

Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Conflict Narrative: A Study of Urban Immigrant Memory Based on Participatory Art

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Abstract. This article aims to explore how participatory art, as a unique medium and method, intervenes in the process of memory production and narrative reconstruction of urban migrants. In the globalized urban landscape, immigrants are not only physical space movers but also carriers and reshapers of cultural memories. However, their memories and narratives are often marginalized, simplified or obscured in the mainstream urban discourse, leading to the predicament of cultural identity and potential cross-cultural conflicts. This study holds that traditional interviews or observational research are difficult to fully stimulate the subjective expression of immigrant groups. Participatory art, through its inherent collaborative, procedural and physical nature, can create a temporary and equal "heterotopia" space, transforming immigrants from passive "research subjects" to active "co-creators". This article, through in-depth analysis of several typical cases of participatory art projects, explains how the artistic creation process prompts non-verbal and emotional dialogues between individual immigrants and urban residents, communities, and even the urban space itself. In this process, an individual's fragmented memories are embodied and materialized, and then converge into a collective, visible and tangible "memory text". The research focuses on analyzing the "conflict narratives" that are bound to occur in this collaboration - including intergenerational differences, the collision of urban and rural concepts, and the friction of cultural habits, etc. - and argues that these conflicts are not negative obstacles but key opportunities to build a more inclusive and tense "shared memory". Ultimately, this paper proposes that memory research based on participatory art is not only a rescue record of immigration history, but also a kind of urban cultural practice pointing to the future. Through creative collaboration, it transforms implicit memories into explicit public narratives, providing an emotional foundation and imaginative path for building a truly "symbiotic city".

Keywords: Cultural collaboration, Immigrant memories, Conflict narrative.

1. Memory, Narrative and Collaboration: An Introduction to Research from a Cross-cultural Perspective

This chapter aims to establish the theoretical framework and research foundation of the entire article. We first start with the phenomenon of immigration in the process of global urbanization to clarify the significance of immigrant memory as a core element of cultural identity and its marginalization predicament in urban discourse [1,2]. Furthermore, we reflect on the limitations of traditional research methods and introduce participatory art as the key methodology of this study to explain how it opens up new paths for the expression and reconstruction of immigrant memories through collaboration, process and physicality. Finally, we will clarify the core argument of this article - that is, "conflict narrative" is the creative driving force in cross-cultural collaboration, and outline the structure and logic of the entire text.

1.1. Speechless Memory: The Narrative Dilemma of Urban Migration and the Shift in Research Methods

In the tide of globalization, cities are increasingly becoming the forefront where different cultures converge, collide and integrate. Immigrants from all directions not only build the material landscape of the city through labor, but also bring their unique life experiences, emotional structures and local knowledge into the city, forming a rich and complex memory picture. These memories are related to the trauma of parting, the hardships of migration, the wisdom of adaptation, and the complex

emotions towards the new homeland, and they form the cornerstone of the identity of individual and group immigrants.[3] However, in the urban narrative dominated by mainstream media, official history and dominant culture, these vivid, diverse and often contradictory personalized memories are often simplified, stereotyped or even completely obscured, falling into a collective state of "silence". The absence of such narratives not only leads to the underestimation of the historical contributions and cultural values of immigrant groups, but also deepens the cultural gap between them and local residents, making potential conflicts based on misunderstandings difficult to resolve.[4]

In the face of this predicament, the fields of humanities and social sciences once mainly relied on qualitative research methods such as oral history and in-depth interviews. These methods undoubtedly have left us a large number of precious life history texts of immigrants. However, its inherent binary structure of "researcher - studied" inevitably carries a kind of power inertia of knowledge production, placing immigrants in the position of objects to be observed and spoken of. [5] Meanwhile, as the primary medium, language sometimes struggles to carry those non-linear, materialized, and subconscious memory traces. Therefore, this study advocates a methodological shift: from "extracting" narratives to "generating" narratives, and from "recording" memories to "collaborative production" memories. Participatory art is precisely a practical philosophy that stands out in this shift. It does not view art as a final static product, but rather as a "social process" that builds a temporary community, stimulates equal dialogue and creative expression.

1.2. Participatory Art as a method: Framework, core concepts and discourse paths

Participatory art is an artistic practice form that takes the process of artistic creation itself as its core. It emphasizes that artists are no longer the sole creators but act as catalysts, coordinators or hosts, exploring a public issue together with participants (mainly urban migrants and related community members in this study) [6]. The ultimate outcome may be a collective work, an event or an experience, but its core value lies in the social connection established during the creative process, the cross-cultural dialogue carried out and the critical thinking stimulated.

This article will revolve around three core concepts for discussion: cross-cultural collaboration, conflict narrative, and urban immigrant memory. The relationship among the three constitutes the basic analytical framework of this article: Participatory art projects provide a unique "social container" for cross-cultural collaboration, in which the memories of urban immigrants can be activated and expressed; During this collaborative process, due to the different cultural backgrounds, life experiences and values of the participants, frictions, differences and "conflict narratives" are bound to arise. The core argument of this article lies in the fact that this kind of conflict is not a negative destructive factor, but a valuable resource for building a more inclusive and authentic collective memory, and a catalyst for cross-cultural understanding to advance to a deeper level.

Based on this framework, the discussion in this article will follow the following path: Firstly, theoretically clarify the unique value of participatory art as a method for memory research; Secondly, conduct an in-depth analysis of the generation and operation mechanism of art projects as "memory fields"; Next, take a positive look at and reevaluate the "conflict narrative" in collaboration, and clarify the possibility of its creative transformation; Finally, explore the cultural and political significance of this kind of artistic practice for building a "symbiotic city".

2. The "Heterotopia" that Creates memories: Space and Collaboration in Participatory Art

This chapter will delve into how participatory art projects can create space and conditions for a temporary and equal cross-cultural collaboration at the practical operational level. We will draw on Michel Foucault's concept of "Heterotopia" to view this art project as a "space for the other" that exists in reality yet differs from conventional social rules. In this space, the daily power relations are temporarily suspended, and new rules of interaction are established, thus providing the possibility for the free expression of immigrant memories and creative collaboration.

2.1. From physical space to social space: Art Projects as the Creation of "Heterotopia"

A successful participatory art project begins with the creation of a safe, open and inspiring space. This space could be a community center, an idle store, a corner of a library, or even an online virtual platform. But the key lies in that it must be transformed through the meticulous design of an artist from an ordinary physical place into a "social space" with specific rules and atmosphere - that is, what Foucault called "heterotopia".

In this Heterotopia, conventional social identities (such as "outsider", "local", "elite", "lower class") are deliberately blurred. Artists attempt to establish a relatively equal temporary micro-society by setting clear workshop rules, such as "listen without judgment", "Everyone has a say", "respect differences", etc. Here, the primary identity of the participants is "co-creator", rather than their original social label. This temporary shift in identity has greatly reduced the psychological defense of the immigrant group when expressing themselves, encouraging them to share memory fragments that might be regarded as "out of place" or "irrelevant" in the daily public domain. The layout within the space and the materials used (such as old photos, maps, local materials, textiles, etc.) also serve as catalysts for memory, jointly creating a "protected bubble" that allows emotions to flow and encourages informal communication.

2.2. Embodied memory: The body, matter and dialogue during the process of collaboration

When a safe collaborative space is established, the expression of memory shifts from pure verbal narration to more abundant embodiment and materialization practices. The core advantage of participatory art lies in its ability to engage all the senses of the participants, allowing memories to emerge and be conveyed through body movements, material contact and collective collaboration.

For instance, in an art workshop themed "Migration Routes", the artist might not directly ask, "How did you come to this city?" Instead, they would invite participants to weave their own routes on a large map using silk threads of different colors. In this process, the movements of the hands, the interweaving of lines, and the convergence of routes with others all become a non-verbal narrative. For instance, when jointly creating a collective installation related to "hometown food", the handling of ingredients, the evoking of scents, and the exchange of craftsmanship themselves are activating a deep memory rooted in physical habits and cultural practices [7]. This kind of "embodied" collaboration transcends the limitations of language and is particularly beneficial to those who are not good at expressing themselves verbally or come from oral cultural traditions.

In this process, the artist does not play the role of a director but a coordinator. Their job is to propose inspiring creative topics, provide rich material support, observe and promote interaction among participants, and ensure the smooth progress of the collaborative process. Dialogue takes place among the participants as well as between them and the materials. Memories are constantly awakened, shared, and collided in the labor of hands, the gaze of eyes, and the coexistence of bodies, and eventually materialize into a "memory text" that carries collective emotions and stories. This text is the valuable carrier embedded with various "conflict narratives" that we will analyze in the next chapter.

3. The Manifestation and Negotiation of Conflict: Narrative Tension in Cross-Cultural Collaboration

If the collaborative process described in Chapter Two is a harmonious chorus, then this chapter will directly confront the inevitable "dissonance" within it. Participatory art is not a romanticized process aimed at eliminating differences and pursuing superficial harmony. On the contrary, it is precisely because of its openness and authenticity that the tension among different cultural backgrounds, life experiences and intergenerational perspectives is revealed. This chapter holds that these "conflict narratives" are not the failure of collaboration, but rather the starting point of in-depth dialogue and the catalyst for memory reconstruction. The value of an artistic framework lies in its

provision of a "softening" mechanism, enabling conflicts to be safely presented, examined and negotiated.

3.1. The various manifestations of conflict: the friction between generations, urban and rural areas, and cultural customs

In the context of collaboration, conflicts do not always take the form of intense confrontation. More often than not, they manifest as narrative tension, silent awkwardness or irreconcilable differences. This tension mainly manifests in three aspects:

The first is intergenerational conflict. In projects involving family memories, the narratives of the first-generation immigrants are often filled with deep affection for their hometowns, the trauma of migration and the hardships of survival. Their memory carriers may be specific objects, the taste of food or dialect ballads. The memories of their children (second-generation immigrants) are more closely related to identity confusion and the ambiguity of cultural belonging in the city. When parents try to express their homesickness with a rural picture, their children may prefer to use a hip-hop piece of music to tell of the estrangement they feel at the street corner. This difference in the medium of expression and emotional focus is itself an implicit conflict, revealing the fragmentation and reshaping of memory across different generations.

The second is the collision of urban and rural concepts. Immigrants from rural areas may base their understanding of "community" on familiar societies such as clans and neighbors, and their memory narratives often emphasize collectivity and continuity. Urban residents or highly urbanized immigrants, on the other hand, may be more inclined towards individualized and selective social patterns. In an art project jointly designed for an "ideal community", this difference will be concretized as different imaginations of the functions of public Spaces and the boundaries of neighborhood interaction, thus generating ideological confrontations in the process of collaboration.

The last one is the friction of cultural habits. This is reflected in the most minute aspects of daily life, such as different understandings of the concept of time, the pace of cooperation, and the way of expression. Some participants may be accustomed to speaking their minds freely in group discussions, while others may tend to express themselves in a subtle and tactful way. The process of artistic collaboration makes these hidden cultural codes explicit, compelling participants to realize that the "taken for granted" ways are not the only ones, thus initiating a reflection on their own cultural presuppositions.

3.2. From Confrontation to Dialogue: The Creative Transformation of Conflict within the Framework of Art

How can participatory art transform these potentially destructive energies into constructive dialogues? The key lies in its unique "artistic framework". This framework elevates conflicts from the level of personal grudges to the level of aesthetic expression and joint resolution.

First of all, art objectifies conflict. When two different memory narratives are deadlocked in an argument, an art project can offer a third-party, neutral "container". For instance, transform the debate over "which is better, the hometown or the city" into a joint creation of a double-sided sculpture or a collage, with one side representing the hometown and the other representing the new home, allowing the contradiction to be juxmoralized and presented in the work. At this point, the conflict is no longer an opposition between A and B, but an "artistic issue" that both sides need to jointly confront and resolve. This transformation relieves the emotional burden of conflict, enabling participants to examine the differences themselves more calmly.

Secondly, art offers a non-confrontational "translation" mechanism. Non-verbal media such as body movements, physical materials, and image symbols can serve as buffer zones and translators for deadlocked language dialogues. When a complex emotional memory cannot be clearly expressed in words, participants can convey its emotional tone by choosing a color or a material. Others may gain a deeper and more intuitive understanding through the interpretation of this visual or tactile language

than the language description. This indirect communication bypasses the direct impact that language may bring and creates space for empathy.

Ultimately, through the transformation of the artistic framework, conflict no longer implies the end of cooperation but becomes the source of narrative complexity and richness. The result of collaboration - that collective art piece - is profound precisely because it does not avoid these tensions but regards them as its inner texture. It does not record a false consensus, but a genuine "shared memory" that encompasses differences and the negotiation process. This memory text thus becomes more vibrant and can better reflect the true picture of cross-cultural life.

4. Towards the Symbiosis of Memory: Insights and Future of Participatory Art

4.1. Reconstructing Urban Narratives: From Cultural Governance to Politics in Daily Practice

The memory collaboration of participatory art projects at the micro level ultimately points to the reconstruction of the macro urban narrative. Traditional urban cultural governance often tends to create a unified, grand and easily publicized "urban image". This top-down narrative approach frequently otherizes, instrumentalizes or simplifies the history and experience of marginalized groups such as immigrants. Participatory art practice, on the other hand, represents a bottom-up, grassroots cultural and political action. It powerfully challenges that monotonous and flat urban myth by creating concrete and perceptible "anti-narratives" or "supplementary narratives".

When the artworks jointly created by immigrants and residents, which carry complex emotions and conflicting memories, come into the public eye (such as being exhibited in communities, displayed in public Spaces or becoming part of local archives), they are no longer merely aesthetic objects but become "issue setters" that activate public discussions. They force the viewers (including citizens, planners and decision-makers) to confront a more authentic and diverse urban picture: a city where glory and trauma coexist, and its development benefits not only from the decisions of the elites but also from the sweat and nostalgia of countless ordinary immigrants. This process of democratization in narrative has prompted urban culture to transform from an object to be "governed" into a "living practice" that is jointly participated in and created by all citizens. It implies a new cultural and political ethics: The charm of a great city does not lie in its superficial harmony and unity, but in its ability to accommodate and display the rich differences and historical layers within it.

4.2. Methodological Implications: The "Emotional Turn" and "Relational" Reconstruction in Social Science Research

This research not only contributes to the field of urban migration and cross-cultural studies, but also offers profound insights into the research methodology of the humanities and social sciences. Although traditional qualitative research is dedicated to "understanding", its paradigm still struggles to break free from the limitations of the subject-object dichotomy and overly relies on language as a medium. It is often powerless in dealing with pre-linguistic, materialized and emotional knowledge. The intervention of participatory art represents an "emotional shift" and "relational" reconstruction in a research paradigm.

First of all, it emphasizes that research is co-construction. The role of researchers (artists/scholars) has shifted from external, neutral observers and analysts to internal, interventional coordinators and facilitators. Knowledge (in this study, that is, immigrant memory) is no longer an "extracted" ready-made object, but is "co-generated" in the interaction of equal and trusting relationships. This research stance handles the power relations in the research process more honestly and ethically.

Secondly, it promotes the multimodality of knowledge. Participatory art acknowledges that true understanding does not only stem from oral or written statements, but also from physical perception, material interaction, spatial experience and emotional resonance. The "knowledge" about community relations contained in a collectively created installation may far exceed the dimensions that a

transcript of an interview can cover. This methodology expands the boundaries of "knowledge", making it fuller and more three-dimensional.

Therefore, this study advocates a more "embodied", "emotional" and "relational" approach to social science research. It reminds us that a deep understanding of emotionally tense issues such as immigrant memory and cultural identity requires us not only to analyze with our minds, but also to feel with our hearts and participate with our bodies. In the co-creation with the research subjects, we should reach the depths of truth that cannot be reached merely by questioning and recording.

4.3. Conclusion and Prospect: Participatory Art as a Cultural Catalyst

In conclusion, this article, through the dual lens of "cross-cultural collaboration" and "conflict narrative", deeply analyzes the unique value of participatory art in activating, expressing and reconstructing the memory of urban migrants. Research reveals that the "heterotopian" collaborative space created by participatory art provides a safe and stimulating field for the embodied expression of immigrant memories. What is particularly important is that the cultural frictions and narrative conflicts that emerge in this process are not obstacles to cooperation, but rather the key driving forces for promoting in-depth dialogue, achieving memory integration and creative transformation.

Ultimately, the value of this artistic practice goes beyond the archiving and preservation of memory; its more core role is to serve as a cultural catalyst. It rehearsed and practiced a "symbiotic" logic based on acknowledging differences, negotiating conflicts, and co-construction and sharing on a small scale. Each such project is like a seed that sprouts in the soil of a specific community and, through concrete collaboration, nurtures emotional connections and cross-cultural understanding among participants. When countless such micro-practices are scattered throughout the city, they can collectively catalyze the evolution of the entire city's cultural ecosystem, enabling it to grow in a more inclusive, resilient and creative direction.

Looking to the future, there is still a vast space for exploration in memory research based on participatory art. For instance, the long-term tracking of its effects, the deep integration with digital technology, and its application in more complex and diverse urban contexts (such as megacities and post-industrial cities) are all directions worthy of further exploration. However, in any case, the core revelation is already clear: a truly great city must be one that knows how to listen to the memories of all its residents and dares to constantly reconstruct itself in the face of differences and dialogues. And participatory art is precisely providing us with a crucial and humanized key to realizing this vision.

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