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## Reciprocity in Community-Engaged Food and Environmental Justice Scholarship

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## *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

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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.”

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