

Title Slide

- Today I'll be talking about a year-long participatory project that I facilitated with a group of community organizers across rural Appalachia.
 - I'll share some background, the methods we used, and then some outcomes that speak to this idea of community-based work being messy.
- Ultimately, I hope that by sharing some moments of complexity, we can start to think through some of the unanticipated and frankly un-measurable aspects of community work, and how that might shape the ways we assess them.

Background

- The pictures behind me are from a year-long participatory project with 11 community organizers from the Appalachian region.
 - Organizers were part of a fellowship program dedicated to fostering a just economic transition in the region away from extractive industries and towards a more diversified and equitable economy.
- And that's what this fellowship program is geared towards: building on the strengths that are already present and developing economic opportunities that serve communities rather than corporate interests.
- A quick note about structure: The fellowship itself was managed by the Highlander Center.
 - Highlander invited applications for nonprofits doing this kind of work, and then for fellows, and then matched them.
 - Fellows were paid through grants funneled through Highlander and through their individual host nonprofits, so this question of assessment, to keep those funds going, was ever-present throughout the year.

Project Timeline

- Long story short, I became involved with the fellowship because I was interested in this work of economic transition, and wanted to do a participatory action research project. The staff managing the fellowship was into it, and as these things often do, it all fell into place.
- Everyone knew I'd be writing about this project in my dissertation, but we really wanted to make sure that it was more than my dissertation.
 - Early on in our conversations, it came out that they weren't doing their own assessment of the program but they'd always wanted to--especially because they had external people coming in and evaluating the program to justify the money they were giving to the fellowship. And there was a gap between what those assessments captured and what many feel is the real work of the program.
 - So, this project became an internal assessment tool of sorts.
- I worked with both fellowship staff and the fellows leading up to the orientation weekend of the program to lay out the basic framework for the project, which used photovoice or participant-generated imagery, where participants take photos of their daily lives and then interpret those photos in interviews or focus groups.

- Photos are particularly powerful in an Appalachian context, given the history of photographs being used to cast the region in a negative light.
- So the timeline shows how things progressed:
 - Participants took photos and wrote narratives about their experiences all year.
 - We had 3 focus groups where participants were given copies of their photos from that period and they used them as prompts for discussion.
 - And then I did site visits with 3 participants for more in-depth interviews and some participatory mapping.

Research Questions

- At the orientation weekend for the program, we had a few hours to spend on our project. Basically, get fellows involved, interested, and invested, which included them coming up with research questions.
 - I can talk more about that process in-depth.
- After reviewing program goals and brainstorming topics they wanted to investigate, they settled on these three.
- [Read them]

Participatory Components

- [Read slide]

1. Demanding Complexity and Contradictions

- So, now I'm going to transition into 3 takeaways from this project that speak to the unexpected aspects of community work.
- First, participants continuously railed against the stereotypes that paint the region in a particular light. I think everyone in this room can conjure up an image of an Appalachian stereotype, which I think has been renewed after JD Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* and coverage of "Trump's America," and while they might just be images for people outside the region, those stereotypes have had very real consequences for Appalachians.
- Of course, participants took pictures refuting those stereotypes.
- But, they also ran into personifications of those stereotypes, like this RV selling Trump merchandise on the streets of Charleston, West Virginia.
 - So, what do we do with that?

Why Can't Our Story Have Layers?

- In our second focus group, Baxter said that they spent a lot of time thinking about the paradoxical nature of the region.
- [Read quote.]
- So, Baxter points to media representations that over-simplify the realities of a place and its people, and explicitly says that they used the project to challenge that simplification, which I think speaks so clearly to the value of visual, participatory methods.

2. Questioning “The Good”

- The second big takeaway is that participants found our project to be a space where they could critique the system they found themselves in: the nonprofit sector.
 - To state the obvious, nonprofits are subject to a lot of pressures. They have to continuously work to get funds, nonprofit workers are incredibly underpaid, the work is seemingly endless, requires emotional investment, and because of all this, there’s a pretty high turnover rate.
- And as they got further into their year-long placements, they identified more and more problems.
 - I want to clarify that they didn’t say “nonprofits are bad.” They were much more nuanced than that.
 - Some of the issues they saw included: exploitation, nepotism, money flows, and gaps between organizational missions and actual impact

Who Are We Actually Helping?

- Our final focus group, which was this past June, held a lot of conversation about this, which I don’t think any of us expected going into this project.
- Violet said, [Read quote.]
- So, Violet’s pointing to a massive tension that I think all nonprofits have to grapple with, and gets at that question of: What are we actually trying to accomplish? And often the assessments that are going on aren’t answering that question.

3. Challenging Relationships

- As a community-engaged teacher and researcher, I’m sensitive to issues of reciprocity and representation. And Appalachia has a long history of being exploited by outsiders--be it companies, venture capitalists, journalists, pop culture, academics. This dynamic forced me to reckon with what I was getting out of this project very early on, and what participants would get from it as well.
 - I was super clear about what I would be doing with the data, I did member checks, I shared all of my writing with participants and asked for feedback. I got a small grant to compensate them for their time. I helped several of them with their job documents to find something after the fellowship, etc.
 - They were on board, they were amazing and generous and kind and incredibly trusting.
- But in spite of all that, I was still honestly worried about benefiting from their knowledge.
- And of course, in our first focus group this dynamic came up.

When Do We Get To Be the Authority?

- [Read quote]
- This is obviously a lot to sit with. And while Jackson clarified that this wasn’t supposed to be a cut to me, it really brought home to me that we can talk about reciprocity all day long, but we haven’t solved the issues that come along with community-based work. We have to keep talking about this and confronting ourselves if we become complacent.

- So, I started being more open about my thoughts on this particular tension, and that disrupted my authority in new ways. They felt comfortable using the space to talk about issues they actually faced: like the nonprofit stuff, which I don't think they would have otherwise.
 - The participatory aspects of the project gave them ownership over the spaces we shared, and they were able to assert themselves as the authority, and capture their actual work, in ways that I don't think a traditional academic study would have done.
- And this gets at another aspect of assessment: what power relationships are being reified through assessments, and whose input is actually being heard? We need to think about what methods we're using, because they shape these processes in different ways.

End: Participatory, Visual Methods

- I just want to leave you with some affordances of visual participatory methods that I think might be useful when thinking about how we assess or document or just talk about community engagement work.
- [Read slide]
- Just as these participants were, we are asked to quantify and justify our work, and while that is often a means to an end, that sort of assessment can often overlook or ignore or even silence really crucial elements of relationships that emerge throughout this work--and invite the unexpected.
 - So, this is an approach that might fill in some of those gaps, with the understanding that this is extra labor, on top of those other assessments, so keeping reciprocity in mind is really key if you want to do something like this.
- Ultimately, they might help us acknowledge and attend to things that are messy or complex in nature, but that need to be taken into account so that we can better serve our communities.

~Thank you.~