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CASE STUDY

Community-Engaged Podcasting with *Hidden Heroes in a Small Town*

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Abstract

This article shares a unique form of public humanities created with an ethical community partnership between a university team, a community nonprofit organization, and a museum. Our podcast focuses on the stories of the staff of an organization that is affiliated with the International Rescue Committee and that resettles refugees, asylees, and immigrants. Most of the staff were immigrants themselves and shared their experiences as both outsiders and insiders in the communities that they serve. Given this historical moment of intense anti-immigrant sentiment, we aim for this podcast to serve for conversation and education about immigration not only in our local area but also in similar small cities and towns. Our podcast takes place in an upstate region of New York, approximately 200 miles outside of the city. We share our experience of putting into practice the methods and concepts drawn from public humanities, critical community engagement, ethnic studies, digital humanities, and podcast studies.

Keywords: digital humanities; immigration; New York; podcast; storytelling

Hidden Heroes in a Small Town is a community-engaged podcast about the staff at the American Civic Association (ACA), an affiliate of the International Rescue Committee, who work to resettle refugees, asylees, and immigrants in upstate New York.[1] Fusing decolonial community engagement, participatory public humanities, and the form of a podcast, *Hidden Heroes* combines the skills and resources of a public university, a community nonprofit, and a museum to address questions of belonging and immigration. Almost all of the ACA staff are immigrants themselves who arrived from countries such as Uganda, Myanmar, St. Kitts, the Dominican Republic, and Lebanon, among others. After establishing themselves and their families in Binghamton, they worked at the ACA with a desire to give back to the community that they had become a part of. *Hidden Heroes* brings forward the voices of Hussein Adams, Laila Hernandez, Aye Aye Mar, Goretti Mugambwa, Edward Marte, and Tamar Boyajian, and their diverse ways of becoming civically engaged.

[1] https://www.immigrantswakeamerica.com/season-2.

Produced by a team at Binghamton University in partnership with the ACA and the Tenement Museum, with support from Humanities New York, *Hidden Heroes* is the second season of our podcast *Immigrants Wake America*.[2] We aim for this podcast project to generate (1) dialogue about diverse ways of listening, speaking, learning, and belonging and (2) teaching and programming on the topic of immigration for our partners and classes. We hope that others can use our experience of creating partnerships and collaboratively producing this podcast to explore more possibilities of community-engaged podcasting as a method for knowledge production.

1. Building trust as preproduction

Hidden Heroes is engaged research that foregrounds the voices and perspectives of a community and is produced *in partnership with* (not just "about") community partners in an end-to-end structure of collaboration. We were inspired by scholarship and practices from critical community engagement, ethnic studies, and studies of testimony and testimonio. These fields intersect in a mission to re-center peoples and perspectives that have been marginalized or suppressed by dominant forms of knowledge production. Ethnic studies have long been "doing" public humanities in a range of forms, as Roopika Risam emphasizes in "Public Humanities Before Public Humanities," noting that "Black studies, Chicano(a) studies, Native American studies, and Asian American studies were inextricable from commitments to communities and activism. The roots of these fields are in community and civic engagement."[3] The roots of these fields moved against mainstream university and institutional practices that historically extract community resources and knowledge while further deepening social and material inequalities.

A community-engaged podcast involves long preproduction: years of engagement and trust built first with community partners. This "preproduction" establishes the viability and basis for collaboration and reciprocity—and whether community members even deem this worthwhile of *their* time, labor, and sharing of knowledge. We were influenced by Amber Dean, Jennifer L. Johnson, and Susanne Luhmann's *Feminist Praxis Revisited: Critical Reflections on University–Community Engagement* and by historian Susan Smulyan's scholarship on public humanities. In 2021, Smulyan was a guest on *Smaller Narratives for a Larger World*, a podcast also produced by a Binghamton University team.[4] Her definition of public humanities "moves away from the translational—the explanation of university-generated ideas to the public—and imagines the humanities as a process of discovery undertaken by collaborative groups—including university faculty, staff, and students—with communities outside the campus."[5]

We also moved away from the translational and put into practice an end-to-end collaboration with a community organization, which helps to avoid fetishizing the "community." We, as academics, cannot function as mere documenters who study the communities from afar or outside. This stance is a cornerstone of our approach to engaged scholarship, drawing from Dean's writing that builds on Sara Ahmed's concept of the "stranger." In "Colonialism, Neoliberalism, and University–Community Engagement," Dean points to the dangers of fetishizing others, noting that "attention to the *sorts* of encounters brought about by these forms of engagement is necessary for the development of CE practices that attempt to avoid

[2] https://americancivic.com/; https://humanitiesny.org/.
[3] See Risam 2025.
[4] See Kenah, Palacios, and Pearce 2021.
[5] See Smulyan 2022.

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reinforcing the 'strangeness' of others, particularly those 'others' who are the least privileged and most marginalized (and thus often sought to be on the receiving end of CE practices)."[6]

2. Storytelling as methodology

With *Hidden Heroes*, storytelling is a mode of knowledge production that centers immigrant experiences through the practice of "talk-story," as explained by the writer Maxine Hong Kingston. In an interview with Bill Moyers, she describes a tradition in which "thousands of years of people... passed on history, genealogy, skills by speaking it. And they managed to take this across the ocean. So what happens when the immigrants bring those stories, see, what I've told are the new American stories."[7] Talk-story is a type of storytelling practiced by everyday people in everyday circumstances.

We studied immigration stories, but we also crafted our own. Shruti Jain, Le Li, and Mamen Rodriguez did this in the seminar "Community Engagement: Theory and Praxis" taught by Lisa Yun. Among a number of sources, we studied the Tenement Museum's digital storytelling and especially their archive "Your Story Our Story." We submitted our own stories. Jain wrote about a rice cooker, an object that allows her to elaborate on her journey from India to the United States. Rodriguez wrote about her family and included a recording of their conversation in Spanish. Li curated a collection on the erasures of immigrant experiences due to the changing policies of who are deemed "legal" immigrants. We learned that doing research but also becoming subjects ourselves helps us to move away from the monocular Western approach of privileged "experts" who observe "strangers." Our own positions as hosts and producers were an ethical starting point. We started conceptualizing this project in 2020, during a rise in anti-immigrant hate that endangered our own lives and livelihoods. Our situatedness among this rhetoric of hate and violence combined with our interest in storytelling prompted us to consider the podcast form as a way of developing immigrants' stories. The project became a way to re-think locatedness and how we are positioned in racializing maps of the world. There is a communal bond between ourselves and our storytellers because we also see ourselves in shared registers of migration and immigration.

3. Aurality as scholarly ethics

Podcasts as an aural medium and genre offer certain affordances to the practice of storytelling. We studied other podcasts, such as *Immigrantly*, founded by the immigrant rights activist Saadia Khan, and we imagined our podcast in conversation with a spectrum of digital storytelling initiatives that bring immigrants' stories to the fore, such as *The Immigrants Stories Project, The Immigrant Story, Immigrants Rising*, and the *Immigrant Storytelling Program*. Given our focus on storytelling as spoken and heard by immigrants and their descendants, we were drawn to how the podcast form can alter the landscape of storytelling.[8] Sound studies scholar Jennifer Stoever reminds us of the invisible but persistent sonic color line in American culture that "allowed conservative, liberal, and progressive whites a method of continuing to perceive race and enact discrimination without seeming to do so or, for some, without perceiving or consciously recognizing it), while making it more difficult for people of color and antiracist advocates to prove the continued existence of racial violence

[6] See Dean, Johnson, and Luhman 2019.
[7] See Kingston 1990.
[8] See McHugh 2016.

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and institutional inequity."[9] In this landscape of "color-blind" aural discrimination, our podcast creates space for the very sounds and accents of people who are actively being invisibilized. Podcasts capture particularities of orality and lend themselves to elevating unique voices and linguistic patterns, departing from traditional academic productions and producing knowledge that differs from publication in peer-reviewed journals or academic books. Ian M. Cook notes that "scholarly podcasting is an insurgency against academic structures that curb creativity, inhibit personal and collective transformations, and promote self-interest over generosity."[10]

We go further to imagine a different kind of "scholarly podcasting," which is a community-engaged practice of podcasting centering immigrants and non-academicians as the bearer and sharer of knowledge. It isn't merely the content of what they say that matters. We are compelled by the intimacy that the podcast offers. As Eden Kinkaid, Kelsey Emard, and Nari Senanayake note, "The visceral elements of the speaker's voice, such as intonation and emotion, carry meaning that is often overlooked in text-based forms of knowledge production and communication."[11] These affordances yield critical insights and qualitative outcomes that would remain hidden under quantitatively driven and text-driven research. Hearing fellow community members tell their stories in their own voices makes them more than a case study on paper: "the distinctness of participants' voices—their particular accents, tones, and tempos—reminds listeners that they are listening to real people, not mere 'data points' or disembodied 'respondents.'"[12] This focus on sound and orality makes possible a certain destabilization. As Dario Linares points out, "Podcasting praxis offers a positive destabilization of the hierarchy between text and sound, reminding us of … a framework of engagement, that is more productive in synthesizing ideas and positions than textual communication in the era of the internet."[13]

Richard Berry identifies the podcast's "hyper-intimacy" as essential to its medial specificity, but Alyn Euritt further argues that this intimacy cannot merely be "attributed to some innate properties of sound or technology."[14] Thus, when we produce this podcast in community collaboration we are not merely drawing on an inherent intimacy of the podcast form but also configuring a peculiar intimacy—which acts as a form of resistance to forms of research that "other" immigrants and their lives. A podcast offers a medium for new affective bonds among and beyond members of a particular community in the process of co-producing voice and sound but also in practices of listening. We designed for communal listening and conversation about the podcast, keeping in mind that, as Samuel M. Clevenger and Oliver J. C. Rick write, "the experience of listening is a corroborative part of the production of meaning about the sound."[15]

4. Partnerships as research

The Tenement Museum archive "Your Story Our Story", started by Annie Polland and Kathryn Lloyd, became our touchstone for understanding forms of public humanities activities around immigrant storytelling.[16] We examined the museum's podcast, "How to

[9] See Stoever 2016.
[10] See Cook 2023.
[11] See Kinkaid, Emard, and Senanayake 2020.
[12] See Kinkaid et al. 2020.
[13] See Llinares 2018.
[14] See Barry 2016; Euritt 2023.
[15] See Clevenger and Rick 2021.
[16] https://www.tenement.org/explore/your-story-our-story/.

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Be American," which featured "the stories that are not in your standard history book." Beginning in the spring of 2019, Lloyd graciously responded to Yun's queries about the archive and periodically visited her classes over the years. Sonnet Takahisa, formerly at the Newark Museum and the Brooklyn Historical Society and co-founder of the Museum School, also visited to share practices of deep listening and introduce us to oral history collections that she helped build. With Lloyd and Takahisa, we became more aware of telling and preserving stories not just for ourselves and our local community but also for public use.

In 2020, Kathyrn invited Yun and her class to collaborate on a series of storytelling videos for their "Objects of Comfort" project on the museum's YouTube channel during the pandemic. This, in addition to our participation in "Your Story Our Story," led to a partnership with Lloyd to develop our podcast. Yun, Jain, and Li collaborated with Lloyd to create the first season of our podcast "Immigrants Wake America."

For the second season, we continued to partner with the Tenement Museum and also partnered with a local organization dedicated to settling immigrants, refugees, and asylees —the ACA—thus bringing together a university, a museum, and a nonprofit organization. At the ACA, we learned more about the experiences of immigrants in the local community. Over the years, Yun had brought classes to volunteer and participate in ACA community events and periodically help provide translation assistance. She and her classes also participated in conversations and story circles with staff to learn about their work and personal journeys. Students especially connected with ACA caseworker Mugambwa, who originally migrated from Uganda as a single mother: they met with her and also wrote letters to her and she wrote back. Yun's long relationships with Mugambwa and the ACA became the basis for community partnership for the second season, "Hidden Heroes."

Importantly, by attending the ACA's yearly memorials in April, we also learned about the ACA's importance as a collective agent of remembrance. The memorial honors the loss of 13 members of the ACA in a mass shooting in 2009 through sharing memories and stories, which sustain and rejuvenate the community.[17] Since then, by volunteering, singing, bringing food, and sitting and listening with families and community members, we appreciated the critical role that the ACA plays in keeping memories alive and passing them forward. With this history, we proposed the idea of producing ACA stories in a podcast to Director Hussein Adams and Deputy Director Laila Hernandez, both dynamic leaders who helped innumerable newcomers, immigrants, and families of the county, with tremendous dedication, and had mentored many students. We shared a sense of the significance of a podcast as an homage to a thriving space in 2024, which would be the fifteenth anniversary of the tragedy in 2009. With this second season, we honor the service of the ACA members past and present by bringing forward the new voices of ACA staff who continue its vitality in a diverse community.

The purpose of our collaboration was discussed at length. What goals and needs should be met? Adams and Hernandez were most interested in the educational value of a podcast and whether it would help community members appreciate the work and service that the ACA provides. How could a podcast be used for education? And what would the ACA and the community gain from this process? What support was needed and what resources would be made available? Other staff members, such as Boyajian, who was the marketing and event coordinator at the time, asked how the podcast could serve for programming and

[17] https://www.pressconnects.com/in-depth/news/local/2019/03/27/binghamton-mass-shooting-american-civic-association-aca-changed-city/3157972002/.

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fundraising. As a university team, we listened closely and worked to reframe the traditional university practice of working "on" communities to working "with," so that our project was responsive to the needs of a community partner and not be overdetermined by the preconceptions of how things should be done from a university perspective. This is one of the core principles of anti-racist community engagement.[18] With these questions answered satisfactorily, and with a relationship of trust, the ACA partnered with us. Below we share how we addressed their concerns and our equitable methods for doing so.

5. Shared authority as praxis

Ownership and copyrighting were crucial to carefully consider, given the asymmetries of a university–community collaboration. We recognized our community collaborators as *owners* of their stories, and we turned to Creative Commons, which offers free and standardized tools for copyrighting and sharing in the public domain.[19] Given how personal the stories on our podcast could be, and given a national rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, copyright and co-ownership were crucial for ensuring that ACA staff would be protected after their episodes were released. Their stories are protected under copyright law and licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 using Creative Commons tools. While this license allows people to share our podcast, it also ensures that attributions are correctly made so that the project and collaborators receive their due credit. Further, this license forbids the use of the stories for commercial purposes and prohibits anyone from remixing these stories, especially given how rampant the misuse and mischaracterization of stories on the internet can be. We also designed a consent agreement for our community collaborators that confirms their right to withdraw their stories. Further, as a way to ensure that the storytellers were ethically involved in the editing process, we sent the semifinal edited recording to them to get their input and then sent the final edit for approval. More often than not, the storytellers asked for changes. These changes reflected how they wanted their stories to be heard.

Recording with a community-engaged ethos meant producing around each storyteller's communicative style. Each individual's ways of narration guided our editorial choices. When editing the episode with immigration caseworker Aye Aye Mar, we chose to delete cues or questions by us, the hosts, in the final edit. Her storytelling flowed with its own energy and rhythm. In contrast, in the episode with Adams, we included our banter and an audience of students during the recording, which he enjoyed and preferred. Both decisions were based on the style and preferences of the storytellers.

The location for recording was also designed around each storyteller's comfort. As a result, we had disparate challenges in the editing process for each episode. Three episodes were recorded in the ACA, as three of the storytellers had demanding work schedules and they enjoyed sharing their stories in the familiarity and hubbub of their center. However, our episode with Marte was recorded in a university classroom with students, as he recently returned to the school to further his education and wanted to share his story with other students. The episode with Boyajian was recorded online using platforms riverside.fm and Zoom, due to her hectic schedule with both her job and also caring for two children.

Spatial familiarity, comfort, and time to engage were also factors of an equitable process. While a recording studio would be technically ideal for our university team, this was not for the comfort of our community collaborators who would have to leave their place of work,

[18] See Santana et al. 2023.
[19] https://creativecommons.org/.

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travel to the university, pay for parking on campus (!), find the studio in the maze of campus buildings, and sit for a recording, all the while receiving text messages from their work. Instead, we embraced a degree of elasticity in the production and let go of uniformity and control. We let go of preconceived notions of "normalizing" the "outcomes" of our project. We came to understand that community collaboration—and storytelling based on trust and open expression—also required technically accommodating each person's location and finding ways in the editing process to work with the sonic textures (including echoes, a passing siren on the street, staff, and clients talking nearby). Is it necessary to make a podcast episode homogeneously clean and tidy? Why not allow the texture of the environments to seep into the recording to some degree? This is a project, an event, a dialogue, a teaching moment in which the academic is not the teacher, but a community member in a community space.

6. Shared resources as equity

Equitable resource sharing was also key. We worked in relative paucity of resources at a state university and our community partner was working hard to keep themselves afloat. We worked together with the ACA to obtain a grant from Humanities New York. The crucial role of state humanities councils in creating possibilities for such collaborations cannot be overstated, especially at this historical moment and with the precarity of doing community-engaged public humanities. Samip Mallick gives an extraordinary example of his and Michelle Caswell's grassroots project, the South Asian American Digital Archive, which grew from a tiny effort into a national and international archive. He writes in "Against Precarity: A Community Notion of Fiscal Sustainability" about how funders were reluctant to fund their project, "in part, because of what they perceive as our fiscal precarity."[20] The irony here is that funders will not fund a project if it is perceived as fiscally precarious (which should speak to the reason for needing funding in the first place?) and critics will not view the project as legitimate if it is not funded.

Funding for our podcast was also transparently itemized and apportioned equitably for honoraria for our ACA storytellers, for the use of the venue at the ACA, for stipends for the graduate students on the team, and for software and equipment, among others. We encountered some skepticism of this apportioning, as colleagues assumed that giving honoraria to community members would skew their accounts of their experiences and community participants could not be "objective" due to receiving honoraria. These assumptions of corruptibility ignore the fact that university-based scholars and researchers *themselves* are also paid for their time and knowledge, that institutions are also funded, and not sharing resources is a form of gatekeeping and paternalism. We also faced practices of university overhead fees for obtaining grant awards, which are unfavorable to the humanities due to the much smaller scale of grants. The university takes a cut of at least 38%–57% of a grant for "indirect" costs (or in some cases more!), which is a common practice of universities. This cuts deeply into resources for humanities-driven work, such as an engaged podcast, and presents a challenge to consider.

7. Minimalism as accessibility

Sustainability and accessibility are also top priorities for a community-engaged podcast, and we leaned into a less-is-better approach, public domain, and free use. We used Audacity and Riverside to record and edit our podcast. These software are free and accessible to those who

[20] See Mallick 2018.

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have access to a computer and to those who might not have a "corporate" account or a budget that allows for more robust packages with bells and whistles, more tools, and options. More sophisticated tools often involve a paywall, subscription, cap on usage, institutional account, or all of the above. Furthermore, the learning curve for the software and platforms that we chose was manageable enough so that we could foresee our community partners eventually participating in and expanding this project on the technical side. A similar critical digital humanities approach is offered by Risam and Alex Gil, with their concept of "minimal computing":

> In environments in which we are contending with limitations, whether of infrastructure, finances, labor, and/or technical knowledge, among other factors, we simply cannot have it all. There are tough decisions to be made, taking into account what we need, what we have, and what we must prioritize. This could mean eschewing the latest, flashiest methods that would cost more money, time, and labor, in favor of a simpler approach that would be practically achievable with what we have.[21]

Sustainability and practicality also influenced our website building and storage for the project. Our podcast can be accessed on multiple streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Soundcloud, among others. However, some community members were not familiar with or did not have access to these platforms. So, we made the episodes available on a website using Google Sites. Anyone who has a Google account could design a website at no cost, have it hosted for free, with basic templates and forms of interactivity (such as fill-in forms for listeners to provide feedback and comments), and store it on Google Drive with no monthly fees. As we ascribed to co-ownership of this project, we chose paths that would enable our partners to learn how to manage and update the website if they wished, with a simpler learning curve, and also, with access that does not incur cost and design barriers.

Accessibility also guided our editorial decisions on the length of the episodes. We designed with an awareness of our audience—including working people with multitasking lives and limited leisure. Our episodes are approximately 15 minutes long. The editing required precise crafting from approximately 90-minute-long interviews. While these interviews could be printed in a book collection, the format of a podcast allows for digital portability, accessibility, and sharing more expansively and flexibly among listeners. Episodes could be shared or communally listened to at the lunch table, on a drive home from work, while doing laundry, when seeing friends. The short form promotes dialogue that centers on listeners sharing their reactions and experiences with each other and raises opportunities for reflection on how they processed the podcast and what this means for our communities. Community utility was also part of our design so that our partner could use this for programming and events, teachers could use it as part of a lesson plan on civic engagement and immigration, and non-native English speakers with limited proficiency could listen to it in an intermediate or advanced English learning class.

Accessibility also influenced our thinking about transcription as a critical part of our method. Linguistic accessibility for local and global listeners (including family members spread around the world) was important. Thus, we could not simply rely on auto-transcription. Some podcasts provide links to transcripts auto-produced by any number of web-based tools and bots. However, auto-transcription is rife with errors. Furthermore, a block of error-filled auto-transcription would not be of use to those with visual impairment or those who are hard of hearing. Thus, we produced carefully edited transcripts that can be used for clearer

[21] See Risam and Gil 2022.

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reading, or text to speech, or multilingual translation by any visitor to the podcast on the web.

8. Podcasts as co-created knowledge

We share this narrative as an example of a public humanities project that puts thinking into doing and theory into practice.[22] In this case, we offer an approach that counters colonial practices of university-produced research, employs a people-first approach, and takes advantage of certain affordances that the podcast form offers. This includes additional generative possibilities for growth and knowledge production if one approaches the podcast as an expansive project. We attended to these possibilities by including co-education activities as integral to this podcast as a project. Our process included a workshop series and a field trip to the Tenement Museum for the community partner, university team, and two museum educators to come *together* to exchange and reflect on our shared understanding of the history and power of immigrant storytelling. This communal exchange is a form of co-education and co-research and is necessarily a part of a community-engaged podcasting process that puts theory into practice. The podcast also includes a forthcoming web-based teaching guide as a programming and educational tool for the local community, which promotes further dialogue, and hopefully, more iterations by students and community members around storytelling and podcasting. We continue to learn and grow, with experimentation, as this kind of production is not the conventional practice of podcasting nor of public humanities generally. The intimacy and reciprocity of a community-engaged podcast offer a new dimension to the practice of participatory public humanities.

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[22] See Wilson and Bulaitis 2025. See also Fisher 2018

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