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Nutrition, Health, and Wellness at La Escuelita: A Community-Driven Effort Toward Food and Environmental Justice

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Nutrition, Health, and Wellness at La Escuelita: A Community-Driven Effort Toward Food and Environmental Justice

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Abstract

This article introduces *La Escuelita*, an after-school health literacy program for youth and families that currently meets in a community center one mile from a port of entry into El Paso, Texas. Through weekly activities that include mediums like art, community-based mapping, and collaborative cooking, participants at *La Escuelita* interrogate notions of health, wellness, and nutrition and engage in discussions about food and environmental justice. Through their discussion of this community-based project, the authors argue that food and environmental justice efforts should center community-knowledge, asset-based frameworks, and reciprocal learning.

Introduction: Indigenous Spatiality and University-Community Partnerships

Figures 1, 2, and 3 are images of three canvases from collaborative paintings created by families at *La Escuelita*, an after-school health literacy program for youth—ranging from elementary to high school—and their caretakers that takes place in the borderland city of El Paso, Texas.



Figure 1. The Past. Photograph by Valente Pancho Saenz (December 2017)



Figure 2. The Present. Photograph by Valente Pancho Saenz (December 2017)



Figure 3. The Future. Photograph by Valente Pancho Saenz (December 2017)

Figure 1 illustrates how one of our community partners, given the pseudonym Maria, her son Jose, and another partner, Sofia portray their lives in the past. They depict a peaceful countryside with sunny and cloudy blue skies, humans enjoying the river, rural houses, a church, green spaces with trees, colorful flowers and animals. Figure 2, produced by Patricia, Lorena, and Job represents these partners' view of the present. They depict a gray-blue smoggy sky where the sun is not visible, an overpopulated city with brownish building complexes, no green spaces or animals are present, only their illustrations on the building complexes' murals. Lastly, Figure 3 illustrates how Sofia, Rosa, and Patricia perceive how they will live in the future, with darkness circulating an overpopulated earth.

As they painted, our partners reflected on how nature has been deteriorating because of industrialization, and they discussed how their lives have been affected by these changes. Maria, the oldest member of our group, asserted, "tradition has been lost and now there is a lot of contamination. Almost all [food] is canned, while before it was all natural. [We used to have] outdoor games and now, mostly technology. We experience a lot of evil, while before, we were united neighbors." Through collaborative deliberation in our University-community partnership program, these families utilized their three-canvas timeline to engage in dialogue about their perceptions of environmental degradation through time. At the same time, as they painted, the families built and sustained relationships with each other and with us as their research partners in this after-school program. Together, in this community, we both reflected on current environmental injustices and helped each other navigate and continue building our current and future circumstances.

It's important to note that our community partners depict dark illustrations of environmental realities in their paintings, but this does not mean that our community members see themselves and their own environment through deficit-based frameworks. Indeed, as research shows, environmental injustices and structural racism proliferate social and contextual factors for marginalized communities, particularly those of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx descent (Bates; Grineski and Juárez-Carrillo; McDonald and Grineski). Researchers such as Ernesto Castañeda, Kevin Beck, and Josué Lachica emphasize the need for studying and addressing critical issues like poverty, housing, and health in communities residing specifically on the Mexico/US border. At the same time, Indigenous studies researchers such as Natchee Blu Barnd present frameworks for (re)understanding the relationships between people, land, and communities through Indigenous perspectives that can inform current conceptions of space and land. Our goal through this article, then, is to answer calls for ongoing research related to environmental justice in marginalized communities through localized, asset-based frameworks (Durá) that honor Indigenous spatiality and seek nuance in understanding and representing the everyday realities of our research partners.

As Barnd explains, when we understand the relationships between people and lands through what he calls “Indigenous spatiality,” we are pushed to consider “indigenous meanings given to surroundings and the cultural lenses used in experiencing that relationship and the nonhuman world” (23). Moving away from settler notions of spatiality, which would only push us to define our community partners through structural and material constraints that guide where and how they live, the purpose of this article is to illustrate the multiple dimensions through which our community partners engage with issues of environmental justice in their everyday lives. Specifically, drawing on a seven-year study with public housing communities on the Mexico/US border, this article showcases how five families understand and experience relationships between land, community, and the environment through a participatory model that values local knowledges (Barnd; Ríos; Ríos and Sackey).

Background on La Escuelita

La Escuelita is an after-school health literacy program for youth and families that currently meets in a community center one mile from a port of entry into El Paso, Texas. The community center is in the Chamizal neighborhood, named after the national parks that sit on each side of the Mexico/US border, separated by the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande. This program grew out of an interdisciplinary research initiative in 2012 to develop, implement, and document integrated intervention programs that build health and educational equity and increase civic engagement and environmental stewardship within the El Paso community. The iteration of the program that we describe in this article consisted of five families, each made up of one mother or grandmother and two or three youth (ranging in age from pre-K to high school).

La Escuelita partnership is facilitated in collaboration with the Housing Authority of El Paso (HACEP). HACEP manages the region's government subsidized housing

program and serves more than fifteen thousand residents in El Paso. Because HACEP provides subsidized housing for all of our community partners, this organization frequently relocates residents based on new housing complex developments and changes in city infrastructure (i.e., gentrification). As a result, the physical location of *La Escuelita* has changed three times in our seven-year partnership. While new families have come in and out of the program throughout the seven years —with our program hosting anywhere from ten to twenty-five community partners each week— the five families that we introduce in this article have been coming consistently to *La Escuelita* over the course of four years, even as our physical location changes and as the family's homes are continuously relocated.

La Escuelita meets once a week, where we, along with our community partners, facilitate various activities that interrogate notions of health, wellness, and nutrition through mediums like art, community-based mapping, and collaborative cooking. As Steven Alvarez and Sara P. Alvarez explain, public spaces (e.g., libraries, community centers) outside of academic establishments “cultivate the literacy practices of its local communities,” allowing community members to engage and develop their linguistic practices without the pressures and stakes that they might feel within academic institutions (403; see also, Durá et al.).

All activities at *La Escuelita* take place in both Spanish and English, mirroring the linguistic diversity of our Mexican and Mexican-American community. Rather than starting each year with a specific theme or research agenda in mind, we as program facilitators begin each year by hosting an initial gathering and planning meeting with our partners, where we discuss what we collectively would like to learn during our weekly meetings. We also ask our partners what they can teach the group, asking them to lead activities on specific days based on their own individual interests and areas of expertise. For example, while we may facilitate sessions on collaborative painting, the mothers in our group may also facilitate sessions on traditional Mexican cooking. We also frequently invite local community members to facilitate sessions based on partners' interests. During the 2017-2018 school year, we welcomed community experts who taught yoga classes and who also facilitated workshops based on cooking with Indigenous Mexican herbs.

Defining and Researching Food and Environmental Justice in Our Community's Context

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Environmental Justice is defined as “The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (Bullard 4). Numerous scholars have examined cases of environmental injustices along the Mexico/US border (Grineski and Collins; Grineski et al; Collins et al. “Mapping Vulnerability”). Disparities in terms of wealth and employment on both sides of the border have been found to be the cause of marginalization and exposure to environmental injustices. That is the case for residents of the *Colonias*—semi-rural

unplanned subdivisions— in El Paso, Texas, who are subject to poor water and air quality. For example, studies have documented high concentrations of air pollutants at and around the international bridges between the US and Mexico (Olvera et al.). Populations living near the four ports of entry, such as our *Escuelita* partners, are subjected to increased automotive emissions due to cars, cargo vehicles, and semi-trucks sitting in line, idling to cross the border seven days a week. These emissions translate to a great array of health problems, including cancer risks (Collins et al. “Understanding Environment”).

Unfortunately, Environmental Education (EE) is not mandated in most U.S. schools and its exclusion imposes serious challenges in the implementation of human development programs, especially in communities exposed to environmental inequalities. Although we are not claiming to fill this gap through *La Escuelita* program alone, our hope is that this program opens up avenues for discussing and drawing awareness to environmental injustices in our community, while also providing an avenue for members of our program to share resources and build relationships that will positively impact the community’s health and wellness.

Methods

The methods that we employ at *La Escuelita* include cultural memory banking and storytelling, asset-based community mapping, and food pedagogy (Durá et al.). These methods are intended to foster reciprocity and grassroots ownership among all members of our community. We are influenced by notions of critical and reflective reciprocity (Cushman; Powell and Takayoshi), while following J. Estrella Torrez’s definition of reciprocity in community-based programs by engaging in the “reciprocal practice of storytelling,” where each partner, independent of age or role in the program, can “see themselves and each individual story as invaluable co-producers of cultural knowledge and community leaders” (91). This means that all *La Escuelita* participants guide the goals and objectives of the program and that each partner has a role in shaping the knowledge being shared and produced during our time together. We employ three specific approaches to redefine and distribute power in our community space: food, collaborative painting, and asset-based mapping. As we demonstrate in the sections below, these approaches allow us to draw on the expertise of all team members and our diverse cultural-rhetorical practices.

Food as Anchor of Everyday Experiences

Food serves as the foundational constant throughout *La Escuelita*’s history. We have found that food not only acts as a common language, but as Rick Flowers and Elaine Swan note in their work on food pedagogy, it enables learning. Drawing on multiple literacies, food allows us to bridge home and school knowledges as well as makes space for multilingual praxis. As Steven Alvarez illustrates through his work on Taco Literacy, through discussions of food, we can easily link to conversations on justice, health, and culture, which we did at *La Escuelita* through our discussion on corn and genetically-modified crops.

During our recent sessions, the families' focus on culture, health, and wellness has inspired interest in heritage-based foods used for health or medicinal purposes. One example of this was experimenting with adding chia, amaranth, and spirulina into *licuados* (smoothies), puddings, and *aguas frescas* (sweet, usually fruit-based beverages). To gain a better understanding of these foods and their histories, we brought in a guest speaker from the local community who explained how many of these food traditions had been displaced from our community's histories through colonial erasure and gentrification, resulting in a loss of consciousness towards Indigenous "superfoods." Thus, food has been and continues to be a grounding pedagogical strategy for conversations about health and environmental justice. We also don't know to what extent the participating families have come to depend on the once-a-week snacks we provide during our sessions, which is why we make it imperative to bring food despite activities like mapping or art being more central to our purpose on a given day.

Asset-Based Mapping

Asset-based inquiry frameworks often use mapping as an integral or first step in action research (See Barnd; Blythe et al; Grabill, *Community Literacy*; Mathie and Cunningham). Mapping serves as the basis for identifying problems, strengths, and mobilization strategies. Further, mapping allowed us to record tangible realities facing the families and take ownership of these experiences against the backdrop of geopolitical borders, colonization, and environmental racism. Mapping is a valuable resource that has been used consistently in the prediction and assessment of environmental equity (Maantay; Diehl et al.). Contemporarily, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have been mapping environmental hazards on certain populations. In correspondence with studies that use GIS, our mapping exercises included having our partners document their neighborhood and community through pictures, videos, and drawings, discuss and plot various landmarks and their relationship to the community (e.g., the mountains in El Paso and the "X," a popular landmark in Ciudad Juárez), and trace various food and health resources in the local area. These mapping activities allowed us to become aware of the spatial relationship between environmental burdens and health, as well as the consideration of other factors like zoning that determine the extent of exposure to pollution sources.

Collaborative Painting

In addition to food and asset-based mapping, we implemented an Arts-Based Research (ABR) approach using collaborative painting as a method of inquiry towards understanding representation, interpretation, and dissemination at *La Escuelita* (Barone and Eisner; Leavy; McNiff). Activities involving art have been consistently popular with our families because painting or crafting activities allowed the various age groups in our community to express themselves, relax and detach from their days, express their emotions, and work together.

Although we did not engage in systematic coding of the artifacts and activities that emerged from all *La Escuelita* sessions, in the sections that follow, we provide da-

ting these layers in conversation with each other, *La Escuelita* families defined and reimagined their community. Mapping also helped center our partners' experiences as we learned about spatial practice. It is worth noting that our partners situated Mexico at the top of our map, countering how maps are traditionally oriented, especially in the United States. This simple act prioritized the community partners' point of view while subtly illustrating how Chamizal families identify Mexico as an important point of reference for their present and future. The initial motivation for a mapping activity was to generate a working list of places where food was available in the Chamizal area and to generate possible board game pieces for the third session. While we did not end up making the full board game, the discussions of neighborhoods and collaborative mapping allowed our *La Escuelita* community to reflect on what they defined as their neighborhood and what they valued about it.

During the first session, Victor led a discussion by asking the families questions such as: What is a neighborhood? What do you like about your neighborhood? Where are the places that you go in your neighborhood? If there's something you could change about your neighborhood, what would it be? To facilitate the discussion, we passed out pens and post-it notes so *La Escuelita* attendees could write their answers as we asked questions.

Defining a Neighborhood

As we began our discussion, we first wanted to come up with a working definition of what constitutes a neighborhood. Since we know that many of our families travel and live in various capacities across both sides of the border, we ensured that any discussion about what constitutes a community or neighborhood allowed for flexibility that stretched across geopolitical borders.

The first step was to translate the word "neighborhood" into Spanish. While Victor is fluent in conversational Spanish, he often used translation as a way to position himself as learning from community members by asking them for better translations. As he asked the question, "What is a neighborhood?" he also translated and asked the question in Spanish and asked the group to come up with other translations for the term neighborhood, saying, "¿Qué es un barrio?" (What is a barrio?) And he followed up with, "¿O hay otra palabra para neighborhood?" (Or is there another word for neighborhood?). The youth in the group quickly offered "vecindad" as an alternative translation, and the discussion turned towards negotiating which word was more appropriate. The context for choosing the best word for the situation had to include the pretext that it was not only where the community members lived but also the places they visited in their daily lives across the landscape. Given these conditions, one of our middle school partners explained:

Gabi: *Pues vecindad es como aquí en Chamizal. Los apartamentos y todo lo que esta adentro como el sandbox y aquí en este salón. Y barrio también puede ser la misma cosa pero también incluye toda las casas y lugares cerca como las escuelas y el parque Chamizal.*

Author 1: ¿Y comunidad?

Gabi: *Pues, comunidad, si puede ser mas grande como usted dice.*

(**Gabi:** Well, vecindad is like here at Chamizal. The apartments and everything that is in here like the sandbox and this community center. And barrio could also be like the same thing and also include the house and places close to here like the schools and the Chamizal park.

Author 1: And community?

Gabi: Well, community, yeah it could be a bigger space like you're saying).

Gabi's train of thought and clarification helped us sort out what we were defining and helped Victor understand that he was actually interested in defining both neighborhood and community with the families present.

As we moved on to the next question, "What do you like about your neighborhood?" we started to learn more about the places the families frequented and how they interacted with the neighborhood. Many of the youth quickly volunteered the "sandbox," which was one of the few play areas in the public housing complex. The mothers in the group named other people and families who lived within Chamizal, and the youth supported this answer saying they liked living near their friends.

As we switched back and forth between talking about the neighborhood and community, other favorites emerged, like the Whataburger fast food restaurant across the street from the community center and the Chamizal National Park. This conversation eventually led to the recurring topic of displacement, as all the residents in the public housing community were being systematically moved out of the Chamizal area because this housing complex was set to be demolished by the end of the year. While the community members were upset about moving, what they were most worried about was moving away and being separated from their friends. Victor saw this as opportunity to highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships to their community. We established that neighborhood referred to a fixed location while community was the lived or embodied experience of our families. This distinction helped us realize that we could define community under the terms that best suited individual needs. As our community partners moved across borders and in-between neighborhoods nearby, many of those movements were defined and motivated by a relationship to both each other and to the surrounding land.

Landmarks, Wants, Needs, and Realities

The main question that helped generate the participatory map was to name landmarks in the area. Due to the high number of youth partners in our project, we had to spend time defining the notion of landmarks. Ultimately, we understood landmarks as places you would use to orient or help orient someone. The example of giving directions to a location based on landmarks helped start the discussion and we quickly were able to move on to naming the various landmarks that our *La Escuelita* partners identified as part of their neighborhood and community. Popular responses include "La X" or "La Equis," which is a giant red X that is located on the Mexican side of the border but is easily visible from most places in El Paso, the Bridge of the Ameri-

cas/Cordova International Bridge, known colloquially as El Puente Libre or the Free Bridge, “School” as a catch all for the various schools in the area, the Chamizal National Park, and the Whataburger fast food restaurant. All of these selections exemplified the traditional definition of a landmark and demonstrate how much of an impact living on the border has on this population.

When asked follow-up questions about where to buy food or groceries, there were not many options for either within the neighborhood, but within the community, going to Ciudad Juárez was just as common for families as was going to the Food City Supermarket located about a mile away from the housing project. Fast food restaurants like Whataburger and McDonalds were closer and more accessible than other fresh food locations.

Along with landmarks, we also asked our families to write down and map things they would change about their neighborhood. This led to a discussion of things they disliked and things they wish they had. At the top of the list was the “trash on the streets,” which youth described as akin to tumbleweeds blowing around, the various “broken windows” in the housing complex, and the “cholos doing drugs.” Almost all of the youth in our afterschool program attend elementary or middle schools that are walking distance to their homes. Many of the dislikes were observations they noted on their daily commute. These observations from middle school youth were made not from a place of shame or embarrassment but rather as something they wanted to change. The families liked their neighborhood and liked walking with their friends. With the same enthusiasm they showed for naming landmarks, youth emphatically called attention to the aspects of their neighborhood they wish would be addressed, exhibiting a sense of pride and expertise as representatives of their community.

Finally, in our discussion of things they wish their neighborhood had, we were able to see the wide range of imagining that our community partners exhibited. Expected answers from youth included more parks, a pool, and a unicorn, but youth also shared more practical wishes like accessible neighborhood-wide WiFi service. A borderlands’ consciousness was best represented during this question, as answers included a desire for stores like *S-Mart*, *Soriana*, *Hipermart*, *Coppel*, and *Farmacias Similares*. All of these are stores located in Ciudad Juárez, and our community partners wished they could have access to these less expensive and useful establishments without having to cross the border. Our participant’s comments also spoke to issues of access related to fresh produce and medicine, which are significantly more difficult to attain on the El Paso side of the border. It is important to note that there was not a desire for American grocery stores or pharmacies in their neighborhood, but that partners specifically named Mexican stores and pharmacies. When asked why, they simply said they were better, implying that these stores better catered to our partners’ needs and preferences. Mapping helped us see what our partners saw as available or accessible, while also helping us understand how they navigate their borderland community to access food and care.

Collaborative Painting through Art-Based Research

As Laurence Parker, Donna Deyhle, and Sofia Villenas explain, community-driven art provides opportunities to leverage the traditional benefits of making art while addressing social justice concerns in specific communities. Art activities are a staple of *La Escuelita* and have represented opportunities to engage in various forms of inquiry that are accessible to all our partners. In the 2017-2018 school year, Valente led our families in a collaborative painting project to explore and express their relationships to the environment through the lens of health and wellness. As a part of his dissertation work, Valente, with guidance from William, led our participants to collaboratively paint the three canvases depicted at the start of this article.

Families conceptualized the paintings together and then worked with Valente to transform their sketches and ideas into the final canvases. The decision to pursue collaborative painting was to implement an Arts-Based Research approach that uses the arts as a method of inquiry. Dialogue was nurtured and observed every step in the collaborative process. These steps included selecting the topic for the paintings, transforming initial ideas into drawings, transferring these drawings onto canvas to be painted, and finally completing the painting. Each step allowed the families, across various age groups, to engage in a dialogue about how their ideas reflected their understandings of health and wellness. This method provided program partners with multiple opportunities and mediums (See van Manen) to express ideas, thoughts, and feelings beyond traditional discourses.

Collaborative Imaginings of the Past, Present, and Future

As families contemplated the theme of their painting, the discussion consistently reflected an attention to the environment through time and temporality. This led to the collective decision to create three pieces of art that represented the past, present, and future, as depicted in Figures 1, 2, and 3. As we describe in the introduction, as the families shared their ideas for each painting, they moved chronologically, reflecting on the differences between each painting and how these paintings reflected their current realities.

The inspiration for the concept behind the painting depicting the future (Figure 3) came from our youngest partner, Sofia. She explained that she had a dream about the comet coming towards the Earth and that hundreds of people were screaming. Sofia's storytelling shaped the idea behind the depiction of the future the rest of the partners filled out the idea while making their connections to this future. Patricia, a teen-aged partner, built on this idea by sharing her perception of the future while explaining that, "all current problems will be added to those in the future, it will be up to us to try to solve them. I do not think we will find a practical solution."

Sofia's and Patricia's comments suggest that our partners at *La Escuelita* are mindful of the connection between the loss of biodiversity, overpopulation, and overall environmental degradation. Patricia is especially conscious of how these temporalities are connected and cumulative. The consistent presence of a church from the past to the present, as well as the differing depictions of life, demonstrates an understand-

ing of the impact of people and cultures on the environment as well. Finally, the disappearance of the river and presence of a fence nods to the ongoing political climate and its impact on their community.

The Impact of Art on Health and Wellness

The process of collaborative art making opened up space for our partners to reflect and dialogue as they worked. In discussing their process of creating art, our partners shared the following reflections:

Maria: Today, it was my turn to paint. I was tired, but I came to paint, I painted and relaxed. Today [was very stressful at work], but I had a commitment with my class. And I went to [*La Escuelita*]. I gave myself the patience that I needed to draw the small details. I entered a world of relaxation and meditation; the stress and fatigue are gone. When I see the progress of the drawing (painting), I am enjoying it every day more. I never lived in a place like this, but if I had lived, I would have been happier than I was. I'm imagining how beautiful it would have been...

Rosa: I felt motivated because I thought there was more to do in certain spaces of the panel [canvas]. I felt relaxed during painting/drawing.

Patricia: When I was painting, I felt happy and without stress. I let myself go. I felt free to express what I could. Today I did not have so much desire to draw [paint], because I did not feel the desire to do it. But by the end, I decided to draw [paint]. When I am painting it helped me to relax, to be able to express myself without using words or feel odd. During these sessions I could express what I could not. I would like to continue this (painting). I would like to be able to paint every day.

Lorena: Painting has helped us reflect on what we think. It has helped me to express myself more and to relax more. Art has helped me to be a better person with a better attitude.

Based on these excerpts, we see the impact that these sessions had on our partners. Being accountable to a community and knowing that their contributions were valued helped motivate our partners to remain engaged. Families also eventually noted that the process and practice of painting was beneficial as multiple accounts spoke to the relaxing impact of art-making.

Implications and Conclusion

As evidenced through the mapping and collaborative painting exercises that we describe in this article, communities such as our *La Escuelita* partners are intricately aware of the power conditions that shape their realities; they know that they do not have access to the healthiest foods and that they are impacted by structural marginalization that will continue to shape their future in various ways. Yet, our *La Escuelita* partners also illustrate what Barnd describes as a Native form of “inhabiting” by re-

alizing that their own value and worth are not defined solely by material conditions but are also shaped by their relationships to each other, to their histories and cultures, and to the land. As Barnd clarifies, “inhabiting describes a frame used for establishing or home, a relation to a place” (5). Participatory mapping, art, and food opened up a space for *convivio*—warm socialization where time stops and where feel safe to be and nurture ourselves and each other.

While we’ve described our methods above as well as how we used them, several insights for replication come to light for our conclusion: (1) the crucial role of an asset-based disposition; (2) involving partners in session design; and (3) conducting open-ended inquiry using raw materials. While the notion of asset-based approaches is not new, when solving social problems, we tend to revert to problem-solving mindsets, particularly at the level of framing (Durá). In this sense, we may not realize that terms like “health literacy” and “health promotion” may sometimes assume un-health in specific communities, even when our intentions are benevolent and our methods are participatory. As researchers and practitioners, we need to be careful about the possibility that these terms orient us towards “improving,” “fixing,” and “changing” minds and bodies to meet scientifically acceptable health standards. We learned from our partners that “to be healthy” in this community does not signal Western conceptions of health and wellness as we may have set out to find and foster through a different paradigm.

We believe that what made our program possible was letting go of what we wanted to “achieve” or “learn” as researchers and leaving those goals in the hands of participating families so that we would learn *from* them and not *about* them. This required allowing partners’ questions to guide inquiry as well as explicitly asking partners to guide or lead sessions while offering our full support. In order to make this happen, we chose to employ a relatively simple but powerful heuristic question in planning sessions where participants were not present: Whose interests are we serving by doing X? This question, in different variations, served as a safeguard of sorts to stay true to participants’ values and needs. A related challenge we faced was that in expressing these values and needs, participants continued to see us as experts and themselves as an eager audience. Sometimes partners were hesitant in taking on leadership roles, and sometimes our attempts at facilitating these interactions failed. On these occasions, the raw materials of paper, paint, and food helped us shift the focus from ideas and roles to concrete, hands-on activities—making together. The process of making enabled partners to both make sense of the worlds they live in and celebrate the wealth of first-hand knowledge about nature and life.

In addition to using participatory methods, the replicable components of our approach led to conversations rooted in respect for the wholeness of the children and their families and therefore connected us with partners to create spaces for meaningful learning. As other community-engaged scholars seek to incorporate asset-based frameworks that push toward food and environmental justice with marginalized communities, we encourage constant reflection on how notions of health, wellness, and literacy are being framed in community projects, particularly those that center historically marginalized people. While we as academic researchers may have ideas

about what food and environmental justice should entail, it is critical that we always acknowledge our own positionalities as members of the University, and that we open up discussions about what justice efforts can and should entail when they are led in collaboration with community partners. Through our work with *La Escuelita*, we continue to realize that we can't impose our own perceptions of injustice on lands, bodies, and histories that differ from our own, even when we do have ties to the communities that we inhabit and the community partners that we work with. These orientations to conceptualizing and practicing participatory learning in community contexts can continue to inform the ways in which University-community partnerships orient to participatory learning beyond settler spatiality, leading us to a richer understanding of our collective relationships to space, culture, and environment, and our shared responsibility to recognize and address power relationships in our community-based projects.

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