

To community with care: Enacting positive barriers to access as good relations

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Abstract

This symposium builds from our discussions about communities, academia, activism, and access as four faculty members with different positionalities and perspectives to advocate for the protection of relations in the face of universities' demands for access to peoples, communities, and lands. In each of four individually authored reflections, we recount our experiences working with and being in community as part of our academic practice. We extend from work in disability studies to explain that while access is generally understood to be good, and often is, access can also be the precursor to exploitation. We argue that to mitigate that risk, we can take on a positive gatekeeping function as part of being in community with care.

Keywords

community, marginalization, access, relationships, ethics

Finding community is precious. Community nurtures our spirits and, often, inspires our work. What a community is—and how it is assembled, feels, and functions—are fluid and contextually based. For this article, we intentionally allow for space around defining community to instead focus on the act of *being in* community. To be in community means more than just “being part” or “being with,” it also means being careful with the gift of connection brought about by community, whatever that means for you.

We are bringing together two conversations: one about community and one about access. Both are often presumed to be unquestionable goods; community and access are both positive, necessary parts of human thriving. In the context of disability justice particularly, access is a necessary condition for equity as well as vital to enabling disabled people to be in community. Even in that context, though, access is a contested concept, which Aimi Hamraie incisively highlights with their development of the idea of “access-knowledge,” which foregrounds the fact that how access is defined and created is a process of knowledge-making. And importantly, that process is not immune to relations of power and effects of intersectional marginalization. Disability justice as a frame allows us to engage access critically, given the fact of access-knowledge. Outside of disability justice, thus, the concept of access risks misuse; it is all too easy to use the value of “access” to justify injustices, if access is treated as a universal and unexamined good. So, it is critical that, in our conversation about academics working in community, we question the role that appeals to access play.

As academics aiming to work in or with communities, we are perturbing a system, even when we already belong to that community ourselves. Our presence as academics changes the community and opens up multi-directional avenues between the community and the academy. The community is not a thing, a research subject, a closed system we can just study – it is a complex open system we affect and are—and should be—affected by in turn. And while access, defined as “the ability, right, or permission to approach, enter, speak with, or use; admittance” (“access”), is generally understood to be good, access can also be the precursor to exploitation. So, when we open up a community system, perhaps by giving others access to it, we put it at risk of exploitation. To mitigate that risk, we can take on a positive gatekeeping function.

This shared introduction places the work we describe in this piece, work we largely do independent of each other, but hardly alone. To open, we describe the central questions we each take up here, and which situate our work's complicated relation to access. This work largely consists of collaborations with non-university communities, which is most often legible within the academy as a form of research and co-production of knowledge. We explore the risks associated with these collaborations that marginalized members incur via providing access for outsiders to their communities. We consider what harm we cause in our community-based work, what power relations we create, unsettle, or reinscribe, and how we might co-create new stories about what it means to do this work in community.

This shared conversation came together through our Roundtable on Good Relations at the 2021 Conference on Community Writing. We assembled virtually there, along with Les Hutchinson Campos, to consider the ways that all of us are focused in our work on relations of all kinds and spend a large amount of time trying to maintain the "good." Our conversation was inspired in part by a question offered several years ago by Margaret Noodin, Associate Dean for Humanities at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, former Director of the Electa Quinney Institute for American Indian Education, and speaker and teacher of Anishinaabemowin: "Can you introduce yourself and include in your introduction the bodies of land and water that have given you life and are now protected and acknowledged by you?" We were moved as a group to reflect on that question and to add several related ones based on our work across technical communication, cultural rhetorics, community-based writing, and beyond: How can we, both we specifically and academics in general, make use of the cultural rhetorics pillars of story, relationality, constellation, and decolonization to foster good relations in our shared work? How can we co-create new stories about what it means to do this work in community? What risks

associated with research and co-production of knowledge might marginalized members incur via providing access for outsiders to their communities? What harm might we—and *do* we—cause in our community-based work? How might community building with languages other than English help us deepen our understanding of good relations? How can we work against the impulse—and often the expectation—to “research”? (For an extremely partial list of works that inspired these questions, see: Edenfield, et al.; Hidalgo et al.; Itchuaqiyak and Matheson; Powell et al; Rai and Druschke; Sparrow et al.; Tuck and Yang)

This collection of short responses works to address those questions, highlighting how we celebrate the relations that give us life in the context of community activism, community writing, and community-based scholarship. We share our work to join a call for scholar-teachers in community writing and rhetoric and composition to prioritize accountability towards our shared relations and we explicitly advocate for the protection of those relations in the face of universities’ demands for access to peoples, communities, and lands. We see ourselves as scholar-activists concerned with these kinds of good relations—to peoples, to places, to ancestors, to histories, to plants and rivers, to organizations—in our work through, with, and in a variety of community settings: as Indigenous boundary spanner, as researcher in partnership with state environmental organizations, as new mother researching and working alongside *promotores de salud*, and as human-scholar working to support community-led initiatives in spite of fraught institutional relations.

No, I won’t introduce you to my mama: Boundary spanners, access, and accountability to Indigenous communities

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There exists an added pressure that Indigenous scholars and other marginalized scholars face as boundary spanners: marginalized scholars are asked to spend their personal social capital on other scholars' professional needs. I define boundary spanners as individuals who occupy both academic spaces and marginalized community spaces and who are called on to act as mediators between the two. This piece discusses my own navigation across these spaces and the nuances of relationship that I must recognize and respond to as an additional component of my professional and communal practice. I will also share about the difference between credibility and accountability and how that important distinction is often overlooked.

Briefly, boundary spanners link together systems of people, communities, institutions, and knowledges through their belonging to and expertise with both systems. As an Iñupiaq from an Alaska Native community in the Arctic, I have cultural and community expertise and connections from being part of that system. As a technical communication and rhetoric scholar and professor at an R1 institution, I have another set of expertise and connections from being part of that system. The boundary spanning I try to do is in the service of helping my Inuit community in Alaska with claiming and accessing institutional resources from academia.

The use of the word "claiming" above is intentional. My goal as a scholar is to help my people—Alaska Natives—who are severely underrepresented in academia claim the space they need to thrive in—or even just graduate—college. The term "Alaska Native" describes the Indigenous people who are part of the 229 federally recognized tribes in Alaska. For context, there are currently 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States. According to the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, the first known Alaska Native to earn a PhD was an Athabaskan named James Simpson in 1970 in Education. The first known Iñupiaq to earn a PhD was Paul A.

Goodwin in 1979 in Physics. By the end of 2010—40 years after the first Alaska Native earned their doctorate—there were 62 PhDs. By 2015, the number had increased to 90. And, as of March 2022, the number has increased to 127 Alaska Native PhDs.

Of these 127 PhDs, there are 29 Iñupiat; I am #28.

Iñupiat homelands are located in the Alaskan Arctic and are roughly the same size as the state of New Mexico. I mention these statistics to make a specific point: while there are numerous Iñupiat who have research skills, there are just 29 who have that magic title—PhD—that can gain them entry as research faculty in academia. And, as I will discuss, that title means that others may consider these 29 scholars as entry points themselves to Iñupiat communities in the Arctic.

Iñupiaq PhD candidate Margaret Anamaq Rudolf's scholar bio states that “Boundary spanners facilitate research projects between Alaska Native communities and research institutes. Boundary spanning is one way to accomplish co-production of knowledge, which may be key in the context of working with Alaska Native communities” (Rudolf para 3). In terms of being a boundary spanner, I am called to use my personal social capital for my professional endeavors. This gets even more complicated when people—usually scholars with more institutional and disciplinary power than me who are seeking local Arctic partners in fulfillment of the increasing coproduction of knowledge requirements in grants—ask me to introduce them to people in my Alaska Native community.

Let's unpack what asking me to make introductions in my community means. What I'm really being asked to do is use my personal relationships that I've spent a lifetime building and rebuilding for their academic research needs. They are asking me to vouch for them to my

people, my community, my friends, and my family. These askers think that their outsider-perspective research agenda is a big opportunity to my people and are shocked when I don't jump up enthusiastically, call my mama, and book them a spot on her couch. The funniest part is that sometimes I don't even know the people who are doing the asking. In other words, literal strangers are asking me to set them up with my family and community. That's some bullshit.

Why do they feel comfortable with this ask? Beyond entitlement, one reason may be a belief that our profession links us in a special way, and perhaps it does. However, let's not forget the ongoing history of harmful and extractive research practice in academia. I'm sorry, but I am not going to help rando scholars inflict their rando research agenda on my people. I will not risk the potential harm of that kind of set-up. Put another way, I'm an insider to my own Alaska Native community yet I am still very cautious about approaching my own people regarding my research. I don't assume that because I'm from the community that my people will welcome or need or want the research I might propose. In fact, it took me two years of careful discussions and small-scale collaborations to convince my big sister—literally someone who helped raise me and who knows that I come to my work with a good heart, meaning my motivations are centered in our people's wellbeing and needs rather than my own personal and professional ambitions—to partner with me on a project creating an online archive for Inuit users for our tribe. And, once we agreed on the project and the partnership, we then approached our tribal organization to make sure that the idea we had, an idea sparked from community needs, was welcome and wanted.

Respectful research in Indigenous communities requires that research problems and research questions related to Indigenous land and peoples must come from these communities themselves. As scholars, we need to respect community sovereignty and be humble enough to take the time to build local relationships and listen to local needs and wants and pivot our

existing research and restructure new research questions to help fulfill those needs. For example, I am not a digital archivist but that's what my community needed. But as a scholar, AKA a professional learner, I can learn about digital archives and combine it with what I know about technical communication and UX. Furthermore, as a boundary spanner, I can help enlist others with complementary skills to help. Keeping an open mind about what and how you might contribute to a community's self-determined needs is important. Sometimes conducting a research project isn't the right course of action for the community in fulfilling its needs. Sometimes a community might want to do the research themselves without you. Being in good relations with a community partner, such as acting with care for the community by supporting and upholding their needs and their boundaries, should not be conducted with a "what's in it for me" attitude. For generations, Indigenous communities have been promised that academic research in their communities would ultimately benefit their people. We have extended our trust and given access to our people and our lands even when the benefits to us were unclear or, sadly, unfulfilled. Perhaps it's time for academia to extend trust back to us, FFS.

This is where the distinction between credibility and accountability comes in. I might have the credibility to do research in my community based on my fancy degrees, position, and identity—but that credibility don't mean shit if I don't hold myself accountable to the self-determination and the sovereignty of my people. What does that accountability mean? It means caring more about the needs and safety of my community more than my own professional needs. Simply, it means putting my community first—in the position of power—when I choose to engage with them in my professional capacity. You see, as a scholar, I have a choice about what I study and therefore can, in essence, self-define my research goals. My community should also have these same choices. My goal as a scholar—to help my people—means that I am

accountable to my people first, not my university. Affiliations to universities come and go, affiliations to communities should not.

When working with an Indigenous community, it's important to position accountability to that community and its needs as the primary factor of your work. Because Indigenous communities likely don't give a fuck about your title or your CV when it comes to your research ideas, they care about your heart.

Cultivating Soil, Cultivating Self

Lauren E. Cagle

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I'll begin with a story about one of the most right things I have done in my life. When I moved to Kentucky in 2016 for my first faculty position, I was in an emotionally abusive marriage, smoking almost a pack a day and drinking far too much, to mute the abuse. And even as that was daily life, I was also excited to finally live somewhere that I could put down roots. I grew up a military brat, and lived in Boston and Memphis for college, Las Vegas for my master's, and Tampa for my PhD. I had never lived anywhere more than four years. I had no permanent home, no roots. Yet I study environmental rhetoric, so I was excited in an intellectual, abstract way about the idea of having a place, because I wondered how I could really understand environmental work if I wasn't attached to a place.

In Kentucky, my then-husband and I moved into a shotgun rental house at the far end of a gentrifying neighborhood. I thought it was perfect. I was going to learn how to garden, and I was going to plant things in the long narrow yard behind the house. I didn't know how to grow anything. I didn't even have houseplants. But it turned out that I couldn't plant things in that

yard, anyway, because the ground was full of broken glass. I couldn't make up a better metaphor if I tried.

I remember asking friends online, what do you do with a yard full of broken glass? The answer was that you cover it in topsoil. And that seemed, and still seems, to me like an unideal situation. There's still broken glass down there. We cover up adulterated soil. Why do we not amend the soil, so that as it turns over, as plants' roots stretch down, as we dig for potatoes and carrots and beets, we don't cut our hands?

The non-metaphorical question about glass in the soil became moot six months later, when I walked out on that relationship and had a very sudden divorce. The house I moved into then was the first place I had ever lived by myself. The backyard was tiny, with a disused gravel path that led nowhere and a single rotting raised bed next to sparse grass. I was there for four years. I started gardening, first in pots, then in the ground itself, under the rotted raised bed I had broken up and cleared away. I grew butter lettuce and sparkler radishes and hollyhocks and red Russian kale and rainbow carrots and sunflowers and Bloomsdale long standing spinach and one single, perfect cauliflower. I started composting, and then added the finished compost to my garden. I learned how to hoe and till and amend and mulch and weed, sometimes from friends, sometimes from YouTube.

When I moved out of that house, a friend asked if I was bothered by having put so much effort into the soil, which I was now leaving behind. I had made a garden where there wasn't one. And my answer came immediately, though I did not know I knew this before I said it to her. I said, "There is so much soil all over this world. I have lived in so many places and walked on

their soil. I have eaten food from infinitely more plots of land. So much soil has kept me alive and fed me during my life; the least I can do is not begrudge this soil whatever I've put into it.”

Knowing and then saying that is one of the most right things I've ever done. Developing that relationship with the soil, that care for the soil I gardened with, that accountability to the soil that nourished me before I ever became a gardener, that was right.

It is not a relationship that sprang from nothing. I can trace the ways I was prepared to encounter soil in that way. Being in relation with the people I'm writing with in this symposium prepared me. Developing research collaborations with geologists and agricultural extension specialists and arborists prepared me. Reading work by Robin Wall Kimmerer and Kathleen E. Absolon Minogizhigokwe and Zoe S. Todd prepared me. Learning from Earth First! activists and water protectors at Standing Rock and nuns from the Sisters of Loretto protesting the Bluegrass pipeline prepared me.

What we know, even what we don't know we know until we are asked to say it, rests on layers of what came before: the things we read, the images we see, and the relationships we cultivate.

Much of what I read, see, and cultivate comes from academia, including many of the roots of my relationship to soil. There's something oddly beautiful about an institution as fucked up as academia leading me to this relationship. That beauty is tempered by the fact that I can only enjoy it as much as I do because I have privileges that allow me to escape many of the harms academia causes. For me as an individual white, middle-class woman whose parents both have graduate degrees, academia is a place of welcome. I have access to academia, and to the resources it offers those invited in.

So, when I think of relations in relation to my academic work, I know that I am often in a position to offer academia's resources to those I am in relation with, including those academia may not have invited in. People often characterize my work as community-based participatory research, but most of my collaborations are with organizations, and not necessarily community organizations in the sense of community-led grassroots organizations, but largely with institutionally sanctioned organizations. For me, doing community-based work involves working with organically developed groups of people who coalesce around shared characteristics —e.g., living in the same neighborhood—or issues—e.g., being downstream of point-source pollution. Of course, these groups might organize into some kind of official structure; a neighborhood coalition focused on environmental justice might file the paperwork to create a non-profit, for example. So, the presence of an official structure or organization does not necessarily mean that there isn't a community there, but the organizations I work with are typically composed of professionals brought together by their expertise or work experience, not by shared personal characteristics or interests. And these organizations often hold institutional power—even when they're chronically underfunded. One of my closest collaborators, the Kentucky Geological Survey, is literally mandated to exist by law, which is about as institutionally sanctioned as it gets in the contemporary U.S.

Not intentionally, but through layer upon layer of relation-building and decision-making, I have aligned my research and teaching with these institutionally well-established organizations. That alignment is not necessarily a bad thing. There are benefits to having someone who has been taught to think about community and relations involved with these organizations; my role can become one of relationship-building between organizations and communities. In other words, when we think about the complex issues people face, the stakeholders frequently include

official organizations such as my collaborators: the Kentucky State Division for Air Quality or the UK Recycling office, for example. These organizations have a service mission—and because of my personal research interests, I gravitate towards environmentally focused missions. But rather than beginning by working with a community or community group impacted by those organizations, I've found myself working with the organizations and then helping those organizations work with stakeholders outside, who may or may not self-identify as belonging to various communities.

But, through my engagement with my co-authors here, and the larger conversation we're pulling together about access, I have been thinking of late about how to articulate my role in these collaborations as an access point, whether that's to a community I've been asked to help scientists connect with, or perhaps to the resources of academia I'd like to put in the hands of under-resourced non-academics. More and more, I find myself telling my academic colleagues to *not* just go into communities, to *not* ask for non-academics' unpaid time, and to *not* assume that our research has value to the communities around us. Instead, I say, let us *ask* people in the communities where we want to do research what they need and want, and let us *pay* them—in funds or other reciprocal relations—for their time and expertise and goodwill. It has taken the layering of time and experience to be able to understand myself this way.

This understanding began for me in graduate school with courses on participatory action research and feminist research methods. But it is only in the building of relationships with official organizations trying to serve communities, and me trying to figure out my role and obligations in that process, that I have come to see how important access—granted or denied or negotiated—is to being in relation with people outside the academy. Ultimately, to even be in relation, I choose to give access to myself, and I ask for access to those with whom I am in

relation. Being honest about the vulnerability that exchange demands allows me to take care with any responsibility for access I am given.

Whether or not I want the role, academia has made me a gatekeeper to its resources. I'm still working through what that means and all the ethical dimensions of it. But it's important to note that I haven't been made gatekeeper because I am somehow uniquely positioned to know best what others need. Rather, it's just because I happened to get this job as a tenure-track faculty member in rhetoric at an R1 university in the U.S. So, it's up to me to figure out how to take this imposed responsibility—gatekeeping the academy's resources—and manage it ethically in conversation with those I'm hoping to collaborate with on gaining them access to those resources.

My impulse when talking about good relations is to focus on how to have good relations with whomever you've already decided to work with. But as I foreground access in the relationships I build as an academic, I am taking a step back to ask a preceding question, with *whom* I want to have good relations. The relations we cultivate cultivate us in turn. I can open myself to that which will cultivate me well, and I can choose what and who that is. And I cannot cultivate good relations with others simply to produce something just for me or because I think I can cultivate *them*. I am the soil. I tend to the soil. I am not in control but what I do still matters.

Co-creating stories of *confianza*

Rachel Bloom-Pojar

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As I reflect on my community-engaged work from the past eleven years, I know that any successful partnerships I've had have been because my collaborators and I took the time to get to

know each other as people and build *confianza* (“*trust/confidence*”) together. As someone who works with Latinx communities but is not Latina, I am aware of how fragile that *confianza* can be, and I do my best to keep building on it by showing up and being mindful of how my actions are read in relation to the harm and objectification they may have experienced from other white academics. Researchers, especially white researchers, often aim to keep their personal lives and identities separate from the work they do. But when your work entails hearing stories about other people’s lives, bodies, and relations, then you need to account for who you are in the emerging relationship and what you will do with access to the stories that anyone may share with you.

My commitments to community and orientation as a researcher today have been shaped by my relationships with a group of *promotores de salud* (“*health promoters*”) at Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin (PPWI) and the director of their program, Maria Barker. Maria and I first connected in 2017 when I first moved to Milwaukee. We met once in fall 2017 to get to know each other and discuss the program, reconnected in winter 2018 at a retreat on Cultural Humility, and started regularly meeting and working together in 2019. Part of that work included co-designing an ethnographic project about reproductive justice, the *promotores*, and health communication. I met many of the *promotores* at four focus groups I held in October 2019. Those focus groups and my larger ethnographic project were designed with Maria’s input about what she also hoped to learn from the research and how it might lead to practical findings that would highlight and support the work of the *promotores*. When I met many of the *promotores* during the focus groups, they trusted me to a certain extent because Maria trusted me, but many were also skeptical of what I would do with the things they shared, and they told me that they often didn’t hear about what happened with the research they participated in. It would take a lot longer to build *confianza* beyond this initial interaction. Around that same time, I applied for a

fellowship that would allow me to be in residence with the program for the following academic year. The need for this time became increasingly clear as my normal responsibilities at the university severely delayed my ability to work with the focus group transcripts or follow up with the promotores. I hated how this might reinforce the idea that I might be just like those other academics that they met with and never hear from again. Thankfully, I did receive that fellowship and our weekly interactions the following year helped alter the course of my research and our relationships as we got to know each other.

It's important to note that these promotores and my work with them have connections to community-based sex education and reproductive justice (SisterSong; Bloom-Pojar and Barker). So, when I write about *confianza*, I'm drawing from knowledge informed by the promotores and their experiences creating it within their communities. While the promotores create *confianza* to talk about lots of different health and community issues, the heart of their work includes the ability to create *confianza* and safe spaces for community members to talk about sexual and reproductive health. When individuals enter into *confianza* with the promotores, they often feel comfortable enough to start talking about culturally taboo topics like birth control, abortion, and sexuality, and many of them open up about experiences with unhealthy relationships, abuse, and/or wishing they better understood sex or personal bodily autonomy at a younger age.

I began my remote work with the promotores amid the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. At this time, I was also navigating new aspects of my identity and reproductive health as a new mother. In May 2020, I delivered my first child and began parenthood amid the chaotic and uncertain start of a pandemic. Three months later, my father suddenly died. Three weeks after that, I began my fellowship work with PPWI. I had never had so many highs and lows happen within such a short period of time. I leaned into things that helped me feel connected and

rooted to other people even when we couldn't be together in person. I experienced a chaotic merging of my personal and professional life as remote work, daycare shutdowns, quarantine periods, and more made any sustained separation of those things impossible. It was a lot, but this did help me share more of myself with the promotores than I might have previously. They didn't just get to know me as a white researcher attending their meetings. They got to know me as a mother who attended meetings on the floor of her son's room while playing with him, rocking him to sleep, and periodically turning off her camera to breastfeed him. They got to know me as I contributed to conversations, shared resources, and met with small groups of them for different projects. And I got to know them as they shared about their work, struggles, and communities along the way. They taught me that it was good to bring my full self to our work together as any separation would have further distanced us and negatively impacted how I might learn from them about parenting, reproductive justice, and making research meaningful.

One day while discussing how academics can make higher education more accessible, Maria asked whether I could do a writing class for the promotores someday. I was interested but unsure how it might work in relation to my other teaching responsibilities. And while I did teach writing, I had not ever taught it in Spanish. The idea was general at the time: provide access to something many of them might not have had access to before and do it in a way that fits within their schedule and interests. We spent months talking through options for this class as something that could help the promotores write their own stories. We regularly mentioned the idea to the group of promotores to get a sense of interest and invite feedback. I also drew from what I had learned from the promotores in my research thus far to develop a course design that might resonate with their experiences and interests.

So, during the fall 2021 semester, I facilitated a community writing class in Spanish with a small group of promotores via Zoom. The course design was informed by reproductive justice pedagogy (Ross), community literacy studies (Alvarez; Pritchard), and key concepts about *confianza* from my research with them. While the class began as a weekly group meeting, we ended up shifting to one-on-one meetings for the second half of the semester since that was what the students preferred. This preference was in part because of their busy schedules but also because of the sensitive things they were working through in their stories. They all had a clear sense of who they wanted to write for and what impact they wanted to have, but many of them had not shared certain parts of their stories with others before then. As we began to enter into *confianza* with each other, the promotores opened up about deep and difficult topics with their own experiences with relationships, immigration, and reproductive justice. I mostly served as someone to listen, support, and give recommendations for getting their story written down in a way that was guided by their own goals for it. The class began with ten students and ended with six. Those six writers continued working with me on their stories after the class ended to prepare them for a website and public humanities project we were co-creating called *Cuentos de Confianza*.

The initial idea for *Cuentos* began the spring before the class began as Maria and I discussed ideas for helping the promotores share their stories with others beyond the class. One of my PhD students, Danielle Koepke, was interning with me at the time to help with conceptualizing some sort of public programming with my research as part of the fellowship I had received. At that point, my research goals and plans for this community writing class began to blend. Danielle and I discussed a variety of ideas for providing an opportunity to publicly share stories, but every step of the way we kept coming back to: what do the promotores want

and how can we create something that meets their goals? We went into the fall semester sharing the idea for the website as an option for the writers in the class, but also with the recognition that it might not come to fruition if none of them wanted to contribute to it. And as I said many times, we had to be okay with that. What we learned was that the six *promotores* who completed the class *did* want to share stories with members of their families, their communities, and other audiences for them to better understand what it is that they do as *promotores* and to inspire others. We navigated uncertainty about who the project “belonged” to—My university? PPWI? The writers, themselves?—but ultimately did our best to keep insisting that it be something in the middle—a collaboration of sorts that kept the interests of the writers at the heart of it and that didn’t let university or organizational interests take control of decision making and design. Through conversations with the writers in the class, and with the help of an undergraduate student, Juan Arevalo, we developed a bilingual—Spanish-English—website that would host stories written by *promotores de salud* about their work and experiences with reproductive justice (see <https://www.cuentosdeconfianza.com>). We launched the site at a community event that focused on our primary audience from the start: the *promotores*’ family, friends, and supporters. We held the event at a high school on the south side of Milwaukee in June 2022, and over 70 people came to eat, connect, and learn about the project.

While this all sounds very neat and successful, the process was anything but. Many weeks were filled with stress and uncertainty for me as I took on my new role of coordinating this community writing project we had dreamed up. I constantly checked in with the writers to be sure I was supporting them in the ways they needed and that we were developing the website in a way that reflected their interests and goals. And even at the website launch when it felt like all our hard work had resulted in a beautiful product, I realized that it was just the beginning of

something more. We would need to develop educational materials to help introduce people to the project and encourage certain kinds of engagement with the stories, we would want to get community feedback on how they were receiving the stories, and we would need to add resources as specific issues that came up in the stories—like domestic violence and pregnancy loss—might resonate with readers who could use extra support with those issues. As this project keeps evolving, so does my orientation to the “work” that I’m doing. I don’t always know how to delineate what it is that’s my community-engaged *research* versus *teaching* versus *something else* these days...but what I do know is that it feels meaningful and driven by good relations.

From access to refusal: Remaking university-community collaboration

Caroline Gottschalk Druschke

University of Wisconsin-Madison

On a recent morning, I joined a very small meeting. Three professors, myself included. Three members of a newly formed watershed council. And two representatives from a small nonprofit, middle-women who had worked to connect the two groups. It had taken the better part of two years to even get to that point. Potential attendees had been screened out to keep things as intimate as possible. Our agenda was focused on testing the waters: feeling each other out to decide whether or not this group of faculty based in Wisconsin’s state capital might have something to offer the efforts of this growing watershed council in the rural southwestern portion of the state. The council members introduced themselves and their goals. Our faculty trio introduced ourselves, our methodologies, our community connections. I explained that I had collaborated in the past with watershed councils in Iowa and Rhode Island, had recently returned home to the Midwest, and had found comfort not so much in Madison, but in the creeks and communities I’d connected with across southwest Wisconsin through time spent researching and

teaching about accelerating flooding in local waters. The council members listened intently. And then one of my faculty colleagues interjected with a final comment: “Oh wait. We should also mention. We’re not trying to publish out of this. We’re not thinking about it as research. We just want to see if we can support your work.” The mood in the room shifted almost immediately. The members of the watershed council registered surprise and relief.

For good reason.

Since its founding in 1848, in part as a promotional strategy to attract white settlers—like me—to the newly established state of Wisconsin, the University of Wisconsin-Madison—my home institution—has built its ethos around academic intervention in the lives of community members around the state. In a 1905 speech, University President Charles Van Hise introduced what has come to be known and celebrated as “The Wisconsin Idea,” describing the university as existing, “for the service of the state,” so that, “the knowledge and wisdom of the generations, as well as the achievements of today, may reach all parts of the state.” Van Hise concluded his speech with the oft-repeated sentiment, “I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the University reaches every family of the state.” That sentiment sits at the center of our institution, guiding extension initiatives, offered in marketing and recruitment materials, considered in reviews for promotion, named professorships, and fellowships.

Much less repeated is the fact of Van Hise’s long-standing advocacy for eugenics, and its deep connection with his advocacy for the Wisconsin Idea. This problematic history is foundational to my focus here: the university’s largely unquestioned belief in its intervention in non-university lives and lands as inherent good. Whether grounded in beneficent public service, which it unquestionably takes in many forms, or in leveraging university “experts” for policies

like involuntary “sterilization of defectives,” encoded in state law from 1913 to 1963 is thanks in part to Van Hise’s efforts, purportedly to support the “public good” (Vecoli, Dept. of Genetics).

The university was quite literally founded on a demand for access: access to Ho-Chunk lands in the area long known as Teejop that begrudgingly host our campus; access to over 235,000 acres of Menominee and Ojibwe homelands across a huge swath of the northern half of the land now known as Wisconsin converted into university revenue through the Morrill Act of 1862; access to study subjects across the state and now world; access to intellectual property; access to graduate student labor; access to student athletes’ bodies. The list goes on.

My point here is not a particular indictment of UW-Madison, at least not more than any other university; UW isn’t exceptional in this regard. The entire U.S. land grant university system is founded on and with stolen Native land (la paperson; Lee and Ahtone). From the 272 enslaved individuals sold by the Jesuits in 1838 to fund Georgetown University (Swarns), to Cornell University’s speculation in Wisconsin tribal lands that netted the university a \$5 million endowment (Gates), to Stanford University’s 1971 prison experiment (Reicher et al.), to Arizona State University’s 1990 Havasupai DNA study (Shaffer), to Harvard University obtaining private therapy records of a sexual abuse plaintiff and disclosing those records to the defendant, a story that made the news just as I began drafting this essay (Flaherty). Universities depend on access, for their infrastructure and intellect. And my point here is that these examples of abuses related to access and knowledge production aren’t a perversion of the academic enterprise; they are a central imperative.

As I began my academic career as a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Chicago [UIC], I was attracted to community-based learning precisely because, in what I

consider its best version, it resists this extractive impulse and works, instead, to support community-led initiatives by facilitating access to university resources. Because community-based work often doesn't fit neatly into the consumptive machinery of academia—it's slow and inefficient, often prioritizing process over product, or creating a product that's not well-valued within university structures—I often found myself at UIC and then as a faculty member at the University of Rhode Island as a liaison and advocate for community needs. In the watershed work I mentioned at the outset, for instance, we have invested hours, months, and now years getting to know each other and considering how we might work together for mutual benefit; two years in, this work still emphasizes process not product. In another example, my Rhode Island undergraduates worked with a Providence watershed council and elementary school to revise their riverine education modules and host an environmental education event on a local river. These activities generated local interest, and did important work to connect community members to their neglected rivers, but this isn't work that gets filed under "research" on a faculty CV. These efforts took a large amount of extra labor to convince university administrators and colleagues that this work was valuable and appropriate, something that should be taught, funded, and supported even if it sat outside of academia's consumptive logics. Without ignoring longstanding and important critiques of some forms of service learning as forced, paternalistic, or uncritical (reviewed in Mitchell, 2008), community-driven collaboration, when done well—a "well" that must be determined by community partners (Cruz and Bakken) and must incorporate an explicit critical focus on justice (Gordon da Cruz)—has worked to exist outside the consumptive structures I critiqued above.

But as community engagement is brought more properly into the center of the academic enterprise—e.g. increasing emphases on knowledge co-production and citizen science in

scientific RFPs; university interest in public humanities initiatives; field components in courses across disciplines—I want to suggest that this current attention—an interest that borders on fetishization—has huge potential for harm. And I want to argue that university faculty like me committed to community-university collaboration need to use our relative institutional power to continue to allow for access—funneling university resources towards community-driven efforts—but also taking definitive steps to support refusal, which I understand from Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, through Audra Simpson, as “not just as a ‘no,’ but as a type of investigation into ‘what you need to know and what I refuse to write in’ (Simpson 72).” This refusal is two-fold: refusal on the part of non-academic communities to “write in” “what you need to know,” but also *my own refusal as an academic researcher*, what Tuck and Yang present as “a refusal to do research, or a refusal within research, as a way of thinking about humanizing researchers” (223).

I have felt a seismic shift in my role in recent years from access to refusal. Much of my time at UW-Madison has been spent working in collaboration with non-university partners on a community-driven oral history project—Stories from the Flood—focused on supporting community healing from increasingly frequent and severe flooding in southwestern Wisconsin with an eye towards moving forward in an increasingly flood-filled future (“Stories from the Flood”). My role in that work has no doubt centered my ability to access resources for the project: securing roughly \$50,000 in grant funding for the project from inside and outside the university, communicating with the press and funding agencies, nominating my community partner for monetary awards, designing and teaching community-based learning courses to support the project, accessing university software to create public-facing materials, leveraging departmental and college funds to pay students to support project StoryMaps and findings reports, using university vehicles to transport story gatherers, paying for meals and tour buses,

storing project materials on university servers, leading student fellowships and independent studies to support the project. But just as much, that work has been about protecting—and sometimes failing to protect—community storytellers, project organizers, and the project itself from extraction at community members' request: resisting an impulse towards data collection, refusing requests for access to flood-affected community members, and stepping outside of the research-making enterprise (“Cultivating Empathy on the Eve of a Pandemic”). All the while, we are trying to balance access and refusal to co-create a path forward acutely attentive to the potential harms of community research (Tuhiwai Smith; Tuck and Yang).

To come back to the vignette that opened this short essay, I don't know where that watershed conversation will go, and that's part of what matters about it. We've promised to meet again when a colleague and I make the five-hour round trip to attend one of the watershed council's meetings early next month. And we'll take it from there. This is slow, deliberate work that defies university timelines and logics. It's work that focuses on relation, not production. Our trio of faculty are committed to doing that because of our shared orientations and commitments. But we also have the luxury of undertaking this work given the protections of our various positions: we're white settler academics, two of us full professors, one emeritus. It's not that we have less work to do otherwise: two of us run research centers on campus, we teach, we advise, we research, we parent. But we can push on academic expectations with much less risk. And we must.

For me, that means getting myself in front of department chairs, center directors, deans, program officers, and fellow faculty to champion these ideas about access, harm, equity, and refusal. Contributing to a revision of our departmental tenure guidelines that more accurately captures and celebrates engagement work. Supporting, guiding, and learning from the work of

junior scholars through manuscript and grant reviews, lecture invitations, tenure and promotion letters, conference panels, and award nominations. Regularly serving on federal grant review panels so that I can express what I know will be an unpopular opinion. Offering to run defense for community partners who are burned out on university contact. Writing job descriptions that reflect these orientations. Working to stay up to date on always unfolding best practices in ethical community engagement. And pushing myself into discomfort (Gottschalk Druschke): initiating uncomfortable boundary setting conversations with partners, students, and colleagues; tolerating continued—and warranted—hazing about my connection to the university; making regular five-hour round trips for in-person meetings after long days of work; existing through chronic outsider-ness; advocating for this work with higher ups; and so on. Moments like these offer powerful opportunities for remaking university-community collaboration in ways that support good relations—relations that support community-driven efforts, relations that refuse the expectations of the university, relations that nourish those involved—and make space inside of and despite exploitative university structures for collaboration and refusal.

Remembering forward

To conclude, we forgo the typical synthesis and reiteration of what all we said in each of our pieces in order to bring this work back to you—members of our CLJ community. We, academics in community with each other based on shared interests in community and literacy, *must* talk about issues of access and justice among ourselves. Having these conversations here, with each other, decreases the burdens we place on community partners by asking them to tell us how they want to be accessed, or not, or assuming that all's well if we haven't heard otherwise.

By way of example: while we were revising this very article, one of us—Cagle—was asked by a colleague at her institution to consult on a project working with victims of a very

recent flood. Because of Caroline's work with community members who had experienced catastrophic flooding, Cagle was able to talk through with her how to best support this colleague, which may end up meaning advising the colleague *not* to proceed with the project. We talked about some potential complications. Have flood-affected community members invited this colleague in to support their recovery? Are the flood and the trauma it continues to create too fresh for academics to start asking communities questions about it? Does the colleague have training in mental health and trauma response, and do they plan to collaborate with someone who does? Are there measures in place to make sure this colleague remains connected to flood-affected communities long-term, even after their students move on to new classes and interests? This moment is precisely why we need this conversation within our CLJ community, and why we offer you our four distinct stories within a single article. It is not despite, but because the four of us—and any number of readers—occupy different personal and institutional positions, that we can offer each other support as we navigate specific projects and requests for access.

We close by encouraging you, our colleagues, to remember forward, that is, to consider what encountering these learning experiences has brought up for you and to apply it to future contexts purposefully. After all, we are in the midst of doing that same work. To assist you with remembering forward, we return to the open-ended questions that prompted our reflections about access. We hope these questions can help guide you in thinking deeply about how you community, how you want to community, how you protect your communities, and how that affects your professional practice.

- How can we, both we specifically and academics in general, make use of the Cultural Rhetorics pillars of story, relationality, constellation, and decolonization to foster good relations in our shared work?

- How can we co-create new stories about what it means to do this work in community?
- What risks associated with research and co-production of knowledge might marginalized members incur via providing access for outsiders to their communities?
- What harm might we—and *do* we—cause in our community-based work?
- How might community building with languages other than English help us deepen our understanding of good relations?
- How can we work against the impulse—and often the expectation—to “research”?

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