



# The Stories WE Create: Storying Social Practice Art (SPA)

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## INTRODUCTION

Our stories can reveal our identity and be part of our identity development. Telling a story of a painful or joyful experience enables sharing and healing to occur. Feelings, memories, thoughts, and impressions surface that play out in a shared space. Re-imagining alternative ways of being or knowing can turn tragedies into personal triumphs (Boal, 2009). Storying involves making the occurrences and experiences our own through our distinct and unique perspective, positionality, and cultural historical being (Raj, 2019).

As an artist, I am interested in engaging and interacting with information from various perspectives to offer another representation. By storying as a participant observer, I use sources of insight and subjects of examination (Fonow & Cook, 2005) from socially engaged art experiences and arts-based research methods to portray individual and communal voices.

I became interested in considering the stories of research after learning about *Grace Street* by Diane Austin. Austin conducted research at

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Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings as a participant observer at them. Austin assembled a vast quantity of stories and songs from a reflective journal she composed of memos and observational field notes. The resulting data was composed to form a musical production, *Grace Street*—<https://tinyurl.com/msty33sr>. The performative piece staged an AA meeting with the members sharing their stories of what it was like when they were drinking, what was the catalyst to help them get sober, and what their lives were like in sobriety. Diane Austin and Michele Forinash (2005) outline arts-based research as either an embellishment or a product. The results of a study can either be incorporated when presenting data from research (adding images to a presentation) or be informed and inspired using the research results of the study to create a piece (create an artwork from the data). I am interested in using the research to create other artistic reflections.

*Blueface* was created by me as a participant observer. This story is meant to encapsulate the apprehension that has lived in me much of my life. Childhood insecurities, secrets, and destinies are components of my identity and thus a representation of myself. *Blueface* is about the parents I have, the daughter I am, and the person any one of us could be.

### **Blueface**

*“Where’s all the furniture?” I ask*

*His response “Do you think Jay will like this whined-up car?”*

*“Will Renee like this harmonic?”*

*I didn’t have the heart to tell my dad,  
... not really because that’s all he had to give.*

*He often gives things away that he owns. There was a period of time that we didn’t have any money so he would give all of the gifts that were given to him to others.*

*“You’re really giving this to me? But Grandpa gave this to you.”*

*The silver blue faced crystal watch ... I remember him wearing it when ...*

*We sat on a park bench and rolled pennies for food ...*

*We made peanut butter and jelly filled tortillas with syrup ...*

*We had to leave the Christmas party after a family fight ...*

*We watched B-movies at the drive-in ...*

*You were abusive to loved ones.  
 You cried as your dad did the same.  
 I got drunk, called and told you the truth.*

*What do I keep and what do I give away?  
 As I am exploring the depth of parenthood,  
 my childhood memories have another layer of depth and perspective.  
 I am choosing to forgive. Regifting what works for me and leaving what doesn't.  
 Parental empathy.*

This poetic reflection of my childhood memory provides a powerful mode to transform an episode of my experience and gain capacity to make positive transformations through self-knowledge and exploration (Knowles & Thomas, 2002). After my parents separated, I often did not know what would happen as things were changing and evolving. It was unpredictable and sometimes chaotic. I was experiencing my parent's divorce as myself and as an empathetic being feeling their struggles. When I think about how my parents managed being alone, my dad expressed a lot of anger and resentment. My mom exhibited her fears in various manners. I still remember the sense of sadness I felt walking into his duplex and realizing he had sold most of the furniture. I thought he was suicidal and wanted to get rid of all of his belongings. I questioned our financial security or maybe he just wanted a fresh start. This feeling is still with me as an adult; I have always felt I need to be concerned about my dad and his well-being. My parents had a tough time and in turn I often did. This is an integral aspect of my identity. This reflection is who I am past and present, as a child and parent.

A workshop conducted by [StoryCenter.org](http://StoryCenter.org) provided a space for me to create *Blueface*, listen and share moments of storying. Each of us shared deeply personal experiences and aspects of our identity. I felt a level of obligation to be authentic and reveal my "emotional truth" (Raj, 2019) as others shared their stories. Emotional truth encourages empathic listening in community spaces and discourse. During our workshop, I provided statements and feedback in the form of, "If I were creating this, I would ...." The process was performative as we read our stories to the group and received input. Additionally, this simple act let me think of the story from their point of view. To some degree, it is often easier to share deep feelings and emotions with strangers as there is little possibility of encountering that individual at another occasion. Trust and respect had to

be established in order to be receptive to sharing and critique. Once we created and re-created our pieces, we then told them to our audience of fellow workshop attendees.

Learning about oneself and others is a primary focus of this work and one I am passionate about. I learned about my former professor and now friend, community members experiencing homelessness, artists, and myself. Practicing listening, and telling stories, while building community, is a creative practice and a civic responsibility (Garoian, 2019). We provided the opportunities for participants to explore their lives and the lives of others while producing insight into their perceptions and challenging behaviors (Foster, 2016). Arts-based methods can provide participants with multiple ways of knowing, as the arts are essential to identity development and awareness (Gerber et al., 2012). The *StoryCenter* workshop connected stories in a socially engaged practice. Each member added a dynamic that was critical to the process and experience. The stories occurred in the manner reflective of the participants in attendance. We are all composed of various experiences, feelings, and emotions. The process of communing and creating is the foundation of socially engaged art and the art serves as a story representation of the community.

Storying carries a collaborative essence and a sense of companionship with the audience. An audience is needed for varying levels of engagement (Benjamin, 1969/2006). The relationship of the teller and re-teller directs and forms the stories shared. Ken Plummer (1995, pp. 20–21) acknowledges the “joint actions” of storyteller and “coaxer” when creating stories. The “coaxer” facilitates and supports the storyteller while creating and uncovering aspects of their story. The objective is to realize an unearthed version and deliver it in a different way. This was my experience when creating and presenting *Blueface*. I would not have created the poem in the same manner without the catalyst of the workshop and the other group members. The “coaxer” in the *StoryCenter* workshop was the workshop facilitator who provided prompts to develop a story and administer opportunities for feedback and support.

In another instance, I attended a workshop session led by Dr. Dirk J. Rodricks, *Voice and Responsibility: Using Arts-Based Methods in Research Exploration*. The session was informed by the idea of *story-doing* and using arts-based methods in research exploration and interactive model applying *mishritata* (mixedness in Hindu) to *story-doing* methodology (as opposed to informed by *story-telling*) and implementing arts-based informed methods. This recreating and reframing stories from an inclusive

perspective allowed me to achieve a greater understanding of the various people involved in my story. This method can be used to shift practices that reinforce barriers and exclusionary methods that are defined by a dominant cultural narrative (Rice & Mundel, 2018).

Dr. Dirk J. Rodricks (2021) provided various prompts to answer with the first thought that came to mind. We were then provided a dynamic electronic form to type our answers and provide as much detail as possible about a specific memory. This part of the activity called “Sharing Your Story” was based on George Ella Lyon’s (1999) writing activity response to poet Jo Carson’s (1989) collection of monologues and dialogues, *Stories I Ain’t Told Nobody Yet*. I was able to share verbally and write my response in the Zoom chat feature. The activity created a feeling of angst for me and a worry of being judged or valued. I felt vulnerable when asked to contribute the details regarding my identity. Letting people know our stories and identities can be unsettling as it can leave one without a response or shield. The memory of my keepsake triggered emotions of my childhood and feeling helpless. Much like the process that occurred in rendering my story, *Blueface*. Researcher-voice poetry from socially engaged practice:

*I am from ... (place) Pasadena*

*I am from ... (food you love) a meatball*

*I am from ... (where you will go or who you will visit) Denmark, to visit my family*

*I am from ... (childhood toy or keepsake you will not part with) doggy and beary*

*I am from ... (thing you miss the most in quarantine) family*

*I am from ... (place you seek refuge) hike a mountain trail*

*I am from ... (someone you admire) my morfar*

*About my keepsake item:*

*Given to me as a child when my parents were still together*

*I would talk to them and pretend they were real*

*I always wanted a dog*

*My grandmother sewed its neck once it was so loose*

Dr. Rodricks asked us to then “[i]magine the item disappeared and in its place there was a love letter from the item. List the aspects that highlight the larger importance of that object. What would the object say to you? How can you empathize with the object?” Creating a “From me, with love” letter to the prompt of my keepsake toy from childhood that I

could not part with shifted the focus from the item to the me of the time. I began to think about memories of people that had been involved in my life at the time I relied on Doggy and Beary for comfort. My thoughts evolved to various experiences from that time and how they have shaped who I am. Researcher-voice poetry from socially engaged practice:

*My “From me, with love” Letter*

*Dearest Maria-Lisa,*

*You were a wonderful companion and took great care of me when I needed you.*

*I have loved growing up with you and we were able to find our way.*

*Do not lose your curiosity for life and carry me with you in your heart and mind.*

*Love forever,*

*Doggy*

“From me, with love” letter was addressed to me from my stuffed animal, Doggy. As a child, I wished for a dog to be my companion. I was an only child at the time and lonely. Doggy was a gift to me from a neighbor when I was three years old. His fur was a mustard yellow with velvety ears. Doggy went everywhere with me. He traveled to the airport with me to pick up my grandparents, and when I was old enough to study abroad, he traveled to Italy. My grandmother, who did not like to sew, patched his eyes and lips that fell out from petting him too much. She also sewed a neck replacement when his neck began to lose capacity. She said he had a “Ronald Reagan neck, and that was unacceptable.” She was not fond of Ronald Reagan as she did not agree with his politics! I knew who Ronald Reagan was because my family would complain that he was a horrible president and was the cause for ending the reduced lunch that I was able to get at school. Overnight, the cost of lunch went from 25 cents to \$1. It was not a huge burden but it was a message I received: the power one person could hold for so many. I remember thinking, if I was not able to make the payment, would I be able to eat? I worried about many things growing up and financial concerns weighed heavy on me as I knew we did not have a lot.

Doggy comforted me and helped make me feel safe and secure. I would talk to him and pretend he was a real dog. The letter addressed from him noted that the relationship was symbiotic. The fondness of keepsakes is in the memories that they hold which are fluid, blurred, and dynamic.

Negotiating the stories within each of us that become embedded as part of our identity became part of the conversation as participants shared

their, “From me, with love” letters. Feminist poet Adrienne Rich stated, “[R]evision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (Rich, 1972, p. 18). This addresses the notion of challenging stories and perceptions. Sharing these enables the process to challenge and change. Researcher-voice poetry from socially engaged practice:

### **Final Thoughts**

(Be with)

Everyone is a series of moments

Expressions

powerful

Stories let people know what has shaped us?

What is going on?

inside us?

If we are?

(Look inside)

Listening with your eyes

Unspoken elements

Verbal

Textual

(Look outside)

Connections

Imaging freedom

Protect and limit

Actual is reflective

(Be with)

Storying offers the opportunity to approach the data allowing a “third voice” to emerge as interpretive from the discourse that develops between the researcher and the participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). Both of the social practice experiences allowed the opportunity for me to acknowledge components of my life that have shaped who I am. The things that represent moments in time hold memories or people and experiences that ultimately make up who I am. I am a physical embodiment of my relatives but also a spiritual and emotional response to my experiences and interactions with them. Realizing I hold the strength and resiliency of my family through hardship and pain provides comfort.

Narrative methods strive for a collaborative process to reveal participants' experiences and perceptions through storying and re-storying to expose compelling data (Leavy, 2015). Arthur Frank (2010) exclaims that "stories are too lively and too wild to be tied up" (p. 1) in discussing placing strict narrative methods. Along with my personal stories and poems included above, I report on poetic inquiry data from my socially engaged art practice dissertation and an arts-informed socially engaged inquiry poem. Research data is elicited to generate stories, poems, and narrative pieces.

In my experience, the *StoryCenter* and *Voice and Responsibility: Using Arts-Based Methods in Research Exploration* workshops disrupted dominant narratives and opened possibilities (Rice & Mundel, 2018). By sharing stories I was able to realize that my individual adversities have social causes (Mies, 1983). I experienced reflective moments informed by methods of *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1974). This social practice work engaged participants in storying and provided transformational and self-directed experiences for individuals and communities.

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

Each person is a story. Socially engaged art is a story of community. This work is embedded with a range of individual experiences. Consequently, each practice encompasses individual and collective stories. The pedagogy of socially engaged art is dependent upon the dynamics and contributions generated during the art practice and process. It is a collaborative art practice where the project is co-created and co-produced with the participants and artists. The emphasis on process over product centers the person. Equally as relevant is what is being shared and what is heard during these learning moments. The compilation of the work is social, representing more than an individual, and specified as a collaborative co-creation. Lacy and Helguera (2017) acknowledge the importance the impressions and experiences a given socially engaged practice has on those involved. This process is essential to socially engaged work in the context of community and individual storying. Bringing people together with diverse experiences offers occasions for shared learning with multiple outcomes to occur (Leake, 2012).

Informed by storying, knowledge is "enacted, reconfigured, tested, and engaged by imaginative summonings and interpretive replays of past events in the light of present situations and struggles" (Conquergood,



1993, p. 337). The dialogical aspect of storying parallels with Freirian pedagogy and offers participants the opportunity to critically reflect on attitudes and assumptions surrounding their positionality. Ledwith and Springett (2010) suggest this reflective occasion can reposition themselves and sharing stories can provide insight that is helpful to understanding “their individual sufferings have social causes” (Mies, 1983, p. 128). Additionally, analyzing the dialogical narrative affords understanding stories. Bakhtin’s (1984) concepts of art are conversations, a dialogic art that is a collaborative practice. It involves examining the evolution of stories as co-constructed through various stages of input and output. Stories can consequently be valued as artful representations of lives. Kothari (2001, p. 151) observes that often the most resistant action that participants can make is in not acting or participating, “exclusion can be empowering and even necessary in order to challenge existing structures of domination and control.” Silence can be a powerful form of dissent and give voice to the oppressed.

When considering the community story, it is about having a conversation with others, listening to the voice of the community, and being part of it. The appropriation of collective narratives into one’s individual story and the development or modification of narratives creates the possibility to generate social change through new communal narratives (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995). Realizing the potential for socially engaged art as storying provides various opportunities and experiences for participants to be invested, as socially engaged practice is intentionally a collective. The impetus for socially engaged art practice to be a change agent is dependent on the participants and collective dynamics. Arguably, any variation of an experience is a change. Socially engaged practice is looking to facilitate and organize various solutions and opportunities to create a better human existence. The socially engaged artist creates multiple occasions for knowledge, dialogue, and experiences to occur. The practice focuses on the participatory aspects navigating a way toward change and reflects the storying of individuals and communities.

### SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

“Art as a Catalyst for Change: A Performance Ethnography of Social Practice Art in Community” (Flemington, 2018) is a study displaying the experience of artists and participants as a result of social practice art occurrences.

This study conceptualized social practice art as facilitated by the Center for Arts visiting artists as a catalyst to realize and explore community experiences. Through the researcher positionality of participant observer and complete participant, the research provided insight into the complexities of socially engaged art in a community organized by a community arts center with three socially engaged artists collaborating for a series of workshops. Based on the findings, this study offers recommendations for the field which include the notion that personal experiences transcend the socially engaged practice and create communal experiences and new “ways of knowing” (Fox, 2015) that are about getting together and creating collectively. Socially engaged art offers the opportunity to engage and explore the modes of address in these moments of engagement and can provide those working in social practice a guide to practitioner/researcher and participant experiences. (Flemington, 2018, p. iv)

The concept of art as a catalyst for change varied for each artist. I asked each artist separately, “In your experience, how can or has art been a catalyst for change?” Their responses depended on their positionality, experiences, and their notion of change. Additionally, how their concept of change impacts their view if art can be applied to change. Each makes note of how their work brings people together to share space and knowledge, to engage one another, and to address social concerns. The responses from artists question the measurability and quantifiability of change, binary and deficit lens, and neoliberal notions.

Leavy (2015) references poetic inquiry in social research as an engaged method to elicit emotions, comprehension, and connection. bell hooks (1990) noted, when examining the poems of Langston Hughes, that poems can capture subjective “truths” and identify the connection in the larger social context. Poems create “the essence of an event” by illustrating “a scene” to evoke feelings (Ely et al., 1999, p. 135). Cynthia Cannon Poindexter (2002) explains the importance of data in poetic form as sculpting language to articulate a compelling and vivid scene. Artist responses to art as a catalyst to change:

*[P]ieces that seem the most powerful to me and that I'm the most excited about are pieces that in whatever method have, people from very different walks of life, or people from different backgrounds, people who would not normally engage with each other, find some way to do that  
... it breaks the boundary that's between these people because of their age, or their background, or whatever it might be*

... pieces that turn that sort of paradigm on its head and get these different types, different groups of people to talk to each other, do something together ... engage with each other, because that's something I think that more and more we're missing as we communicate by texting, and email, and Facebook, and that sort of thing. ... Having those direct interactions is really powerful, and I think we're losing out on those more and more as we communicate in different ways, especially mediated by technology  
 ... finding ways around that to get people to engage with each other on a personal level, I think is really exciting  
 ... I'm just really interested in **breaking** down those sort of **barriers**  
 ... and fostering a more communal environment  
 ... my experience has been a catalyst for change  
 ... well see, the thing is, **how you view art ... the way I view art**  
 ... and the way I actually live my life ... you know? It's artful, the artfulness, I feel like it's in the richness  
 ... the experience of what is creative and what is not ... it's tricky because it's never a fix  
 ... you're never, like, this is it and it's never a formula.

### SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AS A STORYING COMMUNITY

*Unpacking the Participant* was an emergent theme from my dissertation “Art as a Catalyst for Change: A Performance Ethnography of Social Practice Art in Community.” Each person is a story and each socially engaged art practice as a story of community. In my notes I have written, “Look at it as the opportunity to look at the people immediately near me, the other artists, as the participants. Looking at it as a more shared situation. Bring out the dialogue or the stories that are written by people because there’s the dominant narrative that we constantly hear and are bombarded through the media and then there’s the part where we have our own answers” (Flemington, 2018, participant observer notes).

Unpacking the participant is described as the process and concept of identifying where both the participant and the artists came from and why they choose to participate in the socially engaged art practice. This involves the many facets of positioning oneself in a socially engaged process. The process of creating artwork and developing relationships that evolved as a result of or during the practice of participating in the socially engaged art is part of unpacking the individual and their lived experiences. Each individual shares and creates differently. A synthesis of these experiences in relation to the community at large occurs for each of the participants and

artists (if there is a distinction). These artists and their work are reflective of the community that has participated. With the praxis of participation, reflection, and action, socially engaged art workshops enable artists to expose an aspect of themselves and in addition participants reveal an aspect of themselves. These stories illustrate how each participant views and interprets from their own experience and perspective. Additionally, these perspectives come from multiple notions and concepts. These notions and concepts can often have social implications if embedded in social practice.

While conducting research, I participated as a participant/observer in a socially engaged art practice. The socially engaged art serves as a story representation of the community and identity building. The inquiries outlined highlight notable exchanges that reference these occasions and impressions. One of the artists re-conceptualized their perception of a participant, connecting to where the participant positioned themselves as opposed to where the artist had positioned them. One of the artist, Sam, reflected on how the experience impacted their practice:

*I kind of switched myself over to looking at it as more of a case study within a case study ... looking at the people who are the other two artists, as the participants on my project. Since Dylan helped make the control panel, and then I worked with Chris yesterday. Other people ... have made suggestions about the boat. And I'm kind of open and flexible to what those suggestions have been.*

This example demonstrates how the experience of contributing to the socially engaged art workshop made an impression on how they are viewing participants as it relates to their positionality. Sam's workshop project was reliant on participant contributions to create and propel the direction of their project. The shipwrecked boat installation evolved in real time with the input from participants. Each of the workshops requested participants to contribute in a different way but always related to the shipwrecked boat. The workshops ranged from giving feedback to question prompts, making a button for a motor-control panel, painting self-portraits, and participating in a sing-along. Sam's workshop integrated the participant input with their own twist on it. Sam used that feedback and developed the idea to have participants create self-portraits as children around the shipwrecked boat and sing-along. Researcher-voiced poetry using field notes from performance ethnography:

*When asked by Sam, “What are the greatest challenges we face in today’s society” and “what gives you hope?” As a participant observer, I responded, “That people aren’t feeling compelled to listen to each other anymore but rather be heard and this is a source of conflict. There are many people just trying to have the loudest voice and ultimately, nobody gets heard because everyone is screaming in the end. Children and youth are what makes me hopeful. Seeing people show up to something like this fills me with hope.” I was then instructed to write a version of that answer on a sticky note at the table and place it on a large drawing the artist did of the shipwrecked boat at sea. The drawing of a lone sailor on a small sailboat being overwhelmed by the encroaching storm included the message:*

*The Shipwreck is a collaborative artwork in the form of a reconstructed vintage cruiser boat, Tequila. Elements of the boat, such as the control panel, treasure chest, transmitter, life buoys, are based on public interpretation and feedback. With the premise of a ship lost in the Bermuda Triangle, (our society in demise) (which way are we going?) the project aims to generate conversation and optimism through imaginative play. What are the greatest challenges we face in today’s society? Which direction should we head in? Some of the sticky notes responses read:*

#### *RACISM*

*Lack of community support*

*Everyone is greedy*

*Affordable housing*

*Apathy*

*Fear of others*

*Fear of poverty and those in poverty*

*Lack of community support*

*Fear the reduction of people to others*

*President Trump*

*Issues of deportation as a result of immigration status*

*Educational inequities*

*Homelessness*

*Systemic violence*

In reviewing the other participant responses to this prompt, many references to politics at a global and local level were mentioned, as were personal experiences within these realms. The responses to what gives people hope extended from children and youth, grassroots politics, and community art programs. Additionally, asking feedback about personal

and global experiences encouraged the development of personal connections with the artist and other participants. At this point in the practice, there were a couple dozen people participating in the practice and engaging with each other. The artist was available to ask questions, deliver instruction to individuals or small groups, and converse with the participants.

There was a point in the workshop that I was able to have a private conversation with Sam about their experience as an artist working in social practice. Once the conversation developed, Sam shared their educational experience and other prominent artists they had partnered and worked with on other community projects. I mentioned that I went to hear Pablo Helguera and Suzanne Lacy speak at an artist talk. We discussed their passion and different styles. I felt that this was a necessary step in gaining trust and relatability. My relationship in this conversation and activity fluctuated between participant observer and complete observer. As a participant observer, I was engaged in the conversation regarding my research and setting the tone for our relationship in that capacity. As the complete observer, I was voluntarily and actively engaging in the directives of Sam and providing input based on my positionality.

#### AT THE NEXT WORKSHOP OCCASION

Sam was greeting people as they arrived at the entrance of the socially engaged practice. They were involving participants by offering them avenues to engage with the shipwrecked boat installation and contribute their thoughts and creations to the process. Next to the boat was a table with supplies (paint brushes, paints, and canvas) to provide participants the opportunity to paint the canvas stationed at each of the buoys. Participants were requested to create a self-portrait as a child or a representation of a child. When the participants contributed feedback to the question “What gives them hope” and a participant responded that “children give them hope.” “Children rescue our future” was a sentiment shared by an individual at the workshop and symbolic to the function of a buoy. The buoy self-portrait stations were located surrounding the boat on the black asphalt. “We look to children to rescue the future and do not give them the resources to do so.” There was one child participant painting a canvas on their own as their parent spoke with the artist. The child started the process of painting. They needed some guidance to stay painting the buoys as they were more interested in exploring the boat installation space.

The parent was talking with the artist while the child attempted to paint. Once the child started to climb on the boat, the parent was alert and was attentive to their child. Another artist and a couple painted their own canvas toward the latter part of the workshop.

The artist facilitated the initial prompt that generated the idea to have child portraits on buoys and the contribution of the participants producing the content. Sam was providing people the space, tools, and resources to create a component of the piece. In discussing with Sam how they felt the project was progressing, they mentioned looking at the “difference between interactive and participatory.” When not as many participants from the community were represented, Sam’s thinking of participants shifted to include the other artists that were part of the workshops. How the community, especially the kids, responds well to the art and it gives them a chance to be able to express themselves. “You know, there were a few kids here, the ones that did come, seemed to be really interested and engaged.”

*Dialoguing and Engaging* was another emergent theme from my dissertation. Expressions revealed (or lack of) during developing and connecting relationships through meaningful action to catalyze change. The concept that art is solely created by artists and observed by participants is a notion that socially engaged practice negates and challenges. Participation, creation, and reflection are necessary components for the success of a project. Additional guidance, direction, and encouragement may be needed to nurture contributions. Artists should position themselves as relatable to all the various participants, viewers, and contributors by positioning themselves in the various scenarios that accompany each of these roles.

These various roles accompany individual and communal narratives. Individual stories are reflective of personal experiences and are formed by the various community narratives prevalent where the individual identifies (Rappaport, 2000). This concept illustrates the notion of different narratives that are embedded in popular society. These perspectives to the social implications and considerations realized through dialogue and reflection in their work embody the community story. These experiences are the narratives or stories shared with other community members.

Artists working in socially engaged art can inspire ways of being and “ways of knowing” that motivate communities and increase awareness of issues (Fox, 2015). Social practice artists generally place more emphasis on the method of engagement and process of creating (Leake, 2012). It’s not just about the socially engaged concept or idea but the notion of getting

together and creating together. Locating oneself in the practice can offer a tool to be more aware of how experiences are impacted by these interactions and relations (Langhout, 2006). Equally as integral to knowing individual impact is the community experiences and narratives as the community is reflected in each individual.

Storying is a method to understand socially constructed arrangements and structures. When participants actively share their stories while collaboratively generating meaning, their dialogue is co-created (Passila et al., 2013). Researcher-voiced poetry using field notes from performance ethnography (Fig. 7.1):

*All the projects themselves are community experiences because they are in dialogue with the community and they are co-created with the participation of the community. So, I would say the workshops themselves are the things that have been generated, the things that have been generated from this project, from the*

Fig. 7.1 Puppet created at SPA workshop





*experiences of the community. Everything has been co-created through direct participation with the community, the visual aspects of what has been made of the boat itself. I know it sounds kind of redundant but to say that it's the artist's work themselves because those are made by the community maybe that means that is the community. The workshops themselves carry the community experiences within them. It's not just about the socially engaged art concept or idea but the notion of getting together and creating something together. Hearing the needs of the community and the expression of the community in a different way than they usually do through the work. (Flemington, 2018, participant observer notes)*

*The Everyday Puppets Guide to Basic Hand Puppets—Puppets were a part of my childhood and I collected them. My dad loved puppets and would take me to shows in Downtown Los Angeles. He would wake me up in the morning with them peeping around the corner saying hello and an entire skit. I naturally gravitated towards this event as I had fond associations with the content. This workshop was at the focal point of the socially engaged art activities. The ambiance resembled a large festival with many people talking, communing, and creating. Detailed instructions with drawings created in black marker on reclaimed cardboard allowed for participants to cut, glue, and assemble their puppets at various times. At the end of the puppet making table an assortment of masks and puppets were featured to use as inspiration. Various supplies were available for participants to assemble and add to their puppet.*

I was greeted by Chris and asked if I wanted to make a puppet. The artist facilitating the workshop was also engaging and dialoguing with others as part of his process. I observed, as the other participants made puppets that were representations of themselves, monsters, or other fictitious characters. Chris informed me that the puppets would be part of a performance utilizing aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1974). This component was scheduled to occur toward the conclusion of the workshop once more puppets had been created by participants. I utilized the illustrated diagram to construct the puppet and other participants provided instruction and assistance to me. One of the participants that assisted me at the puppet station was a teaching artist. Several children created puppets and were guided by the artist to participate in the Theatre of the Oppressed dialogue and activities. The participants used the puppets as a representation of themselves and acted out issues and situations that were of concern to them. Chris noted about the workshop,

[T]he intention is not to solve a problem, but rather to really bring out the dialogue ... the stories that are written in people because there's dominant narratives that we constantly hear and are bombarded through by the media and then there's the part where we have our own answers. At the same time, we have to also relate to others, too. And if anything, developing some kind of empathy or compassion for others because when we hear a story we see this thing and then hear the labeling of things and then we see that story, but we frame it. I feel like it gives a sense of relief in these types of community experiences. It's a place where you can let go. That's what these community experiences embody, just take a step out of your life and come here and create, talk, discuss news with people. Just a break from everyday.

The activities and exercises informed by Theatre of the Oppressed were to allow for participants to re-frame inequities and situations of their life to experience success or different solutions. The practice also enabled an avenue for people to disclose and discuss occurrences. Giving this time was valuable to the process of creating a space for trust and empathy. The important aspect of this happening is sharing dialogue and engaging with others. The puppet making facilitated the process of creating in a shared space and developing the dialogue for the Theatre of the Oppressed exercises and the conversation that naturally occurred. Creating a version of ourselves and language that we control is very liberating and empowering. These various modes to engage was a strong aspect of this socially engaged workshop.

*Robotic-toothbrush paintings*—“Let’s create a giant robotic toothbrush!” proposed Chris. While Dylan and Chris instructed participants on how to assemble the miniature robots and attach them to toothbrushes, they discussed future projects. They spoke of hypothetically planning a large-scale toothbrush robot that would combine technology and graffiti to paint large sections of cities. Participants could assemble the robots on the toothbrush at their discretion, dip the toothbrush in paint, and place the motorized toothbrush with paint on a sheet of paper. Participants started placing their creations on the same sheet of paper and the robotic toothbrushes would create paintings together. I observed through their dialogue and engagement, how the socially engaged practice impacted the socially engaged artists by discussing future projects. The process of creating, dialoguing, and engaging together contributed to their “ways of knowing.” These “ways of knowing” reference the aspects of the art and more importantly, the aspects that encompass each other. Each artist had their own level of expertise and area of specialization to share. Unloading those ideas in a space that breeds development was one of the catalysts that appeared to make other participants feel inspired. As an artist, I think for me it is always inspiring to see other artists doing what makes them happy and serving their purpose

*in life. It also inspires me to continue to make sure that I'm pursuing my own artistic practices ... to hopefully one day do my own workshops and activities and to continue this type of community engagement. Seeing all of the people working and creating together was inspiring.* (Flemington, 2018, participant observer notes)

*Sense of Belonging* was the third emergent theme from my dissertation. The phenomenon of contributing in a collaborative way or in a collective manner gives a feeling of belonging to a community. The notion that the artists and participants were involved in something that provided meaning and helped them feel connected. This component is an idea socially engaged practice strives to accomplish through the various points of engagement and unpacking. Researcher-voiced poetry using field notes from performance ethnography:

**Sing-Along**—As the resident artists and visiting artists played guitars, bass, and harmonics with their installation piece as a backdrop, we began to position ourselves throughout the space encompassing the socially engaged practice. The process of participating in this practice was familiar and not exactly comfortable. There was a sense of anxiety as we were congregating and some people were not as comfortable singing in a group. Once Sam introduced the visiting artist as a friend and announced they would play as we sang-along. The featured songs all related to being at sea and going somewhere by boat; *Blow the Man Down*, *What Shall We Do With A Drunken Sailor*, *I Want To Go Home*, and *Kokomo*. The lyrics for all of these songs were placed on a folding chair next to the shipwrecked boat with a green resin diamond-shaped paperweight so the wind would not blow away the sheets. We faced the artists and fanned out in a half-circle with holding the lyrics. Small percussion instruments were distributed to accompany the music and singing. Sam directed everyone to contribute either by singing, playing, or listening. Upon hearing that, people started experimenting with the instruments and looking over the lyrics. Dylan and I stood next to each other and I held the lyrics for both of us to follow. Dylan helped keep the rhythm by playing a percussion instrument and guiding participants as Sam and the visiting artist played. The first song played was *Blow the Man Down*. The lyrics began ...

*“Oh, blow the man down, bullies, blow the man down.  
To me way-aye, blow the man down.  
Oh, blow the man down, bullies, blow him right down.  
Give me some time to blow the man down.”*

The melody was slow and about the sea overtaking the sailor. Some of the participants appeared comfortable with singing, while others that placed themselves in the outer edge of the half circles towards the back of the par-

ticipants did not sing. As we sang the second song, What Shall We Do With A Drunken Sailor, someone announced their father would sing the song to them as a child. We sang ...

*“What will we do with a drunken sailor?*

*What will we do with a drunken sailor?*

*What will we do with a drunken sailor?*

*Early in the morning!*

*Way hay and up she rises*

*Way hay and up she rises*

*Way hay and up she rises*

*Early in the morning!”*

The first two songs were sailor shanties, popular in the nineteenth century, while the final two were songs created by twenty-first-century artists. It was about midway through the song, “I Want to go Home,” that I felt the feeling of belonging and that we were making something together. People started to sway and move their bodies in place. The final song was “Kokomo” that makes reference to the Bermuda Triangle. Answering the question that was asked, “Which direction should we head in?” Kokomo as a paradise destination as one version of where our society (ship) should navigate toward. Both of these songs were created by The Beach Boys and did not feel entirely relevant to some of the participants. At the final song, many participants were singing, playing instruments, and slightly dancing. The crowd was large enough that the participants could be engaged as a group and not as single participants with a vocal performance. In this moment, I feel a strong sense of community as we created the sounds together. At that moment, the art was a representation of our community story as a shared moment and experience.

The fourth theme was *Exploring, Making, and Playing* in my dissertation. The concept of creating together enabled a sense of confidence and a communal practice. This theme resonated with me as a participant observer and complete participant. The various socially engaged workshops afforded participants the opportunity to make art in an experiential manner with various methods and subjects. Additionally, what transpired during the process of creating in collaboration allowed for people to just consider “ways of knowing” and not focus on solutions. This opportunity promoted the freedom to address issues, experiment with new media, and create art in various capacities. These modes of expression were focused on the creation without expertise or an emphasis on critique but rather on what is

revealed about identity or others when making and exploring. Researcher-voice poetry using field notes from performance ethnography:

*Walking into the workshop site, I could hear David Bowie's Space Oddity playin,  
 "This is Ground Control to Major Tom  
 You've really made the grade  
 And the papers want to know whose shirts you wear  
 Now it's time to leave the capsule if you dare."*

There was a cluster of a few people watching the next rocket launch just inside the workshop space. Each rocket canister had its own individual launch that involved a countdown announcement with steam and artist introduction accompanied by a song. The workshop direction was to create your own personalized rocket from repurposed film canisters. Each rocket could be decorated with stickers and colorful pipe cleaners. Inside each canister, the participant placed an Alka-Seltzer tab. Once the rocket was ready to launch, water was placed into the canister and recapped, concealing it. The rockets were placed on Stanley Station Launch pad area for the simulated countdown music (Fig. 7.2).



Fig. 7.2 Launching rockets in the space museum

Dylan prefaced the discussion with, “Have you ever traveled in space? I can send you to assist me.” As I began to create my rocket, people joined and watched the various stages of process. Some rockets propelled and successfully launched. Others did not. I design my rocket with the canister lid at the top of the rocket. Dylan let me know that mine was the first rocket to be completed in this way and it might not launch. After embellishing the container and quickly putting the explosive mixture in, I placed the rocket on the circular launch pad and waited; during this time the artist mentioned the importance of experimenting and testing the limits of what we can do. My rocket did not depart, so I assembled the ingredients to create the rocket again and placed the canister lid on the rocket facing down on the launch pad. Rockets that had launched were removed from the launch pad after the countdown event and placed in the space museum display. The reaction of the water and Alka-Seltzer mixture placed in a sealed container caused the explosion. There was a margin for error with a few of the steps involved but key to this aspect of the socially engaged art process is exploring and experimenting. This form of discovery and play is essential in sharing knowledge, learning, and development. Participants cheered for “successful launches” and encouraged those to rework the canisters that did not launch. The artist framed the objective as “Exploring” to focus on the practice and process rather than the product. The danger being for participants to strive for a “successful launch” might imply replicating and not discovering through play.

### REFLECTIONS FROM RESEARCH

Poetic transcription and analytic code weaving is a method derivative of a grounded theory perspective, in which codes were drawn from the data by reviewing the interview transcripts for themes and language and the words and phrases organized to form the poem. This poem solely reflects the exact language participants expressed (in vivo) during research interviews. I identified the elements of the data to feature in the poem and maintained interpretive control, while weaving together personal narratives into a community narrative. Using the selected words as the source of the poem preserves the authenticity of speech (Faulkner, 2005; Glesne, 1997). A “third voice” in poetic transcription evolves from conversations between researcher and participant and transforms during interpretation (Glesne, 1997).

These reflective poems were generated from analytic memos using Saldaña's (2016) method. The analytic memo-writing process is a nonlinear process that transcends the spectrum of data collection and coding from the beginning to the end of the investigation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Birks et al. (2008) present a mnemonic for analytic memo writing: (M) mapping activities in the research process, (E) extracting content for the data, (M) maintaining perspectives, and (O) opening exchanges. "Memos are sites of conversation with ourselves about our data" (Clarke, 2005, p. 202). The poetic transcription code weaving encompassed the analytic code for four of the themes generated in the findings from my dissertation: (1) Unpacking the Participant, (2) Dialoguing and Engaging, (3) Sense of Belonging, and (4) Making, Playing, and Creating. This process gives life to the data through another lens and representation. Interpretive poetry (merging both researcher's perspective and participant's words) and analytic code weaving from performance ethnography:

*[S]tories written in people  
looking from an outside perspective  
see different perspectives  
evolution of people making*

*... unpacking the participant  
what a participant is  
where they came from  
why  
artists as the participants  
make a difference*

*... sense they are contributing  
see each other with more empathy  
expand possibilities  
creates a healing space  
don't know if art helped or changed her ... it was important for her to be there  
contributes to wellbeing as a person*

*... feeling of belonging to something  
being able to be around people  
it's one thing to facilitate the workshop  
it's another thing to actually be in the workshop and facilitate at the same time  
part of ... something bigger than themselves*

*want people to feel like they own part of the work*  
*find personal meaning*  
*impacted my perspective on how are can open people up*

*... open up certain dialogues (1)*  
*create connections with different types of people*  
*being asked a question*  
*considering it*  
*answering it*  
*takes you to another place*  
*hear the needs of the community*  
*hear the expression of the community*  
*in a different way than they usually do through the work*  
*studying*

*... exploring things*  
*... making a piece*  
*creating a scene that is a cross-section of many places*  
*enables people to just consider*  
*we're focused on happenstance*

*... we develop into stories (2)*  
*different dynamic ... face-to-face with people*  
*you are there with this person*  
*an evolution of people making*  
*getting people to*

*engage (3) really directly with each other*  
*relationships out of these projects*  
*1-all*  
*2-artists*  
*3-participants*

## CONCLUSION

“Stories convey both what we do and do not know about ourselves, creating a productive tension between our self-expression (meanings we convey) and our self-knowledge (our current knowledge of ourselves)” (Rice & Mundel, 2018). This creative tension enables discoveries about self and the embedded experiences (Brushwood Rose, 2009). Stories hold ideologies and discourses giving opportunity to create narratives about ourselves



and be the subject for others. The opportunity for socially engaged practice as storying brings moments of shared identities and community by revealing aspects that are otherwise uncommunicated.

Utilizing arts-based research to re-construct stories from data allows for envisioning the data as dynamic. Applying the methods from this chapter invites possibilities. The implications for using these methods to tell stories are endless by invigorating data in multidimensional capacities. Conceptualizing stories in various capacities as socially engaged practice to create community narratives that reflect dynamic and marginalized communities is necessary to be at the center of the story. Sharing stories and spaces will create greater inclusion and more ways of knowing and doing. Everyone has a story and therefore it is a way to relate and empathize.

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