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Curation: A Multimodal Practice for Socially-Engaged Action

Participatory Curation: Who Has the Power to Exhibit in a Collaborative Community-Based Project?

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Abstract

What does curation involve when guided by feminist, community-based participatory methodologies aimed toward social change? This piece highlights that curation is a critically important intermediary rhetorical action in-and-of-itself when working with marginalized groups in a participatory action project. Participatory curation—a process of eliciting, shaping, and sharing creative-rhetorical works with members of a participatory action research (PAR) project—involves navigating tensions while striving to ensure that differently positioned participants have opportunities to voice their perspectives on when, if, and how to exhibit/disseminate the co-created knowledge. This web-text offers a deeper understanding of the praxis of participatory curation as participatory action research project. Drawing on a feminist PAR project to support marginalized youth in creating and presenting digital stories about critical issues impacting their communities, we argue that participatory curation involves creating a sense of "we" by prompting interpersonal moments of discovery and by confronting the commonplaces and structures that would immediately authorize those with privilege to decide when, if, and how to disseminate or make public collaborative creative-rhetorical works.

What does curation involve when guided by feminist, community-based participatory methodologies aimed toward social change? Participatory curation, or curatorial acts conducted by those in a participatory action research project, involves navigating tensions while striving to ensure that differently positioned participants have opportunities to voice their perspective on when, if, and how to exhibit/disseminate the co-created knowledge. Take, for example, this exchange between youth and adults during our community-based project:

Munny[1]:	"To be honest, like, when you guys said we were 'screening' the videos, I thought we were gonna be in, like, an auditorium with a bunch of people coming"
Santi:	"I thought so too. Like a premiere"
Urmitapa (author):	"We wanted for you to see it first, and then as a group, since you're the ones who created it, you get to decide who will watch it, where, when . . ."
Jenna (author):	"Do you think it *should* be screened in a big auditorium?"
Isabel:	"Yes!"
Jenna:	"With who? Who's there?"
Santi:	"All youth and gents" . . .
Munny:	"Anybody. Everybody. . but then I thought about it and it's only 3 minutes."
Isabel:	"And then someone is going to have to talk like 'blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."
	[more discussion about this possibility, a pause, and then]
Munny:	"Can we do YouTube?"

Curation, we argue, is a way to name and critique these kinds of intermediary processes that are fundamental to community-based participatory and action research, yet relatively undertheorized. In other words, curation is a critically important intermediary rhetorical action in-and-of-itself when collaborating with participants from marginalized groups.

[1] Pseudonyms have been used for all youth participants.

Many scholars agree that good community-engaged research is reciprocal, ethical, and driven by co-creation of new knowledges that respond to community-defined needs (“CCCC Statement” 2016; Licona & Gonzales, 2013; Royster, 2014). This aligns with participatory action research (PAR), an epistemic and methodological stance rooted in the principle that valid knowledge is produced through collaboration and action (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Fine, 2007; Lykes, 2013). A common call across these literatures is for researchers to be self-reflexive about how they engage participants to avoid exploiting already marginalized voices and ways of knowing to serve academic ends. This includes ethical concerns around who participates in the research process and who has the right to show and manage the products of the research collaboration. Considering this, **we maintain that curation *is* the researchers’ opportunity to establish reciprocal, participatory creation of knowledge**.

> “**Participatory curation** is the process of eliciting, shaping, and sharing creative-rhetorical works with members of a participatory action research project. It involves creating a sense of “we” by prompting interpersonal moments of discovery, by opening opportunities for relational literacy, and—for university-affiliated researchers or those in the project connected to more resources than other participants—by interrupting and confronting the commonplaces and structural conditions that would immediately or inherently authorize those with privilege to decide when, if, and how to disseminate or make public those collaborative creative-rhetorical works.”

This article offers a deeper understanding of the praxis of **participatory curation**. Specifically, we—two feminist activist scholars, a feminist rhetorician and a decolonial community psychologist—facilitated a PAR project to support marginalized youth in creating and presenting digital stories that highlight critical issues impacting their communities. Our community-engaged scholarship is firmly anchored in the values of activist scholarship as we actively resist and try to disrupt transactional, top down modes of community engagement that have increasingly come to characterize neoliberal institutions of higher education (Sudbury &

Okazawa-Rey, 2009). At the same time, we are critically conscious of the power and politics of our community-engagement in a mid-sized city with a sprawling university campus and its ramifications on the wider community. Thus, we often refer to ourselves as **university-affiliated researchers** to index our power, resources, and inherent complicity in the uneven nature of university-community partnerships.

In this article, we present two vignettes from the project capturing critical moments of curation:

- Vignette 1: The solicitation of shared narratives about youth's experiences in their community
- Vignette 2: The public dissemination of the co-created digital stories

These vignettes are told through narratives from the youth storytellers reflecting on these processes, narratives from the university researchers explaining/theorizing the process, and images of the multimodal ways we engaged the curation process. Guided by feminist methodologies, we engage in a process of critical reflexivity on the role of curation in a participatory, action-oriented, community-based project (Fonow & Cook, 2005; Pillow, 2003; Royster & Kirsch, 2012; Visweswaran, 1994). For us, this means methodically asking the following throughout the process:

- **What is being curated?**
- **What is "our" role?**
- **Who is the curator?**
- **To what end in terms of social change?**

Grappling with these questions, we create this web-text to show how curatorial power shifts during the process of a creative-rhetorical community project like the creation of digital stories (see Reflexive Engagement 1 and Reflexive Engagement 2). At times we made the decisions, at times the youth did. It is not balanced or always shared in utopic ways, but it is mindful, attentive to the pragmatic needs of the youth program (or community site for others), and consistently resistive to the

ivory tower regime of showcasing community to produce feel good moments for neoliberal universities but little else.

YOUTH DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECT / VIGNETTE 1 / REFLECTION ON VIGNETTE 1/ VIGNETTE 2 / REFLECTION ON VIGNETTE 2 / CONCLUDING REMARKS / REFERENCES

[1] Pseudonyms have been used for all youth participants.

The Youth Digital Storytelling Project: Moving from Products to Process

The Digital Storytelling Project brought together a group of 15 ethnoculturally diverse youth[2] (aged 13-18 years old) to collaboratively produce two digital stories highlighting urgent issues impacting their communities. The participating youth were co-curators; they worked together to decide when and how the stories would be showcased—or not—in ways that would be meaningful for themselves, as an afterschool group, and for the urban residents who viewed their stories. Henceforth we refer to the participating youth as **storytellers** in order to emphasize their centrality as knowledge generators. Thus, the emphasis was not just on creating digital stories but developing interesting venues and mechanisms for youth to be seen and heard (Gubrium & Harper, 2016).

We position these products of our digital storytelling project as only a beginning. We place them here as a way to move beyond it, or rather, before it, to a series of moments rarely theorized or critiqued, to the moments of what we are calling participatory curation that led to these collaborative digital stories. We invite you to view these stories now, showcased—**at the request of the youth involved**—on YouTube. [**Read More:** How did youth-storytellers feel about the final digital stories?]

Video 1: Build Your Utopia - - Digital Storytelling, Lowell

Video 2: Dress-Coded - Digital Storytelling, Lowell - Critique of Dress Code Policy in High School

Overview of the digital storytelling project

The digital storytelling project was carried out in collaboration with **Youth Reaching Out (YRO)**, a youth civic and community engagement afterschool program that focuses on violence prevention through strategic activities and meaningful dialogue. The YRO coordinators (henceforth referred to as **youth coordinators**) invited us to facilitate the digital storytelling project with deliverables that would be showcased at ***Peace in the Park1***, an annual youth-driven event organized by Youth Reaching Out (YRO). Thus, we initiated the digital storytelling project in response to our community partners' expressed needs for a concrete spring project that was centered on community and civic engagement, and which was primarily youth-driven. **[Read more]**

Digital storytelling involves the use of multimedia technologies (e.g., text, graphics, photographs, video, music, audio narration) to create and share first-person accounts on a specific topic. As a group process, "digital storytelling allows for the coconstruction of knowledge and a shift from textual to multisensory ways of knowing" (Barcelos & Gubrium, 2018, p. 906). As such, digital storytelling has been used effectively as a vehicle for expression of marginalized voices (Lambert, 2013; Sawhney, 2009) and was particularly suited to our context.

While this synergy allowed us to integrate the digital storytelling project quite seamlessly with the YRO program, it also meant that we had to be responsive to their time constraints—typically meeting once a week for 90 minutes over a span of 10 weeks, following which the youth had to focus on planning the Peace in the Park event. We had to contend with the vagaries of the winter weather and associated school closures typical of the

Northeast; for example, scheduling additional meeting times to make up for weather-related cancellations. Throughout the project, we were deliberate in navigating the tensions between these practical constraints, the need to be responsive to our community partners (e.g., having something to "show"), and the ethical imperative to center youth perspectives/desires in participatory action research.

Across many sessions, our role was primarily that of facilitators, working alongside the youth storytellers via complicated power dynamics to help produce more complex understanding of their lives and the ways they chose to represent themselves and their experiences. As part of a rigorous PAR design, we engaged in iterative cycles of research, action, reflection, and evaluation that centered youth experiences[3]. We gathered different kinds of data: 1) researcher-produced or -elicited data such as observations, fieldnotes, freewriting, anonymous feedback, surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews; 2) participant productions such as posters, flyers, storyboards, and digital stories; and 3) audience response data that involved documentation of audience interaction with the digital stories (e.g., via audience feedback forms and informal exchange). Taken together, the visual and textual materials generated served a three-fold purpose (Appadurai, 2006; Banks, 2007):

- as a prompt for eliciting discussion/responses
- as documentation of process
- as evidence of events and conditions.

Drawing on this multimodal documentation, we are able to critically reflect on our roles and highlight the manifold ethical considerations when curating creative-rhetorical work with community participants in an attempt to produce local, socio-political change. In Vignette 1 and Vignette 2, we offer a relational and reflexive analysis of collaborative, creative knowledge production, naming and unpacking the messy and complex spaces wherein meaningful encounters and theoretical richness emerge (Katz, 2001; Torre & Ayala, 2009).

[1] The event was initiated as a youth-led response to violence in the local community. This annual event is held at the beginning of the summer holidays as a way to create awareness about safe usage of public space. Supported by the YRO program coordinators, Peace in the Park is entirely youth-driven from its conceptualization, to presenting the proposal at city hall to running the event on the day. (Eric Johnson & Andre Chandonnet, in personal communication)

[2] We recognize that the category of youth is only partly determined by chronological age; it is in fact a historically and socially constructed category that constitute a lens through which symbolic dimensions of power, personhood, and agency are refracted (Daiute & Fine, 2003; Durham, 2000). We draw our understanding of youth from critical youth studies that recommend a broad age range spectrum—from as young as seven years through young adults attending college (e.g., Daiute & Fine, 2003; Ginright & Cammarota, 2006).

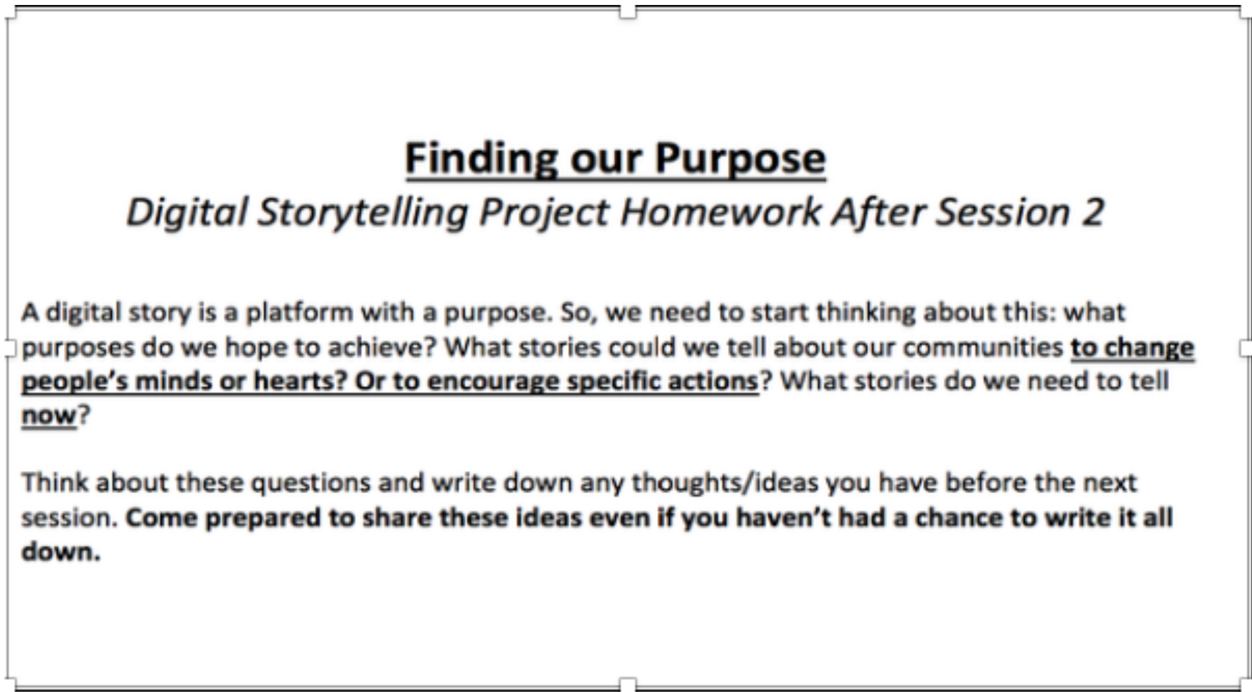
[3] This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

Vignette 1: Collecting and Curating Community Experiences

On this page, we narrate the sessions that focused on eliciting community experiences to shape into digital stories for the project.

Critical Consciousness and Finding the Stories

The of the most important stages of our digital storytelling project was the third workshop session, which we called "Finding the stories." We thought carefully about how to craft the session to evoke, bring together, and draw out stories of shared experiences. Prior to the session, we had assigned youth homework prompting them to think about the kinds of stories they'd like to tell.



Finding our Purpose

Digital Storytelling Project Homework After Session 2

A digital story is a platform with a purpose. So, we need to start thinking about this: what purposes do we hope to achieve? What stories could we tell about our communities **to change people's minds or hearts? Or to encourage specific actions**? What stories do we need to tell **now**?

Think about these questions and write down any thoughts/ideas you have before the next session. **Come prepared to share these ideas even if you haven't had a chance to write it all down.**

Figure 1. Homework Prior to "Finding the Stories" workshop session

We prepared the session by placing large posters of the purposes a story might serve all over the room: to educate or bring awareness; to have new or often silenced voices heard; to change people's minds; to encourage a specific action.

Once the stage was set, we began with an "icebreaker" activity that prompted everyone to sit in a circle and tell the story of their name. While still in this storytelling frame of mind, we transitioned to the next activity: reviewing the purposes stories can serve in order to think about what stories we want to tell with our digital stories.

We then broke up the group of 12 participants into 4 groups of 3, with one youth coordinator or university researcher assigned to each group to take notes as the youth shared the stories that they thought we should tell. As soon as everyone settled, the ideas began to spark, or as one of youth coordinators later put it, "the bomb went off;" the ideas generated like waves building across the participants. Brief excerpts from Jenna's fieldnotes illustrate this generative process, though we take care not to

divulge too much of this brainstorming exchange as some of *these elements were not chosen by the youth storytellers for creation and dissemination***. [Read the excerpts]**

Time flew by during this short activity. One of the youth coordinators, Eric, actually had to be the one to remind us that we were going to bring the shared stories to the large group. From our undergraduate researcher's notes on the session, we came to understand that all small groups essentially went this way. Once we finally gathered everyone into a large group, we asked for representatives of the small groups to begin sharing what they had discussed. We prepared large posters labeled, **"What stories do we want to tell?"** and **"What purpose do you think our digital stories might serve?"** to write on as the youth reported the ideas that emerged from our small group discussion. Youth storytellers brainstormed five possible purposes they could achieve by telling collective stories about their experiences in Lowell, the last one receiving the most ideas: **"Changing the school system/environment"** to address their heart-wrenching experiences with bigotry, fights, bullying, buildings (that have problems), dress code injustices, and the administration not acting on students' reports of problems at school.

As the students spoke in large group, more details emerged, and the energy again built across disparate experiences. The adults exchanged horrified glances, deeply disturbed by the things the students were saying about school. Again, we had to interrupt the moment to end the session. Even though it felt hard to end, we prompted the youth storytellers to start thinking about which of these ideas is the most important to tell right **now** since we had to identify two or three issues to address in collaboratively created digital stories within the span of the 10 sessions that was allotted to us.

The session would have just ended, with our bodies in knots and our minds racing, had it not been for one of the youth coordinators, Eric, who asked everyone to gather in a circle before they left for the night. Eric looked us all in the eyes and thanked the youth for being brave enough to tell these

difficult stories, something that he acknowledged is hard to do in a space like this. He apologized to them for having to deal with what we wrote on the posters and for having adults like that in their lives. He said that the youth coordinators and "our new friends from UMass Lowell" are here to be a positive force in their lives. That we (the adults) will always listen and *act* on what they tell us. That we believe in them and that we will help them make the changes they want to make. Following his lead, we each put a hand in the center of the circle and chanted in unison about being the change that we wanted to see in the world. At a climactic point in the chant, we threw our hands in the air and cried out "YAY!"

Eric's response, described above, is an important contribution to our thinking about participatory curation as a critical-creative rhetorical performance and integral intermediary moment in a participatory project. As such, during his interview, we asked Eric to elaborate upon why he gathered everyone in a circle that day. He explained:

I think having something to bring it full circle so there's a sense of closure. Because I think that's always the tough thing. It's really emotional and after all these stories come out you can be left in a really vulnerable place. . . It can be really good because (you) get a lot off your chest. But, then, how do you bring people back down so that when they leave they're not still sunk in that place of all the crappy things of the stories they were telling? . . .I don't think you can ever really figure out but I think emphasizing, 'Hey. We're here for you. But, also, you guys are here for each other.' This is something... Even if it's just a circle up, it symbolizes we just did a lot of work on our own we shared. But we're still connected in this circle here. We're still connected with each other. I think it's a sense of closure before you leave that space is important. (Emphasis added)

We concur with Eric that the process of eliciting and sharing the stories was "really emotional" and potentially left youth in "a really vulnerable place" having bared all the ways in which they *are* vulnerable: to teachers, to parents, to school security guards, to police, to administration. Eliciting their creative retellings of these events, collecting these experiences, and

showcasing them on a poster, we could have just stored them for meaning-making later and walked away—admittedly what we almost did before he intervened. Circling up, looking each other in the eyes, and stating adult accountability and support of the younger participants was a means of building trust and committing to truly participate with them to get these stories fleshed out and heard. This "symbol" of "connected" nature was both enacted and reflected in that circling up. Together, with the youth coordinators and the participants, we curated a participatory moment.

The brainstorming session during Session 3 was, essentially and strategically, a critical consciousness raising session. As youth storytellers wrote on their anonymous feedback slip submitted at the end:

> *This session was very educational and it got to the point where it helped me to relate to and think about the few things that took place in my life in the past couple of months!*
>
> *I enjoyed the communication and connection we were able to make with each other.*
>
> *Felt that it was a great session to go over because things are not only happening to you but everyone else in the room. It shows that we are all much alike in many ways.*

As feminist, participatory action researchers this was a clear success. Participants were sharing experiences, listening to differences in each other's experiences while also finding vibrant lines of connection between their experiences at school and in the community. The youth coordinators were involved and facilitating alongside us, contributing in terms of collecting youth storytellers' ideas, prompting more ideas, and determining needed moments in the workshop on the spot.

It felt right. It felt important. And yet, it was also overwhelming to hear how often and in how many ways the youth felt they were not being heard or they were being actively harmed or invisibilized.

We stood in a slow drizzling rain outside the youth center afterwards, clutching the rolled-up poster paper, engaging in the little theorized but nonetheless difficult labor of self-reflexivity: what had just happened? Why did it happen that way (it felt right)? How can we proceed with our very time-limited and practical goal of producing 2-3 digital stories while still engaging in thoughtful praxis? As critical, feminist researchers, we were guided by an ethics or imperative “to inhabit a sense of caring about the people and the process involved” (Rosyter & Kirsch, 2012, p. 145). How would we ever do a critical curational move: Showcasing/framing some of these experiences and leaving others in the drawer, so to speak? How can we do this while making sure that the context remains affirming and empowering for the youth?

Curation as care, cultivating participatory decision-making

After a restless night or two we came back together with the idea of curating an exhibition of all the possible ideas the youth storytellers had brainstormed to enable a collective vote. We needed to curate their experiences, by which we mean showcase them, in a way that showed we (adults in this relation to youth, and researchers at a respected local university in relation to youth recruited to our project) **heard** them, **validated their experiences**, and **authorized** them to collectively choose what we should focus on. Part of the participatory curatorial praxis, we have learned, is to build the relationship and context so that the participants choose when, if, and how to tell their experiences. Curation then represents an opportunity for us, university affiliated researchers, to establish reciprocal, participatory creation of knowledge, striving to ensure that each participant has an opportunity to voice their perspective on when, if, and how to exhibit co-created knowledge. This we felt could be best realized by having the participants collectively review what we had created during the previous session but ultimately vote on which stories they needed to tell now with digital stories. Toward that end, we drew upon our strengths in rhetoric and narrative to translate the many brainstormed ideas into 10 succinct ideas for digital stories with a clear rhetorical purpose.

Importantly, we phrased these ideas in ways that emphasized the collaborative nature of the narrative, by using the collective personal pronoun "we," as well as the rhetorical aim of the story, by leading and underling the purpose of each. This move helped to reenact the participatory experience—emphasizing the sense of we—and to buffer the individual sense of loss that may accompany seeing *your personal* experience voted out of the running. We taped these ideas in a circle around the common room, walking the students through the options at the session following the brainstorm. We handed each participant a "Voting Guide" and encouraged them to consider key questions, outlined in Figure 3, before casting a vote on a given story:

Questions for Youth Storytellers	Rationale/Goals of Facilitators [not shown to youth]
*What project do you **feel** most connected to?*	Honors the importance of individual feelings: *if you cannot connect to the topic, why tell the story?*
*What project is **timely**? Something that people need to hear about **now**?*	Prompts consideration of kairos—a rhetorical concept Jenna introduced to the participants as the idea that there is an opportune time for certain messages. *If action is already being taken on the subject, or the story feels outdated, why tell it?*
*What project is really **our** story to tell?*	Engage the politics of voice—some voices, often the ones who experience social injustice, are not heard or acted upon. *How can we avoid speaking for others?*
*What project has the **most potential** for a 3-5 minute digital story?*	Pragmatic considerations: If we want to tell a digital story, and we know good digital stories have particular qualities (a point of our discussion in sessions 1 and 2), which of these might work? *Which are too complicated to convey in 3-5 minutes?*

Figure 2. Table Depicting the Voting Criteria

The vote was a decidedly important and playful multimodal activity, encouraging visual and kinesthetic modes of engagement. Youth storytellers were given sparkly stars to communicate which stories were their favorite and they walked around the room with each other, or on their own, deliberating the many possibilities

After the first round, the stories with the fewest stars, or stars that indicated only moderate interest, were removed. The youth then voted again, this time rank ordering the stories. Weighted averages revealed the three stories "won" the vote: Story #3, #7, and #8.

After the results were announced we encouraged the youth to freewrite and also elicited anonymous feedback to get a sense of how they felt.

What do you think about our project ideas?

How do you feel right now?

Figure 3. Photograph of writing prompt after youth vote

This was our way to evaluate whether the vote had achieved what we hoped it would: a sense of agency to decide which stories to tell, a sense of being heard, and a sense that even though particular stories were not selected for this particular project, it was okay. We had followed a simple democratic process to make decisions about which stories to work on. Not all youth were on the same page with respect to the stories that were selected. For example, a couple of male students reported an active disinterest in the dress code story in their freewrite, seeing it as a "middle school" issue more appropriate for a "school project." Even though there was some disappointment expressed, no one seemed disgruntled by the way was decided on the stories. Indeed, the participants' collective excitement about "next steps" expressed in their freewrites and anonymous feedback on this session indicate that the voting process left them feeling satisfied with the way we selected the material. This was reinforced and validated by the youth coordinators.

In the following session, we quite unexpectedly narrowed down the story ideas even further when participants selected the story projects they wanted to work on. Only one student stood next to the "Challenging Bigotry" poster. We used that moment as an opportunity to, again, collectively decide what to do. The group discussed how the theme of that poster, "Challenging bigotry at school including bringing attention to acts of racism and sexism," could be incorporated into the video on Dress Code, as unequal enforcement of the dress code is related to acts of sexism or racism, and/or the "Encouraging Youth to Better their Community" one. Ultimately the one student decided to join the dress code group leaving us with two stories to develop.

[Read More: Reflexive Engagement with Vignette 1]

Reflexive Engagement with Participatory Curation: Vignette 1

So what was curated in this phase of the Digital Storytelling Project?

Essentially, what we collected were personal stories of injustice that, as they were spoken, became collective narratives of community issues that the participants wanted to change. Yet what we also found is that curation, in a participatory action project, involves curating participatory moments, by which we mean that sense of a "we." This does not mean that there is not already a "we" when working with community members. In fact, in our case, the YRO participants had already bonded in significant ways prior to the digital story project. However, in working together to create something—something that reflects shared experiences with the goal of social change—there needs to be a sense of "we" inclusive of all that are involved. This takes rhetorical skill (Grabil, 2012).

What was our role, as scholar-activists, in this process?

We prompted memories of personal experiences in a way that would encourage collective sharing and a focus on social change. We created large prompts to guide the process. Our role was also to act as curators, collecting and showcasing these experiences for further brainstorming and creative-critical decision-making on the part of the participants. In other words, we had to think about how to situate the potential story ideas in ways that would enable participants to make the authorial choice. We wrote down what the participants said (documentation), we reflected back what we heard via visuals (posters) and oration, and we held space for healing and bonding (the circular creation of a "we") after these critical reflections. Ultimately our role was to facilitate, but not determine, the selection process. We exhibited the narratives in a session, arranging them, placing them in a circle around a room, and created a multimodal meaning-making means for engaging with them: a voting process. Much like curators placing art around a museum space, we took care to exhibit the potential stories in a way that encourage interaction and ownership.

Who was the curator?

Considering our very active role, it is tempting to label the university affiliated researchers as the curators in this stage of the process. We prompted the stories, collected the stories, exhibited the stories, and defined the means of engaging with the stories. The youth coordinators also played a major role in facilitating the homework, recording the stories in the small group, and circling up the youth storytellers. Yet those moments were part of a longer process of creation. It was, perhaps, an internal curatorial step in ultimately sharing curational power with the participants who would decide how to display their stories.

To what end in terms of social change?

The end of this stage of the process was to raise critical consciousness of collective--or disparate--struggles in the community. This, as many critical scholars attest, is a critical stage in the social change process (e.g., Cahill, Sultana & Pain, 2007)**.** We must create space for stories to be told and shared about experiences of injustice. In terms of the social change project of creating digital stories, the end of this process was the collective, but youth-determined, decision making about whose stories to tell, to whom, and to what end.

Vignette 2: Making the Digital Stories Public

In this section, we narrate crucial moments of curation centered on the public dissemination of the completed digital stories:

1. Deciding whether and how to disseminate the digital stories
2. The day of the exhibitionary encounter: Showcasing the stories at the **Peace in the Park** event (see Figure 1)

Resisting the common participatory impulse to organize around consensus, **we demonstrate that participatory curation involves recognizing and navigating tensions that surface in the process** (Fine & Torre, 2004; Powell & Takayoshi, 2003).

Deciding whether and how to disseminate the digital stories

As feminist scholars committed to participatory methodologies, we were deliberate in our efforts to foreground youth voices and youth decision making when deciding what to do with the finished products (Fields et. al., 2015; Fox et al., 2010). However, it became evident that the translation of commitment to participatory action is not a straightforward process.

The first moment where the tension became pronounced was at the "Movie Premiere" that we organized for the youth storytellers. This session was a celebratory event where we viewed the finished digital stories and a blooper reel as a group while we enjoyed popcorn and candy. This was followed by individual free-writes, a focus group discussion where youth reflected on the project, and a post-project survey. We had planned to use the focus group to discuss dissemination plans. However, when the youth showed up for the event, they were surprised that we (the university-affiliated researchers) had not invited a larger audience to watch the videos—hence, the exchange we highlight on our introduction page. One of the youth coordinators later revealed that he may have contributed to this misconception, as he prepared the youth in the afterschool group for the upcoming screening (a term we had used interchangeably with the "Movie Premiere"). The misconception was likely further influenced by our choice of terms. We referred to it as a "premiere" and "screening" which, considering the connotations of these terms, may have evoked images of a red carpet-style event.

A critical moment of participatory curation was the moment when we paused, addressed this confusion, and explained that it was "their" video. We emphasized that we could not make unilateral decisions about when and where to show the videos to audiences beyond our group. **Our role as participatory action researchers in this moment was to prompt the youth to see themselves as curators for the finished digital stories.** In reflecting on the session later, we (Jenna and Urmitapa) discussed the unease brought on by this moment of tension, where we both got the sense that the youth storytellers were either unable to relate to or appreciate our

position/decision; or that its significance was not apparently meaningful to them. This tension, in part, speaks to macro cultures and practices where youth are rarely accorded any meaningful voice or decision-making power on issues that concern them. We thus had to contend with the limits of our praxis in the absence of broader structural and cultural shifts.

During the focus group discussion, it became evident that the youth wanted to use the digital stories as a means of critically engaging people on the issues highlighted in the videos. At the same time, there were mixed feelings about the social change potential of these videos, with the youth seemingly hyperaware of the structural barriers to getting an audience at all and getting an audience to engage with the messages (especially school upper-administration).

When we asked youth if they wanted us to arrange a public screening, one participant answered immediately and enthusiastically, “yes!” and other youth murmured agreement. Yet, when we prompted them to consider where to have the screening and who to invite, one participant pivoted to a different idea: “Can we do YouTube?” He explained, “I feel like we would be better, like, to, shown like, from person to person. Like I’d show like, my teacher or something, and then he could probably do all the teachers or something.” Others liked this idea. One young man thought the videos may spread like a “virus” if the YouTube link was shared on social media. Thus, the digital stories are “public” on YouTube, at the request of the storytellers involved, but whether or not this outlet is meaningful for the youth, as co-curators of these collective narratives, is yet to be determined. **Our role as facilitators was simply to honor their request to make them public there.**

The second moment of tension was in moving forward with the decision to screen the videos during the Peace in the Park event without a clear sense of how the youth storytellers felt about it. Our organizational partners—the youth coordinators—were keen on presenting the videos at the Peace in the Park event. While this made sense for the flow and objectives of their spring programming, we also recognized the possibility

that the youth could decide not to show the videos there, or have other ideas about how to disseminate them, and we would have to figure out how to honor those decisions. It was a tension to the extent that we were not privy to processes whereby those decisions were made by the youth storytellers and the youth coordinators since our collaborative engagement with the afterschool program was limited to 11 sessions following which programming was devoted to planning the public event. This "tension" should not be interpreted to mean that youth voice and the coordinators' roles were mutually exclusive. They were unequivocally invested in youth success and clearly had strong relationships of trust and support with the youth, which were in fact integral to the successful implementation of the digital storytelling project. Thus, while we hoped to honor youth storytellers' decisions about if, when, and how to disseminate their co-created critical creative work—the digital stories—we also had to respect youth coordinators' supervisory roles and their curricular plans. This tension draws attention to the ways in which participatory action research involves relinquishing control toward collective purposes, processes and outcomes (Torre & Ayala, 2009).

Although we were not privy to the group process, we caught glimpses of it in the individual interviews that we conducted with the youth storyteller and youth coordinators. As Isabel shared:

> We came up with the idea that, "Hey, why don't we show our digital story project." . . . but how are we gonna do it? I said, "Well, we can get laptops. We can borrow from this, and this, this, and that." We talked about it and we figured out a way to do it.

Once the decision to move ahead with the screening at Peace in the Park was made, we helped by creating promotional materials (Figure 2) and aided youth in refining and formatting a paper and pencil survey (Figure 3) to elicit audience feedback.

As Andre, one of the youth coordinators, later commented on the process of building the survey:

> I think that they [the youth] felt good that they had created it [the audience survey], they had opportunity for some input and feedback back and forth, and felt very comfortable I think because they were so involved in the creating of the survey, they felt very comfortable when it came time to having people looking at the videos and being able to respond. They could clarify something if there was something unclear or just even have a conversation about how people responded. . . They worked together on it mostly independently. I came on board and asked them what they had come up with, and they showed it to me, and we went back and forth a little bit on some tweaking, and then sent it to [Jenna]. [Jenna] and Urmi put it into a little bit of a different format, but really the same.

The day of the "exhibitionary encounter"

We think of the Peace at the Park event as an "exhibitionary encounter," described by Pollock (2011, as cited in Linden & Campbell, 2016) as "the artworks as material objects (but also as images and texts), the space of their arrangement and the phenomenological encounter with them, the participating visitor, viewer or agent of the encounter, the invitation to the encounter generated by one who has taken responsibility for the assemblage and the institutionalized occasion." In this case, the youth had taken responsibility for both the assemblage (the set-up, facilitation, surveys) and the institutionalized occasion (the Peace in the Park event).

On the day that Peace in the Park was scheduled, we woke up to a very warm and humid day. There were some concerns over rain with an alternative date in case of weather-related cancellation. Fortunately, the weather held after a brief deluge a few hours before the event. The event was held in one of the public parks. A tent was set up for screening the videos. A number of tables from various youth and community-based organizations were set up in a semi-circle with the video tent at one end. Notably, the tables were primarily managed by youth. There were two-three youth at the video tent who were responsible for facilitating the viewings. Two laptops were set up, one with each video and were equipped with

earphones. The earphones were especially useful given the music playing in the jukebox. Urmitapa, who was present at the event, remained in the back of the tent or outside it when it was not drizzling. We felt it was important that the youth storytellers were at the forefront. Urmitapa assured the youth of her support if they needed anything **but explicitly acknowledged that they (the youth) were "running the show."** And run the show they did (see Fig. 4)!

The young people that were staffing the area did a super job of directing people in terms of how to use the technology, as well as to then answer questions that people had. . . They worked the crowds and talked to people and encouraged people to come over to our [table]. . . Part of their job was to encourage people to come over to our area and to take a look at the videos. . . In some cases, people sort of just dove in. In other cases, they [the youth] did a little bit of explaining in how the stories were produced and a little bit of the background behind it. Then, in other cases, they would do that after people had looked at it and people had something to say, because it definitely generated some conversation.

– Andre Chandonnet, youth coordinator who supervised the video screening at Peace in the Park event

Figure 4. Excerpt from the transcript of the post-process interview with the youth coordinator

Drawing from audience texts, including observations of the exhibitionary encounter (i.e., interpersonal dialogue) and audience responses to it (i.e., audience feedback surveys) it is clear that showcasing the digital stories at Peace in the Park was not only invitational and propositional but also interventionist in that it served as a locus for critical engagement and action in community settings (Linden & Campbell, 2016; Pollock, 2011, as cited in Linden & Campbell, 2016). See the following slide show for our thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of the audience texts.

[Read More: Reflexive Engagement with Vignette 2]

Reflexive Engagement with Participatory Curation: Vignette 2

So what was curated in this phase of the Digital Storytelling Project?

Ultimately, it was completed digital stories. This involved making space and time for figuring out how the youth storytellers felt about the finished products and where they, collectively, thought these stories should go to make meaning with others. It was a complicated process marked by moments of tension. It involved critically reflecting on who needs to see these stories, where, and to what end. Once these decisions were made, we disseminated the stories on YouTube, in emails, and—most significantly—at the Peace in the Park event.

Who was the curator?

The youth performed the role of the curators as they were the ones who decided where, how, and when to circulate the stories. While we, technically, posted the videos on YouTube and sent emails to administrators, we did so at their requests. Moreover, the youth storytellers—with the support of the youth coordinators—managed the showing of the digital stories at Peace in the Park. **Their efforts can be understood as a relational practice of mediation between their artistic assemblages and the local community members to ensure meaningful encounters and to explore possibilities for radical intervention.**

Yet, as we have shown, the youth storytellers' curatorial process was not simple or straightforward. They initially assumed we would just arrange the public screening that they would show up to and they ultimately showcased the videos at an event the youth coordinators had on the agenda all along. This is an important reminder of the limitation of participatory values in the absence of corresponding structures and processes that transform or

facilitate their realization. Thus, although we did the “right things” to elicit and anchor youth voices, it is crucial to refrain from equating our processes with claims about “giving voice to” marginalized youth. Given that this sort of ambiguity around perceived power/ownership of creative work is the norm rather than exception in university-community collaborations, it underscores the need to exercise both active affirmation of the youth participants’ decision-making power (hence our pattern of reminding the youth storytellers they get to run the show) but also restraint on the part of university-affiliated researchers. In this case, for instance, we were particular about taking our cue from the youth coordinators. This stance and our subsequent role in the process of screening the videos at the Peace in the Park event illustrates our argument that **curation is a critical intermediary rhetorical action in-and-of-itself when working alongside marginalized youth in a participatory action project**.

What was our role?

We were intentional about assuming a supporting role (Grabil, 2010). Importantly, we respected the integrity of the YRO program, recognizing their prerogative to make decisions about whether and how to disseminate the digital stories at the Peace in the Park event. We scaffolded the process based on the expressed needs of the youth coordinators and we helped to create promotional and research materials to use at the event. As Grabil (2010) writes about community-based research, “Rhetoric is always material, and it is most powerful when it makes things that enable others to perform persuasively” (p. 201).

Vignette 2 problematizes the traditional role of the curator as manipulator of arts with the goal of canonizing artists’ productions in ways that establish hierarchical knowledge structures (Linden & Campbell, 2016). In bringing out the many layers of curation, we not only decenter the primacy of university-affiliated researchers as curators, but also trouble the easy rhetoric of “community” as exercising curatorial voice. Rather, we focus on **curation as the messy, complex space that we traverse and the processes that we navigate as we (in this case, university-based**

researchers, youth coordinators, and youth storytellers) as we build critical artistic and performative assemblages. As this section demonstrates, it may be more productive to think of participatory processes as the creation of "openings" or interstitial spaces within existing social relations and spaces that allow for exchange and collaboration (Cahill, 2007).

To what end in terms of social change?

The youth storytellers used the digital stories and audience surveys to **promote critical consciousness about their collective concerns, to highlight struggles in the community, to inspire hope, and to facilitate moments of public learning**. In the case of the *Dress-coded* video in particular, these curated encounters helped to conceptualize a critical issue (dress code policy and enforcement as a form of gendered discrimination) that needed to be brought onto the public agenda. Framed in a way that centered excluded perspectives (the young women whose bodies were sites of enforcement) allowed audience members to understand how the documented stories actually affect day-to-day practice. Overall, the dissemination process helped engage a broader public in its production of contextually relevant knowledge. Notably, for the youth coordinators, the overall impact of the Digital Storytelling Project could not be disentangled from the specific outcomes of the exhibitionary encounter. As one of the youth coordinators reflected on what he understood as the more "intangible take away" for youth:

> ". . . that we can use our voice to raise concerns about a certain issue. We can inform people about something that we see that we think needs more attention. I think it's empowering. Both, in like, you learn specific skills that will support you in future things, even if it's not in making another digital story. It'll help you in school or moving forward."

Even as we recognize the possibilities inherent in these exhibitionary encounters, we have to be cautious about the kinds of claims we make. The connection between research and social change is complex and

nebulous. The encounters tend to elicit cognitive-affective responses, which although important, are far from adequate in responding to the related violence of patriarchy, sexism, racism, and economic inequalities. In fact, Fine and Barreras (2001) argue that social change is a "long haul" process that demands the engagement of multiple stakeholders, discourses, and levels of analysis. Thus, the key intervention in our digital storytelling project was the **promotion of public learning about issues that matter to youth and relatedly creating awareness about the potential and possibilities of youth civic engagement.**

Participatory curation is—as we have demonstrated in this piece—**a collaborative process of eliciting, shaping, and sharing creative-rhetorical works. It calls for rhetorical strategies that evoke a sense of collective engagement—a "we"—while also being mindful of the differences and tensions within that collectivity**. Participatory curation has the capacity to reveal, mediate, and negotiate the vicissitudes of complex and multilayered social relations and power differentials that characterize participatory research with marginalized groups. In fact, curation is **one of the most important opportunities for researchers to establish reciprocal, participatory creation of knowledge among differently positioned subjects.**

Many scholars have critiqued the ways in which participatory research is co-opted within neoliberal discourses. These include include tokenism, emphasis on consensus, and the failure to address uneven power relations (Cahill, 2007; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). In this web-text, we actively resist a monolithic authorial voice, while recognizing that the many perspectives woven into this paper are mediated by us. We do not claim to "give voice to" the young people who participated in the digital storytelling project. Indeed, we argue that decisions within PAR should be part of a collective process rather than those of individual university-affiliated researchers; as such all researchers involved experience a sense of ambiguity—a contrast to traditional notions of rigor in research. We do so with the hope of

provoking a shift in participatory praxis—both research and representation—from linear, outcome-oriented narratives to a critically reflexive engagement with the messiness, tensions, contradictions, discomfort, and affective evocations.

And, yet, here we are, making the unilateral decision to showcase the youth storytellers' work in *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics,* an open-access but nonetheless academic-oriented outlet. In this audio-recorded exchange, we reflect on some of the politics and ethics that influenced our publication of this web-text **[Click here for transcript and recommended readings]**.

As our piece highlights, participatory curation demands active restraint on the part of participants with more power and active affirmation of those with less so that the storytellers get to decide when, if, and how to disseminate or make public their collaborative creative-rhetorical works. In fact, as activist scholars, our focus is not merely on digital stories as product or outcome but crucially on the ways in which digital stories can open up interesting venues and approaches for marginalized constituencies to be seen and heard in ways that allow them to reclaim their stories rather than being mediated by others (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). Indeed, **future research needs to focus on forms of participatory praxis that are steadfast and rhetorically effective in prompting participants to truly decide the platforms and means of public showcasing of the co-created knowledge(s) produced in community-university collaborations.**

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