

Chapter 26. Neighbor or Researcher? Fluid Positionality in Community-Engaged Research

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We host our inaugural Front Porch Chat, a community conversation series developed with a local Habitat for Humanity affiliate, on the last warm day of fall. A group of ten neighbors sit around a crackling bonfire as the sky dims. One neighbor scrutinizes Josh, Habitat's Executive Director. "You're not trying to build Habitat homes in our neighborhood, right? And what exactly will you be doing with our writing?" she says, turning to me as she bites into a slice of banana bread.

My role in this conversation series is to lead neighbors in a writing activity where they reflect on how their neighborhood brings them joy, which we'll later compile into an interactive StoryMap of our downtown neighborhoods. Josh reassures this neighbor that there's no plan to build affordable housing units on her street, and I explain that the micro-essays I'm asking them to write will contribute to a collaborative community narrative that highlights the charms of our often-overlooked downtown neighborhoods. We developed the prompt for these micro-essays from questions rooted in appreciative inquiry because we wanted neighbors to write about what they love about their neighborhoods, rather than falling into the default mode of complaining about what's wrong with their neighborhoods. I also mention that I'm an Assistant Professor of Writing at the local university and she nods, sharing that her late husband was also a professor. Satisfied, she leans back in her Adirondack chair and begins writing. But another neighbor tosses my micro-essay prompt aside, muttering that she only "takes practical surveys" and doesn't "write touchy-feely things" about joy, happiness, and appreciation.

Though I'm not a resident, I've been granted access to this neighborhood by a friend who lives here. Her neighbors—who are all white, mostly retired, college-educated, and own remodeled, historic homes—initially seemed skeptical about sharing their life stories with outsiders. In fact, in one micro-essay, a neighbor wrote about how great it was when everyone on the block collectively purchased a home that went up for sale, allowing residents to actually choose their new neighbor. Without my university credentials, I ponder their willingness to share such stories with me. But clearly my university credentials aren't enough to earn trust and respect from all of the neighbors, and I can't help but wonder: does my identity as a racially ambiguous woman in her mid-30s enable some neighbors to disregard my writing exercise so openly?

Our second Front Porch Chat takes place in my neighborhood. Perhaps because I am a familiar face who has lived around the corner for seven years, my neighbors freely share their everyday joys of walking to the library, chatting with Tom the mail carrier, and strolling through City Park. However, introducing the QR code for the writing prompt confuses a man in his 70s who squints, holds the paper up to the sun, and says he's never seen anything like this before. Kelly, a local artist, shows him how to scan the code. When the micro-essay prompts pop up on his phone, he asks how he's supposed to write in the text boxes. Kelly offers to type out his responses as he speaks, and I realize that I should've brought a notepad as a writing option for some neighbors.

Because this is also my neighborhood, I write about the delights of planting a native pollinator garden and seeing children smile when they notice the chickens in our red coop. Nobody cares about my role at the university or my age or ethnicity at this Front Porch Chat; here, what matters is that I live in the yellow house with the chickens out front.

The next Front Porch Chat will be on the southern side of downtown, several miles from my home. I don't know if those neighbors will be eager to write micro-essays, or if I'll need to mention my position at the university, or my egg-laying chickens, or my Asian background, or the fact that I've lived in this town for seven years, or if I'll need to share entirely different stories about my life, but I know that people, rightly, will not share their writing with me if I offer them nothing but a sterile IRB form to sign.