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Staying with Complexity

Bidirectional Learning, Engagement, and Transdisciplinary Collaborations on Two Continents

Katherine Lambert-Pennington
k.lambert-pennington@memphis.edu
University of Memphis
ORCID: 0000-0001-6790-597X

Laura Saija
laura.saija@unict.it
University of Catania
ORCID: 0000-0002-8474-9371

Abstract

Over the last few decades, institutions of higher education in both The United States and Italy have intensified their attention, activities, messages toward building relationships with worlds outside of their campuses. Despite their best intentions, the relationship between institutions of higher education and non-academic actors, whether in the frame of engaged scholarship (US) or the third mission (Italy), often does not move beyond unidirectional and extractive interactions. In this paper, we draw on our experiences as an engaged anthropologist (Lambert-Pennington) and a Planner (Saija) working with residents of a public housing community in Memphis, TN and co-leading the Community Planning and Environmental Design (CoPED) program in the Simeto Valley (Sicily), to posit a transdisciplinary bidirectional praxis – one that combines participatory research and experiential pedagogy. We begin by comparing US engagement and Italian third mission debates and then briefly situate our own work within the literature on engaged praxis in our respective disciplines. We trace moments and dynamics in our work together that led us to emphasizes co-learning and bidirectionality - intentionally involving actors' multiple perspectives and dimensions (spatial and socio-political), but also, and especially, to emphasize mutual benefits and co-learning to address local challenges. In the conclusion, we reflect on the ways that institutional approaches to Third Mission, in Italy, and engaged scholarship, in the US, can both contribute to and complicate the possibilities of doing genuine bidirectional work with communities.

Keywords: engaged research, anthropology, planning, bidirectional learning, Italy, US

Introduction

Today, institutions of higher education in both The United States and Italy are in a period of intensified transformation characterized by the adoption of business-inspired management prac-

tices, an emphasis on external funding and private sector and industry partnerships, and a focus on student employability and professional training. Universities have intensified their attention, activities, and messages toward the worlds outside of their campuses, and some have established formal 'relationships' of collaboration and/or exchange with non-university actors. In Italy this is referred to as the Third Mission, i.e., «activities for the development, transfer and direct application of knowledge to contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of society» (Giofre 2014:32). The relatively recent debate on the Italian Third Mission echoes a much longer debate in English-speaking countries, especially the United States, about 'engaged scholarship'. This form of scholarship is characterized by «(1) research, teaching, integration, and application scholarship that (2) incorporates reciprocal practices of civic engagement into the production of knowledge» (Barker 2004: 124).

Many disciplines have been impacted by these broader trends. For example, in applied fields like Urban Planning, where scholars have always been at the nexus between research and professional practice, there is a general feeling that 'engagement' and 'third mission' have always been part of university life, and finally, 'third mission' and 'engagement' offer an appropriate intuitional framework for what applied scholars have always done. In other cases, like anthropology, approaches like public, collaborative, and engaged anthropology have emerged from a disciplinary interest in decolonizing epistemologies and pedagogies, as well as the desire to demonstrate the discipline's contributions to understanding increasingly complex and difficult social conditions and problems and their impact on people's lives and practices (Liu 2021). A comparison between these different continental (Italy and US) and disciplinary journeys (planning and anthropology) offers significant opportunities for reflection.

In this paper, we compare the US engagement and the Italian third mission debates. We explore the nature of the relationship between institutions of higher education and 'the outside', pointing to the unidirectional dynamics of many of these relationships. We then draw on our experiences as an engaged anthropologist (Lambert-Pennington) and a Planner (Saija) collaborating to carry out research and teaching activities in the US and Italy for almost a decade. We briefly situate our own work within the literature on engaged praxis in our respective disciplines to show how, working together with residents of a public housing community in Memphis, TN and co-leading the Community Planning and Environmental Design (CoPED) program in the Simeto Valley (Sicily), we have come to share a transdisciplinary approach that combines participatory research and experiential pedagogy. Central to our approach, which emphasizes co-learning, is the fundamental belief that the university-non-academic actors' relationship should be bidirectional. This means, these relationships are not only inclusive, intentionally involving actors' multiple perspectives and dimensions (spatial and socio-political), but also, and especially, emphasize mutual benefits and co-learning to address local challenges. In conclusion, we suggest that several dynamics underlying institutional approaches to Third Mission, in Italy, and Engaged Scholarship, in the US, can complicate the possibilities of doing genuine bidirectional work with communities.

Third Mission vs. Scholarship of Engagement

In the US, the contemporary debate, and the practice of engaged scholarship began to take shape in the early 1990s as a reaction to growing separation between the knowledge being produced and taught in universities and the world outside the 'ivory tower'. In 1996, Ernest Boyer, an early proponent of the scholarship of engagement, observed a "disturbing" trend in higher edu-

cation; he suggested that the academy had become a place of "a private benefit, not a public good." Further, Boyer argued that more and more the academy was becoming irrelevant to «the nation's most pressing civic, social, economic, and moral problems» (1996: 19). He proposed that the scholarship of engagement could renew Universities' purpose, creating «a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other. For Boyer, this special climate, helps to enlarge what anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes as the universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life for all of us» (ibid: 27).

Since Boyer's early theorization of community-university engagement, universities in the US have experienced a proliferation of types of engagement praxis: institutional, research, and pedagogical. Institutionalized engagement refers to administrative re-arrangements, with names like offices of engagement or university outreach centers, aimed at facilitating institutional interactions with entities outside the university (Welsh and Saltmarsh 2013). Research engagement revolves around collaborative research projects, developed based on a variety of types of agreements with communities, from consultancy contracts to less formal 'mutual learning agreements'. Such projects are aimed at engaging researchers in developing, applying, and testing scientific knowledge that can also help address issues experienced by one specific community (Holland et.al 2010). And finally, pedagogies based on the service-learning paradigm. In this case, formal instruction is combined with experiential learning opportunities which are derived from their students' participation in community service activities (Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999).

After decades of practice along these three lines, institutions' commitment to university-community engagement remains largely voluntary, meaning it is either internally generated, based on individual institutions' mission and culture, as a component of institutions' membership in national associations, like Campus Compact or Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, which promote community-university partnerships, or in response to accrediting bodies expectations. Thus, there is not a universal expectation of community-engagement nor a unified set of institutional metrics for measuring these activities. At the same time, research demonstrates that the work of the strongest engaged scholars sits at the nexus of research, teaching, and service, one mutually reinforcing the others (Ward 2018).

In contrast to the US, the debate around the Third Mission in Italy, as in other European countries, is much more recent and rooted in the governmental decision to link public funding for Universities to an evaluation of their performance. The National Agency for the Evaluation of the University system and research (ANVUR - Agenzia nazionale di valutazione del sistema universitario e della ricerca), established in 2006, initially conceptualized Third Mission as an 'experiment' and between 2014 and 2020 carried out the first evaluation of these activities. ANVUR finalized the national Third Mission indicators in time for the 2019-2021 evaluation window. These performance indicators measure Universities' ability «to enhance the social and economic relevance of their research and to become more accountable for their social and economic impact» (Anzivino et.al. 2021: 107). These metrics suggest that Third Mission activities operate as a "third stream", separate from primary research and teaching responsibilities. During the 2014-2020 period, the focus of this stream was almost exclusively on "economic exploitation" (patents, consultancy work, university spin-off and entrepreneurial initiatives), on the one side, and education of the public through dissemination activities, on the other. In the new evaluation window starting in 2020, ANVUR included the qualitative evaluation of 'Third Mission case-studies'. While this adjustment creates space to document diverse engagement

practices, the metrics are still developed within single faculty evaluation categories and, thus, reinforce the separation of research, teaching, and service to communities.

As universities that have embraced either ES in the US and Third Mission in Italy, determining how to connect in meaningful and ethical ways is not always easy. In our experience, community members often become frustrated with the University because they do not see the results of the research they have participated in, whether in the form of tangible transformations or changes related to an issue or a place, or, more simply in the form of comprehensible, public research products (a map, a report, a website, etc.) or even more 'specialized' research products (a book, an article, etc.). Theoretically, both the engaged university and the Third Mission debates focus on ways in which universities 'give back' to communities. Often lacking a unified vision, much less a shared understanding of the epistemologies and pedagogies associated with engagement, 'engaged' or 'third mission' activities coexist with 'extractive' approaches.

Despite the rhetoric on the importance of giving back, Universities often (with some exceptions) operate in a unidirectional way that is characterized largely by extraction. 'Extraction' is often associated with what is viewed as 'high quality' scientific research in both continents, not only reproducing a hierarchical valuation of research practices, but also pointing to underlying tensions between positivism and other epistemological approaches to research. Moreover, the belief that Universities are supposed to generate the most cutting-edge and innovative knowledge takes for granted that societies will necessarily benefit from their direct involvement in efforts aimed at the exploitation of such knowledge. Involving community members in research often means faculty 'educating' lay people on their research topic and asking lay people to spend time with them for an interview, focus group, or to take pictures of their homes, their neighborhoods, etc. and to freely share their perspectives (data) and their time – often without compensation. In sum, researchers often extract data, knowledge, and time from communities without necessarily prioritizing reciprocity or tangible benefits to non-University actors.

For example, in the case of entrepreneurial universities, "universities' contributions derive from actively commercializing their knowledge through spin-offs, patents and licensing" (Sánchez-Barrioluengo and Benneworth 2019: 207), extraction is combined with transaction. The focus is on scientific advancement and the potential monetary valuation of the products of science, often without an obligation to prove that the public benefits. In Italy, spinoff businesses and research centers stemming from engineering, earth sciences, medicine, chemistry, and architecture departments (among others) have grown since the inception of the Third Mission in the early 2000s (Giofre, 2014) and mark an economic exploitation of expertise. Scholars raise serious doubts on whether this commodification of knowledge makes a «primary contribution coming via structural improvements to the knowledge exchange environment, organization, governance and policy frameworks» (Sánchez-Barrioluengo and Benneworth 2019: 208).

In contrast, 'non-exploitative engagement,' or at least less-extractive forms of engagement are based on the idea of a 'giving university and/or a community-engaged university. The former emphasizes students', but sometimes staff and faculty members, involvement in volunteer opportunities (clean-ups, staffing of community events, tutoring kids, etc.) that meet an immediate community need. Universities can also offer – for free or at a very low cost – its resources to the community, including campus facilities, meeting spaces, a garden, or even a museum or exhibition. Finally, in the US, and to a limited extent in Italy, instructors organize service-learning or engaged learning activities in which they partner with community-based organizations, public authorities, and other groups to engage students in experiential learning opportunities (Norris-Tirrell *et. al* 2010). Students use their time, their skills, their discipline or

course-based expertise (i.e., what they learn from their professors, from books, and in classes) to assist the community partner in accomplishing a goal.[1] While we have glossed these practices as less-extractive for the purpose of this article, it is important to acknowledge that these approaches to engagement are not necessarily exploitation free. Anthropologists have offered important critiques of the relationship between the affect economy and the complex role of volunteerism/voluntourism, and its commodification in the third sector (nonprofits and NGOs) (see for example, Brondo *et al*. 2016; Hoffman *et al*. 2017; Hayakawa 2008).

The aforementioned forms of "non-exploitative engagement" can be helpful to the public in many ways, but often remain unidirectional: the university delivers (transfers) knowledge, labor, products, and time to the outside, usually without economic compensation. Additionally, these activities are often siloed from one another – developed as distinct projects or events, by different university actors, in different places, following different processes and timeframes, and with differing levels of success and impact. In this paper, we suggest the importance of bidirectional relationships and knowledge creation between higher education and 'the outside'. A bidirectional approach to research, teaching and service revolves around the opportunity for all parties to develop a deeper knowledge about a set of questions, concerns, and issues for the benefit of both science and the world. We argue that bidirectional engagement, applied to high quality research, teaching, and service, forces 'extractive' and ''less-exploitative" research and engagement practices to change by bringing them together in a process that reworks the ways academic and non-academic actors relate to one another and the ways knowledge is produced, shared, utilized, and acted upon.

Disciplinary debates on engagement

The authors met in 2011, in Memphis, TN. Lambert-Pennington was a junior faculty member in Anthropology at the University of Memphis (UofM) and was co-leading (with Dr. Ken Reardon, chair of the City and Regional Planning department) the Memphis Urban Transformation Initiative. This partnership was inspired by the scholarship of engagement and the participatory action-research paradigm. Saija joined the UofM faculty and the participatory partnership as a *Marie Curie* Research fellow from 2011 and 2013. The UofM team was working closely with community organizations and residents in distressed inner-city neighborhoods in the southern part of the city. Primarily home to African American residents, this area of the city had been neglected for decades as urban renewal disrupted the fabric of the neighborhoods, development moved eastward, and families with financial struggles moved into local public housing (Biles 1985; Jemmison 1992; Rushing 2014). Various community institutions, including community development corporations (CDCs), churches, and nonprofit agencies, as well as the City were interested in revitalizing these areas. Several community organizations invited the University to work with them to develop a process that would directly involve residents and organizations in these conversations and planning activities. Both Lambert-Pennington and Saija chose to be part of this partnership, drawing on their different disciplinary backgrounds to negotiate the various

[1] For example, students in an anthropology research seminar might conduct research to support a program evaluation or needs assessment for an agency and write and present on their findings to the community partner at the end of the course. Planning studio courses might partner with neighborhood associations or public authorities to develop a landscape design or a land use plan for a community. Social work students, who are required to do internships at agencies, might produce educational or informational materials such as resource guides, websites, or databases that are utilized by the host-agency.

tensions and debates on the relevance of 'engagement' for communities and for research and teaching.

An ethnographer becomes Engaged

As a cultural anthropologist, Lambert-Pennington conducted long term ethnographic fieldwork in an urban Indigenous community in Australia from 2001-2003 for her PhD dissertation. Using a feminist research design, her project focused on community members, especially Indigenous women's, experiences over time, their roles in shaping and maintaining community identity and belonging in an urban context, the ways they understood and negotiated their relationships with the State, and the everyday inequalities they and the community faced.[2] One goal of this approach was to try to unsettle the unequal power relations that often characterize ethnographic research and writing. While Lambert-Pennington cultivated deep social connections, feelings of mutual respect and obligation, and rich ethnographic data during her fieldwork, which continued until 2008, she realized that giving back and incorporating women's voices and experiences was not enough. While well intended, her approach did not genuinely transform the relational or epistemological dynamics of the research nor did the results have a direct relevance to women's lives.

Returning to her native city and teaching in a department with a focus on applied anthropology, Lambert-Pennington saw the opportunity to co-lead the Memphis Urban Transformation Initiative as way to engage in neighborhood-based research that would intersect with debates on poverty, revitalization, inequality, and citizen participation. With a critical understanding of both the history of the discipline and the growth of applied anthropology, she identified participatory action research (PAR) as an approach that could potentially address the limitations of her earlier research experiences, by generating results *with* people that were relevant to them and could be acted upon in practical ways. She sought to combine ethnography and application in ways that disrupted the colonial dynamics of conducting research *on* people that could and often would be used to generate changes according to the logic of powerful governments, groups, and/or settlers. The engaged turn in Anthropology helped light her path.

Engaged, collaborative, and public anthropology have emerged over the last two decades, in part, from critiques of the Eurocentric, colonial, and neocolonial practices within the discipline (Liu 2021). Now a regular conversation at conferences and in journals sponsored by the American Anthropological Association and the Society for Applied Anthropology, these practices are becoming a centerpiece of the discipline (Checker *et.al* 2010; Brondo 2010). Likewise, some departments have developed reputations for their emphasis on public and engaged anthropology and even developed their own models (e.g., the Memphis Model of grit, grind, and praxis, described by Feldman *et.al* 2021). In practice, engaged anthropology takes many forms and many scholars have detailed the diverse definitions of engaged anthropology and debated its distinction from public, applied, and collaborative anthropology (e.g., Low, Merry 2010; Besteman 2013; Lamphere 2003; Lassiter 2005, 2007).

[2] Utilizing a feminist research design, Lambert-Pennington combined methods including participant observation, life history interviews, photo-elicitation interviews, archival research, and go-along interviews during family trips and with Indigenous tour operators, with reciprocal activities like making photo books and videos of family and community events and festivities for community members (at their request), volunteering at the local school and community organization, soliciting feedback on analysis and findings with participants, and returning copies of interview recordings and transcripts, and ultimately the dissertation to participants.

The major points of overlap between public, collaborative, engaged, and applied, anthropology include undertaking research that involves and works with communities; producing knowledge that is relevant and applicable to understanding and addressing crucial social challenges and inequalities; and disseminating findings in forms and through media that circulate and are useful outside of academia. While some practices align more closely with the spirit of engaged scholarship, others are less vested in the civic and problem-solving aims of the practice of engaged scholarship. Yet, they all speak to some of the ways anthropologists are rethinking and being asked to rethink their relationships to the communities with which they work and deeply consider who benefits from the research. Lambert-Pennington looked to anthropologists' whose engaged praxis emphasized collaborative research processes (with both communities and other researchers), attention to power dynamics, politics, and encompassed a commitment to social justice.

Catherine Besteman describes engaged anthropology as «collaborative, critical, reflexive, practical (in that it is oriented toward the achievement of shared goals), and values-driven or associated with value judgements (in that engagement is based on shared agreements that a certain way of living or doing things is better than an alternative way)» (2013:3). Here, engagement and collaboration are synonymous with activist anthropology, political activism, and participation. In this vein, Dána-Ain Davis, proposes a politically engaged anthropology, «grounded in principles of inclusion, equal rights, and equal access. It is not limited to the application of knowledge gained; in other words, it aims not only to share our knowledge with elite policy makers but also addresses the process of gaining that knowledge» (2006:233). Thus, to develop an engaged praxis requires a new understanding of knowledge and knowledge production that recognizes that collaborators are not neutral but occupy particular positions; nor is the research value free. Rather activist research (Hale 2006) is conducted with practical and structural transformations and solidarity as goals.

Collaborative anthropology can involve many types of collaborators, sometimes at the same time. It can be community-focused and directly involve communities in research. It can involve the co-development of ideas and texts with community members (de la Cadena 2015) and can include researchers from subfields of anthropology or from disciplines outside of anthropology. As anthropologists' interest in doing interdisciplinary research has increased, some scholars, like Hedda Askland (2013), argue for the use of *interdisciplinary* collaboration above other forms of engagement. At the same time Asklan points out that when collaborations have transdisciplinary aims, anthropology and anthropological research agendas are often value-added, rather than driving the research process. Others, like Borofsky and De Lauri (2019) go a step further to suggest that interdisciplinary research marginalizes anthropology as a discipline and devalues it in the public eye. As the anthropologist co-leading the Memphis Urban Transformation Initiative, the transdisciplinary context of the project gave Lambert-Pennington the opportunity to learn from the expertise of her non-anthropological and non-academic colleagues, including residents, and to think anthropologically about research practices and the production of knowledge.

Whether anthropology takes a leading role or supporting role in research collaborations, participants must find ways to navigate and negotiate "expert" and "lay knowledge" (Maida 2009), which can be challenging. Roseann Liu's analysis of the "ethnographic backstage" offers insight into these conflicts (2021). Liu treats the behind-the-scenes relations, frictions, and negotiations among research collaborators as an element of ethnography (Jackson 2010). Liu's work reveals that politics of collaboration and activist research can be especially difficult when collaborators

disagree with anthropologists' cultural critiques (Hale 2006) or dispute or reinterpret the meaning of findings. Understanding the behind-the-scenes politics of collaboration was key to Lambert-Pennington's collaboration with public housing residents and the City of Memphis. She gained first-hand experience negotiating the frictions between institutional partners and community collaborators with vastly different degrees of power and influence on the research and different stakes in the actions it produced (Raciti et.al 2016). Finally, as a junior faculty member the framework of engaged scholarship offered her an institutional platform that helped legitimize the research within the academy.

A planner in search for an alternative

City and Regional Planning is an applied discipline, responsible for producing knowledge on how to shape cities in "harmony" with social needs and desires (Quaroni 1954). Its roots are in architecture and engineering, with a focus on urban forms and statistics. Like many other applied fields, planning scholarship has always had very strong ties with practice as it was aimed at producing manuals and guidelines for the benefit of professionals. Since the establishment of the first "planning department" and "degrees", both in the US and in Italy, the most notable planning scholars have also been responsible for developing urban plans and normative planning frameworks (Di Biagi, Gabellini 1992). Additionally, much of the planning research largely focused on "experimental practice" and planning teaching mostly emphasized studios engaging students in assisted professional experience, sometimes with "real" clients. This has been true to such an extent that, in the face of the recent debates on university engagement and Third Mission, many planning faculty have not taken them seriously. Rather, they assume they are already doing it. However, after more than two centuries of practical application of planning theories, guidelines, manifestos, etc. many scholars raise doubts whether planners' best intentions have created more harm than good.

Saija's choice to become a planning scholar took place in the 90s, at a time when Italian planning theorists were drawing from postmodern philosophy (Scandurra 1999) and complexity theory (Pizziolo, Micarelli 2003) and inviting planners worldwide to dismiss their traditional top-down technocratic paradigms and develop alternative approaches based on some sort of acknowledgement of the planning role that grassroots, activists, and "lay people" can or should play. It was a time when Italian scholars were discovering international scholarship. In particular, US-based planners were engaged in the development of many different community-based theories: planners working outside of the institutional realm in direct support of communities opposing top-down plans (Davidoff 1965, translated by Crosta 1973); decision-makers being asked to make planning processes more participatory (Arnstein 1969), deliberative (Forester 1988, translated in Italian by Borri in 1998), and inclusive of all interests and stakeholders (Innes 1996, Healy 1997). These theories suggested the need to drastically change planning's rationalist paradigm (Sandercock 1997, translated into Italian by Monno in 2004); develop plans on the basis not just of expertise but also of a genuine mix between "planning expertise" and residents' "common knowledge" (Fisher 2000), building on the ability of planners to establish a mutual learning relationship with the community (Friedmann 1987, translated into Italian by Borri in 1993).

This significant theoretical shift in planning has had an impact on the relationship between planning scholars and urban communities worldwide, making researchers look beyond the "physical fabric of a city" and engage with the social dimension. This has meant a push for plan-

ning to be contaminated with social sciences and discover a variety of qualitative research methods aimed at understanding people in space (Zeisel 1981, Attili 2008). Since the 1990s, critiques against traditional top-down, technocratic planning have increasingly created spaces for planning scholars to reject the modernist focus on guidelines, planning models and manifestos, in favor of a more descriptive, evocative approach (Saija 2016). The case-study approach has therefore become very popular, especially among those researchers who have focused on studying "insurgent spatial practices" among communities, activists, and grassroots organizations (Miraftab, Wills 2005, Sandercock 1998, Cellamare 2008, Crosta 2010). In these cases, people are engaging in the enhancement of their life environment with, or more often without, planners, revealing what "non-technocratic planning" looks like in the real world. Other planning scholars are increasingly drawing from Foucault's conceptualization of power and using qualitative research approaches to criticize how planning is done in the real world, unveiling its dark side (Flyvbjerg 1998, Yiftachel 1998). As a result, research in planning has largely become a social science with an empirical focus on cities, neighborhoods, and regions.

Consequently, planning scholarship in this vein is disengaged from its former responsibilities of guiding planning practice and decision-making, and instead focus on "interpreting" and/or "criticizing" planning realities (Campbell 2012). Through this shift, scholars wanted to avoid the risk of being "top-down technocrats" but were largely unprepared to face social science's ethical implications and the risks associated with qualitative research. Planning researchers' interactions with settled communities mainly have had the purpose of "extracting" data, under the classical assumption that it was for a "higher" purpose. In the case of the "insurgent planning practices" debate, extraction is done in the name of shedding light on courageous, virtuous communities – i.e. telling their story to the world – which is desirable since it gives them "dignity" and notoriety (Sandercock 1998). In the case of studies on the dark side of planning practices, it is the opportunity to uncover – therefore indirectly contrast – hidden undesirable power dynamics to the world (Flyvbjerg 1998, Yiftachel 1998).

Within this context, Saija's research interests were aligned with most of the anti-technocratic premises behind planning's shift toward social science. However, she was less interested in becoming a social scientist describing, analyzing, interpreting, or criticizing spatial practices. Rather, she was interested in developing a kind of non-technocratic planning scholarship able to maintain a direct usefulness to the world and have a direct impact on humans' highly unsustainable and socially unjust way of living in the world. Thus, Saija directed her attention to understanding the impact that postmodern epistemologies and complexity theory could have on both the planning profession and on the planning researcher. Her feeling was that the concept of technocracy not only applied to planning manuals and professional practice but also to all applied fields of knowledge, leading her to seriously question the role of applied research in society and, consequently, the extractive nature of established research approaches.

In search of a different way of being a university researcher, at a time when the Italian academy had yet to discover the "third mission", Saija was drawn to the US-based debate on engagement. Here, she found an interesting community of planning scholars who were experimenting with the "engaged scholarship" debate. They were promoting long-term community university partnerships and establishing a record of experiences based on "bidirectional" relationships between researchers and community members (Reardon 2006). As Marie Curie Research Fellow, funded by the *European Research Agency* for the period 2011-13, Saija was able to work closely with researchers experimenting along these lines. She chose Memphis, TN, where a key figure in the engaged planning research group, Kenneth Reardon, had just begun working with Lam-

bert-Pennington on a participatory-action-research inspired project, the Memphis Urban Transformation Initiative.

Figure 1. Authors kick off final public workshop in the Simeto Valley (CoPED photo archive)

Our first try - good intentions and less-than-ideal outcomes

The Memphis Urban Transformation initiative was involved in several community-university partnerships aimed at nurturing equitable community development in distressed inner-city neighborhoods through research, students' involvement, community organizing, and participatory planning. The two authors worked closely together within a neighborhood coalition called the Vance Avenue Collaborative (VAC). The project involved public housing residents, City officials, local nonprofits, consultants, and other university faculty. VAC was established at the request of a church and residents in response to the fact that the neighborhood, which is adjacent to downtown Memphis and home to the last public housing project in the City, was a major target for redevelopment. Like many other cities around the US who embraced the deconcentration of poverty by demolishing public housing (Goetz 2011), the City planned to use federal funding to relocate public housing residents with vouchers, demolish the complexes, and partner with the private sector to redevelop the site as a mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhood. VAC adopted a bottom-up participatory-action-research process to develop alternative understandings of the issues and to consider how beneficial the deconcentration of poverty and mixed-in-

come redevelopment would be for the current residents and institutions (Greenbaum et.al 2008; Crump 2002).

The VAC operated on the principle of bottom-up participatory planning and reciprocity. Community and university representatives – residents, a priest, a community gardener, as well as faculty (including the authors) and graduate students involved as graduate assistants or for capstone projects – formed a steering committee that met weekly to make decisions on the research and organizing process. Together the group decided which data would be collected, why, how, and by whom, as well as which community-based initiatives would be organized and how we would share responsibility for these activities. Faculty and students in both Planning studios and Anthropology classes collaborated with residents to do spatial analysis, develop profiles of community organizations, conduct movers and shakers interviews, administer resident surveys, and facilitate participatory planning activities, as well as participate in neighborhood clean-ups, festivals, and volunteer in the local community kitchen and community garden. In 2009, the coalition gave birth to a "preliminary planning framework", indicating residents' preferences and alternative development paths.

The VAC preliminary plan, piqued City officials' interests, as they were about to start a planning process for the neighborhood. While they were publicly indifferent to the preliminary plan, behind the scenes, they communicated their concerns about competing plans to administrators and the faculty (including the authors) researchers. Thus, in 2010, the City asked VAC to formally "partner" with them in a federally funded Choice Neighborhood planning initiative aimed at planning the future of the neighborhood. Funding guidelines called for a highly participatory approach, and VAC had built a network and process during their earlier work. Activities began again, but this time with the formal involvement of the City. VAC's inclusion in the Choice Neighborhood project raised coalition members' hopes that residents' concerns about relocation and community-organizations' potential contributions would be central to the future of the neighborhood.

Over the course of the project, it became evident that VAC and the staff of the City did not share an understanding of the process or the potential outcomes of the participatory activities (as described above). Rather, City staff's interest in employing a participatory framework was motivated in part in response to funders' requirements (Raciti et al. 2016). Additionally, they were more accustomed to consultative and consensus-oriented practices in which planning, and architecture firms develop preliminary designs and plans based on secondary data, and present these in short feedback sessions (charettes) for community comment. Thus, the partners from the City did not view themselves as participants in the participatory planning process during the Choice Neighborhood project; rather, they viewed outreach and research as the purview of the UofM partners. When City staff attended participatory planning activities, they often observed from the sidelines rather than actively engaged in the knowledge making, data analysis, or vetting and debating processes. Their ambivalence highlights the unequal levels of interest in exchanging knowledge and ideas about housing and services based on residents' experiences and priorities. It also points to different expectations of how data would be used to plan and design the redevelopment of this public housing community. Finally, it begins to reveal the different levels of power and tensions that shaped the project.

Although data suggested many residents' opposition to relocation and demolition, the redevelopment of mixed-income housing was a priority for City officials who saw it as a major opportunity for economic growth in a long-distressed area. Many public housing residents worried this potential growth would not benefit them, namely that they would be displaced and not able

to return to the redeveloped homes. They wanted to continue to push for alternatives that would allow them to remain in their homes. Meanwhile, university administrators were concerned that the Collaborative's emphasis on supporting residents' interest in alternatives to relocation might jeopardize the broader relationship between the University and the City. Right before the formal end of the federally funded planning initiative tensions erupted into conflict and the City released the University from its contract.

Once the University was no longer part of the Choice Neighborhood project, VAC's internal dynamics changed drastically. Community leaders, with personal and/or economic ties with the local power structure, as well as most residents, who were tenants of the Housing Authority, could not take public stand within the conflict without the risk of losing access to funding from the City or their future housing options. To minimize their vulnerability, they withdrew from the VAC, which gave the public the impression that this was a conflict between individuals on 'two opposing sides – the City and the university professors – rather than the result of different epistemologies and interpretations of the data and knowledge that was generated. Vance residents were eventually relocated, and the public housing complexes torn down. Today, more than half of the housing has been replaced and reoccupied, including an apartment tower for seniors, mixed-income townhouses and single-family homes, and construction of additional housing is ongoing.

The Memphis Urban Transformation Initiative generated important scholarly reflections; it contributed to the evaluation of the US government's approach to housing policies and community development, as well as debates on the relevance and the challenges of the participatory action-research approach in planning (Saija 2016) and anthropology (Lambert-Pennington 2010; Lambert-Pennington, Pfromm 2010). For the authors, it was an occasion to discover (the hard way) that it is difficult to maintain full reciprocity and bidirectionality in the face of highly controversial issues, especially for people standing in very different positions of "power" and "security" within the local social structure.

Our second try: prioritizing bidirectionality

From the VAC experience, the authors wanted to develop an approach to engagement that was able to sustain co-learning, genuine participation, mutual benefit, and experiential-based learning, even in the face of power conflicts and tensions. The opportunity to do so was created by the possibility of working closely with community partners in the Simeto River Valley, in Sicily (Italy), where Saija, already had a participatory action-research collaboration (Saija 2014). The Simeto Valley corresponds to a portion of the Simeto River basin, in Eastern Sicily, comprising the central stretch of the river and the surrounding areas (the southern slope of the volcano Etna on the left bank and the clay hills on the right bank). It hosts a population of about 160,000 people residing mostly within a dozen small towns immersed within a rural area. Towns' rich historic and cultural roots are deeply linked to the local river ecosystem and its resources. As a matter of fact, since the stone age, humans have built settlements at the bottom at the volcano, taking advantage of its solid ground and the proximity to the fertile alluvial plain as well as the abundance of natural water springs. After WWII, the rich rural productive system encountered the modernization paradigm. Throughout the valley, the landscape has been shaped through wetlands remediation and hydraulic regimentation, to support the industrialization of agriculture and the rise of monoculture of the most productive crops.

Figure 2. Simeto Landscape (by Katherine Lambert-Pennington)

Since 2004, in the face of socio-economic and ecological challenges, a network of community activists organized against public institutions' inability to address environmental and economic crises (e.g., waste, water, depopulation) and pursed bottom-up development initiatives. They also gave birth, in 2015, to an umbrella organization called the "Participatory Presidium of the Simeto River Agreement" (Presidium, from now on) aimed at pushing for the implementation of these initiatives. Based on Saija's collaboration with them, in 2009 and 2010, they were clearly interested in using participatory action-research to advance an alternative model of development, one based on social and inter-species solidarity. After Lambert-Pennington's first trip to Sicily, in the summer of 2012, as a faculty participant in the first "experimental" University of Memphis study abroad program in the Valley, the authors and their colleague, Antonio Raciti, had the idea to permanently support actors in the Simeto River community through the establishment of a short but intensive summer program.

The Community Planning and Ecological Design (CoPED) summer school was an opportunity to develop and test an approach to engaged scholarship and experiential learning explicitly aimed at not only establishing, but also sustaining reciprocity between researchers and community members over time, in the effort to simultaneously advance both scientific knowledge, pedagogy, and local benefits. The annual 10-day transdisciplinary and intercultural program – CoPED – was promoted by the University of Memphis, the University of Catania and, since 2015, UMASS Boston in partnership with Simeto groups and activists. Although the program has evolved over time, based on an annual qualitative evaluation of strengths and areas for improvement, involving both students and community partners, generally it follows, the key "structural" elements described below (see also Lambert-Pennington, Saija, Franchina 2018).

Figure 3. CoPED Kick-off: the first exchanges of bi-directional learning, as students and Participatory Presidium share the history of working together and expectations (CoPED photo archive)

Collaborative question framing and operationalization

Every winter we collaborate with Simeto activists and leaders affiliated with the Presidium to identify a "question" that combines research and action dimensions and can be fruitfully addressed – in terms of research, students' learning, and community benefits – in a 10-day time span. In the spring, we then collaboratively transform the question into a concrete 10-day-long learning agenda. We identify who needs to be involved at various levels (full time participants, occasional participants, expert lecturers, etc.), how to make existing data available, which data need to be collected during summer school, and how data will collection and knowledge exchange will take place. For example, in 2017, Simeto activists asked CoPED to help them understand the potential for adopting a Zero Waste strategy in the Valley. During the semester before the summer program, University of Catania students compiled baseline data on the rates of differentiated trash collection, recycling, and waste management practices in 10 towns in the Valley. Before arriving in Sicily, students in the US did best practice research to find examples of cities and organizations in the US and Europe that promoted zero waste practices and shared these examples in a public presentation.

During the 10-day program community members, including high school students and local farmers, joined CoPED participants for lectures by faculty from the University of Catania and zero waste activists on environmental impact of waste and waste management strategies, zero waste, and circular economy. Additionally, students interviewed farmers, municipal officials, small business owners, and individuals involved in recycling and reuse activities. Participants also took field trips to towns and projects that served as recycling and reuse "best practices" in southeastern Sicily. Data from these activities was presented at an interactive community workshop that drew 65 residents, activists, and municipal leaders from across the Valley. Attendees

were particularly interested to see the town-by-town comparison between differentiated trash collection and recycling in the Valley, prompting them to ask why the rates were so different and how this could be addressed through public institutions. These questions formed the basis of the interviews that the students conducted and focused their attention on trying to understand how to decrease the amount of trash entering the waste cycle.

Students presented their final analysis and recommendations during a community meeting, where residents and municipal leaders debated the possibility of implementing a variety of zero waste solutions, primarily reduction and reuse related actions. They also discussed the politics and possibilities of intervening in a waste management system that involves both public and private interests, some of whom contribute to the gray and black-market waste management (Pasotti 2010). In these public exchanges, attendees incorporated ideas and data the students had shared and their own knowledge and experiences of waste management and local politics. Students, in turn, drew on these insights as they developed the final data book and recommendation report to give to the Participatory Presidium. Based on the success of the 2017 edition of CoPED, the mayor of one of the towns in the Valley invited CoPED to focus on zero waste in his municipality for the 2019 program.

Figure 4. Community workshop: Students and residents examine the levels of waste differentiation in towns in the Simeto Valley and discuss points and ideas for reducing the amount of trash entering the waste cycle (by Katherine Lambert-Pennington)

Figure 5. CoPED public workshop: students and residents exchange ideas (by Katherine Lambert-Pennington)

Figure 6. Collective data analysis (by Katherine Lambert-Pennington)

Figure 7. Public debate of potential zero waste projects (by Katherine Lambert-Pennington)

Diversified recruitment strategies

The program is intentionally designed for various audiences. Through a careful selection of applicants, we seek a mix of disciplinary interests, cultural backgrounds, and motivations. Over the years, depending on the specific topic of the school, CoPED faculty and students have come from anthropology, urban planning, architecture, civil engineering, environmental sciences, public administration, law, sociology, social work, and even philosophy. CoPED has always had a proportion of US students from various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, Italian academic participants, community members, and occasionally participants coming from other European countries. Finally, university participants enroll in the program as a partial fulfillment of their graduation requirements or in general as an educational experience. For instance, PhD students or faculty from other universities who are not seeking academic credit but are interested in being exposed to participatory action-research often attend. Additionally, we are also intentional in the recruitment of full-time participants from the local community who have a vested interest in the action dimension of the program. Occasionally, we have community members coming from other areas of Sicily, interested in learning about the participatory methods that could be applied to other contexts also participate. In this way, the methodology and practices circulate in the Valley and, in some cases, in other activist communities in Sicily.

Dissemination is an important element of reciprocity, bi-directional learning, and the long-term impact of CoPED in local participants' communities.

Dialectics between specialized and relational activities

The program is designed around research-learning activities that fall into two general types, specialized and relational, and emphasize cross-contamination of knowledge, methods, and conclusions among students, faculty, and community partners. Specialized activities are centered on knowledge building – data collection and analysis – and include ethnographic and site mapping, tours of farms and lessons of organic agriculture or whatever is relevant to the key theme, surveys conducted door-to-door, and in town squares or other heavily trafficked areas, interviews with key knowledge holders, and focus groups with local association members. Additionally, faculty lead CoPED participants through debriefing and reflections on the data they have collected to develop a data coding "template". This template enables small teams of participants to analyze data, which is then shared and vetted with the group, and later shared and vetted with the public in workshops and presentations. The latter are examples of relational activities, i.e., public knowledge exchanges and experiences. Relational activities include public presentations of best practices research, participatory workshops, presentations of draft strategies, and social dinners for informal exchanges of ideas and culture.

Is CoPED a successful example of University Third Mission?

Over the years we have come to see that our desire to *stay with complexity*[3] is what makes CoPED an enriching bidirectional learning and participatory action-research experience. Nonetheless, the level of complexity in CoPED is not without challenges. For example, the logistics of housing, feeding, and moving 35 or more people around the Valley can be daunting. Working between two languages and across continents can sometimes result in miscommunications between student, faculty, and our community hosts. Additionally, sometimes there is disagreement about what the annual theme and project should be and competition between groups to host CoPED activities. In part this reflects people's enthusiasm for CoPED, but it is also a reflection of the financial and human resources that CoPED represents to the Valley. Finally, community vetting sessions can reveal community members' varied expectations of and satisfaction with the students' proposals as well as tensions over if and how to implement them. Below we outline several broader dynamics that contribute to and complicate the possibilities of doing genuine collaborative and participatory work with communities within the current frameworks of engaged scholarship and the Third Mission.

Institutional buy-in vs. Faculty commitment – In both the US and Italy, engaged scholarship and Third Mission activities are often viewed as valued added to faculty members' other teaching and research activities, rather than as something that is equivalent to them. Often faculty commit to engaged scholarship/Third Mission research activities out of a sense of personal and social responsibility/commitment, even when there is minimal institutional support or recogni-

[3] Our phrasing here intentionally echoes the title of Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) to signal both the complexities of doing bidirectional work and the mixing of knowledges, experiences, epistemologies, and actions that bidirectional transdisciplinary collaborations require.

tion. CoPED's multimodal, multilevel, transdisciplinary, bidirectional praxis does not easily align with institutional metrics, which look to indicators like students trained, publications, and citation counts, as well as revenue from contracts, numbers of patents granted and spin-off firms as standard ways to report activities and impacts (found on most university reports or websites). While some of these indicators align with the work of CoPED (e.g., number of students and publications), in the case of the Third Mission, the program does not produce numbers that fit with the national ministry's way of counting and measuring the value of the public engagement.

Faculty members' choice to pursue this type of work under these circumstances can put their chances for tenure, merit-based pay, and other forms of reward at risk, especially for junior or untenured faculty.

The reality is that developing community relationships, particularly when cultivating bidirectional learning, relationships take time and requires some degree of long-term commitment. For faculty, this can mean saying no to pursuing new research opportunities. Bidirectional learning and participatory action research do not always produce peer reviewed publications or external grants or contracts. Consequently, they can be overlooked in institutional reward structures. More traditionally trained scholars, many of whom are reviewing tenure and promotion portfolios, often challenge the scientific validity and rigor of scholarship that emerges from bidirectional, participatory action research and learning paradigms. Despite evidence that disputes this critique, both in the literature (Whyte 1989; Balazs, Morello-Frosch 2013; Warren et. al 2018) and in our own experiences, researchers must develop ways to counter this discourse both in their institutions and disciplinary contexts. For example, following the engaged turn in anthropology, the American Anthropological Association has developed guidelines for communicating and reviewing public, applied, and practicing scholarship for tenure and promotion.[4]

Community advantage – In an immediate way, CoPED's presence in the Valley is an opportunity to support local businesses (hotels/B&B, restaurants, social enterprises, organic farmers, etc.) though the fees that American students pay for the program. In the intermediate and longer term, CoPED has enabled community partners in the Simeto River Valley to deploy the data and findings for grant proposals and for the implementation of strategies proposed by students (in adapted form). For example, in 2016, we worked on adaptive reuse of an abandoned train station, and the subsequent year, during CoPED we engaged with former employees who still live in the town and contacted the train company that still owned the building. Ultimately the train company gave the station to the municipality who leased it to a community-based organization to reinvigorate it with activities, which included exhibition spaces, a coffee bar, and outdoor performance/meeting space.

Similarly, in 2019, after the valley-wide Zero Waste edition of CoPED, the mayor of one of the towns in the Valley invited CoPED to undertake a town-specific focus on zero waste practices. The mayor's daily involvement in CoPED and engagement with the ideas and findings led the town to adopt a waste reduction and recycling project that was originally proposed by CoPED participants. This included reducing the use of paper in municipal offices and working with the Participatory Presidium and several local associations to develop funding proposals, using the empirical findings from CoPED, to implement Students for Simeto. This project which includes working with high school students to learn about zero waste practices, training

[4] https://www.americananthro.org/AdvanceYourCareer/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1667 (last consulted 12/06/2022)

them on using discarded metal and electronics to repair and/or build new things, as well as using and paper, plastics and other "found" objects in art projects.

While these initiatives demonstrate the practical value of bidirectionality to community partners, they cannot guarantee long-term success of projects that emerge from the program. For example, in the case of the train station, when the municipality wanted to permanently turn the station over the community-based organization in 2021, they were not in a position to take on the full responsibility for the building. Thus, the activities in the space and plans for redeveloping that station and railway as part of a recreational trail are in limbo. Further, in terms of knowledge, approaches to problem solving, resident-municipal collaboration, and economic support, the impacts that stay with and in the community are often not visible to the researchers' home institutions in ways that "count". All the same, the usefulness of the empirical data, the complex and nuanced knowledge of local issues, and trusting relationships are at the heart of being an engaged anthropologist and planner and the very thing that brings CoPED back together every year.

Existential impacts on students – Students' introduction to bi-directional participatory learning during CoPED have lasting impacts on their praxis, change their view of community development, and for some, especially Italian students who participate in CoPED, lead them to draw on these experiences and relationships with the Participatory Presidium for their thesis and future work. Significantly, a number of the active members of the Presidium are alumni of CoPED and they have taken up leadership roles in the coalition. Further, the international exchange and students' exposure to other research practices, theoretical perspectives, and ways of conceptualizing and solving problems, inspired several students to pursue international educational opportunities, including Italian students enrolling in degree programs in the United States, and two CoPED alumni, one Italian and one American, successfully pursuing Fulbright Scholarships. While some of these activities align with how Universities' measure their educational mission, especially students pursuing degrees in other countries, other CoPED related student outcomes do not. Students' adoption of participatory praxis, civic engagement, and desire for further international experiences are less about instilling specific professional norms and more about encouraging students to explore who they want to be and how they want to practice their future profession (which begins during the program in daily debriefing session and in students' final reflection papers). As such, these self-discoveries emerge over the long term, as their positionality and experience change; yet, significantly, these self-discoveries have the potential to change the praxis of anthropology and planning in the 'real world'.

Figura 8. CoPED Kick-off meeting: Brings together students and community partners to learn about each other (CoPED photo archive)

Parting Thoughts

In this paper, we have argued that bidirectional engagement applied to high quality research, teaching, and service offers an alternative approach to the commodifying, extractive practices and 'giving' activities often associated with unidirectional engaged scholarship and Third Mission activities in the US and Italy. We have suggested the challenges that engaged researchers face, both in their institutional and disciplinary contexts, including how engagement is measured, what counts as scientific knowledge production, and expectations related to instruction and training of students. Although each of us came to embrace the practices of engaged scholarship from different disciplinary traditions, both of us were searching for a new way to be researchers that contribute in meaningful ways to both scholarly debates and practical problem-solving. Each of us drew inspiration from various engaged traditions within our disciplines: politically engaged anthropology, postmodernism, complexity theory, participatory planning, participatory action research, and inter/transdisciplinary collaboration. Points of overlap between these traditions, our complementary knowledge and skill sets, and our genuine interest in learning with each other and community partners have kept us together. Our collaborations have revealed the challenges of navigating power inequities and inter-institutional tensions within

collaborative and participatory action research projects, especially when livelihoods, housing, the environment, and relationships are at stake.

Our experience has shown that sustaining bidirectional learning over time is complex and difficult, but not impossible and can be worthwhile – for researchers, students, community partners, as well as for universities. However, it requires that institutions of higher education rethink their engagement metrics, sensitize administrators and decision makers to the scholarly significance of participatory action research, and take into consideration community impacts of engaged scholarship and the Third Mission activities. Such institutional changes will be necessary to move from extraction and giving approaches to more reciprocal, bidirectional forms of engagement. For engaged researchers, it means being willing to *stay with complexity*. Specifically, researchers must remain attentive to differences in positionality and power of all participants; be intentional in developing research structures and practices that prioritize reciprocity and bidirectional learning opportunities; recognize and navigate "back stage" tensions and consistently evaluate and improve their processes and practices; and, finally, engage in cultural critique and politics, especially when advocacy and activism are necessary to bring about transformation.

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