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## Learning about Sharing Authority With the Gathered Voices of Malmö

Robert Nilsson Mohammadi  and Sima Nurali Wolgast 

### ABSTRACT

For more than two years we were involved in a collaborative process with the aim of finding out how sharing life stories could ensure “the right to the city” in Malmö, Sweden. This process led to the formation of the Gathered Voices of Malmö, an association for social justice oral history that strives to become a community archive. This article is about how *sharing authority* was interpreted collectively in the collaborative process when it could not be directly translated into Swedish, and how those interpretations reflect back on sharing authority as an intellectual development. Drawing upon documents created during the collaborative process and interviews with our coparticipants, we revisit what we learned, including our rereading of sharing authority’s genealogy through project-based research. As participants in, and then analysts of, that process, we learned that our trouble with translating *sharing authority* was not only linguistic, but also had to do with how the approach might conceal community-embedded ways of working, instead normalizing participatory practices which center research rather than community as the primary sphere in which important learnings are made. We suggest that a deeper consideration of the differences between “a shared authority” and “sharing authority” could help us avoid making participation the best practice.

### KEYWORDS

collaborative oral history;  
participatory research;  
sharing authority; urban  
justice

On a hot day in August 2019, Malmö-based community leaders, playwrights, activists, popular educators, museum professionals, and scholars met at Malmö University to start a collaborative oral history project. Those who came shared a concern regarding how public portrayals of their city exposed the majority of the city’s population (most of whom are poor and often racialized as nonwhite—a population to which many in the room belonged) to disenfranchisement and possible harm, while also impairing community building within the city. The workshop was followed by many months of exchanges, resulting in the formation of the Gathered Voices of Malmö (hereafter MSR, from its name in Swedish, *Malmö’s samlade röster*). This is an autonomous association based on voluntary labor performed by paying members, set up to involve a growing number of Malmöites in an expanding process of sustained conversation around stories about themselves and their city. This article is about how *sharing authority* was interpreted collectively in the collaborative process when it could not be directly translated into Swedish, and how those interpretations reflect back on sharing authority as an intellectual development that balances between participatory and community-based modes.

Malmö is a city smaller than its reputation. With a population of approximately 350,000, it is Sweden’s third largest city. Its dense city plan, however, makes it a better example of the highly diverse urbanity typical of postcolonial Europe than a bigger city

like Gothenburg or the capital city of Stockholm. More than half of Malmö's population has a migratory background; one third of the population was born outside of Sweden, and almost 170 languages are spoken in the city.<sup>1</sup> Malmö is also home to the poorest population of Swedish residents, and is, in fact, becoming poorer by the year.<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall's oft-quoted insight that "race [is] the modality in which class is lived" seems pertinent for understanding the recent development of the city.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the narrative formation around Malmö adds emphasis to the social vulnerability faced by many of Malmö's inhabitants.

Malmö has repeatedly been narrativized as a "scary city" characterized by an informal economy, violence, and (allegedly) failed multiculturalism.<sup>4</sup> This noir urbanism seems easier to attach to Malmö than to the more heavily segregated cities of Stockholm and Gothenburg, both cities where some working-class suburbs are imagined in a similar way, but which avoid being characterized as such in their entirety as Malmö has.<sup>5</sup> The scary-city narrative surrounding Malmö has been circulated by actors within the political far right in an effort to demonstrate what Sweden could become if "alien" elements are not curtailed.<sup>6</sup> Between 2003 and 2010, Malmö was terrorized by a racist serial killer who—inspired by white power ideologue William Pierce and Joseph Paul Franklin's "lone-wolf" terrorism—carried out his operations without detection for a long time, while his deeds cast suspicion on his victims and the groups they were perceived to belong to.<sup>7</sup> By choosing Malmö as his site of operation, he added further tension to a racialized Swedish society. The fact that Fox News and Donald Trump, during his presidency, as well as news networks and politicians in many countries, have used the city to conjure up anxieties about a Muslim takeover of Europe highlights the international value of this narrative of Malmö.<sup>8</sup>

In a competing narrative, which finds an institutional home at the municipality and the local liberal daily newspaper *Sydsvenskan*, Malmö is depicted as an exciting and complex postindustrial urban space that is close to the European continent and open to the world.<sup>9</sup> This narrative pulls meaning from a physical environment which is made up of brick buildings in orange and brown hues, more reminiscent of cities in Denmark, Germany, or the Netherlands than of the white-plastered Swedish modernity of Stockholm, or rural Sweden's wooden cabins. This is a narrative that packages the urban spaces and the city life of Malmö as desirable commodities for private investors.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the "scary-city" narrative depicts Malmö and its inhabitants as a problem for "proper" society, the "exciting-city" narrative renders anyone seen to embody the ethnic and social diversity of Malmö no more than a backdrop to urban middle-class lives.

We and those interested in the project gathered at Malmö University in August 2019 to explore how oral history and other life-story practices could be used to change this situation. Professor Steven High from the Concordia Center for Oral History and Digital Storytelling was invited to lecture on how diasporic communities in Montreal, scholars from Concordia University, and various memory institutions had collaborated in the Montreal Life Stories Project (MLS), which thereafter became the primary example of how we wished to work.<sup>11</sup> Many in the room had previous experience in working with life stories, albeit in different contexts such as activism, community theater, or scholarly research. By participating in the workshop, we embarked on a process of learning from each other's practices and theories to find out how acts of telling and listening to life stories could add to the social and political work in which many of us were already engaged. Key approaches from MLS—such as joint learning, sustained conversation and, foremost,

sharing authority—showed how we could work together for urban justice and community building in a multidisciplinary, interprofessional, and socially diverse group.

One problem that we encountered when working collaboratively was the translation of key concepts from oral history theory into Swedish and, especially, into a vernacular that would make sense and be productive in everyday exchanges. Particularly challenging was the translation of *shared authority* (and its derivatives). The Swedish translation of *authority* would be either *auktoritet* (having authority) or *myndighet* (a governance body); the play on *author* is lost (it could be captured by the term *auktoritativ*, but that is a highly technical word that would need as much explanation as the English term itself). This was not only a matter of showing fidelity to the source language, but also what we as scholars, coming from activist backgrounds, perceived as a concept that was a useful link between learning in organizing and learning in research. What further complicated the issue was that the term surfaces in works of seemingly opposite tendencies (both in propositions to work collaboratively and in more critical stances towards popular forms of oral history).<sup>12</sup> It became clear from our group discussions on the meaning of *shared authority* that we were interpreting the phrase through our own political contexts and ideological and professional agendas. In this article, we reflect on what the group in Malmö offered as an alternative when the concept of shared authority was not enough.<sup>13</sup>

### Sharing Authority's Genealogy through Project-Based Research

The notion of a shared authority has become one of the more pervasive theoretical formulations generated by oral history, and one that is gaining momentum as a motivation for participatory practices in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in memory institutions.<sup>14</sup> Thirty years after its publication in 1990, historian Michael Frisch's book *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* is increasingly cited in research publications, in addition to being one of the most-used texts in the training of oral historians (at least in the US).<sup>15</sup> In the period between the publication of Frisch's book and the beginning of our work in 2019, scholars and practitioners have expanded upon the meaning of the concept by moving it through different contexts, handing us the present progressive form of "sharing authority." In trying to find the proper way to express *sharing authority* in Swedish, we had to work through the content and contradictions that this history of articulations has bestowed on our work.

Lynn Abrams says, of oral history theory, that it is arrived at through reflection on and in practice.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Frisch presents the phrase "a shared history" as an afterthought that comes from rereading his own critical engagement with oral and public history practices and their reception since the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> This connects Frisch's original wording to ideas circulating within the field of oral history before the publication of his work. Linda Shopes has, for example, pointed at the similarities between Frisch's theorizing and Alessandro Portelli's "Research as an Experiment in Equality."<sup>18</sup>

In our reading, a comparison with Luisa Passerini's warning that oral history might "transform the writing of history into a form of populism" even better captures Frisch's intervention in connecting oral history to writing history "from below."<sup>19</sup> When analyzing the reception of Studs Terkel's *Hard Times*, Frisch noticed that oral history seems to be praised for supplying "no history" (but rather direct experience) and at the same time "more history" (unabstracted insights into things as they really were)—a history-writing that likely

makes people less aware of how they actively produce historical interpretations.<sup>20</sup> However, according to Frisch, oral history should rather be seen as (unavoidably) expressing a shared authority as it is shaped through exchanges, a point of view comparable to Raphael Samuel's proposition that we see history as "a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands."<sup>21</sup> We take it that Frisch's retrospective viewing of oral history has supplied a term that is useful for analytical involvement in the varying cultural, social, and technological contexts in which historical knowledge and meaning are produced (including the voices being "heard" in oral history).

The awareness that oral history is both a process and a product in which history-writing's social dimensions are easily discernible has, however, led many to conclude that history should be explored and written in more democratic ways. This is what lies behind the noun-to-verb conversion of *a shared authority* to *sharing authority*, which can be traced to the 2003 special issue of the *Oral History Review*, entitled "Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process." This issue contains contributions from scholars reflecting on participation in knowledge production as a means of empowering socially vulnerable groups that also tend to be objectified in political, scientific, and other public discourses. In the reports from these collaborations, shared authority evolved from an afterthought to an approach promising better knowledge, better treatment of interviewees, and even societal change.<sup>22</sup> In what follows here, we focus on the main trends this development has taken, right up to the conclusion of the MLS which inspired us when we began our work in Malmö.

One trend has been the change from coproduction of single texts (such as interviews, stage productions, books, and so on) to sharing authority in wider collaborations and at more stages in the process. In the year 2000, Daniel James published the book *Doña María's Story*. This book presents a longer autobiographical narrative which is based on the author's long-lasting interview relationship with one interviewee, coedited with her, and followed by James's interpretative essays.<sup>23</sup> In his 2003 article, "We Know What the Problem Is," Daniel Kerr offered a different interpretation: in the cocreation of a public space in which Cleveland's homeless community could come together around the sharing of experiences, sharing authority was demonstrated as a means of movement building.<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Miller reflected, in 2009, on how the making of her documentary film *The Water Front*, about the commodification of fresh water, depended on building partnership in a divided community. Here, sharing authority became the way to handle the partiality (tendency, unfinishedness) of each account.<sup>25</sup> The MLS, carried out in collaboration between some of Montreal's diasporic communities and scholars at Concordia University between 2007 and 2012, brought together hundreds of practitioners in a large collaborative process that was co-invented by the participating communities. Steven High has discussed this as an enlargement of sharing authority, from an interview approach to an approach for making every part of the collaborative process participatory.<sup>26</sup> This shifts the focus from carrying out a task to maintaining relationships, thereby arranging the collaboration in a way that reconfigures what Sujatha Fernandes has called "the political economy of storytelling."<sup>27</sup>

These developments have occurred alongside evolving approaches to the relationship between researchers and community partners—from trying to minimize distance and disparity to establishing ways to work across differences. In 2003, Wendy Rickard reported that she collaborated with sex workers in order to defend their positions and strengthen their voices in political and scholarly exchanges. Here,

Rickard offered her authority as a scholar to make the result of their collaborative work widespread.<sup>28</sup> In the same year, sharing authority featured as the starting point for Alicia J. Rouverol's work in setting up a theater play in a correctional setting.<sup>29</sup> In these articles, the authors have reflected on the difficulty of creating knowledge on equal terms when community partners are included in the research projects. Their work both exposes and offers ways of transcending the limitations of the knowledge-producing position.

Similarly, Alan Wong, in 2009, reasoned that he would connect better with the interviewees if he let himself be interviewed, thus balancing the power relations between those involved.<sup>30</sup> That same year, Stacey Zembrzycki's discussion of coworking with her grandmother offers insights into both their evolving relationship and finding out how to work together with people in different social positions.<sup>31</sup> High likens MLS to "one of [Montreal's] intercultural neighborhoods," in that being together in difference is stated as a key understanding of that process.<sup>32</sup> In High's work, the concept of joint learning (learning together and learning from each other) becomes a way to recognize particular experiences, facilitate exchanges between those experience, and find meaning in the shared process.<sup>33</sup>

A bit more detached from these two trends is a third variety of work that maintains the potential of shared authority to uncover the social and cultural frameworks of history production, without prescribing collaborative work. Richard Cándida Smith, for example, used formalist analysis of oral history in print culture to expose its labor process—that is, how it structures the relationships between those who seem to be supplying raw facts and those who add interpretation and, in the process, might alienate interviewees from the fruits of their labor—their storied memories.<sup>34</sup> Alexander Freund has offered similar critiques with regard to digital media in the prevailing capitalist economy and culture, giving a rather bleak account of popular oral history's capability to withstand the impact of established power-orders.<sup>35</sup>

This evolution of theory and practice reveals three aspects of shared/sharing authority: (1) "shared authority" is a concept for critically examining coproduced history, and "sharing authority" is the imperative to engage in history collaboratively, either by (2) leveling differences between researchers and their collaborators or by (3) working across difference. Our understanding is that the field has generally interpreted these concepts—slightly differently worded—through what Joan W. Scott has called a "plot of compatibility," framing sharing authority as a conclusion to Frisch's afterthought and as something professional oral historians have gotten better at over time.<sup>36</sup> It might therefore be logical that Mary Rizzo blamed sharing authority for the naturalization of white subject positions and the subordination of Black people in the early 1980s theater play, *Baltimore Voices*, which was created from verbatim transcripts of oral history interviews: "[Even though] the concept of sharing authority did not exist in the late 1970s, archival materials show that the creators were deeply concerned about involving the oral history narrators in the process of creating the play in a way that anticipated the concept."<sup>37</sup> At the same time, Rizzo's critique is ironic, since *Baltimore Voices* seems to have been exactly the kind of practice that Frisch wanted to critique by formulating the concept of a shared authority. However, we concur with Rizzo in her remark that "sharing authority has become an ethical guideline for oral and public historians."<sup>38</sup> We ourselves adopted the concept as an anchor in our work in Malmö. In the following section, we will consider how this model of shared/sharing authority was articulated, how it was contested in our praxis, how our work forced us to



unpack the concept's overt and covert meanings, and what was provoked in our subsequent reflections on moving between shared and sharing authority.

### **Interpretations of Sharing Authority in the Gathered Voices of Malmö**

“Sharing authority seems to be a question of identity, belonging, and sacrifice, of having the right (or not) to live, to be part of a whole, or not. As a child of the Rwandan diaspora, I have experienced this all my life.”<sup>39</sup> With those words, Lisa Ndejuru, who became part of MLS in Montreal from her position as a leader within the Rwandan group Isangano, interpreted sharing authority from her personal experience and community position. Similarly, within our collaboration in Malmö, sharing authority was articulated along the lines of community experiences and practices based on local urban experiences.

Following the initial August 2019 meeting at Malmö University, our group gathered for a series of workshops in which we explored our own and each other's reasons for taking part, our capacities, and our desired outcomes. At first, we used some of the participating organizations' spaces for our meetings, but soon the workspace of one of the project partners, the Museum of Movements (MoM), became our regular location. MoM was a museum for democracy and migration, developed through co-invention with social movements, minority groups, and migrant communities. MoM's workspace in central Malmö, which had been carefully and collaboratively planned, offered a flexible setting and inclusive ambience that was perfect for our development.<sup>40</sup> In one of our interviews, Mitra Pourkarin, who joined the process as a leader within an antiracist movement for Queer migrants, described this period as an exploratory phase:

At the workshop at Malmö University we started off from a message on what is problematic in our situation that was recognized by all the social movement people at the meeting, since we are working against it in our every-day organizing and community building. It was like you [Robert] said: “This is how I see things. Shall we do something about it?” But you never said what we should do or how we should do it. Gradually, we understood that no one would come and solve things for us, we understood that we are the owners of this thing. We decide both how the work will be done and the path it will take. I think that it has a lot to do with how you started it all, but then kept saying: “I don't know.” Like: “You have to decide.” You have said that so many times.

One spring evening in 2020, right before the pandemic made physical meetings impossible, the group convened at MoM to collectively edit two drafts: one stating the purpose of the joint process, and the other declaring the ethical values of the process. At a preceding meeting, we had discussed the notion of sharing authority and defined it as mutual learning across difference. Sharing authority was also included as one of the guiding principles in the initial paragraphs of the documents, but several issues were raised in the discussion about how that concept should be concretized in the following paragraphs. Some wanted us to be a congregation of formal representatives from different organizations, while others preferred for each of us to attend as an individual with a connection to a certain community or organization. Some emphasized our unique capability to create a forum for exchange of knowledge and experiences, while others stressed the need for social organizing and political interventions. The discussion took many turns, until Ferman El Khoury, a youth leader from an urban justice movement, put into words what we all had been circling around: it all was about “caring for

each other's stories." The rest of the group accepted this wording and the commitment it evoked, and it became embedded in the ethical values. Our suggestion that sharing authority was about mutual learning was thereby replaced with an interpretation of sharing authority as mutual care.

According to our interviews, there were several reasons why "caring for each other's stories" was an orientation that made sense within the group. One reason was that this saying aligned with experiences of having lived (or even grown up) in Malmö in the decades around the turn of the millennia, when the city transitioned into its current postindustrial state. It was apparent from the interviews that these experiences also often served as motivation for people to become involved in the process. In the concluding decades of the twentieth century, Malmö was hit hard by unemployment following the closure of its textile, food, and shipbuilding industries. The breakthrough of the knowledge economy is perceived as a result of the establishment of an internationally successful gaming industry and the inauguration of a university college (which was granted full university status in 2018).<sup>41</sup> Malmö has become the fastest-growing city in Sweden, but is also a city of newcomers and transients, resulting in the replacement of 70 percent of the city's population between, roughly, 1990 and 2015. Half of Malmö's population is now younger than thirty-five. During this period of change, both inequalities within the city and inequalities between the city's inhabitants and those living in surrounding municipalities have deepened.<sup>42</sup> Our first interpretation of why "caring for each other's stories" was widely accepted within the group is that it was seen as a continuation of the daily struggles for "the right to the city."<sup>43</sup>

Elizabeth Knutsdotter, who entered our process with a background in a free professional theater group working with a community of newly arrived migrants, explained in an interview: "When I came to Malmö in 2003, I didn't like the place. I thought that the city was rather boring and dreary." Knutsdotter said that this feeling changed when she became part of the asylum rights movement and then interpreted life stories from Malmö for the stage with her theater group:

Starting to understand what had happened in different places, made me connect with the city and with people who have lived here a long time ago. I started to feel a belongingness when I took part in and connected to other people's stories, beyond my own timeline. My connection with people first came from me being an activist. An asylum group became my home and the people my family. The group gave me a purpose in life. It was possible to have a place and be with people for a longer time, it was a gathering place. I started to realize that Malmö is a place where you can live, and where different experiences are welcome.

In this quote, Knutsdotter illustrates one aspect of "the right to the city," which has to do with being in meaningful contact with people and with experiences of the changing urban space. Personal feelings of attachment, mediated through stories about extended families, also emerged as a theme in interviews with participants that have grown up in Malmö. When interviewed, Ferman El Khoury said, "There was a lot of fun, playing around and doing mischief when I was young. We were a lot of kids living in the same apartment complex, we had relatives, and we knew people from other parts of the city." Other interviewees, however, contrast their feelings of being part of an extended family with having either their personal or their community's belongingness to the city questioned. Mitra Pourkarin told about how moving beyond the safe borders of the neighborhood where she grew up made her aware of class difference and racism:



Malmö changed in your eyes as you grew up. Malmö as a city is really pedagogic, you get to see the different sides of society. In school, all of us lived under similar conditions. Then you go on to the *gymnasium* [high school] and that's a school that is more mixed, and you get to see sides of the city you haven't seen before. And when I played football in primary school, it was the same persons that I met during the day. But when I grew older my friends lost interest and I had to look for a new team. Then I saw people richer than me, with other possibilities in life. And also, I had to go to practice by bus, I had to leave my neighborhood. See, things happened on the bus. I think my first memory of racism is from a bus. You leave your area and get all aware of yourself. Am I too loud? Is music leaking from my earphones? Should I take my legs down from the seat? But also: "Get up, this is my seat!"

Similarly, Pezhman Rahimi, now working as a popular educator, spoke in one of our interviews about growing up:

Growing up in Malmö was raw and hard but I wasn't aware of class difference until I was a teenager. I was good at playing tennis. After my parents separated, I couldn't play so much. And the other kids, they came from western Malmö and had new clothes and were picked up by their parents in nice cars. I grew up in a bubble. We were *svartskallar* [racist pejorative] all of us, those that were my best friends. Only three of us were Swedish, but that difference was never pronounced when we were that age. My best friends, one was Chileno, others were Iranians. One had an African Swedish background. I wasn't aware of racism until I was older, when I noticed how others talked about us coming from this city.

One such moment happened when Pezhman Rahimi was in ninth grade, and his close friend from school was murdered by her older boyfriend.

I discovered that a Nazi platform had written an article about a Swedish born girl that had been kidnapped and killed by an immigrant, ignoring that she was of a Polish background. I was so angry. It was my classmate, my friend. And those fucking Nazis twisted it in their propaganda.

While Pezhman Rahimi spoke about the experience of seeing a personal tragedy being used in an overtly political way, Ferman El Khoury told us about witnessing members of his community getting into trouble and how journalistic discourse made the situation worse:

I had friends that abused others and other friends that themselves were abused. Some were put in jail, some took drugs, others sold drugs, some committed suicide, some moved away. It was people that I grew up with, ordinary people. Some of them wanted affirmation but sought that attention in the wrong ways. When doing things, they did not have anyone to talk to. No one listened, no one asked why they were doing wrong. People assumed that they were bad kids, and they were marked. I was lucky, I had my family, a big family, that supported me without judging me. That is important. The media is constantly judging us and putting up negative images of us.

When reflecting on his own narrative, Pezhman Rahimi feels a sense of belonging to a community that is unwanted and forced away by the systems of politics, policing, and gentrification:

It's like the true city exists below the city that is seen or projected. But the true city has been made invisible and has not been given any platform or resources. Below the ideological narratives, other experiences, and visions swarm. Take *Möllevångsfestivalen* [an annual community-based block party in the area where Pezhman Rahimi lives] as an example. It was created from below but then the municipality decided that it should be subjected to the same security demands as *Malmöfestivalen* [the municipality's annual public festival]. But the difference is that *Malmöfestivalen* is held by the municipality and can afford to have more

than twenty full-time employees, while we were working on a voluntary basis. We have been forced to leave our collective meeting places. There is a fancy cheese shop in the place where our community organization *Möllevångsgruppen* used to have its center. The place where the non-profit café *Glassfabriken* used to be will soon become an architectural office. Many small businesses and associations had to leave to make space for Ubisoft Studio Massive Entertainment. Also, the Museum of Movements, the politicians didn't see any value in it. All the things that professionals and community members did together at the museum have been made invisible and rendered irrelevant.

Richard Rodger and Joanna Herbert remind us that oral history shows that “the city is not simply lived as a spectacle, a site of aesthetic pleasure . . . but is an embodied experience that is often mundane and repetitive.”<sup>44</sup> In their quotes, Elizabeth Knutsdotter, Mitra Pourkarin, Ferman El Khoury, and Pezhman Rahimi are enacting their struggle for the right to the city. They report resistance against certain definitions of themselves and their city as part of the urban experience. Instead, they define the city along lines of extended family bonds and community, but also narrate it as a site for public violence and even death, but deaths that are politicized by being woven into the story of Malmö by different spectators. The interviewees thus differentiate between the Malmö that is perceived through narratives or at a superficial glance and a more real underlying city that rarely breaks through the screen upon which public images of the city are projected.

These comments resonate with Joseph Plaster's work around San Francisco's Polk Street, in which a working-class queer community claims the right to the city through non-heteronormative notions of safety and family.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the participants in our collaboration interpreted sharing authority to be about exercising care in face of challenges to their urban community. The choice is reminiscent of MLS—an emphasis on public curation rather than on collecting.<sup>46</sup> The statement orients the process away from empowering certain communities' voices and towards the creation of spaces in which people can help each other to work on their stories. Ferman El Khoury explained this orientation:

What we are doing is for real. Sharing stories is a tool that is applicable in different parts of life, in our families, with friends, in communities. To share stories is healing. What one participant is sharing is bringing meaning to my story. We are setting up a nonprofit knowledge-producing community. The important experiences are underneath the surface and when our stories are framed by means of theories [referring to oral history], they are given an extensional meaning. We are living with narratives about Malmö that are not based on the stories of people that are living here. In this project, I can share my story without taking space from others. To tell stories in that way is a healing process and has therapeutic effects. This context can make ripples on water and spread, and everybody can take part in our association and the diversity of the stories told is their strength.

Ferman El Khoury here talks about collaborative oral history as a way to do service that strengthens urban dwellers and their sense of community. If our way of doing collaborative oral history as care work was to situate it as service for the community; other interviewees accepted this articulation because it provided the foundation for working together in a diverse group. “MSR is a group of people from different backgrounds, with their own practices . . . it is a place where we can learn and suffice as such. We don't have to think in productivity terms,” Elizabeth Knutsdotter said. In one of the interviews, playwright and translator Carin Ilunga explained that she has been doing interviews for the stage for more than ten years, and has been searching all along for a context in which she could ask and explore questions about how to do and work with interviews. This work, then, came to be

seen as both a service to the community program and a foundation of community practice, meaning a practice that first and foremost produces relationships.

The choice to replace learning with caring as the central principle around which our collaboration would evolve was a decisive point in the development that led up to the formation of MSR. It is similar to how Ndejuru writes about sharing authority in MLS as deep listening and sharing the load:

The life story project made perfect sense: continuing in the vein of speaking us into existence, out of hiding, out from under the radar, out of our own silences, and into awareness, it was and remains to this day a fabulous and unique opportunity to hear our different stories and to actualize the true meaning of Isangano (meeting place).<sup>47</sup>

Ndejuru's call for research to do service that might make a community process sustainable, deeper, and larger helps us interpret our partners' assertion that they would not allow our collaboration to be yet another case in which the community they experienced and actively made in the city would be subjugated or displaced; they insisted that community values and practices should take precedence and that the project should contribute to the urban community.

### **Stressing Independence by Applying a Shared Authority**

To share authority made sense to the participants in our oral history collaboration; it was interpreted to be a way to continue to enact, and build, the community they reported sensing in Malmö. In other moments of our collaboration, however, our partners judged that our project, as it developed, clearly aligned with shared authority as a theory for interpreting the social production of knowledge and meaning.

During the fall of 2020, we decided to organize the work we did together into a cocreated syllabus, through which we trained each other in interviewing while we read and discussed oral history classics. Among the works we read was Alessandro Portelli's *The Order has been Carried Out*, which led many in the group to recognize similarities between representations of Malmö and how the Nazi perpetrators of a massacre in Rome in 1943 ensured that the crime would be memorialized to create tension and conflict, both in Rome specifically and nationally in Italy, for decades to come.<sup>48</sup> By the end of 2020, it became necessary to formalize the cooperation by creating an association, since MoM was unexpectedly defunded, its workspace was shut down, and we risked being evicted and separated.<sup>49</sup> Another reason was that the group needed to transcend its dependence on research funding, which only the project leader could acquire. Inspired by Portelli, who, in his book, uses the *chorus* to represent Rome's history from multiple viewpoints, the association was named the Gathered Voices of Malmö (MSR)—a name meant to convey the force of voices aware of their codependence.

This choice to form an independent association guaranteed the sustainability of the group as a community; it centered the achievements of that community in the hands of its members. This decision also reflected our collective analysis of the conditions of cultural and knowledge production and our conviction that retaining control of the growing collection and method created better conditions for exchange with scholars, the university, or other institutions. Carin Ilunga remembered feeling constrained by participating in a university-based project:

About that first day at the university . . . it was so hard to have a conversation. I am thinking about when we sat in groups, and many in my group were researchers. Honestly, I don't understand what makes it so hard to get through to academics. I stayed because Steven High gave a different feeling and his lecture put words to many of the things I had been thinking when interviewing for the theatre. That's the crux of it, that if it should be a university collaboration, it needs to be encapsulated in that university shape.

Mitra Pourkarin explains the reasons to form MSR:

We in the MSR want to be clear that we are creating something for ourselves, something that we need and that is useful for us as we go on living in the city. We are not giving voice to our neighbors; we are creating an ever-expanding forum in which we can talk and sometimes make statements based on what we learn when we keep on talking. By being an association, institutions must seek our partnership and I think they will do that because we are grounded in the city, we are developing ways to work, and a collection of high-quality oral history interviews that they might want to get access to. We do not want to be let into the institutions, because an experience that was shared by many in the group was that such inclusion always comes with conditions. Instead, we want institutions for culture and research to find a role in the work we have initiated and are leading.

For both Carin Ilunga and Mitra Pourkarin it is important to avoid being submerged by institutional expectations, and instead to establish a way to work for oneself and, when needed, with assistance. Protection and exploration of difference has been claimed to be central for oral history theory and practice. Alessandro Portelli famously teaches that “only equality makes the interview credible, but only difference makes it relevant.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Linda Shopes has encouraged us to see differences between parties as enabling rather than as barriers for collaboration. Shopes reminds her readers of Julia Cowans, an activist in the Black liberation movement in Kentucky who did not trust the white, institutionally affiliated Alessandro Portelli when he wanted to interview her and therefore told him that “there's gonna always be a line”—after which they spent several hours together.<sup>51</sup> This perhaps had something to do with the fact that Portelli had invited Cowans to what Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkolsky have called “a real interview”—an exchange characterized by (among other things) the interviewer's love and care for the kind of conversation in which the interviewee gets to tell the story the way they need to tell it in that moment.<sup>52</sup> Greenspan argued that “a good interview is a process in which two people work hard to understand the views and experiences of one person: the interviewee.”<sup>53</sup> These words indicate that it is the maintenance of what Cowans called the line between interviewer and interviewee that makes for good collaboration. Greenspan's words suggest that the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is not only based on a mutual recognition of difference, but also that it is a relationship that is necessarily unequal (which of course does not exclude that it should be fair). The interviewer is there to help the interviewee do the work of telling and reflecting, not the other way around. Concrete collaborations benefit from a conscious drawing of that line and a manifest sorting-out of which duties are expected to be performed on each side of it. If the line is unclearly drawn—which can happen if the participants have not sufficiently explored each other's agendas, vulnerabilities, values, or expectations—or if the line is erased during collaboration, it becomes unclear who is working for whom. Our interpretation is that by forming MSR, our partners drew a line between community and institution, in order to make our collaboration better.

Forming MSR, thereby stressing independence, was the practical consequence of our community partners' critical examination of the conditions, as well as experience, of productions of knowledge, representations, and care that resemble the afterthought Frisch supplies in the introduction to his book *A Shared Authority*. Forming an association provided the community partners with the means to make what they created sustainable and under their own control, even while operating within a political economy of storytelling. It also emphasized the difference between them, as voluntary and community-based actors, and us, as university-based researchers, all while still keeping us close to each other.

## Conclusion

When our participation in a collaborative oral history project demanded that we translate *shared/sharing authority* into Swedish, it opened up possible meanings of these words that we might have overlooked if we had continued to work in English. Community artist François Matarasso's distinction between participatory art and community art is useful in attempting to clarify these possibilities. Matarasso takes *participatory art* to mean the democratization of art by including community partners in the work of professionals. By *community art* he means an awareness that art is *already* social and shared.<sup>54</sup> *Sharing authority* could encompass both of these approaches, but it does not help to clarify which path is chosen. According to Matarasso, not being able to discriminate between participatory art and community art (*art*, for our purposes, being understood as shorthand for any collaborative meaning-making) has consequences for our practice, ethics, and results:

First, without a clear definition, it is impossible to distinguish good practice from bad, or to protect ethical principles and ways of working from external pressures, such as institutionalization or appropriation. Ideas about purpose, quality or outcomes cannot be defended without a robust theory underpinning practice. Secondly, people planning participatory or community art projects without such a theory, and an understanding of how it translates into practice, are more likely to make mistakes, create false expectations, and have illusions about their work. Good intentions are not enough to avoid bad results when you make art with people.<sup>55</sup>

It was having to translate our theory in combination with working collaboratively that revealed our shortsightedness. Instead of using a direct translation of *sharing authority*, the group conceptualized the collaborative development as aiming for caring for each other's stories and by stressing their independence. Mediating a shared/sharing authority for the group of activists, popular educators, community leaders, and others that we cooperated with without having Swedish equivalents of those words, and then getting the group's responses to what we were conveying, revealed how our thinking and practice were structured by interconnected plots of compatibility. One plot of compatibility that we were unknowingly informed by (and that we have found to be encouraged by influential accounts from the field) structures the idea that the approach to share authority is not only informed by, but is actually a more advanced version of the critical afterthought Michael Frisch worded a *shared authority*. Seeing it like the approach to share authority is the natural next step from Frisch's addendum to oral and public history and its critical reception, thereby subsuming the critical operations suggested by him, made it easy to see a second compatibility between our practice as researchers and the community-building practices of our partners. The consequence was that we situated ourselves as being on their

side. Needing to translate, but not being able to do so literally, opened the concept for interpretation and appropriation by people in community positions; without that, we probably would have inadvertently reinstated research, not community, as the sphere in which important learning occurs.

Our partners rejected our collaboration's propensity towards setting up a "participatory project," as well as the notion that we, as researchers, could be useful by being on their side, all while keeping a place for us in the midst of their community. To understand the seemingly paradoxical placement of us—not on their side, yet in their midst—it is helpful to think about the different meanings of *community* that move in our case. A sense of community as a social formation emerges when the interviewees talk about the set of relationships and sense of belonging that exists, even if precariously, in Malmö. Another notion of community can be perceived in MSR members' insistence on the centrality of caring. This sense of community is less concerned with delimiting a group or experience and has more to do with practices and values centered on caring, sharing, and making together. By forming MSR, the partners we collaborated with provided an arrangement that made it possible to resist being a community that can be included, and thereby objectified; rather, they continued to be a group that actively makes community.

What we learned from MSR, then, is that if we put community (in the sense of *making together*) first, other things will fall into place around it, even if it takes time. Translating shared/sharing authority to a group of people we were working together with introduced a certain resistance to the process. Resistance is a well-known phenomenon from learning processes and is more likely where the learning is experienced as "supplative" (challenging acquired knowledge or skills) rather than "additive" (adding to existing knowledge or skill).<sup>56</sup> Our second lesson from MSR therefore is that we as oral historians should take more seriously Michael Frisch's comment that there is "productive tension between the almost identical but slightly different terms we've been using"—that is, a *shared authority* and *sharing authority*.<sup>57</sup> According to Joan W. Scott, an alternative to the plot-of-compatibility model of interdisciplinary working is to look for incommensurability between interpretative practices.<sup>58</sup> We believe that this is exactly the kind of operation that Frisch encourages with his comment. Observing the difference between shared and sharing authority might be a way to create the resistance needed to avoid making participation the best practice by seeing sharing authority as an expertise of oral historians; instead we must start to figure out how we can be of best service in different situated practices.

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## Notes

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