforced by that dominance. This reality is brilliantly laid bare by Susan S. Lanser in ‘Toward a Feminist Narratology’ (1986):

The units of anticipation and fulfilment or problem and solution that structure plot according to narrative theorists [...] assume power, a possibility, that may be inconsistent with what women have experienced both historically and textually, and perhaps inconsistent even with women's desires. (1986: 356)

According to this perspective, in addition to shaping the way many of us interpret the world, stories are shaped by the experiences and interests of the (normally white, male) storyteller. This insight is especially important given that, besides myself and a male colleague, the majority of the NCACE team is female. I bring this point up not to equate arts and culture with

a female demographic, but rather, to acknowledge my privilege as someone who has never faced discrimination as a result of their gender. While the journey through the Collection that I undertake in this chapter is incomplete to say the least, my hope is that it ventures beyond my positionality to reflect the experiences and ambitions of the NCACE team, as well as the diversity of the sector more broadly.

What follows, therefore, is not an inventory of the NCACE Collection. Rather, it is a curated snapshot of the Collection — one that delineates some of the intersecting values and themes that are nourished by and feed back into NCACE's core mission. My reference to curation is not incidental. '[T]he etymology of “curate” comes from the Latin verb cura or care,’ writes anthropologist and curator Haidy Geismar. ‘Caring not only signifies practices of consideration and concern but also implicitly speaks to techniques and technologies of maintenance, preservation and repair’ (2022: 219).¹³ As the Collection so clearly demonstrates, NCACE is both a source and a catalyst of proliferating stories. To begin curating some of those stories is not just to recount them, but also to care for them.

Contextualising Grand Challenges

One way of approaching the garden of cultural knowledge exchange is to separate it into quadrants, each of which represents one of NCACE's four Grand Challenges: (1) placemaking and levelling out; (2) health and wellbeing; (3) technologies for social good; and (4) environment and climate emergency. As Rossi et al. have suggested, NCACE approaches these Grand Challenges through the lens of ‘how research activities in arts and culture and partnerships between researchers and the arts and culture sectors play a role in mobilising and catalysing societal change’ (2023: 7). Grand Challenges, from this perspective, serve a heuristic function — they give structure to ‘NCACE's strategic mission of evidencing and showcasing the social, cultural, environmental, as well as economic impacts of Knowledge Exchange (KE) activities between Higher Education and the arts and culture sectors’ (Rossi et al. 2023: 41). While far from exhaustive, the markers of placemaking, health, technology and climate emergency offer some general guidance regarding the work that NCACE has platformed and facilitated over the past four years — particularly as evidenced in the Collection.

Before turning my attention to the Collection, however, I want to briefly consider how these four Grand Challenges also (loosely) structure the work of many of NCACE's colleagues and collaborators. This resonance is indicative of how NCACE places the needs of the sector at the forefront of its thinking, thus emphasising its status as a markedly outward-looking organisation. NCACE's perceptiveness and sensitivity in this regard became clear during the interviews that I co-conducted for the publication ‘Small and Specialist Arts Institutions and the Knowledge Exchange Framework (Rossi et al. 2024), part of which covered the main knowledge exchange activities

While far from exhaustive, the markers of placemaking, health, technology and climate emergency offer some general guidance regarding the work that NCACE has platformed and facilitated over the past four years – particularly as evidenced in the Collection

¹³ Geismar cites Shannon Mattern's essay ‘Maintenance and Care’ (2018).

of each institution. Dean of Research and Knowledge Exchange at Norwich University of the Arts, Louis Nixon, outlined how he and Sarah Steed put together a five-year strategy based around ‘the application of creative technologies’ to areas such as ‘social sustainability, climate crisis, arts and health’ (personal interview 2024). The four Grand Challenges embedded in this strategy cropped up across all of the interviews — often in ways that suggested not just strategic focus, but also blurred boundaries.

For instance, Head of Innovation and Knowledge Exchange at Arts university Bournemouth, Daniel Cox, compared his institution’s approach to knowledge exchange to jazz: ‘we’ve got an overall strategy around civic engagement, around working industry, and I kind of set out the direction of travel. But within that there’s kind of jazz, so people have space to kind of really take ownership of ideas’ (personal interview 2024). As part of this ensemble, themes such as technologies for social good play a distinct part in the mix while also crucially intersecting with others, such as placemaking and climate emergency. One example is a project led by the graphic designer, Alice Stevens, which used Radio-frequency identification (RFID) sensors inside a pair of wellies to play ‘eco-poetry to people depending on the humidity levels [...] the idea was to get people out and walking in the rain and enjoying it’ (Cox, personal interview 2024). Similarly, Sian Brittain and Jo Chard — Head of Innovation and Senior Manager for Creative Partnerships and Knowledge Exchange at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, respectively — described a number of projects that specifically address or draw together Grand Challenges. These include a ‘placemaking initiative’ called Culture Mile that was launched by the City of London (Chard, personal interview 2024), and a project called Music Bank that combines placemaking with health and wellbeing to ‘deliver music-based projects for people living with dementia’ (Chard, personal interview 2023).

Sarah Steed highlights the financial conditions that make engagement with Grand Challenges possible for small and specialist institutions: ‘the history of our knowledge exchange activity as a university had prior to the pandemic really been quite small in scale,’ she observes. ‘But that changed after the pandemic [...] the government decided that for a two-year fixed period, it would make a payment to the universities that don’t get HEIF [Higher Education Innovation Funding]’ (personal interview 2024). This funding boost, which Steed attributes to the government’s recognition that ‘small specialist universities in particular are often very important in their communities,’ proved ‘world-changing’ for Norwich University of the Arts (personal interview 2024). Steed and her team used the funding for two marquee projects: the first was a collaboration with John Innes Institute in Norwich, which was about raising awareness of a pea-based snack called ‘The Pea’ that has the potential to combat type 2 diabetes. Drawing on the university’s expertise in communication design, academics and students worked with scientists to co-develop ‘a process of iterative design to work out how you talk to the consumers about very complex science’ (personal interview 2024). The second project, which leveraged the synergies between technologies for social good and placemaking, was ‘driven initially by the desire to create graduate employment’ in the local area for students undertaking courses in the ‘screen-based industries’ (personal interview 2024). The result was the development of the Immersive Visualisation and Simulation Lab — a state-of-the-art facility in Norwich for filmmakers, designers, artists and gamers that is unrivalled in the UK.

As we shall see in the following sections, the ground-breaking projects carried out by these small and specialist institutions reflect the creativity and ambition of the broader sector. The feeling the reader gets when moving through the NCACE Collection is of a knowledge exchange ecosystem that is not only mindful of the four Grand Challenges mentioned above, but also fully committed to meeting them head-on. In trying to conceptualise how the NCACE Collection mediates this commitment, I was reminded of something that Jo Chard said during our conversation:

with the projects that I do in terms of partnership development, often it's not about what we're doing as an institution. It's about drawing together industry knowledge into something that is shareable with others, and our role is a facilitative function. I guess it's research of a kind in that it's drawing together various case studies [...] it's about sharing other people's knowledge.
(Personal interview 2024)

The Collection, I would suggest, resonates with this facilitative function insofar as it provides a source of inspiration, guidance and support for anyone engaged (or simply interested) in knowledge exchange. Its creation, which has involved both generosity and agency on NCACE's part, has resulted in a living, breathing document of the change and possibility that cultural knowledge exchange can bring about.

Placemaking and Levelling Out

Given the national focus on the levelling up agenda since 2019, it is unsurprising that placemaking and levelling out feature so prominently in NCACE's work. Most recently, Place and Culture Consultant-Director, Cara Courage, was commissioned by NCACE to write 'Placing Placemaking: Exploring What Constitutes Best Practice in UK Universities' (2024). In addition to untangling the various meanings of placemaking,¹⁴ Courage shows how universities can affect place-based change at local and national levels (2024: 5). One of her key examples, Culture Compacts — 'small-scale but far-reaching strategic cross-sector cultural partnerships funded by DCMS and Arts Council England' (2024: 5) — calls back to an earlier piece she wrote for NCACE, 'Greater than the Sum of its Parts: Realising Universities in Cultural Compacts' (2022), in which she delineates a 'university culture [...] with experience of building new local to global partnerships and frameworks that are mutually transformative and redefining of experiences and of place' (2022: 2, 3).

As Courage's work demonstrates, NCACE is committed to spotlighting placemaking as a key driver of collaboration between higher education and the arts and culture sectors. This commitment is reflected in a number of NCACE research reports and blogposts, such as 'The Role of "Place" in Collaborations between HEIs and the Arts and Culture Sectors' (Rossi and Hopkins 2021); 'The University's Role in Culture-Led Place-Shaping' (Thompson 2021); and 'NCACE Collaborations in Placemaking: Shining a Light on the Contribution of Higher Education in Cultural Partnerships' (Hopkins 2021). What is more, NCACE has convened multiple events around the theme of placemaking, including 'Collaborations in Place-making'

¹⁴ Courage gives the following definitions of placemaking: 'a material practice that works to create an improved public realm; a cultural practice that centres community voice and agency; a civic practice that facilitates activities that define a place; an economic practice that works to support a place to thrive. In reality, placemaking is all of these practices, conjoined through a multi-variant cohort of stakeholders that work across physical, social, economic and cultural realms of place' (2024: 2)

(2021); 'Why Does Place Matter? Foregrounding Felt Experiences' (2022); and 'Culture Compacts, Collaboration, Knowledge Exchange' (2022). Reflections from this final event resulted in a blogpost by Evelyn Wilson and David Amigoni. 'Together we decided to put together an event exploring the role of universities within the compacts,' writes Wilson, 'to create a chance for some discussions about the ways in which this was manifesting in different parts of the country' (Wilson and Amigoni 2022).

Placemaking and levelling out are equally prominent within NCACE's Case Study work. A keyword search for 'Place' in the NCACE Collection leads to publications such as 'Shape our City' (2022) by Sophie Laggan, Research Assistant at UWE; and 'S.H.E.D' (2022) by Rhiannon Jones, Associate Professor (Civic) at the University of Derby and Founder and CEO of Designing Dialogue CIC. In the former project, Laggan and her team 'used participatory methods to pilot different creative ways in which the public, and particularly marginalised groups, can contribute to urban decision-making' (Laggan and Kemp 2022: 1). The aim was to ensure that residents are included in planning and policy discussions — specifically by incorporating their knowledge of the local area into the evidence base around topics such as health and wellbeing and climate emergency (Laggan and Kemp 2022: 1). Jones's work as co-creator of S.H.E.D, which stands for The Social Higher Education Depot, also creatively challenges the private and public divide — specifically in the form of a mobile structure that encourages and facilitates interaction between those inside and outside the university. 'S.H.E.D explores creative place-making as a methodology to address civic, societal and economic issues,' Jones elaborates, 'through co-designing for performative, sporting, cultural and artistic engagement' (Jones and Kemp 2022: 1, 2). Both projects demonstrate the power of braiding creativity with locality, or what Jones describes as 'utilising culture as a driver for change on place-based local concerns' (Jones and Kemp 2022: 4).

One project in particular that caught my attention while I was navigating this area of the garden was a collaboration between the youth charity Eat Club and the Kings Cross Knowledge Quarter. As Eat Club session leader and independent food learning producer, David Thompson, writes in an NCACE blogpost titled 'Around the Kitchen Table' (2021):

For five weeks during the 2021 summer holidays, the youth cooking Eat Club teamed up with partners from the Kings Cross Knowledge Quarter to deliver a unique cook and eat programme, themed around each partner's work. The project was intended to explore the exciting possibilities of using food and food culture for knowledge exchange between academic institutions and local young people. (2021 n.p.)

In addition to being inspired by the idea that food 'is a cultural and creative medium much like music, dance, theatre and literature' (2021 n.p.), I was stopped in my tracks by Thompson reference to 'the Story Garden (a community garden and education space squeezed into an unlikely brownfield site between the Crick and the British Library)' (2021 n.p.). This Story Garden, which was the location for week one of the project, struck me as a literal manifestation of the horticultural poetics that informs my thinking around knowledge exchange, which has been developed and refined through my conversations with Evelyn Wilson.

Suffice to say that the examples given above are only a starting point. The NCACE collection is also home to case studies such as 'Temporary Contemporary' (2022) by Rowan Bailey and Kath

Wynne-Hague, which is a collaboration between Kirklees Council and the University of Huddersfield that enlivens high street spaces through art, music, performance, food and other cultural activities (Bailer and Wynne-Hague 2022: 1); and ‘iMayflower’ (2022) by Rupert Lorraine and Hannah Irwin, both of the University of Plymouth: a project that draws on immersive and digital technologies to develop Plymouth’s creative industries (2022: 1). Lorraine and Irwin, Development & Partnerships Manager and Project and Knowledge Exchange Manager respectively, spoke about iMayflower at the second NCACE Annual Showcase, ‘The Power of Collaborative Action: People, Place and Planet’ (2022). ‘Placemaking [...] is a kind of unifying theme, a golden thread’ said Lorraine of his and Irwin’s work. ‘For us, placemaking is about actively engaging with the businesses, creative practitioners and communities that we want to work with, focusing on delivering mutual benefits and value through those relationships.’

This notion of placemaking as a ‘unifying theme, a golden thread’ speaks to its imbrication with NCACE’s other three Grand Challenges. As an example, consider the NCACE blogpost ‘The Art and Performance of City Strategy in a Pandemic’ (2021)

by Lecturer in Theatre at Brunel University, Stuart Andrews, and Associate Professor of Performance and Culture at Northumbria University, Patrick Duggan. As co-directors of ‘Performing City Resilience’, Andrews and Duggan share a research interest in ‘performances of place and crisis’ (2021: n.p.). This shared interest led to an AHRC/UKRI-funded project titled ‘Social Distancing and Reimagining City Life: Performative Strategies and

Practices for Response and Recovery in and Beyond Lockdown’ (2020-2022), which explored how performance might inform urban responses to Covid-19. ‘Our current project focuses on three UK cities, Bristol, Glasgow and Newcastle,’ the pair write. ‘We are investigating the ways that theories and practices of performance might be helpful in developing new and nuanced city strategies for sustaining social distancing in and beyond these cities’ (2021: n.p.). In this context, placemaking is not a self-contained process, but rather, a process with the potential to positively affect health and wellbeing.

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Health and Wellbeing

But the connection between placemaking and health and wellbeing runs both ways. That is to say, knowledge exchange projects that are geared towards improving individual and collective health can alter an environment for the better, contributing to a sense of comfort, safety and belonging. I came to this conclusion after reading the NCACE toolkit ‘Examples of Collaboration Between Universities and the Arts’ (2023) by Sarah Sigal and Evelyn Wilson.¹⁵ The toolkit includes a section on a community-led project between Norwich University of the Arts and Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Trust titled ‘Hospital Rooms’ (2021), ‘an art installation designed to transform Northside House, an NHS mental health facility in Norwich’ (Sigal and Wilson 2023: 5). Intrigued by this description, I followed the link to the project website. Alongside pictures of the installation, the ‘About’ section notes that the ‘project has been

¹⁵ Sigal and Wilson also wrote an adjacent piece: ‘Guidance for Developing Collaborative Projects’ (2023)

celebrated by the Northside community for “completely transforming the culture of the ward” and pushing the boundaries of creativity within forensic services, prompting the question “why can’t we just let people be creative?” (‘Northside House’).

The ‘Examples of Collaboration’ toolkit showcases a number of other projects related to health and wellbeing. The first project that Sigal and Wilson outline is ‘Compassion for Voices’ (2014): an animated video that challenges stereotypes around mental health through therapeutic and educational content (2023: 2). Developed through a collaboration between a clinical psychologist at King’s College London, Charlie Heriot-Maitland, and the animator Kate Anderson, ‘Compassion for Voices’ epitomises genuine co-creation in action:

The animator’s individual goal was to develop her skills in terms of collaborative development and incorporating research into her work. The researcher’s goal was to explore the potential of arts practice in engaging audiences. [...] What made this KE project successful was that these two collaborators were given the opportunity to further their own artistic and scholarly practices in making the film. (Sigal and Wilson 2023: 2)

The project’s success was underpinned by the mutual benefit that it brought to the collaborators. As Signal writes in an earlier NCACE publication, ‘Knowledge Exchange, HEIs and the Arts and Culture Sector: A Systematic Review of Literature in the Field’ (2021), successful knowledge exchange requires ‘careful management of expectations in terms of process and output and a consideration for ways to reconcile the culture of research and HEIs with the culture of arts practice and arts organisation’ (2021: 15).

Indeed, for Sigal, the lifeblood of any knowledge exchange project is ‘a great deal of clear and continuous communication between parties’ (2021: 15). Accordingly, in their appraisal of a 2016 collaboration between NHS and Central St. Martin’s, ‘Designing for Dialysis’ — a project in which renal dialysis patients at Royal London Hospital partnered with visual artists to create recipe cards — Wilson and Sigal highlight the fact that ‘participants were able to anticipate the complexities of the collaboration beforehand, plan accordingly and adapt to the circumstances as they proceeded. Their anticipation and planning involved substantive levels of communication that facilitated the process’ (Sigal and Wilson 2023: 2). Healthy forms of collaboration, it might be said, are more likely to achieve healthy outcomes.

There are numerous NCACE case studies that evidence this mantra. For instance, ‘Aesop’s Dance to Health’ (2024) outlines a falls prevention dance programme led by Arts Enterprise with a Social Purpose (Aesop): a social enterprise and charity that seeks scalable artistic solutions to social problems (Kemp and Utton 2024: 1). Building from Aesop founder Tim Joss’s idea ‘of smuggling physiotherapy exercises into creative dance,’ Dance to Health has developed into a £2.1 million funded, UK-wide programme that is believed to reduce falls by 58% (Kemp and Utton 2024: 2-3).¹⁶ The programme is grounded in a collaborative rather than prescriptive approach to healthcare — one that invites participants to ‘influence the activities through their own dance passions, their music tastes and creative ideas’ (Kemp and Utton 2024: 2). Similarly, ‘Saffron Hall — Together in Sound’ focuses on a collaboration between the Essex-based performance space Saffron Hall and the Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy at Anglia Ruskin University. Led by Thomas Hardy of the Saffron Hall Trust and Helen Odel Miller and

¹⁶ Tragically, Joss passed away in January 2024 following a cycling accident. Kemp and Utton dedicate the case study to his memory.

Claire Molyneux (both of the Cambridge Institute), the project provides group music therapy for people living with dementia, as well as their family and friends.

Teamwork and interdisciplinarity are also at the heart of ‘Narratives of Personal Renewal’ (Jones and Kemp 2024): a collaboration between Aberystwyth University’s Centre for Creative writing, the Fathom Trust and the Hywel Dda University Health board that considers how a combined programme of writing and craft can help alleviate the burnout and stress that is common among health professionals. Led by the Director of the Centre for Creativity and Wellbeing, Jacqueline Yallop, the project brought together creative practitioners and NHS staff for a series of workshops that included yoga, hand-loomed and creative writing. As one participant described it: “It made me feel so connected to other professionals who experience the same issues, and it was so nice to have fun trying out new things together without any pressure” (Jones and Kemp 2024: 6).¹⁷

Again, it is important to emphasise here that NCACE’s interventions into health and wellbeing, as well as the ambitions and achievements of the sector more generally, transcend the necessary limits of any given summary or account. As Senior Manager for Research, Evidence and Policy at NCACE, Laura Kemp, put it at the second NCACE Annual Policy Workshop, ‘Collaborations in Creative Health’ (2023):

health and wellbeing is one of the key themes underpinning our work [...] in the course of setting up this event, I’ve been nothing short of overwhelmed by how much work is taking place in this area. We cannot hope to cover the full range of creative collaborations and initiatives that are concerned with improving physical, mental, community and cultural wellbeing within just three hours. But what I hope we can do today is to give you a curated snapshot through some case studies, conversations and keynotes that will highlight the diversity and innovation of this emerging field.

Reiterating the interconnectedness of NCACE’s four Grand Challenges, Kemp is careful to point out that ‘arts and culture sectors have always been engaged in creatively improving individual and community wellbeing.’ And yet, as she also suggested, ‘the number of specifically targeted creative projects that interact and share knowledge with higher education and research’ has been on the rise following the publication of the Creative Health Inquiry Report in 2017, as well as a result of the Covid pandemic and the ‘chronic underfunding of the NHS.’ Contributors to the event who spoke about these specifically targeted projects included Director of the National Centre for Creative Health, Alexandra Coulter, founder of Aesop, Tim Joss, and Jake Abrams and Georgina Potier, co-founders of Get Better Books: a not-for-profit organization aimed at helping ill children through their treatment.

One of the most extraordinary presentations at the ‘Collaborations in Creative Health’ event came from Jennifer Crook, Artistic Director and CEO of Dreamachine: an unforgettable immersive experience developed in collaboration with Grammy-nominated composer Jon Hopkins and Turner prize-winning artist Assemble, along with a team of scientists, philosophers and technologists. Dreamachine explores and mobilises how a person with closed

¹⁷ Feedback for ‘Narratives of Personal Renewal’ was positive across the board: ‘When asked if attending the session had made a difference to how they felt, all 16 responses stated that it had’ (Jones and Kemp 2024).

eyes can experience flickering lights as an intense, almost transcendent phenomenon.¹⁸ ‘Because of the nature of the experience,’ said Crook, ‘we’re hoping that [...] it will engender conversation. And so every stage of the Dreamachine has been designed in a way to really enable people to talk to each other.’ A defining feature of this collective conversation, which finds visual form in the 20,000 drawings created by participants (available on the Dreamachine website), is Dreamachine’s potential to improve wellbeing: ‘we received so many positive reports of wellbeing that our team at the University of Sussex are now developing a research programme to explore how the Dreamachine could form novel interventions for mental health conditions including depression and anxiety.’ More broadly, it strikes me that there is correlation between the labyrinthine nature of knowledge exchange and what Crook describes as the ‘kaleidoscopic, vivid, immersive range of experiences’ that Dreamachine affords.

Technologies for Social Good

As much as a project like Dreamachine demonstrates a commitment to improving health and wellbeing, it also resonates with NCACE’s third Grand Challenge, Technologies for Social Good. As Crook put it at the end of her presentation: ‘if we can provide access to the experience to those who might then benefit most from either the social connection, the creative practice, the opportunity for self-reflexion or just relaxation [...] this could be a community asset, and perhaps lead to social prescription in the future.’ Likewise, the iMayfower project that I discussed in the Placemaking and Levelling out section also clearly leverages immersive and digital technologies for public benefit, specifically in the context of developing Plymouth’s creative industries. Returning to Kemp’s notion of ‘specifically targeted creative projects,’ however, there are a number of other initiatives that also demand our attention.

One is led by NCACE Sounding Board member, Clayton Shaw, who is Head of STEAMhouse (Commercial): a Birmingham City University-based ‘hub to exchange knowledge and ideas, create new products and prototypes, and support local economic growth’ (Shaw 2021). Drawing on the STEAM model – an interdisciplinary approach to science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics aimed at solving the challenges of today – STEAMhouse centres the five key principles of (1) Exploration; (2) Collaboration; (3) Conversation; (4) Openness; and (5) Newness. ‘It is important to break down closed thinking systematically,’ writes Shaw. ‘Some of the most inspiring moments can come from the most unexpected corners’ (2021: n.p.). In creating the conditions for these inspiring moments, STEAMhouse seeks not just to advance but also democratise technology, bringing ‘new energy to finding new possibilities for collaborative problem-solving’ (2021: n.p.).

This more democratic vision of technology is also touched on by NCACE Sounding Board member, Rosy Greenlees, who was Director of Crafts Council from 2006-2022. In her NCACE research report ‘Higher Education and Arts and Culture Sector Collaborations with Reference to the Work of Crafts Council’ (2023), Greenlees offers examples of two projects that have

¹⁸ As Crook noted during her presentation, the backstory of Dreamachine is equally captivating: ‘the story of Dreamachine actually starts back in 1959 with an artist called Brion Gysin, who was a Beat Generation writer and poet and painter. And Brion’s story is that he was on a bus going down a very straight tree-lined road in France on a sunny day, and he was falling asleep against the window, so kind of closing his eyes. And he described himself as entering this other realm, which he described as a transcendental state that was out of time and out of place, and that he witnessed these extraordinary colours and patterns and kaleidoscopic shapes that stopped as soon as the bus left the trees. And he thought he’d had some kind of apparition or spiritual encounter, and he was really overwhelmed by its beauty. But he later learned that this was just the neurological effect of flickering light on the brain’ (Crook 2023).

‘brought rigour and tangible outcomes to the Crafts Council’s work providing both an evidence base and informing its policy and programmes’ (2023: 5). The first is ‘Innovation through Craft for Growth’ (2016): a study of how innovation in craft informs and bleeds into other industries, particularly STEM. The second, ‘Diversity in Craft Practice Through Digital Technology Skills Development’ (2019), which was a collaboration with Karen Patel of Birmingham City University, explores how social media expertise could contribute to the online visibility of Global Majority women working in the field. Such were the difficulties facing makers of colour, the initial findings suggested, that a subsequent two-year research project titled ‘Craft Expertise’ (2019-2023) was funded by the AHRC, which sought to develop diversity and expertise in the contemporary craft economy.

The most substantive publication on technologies for social good in the collection is Marc Garrett’s essay ‘Research and Curation Across Art, Technology, and Eco-Social Change’ (2024). Drawing on his experience as co-director and co-founder of Furtherfield — an art and technology centre based in Finsbury Park — Garrett details some of the key collaborations that Furtherfield has been a part of over the last decade or so. The projects range from an exhibition called ‘Moveable Borders: Here Come the Drones!’ (2013) co-curated by the artist and researcher Dave Young, which sought to improve ‘knowledge and critical discussions around drone politics and loss of civilian lives’ (Garrett 2024: 6), to the aforementioned ‘Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025’ led by the CreaTures consortium. ‘[B]eing part of the larger discussion of technology’s effects on our lives is a positive and empowering act of agency,’ writes Garrett. ‘Furtherfield has brought up various questions regarding technology in the gallery and lab space in the park for an everyday audience to explore with us’ (2024: 5). He also suggests that our ability to harness and develop technologies for social good requires us ‘being open to supporting and unearthing previously hidden histories and their less obvious narratives’ (2024: 22). Far from being a foregone conclusion, the future is a contingent, yet-to-be realised reflection of the stories we tell (as well as the technologies that shape and are shaped those stories).

Moving beyond the Collection, Technologies for Social Good was the focus of the third NCACE Annual Policy Workshop in July 2024 (‘Culture, Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange’). Introducing the event, Evelyn Wilson described the workshop’s aim to showcase ‘the diversity of creative technology collaborations and the ways in which they’re working to support wider social goods and innovations, but also to really encourage dialogue and discussion on the notion of the social good.’ Opening reflections were offered by Professor of Participatory SocioDigital Futures at the University of Bristol, Helen Manchester, who also led the UKRI-funded project ‘Connecting Through Culture As We Age: Digital Innovation for Healthy Ageing.’ Drawing on the work of Donna Haraway and the Detroit collective ‘A People’s Guide to Tech,’ Manchester set the tone for the workshop by pointing out ‘that technology holds many futures and that nothing is therefore inevitable [...] everything could be different. And if we let go of this inevitability, perhaps we have, or we can feel, more agency in thinking about technological futures.’ While Manchester’s own project enacted this principle through ‘a digital code design

Far from being a foregone conclusion, the future is a contingent, yet-to-be realised reflection of the stories we tell (as well as the technologies that shape and are shaped those stories)

process that centred the voices, lived experiences and expertise of minoritized older adults,' there were many other contributors who shared her inspiring vision.

For instance, Clare Reddington, CEO of Watershed — an independent cinema and creative technology centre in Bristol — suggested that 'to make change in complex and fast moving times, you've got to make it with people who are not like you.' She proceeded to outline how Watershed facilitates equitable collaborations by 'look[ing] closely at the structures of power inherent around the technologies being used and understand[ing] how they limit full and equal participation.' Similarly, Professor of Theatre & Performance Studies at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Bryce Lease, spoke about the newly-formed Centre for Performance, Technology and Equity (PTEQ): a 'critical friend of tech' made possible by a £5.6 million investment from Research England's Expanding Excellence in England Fund. 'PTEQ is interested in technological innovation without techno solutionism,' he elaborated. 'When we speak to partners and researchers, we often ask, What are some critical problems that you find with the technologies that you're working with? And what kind of creative opportunities might arise out of criticism and critique of those technologies?' Again, innovation is configured here not just as a monolithic, capitalist-driven endeavor, but also a means of encouraging creativity, critical engagement and change. The key is to listen to those who are affected or bypassed by emerging technologies, and to ensure that their voices are factored into technological decision-making.

Founder of Big Telly Theatre Company, Zoe Seaton, and head of the Manchester School of Theatre at Manchester Metropolitan University, Josh Edelman, also touched on the importance of listening, although in their case this importance was expressed in the form of their presentation. 'I thought we would ask each other questions,' said Edelman, 'because of course, this is a dialogue, this is a collaboration, and it's all about interaction, rather than just one person talking.' The conversation that ensued revolved around 'Granny Jackson's Dead': an immersive theatre and research project that offers novel interventions into the field of grief tech, specifically in the form of an interactive funeral wake that examines how mourning is affected by digital technologies. Meanwhile, Director of Research Development & Innovation at Coventry University, Sinead Ouillon, spoke about creating and running FabLab Coventry, which forms part of a global network of resource spaces designed to foster community-led innovation. 'I managed to cajole the City Council into giving me a shop [...] we run workshops, we help start-up businesses, we run repair cafes, or we're just a place that's now got a reputation and is known if someone's wandering around the city centre, and they want to pop in and have a cup of tea.' FabLab Coventry's work with female migrants from outside Europe, who were invited to join a maker ecopreneur course that gave them the skills to 'celebrate and showcase their culture by making beautiful things using 3D modelling,' provides a beautiful example of this communitarian ethos.

Equally inspirational was the presentation given by Ivor Novello Award-winning composer, Hannah Conway, who is also Founder and Artistic Director of Sound Voice. As Conway explained, Sound Voice began with the Sound Voice Project, which revolved around 'a series of works looking at and thinking about what does it mean to have a voice? And what does it mean when voice is lost?' Inspired by Conway's father, who lost his speech due to a terminal illness, combined with a more general desire to platform underrepresented stories, the Sound Voice

Project uses artistic mediums such as opera to make the voices of the voiceless heard. The composer cited the example of a renowned laryngectomy surgeon, who said that his involvement in the project had helped him to understand the meaning of voice in more depth than he ever had before. ‘It’s enabled hospitals to develop new models of patient, public and staff engagement models,’ she continued. ‘This is unlocking the unspoken.’

This focus on the ephemeral — on aspects of lived experience that are often overlooked — speaks to the broader themes of this creative report. Specifically, creatives like Conway are demonstrating the life-affirming potential of knowledge exchange, which cannot be captured through quantitative data alone. They achieve this, moreover, by incorporating evidence and critical insights into stories, thus capturing the imagination of the public and policymakers alike. For its part, NCACE is at once a cultivator and facilitator of such stories, shining a light on technologies for social good in ways that build knowledge, stir reflection and inspire action. One area where NCACE is more vital than ever in this regard – and where technologies for social good have a significant part to play — is in combatting the hopelessness often associated with climate change.

Creatives like Conway are demonstrating the life-affirming potential of knowledge exchange, which cannot be captured through quantitative data alone.

Environment and Climate Emergency

Much of the contemporary discussion around the environment and climate emergency suggests that we are past the point of no return. While it remains to be seen whether the Global North is willing to put the future of the planet before its own interests, one thing that is for certain is that the knowledge sector is full of individuals and collectives who are fully committed to tackling the climate crisis. In supporting and platforming these individuals and collectives, and thereby promoting best practice, NCACE too approaches this most vital Grand Challenge head on. For instance, climate emergency is a dominant theme among NCACE’s case study work. In a piece called ‘Writing the Climate’ (2022), Climate Writer in Residence at New Writing North/ Newcastle University, Linda France, describes her work on a three-year project that aimed to ‘engage with different communities around Climate and Ecological Change, to initiate various cross-arts collaborations and collective projects and to create a new publication’ (2022: 2). One output that was particularly impactful was a poem sequence called ‘Murmuration,’ curated by France from 500 submissions, which was then made into an animated film by Kate Sweeney. More than 300 people attended the launch, and the film currently has 17,000 views on YouTube.

Other case studies centred around climate emergency include ‘Climate Change Catastrophe!’ (2022) by Kat Vanden, who is Producer at Cap-a-Pie theatre company. The title refers to a filmed performance piece that grew out of a collaboration between Cap-a-Pie, schoolchildren from the North East of England and researchers from Newcastle University led by Alistair Ford from the School of Engineering. ‘Alistair Ford’s research specialism focuses on the direct and indirect impacts of climate events on city systems,’ writes Vanden. ‘The theatre team were also introduced to researchers working on water treatment and waste water sustainability, carbon capturing and future weather predictions’ (Vanden and Kemp 2022: 1). While not without its

difficulties,¹⁹ the project succeeded in making engineering principles more digestible for a general audience, as well as demonstrating the power of creative thinking in working towards climate solutions: ‘The University researchers and engineers [...] learnt that children have the freedom to think up climate solutions that have not yet been considered by adults working on the issue’ (Vanden and Kemp 2022: 6). Creative thinking is also at the forefront of Ann Light’s piece ‘CreaTures: Creative Practices for Transformational Futures’ (2022), the title of which refers to a Horizon 2020-funded project that investigated how art, design and other creative fields can produce more healthy and sustainable ecologies. Likewise, ‘Connecting the Climate Challenge’ (2022) by Research Scientist at Wellcome Centre for Cell Biology, Alba Abad, discusses a project that paired primary and secondary schools in Nepal and Scotland, the aim of which was to encourage dialogue and creative bridge-building between young people from different communities and cultures.

Of course, climate emergency — both in its effects and our responses to it — is intimately bound up with place. It is therefore unsurprising that many of the projects that have climate emergency at their core overlap with placemaking and levelling out. One such project is ‘Rewilding Islington’ (2022) led by Senior Lecturer in Architecture at London Metropolitan University, Sian Moxon: a collaboration with Islington Council that aims to improve ‘the quality and quantity of greenspace in the borough for the benefit of wildlife, people and climate-change resilience’ (2022: 3). Part of the university’s London Met Lab initiative, which involves teaming up with local communities and organisation to tackle Grand Challenges in the capital, the pilot revolves around a disused road in Highbury Fields that is to be ‘transformed through resurfacing, planting, seating and habitat sculptures’ (2022: 1) into a public and wildlife corridor.

This critical intersection between the environment and inter-species belonging was also a key theme at the NCACE event ‘Culture and Collaborations on Climate Emergency’ in June 2022. In addition to providing a platform for some of the individuals and initiatives outlined above (Linda France and Ann Light both gave presentations), the event saw contributions from Professor of English at Plymouth University, David Sergeant, who spoke about the Devon Climate Emergency-led project ‘Net Zero Visions’; and visual artist and Co-Head of Policy Lab, Stephen Bennet, who ‘described how artistic practice can contribute to and inform policy-making by creating embodied affect in the face of overwhelming apathy’ (Kemp 2022: n.p.). Another central theme was the colonial and neocolonial conditions that undergird the climate emergency. Actor Fehnti Balogun, for instance, presented on his filmed performance *Can I live?* (2021), which explores how climate justice and social justice must be considered in tandem. Meanwhile, Director of Research and Associate Professor of Design and Development at Middlesex University, Neelam Raina, spoke about ‘the multifaceted fragility experienced by women across the global south who are on the front line of the climate emergency’ (Kemp 2022: n.p.). Such fragility, she proposed, coexists with an array of knowledge about how to avert and alleviate climate disasters that these communities of women possess — an array of knowledge that the West must engage with in reciprocal rather than extractive terms.

¹⁹ ‘Vanden acknowledges that one of the biggest challenges was managing the logistics of working with a number of schools at the same time, in addition to six researchers from the University. [...] In addition, there needed to be a clear project from the start, as many school children would naturally conflate all environmental concerns into one overwhelming issue’ (Vaden and Kemp 2022: 4).

Intersecting Themes: Decolonisation and Feminism

As helpful as the four Grand Challenges are in delineating NCACE's work, there is a risk of treating them as absolutes rather than general markers. Specifically, between and in relation to NCACE's four Grand Challenges there exists innumerable other challenges — challenges that are equally worthy of our attention, even if they have not been explicitly indexed. Two cases in point are the decolonial and feminist strands of the NCACE Collection, which often intersect, and which speak to the wealth of work within the sector that is committed to challenging colonial legacies of racism and patriarchal thinking.

One project centred around decolonisation is 'Disembodied Territories' led by Associate Professor of Sociology at London School of Economics, Sara Salem. In a 2022 case study for NCACE, Salem described how she and her co-lead, the architect Menna Agha, collaborated with a visual designer, a web developer and 45 other artistic contributors (all team members were from the continent of Africa) to explore 'whether maps could be used in anti-colonial or post-colonial theorising or knowledge production' (2022: 1). The result was a multi-layered, exquisitely labyrinthine website that 'maps the ways in which the African continent keeps reinventing, resummoning, or unbounding itself from dominant frames of place-making, as well as how diasporic and displaced Africans deploy critical ideas of space as a way of imagining an otherwise and an elsewhere' (2022: 1).

This subversion of the colonial imagination is also evident in an NCACE micro commission by Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of English at Birmingham City University, Helen A. Hopkins. Reflecting on her PhD project — the first academic study of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's (SBT) international collection in Stratford — Hopkins discusses the politics of Shakespeare's reception beyond the UK. 'The study found that Shakespeare has been used in nations outside of Britain to address issues of cultural identity and diplomacy through acts of gift giving and communication with the SBT from the mid-nineteenth century through to the present day', she writes. 'As such, it serves to emphasize the role of the SBT as a space of international diplomacy through which nations perform their cultural affinity in accord with Shakespeare's establishment as the pinnacle of world culture' (2022: 2). Crucially, however, Hopkins also found that 'the **imperialistic** narratives of English cultural supremacy of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries were being played out through the SBT's interpretations of its collections' (2022: 2, emphasis in original). In this way, while the SBT hosted Hopkins research, it also benefited from her research insofar as the project revealed and sought to correct 'the Trust's unwitting imperialism' (2022: 2).

Hopkins fleshes out the themes of this micro commission in her 2023 NCACE research report 'Different Stories, Difficult Stories: Why Cultural and HE Partnerships are Essential to Decolonial work.'²⁰ The success of her PhD project, Hopkins suggests, was partly a result of her 'inside-outsider embedded researcher role' (2023: 1), which allowed her to engage with the SBT in both an intimate and critical way. The legacy of this relationship, moreover — which was

²⁰ Not only does the report elaborate on Hopkins's PhD findings, it also outlines the initial collaboration that led to her research: a partnership between the SBT and BCU to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Indian independence, which resulted in 'a series of interpretation panels designed and written by BCU students [that] told the story of the partition of India through connections to Shakespearean performances and themes across the subcontinent' (2023: 1).

strengthened by the signing of a memorandum of understanding between SBT and BCU — opened up possibilities for academics and creative practitioners going forward:

To decolonise Shakespeare would mean acknowledging the ways in which he was used to assert the superiority of British culture in the colonies and how that sense of inherent superiority lingers for the same reasons today and exacerbates the sense of marginalisation from British culture that many communities continue to experience. (2023: 4)

Much as the “ending” of a story is an illusion that obscures the past’s entanglement with both present and future, the effects of colonialism are still prevalent today. At the same time, though, the work of decolonisation is also etched into history, creating the foundations for present and future generations that are committed to social justice.

Interpersonal and intergenerational resistance is also at the heart of the ‘Mary/Marianne’ (2022) project led by Katharina Reinthaller and Sarah Sigal. Funded by the Birkbeck Centre Contemporary Theatre Fellowship, the project explores the Fellowship prompt ‘recovering and resilience’ in the context of female artists working outside theatre. ‘We came to feel that resilience is something that is often thrust onto women,’ the pair write, ‘that we are obliged to be resilient because we are expected to function in a system with rules and laws designed by men’ (2022: n.p.). They took as their starting point the working lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Marianne Faithful who, despite being born almost two centuries apart, both experienced ‘numerous barriers in terms of gaining recognition for their work and being able to live independent, happy lives’ (2022: n.p.)

As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, feminism is central to NCACE’s organisational offering. As a predominantly female team, NCACE is well aware of the challenges facing women in the sector — particularly regarding the patriarchal bias that has historically structured higher education. In many academic and industry contexts, this bias remains, meaning that there is still work to be done in creating a more inclusive environment for cultural knowledge exchange to flourish. And yet, it isn’t just up to those who suffer from discrimination to challenge patriarchal thinking; anyone who benefits from privilege must take the time to question their positionality and beliefs, and to use their platform to elevate underrepresented voices. During my time at NCACE, I have not only come to terms with these responsibilities, but also taken some significant steps towards incorporating them into my own practice.

Chapter Five: Surfacing

Seen from below, the surface of the garden resembles cracked earthenware. The terracotta crust is divided into sections, each one separated by sharp brown fault lines that are bordered and connected by finer striations, as if dropped from a great height.

Just making it this far feels like a miracle. After leaving Ari, you explored countless passageways; faced countless doorways, decisions, false dawns and dead ends. At one point, barely able to see further than a few feet ahead of you, you stumbled over a sleeping gardener (who you first mistook for a boulder). After shaking off her disorientation at being woken so abruptly, she reached into the sack she'd been using as a pillow and pulled out a capsule.

- *What is it that excites and motivates you most about the work that you do? And what difference do you think it is making or has the potential to make? And at the same time what are some of the challenges that you are anticipating or that you have faced already?*

In response to these questions, Ari's thread took on a life of its own. It unspooled in your hands like the reel of a fishing rod, pulling at your sense of reason and responsibility, carrying you earthward in its silver wake. In line with Ari's advice, you didn't experience the journey as prescriptive. You see it for what it is: just one of infinite ways of navigating the garden. But it's the journey that got you here, and that's all that matters.

Now, like an animal emerging from hibernation, you shimmy through a crack in the ornamental earth. Rain is falling hard; the moonlight barely makes it through the thick layer of cloud, and the treetops and bushes resemble dripping hairnets. The root you were travelling doesn't finish at the surface. It morphs into a pathway that has been worn away by footprints. The ghosts of previous journeys, you think, accompanying you on your way.

You follow the flagstone ribbon meandering towards the horizon. Fairly lights flicker and sizzle in the downpour, strung between greenhouses that emit an aura of neon blue. The steamed-up glass is like an extension of your skin; in the muggy warmth, the rain hits like honey, tracing the grooves of your face and feeding the puddle at your feet. You wonder if this weather is a warning, or maybe a tipping point. An electrical storm clearing the way for collective action.

Up ahead, beside a melting mound of fertilizer, a dozen or so gardeners are exchanging capsules with one another. They rifle through the canvas bags that sag at their shoulders, their urgency no match for the elements.

- *The nature of our role as a sector support organisation for the cultural sector means we tend to focus a lot on enablers and barriers for practice and practitioners*
- *We're building on those experiences to shape our future direction [...] We recognise the various and myriad kinds of benefits of doing this type of work*
- *We focus on advocacy, network-building and resources for the sector*
- *I actually use recycled greenhouse glass from allotments*

You float your way towards them and pick a capsule up off the floor. When you try to open it, it slips between your fingers, breaking in two as it hits the ground.

- *I think some key considerations for anyone else working in this space: we find that it's quite important [...] that there is a balance between making sure that the work we're doing is driving the kind of performance that matters to the university, whilst also being responsive and continuing to meet the kind of evolving needs of our partners in the creative community*

The gardeners turn to face you. One of them — a woman wearing a neckerchief and purple gardening gloves — wipes the rain from her forehead and tosses you another capsule.

- *You need to go beyond the numbers to build understanding and inform action. How people feel, what they want, will provide a much more complete picture and a much more solid foundation for priorities, objectives and targets, alongside the data [...] listening, adapting and winning hearts and minds*

'Absolutely,' you respond, not even realising you'd opened your mouth. 'From the moment I stepped foot in the garden, it's been the stories of collaboration that have encouraged and invigorated me the most. I think that's what NCACE does: it illuminates and helps articulate those stories of collaboration. It shows the world — just as it has shown me — what cultural knowledge exchange can achieve.'

Another two gardeners peel away from the group. They open their capsules simultaneously, which creates a fracture in the clouds. Their synergy is rewarded with a knife-edge of starlight.

- *When people started to tell stories about what planting and growing and things like that meant to them, we started to see it really blossoming into something where they were making meaning in the moment for themselves*
- *Those conversations have also been about using a voice and agency and telling new stories. And in spite of all the challenges, all of this panoply of challenges that we know we're facing [...] hope, I think, has been a common and recurring and essential ingredient*

Time seems to contract; the rain stops, your surroundings become clearer. You see the hinterland to your left, backing onto dense woodland. In front and to your right, allotment leads to allotment as far as the eye can see.

You're inclined to pick the landscaped route, but something holds you back. An impulse, the crystalline shimmer reflecting off the grass. When you turn, you see that the group of gardeners are heading towards the hinterland. Claps of thunder have been replaced by voices emanating from the forest beyond.

- *Hi all, I am Cordelia, Engagement at Hipparchus University.*
- *Hi everyone, I'm Archer from the University of Sagittarius where I am the Commercialisation manager. <https://linkedin.com/odyssey2001>*
- *Hello, I'm Gemini, Community & Partnerships at Castor and Pollux, a dance theatre company based in the Northern Celestial Hemisphere*
- *Hi everyone, glad to join the conversation. My name is Columba and I work as a Research and Enterprise Manager at Petris Plancius University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities*
- *Hello everyone, I'm Leo and I am Head of Public Engagement at "The Sickle" Asterism*
- *Hi everyone, so pleased to have you with us this morning. Thank you so much for joining us*

Something about these voices moves you, produces a fragile hunger. With what life force you have left, you allow instinct to take over, zipping across the hinterland as if your existence depends on it. Following a couple of near-misses (who knew pergolas could reach that high?!), you touch down in an enclosure surrounded by trees, at the centre of which is a wrought-iron bench of the type found in London parks.

Amidst the dense back and forth of bodies and conversation, a female gardener balances on one of the bench's armrests. She carefully plucks a capsule from a drooping bough.

- *When we're sitting alongside each other with paintbrushes and stencils, or if we're out in nature, we become human beings, not researchers, not academics, not people who are leading arts organisations*
- *FANTASTIC*
- *@Carina thank you so much — Serpens*
- *Really valid points Carina*
- *If you'd like to connect further, please do contact me at carina@argonavis.com*

The opposite armrest calls you, but you can hardly catch your breath.

'I think I need to sit down,' you say, struggling towards the bench. Your bones feel heavy, like rain-soaked branches, and a layer of mildew has formed around your brain.

'Capacity can be a real problem,' says the gardener as she alights on the seat beside you. 'It's important to take stock — to reflect on what works and what doesn't.' Her words of wisdom are reciprocated throughout the enclosure.

- *I think there's something for me about time and how much we're giving to things. How can we slow down what we're doing? How can we be more consultative earlier on, and probably do less? I think some of this is to do with this sort of maximalist idea that we've always got to get bigger and scale everything we do. And the evidence on the ground doesn't really bear that out [...] I'd like us to move from this sort of expansion model a bit and towards something that's much closer to the spreading of ideas and the slowing down of everything*
- *Thanks so much Taurus!*
- *Fantastic project well done all – truly inspirational*

'Not all heroism is rewarded, or even recognized,' you reply. 'It's about challenging inequality. It's about changing the narrative...' You spot a starling with the name Susan S. Lanser rainbowed across its wings.

- *Perhaps narratology has been mistaken in trying to arrive at a single definition and description of plot. We will learn more about women's narratives — and about scores of twentieth-century texts — if we make ourselves find language for describing their plots in positive rather than negative terms — Susan S. Lanser, 'Toward a Feminist Narratology' (1986: 357)*

As the feeling of heaviness dissipates, what sounds like a skyrocket booms above the trees. You cover your ears as the racket grows louder, and just as it is becoming unbearable, a gardener crash-lands in a pile of leaves in front of you. You're in equal parts shocked and ecstatic when you see their face.

'Ari! I thought you were staying in the shadow universe?'

'It's been hours,' he replies, pulling twigs from his hair. 'Strange as it sounds, collaboration often involves multiple temporalities.'

Capsules from nearby trees are scattered all around you. A gardener wearing Doc Martens boots accidentally stands on one.

- *If you look at enablers and barriers, the key enabler we found is this commitment and passion, the key barrier is money. And that means people will always continue to agree to consultation processes without recompense because they want to support the field*

'That's been my experience, too,' you say. 'There is an inherent tension between the drive to act and the lack of resources to support meaningful action.'

Ari ascends to a hover and pats any remaining leaves off his backside. 'You sound more and more like a gardener each time I see you.'

A cacophony of voices comes from deeper into the forest. A calling — a series of potential outcomes awaiting activation.

- *There's something in relation to knowledge exchange about how we build safe spaces that take account of these histories of power imbalances between institutions and individuals, which inevitably get echoed when you're working in the university sector*
- *Reaching the community in this context literally means spreading out and taking the project to people rather than expecting people to come to us*
- *Fascinating and lots of possibilities — wonderful!*
- *If you're a researcher and you've grown up in a certain environment, you have certain things at the foreground of your mind, because that's your experience. And we're all individuals, we have billions of people on the planet experiencing different things*
- *Will the slides be available afterwards?*

High above the trees, filtered through a trellis of branches and leaves, you witness something spectacular. The future in the making, you think. An emergent synthesis. A cosmic event. The constellation NCACE pulses like a silver heart. Beside it is another constellation, SAS, which shines with the conviction of an idea coming to fruition.

As they move toward one another, it looks like they're going to collide. They don't. Instead, their constituent light converges and combines, creating an energy source so brilliant — so full of promise — that the sky suddenly resembles a polished suit of armour.

'And what about your lived experience?' comes a voice from both outside and within you. 'How do your skills intersect with the garden of cultural knowledge exchange?'

You look for Ari; he is nowhere to be seen. Then, zooming overhead with a gardener strapped to his back, you hear him call your name, and see him wave goodbye.

You rise from the bench; there is so much lifeblood rushing through you that you don't know where your body ends and the universe begins. NCACE and SAS have morphed into a super-constellation, like sequined dancers waltzing across a ballroom. The forest is alive.

- *I have to go for another meeting now. Thank you so much for an inspiring morning!*

You listen

- *I must also leave. Thanks so much for having us and opening this important space*

You learn

- *Thank you so much to all the speakers and the team at NCACE always such strong engagement*

You contribute

- *Great morning. A huge thanks to everyone involved.*

You breathe in

- *Thank you for inviting me to chat :-)*

You breathe out

- *Very interesting, inspiring and lots to think about. Thank you all for your contributions and NCACE for organising*

You become

- *Great session, thanks everyone!!*

You accompany your fellow gardeners into the forest.

Chapter Six: *The Beginning of the Adventure*

Dream Job

Two months before being offered the position of Story Associate at NCACE, I'd just finished a PhD at the University of Amsterdam. I wrote my thesis on the role of labyrinths in the work of the Chilean novelist and poet, Roberto Bolaño, with a focus on the global-neoliberal context his fiction navigates and indicts (Bolaño went into exile in Mexico during the Pinochet dictatorship before later moving to Spain, where he died at the age of fifty in 2003).

I wasn't sure what I was going to do next. I knew that it would be difficult to get into academia. Part of me just wanted to book a one-way ticket somewhere warm and remote, where I could catch up on sleep, eat fresh seafood and wait for an award-winning novel to come to me while sunbathing. Surprise, surprise, things didn't turn out that way. I was back living at home with my parents in South Wales, most of my money going on travelling up to London every other weekend to see my girlfriend. For all my delusions of grandeur, it turns out that novels are extremely difficult to write. So, I did what most people do: apply for whatever I could. Some of the jobs were more attractive than others; I had an interview for an administrative role at a charity in East London, and while the company seemed great, I was secretly relieved when they offered it to someone else. Because what I really wanted to do was *to write* — maybe not a novel, but at least about something that interested me; something I believed in. When I came across the application for the Story Associate role at NCACE, it felt like my dream job was dangling before my eyes, almost — but not quite — within touching distance.

The following week I put everything else on hold. All other applications took a backseat while I wracked my brain for answers to the questions: (1) 'How do you meet the essential and desirable criteria of the programme? (up to 1000 Words)'; (2) 'What draws you to this particular Host Project? (up to 200 Words)'; (3) 'What personal and professional experiences and skills can you bring to support the Host by responding to their challenge? (up to 500 Words)'. When I was happy with what I'd written, I did a final read-through and pressed send. That such a minor action could affect me so much baffles me to this day; checking my inbox suddenly became as instinctual as eating, and I bored my girlfriend to death by repeatedly telling her why I was well-suited to the role, as if she were a secret member of the selection panel. Around a week later, when I received an email saying that I'd made it through to the interview stage, the joy I felt was marbled with terror. I was one step closer to seizing the opportunity. But I was also one step closer to being pipped to the post.

The Monday morning of the interview, I was at my sister and brother-in-law's house in Bristol. I'd decided to decamp there for the weekend; they had a spare room and were out during the day, giving me the time and space that I needed to prepare. I spent most of the weekend scouring the NCACE website and making notes. I made a PowerPoint presentation outlining my proposed approach to the 'Growing the Garden of Cultural Knowledge Exchange' project, which incorporated the imagery of the labyrinth that was central to my PhD. But when 10am finally came and I logged into Zoom, my presentation wouldn't work. The five strangers on my split-screen — including two members of the NCACE team, Suzie and Laura — looked on as the opening slide duplicated itself in an infinite *mise-en-abîme*, as if a trapdoor to the abyss had

suddenly sprung open. Is this a joke? I thought. Or just the inevitable result of bringing Bolaño (and his idol, Jorge Luis Borges) into the equation? Either way, these questions vanished when the lead interviewer said, ‘I’m really sorry, but we’ve got quite a few interviews to get through this morning; I think we’d better get started.’

My stomach sank. I’d spent days practicing, and for someone who struggles with uncertainty, this was the kind of hitch I’d been subconsciously dreading. I tried to plough on, but as I read through my presentation and then answered questions, I couldn’t shake the sensation that I wasn’t fully there. It was like listening to an old recording of myself, or spectrally watching on from the side of the room. There I was, sat at my sister’s kitchen table, trying but failing to conceal the fact that my confidence had followed my presentation into the abyss — that I had, in no uncertain terms, blown my opportunity.

I travelled up to London that afternoon. My girlfriend and I went for dinner at my favourite Indian restaurant, which was meant to take my mind off the disappointment. By the end of the meal, the alcohol in my bloodstream warming me from within, I resolved to forget that the interview had ever happened.

So, when I received a call around a week later offering me the role, I was genuinely stunned. ‘Thanks so, so much,’ I said to the person on the other end of the line, bouncing up and down like a kid at a funfair. It took me a moment to register that it was the StoryArcs programme lead, Bambo Soyinka. ‘I take it that’s a yes?’ said Bambo, laughing. ‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘100 million percent yes!’ Bambo explained the next steps to me, which involved finding a university partner and academic mentor willing to support me throughout the project. Almost immediately after the call, I contacted the Director of the School for Creative and Cultural Industries at UCL, Haidy Geismar, who seemed like an ideal mentor given that NCACE’s work straddles higher education and the arts and culture and sectors.

A Welcome Start

It was a few months before I met the NCACE team in person. At their office in Bloomsbury, Evelyn, Suzie, Laura and Noshin welcomed me to the organisation over coffee and biscuits. My nerves disappeared the moment we started chatting — the topics ranged from knowledge exchange to London life to labyrinths (naturally), and in what felt like fifteen minutes, an hour and a half had passed.

“The meeting went well!” I remember texting my Mum as I headed back to Euston. She and my dad had been on a beach in Mallorca when I gave them the news about the job, and they’d been badgering me for daily updates ever since.

That evening, I went for a run around Victoria Park. Runners and rollerbladers seemed to materialise out of the twilight as the sky gradually changed from purple to black, like a bruise. I listened to my favourite band, The National, as I made a loop of the park, trying to envisage where I’d be in a year’s time. Probably running the same route, I thought. Maybe even listening to the same album. But what I really wanted to know was: Will I be the same person? Will Matt’s Berninger’s lyrics evoke the same thoughts and images as I pass by the lake, breaking into a sprint on the final stretch towards the chapel? Because something in my bones told me that change was inevitable — not the type that falls under “progression” or “personal growth,”

but change that results from listening, learning and experiencing differently. Given that my new role was centred on knowledge exchange, and that exchange denotes not just giving but also receiving, I wondered which fragments of the world would enter my cells, settling inside me like snowflakes on frozen ground.

I officially started at NCACE at the end of November. Before I'd even begun my research — let alone writing — Suzie and Evelyn invited me to the team Christmas meal in Convent Garden. This was the sort of kindness I quickly came to associate with the entire NCACE team, every one of whom seemed interested in getting to know me not just as a colleague, but also a friend.

After the meal, as the results of Secret Santa were revealed and presents given out, Evelyn handed me two small packages wrapped in silver paper. One was a Moleskine notebook, the other some artisan chocolate from Brighton. 'Happy Christmas,' she said. 'It'll be great having you with us this year.'

When I came back to London in early January after spending Christmas at my parents, I was raring to go. During the break, I'd regularly go to the local coffee shop and spend a couple of hours exploring the NCACE Collection, which to me felt less like an online resource than a sanctuary — a place to go when you need reminding that the world isn't all doom and gloom. I felt so inspired by the projects I'd read about, which proved beyond doubt that creativity and collaboration can be forces for good. I wanted to translate the feeling into words while it was still fresh, before it could overwhelm me. My guiding hypothesis was that the fluidity and expansiveness of the garden of cultural knowledge exchange is reminiscent of a story by Jorge Luis Borges called 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1941). In the story, the protagonist discovers a novel-cum-labyrinth with an infinite number of plotlines, meaning that the reader's journey through it never reaches an endpoint. Isn't this also the case for cultural knowledge exchange? I ventured. Aren't the projects and initiatives that NCACE champions entangled in a vast, ever-evolving narrative that is ultimately inexhaustible?

As I chipped away at this idea, trying to give a semblance of form to what felt like a giant space rock, I gradually established a working routine. I spent weekdays either at the UCL East campus in Stratford or the NCACE office. I tried to get most of my writing done in the mornings, before perfectionism and a caffeine crash could conspire to trigger my self-doubt. In the afternoons, I focused on reading and note-taking, which encompassed everything from NCACE case studies and research reports to policy papers and critical theory.

Most Tuesday mornings there'd be a team meeting on Zoom. The meetings were led by Project and Partnership Manager, Noshin, who'd send over an agenda the day before organised around NCACE's five work packages: Brokerage, Collaboration Support and Networking; Skills and Capacity Development; Evidencing and Impact Development; Showcasing and Communications; and Evaluation. But these meetings were never just about work, at least not in the strict sense. They were also an opportunity to catch up and check-in with one another. To understand how the minutiae of daily life informed the perspectives that each of us brought to our respective roles.

This blurring of the lines between research and the everyday is part of what has made my time as NCACE so unique. Like knowledge exchange itself, which often happens across sectoral and

disciplinary boundaries, I often find it difficult to distinguish between my personal and professional identity. This isn't a case of being either a workaholic or a slacker. Rather, it is the result of working across the humanities and the arts and culture sectors — areas of research and practice that are intimately bound up with one's experiences of the world, and in my case, sense of self. To try and separate the personal and professional in this context is like trying to pull a planet out of orbit. They are part of the same solar system, drawing their energy and inspiration from the same vital source.

Key Characters

As much as NCACE is very much an outward-looking organisation, it couldn't exist without the people behind the scenes supporting and advocating for the sector. When I interviewed Sarah Sigal for this project, her advice to me was, 'look at the characters. Look at when the characters are making their entrances and exits' (personal interview 2024). Though she was referring primarily to those that NCACE has worked with, I can't help but feel that Evelyn, Suzie, Laura and Noshin are also pivotal characters in the unfolding story of cultural knowledge exchange. In their own way, each of these individuals has left an indelible mark on the way in which I and many others perceive, negotiate and seek to improve collaboration between higher education and the arts and culture sectors. They perform functions that are at once familiar and awe-inspiring — stellar in every sense of the world. In her role as Senior Manager for Research, Evidence and Policy, Laura is akin to an astronomer who alights on, observes and renders visible work within the KE stratosphere. Noshin, meanwhile, is like an aerospace engineer, ensuring that the mechanisms that support the NCACE star system are in working order. As for Suzie and Evelyn: they are the core of this constellation — the shimmering points energising and directing the initiative. When I started, I wasn't entirely sure where I fit into this dynamic. Now, I see myself as a kind of intergalactic gardener, relying on the support of the NCACE team and others to orient myself and make sense of my travels.

There are other characters I also need to mention: Co-investigator of Evidence and Impact, Federica Rossi (meteorologist?); Evaluation Lead, Thanasis Spyriadis (space historian?); Communications Manager, Rachel Lasebikan (satellite programmer?). While I haven't spent as much time with these individuals as the NCACE core team, they too have been an integral part of my journey, helping me to navigate what was initially an unfamiliar space. For instance, with Federica, I co-conducted an interview for the NCACE publication 'Small and Specialist Arts Institutions and the Knowledge Exchange Framework' (Rossi et al. 2024). This wasn't just the first interview of my project, but also the first interview I'd ever done in my life. Similarly, prior to meeting Thanasis, my understanding of 'evaluation' was shaped by literary theory, meaning that I effectively viewed it as a synonym for interpretation. As I came to appreciate the importance of key performance indicators (KPIs) and other metrics, I realised that evaluation is — under the correct conditions — a vital exercise that breeds integrity, teamwork, reflection and nuance.

As these examples intimate, my journey with NCACE has prompted me to reevaluate a number of beliefs. Most notably, I now feel passionately that the relationship between academia and local communities must be porous if the university is to stay relevant in the 21st century. For someone who used to consider research as perusing old tomes at the *Biblioteca Nacional de*

España, this is quite the shift. In addition to my day-to-day interactions with the NCACE team, this shift has been underwritten by some memorable and formative moments. Conversations with Evelyn about her notion of the garden of cultural knowledge exchange, which have informed not just the content but also the style and tone of the words you are reading. Seeing Suzie strike a balance between openness and clarification while mediating a tense discussion around AI at my first NCACE event. Other moments are less defined — scraps of experience that have taken up residence in my brain. The observation that knowledge exchange is about building relationships; feedback on an early piece of writing, which gave me the confidence and encouragement that I needed to keep going. Together, however, these scraps of experience coalesce to form a picture — one that is brimming with gratitude, if you look closely enough. It's ironic, in a way: in a project about the possibilities of knowledge exchange, I myself have benefited from knowledge exchange in ways that I'll never forget.

Untangling Entanglement

Around Easter, I really started to push forward with my interviews. I'd already spoken to six knowledge exchange experts from small and specialist arts institutions as part of the KEF publication, some of whom had worked with NCACE in the past. Now, I wanted to get a sense of how other NCACE collaborators and stakeholders perceived the organisation, both in terms of its role within the cultural knowledge exchange ecosystem and its effectiveness in fulfilling that role.

Initially, I gravitated towards academics, which, looking back, was probably a reflection of my slightly skewed perspective coming into this project. But following some advice from Evelyn, I broadened my horizons, going on to speak to practitioners and thought leaders from across the arts and culture sectors. These interviews really crystalised my understanding of NCACE. It was like focusing a telescope, or hearing a song that articulates exactly how you're feeling, but in words that you could never conjure up yourself. Many of the interviewees were NCACE Sounding Board members; each had their own insights about what the organisation has achieved, as well as the challenges that may await it in the future. What united these individuals, though, was the sense that NCACE illuminates the boundary-defying potential of cultural knowledge exchange — often in ways that reflect and support their own work. For instance, Head of STEAMhouse (Commercial), Clayton Shaw, notes that

elements of what NCACE does resonates with what we're doing [...] when there are events that organisations can get involved with, or small grants provided for small projects to create case studies, those are the sort of things that I think just enable us to understand better that kind of connectivity between the academic institutions, the creative sector, how it connects with community as well. (personal interview 2024)

Shaw's description of NCACE's fluid positionality, which straddles both academic and non-academic spheres, was echoed by Neelam Raina, who suggests that '[t]he work of NCACE has resounded with me because I stride that space between practice and research and teaching and policy' (personal interview 2024). In both cases, the emphasis is on the adaptability and broadmindedness of NCACE, which is crucial in bringing different types of actors, groups and organisations together.

Such insights made me wonder: in what ways does NCACE's work reflect my own practice? Surely this question only became relevant when I began working as a Story Associate, once I'd ridded myself of the illusion that research and co-creation are separate activities? I'm not sure things are that simple. Looking back to my PhD, which I did part-time while working as an English teacher in Spain, it seems to me that I was unknowingly participating in and benefitting from knowledge exchange all along. The advice and support from my supervisors; the weekly *intercambios* (language exchanges); that short story I wrote, set along the U.S-Mexico border, which went on to be published following some brilliant alterations from a close friend and editor. Even going back to my time as a bookseller at Waterstones Cardiff, surely my daily engagement with customers and colleagues have in some way contributed to the words you are reading? On the flip side, perhaps those same customers and colleagues have taken something from our interactions, no matter how forgettable or seemingly insignificant. All life stories are ghost-written, to an extent.

We must be wary, of course, of the dangers of revisionism. There's the possibility that I am seeing the past *through the present*, and thus distorting it — specifically in light of the knowledge and experiences that I have accrued over the past year. Be that as it may, one thing that is for certain is that my time at NCACE has altered my perception of collaboration and creativity for the better, and that central to this transformation has been my gradual appreciation that knowledge exchange is not just a one-off activity or institutional buzzword, but rather an orientation towards the world.

As I alluded to in chapter two, this orientation towards the world closely aligns with the concept of 'entanglement,' which defines the mutual dependence of all living and non-living entities. Hence why the image of the labyrinthine garden — reflecting the complexity and mutability of the knowledge exchange ecosystem — so powerfully describes both NCACE and the sector more broadly. Consider the following from feminist and posthumanist philosopher, Donna Haraway:

we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplacé, entangled and wordly. Alone, in our separate kinds of expertise and experience, we know both too much and too little, and so we succumb to despair or to hope, and neither is a sensible attitude. Neither despair nor hope is tuned to the senses, to mindful matter, to material semiotics, to mortal earthlings in thick copresence. (2016: 4)

This vision of 'unexpected collaborations and combinations' and 'thick copresence' is shared by a number of NCACE collaborators. Describing her approach to both creativity and activism, one interviewee notes the importance of understanding 'how we are connected as individuals and human beings, but also connected to the whole community of life' (personal interview 2024). Likewise, building on the relational ethos that she helped implement during her time at LCACE and Crafts Council, Rosy Greenlees explains her interest in the way materials might be said to have an agency of their own: 'people talk about material resisting and giving [...] how much is that an equal relationship? How much is it a humanist notion of a person imposing shape and form on something lacking in sentience?' (personal interview 2024). Most tellingly of all, Ann Light incorporates the language of entanglement into her account of how she became involved

with NCACE. ‘It’s because of networks,’ she observes, ‘which is back to the kind of ecology mycelium thing, isn’t it? It’s like every[thing] is a bit connected’ (personal interview 2024). Cultural airways connected through hyphae; relationships established beneath the surface of the everyday.

As spring became summer — as this mycelium grew — I learned that the NCACE network was developing in ways that promised new, unforeseen possibilities.

The Move to SAS

In terms of organisational change, perhaps the biggest event that took place during my time at NCACE was the recent move to the School of Advanced Study (SAS), University of London. I remember waiting to find out what the next iteration of NCACE would look like. The other members of the team were also on tenterhooks, excited and yet uncertain about what the future held.

It was during a team meeting that Evelyn and Suzie told me about Research England’s proposal: to integrate NCACE into SAS, and to fund the collaboration going forward. My gut reaction was that it made complete sense. For an organisation that specialises in knowledge exchange between higher education and the arts and culture sector, there seemed something almost meta about having one foot in the university sector while remaining steadfastly committed to community and creative practice. As I and the rest of the team digested the news, eager to hear when the collaboration would begin, it struck me that — as far as NCACE had come — this was only the beginning of the adventure.

So, the preparations began; the logistics; the anticipation. The move-in date was set for the middle of October, which meant packing everything up in the office near Tavistock Square and making the short journey to Senate House, where SAS is located. In the interim, the team continued to work with the same passion and enthusiasm as ever. I think that’s one of the things I admire most about NCACE — or more precisely, the people that make NCACE possible. There’s a relentless but vitalising sense that there is always work to be done, no matter the circumstances. And not just work for the sake of it, as though hours spent at the desk were a proxy for impact, but work that is consistently and creatively geared towards creating opportunities for anyone interested in cultural knowledge exchange. The lead up to the SAS move may have accentuated this work ethic, but the reality is that it had been the beating heart of the organisation for the previous four years. In Greenlees’s words: ‘they do an awful lot’ (personal interview 2024).

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NCACE’s long list of activities spans multiple platforms. There is of course the Collection, which I discussed at length in chapter four, and the Evidence Repository, where the non-NCACE originated evidence sources are collated. This is before we even consider Ideas Pools, Evidence Cafés, Knowledge Impact Networks and Annual Showcases — not to mention the various micro-commissions that the organisation has awarded. These micro-commissions have included a collaboration between The Independent Theatre Council (ITC) and The Oxford

Research Centre for the Humanities (TORCH) exploring ‘the key enabling factors that support a theatre organisation (or other arts and cultural organisation) to undertake knowledge exchange’ (Lasebikan 2022: n.p.), and a project led by Faye Claridge and Ana Chamberlen that researched ‘the various challenges involved in mapping and measuring the impact of creative interventions on prisoner health and wellbeing’ (Claridge and Chamberlen 2023: n.p.). Add to this list the NCACE Blog, which contains short reflective pieces on a number of subjects — including the micro-commissions — and the prolificacy of the organisation seems almost unbelievable. While I initially felt overwhelmed by this prolificacy, I’ve since come to see it as a reflection of the sector’s scale, diversity and ambition.

In addition to nuancing my understanding of research, NCACE’s packed schedule has forced me to reassess the way I write. During my PhD, I would spend hours obsessing over a sentence — searching for the right word, the perfect phrasing — often to the detriment of the point I wanted to make. The fact that I suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder made this habit feel insurmountable; no matter how hard I tried to grit my teeth and sit with the discomfort, every time I opened a Word document my eyes would be drawn to some negligible but infuriating detail, like a dressmaker who can’t see the garment for the seams. When I started at NCACE, however, such was the volume of events, projects, relationships and possibilities that I learned about on a daily basis that this way of working became unsustainable. I was forced to face up to my fears. It wasn’t just a case of no longer having the luxury to dally (although, given that I was only going to be with NCACE for the year, that certainly played into it). Rather, it was the realisation that, if I kept prioritising style over substance, I’d lose sight of the bigger picture. I’d be faced with a sea of world-changing stories, but unable or unwilling to venture beyond the shoreline.

This isn’t to say that things have been plain sailing; there’ve been days when the old me has shown up unannounced, peering over my shoulder at my laptop screen as I try to write. But in the face of these minor setbacks, NCACE has been both an impetus and a beacon. It has taught me that, sometimes, giving it everything you’ve got is the only way to move forward.

Jumping back in time a second, it is also important to mention that NCACE launched during the height of the COVID pandemic. Consequently, all events had to take place online during the initial phase of the project, and even after restrictions were lifted, this format was carried forward (the first in-person event was NCACE Ideas Pool 3: A Hybrid Innovation Lab, in January 2024). According to Amigoni, this willingness and ability to connect with audiences virtually has been key to NCACE’s success:

One of the great things about NCACE’s work is its Knowledge Cafés, which usually last a couple of hours in the afternoon. It’s more likely that I’ll be available to be part of that or just tune in and listen than if I’ve got to take a whole day out and go down to London. I just think that’s very enabling. So I think actually the move online — the development of the online Knowledge Cafés — has been really, really important to NCACE. And I think it’s characterised a way of working that a lot of organisations across the cultural sector have been able to capitalise on. (Personal interview 2024)

From this perspective, what began as a necessity in the face of lockdown has been honed into an asset, becoming ‘a really important part of the NCACE story’ (Amigoni, personal interview 2024). Resilience and ingenuity don’t just coexist — they complement one another.

A similar idea emerged during my conversation with Sigal. In 2021, the academic and dramaturg was commissioned by NCACE to write a literature review of the sector. On the one hand, this collaboration was complicated by ‘people trying to get used to Zoom and working across different time zones and not being in the same room’ (personal interview 2024). What is more, the lack of comparable studies in this area meant that Sigal and NCACE were effectively working with a blank canvas: ‘the fact that no one had really catalogued all of this stuff meant that we were sort of having to forge a path’ (personal interview 2024). But at the same times, these circumstances encouraged an ‘organic way of doing things’ (personal interview 2024) that allowed for creative and critical freedom. When it comes to NCACE and its collaborators, the difficulties of online working — combined with the capaciousness of cultural knowledge exchange as an emergent field — are as much an opportunity for horizon scanning as a hindrance.

**Resilience and ingenuity
don't just coexist — they
complement one another.**

Into the Future

Towards the end of my interviews, I asked if interviewees had any advice for NCACE going into its next iteration. The responses were diverse, ranging from Shaw's recommendation to look deeper into ‘corporate sector involvement’ in cultural knowledge exchange (personal interview 2024) to Amigoni's proposal regarding Research England's Cultural Compacts initiative: ‘the cultural compacts are really important [...] it may be that NCACE thinks about ways in which it can support that movement’ (personal interview 2024).²¹ Speaking more broadly, the responses covered four main areas: (1) continuing to cultivate relationships; (2) championing and lobbying; (3) promoting inclusivity; (4) and not being discouraged by the various challenges that face the sector.

With respect to the first area, continuing to cultivate relationships, Greenlees speaks about growing and adding depth to NCACE's network. ‘How do you deepen the relationships that people have with each other and sustain them?’ she asks. ‘But also, how do you expand as well [...] how do you make sure you're not just talking to the same people?’ (personal interview 2024). To mediate this tension, she suggests an ongoing commitment to building relationships coupled with a ‘longitudinal tracking’ of impact over time: ‘so much of what we do is short term [...] we don't follow things for long periods’ (personal interview 2024). A similar view is offered by Amigoni, who observes that much of NCACE's work involves people ‘who identify themselves as doing work at that interface between practice, the cultural field and the cultural sector’ (personal interview 2024). He challenges NCACE to engage individuals and groups who fall outside this demographic (‘English departments and so on’), but for whom cultural knowledge exchange could still prove beneficial (personal interview 2024).

The second area, championing and lobbying, pertains to what Ann Light describes as NCACE's ‘role as protector and an advocate’ for the sector (personal interview 2024). This role is put more forcefully by Neelam Raina, who sees potential for NCACE to ask ‘those more pushy, annoying, straightforward questions to those who have the power [...] advocacy through policy

²¹ For an overview of the Cultural Compacts initiative, see Courage (2022) and (2024).

briefs, white papers, green papers to be commissioned by the UK government (personal interview 2024). Another interviewee, who works at the intersection of archival art and poetry, shares this disruptive vision:

I would like to see NCACE surround itself with a really strong body of people who can help it push funders, or encourage or influence, persuade funders that — if we lose the cultural dynamics of the understandings and appreciations of knowledges and how they are important and connected — we lose probably the very fabric of what society is (personal interview 2024).

Given the existential threats currently facing arts and culture, it is vital that NCACE continues to stand up for practitioners, academics and anyone else who believes in cultural knowledge exchange. Specifically, in evidencing and showcasing the absolute necessity of collaboration, NCACE has a key part to play in challenging the systematic dismantlement of the sector.²²

Indeed, a condition of this transformation is that as many people as possible know about and have access to cultural knowledge exchange. As Sigal put it during our conversation: ‘It would be great if [NCACE] could do more networking and matchmaking for knowledge exchange projects, because there are still a lot of people who don’t know what it is and don’t know that the opportunities are there’ (personal interview 2024). And yet, at the same time, there is a danger that trying to do too much at once could stretch NCACE’s capacity. As such, the potential for the NCACE team to ‘assert themselves a little bit more in terms of communicating what they do’ (Greenlees, personal interview 2024) must be accompanied by strategic focus. In Greenlees’s words: ‘I think they could probably — we’re all guilty of this — possibly focus and narrow down a little more and try and sort of intensify some of the things they’re doing’ (Greenlees, personal interview 2024).

In evidencing and showcasing the absolute necessity of collaboration, NCACE has a key part to play in challenging the systematic dismantlement of the sector

One area of focus, suggests the archival artist and poet interviewee, might be around making cultural knowledge exchange more inclusive for people who are not working in traditional academic or creative fields:

There’s a piece of work that is really important around policy that is inclusive [...] Quite a lot of that incredibly important knowledge doesn’t feed through to the communities, societies and networks that it needs to because it’s not digestible or because it’s not accessible. And I think that’s again something that NCACE has been working on and working towards and perhaps could even be scaled up. (Personal interview 2024)

On this view, one of the challenges facing NCACE going forward is to continue advocating for and facilitating the democratisation of cultural knowledge. This process of course involves breaking down academic and institutional silos. But it more fundamentally means recalibrating our individual perceptions of who produces knowledge and how it is disseminated, as well as

²² Also see Sigal (2024): ‘with all the turmoil that’s going on with the arts and funding cuts and people being moved around and companies shutting, but also universities having to cut whole departments and the arts and humanities really taking a hit and being devalued, I think one [area that NCACE could focus on going forward is] lobbying and advocating for the arts and humanities across the practical and the academic sector’ (personal interview 2024).

pushing to make ‘funding more accessible for people that are not necessarily working on those more traditional senses of [...] knowledge exchange’ (Archival Artist and Poet, personal interview 2024). Inclusivity, from this perspective, has both a personal and structural dimension.

A related point is around regionality, specifically the question of how NCACE ensures that it lives up to its National moniker. ‘If NCACE is seen to advocate only for London-based institutions,’ notes Raina, there is a risk of ‘repeating exclusions that the UK government has done for many years’ (personal interview 2024). While this has certainly not been the case over the past four years, there is potential for NCACE to extend its reach even further by engaging with individuals and organisations that have experienced London-centric bias. This could take the form of targeted publications (as NCACE has done with small and specialist arts institutions), as well as in-person events that are held in different parts of the country.

Raina also highlights the importance of negotiating short-term and long-term challenges:

be mindful of not being blinded by the big challenges the sector is currently facing. [...] [T]he value of the knowledge that the sector produces and its use across different spaces has changed in its speed, in its content and – post-COVID – in the way it is also transmitted out. And NCACE needs to be able to see beyond the immediate challenges of the sector, which are mainly financial due to policy restrictions on what we can and cannot do at the university. (Personal interview 2024)

Rather than just focusing on present challenges, Raina suggests, NCACE should keep an eye on ‘the bigger picture of their capacity for change by being who they are. (personal interview 2024). To do this, it must take a much longer view – not just of where the sector is headed, but also where it could potentially go if the necessary policy changes are implemented. The key is for NCACE to continue working with the same mixture of determinism, perceptiveness, responsibility and agency that it has shown since the very beginning, and which has affected my own thinking in more ways than I can express.

‘[T]hink big’ (personal interview 2024), said Raina at the end of our conversation. Though she was talking about the next chapter of the NCACE story, her advice is relevant for anyone co-producing the next chapter of their lives – the next chapter of the world even – among the forking paths of the garden of cultural knowledge exchange. My own adventures in this starlit landscape have become a part of me; have transported me here. The receding horizon creates space for the journey. Where will yours take you?

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