



# Communication Design Quarterly

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Community Engaged Researchers and Designers: How We Work and What We Need <i>Timothy R. Amidon, Kristen R. Moore, Michele Simmons</i> .....	5
Designing Public Identity: Finding Voice in Coalitional Technical Writing with Black-Led Organizations <i>Carrie Grant, Dorian Walker</i> .....	10
Seeking Out the Stakeholders: Building Coalitions to Address Cultural (In)equity through Arts-Based, Community-Engaged Research.....	
<i>Olivia M. Wertz, Kandi Workman, Erin Brock Carlson</i> .....	18
Community-Driven Concepts to Support TPC Coalition Building in a Post-Roe World <i>Maria Novotny, Maya Grobel, Gina Davis, Jennifer Vesbit</i> .....	28
Making Graduate Student CER Practices Visible: Navigating the Double-Binds of Identities, Space, and Time <i>Lydia Allison, Salma Kalim, Christopher Maggio, Megan Schoettler</i> .....	38
The Hidden Labor of Sustaining Community Partnerships <i>Megan Faver Hartline</i> .....	44

Communication Design Quarterly  
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## Communication Design Quarterly

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# Communication Design Quarterly

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# Community Engaged Researchers and Designers: How We Work and What We Need

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## ABSTRACT

This introductory essay describes the need for clarity and openness surrounding community-engaged research projects, which comprise expertise, efforts, and experiences that often fail to make their way into traditional research accounts and articles.

## CCS Concepts

Social and Professional Topics

## Keywords

Community-engaged research, institutional critique, critical methodology, just use of imagination

## INTRODUCTION

For those of us within the fields of Professional and Technical Communication and Communication Design who do community-engaged research (CER), it perhaps goes without saying that the institutions we work in as researchers are not well-suited to support the types of activities and practices involved within our scholarship. Institutional Review Boards refer to our community partners as “subjects;” peer-reviewers seek evidence of objectivity and clean, unmessy data; tenure and promotion (T&P) requirements draw delineations between community work and research. Heck, at times, the kinds of products and outcomes associated with CER often don’t resemble traditional *research* at all. Rather, these products and outcomes might take the shape of technical communication or communication design scholars partnering with community groups and organizations to fund or facilitate meetings or workshops, develop grant proposals, create documentation, improve the usability of organizational processes or services, and/or participate in activist campaigns to respond to injustices causing harm within communities. Largely, the dissimilarity in products and outcomes is reflective of the methodological drift between conducting *research* and *engaging* with communities, as the ideologies, values, stances, and practices centered within traditional methodologies do not neatly align with those centered in community-engaged scholarship. From our perspective, it is important to name those distinctions because research paradigms have powerful downstream effects in terms of the outcomes they pursue. In the call for this special issue, we’ve sought to foreground and name this distinction to work towards opening space for future CER/Ss within PTC/CD for three critical reasons.

Foremost, CER strays markedly from the traditional economies that have governed how, why, and on what terms scholarship is enacted within the academy. Pointing to these very structures over a decade ago, Gelmon et al. (2013), scholars conducting CER in public health, concluded: “Most universities do not have in place the incentives and supports needed for faculty to work in this way. [...] Faculty are generally rewarded more for publishing a paper in an academic journal or receiving grant funding than for contributing to

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meaningful societal change” (p. 59). Their sentiments and examples resonate with our own experiences and research in CER that reveal academia is poorly structured to scaffold the kinds of relational, justice-oriented, or world-making work associated with CER. CER entails different practices than other forms of research and design; yet the field offers few opportunities to shuck its traditional formats and expectations so that scholars and community partners can share their knowledge and expertise or work in meaningful collaboration. Instead, CERs cobble together knowledge and training from networks, often learning from experience, trial-and-error, or unpublished accounts.

The upshot is that CER expertise is generally unpublished and therefore unacknowledged in the universities that tenure and promote us. Instead, the uncritical acceptance of traditional research paradigms perpetuate expectations about what research *is* and how research aligns with (or deviates from) the normative timelines that drive academic institutions. As such, the knowledge made at every stage of community-engaged work can remain invisible, and the coalitional work needed to be successful, ethical, and just researchers fails to “count” in our professional reviews. This tension, between traditional academic expectations and CER actualities, limits the ability of scholars within institutions to sustainably engage in this work. Within Simmons and Amidon’s (2019) study of CERs in CD, for example, a number of the participants reported that they had to maintain a traditional research program in addition to their CER program because the products associated with cultivating, maintaining, and sustaining relationships with community partners were not recognized within their institutions as “research” and because the time commitments and deep relational investments associated with CER did not lend to meeting scholarly timelines for production. The end result: the capacity of research and academic institutions and individual scholars to engage in work that creates value with and returns agentive decision to communities is stunted, limited, and harmed.

As the authors in this special issue illustrate, neither the time it takes to cultivate trusting relationships with community partners nor the types of products and outcomes that grow from community-engaged scholarship align with the productivity expectations associated with tenure and promotion criteria and timelines. While we’ve observed increasing symbolic acceptance of CER, we’ve also encountered a hesitance within our own institutions to adapt and modify the traditional economies that have been instantiated within T&P standards in order to open up value structures and institutional scaffolding to support the work that scholars do in CER. For instance, annual activity reports at institutions rarely provide categories within annual activity reporting that recognize the work associated with building relationships, adding capacity within public organizations and initiatives, and/or creating products that fall outside of traditional academic publications, grants, or press releases.

Consequently, the traditional economies that continue to drive institutional reward systems, expectations, and productivity metrics extend outward, influencing disciplinary spaces and genre expectations. Word counts and IMRAD formats, for instance, demand discussions of methods associated with study design, participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis, while excluding or sidelining meaningful discussion of the kinds of relational labor that make CER possible in the first place. That is, the genre conventions surrounding “objective” methods, results, analysis, and discussion sections reinforce colonial logics

of “discovery” through the promulgation of “findings-centric” sections, while rendering imperceptible the agility, expertise, and innovation that comprise CER methodologies. Moreover, traditional genres often obscure the perspectives of community partners and community members by limiting how their own stories get included within write ups. Yet, their wisdom, knowledge, words, stories, and experiences could be incredibly valuable for leading the next generation of scholarship within PTC and CD toward approaches that can cultivate sustainable, reciprocal, justice-oriented partnerships through trust and coalition. We editors argue that the processes through which we often enact disciplinaryity, such as peer-review timelines for monographs and journals, tend to center values such as critique, “rigor,” or production, over values such as adaptability, kindness, and care, which are necessary for cultivating spaces and outcomes wherein scholars and community co-create in ways that combine their unique forms of situated knowledge and expertise (Anti-Racist Reviewing Heuristic).

Again, these aren’t entirely novel challenges in CER. The persistence of barriers to CER observed by Gelmon et al. (2013) in the field of public health illustrate how ongoing “resistance to CES [continues to be] grounded in the culture and traditions of the academy, home of an intellectual elite who are separate from the community by virtue of their advanced education” (2013, p. 63). Yet, our institutions, disciplines, communities, and world simultaneously face grand challenges that are continually expanding in terms of their complexity and consequence for our communities and world. Here we think of the extrajudicial killing of Black folx and disparate forms of inequity and injustice spanning the Majority and Minority world; we consider the increasing attacks across the globe (including the US) on women’s and LBGQT+, folx’ rights, autonomy, and agency to their own bodies; and we contemplate the catastrophic environmental, economic, ecological, and ethical/humanistic impacts of wildfire, drought, water insecurity, flooding, sea level rise, and biodiversity loss associated with colonialism, monopoly capitalism, and global climate change. Across these (and more) contexts, it’s painfully clear that the status quo does not and cannot sufficiently provide tools or approaches necessary to our collective survival and the thriving of Earth.

Indeed, in their call to action Jones and Williams (2020) proclaimed that “The just use of imagination is praxis, where theory meets practices in service of re-shaping the lived experiences of marginalized and oppressed peoples. The just use of imagination cannot take up static residence in the heads and hearts of allies and accomplices. The just use of imagination must be transformative” (np). Following their call, we envisioned this two-volume special issue as a step toward a more critical praxis, in that it seeks to offer perspectives, practices, critiques, theories, and stories of coalition building that illuminate how scholars in PTC and CD might realize more just methodologies in CER. To apply Jones and Williams’ articulation of “A Just Use of Imagination” to CER, we must not only reimagine how we might marshal institutional resources, expertise, energy, and capacity to center the perspectives of those who are most vulnerable and marginalized to respond to the grand challenges before us, but also reject the traditional economies and logics that have taken up residence within institutional and disciplinary spaces and replace them with the forms of critical positionality, reflexive methodology, culturally sustaining practice, and relational work necessary for enacting change coalitionally within communities. That’s what this special issue aims to do: to invite traditionally silenced narratives, expertise, and examples of

CER, and to do so in innovative formats.

This special issue, then, emerges from a tension between the ways CER consumes our time, energy and research programs and the need for critical imagination in solving community-based problems; it emerges from the need for coalitions that do agile, innovative work and the sacrosanct nature of single-author publications. It also grows out of a larger ongoing tension, surrounding the power dynamics associated with who gets to do research and on what terms, such as those Grenz (2023) outlined when discussing in *Nature* how Indigenous scholars' capacity to work within Indigenous communities are harmed by "[IRB processes that] impos[e] requirements that alienate us from our own People" (p. 221). And, it grows from the increasing recognition of agencies like the USDA, DOE, NSF, and NASA that stakeholders from beyond the academia will play a critical role in responding to today's societal grand challenges (see, for instance, NSF "Broader Impacts" (2023a) or "Convergence Research"(2023b). Yet, few holistic and authentic accounts of CER are in the pages of the journals we go to for expertise. The outcomes and outputs take priority over the boots-on-the-ground work. If we are to be ethical and just, we need to insist on a different view of community-engaged research, and that's what the articles in this issue do: account for the holistic, authentic, and practical challenges of CER.

## WHAT'S IN THIS ISSUE

In our RFP, we called for scholars who could help us understand coalitional work in community-engaged research and communication design. We argued that "communication design needs even more examples of collaboration across differences—examples that showcase how collaboration can be enacted to materially improve conditions with communities and bend existing designs toward social justice" (RFP). The authors in this special issue illustrate that coalitions for justice in CER require new ways of working and thinking together. Grant and Walker illustrate this point well in their experience report, "Designing Public Identity: Finding Voice in Coalitional Technical Writing with Black-Led Organizations," which calls into question traditional forms of CER that subjugate the activity of technical writing in favor of teaching or studying it. In building a coalitional approach to CER, Grant and Walker emphasize the importance of centering organizational needs, offering an honest vision of equitable collaboration. "[I]n practice," they write, equitable collaboration "means putting the community's vision first in order to break cycles of academic exploitation of marginalized groups. From the community side, collaboration takes bravery to express real needs, disengaging from games of trying to meet (racist) white models of success." Grant and Walker highlight the need for rejecting academic priorities in CER—and, further, they inspire us to change academic priorities both in the ways departmental units celebrate scholarship and in the ways disciplines report on and reflect scholarly work.

In "Seeking Out the Stakeholders: Building Coalitions to Address Cultural (In)equity through Arts-Based, Community-Engaged Research," Wertz, Workman, and Carlson provide a different set of coalitional practices, offering us a perspective on coalitional research that is rooted in participatory design. In centering the needs of an arts organization in Appalachia, they echo Costanza-Chock (2020) in building values statements that establish norms around a group committed to cultural equity; this methodological detail provides us with a deeper understanding of how we can use documents and statements to build coalition among community

members. In inviting a local artist to help them develop a values statement, they illustrate an important applied step in building trust in communities and moving towards coalition. Building coalitions is, as Novotny, Grobel, Davis, and Vesbit note in their article, "Community-Driven Concepts to Support TPC Coalition Building in a Post-Roe World," slow work that must be deliberate and patient. Novotny, Grobel, Davis, and Vesbit wisely advise: "Coalition building takes time and labor; it can be slow; and it requires dedication. In short, it is not easy work and as such it can be difficult to navigate how one may engage or build their own coalitions." The articles in this collection provide support for others as we navigate CER and seek justice through our scholarly work.

For us editors as well as the contributing authors, one notable necessity in establishing both CER and coalitions is a deep understanding of one's own positionality, which Walton et al. (2019) define as, "a way of conceiving subjectivity that simultaneously accounts for the constraints and conditions of context while also allowing for an individual action." As Novotny, Grobel, Davis, and Vesbit aptly demonstrate, recommendations for CER must be contextualized both in terms of the situation and in terms of the individual's position. They recommend decentering as an approach to considering trust and suggest, "De-center yourself and your expertise to consider what may be missed or not taken account for in your approach." Good advice, to be sure. But they go further in introducing positionality as a key guide for this work: "Remember, de-centering is a practice which varies depending upon one's embodied positionality. That is, it is one thing to de-center oneself as a cisgender white man than to de-center as a queer Black woman." Such framing allows us to critically engage with communities holistically, but considering positionality is demanding and difficult because we're not necessarily invited or required to consider it critically in graduate programs. [Kristen gives a shout out to Michele here, who did, in fact, require that graduate student researchers (Kristen included) engage with positionality as a course of all research—not just community-engaged research].

In "Making Graduate Student CER Practices Visible: Navigating the Double-Binds of Identities, Space, and Time," Allison, Kalim, Maggio, and Schoettler provide a compelling dialogue about institutional positionality and, more specifically, the double-bind of graduate student researchers in the community. In their dialogic reflection, they help us understand a sort of epistemic violence (to echo Dotson, 2011) that occurs in graduate school: because academia illustrates authority in only one way, graduate students in the community can struggle to co-create knowledge in communities, to defer to community members and allow community needs to drive their projects. In other words: academia doesn't honor coalitional knowledge-making. This, as Allison, Kalim, Maggio and Schoettler teach us, is a problem for graduate student community-engaged researchers; they needed to be slow, to engage in reciprocity, to shirk traditional values. But in all of their cases, their positions as graduate students meant that they also needed to be careful to balance commitments to their communities alongside academic expectations and timelines.

Hartline similarly ruminates on positionality as she discusses how her various institutional roles allowed for and demanded differing approaches to building community partnerships. She shares the many resources she now engages as a tenure track faculty member in her CER work and explains:

As a graduate student, I largely did not have the time or knowledge to go through these processes and give them the time and care necessary for ethical community engagement...the demands of moving to a new place for a short period of time, taking coursework, prepping new classes to teach, and planning the largest research project of your life thus far—all with few financial and time resources—make building partnerships a particularly difficult task for graduate students. As such, Hartline’s discussion of community-partnership work offers a number of perspectives on community-engaged work, as she narrativizes her experiences building relationships and integrating them into her classrooms and research.

As we editors reflect on this volume of the special issue, we find the practicality of each submission remarkable and perhaps as importantly note that in many cases the practicality bore out of genre exploration. For example, Hartline might have developed the same themes for understanding community-based work (time, positionality, trust) even without employing narrative—but we understand those themes and principles more effectively because they’re contextualized. And it’s possible that Allison, Kalim, Maggio, and Schoettler would have always had the same suggestions for others doing CER work as graduate students; but we can locate the suggestions in their shared dialogue (patiently listening for stories and using inclusive strategies and tactics) in order to “turn double-bind situations into productive moments” and “creat[e]... thoughtful community-engaged methodologies.” Similarly, Novotny, Grobel, Davis, and Vesbit’s detailed explication of methodological practice would likely never find the pages of a traditional research article, because our genres tend to celebrate findings and downplay the boots-on-the-ground work needed to gather data. In more standardized study designs, this may work well enough: here’s my method—now you can understand how I got my findings. But with CER, there’s more to it. The authors in this special issue demonstrate as much.

## STATEMENT FOR EVALUATING AND VALUING CER IN PTC FOR T&P

These articles offer us examples of agility and innovation for navigating the liminality of shifting positionality, for building transdisciplinary coalitions, and for pushing the boundaries of genre expectations in order to better document the slow labor of this work and the methodologies and practices that must be developed, adapted, and readapted to ethically, inclusively, and equitably accommodate the complexities of inquiry across community members, community organizers, and researchers, whose roles may shift and overlap in the pursuit of justice. These articles offer community-engaged researchers, and those seeking to do this work, pathways toward approaches that support our intentionality of inviting affected stakeholders from the beginning and throughout to collaboratively develop research questions, analyze findings, and respond to shifting and unanticipated situations that occur in community settings in order to improve conditions that matter to community members; research projects that highlight rather than hide the slow work and material forces of coalition building, collaborative knowledge making, and community organizing; and transparency about the time and labor for building trust within those communities. These articles share the disconnect between adding capacity with communities and fulfilling institutional criteria for promotion. These articles offer a step toward making community-

engaged research more sustainable because we are sharing the practices, the processes, the challenges, the slow work, that is often absent in academic write ups.

Drawing from this research, as well as our own experiences, we believe a shift is needed in T&P evaluation, in academic journal genre expectations, and in IRB practices. We encourage those on T&P committees and those writing T&P review letters to consider ways to acknowledge the different kinds of work required in CER when evaluating tenure cases—work that reflects scholarship and expertise. We invite IRB offices to develop critical review boards and requirements for community-engaged research that ask questions that center community partners and respond to the demands of CER. Such boards must be agile enough to not function as yet another impediment to CER, while also ensuring that those seeking to do this work have meaningfully designed projects that will add capacity and value with communities rather than causing harm. Even more importantly, IRBs and those who work alongside them need to also critically consider how their practices can participate within the ongoing legacies of colonial harm that Indigenous communities have shouldered. As Grenz (2023) argued, many IRB practices do not align with Indigenous worldviews and practices, and requiring Indigenous scholars to align with those worldviews and practices goes against the kinds of relationality needed for working with/ in these communities. Instead, she suggested that “Indigenous academics [should] stand before Indigenous communities, and be wholly and solely accountable to them” (p. 221). Further, since universities benefit from the community engaged work of scholars (e.g., Carnegie Engaged University status), but rarely extend that benefit in ways that value the actual capacity building and coalition building that scholars co-contribute with community, we invite the creation of committees that understand and speak to the disconnect facing CER. This disconnect perpetuates an unsustainable model for scholars who aim to redress localized oppression and injustice with their work.

To redress this structural problem, we call for (and offer) a broader understanding of what counts as scholarship. Relegating to service any work done with and in communities diminishes the expertise, scholarship, and research that helped develop that work. (If grants written for “academic” research can count toward productivity, why can’t grants written with communities?) Creating partnerships and coalitions requires not only time, trust building, and methodologies for working across a range of experiences and expertise, but also a commitment to privilege the needs and stories of those coalition members. Valuing co-authored work with community members is essential to honoring those stories and sustaining community-engaged work. This shift is slow work too. However, starting in our own spheres of influence—on departmental T&P committees, in our external reviewing practices, on IRB committees—we can chisel at the institutional practices that challenge community-engaged research to do and be better. We can share these arguments with our colleagues and field. We can make space for (quite literally in our genres) and support the relational and justice-oriented labor community engaged researchers set out to undertake. We can be more imaginative in supporting community-engaged research that aims for justice. Toward those aims, we invite you to [contribute to the development of a statement on community-engaged research](#) and draw from it when making arguments about CER research and how it is valued within academic institutions.



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# Designing Public Identity: Finding Voice in Coalitional Technical Writing with Black-Led Organizations

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## ABSTRACT

This experience report offers an applied example of coalitional communication design, written collaboratively by a white faculty member for a student grant writing program and a Black executive director of a community organization. Highlighting the needs, thought processes, and practical considerations of doing antiracist technical communication work collaboratively from varied identity positions, we detail an ongoing effort to redesign a Black community organization's public voice to honor Black humanity and communal healing. This example spotlights the possibilities of coalitional technical writing that deeply engages with and supports community needs, one way to meet the challenge of TPC's social justice imperative.

## CCS Concepts

Social and Professional Topics

## Keywords

Community engagement, Social justice, Race, Nonprofits, Technical communication

## INTRODUCTION

Community-engaged research frequently involves negotiating relationships across identity differences. As Simmons and Amidon (2019) documented in their interviews with community-engaged researchers, these differences can create barriers to accessing particular communities, requiring careful navigation in order to forge successful partnerships. Building trust between academics and communities can be challenging even when personal identities mostly align; but add in the potential for misunderstandings and disagreements based on differing cultural backgrounds—and soon positive partnership experiences can seem dauntingly difficult to achieve.

Yet, learning to build such coalitions across difference is crucial to centralizing advocacy work in technical and professional communication (TPC) in light of the social justice turn (Jones, 2016; Walton et al., 2019). In working to become more attuned to justice, TPC scholarship has begun offering approaches and frames for coalition building, like comradeship (Brock Carlson, 2022), culturally-situated translation (Gonzales, 2018), reflective “work before” collaboration (Pouncil & Sanders, 2022), and equitable partnership tactics (Grant, 2022). One model offered by Walton et al. (2019) for technical communicators seeking to build coalitions toward social justice is the 4 Rs: we must “recognize, reveal, reject, and replace” unjust practices, both within systems and ourselves (p. 133).

Enacting the 4 Rs in TPC includes interrogating scholarly practices within our own field. An arena that has been revealed for its injustice is the field's longstanding dismissal of Black practices and contributions to TPC (McCoy et al., 2020). We cannot be said to be working toward social justice if we are still disciplining Black voices into white definitions of professionalism, actively participating in anti-Black linguistic racism (Baker-Bell, 2020). Thinking about linguistic justice within community-engaged TPC work requires acknowledging the impacts of identity differences. How can we *recognize* the cultural assumptions we're bringing into our collaborations, *reveal* the biases we impose, *reject* racist language “best practices,” and *replace* white impositions with

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culturally-situated responses (Walton et al., 2019)?

In this experience report, we offer one applied example of a coalitional communication design effort to prioritize Black epistemologies in response to community needs. Writing collaboratively as a white faculty member for a student grant writing program (Carrie Grant) and a Black executive director of a community organization (Dorian Walker), we hope to demonstrate coalitional practice in action. We zoom in on a specific project to highlight the particular needs, thought processes, and practical considerations of doing antiracist technical communication work collaboratively from varied identity positions. Our project under study: an ongoing effort to redesign a Black community organization's public identity—dismantling white institutional models of health in favor of a voice that honors Black histories of communal healing. We'll analyze the origins and dilemmas of FSN's public voice, along with our collaborative efforts negotiating its shift. This example of finding FSN's voice, together, spotlights the possibilities of coalitional technical writing that deeply engages with and supports community needs, one way to meet the challenge of TPC's social justice imperative.

We also aim to highlight the value of directly *doing the work needed*, rather than always ensuring academic research outcomes. We were initially uncertain of our eligibility to be included in this special issue because of its focus on community-based *research*. We did have an IRB-approved study planned some time ago related to gathering community narratives. But when the project fell through, we realized the organization's more immediate needs laid elsewhere. The most pressing coalitional need, at least right now, is not research about, or even on behalf of, the community. The organization knows their community, and they understand their needs well. What's needed to better serve them is technical writing support. The organization needs hands on deck to actually get things done, like writing grants, annual reports, website structure and content, event marketing, and social media. Why does being an academic in TPC seem to so limit our purview against actually producing technical and professional communication, rather than merely teaching or studying it?

In addition to highlighting strategies for collaborating across difference, we hope this experience report will serve as a call and model for more academic community engagement efforts to *do the work needed* in the communities that surround us, whether that work includes academic research outcomes or not. Leveraging our expertise and resources to do some actual direct technical communicating in support of marginalized communities is worthwhile in our pursuit of a more socially just TPC.

## About the Case: A Communal Organization with Clinical Language

This case comes from an ongoing partnership between a university community grant writing program, Grantwriting In Valued Environments, and a grassroots grief support organization, [Family Survivor Network, Inc.](#) (FSN) provides comprehensive trauma-informed support and assistance to youth, adults, and families impacted by violence in Baltimore City, where homicide rates are among the nation's highest. FSN offers professional guidance on survivors' healing journeys, while providing the tools necessary to sort through the multitude of issues that can become roadblocks to navigating through grief. Support includes assisting with procedures involved in the criminal justice system, accessing other government/social services that support quality of life standards (i.e., VINE, CICB, SNAP, WIC etc., ...), and treating the issues

that prevent survivors from being able to focus on their trauma and grief. FSN utilizes healing techniques that include clinical therapy, alternative therapies, and culturally-based healing approaches that coincide with our community, family, and heritage-based ethos.

The Towson [Grantwriting In Valued Environments](#) (GIVE) program, founded by Zosha Stuckey (Stuckey, 2019), provides writing students with professional experience by connecting them to the needs of small local nonprofits through coursework and internships. By design, GIVE works in coalitions across numerous identity divides, with faculty, students, nonprofit staff, and community members coming from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, class, culture, education, gender, and values. Headed by two white women, Zosha and Carrie have written before about their commitment to supporting grassroots Black-led organizations in the Baltimore area as an effort toward distributive justice (Stuckey & Grant, 2023). This work has necessitated critical reflection on identity positions and power in the process of learning how to best support organizations' lead. Aligning with Pouncil and Sanders' (2022) model of upward critical collaboration, GIVE is constantly cycling through the steps of 1) "inward critical reflection," which has all collaborators examine how social systems have shaped their experiences, 2) "outward critical reflection," which has collaborators engage honestly with one another about their social positioning, and 3) "upward critical collaboration," which brings collaborators together to find common ground to take action (p. 285). For GIVE, this process often results in challenging ourselves and our students to honor and support community leaders' needs as they express them, even (and especially) if they may not align with our first instincts coming from a white position of privilege.

GIVE has been working with FSN since 2019, starting with grant writing support, but evolving to support a wide range of organizational needs, including website design and maintenance, social media content and strategy, annual reports, white papers, fundraising efforts, event marketing, newsletters, and board recruiting. Over time, GIVE collaborators have become deeply interlinked with FSN, with Zosha and Carrie serving on the board, former GIVE interns becoming FSN staff and board leadership, and GIVE students developing ties to the organization that extend far beyond their classwork. GIVE sees its collaboration with FSN as the ideal for the model of coalitional technical writing it aims to create, with deep relationships facilitating the kind of meaningful, challenging social justice work discussed in this case study.

In a recent article in which Carrie interviewed Dorian, we explored our collaboration tactics to conscientiously promote equity within the partnership between FSN and GIVE (Grant, 2022). We emphasize "balancing perspectives, aligning goals, and 'showing up'" (p. 151), all of which require being honest and generous in relation with one another. From the academic side, equitable collaboration often, in practice, means putting the community's vision first in order to break cycles of academic exploitation of marginalized groups. From the community side, collaboration takes bravery to express real needs, disengaging from games of trying to meet (racist) white models of success.

For the case discussed in this experience report, FSN's need was to shift its public identity and voice to become better aligned with its communal identity. This need arose out of a funding dilemma: since its founding, FSN has positioned itself to qualify for victim services funding, particularly from the state but from private funders as well. Funders in this realm emphasize empirical

outcomes, clinical metrics, and pathological models of health. And so, in order to receive funding, FSN did its best to fit these models, and GIVE helped them to reflect funders' desires in the language of their grant proposals—emphasizing, for instance, quantifiable clinical counseling outcomes to qualify for Victims of Crime Act funding. But a growing problem emerged: FSN was not founded to do this kind of institutionalized work. It was founded from a community of Black women seeking healing from the violent loss of their sons and daughters in a space that offered more humanity than the healthcare and social work institutions that push through clients like cogs in a machine.

Dissonance grew between the sterile language FSN used to qualify for funding and the organization's felt sense of the community's needs. Beyond just the mismatch in language, once funding is obtained, organizations can become beholden to requirements to demonstrate concrete outcomes according to funders' standards, in addition to a whole host of other expectations of an organization's time and energy: one funder required FSN to attend a golf tournament, an all-day telethon, numerous mixers and publicity events... While, yes, these expectations are a regular part of nonprofit fundraising, it is all too easy for organizations to get caught up in chasing funds they can't survive without, only to wind up filling their time with activities far from their original goals—a phenomenon known as mission drift. FSN felt mission drift encroaching. Should they double down and expand on clinical counseling offerings? Should GIVE help to create empirical measures of FSN's impact on clients?

When a well-known healthcare foundation approached FSN, we were excited by their offer to fund staff, particularly the social workers and case managers providing grief and trauma support. But when the foundation discovered FSN's niche in ancestral/holistic care for Black communities, a new angle to mask the foundation's programming for revenue, they began compulsively demanding research outcomes that devalued the lived experiences effectuating change. As Dorian reflected on FSN's identity, taking time to really weigh things with collaborators from GIVE, including Carrie, Zosha, GIVE interns, and GIVE classes, the answer became clear: we needed to redesign FSN's public identity away from pathology and toward Black communal healing. The healthcare foundation's funding could have been helpful, but the cost to FSN's ethos was too great.

As FSN's community gathers together to hold space for their lost loved ones, creating an apothecary of herbal remedies to bring comfort, expressing themselves thoughtfully through art, telling their stories in the oral tradition, learning breathing techniques to ground anxiety, even just meeting for some uninhibited board game fun—they aren't fulfilling funders' models of what historically sterile victims' services in an economically oppressed neighborhood "should" look like. But we dare anyone to challenge what FSN's motto claims— "There's healing happening here." Black communal healing practices have existed alongside Western healthcare institutions since their founding, when Black people were historically denied access to white healthcare systems. And holistic healing practices find their origins long before in the indigenous practices of ancient Africa, China, and India (Jones, 2020). Yet these practices are too frequently dismissed as unserious by the powers-that-be, particularly those who control the purse strings of the nonprofit industrial complex<sup>1</sup>.

1 The nonprofit industrial complex is a critique that nonprofit funding "controls and manages dissent by incorporating it into

Such attempts to discipline Black practices to meet white standards are historically shared by the discipline of technical and professional communication (McCoy et al., 2020). As Moore (2017) has argued, TPC's conventional theoretical resources are insufficient to understand Black communication practices and strategies that have much to offer the field as a whole. And so in order to support FSN's shift in public voice, GIVE has had to relinquish white models of TPC as well (Jones et al., 2016): no more elevating effectiveness as the sole measure of "good" (Connors, 1982; Katz, 1992), no more striving exclusively to be "clear, concise, and precise" as the only way to reach audiences (Purdue OWL, n.d.), no more conceding to positivist notions of writing *or* science as capturing some kind of singular truth (Miller, 1979). While certainly these principles have long been challenged in TPC scholarship, they remain our foundations, persisting in our textbooks and as our starting points when we sit down to write "technically." GIVE and FSN needed to rethink and relearn our voice creatively and collaboratively, starting from FSN's communal origins and identity.

From here, our experience report will explicate the motivation for FSN's public identity redesign specifically from Dorian's perspective. To convey this professional communication need, we believe it's important to honor this narrative directly from Dorian's experience. Voices like Dorian's, and even Dorian's voice directly, aren't often heard from a "professional" standpoint—but "[n]arratives stemming from embodied knowledge are useful for learning from diverse users and contributors to our discipline and redressing injustices in and with technical communication" (Gonzales et al., 2021, p. 17). Like Jones' (2017) narrative inquiry into Black entrepreneurs' rhetorical strategies, FSN's case and Dorian's story in particular offers insights for technical communicators toward challenging oppressive narratives through cultural empowerment. Finally, we'll share practical examples of how we've actually navigated the coalitional work of making such a communication design shift happen.

## DORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

Let me begin with a confession: I am a host of official titles best described by others, and I do not know how to write this article. Though, my experience as a human being with many complex parts keeps me grounded.

Seldom does space exist to narrate with transparency to an audience that includes neighbors, friends, strangers, and professionals without alienating any of them. Yet, my commitment to authenticity means the words that follow may or may not land with all readers. My task is to share (my) experiences about "Designing Public Identity." Particularly, "finding voice in coalitional technical writing with Black-led organizations."

I am Black, always—have been since before I developed consciousness of this Blackness. Hence, this article will be unapologetically Black, especially as a Black queer man in a nation where Blackness has meaning and carries weight.

As humans, I have always challenged us to be careful with the toxicity talk, trauma talk, the generational curse talk. Including the ways we "*communicate*" these discourses; especially through "writing" and "storytelling," as they collude with a narrative that

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the state apparatus," preventing substantive social change by way of nonprofits plugging the gaps of social programs that should be the responsibility of the government (Smith, 2008, p. 8).

further perpetuates a victim mindset within the Black family. I have also experienced the past few years developing and designing nationally evidence-based crime prevention programming, drafting state and local policy, being recognized as a T. Rowe Price “Baltimore Homecoming Hero,” and bearing the responsibility of guiding and leading the Family Survivor Network, Inc.

Similarly, it is as a Black Energy Director leading a comprehensive human-centered support and service nonprofit for survivors (“victims”), that I am constantly hyper-reflective on the ways in which voice(s) shape public identity, both personally and professionally.

That said, quotes by James Baldwin have been widely shared for good reason. Specifically, as he has become both a symbol and voice for many contemporary activists and social justice movements. In my search for the origin of a particular Baldwin quote, I discovered the recording and transcript of a panel discussion that included Baldwin as well as Lorraine Hansberry and Langston Hughes. The topic of discussion was “The Negro in American Culture,” and the dialogue explored the social and artistic responsibilities of writers, the nature of protest in art, and the marketability of art that focuses on race (thepostarchive, 2016).

Despite being broadcast on the radio 60 years ago and focusing on literary art, I found the dialogue to be relevant in the current context for designing public identity and finding voice. The dialogue began with the moderator’s opening question regarding the potential polarity and “self-consciousness of being a Negro and a writer.” In his response, Baldwin did not mince words:

...to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time—and in one’s work. And part of the rage is this: It isn’t only what is happening to you. But it’s what’s happening all around you and all of the time in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, indifference of most white people in this country, and their ignorance. (thepostarchive, 2016, :55)

As I heard the full quote, spoken in Baldwin’s voice, I paused because he had encapsulated my sentiments with near perfection. The feeling of rage, anger, disappointment, sadness, loneliness, and frustration that have all occupied space in my head and heart. However, it is not present solely as a result of anything that has happened *to* me, but because of what has happened *to* others who looked like me.

This is the identity and voice of Family Survivor Network. The type of freedom in one’s mind and heart that births an unstoppable momentum, plus recognizes real time actualities by encouraging and amplifying the history of lived experience and culture. It provides understanding of the chaotic effects on the Black Experience in this country and how it may show up in identities, groups, communities, networks, and families.

Healing is not a goal. It is a by-product of living a life of true expression. We are magnificently glowing and so too is our lineage.

Prior to, and since the end of, the civil rights movement, large numbers of Black people have made their way into settings previously occupied exclusively by whites. We have received mixed receptions, and many neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and other public spaces remain overwhelmingly white; informally “off limits.”

The challenges Black people face while navigating white spaces is why FSN was cultivated and exists. Human beings (Black

women) were losing their sons to gun violence, homicide, and murder. Their reality, proximity, and shared grief all led them to support each other directly in their community. Later, when the world started publicly recording the unjust deaths of Black men, they would gather and nominate FSN’s original founder, a Black man, to serve as the first executive who incorporated (registered the 501(c)(3) nonprofit) the healing they were intrinsically organizing in their community, and providing in their own lives. To everyone’s surprise, he would unexpectedly pass away, and being in relation, the community (especially the Black women) affirmed me as the next executive director.

I definitely am not a licensed clinician, and I am not too sure it matters. In a *Psychotherapy Networker* magazine feature entitled, “Decolonizing Mental Health: The Healing Power of Community” by doctoral candidate Shawna Murray-Browne, MSW, LCSW-C, she shared: we all are peers, socially working together, and “the stories of those most marginalized ought to guide the way we offer care, and their healing should become what we deem good therapy” (Murray-Browne, 2021).

Throughout history, and equally explored in *There’s Healing Happening Here: Reimagining Community Health and Wellness* by (then GIVE intern) Carmen Jones on behalf of FSN, African Americans, especially Black women, have always lamented at the care or lack thereof provided by certified and licensed (white) professionals.

For FSN, it is clear that Black people need their own spaces. Places to gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes and marginalization that permeate every other societal space occupied. Spaces where one can be their authentic self without other people’s judgment and insecurity muzzling that expression. Space to simply be—where everyone can get off the treadmill of making other people comfortable and finally realize the joy in being who they are, and not just how tired they are (Jones, 2021).

This is the application of designing a public identity and finding voice. Being present, vulnerable, and steadfast. Consider asking yourself: how will you use your position, privilege, and power, to empower others to effectuate change by them, for them? The answer, and context throughout, is the application of writing in coalition with Black-led organizations.

When I was onboarding, FSN was solely supported through a state-administered federally funded grant for victims of crime (i.e., homicide and murder). In reality, there is so much more happening. Survivors are present, but again, victims only existed as an extension of a narrative that further perpetuated a victim mindset within the Black family. Sensible, given FSN’s program director at that time was an affluent white woman social worker. Amazing spirit, tenacity, and stamina, but truly lacked the histo-cultural understanding that provides awareness.

Though she had expertise, I did too, and she would have to work with my leadership and vision. Essentially, she would have to be told what to do by a Black queer younger man. A different orientation if for nothing else than our physical identities. Time progressed, and so did FSN. If I was to successfully meet the momentum of the community and properly funnel all of the brilliance, it began with getting in relation with everyone present (e.g., members, residents, staff, and the board of directors).

For instance, the affluent white woman was a certified licensed clinical social worker, twice my elder. Remember, I am not a

clinician and earlier I gave context into my professional portfolio. Moreover, FSN is not just a space for survivors of adverse experiences or “victims” of crime. Equally, amazing human beings are acknowledging and affirming the strengths adapted. We are also living out our normal lives, healing as a community, not pathology (Epps & University of Baltimore, 2022).

The majority of human and social services organizations see the hearts of the humans they engage and support as something that needs fixing; they seemingly exist to delegate, dictate, regulate, and control one’s restoration. This hurt, harm, and distrust is why FSN primarily gathers. It is an ethos not present solely as a result of anything that has happened by/from me, but because of what is happening *with* others who look like me. This needs to be shared and thus we embarked on a journey to grow the network.

Often, the subtlety of not knowing what you do not know manifests in the happenings closest to us.

Yet when those who have learned what they do not know inadvertently continue to reinforce their own position, it indicates the power of societally patterned interactions (Bandura, 2001). These patterns are specific, and without attention to these reinscribed patterns, we are not actively listening, hearing, focusing, and understanding. Obviously, the potential exists to recreate oppressive societal structures of power and hierarchy on the micro-level in our conversational dynamics, even against our best intentions.<sup>2</sup>

Even following *Trauma Informed Community Building and Engagement*, we learn how life impacts the various layers of communities—how systems affect communities, and in turn, affect interpersonal relationships and then individuals (Falkenburger et al., 2018). Eventually, all of this is why I expressed the need to shift FSN’s voice from pathology to community, and our partner GIVE heard and reflected back.

## SHIFTING VOICE IN PRACTICE: GRAPPLING WITH IDENTITIES

Here is how we specifically did it: redesigned FSN’s public identity from a stance of Black ancestral healing. Our motivating question for this rhetorical reflection—how do we maintain funding without compromising FSN’s identity?—has emerged as more achievable in practice than we initially feared. While philanthropy still can at times mirror toxic charity,<sup>3</sup> and funders ask, “What makes FSN different?,” egregiously demanding measurement without any true understanding of care, we’ve discovered that we can push back in

- 2 We unintentionally recreate these structures on a macro level as well. See “Women of Color Assess the Impact of the Women’s March,” wbur.org, January 24, 2017; and Brooke Obie, “Woman in Viral Photo from Women’s March to White Female Allies: ‘Listen to a Black Woman,’” *The Root*, January 21, 2017
- 3 Robert Lupton’s (2011) “toxic charity” is that which doesn’t foster development, but dependency. As Lupton—a Presbyterian pastor who is president and founder of a decades old Atlanta, Georgia non-profit, Focused Community Strategies—writes, “when we do for those in need what they have the capacity to do for themselves, we disempower them... For all our efforts to eliminate poverty—our entitlements, our programs, our charities—we have succeeded only in creating a permanent underclass, dismantling their family structures, and eroding their ethic of work. And our poor continue to become poorer.”

areas important to us, but at the same time maintain framing that funders understand. So much of what and how we do what we do, can meet the language used in requests for proposals, even if very few see our sustenance. At times, articles, grants, and press releases experience a change in delivery, not in principle. For instance, we have updated our mission so that it rings more true to our ethos, while including keywords that maintain our categorization for funding:

FSN’s old mission: At Family Survivor Network, Inc., our mission is to support the mental, emotional, and physical health of youth, families, and communities impacted by violence (e.g., homicide, murder) in Baltimore.

A draft of FSN’s new mission: At Family Survivor Network, Inc., our mission is to support community-based holistic healing from violence, harm, and systemic inequities.

“Violence” remains important to label and qualify for victim services funding. In actual practice, FSN addresses survivors’ needs by providing comprehensive support for all human needs, rather than exclusively focusing on homicide-related grief. It is incredibly difficult to focus on grief when one is struggling to meet the demands of day-to-day life, understanding that Black people are working and living within a system that has been intentionally difficult to navigate. Essentially, we work with, not for, helping guide people through processes. The new mission allows FSN to keep a core theme of responding to violence, still essential for funding, but soften our voice to more transparently honor FSN’s approach. In application, for the new round of Victims of Crime Act funding, we are emphasizing counseling *and* Black identity *both* as important to what FSN does, rather than ignoring the parts of ourselves more challenging to funders.

Here are a few more projects FSN and GIVE have collaborated on thus far in FSN’s (re)new(ed) voice:

- New board recruitment materials, clarifying board values, needs, and expectations;
- Annual reports balancing metrics with humanity;
- A health history report articulating the origins and philosophy of FSN’s holistic approach;
- Fundraiser event marketing that increased FSN’s visibility and donations without pathologizing its clients;
- Grant proposals that tick funders’ boxes without compromising community principles.

In projecting FSN’s voice through these projects, student interns and GIVE staff effortlessly materialize tasks by participating with sensory closeness to oppression and resilience. In other words, this is where the work of self-reflection is vital to root out biases and allow open-minded collaboration. As we foster this work with students, we acknowledge that academic practices can feel off-putting at best, and elitist at worst—no one is likely to succeed when the hardship of learning what you do not know is not discussed or addressed. Though we are collaborating to write with a voice that feels authentic to the Black community of FSN, not all writers involved are Black; our work involves Towson undergraduate and graduate students from all sorts of backgrounds. Engaging difference and writing beyond it is not easy.

In order to help prepare students to tune into FSN's needs and voice, we scaffold theoretical readings on community engagement and Black feminist theory, as well as historical readings providing local context for the systemic issues faced at FSN<sup>4</sup>. Before meeting Dorian or other FSN staff, students do their own canvassing of FSN's materials to confront their own impressions first, then reflect again after Dorian has shared his direct experience. When students are writing grants, they are invited to personally attend one or more fellowship or social events. Innately competent, the proximity from being amongst us, and not simply working for us, induces a presence that makes one keenly aware. Be it play dates, support groups, intergroup dialogues, and restorative circles. Everyone involved in the nature of our social change work must be willing to acknowledge and admit what they sense and how they feel. As students write, they grapple in classes with multiple rounds of peer and instructor feedback, then FSN staff make themselves available to clarify, redirect, and reshape before students submit their final versions for the class. Even after a "final" version, a future class, student, intern, faculty, or staff, might pick up a given deliverable once more for further iteration, until we get it right.<sup>5</sup>

Please know, this approach is not one size fits all. Many respected professionals have identified that there are similar patterns each individual practices when recognizing identity (e.g., volunteering, community engagement, fellowship, bonding etc., ...). While these patterns help us understand voice, creating identity across coalitions varies for every person and group. Even when individuals are deeply guided by the community they are serving, the outcomes follow their individuality: a graduate student pursuing a masters in professional writing may draft an award-winning grant, while a student studying family studies contextualizes the program model, and then an intern pursuing a degree in communication studies can creatively flesh out program activities. We inevitably bring our whole selves into our work.

Of course, acknowledging our full selves also means recognizing that some folks may never get there. Those who may not understand what it is like to be Black, AND—and anything—may struggle. Group stratification as a whole, being excluded from certain privileges, and denied fair chances, logically helps one give more (Kleugel & Smith, 1984). Understanding this context does not always mean color. In fact, the real time marginalization of student interns and GIVE staff who identify as LGBTQIA+ curates an understanding of strength and repression. Versus someone who may know about Black history, but not the cultural situatedness of the community. For instance, a white non-binary student correctly embodies FSN's duality when composing letters of inquiry, executive messages, and liaising with partners and funders: their newsletters sound as if Dorian wrote them himself. However, a Black female student wrestles with tone and capturing the organization's holistic approach when adding to FSN's annual report; gaps are left where experience and imagination falter. Conversely, yes it can be seen in the traditional identity sense. In an early success in articulating FSN's public identity, a Black female

student studying political science was able to craft a nuanced report interpreting what community health can look like in light of the historical barriers of traditional healthcare that have left the Black community underserved (Jones, 2021). In the same term, a talented white female student writer, with lived experience with social media and marketing, struggled to amplify FSN's voice digitally. All of this is to say: results in relation to identity will vary; they must.

We have discovered that when writers struggle to communicate in FSN's voice—whether student, faculty, or staff—it's in the same places that traditional models of professional communication fail to meet FSN's exigence. The writing's too empirical; it's too plain in style; it's overly focused on facts instead of energy. It's where we hit up against what our "best practices" tell us we *should* do, leaving us unable to recontextualize what the organization or audience actually needs. As teachers and as writers, these barriers can be frustrating, and we can't always break free. But these challenges also highlight points of opportunity for us to develop better TPC tools to facilitate and encourage flexibility, to investigate and channel identity, to meet a wider range of technical communication needs. When technical writers do break free from restrictive rules and are able to attune to and apply culturally-situated responses—there's no limit to the potential applications of coalitional TPC working toward social justice.

## CONCLUSION

FSN & GIVE have worked in coalition to do the antiracist technical communication work of *recognizing, revealing, rejecting, and replacing* (Walton et al., 2019) the oppressive model FSN was suffering under for the sake of funding by someone else's standards. In our experience, re-envisioning FSN's public identity has been well worth the effort to more fully honor the voice and ethos of the community in practice. Concerns that depart from conventional clinical language for victim services would result in loss of funding have not come to fruition. In fact, this process has helped to reveal a clearer vision for FSN's future, opening up new pathways for funding that create less agita within the organization due to constant questioning and disconnect from the organization's founding goals.

In terms of writing in coalitional practice, we won't lie to say that embodying a voice that does not match your own conception of identity and professionalism is not challenging. As is part of the nature of doing community engagement work, especially with so many diverse student writers, not every effort is going to be successful. That doesn't mean the efforts aren't worth it. For the efforts that don't succeed, those too are valuable experiences for growth for all involved, especially to expand students' thinking about writing in context that hopefully they'll adapt better the next time (though we are certainly not saying here that outcomes don't matter (see Grant, 2022)). We continue to strive to put the right people into positions where they can find success in creatively expanding the horizons of TPC, and wow, those victories are sweet. Ultimately, valuing and protecting identity and voice is not just a kind thing that other people can do to help one feel better; together we can reclaim parts of ourselves.

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5 For further pedagogical details, see Stuckey, 2019; Grant, 2022; and Stuckey & Grant, 2023.



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# Seeking Out the Stakeholders: Building Coalitions to Address Cultural (In)equity through Arts-based, Community-engaged Research

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## ABSTRACT

Artists are an important, but under-recognized, aspect of rural community growth. This research article details a collaborative project between a statewide arts organization and academic researchers in West Virginia designed to document the needs of under-represented artists across the state. We share our theoretical approach that meshes stakeholder and standpoint theory and our research approach that uses participatory and arts-based methods such as asset-mapping and collage-based listening sessions. Ultimately, we provide a model for others interested in research projects that explicitly prioritize coalition-building throughout a project and demonstrate how cultural (in)equity shapes multiple facets of community life.

## CCS Concepts

Social and Professional Topics

## Keywords

Community-engaged research, Arts-based research methods, Arts-based development, Rural communities, Stakeholder theory

## INTRODUCTION

Tamarack Foundation for the Arts: the name is a conundrum even for the nonprofit's board and staff; it's a real point of contention, a misrepresentation, as it alludes to a now-separate entity called the Tamarack Marketplace, a state-run venue in southern West Virginia where a select number of artists and artisans are chosen to sell their wares. The Tamarack Foundation was initially founded in 2001 to support those artists, hyper-focusing on a handful of individuals and leaving other artists in the state to their own devices. Two decades later, as West Virginia wades through devastating post-extraction economic decline, a 25-year opioid epidemic, the COVID-19 pandemic, nationwide calls to action to address structural racism and other harms, and cuts to the arts and other public programming, the state is in a very different place. And so is Tamarack Foundation for the Arts (TFA), as it has separated from the Tamarack venue and finds itself at a crossroads as the organization imagines how it can serve *all* artists in West Virginia—especially those overlooked for decades and often from marginalized backgrounds.

Today, TFA's programming supports portfolio artists, creative entrepreneurs, and emerging and established arts-based business owners across the state. Additionally, TFA is investing in artist-centered community building to strengthen creative economies and build networks for artists across the state. But what if this shift in focus simply isn't enough? As a nonprofit organization, TFA is especially aware of harmful dynamics that unfold between organizations and communities under the cover of goodwill and charitable acts, including savior-like complexes. The last thing the organization wants to do, especially at this critical juncture, is to merely perform empowerment while sticking to hierarchical decision-making and freezing out marginalized stakeholders, barring them from becoming the generators of their own authentic futures. In the last several years, TFA has been faced with the existential question of: *How do we walk the walk?* How can a statewide organization, led by white people and recently charged with a new focus and structure, seek out a wide and diverse range of stakeholders across the state to guide the work of the organization in a direction that builds relationships, crafts coalitions, and

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fosters material changes for West Virginians? And perhaps more importantly, how can this work be done carefully, ethically, and equitably? (These questions could very well be applied to any nonprofit organization or institution of higher education, as well.)

To start answering these questions, TFA decided to conduct community-based research to seek out stakeholders previously unheeded to learn more about cultural inequity in arts spaces in the state. Kandi, leading the project for TFA as a grant writer and programming manager, reached out to folks in her network, including Erin, an assistant professor in the Department of English at West Virginia University with expertise in participatory research and technical communication. Kandi and Erin met several years ago when they worked together on a research project through the Highlander Center for Education and Research, an experience that further reified both of their commitments to social justice work in the Appalachian region. As the project progressed, Olivia, a Ph.D. candidate in English at West Virginia University, took a paid internship as the cultural equity coordinator for TFA. And together, the authors (Olivia, Kandi, and Erin) have witnessed the growth of this project and the relationships it has built in West Virginia over the last year.

Communities in West Virginia and the Appalachian region at large have long been subject to the whims of powerful actors related to media, business, and education, leading to a culture of extraction of not just natural resources, but intellectual and cultural resources as well. Given this history we knew that building a sustainable project rooted in mutual trust between stakeholders would require slow, careful work—work that would not immediately yield clear, measurable results. And so we set out to design a project that prioritized relationship-building over data collection. That is, while we had a central research question, research methods, and planned outcomes as any IRB-approved research study would, our primary goal was to create space for the intangible outcomes of research, including close collaborations and projects that we couldn't even imagine at the time. In service of this goal, we employed rich, qualitative research methods such as collage-making to emphasize the power of sharing stories in shared spaces in order to create art but also interpersonal connection.

We invited the mess that comes along with community-engaged projects that are, indeed, “messy” (Walton et al., 2015), because we hoped that the mess would help us to build something that would actually respond to community needs, including developing relationships across the state to invite perspectives that often go unheard and unheeded. Central to our work was to seek out “silent” stakeholders (Kimme Hea & Wendler Shah, 2014) and to carve out spaces where those stakeholders could share their experiences without feeling like they were being extracted from—especially stakeholders from marginalized backgrounds, including BIPOC, poor and working-class people, LGBTQ+ folks, and people in addiction or recovery. We hoped that by bringing together arts-based research, participatory technical communication frames, and community-based insights, we, the project facilitators alongside others at TFA, might be able to develop programs responding to issues that disenfranchised artists themselves voiced as important.

In this article, we share what we have learned about designing and facilitating a community-engaged research project that engages stakeholders via participatory approaches at multiple stages of a project. We start by articulating the importance of fostering cultural equity in creative spaces, specifically in West Virginia, and sharing

more about how this project developed. Next, we weave together stakeholder and standpoint theory, which have been helpful frames for understanding our work as it has unfolded. Then we discuss our methodological approach speckled with realizations that came about in different stages of the project. In our design, we employed a range of methods meant to engage artists around the state in ways that prioritized their expertise, even if it completely changed the course of how we imagined the project progressing. We conclude by briefly summarizing some initial findings and emphasizing the importance of crafting spaces in which people from different institutions, sectors, and communities can hold space together as they dream up new coalitional futures.

## CULTURAL EQUITY IN APPALACHIA

Appalachia is a vast region, stretching along the Appalachian mountain range from northeastern Mississippi through southern New York. Its official borders were established to bring the nation's poorest counties into America's mainstream economy: by designating these counties as part of the region, they would be eligible for particular programs and benefits. The region's rich natural resources have led to the dominance of extractive industries such as timber, coal, gas, and oil. Eller (2008) wrote that in Appalachia, “economic growth [linked to extraction industries] produced material wealth for some...but it also fueled poverty and inequality within the region and between Appalachia and the rest of the nation” (p. 265). Catte (2018) agreed with this assessment, arguing that “as the region came to be defined by poverty... subsequently poverty came to be defined by the region” (p. 11). As a result, renderings of Appalachia are rooted in economic realities that have cultural implications.

This is especially true for West Virginia—the only state that falls entirely within the boundaries of the Appalachian region. West Virginia is synonymous with Appalachia, for good or bad: the resourceful, adventurous Mountaineer and the impoverished, ignorant hillbilly are both figures associated with West Virginia. Furthermore, these renderings present whiteness as the default. At first glance, demographics reiterate this norm of whiteness: 93% of West Virginians identify as white, with less than 4% identifying as Black and 2% as Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). (Of course, in a state with only 1.783 million people, 4% of the population is over 71,000 people—a considerable number.) Institutional policies also reiterate whiteness, as West Virginia state law does not officially recognize any Native American tribes, despite calls in recent years to do so (Cremeans & Appleton, 2017). Appalachian Studies scholar Smith (2004) has challenged the evasion of critical engagement with whiteness by many in Appalachia and has argued that to simply accept whiteness as demographic fact ignores the social reality that is “a product of active practices characterized in part by persistent white supremacy” (p. 43). Smith noted that while the experiences of white working-class Appalachians, who make up much of the region's population, should be acknowledged, those experiences should not be used to craft narratives that claim that poor white people experience discrimination in the same ways as BIPOC individuals. The overwhelming presence of whiteness, and a widespread hesitation to confront that whiteness, obscures the presence (and needs) of communities of color in West Virginia who are undoubtedly present and contributing to the state culturally and economically.

Cultural inequity, then, is more than a theoretical concern. Accepting whiteness as the norm perpetuates white supremacy,

and white supremacy has material effects on communities of color. Among these many effects are public health disparities (Simmons, 2021), limited economic opportunities (Inwood, 2015), and less access to community-based support and resources (Folkerts et al., 2022). Because structures are designed to perpetuate whiteness, significant barriers for people of color and other marginalized groups who wish to enter mainstream spaces exist. Additionally, because navigating institutional processes (e.g., grant applications) requires a certain level of familiarity with rules that are often hidden and steeped in cultural norms like whiteness, community members can become discouraged from pursuing such opportunities. These observations are pertinent to our research, for they reinforce how whiteness exists in cultural and regional contexts, which contributes to our own racial consciousness and reinforces the importance of researching through an intersectional lens.

Walton et al. (2019) has urged us to consider stakeholders of all kinds to actively “inform action” (p. 53) through building relationships, and we agree that coalition building “is localized and should be driven by the collective agenda and the experiences of those who have been and continue to be multiply marginalized” (p. 134). As three white women, we are very aware of our positionality as we move through spaces alongside participants, and designed this project to de-center our perceptions and to focus on what participants want to pursue in our sessions. This research reflects TFA’s (and our own personal) commitment to highlighting stakeholders’ voiced experiences, needs, and aspirations via participatory approaches that encourage participants from varied backgrounds to tell stories and build community. Ultimately, this project is dedicated to building relationships in service of action.

## MESHING STAKEHOLDER AND STANDPOINT THEORY

A central component of our cultural equity project has been consistent engagement with stakeholders that would be affected by arts programming. By consistent engagement, we mean sustaining reciprocal relationships with stakeholders before, during, and beyond our project: asking them to help plan the project, paying them stipends to help recruit other artists for project events, inviting their feedback on next steps, and more, to build power beyond specific institutions and within networks of people.

One key part of this work has been building relationships with and amplifying the stories of artists in marginalized positions to simultaneously include *all* stakeholders in development conversations while rejecting simplistic narratives about the arts. Art is more than a hobby, more than the creation of pretty things. It can be a source of income for some, while others resist that their work be economically motivated, especially in a place haunted by extractive logics like West Virginia. Artists and creatives are oftentimes left out of the world of economic development despite their importance to community growth; if they are included, it is only a very small subset of artists who have economic or cultural capital that many creatives do not. As a result, artists who identify as BIPOC, poor or working-class, LGBTQ+, in addition or recovery, disabled, or otherwise marginalized find themselves pushed even further to the margins.

Since our goal is to reach out to artists who find themselves outside of arts spaces or have barriers that prevent them from pursuing artistic opportunities in the state, we, the authors, initially drew on stakeholder theory (Kimme Hea, 2011) and standpoint theory

(Collins, 2000; Harding, 2004) to strategize our work. Both theories highlight the importance of positionality, which, as Walton et al. (2019) pointed out, “asserts that aspects of identity (such as race, gender, nationality, religion, etc.) are complex and dynamic” (p. 65), and is a lens that “offers an alternative to simplistic perspectives such as essentialism, social determinism, and dyadic perspectives” (p. 65). Thus, these theories provide a natural framework for our cultural equity project that prioritizes building coalitions because they emphasize how, in our case, artists’ individual identities are shaped by social circumstance and systemic factors. Additionally, by working to bring “silent” stakeholders (Kimme Hea & Wendler Shah, 2016) to the forefront of our project, we aim to expand whose experiences shape the arts landscape in West Virginia.

Stakeholder theory, originally conceptualized as a business framework that considers “who can affect or [be] affected by the achievement of the organization’s objective” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46), has been adopted by Kimme Hea and Wendler Shah (2016) “as a potential corrective to hyperpragmatist perspectives on nonprofit participation” (p. 50). This approach stresses the value of including multiple people with differing perspectives on a project, rather than only bringing in who might be perceived as the most important or most representative people. In an earlier piece, Kimme Hea argued that stakeholder theory is tied to an “ethic of care” that bolsters connections between participants and illuminates the range of relationships that must be accounted for in collaborative projects (2011, p. 60). Incorporating multiple stakeholder voices into projects increases their complexity, and it results in projects that are more culturally-responsive and can help “avoid damaging assumptions” (Walton, 2013, p. 429).

We tie stakeholder theory to standpoint theory by considering the relationship between community organizations, academic institutions, and community members, focusing specifically on how we, as a team, have come together to engage with West Virginia artists who are typically not represented in mainstream conversations about art and development. According to standpoint theory, knowledge production stems from one’s social position (Collins, 2000; Harding, 2004). The feminist framework of standpoint theory underscores the importance of “historical and social locatedness of knowledge” (Harding, 2004, p.10) and, as Collins (2000) stressed, those from marginalized groups utilize their experiences to act as “situated knowers” (p. 19). Yet, we also remain committed to acknowledging that no homogenous standpoint exists (Collins, 2000), which reinforces the necessity of our equity work: our equity-centric project, rather than perpetuating a blanket notion of equality, aims to pinpoint specific structural barriers that prevent individuals from artistic success—however each artist might define that for themselves.

We weave intersectionality and positionality together because both ideas play important roles in utilizing stakeholder theory and standpoint theory as tools of cultural equity. Stakeholder theory and standpoint theory are not dualistic approaches to one’s stake or position, but instead, center intersectionality, reinforcing the theoretical value of first-person narratives and their capacity to act as catalysts for equity-oriented planning and action. As Shah (1997) explained, “Although in theory we can isolate one dimension of social life . . . from other . . . in fact such a one-dimensional moment never exists” (pp. x–xi). By embracing both stakeholder theory and standpoint theory—categorized as what Hancock (2016) has called “intersectionality-like thinking” (p. 165)—we embed both positionality and intersectionality into this project. This meshing

broadens our approach, forcing us to consider not only how artists' values, views, and locations influence their positionality, but also how the values and views of the region and state dictate how certain persons experience privilege and oppression.

Further, stakeholder and standpoint theory has urged us to consider how our own positions within nonprofits and academia shape this project. As noted, we are a team made up of researchers with different skill sets, orientations, and connections to West Virginia. Kandi's job description at TFA is literally "Creative Writer and Community Organizer": her role includes writing essays about artists and their lives as they experience it in West Virginia, growing a true narrative of diversity in this state. She also seeks guidance from stakeholders, designs projects to support their expressed needs, pursues grants to fund the projects, and then manages those projects. While she is based in southern West Virginia (where she was raised), she travels extensively around the state to connect with artists each month, and she herself has experience living as a queer low-income single mother pursuing an arts-focused future. Erin is squarely in the academic space, as an assistant professor at the state's flagship university in northern West Virginia—though she does travel the state doing field work during community projects. And while she is not originally from West Virginia, her family roots are in southeastern Kentucky, an area with a lot of similarities to West Virginia. Olivia is originally from a centrally-located city in Pennsylvania that is considered part of the Appalachian region; although, interestingly enough, residents of the area don't typically identify as Appalachian—an identity and culture that Olivia did not learn about until coming to West Virginia for graduate school. Kandi is tied into the art world, both in her own social network and through her job, while Erin and Olivia didn't initially consider themselves to be part of this world. All three of us are white cis women with jobs. Our identities are different from many of the artists that we seek to serve through this project, requiring us to navigate this process with significant attention to how our work might reify or disrupt the inequities that participants share with us.

In considering our own positionalities, and those of the artists we connect with, we have found it necessary to frame our work with an intersectional lens by, as Collins and Bilge (2016) explained, addressing "the complexities of people's lives within an equally complex social context" (p. 25). Rather than reductively accepting a singular factor as shaping experience, an intersectional approach considers how "many axes [work] together and influence each other," such as gender, race, class, sexuality, dis/ability, etc. (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). Intersectionality is an essential component of this project, for we recognize that stakeholders exist in multifaceted, nuanced ways, both as artists and individuals. Within this project, we actively seek out marginalized artists within impacted communities. The layering of identity factors noted above shape the life of anyone, but especially artists in a largely rural state trying to make a living off of their art. For example, a young artist in recovery who is living in a small town in the eastern panhandle has a different perspective than an older, established artist located in Charleston, the state's capital. Meshing stakeholder and standpoint theory can help us to articulate these differences in careful, nuanced ways that do not over-simplify lived experiences of the people we are working with.

## COMMUNITY AND ARTS-BASED RESEARCH AND STUDY DESIGN

In this section, we'll provide information about how the project has proceeded to this point. (As of writing, we are still facilitating the project.) TFA first began planning this project in earnest after receiving a Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation grant in late 2021, but had been planning to engage a cultural-equity specific agenda for several years leading up to this project. Erin wrote a letter of support for the foundation grant and in early 2022, began working with TFA to design a paid internship for a graduate student and a rough timeline for the project. That summer, Olivia came on board as the Cultural Equity Coordinator. After receiving IRB approval in June 2022 (WVU IRB Protocol #2205580033), we began to dive into the work described below.

From the start, we knew that we wanted our approach to be guided by community-based, participatory research methods that brought stakeholders into our process at multiple points. Additionally, because we would be working in conjunction with an arts-based organization to reach out to artists, an arts-based approach seemed like an exciting way to engage participants' expertise as creators. Visual and arts-based methods encourage participants to explicitly reflect on their meaning-making and offer a way to represent big ideas in unexpected, non-linear ways (Loads, 2009; Roberts & Woods, 2018)—and we are asking big questions. Our initial guiding research question was: *How do individuals involved in the arts in West Virginia feel involved and supported (or not involved nor supported) in their local and statewide communities?*

In June, Olivia and Erin began researching possible research methods to propose for use in this project. After reviewing literature published across fields, we identified several possibilities: body mapping, in which participants outline their body on a large piece of paper and then map different aspects of their experience onto that outline; collage-making, in which participants use a range of materials to create a collage in response to a prompt; and graphic elicitation, in which participants are directed to draw different elements on a page to create a concept map. Regardless of approach, our goal was to create a space in which participants could feel both safe and brave sharing their experiences with us.

After discussing possibilities within our team and others at TFA, we decided to use collage-making during listening sessions. As with the other two methods noted above, it offers participants a significant amount of freedom in how they work but also "frees them from the challenge of drawing and allows them to express themselves in a way that does not rely on perceived artistic ability" (Culshaw, 2019, p. 272). We also felt that collage would be an interesting way to allow participants to work with a variety of materials, including materials that they were interested in bringing that connected to their own mediums, whether that be fiber, paper, paint, or more, resulting in an embodied experience that would ideally connect facilitators and participants together as the start of a longer, more sustained network of relationships.

### Stage One: Interviews

Before we began to reach out to artists, we wanted to talk with organizational stakeholders to map out organizational goals and perceptions. Olivia interviewed a number of TFA's board members over Zoom. These interviews were conversational rather than formally structured, allowing board members to interject with their own arts-related experiences and knowledge. These internal

conversations reiterated our commitment to cultural equity by requiring us to present our goals to board members who are actively engaged in the West Virginia arts community, either as advocates or creatives themselves. Board members made recommendations for asset mapping within their local regions, asked important questions about the project's methods, and some even shared their own experiences as artists. These conversations also led us to more thoroughly examine some of our own approaches that we perhaps might have taken for granted. For example, we were committed to compensating participants for their time and emotional labor in addition to engaging them at later stages of research to avoid perpetuating harmful extractive practices that we in this state are quite familiar with. Conversations with different board members reified that importance to us, for these conversations forced us to consider how equitable ideology must be embedded into projects and acted upon, rather than only being written or spoken about in project documents.

## Stage Two: Asset Mapping and Outreach

After speaking with TFA board members, Olivia began asset mapping, an integral part of our community engagement that remains an ongoing practice. Asset mapping, according to Burns et al. (2012),

is the general process of identifying and providing information about a community's assets, or the status, condition, behavior, knowledge, or skills that a person, group, or entity possesses, which serves as a support, resource, or source of strength to one's self and others in the community. (p. 6)

Recognizing the vague nature and seemingly infinite open-endedness of the definitions of community, we borrow from Dunham et al.'s (2006) three categorizations of community: community of place, defined by the physical space or location occupied by proximal members; community of interest, defined by members' shared focus; and community of practice, defined "by a strong sense of identity, mutual obligation and an openness that facilitates learning and change within organizations" (p. 35). By creating a listing of community resources, as well as a visual map (see Figure 1), our asset mapping showcases the importance of considering stakeholders and their needs because the map encompasses resources for artists and arts organizations. It also generates what Thibodeau and Rüling have called "shared urgency" (2015) by functioning as an outreach artifact that highlights locations and contacts for community organizations and businesses within West Virginia's six arts regions.



**Figure 1.** Here, arts-related assets in West Virginia have been mapped using color coded icons. Each icon represents a different category. For example, blue icons represent art-specific assets, yellow icons represent public libraries, green icons represent regional and/or city-specific assets (such as convention and visitors bureaus, chambers of commerce, and charity organizations), and purple icons represent fairs and festivals.

Therefore, we, as well as artists and other community members, are able to utilize our asset map in various ways. When contacting the businesses and organizations listed on the map, our goal was to introduce ourselves and provide a brief overview of the project, prompting interest and shared urgency. To procure this urgency among community members, "Material and cognitive connections are made to [our] project and the people involved in it, commitment to one or both of these occurs, and the capacity (e.g., financial, emotional, intellectual) of a community is leveraged" so that our "nonprofit cultural organization goals" are recognized and, most importantly, supported (Thibodeau & Rüling, 2015, p. 157). This type of outreach has successfully prompted community interest, secured locations for our listening sessions, reached potential research participants, and hopefully, encouraged equity literacy among recipients who otherwise may have never considered how (in)equity exists with their community.

## Stage Three: Practice Session

As part of our participatory approach, we wanted to experience what we would be asking participants to do to be sure that our questions were clear and in line with our goals. Through her work with TFA, Kandi was familiar with an artist in central West Virginia, Emily Prentice, whose work in and with the arts centers on how to emphasize equitable engagement in her rural community while inciting creativity. Feeling it was critical to have artist input outside of board members, Kandi asked Emily to facilitate a guided practice session for us. One afternoon in early summer, we met in a small, artsy town and spent an afternoon fine-tuning our approach. First, Emily guided us through some visioning exercises, asking us questions about our ultimate vision and goals. We generated the following list of values that we shared with participants in preparation materials.



## Our values

- **Developing a framework of arts for all:** *We believe that the arts have a place everywhere, and that people from all walks of life should be able to access whatever resources are needed to create art.*
- **Opening up safe and brave spaces:** *We believe in meeting one another in spaces where we feel safe to be ourselves and brave to share what we feel is important.*
- **Embracing joy as resistance:** *We believe that seeking joy in ourselves and others is one way to challenge the structures that continue to not work for us, to fail us.*
- **Listening to relate to one another:** *We believe that listening is relational, and that in order to learn from one another, we need to listen and reflect on a deeper level.*
- **Understanding the importance of process:** *We believe that the acts of creating and conversing are intertwined, and that the journey is just as important as the destination.*
- **Acknowledging the value of slow, flexible work:** *We believe that productivity culture is toxic, and that speed does not guarantee success; instead, we value adaptability and accountability to community.*

We wanted to share our values in this article not only because we collaboratively developed them and share them with participants during our listening sessions, but because these form the basis of our work. We think of these values as a sort of manifesto that guides this research and whatever might emerge from it in the future.

With these values established, Emily began to guide us through a practice session of what we had designed. We brought two different possibilities for sessions: the first was to provide a central prompt (“Tell us about your experience as an artist in West Virginia”) and then to ask questions throughout the session; the second was to tell participants that our series of questions would guide them in making a representation of their ideal future as an artist in West Virginia. Almost immediately, we realized that the first option was much more user-friendly, providing a clearer goal for participants while remaining relatively flexible for different types of contributions from participants (since the questions were more open-ended). Emily suggested that we frame “experience” as past, present, and future, to provide structure for participants.

After deciding on the overall approach, Emily guided us through the session, asking us questions, guiding our conversation, and providing space for us to share the collages that we each had created. This process helped us to put ourselves in participants’ shoes and to see which questions were too conceptual or difficult to answer. For example, our original final question in this session was “How do you understand cultural equity/inequity and where do you see it or not see it in your art spaces?” This question required participants to suddenly define cultural equity, a concept which of course is central to our project, but perhaps not cleanly defined in these sessions because we wanted participants to interpret it in their own way. As a result, we decided to use more direct questions (i.e., “What arts spaces do you feel welcome in?”) that had a clear answer that could guide to more extensive discussion.

Overall, testing this out on ourselves was incredibly fruitful. It offered us space to connect with one another and to refine our goals, but it also had practical outcomes: we created examples to share

with participants at the beginning of their session, so they had an idea of what we were asking them to produce, and it also helped us to compose our welcome materials for participants, which we decided would include a statement of our values to emphasize our positionality to the project.

## Stage Four: Listening Sessions

We held our first listening session in August 2022 with a group of four artists in the Charleston area. We treated this as a pilot session that would allow us to practice our method but also to ask participants after the session for feedback on our protocol, so we scheduled it for three hours instead of the two and a half-hour-long sessions we have conducted since. Kandi reached out to artists that she knew would be in the area for an art show opening and who were already somewhat familiar with TFA as an organization. She also secured a space and materials for our session. We met for several hours at an American Legion hall, which had a big meeting room in which we were able to re-arrange the tables and chairs to create a more social space where participants would sit facing one another (see Figure 2).

We divided the listening session into three parts: a brief introduction; the making session; and the reflective conclusion. During the introduction, we talked about the larger project and our overall goals for the research including our values, explained the outline of the session, and shared our own collages that we had made in our trial session. Then, we shifted into facilitation. The first part of facilitation was a grounding exercise using talk meditation. Participants were asked to close their eyes, take deep breaths, and Kandi talked participants through envisioning their past, present, and future of being an artist in West Virginia. When the visioning was over, participants were asked to open their eyes and look at the cardstock Kandi was holding and consider the phrase written on it: “Appalachian Futurism” (inspired by Waymakers Collective). In the making session, participants were tasked with creating a representation of their past, present, and future as an artist in West Virginia using collage. We hoped that this portion would yield organic conversation while participants created collages—but we also had prompting questions to encourage participants to speak to one another. (See Appendix A for questions).



**Figure 2. Set up of first listening session, with tables clustered to face one another to facilitate discussion**

In this pilot session, we found that while participants started to work quietly, with some prompting, they were able to share experiences that the visuals they were working with conjured. For example,

one participant began discussing their experiences trying to break into the local arts and festival scene after moving to West Virginia earlier that year when they were working with pictures of forest scenes from a nature magazine. Reflecting on their transition, they shared how important spending time hiking through nature was in making them feel connected to their place, and in turn, their art.

Throughout the session, participants shared stories and experiences, linking them to questions of equity and inclusion. They also acted as support for one another, providing suggestions to help one another with any problems they shared that they were facing. Figures 3–6 show collages that participants made. While the collages captured each participant’s journey in unique ways, there were some similarities—such as the ladder imagery—that made for interesting conversations about the difficulties of being a working artist in a state that does not provide much programmatic or social support. Participants in this session were compensated \$100 for their time. (Note: In future sessions, participants have received \$40 because sessions were shorter. Additionally, for each future session, we identify an on-the-ground organizer who helps us recruit participants and find space. We pay the organizer \$100 for their time and labor and an additional \$40 if they choose to participate in the listening session.)



**Figure 3.** Collage made by participant during first listening session



**Figure 4.** Collage made by participant during first listening session



**Figure 5.** Collage made by participant during first listening session



**Figure 6.** Collage made by participant during first listening session

## Stage Five: Surveys

After each listening session, surveys are distributed to participants. These surveys allow for demographic-related information to be shared anonymously, and, thus, more discreetly, while also providing us a way to gauge participants’ experiences. Among the various questions related to demographics (age, household information, healthcare status, etc.), participants are asked questions that pertain directly to the listening session, such as “Do you feel that you were equitably compensated for the time [and emotional labor] spent at the listening session?” and “How would you describe the listening session in three words?” Ultimately, these surveys affirm our commitment to opening space for multiple voices to be heard, a reiteration of our listening session goals and, as Collins (2000) noted, a crucial aspect of intersectional research. We recognize that communal talking spaces have both benefits and downsides, one of which can be discomfort in sharing personal experiences. This post-listening session survey can prompt further discussion between us, as the researchers, and participants, as well as providing important information for the project.

## Stage Six: Social Media Outreach

In addition to these previously mentioned practices, we also conducted research via social media. We posed questions related to cultural equity and access on Facebook to members of the Creative Network Facebook page, which is a group set up and maintained by TFA. (See Appendix B for questions.) This career-focused platform increases creatives’ visibility and connections. By posing these questions in an online space we aimed to open conversations to a larger group of participants than our listening sessions offer.



Facebook is widely adopted in North American (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022) but locally, the Creative Network Facebook page encompasses a large group of people (almost 300 users) already involved in TFA's work. Though we are aware of the limitations and risks of utilizing social media to collect research (Dadas, 2016), the closed nature of the Facebook group and the presence of moderators made this approach useful.

We utilized Facebook to conduct a five-week long question and response forum, where we posted one question each week. The prompts were essentially open to all Creative Network members, but to ensure engagement, we asked four participants to commit to answering every prompt. To receive a \$100 stipend, paid participants were required to respond to initial prompts, respond to other participants, and complete an experience survey.

Within these responses, a number of themes emerged. For example, when prompted to describe their ideal arts community, answers included the following keywords and ideas: diverse/diversity, resilience, financial consideration, ecosystem, equitable, interaction/connection, community, support, feedback, audience/exposure. One user wrote, "My ideal arts community is an ecosystem—non-competitive, decentralized, and stronger through diversifying." Other users reiterated that approach, citing "community" and "working together" as important tactics. When asked about particular resources, many users spoke to/mentioned the following keywords/ideas: money/financial, connections, intersectionality, coaching/teaching, healthcare, art/studio space, peer review. Specifically, one user wrote "opportunities to make \$\$" and another wrote "the number one wish I have is that there is a cooperative of sorts where I could purchase insurance . . . ." These responses further illuminate the necessity of financial compensation and community-centric practices, but they also highlight the barriers that many artists face, barriers that we hope to formally address by the end of this project.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ultimately, though TFA's cultural equity project is still very much in process, it has taught us a great deal about how to approach community-engaged work that brings in stakeholders at multiple points—especially those previously silent stakeholders. It is our hope that this article can provide several takeaways that might be of use to other folks doing this kind of slow, relationship-focused work in the future—work that yields powerful data that can be used to advocate for change, but more importantly, work that prioritizes sustained community relationships.

In summary, we first provided a model of what a community-engaged research project explicitly designed to build relationships might look like. In academic and professional spaces, so much of our attention is placed on the deliverables of a project: Did we meet our intended outcomes? What can we share immediately? However, as others have argued, deep, meaningful, sustainable community work takes time, and there are fewer models of that sort of work because it takes years to do and because the outcomes often don't fit neatly into an academic article. While this project is admittedly open-ended and can lead many different places, depending on what we learn from stakeholders, we are committed to ensuring that the outcomes serve under-represented artists in West Virginia whose needs are often unrecognized and/or systemically ignored. Countless times throughout this research, we have heard stories from artists that have required us to reckon with our own privilege:

as three white women with funding to conduct *our* work, listening to a queer artist of color discuss the barriers they had faced in securing space, time, and monetary support for *their* work has fostered a sense of urgency for this project.

Our next steps depend on the outcomes of these sessions, and more importantly, the relationships stemming from this work and who wants to build something together. More immediately, TFA will be using findings from the sessions for their strategic planning processes in 2023, including the formation of a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee within the organization. We will also develop materials to support other organizations wanting to do this sort of work and distribute those materials widely. Ultimately, we (the authors and TFA as a whole) want to develop programming that can shape the material lives of artists in West Virginia, but we know that work will be slow.

Second, we have articulated the value of meshing stakeholder and standpoint theory together. Because the artists we are working with have such a rich range of experiences that are directly tied to their individual identities and circumstances, a framework that values intersectionality can more effectively shape future action. Further, the combination of such a framework with a range of qualitative research methods such as collage, focus groups, surveys, interviews, and more provides space for marginalized community members to share their experiences in ways that make the most sense for them. Our small group listening sessions prompt open and engaged discussions. We have heard stories that range from participants' childhood experiences to present-day, arts-specific struggles. Race, gender, climate change, healthcare, and housing are among the many topics that have been explored in our listening sessions thus far. The small group size, our guiding values, and the low-pressure atmosphere of our listening sessions foster natural conversation that, in turn, reveals important truths about participants' standpoints.

Finally, we have made a case for the inclusion of artists in conversations about economic development. Artists and creatives are an integral part of our society, yet they lack the attention they deserve, despite the ways they enrich all of our lives and many of our communities. Their work is visible, yet they oftentimes are not. By expanding the notion of who counts as a stakeholder in a statewide economy by seeking out silent stakeholders, specifically looking to vulnerable individuals who have been marginalized by systems and hierarchies, we are seeking to enact the coalition-building that Walton et al. (2019) have urged us to take up. Valuing the expertise of a group of people who are typically not seen as part of the conversation defies the logics of monolithic thinking, and offers organizations, communication designers, and communities one step towards a more inclusive, equitable future.

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## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONS FOR LISTENING SESSION

### Prompt:

Use the collage materials to map out your past, present, and future experiences as an artist/creator in West Virginia.

**Questions to ask throughout to prompt conversation, in addition to general questions, i.e. what are you thinking about as you create?:**

1. What is your ideal arts community?
2. What do you already have that you need to make art? What do you need that you do not have?
3. Where do you go to feel more connected to your art or more included in your art community?
4. Spaces:
  - a. Are there spaces that you wish you could go to?
  - b. Are there spaces that you avoid?
  - c. How could these spaces be more inclusive to you or other artists who might be left out?
5. People:
  - d. Who is being left out of arts spaces?
6. Cultural Equity:
  - e. How do you understand cultural equity/inequity?
  - f. Where do you see it or not see it in your art spaces?
  - g. Where do not see it in your art spaces?

## APPENDIX B: QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

### Week 1

Describe your ideal arts community.

### Week 2

Where do you go to feel more connected to your art or more included in your art community?

### Week 3

Imagine your ideal arts community. What resources does this community offer you and other artists?

### Week 4

What does cultural equity mean to you?

### Week 5

As an artist, are there spaces that you wish you could go to, but have not been invited to or do not feel welcome? Or, are there spaces that you purposely avoid? How could these spaces be more inclusive to you or other artists who might be left out?

You don't need to list these spaces by name, but instead think

of how these spaces function or what kinds of spaces these are (galleries, restaurants, organized groups, etc.). Think about what makes them exclusionary.

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Kandi Workman works with the Tamarack Foundation for the Arts as a Programming Manager and Grant Writer, developing programming that increases access to social and economic opportunities for artists in West Virginia. She serves on the governance team for the Waymakers Collective: Appalachian Arts and Culture Assembly, a Central Appalachian organization invested in radical philanthropy rooted in equitable justice, creative cooperation, and sustainable stewardship. And as a daughter of a retired UMW coal miner, she serves as a proud board member of the WV Mine Wars Museum, bringing visibility to unions, labor history, and workers' rights through storytelling and solidarity. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from the West Virginia Wesleyan College.

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# Community-Driven Concepts to Support TPC Coalition Building in a Post-Roe World

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## ABSTRACT

As threats against reproductive autonomy increase nationally, coalition building serves as an essential practice to advocate for the needs of reproductive persons. This experience report focuses on the work of coalition building for those seeking access to alternative family building services and fertility treatments like in vitro fertilization, which rely upon the availability of donor embryo/s. Our report sheds light on the often unseen moments essential to supporting community-driven coalitional efforts, identifies concepts to guide coalitional practice in technical and professional communication, and underscores the value of *slowness* in coalitional work despite the increasing threats limiting access to reproductive care.

## CCS Concepts

Social and Professional Topics

## Keywords

Coalition building, Community engagement, Embryo donation, Reproductive justice, Third-party family building

## COALITION BUILDING IN A POST-ROE WORLD

Coalition building in the context of reproductive health has a long history which extends well-beyond the most recent U.S. Supreme Court's decision to repeal *Roe v. Wade*. For example, coalitions like the "Army of Three" consisting of Pat Maginnis, Lana Phelan Kahn, and Rowena Gurner, which formed in 1964, were essential to ensuring the right to have a safe and legal abortion. Their leadership and ability to work across differences contributed to the successful affirmation of reproductive bodily autonomy with the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. Through their work, the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Law (NARAL) was created and continues to be a leading voice in the pro-choice advocacy movement.

We acknowledge the historical work of this coalition because not doing so would be a disservice to the spirit of this special issue and fail to uphold Karma Chávez's (2013) statement that coalitional work is "a present and existing vision and practice that reflects an orientation to others and a shared commitment to change" (p. 146). Given this, we start by acknowledging the coalitions of the past that make possible current and future reproductive health advocacy projects. By mentioning the coalition work of NARAL in the 1960s and 1970s, we remind readers that coalition building does not happen overnight. Coalition building takes time and labor; it can be slow; and it requires dedication. In short, it is not easy work and as such it can be difficult to navigate how one may engage or build their own coalitions addressing reproductive health injustices.

Nonetheless, the noted success of coalitions like the "Army of Three" signals the enduring need for coalition building today. While national organizations (like NARAL) and state-based organizations (like the WI Abortion Fund) are examples of effective organizations mobilizing to address reproductive health needs, we understand coalitions as more complex than simply sharing a mission or ideology. As Jaquetta Shade-Johnson and Phil Bratta (2021) wrote:

Coalitions are not formed on merely shared ideology, but they must integrate difference and embodied experiences as they develop collaborative action that addresses

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oppression, exploitation, and discrimination to build more just and livable worlds. (n.p.)

We affirm Shade-Johnson and Bratta's position and suggest that coalitional work in the context of reproductive healthcare may take on a variety of forms to successfully intervene in instances of oppression, exploitation, and discrimination. It can include work across states or across regions to ensure access to reproductive care (i.e., ARC-Southeast—supporting Southerner's access to safe abortion services). It can include the sharing of resources and information across organizations or cultural communities to support more localized needs (i.e., Tewa Women United—an Indigenous serving organization in New Mexico). It can also include the organizing and mobilizing of physicians and lawyers working to advocate for protections to ensure their ability to offer legal and safe care (i.e., Physicians for Reproductive Health—which supports access to abortion services). These examples illustrate the range of approaches coalitions are enacting to address inequities to reproductive care and situate how we, in our work, aim to engage in coalitional work in a post-*Roe* world.

Our discussion of coalition building in a post-*Roe* world draws on a reproductive justice framework. SisterSong has defined reproductive justice as the “human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities” (n.p.). In this article, we consider the impact of the Dobbs decision on *the right to have a family*. While there are other coalitions actively working to ensure safe access to abortion services, the focus of this article examines another tenet in reproductive justice—the right to have a family and/or become pregnant. In the wake of Dobbs, this article considers persons struggling with infertility, those seeking to build a family as a member of the LGTBQ+ community, and/or single persons seeking to become a parent and their reliance on reproductive technologies (like IVF) to have a family including access to embryos to build a family. Given this, we consider how the Dobbs decision prescribes much uncertainty around the future rights to fertility services and, specifically, access to donor embryo/s for family building.

For those unfamiliar with fertility services in the U.S., the Dobbs decision poses many potential threats to equitable access to alternative family building options. Since the repeal of *Roe*, several state legislatures have put forward new state laws defining fetal personhood beginning at fertilization, which the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) warns could have the potential to ban in vitro fertilization and access to other reproductive technologies including the use of frozen embryos (ASRM Center for Policy and Leadership, 2022). Disputes around fetal personhood have fueled many reproductive technology and fertility advocates to mobilize into coalitions, including the recently launched [national campaign “Fight for IVF.”](#)<sup>1</sup> Such coalitions are essential

1 “Fight for IVF” is an example of these types of campaigns operating in-part of an already well-established, well-funded, and well-known organization. (In this case, RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association.) We cite this not to criticize their work but to make transparent that the type of coalition-building we are focused on related to reproductive health is much smaller, less established, and very much in the process of being formed into a larger collective coalition. Making the process of doing smaller reproductive health coalition work we see as valuable to scholars and community members in the wake of Dobbs.

to ensuring equitable access to fertility services and reproductive technologies, yet, they often are facilitated by large organizations who have funding and established recognition in the community. How these coalitions are working to protect the right to have a family are established and the tools they rely upon to mobilize often fail to be disclosed. As such, we limit our discussion to focus on the smaller, more grassroots coalitions that are mobilizing in the wake of Dobbs—especially those that are consider more niche topics of reproductive access (i.e., access to embryo donation) that larger organizations can at times claim to have expertise with yet fail to fully center those niche concerns and perspectives in their coalitional building work.

There are several issues surrounding embryo donation which connect to reproductive health access yet are often not centered within the aims of coalitions fighting for reproductive justice. Part of this is a result of legislative actions that threaten the health and safety of womxn seeking reproductive care.<sup>2</sup> Access to embryo donation does not pose immediate threats to the health and safety of womxn, and as such, often remains on the periphery of coalitional work advocating for reproductive care. Our notice of how access to donor embryo/s and other forms of alternative family building are taken up in reproductive justice coalitional work is meant to further insight into the minutiae of smaller reproductive justice coalition building. To better connect readers to our orientation of how embryo donation connects to reproductive justice, consider the fact that the number of donated embryo/s available for recipient use disproportionately impacts persons of color who wish to use an embryo that represents their genetic heritage. Complicating the landscape are religiously affiliated embryo “adoption” organizations that restrict single-persons, LGTBQ+ individuals, and non-religious individuals from accessing embryo/s donated to their organization. Further, while many families are created through embryo donation, there is a notable lack of clinical and psychological guidance with how to describe and normalize their alternative family structure. Parent/s may have difficulty describing the genetic relationships of their donor-conceived child; for example, families created through embryo donation often struggle with the language to refer to fully genetic siblings raised by different parents. The lack of consistent language to describe the family structure of donor embryo created families can impact the identity formation of a donor-conceived child and may complicate the decision to build a family through embryo donation.<sup>3</sup> These examples underscore the value of discussing coalitional work in reproductive justice from lenses beyond those working to ensure the safety and security of womxn seeking abortion services to include those working to uphold other tenets of reproductive justice, including access to have a family.

We believe there is value for scholars and community members to have a better understanding of the practices and tools needed to support the starting of community-engaged coalitions, especially those that are small in scale and/or niche in focus like embryo donation. As such, in this experience report, we overview a

2 Our use of womxn is intentional and signals our understanding the trans and non-binary persons must also be included in conversations surrounding reproductive justice.

3 Building a family through embryo donation, we assert, is not an elective decision. Rather, embryo donation may be one of only a few options to have a family due for those with a medical diagnosis requiring the use of donor embryo/s, those who identify as same-sex and want to build a family, or those who are single and want to raise a child.

collaborative research project that brings together a series of experts trained in rhetoric and technical and professional communication (Maria), genetic counseling (Gina), social work and psychotherapy (Maya), and mental health counseling (Jen). Specifically, we narrate a series of scenes and offer five concepts essential to informing our collaborative community project titled, “Language Preferences of the Embryo Donation Community,” which seeks to improve the language used when describing the family formation and genetic relationships formed through embryo donation. Our transdisciplinary approach we believe is essential to supporting the coalitional work of addressing the rhetorical and linguistic barriers that may impair decisions related donating embryos and/or using donated embryos to build a family. Further, we believe that this project illustrates new models of community-engaged work that draws on coalitional building to address inequities in accessing reproductive justice. Such a project we see as a model for other transdisciplinary projects that could incorporate Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) scholars and mobilize greater coalitional action in a post-*Roe* world.

In what follows, we articulate the very beginnings of our community-engaged project seeking to facilitate coalitional support for families created through embryo donation. By sharing these scenes, which often are mundane and do not get published in academic research, this report reveals how *shared lived experience*, *relationality*, and *reciprocity* became embedded in the design of our project and concepts that, when put into practice, foster *trust*. We define trust as an ability to be *open* to other forms of expertise—whether that expertise is from a different discipline or that expertise may be less institutional and more community-informed. Additionally, we see value to discussing the transdisciplinary design of this coalition as it holds relevancy for scholars in TPC and readers of CDQ who may consider issues of design from the perspective of more public-facing products. For us, the transdisciplinarity of our coalition is an intentional design which should be considered in TPC collaborative and community-engaged projects as it laid the foundation to structure our research with aims to target and capture multiple stakeholders invested in embryo donation. In short, we find the transdisciplinary structure of our coalition as essential to having our work take on value in spaces that include the university but also the clinic, the counselor’s office, the elementary classroom, and the embryo donated family itself. Ultimately, we hope that by describing how our shared lived experiences fostered a transdisciplinary and community-centered project, other scholars and community members invested in reproductive health projects may use this piece as evidence to demand resources from institutions and grants to support reproductive community-driven coalition work.<sup>4</sup>

## CONCEPTS GUIDING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

In their call for proposals, the editors of this special issue stated a need for “more visible set of social practices—tools, tactics, strategies, and values—useful for sustaining community-engaged inquiry that are both valued by our discipline...while we produce value for (and return value to) the communities scholars are in

coalition with” (Moore et al., 2022, n.p.). Shared lived experience, relationality, reciprocity, trust, and openness are five concepts that have guided our collaboration and when put into practice have been essential to sustaining our collaborative community-engaged work. Scholars in rhetoric and TPC have written extensively about these guiding concepts to engaging responsibly and ethically with communities. In what follows, we draw on the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Shawn Wilson, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Dawn Opel and Donnie Sackey, Rachel Bloom-Pojar and Maria Barker, and Rachel Shah to define these terms. We do this for two purposes. One, to invite collaborators who may be community members or may not have disciplinary knowledge of these terms to have these definitions clarified and consider how these concepts may be (or already are) in operation in their collaborative work. Two, to illustrate how they are put into practice in the scenes that follow. This serves as a model to TPC scholars, who may have an interest in coalitional reproductive justice work, how to value the *everydayness* of coalitional building that often does not get centered in academic articles.

## Shared Lived Experience

Feminist scholars across disciplines forged space not only acknowledging the value of lived experience but methodologically documenting how the sharing of lived experience mobilizes particular communities seeking action, creating knowledge, or addressing systemic injustices. We draw from the work of Patricia Hill Collins who has theorized the centrality of lived experience for African-American womxn in their communities. Collins (2008) explained:

For most African-American women those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences. Thus lived experiences as a criterion for credibility frequently is invoked by U.S. Black women when making knowledge claims. (p. 276).

While lived experience is built into the African-American experience, the collective sharing of those experiences works often to create what Collins called a “Black women’s sisterhood” which “recognize[s] connectedness as a primary way of knowing” (p. 279). Collins’s point about the building of a sisterhood and/or connectedness because of shared lived experiences applies to other marginalized communities in which their lived experiences are often misunderstood and at moments questioned as having value by more dominant communities. For us, infertility and/or the need to rely upon alternative family building options is another instance of a collective lived experience that we see as aligned to Collins’s explanation of lived experience in that there is a collective understanding of how the failure to create a family from more traditional practices and access unites those who must reorient themselves to new tools and knowledge about what it means to form a family. This shared sense of knowing what it means to see the world through a lens which does not associate the female body as an automatically fertile body capable of conceiving a child is unique in how it orients the three of us to reproductive coalition work. Later in this piece, we narrate how tapping into these experiences operates as a small step in larger coalitional work.

<sup>4</sup> We want to acknowledge that our use of “community-driven” work comes from Dr. Kimberly Harper who discussed the differences between “community-based” and “community-driven” research projects at a private talk with University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee researchers and students in 2020.

## Relationality

Our definition of *relationality* is informed from Cree scholar Shawn Wilson's (2008) work who discusses relationality as an ontological and epistemological grounded way of being because there is nothing that exists that is not interconnected. For Wilson, relationality is a practice that understands knowledge through relations. He wrote, "rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of" (Wilson, p. 80). Our bodies—as existing in the world—pull and call us to what we are oriented towards knowing and understanding, with Wilson explaining:

Knowledge itself is held in the relationships and connections formed with the environment that surrounds us. This reinforces the earlier point that knowledge, theories and ideas are only knots in the strands of relationality that are not physically visible but are nonetheless real. (p. 87)

In this way, relationality requires us to be *accountable* to all our relations. Expounding on Wilson's work, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (2020) has explained to writing and rhetoric scholars that when we put relationality into practice in our work, we can see how it informs how we collectively and individually "make knowledge and pay attention to how the meaning and the knowledge itself changes as the relationships do" (p. 546). Meaning, when we position ourselves as research collaborators in community-engaged work, practicing relationality in that work means that we have a relationship to the work that we study as well as the community bodies implicated by our work. This means considering the ways in which we as research partners relate and stay accountable to our intended research community (i.e., the donor embryo community) as well as how we build relationships and accountability amongst ourselves as collaborators. We return later to relationality as it is a practice that we find essential to work grounded in reproductive healthcare and when intentionally practiced leads to research outcomes rooted in reciprocity.

## Reciprocity

Doing research with/in community bodies requires serious evaluation not only of the community bodies that are connected to the project, but also which obligations flow from the researcher to each community. While community-engaged scholarship has spent decades addressing how we enter communities, there's little-to-no work that complicates this by acknowledging the reality that research is always interacting with multiple community contexts and that each context creates a differing set of responsibilities on the part of the researcher. While this complex mapping effort and negotiation process seems daunting, scholars like Dawn Opel and Donnie Sackey, for example, have begun the work of reorienting community work to be more accountable. In their co-edited special issue on community literacy and food justice, "Reciprocity in Community-Engaged Food and Environmental Justice Scholarship," they drew into question the longstanding concept of reciprocity in community research. Opel and Sackey (2019) argued that researchers need to rethink what research responsibility is and looks like:

Even seemingly progressive models of reciprocity emerge from a western rationalist foundation that still privileges academic notions of justice and balance that might be inconsistent with community beliefs and needs. Our questioning of reciprocity implores that we

revise or even abandon accepted notions of partnership in community-engaged scholarship. This might mean focusing upon not only how reciprocity happens but also what kind of research benefits community organizations. Sometimes this entails reconsidering our definitions of responsibility. (p. 2)

When we consider that communities have histories and that communities are relationships, Opel and Sackey's call for a reconsideration of responsibility and responsible research takes on added meaning. As readers will learn in the report below, our eventual collaboration to work on this embryo project resulted from a variety of other community projects with their own histories and relationships—namely stemming from work related to infertility advocacy. Yet, those moments in which the outcomes of our collaboration reciprocally benefited all of those invested illustrate how moments that may not be directly related to a specific collaboration can stem other/future work that may be unknown at the time when reciprocal moments first emerge.

## Trust

The ability to account for multiple moments where reciprocity appears invites the building of trust and is important when cultivating coalitional action. That is, trust isn't something that can be assumed within a community partnership. Trust takes time to be effectively cultivated. Rachel Bloom-Pojar and Maria Barker (2020) discussed the significance of trust and its dependence upon time and the additional labor it requires as they reflect on their own collaborative reproductive health project, *Promotores de Salud* of PPWI. Trust or, in the context of their project, *confianza*, is "much more dynamic than simply talking about whether someone trusts another person or not" (p. 91). Rather, trust "is something that the promotores have developed an expertise with as they continuously work to build relationships and genuine connections with their communities" (p. 91–92). And, as a result of the time this takes, trust or "confianza comes with great responsibility and, at times, additional pressure to help people" (p. 92). In this way, Bloom-Pojar and Barker remind us that "researchers need to recognize that *confianza* takes time and needs to extend beyond any specific project, grant, or interaction. It must be built up through consistent and genuine interactions that center relationships and mutually beneficial goals" (p. 92). Trust then becomes something that is achieved only through embodying the concepts of relationality and reciprocity. In the scenes below, we illustrate through the stories shared how trust slowly began to be "baked in" to our collaborative research project and how it often acted as needed reassurance when new ideas and transdisciplinary expertise were offered, complicating the trajectory of the work.

## Openness

It is by cultivating trust that we find openness can emerge by "creating a space where people feel their perspectives are valued" (Shah, 2020, p. 108). Rachel Shah defined "openness" as an asset-based knowledge production tool in community projects which works to redefine intellectualism to "interact with difference in a generative way" (p. 106). For her, practicing openness in community projects involves embracing "open minds, open construction of self and others, open hearts, open revision, open communication, and open structures" (p. 97). In this way, Shah has asserted "openness enriches critical community-based epistemologies by suggesting that it is not simply enough to make a theoretical argument for the validity of community stories" (p. 39). Openness, in this way, suggests that it is not just who is speaking that is important as what



is said and can require “those from the center sometimes have[ing] to defer to those with experiential knowledge of a situation” (Shah, 2020, p. 123). We find then in our work that openness serves not just as a guiding practice of how to do community-driven work but as a practice that reinforces the other concepts already defined here. In this way, these concepts become circular, building off of each other, and holding our actions accountable to the community changemaking (Itchuaqiyaa, 2021) our collaboration seeks to foster.

In the following section, we share a series of scenes that contributed to our collaborative embryo project. These scenes, we acknowledge, are not radical but consist of basic yet fundamental moments that allow the five concepts defined above to be transported from a theoretical concept to an actualized practice. We call attention to these *everyday* or *micro* moments of coalition building to invite other scholars and community members interested in coalition work to reflect on the time, care, and vulnerability that these scenes illustrate. Doing so, we see, is an act which resembles the work of “amplification.” Amplification is not just validating a marginalized experience but also making space to hold others accountable to knowing a lived experience, even if the listener who is told about that experience does not self-identify with it (McCoy, 2019, p. 45). In this way, amplification while at surface-level is a macro process, yet the careful to being accountable to others suggests how it is also a *micro* process. In this vein, we find, “that micro amplifications happen in the moment of learning a new truth, a new lived experience previously misunderstood, misrepresented, or albeit silenced” (Novotny et al., 2022, p. 378). Experience reports that capture these lived experiences or scenes are essential, we argue, to demystifying the time, labor, tools, and practices of coalition work and coalition work especially in the context of the increasing stakes surrounding reproductive healthcare in a post-*Roe* world.

## AMPLIFYING MICRO SCENES OF COALITION BUILDING POST-ROE

The following consist of the various scenes by which our project “Language Preferences of the Embryo Donation Community” formed. We offer a linear overview of how these interactions evolved eventually into a collaborative project that seeks to coalesce action to address rhetorical and linguistic concerns pertaining to embryo donation and family building. These concerns are of relevance to those advancing reproductive action in a post-*Roe* world. Ultimately, the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision reversed the 1973 ruling of *Roe v. Wade*. Practically, the *Dobbs* ruling returned the decision of individual’s access to reproductive care to individual state legislatures. The media coverage of the *Dobbs* decision frequently focuses on how individual states may restrict or affirm access to abortion services. Such coverage is warranted given the potential life and death impact restricting abortion services may have on pregnant person’s life. Still, other forms of harmful legislation have also been proposed by numerous state legislators that restrict access to family building services through fetal personhood bills. These fetal personhood bills often view embryo/s as potential viable life or persons. From the point-of-view of embryo donation such bills threaten not only one’s autonomy over their embryo/s but one’s ability to create embryo/s and eventually donate them to other persons seeking to build their family through fertility services like IVF. Such an example underscores how access to embryo donation may be impacted in a post-*Roe* world by legally defining embryo/s as persons through fetal personhood bills. To be clear, when we first

began our collaborative project, *Roe v. Wade* was federal law and the numerous state-level threats restricting access to reproductive health were not proposed. In fact, for many, coalition building in a post-*Roe* world is still new ground to become familiar, especially as we emerge out of COVID-19 lockdowns and attempt to navigate coalition building after quarantines. In what follows, we begin before the reversal of *Roe* to identify concepts that, in hindsight, we now see as key to navigating the precious actions of coalition building post-*Roe*. Specifically, we amplify what we see as micro exchanges that serve as foundational moments to grounding our collective work addressing the increasing threats impairing family building options. As such, we provide the location of this work and the year the scene took place indicating how this work entails a national scope and the time it has taken for the possibility of such a project to even emerge. We see these scenes as amplifying the slow work of coalition building as well as the work that occurs often outside of the project itself. Thus, we intentionally included these scenes as they remain foundational to contributing to the work our coalitional efforts of today, in a now, post-*Roe* world.

### Scene 1. Salt Lake City, 2018.

This scene begins prior to the founding of EM•POWER with Moxi, an HHS-funded educational organization dedicated to increasing awareness, empowering choice, and fostering understanding for everyone involved in embryo donation, which Maya, Gina, and Jen co-founded and currently run. In fact, this scene begins well before our collaborative community-engaged project took shape. Rather, it begins when Maria and Maya first met — at an infertility art exhibit and event that Maria was hosting on behalf of her organization The ART of Infertility. The ART of Infertility invited Maya to show her newly released documentary, *One More Shot*. The documentary chronicled Maya and her husband’s, Noah, years of struggling to conceive and the various fertility treatments they underwent until deciding to use a donor embryo. Earlier, in 2014, Maya met Maria’s ART of Infertility collaborator, Elizabeth, who interviewed Maya and Noah about their family building struggles with infertility. Elizabeth suggested to Maria that it may be poignant to invite Maya and Noah to travel to Salt Lake City to promote their documentary as additional programming that aligned with the exhibit. It was there that Maya and Maria first met—over pancakes—in a small Salt Lake City diner in February of 2018. Over breakfast, Maria, Elizabeth, Maya, Noah, and their 3-year-old daughter sat and chatted about the personal decisions we had to confront through our own family building journeys. The conversation was casual and with ease. Maria was struck with how comfortable she was sharing some intimate and painful stories about her fertility journey with a couple that she had just met. Similarly, Maya openly disclosed not just about their past family building process but the reality of where they were today in the journey—something that at the time was spoken about with less certainty and very much not included in their documentary. This ease by which we collectively opened up to each other was the result of shared experiences with family building. For those who are diagnosed with infertility, there can be much difficulty in understanding where, when, and with whom to disclose the sensitive, vulnerable stories and decisions that come with that diagnosis. Yet, much of the anxiety and assessment of what to disclose dissipates when shared with others who share experiences that may be misunderstood by dominant culture—this includes infertility.



### *Concept practiced: Shared lived experience.*

Takeaway: Draw on embodied commonalities and share those stories that are often vulnerable to tell others. Listen to others share their similar stories and find commonality with them while eating good food and laughing at the moments of your story only they “get” because of that shared experience. Likewise, meet each other with where the other person is at. With many intimate shared experiences, while there can be felt ease with recounting the story, there can also be emotional vulnerability. Allow empathy to guide conversations. Listen not only with intention but with care. Make space and allow for emotionally raw moments to emerge. If moments of emotional vulnerability emerge, treat them as sacred. Do not expose the other’s emotional rawness but rather comfort and validate the integrity of those emotions. In sum, ponder the power of those shared moments when your experiences are validated by each other.

## **Scene 2. Los Angeles, 2018.**

In June of 2018, Maria traveled to Los Angeles for another infertility art exhibit event, which focused on male experiences of infertility which coincided with Men’s Health Month. While the exhibit was sponsored by a urologist practicing in the area, Maya and Noah were also living in Los Angeles at the time. Reflecting on the network of relationships that the exhibit had in the LA area, Maria reached out to Maya to see if she or Noah would be interested in participating in the event. Trained as a clinical social worker and working as a psychotherapist, Maya noted the need for explicit discussion about the impact of infertility on men and the alternative family building experience. Such insight prompted Maya and Noah to participate in the exhibit by hosting another screening of their documentary which featured a panel on making modern families. It was through the relationship we had built upon collaborating in Salt Lake City that led to additional opportunities to continue collaborating with Maya and Noah. While this exhibit and document showing occurred in a different city, we continued to draw upon our shared experiences to invite others to witness and participate in sharing their own stories with infertility as well. In this instance, we were able to center more of Noah’s lived experiences as a man navigating infertility. Such a note is important given the continued gendering of infertility and the stigma some men can feel when trying to build a family through alternative means. In this way, by drawing upon our shared experiences, we were assembling a barrage of similar yet distinct experiences for others to relate and expand the representations of infertility.

### *Concept practiced: Relationality.*

Takeaway: Bring people together. Offer them opportunities to share their experiences and their work. Find moments of commonality and yet also amplify small moments where one’s experience may diverge from another. Build a more collective, inclusive representation by threading together the ways our shared experiences relate. If done collaboratively and honoring each other’s experiences, it can enhance everyone’s learning and create new representations and even categories of belonging.

## **SCENE 3. PHILADELPHIA, 2019.**

In October of 2019, Maya and Maria met again—this time in Philadelphia where Maya was attending the American Society for Reproductive Medicine’s (ASRM) annual convention. In attendance were also Gina and Jen. The three of them (Maya, Gina, and Jen) had recently received an HHS grant allowing them to create

EM•POWER with Moxi. At the time, Maria was in Philadelphia hosting a new photovoice exhibit connected to infertility advocacy. Strategically, the exhibit debuted during ASRM allowing multiple infertility stakeholders from across the country to attend the gallery event. That evening, Maya brought Gina and Jen to the exhibit where the three met and Maria learned more about EM•POWER with Moxi. Maria also shared more about her new job in rhetoric and technical communication and the research trajectory she was interested in building. The conversation evolved into a discussion about the various ways language complicates embryo donation, beliefs about personhood, and the implications of an organization’s choice to say embryo adoption versus embryo donation. Maya, Gina, and Jen talked about the ways in which describing families formed from donor embryos often encountered new challenges to figuring out “the right” language to describe the genetic relationships of that family. For instance, Jen was an embryo donor and had biological children of her own. She struggled with figuring out the language to use to describe the other child a different woman conceived from Jen’s donated embryo with Jen’s children. While the embryos were genetically related that is where the similarities ended. The donor conceived child was being raised in another part of the country. And while the embryos were from the same ART cycle they were not conceived at the same time. Maria listened and shared how she was interested in also understanding how other forms of family building like adoption had created standard language terminologies like “birth mom” and discussed how she, as a new parent of an adopted child, was trying to incorporate that language into her family formation descriptions. “Birth mom” clearly had become an acceptable and readily used term yet the issues that Jen faced while similar to Maria still needed more thought and care. Talking with Jen, it was clear that we shared lived experiences that informed our thinking and that we also had various disciplinary training that could enhance this work—Maria’s through a rhetorical and TPC point of view and Jen’s through her work as a mental health counselor for those considering embryo donation. There was a general excitement about the overlaps of our expertise, yet all of us already had other commitments, and we left the excitement about language, embryos, and family building in Philadelphia.

### *Concept practiced: Reciprocity.*

Takeaway: Talk about your expertise and see how different points-of-view may be beneficial to a project. What do you research and why? How does that research relate to other disciplinary orientations? In what ways do they intersect? Asking those questions can invite reciprocity to emerge by considering ways in which disciplinary differences can foster transdisciplinary problem-solving relationships.

## **Scene 4. COVID-19, 2020.**

A year passes and we are coping with the realities of COVID-19. Maria’s past in-person art exhibitions are on infinite pause and EM•POWER with Moxi is attempting to expand their outreach through virtual educational webinars and social media. Maya, Gina, Jen, Maria, and Elizabeth meet on Zoom to discuss how COVID-19 is impacting both of our organizations. Wanting to continue our work and engage with the infertility community, we floated the idea to create a virtual participatory photovoice project highlighting the unique experiences surrounding embryo donation and family building. Maria and Elizabeth agree to manage the project while Maya, Gina, and Jen agree to help circulate the call for participants. EM•POWER with Moxi advertises the project on their social media accounts and through their educational networks.

The ART of Infertility collects, edits, and curates the photovoice exhibit. These distinctions matter as EM•POWER with Moxi has more direct communication and investment embedded in the embryo donation community, whereas The ART of Infertility engages more broadly with the infertility community—which may or may not include the embryo donation community. In October of 2020, the project debuts as a solely virtual exhibit in conjunction again with 2020 ASRM conference. The timing of this debut was again strategic. Collectively, as we advertised the virtual exhibit, we used ASRM hashtags in our attempts to direct some of their stakeholders to this project. While the use of hashtags may appear minimal or surface-level, it is essential to remember the timing of this project. The virtual exhibit debuted in October of 2020. At that time, COVID-19 remained rampant and with no vaccine available extreme caution was taken to avoid getting the virus. This included the fertility clinic where reproductive endocrinologists were frequently canceling IVF transfers due to COVID-19 exposure. Given the crisis-level moment that the pandemic presented, the success of the collaborative photovoice project was deemed ‘mixed’ as the heightened anxiety of COVID-19 seems to cloud the ability to measure engagement and impact. For instance, beyond our attempt to engage with health professionals, those pondering or considering embryo donation were legitimately burned out by the prospect of documenting an experience that feels all too uncertain. As a result, participatory engagement with the project flutters. Nonetheless, what results is a deeper understanding of the unique challenges embryo donation faces and the process by which we collaborate. The photos that are submitted illustrate a range of challenges that being an embryo donor or using donor embryos to build a family face. Similar questions, like the conversation Maria and Jen had, about genetic relationships with siblings formed from embryo donation appear. From the photovoice project and the patterns we see surrounding genetic relationships, we note possibilities for more collaborations to continue and a desire to pivot from simply representing these challenges to addressing them with more concrete interventions.

### *Concept practiced: Reciprocity.*

Takeaway: Pilot a collaborative project that can benefit communities. Learn how different organizations make decisions and what they prioritize. Scope the project small to make space for learning how others operate. Reflect on what was achieved and learned from that process to determine how one may move forward.

## **Scene 5. Milwaukee, 2021-2022.**

COVID continues to control the world. This includes research. Nonetheless, EM•POWER with Moxi receives another HHS grant renewal, and Maria finds herself as a faculty member at a new institution with more research support. As she reflects on the direction of her research and her desire to expand it beyond The ART of Infertility project, Maria returns to the conversations had with Maya, Gina, and Jen in Philadelphia. There is an internal fellowship application circulating at Maria’s institution, which prompts Maria to send an email to EM•POWER with Moxi asking if they would be interested in exploring the connections between embryo donation, language, and alternative family building. Maya, Gina, and Jen respond that the idea for this project arrives at a good time. There are others in the embryo donation community noting the need for this work. We talk about what this project may entail, and Maria sends them drafts of the grant application.

Some of the content the application discusses is the impending impact the reversal of *Roe* may have on beliefs and legislative efforts surrounding ‘personhood’. Specifically, the grant application describes the potential impact of this work as understanding the relationship between embryo donation, personhood, and decision-making. In short, Maria wants to understand if a person believes their embryos to be a viable ‘person’ how that impacts their decision to or to not donate their remaining embryos. Upon sending the first draft, Maya calls Maria and shares how the scope seems off. It is focused too much on decision-making and perhaps aims to do what EM•POWER with Moxi has already prioritized their future planning. We take a pause to assess the specific need for a rhetorician to work on this project and there is a sense of trust in Maria’s expertise and contribution to the project. A new draft is sent to Maya, Gina, and Jen and there is consensus in the direction and scope of the project. The draft is submitted to the fellowship, and soon Maria learns she will be granted a year fellowship to support the project. During this time, Maria meets monthly with EM•POWER with Moxi and slowly crafts IRB materials to survey the language preferences of the donor embryo community. After sending the draft of the survey to Maya, Gina, and Jen, Maria receives an email from the three that the survey doesn’t adequately address the range of stakeholders impacted by embryo donation. In its current form it is focused on just the embryo donor or the donor recipient, excluding many others who are involved in the decision. As someone only tangential to embryo donation, Maria takes a pause to reflect on this information and moves to significantly revise the survey to include the many stakeholders: those that have formed families through donor embryo, those who are considering creating their families through donor embryo, those who have donated their embryos, those who are considering donating their embryos, those who are donor conceived persons, and those who work professionally to support the donor embryo families (i.e., lawyers, fertility specialists, and mental health specialists). The revision causes Maria to pivot and delays the progress she sought to make during the fellowship. While this pause causes a delay in Maria’s progress, the delay is essential to ensure that the survey design serves and captures the layers of stakeholders invested in embryo donation. Maya, Gina, and Jen’s range in expertise on the topic amplifies the need to design a survey that can collect information that can be of value to all involved in embryo donation—advancing the impact of this work—and building trust about the validity about the survey itself within the community. As such, Maria takes time to revise the survey and redesign it to account for the multiple stakeholders Maya, Gina, and Jen requested.

### *Concept practiced: Trust.*

Takeaway: Trust others and the knowledge they carry about community needs. De-center yourself and your expertise to consider what may be missed or not taken account for in your approach. Remember, de-centering is a practice which varies depending upon one’s embodied positionality. That is, it is one thing to de-center oneself as a cisgender white man than to de-center as a queer Black woman.<sup>5</sup> Finally, give yourself space to revise timelines even when they may no longer fit within institutional confines. Trust requires flexibility as well as de-centering oneself and one’s needs so that community needs can made the priority if we claim the work to be truly coalitional.

5 I want to credit reviewer #2 who made this important comment upon reviewing a draft of this manuscript. They deserve the credit for that statement and the understanding that “there are layers to decentering” (Reviewer #2).

## Scene 6. Milwaukee, 2021-2022.

With the added revisions needed to be made to the survey design to include multiple stakeholders, Maria knows that she is not going to be able to complete the collaborative research project she started with EM•POWER. Given this, she applies and receives an internal university grant that can continue to support the research on embryo donation, language, and family building she started. At the beginning of May, Maria is awarded the grant, which allows her to continue this work for another year. As she begins this work in June of 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court rules on the Dobbs decision. Increased media coverage begins to highlight some of the initial concerns we had originally anticipated regarding access to embryos and personhood bills. As a result, there is a heightened level of anxiety amongst those in the community who have frozen embryos and have not yet decided to donate. As some state legislatures openly draft bills that would define personhood to include embryo/s and regulate access to use and/or donate such embryo/s, some in the infertility community begin to make plans to ship their remaining embryo/s to post-Roe “friendly” states where they may maintain autonomy over their embryo/s. Such background is significant and influences the heightened emotions and appeal for this collaborative project. While the survey was already in need of further revision, the cultural moment of post-Roe added another exigence to revise the survey. Specifically, the cultural moment influenced our desire to ensure the language and design of the survey made space for survey participants to openly reflect and document any felt anxiety about their embryo/s in relation to the Dobbs decision. Given this, it is suggested that Maria works with Melody, another quantitative researcher who is employed by EM•POWER with Moxi and has designed other surveys for their organization in the past. Maria agrees welcoming the help of an expert with more of a quantitative background than herself. She also brings on a graduate student, Angie, who was working on a mixed methods thesis and had experience with survey design. The process to refine the survey takes nearly the entire Fall 2022 semester. Ultimately, a new IRB must be submitted. As such, the timeline to complete this research project changes once again. Maria realizes this work needs time and ultimately must be responsibly designed for the donor embryo community to participate. Rather than become defensive or defend a particular point related to the research design, Maria listens to the community experts—EM•POWER with Moxi—and the survey is changed *again*. And while it is changed, it is changed to be more responsive to the heightened precarity on how the Dobbs decision influences embryo donation.

### *Concept practiced: Openness.*

Takeaway: Successful transdisciplinary, community-driven research embraces a spirit of openness which prioritizes community knowledge over institutional or disciplinary expertise knowledge. Openness requires time and reflection and honestly the ability to be open to the evolution of projects and how they respond to community needs. One can’t just claim to be open to new ideas. One must position their research as open to revision and critique throughout the research process. Further, one must be open to sociocultural influences that may emerge outside of the previously defined research timeline. Flexibility and patience is needed if one is to truly engage openly in community-driven coalition projects.

## REFLECTIONS FOR TPC SCHOLARS COMMITTED TO REPRODUCTIVE COALITION BUILDING

These scenes offer a linear narrative of how community-engaged concepts emerge in the transdisciplinary, community-driven coalitional work. And while we acknowledge that these scenes may not emerge in the same chronological order in other community-driven coalition projects, we invite readers of this report to reflect on moments when their collaborative work could benefit from the application of these five concepts. Further, while these concepts may not appear in the same order in other community-driven coalition projects, we do see them as a series of scaffolded events. That is, the five concepts when put into practice build and constellate off each other. In doing so, the *embodiedness* required of putting these concepts into practice facilitate new ways of addressing the transdisciplinary complexities of working across differences.

Barriers to community-driven work related to science and technology frequently occur in academia and pose challenges to scholars wanting to do collaborative, transdisciplinary work. As our experiences illustrate, we encountered a series of our own misinterpretations as a result of the transdisciplinary nature of this project. Yet, making these experiences visible to others we believe can better prepare future collaborative research between communities and scholars. In this way, we see this experience report as offering support to TPC and rhetoric scholars, emerging and established, seeking to pivot their work towards community-driven coalition projects. Specifically, we believe our experience report responds to Lauren Cagle’s (2017) call for more “training that allows students [or faculty] to practice talking across disciplines, collaboratively constructing research questions and methodologies, and advocating for the value that rhetorics brings to the shared project” (p. 8). That is, we share these stories as an invitation to those interested in collaborative reproductive health coalitions to reflect on these concepts put into practice to consider how they appear in their own work and the value they place in the invisible work this requires.

In the field of technical and professional communication, we find that our scenes may offer additional insight into conversations of design through two avenues. One, these scenes invite those committed to coalitional building in TPC to ponder the design of the very structures of those coalitions and how these five concepts may influence or shape the design of coalitions. That is, the concepts we defined and illustrate in practice through the short scenes may be helpful to those first starting out with coalitional efforts. For instance, the transdisciplinary structure of the coalition has proved to be essential to supporting a layered, multifaced approach to understanding embryo donation in a post-Roe world. By valuing the various expertise we all bring to the project, we allow for the five concepts to become practices that have built trust amongst ourselves and we argue created a more successful project that aligns with the needs of the multiple stakeholders invested in embryo donation—expanding the scope of coalitional research beyond the academy and centering it in the community. Thinking through how we design our coalitions to embody and embed those concepts may be one takeaway of use for emerging TPC scholars with coalitional aspirations. Second, the public facing materials we are creating may offer another avenue to ponder the place of design. Take for example the survey design. The design of the survey has undergone multiple revisions to expand stakeholder participation and account for the evolving sociocultural post-Roe

influences on embryo donation. Such a design, intended to capture the perspectives of various stakeholders, may also influence how the findings of this coalitional work is circulated. For instance, we anticipate the results of the survey contributing to a glossary of preferred terms to describe embryo donation family structures. This glossary, which will consist of affirming language to describe genetic relationships with embryo donors and embryo recipient families, may be used by fertility providers, mental health professionals, and genetic counselors as they consult with those considering embryo donation to build their family. Another potential public facing deliverable we have identified includes a children's book geared towards elementary teachers and families to affirm the structures of alternative family formations created through embryo donation. These examples illustrate ways TPC scholars may rethink the role of design beyond more traditional user-interface experiences and rather how embracing design as a structural process in coalitional work can identify new forms by which our TPC-based work may be shared.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, for TPC scholars who may seek to pivot their research to consider the reproductive health coalitional landscape in the wake of the Dobbs decision, consider how *quickly* coalitions are mobilizing to challenge state legislatures that are working to eradicate the right to bodily autonomy. In this vein, research trajectories and funding mechanisms are increasingly rewarding work that addresses reproductive health. Given these exigencies, we call for community-engaged researchers and communities seeking to build coalitional responses to consider the value of changemaking by *slowing down on the rush to respond*, which was catapulted by the Dobbs decision. Doing so, we argue will reposition community-engaged work to better align with community-driven work which because of its valuing of community expertise and knowledge requires more time. Julie Lindquist has reminded researchers invested in engaged scholars that community work can be “unpredictable, time [...] intensive, and entirely inefficient” (p. 651) and, as such, community-engaged research “is a long uneven process, and it develops within the context of carefully cultivated relationships of trust between researchers and participants” (p. 649). We realize the choice to emphasize being slow can seem counter to the very real harm that reproductive health researchers want to reduce. Yet, *slow work* we believe allows shared lived experiences, relationality, reciprocity, trust, and openness to be fostered and reorients community-driven research to scenes and practices that exist well-beyond the scope of the traditional research project. Tending to the slow work of collaboration can make visible the moments that foster coalitional commitments that center the aims of community-driven research within the community/ies. Given this, we encourage others seeking to form coalitions to counter the increasingly emotional and polarizing contexts of reproductive health may embrace these five concepts and find value in slowing down community changemaking as a way to stay accountable to the communities our work serves.

6 Another example of scholarship rethinking the potential design work in reproductive justice collaborative projects is Danielle Koepke and her dissertation, “Toward a Cultural Rhetorics Praxis of Care for Digital Storytelling Projects about Reproductive Justice” (2023).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Maria Novotny is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her research considers how reproductive health patients navigate access to fertility care and other alternative family building services such as adoption and surrogacy. As a community-engaged scholar, she has collaborated with several assisted reproductive technology organizations including EM•POWER with Moxi. Her co-edited collection *Infertilities, A Curation* portrays the myriad voices and perspectives of individuals who experience infertility and difficulty in family building using art and writing as mediums for personal expression. Other scholarship related to the intersections of infertility, rhetoric, and advocacy has been published in *Community Literacy Journal*, *Peitho*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and other edited collections.

Maya Grobel is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and psychotherapist who specializes in supporting individuals and couples struggling to conceive and building their family in alternative ways. She has written about infertility for various outlets and most recently co-authored the embryo donation chapters in the second edition of *Fertility Counseling: Clinical Guide and Fertility Counseling: Case Studies*. Maya is a fertility advocate who produced a film with her husband documenting their tumultuous journey to parenthood called *One More Shot*. Maya is a co-founder of EM•POWER with Moxi, an educational company focused on empowering choice in embryo donation. She is a parent via embryo donation.

Gina Davis is a multi-state-licensed and board-certified genetic counselor who founded Advocate Genetics, an independent telehealth genetic counseling practice specializing in reproductive medicine. Gina is also co-founder of EM•POWER with Moxi, an education company in embryo donation and third-party family building, and is a known embryo donor.

Jennifer Vesbit is a Nationally Certified Counselor who rode the IVF roller coaster twice. Her first IVF cycle ended in a heartbreaking miscarriage and no remaining embryos. Her second cycle gave her twins, and one remaining embryo. Jen and her husband agonized over what to do with that one embryo, and ultimately decided to donate to a single mom by choice. That embryo is now a healthy and happy little boy. Throughout her journey, Jen found a lack of education and support for people considering embryo donation, so she created an online community called [Embryo Donation Support](#) and began running support groups for embryo donors.

# Making Graduate Student CER Practices Visible: Navigating the Double-Binds of Identities, Space, and Time

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## ABSTRACT

In this dialogue, four recently commenced PhD students discuss and thus expound upon how their community-engaged research shaped their methodologies and vice versa. The four authors explain how they each individually overcame the double-binds of identities, space, and time associated with graduate school and community partnerships. They conclude by detailing how, in overcoming these double-binds, they were able to enact community-engaged practices not only tied to their respective methodologies but also focused on equity and social justice.

## CCS Concepts

Social and Professional Topics

## Keywords

Community-engaged research, Methodology, Graduate students, Social justice, Double-binds

## INTRODUCTION

As four recently graduated PhD students conducting community-engaged research (CER) as part of our dissertations, we were excited by this special issue of *CDQ*. We were particularly interested in making visible the sometimes invisible practices of graduate students engaged in CER, with an emphasis on how to navigate double-binds while developing CER practices that encourage equity and social justice and how to develop methodologies for CER from within our communities.

A disciplinary commitment to coalitions, community-based research, and social justice (Cushman, 1996; Shah, 2020; Walton et al., 2019) inspire our projects. Our work answers the question: how can graduate students navigate CER, given double-binds connected to identities, space, and time, and come to develop methodologies from the inside out?

In our efforts to create CER projects, each of us encountered double-binds in some form or another. We define double-binds as situations of liminal positionality when the goals, values, and circumstances of “institutions, disciplines, expertise, methods and tools, researchers, stakeholders, aims, practices, and resources” interact and often challenge each other (Simmons & Amidon, 2019, p. 2). In addition, we draw our notion of double-binds from Wardle and Clement (2016), who discussed the identity-related double-binds writers encounter when expectations of home and academic communities challenge each other. We combine this scholarship on double-binds to talk about how in each of our projects our positionalities intersected and challenged each other, ultimately leading us to moments of complexity and generativity. We are adding to this scholarship by delineating how community-engaged graduate-student researchers might navigate the double-binds they will inevitably encounter as they step out of the classroom and into communities and how these situations can be productive for community-engaged methodology creation.

As we shared our stories with each other, we realized that though we each encountered these double-binds under different circumstances or from different positionalities, we each navigated

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our way through them by committing to a deeper engagement with our community partners in order to craft methodologies which fit the unique needs of our partnerships. The relationships we built with our community partners ultimately built our CER practices in significant ways. Rather than succumbing to the double-binds or attempting to research or write our way out of them, we created CER methodologies via our engagement with community partners that accounted for them. This kind of reciprocal methodological approach is supported in particular by discussions on Indigenous methodologies such as Margaret Kovach (2009), Zoe Todd (2016), and Jennifer Clary-Lemon (2019).

Ultimately, our research builds upon existing scholarship on graduate student experiences with CER (Mathis et al., 2016; McCool, 2020) through an examination of how we navigated these double-binds. Our work combines storytelling with critical examinations and implications of our work situated within CER scholarship. Together, we describe how our experiences building reciprocal relationships with community partners helped us to navigate the double-binds we found ourselves in as well as develop CER methodologies which fit the needs of our communities and the projects we had designed around them.

Inspired by Powell et al.'s "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics" (2014) and the Octologs, we engaged in a dialogue in which we discussed our CER methodologies. A dialogue allowed us to prompt one another about our respective methodologies, all of which were often messy but allowed for the adaptability and flexibility that working with communities requires. Through questioning one another, we were better able to probe how our methodologies fit CER best practices as well as the similarities and differences between them.

Lydia Allison explores the intersections of graduate student positionality and building research relationships and how these intersections impacted her methodology when working with a prisoner reentry community organization.

Megan Schoettler reflects on her partnership with the Midwest Rape Crisis Organization, including how she navigated the simultaneous roles of advocate, mentor, and researcher.

Salma Kalim describes her experience of navigating CER with digital South Asian feminist communities outside the Western context and reflects on how she developed strategies for responding ethically to tensions among different communities and institutions.

Chris Maggio details his immersion in a community development corporation in a borough just outside Pittsburgh and how this allowed him to listen for stories about it.

We hope the dialogue will be an entryway for current and future graduate students hoping to accomplish similar work. Come join our conversation.

## DIALOGUE

*Our dialogue, like so many over the past three years, takes place over Zoom.*

**Lydia:** I want to start by talking a bit about the double-bind of positionality and research "authority" in my project with a local prisoner reentry organization. Within my community-engaged research (CER), my positionality is as a graduate student. I came into this as a graduate student who had never done person-based

research before, let alone CER. So when I got started, I still felt very much like a student but also had to go out into the community to try to be a "researcher." But I felt like I had no right or authority to do so. The way I navigated through this double-bind was by developing a genuine, reciprocal research relationship with my community partners, along the vein of Indigenous methodologies that prioritize reciprocity and relationality such as Kovach (2009) and Kimmerer (2013). And I let that reciprocity guide my methodology so that I built it from the inside-out, rather than trying to come in with a preconceived methodology.

When I was looking for research projects to do as a graduate student, I realized that I wanted to work with a community organization, but I didn't know where to start. So I just started telling people about my research interests, and somebody gave me the idea of this cool coffee shop opening up in Hamilton, Ohio. I thought it sounded really interesting. It was a Christian couple opening a coffee shop to hire exclusively ex-inmates to help them and to address the stigma surrounding citizens returning from prison.

So I came to CER because I wanted to work with people who were giving back to their communities, and I wanted my research to give back. But that was a difficult goal because of my positionality as a graduate student—I had no idea what I was doing. When I approached this couple about the possibility of doing research with me, it was nerve-wracking. I stumbled over my words and talked too much because deep down I didn't think that I had the community or scholarly authority to make an ask like that. But thankfully, they are gracious people, who were willing to work with me anyways. And here we are, two and a half years later, still doing research together, and I'm always looking for ways I can give back to them and back to the community. Because, for me, CER is all about reciprocity.

**Megan:** Could you tell us about some of your research questions, and how a community-engaged approach helped you answer those or investigate those questions?

**Lydia:** My biggest research question was: How can community organizations create sustainable change? I initially looked at this in terms of New Materialist methodologies (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Gries, 2016; Rickert, 2013). As in, how do situations or intra-actions keep becoming even after separate or individual moments of intra-action end? Indigenous and New Materialist methodologies speak to how everything (humans, nonhumans, intra-actions, time, space, assemblages, networks, etc.) is always already ongoing (Cordova, 2007; Deloria, 1999; Powell, 2011; TallBear, 2015). But the methodologies I'd been looking at still weren't bringing this idea of sustainability *into* the communities, I thought. Like, how do we use this idea of becoming and ongoingness to help communities change and keep that change going? How can we track that kind of change? And how can this kind of research give back to the communities it's used to study?

So I changed where I was starting my research and looked first to my community partners and how they were communicating with the public, how they were creating change. What I recognized was that they were communicating in ways that were productive, generative, and reciprocal. And I came to the conclusion that those are three tactics of communication that have the ability to create sustainable, ongoing, always-already-becoming change. After recognizing and verbalizing these tactics that I saw my community partners using, I was then able to create a methodology that highlighted those specific tactics within their public-facing communications. So now I can look at other community organizations and find those

tactics or see ways those tactics could be implemented to create sustainable change.

As I said before, I wanted my research to be able to give back, to be reciprocal. So by starting my methodology from within what my community partners were already doing and going from the inside out, I'm able to point out to them what they are doing that's creating sustainable change. Now we can look to see where else they can implement those tactics and expand upon what they're already doing and the change they're already creating.

If I'd allowed the double-bind of my positionality and my perceived lack of authority to define my research, I never would have looked to my community partners first to help guide my project. Instead of letting myself be intimidated by my lack of experience, I accepted it and looked to the true experts on the situation: my community partners. This way, I was able to build a methodology around them which I can now go out and use to help other communities.

**Chris:** Lydia, can I echo something you said about approaching community partners and the time that that takes?

**Lydia:** Absolutely.

**Chris:** First, my double-bind concerned one of the overarching tensions of community-engaged research—time—specifically regarding the four- to five-year time-limit of a graduate program versus the oftentimes longer timetable of a community development corporation (Simmons & Amidon, 2019). I overcame this double-bind through immersion (Shah, 2020), which is linked to the idea of slow work, meaning that by ironically slowing down I was better able to conform my methodology to everyone's timetable and reciprocate with my community partners.

**Salma:** What's your methodology?

**Chris:** An antenarrative methodology, which at its core is about searching for marginalized stories, or antenarratives, and centralizing them to rewrite narratives (Boje, 2001; Boje, 2011; Jones et al., 2016; Small, 2017). I researched community-planning documents and interviewed stakeholders to learn how a community development corporation centralized antenarratives to craft a narrative for the borough that was environmentally sustainable and equitable for all residents. What better way for me to research antenarratives than by not listening *to* stories but listening *for* stories (Mangum, 2021)? Which means not just asking people to tell their story, but rather, immersing myself in the community and speaking with diverse stakeholders. I often felt bound by my program's schedule, but by slowing down, listening for stories, and getting involved, reciprocal and research opportunities arose naturally. Although that slow work can feel uncertain at times, it's something that I recommend.

**Megan:** Could you tell us about some of those opportunities for reciprocity?

**Chris:** Sure. They also speak to my double-bind as a writer and community-member. When I first got involved, more than one community-member approached me and said, "Oh, you can write. Maybe you could do a little outreach for us?" I wrote one social media post for the community garden. One of the other initiatives that the community development corporation suggested was to spotlight different people in the organization. I emailed people, but there was always so much going on. For example, the Music Festival. Volunteers and I emailed back and forth and tried to set up a time for an interview for social media, but they were too busy

planning the festival. I didn't push it because I didn't want to be annoying. Reciprocity came from being in the community for a year and doing similar embodied work. Again, the Music Festival. A neighbor, one of my research participants, needed someone to volunteer with the 50-50 raffle by walking around the park and yelling "50-50 here!" That was how I reciprocated. The outreach would have been great, but there just wasn't time for it, and in retrospect, the Music Festival gets plenty of media coverage. What was needed more was collecting money for the cause, which was helping to maintain Girty's Woods, a watershed. It's funny; I was still able to use my research to help. While selling 50-50 tickets, I remembered how flooding had affected the community and how one of the antenarratives to emerge from this tragedy was a kairotic opportunity for green development and infrastructure. I said to people, "It's about maintaining Girty's Woods *and* the watershed. Now I'm not against all development, but this watershed reduces flooding, and by maintaining it, we can hopefully reduce future water-related damages." I sold quite a few tickets, and this history of flooding was something that I never would have known of had I not immersed myself within the community, listened for stories, and reciprocated as a community-member first, writer second.

**Megan:** Your project reminds me that it's a good disposition to be open to the opportunities for reciprocity in CER that are brought to us that are totally different from our initial ideas about what we might contribute to communities. This connects to my experiences partnering with the Midwest Rape Crisis Organization (MRCO), where I needed to navigate the double-binds of multiple roles and identities. Specifically, I had to balance being a volunteer advocate, mentor, and researcher, all in the same spaces.

I was volunteering as a survivor advocate at MRCO before it occurred to me that I could study the feminist work that they were doing there. My volunteering began out of the desire to become more connected to the community where I was attending graduate school. I had felt for a little while as a graduate student that I was—like Lydia said—a transplant to the area. Sometimes it can feel like the only reason you're there in that new space is to be a PhD student. But you're living your whole life there. And so I wanted to become more intentionally connected to the community outside of my graduate work and had a really great experience becoming a sexual assault survivor advocate.

I study Feminist Affective Resistance, or how feminists challenge scripts about how women are supposed to feel in reaction to different social situations, including assault. One of my mentors told me, "You know, a really great way to study Feminist Affective Resistance would be to do a case study and examine an organization or community of feminists." And so, already being embedded in the MRCO community, I knew what rich feminist rhetorical work there was for researching.

I approached my volunteer supervisor at the time and told her how interested I was in building a research partnership in which I could learn about the rhetorical strategies and literacy practices of the organization—also that I really wanted to be reciprocal and build a study that was going to help MRCO find out what they wanted to know about the organization. During a meeting, we sat across from each other in the office space of MRCO and we talked about what I wanted to learn and what she wanted to learn, especially as the county director. We designed the research questions for the project together. She told me how she really wanted to know how MRCO could better support advocates experiencing vicarious trauma. And



so we built into my research an investigation of advocates' vicarious trauma experiences and how MRCO could better address that and support them. It was amazing to be able to give that knowledge to my community partner.

The CER relationship was also integral to the feminist trauma-informed methodology that I developed. I saw clear intersections between the post-positivist feminist methodologies that I was familiar with from graduate school (Lather, 1991; Royster & Kirsch, 2012) and my work as an advocate. A development from my CER—that helped me be more equitable—was applying some of the trauma-informed knowledge that I had as an insider of that community to enhance what I was doing as a feminist researcher.

One of the principles of my methodology is ceding power and control to participants. That touches on what I was saying earlier about partnerships. It's not me guiding the research partner through the hoops that I produce. It's recognizing the power structures involved in research. Though we can never flatten out the hierarchy between researcher and research participants, we can make conscious decisions to shift some of those power dynamics, including doing things like offering up our time and resources, like Chris running the 50-50 raffle.

Another principle of my methodology is responding intentionally to the disclosures of trauma. This, and the principle about ceding control, were especially important in my interview with Jack, a new advocate at MRCO. When I interviewed Jack after his 40-hour advocate training at MRCO, I was challenged to navigate the double-binds of multiple roles and identities. Foremost, in that interview I was a feminist researcher; however, when Jack disclosed two sexual assaults, I integrated my role of researcher with my role as advocate, allowing Jack to take the time he needed to process his experiences. He talked about how he wanted to become the advocate he wished he had after his assaults. Jack then talked about his challenges starting to apply advocacy techniques with a stranger he met during training who disclosed abuse. In this part of the discussion, I integrated my role as an experienced advocate in the organization, mentoring Jack and validating his experiences. Interviewing Jack, I was feminist researcher, sexual assault survivor advocate, and peer mentor all at once.

Reflecting on my research process, sometimes it's hard to tell when one role ended and another began—the multiplicity of identities are all part of who I am in CER spaces. Community engaged researchers who study organizations in which they are insiders should prepare to integrate and shift between roles. Like Maisha T. Winn (2011) wrote, sometimes we have to make judgment calls about when we “enter” and “dismount” as researchers (p. 9). Though navigating double-binds can be a challenge, my experience with MRCO taught me important lessons about how our community lives inform our scholarly practice, and vice versa.

**Chris:** I never knew you wrote your research questions with the supervisor. Excellent.

**Megan:** Thanks! Salma, you also conducted CER with feminist communities. Can you tell us about some of the unique opportunities and challenges you encountered?

**Salma:** So like Megan, before I decided to study online communities, I was already actively involved and part of various feminist communities advocating for social issues concerning Pakistani women by arranging offline and online activities. When I decided to study the roles of affect in the circulation of their

activist rhetoric, the double-bind for me was my positionality as an international graduate student. I found myself restricted by how the participants from my local communities in Pakistan were unaware of various protocols of IRB and suspicious of Western institutions. To navigate the double-binds due to tensions among institutions, I had to develop strategies for meeting the requirements of different communities and institutions, as their values and commitments, such as IRB, may or may not align.

As I began my research for my dissertation in March 2020, I obtained approval from my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before approaching Pakistani women for interviews. During the early stages of research, I planned on recruiting several participants; however, I struggled recruiting women online. While securing consent when studying women's communities online is already challenging, I found myself restricted by how the participants from my local community in Pakistan were unaware of various protocols of IRB. Many women initially agreed to the interviewing but later backed out when I shared a consent form (written using technical jargon). I revised the consent form to avoid academic jargon, but the turnout was still very low.

**Megan:** How did it change your methodology?

**Salma:** At that moment, I turned to the CER scholarship (Grabill, 2012; Shah, 2020) to understand both potentials and challenges of researching non-Western communities using Western methods and methodologies. Community scholars have discussed how IRB language used in informed consent can become literacy violence in communities where access to literacy has been compromised or institutions can be suspicious (Adkins, 2011; Opperman, 2018). As I read scholarship, I learned how IRB protocols could put some research participants at greater risk or could limit their participation in the study due to skepticism and distrust of dominant Western methodologies.

Reflecting on the consent form and how I presented myself to the community made me realize how my positionality was a double-bind for me, as it was restricting my access to my own community. While I was an insider and part of this feminist community, I, as a graduate student in the U.S., also represented Western academic white savior discourses that essentialized Pakistani women as a homogeneous group. I noticed that Pakistani women were also suspicious due to my positionality as a researcher in the U.S. using Western tools to understand their lived, embodied experiences.

It made me wonder how I could engage with the feminist community in a way that was responsible, ethical, and reflexive. Because sometimes attempts to form meaningful relationships may actually “cause more harm than good” (Opperman, 2018, p. 67), I realized that again reaching out to those women (who were reluctant to sign consent forms) may put them at risk, as many women use digital platforms for activism in secret. I felt that the best course of action when examining vulnerable communities online is to listen at this intersection of public discourse and extreme need for privacy. I realized I could draw on community literacy practices without engaging with or quoting directly from publicly published content, favoring an emergent thematic methodology. While I strongly believe that informed consent is essential for CER research, my experience of engaging with South Asian feminist communities prompted me to rethink some of the conventions of when and how consent should be achieved. I wonder what other methodological tensions International graduate researchers might face when studying Non-Western communities. Thinking along these lines,

I feel, we can make invisible structures visible and ensure low barriers for entry for international graduate community researchers, navigating CER research for their dissertation projects.

**Megan:** I'm intrigued by how communities that we're studying can inform and enhance how we study these communities through their terms and values and help us to spread into scholarship outside of writing and rhetoric. Did anyone else find that?

**Salma:** I drew on South Asian studies scholars (Kirmani, 2020; Sahar, 2022) who have talked about double-binds of identities of feminist activists in South Asian communities, and they made me aware of how women are sometimes reluctant to amplify their work, because at home they are judged as supporters of the Western agenda, and abroad they are seen as victims of their cultures. So reading more scholarship beyond Rhetoric and Writing studies helped me think more critically about the double-bind of my position as a feminist researcher. The South Asian gender studies scholars (Mohanty, 2003) taught me how I need to be respectful, strategic, and careful when writing about my women's communities, reciprocating by amplifying their lived embodied experiences.

Our Zoom call ended, we returned to our teaching, families, and communities. We left with a greater appreciation for how communities not only amend methodologies but also better them by making them more receptive to change and inclusive of the people who so often are more than participants. They are colleagues, neighbors, and oftentimes friends.

One major takeaway of our dialogues is that graduate students can bring visibility to a variety of organizations and communities despite the time and space constraints. Because CER methodologies are flexible and thoughtful to the communities that are being researched, we encourage other graduate students to collaborate with communities that they are already a part of or organizations that are approachable at that very moment, tactfully crafting methodologies which fit the unique needs of their partnerships.

Another takeaway is the suggestion to navigate the double-binds strategically while developing CER methodologies. Graduate students engaged in CER research might face various double-bind situations due to their liminal positionalities and conflict among values of different institutions, disciplines, and communities. However, by patiently listening *for* stories, and by using inclusive strategies and tactics, graduate students can tactfully build and maintain reciprocal relationships with communities/organizations. Such an approach to CER research turns double-bind situations into productive moments, leading to the creation of thoughtful community-engaged methodologies. Graduate research workshops should offer opportunities to reflect on double-bind situations through storytelling and critical examinations, encouraging students to navigate double-binds through a deeper engagement with their community partners.

To echo Salma, our positionality is why we must remain careful. However, we hope this does not scare future community-engaged graduate-student researchers but rather prepares them in continuing this important work. And that is a final lesson we would like to leave you with: remain careful, but also remain brave, flexible, adaptable, and open to encountering and building relationships with the very messy, human, and beautiful communities surrounding us wherever we find ourselves.

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# The Hidden Labor of Sustaining Community Partnerships

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## ABSTRACT

In this experience report, I discuss the difficult, often hidden, labor of setting up, developing, and maintaining the relationships that are foundational to community-engaged research. Drawing on my own partnership building experiences as a graduate student, a Director of Community Learning, and an Assistant Professor of English, I illuminate the complexities of relationship building while detailing practical examples of how to build and sustain strong community partnerships through three core processes: establishing connections, following through, and growing trust.

## CCS Concepts

Social and Professional Topics

## Keywords

Community partnerships, Relationship building, Community-engaged research, Hidden labor

## INTRODUCTION

*Them: “Tell us about your organizing strategy in Connecticut.”*

*Me: “Um, I staked out the clinic waiting room for 6 months and called everybody I knew in Hartford.”*

*I also drank a lot of coffee.” - @ericaflorencee, 15 Jul 2018*

So many community partnerships begin with coffee (or tea, or water, or your preferred beverage). Two people sit across a table, on a couch, on a bench, wherever and begin the work of getting to know each other and what they might do together. While Erica Crowley’s tweet above reflects the way coffee can fuel the long, grueling hours that go into organizing, coffee, in this case, also represents the many, many times she met with potential partners to navigate coalition building for reproductive justice in Hartford, Connecticut aiming to pass a city ordinance that protects residents from Crisis Pregnancy Centers that share false information about reproductive rights and health. Sitting together, sharing sustenance, and learning about each other are key elements to the process of developing relationships, but because these practices of relationship building can be challenging to articulate they are often glossed over in discussions of community-engaged research (CER). That is, scholarly endeavors that are developed with community members and organizations to co-create knowledge and projects that benefit all parties.

The difficult, often hidden, labor of setting up, developing, and maintaining relationships deserves more attention as technical and professional communication (TPC), as a field, urges greater engagement with community needs and social justice causes. While several community writing scholars have discussed relationship building practices (Alvarez, 2017; Mathieu, 2005; Riley Mukavetz, 2014; Shah, 2020), much of the scholarship in TPC focuses explicitly on research methodologies and community outcomes (Agboka, 2013; Dorpenyo, 2019; Durá, 2018). Through TPC’s social justice turn (Walton et al., 2019), more attention has been paid to communication needs of nonprofits (Flanagan & Getto, 2017; Kramer-Simpson & Simpson, 2018; Ross, 2018), plain language analysis (Jones et al., 2012; Jones & Williams, 2017),

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and methods needed to center marginalized voices (Gonzales et al., 2021; Itchuaqiyag, 2021) and conduct ethical community-engaged research (Brock Carlson, 2021; Rose & Cardinal, 2021). These threads of research represent how TPC scholars can move beyond industry-specific models of analysis to center those who need communication design help in their social justice work. This experience report illuminates the hidden labor of relationship building while detailing practical examples of how to build *and* sustain strong community partnerships.

Discussing my own partnership building experiences as a graduate student, a Director of Community Learning, and an Assistant Professor of English, I identify three core processes: establishing connections, following through, and growing trust. In each section, I consider the way attention must be paid to *time* and *positionality* as a partnership grows. How a long-time tenured faculty member creates and strengthens partnerships is going to necessarily look different from how a graduate student pursues that work, but we all must be thoughtful about dynamics between our institutions and our communities and spend time listening to and learning from others to ensure we are actually moving toward justice. Underpinning these conversations is the idea of *there-ness* as theorized by Andrea Riley Mukavetz (2014), which calls for “personal and communal research where the roles of researcher and participant are fluid” (p. 108). *There-ness* allows us to “draw attention to the significance of everyday tasks—that these tasks are just as meaningful as the events and realizations marked by dominant discourses” (p. 120). I am using the concept of *there-ness* to story, through my own experiences, the often hidden labor of what it takes to *be there* with our communities as we aim to create mutually beneficial projects that center community knowledge-making. These processes are often invisible when it comes to final products of our partnerships—whether class projects, scholarly publications, materials and research for our partners, or even discussions in annual review materials—but they are key to developing ethical community work and must be made more visible if we want to orient higher education more toward social justice.

## ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS

This brings us back to coffee. In the first days of my first job out of graduate school, Associate Director of Community Learning at Trinity College, I sat through meetings with multiple campus stakeholders who were (and are) committed to strengthening relationships between Trinity and the surrounding Hartford community. I left every meeting with a list of names and directives to “grab coffee,” “schedule lunch,” or “figure out a good time to chat.” They knew how important low-stakes conversations over food and drink are to establishing the connections that might eventually lead to trust. As Riley Mukavetz (2014) explained, *there-ness* is a practice where “knowledge is made and exchanged” as people “share space with each other—as they make themselves visible and present to their cultural community” (p. 120). As I began to meet with partners, being there with them meant spending a lot of time *listening*. I shared a little about what my role was, but I mostly wanted to learn about their work, their goals, and their upcoming projects. Those early meetings led me down a variety of paths: some helped me gain a deeper understanding of the city I had moved to, some set up early partnership projects I helped direct, and a few special meetings set up relationships that grew during my three years in Hartford and continue today, three years after I left.

The magic, of course, isn’t in the coffee from First and Last, or

the pasta from Trinity Restaurant, or the sandwiches from The Kitchen. It comes from the conversation and, especially on the part of higher ed folks, the listening—the practices of being there. Like many institutions, Trinity College has a fraught history with the city of Hartford, particularly because its student population is much whiter and much wealthier than the surrounding city. There have been ups and downs, moments of connection and many moments of distrust, and the people in Hartford, especially the changemakers, remember. So I knew going into many of these meetings that my primary goal had to be to *listen* to what these leaders wanted to accomplish and think through how Trinity could offer resources to help folks reach those goals. Only 15% of current Trinity students are from Connecticut, and very few of those are from Hartford (National Center for Educational Statistics). More importantly, the people who work at Trinity are largely commuters—less than 10% of faculty and staff live in the city. As a result, this is not a group of people who should be leading the charge and making decisions about what should be happening in the city. Instead, it should be the people that live in Hartford. And that was the most important guiding idea for my work: how did I learn about what people in Hartford wanted to see next for the city, and how could I leverage college resources to help in that process? This was an approach I communicated to partners as I met with them, and I listened to their ideas and used their goals and plans to guide how I built projects, encouraged partnerships, and spent my energy outside of my position as well.

This process of relationship building, of *there-ness*, has, of course, looked different in my different positions—though the core values remain the same. In my current position as Assistant Professor of English at University of Tennessee, I knew I wanted to take on community partnership projects, but I needed to be more selective about that process because it is now one element, rather than the majority, of my job. Because of that, the process has been more stop-and-start as I move forward with one or two partners and then pause to navigate new challenges. While I had hoped to have similar suggestions for who in Chattanooga to meet with given to me by other faculty and staff, this largely did not happen when I arrived at UTC. The three partnerships I’ve forged have come from 1) a colleague suggesting I get in touch with a former student (Tennessee United), 2) visiting the class of another community-engaged professor (City Farms Grower Coalition), and 3) cold-emailing an organization (Girls Inc. Chattanooga).

Each of these partnerships have had stops and starts. After two successful projects with Tennessee United, the small immigrant rights group decided to close its doors and use their funding and time to support other organizations. My work with City Farms has been more continuous, resulting in three class projects and additional research, writing, and volunteer work from me and my students. The partnership with Girls Inc. produced a solid class project, but the partnership laid dormant for a year before I started consulting with the organization on program evaluation and assessment, which has led to a new class project as well. Finding time to create these partnerships has been more challenging than in Hartford, and because I’m not meeting with dozens of potential partners in quick succession, I have to be more aware of how best to make promises and navigate the best uses of our time to create projects that are worth doing.

This kind of time, however, is not something that I had as a graduate student. As a faculty member, I have time for these fits and starts in partnership building. My contract does not *require*

community-engaged courses, and my publication record is on track for tenure. As a graduate student, I largely did not have the time or knowledge to go through these processes and give them the time and care necessary for ethical community engagement. Some graduate students do a phenomenal job of creating and sustaining community partnerships that sit at the center of their dissertations, but largely, the demands of moving to a new place for a short period of time, taking coursework, prepping new classes to teach, and planning the largest research project of your life thus far—all with few financial and time resources—make building partnerships a particularly difficult task for graduate students. I am grateful for my strong CER mentors at University of Louisville: Mary P. Sheridan, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Beth Boehm who all did the background work of building partnerships that were then the site for graduate students' projects *and* made clear to us the extent of relationship building required for this work. Without these faculty-built projects, I'm not sure that I would have been able to make CER such a central focus of my work—a focus that has guided my entire career path thus far. All of this to say, it is important to keep in mind how to approach partnership building as a graduate student *and* for faculty and staff to lay groundwork so students can take on community-engaged projects, even in their shorter time frames. To illuminate these approaches, scholars need to make this labor more visible: writing about it in publications, sharing it in annual reviews, and explaining it to students. Letting the work of connection-building meetings remain in the coffee shop (or sandwich shop or wherever) contributes to the obfuscation of the depth of work required for community-engaged projects, to the complexities of what there-ness requires.

## FOLLOWING THROUGH

Once connections have been made, following through on promises and projects is key to forming trust in relationships. Scholars have written a great deal about the ways trust is broken in these relationships (Baker-Bell, 2020; Mathieu, 2005; Shah, 2020; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009), but less so on what following through to create trust actually looks like, particularly in TPC. I've found that two important elements of this process are moving from contact to connection by building projects together and delivering on promised projects to the best of your abilities. These steps help new relationships move from contacts to trusting partnerships—they give partnerships the time to grow and offer space for the repeated positive interactions needed for trust to build. And they show there-ness, in “being attentive to how relationships and space impact the opportunity for and construction of knowledge making” (Riley Mukavetz, 2014, p. 120). Again though, this is labor that is largely hidden in our discussions of how to pursue community engagement, which I illustrate here.

While I said earlier that not every contact I made in Hartford resulted in a partnership project, I still tried to follow contact through to connection, helping as many groups as possible find the necessary people and resources to reach their goals. At Trinity, networking people together was a key part of my job. As Associate Director and then Director of Community Learning, I set up structures that helped me understand community needs, student interests, faculty research and teaching plans, and the work of other engagement groups on campus. These structures consisted of three main elements: face-to-face conversations, social media networking, and copious note taking to keep abreast of what was happening in the area and think through who might be able to help one another reach their goals. When I met with folks, I wrote down what they were

working on and their goals. I kept track of new classes faculty were teaching and research projects they were starting. I followed current and potential partners on social media platforms and checked in to see what they were doing. I showed up at local events. I sat down with community engagement colleagues and discussed what we saw happening on campus and in Hartford. And I made notes about all of it in our Community Learning Google Drive folder for when I was taking on too much information to keep in my head all at once and so that others could use this information too. These multiple methods of input gave me an extensive amount of data to keep in mind as I followed through on creating partnerships that paired Trinity's resources with the Hartford partners who had the on-the-ground, community knowledge and vision to leverage those resources for their goals.

One important element of moving forward in Hartford was helping partners figure out how they could work with Trinity folks across classes and time, rather than always being a one-off, semester-long project. For example, one project (discussed in depth in Hartline et al., 2020) with Pro-Choice CT began with students showing up for community events, moved into a semester-long research project, and has since evolved to include two capstone research projects, four internships, and several additional course projects as well as broader reproductive justice work beyond the classroom, including multiple protests, hearings, and meetings to advance Pro-Choice CT's work. Through the connection I established with Erica Crowley, the Pro-Choice CT organizer at the time, we co-created a years-long, multi-project relationship that continues today and has included multiple organizational staff, faculty, students, and Trinity staff working together, under the leadership of Pro-Choice CT, to advance reproductive justice in Hartford. One email asking how my students and I could help with a planned action has led to a strong partnership based on trust and a commitment to the work and each other.

Of course, not every relationship is going to be as extensive as the one between Trinity and Pro-Choice CT, but in each project created, there is the opportunity to take steps to deepen trust, to be there with partners. In my own classes, I always aim to co-create projects that 1) extend capacity of the organization and help them reach their goals, 2) are manageable for the students in the time allotted, and 3) are backed by my willingness to follow through on any project areas students did not fulfill adequately.

In each case, I aim to be as transparent as possible with my partners about what my students and I can deliver and what will happen if they aren't satisfied with the products they receive. I ask partners to scale back when they are expecting too much. I tell them if we are trying something new and what I can give them if it does not go well. I have, thus far, always found financial compensation to pay for the time partners spend with students to make sure these projects work: check with sources like your department, the teaching and learning center, the community engagement center, and outside grants from local or regional foundations or national organizations like the Mellon Foundation, the Council of Independent Colleges, or the National Endowment for the Humanities. Most importantly, at every step, I hold myself and my students accountable for fulfilling the goals of the project. For one class I worked with, “Envisioning Social Change,” students created one-minute promotional videos for local organizations, and I talked with both partners and students about expectations. One partner wanted students to create three separate videos of different lengths, and I had to remind them of what students were capable of doing in the time frame and that we

were giving all video footage to the organization that they could use for their own purposes. I also talked with students often about the nature of editing videos, and when a few organizations asked for clarifying changes *after* the final class deadline and even *after* finals were over, students were willing to make those changes, because they knew it meant fulfilling their promise. And I was ready to make the changes myself if I needed to.

My role in every community-engaged course project is to remain flexible and ensure that everyone's expectations are on the same page and, most importantly, that our community partners are getting work that they can use. Over the course of dozens of partnerships and projects over the last decade, I have very rarely had to step in and create something new myself, but I'm always ready to do so. Not every project was the most useful thing an organization could have received, but I worked hard to make sure that these projects embedded trust and ultimately strengthened *relationships* with the organizations, with them knowing that I and my students were willing to put in the work to deliver something worthwhile for them, that we wanted to be *there* with them, doing the work of building knowledge together.

As a reminder, positionality matters here too. I am largely conducting community engagement projects in courses where I can set my own learning goals, but for instructors teaching in writing programs and general education that might have more established learning goals they must accomplish, figuring out how to build in community projects that meet partner needs can be exceptionally difficult. Complexities also arise with new courses, with new students, and at new institutions. Figuring out who your students are, what they are capable of, and what resources they and you will have at your institution are all important aspects of preparing for an open and transparent project-based relationship with a partner. This is yet another aspect of labor that goes into community-engaged courses that is largely undiscussed. And even when it is discussed, the additional difficulties for graduate students and contingent faculty are largely left out. These instructors are often teaching large numbers of students across majors in entry-level courses, and contingent faculty are more likely to have higher teaching loads and fewer resources. Making our particular positions and possible projects clear to our partners, no matter our role and resources, is an important part of establishing trust and of *there-ness*. It's also up to those with more institutional power to advocate for those with less who want to do this kind of work.

## GROWING TRUST

However, it is also key to consider that building trusting relationships requires work beyond the transactional nature of class projects, even when it is not going to show up on our annual review, our dissertation, or our tenure portfolio. My relationship with partners does not and cannot sit neatly within a 14-week semester. We don't start when a class project begins and end when we submit the final project. Following through means I'm committing myself to care about our shared beliefs and issue areas beyond a student project. Sometimes, that's as simple as checking back in and grabbing coffee (or even just sending a quick email!) after a project has finished to see how things are going. But it also means showing up for the *work* of social change beyond the classroom. In a letter supporting an award application for "Tactical Approaches to Reproductive Justice in Hartford, Connecticut" (which won the 2021 Coalition for Community Writing Community-University Partnership Award), Pro-Choice CT Director Liz Gustafson made

a point to include that:

So many of the staff and students we have worked with at Trinity also routinely show up for our organization and for reproductive freedom more broadly outside of the strict parameters of the project. Erica, Megan, and Eleanor (who just graduated from Trinity) have all come to late-night legislative hearings to provide testimony for legislation we are supporting. They invite [Pro-Choice CT] to speak at community meetings, show up at rallies, and check in on how they can support us in our current work. They are true partners in the fight to protect and expand reproductive freedom, not only when we have a specific project with Trinity students, but beyond that as well. I am so grateful for the work we engage in together, and am exceedingly glad to have them as allies on the ground in the movement as a whole.

Following through means creating strong projects that are useful for our partners, but it also means understanding *and contributing to* the time and labor required to create change that does not happen on a semester timeline or within carefully curated projects. It means being *there* with them.

Gustafson's comments about Trinity partners coming to outside events and following through on their commitment to reproductive justice *beyond* course projects gets at an important final aspect of building relationships: maintaining contact. This has been particularly important for me as I have moved away from that first position at Trinity and the many deeply important relationships I grew there. Just because I no longer live in Connecticut does not mean I don't pay attention to what is happening, that I don't pick up the phone, that I don't continue donating to organizations. When a local union rep and campaign organizer called about getting contacts in the Hartford suburb I lived in so he and others could put pressure on a local representative, I gave him the names and numbers of a dozen people I thought would be willing to step up on this issue. I keep up with and comment on social media posts for recent ACLU CT and Pro-Choice CT legislative campaigns. I keep an eye out for what professional moves people are making. I text and check in with partners who became friends. The relationships I fostered and grew in Connecticut are all at different levels, but because I prioritized the relationships and advancing the causes at the center of our work together (rather than on in-and-out, project-only partnerships), they largely still exist. When I was looking for community changemakers to interview for a project with Elliot Tetreault (SUNY Albany), I was able to bring in several people from my time in Connecticut so that we could learn about and from their experiences and work. Had I not maintained contact, I would never have felt comfortable making that ask (even though it was a paid interview!). In fact, I largely only asked people who I was still in somewhat regular contact with. I know the cost of their time, and I was clear that they were welcome to say no. But on the strength of our relationship over the years, several people took the time to say yes. None of this labor is listed on my CV or discussed (until now) in my publications, but it is *essential* to the work of social justice with my partners. Moments of growing trust, of *there-ness*, are not just doing the big, flashy project; it's being in the trenches and showing up when the work is hard, even, or perhaps especially, if you aren't going to get credit for it.

## CONCLUSION



I want to end with a note of caution. When I was first building these relationships and establishing projects in Hartford, one element about relationship building that was hidden to me is *why* people might say yes to a project. I assumed when I presented organizations with what we could do, they would decide if it seemed like something useful and worth their time and then say yes or no based on that. That is mostly what happened. But I also found out later that some organizations were going to say yes regardless of the project, because it was a foot in the door with the local elite college. Some were going to say yes to anything in the hopes that down the line they could actually do a project that was worth their time. And some said yes because they thought if they said no, then they would never be asked again. One of my goals is to be a person that partners feel okay saying no to. It's always going to bring me joy when I hear someone I respect, who I *know* is busy, say they are "willing to say yes, because it's you" to me, but I know not every project and every opportunity is worth a partner's time. And I want to build relationships that enable people to say no and not feel like they are cutting off their only potential connection with me, my students, or my university. That's not an easy task, and it's a constantly evolving process. But I think it's something to strive for. How do we build and sustain relationships that don't *just* make it easy for people to say yes to our projects and yes to our help? When can they say no? When can they trust that we'll come back and ask again or listen when they say "not right now, but maybe next fall" and act on that future promise? Building these kinds of relationships requires *time* and *labor* that are rarely discussed in the field and need to be unveiled. As Andrea Riley Mukavetz (2014) argued, "all research practices, methods, and theories are culturally located and specific," and there-ness offers one "way in to making cross-cultural (research) relationships visible" (pp. 121–22). By discussing processes of establishing connections, following through, and growing trust, I continue making visible the way that relationships develop and sit at the center of CER. It isn't easy. It isn't transactional, and it certainly isn't always glamorous. But this is what the work of community-engaged research requires of us if we want to do it ethically and in a way that transforms our communities into more just places. These are big questions and concerns. But it's also important to remember that it can start with just a cup of coffee and a listening ear.

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