Vassar College

Digital Window @ Vassar

Senior Capstone Projects

2020

Storytelling's capacity for individual and collective healing: Vassar voices as latent commons

Antonella DeCicci
Vassar College

Recommended Citation

"Storytelling's capacity for individual and collective healing: Vassar Voices as *latent commons*"

Antonella DeCicci

May 12, 2020

American Studies 302/03: Senior Project

Advised by Jonathon Kahn and Kimberly Williams-Brown

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Thank you does not even begin to cover my deep gratitude for my Vassar community. My biggest thanks go to --

The American Studies department, *especially* Jonathon Kahn, Kim Williams-Brown, Molly McGlennen and Melissa McAlley. And all who have taught me – Andy Davison, Bill Hoynes, Carlos Alamo-Pastrana, Michael Drucker, John Andrews, Andy Bush, Travis Holloway, Lisa Collins, Giovanna Borradori, Miriam Cohen, Tim Koechlin, Luis Inoa, Candice Lowe-Swift, Claudia Abbott-Barish, Colette Cann, and many others who have introduced me to these texts, been generous with your office hours (even during semesters when I've not been in your classes), responded to emails I've sent at all hours of the early morning, and emailed me book titles after running into me in the college center while walking your dog at 11 pm.

All who supported Vassar Voices, especially Jon Chenette and Sam Speers who were the first to write their names on my sheet at the World Café and have been unwavering in their support ever since. The EPI team – Candice Lowe-Swift, Cecilia Hoang, Primavera Ward, Henry Molina, and Patrick Tonks, and all the campus offices and individuals who made our events possible – campus activities, media resources, the copy center, the library, the women's and LGBTQ centers, Bon Appetit, communications, Ruth Spencer and HR, the info desk, President Bradley, Jason Bailey, Larry Hertz, Jasmine Mitchell, and countless more. The guidance and mentorship of Tom Pacio, Jerry Stropnicky, Bill Hoynes and the global campus working group, Barry Lam, Liz Aeschlimann and countless others who contributed to our event and workshop models.

Introduction

Preface

Why I'm here

Roadmap

Preface

This is a thesis.

But it is also a swirling mass of ideas.

At times they weave together neatly – orderly, somewhat logical,

but at others they become knotted and tangled,

difficult to locate the beginnings or ends, let alone to attempt to untangle them.

They cannot be held within a single container – in fact they are more accurately the bridges

between containers, or perhaps even the containers themselves. *(And I can say this after having*

spent months trying to put them all in a container and close the lid. Futile attempts to tuck them

away neatly within the confines of a single traditional academic discipline only made them seem

to grow even more, like a petulant child protesting bedtime.)

To neatly enumerate their relationships in a singular sequence would be a disservice to their

complexity, though I at times try to highlight the key connections.

This next section is my first attempt at doing just that.

Why I'm here

Throughout this process I've been asked, why and how I've settled on this topic. Sometimes the question comes from well-intentioned professors trying to guide me in focusing my argument, sometimes from skeptical friends or family members.

My answer varies. I often struggle to articulate it concisely, if at all. I stumble – again, my thoughts a swirling mass rather than a linear argument – or, I fall back onto trite, stale, uncompelling language about "silenced voices" and "making stories into legitimate discourse."

To get at the heart of the real *why* for me, I'm going to tell a few stories.

Story 1: My Broken Foot (and other medical woes)

I recently watched a documentary that was recounting the story of a young child who was diagnosed with Type I diabetes. His family researched and followed the national guidelines, but his condition did not improve. Desperate for him to be well again, the parents sought out support and advice from other families with diabetic children, and finally found a homeopathic solution that, though it differed from the national guidelines, drastically improved their son's health and quality of life. However, the parents recounted that when they next went to their doctor and explained their methods, they were scolded for straying from the directions (although the doctor did reluctantly admit that his condition seemed to have improved).

The next clip was an interview with a different doctor who commented that, as an orthopedic surgeon, he has observed a shift within the field of medicine over the past 15-20 years: patients, especially those whose conditions cannot be explained by existing research, are having to convince their providers of their conditions and need for treatment, rather than being diagnosed and treated by their providers. The main objective of this doctor's comment was to point out the flaws in the production of medical research findings, but I stopped the film to frantically draft a text to a friend.

I told her that I was angry that others have experienced this, but incredibly relieved for the validation. This is my story. I have a slew of chronic health conditions, and since the age of 12 my legs have stuck to the paper of countless exam tables where I've faced the same phrases: *I just don't know what else to tell you / you just have a low pain tolerance / this really doesn't seem like any of the conditions we typically see in patients of your demographic / maybe it's psychosomatic, do you see a therapist?* – you get the idea. Time and time again not only did I walk away without answers or treatment, but also with the total invalidation of my experiences in my own body.

This pattern came to a head in 2016. In August of 2015 I had been in a car accident and broke my foot in 10 places. It took 11 months to walk in PT, 13-14 months to walk functionally (and even then only short distances), and 24 months for total recovery. During those first 11 months, I was cleared to start physical therapy three separate times, based on the standard timelines for these sorts of injuries. But for the entirety of my first two rounds of PT, any attempt to bear weight was excruciatingly painful. I returned to the doctor for help, but was told in response that *muscle pain is part of the rehab process / this is normal and will pass in another 2 weeks / you just need to get things working again*. I insisted that, as a former track and cross-

country runner, I am no stranger to muscle pain, and expressed my certainty that this was different. Nevertheless, I trusted my doctor and returned to physical therapy each time, only for my physical therapist to tell my doctor after 2 more weeks that I was worsening rather than improving. Yet another 2 weeks after that we'd get another X-ray which showed both times that my fractures were, in fact, not healed, and that after (by that point) 4 weeks of premature physical therapy, the injuries were aggravated and needed another 2 months of total immobilization before resuming this entire process over again. This happened three separate times.

In these hospitals I felt silenced, invisible. I felt as though my experience was invalid or illegitimate because it differed from the calculated, studied, published norm. I felt as though my body was wrong or misbehaving. And, above all, I found that the more strongly I advocated for myself and my experience, the less valid my perspective became. Once, I cried in the exam room out of exasperation and frustration (and anger that this happened yet again), and I was called overreactive, irrational, and unstable – an assessment which then became the linchpin in my doctor's case for why I should continue PT, to move beyond my anxiety around the situation, rather than considering that I might be an atypical case.

I spoke from my experience. I told my story. I raised my voice, but the data was louder.

Story 2: The Kavanaugh Hearings

While chatting with a professor about the devaluation of narrative and storytelling, I received criticism that narrative is not secondary to data because a key aspect of practicing law is "the ability to narrativize data." My rebuttal was to point out the narratives that are not backed by

data in hopes that this professor would realize that this exact narrativization is what contributes to the belief that there are no other stories beyond data. The reply was insufficient, but made me realize why I do this.

To give an example of narrative beyond data -- the Kavanaugh hearings happened in September of 2018, the fall of my junior year. I was deeply disturbed by the outcome, but even more so by the process.

In their testimonies, both Dr. Ford and (now) Judge Kavanaugh told about their adolescence, specifically their experiences of one night. These testimonies were recounted from the first-person perspective, like stories. They both had inconsistencies in their accounts (as memory, especially of trauma, tends to blur over time), and due to these inconsistencies, their stories differed. In a legal context, ultimately it came down to a test of credibility – whose story would win?

Neither of them had "data" in the sense of scientific or clinical research to support their accounts, unless we count the calendars produced by Judge Kavanaugh. Judge Kavanaugh also produced confidence, audacity, and outrage which, paired with identity-based expectations for emotional expression (see Hochschild), gave him an advantage over Dr. Ford and her gentle, hesitant tone.

Dr. Ford told her story. She shared her experience. She raised her voice, but his was louder.

Back to Why I'm Here

I was raised to believe that emotions are a weakness – irrational, unstable, not to be trusted and *certainly* not to be the basis for any important action or decision. I often wonder whether this was because I am a woman (after all, we women are known to get hysterical), because I was raised to be an good American citizen (always rational and unwavering in my patriotic support of military power, neoliberal capitalism and all its appendages, and rugged individualism), or because I grew up with a slew of chronic health conditions and a doctor parent (and if the data wasn't subject to clinical trials and peer-review then it's a joke). I heard it from teachers, family members, friends, significant others, professors – *a good argument is based on hard data / talking about politics shouldn't get emotional / you should save that for creative writin*g. The message was, in short, that emotions are not fit for the public sphere. Of course, you can feel them when they are absolutely undeniable and socially accepted (a death, a college rejection letter, a mass shooting or natural disaster), but to live by them would be irresponsible and immature. Maturity meant sanitizing my life of emotions and emotional expression. If I did act on them, I needed to also provide a logical, rational justification for my actions, seemingly distinct from how I felt about the matter.

This is how many of us are conditioned. Though insidiously and indirectly, it is part of the American Dream[1]. And because of that, this conditioning does not affect all people equally.

With all of this said, I must acknowledge that I have enormous privilege – recounting only stories which resonate with my own experiences of feeling silenced and invalidated, I have only directly addressed sexism and ableism. The experiences of Dr. Blasey Ford (and so many others who have come forward about sexual assault), the child in the documentary (and so many

---

[1] My definition of the American Dream will be refined in chapter 2; it is based on the writings of Sara Ahmed and Kathleen Stewart who draw connections between affect, privilege, and the American dream

others who have been denied treatment for health conditions), and me, only capture a narrow slice of the many voices which are systemically silenced within the legal, medical, financial, political, and social systems in place within America.

I want those stories to be valid. I want them to be legitimate. I want them to count.

I want to explore the structures which teach us to be skeptical of them.

I want to question and demonstrate their potential for change.

I want to engage with spaces where this is attempted.

I want to imagine more spaces where this can be attempted.

Roadmap

In chapter 1 I will explore the structures which teach us to be skeptical of stories both inside the academy and beyond. Within the academy I will be looking first broadly through the lens of Patricia Hill Collins's work to underscore how this silencing disproportionately affects already marginalized groups and perpetuates erasure of voices from the dominant historical and contemporary social narrative. Then I will show how this plays out within disciplines which deal with people and their stories – history (Michel-Rolph Trouillot), sociology (Kristin Luker and Arlie Russell Hochschild), and political science (Andy Davison). Next I will demonstrate how silencing occurs beyond the academy through the centrality of notions of credibility and legitimacy to the function of contemporary social and political life – my case studies for this will be the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearing and the Dr. Christine Blasey Ford/Judge Brett

Kavanaugh hearing. Finally, I will return to the work of Patricia Hill Collins and Andy Davison to write about the ways in which testimonial authority can act as epistemic resistance.

In chapter 2 I will question these structures through the work of affect theorists Sara Ahmed, Kathleen Stewart, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. Their work converges on the notion that the American Dream is flawed, exclusive, and harmful, creating a cognitive dissonance between what is and what is said to be[2]; that it denies any negative affect as a result of experiences which deviate from the norm it establishes; and that there is a longing for (affective) disruptions of this illusory happiness.[3]

In chapter 3 I will demonstrate the potential within story for healing, connection, and social change. I will do this by drawing connections between Tsing's concept of the *latent commons*, the framework from chapters 1 and 2, and Adriana Cavarero's account of the relationship between storytelling and selfhood.

In chapter 4 I will engage with a space where this is attempted. Two years ago, I created the Vassar Voices (VV) Project, an initiative that culminated in 3 separate events, at which in total 300 members of the campus community, including students, administrators, staff, and faculty, came together to tell personal stories. Unknowingly at the time, I was setting up the perfect case study of community building through storytelling within an environment (the highly-selective liberal arts college) which embodies many of the values discussed in chapter 1.

And in my conclusion, I will imagine two more spaces where this can be attempted: restorative practices and intergroup dialogue processes. I am engaging with both at the moment

---

[2] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).
[3] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

in different ways[4] and I see many connections between the founding principles of both of these

methods and the goals of Vassar Voices as framed through affect theory and epistemic

resistance.

---

[4] I am interning at the Mediation Center of Dutchess County where I am working to write a set of recommendations for the mediators on how to incorporate storytelling into the peacemaking circle process, and I am interning with the Intergroup Dialogue Collective at Vassar, a group of administrators and faculty members who are exploring potential applications of Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) at the college, while also practicing it within the group.

Chapter 1: American Epistemologies

-Epistemology within the academy: knowledge production

-Epistemology beyond the academy: epistemic resistance

-Epistemic resistance through testimonial authority

-Story as theory: re-validating emotionality

Epistemology within the academy: knowledge production

Stories alone are traditionally not considered "valid" scholarship in nearly every discipline – even those in the humanities and social sciences who primarily study individuals, communities, and societies. In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Patricia Hill Collins states that "all knowledge produced within existing Western epistemologies becomes suspect precisely because the validity of such knowledge rests on exclusionary, nondemocratic methodologies."[5] This is the central claim of her critique of epistemology. After further highlighting the key points of her argument, I will explore how epistemic values bleed out beyond the academy to impact social life more broadly. Overall, this combination creates a society which widely devalues stories.

Collins defines epistemology as "the study of the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true."[6] Functionally, epistemic power "generates ever-present frameworks that identify… which topics are worthy of investigation as well as the best strategies for investigating what's worth knowing."[7] This translates broadly to a devaluation of story in that

> Within Western social theory, social actions and the experiences they engender are often interpreted as data to be included within existing social theories or bias to be excluded from them. Experience is not a valued way of knowing, and theorizing through social action may not be seen as theorizing at all. These epistemological assumptions devalue important theoretical tools that catalyze and shape resistant knowledge itself…Experiences constitute an important, albeit overlooked, tool of critical theorizing. Because experiences occur in the world they are windows to that world.[8]

---

[5] Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 144.
[6] Collins, 122.
[7] Collins, 127.
[8] Collins, 12-13.

That she starts this paragraph with "within Western social theory" means that the epistemology of that field is the force behind the exclusion of experiences from theorizing.

To contextualize this, Collins writes, "Academic departments, fields of study, areas of specialization, curricular offerings, and classroom practices all constitute particular interpretive communities… all of which have distinctive understandings of what counts as legitimate knowledge for them."[9] I will elaborate briefly on this to examine the epistemic guidelines of two interpretive communities that I've come into contact with over the past four years: history and political theory.[10].

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, an anthropologist and author of *Silencing The Past: Power and the Production of History* critiques the epistemological violence embedded in historical production. He writes "in history, power begins at the source" because "the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production."[11] His main argument is that there is a "distinction between that what happened and that which is said to have happened."[12] He elaborates,

> human beings participate in history both as actors and narrators… history means both the facts of the matter and the narrative of those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.' The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, and the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process.[13]

He goes on to attribute this difference to positivism. "Scholars significantly influenced by positivist views tried to theorize the distinction between historical process and historical

---

[9] Collins, 127-8.
[10] For a critique of how epistemic violence occurs within sociology, see Luker in additional readings.
[11] Trouillot, 28; *ibid.,* xix.
[12] Trouillot, 2.
[13] Trouillot, 2.

knowledge. The professionalization of the discipline [of history] is partly premised on that distinction: the more distant the sociohistorical process is from its knowledge, the easier the claim to a 'scientific' professionalism."[14] This professionalization is the creation of epistemic standards which legitimate some claims over others.

Unfortunately, as Collins writes, the effect of this is that "each historical narrative then renews a claim to truth"; this is "what makes some narratives rather than others powerful enough to pass as accepted history if not historicity itself."[15] This claim to truth on the basis of superior epistemic processes is what made it easy for colonizers to invalidate the stories and histories of colonized places. The colonizers said that the colonized had different "rules that govern claims to historical truth," and that their rules were not valid; so the colonial narrative dominated.[16] Trouillot's response to this is to return to "the fundamentally processual character of historical production, to insist that what history is matters less than how history works; that power itself works together with history."[17]

Likewise, Andy Davison, a political scientist at Vassar College, writes at length about the centrality of empiricist empirical thinking to political analysis in his book *Interpreting Politics*.[18] He begins by breaking down the objectives of empiricism, then moves to exploring its biggest critics. Using the work of Kuhn, and Quine as a bridge, he then explains the foundations of *verstehen* analysis, conversational inquiry, and hermeneutics as alternatives to empiricism.[19] He

---

[14] Trouillot, 5.
[15] Trouillot, 6.
[16] Trouillot, 7.
[17] Trouillot, 28.
[18] Andy Davison and Mark N. Hoffman, *Interpreting Politics: Debating the Foundations and Objectives of Political Analysis* (Cornwall on Hudson: Sloan Publishing, 2020).
[19] See additional reading for citations on Kuhn and Quine, as well as Hans-Georg Gadamer, the author of the foundational text of hermeneutical inquiry.

continues to build on this foundation, covering critical theory, discourse analysis, and decolonial and subaltern studies.

He advocates for the methods and values of the latter methods, citing their recognition of inherent power imbalances in the world, and in the creation of the standards of empiricism. In contrast, rather than account for power imbalances, empiricism exploits them. Davison writes that the goal of empiricism is to "predict and, in turn, to manage, control, and even engineer the future behavior of their objects of study. Empiricist political inquiry thus uses scientific principles and methods to generate practically useful knowledge in a very particular sense: useful to produce certain desired political phenomena and to prevent others."[20]

However, despite the richness of non-empirical modes of political inquiry, Davison notes that "empiricism is the single, most influential theoretical foundation for the interpretation of politics in the world today… [it] profoundly shapes thinking in both academic teaching and research throughout the world. It functions as the foundation for legitimate thinking about policy in governmental deliberation and decision-making, in media representations of political phenomena and events, and in many institutional domains that are only vaguely connected to what people think about as politics."[21] I will return later to the relationship between empiricism, positivism, and epistemic violence. For now, I'll simply acknowledge that both history and political science have their epistemic guidelines.

The implications of this epistemology are far-reaching. The historical and ongoing exclusion of marginalized voices from the academy[22] demonstrates first hand that "epistemic

---

[20] Davison, 2.
[21] Davison, 2.
[22] Collins writes that with academic spaces as "newly desegregating settings, [members of subordinated groups] experience a formal equality of testimonial authority concerning their right to belong in the context of sedimented epistemic power relations that questioned their actual testimonial practices. Speaking from experience threatened

power is part of how domination operates."[23] Collins elaborates that, "Just as interpersonal and state-sanctioned violence underpins intersecting power relations by policing the borders of race, class, gender, sexuality, and similar forms of power, tactics of epistemic violence operate within interpretive communities to police the cherished ideas of any group."[24] She lists two ways in which this most commonly happens: testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering. Testimonial quieting occurs "when stories that criticize taken-for-granted knowledge do reach public venues, such stories are often ignored, disbelieved, or rewritten… the tendency to disbelieve the stories of subordinated individuals [is] epistemic violence."[25] On the other hand, "Testimonial smothering describes the internal self-censorship of people who understand that what they have to say may not be welcome… a person waters down her ideas to make them more palatable."[26]

In both of these cases, the epistemic values of the academy are being valued over the voices representing marginalized communities. "Testimonial quieting…dismisses knowledge claims" and with testimonial smothering, "self-censorship is often the cost of being heard at all."[27] Consequently, "These practices harm the quality of knowledge itself and foster ignorance among dominant group members concerning what subordinate group members actually think."[28] For interpretive communities who claim inclusion and equality, and especially for those who

---

epistemic norms… because doing so rejected the norms themselves…. Discrediting the testimonial authority of historically subordinated groups could no longer be accomplished through tactics such as excluding them…. Discrediting people of color as epistemic agents came less through attacks on their actual arguments (e.g., informed experience) and more through targeting the epistemic assumptions that underlay the process of legitimation." (141)
[23] Collins, 122.
[24] Collins, 133.
[25] Collins, 133.
[26] Collins, 134.
[27] Collins, 133; *ibid.,* 134.
[28] Collins, 135.

concern themselves with studying people and communities, this demonstrates the need for a new epistemological approach.

Epistemology beyond the academy: epistemic resistance

Having established that, due to epistemic power within the academy, the production of academic knowledge excludes many voices, I'd now like to expand upon how this phenomenon is not unique to academia, but in fact also applies to contemporary social and political life. Collins says, "Belonging to privileged communities of inquiry grant[s] members considerable epistemic power…. For privileged academics… their legitimacy as social theorists is rarely in doubt… more credence is routinely granted to the ideas of established social theorists."[29] I'd like to focus on two words here: legitimacy and credence. Legitimacy and credence (or, since we are now referring to individuals rather than ideas, credibility) are central to any sort of social interaction; being taken as seriously as the person next to you is part of just and equal treatment. And often the forces that undermine legitimacy and credibility are the same systems of oppression that shape epistemic power.

The courtroom is one example (and perhaps the most literal example) of a non-academic space in which credibility is central to justice. Collins applies her framework to the 1989 hearings by the Senate Judiciary Committee to examine Anita Hill's sexual assault claim against Clarence Thomas, who was nominated to the Supreme Court. Ultimately, the claim was dismissed and Thomas was appointed.

> The Senate Judiciary Committee drew upon ostensibly objective, established rules and ways of proceeding to weigh the merits of different stories… the fact that the

---

[29] Collins, 128.

committee was comprised of white men provided a taken-for-granted frame for ascertaining truth… [all senators] participated in a homogeneous interpretive community that shared common experiences that accrued to them as powerful white men. The senators were comfortable judging the truthfulness of African American stories. This case stood out because a committee of white males judged the veracity of the testimony of two African Americans with similar biographies but who differed primarily by their gender. The committee was tasked with evaluating two different versions of the same events, in essence, deciding whose testimony held more authority for them… the committee was asked to believe one narrative over the other. In this case, because Hill and Thomas were both African American. gender proved to be the significant factor.[30]

This is the perfect case study in that it captures the relevance of academic epistemic guidelines to other areas of human interaction– especially those in which significant decisions are made by people who, although not academics by profession, spent significant amounts of time in rigorous academic spaces to get to where they are. It also captures how intersectionality impacts credibility and legitimacy, especially in regards to claims of sexual misconduct.

That brings me to an all too similar case from September of 2018 – the Senate Judiciary Committee's hearings for Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh in the face of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's sexual assault allegation. Much like its 1989 precedent, the claim was dismissed and Kavanaugh was appointed. Months before reading Collins, I wrote a paper analyzing this hearing through the centrality of the public/private divide, religion, and hypermasculinity to American narrative construction, and Arlie Russell Hochschild's feeling rules[31]. The parallels between these two hearings will serve as a bridge between Collins's writing on epistemic power within academia and how this power manifests in the rest of the world.

---

[30] Collins, 131-2.
[31] Arlie Russell Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion: Selected Possibilities," Sociological Inquiry vol 45, no. 2-3 (April 1975), pp 280-307.

The Enlightenment-era public/private divide (which is relevant to modern society due to the basis of contemporary politics in Social Contract Theory[32]) is built upon a dehumanized and gendered[33] public sphere which relegates all things emotive, familial, or personal to the private sphere. This is based on a set of "simple oppositions – modern/traditional, secular/religious, sexually liberated/sexually oppressed, gender equality/patriarchal hierarchy, west/east."[34] To these I'd also like to add rational/irrational, logical/emotional, masculine/feminine, and public/private. When emotions are brought into the public sphere, this divide works to invalidate the emotions and damage the credibility of those who challenged the divide. Joan Wallach-Scott, historian and feminist theorist, says that "patriarchy thrives on either side of the public/private divide: men are at once 'the public face of the family and the reasoning arbiters of the realm of the political… the public/private demarcation… rests on a vision of sexual difference that legitimizes the political and social inequality of women and men."[35] Soraya Chemaly, author of *Rage Becomes Her*, elaborates on how this applies to the credibility of claims of sexual violence.

> When he speaks, he has a millennia of misogynistic and often racist philosophy,
> religion, political ideology. When she speaks, that same ideology undermines
> what she says. It undermines public understanding of the credibility that she is
> seeking when she speaks, And so, even that alone, which does not acknowledge
> the imbalance, the culture, the context, is dangerous for women.[36]

This divide is supported by two key American values: religion and masculinity. Religion, especially Protestant and Christian religions, plays a central role in America's history and current

---

[32] See Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau in additional reading.

[33] It is also raced and exclusionary in countless other ways; I will focus primarily on gender in this section since that was the focus of my original analysis of the hearings

[34] Joan Wallach Scott, "Secularism and Gender Equality" in *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) 26.

[35] Cady, Linell and Fessenden, Tracy. "Gendering the Divide: Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference." In *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 9. Quote from Joan Wallach Scott's essay "Secularism and Gender Equality," 25-47.

[36] Ali Velshi, "Soraya Chemaly, 'Why would you automatically assume that this woman is lying?'" *MSNBC*, September 19, 2018, Accessed online October, 2018.

political climate, to the point that "Christian norms and values frame the possibilities for US law and policy."[37] To further demonstrate the complicated place of religion in America, Ann Braude, Harvard professor of religion and women's studies, shares that during a workshop in a foreign country, a student used the words "Christian" and "secular" interchangeably to refer to the United States.[38] Scott explains that the simultaneous privatization of religion and its public relevance to politics of sexuality, family, and femininity, stems from the fact that religion, having been privatized alongside the female body and the family, becomes the primary authority within the public sphere on matters feminine and sexual. This dynamic posits religion as a bridge across the public/private divide. However, that this bridge is built with religion perpetuates gender inequality and discredits the voice of women. Chemaly, again, speaks to this.

> One of the common responses is that Kavanaugh went to Catholic school. I went to Catholic schools from elementary school through college. And the thing about Catholicism is that every time you take a child into a Catholic church, you literally teach them that women don't have public authority. Women cannot have public authority. They cannot be knowers, they can't have… a path to divinity unless a man speaks for them. So using that as a rationale for justifying his innocence is distorted.[39]

The relationships between gender, religion, and credibility outlined here exemplify the relevance of Scott's framework (the parallel binaries) to expanding Collins's epistemological violence beyond the academy.

The public/private divide is also perpetuated by the conflation of masculinity and violence, a core value upon which American patriotism sits. Hypermasculinity and the denial of the violence at the foundation of America together enable violence against marginalized groups.

---

[37] Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, "Bodies-Politics: Christian Secularism and the Gendering of U.S Policy," in *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 140.

[38] Ann Braude, "Religion and Women's Political Mobilization" in *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), #.

[39] Ali Velshi, "Soraya Chemaly, 'Why would you automatically assume that this woman is lying?'".

Frederick Jackson Turner, an American historian at the turn of the 20th century, outlines the key

role of the frontier and expansion in the foundation of America as it is today. He emphasizes that

the frontier culture of the nineteenth century promotes "stalwart and rugged" individuals who

value hard work.[40] However, central to this expansion was violent treatment of native peoples in

the name of "manifest destiny." This violence is erased from or sanitized within the dominant

historical narrative, enabling the continuation of the power dynamics which justified it.

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, this set of hypermasculine values permeated

American culture broadly, but more overtly resurfaced episodically in politics and foreign

affairs. A few examples are Atomic Fever after WWII and Reagan's embrace of militarism in the

1980s, and the Spanish-American War. Kristen Hoganson, a contemporary historian, expands on

the Spanish-American war and claims that the primary motivator for American military

involvement in the Philippines in 1898 was the fear that "extended peace would lead to…

'effeminate tendencies in young men.'"[41] This is in response to the notion, captured by Turner,

that, "ideal citizens [are] physically powerful men who would govern unmanly subordinates,"

shaped by the belief that "earlier generations of men had developed their character in the civil

war and in continental expansion."[42] This is rooted not only in colonial ideals, but also in the

conflation of American democracy, hypermasculinity, and military action. Consequently, many

supported the war "not only for economic and strategic benefits but also for their character-

building potential," for the "sake of the nation."[43] The conflation of stereotypical masculinity

---

[40] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Frontier in American History," Chapters I and XL, accessed online on 9/6/17 at http://xroads.Virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/.
[41] Kristin Hoganson, "The Problem of Male Degeneracy and the Allure of the Philippines" in *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Excerpt accessed on Moodle, Fall 2017.
[42] Hoganson, "Male Degeneracy"; *Ibid.*
[43] Hoganson, "Male Degeneracy."

with "Americanness" strengthens the notion that women do not belong in the public sphere, and

the conflation of stereotypical masculinity with violence normalizes and encourages violence (in

both the public and private spheres).

To connect this back to the hearing, the erasure of women from the public sphere

constructs women as objects, reduced simply to "the female body" and relegated to the domestic

realm, rather than constructing women as political actors. This body is then to be regulated by

legislation, but not protected from violence. In fact, the denial of sexual violence is also

promoted by this erasure. With this denial in mind, I'd also like to consider that sexual assault is

by nature an incredibly emotional experience, and while emotions are relegated to the private

sphere, legal action surrounding sexual violence is squarely located within the public sphere.

That sexual assault lies at the nexus of the public and private and thus inhabits space on both

sides of the divide constitutes it as something that fundamentally challenges the divide and, thus

intrinsically, the systems of power which stem from it. The implications of this dynamic and its

invalidation extend beyond the legal to the social in that ways that discourage reporting and that

are damaging to survivors who do enter the legal system. Chemaly again captures this well.

> Especially when it comes to sexual violence… if they aren't the perfect victim – if
> they aren't vulnerable and crying, if God forbid, they are angry, and they're calm
> – that must mean they're lying, right? because the perfect victim is one that we
> have a stereotypical idea about. And when a woman violates that by defending
> herself or standing up for her rights in a way that is quite forthright, that makes
> people suspicious.[44]

In her book *Rage Becomes Her*, Chemaly looks at these same ideas. First she suggests

that anger, when expressed by women, is held against them—angry women are portrayed as

"overemotional," "hysterical" or "irrational," – whereas men who express anger are seen as

---

[44] Velshi, "Soraya Chemaly, 'Why would you automatically assume that this woman is lying?'".

powerful, strong; second she argues that justified female anger most often mutates into sadness

and disappointment because women have been socialized not to express it authentically; lastly,

she argues that anger is a powerful tool for change, however, that this mutation of anger into

sadness or disappointment robs it of that power.[45] This second concept most directly relates to

the perfect victim complex, in that the victim is supposed to be sad or distraught, but never

angry. Unfortunately, even when women do fit the image of the "perfect victim," as, arguably,

Dr. Ford did, they are still not believed. This is because fundamentally, due to the social and

legal values central to the American identity, women are not believed to be as rational (and

therefore, nor as credible) as men. This dynamic played out in painfully obvious ways during the

Kavanaugh Hearings in September 2018.

Chemaly's writing is based on an earlier text by Arlie Russell Hochschild, a sociologist

and one of the earliest scholars of affect. "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion" starts off,

much like Collins, by noting the relegation and devaluation off emotion in the academy. She

says, "Our society defines being cognitive, intellectual or rational dimensions of experience as

superior to being emotional or sentimental.... Through the prism of our technological and

rationalistic culture, we are led to perceive and feel emotions as some irrelevancy or impediment

to getting things done."[46] She then responds to Max Weber as the representative of traditional

sociological approaches to emotion. She says that

> He confuses irrationality as it refers to behavior with irrationality as it refers to
> feeling. He posits a model of social action that is rational, while action based on
> emotion, like action based on ignorance or tradition, is nonrational. I see two
> problems with this: a confusion between rationality and emotionlessness, and the
> implication that emotions and feelings are not positively required by the rational

---

[45] Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her* (New York: Atria Books, 2018).
[46] Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion," 281.

action of individuals and the smooth functioning of institutions... surely emotion and sentiment are active ingredients in rational behavior as well.[47]

Having established that emotion is worthy of studying further (defying epistemology which is, according to Collins, deciding which topics are worthy of study), Hochschild then proceeds to write about the normative and political dimension of feelings.

Normative feeling rules "define what we should feel in various circumstances."[48] She provides the example of a professor who hates an obnoxious student – hatred is not an "appropriate of desirable" way for a professor to feel towards a student; the normative range is "to care in a mild, delimited way about a student's intellectual development." [49] However, compared to the professor (who presumably, as Collins writes, benefits from a great deal of privilege), the presence of feeling rules is especially amplified for those who work in the service sector ("we realize the silent presence of feeling rules when we experience 'good' role performances," that is, when service workers are pleasant and accommodating), or by those in other emotion-centered professionalized fields (psychiatry, acting, press secretaries, poker players).[50] She also argues that feeling rules, regardless of profession, differentially impact people based on their privileged and marginalized identities.[51]

This moves us into the political dimension of feelings. Hochschild writes that anger "tends to be deflected down… aimed at people with less power."[52] She provides "the proverbial case of the boss who blows up at the worker, the worker who blows up at his wife, the wife who gets angry at her children, and the children who take it out on the dog."[53] Her final example in

---

[47] Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion," 284-5.
[48] Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion," 289.
[49] Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion," 289.
[50] Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion," 289.
[51] Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion," 294-5.
[52] Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion," 295.
[53] Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion," 287.

this section, "the paradox of women's anger," brings us back to Chemaly, the feminist movement, and sexual assault hearings.[54] Hochschild writes that movement ideology changes the way that negative feelings (anger, resentment) are aimed in variable and unpredictable ways. However, across the board, "social movements for change make 'bad' feelings okay, they make them useful… rational… [and] visible."[55] I will now return to Collins to explore some of her concepts for how social movements against epistemic violence manifest.

Epistemic resistance through testimonial authority

As we have established, "Epistemology is implicated in power relations. It is not a passive bystander during the social construction of knowledge," and "epistemic violence operates through practices of silencing."[56] Recently, alongside Collins's writing, a few other scholars have started to study epistemic oppression and epistemic injustice.[57] Of this scholarship, Collins writes

> Terms such as 'epistemic oppression' and 'epistemic injustice' provide a more
> nuanced understanding of how epistemology constitutes a structuring dimension
> of social injustice beyond the actual ideas of racism, heteropatriarchy, and
> colonialism as ideological systems. Providing a language for how epistemic

---

[54] It's essential to pause and acknowledge the other areas in which feeling rules apply. My case studies so far in this chapter are focused heavily on gender and sexual violence. However, as Collins made clear, epistemic oppression occurs within racial, heteropatriarchal, colonial, nationalist, and many other hierarchies alike. To demonstrate just a few of the ways in which this plays out beyond sexual assault hearings, I will briefly mention a few other sites where I've seen the phenomenon of marginalized voices being silenced – and at times even gaslit. Gaslighting is an intimate partner abuse tactic in which one partner manipulates the other into doubting their own sanity. An earlier iteration of my thesis was going to focus exclusively on the phenomenon of large-scale gaslighting of marginalized voices for drawing attention to injustices. This footnote is indulging that interest of mine. For the invalidated lived experiences at the workplace, see Berardi; for the invalidated lived experiences of racism, see Mills and Lipsitz; for invalidated experiences of media coverage, see Anker; for invalidated experiences of the medical industry, see Dumit; for invalidated experiences of political difference see Hochschild (Strangers in their Own Land); for invalidated experiences of disability see Nussbaum. The full citations for these texts can be found in "Additional Reading" after the bibliography.

[55] Hochschild, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion," 298.

[56] Collins, 11; *ibid.,* 133.

[57] See Kidd, Medina and Pohlhaus in additional reading.

> power influences various aspects of scholarly practice makes it possible to move beyond 'bad apples' arguments about biased individuals. Instead, epistemic oppression and epistemic injustice name the aforementioned interpretive communities that are essential to knowledge production.[58]

Having named the interpretive communities, we've now arrived at the response: epistemic resistance. Epistemic resistance is, simply put, "resisting the rules that govern what counts as knowledge," and often occurs within what Collins calls 'resistant knowledge projects' – for example, critical race theory, critical feminist and gender studies, decolonial studies.[59]

A central method by which epistemic resistance happens is testimonial authority.[60] Testimonial authority "rests on the ability of a person both to speak and to be heard."[61] That is, "testimonial authority rests within the epistemic power relations of a particular interpretive community to determine the rules of truth."[62] To speak, be heard, and have one's testimony considered legitimate knowing is testimonial authority; if any of these three does not happen, it is quieting, smothering, or any other form of epistemic violence. Dotson says that testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering "illuminate how and why claiming testimonial authority is especially important."[63] In our previous example Hill did not have testimonial because "both Hill and Thomas spoke but were differently heard"; this is because "intersecting power relations calibrate these interactions such that hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, class, and citizenship empower some members both to speak and to be heard."[64] An interpretive community can decide whether or not to name and address those power relations, or to be complicit in their perpetuation.

---

[58] Collins, 129.
[59] Collins, 118.
[60] Collins, 131.
[61] Collins, 132.
[62] Collins, 133.
[63] Collins, 133; see additional reading for Dotson citation.
[64] Collins. 132.

Unfortunately, many academic communities do not practice testimonial authority. From the perspective of those within resistant knowledge projects, "elites are not the only ones who theorize. May everyday people offer compelling explanations of their social worlds";[65] however, often from the perspective of the academy this approach "is framed as… non-theoretical. Reducing resistant knowledge projects to… critiques of what already exists, misreads critical theorizing advanced by women and people of color as simple criticism, reactions from the margins of assumed theoretical truths."[66] This is just the beginning of the critiques leveled against testimonial authority and other forms of epistemic resistance. Collins continues that

> within epistemic norms of objectivity and nonpartisanship…the fundamental criticism of standpoint epistemology[67] is that it is too particularistic and insufficiently universal. It could only produce multiple and partial perspectives on truth because it lacked mechanisms to correct for its own bias. Yet the purpose of standpoint epistemology was never to become a theory of truth. Rather, standpoint epistemology is a dimension of theorizing that recognizes the significance of power relations in producing knowledge.[68]

That interpretive communities cannot understand that standpoint epistemology does not share its objective of theorizing truth but rather theorizing power *is* testimonial silencing. These communities are not hearing what resistant knowledge projects are saying to them. This criticism highlights a fundamental disconnect between the objectives of traditional epistemology and testimonial authority/other methods of epistemic resistance. In the next section I will outline the qualities of traditional epistemology (in political science and history, at least) which obstruct the coexistence of these epistemologies.

Story as theory: re-validating emotionality

---

[65] Collins, 5.
[66] Collins, 118.
[67] Standpoint epistemology is the broader term for an approach to epistemic resistance which is inclusive and welcoming of testimonial authority.
[68] Collins, 140.

In this section I will highlight the specific qualities of the epistemologies of history and political science that devalue stories and experience as theory. Earlier in this chapter, Trouillot talked about the influence of positivism on the (problematic) distinction between historical process and historical knowledge. Davison, though talking about empiricism within political theory, also talks about positivism. Davison writes that

> In contemporary times, the crispest expression of the meaning of 'empirical' in empiricism may be found in the outlook of *positivism* as that outlook was articulated by a group of early twentieth century philosophers called the Vienna Circle… [who] maintained that the only valid, legitimate, 'meaningful' statements about knowledge are those that human beings acquire through immediate sense-based experience.[69]

This parallel is explained by the unity of the sciences – in which positivism aspired to

> guide inquiry for all legitimate, meaningful scientific analysis in the non-human natural and human-social realms of scientific inquiry. To achieve this goal, social scientists in general and political scientists in particular need to adopt and adapt both the language and the analytical aspirations of the natural sciences in their methods, in their analysis of observations, and in their findings and conclusions.[70]

Within this guide, what counts as legitimate social scientific knowledge (that is, epistemology!) became very narrow, limited to "the phenomena that scientists observe through their five senses," or "sense-data."[71] Due to the importance of "intersubjective verifiability," or the ability for multiple people to share the same definition of something, terms "must be operationalized to be valid, because validity depends on connecting each concept with observable data."[72] must be operationalized and measurable. Davison continues that "operationalization involves assigning, fixing, and stabilizing the meaning of each concept according to each observation" and "often involves specifying how a

---

[69] Davison, 3.
[70] Davison, 5-6.
[71] Davison, 8.
[72] Davison 10; *ibid.,* 8.

particular concept may be measured. Measurement can take a variety of forms, such as quantification."[73]

This is where stories and experience-based theorizing become fully incompatible with this epistemology. It is nearly impossible for stories to operationalized, quantifiable, or observed by the senses in the way positivism demands. And the intentional application of these values to all social sciences means that all of those interpretive communities are exclusive on the same basis – "Non-empirical statements are *meaningless* in the context of the pursuit of knowledge. True knowledge of the natural and social world … is gathered and created, as empiricists understand it, by setting aside all *a priori* theoretical, philosophical, ideological, moral, or political judgements about the world," to the point that "Positivism sets itself up as an almost revolutionary doctrine against what it considers 'meaningless' claims about the world, i.e…. Statements about the world founded on 'common-sense' or what positivism views as pseudo-'knowledge.'"[74] From the perspective of those in resistant knowledge projects, being told that their critiques are "simple-minded", "multiple and partial," or "unable to correct for its own bias," comes down to this last line. The goal of resistant knowledge projects is to theorize about power, not truth; but theorizing about power is a non-empirical "judgement about the world," since power is difficult to fit into positivism's epistemological guidelines.

And finally, this is all maintained by the legitimacy conferred by this epistemology. For the social sciences, "empiricism's appeal is the prestige and legitimacy that the language of science provides. In what is properly thought of as the modern

---

[73] Davison, 8.
[74] Davison, 4.

positivist era…. The language of science offers political science [and history and

sociology] enormous prestige."[75]

Once again, I'd like to underscore that the boundaries of these epistemologies and

methodologies are not only within the academy. Trouillot writes,

> The positivist position dominated Western scholarship enough to influence the
> vision of history among historians and philosophers who did not necessarily see
> themselves as positivists. Tenets of that vision still inform the public's sense of
> history in most of Europe and North America: the role of the historian is to reveal
> the past, to discover or, at least, approximate the truth. Within that viewpoint,
> power is unproblematic, irrelevant to the construction of the narrative at such. At
> best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won.[76]

Not only does he acknowledge that the values bled out into the discipline as a whole, but beyond

the academy entirely into the public. This also plays out politically. Collins reminds us that

"Epistemic power is deeply intertwined with political domination, and exercising epistemic

power is a form of politics… engaging in epistemic resistance is important for political

resistance."[77] However, since "subordinated groups routinely advance political claims in terms of

the experiences that accompany negative identities," that "experience as a way of knowing is

routinely dismissed as mere opinion rather than informed testimony that illuminates the truths of

being silenced and subordinated" and further underscores the need for more inclusive

epistemologies.[78] Considering together first, the incongruence of recognizing testimony within

positivism and empiricism, and second this academic, political, and social need for this to

change, I'm going to shift now to exploring affect theory. Affect theory is a site that is ripe for

---

[75] Davison, 29.
[76] Trouillot, 5.
[77] Collins, 127.
[78] Collins, 137.

ushering in the beginnings of this change due to its fundamental opposition to the values I just

outlined alongside its acceptance and credence within the academy.

Chapter 2: Affective Disruptions of the American Dream

-"Defining" affect theory

-The affect of the American Dream: precarity & potentiality

-Disruptions for connection

-The *latent commons*

"Defining" affect theory

Affect[79] is difficult to describe (hence the scare quotes around the notion of truly 'defining' it), but is ever-present. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, the editors of *The Affect Theory Reader*, define affect as

> "the name we give to those forces -- visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion -- that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) … [it is] found in those intensities that pass body to body… in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds…"[80]

Some key concepts within affect theory to which I will return are: first, how the American Dream is built upon a promise of positive affect that it does not deliver to many, second, the collective itching to disrupt these stifling affective norms, and third, the sense of potentiality which comes with this disruption.

On the notion of potentiality, Seigworth and Gregg write that

> affect in its immanence -- signals the very promise of affect theory too: casting illumination upon the 'not yet' of a body's doing, casting a line along the hopeful (though also fearful) cusp of an emergent futurity, casting its lot with the infinitely connectable, impersonal, and contagious belonging to this world.[81]

This potentiality speaks to "the real powers of affect, affect as potential: a body's capacity to affect and to be affected" – a potential that requires encounter with other bodies to occur, thus making affect "a relational phenomenon."[82]

---

[79] It is worth noting right off the bat that affect is not synonymous with emotion. Affect can be expressed at times through emotion, but is distinct. For more on this difference specifically, see Jonathan Flatley, "Glossary: Affect, Emotion, Mood (Stimmung), Structure of Feeling."

[80] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers" in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

[81] Seigworth and Gregg, 4.

[82] Seigworth and Gregg 2; Megan Watkins, "Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect" in *The Affect Theory Reader,* ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 270.

It is also worth noting that affect theory as a field is relatively new. In the introductory

essay to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write that affect has not

been wholly embraced academically because of its fundamental opposition to the

epistemological values described in chapter 1. They say,

> "it is no wonder that when theories have dared to provide even a tentative account
> of affect they have sometimes been viewed as naively or romantically wandering
> too far out into the groundlessness of a world's or a body's myriad inter-
> implications… dramatizing (indeed, for the unconvinced, over-dramatizing) what
> so often passes beneath mention."[83]

That affect theory is, even within academic spaces, still doubtfully regarded speaks to my first

chapter and reiterates the necessity for the ones that follow. Kathleen Stewart, theorist and author

of *Ordinary Affects,* a central text within affect theory, is aware of this. In the prologue, she

writes,

> models of thinking that slide over the live surface of difference at work in the
> ordinary to bottom-line arguments about 'bigger' structures and underlying causes
> obscure the ways in which a reeling present is composed out of heterogeneous
> and noncoherent singularities… this book tries to slow the quick jump to
> representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of
> approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they
> literally hit us or exert a pull on us.[84]

The notion of "bottom-line arguments" is central to the method of theorizing that comes from

empiricism; already Stewart is working beyond those epistemic confines. Likewise, Anna

Lowenhaupt Tsing, theorist and author of another central text within affect theory called *The*

Mushroom at the End of the World, similarly acknowledges the epistemological barriers to the

legitimacy of her work. She writes, much like Collins and Davison, of "the unfortunate wall we

---

[83] Seigworth and Gregg, 4.
[84] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

have built between concepts and stories" and encourages an embrace of "knowledge, but not that kind codified into reports." [85] She writes of

> the twin master sciences of the twentieth century, neoclassical economics and populations genetics. Each of these disciplines came to power in the early twentieth century with formulations bold enough to redefine modern knowledge…. The twins set up similar frames. At the heart of each is the self-contained individual actor, out to maximize personal interests, whether for reproduction or wealth… Thinking through self-containment and thus the self-interest of individuals (at whatever scale) made it possible to ignore contamination, that is, transformation through encounter. Self-contained individuals are not transformed by encounter.[86]

She then poses transformation by encounter as "recalcitrant to the kind of 'summing up' that has become the hallmark of modern knowledge. Contaminated diversity is not only particular and historical, ever changing, but also relational. It has no self-contained units; its units are encounter-based collaborations."[87] This statement will be relevant again shortly, but for now we'll continue surveying the landscape of affect theory.

While Seigworth and Gregg provide a great introduction to the concepts, I will focus more on Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

Kathleen Stewart in *Ordinary Affects* deftly crafts a work which makes a statement about the resonance of bodies in a world which seeks to suppress and silence this innate energy. Stewart's work is critical to my argument because she not only acknowledges most directly the importance of embodied forms of knowing and the ordinary lived experience (which I extend to

---

[85] Tsing, 158-9; *ibid.,* 241.

[86] Tsing, 28; it's also worth noting here that this connects to Davison's analysis of positivism and empiricism: "Undergirding positivism and empiricism is the Enlightenment belief that human rational capacities offer the basis for freeing human beings from a prior state of tutelage and giving them full control over their own destinies. They can control that world by creating technologies and institutions based upon their reasoned analysis of their observations of social behavior. History is now something human beings can make on their own, toward ends they determine on their own, with new scientific behavior guiding their way" (Davison, 6).

[87] Tsing, 33.

the sharing of these experiences through story), but she writes about what is lost when these aspects of life are devalued or eliminated. Her entire book centers the ordinary, which she defines as "a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges… the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences."[88] Her vignettes capture various facets of the ordinary, including a resonant potentiality which permeates everything. She specifies that this resonance resides in the body. This reiterates the power of the lived experience to challenge that what is said to be, and suggests why this power may be denied within American society.

Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness* connects the values outlined in chapter 1 with the affective theoretical framework for what is to come.[89] She writes about the relationship between the American Dream and happiness – or, more generally, positive affect. She writes about how this positive affect does not extend to everybody, and that those who are not included in it are further alienated for expressing their exclusion. This underscores even further the cognitive dissonance of the American dream and makes the conflicting perspectives undeniable. Ahmed then calls for a reconsideration of the potential uses of negative affect to motivate social change.

And Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing suggests alternate ways of human interaction through her study of Matsutake mushrooms. She writes about the necessity of spaces of entanglement, and how these encounters can engender alternate modes of exchange. She writes about the potentiality for regrowth after disturbance, and calls for this growth to be done collaboratively and within a framework that is distinct from contemporary capitalism.

---

[88] Stewart, 1-2.
[89] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

While each of these works touches on all three of my main points – the affect of the American Dream, the itch for a disturbance of that affect, and the potentiality for connection as a result of that affect – I will be focusing primarily on Ahmed's account of the American Dream, Stewart's account of the potentiality for disruptions, and Tsing's account of what the collaboration and connection that emerges from that disruption might look like.

The affect of the American Dream: precarity & potentiality

Sara Ahmed and Kathleen Stewart, in *The Promise of Happiness* and *Ordinary Affects* respectively, write about the American Dream. In short, they characterize the American Dream as illusory – inaccessible for most, and deceptively shallow for those who seem to achieve it. This creates a cognitive dissonance, a tension between that what is said to be (prosperity) and that what is (precarity). However, because of the requirement of the Dream that positive affect reign, this tension can never be expressed. Further, I argue that, due to the exclusion of story and emotive expression from the production of legitimate knowledge within the academy, the impacts of this disillusionment are often denied and suppressed.

Tsing connects this directly back to epistemology. She writes that the "twin master sciences of the twentieth century, neoclassical economics and population genetics" are based on "the self-contained individual actor, out to maximize personal interest."[90] She calls this "the lie of *Homo Oeconomicus,* economic man."[91] Philosopher Wendy Brown also writes of *Homo Oeconomicus* in her book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution.* She says that neoliberalism defines all human value solely by its marketable aspects, forcing people to act in

---

[90] Tsing, 28.
[91] Tsing, 28.

all spheres of life as "homo oeconomicus and only homo oeconomicus."[92] This aligns with

geographer David Harvey's definition: that neoliberalism is, "in short, the financialization of

everything."[93] Its defining characteristics include privatization, deregulation, competition,

individualism, and self-entrepreneurship through a focus on building human capital.[94] However,

neoliberalism does not stay confined to the financial sector and, "when it becomes ascendant,

takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values,

practices, ad metrics to every dimension of human life."[95]

This is noteworthy because when people function as solely economic beings, or *homo*

oeconomicus, there is no room for action beyond economic productivity because "both persons

and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the

present and enhance their future value… Any individual who veers into other pursuits risks

impoverishment and a loss of esteem and creditworthiness at the least, survival at the extreme."[96]

This is especially prevalent within academic spaces – at all levels, from elementary school

through graduate degrees. Students feel more and more pressure in a neoliberal academic

environment to overachieve and produce all the time, even in their free time.[97] This will be

relevant to the case study. All of this is to say that neoliberalism's relationship to human social

interaction is much like that of positivism and other epistemological guidelines to the production

---

[92] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: ZoneBooks, 2015), 33.

[93] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 33.

[94] Based on the following sources: Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015); lectures and handouts from Philosophy-106-52, Spring 2017, Vassar College, Professor Travis Holloway.

[95] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 30.

[96] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 22.

[97] For more on how the public education system embodies neoliberal values, see Reese, Trattner, and "A Nation at Risk" in additional reading.

of knowledge: they both emphasize productivity at the cost of holding space for stories and

emotive/affective expression. Hochschild also expressed dismay at this notion.

Tsing highlights this connection well, asking "what if… precarity is the condition of our

time -- or, to put it another way, what if our time is ripe for sensing precarity?"[98] She then goes

on that

> precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others… Unable to rely on stable
> structures of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake
> us as well as our others. We can't rely on the status quo; everything is in flux,
> including our ability to survive…. A precarious world is a world without
> teleology. Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but
> thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life
> possible.[99]

This world is very similar to the one Wendy Brown describes in which "no capital save a

suicidal one can freely choose its activities and life course or be indifferent to… parameters of

success" because "a subject construed as human capital… is at persistent risk of failure,

redundancy, and abandonment."[100] Tsing concludes this thought with, "The only reason this

sounds off is that most of us were raised on dreams of modernization and progress" – that is, the

American Dream.[101]

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed writes that the American dream is predicated

on the assumption that everybody will be happy and fulfilled if they achieve certain milestones

which align with American values, but that these milestones are only accessible to certain

privileged populations. She continues that minority groups experience cognitive dissonance and

unhappiness when they realize their inability to attain this idealized way of living; however,

---

[98] Tsing, 20.
[99] Tsing, 20.
[100] Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 41; *Ibid.*, 37.
[101] Tsing, 20.

there is no space for these 'negative,' deviant emotions within the American Dream, where "happiness is premised on, and promised by, the concealment of suffering."[102] Thus, the American Dream is closely intertwined with Hochschild's 'feeling rules' discussed in chapter 1.

Ahmed's analysis of *The Island* exemplifies this: just after establishing the film as an allegory for the American Dream, she observes that "injustice works…in the absence of suffering or even by making suffering absent… optimism, hope, and happiness can be technologies of control."[103]

Ahmed's account of her experience as a "feminist killjoy" exemplifies both the cognitive dissonance inherent in the American Dream and the challenges one might face in attempting to draw attention to this dissonance by expressing deviant emotions in normative spaces. She writes that "feminists by declaring themselves as feminists are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness… feminists are thus attributed as the origin of bad feeling, as the ones who ruin the atmosphere."[104] This is because within the American Dream, "in order to get along, you have to participate in certain forms of solidarity," which feminists and other activists do not.[105] For Ahmed, the shift comes from the proposition that, rather than being the source of the rupture from the norm, feminists "expose bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy… feminists do not kill joy in a certain sense: They disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places."[106]

---

102 Ahmed, 196.
103 Ahmed, 188.
104 Ahmed, 65.
105 Ahmed, 65.
106 Ahmed 65.

Stewart captures this more broadly. She references this in passing, saying "this makes

him mad… this is America and they can do anything," and mentioning crimes committed in

desperation by "people lurching towards a dream."[107] She directly addresses the American dream

from the perspective of those who are excluded from it, describing "the life of a sheer

collaboration produced through circuits of debt, grief, affects, and hard necessities… the rhythm

of a struggle to wrest a 'something' out of an everyday life saturated with dragging, isolating

intensities."[108] She also, much like Brown and Tsing, gets at precarity. She writes,

> Stress is the lingua franca of the day. It can be the badge you wear that shows that
> you're afloat and part of what's happening -- busy, multitasking, in the know. Or
> it can be a visceral complaint against being overworked, underpaid, abandoned by
> the medical system, or subject to constant racist undertows.[109]

This precarity is the common denominator, the point of connection, for so many who are

disillusioned with the dream.

She also addresses the illusory nature of the dream for those who seem to have it,

beautifully and tragically capturing the deterioration of that which is said to be into that which is

in the following passage:

> "Home is where the heart is. You can get inside and slam the door. We dream of
> the big, beautiful, sensate commodity-to-live-in, the bathroom done in the textures
> of old stone and precious metals, a utopia of colorful decor. But the synesthesia of
> being at home is always already afloat in the circuits of the prevailing public
> winds -- privatization, sensible accumulation, family values, or some kind of
> identity or lifestyle or something. The American dream takes the form of a still
> life: the little family stands beside the SUV in the driveway, looking up, stock
> portfolios in hand, everything insured, payments up to date, yards kept trim and
> tended, fat-free diet under their belts, community watch systems in place. Martha
> Stewart offers advice on the finishing touches. But then the little disappearing act
> starts coming up right in the middle of the home's retreat, adding a different
> charge to things. There are times when it seems as if everything the heart drags
> home is peppered with a hint of addiction, aloneness, something rotten or

---

[107] Stewart, 34; Stewart, 101.
[108] Stewart, 118-19.
[109] Stewart, 43.

worthless. Horror stories leak in over the airwaves. Seemingly ordinary intimate spaces are revealed to be scenes of hidden corruption, catastrophe, isolation, and crime. There are children on welfare beaten to death in their homes between visits from the social worker; men who burst into their ex-girlfriends' trailers, shooting them and their new lovers in their beds; bodies discovered only after the neighbors hear the dog barking in there for days on end. News of the weird feature stories like the one about the educated middle-class couple who calmly goes away on vacation leaving behind a hundred cats -- some dead, some alive, wild ones living in the walls."[110] (53)

She writes how this life "draws the subject into the prepersonal zone of affect."[111] She continues

that this zone is overflowing with potentiality. The American who cannot reach the Dream is

"a subject whose only antidote to structural disenfranchisement is a literal surge of vitality and mobility. A subject whose extreme vulnerability is rooted in the sad affect of being out of place, out of luck, or caught between a rock and a hard place, and who makes a passionate move to connect to a life when mainstream strategies like self-discipline or the gathering of resources like a fortress around the frail body are not an option…. It's an experiment that starts with sheer intensity and then tries to find routes into a 'we' that is not yet there but maybe could be. It's a facility with imagining the potential in things that comes to people not despite the fact that it's unlikely anything good will come of it but rather because of that fact. It's as if the subject of extreme vulnerability turns a dream of possible lives into ordinary affects so real they become paths one can actually travel on."[112]

This itching to disrupt the affective illusion of the American dream, and the potential for a 'we'

enabled by it, brings us to disruptions.

Disruptions for connection

Stewart, Ahmed and Tsing all talk about disruptions – though each in her own language.

Stewart talks of eruptions, Tsing talks of disturbances and interruptions, and Ahmed writes about

---

[110] Stewart, 53.
[111] Stewart, 119; Stewart 118.
[112] Stewart, 116.

suspensions. However, all of them write about the potentiality within these disruptions for relational outcomes.

These interruptions of the ordinary can occur on any scale. Stewart writes, "things flash up – little worlds, bad impulses, events alive with some kind of charge. Sudden eruptions are fascinating beyond all reason, as if they're divining rods articulating something."[113] Stewart then again acknowledges the relationship between eruptions and the cognitive dissonance of the American dream, saying "There are plenty of people in free fall. There are people whose American dreaming is literally a dreaming cut off from any actual potential. But that doesn't stop it – far from it."[114] Even more specifically, she writes "power grows palpable in the image of high brick walls that can be breached by a potent, collective, working-class masculinity… Potentiality resonates in its scene."[115] But these "surface tensions" are never acknowledged publicly. Instead, "unwanted intensities simmer up at the least provocation. And then a tiny act of human kindness, or a moment of shared sardonic humor in public, can set things right again as if any sign of human contact releases a hidden tension."[116] But these moments, though notable, are infrequent. This tension then builds under the surface until it erupts.

Tsing gets at disruption more metaphorically. She begins, literally, by writing about the growth of Matsutake mushrooms in forests which have undergone great disturbances, such as a fire or excessive logging. She says that "disturbance opens the terrain for transformative encounters, making new landscape assemblages possible."[117] She goes on to describe disturbances in a very similar way to Stewart: "disturbances are ordinary" and "disturbance

---

[113] Stewart, 68-9.
[114] Stewart, 95.
[115] Stewart, 98.
[116] Stewart, 47.
[117] Tsing, 160.

matters in relation to how we live…. Disturbance is never a 'yes' or 'no'; disturbance refers to an open-ended range of unsettling phenomena… this is always a problem of perspective, based, in turn, on ways of life." These parallels are notable because they underscore that this phenomenon has been noted by multiple scholars who access it through different modes of scholarship. Finally, and I'll return to this later, Tsing writes of disturbances that "have been followed by regrowth of a sort that nurtures many lives…small eddies of interlocking lives within great rivers of disturbance: these are surely sites for thinking about human talents for remediation." [118] This speaks to the potentiality of disturbance, especially in terms of healing past wrongs.

Likewise, Ahmed also cites the work of Slavoj Žižek, who theorizes that when "the rules that govern social life are suspended… communities take shape… a 'we' is assembled"; Ahmed expands on this premise, posing that "to hold on to the moments of suspension we might have to suspend happiness."[119] I interpret Ahmed's suspension of 'happiness' as a suspension of the projection of happiness as defined by the American Dream, since this would enable the embodied knowledge to surface.

Vassar Voices is based on the premise that people are eager for Stewart's disruptions because they facilitate connection that is not attainable under oppressive norms and values within the American value system. Stewart says of disruptions that "it's as if the singularity of the event has shaken things up, lightening the load of personal preoccupations and social ruts. As if everyone was just waiting for something like this to happen. A 'we' of sorts opens in the room,

---

[118] Tsing, 190.
[119] Ahmed, 191-2; Ahmed, 192.

charging the social with lines of potential," creating "a tangle off potential connections."[120] This language mimics that of Ahmed and Žižek.

Further, I believe that this desire for connection, which is infinitely more possible in the light of disruptions, is why the body resonates and buzzes – this "sense of potential" stems from the potential for a disruption that could, at any moment, open the door to the meaningful connection all humans crave and are deprived of in an American society which actively devalues these human, lived needs and experiences.[121]

The *latent commons*

While Tsing, Ahmed and Stewart all write about the desire to disrupt and the potentiality for this disruption, Tsing is the only one to give language to what this disruption looks like in practice. She calls it the *latent commons*, which are "fugitive moments of entanglement in the midst of institutional alienation."[122] More directly, the latent commons "are latent in two senses: first, while ubiquitous, we rarely notice them, and second, they are undeveloped. They bubble with unrealized possibilities; they are elusive."[123]

Her understanding of this space came from observing interactions between mushroom picking groups who were at odds with one another. These spaces were based on "a common

---

[120] Stewart, 11; Stewart, 4.
[121] Stewart, 94.
[122] Tsing, 255.
[123] Tsing, 255.

program… that we could all share progress."[124] The facilitator of these spaces started from a

place of listening to both sides, and making space for the indeterminacy of the situation.[125]

The latent commons are also rooted in potentiality. Tsing writes, "Indeterminacy is not

the end of history but rather that node in which many beginnings lie in wait. To listen politically

is to detect the traces of not-yet-articulated common agendas… ephemeral glimmers [of common

agendas] are the political" – that is, they are relational. For this the latent commons are 'sites at

which to seek allies."[126]

Finally, it is worth noting that Tsing says that humans cannot make a Commons, but can

disturb and hope – we "hope their [disturbing] actions might stimulate a latent commons, that is,

an eruption of shared assembly, even as they know they can't actually make a commons."[127]

With that said, it is worth noting that Tsing says the latent commons are not "exclusive human

enclaves… are not good for everyone… don't institutionalize well… [and] cannot redeem us."[128]

I will return to these concepts in relation to my case study, but before elaborating on the

connection between the two, I'm going to outline the origins and history of Vassar Voices.

---

[124] Tsing, 254.
[125] Tsing, 254.
[126] Tsing, 255.
[127] Tsing, 258.
[128] Tsing, 255.

Chapter 3: Vassar Voices as *Latent Commons*

-Vassar Voices origin story

-Why storytelling?

-Vassar Voices as *latent commons*

Vassar Voices origin story

In May 2018 at the Engaged Pluralism Initiative (EPI)[129] World Café, I proposed a

project called "MattTalk." MattTalk would be "a TEDTalk-esque event (hence the very tentative

title 'MattTalk,' named for Matthew Vassar"[130] and would manifest as

> a series of presentations by Vassar students, faculty, and administration to share
> aspects of their academic and personal work [around] a key topic or question
> relating to belonging and inclusion. The… responses could be anecdotal,
> research-driven, creative, or personal as the presenter chooses. Talks would last
> between 10 and 15 minutes, and could be followed by 5-10 minutes of either
> Q&A with the presenter or discussion in groups among audience members.
> Anybody can submit topics for talks, and a committee will select which will be
> featured in the series, with consideration for hearing the most equal distribution of
> Vassar voices between administration/faculty/students, areas of study, and various
> social identities. Regarding timeline… the presentations could happen back-to-
> back on a single day, or it could be a series of talks spread out over the course of
> the semester or the year. (I imagine it as a day in [Rockefeller Hall, affectionately
> referred to as] Rocky with multiple talks happening at once and people walking
> from room to room, fully immersed in the experience).[131]

In this original iteration, the events would mimic faculty research presentations that are part of

first-year orientation: rooms in Rocky would be full of individuals doing brief presentations, and

the attendees could select rooms to go to for each of the three sessions. The entire point, though,

was that these presentations would center part of the life of the presenter that the listeners

otherwise would not know about – it could be a hobby, a past interest, current academic research

that is not reflected in their classroom work, a performance, a personal story, or anything else. At

---

[129] The Engaged Pluralism Initiative is the product of a Mellon Foundation Grant that Candice Lowe-Swift and Wendy Maragh-Taylor applied for. Its purpose is to "[view] all manner of social differences as essential components of a strong community, rather than as challenges to be overcome… [and reconsider] how we listen, learn, and provide proactive support for our community—especially for those members who are most vulnerable or who come from historically underserved groups." EPI has an event each semester called the World Cafe` to network between those on campus who are more directly engaged with the work of EPI and those who are not. One aspect of that event is "Igniter Pitches" – an opportunity for any member of the campus to propose an idea that relates to the work of EPI, which in short is belonging and inclusion.

[130] "EPI Project Proposal – 'MattTalk,'" 5/4/2018.

[131] "EPI Project Proposal – 'MattTalk,'" 5/4/2018.

the core of the proposal were the following observations that members of the Vassar community are craving connection, that division by hierarchical function areas is a barrier to this connection, and that people want a space where those distinctions and roles could be put aside to focus on human connection and community-building.

For me personally, this idea was inspired by a handful of experiences that serendipitously all happened around the same time to draw my attention to these challenges. That year I was on Davison House Team as a student fellow. Part of the role of house team is to do one all-campus program per semester. The basic concept came out of a house team brainstorming session for what this event might be. It would be a way to hear more voices from within the Vassar community about the Vassar community. The student who suggested it as an idea was referencing the quip at the time, "Welcome to my TEDTalk," which was a punchy comment that people often said after a long monologue about something. At the time we imagined a "coffeehouse vibe that included all forms of expression-- poetry, original songs, personal stories, creative writing, reflections, academic presentations, video, etc.-- that centered and celebrated belonging at Vassar."[132] We ultimately decided to have a different program, but the idea stuck with me.

Then the week before the World Café I attended an open conversation held by the Inclusive Pedagogies working group, and had the opportunity to discuss inclusion and belonging with a group of administrators, faculty, and students. First, I noticed how refreshing it was to interact with people with whom I otherwise would not speak in my daily functions as a student, either because they taught in other departments or had non-student-facing administrative roles.

---

[132] "EPI Project Proposal – 'MattTalk,'" 5/4/2018.

Both the faculty member and the administrator present in my group expressed sadness at the

small number of opportunities for dialogue within and between these two groups. The faculty

member said that she rarely gets the opportunity to speak with her peers about their work, and

the administrator expressed a sense of alienation from the academic community due to his lack

of disciplinary identity. As a student, I had never considered these points of view, and

immediately this idea came to mind again as a potential way to engage with this experience.

And lastly, once I began to consider proposing the idea at the World Café, I discussed it

further with my house advisor and members of my house team. They suggested that the proposal

incorporate more opportunities for dialogue rather than just presentation, and that it focus on

inclusion and belonging specifically. So I wrote the proposal which stated,

> Creating spaces for dialogue between these groups on the topics of belonging and
> inclusion (with the presentations as a starting point) opens the floor for more
> organic conversations across campus on the subject, while an emphasis on the
> inclusion of voices from a broad spectrum of campus community members
> (faculty, staff, students, administrators) not only explicitly invites into the
> dialogue those who may not feel that they have a place here, but also amplifies
> certain voices which may be harder to hear.[133]

The idea was well-received at the event, and work began almost immediately. Over the

summer, the EPI planning team sent out an email requesting more participants in the planning

process for the event, and four students responded: Irfan Badruddin, Bryan Fotino, Shreya

Suresh, and Ananya Suresh. I was consistently shocked not only that the idea had community

support but that four individuals had enough buy-in to commit to planning this with me.

And the process began. For 15 weeks, we would meet in my room on Sunday evening, sit

on the floor, eat snacks, and discuss what this imagined event might look like in reality. We

---

[133] "EPI Project Proposal – 'MattTalk,'" 5/4/2018.

talked back and forth for hours. As we grew closer and more comfortable with disagreement, we

debated how to make space for voices on campus that are less often heard, what it might look

like to develop a process to evaluate the proposals we received so that nobody felt hurt that their

story was not selected, and how to arrange the rooms to facilitate more authentic sharing. We

labored over the exact language in every piece of publicity and recruiting material to make sure

that, even if not overtly stated, our intentions and values were being embodied and conveyed

clearly. We also decided to rename the project: "Vassar Voices." It was also during this process

that the mission statement was developed:

> Vassar Voices as a whole is a story-telling, community building initiative. Our
> goal is to bridge some of the gaps that have appeared within our community and
> to challenge the devaluation of emotions by encouraging stories which emphasize
> the mundane yet meaningful aspects of life. This project strives to center the
> personal narratives of Vassar students, faculty, staff, and administration and
> create space for authentic, inclusive conversation.

During this process, I certainly had moments of anxiety about the timeline of the event – there

was so much to be done, and it felt cumbersome to spend so much time talking rather than even

just beginning to act. However, in hindsight I attribute the significance of Vassar Voices to the

intentionality behind our every move during the earliest days.

One notable factor here is that "storytelling" was barely mentioned in this first iteration

of the project, except as one option in the list of potential ways to use the space, but was central

to this new mission statement. During a meeting with the EPI leadership team very early in the

fall of 2018, Cecilia Hoang suggested that, in light of the work around story that the Inclusion,

Belonging, and Community Building through the Arts working group was doing, we could

center storytelling and roll ourselves into their broader project that was already happening on

campus. Thus, while the use of the space could still be flexible, it would be promoted and

described primarily as a storytelling event. I brought this idea back to the student group, which at this point was just beginning to gel, and we decided to adopt this new focus.

After months of planning, promoting, discussing, and sending emails, the Fall 2018 semester came to a close. We were poised to have our first event on January 25, 2019 – less than a week after returning from the winter break. During the fall semester we had sent out an open call to the entire campus for storytellers, along with promotional materials for the event itself; we went to the staff and administrator forums to encourage participation beyond just students and faculty; we met often with Jasmine Mitchell in Campus Activities who assisted with reserving spaces and logistics; we met with Nicole Hoeksema in dining to arrange catering; we had countless conversations with professors, administrators, and other EPI working groups who advised us in the process,[134] and we designed and facilitated workshops during study week and finals week in December 2018 with our storytellers who responded to the open call.

These workshops were my most meaningful experiences at Vassar. Groups of 8-10 people met in a variety of locations around Main Building and the College Center: some were in the Jade Parlor, Gold Parlor, and Faculty Parlor, which have a very cozy feel; some were in the (formerly) President's Conference Room, or the College Center rooms 240 and 200, which are very sterile rooms with tile floor, blank walls, and movable tables for interviews. Despite these differences, though, the interactions were no less meaningful.

The outline for the workshop was as follows:

➢ 5 minutes – people enter, sit in circle, encourage to sit next to somebody they do not know, jazz music plays in background
➢ 10 minutes – introductions, names but not role on campus, check-in question: what was your favorite music in middle school?

---

[134] See acknowledgements for full appreciation list.

➢ 10 minutes – overview of Vassar Voices, how it started, what our values and goals are, big thank you to the storytellers

➢ 15 minutes – first activity, prompt: list ten characteristics about yourself (60 seconds of writing), then cross out the first 5. Now choose one and write a brief story about the first time that trait became apparent to you beginning with the phrase "it was a time when" (5 minutes of writing), then share with a partner (7 minutes to share)

➢ 15 minutes – second activity, prompt: choose a word out of a bag (words were *Wish, Heart, Table, Oil, Letter, Crowd, Attention, Scent, Mourning, Map,* & *Screen*), write a list of 10 values, concepts, or memories that this evokes (60 seconds of writing), choose one and write a story about it (5 minutes of writing), share with the same partner (7 minutes to share)

➢ 5 minutes – discussion about logistics of event and brief chat about next steps[135]

There was no single moment that stands out, but in the 60 minutes of the first workshop, I realized the potential that this project had. In the workshop space we'd suspended the rules. We had 9 people in one of the conference rooms on the second floor of the college center – a room that felt incredibly sterile in contrast with the nature of the work happening in it. An assorted group of faculty members, administrators, students, and even two staff members, sat in a circle and dutifully moved through the activities we'd designed or compiled. The space transformed. People were sharing in ways that I had never experienced at Vassar. There was a sense of comfort and safety in the space. People seemed more relaxed. Something in their eyes was sparked when we asked them to tell us a story about a time in their life that seemed (emphasis on seemed) totally irrelevant to anything they do on campus professionally. I felt renewed in my commitment to the project, and immediately began to seek more of those moments, and to understand how and why they happen (or don't).[136]

---

[135] "Workshop Plan," 12/7/18.

[136] Another Vassar Voices coordinator, Bryan Fotino, also had a meaningful experience while facilitating a workshop. There were only three attendees due to scheduling difficulties, but all three in the room had never met before. There was one student, one professor, and a staff member. They noticed early on in the workshop that they were all left-handed, and that was just the beginning of the coincidences. As they moved through the exercises, all three of them shared about their experiences with autism, either personally or with a close family member. The sense of connection and solidarity in the space, between three people who had met an hour earlier, was incredible. Brian often refers to this moment as one in which he also felt a renewed sense of commitment to the project.

On January 25, 2019, 18 storytellers sat in different rooms around the second floor of Main Building and the College Center and told stories to groups of 10-15 people. There were over 100 people in attendance, and most of the stories told were recorded and uploaded to a WordPress site so that those not in attendance could still hear the stories. We also collaborated with the Vassar Library and have a section in the Vassar Digital Archive.[137] Following that event, we planned to pause, regroup, and decide on next steps. But the Arts Working Group planned to bring Anna Deavere Smith to campus later that semester, and, swept up in the energy of that, we decided to do another event that same semester in May.

The event in May was very similar to the one in January – we did not need to deliberate as much over the method or the layout, since we felt that the format of the January event represented our goals and intentions. So we went through the same process, but with a larger group.

On May 8, 2019, we had an event in the library. 26 storytellers told stories to groups of 5-18 people, and there were over 150 people in attendance. We had scaled up more than we'd expected, and in doing so we also added more variety –some of the conversations occurred in outdoor spaces, we encouraged the telling of stories in other formats, and we collaborated with the Academic Computing Department to increase the quality of the recordings for the digital archives. All in all, it was another success.

Following that event there was an internal upheaval in the group. We were burnt out. As a group of 5 students who took taking challenging courses and were also engaged with much other work on campus, to create, implement and sustain a model in which we had to make time

---

[137] The WordPress site is http://pages.vassar.edu/vassarvoices/.

to facilitate workshops and coordinate the movement of over 100 people between up to 20 different spaces was unreasonable. So we asked first for help – with coordinating logistics, communications with collaborators, or anything else that EPI could offer us to lighten our workload – and for more recognition within EPI for the amount of leg work we were doing to make these events happen.

After many discussions with Candice Lowe-Swift, the director of EPI, and Cecilia Hoang, the Engaged Pluralism Initiative Program Associate, we were faced with a choice: become a full-fledged EPI working group about storytelling, leave EPI altogether, or stay where we were. These options were complicated. Becoming a working group would allow us more time and funds to expand our project to the Poughkeepsie community, more actively engage staff, increase the frequency of our events, strengthen our digital presence, and experiment with new models; however many of us were already involved in other working groups and did not want to have to choose. Leaving EPI would allow us to find that same support elsewhere without having to choose between our other EPI commitments, but we would lose connection to our roots, and we would still be doing just as much work re-establishing ourselves in our new home. Neither of these options was appealing, so we stayed as an igniter pitch with EPI. This allowed us to keep doing what we were doing with a sense of stability, continuity, and autonomy, but did not address the issue of burnout and unsustainability.

We began the Fall 2019 semester harrowed from all the discussions about what institutional form Vassar Voices would take. We also gained two new members, sophomores, one of whom was Sophia Kapur, and Bryan had returned to the group after a spring semester abroad. We planned to have another event later that semester, and the preparation for this event was far more deliberate than it was for the May 2019 event, since the planning crew had two

events' worth of feedback and reflection to work off of and to make changes based on. We had

spent most of the semester debating what our next step forward would be – some in the group

wanted to continue to scale up and branch out, while others were content with the model as it

stood and wanted to keep holding space as we had. This tension delayed the planning process

significantly to the point of almost cancelling the event.

But still we had our event on November 22, 2019, in the Reading Room of the library.

This event took on a much different format in which all attendees sat in the same room, but

clustered into groups of 6-8, and went through the same workshop that the storytellers had

previously done in preparation for the event.

This was partially an intentional shift -- to encourage listening deeply and meaningfully,

to actively engaging the voices of staff members, and to reclaiming a version of "story sharing"

that is more intentional and deliberate than "storytelling," which has lately become a buzzword

at Vassar – but also was the result of burnout. Our decision in June to stay as we were had not

addressed this.

The event was still a success with about 60 people in attendance, but 2 weeks later we

met as a group and decided that it was time to pass the torch. Three of us were seniors and would

be graduating in the spring (Irfan, Bryan, and me), and the two juniors (Shreya and Ananya)

could not do all this work alone on top of thesis-writing and other post-grad planning that comes

along with being a senior. Plus our one remaining sophomore, Sophia, would be abroad next fall.

We met again with Candice and Cecilia to discuss potential next steps for the project, and settled

on asking a sub-group within the Global Campus working group, Non-Evaluative Storytelling

Encounters, to take on the project. We, the 6 students, would compile an archive, including key

conversations we had during our meetings, publicity and recruiting materials, the template for

the logistics of the event, and the outline of the workshop. We would also each write a 1-page

reflection on the experience as a whole, including some words of advice to the next event

planners.

While I am sad that Vassar Voices was unable to be sustained as a student-led initiative, I

am still gratefully shocked at the significance it had to the lives of the participants. We

accomplished what we set out to do, in most cases, and so much more.

This history was told primarily from my point of view. In the next chapter I will share

excerpts of interviews conducted with a range of participants in these events – faculty, staff,

administrators and students who participated as storytellers, listeners, and coordinators.

However, before diving into that I want to elaborate on the (unintentional) theoretical

connections between Vassar Voices and the affect theorists from chapter 2.

Why storytelling?

While chapters 1 and 2 spoke more deeply to this question, at the early stages of Vassar

Voices I did not yet have the language to fully elaborate on the relationships between

epistemology, testimonial authority, positivism, affect theory, neoliberal capitalism, the

American Dream, and disruptions. What follows partially represents the theory behind my

original intentions for Vassar Voices, then proceeds to draw connections between that

framework and the framework for this thesis.

As I said before, storytelling was something that fell into my lap – or perhaps it is

something that I fell into. Vassar Voices was originally not rooted in personal narrative as it

turned out to be, though that was one component of it, and I certainly would not have called it a "storytelling" event in its original conception.

I will pause here to make a big clarification: when I say storytelling, I am not talking about fiction or other forms of creative writing, nor am I talking about theater-making or performance. Adriana Cavarero, a philosopher and feminist theorist, writes in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and selfhood* talks about "life-stories," that is, stories which capture that "every human being his unique, an unrepeatable existence, which… neither follows in the footsteps of another life, nor repeats the very same course, nor leaves behind the same story."[138] Cavarero continues, "life-stories are told and listened to with interest; because they are similar and yet new, insubstitutable and unexpected, from beginning to end… nothing responds to the human desire more than the telling of our story."[139] Looking back, this is much like claiming testimonial authority except with much less of a social-justice oriented lens; where Collins is looking at resistant knowledge with the aim of justice for marginalized groups, Cavarero is looking at individuals.

Cavarero also says that stories come naturally because that the default setting of humans is "narratable" because of "the narrative attitude of memory which does not cease."[140] I agree that stories come naturally; however, again, Cavarero does not acknowledge that while the stories may be told, they may not be heard (testimonial quieting). I also agree that memory has a narrative attitude, and that it is exactly this memory that provides the basis for the personal experiencing which is at the root of theorizing done by resistant knowledge projects.

---

[138] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.
[139] Cavarero, 2-3.
[140] Cavarero, 35.

The uniqueness of the personal narrative is central to the significance of Vassar Voices. The primary goal of the project is to create space for personal stories to be shared, heard, and felt by others. However, before that can happen there must be the understanding – undeniably – that every person has a story worth telling. Once those stories are acknowledged by both the storyteller and the others in attendance, its other objectives – breaking down the boundaries between facets of campus, holding space for connection through vulnerable self-expression, and expressing parts of oneself excluded from the professional personas we put on – are made possible. Looking back, this is connected to creating disturbance – both in the epistemology of academia, the neoliberal capitalist values within the education system, and the inequality inherent in the American Dream.

Furthermore, since this deepening of my engagement with storytelling, its salience in the face of the epistemic violence discussed in Chapter 1 has become clearer and clearer. When somebody speaks from personal experience, they are not speaking to or within any legitimated, quantitative knowledge or set of ideas; rather they are speaking from personal experience, as one human, to one or more other humans. Cavarero writes that "[the discursive register of narration] has the form of a biographical knowledge that regards the unrepeatable identity of someone," whereas "[the discursive register of philosophy] has the form of a definitory knowledge that regards the universality of Man."[141] Likewise, Tsing writes,

> To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method. And why not make the strong claim and call it science, an addition to knowledge? Its research object is contaminated diversity; its unit of analysis is the indeterminate encounter. To learn anything we must revitalize arts of noticing and include ethnography… But we have a problem with scale. A rush of stories cannot be neatly summed up. Its scales do not nest neatly; they draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos. These interruptions elicit more stories. This is the rush of stories' power as

---

[141] Cavarero, 13.

a science. Yet it is just these interruptions that step out of the bounds of most modern science.[142]

Both Cavarero and Tsing identify not only that stories are distinct from academic knowledge – specifically scientific and philosophical knowledge – but Tsing goes further that they are opposed to it, that they do not fit into it.

Cavarero also gets at this. Following from chapter 1, narrow construction of legitimate knowledge leads to invalidation of any experiences which do not conform; Cavarero writes of the power of story and narrative to validate all experiences. She calls it the "reification of self through story," which occurs inevitably when the narratable self is interwoven with the story. This "interweaving… comes irremediably to the self as a reifying experience. The effect of a life-story, whatever the form of its tale, always consists in a reification of the self."[143]

Finally, to draw yet another connection between affect theory and the telling of life-stories, Cavarero writes of potentiality, as do Stewart and Tsing. But Cavarero writes that "narrating impulse… is never in 'potentiality' but rather in 'actuality.'"[144] My reading of this section is that the space in which life-stories are shared is a space in which the potentiality for disruption -- "rooted not in fixed conditions of possibility but in the actual lines of potential that a *something* coming together calls to mind and sets in motion" which enables "a tangle of potential connections," "little collaborative worlds of an 'us.'"—is truly realized.[145] This brings me nicely to my next point.

---

[142] Tsing ,37.
[143] Cavarero, 35-6.
[144] Cavarero, 35.
[145] Stewart, 2; Stewart, 4; Stewart, 89.

Vassar Voices as *latent commons*

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* Tsing writes of the latent commons as "fugitive moments of entanglement in the midst of institutionalized alienation."[146] My hope is to demonstrate two things: first, theoretically, that storytelling is capable of engendering a space similar to the latent commons (see section titled "Why Storytelling"); and second, more concretely, that Vassar Voices did this in some ways – and that the ways in which it did not also align with Tsing's description of the latent commons.

I did not have the language of affect theorists like Ahmed or Stewart or Tsing when I created Vassar Voices, but now looking back I can comfortably say that my objective was to create a disruption, a space where everybody could exhale and release the tension that we carry from the exacting demands of the professional and academic space that Vassar is, and bring our whole selves to meet one another rather than just the parts of ourselves that we don't check at the door when we walk into classrooms, offices, or meetings.

From my perspective, the impact of these events was almost exactly what I had imagined a year earlier, but did not expect to be fulfilled. In the original proposal I wrote,

> "The expected short-term impact of this work is to create a space for open dialogue between groups which ordinarily would not interact on the subjects of community, inclusion, and belonging. It would also allow for professors, students, employees, and administrators to share their individual observations, reflections, research, or experiences in an atmosphere that is neither academic nor private. The expected long-term impact of this work is to normalize new modes of communication about inclusion and exclusion, to establish a space for sharing of ideas which may not fit into conventional boxes for talks or performances, to strengthen connection and understanding between admin/faculty/employees/students, and to stimulate more reflection on how Vassar functions socially. In short, this project seeks to change the culture surrounding how we as a campus, conceptualize, perceive, and discuss inclusion,

---

[146] Tsing, 255.

> while also creating a space for engagement with the ideas of individuals with whom interaction is currently scarce."[147]

A first-year student shared that it was the first time she felt at home on campus. A staff member said she felt valued and visible, for a change. Administrators and professors said "I love you" to one another. A faculty member cried listening to the story of a student, and shared a similar story in response – they had never spoken before. Two students who met in a Vassar Voices room are now best friends because they had a conversation one-on-one after the event. The people who share space in this way with strangers are no longer strangers, and say hi to one another around campus. Former Interim President Jon Chenette told me once in passing that he references Vassar Voices often in administrative meetings as "an example of an alternative model for how we relate to one another at Vassar," and during her address at convocation this year, President Elizabeth Bradley referenced Vassar Voices by name as an example of the storytelling which is now central to Vassar's campus culture.

These are instances of individual and community healing. The norms are suspended in those spaces and in the smaller versions of that space that all the participants carry around campus with them and can recreate when they interact with people who have or have not shared that space with them. There is little about this that is groundbreaking – it is constituted by the intentional designation of a space and time that is dedicated to sharing the most human parts of us, those parts of us that are deemed irrelevant to performing our primary functions at the college or that are considered a barrier to the most effective performance of these functions. The emotions, the memories, the experiences, the seemingly mundane reflections, the random musings, the passions and joys, the relationships – on paper, college campuses, and much of the

---

[147] "EPI Project Proposal – 'MattTalk,'" 5/4/2018.

neoliberal capitalist world, are devoid of these. Where they do exist, they are as a footnote, or they are directly mentioned so that they can be devalued, belittled, and relegated to the private. Vassar Voices is a response to this, and one event at a time, it is beginning to shift culture.

However, as I said before, all of this is only from my perspective. In February 2020 I conducted 11 interviews with a range of participants in these events – faculty, staff, administrators and students who participated as storytellers, listeners, and/or coordinators. I will now share the breadth of their experiences.

Chapter 4: Experiences of Vassar Voices

-Method

-Merits

-Limitations

-Reflections of the Planning Group

-Reflections

Method

Over the course of 3 weeks I conducted 10 interviews with 11 people. My goal was to capture the variety of experiences of students, staff, faculty and administrators who participated in any of our events (in January, May, and November of 2019) either as a storyteller, listener, facilitator, or a combination of these.

Sample

I selected my interviewees based on their willingness to participate. For the sake of my own time and data organization, I limited my total number of interviews to 10. I began by sending an email to all Vassar Voices participants ever (again, in all of those capacities at any of those events) who still had active vassar.edu emails. This ended up going out to over 200 people. Of those 200 people about 50 responded, and from those 50 I selected 9, again based on capturing breadth of experiences within Vassar Voices spaces.

It's also worth mentioning that of the original 9 interviews, 2 cancelled due to the flu that was circulating on campus at the time. I then sent a second email out to some people who I'd declined to interview the first time (again, based on capturing breadth of experience), and from those who responded again selected an additional 4 people, bringing my total to 11. In this second round I added an interview with 2 of the other students who were a part of the Vassar Voices planning group. They requested to be interviewed together, which is why the number of individuals interviewed is one higher than the number of interviews.

Considering the three factors I was hoping to cover, my interviewees were:

➢ a student who was a storyteller at the May 2019 event
➢ an administrator (and alum) who attended the November 2019 event
➢ a staff member who was a storyteller at the January and May events

> ➤ a professor who was a storyteller at the May 2019 event
> ➤ a professor and former administrator who attended the January and May events
> ➤ a student who attended the January event and who was a storyteller at the May event
> ➤ two students who were a part of the planning group
> ➤ an administrator who attended the January, May, and November events
> ➤ a professor who was a storyteller at the May event
> ➤ a professor who attended the January event and who was a storyteller at the May event

The following tables visually represent the distributions across these categories.

Table A – distribution across function roles

Students	Staff	Administrator	Faculty
5	1	3	4

Table B – distribution across event attendance

January 2019	May 2019	November 2019
7	10	4

Table C – distribution across nature of participation

Storyteller	Attendee	Facilitator
6	5	2

Since these oversimplified categories cannot capture the complexity of the experiences of the people I interviewed, please note that for any of these tables, if an interviewee could be described by more than one of these categories, they were counted in both.

Questions

I asked all my interviewees the following questions in this order; however, I used discretion to ask for elaboration or clarifications when it felt appropriate. Interviews typically lasted between 25 and 35 minutes, though the full range was between 15 and 60 minutes. We met in various locations – offices, the College Center or Deece, empty classrooms, or a bench on the quad. Interviews were not recorded but rather transcribed on the spot to eliminate the possibility of technical malfunction.

- ➤ What was your role in Vassar Voices (storyteller, facilitator, attendee?) And at which events?
- ➤ What is your role on campus in your own words?
- ➤ What made you want to participate in/ attend Vassar Voices?
- ➤ Tell me about your experience at the event. How did you feel? How did the space itself feel? (If storyteller, specify that this includes the experience of the workshop).
- ➤ More specifically – at the event, how did you feel in relation to the other people in the space?
- ➤ Did this differ from your typical way of interacting with others on campus? If so, how? If not, how?
- ➤ Think about who else was in your groups. Do you see them around campus? How do you interact with one another when you do?
- ➤ What other spaces in your life (at and beyond Vassar) have felt this way?
- ➤ Is there anything else about your Vassar Voices experience that has not come up yet that you'd like to mention?
- ➤ Do you have any questions for me?

Confidentiality

Given that Vassar is such a small campus and at times responses to the interview questions contained sensitive information about institutional hierarchies and about specific individuals with whom they interacted at these events, confidentiality for the interviewees was an essential part of my method. At the beginning of each interview I asked how the interviewee felt about having their name attached to this project, and then again at the end I asked if there was anything specific that they said that they want to be entirely anonymous, or that they would be

comfortable having with their name. I wanted to leave that open in case a large number of people did say that they were comfortable with having their name used, but at the end it was an even split. For the sake of consistency, I have opted to redact identifying characteristics and use pseudonyms instead. However, I am extremely grateful to those who volunteered their time and reflections, both to this thesis and to Vassar Voices.

Merits

As outlined in chapter 3, the primary goal of Vassar Voices was to create an alternative space, a space where we could embody testimonial authority as a mode of epistemic resistance while also creating the conditions for the *latent commons*. To review, the latent commons are "fugitive moments of entanglement in the midst of institutional alienation…They bubble with unrealized possibilities; they are elusive."[148]They start from a place of listening and "a common program… that we could all share progress" and become "relational… sites at which to seek allies[149]

My hope was that Vassar Voices events would be like a bubble (fugitive moment of entanglement) within the dominant culture of Vassar (in the midst of institutional alienation), within which we could share vulnerably (claim testimonial authority), model different ways of engagement (start with listening and a common program), and generally foster an environment that was equalizing and ripe for connection (epistemic resistance, disruptions, and potentiality to seek allies) . We tried to achieve this by asking questions that lent themselves to sharing stories about participants' lives beyond their hierarchical function roles within the college, and putting

---

[148] Tsing, 255.
[149] Tsing, 254.

together groups of people who otherwise would not have interacted in their daily orbits. The

experiences of most interviewees captured various aspects of these goals in meaningful ways. I

will now provide a few examples of each.

<u>Culture Shift</u>

Many people commented on how unique Vassar Voices was for being a space which was

explicitly for connecting with the other people in the room. One participant, a professor,

described Vassar as full of

> work addicts-- the pressure of academia, the amount of work, class time with
> students, the publication and the service, brings people usually to maybe not have
> time to communicate [vulnerably]… We talk so much about Vassar as a
> community and probably that's why we talk so much about it, because we don't
> have it… because everybody is so busy busy busy busy… Vassar is a space of
> perfectionism, a place that is highly selective for super achievers.

Another participant expressed a similar lack of focus on connection on campus. We'll call her

Mary. Mary is a staff member, and had lived in the same place for 30 years before moving to

Poughkeepsie to work at Vassar, and she said that it felt "very weird to suddenly be in a place

where people did not know her, would not necessarily get her jokes and really did not know

anything about her." When she heard about Vassar Voices, she decided to participate because it

"would be a good way to come out and open my mouth after spending 6 months being

completely terrified." Reflecting on the experience as a whole, Mary said, "I really needed it…

It's something we never make time to do… Everybody is so busy working." That both Mary and

this professor have experienced this disconnection from their colleagues is notable. While

students experience disconnection as well, it is often for different reasons, which I will analyze

in the next section.

In the context of this culture of busyness and lack of time for connection, many participants commented on the informality and spontaneity of Vassar Voices as different from this culture. Mary said that when she told her story, "nobody knew what they were doing and I didn't know what I was doing and I didn't really know what to expect... It felt more intimate because… and there weren't really any expectations." Another participant, who we'll call Joe, is a professor. Joe was an attendee at our first event, and shared

> I love that they were so well organized but organic at the same time and it felt like you really could -- well obviously the storytellers had to prepare a story but other people could just walk into the room and… just hear another story and feel the truth and the beauty and the pain and reach a deeper understanding of what it means to be human on Vassar campus… I did tell a story in response to a story and I don't even remember it but I totally expected to sit in that room and listen and didn't know I was going to be so moved to want to share something of my own that that story called forth.

Two other interviewees were also in this room in which Joe unexpectedly shared his own story, and this moment was equally as moving for both of them

In addition to this lack of time for connection, many participants also noted that having interactions centered on storytelling fostered a different way of engagement, one more focused on listening and collaboration rather than on academic debate or evaluation. One student, who we'll call Serena, was a storyteller in May. Serena said the storytelling model felt different

> opposed to conversations I have at Vassar where we always interrupt each other and go off of each other. There are a lot of times where people do not get to finish what they started off to say. With storytelling you don't get feedback until you are done giving your whole piece. So that difference, in the way that people had a chance to really reflect before responding to me… that was really nice.

Similarly, another participant said, "I think we need to work on appreciation, I think there is something about the storytelling project that provides opportunity for that." This notion of listening more deeply, listening to appreciate or to hear rather than to critique or respond, was

shared by many interviewees. Similarly, Joe commented on the collaborative and open-minded

nature of interaction that he experienced at all 3 events:

> We were being creative together… we were all trying in those spaces build a
> stronger community… somebody says something and it triggers an idea in
> somebody else's mind and you start talking and other people chip in and it grows
> into something much bigger. I love just throwing out an idea and seeing if it has
> any resonance with other people… For me the special thing about those spaces
> is… engaging with one another as individuals who were open to engaging with
> and responding to ideas without judgement or censorship or self-censorship or
> shaming or those things that break down communication and understanding
> between people.

While some spaces at Vassasr are rooted in this sort of collaborative creation, many,

especially the academic and professional ones, are not.

Strengthening Community

With these values in mind, we strove to create as much novelty in each room as possible

– partially by creating combinations of people who otherwise would not interact, and then, for

those who already knew each other, by encouraging the sharing of stories that reveal aspects of

their lives that they would not typically bring into academic or professional spaces. At the root of

all of this is the vulnerability of sharing, with strangers and colleagues or peers alike. Nearly

every interviewee mentioned this aspect of the model.

Vulnerability, as a word, was mentioned at least once (often many more) in each of my #

interviews. To share a few favorites -- "what this space does is to set a time and place for being

vulnerable with each other, which is not something that would happen all the time"; another said

that Vassar Voices gets at a "particular community-building based in sharing out of

vulnerability"; and one storyteller said "it was a very special experience to be with colleagues

and students in a space where people talk about themselves in a way that is very different from

the way people talk about themselves in an academic setting, this was a very informal and intimate space where it felt like [telling an intimate story] was appropriate."

This last quote came from a different professor, who we'll call Nick. Nick told a story in May because he was in the same room as Joe in January. He says that he "told a story about something that happened 20 years ago that I'd never told anyone before, in fact I haven't even thought about it since 1998." He said that this event was not too big a stretch for him, though. He considers storytelling to be a central part of his pedagogy in the classroom, and says that he will often tell stories to illuminate more challenging material. He says, "I think in a smaller way I do a version of this when I have lunch or chat with students in my office. We tell stories, but [Vassar Voices gave me] the opportunity to listen more deeply, not just to snippets, but to the way people articulate a more though-out version of how they wanted to tell the story, and the opportunity to do that myself."

This theme of telling uncommon stories ran through many interviews, especially from the storytellers. Many referred to a specific question in the workshop, in which storytellers are given a random word and asked to tell a story about it. This question was designed to get at exactly what this participant talked about:

> My word was attention, I think with a guided prompt like that, that is way more open ended and will prompt a story that you might not feel otherwise (like icebreaker questions, tell me an interesting fact about yourself -- those icebreaker questions feel a little more cached) - having a prompt that was a little more open ended, thought provoking, totally random - meant that I shared something that I would not have shared in just a check-in question, and probably heard something that I may not have heard in just a check in question.

The other workshop prompt, where storytellers are asked to list 10 characteristics about themselves, but then to cross out the first 5 that came to mind, also came up in Serena's interview when she was asked how she chose her story.

> I think it had to do with the workshop, I don't know if it was just me but I had no idea what I was going to write about when I went into the workshop -- did I want to talk about sexual assault? Family? Faith? The story I finally settled on was a combination of family, small element of religious faith, and I think I settled on it because the facilitator said to focus on the last 5 things and I realized that religious faith and family were at the back where as sexual assault was more readily at the front (understandable so) and I realized that I had never told this story before, not in a narrative way that explained how I felt.

Another student, who we'll call Caleb, told a story at the May event. He said that he was "really enamored with… specifically how we do the brainstorming session -- the part about choosing the story from the bottom 4 characteristics, really got at parts of their selves that are not their 'public identity.' Especially at Vassar there is not a lot of movement across categories of identities, this was a cool and unique way to get at and address that factor." This notion of a polished, 'public identity' came up again later in Serena's interview. She said,

> Every part of it was different from a normal conversation because these were people that I did not know at all. Which was the other scary part of it -- these people did not get the chance to know any other thing about me (like I did not introduce myself, hi I am so and so, I study these things) so I did not get to portray my strengths first or what my good points are, I just jump right into a story about me maybe not being the best big sister, so that was different in a room of strangers. It was not how I would introduce myself to new people. But the expectations of the space helped with that. People knew this was a storytelling space so they went in without judgement -- the facilitator had mentioned that it was a safe space and we are not judging one another. And it was performative, storytelling is performative, so that offset 'oh I am telling complete strangers this not so proud story,' or at least a story I did not like - telling it to strangers is offset by the fact that the event is already called storytelling.

Serena's awareness of her unfamiliarity with the other people in the room gets at another common topic in the interviews. Many people talked about the uniqueness of sitting in a room of strangers. One participant said, "usually when you set aside an hour to talk to somebody, it's typically somebody you know, and there's a reason for it. So this was different in the reason, that you have an hour and a half to sit with somebody you don't know." This difference was felt equally by professors, students, and administrators – and the universality of this observation will

soon begin to point out some of the shortcomings of the model. But first, some positive

reflections.

Caleb was paired with a faculty member to share work during the workshop. He says that

the model "definitely sets up a possibility for the older people in his Vassar life to be vulnerable

and share intimate things with me that he otherwise would not, it gives an added dimension to

our relationship and that may set stage for future conversations like this." Likewise, a professor

comments that "we are somewhat cloistered in our own spaces - I rarely move out of [my

academic building] because of work and because I choose to commute [from New York City] so

that prevents me from really merging with others… I am just here for work. So I think that has

prevented me from establishing larger conversations with people not in my department." While

this may seem like a rather specific example, the idea of Vassar as a place solely for work or

learning is ubiquitous for many reasons.

Finally, I'd like to highlight once again the experience of Joe. Joe, for part of 2019, was

also serving as a senior level administrator. Many students knew him by name only, due to his

emails. Again, 3 of my interviewees were in the same room in January, and said that most of the

students in the room were first-year students, who may be even more intimidated by senior-level

administrators. Joe said,

> It's so rare for a person in a high administrative role to be able to sit in a room and
> have people be open to your presence as just another person in the room that
> shares interesting roles for the campus instead of somebody you want to blame or
> get something from, so I found it an extraordinary space to sit down with students
> and some other employees and faculty and hear other people's stories and then the
> conversation that followed from that to be an equal partner in that rather than [in a
> senior administrative role.]… I was in a powerful role on campus and people
> perceive you as that powerful figure, but I thirst not to be in these powerful roles.
> And even in faculty I wanted to sit and have creative idea generating but if I say
> something it gets perceived as the administration's policy. So being able to get out

> of where I had to be that administrator and I could be me and be creative with
> other people and engaged with other people really fed my soul.

These interviews were music to my ears. In so many cases, we'd succeeded in creating that

alternative space, that *latent commons*. The norms and rules were suspended to allow for

vulnerable connection across function roles vulnerably. However, the positionality of those

whose interviews were highlighted here points to some broader shortcomings within the project.

Limitations

Of those who did not experience the liberating vulnerability and connection we'd hoped

to foster, many knew why and stated their reasons. I will now draw parallels between the

interview data which pointed out the limits of Vassar Voices and Tsing's characterizations of the

latent commons.

Institutional Barriers

In chapter 2, I mentioned Tsing's negative characterizations of the latent commons: that

they "are not exclusive human enclaves… are not good for everyone… don't institutionalize

well… [and] cannot redeem us."[150] I will be writing primarily about institutional limitations. To

elaborate, Tsing says that institutions cannot "capture the effervescence of the latent commons.

The latent commons moves in law's interstices; it is catalyzed by infraction, infection,

inattention -- and poaching."[151] Vassar Voices exists within the limitations of Vassar College,

and most of the barriers that participants experienced at the events can be connected either to

cultural, functional, or physical barriers within Vassar.

---

[150] Tsing, 255.
[151] Tsing, 255.

By far, the biggest limitation was related to role or function area on campus. The power dynamics inherent in these distinctions did, despite our best efforts, have an impact on the space. One administrator, who works in an office which provides confidential support to students, said that while the sentiment of equalizing the space is important, she "cannot ignore boundaries, especially in role on campus as a potential [provider of confidential support]. It's not fair to assume that a student in these spaces will never or has never come to this office seeking [confidential] support from me." While this is more function-based rather than explicitly hierarchical, Mary was limited from fully participating in the space due to a hierarchical relationship. She said,

> And then the second time it was really different because the participants were really different -- my boss [name redacted] from the music library came to hear me, and there were many people there from different parts of the college … it felt like the stakes were really high because there were faculty members there and there were people who I worked with -- it felt like there were a lot of expectations.

A similar power dynamic played out between students and non-students. Serena said

> Before I even started telling my story, I was really afraid I'd get emotional before telling it... I did not know anyone in the room except for [one administrator]… but I didn't want to totally break down in front of her. There were also no students in the room, it was all administrators, and I didn't know how to react.

She elaborated that her concerns are based on the evaluative nature of the relationships between students and faculty, and in some cases students and administrators in regard to on-campus jobs or extracurricular work. This is similar to the evaluative relationship between Mary and her boss.

This dynamic was also noted by Nick, who said that he felt "the storytellers I saw seemed a little bit nervous… particularly the one I went to that was a storytelling by [two students], and the audience was mostly faculty -- and maybe that is why the students were

anxious, but it was a very warm and supportive discussion afterwards." Nick was

referring to the same room where Joe said he felt that roles were transcended, but Nick

observed that the students in the room were not as comfortable as he and Joe were. This

same dynamic played out in the workshop, where another faculty member, who was

paired with a student shared that

> at the beginning I felt very tentative, I was the only faculty member there and I
> was trying not to speak too much and not to make anybody else uncomfortable,
> especially not the students there… the student I shared stories with in the exercise,
> it was great, it was great to have what felt like a very comfortable space to be
> candid with each other, but it definitely took e a little bit of time to feel
> comfortable in the space and I think that's because of status stuff.

This professor's awareness for the "status stuff," even in that space, yet again speaks to how that

status stuff is differentially felt across the hierarchies present. She, and the other faculty members

and senior level administrators shared the sentiment of feeling uncomfortable or tentative at the

beginning, but comfortable by the end; however, the students and staff at no point moved

through that discomfort. These barriers embody not so much how the institution failed to

"capture the effervescence" of Vassar Voices, but how Vassar Voices could not transcend the

hierarchical confines of the institution.

Aside from this particular institutional barrier, which was noted by many interviewees

from all positionalities, a few other things were mentioned, each only by one person but I believe

these experiences of Vassar Voices are still worth acknowledging here. While many experienced

Vassar Voices as a space that was different from dominant Vassar culture, 2 people commented

that the shadow of that dominant culture was still present. Nick said,

> I think there is something about the temporary nature of the space that makes it
> work the way it does. If this were a storytelling group that met, the same people,
> over a week or month I am not sure it would occupy…. it felt like a space of
> imagination and community that was rich in part because we knew it was not

>   something we would continue, not in the same way at least. And people did step
>   out of some of their everyday ways of being in the college in their roles in
>   relationship to each other… I think partly we were able to do it because it was this
>   temporary autonomous zone

This comment captures the tension between the experience of the space itself then being located

within that culture, which still prevails. It notes that the space itself accomplished much of what

we set out for it to accomplish, but that it is still just a drop in the bucket of dominant Vassar

institutional culture.

Similarly, Caleb commented on the way that the culture of Vassar Voices fits into

"cancel culture."[152] They shared that while the workshop was effective at bringing out stories

that otherwise would not be shared, it was still limited by a

>   phenomenon at Vassar where people are really scared to say the wrong thing, a
>   really strong cancel culture, and this was also present in the space, this space was
>   not immune from cancel culture. I did not feel like I could say anything that I
>   would not otherwise say on campus (but I don't know if that is even possible), but
>   it did de-center the conversations about 'who is the most oppressed' and I was
>   able to connect with who was in the room in love and compassion beyond those
>   sorts of backgrounds.

I see this, again, as a comment which locates Vassar Voices within Vassar's institutional culture.

Despite its successes, there was still a shadow over it. And, once the event/workshop ended,

Vassar more broadly had not instantaneously changed.

Moving away from cancel culture and into cultural difference, Serena commented on her

experience sharing a story from her perspective as an international student. Serena is Indian, and

her storytelling process was especially significant because it allowed her to take an experience

from her childhood and reframe it in a healing way. Still, sharing it with a group of strangers was

---

[152] Cancel culture is essentially group shaming where support for and communication with a group or individual is withdrawn after they say or do something offensive

challenging because she was expecting the same type of response she has historically gotten when discussing this back home. Serena shares,

> One of the things that really helped me was hearing from [an administrator who has a similar cultural upbringing] that telling the story back home or to anyone from home would be seen as selfish because you are making somebody else's [experience] about yourself. It brings in this dynamic from back home about how females are seen as nurturers and how we are not allowed to have the space to break down - because women are expected to be more emotional but are also expected to take care of the household and I'm the older sister. So it was really nice to hear from her that she understood how I could not tell the story back home so I appreciated that I could have had that space.

This demonstrates that the emotional labor already done by members of marginalized groups on campus still occurs in these spaces. Caleb commented on this, beyond the context of Vassar Voices within Vassar but with a more global lens, and said, "this kind of vulnerability is tied to class privilege), I have so many friends from when I was younger who have a complete inability to be vulnerable… It feels like a very elite sort of bubble, sitting here talking about our feelings but because we have this privilege of being employed by or attending Vassar and having safety and security to sit here and talk about our emotions." I do not think Caleb is wrong; to take the time out of our work and school days to do this experiment *is* a privilege. However, I interpreted Caleb's statement to mean that claiming testimonial authority at Vassar Voices is a privilege. And that I fully agree with. To create a space where testimonial authority is as close as possible to guaranteed is quite the privilege, especially in the context of the layers of epistemic violence upon which academia is built.

I also think the different experiences of participants from marginalized identities who did not feel the freedom and liberation that those with privileged identities did speaks to the work that remains to be done there. As I outlined in chapter 1, believe that epistemology and methodology from within academic institutions extend beyond to inform social and political life

as well. I would hope that this project may have been an early model that, with feedback and adjustments, could be the foundation for a world in which testimonial authority is not a privilege.

Scaling Up

Tsing is a proponent of story as knowledge, but notes the tension between storytelling and the expected scalability of data within positivist social scientific epistemologies. She says that "to listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method…. But we have a problem with scale. A rush of stories cannot be neatly summed up. Its scales do not nest neatly; they draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos. These interruptions elicit more stories. This is the rush of stories' power as a science.[153]

Vassar Voices scaled up significantly between the January and May events – in number of attendees, number of storytellers, number of collaborators on and off campus, and amount of publicity, to name a few ways. One symptom of this increased attention was that we had more storytellers than we had physical spaces for stories to be told in. Our solution to this was to put two storytellers in each room, we called it "co-sharing." In the best-case scenario, the stories would complement one another, and further highlight the uniqueness and insubstitutability of life-stories.[154] However, what happened more often was that the storytellers did not feel fully heard, or the attendees were overwhelmed by the lack of processing time for each.

We also had to put a few of these pairs into rooms that did not embody our goal to create a space that was alternative to the academic or professional daily functions of the college. All the interviewees who had been in one of these rooms commented on this. To quote a few: "we were in the round couches in the library, they did not feel private enough. We could hear snippets of

---

[153] Tsing, 37.
[154] Cavarero, 2.

the other stories happening around us and I think that made people hesitant to share"; and "I came into it feeling like it would be the same as the first time and it was in the library and there were tons of people - I don't think it was worse, but it was different in a way I didn't expect it to be different"; and "there was this long table… but I'd prefer a round table, all around the circle would create a sense of better participation. or a more open space, brighter, not one of these classroom boxes that we run into - it looked more like a business meeting." I fully agree that some of the spaces we used, particularly at the May event, were not conducive to the project.

<u>Not for everyone</u>

Lastly, Tsing also wrote that the commons are not for everyone: "every instance of collaboration makes room for some and leaves out others… the best we can do is aim for 'good-enough' worlds, where 'good-enough' is always imperfect and under revision."[155] I did see this dynamic play out only in a few cases, during the interviews. However, I am not treating this as a failure at inclusion, but rather as an incongruence of approach to the space. There were a handful of storytellers at our second event who simply were not very moved by Vassar Voices. What was most notable about these is that, during the interview, the question "Tell me about your experience at the event. How did you feel? How did the space itself feel?" typically solicited the longest and most vulnerable responses. However, these quotes are not excerpts but rather the entire responses from these two storytellers: "It was okay, I thought it was informative and they were clear, I don't have any specific comments - the comment is yeah, it was fine," and "it's fun - we were in kind of a not great [physical] space. But it was nice. Storytelling is a good icebreaker, right? So it's a good way to start the conversation." I do not think it is worthwhile to

---

[155] Tsing, 255.

attempt to extrapolate or hypothesize why this occurred, but it is worth noting that, while most of these interviews were deeply informative, some simply were not.

Reflections from the Planning Group

As I mentioned before, I also conducted an interview with 2 members of the planning group. I have not included any quotes from this interview in the above sections because the perspective that these two students have on the project is from a completely different vantage point. They have been in the thick of it since day 1, creating and imagining and building it. They certainly have a grasp on the goals and values because, again, we co-wrote the process. They also have been in every session of every event, as facilitators or coordinators, and have more breadth of exposure to the event and workshop spaces than a single storyteller who is in each at a maximum one time per event.

While I did not include the following comments above, I do think they are worth including. The planning group represents a microcosm of the entire project. The merits and limits alike are all captured in this one interview, but under a magnifying glass – the merits demonstrate our purest intentions, and the limitations were seemingly insurmountable. This next section will mirror the previous sections, going through the merits and limitations. I will not provide much analysis of each topic, since I have already done that. Instead, I will more often let the quotes speak for themselves.

<ins>Merits</ins>

The quotes that follow, I feel, embody different characteristics of our planning group space as a latent commons.

On experiences in the event spaces – both Y and Z spoke very positively and affectionately,

even, about their experiences. One said "it brought together people from different corners," and

then told a story about one of their facilitation experiences where they sustained a connection

with a previous stranger:

> I still talk to the people who were at that story and they tell me that they also think
> about that story -- I love the atmosphere, it was a small group, we were outside on
> this little picnic blanket and it was warm, nobody else was really watching us.
> Then [the speaker] started, he was really unsure how to start and then he did start
> and we were enraptured, and the word *comunitas* does not even begin to describe
> that but we were all in such a good wavelength with each other We did not all
> have the exact same experience with each other but we were at the same
> wavelength, and there were so many things that I would not have known about
> these people and would not have felt. There was one guy who writes the Vassar
> Quarterly and I see him around and I say hi. Once he looked at me and recognized
> me and didn't know whether he should approach or not. The first time I saw him I
> was like 'where do I know you from?' And then I made the connection and
> remembered the story he shared.

I asked how they knew that everyone was on the same wavelength and they replied, "I could just

kinda tell. It was definitely not a moment of connection in like a linguistic or a rational sense, it's

hard to explain the air, like the affect. But it's true! It's so true, one of those 'it's something in

the air' kinda moments." Then the second interviewee present shared a similar story:

> Y: it was one of those things where by some miracle all of us had a connection. I
> mean her story was about a teacher who I think committed suicide and all of us
> had teachers in our lives recently who had died, and/or wanted to be a teacher.
> Like [a student] was in that space and wants to be a teacher, I had just lost a
> teacher from primary school, [a professor] was there who was and is a teacher in
> that sense, and [a student-facing administrator] was there. So everyone had
> teachers. Teachers was a big role in their life/they lost a teacher. And I don't
> know if I want to make it so simple as in that's why we were all moved, but I
> don't know [the speaker] had this way, I wouldn't even say that her voice was
> special or something but there was some kind of sorrow in her voice that…
> because [the administrator] and I got up at the end and hugged her and I also felt
> like I wanted to get up and give her a hug, not like "you poor thing you went
> through this and I went through this' but more because there was something
> sorrowful in her voice. And everyone was moved to tears at the end after we were
> just talking. Like wow, people had such an impact on you and you think about all
> those people in your life who had an impact on you and how you want to have an

impact

Z: I'm thinking about how you said that it's not possible how everybody has a connection to this story. I think that about [the story excerpted right above this one] too. How did we all somehow have something connected to this? Is it because by faith there are these people who are connected? Or is it something else that will make anyone.... Because I've been in stories where that just has not happened

Y: even just in general when I've been at storytelling things, I've literally sat there and been like "I feel nothing I want to look a my watch right now." I don't know what it is. I think… it was like "what were the odds"

Z: same, that's the same question, what were the odds. At one point [the speaker made a joke] because all of us without exception had a connection

Immediately after this, the two conversed about an experience that one had with a person

they already knew.

Y: 'it's funny how most of the people you kinda know because some people you've had more rationalized interactions'

Z: 'what do you mean by more rationalized?'

Y: "'I knew [a speaker] from meetings, I did not know the more human in him. We've had some intense disagreements, there were points where I hated him and he hated me, with certainty. But from there our entire relationship completely changed, completely'.

Z: 'you think that story session was the turning point in your relationship?'

Y: 'I was getting less annoyed with him because I wanted to listen to his story'

This brings me nicely to my next point which is about our shared common ground, our

foundational assumption "that people will just connect if given the space." The conversation was

as follows:

Y: I was disillusioned with that because I didn't connect [with one group member] after so many times of us creating that space, and at the end my mind went to 'I don't think it's the engineering that is the problem, it might be that I can't connect w this person no matter how hard I try'… the rift between us poked a whole in the whole bubble of our foundational assumptions

Z: I don't think you can connect with everyone

Y: so what was the point of VV?

S: I think there are so many people you can connect w but who you aren't given the opportunity to"

Y: okay yeah, and the stories that we tell, like political goals of certain stories…at Vassar there is a specific goal of storytelling and that is usually identity-based but

I said in our workshops we were really pushing away from that
S: oh yeah, sometimes storytelling is also used to market, we weren't doing that

This anecdote then brought our conversation over to the topic of the group dynamics. Much of

our conversation centered around confrontation and entanglement. I think we reached this point

because we had bonded enough as a group and become invested enough in the project to feel

comfortable pushing back against one another, whereas in a one-off group setting that would be

harder.

Z: The first semester of us doing VV was a lot of building trust with each other,
which took a lot of time for me personally, but I felt so much trust and love. it
also I think exposed different social dynamics that were… like there were points
where I think it was the men vs the women or there was a point where it was
maybe like the POC vs the white voices… it was nice in how it took different
turns, like we were like I think I'm going in this turn and it was like BOOM what
about this and it became super, I think building the workshop was one of the most
exciting things
Y: We also were not afraid to have those confrontations. I had a confrontation
with Antonella, I had a confrontation with [another group member], I remember
Antonella and [another group member] having confrontations,… I think the
spaces of confrontation helped our group get closer. We were at the point where
none of us could leave. We were in passionate confrontation… There'd be these
pauses of rage and after the meeting we'd go back and talk between ourselves in
different groups -- about taking charge, conversations with [a group member], the
three of us, or you [Antonella] and me -- these confrontations that would bring us
closer to the person who was confronting us but we'd work through it because
we'd never quit because of a confrontation. We had a bigger goal
Z: we were really entangled, we were passionate about the project and couldn't
leave, we were also passionate about each other and [another group member]
couldn't leave, we couldn't leave, Antonella couldn't leave.
Y: the thought never crossed my mind to leave the group and have the group
continue without me, until the end
Z: but that's the burnout

The mention of burnout brings me right to the limitations.

Limitations

Much like the merits, the limitations mirror those of the larger interview pool. A big topic was

physical space:

Y: Our assumption was that people will connect naturally but don't have spaces to do that, a space for people to be together

Z: yes I would not remove the deliberateness that we had

Y: but we did not manufacture the connections because we were operating under the assumption that these connections were happening anyways

Z: they needed a little push. I think there are spaces on campus that have that potential but are not being used -- like the [academic department] lounge is so cozy and it could be used, or you know old bookstore I don't know there are little spots there where it's a reflective sink-y space, is the [academic department] lounge like that?"

Y: Cozy vibe definitely changes things, like rugs and couches and fresh air. I feel like f you are sinking into something like grass or a couch you want to sink into your thoughts, and if you are stretched out you are relaxed

Z: as opposed to some gross place like the college center 240

Y: I think the way your body is affects the way your thoughts are going to be. My mom always says not to lounge while doing work, which is true, but I can't get reflective if I'm not lounging

And on a related note, these two planners commented on how the responsibility of facilitated

affected their presence in the space – "I had the facilitator hat on… I was not able to just fully be

there because the first few minutes I was like did I switch on the damn recorder and then I

couldn't let the story seep in. We took a minute to sit in silence and appreciate it and let the story

sink in but I was counting down in my head." Facilitating also gave them a different perspective

on how group dynamics played out among attendees.

Z: how engaged everyone else around you is affects how engaged you will be. Not that that it's the main thing that does it but I think if everyone else is fully in that space with you, you'll be in that space. It's not a guarantee you'll be in that space but it's a big factor.

Y: yeah I think if one person gets in that space, everyone gets in that space… I remember talking to [a professor who did not follow directions to randomize rooms] afterwards, I said we gave you these things so you would separate and he said he wanted to connect with his people. They were in a different space. Their space was to connect with each other on a different level rather than connecting with someone new. Whichever space they were in they would not have taken anyone with them into that space, and that's not what we were trying to create. Nobody was, because they weren't starting from the same place

The notion of coming from the same starting place is central to the latent commons, and the two facilitators said that in the rooms where groups entered together, that connection they talked about in the merits section did not happen.

Finally, we closed by reflecting on the final days of Vassar Voices. Since they are not as related to the previous sections, I will spare the quotes. However, some key topics were burnout, the shifting of our weekly meeting time to be in a classroom space with administrators present, and the increasing logistical planning burden as we scaled up our event size – each of these relates to institutionalizing and scaling up which, as Tsing says, are not characteristics of the latent commons.

Reflections

To conclude this section, Vassar Voices in both its merits and limitations, acts as latent commons. It is a site where people can connect spontaneously, build new connections, engage differently with one another, share vulnerably, and practice deep listening. Likewise, the limitations were almost entirely related to the limitations of Vassar as an institution (culture, physical space, or the location of Vassar Voices within its structure). To qualify the limitations – I am beyond grateful for all this space explored; I consider this a massive learning experience for creating more spaces like this moving forward, and I am encouraged by one interviewee who said "You asked what my relationship to Vassar Voices is and the options were attendee, storyteller and facilitator. There was no option for fan but if there had been, I'd be a Vassar Voices fan."

I'd like to close this section by sharing how beautiful it was to hear the stories that people shared with me during their interviews. Particularly in the question about other spaces that remind people of Vassar Voices, I was told stories about friends from grad school who meet up at a conference once a year and stay up all night telling stories to one another ("because how else do you catch up with somebody for what they've been doing for the last 12 months without telling tragic or riotously funny stories"), a family tradition of telling stories around the dinner table at holidays, the annual Vassar Posse Plus retreat, and even the experience of developing a new multidisciplinary program.

In these moments of storytelling, my heart felt so full. I kept thinking of Tsing's closing line: "In this kind of storytelling, stories should never end, but rather lead to further stories."[156]

---

[156] Tsing, 287.

Conclusion

The Recap

Applications: Restorative Justice and Dialogue Process

Final Thoughts

Epilogue

Recap

To recap everything so far, I firmly believe that storytelling can be used as a tool to squeeze through the gaps in the epistemology of the American Dream and create constructive, generative spaces of collective vulnerability and individual healing. This is necessary in the face of the epistemic oppression (through silencing tactics such as testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering). It is essential to understand first that this epistemology, that is, what counts as valid knowledge, expands beyond the academy into other facets of social and political life (particularly along lines which amplify existing social inequalities), and second, to understand the roots of this epistemology in positivism and the unity of the sciences. Only once this is unpacked and examined can space be opened up in the academy to claim (perhaps emotional) testimonial authority and legitimate resistant knowledge projects.

Ahmed and Stewart attribute part this epistemology to the positive affect of the American Dream. They write about how the American Dream, which is deeply intertwined with these systems, is exclusive, elusive, and an impossibility for all, including those who appear to exist within its illusion. Ahmed writes specifically about how the American Dream is dependent upon constant positive affect – which is impossible because human beings inevitable experience a whole range of emotions and affects – so to maintain its illusion it denies and suppresses negative affect. This positive affect is also absurd in a present which is characterized by precarity, as Tsing, Stewart and Brown all acknowledge. Additionally, this suppression and denial impacts systemically disenfranchised groups the most, and alienates them further from the illusory American Dream.

Because of this cognitive dissonance between illusion and reality, Stewart and Tsing write about a need for "disruptions." These can be moments in which this deviation from the

normative positive affect are undeniable, in the case of an accident or a national disaster, or "fugitive moments" in which a group of people, for whatever reason, experience a different way of being together in which new possibilities for affective expression and action emerge. The rest of my thesis focuses on those fugitive moments – or, the latent commons. Specifically, it focuses on my (unknowing) attempt to create the latent commons through the Vassar Voices project.

After 10 interviews with Vassar Voices participants, I found that the experiences varied widely – for some it was liberating, soul-nourishing; for others, stressful and alienating. Often this divide occurred along the lines of privilege within the college. However, I think that in some ways this speaks even further to Tsing's characterization of the latent commons in that they do not institutionalize well nor do they scale up well. That is not to say that the critiques I received were not valid – they absolutely were, if this thesis has made any one point, it is that critiques based on personal experience are valid. I am accepting those for what they were, considering this the beginning of a larger brain project to keep practicing how to create these spaces, and feeling grateful for the support I had in starting it.

Applications: Restorative Justice and Dialogue Process

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my engagement with the groups I mentioned in my introduction (the Mediation Center of Dutchess County and the Vassar Intergroup Dialogue Collective) and my access to my resources (library, books) came to an abrupt end. Additionally, due to the massive shift to doing schoolwork via Zoom from my childhood home, my time management took a hit and I was unable to put in the extra legwork to complete this section. I had been so deeply looking forward to it – in fact, one early iteration of this thesis focused almost entirely on the relationships between storytelling, Intergroup Dialogue, and Restorative Justice. However, I have included all the sources I was planning to use in the additional readings. For more on Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices, see Pranis, Johnstone and Van Ness, and Zehr. For more on Intergroup Dialogue, see Maxwell et. al., Spooner, Grande, Harro, hooks, and Friere. Thank you for understanding and I am still looking forward to continuing to explore these relationships beyond this thesis.

Final Reflections

Lastly, I'd like to leave some space to reflect on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Our society is experiencing the largest disruption of day-to-day life that has happened at least during my lifetime and, based on my conversations with older adults, most likely for longer than that. (The fact that I am writing the final sections of this thesis from my parents' house, which I would have been outraged and in utter disbelief to hear even just a few weeks ago, speaks to this). Yet, it *seems* as though the need for social distancing, self-quarantine and distance learning and remote work directly obstructs the potentiality for the coming together of people which this entire thesis has advocated for.

The conditions of this pandemic also highlight many existing inequalities – differential access to healthcare and testing due to structural racism and income inequality; the low wages paid to the essential workers who risk their lives every day to keep life-sustaining businesses running and to treat those who are ill and dying from this virus, and the dominant demographics of these workers (people of color and women); inadequate action against conditions in prisons and ICE detention centers which make those spaces hotspots for spread of and inadequate treatment for the virus; disrespect (fueled by our own president) for female governors who issue 'stay-at-home' orders, culminating in demonstrations which put the health of many at risk; and the discourse within our own campus community surrounding access to the conditions and tools necessary for academic success during distance learning, among many other injustices amplified by this crisis.

This is also a time in which voices resisting the information from authority figures on preventing spread of the virus are very loud. Some are flagrantly disregarding social distancing guidelines to protest stay-at-home orders, claiming that government-enforced social distancing is

an overreach of the state; others are intentionally spreading information on the internet which undermines the credibility (yes, there it is again) of medical experts. It's also worth pointing out that a vast majority of these protesters are white.[157] I must clarify that politically-motivated skepticism is *not* epistemic resistance, although it may portray itself as such. What it boils down to is that this pandemic has been politicized, at the cost of the lives of our most medically vulnerable, a deeply disappointing situation that only underscores Trouillot's statement that "facts are never meaningless" and "facts are not created equal: the production of traces is always also the creation of silences."[158] In this case, the silences are the disproportionate number of essential workers, elderly, and immunocompromised who are dying from this virus.

All of that said, I hope that in this time of division, fear, and loss, we can harness this disruption as an opportunity to spark the *latent commons*. That once we dig through all the mud and sludge rising to the surface, we can find that emerging 'we'; that we can use the disruption as an opportunity to begin the work to right these injustices; that as this work begins, it is inclusive of *all* voices expressing their unique experiences of this time; that the healing from this can be collective and gentle; that it will break down the damaging aspects of the public/private divide (which in many ways is already being challenged by working from home and the lack of face-to-face interaction in public spaces); and that the emotional processing can occur openly without shame or invalidation. And, finally, that we will hold space for stories, and that this story-sharing can and will become the primary mode of discussing and documenting these times.

---

[157] This fact alone has drawn attention to the racial disparity on public protest. While peaceful, unarmed Black Lives Matters protesters are met with police brutality, white armed COVID protesters are not. I hope that this can be the beginning of a deeper reckoning with police violence in the US.
[158] Trouillot, 29.

Epilogue

I've attempted to sequentially enumerate the relationships between these ideas while also fully

recognizing and holding space for their complexity.

At times they wove together neatly,

and at others they remained knotted, beginnings and ends lost in the mass,

impossible to untangle.

Whether they are multiple containers, bridges between containers, or if this has set the

foundation for a new container altogether is still undetermined.

Thank you for indulging my swirling mass of ideas.

This has been a thesis.

<u>Works Cited</u>

"EPI Project Proposal – 'MattTalk.'" Google Document edited by Antonella DeCicci. 4 May

    2018. Accessed on my personal google drive, fall 2019.

"Workshop Plan." Google Document edited by Irfan Badruddin, Antonella DeCicci, Bryan

    Fotino, Ananya Suresh and Shreya Suresh. 7 December 2018. Accessed on our shared

    google drive, fall 2019.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Braude, Ann. "Religion and Women's Political Mobilization." In *Religion, the Secular, and the*

    Politics of Sexual Difference, ed. Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, 69-77. New York:

    Columbia University Press, 2013.

Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution.* Brooklyn: Zone

    Books, 2015.

Cady, Linell and Fessenden, Tracy. "Gendering the Divide: Religion, the Secular, and the

    Politics of Sexual Difference." In *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual*

    Difference, ed. Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, 3-25. New York: Columbia

    University Press, 2013.

Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood.* New York: Routledge, 2000.

Chemaly, Soraya. *Rage Becomes Her*. New York: Atria Books, 2018.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham: Duke University

    Press, 2019.

Davison, Andy and Hoffman, Mark N. *Interpreting Politics: Debating the Foundations and Objectives of Political Analysis*. Cornwall on Hudson: Sloan Publishing, 2020.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion: Selected Possibilities." *Sociological Inquiry* vol 45, no. 2-3 (April 1975): 280-307.

Hoganson, Kristin. "The Problem of Male Degeneracy and the Allure of the Philippines" in *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars,* 133-135. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Jakobsen, Janet R. and Pellegrini, Ann. "Bodies-Politics: Christian Secularism and the Gendering of U.S Policy." In *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. Eds. Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, 139-174. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Scott, Joan Wallach. "Secularism and Gender Equality." In *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. Ed. Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, 25-47. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Seigworth, Gregory J. and Gregg, Melissa. "An Inventory of Shimmers." In *The Affect Theory Reader.* Eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 1-25. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon, 1995.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Frontier in American History" and "The West and American Ideals." In *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. 1920. Accessed on Moodle at Vassar College in fall 2017 at http://xroads.Virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/.

Velshi, Ali. "Soraya Chemaly: 'Why would you automatically assume that this woman is lying?'" *MSNBC*, September 19, 2018. Accessed online October, 2018. https://www.msnbc.com/ali-velshi/watch/soraya-chemaly-why-would-you-automatically-assume-that-this-woman-is-lying-1324434499732.

Watkins, Megan. "Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect." In *The Affect Theory Reader*. Eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 269-287. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Additional Reading*

US Department of Education's National Commission on Excellence in Education. "A Nation at

    Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform." 1983. Accessed on Moodle at Vassar

    College in spring 2019.

Anker, Elisabeth R. "The Venomous Eye" in *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of*

    Freedom, 31-64. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Ayer, A.J., ed. *Logical Positivism*. New York: The Free Press, 1995.

Berardi, Franco. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy.* Los Angeles: Semiotext(e),

    2009.

Dotson, Kristie. "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia* 26 no.

    2 (2011): 236-257.

Dumit, Joseph. *Drugs for Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

Feyerabend, Paul. *Against Method*. (London: New Left Books, 1975.

____, *Farewell to Reason*. London: Verso, 1988.

Flatley, Jonathan. "Glossary: Affect, Emotion, Mood (Stimmung), Structure of Feeling."

    In *Affective Mapping*, 11-27. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. Accessed on

    Moodle at Vassar College spring 2019.

Friere, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th edition. Trans. Donaldo Macedo. New York:

    Continuum Press, 2005.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Philosophical Hermeneutics.* Berkeley: University of California Press,

    1977.

_____, *Truth and Method.* New York: Continuum, 1989.

Grande, Sandy. *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*. New York:

    Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.

Harro, Bobbie. "The Cycle of Liberation." 2008. Accessed on a shared google drive for the

    intergroup dialogue collective in spring 2020, original source unknown.

Hertz, Larry. "Hearing Vassar's Voices." *Vassar Quarterly* 115, no.2 (Summer 2019): 32-33.

    Accessed online in fall 2019 at

    https://read.nxtbook.com/vassar/vq/summer_2019/hearing_vassar_s_voices.html.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan: with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668.* Ed. Edwin

    Curley. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *Strangers in Their Own Land.* New York: The New Press, 2016.

hooks, bell. *all about love.* New York: William Morrow and Company, 2000.

Johnstone, Gerry and Van Ness, Daniel W. "The meaning of restorative justice." In *Handbook of*

    Restorative Justice, eds. Gerry Johnstone and Daniel W. Van Ness, 5-23. Portland:

    Willan, 2007.

Kidd, Ian James, Jose Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., eds. *The Routledge Handbook of*

    Epistemic Justice. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

    1962.

Lipsitz, George. "From Plessy to Ferguson." *Cultural Critique,* 90 (Spring 2015): 120- 139.

Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*. Ed. C.B. Macpherson. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980.

Luker, Kristin. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: research in an age of info-glut.*

    Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labor." in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Accessed

    on Moodle at Vassar college in spring 2019.

Maxwell, Kelly E., Biren (Ratnesh) A. Nagda, and Monita C. Thompson, eds. *Facilitating*

    Intergroup Dialogues: Bridging Differences, Catalyzing Change. Sterling, VA: Stylus

    Publishing, 2011.

McGrath, Sophie. "Vassar Voices connects attendees through narratives." *The Miscellany News.*

    January 30, 2019. Accessed October 2019 at

    https://miscellanynews.org/2019/01/30/news/vassar-voices-connects-attendees-through-

    narratives/.

Medina, Jose. *The Epistemology of Resistance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Mills, Charles. *The Racial Contract.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1997.

Nussbaum, Martha. *Frontiers of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Phelps, Talya. "Engaged Pluralism World Café addresses VC community climate." *The*

    Miscellany News. May 27, 2018. Accessed October 2019 at

    https://miscellanynews.org/2018/05/27/news/engaged-pluralism-world-cafe-addresses-

    vc-community-climate/.

Pranis, Kay. "Restorative Values." In *Handbook of Restorative Justice*, eds. Gerry Johnstone and

    Daniel W. Van Ness, 5-23. Portland: Willan, 2007.

____, *The Little Book of Circle Processes*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books 2005.

Quine, W. V. *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

____, "On Empirically Equivalent Systems of the World, *Erkenntnis* 9, no. 3 (November 1975):

    317.

Reese, William J. *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to 'No Child Left*

    Behind.' Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Basic Political Writings*. 2nd edition. Edited and translated by

    Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011.

Smith, Lisa and Egan, Meredith. *Being changed in the sharing: The power of story and*

    restorative justice. Harrisonburg, VA: Eastern Mennonite University Press, 2010.

Spooner, Marc and James McNinch. *Dissident Knowledge in Higher Education.* Regina:

    University of Regina Press, 2018.

Trattner, Walter I. *From Poor Law to Welfare State.* New York: The Free Press, 1999.

Zehr, Howard. *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002.

*additional reading contains any text that was mentioned in a footnote, or texts I've encountered in my time at
Vassar that more deeply informed connections to this work which were beyond the scope of this thesis