

Conducting a Dissertation by Implication: *Showing Up* as Relational Method in Community-Engaged Arts-Based Research

David LeRue, Concordia University

David.lerue@concordia.ca

Arianna Garcia-Fialdini, Concordia University

ariannisquis@gmail.com

Abstract: Arts-based research that integrates community making and testimony requires finding willing and eager participants. While existing scholarship in community-based art education emphasizes ethical engagement with participants and communities, it often frames recruiting community partners as a logistical hurdle rather than a relational endeavor. This paper draws on two embedded arts-based doctoral dissertations to propose *showing up* as a defining metaphor and method for community-engaged arts-based research. We frame this as a relational approach to embedding for community-engaged arts-based research where researchers engage directly in the communities they set out to study and contextualize it within broader forms of relational ethnography.

Keywords: Art Education; Contradiction; Community-Based Art Education; Dialectics; Embedding; Friendship as Method; Reciprocal Ethnography; Relational Ethnography; Research-Creation; Patchwork Ethnography

Community-engaged arts-based research (CEABR) is the name we give to research that brings community members' artistic practices and testimony to the centre of collaborative, co-constructed inquiry (Leavy, 2020; Wang & Burris, 1997). These projects engage existing social dynamics, and implicate a constellation of human, non-human, and institutional actors that include the neighborhoods and organizations where research is situated, and the shifting political, social, and material conditions found in communities. These projects require finding participants who share mutual interests with the researcher and who are willing to give their time and energy to shared inquiry. Although community-based art education (CBAE) scholarship emphasizes the benefits of community engagement for communities, such as empowerment (Krensky & Steffen, 2009), social justice (Hochtritt et al., 2017), and cultural enrichment (Ulmer, 2017), and calls for centring ethical and reciprocal engagement (Paris & Winn, 2013), existing guidance on building community partnerships is often framed as a logistical hurdle rather than a relational endeavour (Darts, 2006; Lawton et al., 2019). This leaves the specific processes of building trust, rapport, and long-term buy-in for CEABR projects underexamined. How can artist-researchers facilitate reciprocal, inclusive dialogues with communities from scratch? And how can arts-based researchers ethically navigate and represent community members' divergent interests?

We contend with these questions by reflecting on our individual but concurrent CEABR dissertations (Garcia-Fialdini, 2025; LeRue, 2024). COVID-19 lockdowns prolonged our

embedding processes, turning short-term engagements into four-year endeavours that melded our personal and professional lives. Our projects conjoined CBAE (Lawton et al., 2019; Ulbricht, 2005), arts-based research (ABR) (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012; Leavy, 2019), and oral history (High, 2014; 2021; Yow, 2014) to integrate community members' testimony and artmaking into research (Garcia-Fialdini, 2025; LeRue, 2023b). LeRue conducted research in Montreal's Sud Ouest at the small, independent Pointe-Saint-Charles Art School, housed within an anarchist building project called Bâtiment 7 that is dedicated to meeting community needs and resisting gentrification (LeRue et al., 2023; Sévigny, 2021).¹ Passionate about both projects, he assumed formal teaching and administrative roles which informed a dissertation that joined artmaking, teaching, and spatial research about the changing neighbourhood (LeRue, 2024). Meanwhile, Garcia-Fialdini facilitated monthly arts-based workshops with young Latinx mothers in an immigrant advocacy group called the Latin American Family Aid Centre (CAFLA), where she helped with administrative tasks. The workshops focused on migration and food, inviting participants to recall familial and cultural recipes (Garcia-Fialdini, 2025). By applying these culinary traditions within a new geographical context, participants reflected on how food informs memory and identity in a new cultural context. Our prolonged embedding required rethinking the traditional role of *researcher* as we navigated the murky, everyday logistics of community engagement, which we found enhanced the scope and depth of our research programs.

This paper uses our experiences in community to develop a relational CEABR method we call *showing up and getting involved*² to develop deeper relational connections and understandings to better integrate community making and voices into the research process. By this, we mean that researchers should take their first steps into community by contributing to, and personally engaging with the communities they set out to study. *Showing up* build's stakes for researchers and participants, creating the time needed to develop mutual vulnerability and engage in collective arts-based inquiry. We develop *showing up* over three sections. The first section contends with how communities are identified in the arts-based and broader literature, using dialectical contradiction to argue that communities are seldom monolithic, but are nodes for divergent interests. The second section situates *showing up* within frameworks of relational ethnography, which requires researchers to navigate myriad identities and demands between community and the university (Günel et al., 2020; Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014; Tillman-Healy, 2003). The third section articulates *showing up*, suggesting it offers five distinct insights: Thick, rich, embodied experiences; Seeing and acting upon opportunities; Ongoing dialogues and investment; Embedded and shared accountability, and bridging university and community structures. These sections advance *showing up* as a distinct methodological contribution to CEABR by foregrounding sustained, relational presence as a way to produce knowledge through participant making. Taken together, these elements can shift the focus from doing research *about* communities to unearthing complexity *with* communities.

Theoretical Framing: Situating Community in CEABR

Showing up as method requires considering how the literature conceptualizes community, which has become a buzzword with several diverging definitions (Cobigo et al., 2016; Sihlongonyane, 2009; Strawn, 1994). Community is often defined as people living together in a town or neighbourhood developing specific intimate social bonds (Jewkes & Murcott, 1996; Parsons, 1951/1991). Communities also describe people with shared traits

¹ These sites are administratively distinct, and LeRue was involved with both sites.

² Henceforth called *showing up*

beyond geography, such as language, disability, gender, or ethnicity, and those with common interests or goals, from activists to anime fandoms (Bessant, 2017; Cobigo et al., 2016). Community membership is also negotiated and contested. Rural communities may reject newcomers, whereas purchasing a MacBook grants membership to the *Apple community*. Membership is sometimes ascribed through proximity, earned, or prescribed by others.

CBAE includes projects that engage communities from within formal art classrooms, through individual art projects, or standalone projects outside formal education that engage communities (Harris-Lawton, 2010; 2019; Krensky & Steffen, 2009; Irwin, 2022; Ulbricht, 2005). We developed *showing up* in dialogue with projects that engage community members to make art, which Lawton et al. (2019) emphasize can uplift community voices, build social understandings, erode tensions between researcher and participant, and contribute to social justice. This includes projects like community engaged scholar Charlotte Lombardo et al.'s (2023) project *making with place*, where QTBIPOC youth in Toronto engaged in collaborative workshops to develop works responding to place. Similarly, community-engaged projects like *The Right to the City* (Vaughan et al., 2016) led by Concordia University instructors Dr. Kathleen Vaughan and Cynthia Hammond in collaboration with then-doctoral student Dr. Emanuelle Dufour, exemplify multi-year, place-based and interdisciplinary teaching that embedded in non-extractive, reciprocal institutional and community initiatives.

The arts-based literature mirrors other fields, which present community engagement as requiring deep, relational trust that allows projects to grow from the bottom-up to ensure that communities control their own narratives (Brown, 2017). When considering what 'true' community means, medical researcher Renata Schiavo's (2021) invoked a quote by Margaret J. Wheatley (2002): "There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about" (pg. 26). Schiavo argues *true* community engagement centers community perspectives, while superficial practices are marked by extractive, infrequent meetings. Meanwhile, Campano et al. (2016) said *true* engagement requires researchers to become organic intellectuals within the community, where the research serves as a platform for communities to theorize their own lived experiences. These approaches to community engagement foreground relationality because they center community voices rather than individual researchers, aiming to *speak with* rather than *speak for*. This includes calls for researchers to contend with power differentials and to navigate privilege as they move between university and community (Lawton et al., 2019). However, these approaches tend to frame communities as monolithic. For instance, Lawton et al. (2019) suggest developing projects *and then* finding a community, with the emphasis on solving a perceived deficit. To draw on Schaivo's (2021) invocation of Wheatley's (2002) quote, who decides *for* the community what it cares about? Who assigns membership? And how should researchers contend with these tensions?

Showing up draws on and pushes back on these tensions to adopt an anti-idealistic view of community rooted in relationality and egalitarian engagement. We adopt Tuck and Yang's (2014) contention that researchers must move beyond *damage-centered* frameworks that define community by deficit, opting instead for an ethics of refusal that respects community members' divergent perspectives and agency in knowledge creation. Rather than treating participants as what Chantal Mouffe (2005) called a *vacuum of harmony*, we address these sites as complex ecosystems where power is continuously negotiated (Bessant, 2017). *Showing up* is inspired by artists like Lorena Wolffer (2022; 2025) and CERRUCHA (n.d.; Peña, 2023) whose feminist activist practices engages community through situated pedagogy which invites participants to highlight what they care about. Both artists expand art into unconventional spaces to encourage

participation, collective teaching models, and counter narratives that centre the needs of their communities. We also align with Wolffer's recent research-creation projects, such as the social portrait project *Diarias Global* (Wolffer, 2022), which invited women to share photography from pandemic isolation. These works taken together focus on listening, recording lived experience, and building community knowledge based on social justice and care. Building on the relational complexity in these projects, the following section integrates frameworks of contradiction into *showing up*. We argue that the artist-researcher's role is not to synthesize these frictions into a tidy narrative of empowerment, but to remain present within the messiness and multifaceted realities of participants.

Showing up as Revealing Contradictions

Showing up is an anti-idealist approach to engaging communities, where relational closeness can reveal a community's contradictory desires, motivations, and perspectives. We embrace a constructivist paradigm and a dialectical framework. Constructivists believe knowledge is both situated and co-constructed with participants (Charmaz, 2023; Egbert & Sanden, 2019), while acknowledging multiple interpretations of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In our projects, community art workshops provided spaces for constructivist dialogue. To centre and bridge artmaking and dialogue, co-author LeRue (2023) developed community-based research creation, a method where participants develop artworks as a form of testimony. His dissertation invited community members to share visual and oral perspectives of a changing neighborhood that had undergone rapid de-industrialization since the 70s. Co-author Garcia-Fialdini (2025) also centred artmaking as testimony, capturing her participants layered and often conflicting narratives of migration. Our constructivist approaches brought participants multifaceted realities into dialogue with us and each other, revealing tension and variability in their perspectives and stories that challenged notions of wholeness and single community voice.

Dialectical contradiction provided us a way to hold space for divergence within communities. Contradictions are the internal forces within a subject that undo (negate) its identity (James, 1948). For example, human identity requires social bonds developed in relation to others—A nice person can only be nice *to others*. Communities are contradictory in that they are described collectively, but contain everchanging memberships, internal divisions, and norms for inclusion and exclusion, such as sameness (Drevdahl, 2002). Communities also have explicit or implicit demands for membership that require obedience (McGowan, 2024). For example, when LGBTQ+ individuals are expelled from a community for coming out, they presumably disobeyed expectations about sexuality. Finding acceptance requires finding communities that affirm this identity, but these new spaces would likely exclude someone like a homophobic heterosexual. This highlights the contradiction within communities, because *what it is not* is presumed in *what it is*. Acknowledging these dynamics helps us move beyond wholeness toward understanding community as emergent and relational.

Our projects revealed several tensions within supposedly whole communities. Our sites had longtime administrators and activists who were community anchors, while others engaged for a period and moved on. At the art school, LeRue found that the administrator / user dynamic was mirrored in the classes, though many students stuck around for years. At Bâtiment 7, members (typically Francophone anarchists) engaged based on shared political beliefs. But debates about bilingualism, militancy, and differing commitment expectations discouraged and alienated many new members. Some activists claimed Bâtiment 7 spoke for the neighbourhood, despite residents mostly being non-anarchist, linguistically diverse, and / or fitting the definition

of *gentrifier*. Despite LeRue not fitting the ideal membership as an anglophone non-anarchist, he was generally welcomed despite finding the dynamics stressful. Similarly, Garcia-Fialdini's site, CAFLA, included newly arrived Latin American immigrants and refugees. While participants generally got along, the site revealed tensions between the sites' collective ethos and the solitary nature of the migrant journey. Catering specifically to culturally integrating young single mothers, the problems were largely individualistic: survival needs such as housing, individual identity development, navigating legal systems, contending with grief after feeling home countries, and language barriers, to name a few. However, solidarity meant that navigating these issues was more individually feasible. Garcia-Fialdini's positionality within this was tenuous, entering this space as a young Latina mother seeking the same cultural sanctuary she found when she relocated to Montreal years prior. While she embodied the cohort's demographics, having already been integrated meant that her own needs were different from her participants'.

Showing Up as Relational Ethnographic Method

Embracing *showing up* as a method forces researchers to contend with their idealizations about community by revealing the forces that both unify and erode their cohesiveness. This approach invites varied and unpredictable social situations into research and is rooted within relational approaches to ethnography. Ethnographer Matthew Desmond (2014) defined relational ethnography as research that focuses on social situations and processes rather than entire localities. Relational methods are typically constructivist, embracing knowledge production with fewer participants. In this section, we frame *showing up* and artistic production through three relational methods: patchwork ethnography (Günel et al., 2020; Günel & Wantabe, 2023), friendship as method (Tillman-Healy, 2003), and reciprocal ethnography (Lawless, 2000; 2019). Situating *showing up* within these approaches reveals how artistic labour and visual inquiry can serve as modalities for building trust and accountability.

Patchwork ethnography was a term coined by anthropology professors Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe (2020; see also Günel & Wantabe, 2023) to highlight how ethnographers have responded to challenging conditions in academia. Ethnographers were once expected to spend a year or more in the field to study people in distant locations, separated from their families, friends, and personal livelihoods. However, funding these projects is difficult, and researchers are now more diverse: they are working class, marginalized, immigrants, parents, caretakers, and professionals. The pandemic compounded this reality, where lockdowns eroded the distinction between home and field, and personal and professional for everyone (Günel et al., 2020). Patchwork ethnography accounts for these realities and reconceptualizes *the field* as places and people close to researchers, which they can engage with more sporadically over long periods of time.

Showing up bridged our personal and academic lives. As grad students with little job security, we worked and volunteered at our sites as administrators and teachers. LeRue taught classes online in community during the pandemic before integrating into the art school and Bâtiment 7. Garcia-Fialdini was having children of her own during the research, while working as an artist, researcher, and engaging CAFLA as a community member. Being present on the sites meant we could understand and roll with complexity. For example, Garcia-Fialdini's workshop participants would step away from making to care for their children (Figure 1 and 2). This also manifested in the compounding isolation from the pandemic, language barriers, and the systemic challenges of settlement that meant these mothers could rarely commit to a rigid schedule. Garcia-Fialdini's research adapted to these realities by conducting workshops in parks,

community kitchens, and workshop rooms that could facilitate making and participant needs. The patchwork model therefore gave cohesion to these experiences and made us feel as embedded as if we had adopted traditional approaches to ethnography, while embracing and better understanding the challenges in our and participants lives.

Figures 1 & 2

Recetas y Raíces outdoor community art workshops



Note. Groupe de La Petite Enfance, CAFLA. Outdoor community workshops held in a park adjacent to CAFLA headquarters, 2021-2022, Rosemont – La Petite-Patrie.

Relationality, Artmaking, and Friendship

Artmaking was a conducive modality to the relational engagements with participant's. In Garcia-Fialdini's project, a participant might sketch a memory of a favourite childhood food from her home country while bouncing a toddler on her knee or map out the colours of a traditional recipe in the brief moments between navigating settlement paperwork for immigration. Meanwhile, LeRue's art classes would often bridge skill-building activities with discussion questions, providing multi-modal avenues for individuals to share their perspective. This was especially conducive for those not comfortable only speaking, and for those not-yet confident in sharing artworks.

Patchwork ethnography aligns with other relational approaches such as friendship as method, which recognizes that researchers and participants live in intertwined social worlds (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014). Friendship as method posits that embedding is similar to building and maintaining friendships (Tillman-Healy, 2003). Cultural studies professor Lisa M. Tillman³ (Tillman-Healy, 2003) observed that ethnographic fieldwork, like friendship, requires building rapport and investment. This includes negotiating roles, expectations, and giving time to each other. She said,

for friends, one sacrifice[s] a day to help someone move. We set aside our reading pile when someone drops by or calls "just to talk." When asked, we keep secrets, even if they would add compelling twists to our research report or narrative. (2003, p. 738)

³ The author initially published under Tillman-Healy.

Like a friend, this rapport grants the researcher more privileges than an outsider while instilling an emotional and personal responsibility to the relationship (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014). In our projects, friendships developed through selecting sites that shared love for artmaking. These friendships granted us access to our communities, but also created professional, ongoing obligations that implicated each of us in decisions around pandemic restrictions, institutional upkeep, and community-building. Furthermore, the shared vulnerabilities of studio making—taking risks with different materials, sharing supplies, collaborating, and engaging in deep discussions about our research topics—helped to dissolve the hierarchy between researcher and participant. LeRue would often make alongside his students and participate in organic conversations about art and life which, like Garcia-Fialdini (2018) previously said, transformed the classroom into a space of mutual investment.

Friendship steered the direction of our PhD research and persisted beyond our engagements. For LeRue, the art school became a sanctuary of like-minded artists, where conversations extended into all facets of what it means to paint and draw. Garcia-Fialdini negotiated being a collaborator, confidante, and fellow-traveller with young Latina mothers, finding mutual investment through the sensory, collaborative acts of preparing ingredients, washing dishes, and mixing paints side-by-side (Figures 3 and 4). She was also vulnerable in sharing her own journey as a fellow creator, mother, and immigrant that moved her beyond a detached observer. The studio and the kitchen became sanctuaries where the hardships of migration, the nostalgia for a distant ‘home’, and the daily hurdles of integrating into Canadian culture could be safely held.

Figure 3 & 4

Recetas y Raíces Outdoor Community Art Workshops



Note. A Gathering Taking Place at Park Drolet - Rachel. Rosemont - La Petite - Patrie, 2021-2022.

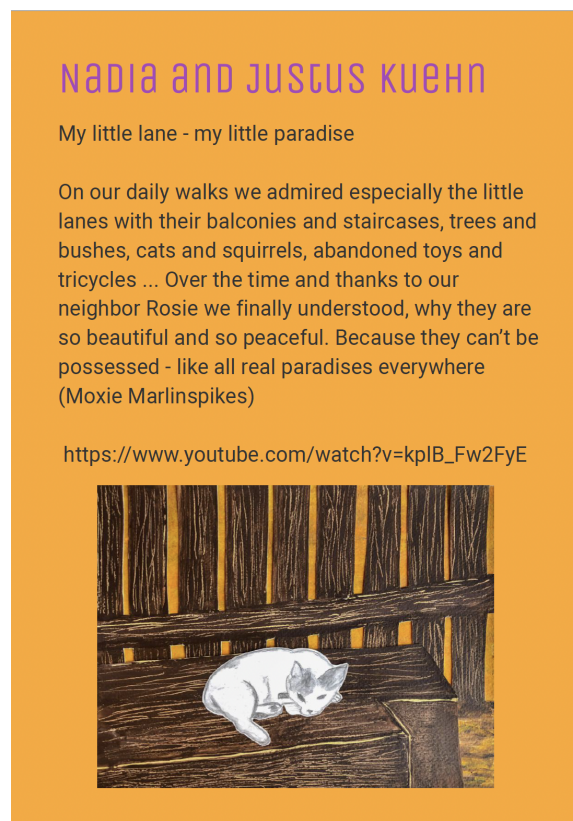
Reciprocity

Our community friendships troubled the often-extractive nature of qualitative research, which led us to adopt Elaine J. Lawless's (2000; 2019) reciprocal ethnography. Reciprocal ethnography calls for ongoing dialogue with participants to contend with diverging possible interpretations of research. In her own research interviewing women Anglican ministers, Lawless built rapport by joining them for lunch and sharing early research findings, which her participants debated vigorously. This revealed how research can have different meanings for participants and researchers. For Lawless, integrating these debates made research more meaningful, comprehensive, and *reciprocal* by granting agency to participant's viz their interpretations.

In *showing up*, reciprocity was embedded in the iterative visual dialogues with our participants in studio settings. Participants often engage in dialogues about what they are making, which provides an ideal space to interpret, discuss, and debate the meanings of research, which grants the researcher ample insights about the afterlife of the projects. In our experiences, these spaces are almost always supportive and encouraging, which helped participants feel at ease over time with the vulnerabilities of sharing artwork.

Figure 5

Still from a small publication that was made about Landscaping the City I



Note. Work titled: *Ma petite ruelle*. Words are participants' own. Animation can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kplB_Fw2FyE

Reciprocal ethnography also fostered rich, evolving understandings of participants stories and making beyond the studio. LeRue's had known many of his participants throughout his four-year engagement, and their perspectives influenced his project's themes, methods, and direction. Nadia, Lou, and Deborah A.⁴, students in online courses during lockdown (LeRue, 2023a), participated in LeRue's ultimate dissertation work. Their enthusiasm for place-based making in the first class led LeRue to pursue relational, arts-based approaches more deeply. Nadia's animation Montréal's ruelles, created with her son in 2020, clarified how artmaking could stand as testimony by animating the emotional and aesthetic significance of overlooked urban spaces (still and link in Figure 5). Participant Bob inquired about LeRue's beliefs about arts-based research and the city in ways that pushed the intellectual dimensions of the project; his contributions were so substantial that he was acknowledged as an honorary advisor to LeRue's thesis. Participants also asked LeRue about his own work, such as when he was making small paintings and participants wanted to try the technique themselves. This session was a highlight of the final study (Figure 6 and 7). Participants continually showed LeRue what mattered to them creatively, intellectually, and relationally, ensuring the work remained grounded in reciprocal exchange.

Figure 6 & 7

Box Painting Activity outside



Note. Left: Lou's box paintings in Summer, 2023. Right: Participants painting box paintings on site in Summer, 2023.

For Garcia-Fialdini, reciprocity was realized through collective making and the iterative nature of the workshop environment. This manifested in a co-developed recipe and colouring zine-book (Figure 8 and 9) where participants co-interpreted their own visual testimony. This led to polyvocal narratives that honored their shifting agency and the evolving social context. The

⁴ Nadia and Deborah A. are real names, while Lou is a pseudonym

book included line drawings, assemblage, sculptures, paintings, ceramic vessels, and text integrating participants own histories (these can be accessed by scanning the QR code at the bottom of Figure 9). This reciprocity extended into the private sphere, as, in many cases, she found herself being invited into participants' kitchens where they would share their oral histories. There, amidst the sights and smells of domestic life, participants reminisced over shared recipes they had recreated in their artworks as vital expressions of their evolving migrant identities.

Figure 8 & 9

Digital Zine Recipe Book



Note. Recetas & Raíces, Recettes & Racines, Recipes & Roots, Digital Zine Recipe Book. Front and back cover. 2024

We affirm *showing up* is rooted in a constellation of relational approaches that closes the distance between researchers and communities. Like friendship as method and reciprocal ethnography, showing up challenges expected research distance, transforming the field from a site of temporary inquiry into interpolated, lived contexts. For us, the time between showing up and starting data collection was two years. By this time, we were active participants rather than observers. This prolonged immersion meant that our findings were not extracted from a distance, but were forged through continuous, ongoing dialogue.

Ethical Considerations and Trappings

Showing up is not without possible objections and traps, and this approach works with and against scholarship on blurred relationships in ethnography. Ethnography has many meanings, but each generally include representing culture sharing groups through prolonged observation and embedded fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This historically involved westerners studying non-westerners using paradigms that assumed the westerner as a neutral, objective observer (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This dynamic has merited critiques about unequal power dynamics and colonial gazes that enforce rigid researcher-participant boundaries and hierarchies (Dutta, 2021; Lombard, 2025). While relational approaches work against this dynamic, anthropologist Louisa Lombard (2025) noted that despite the best of intentions, losing attention to boundaries can re-enforce extractive practices by masking the intentions of the researcher and what data they are extracting. Lombard argues that attention to boundaries can instill mutual understanding about what the research is about. While *showing up* does call for eroding boundaries, but we agree that boundaries need to be clear when collecting data. We call for reflexivity in research, where the researcher considers themselves with the same self-awareness, complexity, and criticality that they apply to their study participants (Pugh & Mosseri, 2023). Equally important is practicing informed consent, where the researcher dedicates themselves to the wellbeing of their participants and makes clear when, how, why, and in what ways data collection will take place and how data will be used (Klykken, 2022). It is imperative that the researcher *showing up* is consistently communicating and negotiating the terms of the research with participants and sites.

We also want to encourage researchers to consider and understand how institutional and relational ethics impact their project before *showing up*. In the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement that governs human participant research, article 6.11 states that “REB [Research ethics board] review is not required for the initial exploratory phase (often involving contact with individuals or communities) intended to discuss the feasibility of the research, establish research partnerships, or the design of a research proposal” (2022, p. 188). However, REB review is required before recruiting participants and gathering data. This means that *showing up* is strictly exploratory until such a review is conducted and approved.⁵

In reflecting on this discussion within our research, we acknowledge the contradiction that we did and do materially benefit from this research through research funding, recognition, and post-secondary employment. In addition to representing our participants’ stories to the best of our ability, we also extended authorship and recognition to our participants when possible and appropriate. Garcia-Fialdini’s participant cookbook that lives on beyond the research, and she mounted several exhibitions. LeRue meanwhile shared participant works through catalogues, exhibitions, and academic publications. He also co-authored a book chapter with the volunteers, employees, and teachers at the art school, highlighting its history and transformation through the pandemic (LeRue et al., 2024). Nevertheless, institutional tensions between communities and universities highlight uneasy relationships between the incentives for researchers and participants (as we discuss in the following section). But participants reported that they were happy to share their stories and expressed desire for this work to make a larger impact.

Toward an Ethnography of Showing Up

To this point, we have discussed *showing up* as a relational approach to embedding that blurs the lines between personal life and academic inquiry while facilitating long-term

⁵ Conflicts of interest also need to be considered and mitigated when researchers hold multiple positionalities.

community presence. In this section, we deduce what it means to show up as a method, while further elaborating on the ethics, benefits, inherent risks and opportunities for researchers. We discuss these components through five benefits we have observed for arts-based researchers: Thick, rich, embodied experiences, seeing and acting upon opportunities, ongoing dialogues and investment, embedded and shared accountability, and bridging university and community structures.

Showing up means finding and becoming present at sites that align with the researchers' personal values and research objectives. A site may be a formal organization such as a community site, church, or an activist collective, or informal networks and self-organized groups such as a local knitting circle or chess club. For formal sites, showing up can include attending public-facing events, participating in classes, and offering to volunteer. While traditional ethnography relies on gatekeepers to grant access to participants (Hunter 2018; Reeves, 2010), showing up operates on a direct relational level. It allows for a mutual dialogue about what research might look like before a formal proposal is ever drafted, pre-establishing trust and granting the researcher a nuanced understanding of the social context. With informal networks, showing up is more porous. To understand how a knitting circle is sustained, one must show up to knit. Access might be found through a Facebook group, a chain of text messages, or a series of chance encounters.

Showing up is anti-idealist because it frames communities as both relational and contradictory, foregrounding tensions through embedding. Whereas ethnography often calls for embedding, gathering data, and disengaging, *showing up* rejects that research time must be strictly bounded or imposed by an academic calendar. Instead, embedding occurs at various points that are convenient for the site and the researcher. We encourage researchers to think in years, and to learn their site's schedules and cycles. Doctoral students could *show up* in year one, well in advance of comprehensive exam and proposal timelines. This allows the work to be informed by the site early, foregrounding deep reading and methodological attachments. *Showing up* also troubles positionality, transforming the researcher from a temporary guest into a stakeholder who contributes to the site's survival. This transformation, while not being ideal for every kind of arts-based community study, provides an appreciation for the work and labour of the site.

It is worth pointing out however that this method poses core ethical and social risks. A community may feel betrayed if they perceive the researcher's presence as solely motivated by data extraction (Lombard, 2025). A *quid-pro-quo* dynamic can emerge where a researcher's participation feels conditional upon the researcher's access. To mitigate these risks (beyond our discussion in *ethical considerations and trappings*), we recommend early transparency and gauging mutual interest before roles become fixed. This not only allows the site to plan for a project in one or two years, but also allows the researcher to adapt their timeline, study design, and outcomes to suit their site. This can both safeguard participants from the extraction model and benefit the site by creating moments of shared authentic value, where the process provides meaning for both sides even if a project does not materialize. *Showing up* at one site could inform work at another site. Finally, we advocate for radical, unrequited labour: giving one's time freely in ways that are useful (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Cleaning the toilets or managing a mailing list is just as vital to the institution's sustainability as larger administrative roles. By giving labour without expectation, the researcher avoids emotional blackmail and builds trust. As LeRue (2024) noted in his dissertation, community sites are labours of love run by overworked administrators; a researcher who shows up to help with the

heavy lifting of seeing through a mission solves the problem of research being one more thing on an administrator's plate.

Becoming part of a site's day-to-day mission provides a valuable perspective but incurs a significant responsibility. Pulling out abruptly to meet a dissertation deadline, not following through on commitments, or failing to compromise with a site's culture can upset the community's ecosystem. LeRue once found he was too busy with life to meet some of the site's deadlines, and it was impacting other people's jobs. He stepped back from that role to focus on what he could reasonably give. Showing up is a negotiation, where the researcher must balance the needs of their academic reading pile and personal life with the demands of embedding.

Now that we have laid out what showing up for a researcher can look like, we want to highlight five specific benefits and opportunities that showing up can provide, and how it transforms the very nature of our studies.

Thick, Rich, Embodied Experiences

Ethnographer Clifford Geertz (1973) coined the term *thick, rich description* to encourage detailed observations of cultural symbols and the webs of significance within situated knowledge. By showing up, we argue that embodied experience begins to flesh out the inner workings of a community. Developing a personal stake creates rich, visceral contexts that give texture to the research, and break down community idealizations. In our work with pre-service teachers working in community settings, students often select at-risk youth as a target group for their internship placements. However, when faced with the reality of youth who may disrupt, talk back, or resist, student-teacher idealism clashes with experience. By showing up, the researcher is forced to confront the messiness of the human condition that some definitions of community do not account for. These contractions become embodied and understood through practice.

This confrontation was pronounced in Garcia-Fialdini's work with newcomers of varying statuses. Navigating precarious environments required flexibility. The researcher could not rely on a pre-set syllabus when participation fluctuated based on legal appointments or exhausting commutes. Here, labour extended into the upkeep of research environments, where childcare was not an afterthought but a foundational requirement. If a mother was overwhelmed, the plan for the session was set aside. Axiology calls on researchers to assess moral worth through real-time choices. Our values were articulated through action: the choice to provide childcare, to listen rather than lead, and to bend a pre-designed study to meet a human need. Showing up is an axiological practice; it proves that the participants' well-being holds more moral weight than the structural requirements of the academy.

Seeing and Acting Upon Opportunities

Integrating into a site earns the researcher trust and responsibility, exposing dynamics shielded from guests. Effective community research requires the alignment of researcher expertise, institutional opportunity, and participant interest. While shorter engagements often work well, it can result in researcher frustration and a lack of situational self-awareness. When LeRue was teaching for the art school online during the pandemic (See LeRue, 2023a; LeRue et al., 2024), the investment from participants inspired his doctoral focus and methodology while revealing what kind of research project would resonate with the site. Without this time on-site, LeRue could not have identified the unique opportunities that making and testimony offer together, nor develop a site-specific curriculum. Developing a project *after* showing up allows

the researcher and the site to parse the opportunities available and ensures that research design accounts for the site's specific needs and the participants' actual interests.

Ongoing Dialogues and Investment

Showing up places the researcher in a dialogic relationship with participants and sites that has the potential to erode researcher authority. The researcher who shows up presents as a fellow human. And while power dynamics certainly persist, our preferred relational approaches work to share agency between researcher and participant. In LeRue's project, many of the critical dialogues that informed the research happened outside of formal research settings, such as with colleagues and students at the art school. Our established relationship allowed for pushback, debate, and dialogue, as friends and as equals. LeRue's positionality as a PhD Candidate interested several community members who were enthusiastic about participating in research (as we will discuss in point 5).

Some forms of community-engaged work accept that some community members are gatekeepers that control access to others (Singh & Wassenaar, 2016). But, in line with our discussion on dialectical contradiction, who decides who a gatekeeper is? We observed that our communities' gatekeepers were often the most engaged participants. These were valuable perspectives to integrate into research, but they are *skewed*. In activist communities, philosopher Robin Celikates (2018) observed that some activists speak on behalf of communities for political ends. But what about those outside these discourses? Our presence and dialogues in communities meant that gatekeepers did not necessarily mediate access to other participants, which expanded the diversity of who participated and who we could talk to.

Embedded and Shared Accountability

Showing up instilled shared accountability, where research sites became extensions of our professional and personal lives fostering a sense of shared responsibility and a desire to represent sites and participants well. The sites and participants, in turn, have their own stakes and responsibilities. Like friendship as method, *showing up* implies mutual sacrifice and engagement. We often had to assess where our accountability lied, with the university or with the site? By prioritizing the latter, care and co-presence took precedent over data extraction (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Whether it was ignoring a pre-designed survey to assist a participant with an urgent legal document, or extending a workshop's duration because of a juicy, collective conversation, these acts of institutional defiance were critical to shared accountability. By subverting the expectations of the institution in favor of the needs of the site, we transitioned from being researchers *on* a community to being researchers *in* and *of* a community, bound by our relationality.

Closeness and a personal stake erodes the perceived neutrality and independence of the researcher, and it is critical for researchers to speak freely about their impressions. But by *showing up*, the dynamics and allegiances *do* shift. LeRue has at times been privately and publicly critical of his sites, which some have read as bashing the mission of his sites (who has not complained about their workplace?). But these criticisms need to be levied in a spirit of solidarity, and within the proper context. For example, oral historian Steven High (2022) criticized Bâtiment 7's membership for catering to a university educated populace that does not align with social solidarity movements in the neighborhood, and Marcel Sévigny (2021), an insider, critiqued Bâtiment 7 for turning its back on the activist impulse that led to its formation. As Bâtiment 7 is a politically active institution with many internal and external dialogues,

criticisms are fair play. However, the art school is more vulnerable and financially precarious, meaning LeRue kept criticisms within dialogues with other members. Deducing what is fair to criticize publicly should be negotiated relationally based on solidarity and shared accountability.

Bridging University and Community Structures

Integrating into the community allowed our research to develop in response to site dynamics while adhering to our PhD requirements. As students navigating courses and defenses, our early presence provided a vital bridge between community sites and the institution. While the university provided a mask of authority, the work was defined by a deeper shared accountability to participants. This supplants any allusion to neutrality but presents an opportunity for shared collaboration. Nevertheless, our research was guided, approved, and overseen by Concordia University. Interestingly, the institutional nature of the research often fostered participant eagerness rather than deterrence. Many of LeRue's participants said they signed up for the research and inquired about research components like methodology and possible impact. For Garcia-Fialdini, the university structure comforted and assured her participants. Many of the women she worked with associated interviews with the bureaucratic trauma of high-stakes migration hearings. In this precarious context, the university's strict ethical mandates for anonymity and data protection offered relief that personal trust alone could not provide.

Conclusion

Immediately after finishing our fieldwork, we each felt that our murky engagements in communities were deficits in our dissertations. We implicitly believed research should be clean, straightforward, ethically unambiguous, and uninterrupted. Despite loving and treasuring our community sites, our own busy lives pulled us in several directions at once: precarious work and teaching, having kids, full-time studies, and a global pandemic each felt like distractions to our doctoral work. However, as our dissertations entered the world, we realized that the messiness provided rich texture and led us to conduct wonderfully complex projects. We hope that our post-hoc theorizing of *showing up* as method provides other researchers the tools and confidence to engage communities without knowing exactly how these engagements will play out, and provides a way to think through community engagement that frames embedding as a core component of relational knowledge production.

Showing up is not the only or the easiest path for conducting CEABR, and it requires additional time, commitment, and relationship building. It is about working transparently within whatever boundaries, timelines, and capacities life permits. We acknowledge that our capacity to engage in this way was predicated on specific privileges: the security of multi-year PhD funding, pedagogical expertise, and the lifestyle flexibility to respond to communities real-time. However, this investment fundamentally reframed our positionality and allowed sites and participants to meaningfully inform our research. *Showing up* is not a prescription for all arts-based community scholars but offers and affirms one way that research can be written from the inside out.

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