

Nadine O. Osbild

Incantations from the creative margins: Disrupting binaries in innovation and ethnographic form



Nadine Osbild is a passionate STS teacher and researcher at the STS Department of TU Munich, where she works as a scientific manager of the Innovation, Society, and Public Policy research group, and writes her doctoral thesis on the co-cultivation of creative cultures and innovation cultures in Munich (Germany) and Bristol (UK). In her research, as well as her teaching, she works with sensory ethnography and activist methodologies. In her non-academic life, she co-runs a queer-feminist bookstore.

From queering innovation...

Amid growing political advocacy for creativity as a cornerstone of economically viable and socio-ecologically desirable futures in a post-growth world, urban creative districts have emerged as tools for this reimagination. Situated at the nexus of technological advancement and cultural reform, these creative spaces ostensibly unite diverse creative spheres – including creative and artistic (sub)cultures and technology-focused start-up scenes – and serve as experimental sites for more democratic, sustainable, and inclusive urban futures. While existing research often evaluates successful innovation and creative sectors in these districts through market-oriented frameworks, my research critically interrogates the cultivation and co-stabilization of what is deemed as worthwhile creative cultures and innovation. It hereby approaches creative districts as socio-material manifestations of entrenched hierarchies that define desirable forms of creativity, innovation, and the respective identities of the ‘creatives’ within a city’s sociopolitical constitution.

Employing the conceptual lenses of *Regional Innovation Cultures* (Pfothenauer et al. 2023), *Seeing Like a State* (Scott 1998) and queer-feminist STS sensibilities, I quasi-comparatively analyze eight creative district projects in the city-regions of Munich (Germany) and Bristol (UK), contrasting the cultivation of creative cultures within a strong state logic (Munich) with that of a rather weak state logic (Bristol). The findings explore the notions of the ‘creative binary’ and the ‘queering’ of creative politics of innovation policy. Despite their potential as negotiation sites for more systemic and inclusive transformations, creative district projects paradoxically fail to transcend binary categorizations of creative identities. Attempts to ‘queer’ urban innovation through practices and products that focus on mutual understanding of diverse social needs are hence choked by the persistent binary valuation of creative contributions. Informed by

gendered norms and power dynamics, creative districts impose an unequal and essentialist dichotomy between economically driven, rational (tech) innovators – stereotypically associated with the male – and socially driven, emotional creatives – stereotypically associated with the female (Andersson et al. 2012; Butler 1999; Haraway 1988; Lindberg & Schiffbaenker 2012; Pecis 2016; Isaksson et al. 2020). Due to the restricted institutional readability, state rationales and (financial) valuing systems force involved actors to ‘pass’ (Ginsberg 1996; Goetz 2022; Halberstam 2018; Serano 2016) as either one of the two categories to participate in creative districts, shifting the focus from transformative desirable practices (what you do) to constrained creative identities (who you are).

I ultimately argue how creative districts tend to reproduce hegemonial power hierarchies and economic imperatives by imposing technocratic visions of urban transformation while externalizing social and ecological responsibilities to non-profit creative actors. This research contributes to STS discussions on counterhegemonic and site-sensitive forms of reflexive innovation policy and urban future-making by underscoring the need to reimagine governance frameworks and valuation systems that genuinely counteract structural inequities ingrained in both local-specific power hierarchies and the general maelstrom of corporate innovation narratives. It hence advocates for embracing diverse creative expressions and collective agency in the pursuit of socio-ecologically viable urban transformation approaches.

...to queering ethnographic form

While my research shows how the attempted queering of creative cultures and innovation in creative district projects currently stops at the state level, I at least aim to overcome the constructed dichotomy between scientific and artistic work in my own research approach. As Ather Zia (Pena et al. 2019) reflects on her interpretation of the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, who includes poetry and other creative modes of expression in his theoretical work:

“I don’t buy into the dichotomy between creative writing and social science research. The latter, too, is creative.”

In addition to traditional semi-structured interviews and short-term qualitative ethnographies, I hence integrate poetic text and comic-reminiscent ethnographic drawings as simultaneous modes of gathering and analyzing material, forming an essential part of my creative district research. These artistic practices foreground slow and careful observation, reveal abstracted meanings, and challenge the researcher’s own gaze to foster different paths of reflexivity regarding the usually non-transparent labor of transforming ethnographic experiences into abstract theory. In what follows, I want to share one of my ethnographic poems (Maynard 2009; Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor 2010), which aims to capture the relentless and exhausting reality of Bristol’s creative actors

who attempt to queer innovation and creative cultures within creative district projects. I found said actors to not only be responsible for much of the city's heavy lifting to counter the city's socio-economic inequalities, but to also wear themselves out in protest and constant struggles in the face of the institutionally engrained marginalization of 'female-coded creatives'.

Methodologically, the poems are based on the conducted interviews and fieldwork observations, helping me to analytically reflect on both the interviewee's conveyed perspective as well as on my own subjective interpretation as a researcher. To do so, I developed a writing style based on erasure poetry (Douglas-Jones 2018; Gugganig and Douglas-Jones 2021), oftentimes also known as deletion or blackout poetry, which would leave me with influential interview text bits. I would then go on to slightly re-shuffle them or add small sections to account for non-verbal observations (for example, body language, facial expression, emotional atmosphere, or interactions with the environment), which I logged in voice messages and fieldnotes I would take after interviews and fieldwork outings. The resulting incantation-like flow of this poetry aims to provide a different source of information on the creative actors' imagination of desirable creative innovation and respective creative cultures, and thus fully embraces the following claim by the author Philip Pullman (2019):

"Poetry is not a fancy way of giving you information, it's an incantation. It is actually a magical spell."

By sharing this glimpse into ethnographic poetry, I hope to allow my readers to experience poetic text as a valuable method to exceed interview situations that seemingly distil actors' words into factual truths by instead highlighting the attached hopes, fears, and values, ultimately acknowledging affect as constituent element of social order.

Danny's poem

*And look here, this is where we coexist
this house our lifeline, holding us tight so that we dare
to be great, community rituals, construct opportunity
for social change, technology for love, for we exist in an interconnected
way.*

*And here, just a second, here is a flyer, swing by
look, here, just a second, take this flyer, swing by*

*And was it not dreamt up in an ayahuasca ceremony?
Can we no longer stand in this mythical place?
Look over there, this is where we broke the mold of 'normal society'
exploring new ways of thinking, of doing, of being – new ways.*

*And in our house, ask the right question, you are forced to see
who is not there, who cannot dare
asking for 5 sugars, 5 sugars in my tea
yet all they ask is to tell them why they should care.*

*And here, just a second, here is a flyer, swing by
Look, here, just a second, take this flyer, swing by*

*And yeah, what happened? Look over there
where excellence is a feeling, I feel absolutely excellent
while for you, it is the evaluation of performance
but which men are we performing for?*

*Strong men dying, greedy men following, so many men in this story
and they need to protect their ass-set everything aside
and to protect their ass, they sit on their hands
for there is no leadership there in the city of exes*

*And here, just a second, here is a flyer, swing by
look, here, just a second, take this flyer, swing by*

*And now the song of creativity is crying so differently
look at this bloody warehouse, they have chicken-factored us in
package our creativity and sell it at the market
guiltily feeding ourselves to that machine*

*From extension to extension, exploitation, appropriation
we are already fractured but need to feel the tension
one more time, for we cannot keep doing this, constant trauma
rebuild the commons, common benefits, common ownership*

*Here in our house, just make it a little bit more shit this time to fly under the
radar*

*and here, just a second, here is a flyer, swing by, swing by
and here, just a second, I cannot breathe,
take the flyer, I need to sleep, just
a second*

References

- Andersson, Susanne, Karin Berglund, Ewa Gunnarsson, and Elisabeth Sundin. 2012. *Promoting Innovation: Policies, Practices and Procedures*. Vinnova.
- Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 10. anniversary ed. New York: Routledge.
- Douglas-Jones, Rachel. 2018. "GDPR Erasure Poems." Copenhagen: ETHOS Lab, IT University of Copenhagen. Retrieved from <https://www.itu.dk/~rdoj/?p=667>

- Ginsberg, Elaine K., ed. 1996. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Goetz, Teddy G. 2022. "Self(le)-Recognition: Authenticity, Passing, and Trans Embodied Imaginaries." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 23(4):256–78. doi:10.1080/15240657.2022.2133525.
- Gugganig, Mascha, and Rachel Douglas-Jones. 2021. "Visual Vignettes." Pp. 215–36 in *Sensing In/Security: Sensors as Transnational Security Infrastructures*. Mattering Press.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2018. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14(3):575–99.
- Isaksson, Anna, Camilla Andersson, and Emma Börjesson. 2020. "Don't Ask for Ideas and Innovations, Ask for What They Do. Understanding, Recognizing and Enhancing (Women's) Innovation Activities in the Public Sector." *Journal of Technology Management and Innovation* 15:95–102. doi:10.4067/S0718-27242020000200095.
- Lindberg, Malin, and Helene Schiffbaenker. 2013. "Gender and Innovation." Pp. 782–89 in *Encyclopedia of Creativity, Invention, Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, edited by E. G. Carayannis. New York, NY: Springer.
- Maynard, Kent. 2009. "Rhyme and Reasons: The Epistemology of Ethnographic Poetry." *Etnofoor* 21(2):115–29.
- Maynard, Kent, and Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor. 2010. "Anthropology at the Edge of Words: Where Poetry and Ethnography Meet." *Anthropology and Humanism* 35(1):2–19. doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1409.2010.01049.x.
- Pecis, Lara. 2016. "Doing and Undoing Gender in Innovation: Femininities and Masculinities in Innovation Processes." *Human Relations* 69(11):2117–40. doi:10.1177/0018726716634445.
- Pfotenhauer, Sebastian, Alexander Wentland, and Luise Ruge. 2023. "Understanding Regional Innovation Cultures: Narratives, Directionality, and Conservative Innovation in Bavaria." *Research Policy* 52(3):104704. doi: 10.1016/j.respol.2022.104704.
- Pullman, Philip. 2019. "The Fallen Worlds of Philip Pullman."
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Serano, Julia. 2016. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.