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Storying Access: Citizen Journalism, Disability Justice, and the Kansas City Homeless Union

Brynn Fitzsimmons

Abstract

This article is an ethnographic case study of the work of two activist groups in Kansas City, Missouri. It discusses how unhoused activists with the Kansas City Homeless Union, through their 13-month on-and-off occupation of city property, worked to reframe access in ways that moved toward what disability justice activists call collective access, prioritized marginalized lived experience, and asserted their right to control over the resources that impacted their lives. This article ties these interventions explicitly to community writing work through a discussion of how citizen journalists from Independent Media Association, with whom the author has collaborated, documented and crafted narratives around the union's work in ways that demonstrate ways community literacy work can function as rhetorical solidarity practices.

Keywords

Disability justice, access, citizen journalism, housing rights, community writing, abolition

Content Warning: brief discussions of suicide and police brutality

Introduction

On New Year's Day in 2021, during the coldest, most brutal snowstorm of the year, Sixx, a Black unhoused[1] man, was found naked and frozen to death in the snow in Kansas City, Missouri. The day before, protesters had gathered outside the Kansas City mayor's residence at the start of a snowstorm and cold spell that proved the worst of the year so far. The same abolitionist protesters who had, back in October, demanded that the $273 million police budget be cut in half and reinvested in "life-affirming institutions," including housing, now extended their call to action, calling for immediate housing solutions for Kansas City's growing unhoused population (Stoica, December 31).[2] The city did not respond—and then came news reports from multiple stations that Sixx had died.

Less than a week later, I was on the phone doing interviews with his family for citizen journalism project Independent Media Association (IMA)—a group with which I have worked closely since fall of 2020. While news outlets were talking about Sixx's death, IMA's hope was for a story that was about Sixx's life as well. What we

ultimately ran was somewhere in between a news story and a long obituary, and, importantly, citizen journalists were the *only* journalists Sixx's family ever talked to, even though dozens of news stories would run his photo alongside work being done in his name. Sixx's story, like many stories of unhoused individuals IMA would publish after that, included passing references to disability–in Sixx's case, to lingering effects of childhood trauma, mental health needs around communication and interpersonal relationships that went unmet, injuries that caused him to lose scholarships and thus never finish school–and the ways in which many services harmed rather than helped (see Fitzsimmons, "In Memoriam"). Sixx's family, like many others, also spoke of camp sweeps—where city employees, usually from Parks and Recreation, give written and thus often inaccessible notice for residents of a camp to leave and then bulldoze anything remaining at the camp 48 hours later—as one of the most violent forms of "help" available to unhoused communities. That story was the beginning of far too many stories I and other citizen journalists from IMA would write, livestream, photograph, and video that began and ended at "access" with strings attached, and shelters that look like prisons. And right from the beginning, Sixx's story drew what would become an increasingly important distinction in discourse around houselessness in Kansas City: "solutions" that were not self-determined by unhoused people—especially those most at risk, which includes disabled houseless people—almost always caused more harm than good. Even the best-intentioned state solutions didn't save Sixx or the many others like him—and that, citizen journalists quickly found, had to be the story.

Sixx's death shook the city. Activists who had never worked on direct services for houseless people jumpstarted warming centers, began negotiating with city council for funding and space in community centers, and joined new city taskforces on houselessness. Organizations like Free Hot Soup, a direct-services mutual aid group whose members had known Sixx well, redoubled their efforts and expanded their volunteer base. They joined with Creative Innovative Entrepreneurs, a nonprofit which had up until that point served at-risk youth ages 16-21, to open and help staff the Scott Eicke Warming Center—named for Sixx.[3] Meanwhile, Qadhafi, a Black, homeless, formerly incarcerated man who had been working with housing rights group KC Tenants, called a meeting among the homeless camps and proposed a homeless union. The group elected him leader and established the Kansas City Homeless Union (KCHU), whose first action was to occupy city hall in protest. While activists ran the warming center and, later, other activists collaborated with unhoused individuals to run Camp Sixx, a camp in Westport, KCHU was decided in their position. Homelessness, they said, would be addressed through access to "homes, jobs, water, and a seat at the table," and decisions would be by and for homeless people—not housed city officials, nonprofits, or even activists. Qadhafi said his goal was to "make homelessness the number one issue"—and, over the next year, he did (March 23).

Storying Access

How do we—community writing practitioners, both academic and non-academic—story access at the intersection of disability and abolition? What and for whom does it matter that we do? This article considers these questions of how we story access by looking at two different threads of the story sketched above: the work of citizen journalists at IMA, an abolitionist, Kansas City-based citizen journalism project, and the work of the all unhoused-led KCHU, predominantly as documented by IMA citizen journalists, both because their coverage is the most extensive and because they/we were, eventually, the only media outlet to keep covering. Both IMA and KCHU deal directly with questions of access to news and housing, respectively. However, examining their work through a disability justice lens also clarifies linkages between disability and abolition, particularly in community literacy contexts.

As QTBIPOC writers like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha point out, we cannot understand disability justice without abolition, and our movements will likewise not be healing and life-affirming without disability justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha 83-96). This is true for those doing community writing work, as IMA and KCHU did, both inside and outside the academy. However, community literacy work as a *practice* of collective, liberatory access that undoes the white supremacist, colonial systems that created inaccessibility to begin with is perhaps particularly important for scholar-activists to consider (see Dolmage; Mingus; Sins Invalid). White disabled academics like me do a lot of talking about intersectionality while practicing complicity with white supremacist, settler colonial, carceral logics, and so how we show up in activist movements and policy changes—including movements built on the labor of disabled QTBIPOC—tends to reinforce those systems. For example, as someone who is white and grew up with class privilege in the Midwest, I often felt the pull to look at church-, nonprofit-, and advocate-run projects as well-intentioned and on the right track—to not be *too* critical because "at least they're trying." But as KCHU leader Qadhafi pointed out repeatedly, the best intentions did not erase that "a shelter is only in the business of capitalizing off of us being homeless," (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, "We Are Not Accidentally Homeless"). In other words, access to homes, or jobs, or other services without self-determination and the abolition of systems and logics that strip people of self-determination isn't really access. Nor can we end houselessness with academia's ever-more-rigorous critique; critiques don't house people.

White scholars in particular, by buying into what la paperson terms the "second university's" assertion that analysis and critique are in themselves liberatory or decolonizing work are particularly guilty of reifying these systems (41-43). Instead, la paperson pushes us to think about a third, decolonizing university that turns colonial systems against themselves–a small piece of which I hope to parse out here by considering how community literacy projects like IMA can materially amplify KCHU's abolitionist repositioning of what access *is* and what we *do* about it in the context of housing. Specifically, in this article, I consider how KCHU and the citizen journalists who most extensively covered their activism story that kind of liberatory access, what it looks like to center knowledges and leadership of those most impacted, and how

citizen journalism as a community writing/media project is perhaps uniquely suited to do that work.

As scholarship like Liat Ben-Moshe's *Decarcerating Disability* has pointed out, and abolitionists like Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Ritchie have recently affirmed, disability justice and abolition are intimately connected. The decarceration of mentally and physically disabled people between 1977 and 2015 was in part possible because of changing media narratives that, while they fell short of a full critique of carceral logics, still shifted public opinion from seeing the institutionalization of disabled people as necessary to understanding institutions like asylums and other facilities as inhuman and dehumanizing (Ben-Moshe 3-4; 46-53). However, the logic that some bodily difference is so dangerous that it must be segregated and expunged persists, often marginalizing and incarcerating disabled people, particularly disabled people of color (Annamma 7; Price 166-173). Carceral logics also cast body-based categories like sexuality and gender as so rigidly hierarchized that they are, themselves, carceral (Smith 5-6)—something scholars of disability and mad studies note as often true of the categorization of disability (Cherney; Puar) as well as true of medical and psychiatric institutions and knowledge (Ben-Moshe; Kafer; Piepzna-Samarasinha; Price). At a macro-level, in many ways, prisons and police continue to be imaginable because body-based discrimination—what activist Sonya Renee Taylor calls "body terrorism" (54)—is imaginable, and ableism is often one of the justifications for gendered and racialized violence (Schalk, Bailey, Bailey and Peoples). Thus, while the activist work from both unhoused activists and citizen journalists that I consider here is not directly engaging disability—housing rights, abolition, and media freedom are more common ways for these activists to situate their work—a large dimension of their work against carceral logics or toward access and body-based justice become clearer through a disability justice lens.

The way access specifically is positioned in these examples of activist media is, I argue, *storying* work. In calling this "storying," I hope to invoke the varied forms of storytelling that get at power, where it lies, whom it harms, and how to dismantle it in favor of a world built on collective access, mutual aid, and liberation (see Kafer; Sins Invalid). For example, M. Remi Yergeau uses "storying" as method in *Authoring Autism* to resist erasure and control through an intentional retelling of other people's narratives of one's bodymind. They deploy this method throughout their book as a way of narrativizing dominant narratives of autism through a neuroqueer lens—to assert the authority of their own experience and tease out the points at which that lived experience disproves dominant, ableist narratives, exposes them as violent, and renders them untenable.

Although the work activists and citizen journalists are doing takes a different form than Yergeau's book, I argue the storying work is fundamentally similar. Unhoused activists regularly engaged, retold, and exposed as violent the city's and the media's narratives of homelessness in Kansas City—stories that often involve, even if it is not explicitly stated, both physical and mental disability. Relatedly, IMA's methods of citizen journalism engaged dominant narratives only to filter them through the lens of people's lived experience, a choice which shaped their reporting from the out-

set of KCHU's occupation and, importantly, kept them reporting on that work long after other media outlets gave up.

This conception of storytelling as a way of exposing systems of power and working to dismantle them is found in other areas of storytelling as a critical methodology as well; perhaps most notably in critical race theory's *counterstory*, which Aja Martinez discusses as "exposing stereotypes and injustice and offering additional truths through a narration of the researchers' own experiences," (17). By storying access via the lived experience of those who are being denied access, unhoused activists and citizen journalists intervened in how access is defined; resisting, for example, the idea that more surveillance or control can ever create access to safe and healthy communities. Unhoused activists in Kansas City demanded self-determination—moving, over the course of their 13-month occupation, toward resetting the terms of discussions about access to housing that were determined by unhoused people, not city agendas. In focusing on storying access, citizen journalists worked to advance these terms—to create a media narrative that advanced both epistemic justice and collective, liberatory access.

"Every Damn Body": The Kansas City Homeless Union Occupation

Just days after IMA published Sixx's story, Andrei Stoica, the founder of IMA, met and began talking with Qadhafi, who was heading the KCHU occupation on city hall front lawn, demanding "homes, jobs, water, and a seat at the table". KCHU staged an on and off occupation of Kansas City, Missouri city property for a year, before their camp was destroyed by city officials who said they moved everyone into some kind of housing and then bulldozed the camp to turn it into a dog park. There were countless "sweep threats" (see March 23, April 5) before then—times the camp had been given notice to vacate under threat of being bulldozed—and IMA showed up alongside protesters with livestream cameras. City officials claimed sweeps were not violent and that people's property and homes were not destroyed. Among other interventions, the city gave additional money to shelters as well as new groups claiming they were addressing houselessness. However, unhoused individuals–many of whom told their stories on IMA's livestream cameras while we all waited for threatened sweeps–told a different story. Specifically, when KCHU activists, whether on their own channels or on IMA's livestreams, described sweeps and other city responses to unhoused communities, they talked about how the only "access" offered by the city came with strings attached–like shelters with strict surveillance or rules that banned the majority of unhoused folx on the basis of sexuality, previous criminal records, or disability (March 23).

In an interview Andrei eventually ran a transcript of on IMA's website, Qadhafi talked about the importance of forcing elected officials to *see* their unhoused constituents (Stoica, "My Address Is"). As Qadhafi would continue to repeat for the next year of on and off occupation, "to be seen is to be heard." In so doing, they asked for a reframing of the city's sense of accountability to its constituents, asking questions not dissimilar to what Cody A. Jackson and Christina V. Cedillo asked the field of

rhetoric and composition in their 2020 article: "If accountability ends at the mention of "structural" issues, how can we reframe accountability politics as a profoundly localized, embodied endeavor (Mingus "Dreaming Accountability")?" Unhoused activists sought to embody the citywide calls for accountability and access. These calls had started with Sixx, with his body, but had done little more than that second-university critique that la paperson discusses. These quickly faded into vague calls for change and vaguer promises for "help" as defined not by unhoused folx, but by people with power and 501c3 status. The union took a strong position from the start on this issue—intent on not settling for any less than self-determination.

Early in the occupation, Qadhafi described his work in the following way: "My job is to make every damn body uncomfortable and to make homelessness the number one issue," (March 23). It strikes me as important that his choice in emphasis splits the word: "every damn body". Qadhafi's strategy was for the union to be seen, and in so doing to hold the city accountable. To do so, he put a camp that would normally be tucked away out of sight right in front of city hall–which, in Kansas City, also means it was in front of the police department headquarters and the county courthouse, with a parking garage on the fourth side. He was determined that, in seeing bodies, he would make those with power uncomfortable enough that they would have to recognize the union–a tactic which worked, at least partially, in the sense that city officials did ultimately come down and meet with the union. Cedillo writes, "Those whose bodies are seen (in terms of surveillance and an ableist predilection for sight) as Other are framed as too corporeal and incapable of legitimate speech, as rhetorically expedient but never rhetorical in their own right. They are mere bodies, objects upon which meaning can be imposed," (n.p.), and Qadhafi's demand for "a seat at the table where they make decisions about our lives" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, "We Are Not Accidentally Homeless") was precisely a resistance to this kind of imposition.

While city officials insisted throughout the KCHU occupation–in city council meetings, on IMA's camera, and to activists' faces–that sweeps were not violent and unhoused folx were able to move with their belongings into a shelter before a camp was "cleaned," that narrative was repeatedly combatted by anyone who actually experienced a sweep. Many unhoused folx and their housed friends sharing—with IMA citizen journalists and on their own social media channels—photo after photo of belongings bulldozed into a pile at the edge of what had once been a camp. In addition to detailing what sweeps looked like (see Fitzsimmons "In Memoriam"), homeless leaders also described the mental health impacts, such as Qadhafi noting after a sweep that one man from the camp "was so tired and constantly frustrated of being tried to run off that he tried to kill himself," (September 22), or talking about families panicking at the mere mention of a shelter, terrified that their children would be taken from them if they were judged unfit to be parents (March 23).

These stories–which are common among houseless communities outside of Kansas City as well–illustrate what Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law describe as the ever-expanding nature of the prison industrial complex via "almost-imprisonment… institutions that do not bear that name (prison) but are still Somewhere Else–places designed to cut off marginalized people from society," (20-21). This includes, for

Schenwar and Law, psychiatric institutions, foster care, the sex offender registry, probation, and a number of other systems that all also directly or indirectly impact homeless communities. As both their work and that of Qadhafi highlight, abolition of carceral institutions without the creation of liberatory access ends in more prisons *and* "services" that aren't called prisons but function in much the same way.

KCHU was an exercise in creating that kind of collective access that resisted extensions of state control. This emphasis was perhaps clearest about eight months into the occupation, when the camp had moved to city-owned property a few blocks away while city taskforces continued to pour money into service organizations–without substantively recognizing the authority of the union. In a September 22 interview, Qadhafi explained that people were leaving city-funded shelters and coming to the KCHU camp because "the city is feeding (shelters) money, but they (unhoused folx) don't want to be there. It's more like prison," Qadhafi described. "Here they're free." And from that place of freedom, Qadhafi invited Kansas City publics into a different kind of project: "If anything, we're gonna set the table and maybe invite them, because they're not the ones suffering and dying out here—it's us. So the table is amongst us, not us amongst them, because they're gonna continue doing the same thing and there's not going to be different results," (September 22). In other words, he pushed for, essentially, the same interdependence and cross-movement solidarity Sins Invalid calls crucial to disability justice–because he sees it as crucial to building power that threatens oppressive systems ("10 Principles"):

> The anarchists, abolitionists, anybody should get our back because we're proving we can do something that people only talk about or study, and we're proving that we can do it and do it without funds. And that's scary, I know it is, it's got to be, because (if) people continue to do this and come together and create autonomous communities…what we end up doing is creating autonomous neighborhoods and creating treaties between (camps) and creating our own federation—yeah, that's scary. You know, autonomous, life-affirming community. (September 22)

In addition to cross-movement solidarity, what Qadhafi presented here was abolition–it was a model of the "radical, life-affirming infrastructure and support along with a flowing stream of resources (which) is what creates safe, secure, healthy, sustainable and equitable communities, conditions that allow us to not only survive but thrive," which Critical Resistance discusses as the necessary alternative to carceral institutions. That includes prisons—but also, as Qadhafi points out, includes shelters and other parts of the non-profit industrial complex. It is access founded in both self-determination—camps are self-determined or autonomous here; and interdependence—camps working together to threaten the systems that marginalize them.

Self-determination—particularly within discourse around disability—has often been framed in terms that imply that the right to determine one's own life is a matter of gaining the right to be included in public institutions and discourses on the basis of individual independence that one earns by performing as a normative member of society, a normalization project that is closely linked to colonial projects (Ben-Moshe

79-80). However, KCHU reframed self-determination as the ability to use one's lived experience and the experiences of one's community to make decisions about the flow of resources that most directly impact one's life—as many abolitionist and anticolonial movements have framed self-determination (Stanley 90). While self-determination as defined in the neoliberal, colonial sense focuses on moving people toward proximity to hegemonic identities—e.g., performing able-bodied/able-mindedness, whiteness, masculinity, etc.—self-determination as KCHU used it is more centered on epistemic justice. That is, it is centered on addressing the asymmetrical ways in which credibility of knowledges, particularly embodied knowledges, and testimonies are assigned. In reframing unhoused speakers as able to self-determine the solutions that made sense to their communities, they worked to center how people–particularly disabled people, like many in the camp—make access via new and accessible systems, systems that, in the spirit of mutual aid, allow them to meet each other's needs in ways that, as Qadhafi sketches here, threaten the very systems that created that need to begin with.

Cripping Citizen Journalism

Although the camp began with a demand for "a seat at the table," KCHU eventually moved away from that. Instead, Qadhafi and other union leaders began saying they were creating their own table—calling explicitly for that later in the fall, and, even after the camp was ultimately swept by the city in February 2022, building toward those ends. It's here that the sources I've drawn on to this point matter. With few exceptions, the documentation of Qadhafi's and other unhoused activists' speeches comes from the work of IMA citizen journalists, and while the preceding section demonstrates some of the ways KCHU reframes access—what it means, who leads it, and what its material impacts look like—the way citizen journalists responded and used their/our writing to support not only fell in line with their dedication to information access (see "Who We Are," *Independent Media Association*), but it also illustrates a few ways community writing projects can and do support, amplify, and *story* radical, liberatory access.

Citizen journalism work is generally predicated on some concept of access to information, with citizen journalists often getting into their work because of a perceived *lack* of access to relevant, contextualized information in mainstream forms of news (see Allan, Allan and Thorson, and Greer and McLaughlin). Although most citizen journalism in the U.S. has historically been assumed right-leaning, citizen journalists—particularly those like IMA who do livestream coverage of protests, such as around the Ferguson and George Floyd uprisings—citizen journalists have played important roles in leftist movements as well (see Borda and Marshall). Having emerged from Kansas City's uprisings following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, IMA undertakes their citizen journalism work from an explicitly abolitionist lens, seeking to trouble carceral logics tied up in both "journalist" and "citizen" through open-access news that prioritizes lived experiences, challenging, as abolition does, "social logics and institutionalized systems of violence" (Rodriguez 810) through stories that ex-

pose impacts of state violence on actual people. Following Black feminist standpoint epistemology as articulated by writers like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, IMA centers their coverage on lived experience of those most impacted by a given issue, their accounts, and their solutions.

I met Andrei Stoica, the founder of IMA, in September 2020, at a park outside a school before a Black Lives Matter protest. An acquaintance had introduced us via email after I'd had a bad health flare that was quickly slowing my capacity to show up in-person for protests; I started asking people if they needed a researcher or a writer. Andrei did. He was a photographer, and told me he had started IMA to livestream, photograph, and, he hoped, write about activist work following damaging media mis-coverage of 2020's protests and related events. For him, the final straw had been a local station—KCTV5—reporting that someone threw a pig's head at police. He had been there, and he doubted the accuracy of the story. He pulled together social media footage, eyewitness accounts, and photographs, all of which disproved KCTV5's story. He posted his documentation for his fact check publicly, sent it to them, and posted it as a comment on their story, which they never updated.

This hadn't been a one-off issue, either; news coverage of the 2020 protests tended to be like KCTV5's—centered on sensational headlines and photos, overly concerned with whether the police were good or bad, whether the protesters were violent or nonviolent, whether they had broken the law or obeyed all of them perfectly. People got ignored in those binaries. Meyerhoff and Noterman argue, "Reclaiming the university for projects of Black liberation and decolonization requires jettisoning this modernist/colonial (zero-point) epistemology in favor of place-and-body political epistemologies and alternative modes of study" (226). However, dominant media narratives, even if they talk about things like community-based safety, investing in housing or healthcare, or alternatives to policing, never really make it to that "place-and-body" epistemology either; they never trouble "dichotomies of 'human vs. animal,' 'society vs. nature,' and 'space vs. time'" (226) or, I would add, law and order vs. crime. By continuing to tell stories that replicate binaries that allow fundamentally violent systems to be one side of two acceptable options, mainstream news risks reifying carceral logics even as it claims to be covering interrogations of them.

For IMA, the carceral logics of the news such as the capitalist business models, economic and educational gatekeeping of journalism school, and sensationalist plays into dehumanizing algorithms do more than make *imaginable* the need for police, prisons, modern-day slavery; in many ways, they imagine them *for* the public. They imagine crime into existence in the social narrative—crime being a cultural construct (Davis 29) often associated with mad and disabled bodies (Cherney 19-20). It's easy for our social media feeds to disappear people into headlines, just like it's easy for prisons to disappear people (Davis 29). In so doing, importantly, mainstream media sets the terms of public discourse; media questions, asked supposedly on behalf of the public, model what terms people may engage in dialogue about a given topic. This proved true at the start of IMA during 2020, but it quickly proved true again as homelessness, as Qadhafi had predicted, become a hot topic in Kansas City media and public discourse. Although IMA's interventions were shaped by their specific po-

sition as a citizen journalism project, the broad strokes of their response—storytelling with epistemic justice, crip time, and power analysis—have potential application in community literacy work well beyond citizen journalism.

Media visibility around homelessness came at a cost for KCHU. News stations regularly walked into the KCHU occupation with cameras, invading people's privacy and homes and misconstruing the union's efforts. While mainstream coverage included KCHU for many months, the longer-lasting dialogue was around city initiatives and advocacy organizations; KCHU was made to fit into that dialogue, rather than leading it, despite city initiatives and advocacy groups being led entirely or almost entirely by people who had never experienced homelessness. IMA's primary intervention, at first, was an epistemic one; rather than forcing KCHU to fit a broader dialogue, IMA fit it to them. Throughout IMA's coverage, unhoused leaders were the first source, the ultimate authority on their own experiences. The first interview Qadhafi gave on behalf of the union was with Andrei, who ultimately ran a transcript of the entire interview with a brief introduction—something that was replicated in the numerous livestreams IMA did with KCHU members, a format which ensured people could and did speak for themselves.

IMA citizen journalists also regularly asked the union to verify what the city said about what kind of access they were creating for unhoused people–not the other way around. This flipped dominant narratives on their heads even as they were being written; while other outlets focused on city and nonprofit initiatives and sometimes wove the union into that, citizen journalists gave the same information but contextualized it through the lived experiences of unhoused activists. This continued into the next fall and winter, as the city's failure to plan for cold weather became quickly evident. IMA citizen journalists covered the city's failure, but especially as the year wore on, their questions highlighted unhoused-led solutions—people from the camp organizing mutual aid, creating jobs for homeless membership, and gathering and distributing supplies despite numerous setbacks, including theft of a large portion of early donations to KCHU.

Citizen journalism also proved more accommodating of the iterative, collective, and often messy portions of the union's various phases of work. IMA's position as a citizen journalism project meant they could, in a sense, work on and with crip time and its many facets (Samuels). Their journalists chose whom and what to cover, and coverage wasn't on their news deadline; it was something they could negotiate with the union and around their other work schedules. Among other upsides, this offered IMA the freedom and the flexibility to ensure its coverage centered on what unhoused leaders said—their solutions, their material needs, and their leadership. At the beginning of the occupation, this allowed IMA to take KCHU's demands into spaces of power—including, but not limited to, Andrei and I going after the mayor as he walked away from us, reading KCHU's demands back to him, and asking him to respond. We were there with cameras when he negotiated with Qadhafi for a hotel program that was supposed to be a precursor to permanent housing, and we were there when the union returned to city property when the city broke its promise.

On an immediate level, that kind of coverage—the consistent coverage of a few topics over a substantial period of time, which is common to citizen journalism (Greer and McLaughlin)—meant that when city officials tried to backtrack on promises, it wasn't activists' word against the city's; it was the city's claim against dozens of hours of live video proving them wrong. That is, citizen journalist coverage prevented those with material and discursive power from getting to frame the entire narrative. In storying KCHU's work, IMA's intervention wasn't just in creating documentation; it was an intervention in *access*—in ensuring the story of housing in Kansas City in 2021 didn't get to lose those bodies, and that the city's claim of creating "access" would either have to be access as defined by those most impacted, or else it would have to answer to an archive of stories about the embodied realities it overlooked.

Over the course of covering the union and other activist work in Kansas City, IMA has also built in practices to ensure its coverage of KCHU and other movements that attend to questions of power and amplify the most impacted–rather than just the loudest–voices as best we can. IMA has, for example, adapted feminist organizing tools like power analysis as a way of structuring both their questions on live interviews and their stories—something several citizen journalists and I gave a workshop on at the 2021 Conference on Community Writing. Organizers use power analysis to analyze formal (e.g., laws, policies, city government); hidden (e.g., lobbyists, economic interests, NGOs); and shadow (e.g., ideological, religious) power. However, IMA has taken the same analysis as a way of structuring stories that start with lived experience and then questions and exposes the power structures that impact it. In the process, citizen journalists often point their audience toward potential ways of intervening in and dismantling that power, such as when Andrei dug through files from the Fraternal Order of Police and drew attention to specific policies that enabled harm in Kansas City (Stoica, "The Blue Hand"). "Solutions-focused" journalism, for them, isn't focused on top-down solutions either—it's solutions like KCHU's, developed by and for those most impacted by a given problem. The way citizen journalists from IMA story movements for access, like KCHU's, makes intentional intervention into the gap between awareness and action that Nedra Reynolds identifies (20-26). This includes both asking questions that draw out grassroots solutions and using tools like social media to draw audiences into not just awareness, but involvement (see Stoica, "Introduction to Citizen Journalism" and Swank, "Using Social Media").

Conclusion

The KCHU camp was swept in February 2022, after a year of on and off occupation. The space where the occupation had moved in summer 2021—the lot at the corner of 10th and Harrison Street, just a few blocks from Kansas City, Missouri City Hall—has been turned into a dog park. It's not open, but, like city hall's front lawn, there's a fence around it now—public property barred from public access because the wrong public tried to access it. The union demanded a seat at the table and got a fence instead, and then another one, and now a dog park. However, in pushing for and modeling collective, self-determined access, KCHU not only exposed top-down city solu-

tions as untenable; they also laid the groundwork for the relationships and movement that is them creating their own table, as multiple KCHU members have described since. Mutual aid work persists despite most of KCHU's funds for that work being stolen a few months ago. Qadhafi's LLC to employ homeless people continues, too, but quietly—for now.[4]

And here's where it matters to read this story as one that's about access–in the liberatory, crip sense of that word. Not all citizen journalism bothers to take up questions of access, who's responsible for creating it, what it really means, and whether it's liberatory or whether it simply replicates the same carceral social logics and institutionalized violences mainstream media so often does. But for IMA, storying activist work has looked like storying access with an abolitionist, liberatory access in mind. Their work demonstrates how community writing projects like theirs—whether they're citizen journalism or some other form of oral history or public storytelling—practice epistemic justice that has material impacts on public discourse. By framing their narratives around concepts that are echoed in disability justice like leadership of the most impacted, IMA could story housing in Kansas City in a way that got at collective, liberatory access rather than simply the top-down solutions that quickly came to dominate mainstream media discourse. Their intervention has looked like creating media narratives that try to help people see beyond prisons and policing as the solutions, and to recognize when what is actually being proposed as a solution is actually a prison, or police, and not life-affirming at all—and that extends well beyond coverage of stories like KCHU, even though how we frame and understand those stories shape how we understand and position access in the rest of our work.

For community writing work like IMA, stories create and are created by movements for access. Drawing out access as a theme has proven useful not just the actual writing and composing IMA does, but also for creating broader organizational practices, visions, and strategic plans. It's become a way of assessing impact, structuring conversations, and organizing citizen journalists to meet each other's needs so they can keep telling stories like KCHU's. That is, although IMA is not a disability justice organization per se, their work and the work of those whose stories they help tell is shaped deeply by questions of access—a small move, I think, toward creating the "autonomous, life-affirming community" Qadhafi talked about.

Notes

1. Often, terms like "unhoused" and "houseless" are preferred to "homeless" due to the stigma associated with "homeless" as well as, importantly, the implication that persons without permanent housing are without a "home"—something that often disguises the violence of something like a camp "sweep," where city officials (in most cities, Parks and Rec and/or police) destroying the encampments that unhoused individuals may in fact consider home. Many of the advocacy organizations (most of which are predominantly comprised of housed individuals) in Kansas City tend toward language like "unhoused" and "houseless" for this reason. However, the homeless activists I will be discussing in this section have explicitly told me they prefer—and intentionally use—the term "homeless," and see other terms as a way of trying to

soften the reality of homelessness through language. Out of respect for the complexity of the various perspectives on linguistic choices here, the importance of the homeless leaders whose work I discuss being allowed to self-define, and the recognition that there are differing viewpoints on these terms, I have made it a point to interchangeably use all these terms, preferring whenever possible the terms used by whomever I am describing at a given time.

2. All KCHU interviews are from 2021. Unlike other sources here, they are cited by date, because the timeline of KCHU's occupation, when in the year (seasons) they fall, and the duration for which they had these conversations and issued these demands are important context for the story. Only a small fraction of IMA's coverage of KCHU appears here. You can find the rest of the livestream and video coverage (including more than 15 extended interviews) at https://www.facebook.com/independentmediaus. Articles are at https://www.independentmedia.us/.

3. Although the warming center was named "the Scott Eicke Warming Center," Sixx did not like or use his legal name, according to his ex-wife, so this article will not use it either (see Fitzsimmons, "In Memorium").

4. Both fundraising efforts and other mutual aid work are ongoing via KCHU's social media (https://www.facebook.com/kchomelessunion). Dialogue around housing also continues, with another KCHU leader, Davina Meyer, starting the Kansas City United Front Against Homelessness (https://www.facebook.com/groups/1104654573793545).

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