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Symposium

To Community with Care: Enacting Positive Barriers to Access as Good Relations

Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq, Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Lauren Cagle, and Rachel Bloom-Pojar

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 ac-

cess-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.; Itchuaqiyaq 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.