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Main Article:

The Practical Realities of Giving Back

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Abstract

In this thematic section, authors consider practical ways of giving back to the communities in which they conduct research. Each author discusses their evolving thoughts on how to give back in these practical ways. Some of these authors discuss giving back by giving money, food, rides, parties, and water bottles. In other cases, authors discuss giving back by creating jobs in the short or long term, grant writing, advocacy, and education. Story-telling is also a theme that many of the authors in this section discuss. For some authors, non-material forms of giving back are critical—simply maintaining social ties to the communities in which they worked, or sharing humor. The authors consider the utility of their attempts at giving back, and in some cases present their personal philosophy or guidelines on the subject.

Index Terms: Western imperialism; extractive research; structural inequality; de-colonizing research; subaltern knowledge; emancipatory practice; self-reflexivity; border crossing

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1. Introduction

Scholars have problematized the violent and extractive nature of research (Deloria, 1988; LaDuke, 2005; Pratt, 1992; Robbins, 2006; Smith, 1999). Work by feminist scholars and citizen-scientists of color spanning disciplines of geography, sociology, anthropology, indigenous studies, and de-colonial theory has clearly demonstrated the colonial legacy, and now imperialist neocolonial implications, of academic projects that have "good intentions" but ultimately depend on the resources, knowledge, and hospitality of "other" communities (Anzaldúa, 1999; Deloria, 1988; LaDuke, 2005; Pulido, 2002, 2008; Robbins, 2006; Smith 1999). We begin with a concise presentation of the legacy of conceptual and activist work against extractive research. Here we will foreground contemporary scholarship's propositions for responding to the power and privilege that runs through institutionalized academic work. Approaches to dealing with these problems are numerous. Contemporary methodological scholars push us as researchers to reconfigure our methods to center self-reflexivity, incorporate subaltern knowledges and the projects of historically exploited groups and communities, as well as reshape the trajectory of social science to reclaim research and knowledge production as liberatory projects (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991, 2008; Nagar & Geiger, 2007; Sandoval, 2000; Smith, 1999).

Scholarship writing from the vantage point of the world's colonized peoples posits research and academic institutions as inextricably linked to Western imperialism and colonialism (Smith, 1991). Many scholars have argued that researchers must begin from the position of the subaltern or marginalized in order to reclaim research as a collaborative, community oriented, and even healing and emancipatory practice (Anzaldúa, 1999; Deloria, 1988; LaDuke, 2005; Pulido, 2002, 2008; Robbins, 2006; Smith, 1999). In response to scholars' questions on whether, where, and how Western researchers should do their work, feminist geographers Richa Nagar and Susan Geiger argue:

> Those of us who believe that the intellectual and political value of engaging in fieldwork across borders outweighs its problematic context (global capitalism, northern imperialism, structural inequalities), are responsible for developing critical analyses of our multidimensional struggles with such crossings. (Nagar & Geiger, 2007, p. 272).

Research methods and fieldwork must be constructed such that knowledge is produced across divides, collaboratively, and with attention to re-inscriptions of privileged interests, as well as being explicitly tied to the material politics of social change. Nagar and Geiger, like Sandra Harding (1991, 2008), advocate a "speaking with" as a model for research, and a methodology of crossing boundaries with situated solidarities (Nagar & Geiger, 2007). This approach necessarily undoes the constructed binary of "theory" and "practice," of "researcher" and "subject"; it allows borders to be crossed, complicates the idea of a "here" and "there," and necessitates that researchers problematize their own perspectives and assumptions before and during the research process. As feminist rural sociologist Louise Fortmann has argued (1996), we cannot deny the responsibility of the

privileged role of researcher but we must also go beyond simply criticizing privileged interests without creating new possibilities, or venturing into the process of reflexivity, situated solidarities, and giving back through our work.

Like feminist researchers, de-colonial scholars have urged us to consider what is at stake in how we do research; centering questions of positionality, methods, and the power of research institutions as crucial entry-points for reconfiguring the claims, values, and practices of research participants and their communities. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and de-colonial native studies scholar Vine Deloria (1997), among others, have been critical in methodological interventions that demonstrate how the authority to pose questions, the development of methods and carrying-out of research, and the control over data and results should be put in the hands of indigenous communities and other marginalized groups, far too long positioned as the "objects of study" in western research. De-colonial scholars challenge traditional academic norms that inhibit collective and collaborative research, such as prioritizing non-hierarchical, community driven projects with explicit social justice and activist agendas, and expand the horizon of what is considered academic productivity and legitimate knowledge. These scholars challenge us to think of research as a social justice work, and ask why we do research, how we will do it, and where we have made mistakes. This self-reflexivity can help us de-colonize research together. The "we" of these questions is meant to expand beyond the dominant standards of who is considered a "researcher," and to encompass all of the laborers who initiate, demand, critique, and contribute to the creation of knowledge.

The articles in this thematic section complicate, contribute to, and challenge these already well-established efforts of interdisciplinary scholarship on a path toward critical, feminist, de-colonial praxis. We use a feminist notion of praxis here to emphasize that our authors are concerned with bridging the gaps that remain between theorizing ethical work in the classroom, at home, or in the institution, and navigating the practical day-to-day personal, social, and human relationships on the ground during research. Understanding these theoretical framings allows us as readers of the following articles to align ourselves with the starting-points of the featured authors. Many of them configure their own familiarity with the aforementioned scholarship as a catalyst for their wrestle with the power and privilege inherent in their role as researchers. This is reflected in their ability to leave a site and community behind, to take information and benefit from generosity that enhanced their career, while potentially leaving those who had assisted with nothing at best, or further deprived of resources at worst. As these authors show, our academic training as critical scholars may send us off to the field feeling prepared to critique global, structural inequalities, armed with what we insist are good-intentions and tight methods to conduct research and produce results that are beneficial for under-represented human and non-human communities. However, the authors of this section show us that these good intentions and well-conceived methods are not enough. Grappling with how they have tried to put these things into action on the ground, the authors give us their guilt, struggle, and hope for patient humility and improvement.

2. The Practicalities of Giving Back

When many of the authors in this section entered the field, they described a new—and often overwhelming—sense of guilt, privilege, and the inability to "do enough" to thank their hosts and collaborators. Others cited the need to mend extractive histories present within their field sites and academic fields and yet others noted a sense that they must constantly challenge the integrity of their critical consciousness and reflect on the trust and accountability in their relationships. All of these authors acknowledge various, intersecting levels of privilege and power that come with being a highly educated researcher whose job depends on the generosity of time and resources of others. Our field-sites are places where specific moments, actions, and conflicts come to embody a co-constitutive convergence of our own power and privilege, and the larger socioeconomic structures and power relations that produce our research relationships. Tensions borne from trying to address, and in some cases repair, large and small-scale inequalities, become most visceral in everyday exchanges and practicalities. It is within these tensions, if we can stand in them (Tracking Patterns, 2012), that re-configuring the relationships between theory, practice, researcher, and subject becomes possible. The work of understanding how power moves through daily interactions between "researcher" and "subject" requires not only a self-reflexive examination of privilege, but also a willingness to be ever-present and open to lessons. As we navigate doubts, contradictions, and tensions we fumble our way to a place of humility that academic research, which seems to ask us to be surer than we often are about our methods and goals, often appears to foreclose.

We may critically examine our positionalities and theoretical frameworks in one way during our training, but they take on new meanings and are met with new challenges upon stepping into the field. In her article in this section, C. M. Finney describes the sudden feeling that everything she had "read and learned to construct 'just right' on paper was suddenly put to the test." In her words, simply creating an airtight participatory methodology does not mean "you have the level of awareness and flexibility to know what the person you're working with needs or wants." In their articles, C. Gupta, M. Ybarra, and A. B. Kelly explicitly confess doubt about the large-scale beneficial impact of their critically crafted research intentions.

Another author in this section, M. S. A. Baker-Médard challenged herself to respond to the reality that the "likelihood of [her] work influencing policy or changing the way in which conservation development organizations operate is fairly slim." While an aim to benefit communities and individuals might be conceptually built into a long-term research goal, the authors in this issue—on the shoulders of scholars like Robbins, Deloria, and Smith—know that a researcher's good intentions are bled all over with power and privilege. Finney argues that the methodologies we have developed from our training in the academy just do not match the "truth of the situation." Even on the smallest of scales, good intentions in dealing out material goods and monetary gifts, or promising future jobs amongst collaborators and hosts can have unintended consequences and can be limited by our own capacity. We cannot always follow through, nor can we

always understand the implications of our actions, within the larger social and cultural contexts in which we act.

The lessons learned by our authors through their failed or flawed methods are a call to address the problematic history of relying on good intentions, the reality of intersecting levels of privilege (across race, gender, education, mobility) power, and the failure of theory and concept to respond to the truth of the situation. In sifting through the practicalities of relationships built and broken while embodied in the role of researcher, the authors of this section found that giving out material goods and making hopeful promises failed to create relationships of reciprocity and trust at best, and reinforced neo-colonial dynamics through the frantic actions of a "one woman development organization" at worst (as Baker-Médard notes in her article). In response, many of our authors struggled with how to fashion ways to tell stories and represent voices, create jobs and skill-training, and provide daily as well as long-lasting community services in order to be in relation with, rather than "develop," "sustain," or "improve" their host communities.

In their articles, authors C. Lund and M. Ybarra discuss their struggles in providing reciprocity through the act of story-telling and listening as they break away from their predecessors whose sole purpose was knowledge and resource extraction. They work to cultivate mutual exchange and benefit in the interaction between the researcher and the researched, visitor and the visited. Ybarra argues that she provides an important service by telling the story of massacre survivors' contemporary political struggles, a service useful for visibility and legitimacy to provide "legible" accounts in important state and non-state agencies. However, she also recognizes that without these stories she cannot further her career through publications and conference presentations, and that the story-telling holds little meaning for her collaborators and informants unless she continues to uphold her promise of presence, returning to her site and maintaining strong ties. Lund both shared and listened to stories, and in doing so intentionally made himself accessible outside a strict "research" paradigm. Through engagement with story exchange outside the regimented mode of interviews, Lund broke with the role of researcher in order to attempt a reciprocal relationship.

Though the authors' contributions may be useful to local communities, they do not erase the power dynamics between researcher and community. As many scholars have done before (Deloria, 1988; Pratt, 1992), the authors of this section highlight that there is power running through the politics of telling the story, especially in the form of conference presentations, publications, and credible expertise. The social capital and academic privilege that allow researchers to act as advocates of positive social change also allow them to use the material of such advocacy as the source of their own socioeconomic mobility and success.

For authors C. Gupta, C. Kremen, and C. D. Golden, providing jobs and skills training for locals is incorporated in their research practice with the hopes that their work will provide long-term benefits for host communities. But this method has its slippages; all three authors agree that this process is never complete, nor is it ever easy. Gupta shares her

experience with this process as one with both fulfilling moments of connectedness and gratitude, but also those of regret, after promising future opportunities for work and travel that could not be fulfilled. She laments that her failed attempts to "help" perhaps interfered with the life-plan of others in ways she could not have predicted. Kremen also identifies internal conflict as she tried to develop strategies to counter-balance the fact that while her efforts to establish Masoala National Park to protect native ecosystems and species, the park's physical and institutional borders restrict local peoples' access to resources essential for their own wellbeing. While she sees creating the national park itself as a type of giving back to non-human nature that also has a right to existence, it is the capacity-building, employing, and providing future support through professional networks with local communities and laborers that she sees as the most effective and satisfying form of giving back. Likewise for Golden, training local university students and maintaining a research team of full-time employees from the area are methods of not only shaping his work so that it is useful for people, but ensuring that he is providing some of what he is taking—fulfilling work and a secure job. However, the villages that do not receive as much dedication or employment experience this differentiation as marginalization and neglect, something Golden does not anticipate being able to resolve easily.

Sometimes, promising economic stability and future opportunities for individuals or a community is problematic or impossible. In Gupta's case, residents wanted job creation and a reversal of the declining agricultural sector, but this was something the scope of her work, connections, and expertise could not provide. Instead, Gupta intentionally sought activities and projects that were both asked for and feasible: helping a women's cooperative write a business plan, giving rides into town, and throwing a fun, music-filled feast to thank everyone who had directly and indirectly supported her. Similarly, Kelly's choices to share food with village chiefs and provide villagers with car-rides into town also came from realizing limitations and problems with her initial methods of giving back. Kelly learned crucial lessons from the jealousy, social discord, and unrealistic expectations of others while giving out plastic water bottles and money, and refusing the gifts of hosts she knew had much less than she did. Rather than distributing non-consumable goods or rejecting offers of food from people who welcomed her into their homes, Kelly learned to participate in already existing social frameworks of the villages she visited; in other words, she tried to make her actions legible, appropriate, and humble. Ybarra and Finney also strived for community-oriented, transparent long-term commitments to their research sites: both of them stress the importance of remaining accountable in communication, returning when promised, and being honest about the limitations of your capacity to do so.

Developing a giving back rubric as part of one's research methods or incorporating long-term commitments to collaborators and participants in one's field site can help us re-center research, and the work of the researcher, around reciprocity and shared struggle. However, the methods we (re)forge over and over again are not air-tight, they still produce inequalities and ends that do not quite meet. But it is within this state of perpetual learning and revision that the authors are able to inhabit a position of humility—considering themselves as novices rather than experts with ready-made

solutions. Baker-Médard, Finney, Gupta, and Kelly all echo the need to relate on a human level—rather than always reconciling a research agenda. As Finney states, we can think about being present and acting on the basic level of simply saying "thank you." These authors' emphasize being present, attentive to the needs of others, and connecting on a level that does not always position the resolution of one's privilege at front and center. Rather, giving back becomes "an all-encompassing life-process" (Baker-Médard).

Throughout these authors' accounts, the lesson of presence and accountability emerges again and again. Being open and humble amongst others was crucial to cultivating, together, a sense of trust and humanity. Being present can take on many different forms. Kelly embraced her role as a fumbling researcher; her presence could be a source of humor and the laughter she provided to others a deeply human way of connecting despite "the sour taste of inequality in everyone's mouth." Lund took the time to listen to life stories outside the context of interviews, as a confidant. Baker-Médard let go of her pragmatism, and helped with grant writing, software programing, and "started moving more freely . . . sharing [her] own family stories as [she] asked and heard about other people's personal stories." All of the authors in this section show that complex relationships in the field can blur the lines between the "researcher" and the "researched." Such blurry, and often confusing and frustrating, boundaries can be flexible spaces in which our roles as confidant, friend, stranger, author, student, and teacher collide; the reality of an inseparable multiplicity of responsibilities, residing in the same body, becomes palpable.

3. Conclusion

We might cast the lessons our authors have learned as ones that require standing in the tension of the privilege and power that comes with our academically constructed identity as a researcher, while simultaneously deconstructing this role. Indeed, their mistakes have pointed us in the direction of larger questions about our own positionalities and about how we choose to struggle alongside those we interact with in our research. After grappling with the frustration and conflict resulting from her initial "development machine" tactics, Baker-Médard found solutions by turning her criticism inward and unlearning her own sense of what was "rational," "sustainable," or truly "empowering" about distributing goods related to privilege. Kelly leaves us with a similar provocation to think differently about ourselves, and how we come into relation with others by posing an important possibility: the people we work with in our research may have completely different ideas and opinions than our own, with regard to what worked and what was useful. If we as researchers do not know whether we are giving back, whether our research is useful, or whether our communities benefit from our work and our presence, do we need to (re)position and (re)place research?

This provocation encourages us to turn to Robbin's (2006) question: should researchers just stay home? If we can constantly be in the self-reflexive process of preparing and re-preparing "Working Rules for Giving Back" like Kelly's, is this enough of a tool kit to pack our bags with? Or do our anxieties speak to larger concerns about knowing where our commitments truly lie, how we are obligated to other human and non-human

communities, not because we are researchers but because we are simply cohabitating beings? Does fumbling through the field actually reflect our skepticism about whether the academy aptly prepares us to (re)construct—or perhaps, as Smith (1999) aims, de-colonize (1999)—research as a possible means for producing better, more equitable ways of being in relation?

Everyday moments and difficult practicalities expose the tangible, emotional, and material ways in which all of us continue to grapple with the inequity and imbalance of power in knowledge production. The authors in this section demonstrate that in our conceptual and theoretical work, we must not ignore the practicalities of giving back— the nitty-gritty on-the-ground negotiations—as crucial moments for analysis and inquiry. In fact, these stories often make for more easily relatable, tell-able, and understandable examples of how privilege and power matter in research. As we learn from the authors of this section, exchanging stories, perspectives, and lessons is one of the ways for developing trust and reciprocity in our social, academic, and research communities. Self-reflexivity and collaborative projects—such as this special issue—are important starting points for being honest with ourselves about the capacity and limitations of dominant forms academic research.

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