

ARTICLE

# How To Nurture Community Through Storytelling

Azlan Guttenberg Smith

Writing Studies, The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA

Email: [azlans2@illinois.edu](mailto:azlans2@illinois.edu)

(Received 31 August 2024; revised 14 November 2024; accepted 14 November 2024)

## Abstract

How can staging local stories sustain local relationships and community programs? How can community storytelling projects reshape understandings of what research is, does, and for whom? In considering these questions, I draw on my experience facilitating 10+ *Voices* projects. These community storytelling collaborations collect, weave together, and perform true stories. Focusing on *Solidarity Garden Voices* (2023), I trace motivating and guiding principles, including 1) centering community knowledges and choices, 2) celebrating programs beyond my (or any individual) control, and 3) presenting insights inside stories of the lives they come from. I ground these principles in lived moments, as this article is both a portrait of what community-centered research can look like and a song about how such research can feel: disorienting, overwhelming, freeing, inspiring, necessary. Shared.

**Keywords:** Indigenous studies; feminisms; community; queer; writing

## 1. Dirty hands

Fiona Munro tells me we will roll back the greenery, like a carpet, cutting the stems where they emerge from the soil. After we dig up the sweet potatoes, we can unroll the greenery again, laying out the broad leaves as mulch to protect the earth. “I think it’ll work,” Fiona says, smiling. And so we start laughing and joking and feeling a bit tired. We are pushing to finish the harvest before tonight’s freeze.

When I started coordinating the project that became *Solidarity Garden Voices*, I did not know much about agriculture. I knew less about community gardening. To be honest, I had (nagging, unspoken) doubts: could local community gardens ever produce *enough* to impact

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### Land Acknowledgement

“[I] respectfully acknowledge that [I am] on the lands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Piankashaw, Wea, Miami, Mascoutin, Odawa, Sauk, Mesquaki, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Chickasaw Nations. These Nations were forcefully removed from their traditional territories, and these lands continue to carry the stories of these Nations and their struggles for survival and identity. As part of a land-grant institution, [I] have a particular obligation to recognize the peoples of these lands and the histories of dispossession upon which the university rests” (Antoinette Burton and Jenny Davis; adapted with permission from Jenny Davis).

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a nation's food systems?<sup>1</sup> A year later, hands in the dirt, it is not like I had answers for food access or corporate-focused agriculture systems. But Fiona taught me to harvest sweet potatoes. Dusty Bacon taught me to ask for help. Danielle Chynoweth showed me how attending to food logistics can move us past individualism toward mutual aid. Along the way, my questions got more nuanced. What do I mean by enough? By "us"?

The organization Solidarity Gardens is a coalition of local government, nonprofits, farms, and other community members. Starting in 2020, this organization pursues food justice by supporting people in growing crops for their communities. *Solidarity Garden Voices* is a collaborative community storytelling project I facilitated that collected, wove together, and performed true stories from the organization's network. By telling these stories, *Solidarity Garden Voices* planted questions and plans inside a practice of learning from one another's lives. It also celebrated how touching the earth together can refigure social narratives and practical relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Deep collaboration means centering an awareness of what I do not know. That nurtures an attentive respect for the knowledge around me. On campus, inside academic fields that seem largely disengaged from what other fields (and communities) are asking/wanting/living, I can become "entrenched in the circuit of my own truth."<sup>3</sup> Knowledge silos behave purposefully: they create hierarchies to rank who is an expert, who is hired and paid, and who is not.<sup>4</sup> Inside this market, I feel pressure to shout my expertise.

Off-campus, a *Voices* project that tells community stories is not about what *I think*. It is not about what you *should* think. It is about many things, including an intertwined ecosystem of our lives growing together. Creative Writing pushed me to use my training to build an audience. I want to work instead to build a stage for stories from my neighbors in these community gardens. That means tending to relationships and being responsible to the people I work with. That means listening deeply to the stories entrusted to me.<sup>5</sup>

After harvesting sweet potatoes, I sit on the floor, some 50 printed pages scattered nearby. These are some of the true stories contributing authors have shared. I am arranging them into a theater script. I pick up a page where an organizer talks about helping start Solidarity Gardens. That is in 2020. As the pandemic heightened local food insecurity, this coalition came together to grow and deliver two weeks of groceries to anyone who asked. I put that story next to someone wearing winter gloves to the grocery store, not sure what is safe to touch and feeling so alone. What happens if we perform these two together? I usually weave at least three stories into a scene—what else would I add? Sitting on the floor, I want to stop. I am exhausted. I am worried I will not be able to arrange these stories in a way that feels powerful and true to contributing authors. Soon, I will ask for input from these collaborators, but I signed up to arrange this draft. I respect these people. I love their stories and the

<sup>1</sup> Both academic (Ken Meter) and popular (Cecil Castellucci et al.) authors push back on the way scalability can invade and dominate discussions of food systems, obscuring so many other concerns.

<sup>2</sup> Some collaborators include: Fiona Munro, Solidarity Gardens administrator; Outreach & Education Coordinator at Sola Gratia Farm. Dusty Bacon, Solidarity Gardens Community Liaison; PhD Candidate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Danielle Chynoweth, founding Solidarity Gardens leader; Cunningham Township Supervisor. More info: [www.solidarity-gardens-cu.org](http://www.solidarity-gardens-cu.org).

<sup>3</sup> Freire 2005, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Littlefield et al. 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Chickasawscholar Kari Chew.

resonances where they twist together like roots inside the ground. I pick up a page and read a story for the fifteenth or eighteenth time, trying to listen.

I learn from Black Studies, Black Feminism, Critical Race Theory, Queer Studies, and Indigenous Studies.<sup>6</sup> Sarah Keeton suggests, “We come to knowledge, active, emergent, in relation, co-constructing our reality.”<sup>7</sup> *In relation. Our reality.* Universities (and other institutions) can alienate us from our collective emergent knowledge-making.<sup>8</sup> My university might aim (and sometimes succeed) in creating knowledge and possibility, but it also aims (and too often succeeds) in creating a brand of knowledge that is focused on oppression, extraction (bell hooks), settler colonialism; on the creation of a certain type of person who is categorically above another.<sup>9</sup> In facilitating community storytelling, I am working toward collaborations that confront these oppressive systems by centering and supporting the ways that communities are always already “co-constructing our reality.”<sup>10</sup> I am learning from a variety of vibrant traditions whose theoretical frameworks emphasize different possibilities and pitfalls in storytelling. Aja Martinez defines “counterstory” by *what it does*, by the specific ways story forms (parables, *testimonios*, composite characters, and more) can foreground minoritized perspectives in the face of majoritarian systems that bury them. James Joshua Coleman’s “de-storying” emphasizes that communally sharing stories of queer joy can actively “unimagine” dominant narratives of erasure and fatalism.<sup>11</sup> Ojibway playwright Drew Hayden Taylor resists a form of storytelling in which a settler state asks an Indigenous author to become a window into their own community for settler viewing.<sup>12</sup> Kahnawake Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson centers refusal, emphasizing that some stories are not to be shared with some audiences or at all. I learn from specific communities engaging distinct storytelling practices (and theorizations) as part of growing what they need.<sup>13</sup>

To put it personally, I am delighted and inspired by my academic discussions on campus. Every month, I am also so stifled by my university’s assumption of itself as the (primary) site of knowledge that I consider leaving academia forever. I ground into Public Humanities. Into community gardens. Into places that value more knowledge and knowledgemakers. In facilitating community storytelling, I am working to understand my scholarly position as a meeting place where my studied skills join wider community projects enlivened by so

<sup>6</sup> A note on citations: In general, I do not tag scholars by individual disciplines. I do not want to call in hegemonic disciplines to arbitrate our meetings and learnings, especially when many powerful disciplines function by actively defining canons that ignore or bury marginalized voices (Aja Martinez). In saying what counts and how we are supposed to count it, such disciplines can operate as campus-capitalist taxonomies that regulate/discourage learning and meeting instead of supporting it (Jack Halberstam; Metis scholar Judy Iseke & Biigtigong Nishnaabeg scholar Leisa Desmoulins). At the same time, I want to name and celebrate Black Studies, Black Feminisms, Critical Race Theory, Queer Studies, and Indigenous Studies. A discipline can be a way to celebrate, empower, and pull resources toward ways of being and knowing that are attacked/defunded, and to organize against the violence of campus-capitalist systems. I’m still considering citation’s involvement with resource allocation (Jennifer Sano-Franchini et al.) and educational infrastructure (Iñupiaq scholar Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyak & Jordan Frith) and talking with my communities about strategies to cite toward justice.

I follow Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice in naming Indigenous scholars with their people.

<sup>7</sup> Keeton 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Keeton 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Harney and Moton 2013; Smith 2021; Wynter 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Keeton 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Coleman 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Dillon 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Whitehead 2020.

much I do not know.<sup>14</sup> I am trying to engage with and be responsible for my lived communities as we co-construct life paths.

I tell myself: I do not know. I do not know. On campus, as hierarchies encourage us to trumpet our expertise, this litany can feel like a threat. Like self-effacement. As Fiona teaches me to harvest sweet potatoes, it feels instead like delight and possibility. It joins with listen deeply. Listen deeply.

*A principle: I do not know. And we know so much together.*

## 2. These streets are loud—Can we borrow mics?

My friend and fellow PhD Candidate Dusty Bacon told me about Solidarity Gardens in 2022. We would walk for miles through Champaign-Urbana, IL, sometimes past the gardens themselves, spitballing connections between this coalition and our research. Dusty was already volunteering with them. After several months, we applied for a grant through iRegen, a regional regenerative agriculture initiative that offers seed funding. We also asked to meet with Danielle Chenoweth, Cunningham Township Supervisor and a Solidarity Gardens leader. Drawing on 10+ *Voices* projects I have led previously, I proposed a collaboration inviting people to share stories of how these gardens are rooted into our lives. I would arrange pieces of these stories into a script. Actors would perform it in our communities.

Danielle liked the idea. iRegen funded us.<sup>15</sup> A growing group of collaborators drafted lists of people to talk to: farmers, volunteers, organizers, and people who eat what is grown. We discussed what questions might invite people to talk about community gardening as a relationship to earth and each other. I wrote drafts of these questions, and we revised them.<sup>16</sup> I wrote a project description and invitation for Solidarity Gardens' newsletter, and people sent in stories. Others shared stories through in-person interviews. I started putting together a cast of performers. We picked a performance date: Solidarity Gardens' 2023 Harvest Festival. I stressed the hell out: a fluid project like this has people joining and dropping out as they juggle their many commitments, and I was in charge of making sure we finished something on time. I also went to events like Cunningham Township's Back To School Fair, helping Solidarity Gardens distribute free produce and asking if folks wanted to hear about *Voices*. This led to key contributing authors who shared stories from perspectives we otherwise would have missed. For example, one woman liked the idea of Solidarity Gardens, but she had never heard of them. She shared ideas for outreach.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Paulo Freire, Melissa Littlefield et al., Driftpile Cree scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt, Anna Deavere Smith.

<sup>15</sup> Our grant included funding for *Solidarity Garden Voices*, and separate funding so Dusty Bacon could engage Solidarity Gardens in other wonderful ways. In this article, I focus on *Voices*.

<sup>16</sup> It's hard for me to say what "I did," because everything I did collaborated with so many efforts from so many people. I think about how people – especially cis white men; especially scholars and project leaders and PIs – use "I" to take credit for work a community is doing. At the same time, Chickasaw scholar Jenny Davis teaches me: "I" can also be a way of recognizing my position within a community, and purposefully accepting the duties that go with it. I practice that.

<sup>17</sup> Abing et al. 2024.

Through these steps, the project *Solidarity Garden Voices* invited people to share and to listen. It built a stage for different expertise already at work in our community. Joining us for a performance, you would hear experiences of America's segregated cities constraining racialized relationships to the ground. What kind of space do neighborhoods have for community gardens? You would hear about favorite foods. About learning to garden. About capitalist structures keeping someone far from their own body. About fear leading us toward separate stockpiles and community gardens, teaching that when we need help, "someone shows up."<sup>18</sup>

Instead of people making arguments, *Voices* supports people in sharing insightful stories about their own lives. Such stories have vast implications. A gardener describes sharing the earth's sprouting abundance with a visiting family and feels a shift in how they themselves relate to America's scarcity narratives. An organizer invites us to live with them as they navigate institutional frustrations, emotional exhaustion, COVID-19, and the joy of a new program becoming possible. In each story, we see one lived reality of what is possible and what is important. An emphasis on arguments risks removing an "I think" from all its interwoven "I am," "I dos," and "I cares" – from the community life paths that this thought comes from. Listening to and sharing stories can invite deeper relationships and collaborations.

At the Harvest Festival, we set up chairs and tables and borrowed microphones. Most contributing authors came to listen. They brought family. Friends. Other people learned about the performance online or through flyers at the library next door. After the performance, we hosted an open discussion where anyone could take the mic and speak. One person commented how important it was to see "the heart of Solidarity Gardens." This coalition involves more than a dozen organizations, and the performance helped us experience how all the labor comes together into growing and distributing food. Another audience member discussed future plans. A third stood up with tears in their eyes and two small kids at their feet, saying they would have "found their people." They asked, "How do I get involved?" An organizer waved: "You talk to me!" Here was our community, weaving itself in real time.

That is the goal. To support communities in their own ongoing endeavors.

For me, moving responsibly toward this goal means shifting my practices toward what I might call Public Humanities methods and methodologies. No two *Voices* projects unfold the same way. They sprout from interactions between what I can do as a facilitator and what collaborating communities want.<sup>19</sup> I work to be responsible within a community. Then, I trust what we are doing together. When people talk about *designing research*, I remember Ocean Vuong: "The rules, like streets, can only take you to known places. Underneath the grid is a field—it was always there—where to be lost is never to be wrong, but simply more."<sup>20</sup> In a sense, *Voices* practices collectively getting lost as part of being more. I hold onto that when I am overwhelmed. This is not a bus, and I am not driving. I work hard to make sure the script's finished, the performers are ready, and the microphones are borrowed and plugged in, but the reality of what we are performing, why, and where is emergent, relational, and community-driven.

*A principle: Instead of seeking control, I trust community visions of where we are and where we are going.*

<sup>18</sup> Abing et al. 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Many sprouting projects dry out and die early on, compost for something else.

<sup>20</sup> Vuong 2019.

### 3. I am going to need more than bars and co-ops

I did not know Fiona or Dusty when I moved to Illinois in 2019. I did not know anyone in the state, just like I did not know anyone in Oklahoma when I moved there to teach high school in 2014, or in India when I moved there to teach in 2011, or in Massachusetts when I moved there to study in 2006. Along the way, I told people I was Californian (I mean, I hug trees). When they wanted more, I said I was a teacher. When they asked about my background, I said my family was English, Hungarian, German, Polish, and Mexican.<sup>21</sup>

Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice suggests that the United States' mobile, settler colonial society involves replacing community identities with "some vague notion of inherited ethnicity."<sup>22</sup> As institutions, ideologies, and social practices cut apart "relationships" and "one's obligations to kin and place," people like me are maneuvered to be primarily responsible for capitalist identities like *workers* and political identities like *citizens*.<sup>23</sup>

In moving around to study and build a career in the ways I thought I was supposed to study and build a career, I felt the loss of relationships and places. I walked across campus and recognized a friend – only to realize, no, she is six thousand miles away. She is not here. Or I am not there. I vaguely understood these losses as a necessary part of something called growing up.<sup>24</sup> I tried to repair the damage by diving into school communities. In undergrad, my life focused on campus. Then, I threw myself into the social role of a *teacher*, mediated as it is through hierarchical school systems and the identities such systems encourage/construct.<sup>25</sup> In many ways, I was happy. I made good friends. Found amazing mentors. Teaching seemed rewarding, even while I burned out. It is inspiring and humbling to support people as they grow. I organized poetry clubs, discussion clubs, hiking clubs, and collaborative storytelling clubs.<sup>26</sup> I was also increasingly, crushingly lonely. When I moved, heartsick, to Illinois, I consciously set out to build community in a way I would have never done.

I did not know how.

I did things Americans do when they move to loneliness in a new city: dance classes, gym memberships, maker spaces, a housing co-op, and bar trivia nights, even though I honestly do not love bars or trivia. I reached for the practices I could imagine.<sup>27</sup> In discussing Yankton Sioux ethnologist Ella Cara Deloria's novel *Waterlily*, Justice suggests that a community with strong social ties is not a chance harvest or luck of the draw. It is the result of a community that has practices for weaving social ties and reweaving them when they are inevitably frayed. As my loneliness, my research, my Public Humanities organizing, and my joy at community become more and more intertwined, I recognize how *Voices* has always aspired to be one such practice. A way of coming together to weave community.

Considering how communities grow leads me to recognize what communities know. And reconsider what knowledge is. Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson discusses an

<sup>21</sup> I remember practicing this list as a kid. It was hard for me to remember.

<sup>22</sup> Justice 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Justice 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Ng-A-Fook 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Paré 2002.

<sup>26</sup> It's like D&D. Yay nerds!

<sup>27</sup> Miller 1984. Last night, I was awake for a while, caught up in the way all these spaces are mediated by overt capitalism.

epistemology in which knowledge is not seen as belonging to an individual. When I start thinking about that, to be honest, it is wild. So much of my academic training shores up systems that fundamentally encourage, defend, and pursue knowledge ownership. Right now, I am logged into three article databases, all paid, all through my university library at an institution that pays and charges a lot. Most people I know are against a *banking model of education*, but general advice on campus still emphasizes that my CV should demonstrate me amassing publications, awards, and knowledge, so I am a proven producer who is worth buying on the job market.

Then Wilson describes an epistemology in which knowledge is not even the kind of thing that can be individually owned. I listen. It is a relief like breathing.

(All this is confusing for me to navigate. I am trying to steer into that confusion. Cherokee scholar Rachel Jackson suggests if we are “disoriented” by working to engage Indigenous cosmologies in our academic writing approaches, we can take that disorientation “as a good sign and follow it.”<sup>28</sup>)

On the one hand, I find it incredibly important while facilitating community storytelling to insist that stories belong to the people who live them. There is a long, awful tradition of academic projects stealing, misusing, erasing; and otherwise doing violence to stories. I feel a weighty responsibility to be accountable to my collaborators and weave the stories they share into a performance they recognize as true to and respectful of them. That is why the first revised draft of *Solidarity Garden Voices* went to contributing authors, asking if there was anything they wanted to cut, add, or change. I do not know how to weave the duty of community except by working to live up to the duty of community.

At the same time, *Solidarity Garden Voices* is not a script, performance, or video recording. While those are the “deliverables” I led with when requesting funding, they do not fully reflect the shared work and relationships of what a project is. The gardens are a collaboration of people growing food to share. *Voices* is a collaboration of people growing the shared space between and throughout our stories. *Voices* weaves stories together: you hear some thoughts from one speaker, thoughts from a second, more from the first, some from a third. This practice attends to resonances, relationalities, multi-voiced interpretations; the collective nature of experience and action.<sup>29</sup> *Voices* is an ongoing commitment to engage with each other. Do not the knowledge and possibilities it stages live inside these engagements?

Collaborators find it powerful to hear their words performed in conversation with others’ words. Even participants who did not share a story often hear themselves in the performance, as with someone who approached me after *Solidarity Garden Voices*: “I didn’t contribute something, but that woman at the end talking about fear—it was like she was talking to me.” Can someone own the mutual space where we recognize ourselves?

Coming together to hold words in our mouths and taste them with our ears is a powerful way of recognizing mutual space. Oji-Cree scholar Joshua Whitehead writes, “The very act of putting breath to language, of making sound, is an entry into community-based care.”<sup>30</sup> He says oral storytelling enters into “the building of futures through the interlacing of our

<sup>28</sup> Jackson 2024.

<sup>29</sup> By “practice” I mean the ongoing exchanges between me and collaborators, not the text as it appears in a google doc (which, when I look back at it alone, always feels like a deflated scrap of algae removed from water).

<sup>30</sup> Whitehead 2022.



histories.”<sup>31</sup> I could see someone reading this as a large claim. How could speaking aloud carry such power? Then again, think about a conversation with someone you trust. Were there moments when you felt recognized? Felt met? Felt held? Think about a community conversation you have been part of where the group thought through where you all were and where you were going. Being together to exchange stories and build relationships can attend to the sounds of our voices, the place of our meeting, the presence of community members we miss, or community members we are trying to avoid. Sharing stories and talking together can be a “collective event,” “emergent.”<sup>32</sup> *Voices* never goes exactly how I or anyone else planned. It is touched by all our hands.

*A principle: Speaking and listening together can create shared space for knowledge that is collective, emergent, and ours.*

#### 4. Our tools

I want to end by thinking about practices and tools and how we keep developing them. A lot of people I know are not sure what we can do with Public Humanities. I am not sure. But I think we can learn how to move by staying attentive and responsible to our communities, relationships, curiosities, commitments, abilities, hurts, and hopes – by trusting our anger toward damaging systems and our dedication toward liberatory possibilities.<sup>33</sup> You do not have to know what you are doing to let yourself start trying.

Here are some of *Voices*’s movements, leading toward questions I find useful in growing practices and tools. I am suspicious of commodified best practices.<sup>34</sup> As we work inside the realities and needs of our communities, I want instead to invite you into the garden to share what my collaborators and I are doing. To consider, in conversation with us, what you want your research to be, to do, and for who. Another time, I would love to be invited to your garden or print shop or – I do not know – Hack Space Cafe to see what you and your collaborators are doing. Maybe we will weave community threads between us.

*Voices* builds stages for overlapping stories here in our community. For me, this is *against* social structures that focus so much of our attention on a few stories from celebrities, *Netflix*, and “geniuses.” It is against an academic conceit of single-authored expertise and *toward* interwoven contextual knowledge. It is toward spaces for listening deeply to people who ride the same bus. It is a methodology for staging performances of *here*, where *here* grounds into some kind of community that makes it practical to collaborate. If you are excited about Solidarity Gardens from where you are reading on Indigenous land near Tucson, that is awesome, but it is a long walk to come to harvest sweet potatoes. I can still ask:

*What stories, archives, activities, and mysteries are you drawn to? What collaborations do you want, what collaborators might you work with? What practical collaborative space might you all open?*

*Voices* brings theater and writing tools to places they do not often go. This is against academic siloing and toward transdisciplinary and/or undisciplined approaches that honor and engage many knowledge traditions. It is toward using university resources and tools to

<sup>31</sup> Whitehead 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Simpson 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Keeton 2022; Smith 2021; Halberstam 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Shea 2022.



empower knowledge that academia often devalues. I was the first humanities facilitator to apply for an iRegen grant. We found productive resonance between my approaches to stories, their engagement with agricultural research and food systems, and expertise from farmers, grocery store workers, community organizers, agricultural lobbyists, poets, scientists, and more. More personally, I taught high school theater for years and loved it, but I grew frustrated with rehearsing words from famous people. I also study writing and narrative structures. So when I ask *how can I help my communities hear more of our stories*, theater, and creative writing tools feel close. I brought those tools and sat with a *Voices* contributor who was trying to tell a true story she had never shared. First, she wanted to hear about my fiction: talking about that helped grow trust. Then she started asking questions about narrative structure: where do I start? There is so much – what do I include? I offered strategies: “Sometimes I start in the middle and explain how I got there.” “Sometimes I use an object or location to tether the story, a touchstone we can keep coming back to.” She adapted my suggestions, making them her own as we worked to tell the story the way she wanted. I wonder sometimes about being “too involved,” but writing also teaches me that *saying what I mean* is hard. She asked for my suggestions, appreciated my support (like I appreciate everyone who helped revise this), and wanted to see her story on stage. After the performance, she asked me to introduce her to the actress who performed her story. The two sat together, sharing, learning, growing, and feeling their connected strength.

*What tools do you know, study, or love? Where could you bring these tools, and who might welcome and appreciate them? What projects might grow?*

*Voices* invites community members to give their words to each other. A theater student once told me, “There is so much I need to say but cannot because I do not have the words. Then I memorize a speech and open my mouth, and the words are there because someone else wrote them.” This student turned to art to help say herself. I do the same thing. Now, I open my mouth, and the words I need are there because she said them. As Alok Vaid-Menon writes, “Becoming ourselves is a collective journey.”<sup>35</sup> *Voices* help us open space for each other as we open space for ourselves as we open space for each other. This is against an individual stable definition of subjectivity and toward our mutual co-construction.

*Voices* invites contributors to hear their stories on another community member’s lips. This does not replace people speaking their own stories, which I consider a necessary practice. But it does open another space for people who do not want to be on stage but want their story told. Jackie Abing, a PhD Candidate in Anthropology who has become a dear friend while contributing to and performing in *Voices* projects, describes our process as *accepting invitations*. Coming to a performance is accepting an invitation “to become part” of a community of witnessing. Performing is accepting an invitation to “embody” the story someone entrusted to you.<sup>36</sup> Contributing a story is trusting your community to carry a piece of you. These invitations and acceptances lived together, create a “material space of empathy” that “comes with a responsibility.”<sup>37</sup> This is against an ethics of objectivity and toward an ethics of care. It is against a whole bunch of interpretative binaries (true/false;

<sup>35</sup> Vaid-Menon 2020. When I read that I cried. It’s not only because I’m genderqueer, and the very reality of what I am feels possible when I’m celebrating with my queer community, but that’s definitely part of it.

<sup>36</sup> Abing 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Abing 2024.

valid/invalid; agree/disagree; good/bad, as it relates to a story or worldview) and toward reciprocal accountable relationships that honor where each person is and what they bring.

*With Voices, we ask, how do we honor the stories entrusted to us? How are we entrusting our communities with our work, ourselves? What practices help us stay accountable? More broadly, what are you entrusting, and to whom? Who is entrusting something to you, and how do you honor them? What invitations do you want to open and accept? What practices will help you stay accountable?*

I know I need my community to recognize myself. I spent so long trying to fit into *he*. Pretending it did not hurt. Naming my genderqueer identity is wonderful, but it is also powerful to hear myself in the voices of family and friends. When a friend says *they* – easily, lovingly – it is a reminder that I am seen. That we are in a supportive, powerful community together. When I hear a friend telling someone about my work with *Voices*, it is a celebration.

Have you ever gotten to hear someone who cares about you saying a piece of your story? Carrying a few words of who you are? We can do that when we are asked for one another.

*A principle: Work with and towards your communities, shaping ways to use what you have toward what you all need.*

**Azlan Guttenberg Smith**, MFA, is an art facilitator, writer, educator, scholar, and someone who's uncomfortable with bios (and writing itself, though sometimes they love it). Can we enact a meeting in a printed bio? What kind of meeting would it be, and is that the kind of meeting we want? They currently work and learn as a Public Humanities Fellow and PhD Candidate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Their art facilitation empowers communities, encouraging coalition by creating live performances of interwoven stories and lives. Their research moves toward queer possibilities and collective liberation. They love when people find ways to let writing listen as well as speak.

**Author contributions.** Conceptualization: A.G.S.; Funding acquisition: A.G.S.; Investigation: A.G.S.; Methodology: A.G.S.; Project administration: A.G.S.; Writing – original draft: A.G.S.; Writing – review and editing: A.G.S.

**Funding statement.** No funding was received for this article.

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares none.

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