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ARTICLE

Collective Conversations: Talking About and Beyond Our Institutional Positions

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Abstract

How can communities on campus support scholars in developing specific, situated practices for ethical, accountable, impactful collaborations beyond campus? What opportunities can we open by being communally, radically present in our work? In considering these questions, I draw on three-plus years of organizing and facilitating two scholarly Collectives. These Collectives sustain lived community for scholars bending university systems toward liberatory work. From inside these Collectives, I trace seven guiding principles, including 1) learning alongside situated stories (as opposed to abstracted "advice"), 2) analyzing the specific institutional mechanisms we work through, 3) centering joy, 4) reimagining what we call possible, and 5) naming the places where we refuse educational systems' dangerous expectations. I ground these principles in lived stories with fellow Collective members, celebrating how living alongside one another can open relational scholarships that are respectful, inspiring, undisciplined, and growing into what we need them to be.

Keywords: Indigenous studies; public humanities; queer studies

A week before one of those important institutional reviews, I bump into my friend Dana. This particular review's with an arbiter who makes me feel impossible. Makes the work I want to do in the university feel impossible. My queer body, my off-campus research, our community organizing—dismissed. Devalued. Without place.

Dana knows this reviewer. She hugs me and asks, "Want to go for a walk afterwards?"

I don't know how to name or even feel the relief-hope-hurt-possibility that comes welling up. I nod. The review will try to take me apart. Dana will be there to help me heal.

1. Two scholarly Collectives

Academia can be lonely, isolating. It can push us to perform only small parts of ourselves and undercut our interactions with our communities. In response, community work *on campus* can create spaces for scholars to be radically present in their scholarship and to develop

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accountable practices for their community work. Over the last five years I've co-organized and co-facilitated the Critical Disciplinarity Collectives. These communities discuss what it feels like to work on campus. We support one another in navigating university systems toward work we believe in. We ask, "Where do we feel trapped? Where do we build possibilities? How?" This article outlines how these Collectives started, what they are like, and what we are learning in them.

When we work in related, damaging academic systems, our pains are often both connected and distinct. This is the context for our Collectives. If you are trying to bend university money toward community projects, you and I may struggle with related funding processes. If you are trying to publish work toward continuing a career, we are facing related mechanisms of prestige politics. Our pains are also specific to our positionalities and locations. Some face constant surveillance on campus because of how they are seen. Some have their language variety dismissed as "unprofessional." Some work in fields actively antagonistic to who they are. These experiences, too, arise inside shared academic systems that demand we mask, pass, and perform ourselves as scholars. We can face them together.[1]

As I tried to orient myself in these systems before the Collectives began, I realized one-on-one discussions were not (for me) enough. Conversations about these pains and how we respond felt private, isolated, unfolding in borrowed time. At a bus stop before hustling to work. In a mentor's office, before the meeting turned toward clearing another academic hurdle. I felt myself fracturing as I tried to fit my public humanities work—and my human commitments—into academia.[2] Lonely at my desk, I wondered what might become possible inside a community that centered these questions. I needed that community. Could I help nurture solidarity networks beyond individual relationships and departmental silos?

I reached out, asking friends what they would want from the kind of Collective I was imagining. I thought (and felt) about what I needed and what parts might be something my colleagues needed too. I searched for funding to meet around a meal. A faculty member gave seed funds. A research unit promised more. I made a "menu" of thirteen ways we might open the first meeting. Then, still unprepared, I took the plunge and sent invitations. Worried no one would come.

People came. Our vibrant engagement grew beyond my plans. That was three years ago.

(And it was messy. Effortful. Ongoing. I want to highlight that this work is uncertain. I believe we learn from one another's lived realities, not as replicable models, but as companions as

[1] This article centers on conversational collective knowledge rather than published work. At the same time, our Collectives' lived conversations build on and are supported by powerful writing in a variety of fields. We respond to traditions of the Undercommons, in part by trying to make a space that keeps some of the protections of lived support networks while being one step more legible to the institution and colleagues we have not yet met (Harney and Moten 2013; Muñiz et al. 2025; Okello 2024). We're also in conversations with queer and decolonial critiques of hegemonic systems, and the counter possibilities that always already exist in community joys and resistances (Halberstam 2005; Keeton 2022; Paperson 2017). We align with Indigenous studies by tending to these counter ways and by considering how we engage with the intersections (and trans-sections) of large-scale patterns of power and local contexts (Graphenreed and Poe 2022; Jackson 2021 (Cherokee); Lonetree 2021 (Ho-Chunk); Simpson and Manitowabi 2013 (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg; Ojibway, Odawa); Tuck and Yang 2014 (Unangaŝ)). We learn from scholars who center their own needs/desires inside the needs/desires of their communities (Blair, Brown and Baxter 1994; Chew and Lokosh 2021 (Chickasaw); Kauanu and Doe 2018 (Kanaka Maoli; Mashpee Wampanoag); Waite 2019), opening a scholarly community that invites members to work toward that centering in relationship with supportive colleagues.

[2] For more on my public humanities work, see Smith 2025.

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we walk toward our hopes. If you are working around related themes, or want to be, I'd love to talk. Really. Reach out. Azlans2@illinois.edu.)

We now have two Collectives. One is primarily graduate students and postdocs, and one is faculty and administrators. Given university hierarchies, it's useful to talk with folks at similar career stages. Joint meetings also empower solidarity across such divides. In all, we host about 18 meetings per year. Each is drop-in, with no readings beforehand, no requirement to return, and open-ended questions to get us started. Almost everyone who's come to one meeting comes back (about 170 people over three years).

In meetings we center one another as community members who sometimes do what universities call scholarship, not scholars who sometimes make tactful mention of community lives. We protect each other where we can. We discuss difficult experiences and powerful celebrations. We tend to relationships in which we ask, "How can we move through academia while holding onto who we are, who we work with and for?"

2. Three snapshots

October 10, 2025. We meet at the Lazy Daisy Diner. Some hug, some politely introduce themselves. I've got paper, pens. An activity for describing the semesters we are living and the semesters we are working toward in poems about the diner around us. Without this Collective I would've quit years ago.

After we order, before we sink into conversation, we write a bit. Lindsay Rose Russell writes about a bar stool of scattered hopes—the one she's looking at, and one she knows from another time—and about the booths we can make, clean, crowd into while meeting. Kelley Lemon writes about a coffee pot that keeps pouring coffee. (Two weeks later, when I ask about including her here, she still has the poem in her pocket). We've heard the menu's giant pancake takes the whole griddle. Shuts down the kitchen for anything else. Ángel García writes about the giant pancake of securing tenure, and what else he wants—needs?—to start cooking.

The conversation feels like where am I? Like how can we? And more than anything, like here we are, finding our ways together. In two weeks we'll meet again.

Part of me wants to share more about that meeting, but we use meetings to create spaces sheltered from academia's gaze. To discuss how we are dismissed, devalued, struggling, and to celebrate beyond-institutional ways of being. (If you are interested, a group co-authored an experimental piece about what meetings are like).[3] Instead I'll describe how two members are wrestling with their work.[4] I hope this gestures at the kind of support we create inside meetings. I imagine these like snapshots, people smiling along a river, inviting you to swim.

In his teaching, organizing, and poetry, Ángel García draws a contrast between "tinkering" and "radical revision."[5] Tinkering means changing a word, class assignment, or application process.

[3] Smith et al. 2025.

[4] Before mentioning anyone in the article, I talked to them directly, and they are excited to be part of this. They also read early drafts. One commented that seeing their story reflected here helped them reconnect to their work. Beyond simple constructions of "consent" (read as a single instance of permission), these practices ongoingly ask how we want to appear (or not appear) in one another's writing and what such appearances can mean.

[5] Ángel García in discussion with the author, March 19, 2025, and follow-up discussions in July 2025.

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Radical revision means "dismantling" and "rebuilding," "scavenging for what's working," and rearranging those pieces into configurations that help us "work again in organic ways that disrupt what we think we know." He's found that radical revisions aren't usually "part of the agenda" for universities and nonprofits. They take too much time. They risk turning away from a program's constructed normal. The Collective centers such revisions, perhaps because we do not have agendas, "efficient plans for where we're going." We have starting ideas, relationalities, commitments, and an open interest in collaborating.

Ángel's reimagining how scholars co-construct spaces for Latinx poets. He previously attended workshops, wrote in community, and shared readings as a fellow with CantoMundo, a 501(c)(3) that hosts Latinx poetry retreats. He liked it. At the same time, CantoMundo's approach plans activities before people show up and builds from funders' agendas and host universities' visions. Ángel's working toward "organic," "responsive" communities that co-create their own ongoing activities and goals without prewritten "goals and project impacts." As he watches universities pull funding from initiatives centering people of color, he's considering turning away from institutional funding, too. "What can we do with no cost except our time?"

His friend's dreaming "a popup CantoMundo kitchen," not tied to any institution or funder, where people cook ideas to share. "I don't know what that is," Ángel shares, but he's thinking. Maybe its open-access workshops on zoom. A salon to share your work, your life. Maybe it's totally different. Instead of blank space *beyond the scope of my research*, Ángel's "I don't know" opens community space where organizing grows.

Jackie Abing reimagines her Anthropology PhD. She's writing a dissertation. She also feels a need to do more, to do otherwise. Her "fieldwork" is with her own communities, her own family, learning how lived networks resist mass incarceration systems. An anthropology dissertation and articles are not made to circulate here. TikToks are common. Music is important. Jackie asks what she can make that will help her communities share strategies, resources, and understandings of the systems they face. What she makes cannot just be writing:

"I want to ask, 'How do I narrate?' Like Jucuapa—how do I write that? I can write *my skin was glazed with sweat and a cool breeze, riding in the back of this truck.* But how do I convey it? I'm thinking about recordings of rain sounds, of birds, of the trucks coming and going. Quotes interspersed with a soundscape and video footage."[6]

Our Collectives open space for Jackie to talk with supportive colleagues as she develops her practice. I feel the power of where she starts. *I want.* Her motivations lead beyond academia's fanfare and requirements. I want to see what she makes.

3. Seven principles

Reflecting on meetings, I see seven principles that make our Collectives generative and affirming.

1) We share lived stories rather than universalized "advice." Advice risks flattening situations, erasing how context and positionality affect what is possible for whom, when. When Ángel shares, *here's what's happening for me*, he invites us to live alongside

[6] Jackie Marie Abing in discussion with author, February 15, 2025, and follow-up discussions in July 2025.

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one another, learning and offering support. No one's experience is up for critique or debate.

What do you wish you could share from your experiences? Or hear about it from others' experiences? Who do you need to be alongside?

2) We chart how educational systems undercut us and how we can respond. Fields, institutions, departments, and individual referees constrain us in different ways. Ángel studies structures of poetic space. Jackie studies program requirements, searching for ways to serve her communities while looking enough like an anthropologist. These examinations ground their work.

In your work, what gatekeepers hold what specific levers of power? What can you learn about both? How have others gotten through?

3) We have fun. People laugh. Listen. Share. We're not "trying to get" anyone to do anything. We're opening invitations that we take up—and refuse—as we choose. The food helps.

What nourishes you? Where's joy growing?

4) We reimagine what's possible. I expect "poetry retreats" to start with applications, deadlines, and reviews. Ángel smiles, asking, What if we did not start there? My training assumes that scholarship aims (primarily) toward published books and articles. Jackie turns to her communities' goals and ways of making, asking, What else can I do?

What do you wish you could do, beyond the paths academia teaches you to expect? What desires, relationships, and examples push toward new practices?

5) We center *not doing.* Scholars (especially Othered scholars) are asked to do too much: teaching, service, research, departmental politics, and more. We ask: which of the expectations placed on me are actually being tracked, at what level, and how? If Ángel and Jackie are going to have a life for their life's work, they have to hustle less elsewhere. To refuse. What could you *not do* while triggering minimal institutional alarms?

Scholars are also asked to do harmful things. To extract knowledge from our communities. What pressures do you refuse?

6) We take our time. Annual university lunches miss how people notice each other across the room, sit together, and grow trust. Ángel, Jackie, and I became a community through years of sometimes silly, sometimes serious, and often spiraling time.

What spaces—what time—do you need for community and collaboration to grow? Where do we open slow, generous time for tending relationships?

7) We start without knowing how. Somewhere I learned research starts with a question, methodology, and plan. Focused on resonances among separate and overlapping intentions, we did not know where we were going. We started, instead, by opening

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to joys. *I love talking together.* To wounds. *I'm so lonely.* To work. *I'm willing to send* a lot *of emails to schedule a meeting.* Our questions and the relationships they invite become our methodologies.

Who is your community? Who could it be? Where do your needs connect, how can you be accountable, and what can you try?

See you in two weeks.

Azlan Guttenberg Smith, MFA, is a community researcher, organizer, educator, and PhD candidate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Their *Public Humanities* research queers institutional spaces toward collective liberations. Their community art facilitation strengthens communities and improves institutions by sharing true stories from collaborators' lives. Their teaching emphasizes student agency inside complex social systems. Together, their teaching, organizing, and research foster diverse coalitions toward polyvocal understandings of ourselves, our communities, and our possible futures. They're not sure about bios. What kind of meeting can we enact in these few lines, and what kind of meeting might we want?

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