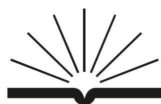
THE ART OF PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE

Elizabeth Miller,
Edward Little, and
Steven High



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UBC Press has published three books based on insights from the Montreal Life Stories project. These are:

STEVEN HIGH
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Going Public: The Art of Participatory Practice

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Introduction

> You go public with an idea, with an inspiration. You can go to the public to learn something. You go to find out what other people think. You don't have all the answers, you really just have the first questions and that's the beginning of a process.
>
> – Katerina Cizek, Toronto-based documentary maker[1]

> *"Going public"* ... evokes vulnerability and responsibility simultaneously ... the idea that you have something personal to share that might be difficult to engage in and at the same time that there's value in your stepping forward and being public about what it is that you represent and the values that you are coming with and the identity and experiences that you bring to the mix.
>
> – Ronit Avni, New York-based filmmaker, human rights advocate and media strategist[2]

Going Public places socially engaged practitioners in theatre, documentary media, the visual or multimedia arts, and oral history into conversation to explore how and with whom we collaborate and why. With this project, we sought to create a space of mutual reflection with seasoned practitioners across disciplines about core challenges and the potential of new technologies and methodologies to engage multiple publics across disciplines, cultures, and geographies. In an era of transnational digital capitalism, "going public" is often identified with immediacy, exposure, self-branding, or even appropriation. We felt an urgency to converse with individuals who are exploring emergent participatory approaches while remaining invested in the ethics and the time it takes to cultivate collaborative public endeavours. In the process, "going public" became a meaningful prompt to talk about the stakes involved and what matters to those of us invested in critical participatory praxis. For documentary director Katerina Cizek, there is "an inherent democratic motivation in there." Going public "also means an

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openness – that we're not doing things in private, in closed rooms."[3] Core to the concept is a commitment to collaborate at all stages of a project as a method to challenge power relations and enhance the impact of projects. For documentary theatre maker Annabel Soutar, "ideas get stronger as they are bounced back and forth between different minds."[4]

The willingness to be open to new ideas, tools, media, methods, and relationships is a fundamental part of any collaborative endeavour that crosses disciplinary or cultural boundaries. We found a growing interest in the creative tussle that can happen when you're working outside of your comfort zone.[5] Several practitioners with whom we spoke went so far as to refer to themselves as media or methodological "agnostics." For some, this produced a certain tension between their willingness to try new things and the closed nature of disciplinary authority and identity. Ronit Avni, after confessing that she uses a "variety of media" and that she was "fairly agnostic," went on to say: "It's hard to admit that because I wear a filmmaker hat, but I'm open to different technologies and ways of reaching people. I think we are entering into a new arena as a field that has to think creatively about what are the tools at our disposal." A similarly expansive understanding of our research and creative practice, and the need to be nimble, is evident across a wide range of fields, including our own.

Within universities there has been a strong "public turn" in recent years that is rekindling interest in multimedia knowledge production, new kinds of cross-disciplinary alliances, and participatory approaches to research-creation. The development of cross-disciplinary methodologies such as photo-voice, digital storytelling, community mapping, participatory archiving, and other arts-based approaches, on the one hand, and the emergence of new "public" subdisciplines in traditional social science and humanities disciplines such as history, geography, sociology, folklore, and archaeology, on the other, reflects a deep-seated desire to rethink how and why we do research-creation, with whom, and for whom.[6] This wider notion of "public scholarship" itself, bolstered by large collaborative grants from the major funding councils, has accelerated this trend, creating new spaces of sustained conversation and co-creation between university-based researchers, artists, and the wider community.[7] The burgeoning presence of feminist and Indigenous researchers, and of artists and activists in many universities, has contributed to a deeper reflexivity about the situated nature of research, demanding transparency by raising critical questions about who owns and benefits from any research endeavour. Māori scholar Linda

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Tuhiwai Smith reminds us that the practice of sharing knowledge is a long-time commitment, one that requires ongoing vigilance against new formulations of colonization and appropriation.[8] An emerging culture of transparency is also evident in wider public movements for open access and open source.[9] This book is both a product of and a sustained reflection on these sweeping changes.

Before undertaking *Going Public*, we had already worked together for six years as part of a major collaborative research project with survivors of mass violence: Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and other Human Rights Violations (Montreal Life Stories). Each of us served on the coordinating committee and led specific parts of the project: Liz with refugee youth, Ted with oral history performance, and Steven leading the project as a whole. Survivor communities were an integral part of the project team itself: active in design and direction as well as in the wide-ranging authored outcomes. While we all had a commitment to share the project's interviews with wider publics and within survivor communities themselves, our pathways to going public were as diverse as were the hundreds of individuals who participated in Montreal Life Stories. We have published extensively on our experiences in the project and on what we have learned as a result; suffice it to say that it has been transformational at a personal level as well as in terms of our respective practices.[10] Steven likes to say that he is no longer the same historian he was in 2006, when Montreal Life Stories was initiated. But this shared history left us with a strong desire to learn more about how others have approached diverse forms of community-engaged or participatory work. With whom do we choose to collaborate and why? How does collaboration play out in practice? Can it help us understand our methods and expertise and at the same time dislodge assumptions? How can we take advantage of technological affordances without undermining the ethics or even the political goals of an initiative? And to what extent is geographic scale (local versus national or global) important?

With an increased potential to communicate across time and space, we wanted to rethink the very notion of "public" given the myriad of situated publics to which engaged artists and researchers turn. We also wanted to reflect on the notion of sustained collaboration and what that entails. Our own six-year collaborative project impressed upon us the amount of time required to build trust and relationships, and the extent to which it is essential to structure in time to discuss expectations and foster consultative processes. Embracing a slower temporal ethos was

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FIGURE 0.1 Leontine Uwababyeyi and members of the Montreal Life Stories project gather at the St. Lawrence River to participate in the Annual Commemoration of the Genocide in Rwanda as part of the Going Places bus tour. Leontine is throwing flower petals into the water as a tribute to those who were murdered. *Photograph by Anne-Renée Hotte.*

necessary to incorporate reflexive practices, but it was also our way of contesting the orthodoxy of efficiency, consumerism, and standardization seeping into every aspect of our lives. "Slow movements" emerging in food, art, and academic cultures informed our work. We asked ourselves: How might a deep interrogation into the ethics and the efficacy of going public serve as a mechanism for shifting power and dislodging assumptions in the academic realm and beyond? *Going Public* is a response to what we consider the urgent need to explore emergent public engagement practices across disciplines and cultures, to move beyond simplistic notions of what it means to collaborate, and to learn from each other and from our respective projects new ways to theorize, co-create, and take work public.

In Conversation with Practitioners

With these questions in mind, we interviewed artists and researchers whose projects, large and small, local and transnational, were breaking new ground in our respective fields. In the realm of documentary media, Liz interviewed a number of makers whose work reflects a

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shared commitment to feminist media, participatory documentary, media advocacy, and human rights issues. Common to all was the understanding that it is not enough to simply make media; rather, the challenge is how to also use the work to generate dialogue, advocacy, or social change.[11] Filmmaker Ananya Chakraboti spoke with us about *Understanding Trafficking*, a documentary project she initiated to address the exploitation of young girls in remote villages along the border of India and Bangladesh. In collaboration with a local non-profit, Chakraboti hired some of these young women as researchers and advisers to ensure that the film represented their concerns. She then co-initiated a prevention campaign for remote villages in which girls were particularly vulnerable to being trafficked. In each village, Chakraboti and her collaborators identified "change agents" – health workers, school teachers, village council members, and influential individuals – who suggested ways of using the film to raise awareness and to support the girls.[12]

Laura Aguiar, a documentary maker from Brazil now working in Northern Ireland, spoke with us about forging a methodology of collaborative filmmaking and "nearby listening" as part of her work with the Prisons Memory Archive.[13] Aguiar's project contributes to the proliferation of digital archives over the past decade – work that makes a diverse range of historically significant digitized and born-digital recordings accessible to a much wider audience than has been possible with traditional archives. To this end, the Prisons Memory Archive interprets the histories of the Maze and Long Kesh prisons through online archived interviews with the wives and children of political prisoners and guards as well as with cleaning staff and teachers. It is a powerful example of place-based storytelling; interviewees were recorded as they walked through the ruins of the Maze as it was being demolished. The religious or political affiliations of those being interviewed are never identified, with the result that visitors to the online archive cannot avoid encountering differing points of view. This effort to side-step political and religious binaries animates the project. All sides were scarred by the violence.[14]

Many of the documentary makers Liz interviewed discussed the interconnected role of art and advocacy, viewing their work as a process that strengthens connections between communities, audiences, and the social issues they are confronting. In this context, stories are developed for a purpose and often with a specific audience in mind. In describing her four-year residency at St. Michael's research hospital in Toronto,

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FIGURE 0.2 Liz Miller (right) on the *Contracorriente* set with director Martha Clarissa Hernandez (left) and cinematographer Brenda Liz Negrón (centre) in Nicaragua. *Photograph by Deborah Vanslet.*

Katerina Cizek explained: “The advocacy goal comes first. That’s the raison d’être of all the interventions ... So, each of the partners came to me with a problem, ‘We are trying to accomplish this – this is our goal,’ and from that sprouted everything else ... and that was always the guiding principle.”[15] Media artist jesikah maria ross emphasized that the goal in going public may not be to reach huge numbers of people but, rather, to influence a handful of policy makers or another targeted group. She talked of tailoring communication for targeted audiences: “Different audiences, kind of tune in, require, or resonate with different forms, different aesthetics. And so, when you go public it’s important to have in mind what public you are going to, and what you are going to them for, so that you can use the language and the form, the aesthetics of your tool.”[16] Kelly Matheson, an attorney, filmmaker, and human rights advocate, works with Witness – an international media advocacy organization. Matheson trains lawyers and activists to use video as evidence in court. She characterizes her approach as “getting it to the audience that can give you the change that you seek.”[17] Media advocacy is most successful when it is constructed around well-chosen partnerships, and this raises critical questions about the qualities we look for

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in partnerships. How do you identify a strategic partnership and how do we sustain these partnerships? Our interviews confirmed that advocacy stories are developed around careful audience analysis, recognizing that, rather than any singular public, there are always multiple situated publics, each with a unique potential for further involvement or action. The potential for engagement or action is amplified when strategic partnerships are in place.

In the area of theatre and performance, Ted grounded our conversations in the inspirational work under way in Canada involving the development of long-term partnerships between Aboriginal and settler artists and communities. His interviews with artists engaged in groundbreaking bicultural theatre and performance provided us with key points of departure.[18] Trans-disciplinary artist Floyd Favel (Poundmaker First Nation), a long-standing advocate of cross-cultural work, spoke with us about transparency, accountability, and ownership. Much of Favel's critical writing deals with protocols and permissions relating to the ethical use of sacred personal and family stories, crests, symbols, and ritual. Theatre makers Ruth Howard (Jumblies Theatre), Savannah Walling (Vancouver Moving Theatre), and Cathy Stubington (Runaway Moon Theatre) shared with us the approaches they have taken over many years to position their companies as centres for the development of arts-based settler-Aboriginal partnerships in Toronto, Vancouver, and rural British Columbia, respectively. Ted also interviewed participants in Vancouver Moving Theatre's *Storyweaving* project, an initiative undertaken in collaboration with the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre and centred around the idea of "weaving First Nations memories from the past into the future."[19] Ted also took inspiration from participants in Jumblies' postcolonial Train of Thought, a cross-Canada networking project that involved community-engaged artists travelling by rail from Vancouver to Halifax and stopping in at communities along the way to share knowledge, exchange practices, and explore alliances with and between local artists interested in settler-Indigenous partnerships.[20] Repeatedly, these interviews affirmed that sustainable co-creation can only emerge after considerable time and effort has been made to cultivate a spirit of trust and reciprocity grounded in an embodied respect for cultural knowledge and experience.

In looking at diverse approaches to relationships, residency, and social efficacy in community-engaged arts, Ted spoke with various self-described theatre makers, playwrights, artist-curators/producers, and artistic directors whose work encompasses a range of practices. These

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FIGURE 0.3 Left to right: Penny Couchie, Rachael van Fossen, Katrina Clair, Sid Bobb, Ann Pohl, and Braiden Houle in a movement workshop led by Penny Couchie aboard a VIA Rail train during the 2015 Train of Thought national community arts tour. *Photograph by Aaron Leon.*

included theatre programs in prisons; performance installations in museums; documentary projects with organized labour that incorporate image, music, video, and live performance; and large-scale issue-based community plays involving hundreds of residents in all aspects of conceptualization, production, and performance.[21]

Annabel Soutar, playwright, founder, and artistic director of Montreal's documentary theatre company Porte Parole, spoke with us about how "theatre is a fabulous tool to explore contemporary stories" as it "allows us to explore the humanity behind the story. It allows us to cut through some of the stereotypes, simplifications that I think other media are prone to because they don't bring as much time and reflection to the issue." Her plays – such as *Sexy Béton*, on the human consequences of the 2006 collapse of a highway overpass in Montreal – are based on first-person testimony. For Soutar, at their best, theatre rehearsals are conversations that "breathe life deeply into the soul of the production." A similar sense of immersing oneself in the particularities of people's lives and stories animates other fields, such as oral history, community arts, and participatory media. The approach, rather than the art form or media, seems to be determinant here.

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Oral history, as we generally refer to it in the academy today, emerged in the 1960s with the proliferation of the personal audio recorder as a tool to recover the "hidden pasts" of those whose histories don't usually make it into state-run archives.[22] It also served marginalized communities directly, contributing to community building and political mobilization, as individuals or groups used stories "to claim or renegotiate group membership" and to become visible to others.[23] Notably, as historian Jackie Clarke reminds us, the term "invisibility" does not necessarily signal "total disappearance, but refers to various forms of marginalization, occlusion, and disqualification from the mainstream political and media discourses that shape public understanding of the social world."[24] Composing the individual and collective self is thus "not only a way of imagining, or re-imagining, the past, but of making sense of the present and situating oneself within it."[25] In recent years, following the lead of Michael Frisch, oral historians have been urged to "share authority" with their interview partners and source communities. Frisch originated the term in 1990 to describe the shared authority of the oral history interview between the expert authority of the researcher and the experiential authority of the interviewee.[26] Since then, this idea has evolved into a wider and more profound sharing of authority over the entire history-making process.[27] Learning *with* rather than simply *about* represents a fundamental shift in knowledge production – one that breaks the disciplinary illusion of the omniscient historical narrator or curator.

In pursuing this idea, Steven looked to Toby Butler, whose place-based storytelling work in the United Kingdom explores ways to curate memoryscape audio walks for in situ listeners.[28] Inspired by the work of sound artist Graeme Miller, whose *Linked* explores the demolition of his neighbourhood, Butler set out to understand people's relationship to the River Thames. Living in a houseboat, Butler was struck by how often the river was treated as merely a boundary between administrative parts of the city rather than as something that connected residents. Butler's unorthodox methodology for his PhD dissertation involved floating down the Thames in a skiff following a float made out of the detritus he found piling up behind his boat and then letting the current and the bends in its course choose his interviewees, who were the first people he met whenever the float touched shore:

> I wanted to find a way of acknowledging the spatial and natural dimensions of the river by developing a more artistic and intuitive

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FIGURE 0.4 Toby Butler (left) sharing his Thames audio walk with Ted Little (right). *Photograph by Liz Miller.*

> approach to structuring my fieldwork. So, I developed a method of using the currents of the river to find my sample. The first thing in an oral history project is "Who are you going to talk to?" "What's your sample?" So, my thought was to actually use the force of the river itself to find my sample, and use the river to link up lives.

The resulting memoryscape, and the publications that followed, represented an important milestone in the emergence of audio walking as a field of research-creation. In his interview with us, Butler spoke of walking as a creative act "where you can improvise, you can make connections, you can take short-cuts, you can take thousands of decisions in the present." Spoken memory works similarly:

> The ability of spoken memory to make connections with other times; its ability to use symbols; its ability to make places – not just the place you are in but others – make the act of memory an extremely nomadic and dynamic process. It can therefore present a multifaceted and nuanced way of seeing the world. Memory is also fiercely independent, and it sometimes affirms the dominant ideas and narratives of the past and it sometimes opposes it.

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Storytelling is a strong connective thread running through all three of our disciplines. As everyday practice, storytelling is most closely associated with premodern, rural, or Indigenous communities, in which oral culture remains strong and most visible to others. Floyd Favel spoke with us about storytelling, which he sees as essential for "people, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals[,] to have greater understanding and knowledge of themselves as human beings, because that's what Aboriginal information is all about – who you are as a human being and also who you are as a human being in relation to creation, that's what those stories are all about." Favel advises non-Aboriginals entering into partnership with Aboriginals of the need to begin by spending time on "the basics" – learning the cultural protocols of partnership, exchange, purpose, and use. Julie Cruikshank, who has spent much of her life working with Indigenous people in Canada's northern Yukon Territory, spoke to similar themes. She stresses that non-Aboriginal researchers need to know the cultural context in which these stories emerge if we hope to understand their intended meaning. We not only have to understand what the story *says*, but how it emerged and also what it *does*. Reflecting back on the stories that her female interview partners shared with her, Cruikshank wrote, "I learned to follow the complex plots and to understand that when women told me stories they were actually using them to explain some aspect of their lives to me."[29] Gradually, she "came to see oral traditions not as 'evidence' about the past but as a window on ways the past is culturally constituted and discussed."[30] The inside, or personally experienced self, also has a history.[31] Jaime Valentine, founder of Our Stories Scotland, an organization dedicated to collecting, archiving, and presenting the stories of the LGBTQ community, suggests that his first challenge is helping individuals acknowledge that even they have a story to tell. He addresses this by working in collaborative contexts that help to validate previously unspoken stories: "In those collective sessions you would have someone who is telling a story about their 'unsuitable love' and someone else was sharing an 'unacceptable love story' and you have one thing triggering another and the people who are there see the connections which otherwise would have been considered totally separate – even antagonistic."[32]

In all, we interviewed over thirty community-engaged practitioners from twelve countries. Our desire to foreground the voices of practitioners who have influenced the long-term trajectory of our own work led to our decision to include "In Conversation" interview excerpts between each of the six chapters in *Going Public*. Video excerpts from these

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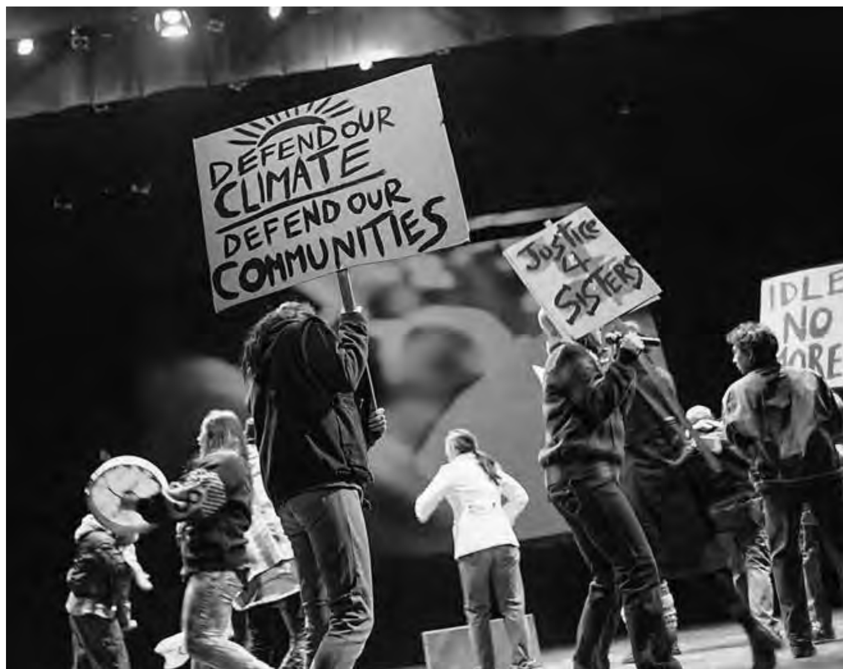

FIGURE 0.5 Concordia University's production of *Attawapiskat Is No Exception*, lead writer, Floyd Favel. *Photography by Tristan Brand.*

and other interviews can be accessed directly at goingpublicproject.org. We have also included biographical notes for all interviewees at the end of the book. Central to all of our interviews and conversations is a shared sense of urgency to rethink our capacity to take our work public as cultural producers, advocates for social change, and researchers.

Framing Our Inquiry

Going Public has permitted us to engage in sustained reflection upon collaborative praxis across disciplines. It has prompted us to think together about what we value in our work, why we are doing it, and how and when we "know" if it is appropriate to take something public. The question of whether or not going public is necessarily the right thing to do invariably comes up in relation to work with Indigenous people. We believe it is just as relevant in working with other groups that have experienced systemic invisibilization, othering, or appropriations of stories, culture, knowledge, or lands. As postcolonial scholar Edward Said reminds us, "Stories are at the heart of what explorers and

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novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history."[33] A common thread in our interviews is how each of us, in our own way and in our specific contexts, is seeking to break with abstraction and prevailing assumptions about the "other" in order to work purposefully across difference.

We grappled with other critical questions, such as: What do we mean by "public"? And whose public are we speaking to? Nancy Fraser reminds us that publics are not only multiple and contested but also that the public sphere is based on exclusions.[34] This is particularly challenging when publics have different sets of values that are entrenched in long-term conflicts. In a capitalist-driven information age, public realms are increasingly polarized. Social media platforms connect us to those with whom we agree but don't exercise our ability to listen and share across cultural and political differences.

Referencing her work with Israeli-Palestinian populations through Just Vision, media strategist Ronit Avni noted:

> It's difficult when you're coming into a context where people have very deeply held convictions on an issue. To change their frame in any way, and we don't always succeed, but we try to create complex media about particular issues that challenge people's frames and then give them a form to hash out the

FIGURE 0.6 Ruth Howard (centre left) and Savannah Walling (centre right) at the Montreal Life Stories *We Are Here* exhibition. *Photograph by Liz Miller.*

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> complexities and the difficulties of the issue so they can really digest it, grapple with it, think about it before they are writing about it and before they are creating another framework for interpreting the issue.

To counter the collective fatigue and demoralization that leaves people with the sense that there is nothing to be done, Avni works to shift attention away from the usual hateful or fearful voices heard in the media and towards the voices of everyday people working to bridge the divide and find a non-violent resolution. She spoke with us at length about the role that media can play in addressing bystandership and about her conviction that "bystanders are very, very accountable for what happens in the world in ways that we don't necessarily want to think about and recognize." She recounted the impact of receiving a copy of criminologist Stanley Cohen's book *States of Denial* – an examination of how people who witness crimes but do nothing become bystanders. The book was a gift from a friend who advised Avni, "'If you can get past the ways that people deny and deflect information that would implicate them as bystanders to do something and get involved then you're onto something, and if you can't then you're not adding value.'" There are many bystanders on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but no more than on economic inequality, industrial restructuring, homelessness, and a myriad of other issues plaguing our societies. For Avni and others, the pressing concern is how to activate people:

> I think that challenge of how do we stop suppressing information that implicates us, how do we take an approach that calls upon our highest values and our highest way of being in the world and that looks at our own behaviours irrespective of what other people may have done or may be doing to us, those are motivating forces for me ... We have options and we have choices, and I'm also aware that the window for those options and choices has been narrowing over the years and so there's an urgency to getting involved, so I think there's a real sense of personal responsibility.

Ronit Avni's approach involves "trying to give [audiences] a sense of their own agency, [showing them] that they have more power than they think they do, by highlighting stories where that has been the case and it has led to some sort of impact." She believes that artists and researchers can play a significant role in the first stage of both informing and dislodging assumptions but that there is then a critical role to be

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played in moving audiences beyond that first impulse: "An ideal audience is willing to open themselves up to cognitive dissonance, to challenging opinions, to shaking their preconceived notions of the situation, and are willing to then take the next step and find out how they can get involved." Similarly, our own stakes in *Going Public* are rooted in the potential of interdisciplinary projects to diminish the gap between knowledge and action and between disparate disciplines and communities.

The impulse to go public both during the research process and beyond – into what Ruth Howard and others refer to as the "legacy phase" – rests on the idea that participation empowers individuals and their communities. This speaks to a deep-seated belief that connecting with audiences at an emotional level will somehow activate them, making them care. The presumption that audiences can be emotionally moved to remember or to act is the driving force behind the large testimony projects of the past quarter century. To this end, to date over 100,000 Jewish survivors of the Holocaust have been interviewed and their stories archived. The proliferation of local storytelling projects is another expression of this phenomenon. But there is also debate about whether these projects do, as hoped, activate listeners. Some criticize the participatory research paradigm as little more than a new conformity;[35] others, such as oral historian Alexander Freund, have suggested that the popularity of storytelling is a by-product of neoliberalism, or individualism gone wild.[36] We are not so sure, as Freund's call for a return to a certain critical distance within oral history can be read as a disciplinary appeal to police boundaries. It ignores the underlying political discomfort with the academic gaze that contributes to the popularity of storytelling as a research-creation methodology. That said, Freund's scepticism does draw attention to the limits of stories and prompts us to consider how personal stories are framed or used in larger research or political contexts.

The discussion of storytelling, or other forms of story-sharing, is complicated by questions of ethics and community control. Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer have raised troubling questions about the use of life story material by human rights organizations, where first-person testimony is deployed as an authenticating device for non-resident human rights workers and researchers. "All stories emerge in the midst of complex and uneven relationships of power," they caution. Too often, first-person accounts are used as a highly affective "illustrative device" or as aggregate data in a wider accumulation of eyewitness evidence.[37]

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The same critique can and should be directed at qualitative researchers and artists. "Thoughtlessly soliciting autobiography," Julie Salverson warns us, "may reproduce a form of cultural colonialism that is at the very least voyeuristic."[38]

In responding to these concerns, a growing number of storytelling projects are designed to curate, or document, a variety of sometimes opposing or contradictory perspectives. Working as the very first National Film Board of Canada (NFB) filmmaker-in-residence, Katerina Cizek used technology to "bridge" divides – interviewing health care professionals and their youthful patients separately, and then playing back their, often frank, assessments of one another. For her part, Annabel Soutar has developed an expertise and passion for using theatrical art to present divergent opinions:

> Fundamental to our work is this idea that it's important to people who think and feel very differently or have very different life experiences to share a stage together and that for audiences it's great for them to practise that critical muscle in their brain to see the different points of view and make some sense out of them together.

This multi-vocal approach has sometimes raised concern, as in the case of her play *Fredy,* which is about the police shooting of Fredy Villeneuva in 2008. Family members and others expressed concern that Fredy's story had to share the stage with the story of the police officer who killed him. Whose story was it to tell?

While storytelling can be an effective vehicle to advocate for political change, listeners shape what can and cannot be said. Ronit Avni depends on Just Vision's reputation as a "trusted messenger" – a status incredibly hard to achieve, and perhaps even harder to maintain, particularly as the two "sides" in this conflict see things so differently:

> [In an] asymmetric dynamic, people tend to have a very romanticized self-perception and a very demonized perception of the other. In any conflict situation, where you have an asymmetric conflict situation, the group that's in power has a tendency to want to get to know the other as a person, not to talk politics, to really humanize and recognize the humanity of the other and then maybe over time after trust building, deal with the political, whereas the structurally disempowered group says, "Look, at the end of the day it doesn't matter whether you're a nice guy or not,

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> if I'm in a situation where I'm facing structural oppression your personality is irrelevant, we need to be working on the structures that are creating this asymmetry." Those are very different approaches to interactions. The expectations are different, the call for action is different.

Oral historian William Westerman notes similar patterns elsewhere. Central American refugees, active in the sanctuary movement in the United States during the 1980s, told Westerman that American audiences would shut down whenever refugees stood up and challenged US foreign policy in the region directly.[39] When they embedded their politics in their first-person accounts, however, showing the real-life effects of US foreign policy, this personal approach resonated with North American audiences. This asymmetrical dynamic is remarkably similar to what Avni describes regarding the Israeli-Palestinian context.

Similarly, the creation and sharing of Leontine Uwababyeyi's digital story highlights other challenges and opportunities that we face in our respective research and creative practices. Uwababyeyi was a participant in the Montreal Life Stories refugee youth group Mapping Memories project led by Liz in collaboration with the Canadian Council for Refugees. In a ten-week workshop with seven other young people, Uwababyeyi, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, created *My Two Families*, a digital story about losing her family and then adopting an alternative family, a family of peers.[40] The workshop's immediate goal was to develop a bus tour through Montreal – an immersive storytelling space in which each youth presented a pre-recorded story and then answered questions about his or her challenges in adapting to a new city. Uwababyeyi, like others involved in the project, was taking her story public for the first time. She relied on the support of the youth group to work through the complexity of what it meant to go public with a sensitive story. How much of her story should she tell? Who did she want to reach? What was the point? Uwababyeyi gained confidence by being part of a large initiative, and the wider project enabled Montrealers to encounter her story in a variety of places across multiple formats. To this end, 350 subway cars were "equipped" with QR-coded audio portraits that enabled commuters to download one of nine life stories, including Uwababyeyi's.[41] Leontine Uwababyeyi's story was also incorporated into a curriculum module for Grade 11 high school students across Quebec and into the year-long *We Are Here* exhibition at the Centre d'histoire de Montréal.[42] She toured her digital story to twenty

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area high schools, reaching thousands of other young people. Finally, the entire process was the subject of a short documentary film as well as a series of scholarly books and articles authored by team members. The ongoing participation of Leontine Uwababyeyi and the circulation of her story was not predetermined: it was the result of processes and partnerships that emerged over the course of the project. And it was just one of many trajectories in our collective endeavour.

The rise of digital culture and a resurgent interest in participatory approaches and personal storytelling are clearly shaking things up. They are raising critical questions about ethical practice: How do collaborative projects share authority or control throughout the research-creation process? What are the ethical and political imperatives for those entrusted with another person's story? How do, and how might, community-engaged arts contribute to public knowledge and to healthy and sustainable relationships? The research environment within our universities and artistic disciplines is changing as humanities and social science disciplines look to go public in new and creative ways. The co-creation, co-curation, and co-diffusion of Uwababyeyi's story illustrates the wider rethinking that is under way. One of the most compelling aspects of participatory approaches to research-creation is its capacity to "redefine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that this might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy."[43]

FIGURE 0.7 Liz Miller (left) and Leontine Uwababyeyi (right) on the Montreal Going Places bus tour, an audio immersive "memoryscape" that was part of Mapping Memories. *Photograph by Deborah VanSlet.*

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Historical Roots of Collaborative Research-Creation

While some may think that collaboration itself was born digital, there is a long history of sustained collaborative projects in North America and elsewhere. Here in Canada, the NFB's landmark Challenge for Change project (1967–80), ushered in by video as a more accessible technology, combined with an aspiration to trigger social change through media. The diffusion of the audio-recorder during this period sparked a similarly democratizing influence on oral history practice. In the case of Challenge for Change, this large-scale media intervention resulted in over two hundred films and videos that explored a range of collaborative methods with marginalized people.[44] Colin Low's Fogo Island initiative in Newfoundland and Labrador represented a cornerstone of Challenge for Change, "serving as a template for later projects" wherein the "Fogo-process" gave local people a substantive role in the media-making process.[45] After shooting, footage was played back to Fogo Islanders gathered in schools, churches, and other public spaces to consider the underlying social issues revealed. It was slow and deliberate work.[46] George Stoney, an American filmmaker who helped shape the project, has said that the intention was to move beyond documentaries that were accusatory, that exploited a tragic situation, or that produced a sense of outrage with nowhere to go: "Challenge for Change is an approach to media, which assumes that social change is the objective. It's not necessarily the popularity of a video or its position on prime time or even how many people watch, but the effect it has on the people who get involved."[47] And while Challenge for Change is a pivotal model for social engagement, media scholars like Janine Marchessault have also acknowledged the limitations of a top-down social change media project.[48] The emergence of activist video collectives in the 1970s and 1980s, and AIDS video activism in the 1990s, points to collaborative video initiatives that were more closely aligned with social movements.[49] Citizen journalism and mobile technology have empowered video collectives like the Abounaddara video collective in Syria, consisting primarily of self-taught filmmakers. Their videos offer raw and immediate impressions of daily life in the midst of war, reaching millions and serving as a critical counterpoint to more mainstream reporting.[50] Inspired by the possibilities of new media tools and emergent platforms, the NFB has revisited its tradition of community-driven production to launch Filmmaker-in-Residence (FIR), a participatory initiative emphasizing long-term partnerships and co-creation in the digital age.[51]

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Other disciplines and media demonstrate similar patterns. Arguably, no discussion of public engagement in the twentieth century would be complete without mention of the work of Bertolt Brecht in 1930s Germany. Brecht's work changed the face of theatre, and the legacy of his influence in the work of innumerable feminist, gay, lesbian, socially engaged, activist, and political theatre makers is extensively documented.[52] More than three-quarters of a century later, Brecht's call to tear down the "fourth-wall" – the invisible divide that separates actors from the audience in theatre staged in the genre of Realism – remains a strikingly resonant metaphor for community-engaged researchers and artists. Brecht's theory and practice emerged in response to what he saw as escapist tendencies of dominant theatrical forms that sought to engender the illusion that the play is somehow "real." Brecht believed that a theatrical illusion within which actors do not acknowledge that they are being watched was a passive exercise that depoliticized audiences. He challenged theatre makers to make the material and ideological conditions of production – including lights, effects, and structures – visible and transparent. He called on actors to break the illusion of a separate reality; to acknowledge the audiences' presence, their responsibility, and their potential agency; to raise awareness; and to create implicated, active audiences. In Brecht's theatre, "art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."[53]

Inspired in part by the work of Brecht, Augusto Boal, founder of the highly influential Theatre of the Oppressed, worked to transform spectator into author and used theatre as a tool to affect both art and politics.[54] Through the development of techniques that would eventually coalesce into the methodologies of Forum Theatre, Image Theatre, and (later) Legislative Theatre, Boal effectively harnessed the powerfully affective, abstract, and imaginative aspects of theatre to the cognitive dialogic of critical pedagogy. The result was a palate of theatrical forms that could be deployed to create time and space for people to come together to identify common concerns and then co-create "rehearsals" of potential actions aimed at socio-political change. In Boal's theatre, audiences become active, taking on the role of "spect-actors" – exploring, analyzing, showing, and aspiring to transform the reality in which they are living. In Forum Theatre, for example, audiences are encouraged to stop the show in order to propose alternate actions aimed at changing the nature of the conflict. They can even, should they wish, take the place of the onstage protagonist to test their proposals. Image Theatre, created using human bodies as living sculptures, is designed

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to gain access to embodied memory. Here spect-actors are encouraged to limit the use of language in order *not* to seek to reproduce an "image of reality" but, rather, to seek "reality in the image."[55] The global legacy of Boal's work is immense. Hundreds of socially engaged practitioners have trained in this work, and companies such as David Diamond's Theatre for Living have developed adaptations of Boal's forms that, in Diamond's practice, focus on systems theory and the ways in which "oppressors" are created by conditions within communities.[56]

Similar challenges can be found across disciplines. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* effectively laid the foundation for critical pedagogy as a reconception of the relationship between teacher, student, and society.[57] Freire criticized the way that educators assigned students a passive role as "docile learners"; instead, he advocated a dialogical process of popular education in which students become "co-investigators" with their teachers.[58] Trust, Freire argued, is established through "true dialogue."[59]

True dialogue is likewise at the heart of oral history practice, not only in the interview but also, in some cases, throughout the research process. Unlike ethnography, which established itself as a disciplinary methodology, oral history has found no such disciplinary home-place. It has thrived at the margins and in the spaces in-between: between and across disciplines and outside of the academy altogether. In fact, most "oral historians" are not university-based, and oral history has been used for a variety of reasons other than what most would recognize as "research." Community-building, empowerment, and advocacy have been integral parts of the field, particularly as most oral history is done with marginalized communities whose stories don't typically make it into state-run archives.

One of the most influential early projects was the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage project, begun in 1977, in one of the city's oldest "ethnic" neighbourhoods. The group sought to democratize history and bolster community identity and pride by involving people in the interpretation of their own history.[60] Recalling these efforts, oral and public historian Linda Shopes notes that "if such projects are to be intellectually and socially responsible, they require time, commitment, and substantial grounding in the community itself."[61] The biggest impediment to collaboration in the project was social as professional historians didn't consider themselves community members and therefore stood apart. Community-based project members were likewise hesitant to ask the tough questions that were needed. Shopes concludes that "unless

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such local history efforts are firmly rooted in the communities being studied and have well developed links with local institutions and organizations, these goals will be translated into a series of awkward public meetings, a collection of history tapes, or a photo exhibit."[62] At its best, community-university collaboration allows projects to transcend the limits of each social and political location.[63]

In various ways, hybridity has therefore become an integral part of collaborative projects. In their work with organized labour, for example, companies such as Banner Theatre in the United Kingdom and Don Bouzek's Ground Zero Productions in Canada are working together in the creation and application of new digital forms for performance. Their "Video Ballads" mix live music, "actuality" (excerpted footage from videotaped oral histories and interviews), documentary collage, and voice-overs of news items. As Alan Filewod describes the form, "it isn't theatre ... but neither is it video, or concert. It is the performance of hybridity, as forms migrate and reterritorialize, across disciplinary, cultural and national borders."[64]

In recent years, there has been a lot written about building the "capacity" of communities to undertake their own research for their own needs. The proliferation of community-based research, media, and arts projects is one expression of this desire.[65] But this book posits that there is also considerable value in collaborating across difference: be it

FIGURE 0.8 Ayanda Dube on the Mapping Memories school tour at Marymount High School. Mapping Memories was the youth working group of the Montreal Life Stories project. *Photograph by Liz Miller.*

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disciplinary boundaries, community-university divides, or even cultural and political differences. With the Montreal Life Stories project, we experienced first-hand the value of opening up the research and creation processes to the "source communities" from which the life stories were being collected and curated. Dozens of survivors, and their family members, became members of our blended project team: co-directing the project and its components, sitting on both sides of our video cameras, and co-authoring many of the outcomes that resulted. As a result, the project mirrored the shared authority of the oral history interview itself. Not only did this conversation across difference lead to a much deeper engagement with the life stories of those displaced by mass violence, but it also changed the project's design, the questions we posed, what we learned as a result, and how and with whom we went public. The "we" in this instance was an emphatic community-university we. But there are many challenges in doing this kind of collaborative research, and no single pathway or model.

Key Challenges

The new millennium is seeing an explosion of interest in university-led "collaborative" or "participatory" projects that engage with personal story. Some of this work is of the "hug-and-run" variety[66] – earnest but superficial and of short-duration. Katerina Cizek reminds us that community "engagement" is, "in some respects, a really watered-down term if you think about trying to actually create change, what does that mean and how do you measure that?" These are tough questions. A good starting point is feminist geographer Sara Kindon's call for us to move beyond the "moralistic discourse" that insists that such engagement is inherently good – and important.[67] Rather, we must honestly consider its messiness, incompleteness, and roughness. Sometimes, she cautions, "the emphasis on the researcher as facilitator" leads us to suggest that "we just enable other people, we don't impose and structure – and of course we do!"[68] While *Going Public* generally focuses on inspiring examples of successful participatory research-creation, clearly we can learn as much, or more, from our failures.

The challenges are real, and among the greatest risks of collaborative work, particularly within marginalized communities, is that outside researchers, artists, or media makers appropriate the experiential authority of those on the margins. Cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo cautions against cloaking ourselves with "the borrowed authority of

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ethnographic science."[69] Oral historians have likewise feared that shared authority can easily become borrowed authority. Mocking the practice, critical theorist bell hooks devastatingly writes:

> No need to heed your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it becomes my own. Re-writing you I rewrite myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still coloniser, the speaking subject, and you are now at the centre of my tale.[70]

For her part, historian Joy Parr, in her keynote address to the 2010 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association at Concordia University, warned fieldworkers not to retreat into high theory or their own methodological navel-gazing but, rather, to serve as witnesses to the often vulnerable populations with whom we work.[71] Otherwise, as sociologist Beverley Skeggs acidly, but poignantly, writes, only those with privilege would seek out the marginalized for the primary purpose of understanding themselves.[72]

The risk of appropriation is perhaps most visible in the context of Indigenous studies. Too often, researchers and artists have failed to give back or otherwise contribute to the Indigenous communities in which they worked, and we continue to struggle with this poisonous legacy. Robin Brownlie and Roewen Crowe spoke with us of a young Indigenous woman living in a poor inner-city neighbourhood of Winnipeg, Manitoba, who, when approached to participate in an oral history project, replied, "So you want to hear our ghetto stories?" The comment prompted Brownlie and Crowe to engage in sustained political reflection about how these "ghetto stories," once collected, "can lend authority or 'street cred' – to those who can appropriate them despite their own social distance from such experiences."[73] Appropriation becomes even more charged in increasingly "collaborative" digital environments within which, in the absence of ethical standards, many consider all online content fair game for sharing, sampling, and remixing. In Quebec, the collage film *Of the North* sparked a heated controversy about the limits of online appropriation and the amplification of social distance in online cultures. In this case, well-known filmmaker Dominic Gagnon used publicly available clips from YouTube to depict Inuit life in northern Canada that included numerous clips of drunken youth and a sexually explicit scene. While Gagnon had never travelled to the

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North, as a mashup artist he claimed the right to use videos that were "public," regardless of who posted them. Many were outraged about the lack of sensitivity and subsequent recirculation of demeaning stereotypes by both the filmmaker and international festival circuits. The case sparked intense debates throughout Canada, prompting deeper reflection on the politics of circulation. In this instance, the rhetoric of openness and transparency hit up against legacies of misrepresentation.

Clearly, as these cases suggest, issues of appropriation, ownership, and shared authority do not end with our interviews, filming, or fieldwork. They persist throughout the production process and are often amplified in the realm of circulation. They are further complicated as, more and more, we operate within a fast-changing digital environment in which people regularly share with others across a range of screens and platforms – on popular social media sites or in blogs or tweets. Increased circulation raises critical concerns about ownership, consent, and ethics. Media scholar Charles Acland argues that platforms are a staging ground, a setup for something else to happen, but he reminds us that "platforms are not neutral stages upon which interactions transpire; they are deeply embedded technological structures that both facilitate and inhibit communication."[74] Katerina Cizek points out that many of the big technological changes in media are "industry driven," producing a great deal of friction and cultural clashes:

> There's a lot of translation and interpretation that has to happen, and build the bridges and find points of relation, and it's very, very exploratory. People are coming from very different cultures, and you can see this in terms of language that they use to describe their work. For example, a lot of people come out of the ad-agency world which is hyper-entrepreneurial and the language is very capitalist, so they are talking about content as assets, and just that alone speaks to the ideological divide. Ultimately, it's about respecting and understanding the cultures that people come from, but also transcending that and finding unique ways to work with partners. And really, it's like writing the handbook each time.[75]

There are likewise institutional barriers to community-university collaboration. Here, relationships are structured and constrained by university policies and procedures "such as the protection of academic freedom, right to intellectual property, ethics policies for research involving humans, and constraints on allocations of funds."[76] As the boundary between research diffusion and institutional publicity

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FIGURE 0.9 Coordinator Neal Santamaria (left) with artist-in-residence Shahrzad Arshadi (right) in a subway car with one of our Montreal Life Stories QR coded portraits. *Photograph by Gracia Jalea.*

continues to blur, it is becoming increasingly urgent to assert and defend intellectual property rights, and academic freedom, in the public platforms and multimedia products that we create – in the content, to be sure, but also the aesthetics and forms that these take. One of the only conflicts that we had with our university as part of Montreal Life Stories erupted when the institution's communications wing decided to act as "branding police," attempting to impose the institutional logo and identity onto our project's collaborative identity. As a community-university alliance, we won the right to "brand" ourselves otherwise only after petitioning the provost and the dean of graduate studies and research.

If issues of appropriation are a problem, so, too, is the flip-side: researchers who think that they can, or need to, abdicate their own voices. This might seem paradoxical at first, given the discussion above, but, as Sara Kindon puts it, one of the by-products of being more aware of the dangers of being extractive or exploitive is

> that there's a disavowing and disrespect of the self and a kind of putting-on-a-pedestal of the Other. And there's a desire for partnership and collaboration and mutuality but it's so entangled in the legacies of colonization and trying to decolonize and not Orientalize and something else happens where actually you continue to do that because there's a romanticization of the Other or

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> the infantilization of the Other, there's a denial of the self ... So, trying to actually reclaim the self, while also practising a decolonizing politics, I think is really where those of us who are positioned in the privileged mainstream, that's our work now.

It is a tall order: advocate without preaching, be reflexive without losing sight of why we are collaborating with others in the first place. The recent proliferation of community-based research, arts, and digital media projects is an expression of the growing interest in building the capacity of communities to undertake their own research for their own needs. But when are researchers truly community-based? Is it enough simply to be located outside of the university in museums, government agencies, non-profits, or community groups? Who has the financial capacity to employ researchers in community settings and who doesn't? And what is the relationship of these organizations to the people they serve or represent?

Clearly, sharing authority across difference – be it disciplinary boundaries, community-university divides, or cultural and political chasms – must avoid both borrowing and the naïve idea that somehow you are not really there. For Sara Kindon, the essential elements are "relationship, respect, and reciprocity." For William Cleveland, director of the US-based Center for the Study of Art and Community, these are incorporated within a "box of integrity" comprising "respect, excellence, sustainability, and accountability."[77] We would add self-reflexivity to the list – an essential element, wherever you are located, when considering the underlying logic of what you are asking and seeing, and with whom you are working.[78] As Alicia J. Rouverol cautions, collaboration does not require that, as university-based researchers and artists, we "abandon our own stance, that we lose our 'critical edge' as scholars ... It does, however, challenge our power dynamics in the field, and by extension in the editing and/or publishing process."[79] For Kindon, collaboration requires that we continually "reassess our understandings and differences in dialogue." In her work with Porte Parole, Annabel Soutar incorporates self-reflexivity as a methodology to explicitly acknowledge that both research and creative processes are dramatic struggles, full of ethical questions and moral quandaries about who ultimately benefits. Rather than gloss these over, she stages them:

> I actually presented the idea of the playwright as being devious, of potentially not being all altruistic but wanting to create a really good drama and hoping that her protagonist would go forward

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> and launch a lawsuit that would just make her story more dramatic. And I think the fact that I revealed that made people appreciate: I wasn't just glossing over my own ethical decisions, I was presenting them in their struggle, in the dynamism of indecision, and that's what people want in the theatre.

Finding a shared working language and managing expectations are among the first challenges we face within projects themselves. Human chemistry is important, too. Misunderstandings happen. Katerina Cizek emphasizes the need to establish mutual expectations at the outset of any collaborative process so as "not to promise things that you can't deliver." In her experience, failing to do so can create a "lot of hurt feelings and expectations that aren't met and it leaves a very complicated trail behind you." For performance artist Lisa Ndejuru, it means spoken language, as research-creation projects draw different linguistic communities into conversation; but more often, perhaps, this involves languages of specialization or disciplinary knowledge. For Cizek, the "first place often where collaboration has a problem is language. We are trained in different worlds. Even fields of little subcultures develop their own languages around their process and what they mean. So, often, I find the beginning of a collaboration is just learning each other's vocabularies and [the] ways in which you describe things." And that is just the beginning: it "makes for a very difficult process when those two worlds come together." Certainly convening different people from different disciplines, different vocabularies, and different languages is a challenge that should not be underestimated.

Several researchers and practitioners with whom we spoke identified the difficulty of navigating what is often a substantial communicative gap between themselves and computer programmers or coders. Documentary maker Luisa Dantas, in speaking with us about her innovative and interactive 2013 transmedia project *Land of Opportunity*, noted that, as a non-programmer, she found it difficult to assess options. She had to trust in her coding partners – with mixed results. She had been working with the Mozilla Foundation, which was then developing a new open-source software designed to annotate video and create "layered story scapes." It was about "allowing people to go deeper into storylines, to make connections across space and time, among different communities and stories that are happening in different places but that have a lot of commonalities." Dantas's intent was to reach people first on an

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