

Fall 2019

Reciprocity in Community-Engaged Food and Environmental Justice Scholarship

Dawn S. Opel
Michigan State University, opeldawn@msu.edu

Donnie Johnson Sackey
University of Texas at Austin, donnie.sackey@austin.utexas.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Opel, Dawn S., and Donnie Sackey. "Reciprocity in Community-Engaged Food and Environmental Justice Scholarship." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1. 2019, pp. 1-6. doi:10.25148/clj.14.1.009052.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Guest Editors' Introduction

Reciprocity in Community-Engaged Food and Environmental Justice Scholarship

Dawn S. Opel and Donnie Johnson Sackey

Reciprocity as a Guiding Principle for Community-Engaged Research

For more than two decades, scholars in rhetoric, composition, and community literacy studies have consistently argued that reciprocity is key to successful and equitable university-community partnerships (e.g., Cushman; Cushman and Monberg; Grabill; Simmons and Grabill; Takayoshi and Powell; Remley). Their scholarship asks us to establish networks of reciprocity via a self-reflexive rhetoric that includes:

- 1) a reconsideration of how we define and categorize oppression before we enter communities;
- 2) a recognition of how we gain access to the lives of people outside universities;
- 3) a commitment to reciprocity, which necessitates the involvement of community partners in the interpretation of data and in how we tell stories that are not our own; and
- 4) an emphasis on scholarly activism, or commitment to effectuating change.

This special issue seeks to expand the conversation of what reciprocity is or could be, and what it looks and feels like, from the perspective of both researchers and community members.

On Food and Environmental Justice Research, Advocacy and Activism

Environmental and food justice research documents and addresses the dimensions of social inequality across ethnicity, gender, age, class, and national origin. This research has primarily focused on food security, resource depletion, the siting of toxic industries, and climate change as they affect poor and working-class communities, especially communities of color, which often bear the disparate impacts of social inequality. Universities have engaged in partnerships with communities to address this inequality with varying approaches and degrees of impact. Across the disciplines, academics have traditionally defined approaches to issues of equity through the lens of procedural justice (Schlosberg 4). For example, zoning decisions for noxious industries or even policies to combat food insecurity are made by predominantly privileged white officials who are unlikely to bear the negative impacts of their decision-making (Maantay 1038). A corrective has been to make stakeholders an integral part of the planning process, a critical component of the design of reciprocal university-com-

munity partnerships. Nevertheless, increasing community participation is easier said than done. Lack of technical expertise, time constraints, and divergent commitments make meaningful participation difficult to achieve. There are a variety of variables upon which successful partnerships rely. In this moment, we focus on reciprocity as a concept that requires deep consideration in order to address social inequality meaningfully. What notions of reciprocity guide “successful” partnerships around food and environmental justice? What can community organizations teach us about how we as researchers engage with them to address food and environmental justice issues?

This special issue builds upon conversations initiated at the 2017 Conference on Community Writing’s Food and Environmental Justice Deep Think Tank (DTT). That meeting used reciprocity as an organizing principle to facilitate discussion that could allow participants to better understand the various relationships that comprise community-engaged projects (e.g., academic institutions, community-based organizations, non-human agents) and the material contexts in which these relationships exist. Ultimately, the goal of the dialogue was to orient those new to food and environmental justice to an array of environmental justice and food justice community-engaged research projects that offered different models of reciprocity. The concerns of the DTT vis-à-vis reciprocity match our efforts with respect to designing this special issue. For example, what is the nature of academic research and how does it contribute to the overall mission of work happening in non-profit organizations? Even seemingly progressive models of reciprocity emerge from a western rationalist foundation that still privileges academic notions of justice and balance that might be inconsistent with community beliefs and needs (see Vermeulen). Our questioning of reciprocity implores that we revise or even abandon accepted notions of partnership and participation in community-engaged scholarship. This might also mean focusing upon not only how reciprocity happens but also what kind of research benefits community organizations. Sometimes this entails reconsidering our definitions of responsibility. For example, whose responsibility is it to “translate” or code switch, or learn a new language? Whose responsibility is it to initiate the research process and design research questions? Who is responsible for the uptake of research into action communities and with broader audiences? There is much to consider. We hope the space of this special issue can expand our understanding of what it means to be reciprocal in our relationships with academic and larger publics.

In This Issue

The contributions to this issue employ disparate disciplinary and/or methodological approaches to their food and environmental justice research and advocacy, but all are value-driven by a commitment to reciprocity in their actions. From theoretical to qualitative to mixed methods research, across rhetoric, writing studies, technical communication, and public health, all ask of us to slow down, develop meaningful relationships, build trust, and think about broader impacts than scholarly publishing. These ideas are woven into the work, suggesting that community-engaged researchers

may have more in common with one another than those who share a disciplinary or methodological orientation. Reciprocity, then, is the tie that binds.

The first two articles in the issue challenge us to understand traditional notions of reciprocity as operating through a colonial ontology. In “Research Justice as Reciprocity: Homegrown Research Methodologies,” Jennifer L. Bay points to the complicated and situational nature of reciprocity, which is not easily measurable when considering the material needs of community partners and research participants. Her corrective is a notion of research justice, “homegrown” participatory methods, which compels researchers to reassess our not only our methods of research, but also the desired outcomes of our research. Pointedly, she asks us to be attentive to the ways in which even traditional community-based research methods still operate within a colonial matrix of domination that can still exploit marginalized populations. In her own words, Bay writes that “Research justice works to empower communities to conduct their own research, ask their own questions, and to see their own spiritual, communal, cultural, and lived experiences as forms of expertise.” In “Nutrition, Health, and Wellness at *La Escuelita*: A Community-Driven Effort Toward Food and Environmental Justice,” Victor Del Hierro, Valente Francisco Saenz, Laura Gonzales, Lucía Durá, and Williams Medina-Jerez introduce us to *La Escuelita*, an after-school health literacy education program in El Paso, Texas. The authors shift our attention toward indigenous spatiality, which allows researchers to better understand the nuances of community partners’ everyday realities. Thinking through spatiality gives us an opportunity “to define our community partners through structural and material constraints that guide where and how they live . . . [and] illustrate the multiple dimensions through which [they] engage with issues of environmental justice in their everyday lives.” The article presents a variety of participatory methods that illustrate how *La Escuelita* works with community partners to unpack and ascertain the situational contexts that define their individual and shared lifeworlds. Here we believe this article presents an important lesson: We cannot continue university-community engaged food and environmental justice research if we are unable to adopt critical, reflexive positions that allow us to understand how, why, and where community understandings of health, literacy, and injustice differ from our own.

In “Interventional Systems Ethnography and Intersecting Injustices: A New Approach for Fostering Reciprocal Community Engagement,” Danielle DeVasto, S. Scott Graham, Daniel Card, and Molly Kessler look beyond participatory action research (PAR) to a new community-engaged framework, Systems Ethnography/Qualitative Modeling (SEQM), designed to “support reciprocity through enabling participant-centered community self-definition, goal setting, and solution identification.” SEQM is a blend of ethnography, interviewing, and qualitative modeling. The goal with SEQM is not to participate together, as in PAR, but, as they argue, “As rhetoricians of science and technical communication scholars, we see our role as a form of facilitation; our aim is to help create systems that support community self-determination.” DeVasto et al. offer a position for the researcher that is a performative one—engaged in the staging of conversations designed for communities to take action on their own.

Our two snapshots are reports of ongoing work that offer deep commitments to reciprocity in their unique research and programmatic efforts. In “School Vegetable Gardens as a Site for Reciprocity in Food Systems Research: An Example from Cape Town, South Africa,” Jo Hunter-Adams discusses gardening as a form of reciprocal participatory action research that is slow and process-oriented. Whereas traditional approaches to research often center on evidence-based, researcher-driven outcomes, the unpredictable nature of gardening turns our attention toward issues of scalability in solving food insecurity and injustice. As, Hunter-Adams emphasizes, perhaps slow, methodical movement, in which reciprocity is frame as an in-the-moment negotiation over time, provides a locally relevant framework for problem-solving. In “Pathways to Partnerships: Building Sustainable Relationships through University-Supported Internships,” Lara Smith-Sitton reports on the development of an internship program that was co-created to sustain a long-term partnership between the national nonprofit organization Food Security for America and Kennesaw State University. The program was slowly and incrementally developed with reciprocity in mind, as she writes, “By starting small with internships, the infrastructure for a partnership was created, and this solid foundation has allowed for future growth into larger community engagement initiatives.” Her insights provide useful advice for program administrators who are interested in building and maintaining community-engaged food security projects but do not wish to repeat the “checkered history” of problematic town and gown relationships (Flower).

We close with a conversation between Shane Bernardo and Terese Guinsatao Monberg. Their contribution serves as an apt ending to this special issue, one we hope can serve as a catalyst for helping scholars in rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies reconsider their understanding of reciprocity in current and future projects. Pointedly, Bernardo and Monberg ask us to situate reciprocity within a decolonial context (in their case, an indigenous Filipinx context) in order to better ascertain the temporal constraints of reciprocity. They offer the indigenous Filipinx notion of *kapwa*, which centers on building trust over a period of time and extending that behavior beyond the traditional limits of research. Therefore, we must dwell upon not only “When does a research project begin and end?” but also “Why do we choose to make these temporal distinctions and what impact they have on outcomes and our relationships with community partners?”. Similar to Hunter-Adams’ snapshot, they turn our attention toward an approach to community-based research that is slow and methodical by emphasizing that “[e]nacting reciprocity asks us to slow down in time and do the work repeatedly over long durations of time. To see ourselves as reciprocal beings means we see ourselves not as separate from and working with community members; we see ourselves instead as community members invested in making structural asymmetries legible and open to deep revision.”

Finally, we are thankful to our peer reviewers Ellen Cushman, Steven Alvarez, Sean McCarthy, Stephen Parks, Jessica Pauszek, and Michele Simmons, who offered their time and careful consideration of each manuscript. We deeply appreciate your contributions that make this special issue of the *Community Literacy Journal* come to life.

Works Cited

- Cushman, Ellen. "Response to 'Accepting the Roles Created for Us: The Ethics of Reciprocity.'" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2004, pp. 150-156.
- Cushman, Ellen, and Terese Guinsatao Monberg. "Building Bridges: Reflexivity and Composition Research." *Under Construction: Composition Research, Theory, and Practice*, edited by Chris Anson and Christine Farris, Utah State UP, 1998, pp. 166-80.
- Flower, Linda. "Partners in Inquiry: A Logic for Community Outreach." *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-learning in Composition*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters, NCTE, 1997, pp. 95-118.
- Grabill, Jeffrey T. "Shaping Local HIV/AIDS Services Policy Through Activist Research: The Problem of Client Involvement." *Technical Communication Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2000, pp. 29-50.
- Maantay, Julianna. "Zoning, Equity, and Public Health." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 91, no. 7, 2001, pp. 1033-41.
- Remley, Dirk. "Re-considering the Range of Reciprocity in Community-Based Research and Service Learning: You Don't Have to be an Activist to Give Back." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2011-2012, pp. 115-132.
- Schlosberg, David. *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- Simmons, W. Michele, and Jeffrey T. Grabill. "Toward a Civic Rhetoric for Technologically and Scientifically Complex Places: Invention, Performance, and Participation." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2007, pp. 419-448.
- Takayoshi, Pamela, and Katrina Powell. "Accepting the Roles Created for Us: The Ethics of Reciprocity." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2003, pp. 394-422.
- Vermeylen, Saskia. "Special Issue: Environmental Justice and Epistemic Violence." *The International Journal of Justice & Sustainability*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2019, pp. 89-93.

Author Bios

Dawn S. Opel is Assistant Professor of Digital Media and User Experience at Michigan State University. In 2019, Opel served as research policy fellow at the University of Michigan Center for Health and Research Transformation. Opel's research focuses on the design of communication in nonprofit and clinical settings; specifically, improving care coordination for patients across clinical and community contexts. A participatory action researcher, she partners with Michigan-based healthcare and legal clinics, social services and community organizations. Her research is funded by the Michigan Health Endowment Fund and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Community Living.

Donnie Johnson Sackey is an assistant professor of Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a senior researcher with Detroit Integrated Vision

for Environmental Research through Science and Engagement (D•VERSE). Previously, he served as an executive board member for the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition. His research centers on the dynamics of environmental public policy deliberation, environmental justice, and environmental community-based participatory research. Sackey's research has been previously funded by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and the Center for Urban Responses to Environmental Stressors.