A Look Into “Borderless Seed Stories”

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Michigan Library Scholar 2024
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Keywords: Oral History, Arts-Based Research, Literature Reviews, Exhibit Design
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Project Scope
“Internationalizing the Seed Library”

This exhibit is the first to be completed under the banner of “International Studies and seed libraries” and will act as a marketing and outreach tool. As such, the exhibit will not be a comprehensive resource, but instead will provide a narrative structure centered on highlighting the experiences of international community members and seeds.

“A Big Redirection!”

“Borderless Seed Stories”

“Borderless Seed Stories” is a collection of oral histories, literature, and archival research that aims to highlight important work going on within the Southeast Michigan gardening community, situating local seed/farming reclamation efforts within the broader global context of political, economic, and cultural frames... The goal of this exhibit is not to be an exhaustive guide to understanding seed work and its accompanying stories, but rather to introduce visitors to local initiatives as they relate to global conversations of seed justice.
02 Transgressive & Relational Learning
Teaching to Transgress (1994) by bell hooks

- “To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress... Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction.” (7)

- Pedagogical practices as emerging “from the mutually illuminating interplay of anti-colonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies” (10)

- “education as the practice of freedom” (11)

- “The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created.” (207)
“They have been the most unconventional teachers, these humble seeds, reminding me that all that seems lost truly isn’t…just laying dormant until the time is right for them to return to the earth.” (Fertile Resistance and Reconciliation)

The beauty of recognizing and honoring our seeds as living breathing relatives, is that we see the stories, cultural memory and wisdom they carry is also alive” (Reawakening Relationships)

“Our greatest wealth is not only in the seeds and their stories of abundance and nourishment, but in the connection that is made between people who share seeds.” (Currency of Connection)
03 Research & Design Process
Literature Review

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01 Food Systems and how we talk about food sovereignty and seeds.
02 Seed Rematriation as it relates to foodways, Mother Earth, and healing.
03 The Garden and how it frames “The Native,” and the Edenic Narrative in colonialism.
04 Internationalism as it relates to globalization, colonial borders, and ownership.

Disaster Capitalism, Mutual Aid, & Community Resilience

Actually existing tomatoes
Politics of memory, variety, and empire in Latvian struggles over seeds

Gauta A. Aistara

Abstract: In March 2012, a small farm in Latvia with a collection of over 200 tomato varieties was charged with the illegal sale of seeds not included in the European Union’s Common Catalogue. The farm collection includes traditional Latvian varieties that have never been officially registered. Western varieties imported illegally during the Soviet years, and Russian varieties that came into use during the Soviet years and are now defended by Latvian gardeners as “traditionally grown” and representing the taste of their childhoods. The debate highlighted the continuing struggle over Latvia’s geopolitical positioning between Russia and the European Union and control over seeds as a tactic of empire. I explore the cultural memories embedded in the contested tomato seeds and how they contribute to an intertwined imaginary of the Latvian landscape idyll with a Soviet socialism. I argue that the innovative revalorization to this conflict represents a process of transculturation in a contact zone between empires (Pratt 1992).

Keywords: biodiversity, borders, cultural memory, intellectual property rights, seeds, variety
Oral History Research

This interview has been edited for brevity. S.J. uses they/their pronouns, and Shelby uses she/her pronouns.

S.J.: Good afternoon. My name is S.J. Shih and today I'm interviewing Shelby Stakanaes on July 9th, 2024. Can you state your name as you would like to be called for this recording?

Shelby: I'm Shelby. It's nice to meet you.

S.J.: All right, so the first question that I have is what identities do you hold that you'd like to share with us?

Shelby: I think the identity that I most relate with is student. I really love being at the University of Michigan and coming here and having an opportunity to work with the people I have and learn in this environment has been the most important to me. I also come from a low income community. And so I'm a member of a very interesting community, comparatively, at the University of Michigan. We have a wide range of people here and I really feel like it's a great place to be a part of a member of the LGBTQ community. I love it—so it was just Pride Month and so that's a very exciting thing. And I think those are the ones that I relate to most.

S.J.: Can you share with me when and where you were born, and who raised you?

Shelby: I was born in a small town in the middle of the United States. My family is from the U.S. and I was raised by my parents.

9. What were your initial goals and visions with shifting the narrative over the course of the project?

Shelby: One of the primary goals of the project was to create a collaborative garden space for the community. This space would be used for community events, as well as a place for people to come together and learn about their cultural histories.

10. What role does storytelling play in your work?

Shelby: Storytelling is a crucial part of the project. It helps to bring people together and create a sense of community. It also allows us to explore our cultural histories and understand the impact of colonization and ongoing occupation.

11. A word that this project has been exploring is “reclamation.” Does the word have any significance for you?

Shelby: Yes, reclamation is a crucial part of our work. It is about reclaiming ancestral knowledge and re-establishing relationships with ancestors and traditions that were lost during colonization.

12. What do you hope the garden will become?

Shelby: I hope the garden will become a place where people can come together to learn about their cultural histories, to connect with each other, and to celebrate our shared heritage.
Exhibit Design/Curation

Options for quotes over image:

Culture and Connection

Phimmasone also discusses her experiences with her identity as a refugee, and how food and seeds come together as a way of knowing and illuminating oneself, explaining, "Laos is a neutral country, but is the most bombed country in both World War 1 and 2. We were a casualty of war... It empowers me to know that I don't owe this country anything... This all started with food, but now I know my identity... I want to preserve our culture first through food, through our ingredients, through seed saving." Food has
04 Challenges
Challenges

This is hard!

Lots of moving parts in the project, reorienting and refocusing, LOTS of conversations with so many people, a hybrid working model that was my salvation and my downfall.

Staying committed to learning

Excitement and pleasure is important in learning, but there are many points where I feel no excitement nor pleasure! A 12 hour work session feels terrible! Being stuck in a room listening to audio and doing transcripts can be boring!

Burnout (and the importance of rest)

Cognitive overload and feeling overwhelmed, juggling multiple jobs, exhaustion and the mental toll this research takes, reading about... really depressing things... among other things.

An intense (!) imposter syndrome

Am I good enough? Should I be doing this project? Did I just mess up that interview? How am I going to get this done? I should have written better. I am not god’s strongest soldier.
Recommendations
Recommendations

**Research Funding**
- Grants to provide compensation for not just the interns and staff members (us!), but also to our community partners and interlocutors
- Expanding projects beyond the scope of MLS (BSS is just a small portion of initiatives related to the Seed Library)

**Additional Projects**
- Digitization of the exhibit
- Zine collection to distribute and share with the community
- Expanding the Oral History collection with southeast MI gardeners, farmers, organizers, and activists
- Circling back to our initial idea to interview the international community
- Programming ideas in partnership with the Seed Library: upskilling workshops, community conversations, facilitated dialogues, open mics and story sharing
Thanks!

Do you have any questions?

Contact me: sojungsh@umich.edu

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