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Creating Knowledge with the Public: Disrupting the Expert/Audience Hierarchy

*Denise D. Meringolo with Lee Boot,
Denise Griffin Johnson & Maureen O'Neill*

This essay provides both a philosophy and a case study to define, analyze, and explore community-centered public history practice. In its ideal form, community-centered public history practice strives for equity and inclusion. It is service-oriented. It is often future-focused. On the ground, in real time, community-centered public history practice requires constant recalibration, humility, and active collaboration that can be challenging for academically trained scholars to fully embrace. The co-authors share their experiences and impressions in order to highlight both the difficulty and the value of this work.

Public history is an interdisciplinary field composed of individuals with a common interest in understanding the past. Public historians work for museums, historical societies, government agencies, consulting firms, and academic departments. Many deliver original content and translate specialized knowledge to nonexpert audiences. But others practice community-centered public history, engaging self-identified public(s) as equal partners in a process of inquiry, research, and interpretation. They position themselves not as authoritative experts but as collaborators in the cocreation of knowledge.¹ Community-centered public history challenges deeply held beliefs about scholarship and authority. It requires constant attention to power dynamics, epistemology, expression, ownership, and accessibility.² Community-centered public history can generate critical understandings of the human condition that are rooted in place, embodied in lived experiences, and responsive to the questions, needs, and interests identified by a broad social network.³

Community-centered public historians strive to be both responsive and responsible. Our work requires us to be responsive to the needs and interests of the communities we serve and responsible advocates on their behalf. At the same time, we remain responsible for upholding the highest standards of our disciplines, and responsive to questions and critique from our academically

oriented colleagues.⁴ Balancing the demands of the discipline with those of our collaborators requires constant recalibration. We must occupy a clear ethical position, building relationships and trust before we begin any work. We must listen to our community partners before we frame questions and shift the typical orientation of scholarly inquiry, honoring life experience as a legitimate source of both questions and knowledge. We put history to work in ways that require us to align ourselves with the people we serve.⁵ Community-based practice demands humility, self-discipline, and compassion. Our role in any given collaboration should begin with a question rooted in service. Not “what can I tell you about the past?” but rather, “how might I best put my particular skills to work to help you answer your own questions or accomplish your own goals?”

Community-centered public historians seek to activate the past for the present. We believe that engaging people in a process of knowledge creation can have a profound – if unpredictable – impact on the communities we serve. This requires a deep commitment to equity, inclusivity, and truth. Our work exposes systemic racism and inequity in the realm of culture. Commemorative statues, interpreted landscapes, and collecting institutions have come under long-overdue public scrutiny in the twenty-first century. Rather than inspiring exploration or sparking dialogue, these places represent exclusive ideas about the past and silence counternarratives and experiences that challenge their ideological project to advance a belief that the past was both benign and simple. Effective community-centered public history practice can transform both public space and public uses of the past but only if it challenges existing power structures, insists on truth-telling, allows for discomfort, and does not shy away from dismantling institutions that no longer serve us.⁶

What does community-centered public history practice look like in real time?⁷ Community-centered public history is best practiced slowly, but sometimes events impacting the people we serve require us to work quickly. Such was the case in our effort to provide a meaningful, responsible, and authentic response for the people engaged in the Baltimore Uprising. The Uprising began on April 12, 2015. Baltimore city police, patrolling in the Sandtown/Winchester neighborhood, chased a twenty-five-year-old man named Freddie Gray. They handcuffed him and dragged him to a police van. Gray was injured during this encounter and repeatedly asked for medical assistance. Instead, officers tossed him into the back of the vehicle, failing to secure him safely. Gray suffered additional injury as the van bumped and jerked along city streets for thirty minutes. People assembled outside the local police station, protesting both the brutality of the arrest and the failure of police to provide medical aid. After Freddie Gray died on April 19 from a spinal injury, the protests expanded.

Police violence against Black men has long been a subject of protest. As police departments began to acquire military-grade weapons and gear in the 1960s, protests became more persistent and more visible. Arguably, however, public debate, civic unrest, and media attention around this issue did not enter into broad public consciousness until the 1990s.⁸ Active opposition to the violent policing of Black people led to the 2013 creation of Black Lives Matter. Founders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi established the organization in response to the murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin by a vigilante.⁹ By the time of Freddie Gray's arrest, Black Lives Matter had organized two high-profile protests against the police: the first after the July 2014 murder of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, shot twelve times by Ferguson, Missouri, police after allegedly stealing cigars; and the second after the November 2014 murder of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio. Rice was playing with a toy pellet gun when shot by police.

Because the protests in Baltimore were recognizable as part of a national movement, they attracted national media attention. Intense focus on incidents of property damage and looting (most of which took place on April 27, the day of Freddie Gray's funeral) shaped public perception.¹⁰ Reporters and politicians alike described an encounter between police and a crowd of young people at Mondawmin Mall in West Baltimore as the moment when protests became a "riot."¹¹ Governor Larry Hogan activated the National Guard. City Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake declared a citywide curfew.¹² Both she and President Barack Obama attracted outrage from activists for their use of the term "thugs." In comments he made on April 28, Obama distinguished between "criminals and thugs who tore up the city" from those who had participated in "several days of peaceful protests," which he argued should have received more media attention.¹³ Rawlings-Blake similarly said, "It is very clear there is a difference with the peaceful protests."¹⁴ Regardless, media outlets across the country repeated the charge that Baltimore was suffering through a "riot" perpetrated by "thugs," language that simplified a complex situation and delegitimized activists' efforts to draw attention to the plague of police violence.

From the vantage point of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), however, the death of Freddie Gray and the protests that followed were not national dramas unfolding on television. Then-President Freeman Hrabowski reflected on the fact that he had crossed paths with Freddie Gray's father. The elder Gray had been a student at Coppin State when Hrabowski was an administrator there.¹⁵ Students, alumni, staff, and faculty, many of whom were born, live, or work in Baltimore, participated in demonstrations.

Seeking to unpack the impact of the unrest on the campus community, UMBC scholars organized a teach-in on campus. Faculty offered insights into the ongoing crisis of police violence and the history of racial injustice in Baltimore. The teach-in provided valuable context during a tumultuous moment. It also repre-

sented the University's broad commitment to public engagement. In the months and years after the town hall, UMBC students, faculty, and administrators produced a variety of projects, articles, syllabi, and events to interpret and commemorate the Uprising.¹⁶

But, in the moment, the teach-in also revealed a sharp divide in the public humanities. Some expressed frustration, anger, and sadness that the teach-in seemed both to gloss over racism on campus and to compound it by co-opting Black people's experiences as the object of intellectual inquiry. These feelings were expressed by members of the campus community who had first-hand encounters with microaggressions, injustice, inequity, and violence. In some ways, the teach-in delegitimized the epistemological value of their stories just as the word "thugs" had flattened a complicated and diverse series of responses to injustice.

During the Uprising, those directly impacted by its deep societal roots did not need experts to tell a story of injustice to them. They needed to be centered in a conversation about inequality, racism, injustice, and violence. They needed to be heard, not addressed. It was evident that the moment demanded something more akin to community-centered public history.

The events unfolding in Baltimore, their characterization in the media, and the extent to which both of these revealed and exacerbated systemic racism all became central to urgent discussions taking place in my public history classroom. My students and I worried about the stories emerging about the Uprising, concerned that the voices of protesters and activists would be silenced.

Histories of social and political disruption often originate in official records that emphasize the perspectives of police officers, government leaders, and media figures. These records become collections, held in archives and museums. The stature of these institutions lends them a false sense of objectivity. Taken together, these conditions reinforce damaging fictions. Individual actors bolstered by their proximity to institutions conferring authority – the mayor's office, the police department, the historical society, or the university – appear to direct the course of history, while groups of people operating outside formal power structures appear as little more than a frustrated mob or as victims. We are left with a historical landscape that is more than simply exclusive; it is implicated in the reproduction of inequality, and it undermines our efforts to foster critical reflection.¹⁷

My students and I decided that the most responsible way for us to be of service was to create a space where the people most directly impacted by the conditions leading up to the Baltimore Uprising and those involved in the protests could control their representation. We established Preserve the Baltimore Uprising, a crowdsourced, digital collection. Individuals can upload digital materials directly to the collection, and they control the decision about whether a given item goes public or remains private.

The collection was founded on a community-centered philosophy. By adopting crowdsourcing as its primary method, we built a space where local people can create an alternative to the official narrative taking shape in the media. It also directly challenges the exclusive collections practices, long undertaken by cultural institutions.

But collecting is only a first, necessary step in a community-centered public history process. In 2017, I received support from the Whiting Foundation to activate the collection as a platform for cocreation and dialogue. Between June 2018 and December 2019, I worked with a broad range of culture activists, high school students and teachers, community-based organizations, artists, and university faculty in a collaborative process to develop a deeper, community-centered understanding of the causes and consequences of the Baltimore Uprising of 2015.

The project unfolded in parallel arenas. I worked with 150 students and nine teachers at three city high schools: Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Baltimore City College High School, and Bard College High School. First, we explored the history and value of museum and archival collections. Together, we examined the ways in which collecting practices have shaped misleading interpretations of the past. Students came to recognize that gathering stories and conducting oral histories could be a form of community service. Second, we engaged in a process of collaborative inquiry. We used materials in the digital collection to identify focal points for dialogue. Students participated in small story circles, sharing their own memories and experiences to help identify questions. They read a variety of reports on the causes and consequences of the Uprising. I worked with them to unpack these sources and develop research projects based on their questions. Third, I trained them in oral history methods. Finally, I worked with teachers to facilitate collaborative interpretation, supporting students in the development of a variety of projects that enabled them to arrive at new understandings of the history and impact of racial injustice in Baltimore.

Maureen O'Neill, Library Media Specialist and Film Teacher at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, served as a key partner. She recognized the ways in which community-centered collaboration differed from other forms of university-school partnerships. Her reflection on our collaboration makes particular note of the rapport we developed:

Our high school's partnership with UMBC was focused on organizing a student-driven oral history/public history project for 2018–2019 school year, using the Preserve the Baltimore Uprising digital collection as a springboard to encourage students to reflect on these events, explore their history, and develop creative, interpretive projects. This was merely the galvanizing concept, however, since Denise Meringolo demonstrated just how much possibility can manifest in schools and communities when academics wield their power and resources in true partnership and collaboration with schools.

While I have experienced many “partnerships” with colleges and universities, they are most often driven by the dictates and structures of grant requirements and the literal logistics of separate worlds. Many academics either don't remember their own schooling experiences before higher education, or they are consciously avoiding a return to our very controlled and paternally-structured worlds. The intellectual freedom advocated on college campuses is difficult to replicate when our K – 12 physical and resource limitations are so much more structured in a high school than on a college campus. Schedules are more rigid and complex in high schools, and this matrix of time and space can constrict the dialogue, communication and exchange that takes place within this type of partnership.

Denise was very in touch with our world at Poly, and she soon realized that she would have to be the one to demonstrate the most flexibility in order to make the partnership successful. She spent the physical time necessary on our campus to be present and develop the relationships necessary to make our partnership even logistically possible. She would spend an entire day in our school library so that she could meet with different students and teachers throughout our school day, rather than asking us to rearrange student and teacher availability to meet a narrow visit timeframe for her benefit. This was significant because it removed participation barriers for us in the high school, both mentally and physically. The complexity required for a K – 12 school to meet with academic volunteers, mentors, etc., is almost more than the benefits are worth for many schools because our bandwidth for organizing such events is dwindling every day under the increased demands of K – 12 bureaucracy.

For academics to “get out of the way” in order to support the work happening in schools and communities, based on my experience with Denise, means that the academics themselves must be more present. Denise was physically present in our school, bringing snacks to our students as she sat and talked with them. She was present as she led a workshop in oral history interviews for our AP Research class, providing us with digital audio recorders and recommending audio transcription services that we still use several years later. She was emotionally present with us, speaking to me about my struggles outside school caring for my dying mother as I faced the daily demands of my teaching job. She was intellectually present in the ways which she allowed for our partnership pathways on this project to be sculpted by the interests and abilities of our students and teachers, not just the demands of her grant or her university department. For example, she had initially envisioned our oral history work as something that could be used to support National History Day-type projects, but that wasn't where the student interest or energies manifested during that year. She also recognized that student and teacher time and efforts are valuable, and she placed a monetary value on participation so that participants' contributions were paid through stipends. Our students do not have extensive amounts of leisure time, waiting to be filled. They have families that need financial contributions. Our students hold jobs while taking full

academic course loads. Denise understood this and made our students' participation possible by meeting us "where we lived" here at our school.

But such work requires courage. When Denise first approached me about the project, she explained in an email, "I see this project as a framework within which there is significant flexibility for meeting specific school/teacher/student needs and interests . . . leaving specifics unknown was the right decision but it is also making me anxious!!" Educational systems, corporations, foundations, all get very nervous when approached with the unknown. We must test and assess and quantify our learning experiences so that no child is left behind. But there are other ways of being left behind, and one of them is being left alone, being kept apart from each other. For academics' work to be relevant, it must be grounded in full-fledged time, space and relationship with we who are their partners. Denise, our academic partner, met with us in our own space. She listened to what was in our curriculum and our plans. She listened to the students and their goals for the year. She witnessed their talents. And she returned, week after month for the whole school year, even when it was colder and darker and more difficult to do so.

Denise's work was ultimately focused on community and young peoples' experiences of the Baltimore Uprising in response to the death of Freddie Gray. Part of what led to that event was a disinclination to listen to people and communities, to deny people's humanity. One of the key ways this is done is by silencing people and their stories. Denise made sure that she "listened" to our school community in multiple ways, by talking with us in ways that supported us and didn't stress us for her own academic objectives. By engaging in this kind of work, she helped to ameliorate systems and structures of oppression which continue through silence and the absence of human relationships.

O'Neill describes the elements of a successful community-centered project. The collaboration worked because we refused to put ourselves as experts at the center of the work. Instead, we engaged in deep listening and facilitated both dialogue and reflection that freed students and teachers to construct truthful stories about the Uprising.

The project also took shape in community spaces in and around West Baltimore. This work was led by Denise Griffin Johnson, a CultureWorks Culture Agent for the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture.¹⁸ A West Baltimore native, culture activist, and educator, Griffin Johnson uses story circles as a method for moving grassroots ideas, interests, and questions from the margins to the center of public humanities. Her description of her process captures the ways in which community-centered practice can disrupt more traditional hierarchies of knowledge production:

The Story Circle makes us human. The practice takes away perceived power based on a societal perspective that sometimes, we use to define ourselves, things, titles, places, status, etc.

We gather in a Story Circle and give a prompt to share a story. It is a story about an experience you had, you remember. You usually can recall it; maybe because it made you feel, or how you were judged, or impacted, maybe it provided you an epiphany to further your human consciousness. I recall, when a Design and Architecture Symposium, asked me to facilitate a Story Circle. The focus of the symposium and the prompt asked how Design and Architecture has influenced or disrupted community passage. It was a big circle, over 20 participants. They all shared a story. No one in the circle shared a story about Design and Architecture disruption of the passage of people moving through their community.

Instead, participants talked about things they experienced in their lives that created an emphasis or path for their forward movement in a certain profession or to support community empowerment work. All the stories were an expression of human interactions.

As this example shows us, the Story Circle is a Cultural practice, a tool, a method, to get people together, to better understand one another, build bridges, help one another accept and understand their interpretation of their experiences and values. Story Circles re-connect, connect, build fellowship and build community.

I like to recall my understanding of working with both Dr. Meringolo and Mr. Boot. Our conversations originated when I was invited to UMBC for a discussion about public humanities "Who Talks, Who listens, and Who Matters." I was fascinated then, and I still am fascinated today, when I hear someone say "they give a voice to people." What does that really mean?

While there are people in our society who are not able to express themselves verbally, due to a disability, most of us are verbal and all of us have our own voice. During the session, Dr. Meringolo talked about Preserving the Baltimore Uprising. She had been collecting information and other things as a historian. Preserving and honoring history is so important, directly related to culture for me.

As a Cultural Organizer, I found what she was doing interesting in that people created the actions of the Baltimore Uprising and therefore, in my practice as a Cultural Organizer, I believed strongly their voices and stories should be preserved, honored, and respected. The people did the work, created the action and the action extended beyond the individual to the collective.

The Collection of stories and filming for the Whiting Public Engagement Fellowship provided space for community to express feeling and share ideology and resources. It also helped to give meaning to the action from a human perspective. The filming provided high quality viewing, the announcements were artistic, creating community actions into art, and the participants from high school students, teachers, community and others were interested in partaking in the further creation of community.

Why is this practice relevant? I recall some of the expressions and thankfulness that I heard from participants of the Story Circles from the Whiting Project. The stories that were shared, I hold in high regard and evolved as a human soul through the practice and interactions.

I was amazed when a high school student shared Dr. Cornel West's definition of community. I was grateful that a high school teacher showed up in community to ask for support for her colleagues and student body to discuss the Baltimore Uprising. Another participant acknowledged the therapeutic value of the discussion and expressed gratitude. Others wanted to be part of the experience because it created community.

The Story Circle sets the environment for us to have the opportunity to be honored, respected, and listened to, as we can come to realize we are all a part of community, if we allow ourselves to be.

The ending of a Story Circle creates a 3rd story. The story is the middle; the 3rd story begins a new narrative, a new understanding, a connection with one another that provides the opportunity to build community.

Denise Griffin Johnson's language is poetry. So is her process. As her reflection suggests, she is appropriately suspicious of the questions raised by those coming into communities from institutions that have excluded or dismissed embodied knowledge. She also trusts people to speak their truth even in oppressive contexts. She positions herself as a conduit, coming from a place of intimate community knowledge and finely honed dialogic skill. She does not speak for the community. Nor does she need to amplify their voices. Rather, she recognizes that a crack in the structure is a space where knowledge can blossom.

We had planned to bring students from several schools together with members of community groups to foster dialogue across boundaries of generation and neighborhood. Unfortunately, we could never successfully connect the two sides of the project. Instead, we came to understand the story circles and the student work as two forms of community-centered public history practice. Denise Griffin Johnson worked with adults at the Arch Social Club, a historically Black organization in West Baltimore, and with members of the Baltimore Police Monitoring Team, a community-based organization designed to foster better relationships between city residents and law enforcement.

Lee Boot, a media artist and filmmaker at UMBC, and his students filmed these events and created four short films to document the knowledge shared by local people.¹⁹ These films are now linked to the digital collection. Boot views his role in the project this way:

I've worked with cultural organizer, Denise Griffin Johnson, for several years starting with our collaboration on a project to bring the annual meeting of the Imaging Amer-

ica organization to Baltimore back in 2015. This has given me a number of opportunities to experience and film story circles as Denise crafted them. The power of them struck me immediately but has also deepened with time. I've seen how people honor one another by showing up, sitting with one another, and sharing something meaningful in a ritual of respectful listening and engagement. In story circles, versus, say, "town halls," I've observed a depth and breadth of telling and listening that I had not previously experienced. Like the best of the arts, story circles are an evolved structure that builds social capital – meaning relationships and trust. They take time, but ultimately allow for ideas to take root, for collective action to emerge. Though they might not always build consensus, they always feel like progress.

A criticism often leveled at news and documentary films is that they're not often entertaining enough to hold an audience. As a filmmaker making documentary works, one hears that people don't like "talking heads." Nothing is more boring. I find this curious. When I listen to friends and family talk about their favorite stories, whether in film or in books, a large portion of what I hear is descriptions of people (using their heads – both literally and figuratively) to talk in memorable and moving ways. Even spectacular films, filled with action, pivot on moments when a character, through dialog, manages to convey something critical and meaningful to another. Of course, it's not just media; it's life. What do we talk about with family or friends at the end of the day? It's not how someone might have rushed down the hall toward me; it's what they said when they got there. The story circle is a sacred art form designed to create such moments. For this reason, I am committed to story circles, and to extending and amplifying them – lifting them up – by translating them into media well enough to convey the moments transparently.

This is hard. Mostly I've failed. The challenge of filming and editing a story circle has many interrelated pieces to it. You want to be able to record what is said without influencing it, so you must be unobtrusive enough for participants to ignore you. The most efficient and effective way to capture footage of people telling their truth is by putting the camera right in front of them. But that would place you, the filmmaker, somewhere inside the circle, blocking people from seeing and being seen. Obviously, this is a bad idea if you want to be ignored. Instead, it's best to stand outside the circle and shoot across to the other side. But what if people unexpectedly begin talking when you are right behind them? You need a second camera operator on the other side of the circle. Now you are in the frame, so the footage will often show the filmmakers. That's fine. There's nothing to hide, but it can be startling for those watching the film. It often feels as though you are never filming from quite the right angle. It's better toward the beginning of the event, when one speaker gives way to another in a relatively orderly way. But later, when the discussion begins to generate itself and heats up, everything becomes unpredictable.

And then there's the audio recording. To get good sound, mics should be as close to the source as possible. It would be best to "wire" everyone – ten, twenty, or thirty people with their own microphones, but very few budgets can pull that off. (Did I mention that there is likely no budget at all?) Instead, we mount "shotgun" mics to the cameras, and have a third person "boom" the speaker (hold a mic near them on a pole) but these methods pick up lots of background sound – particularly in the places where story circles happen: community gathering places; not sound stages.

Still, despite the challenges, there is something unusually compelling about the circular format and the passion it calls forth that I believe will work in film. I like that it's easy to lose a sense of the geography of the scene, and get caught in the swirl – getting ping-ponged back and forth and having to anchor yourself in nothing but the truths people tell.

Like Denise Griffin Johnson, Lee Boot approaches his work through the lens of art and culture. He captures a truth that might otherwise be overlooked or invisible in more formal public humanities practice.

Measuring the success of community-centered public history can be tricky. There may be no peer-reviewed publication, scholarly accolades, or public product. In many cases, the process is the product, because the goals are to build an intellectual community that cuts across institutional and demographic boundaries and to ensure that knowledge gained is not extracted from participants. Our project came without strings. Students were not required to upload oral histories or projects to Preserve the Baltimore Uprising, though some did. Story circle participants did not have to sign consent to be recorded, though they all did.

We measure our success in more subtle ways. Students became more confident in their own knowledge. Museum professionals allowed their best practices to shift. Through dialogue came mutual respect.

We hosted two public events. In April 2019, students and teachers from all three participating schools assembled at the Maryland Historical Society along with local residents who had participated in story circles and with staff of the Maryland Historical Society. On October 26, 2019, local people who had participated in the story circle project assembled at the Arch Social Club for a film screening. In both spaces, we discussed the importance of recording these experiences, and we acknowledged deep fissures that remain both within the West Baltimore community and in the city at large. We are hopeful because community-centered public history practice can begin to bridge those fissures, and many groups and individuals are committed to that work.²⁰

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Denise D. Meringolo is Associate Professor of History and Director of Public History at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She is the creator of the Preserve the Baltimore Uprising archive project, the author of *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (2012), and the editor of *Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism* (2021).

Lee Boot is Affiliate Associate Professor of Visual Arts, Computer Science and Engineering, and Language, Literacy and Culture, and Director of the Imaging Research Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. His feature film, *Euphoria*, won the Gold Award for Documentary at the Houston International Film Festival in 2005.

Denise Griffin Johnson is Cofounder of CultureWorks Baltimore, Director of the Arch Social Community Network, and a Culture Agent with the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture. She has collaborated with Alternate ROOTS and Roadside Theater as well as the higher education consortium Imagining America.

Maureen O'Neill is a Library Media Specialist and Film Teacher at the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute. She is also Coordinator of Poly's National History Day program and was named Baltimore City History Day Teacher of the Year in 2015.

ENDNOTES

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