From Access to Refusal: Remaking University-Community Collaboration

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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 be-

lief 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, 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 long-standing 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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