

Trans Young Adults' Building Communities: Narratives and Counternarratives of Identity and World Making

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Abstract

This paper draws on a three-year inquiry, in which I lived alongside three trans young adults amid their unfolding lives. I used narrative inquiry, a relational methodology that holds relationship central, to explore asset-building processes within relational learning. This article showcases participants' use of artworks, stories, and counterstories to understand experiences and engage communities. Additionally, this study highlights how trans young adults transform their identities at the intersections of race, citizenship, ableism, and health. This research demonstrates the complexity of trans: identity formation; intersectional tensions, and creative possibilities; and, performativity of intersectionality and identities across multiple communities' spaces and places.

Introduction

As I look at Max's, Espen's, and Adebayo's experiences, I see their trans identity-making unfold alongside traces of absent, missing, and invisible communities; pop-up, intermittent communities, and emergent communities. (Michelle's reflective note).

This paper highlights Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's stories of identity making and world making as trans young adults. Their use of artmaking, and telling stories and counterstories, is forefronted to illuminate the complexities they negotiate both within Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM)¹ communities and in the public sphere. Elsewhere (Lavoie & Caine, 2021; Lavoie, 2021a, 2021b), I have focused on participants' use of artmaking to create generative, transgressive, and transformative spaces to support their lives. This paper unpacks how Adebayo, Espen, and Max employed artmaking, narratives, and counternarratives, to counter hegemonic narratives and make sense of their lives as they transformed their identities. Halberstam (2018) posits that trans is a multiplicity of transgender identities and possibilities, which embody liminality and plurality. It is within these emergent possibilities that Adebayo, Espen, and Max, navigate intersectional challenges and priorities (e.g., citizenship, race, ableism, health, mental health). This paper explicates Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's trans identity making as a highly nuanced and heterogeneous process, always in the making, and in relation to intersecting challenges and priorities.

This research received university ethics board approval from The University of Alberta Ethics Board as part of a doctoral dissertation. This dissertation (Lavoie, 2021b) was approved March 21, 2018 (Pro00079772). Approval was obtained prior to commencement of this study. Adebayo, Espen, and Max asked that their first names, as well as all their stories and artwork, be publicly visible in all research texts and in all forms of dissemination proceeding from research.

Background/Context

Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) communities often serve dual roles, both social and political (Warner, 2002). These communities² constitute what hooks (1990) calls a homeplace, a space that fosters a sense of belonging and safety and supports advocacy and activism. Many SGM communities trace their advent to specific civil rights events, such as The Stonewall Riots³ and civil rights movements, such as the Gay Liberation Movements⁴ of the 1960s and 1970s⁵ (Duberman et al., 1989). These communities also develop in relation to highly localized and community-specific contexts⁶ (Lavoie & Wells, in press). SGM communities are complicated, often constituted of multiple and diverse identity groups and communities, each with unique histories and narratives, as well as continuing and emergent needs (Stryker, 2008).

Framing the Research Puzzle⁷

My research puzzle emerged from my experience working with queer and trans youth as Artist-in-Residence at Camp fYrefly.⁸ My interests pivoted around relational ways of thinking and knowing. Specifically, I wondered: how relational learning might act to support queer or trans identity formation of young adults. Initially, some of my research questions were influenced by narrow definitions of mentorship in relation to support. These understandings broadened over time, as I began to reimagine mentorship as relational learning, dynamically co-constructed in social interactions and often within conflicting constructions of identity, agency, and resistance. Reflecting on my experience of Camp fYrefly, I realized mentorship might comprise a piece of a much larger “research puzzle” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124), such as trans young adults’ experiences of identity and world making.

Methodology

I utilized visual narrative inquiry design (Bach, 2007; Caine, 2007; de Mello, 2007). Visual narrative inquiry is ground in narrative inquiry’s (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) theory, methodology, and methods, but emphasizes participants’ and researchers’ art creation, alongside narrative, to elicit storytelling, and respond to, and tell stories (Bach, 2007; Caine, 2007; Caine & Lavoie, 2011, 2015; de Mello, 2007; Lavoie & Caine, 2021; Lavoie, 2021a, 2021b). Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that focuses on understanding experience and reflects a relational ontology (Clandinin et al., 2018). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explicate the relationship between story, experience, and narrative inquiry, explaining that “story . . . is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (p. 477). In seeking to understand the complexities of experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) were drawn to Dewey’s (1938) insights into life as a continuous temporal unfolding, taking place in relation and within discreet events. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) based the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry on Dewey’s (1938) criteria of experience: continuity, interaction, and situation. I paid close attention to the three inquiry spaces of narrative inquiry in this study in relation to participants’ stories of experience.

Methods

This study took place in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Informal settings included The Society of Northern Alberta Print-artists (SNAP) community printmaking studio. I engaged with participants in settings where stories are remembered and contextualized (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). I worked with three trans young adults, aged 18 to 24. This is a typical sample size of a narrative inquiry, as narrative inquirers are interested in constant engagement and sustained interactions (Caine et al., 2013). I initially met participants in 2016 in informal arts-related group activities. I subsequently worked alongside all three participants in 2017 for a short time, when I co-curated an art exhibition they participated in called *Re-Imaging Normal*. Participants formally agreed to be part of the study in 2018.

Field Texts

As I engaged with participants, we included diverse field texts, which consisted of recorded conversations and field notes. Additional data sources included the creation of artwork and poetry. These creative activities took place both on an individual basis and in small groups with other participants in this study. Artistic methods were used to facilitate autobiographical exploration and storytelling (Caine, 2007; Caine & Lavoie, 2015; Grace & Wells, 2007; Lavoie & Caine, 2021; Lavoie, 2021a, 2021b) and served to “queer” or disrupt hetero- and cisnormative discourse and identity formation. The use of all data sources was negotiated with participants. I met with participants for multiple and ongoing conversations over a two-year period. Because the purpose was to learn about the diverse experiences of relational learning for trans young adults, I engaged in open-ended conversations. I also provided monthly opportunities to create artwork in a well-supported community artmaking studio to deepen reflections on experience. I could facilitate this given my work as an artist and art instructor.

Data Analysis

Consistent with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), data analysis involved examining, reading, and rereading field texts. Narrative accounts were co-written with participants who shared evolving stories and contributed feedback (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). This iterative process involved interpreting the participant's experiences by examining them in relation to familial, cultural, societal, and institutional narratives (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). In addition, analysis involved making visible my relational commitment to participants. The narrative accounts were negotiated and finalized with each participant's feedback. Final narrative accounts (interim texts) include: a play, short stories, poems, artworks, and stories (Lavoie, 2021b). The final analysis involved exploring narrative threads that resonated across the narrative accounts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative Threads

Two narrative threads that emerged from this study are explicated in this paper. These include: 1) Building complex communities through ongoing negotiations of identity; and 2) Telling counterstories to make spaces for identity and world making. Narrative threads that resonated across Max's, Espen's, and Adebayo's interim narrative accounts formed intricate patterns, while each story thread remained distinct. Gaps and absences are visible across their experiences and some stories were not shared.

To appreciate the nuanced complexity of these threads, I attempt to think *with* Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's artwork and stories. Turning to Morris (2002), I discern the difference between thinking about stories and thinking *with* stories; while "[t]hinking about stories conceives of narrative as an object. Thinking *with* stories is process in which we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative [... but allow] narrative to work on us" (p. 196). Thinking *with* story, "creates a narrative vantage point from which lived experience is understood in relation to personal and collective stories (i.e., familial, social, cultural, and institutional stories)" (Lavoie, 2021b, p. 38). Allowing Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's stories to work on me, I begin to see their identity-making processes emerge as they each engage in distinct communities.

Building Complex Communities Through Ongoing Negotiations of Identity

I'm surprised by the amount of queer resources we have in Edmonton... But it's almost as if those resources are only accessible to people who come upon them by chance. Although my mom took me to a Pride Parade when I was five, which looked cool... I perceived it as a one-time thing, with no community beyond that. Like everybody just got together one day a year to party, party, party. Then they go home – that's it. Whereas, at this point, there are multiple facets of the community doing activism or community get-togethers, but unless you know someone, unless someone introduces it to you, it's hard to find. (Max and Michelle in conversation, Michelle's field note)

Thinking *with* Max's story, I consider SGM pop-up communities that appear and disappear just as quickly. An event, like a Pride Parade, brings community together for a short time, then disperses. From childhood, Max recalls SGM community as a one-time thing; later, as an adult they still experience SGM community as elusive. This sense of absent or missing community seems to have shaped Max's *stories to live by*. A phrase coined by Connelly and Clandinin (1999), "stories to live by" is a narrative process for understanding identity; it "helps us to understand how knowledge, context, and identity are linked and can be understood narratively" (p. 2). "Stories to live by" provide insights into how "individuals contextualize past and present experiences, while constructing their identities in relation to the stories they carry" (Lavoie, 2021b, p. 49). Looking to Max's past and present stories, I see their continuing challenge finding and connecting to community. Max states, "*unless you know someone, unless someone introduces it to you, it's hard to find.*" Thinking *with* Max's experiences, I recall SGM communities being named "spectral" by Grace and Benson (2000, p. 109). These communities are "a loose confederation of people with shared experiences of marginalization because of their sexual orientation or gender identity" (Grace et al., 2004, p. 302). Spectral is a useful term when thinking of SGM communities,

suggesting an invisible and illusive presence.⁹ Further complicating issues of SGM communities are the intersections of power within communities; some SGM populations and identities (i.e., trans communities and individuals) remain more spectral and invisible than others (Stryker, 2008).

Returning to consider how some experiences seem more significant than others in relation to identity making, I recall Espen's experiences finding spaces of SGM intergenerational community at Camp fYrefly:

I didn't have many friends who were out, and it was awesome to be surrounded by people who had all these different stories and experiences.... Again, it's that information sharing that you don't get. Because it's not like other minorities where you can pass down information from generation to generation. (Espen in conversation with Michelle, Michelle's field note)

Thinking *with* Espen's story about the challenge finding SGM community spaces, McAdam's (2003) reminds me "that life stories echo gender and class constructions in society and reflect, in one way or another, prevailing patterns of hegemony, the economic, political, and cultural contexts wherein human lives are situated" (p. 201). Thinking *with* McAdams (2003), makes visible the complication of SGM identity making in relation to absent SGM communities, and highlights the significance of telling and hearing SGM life stories to potentially counter hegemonic narratives (i.e., hetero- and cisnormativity) and make space for SGM identity making and world making.

Although both Max and Espen's experiences of intergenerational SGM communities were fleeting, the fact that they chose to highlight these stories, suggests these experiences remain impactful and important to their SGM identity-making processes. Turning back to think *with* McAdams (2003), I recall that evolving quality of each person's life story is uniquely and purposefully composed, with some episodes being "more central to self-definition than others" (p. 195). "Stories to live by" are those impactful stories that shape identities. They are the "stories we carry, which have become part of how we understand our world and who we are in relation" (Lavoie, 2021b, p. 24). While Max's and Espen's stories point to challenges for young adults coming out alongside absent, missing, and invisible SGM communities, they also point to Max's and Espen's determination to find and create opportunities for SGM intergenerational conversations and community making.

Telling Stories to Live by Alongside Pop-up & Intermittent Communities

SGM pop-up and intermittent communities are opportunities to participate in SGM communities through short-term, and non-reoccurring events, or, opportunities to participate in SGM communities through short-term, regularly scheduled events. Although online forums create a continuous online presence, I would also describe online forums as intermittent communities because members' participation can be sporadic.

I recall looking to the audience of about eighty people gathered to hear Max's and Adebayo's stories as young emerging trans artists in a provincial touring show. As co-curator, I sit back, delighted, Max and Adebayo will fill this public space with their stories and artwork. Adebayo shares stories of coming to Canada as a trans refugee and refers to his image showing two people

hugging. Thinking of continents, he crossed, Adebayo shares “You never know how far people have travelled, what they have gone through to get that hug”.¹⁰ Max speaks of the stigma and transphobic violence their friends have encountered. Referring to their artwork, Max states: “these ‘victims’ are resilient and that’s very inspiring. While things have improved, there are still many challenges [in Alberta], especially in rural communities. Through this [art]piece, I’m telling people to keep going and show their colors”.¹¹ (Michelle’s reflective note)

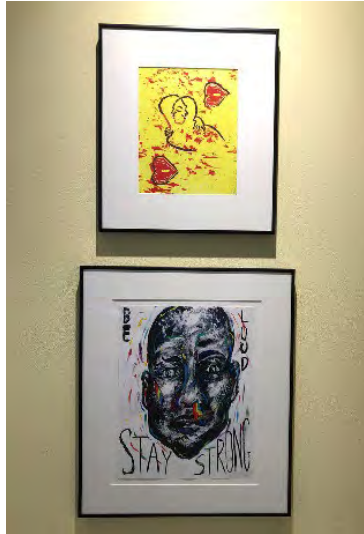


Fig. 1: Michelle Lavoie. (2018). Photograph of Re-Imaging Normal exhibition. [Photograph]. Collections of the Artists, Edmonton, AB, Canada. This image shows Adebayo’s woodblock print (top) and Max’s painting (bottom).

This pop-up community came together to celebrate artwork and stories by SGM emerging and established artists. Importantly, the exhibition was the first exhibition in the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Rural Exhibition Program (TRES) to circulate stories and art with SGM themes to schools, libraries, and community centres in rural Alberta. Adebayo, Max, and Espen participated by sharing their stories and artwork. Adebayo’s artwork (Figure 1., top) speaks of looking for, seeking, and finding community, and a sense of belonging. Max’s artwork (Figure 1., bottom) tells community members to *Be Loud* and *Stay Strong*, despite violence and threats of violence.

Turning to reflect on Espen’s stories, I recall his experiences of identity making within the intermittent community of Camp fYrefly, Espen recalls:

I did make friends. I didn’t stay in contact with them though. Which was okay, because it felt like you could go and try on a bunch of identities and see what fits and not be afraid of who’s going to see you or need to maintain something you’re not. (Espen and Michelle in conversation, Michelle’s field note)



Fig. 2: Artist: Espen (2019), Snake (right) [Woodcut Print]; Fig. 3: Moth (centre) [Screen Print],
Fig. 4: Jellyfish (left) [Woodcut Print], Collection of the Artist, Edmonton, AB., Canada. These images were created in relation
to research conversations about beauty, change, and transformation.

What I find unexpected in Espen's story was his speaking of the intermittent nature of Camp fYrefly, a four-day annual camp, being in sync with his process of ongoing identity formation. Thinking with Espen's stories of identity making alongside community, I turn to Bruner (1990), who suggests social interaction fosters both meaning-making and identity formation. Bruner states, "realities that people constructed were social realities, negotiated with others... both mind and the Self were part of that social world" (p. 105).

As I begin to wonder how Espen is negotiating identity making and community making, I consider Carr's (1986) theory of narrative coherence to consider continuities and discontinuities in life stories. Carr (1986) suggests that continuities in life stories provide a sense of self across time, while discontinuities in life stories disrupt a continuous sense of self. Within this theory, Carr (1986) asserts that narratives function to unify individual's experiences by composing the self, "as subject of a life-story" (p. 128). It is the act of storytelling and acting out self-stories that fosters personal and collective agency by enabling the storyteller to act as the subject and protagonist of their life story (Carr, 1986). Turning to artmaking to think *with* his life stories and consider his process of transformation, Espen creates subjects that transform (Figures 2, 3, and 4: a snake, moth, and jellyfish). Continuing to think with Espen's experiences of transformation and SGM identity making, I recall one of Espen's stories finding community through online forums:

When I started drawing online, I thought it was incredible.... and you get to meet all these different people. And at that time, a lot of my peers were starting to develop crushes, and I just wasn't. I was very insecure about it and [then] I found online communities, which were the gateway to my LGBTQ personality. (Espen and Michelle in conversation, Michelle's field note)

For Espen, online forums provided spaces of community and connections that supported his identity formation. Importantly, Espen felt comfortable enough to stay connected to this online community as he explored his identity. I recall often sensing Espen's presence as tenuous or fleeting in spaces and places we attended together. I understood this sense later, when Espen revealed his health and mental stories, and how these experiences challenged his sense of well-being and ability to stay connected. After a prolonged absence, I recall meeting Espen by chance:

I was surprised and pleased to see Espen on the steps of the Legislature, following the Trans Day of Remembrance rally. I grew concerned when I asked if we could meet and he told me that his life had become complicated again due to health concerns, because I know what those complications can mean in relation to Espen's stories. (Michelle, reflective note)

I was delighted when Espen told me that a café, which we visited for our research conversations and lattes, had become a favourite haunt, because not all public spaces were comfortable for Espen. Thinking about Espen's sense of comfort, I recall how stories to live by "are expressions of an embodied knowledge of the landscape, of space and time, of borders, cycles, and rhythms" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 113). For Espen, it appears these online forums, like the café, provided a community space, where he experienced the comfort of a familiar landscape, and where he knew the time, borders, cycles, and rhythms; these spaces shaped his ability to tell and live his "stories to live by".

Developing Stories to Live by Alongside Emergent Communities

Adebayo's stories of coming to Edmonton as a LGBTIQ refugee and subsequently creating an organization to support LGBTIQ refugees highlights his experiences of identity making while building an emergent community.

My experience made me sit down and think about a thousand refugees, who are going to come in the same way I came in, and find these gaps. I wanted to make sure that I put something down that can help a thousand of them. (Adebayo in conversation with Michelle, Michelle's field note)

Adebayo's identity making centres around his experiences as an LGBTIQ refugee, a trans Black man, and community leader. Supporting others following in his footsteps strongly resonates across all of Adebayo's stories.

We're starting this organization to look out for other refugees who are coming in and need this [support]. To cover the gaps that were so hard. If I link up with them, they will help someone else jump the same gaps. (Adebayo in conversation with Michelle, Michelle's field note)

As Adebayo describes his community work and work as an artist, I am struck by Adebayo's stories of community as chosen family and how Adebayo has also joined a community of artists through his artmaking and shared stories.

Discussion of Resonant Threads

Thinking *with* Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's experiences, I see complexity as a thread woven through their stories. I see their complex identity-making processes as they engage in multiple, diverse, and, at times, complicated communities. Adebayo seems to thrive in activism, making space for himself and others in SGM refugee communities. Espen, on the other hand, withdraws from spotlights, seeking spaces to join communities at his pace. Max seems to travel to others' worlds to learn alongside.

From Espen's, Max's, and Adebayo's stories, we see complex SGM identities being formed in relation to diverse communities. Thinking with Lugones' (1987) concepts of selves and worlds, I consider how identities are endlessly formed and reformed in multiple communities that are always in the making. Letting go of the notions of selves as always continuous and unified, Lugones (1987) suggests the possibility of selves that exist in a continuous state of becoming, a state that can always be otherwise. Importantly, Lugones (1987) also highlights how playfulness and ease can allow us to travel to multiple worlds: those we inhabit and those of others. Artmaking, which is intrinsically playful (Dewey, 1934), seems to create and enable pathways to think *with* stories of identity and community making.

Self-stories, which inform identity and meaning making, can be heavily influenced to conform to societal and cultural expectations (Bruner, 1990). Hegemonic stories exist both in public and within SGM community spaces and places that may preclude or block SGM identity making. In response, counterstories need to be told to take, make, and hold open space for "othered" stories to be seen, told, heard, and lived.

Telling Counterstories to Make Spaces for Identity-Making

Counterstories are stories told to disrupt or counter mainstream hegemonic narratives (Lindemann Nelson, 1995). From Lindemann Nelson, we learn counterstories are told in communities, often by those asking, sometimes demanding, recognition and rights of full citizenship within communities and publics. SGM communities are an example of communities founded, in part, in reaction to hegemonic narratives (e.g., hetero- and cisnormativity) that inform larger discourse (e.g., cultural, societal, and institutional).

Max's, Espen's, & Adebayo's, Counterstories

Max travelled to multiple urban and rural high schools in the province of Alberta to teach gender theory and LGBTIQ+ issues and programming in public education for the flyrefly in Schools Program. This is one of Max's stories:

Yeah, it's not part of the curriculum, so it gets very complicated [...and] having to justify that to people as well... Especially when people are saying there are only two genders. I'm like, well, I know a bunch of non-binary people, and their existence simply proves that there isn't, but okay. (Max in conversation with Michelle, Michelle's field note)

From Max's story, we see complications in what is deemed to be legitimate knowledge and who are seen to be legitimate knowledge holders. These questions extend to whose identities are considered legitimate. Max points to academic research and his lived experience as a non-binary trans person to support his teaching. Max's story highlights the power of hegemonic gender norms. The double edge of normalcy is the stigma, biases, and discriminatory actions often enacted on those who fall outside the boundaries of "normal" expectations.

Max's counterstories, like the one below, make space for them to be their authentic self and stand in their truth as a non-binary trans person.

I don't super agree with a lot of the conservative teaching or whatever, for obvious reasons. Like they're kind of anti-me, so I'm not really cool with that... when I encounter people who sort of come back to me with, "Oh, everyone's allowed to have their opinion" or something, I'm like, yeah, but your opinion is that I cannot fundamentally exist. So where do we draw the line? [What's] the importance of this knowledge – is it telling you that I don't necessarily have the right to the same opportunities as you? (Max in conversation with Michelle, Michelle's field note)



Fig. 5: Max (2019), Untitled 1 (left). [Linocut Print]; Fig. 6: Max (2019) Untitled 2 (centre). [Woodblock Print]. Fig. 7: Max (2019) Untitled 3 (right). [Linocut Print], Collection of the Artist, Edmonton, AB., Canada. These prints were created thinking about the climate crisis, different forms of communication and navigating identities in relation.

Many of Max's counterstories revolve around the complexity of living and being acknowledged as a non-binary trans person, even within SGM communities. Max's story, below, highlights the complications of working within SGM communities, where multiple marginalizations still occur, but are seldom acknowledged.

[when] I'm working with other people in the queer community, there are some people who are like, we have legal same-sex marriage – we're done. I'm like trans people don't do it, but okay. And different experiences come through, like for disabled queer people and people of colour. There are still things to work towards, but just saying that [it's] the stuff that affects you, [and] that's done. But, I'm like, there's still so much work to do! And having to try to give them that push, and almost convince them, there are other people in the community that aren't you. (Max in conversation with Michelle, Michelle's field note)

Max's stories highlight a collective counterstory, which is the need to look beyond personal stories and identity group norms to gain broader perspectives on the scope of emergent needs of those facing multiple levels of marginalization within SGM communities.

Turning to Max's images (Figures 5, 6, and 7), we see Max's process of thinking and feeling *with* images. Figure 5, Max describes as their response to the terror of climate collapse. In Figure 6, Max combines a mouth and eye, overlapping senses, perhaps suggesting looking before speaking. In Figure 7, Max literally asks *what should I think*, both highlighting and questioning how people are taught and told to think. We see throughout Max's artwork a questioning and thinking process made visible through images.

For Espen, things were different:

I got into a very dark place because there weren't supports. I got juggled around by the system. I remember consulting help lines and they told me to go to the hospital. So, I had quite a jarring experience there. When I get upset, I stop displaying distress on my face. I just go flat. And that's not what they're looking for. So, they put me in a cement room for psychosis patients for six hours. When the psychiatrist came to see me, I said: "I'm really struggling here. Please give me something in my toolbox to help me". And it slipped out that I was also concerned about my gender. It was causing me a lot of stress. And he gave me a number and sent me home. And when we called number and it was the Gender Gatekeepers. So, to transition medically, you need to go to a gender specialist and it takes years on the waiting list. So instead of giving me something to help me in the moment, like actual therapy numbers, or talking through my problems, they gave me a number to a place that had a two-year waiting list. (Espen in conversation with Michelle, Michelle's field note)



Fig. 8: Michelle Lavoie. (2019). Tactile Expressions 2. [Digital Print]. Collection of the Artist, Edmonton, AB., Canada.
This image was created to respond to Espen's stories and create a space to begin conversations about mental health.

Espen's experience highlights the silences around mental health stories. Espen's story also hints at the false narrative that LGBTQ+ communities are all inclusive and always welcoming places and spaces. Community is not always granted. For those, like Espen, struggling with mental health issues, stigma and silence often combine to result in further stigma and isolation. Figure 8 was my response to Espen's mental health stories. This image acted as a placeholder; it held open spaces for Espen and me to begin to speak about mental health. Espen's mental health stories likely would have remained silent without artwork that elicited conversations.

Many of Adebayo's counterstories are grounded in his experiences as a trans Black man and refugee to Canada. These counterstories respond to structural barriers in Canada's immigration system that were reinforced by levels of implicit bias, racist language, and (in)actions.

So, when I came to Canada, I got the resources I really needed, but there were gaps, and a lot of challenges. If I wasn't strong enough, maybe for different challenges, I wouldn't have survived. People telling me to go back home. People being racist, and then I had to prepare for my permanent residence, five hundred bucks, yet I didn't have the money. I didn't even have a work permit yet. Like all these things caught me and it was a struggle to work through them. This, along with all the trauma recovering from my story. (Adebayo in conversation with Michelle, Michelle's field note)



Fig. 9: Michelle Lavoie. (2019) Adebayo Printing (right). [Photograph]. Collection of the Artist. Edmonton, AB., Canada. Fig. 10: Adebayo (2019). Trans Africa (left). [Linocut Print]. Collection of the Artist. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The image on the right shows Adebayo printing a plate and the image on the left shows the plate printed on fabric. Adebayo printed hundreds of t-shirts to share within his community.

Adebayo's counterstory makes visible how barriers multiply at the intersections of race, citizenship status, and gender identity. His experience highlights the additional complexity of mental health and trauma suffered by many refugees and how these factors intersect with structural barriers (i.e., transphobia, racism, and xenophobia) to prevent refugees from accessing supports to gain a path to citizenship. Layers of bureaucracy sit atop layers of trauma, which cannot be addressed because of claimants' lack of rights to citizenship. As Adebayo eloquently states below, counterstories are an act of hope.

My life has the spotlight now. Someone else will have the spotlight later. This is not one person's fight. This is a fight for a whole community. I am trying to give a platform for all those stories, and all those people with similar stories, who are always pushed to the margins for being queer. I want to bring the community together, so nobody is left behind. I want to help give space to those people who have been displaced for whole parts of their lives. (Adebayo in conversation with Michelle, Michelle's field note)

Turning to look at Adebayo printing (Figure 9), we see Adebayo totally engaged in artmaking. I had cut printing plates for Adebayo, who had been away, working to prevent a community member from being deported to a place where it is not safe to be queer. Imagining a safe and inclusive future, Adebayo printed the colours of the trans flag on the map of Africa (Figure 10). The image is a powerful call for change. Figure 11 is Adebayo's response to tensions in the queer community that emerged during Edmonton Pride 2019. Adebayo printed this image after stating that within our queer community, we were not seeing each other, even though we are, in Adebayo's words, *like two sides of the same hand*.



Fig. 11: Adebayo (2019). Two Sides of the Same Hand. [Linocut Print]. Collection of the Artist, Edmonton, AB, Canada. I cut this plate and gifted to Adebayo, responding to his stories about tensions in Edmonton's queer community and members not seeing each other even though we are like two sides of the same hand. Adebayo printed the plate using colours of the Trans Flag.

Discussion of Narrative Threads

Creating counterstories are opportunities for missing stories to be told. They offer spaces for individuals and communities to think with previously excluded and still-silent stories. I am reminded of Lugones' (2003) concept of complex communities as creative spaces and concrete places that enable complex thinking, while countering reductionist and binary logistics and norms. Lugones' (2003) imagining of complex communities presents a radical reimagining of communities as unbounded and fluid, always transforming in response to emergent possibilities. While this concept might seem overly idealized, Lugones (2003) asserts it reflects the realities of communities and identities formed in relation. It is rather the concept of communities as ossified, geographically bounded, and protectionist, that reflects an overly simplified notion of what communities are and can become. The truncation of possibilities, erasure, and homogenization of difference are clues that bounded definitions of communities are at play, dividing people and groups into arbitrary assignments of Us or Them (Lugones, 2003).

Counterstories (Lindemann Nelson, 1995) seem to provide a mechanism to develop and support complex communities (Lugones, 2003). Counterstories are stories, lived and told, which counter hegemonic narratives. When told within communities, they may upend mainstream narratives and create space for new stories to be seen and told. Counterstories, enacted through telling and living stories, may further develop agency and manifest complexity, as reflected in Max's, Espen's, and Adebayo's stories and lives.

As Max, Espen, and Adebayo negotiate multiple worlds (Lugones, 1987), they prioritize certain experiences alongside their gender identity and expression as part of their identity and world making. For Espen, making space to tell his mental health stories was an important part of telling his stories of trans identity and advocating for trans inclusive mental health reforms. For Adebayo, his stories of racism and xenophobia intersected with his experiences of transphobia, and he responded by creating a community to support himself and other LGBTIQ refugees. For Max, it was important to challenge

intersections of ageism and ableism by telling stories of their experiences as being a non-binary trans person through public education, to make space for themselves and others.

Taking a Reflective Turn

Throughout their diverse community making experiences, Adebayo, Espen, and Max used artmaking and storytelling in their narratives and counternarratives to inform their identity making and world making. The three each used artmaking to think *with* and inform their stories of identity while negotiating complexity. Espen thought through transitioning by creating images about transformation. Max engaged in artmaking to query topics from climate change to normative thinking. Adebayo created artwork to disrupt and confront cultural, societal, and community narratives by offering alternative imaginaries, like trans and racial equality. I also used artmaking to bridge gaps and elicit hard-to-speak stories. Artmaking created space for stories to follow. Many stories surfaced because of artmaking.

In this research, artmaking and storytelling were used by Adebayo, Espen, and Max to foster a sense of connectedness, make sense of their experiences, combat social isolation, and form and transform community networks. In Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's stories and counterstories, communities are dynamic and emergent processes, rather than final destinations, continuously evolving in the hands of makers (Greene, 1995). Communities appear to be continuously made and remade through storytelling, artmaking, and direct action to communicate and connect lives. Adebayo, Espen, and Max demonstrate that communities are complex sites of negotiations of identities and always in the making. These complex communities promise not to erase differences, but forge new paths by acknowledging commonalities, learning from differences, and continuously imagining new possible futures shaped in relation to emergent identities.

Conclusion

Through artwork, stories and counterstories, this paper highlights Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's complex, ongoing processes of identity making and world making as trans young adults. Artmaking is an empowering process that Adebayo, Espen, and Max used to reflect on and communicate their stories. Making visible Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's experiences through artwork, stories, counterstories creates space to tell, hear, and honour their complex lives, while complicating notions of homogeneous trans and SGM identities. These stories illuminate complex negotiations and nuanced identity-making, community-making, and world-making processes that showcase each person's resistance and resilience. Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's counterstories may be challenging because they require de-centring of self-stories and collective stories to make room for new and long silent stories. Counterstories reverberate through webs of community connections in complicated and unforeseen ways, disrupting norms, while making space to address blind spots and imagine alternatives. Adebayo's, Espen's, and Max's artworks, stories, and counterstories offer novel ways to see and imagine through liminality and multiplicity, enabling creative and complex choices to transform and reimagine possible identities, communities, and worlds.

Notes

1. That is Sexual and Gender Minorities. SGM is interchangeable with LGBTIQ+. SGM identities include: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or trans, intersex, queer, Two Spirit, plus those not identifying as heterosexual or cisgender.
2. Lindemann Nelson (1995) suggests communities of choice are built around common affiliations and may transcend geographic locations, while communities of place are geographically situated. Participants' counterstories take place in communities of place and within chosen communities.
3. The Stonewall Riots took place in New York City in 1969 when the police raided the Stonewall Inn and arrested SGM patrons (Duberman et al., 1989). This event is recognized as a pivotal moment in SGM and trans history (Stryker, 2008) that coalesced emergent communities through collective action to resist oppression (D' Emilio, 2014).
4. Gay Liberation Movements are often critiqued for not being trans-inclusive, erasing trans lives, and for transphobic attitudes (Namaste, 2000).
5. Although early (e.g., 1900s) SGM communities have been traced through archival research, much remains hidden from history (Duberman et al., 1989).
6. Communities are often built to respond to needs of individuals and collectives (D' Emilio, 2014; Lavoie & Wells, in press). For more on Edmonton's Queer history please see: <https://edmontonqueerhistoryproject.ca>
7. Within narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), research puzzles are used to frame inquiry; they are part of a process in which questions and wonders emerge throughout research in response to stories (Clandinin & Huber, 2010).
8. Artists-in-Residence provide art workshops to SGM youth. Camp fyrefly is an arts-based leadership camp for LGBTIQ+ youth created by the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS), University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.
9. When considering visibility of SGM communities, there are many variables to consider, such as geography or age (Harley & Teaster, 2016).
10. Adebayo personal communication, at VAA CARFAC Gallery Edmonton, May 23, 2018.
11. Max personal communication, at VAA CARFAC Gallery Edmonton, May 23, 2018.

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