Community geography for precarious researchers: examining the intricacies of mutually beneficial and co-produced knowledge

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Abstract At the center of community geography is a commitment to mutually beneficial and co-produced knowledge. While the intricacies of managing these two commitments are often well-articulated for community partners, university faculty and their undergraduate students, the experiences of precariously positioned researchers (such as graduate students or those who work outside the university) remain under-examined. Therefore, through a reflection on the authors' personal experiences facilitating community geography projects, this paper takes seriously the experiences of precariously positioned researchers. We highlight how the privileging of co-production creates moments of dissonance for precariously placed researcher's experiences of mutually beneficial research. We argue that precarity, particularly when paired with privilege, results in heightened feelings of risk that may lead researchers to compromise their own ethics or values to ensure both the ongoing continuation of the partnership and the desired goals of the community partners. As we work to further establish community geography, we call for more nuanced considerations of how the entanglements

fostered through co-production impact experiences of mutually beneficial research for differently positioned researchers, particularly for those situated within in the neoliberal university.

Keywords Activism · Collaboration · Community engagement · Community geography · Mutually beneficial

Introduction

Foundational considerations for the growing sub-discipline of community geography have largely examined techniques for leveraging the resources of research and teaching institutions towards supporting the needs of diverse community members (see for example Robinson and Hawthorne 2018). Inspired by feminist and black geographies and methodological framings of pragmatism, community geography is sensitive to relations of power and positionality while allowing for a broad range of approaches and methods (Shannon et. al 2020). However, the foundational cornerstone of community geography is the establishment and nourishment of community partnerships. More specifically, as with many collaborative and participatory practices, community geography hinges upon the co-production of knowledge that takes place through partnerships between those who are

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differently positioned and experienced, such as a university-based researcher and members of grassroots, community organizations.

In this paper, we argue that the developing framework of community geography lacks a way to conceptualize the tensions, disagreements, misalignments, and feelings of dissonance that emerge for precariously placed researchers as they navigate the demands of mutually beneficial *and* co-produced knowledge. Addressing this gap has important significance for the ways in which community geographers (1) conceptualize the complex power dynamics of community partnerships, particularly the expertise and strategies of our community partners and (2) support differently positioned researchers in ways that make community geography more inclusive. Both areas of consideration work to strengthen the approach's capacity as it continues to expand across the discipline and solidify within our institutions.

To formulate our argument, we begin by engaging literatures on activist scholarship, noting that we are witnessing a burgeoning of opportunities to engage in community-based research that is a consequence of decades of effort to legitimize activism within the academy. We then examine the contributions of foundational literature on community geography, highlighting that while its institutional focus has made vital space for activist scholarship in research institutions, such a focus has also simplified the nuanced expertise of community partners as well as the experiences of precariously positioned researchers. Moving into our two case studies, we reflect upon our attempts as young, white women leading community geography projects and depict the various tensions that emerged as we navigated moments within our collaborations that challenged our ability to uphold both our commitments to our community partners and our understanding of the principles of community geography. In the discussion, we bring these case studies together to discuss the way these tensions highlight a need for more nuanced considerations of the structures and functionings of mutually beneficial research.

Activist scholarship: modeling collaboration

Geography in North America has well-established traditions of both radical and critical scholarship. Although the two terms are often collapsed into considerations of the academic left, radical scholarship of the late 1960s and 1970s drew on an epistemological framework grounded in Marxist political economy. Radical geographers critiqued both the quantitative revolution underway in the discipline and challenged academic scholarship to be more relevant at a time when disciplinary debates seemed far removed from pressing social issues, such as the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and concerns over environmental pollution (Peet 2000). The contemporary demands for racial justice, the stark health inequalities of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing environmental threats highlight the continued urgency of radical geographies (Hamilton 2020; Mooney and Juhász. 2020; Ybarra 2020). Building upon the radical tradition, critical geography emerged towards the end of the 1980s coupled with the increasing prominence of feminist scholarship (Longhurst 2002). While remaining sympathetic to Marxist analyses, critical geographers embraced a more oppositional social theory that was attuned to considerations of oppression as multiple, produced and imbricated within questions of identity, culture and geography (Blomley 2006). Since its development, critical scholarship has cemented its role within the discipline, inspiring generations of academic geographers. However, its increasing ubiquity has also resulted in an ambiguity as to what exactly it means to conduct critical scholarship and ultimately for whom and to what end it serves (Blomley 2006; Castree 2000; Latour 2004; Warren, Katz and Heynen 2019).

Responding to these concerns by combining critique with a progressive praxis, activist scholarship directly linked the understanding of oppression, human suffering, and violence with a need to transform its conditions. As Ruth Gilmore suggested, activist scholarship is “talk plus-walk”: it combines the creation and promotion of critical knowledge with active political bargaining (1993: p. 71). Therefore, unlike radical and critical geography, activist scholarship was not simply a matter of reaching broader publics with a message from social science, but instead, was a way of doing science differently, often

in collaboration with diverse communities (Hale 2008). Such work continues to build upon the foundations of black feminist thought by highlighting the importance of producing situated knowledge from the standpoint of those most affected by and subjected to structures of oppression, particularly if knowledge is to create and sustain transformative social change (Collins 2002; Mohanty and Carty 2018; Sandoval 2000). In doing so, activist scholarship challenges a series of fictive divides within and beyond the academy, necessitating that intellectuals not only study, but live their scholarship.

Nevertheless, like the critiques of critical geography, debates have pushed activist scholars to reflect on where activism occurs and at what scales. For instance, while the initial push for activism encouraged scholars to take to the streets and directly engage with communities beyond the walls of the ivory tower, more recent activist scholarship has also turned inwards to examine opportunities for engagement within spaces of the university, particularly given the increasing pressures created by the neoliberalization of higher education (Castree 2000; Dalton and Mason-Deese 2012; Pulido 2002). Rich Heyman (2007) for example, has argued that teaching should be reconceptualized as a radically democratic project capable of breaking the cycle of expert knowledge production. Similarly, academic practices, particularly writing and publishing, have also been opened up as spaces for activism, drawing on feminist practices of writing and interpreting the self (Mott and Cockayne 2017). Furthermore, given the increasing proliferation and ubiquity of digital technologies, scholars have leveraged online platforms to engage in activism that transcends the boundaries of place.¹ Such practices broaden the scope of activism, challenging some of its masculinist underpinnings (Johnston 2017). It also challenges some of the Anglocentrism of critical narratives by enabling diverse engagements across different scales and placing them in dialogue with each other (Katz 2001).

Accompanying this broadening scope of activist scholarship is a proliferation and increased popularity of institutional models that integrate an activist impetus for knowledge to have broader societal

significance into academic structures. For example, funding agencies, such as the national science foundation (NSF) within the United States and the research excellence framework (REF) in the UK, are increasingly evaluating applicants based on their ability to contribute to broader societal impacts. The REF is especially significant because its impact metric explicitly excludes the advancement of academic knowledge.² Beyond funding, universities are also witnessing a growing number of classes that embrace service-based learning. Facing pressure to provide students with greater opportunities for applied learning experiences, service-learning integrates community-engagement with instruction to advance the goals of a given curriculum with the intent to both teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities. The gaining popularity of these models marks an undeniable advancement in the ongoing battle to legitimize activist scholarship within the academy and to recognize the pressing need for academic knowledge to engage with the mounting challenges facing societies around the world.

Community geography: making space for activist scholarship

Community geography provides a further model for geographers to integrate activist scholarship into research and teaching institutions through the establishment and support of collaborations with community-members (Robinson and Hawthorne 2018; Shannon et. al 2020). In doing so, community geography works to explicitly highlight and address some of the constraints experienced by community-engaged activist-scholars in geography as well as promote changes to institutional structures in ways that value community-engaged work. This includes conceptualizing and supporting sustainable, reciprocal partnerships in addition to broadening considerations surrounding collaborative knowledge production and shared power (Robinson, Block and Rees 2017). While community geography often aligns with the practices of participatory and public participation geographic information systems, such as its

¹ See for example Dean Spade's collaboration with the Big Door Brigade and their digital resources on mutual aid: <http://bigdoorbrigade.com>.

² See the REF submission guidelines for the wording on impact (page 68): https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1092/ref-2019_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf.

commitments to confront existing power structures while addressing community concerns, community geographers face no methodological constraints and employ a multiplicity of quantitative and qualitative methods to address the broad set of research questions that reflect the diverse communities in which community geography work is situated.³ Reflecting this diversity further, projects vary greatly in scale, scope, and duration in order to serve the specific and unique goals of community partnerships.

A central tenet of community geography is to create pathways for community-engaged geography scholarship to be more fully integrated into and valued by research and teaching institutions. Motivating this drive is an assertion that geographers have the capacity to holistically examine urgent social and environmental challenges, particularly those threatening some of the world's most vulnerable communities. Thus, through the establishment of generative pathways to activist-scholar work, community geography encourages geographers to produce socially relevant work. As discussed by Jonnell Robinson and Timothy Hawthorne (2018), this requires thoughtful restructuring of the academy due to the institutional prioritization of individually performed, in-depth, theory-based research which, in turn, disincentivizes collaborative, community-engaged work. University researcher-community partnerships in particular have the greatest amount of legitimacy to gain in the eyes of the university, as academic metrics are much more perceptible to research-researcher, researcher-industry, or researcher-government partnerships (Katz and Martin 1997). Robinson and Hawthorne go on to propose strategies to deconstruct these barriers, including the establishment of expectations and evaluation of community-based work particularly in ways that recognize community partners as experiential experts and peers in the peer-review process, supporting community-engaged teaching and providing resources for faculty development especially through research funding.

In addition to making the values of community-engaged work more perceptible to our research and teaching institutions, community geography also confronts the ways in which institutional structures can be incompatible with community-based work. For

example, a commonly cited logistical barrier is the way partnerships are impacted by the ebb and flow of the academic calendar. As such, flexible schedules and timelines for both teaching and research are also highly conducive to community-engaged work as the establishment of mutual and reciprocal trust does not necessarily occur on the semester system (Robinson, Block and Rees 2017). A broader struggle for community geography is both predicting and measuring quantifiable metrics by which the project can demonstrate effectiveness to traditional modes of university reviews. The establishment of partnerships, in addition to sometimes requiring time and attention that falls outside the structure of the semester timeline, is emergent and uncertain in ways that can be both challenging and vulnerable (Glass 2017; Saunders and Moles 2013; Trauger and Fluri 2014).

Beyond challenges of timelines and effective metrics, community geography works to counteract exploitative practices of community-engagement such as crowd harvesting, mainstreaming and the complex of the great white savior (Breen et al. 2015; Cole 2012; Elwood 2006). By extracting data from communities without assurances of serving the community, these modes of “engagement” are performative. They lack a meaningful intentionality of resisting the systems of oppression communities face and instead are done to legitimize the contributions of the researcher. In striving to produce work that actively resists social and environmental injustices while also challenging the legacies of exploitative research practices, community geographers directly grapple with the weight of the power and privilege held by resourced researchers, particularly when working in disenfranchised communities.

These critiques further highlight the urgency of asking critical questions not necessarily about the processes of participatory work, but about the politics and ethics of community-engagement. Reflecting on her varied experiences engaging in participatory projects, Kysa Nygreen (2009) poignantly examines how prescriptive methodological processes fail to protect social scientists from the various dilemmas that emerge in participatory work. She states, “I conflated the political and ethical values of PAR [participatory action research] with the practice and process of PAR, wrongly believing that these values were inherent within the “steps” of the method I faithfully followed... My experience painfully taught me that there was nothing inherent in the process of

³ See for example Fischer et al. Doing Community Geography anticipated to be included in this special issue.

PAR that would reduce exploitation and avoid objectifying my research participants” (28). Here, Nygreen highlights how the formal establishment of participatory practices does little to mitigate the political and personal challenges associated with collaborative research. In other words, she depicts the messiness that lies beyond prescriptive approaches to community partnerships, particularly as researchers navigate the contradictions between their political and ethical commitments and the participatory process. In this paper, we take up this concern to examine how researchers navigate their activist commitments to do the talk-plus-walk when their ability to do so is tied to collaborative processes with community partners.

More specifically, we examine how precariously positioned researchers navigate these concerns. The considerations of supportive pathways for community geography outlined above often focus on the position and positionality of faculty members, particularly those who are on a tenure track. However, there is little consideration about how these vary for early career researchers, public scholars, and student researchers, though it is pertinent to note that some of the foundational work on community geography developed from graduate dissertation research (Robinson 2010). Additionally, community geography has done little to conceptualize the political agency of the communities we partner with, providing scant considerations for the strategies, negotiations, or conceptualizations of power at play for our partners. These two considerations, we argue, are closely entangled. Non-faculty researchers in particular are often precariously situated in ways that cause them to do additional work to protect the continuation and success of community partnerships, especially when partners act in ways that do not align with the terms on which the partnership was established. This protection of partnerships is perhaps a larger symptom of community geography scholarship, however, as with most experiences of individuals on the margins, precarious researchers have the most to lose if a partnership sours.

Strategies of collaboration

In the following two case studies, we offer our experiences as two non-faculty researchers engaged in community geography projects. We grapple with the pairing of privilege and precarity, reflecting on

moments when the contributions of our community partners contradicted the activist and justice-orientated intentions that motivated our engagement with community geography. Broadly, we explore: how do precariously placed researchers navigate the complex entanglements of co-produced and mutually beneficial research? In both case studies, we struggled to navigate the achievement of “mutually beneficial research” alongside our commitments to co-produce knowledge that fosters just and sustainable communities. In our writing, we strive to be mindful of the ways we have identified and portrayed the partnerships that inform our case studies. In doing so, we have confronted a discomfort that precisely demonstrates our broader argument: even from our places of relative privilege, the forms of precarity that we experience manifests as feelings of risk as we attempt to speak back to and critique our community partnerships.

Leveraging collaboration as strategy

While working at an organization with a history of facilitating community-based planning, author Emily Barrett was approached by a community group looking to create a neighborhood housing strategy. Because of shifting racial and economic demographics, the community group idealized the strategy as a guiding document that could be presented to city officials as a guiding document for the vision of development in the changing neighborhood. Barrett agreed to partner with these residents and we began our work with a mutual understanding that community input was vital for local decision-making processes. Our intent was to first create a dataset that inventoried neighborhood housing conditions that could be mapped and subsequently used to inform our housing strategies.

Drawing on traditions of counter-mapping (Peluso 1995), our activities intentionally usurped the data practices of the local government repurposing them to the goals of the community residents. For example, to assess the condition of residential properties we used a numeric rating system that mirrored the ways in which city planners assessed the demolition priorities of vacant buildings. We also linked our data to a dataset that city planners produced, updated, and routinely used in their own planning activities. By using the practices of city planners, we intended to create housing strategies that more effectively spoke the language of city hall.

However, as we began the collective process of interpreting the data and identifying housing strategies, Barrett began to notice some concerning patterns that fundamentally challenged her commitment to the partnership. Mapped in its entirety, the dataset became a powerful representation of a series of biases rooted in divergent visions of the neighborhood. For example, streets with majority owner-occupied single-family homes were more likely to be missing conditions scores or had comments within the metadata that revealed a leniency in the assessment. In these cases, exceptional circumstances were often used to explain the poor condition rather than the intentional neglect often associated with renters. These patterns created a visual representation whereby rental properties and their relatively poor conditions dominated the map.

Additionally, at monthly neighborhood meetings Barrett witnessed insensitive and discriminatory comments, as well as neighborhood rivalries that fundamentally challenged the inclusive intent of the community-based process. In these moments, discriminatory stereotypes of poverty, renters, and people of color went unchallenged. As Barrett attempted and perhaps failed to appropriately navigate these moments, she was often overly conscious of the fact that she was an outsider to the community. For example, when Barrett tried to temper some of the disagreements within the group, she often felt that the groups' trust and respect in her was challenged by her status as a relatively young and new outsider, living just beyond the neighborhood boundary, and without being fully embedded in the community history felt compelled to focus on her expertise. She was there to map. Similarly, when raising concerns with her organization, Barrett again felt compelled to focus on the map, the perceivable end goal of the project, as the organization's funding streams were dependent on demonstrating community support. These encounters left Barrett struggling to understand how her politics and broader understanding of community geography's commitment to foster just communities aligned with the work of the partnership. These experiences undermined what she believed to be a mutual commitment to equitably including all community voices in local decision-making processes.

Although the consequences of this project remain unclear, it did leave Barrett with a lasting uneasiness and discomfort. Firstly, Barrett worried that her methodological expertise and inability to navigate

the tensions of the partnerships as they arose accentuated the legibility of the data. Barrett explicitly contributed knowledge on counter-mapping so that the neighborhood plan effectively spoke the language of city planners. In doing so, the data and map had a glow of objectivity, legitimacy and simplicity that severed the final output from the biases, dynamics and complexities of the neighborhood group. Secondly, the scale of the housing strategy, which consisted of housing assessment scores for almost every house in the neighborhood, accompanied with specific investment recommendations and strategies, gave the process an air of finality suggesting that this document presented a unified, representative and accepted vision for the neighborhood. Ultimately, although the plan claimed to objectively show neighborhood housing conditions, it showed some of the residents' highly subjective and often preconceived perceptions of their neighborhood and neighbors.

Of course, this does not mean that the city planners, the intended audience of the plan, were unaware or unfamiliar with these challenges. They were critical of participatory planning initiatives and were familiar with the dynamics and histories of these community groups. However, active, organized and persistent community groups also have a particular sway over the actions of local government. Armed with the strength of the seemingly objective data at the scale of the neighborhood, the claims of the community group appeared more unified, legitimate and therefore harder to ignore. The plan was powerful. It gave the community group leverage over city hall, as was its intent. However, at various times and in multiple ways, this project largely undermined rather than upheld the political and ethical values of inclusivity and equity that inspired its conception and Barrett's participation.

Denying collaboration as strategy

Building upon existing department connections, author Amber Bosse was invited to form a partnership with members of an organization working to resist gentrification. This organization was situated in a historically Black neighborhood and experienced the ongoing impacts of systemic disinvestment and disinterest from local decision-makers. A causal memorandum of understanding (MOU) acknowledged that Bosse would help the organization produce maps, thus

supporting their efforts, while also engaging in participant observation and conducting interviews with partners to support her thesis project. Mindful to develop trust and develop a deep organizational understanding, Bosse initially only attended business meetings and did not produce any maps until several months into the partnership. As such, by the time first drafts of maps were presented, Bosse was viewed as an active and informed ally to the organization.

The rhetoric surrounding the partnership was always framed in terms of collaboration and co-production. For instance, each partner was viewed as their own domain expert. Thus, Bosse was tasked with providing the technological scaffolding to enable the processes of community-wide data collection using mobile devices, while others were in charge of leading the data collection efforts and ground-truthing.

While data collection was well under way, the efforts of the partnership began to capture the attention of local, state, and federal leaders. Capitalizing on this momentum, members of the organization were able to schedule a meeting with representatives from a well-known federal program. For this meeting, Bosse's partners requested that she present on the data collection efforts, to which she happily agreed. Bosse was told that she would get ten minutes to complete the presentation and was asked to describe the background of the project, give a short overview of the technical components of the data collection process and display and interpret the results of the data that had been collected up to that point. While she had presented multiple project updates to community stakeholders, this would be her first time presenting this information in a meeting intended to communicate the project to an audience of individuals who were not considered community members.

On the afternoon of the meeting, Bosse arrived and was confronted by a framing of the meeting that directly and strategically obfuscated the collaborative and co-produced nature of the partnership. For example, not only was Bosse's presentation listed as the primary item on the printed agenda, but it also explicitly credited the mapping project to her by naming the presentation "Mapping Project: The Boll Theory" (Bosse's maiden name she went by at the time of the project). Similarly, when introduced, Bosse's presentation was prefaced with language that suggested that she was leading the charge on using data to fight back the systemic oppression facing

members of the community. This language did not reflect the partner organization's important role in leading the data collection efforts, or their contributions to the community that extended far beyond the work of the partnership. Wanting to "save face" in front of representatives from the federal organization, Bosse went along with this framing, delivered her presentation, and did not correct or challenge the naming or framing of her participation.

While these strategies are not intrinsically problematic, the fact that they were not openly discussed or agreed upon before the meeting required Bosse to make challenging even compromising choices about how to behave and perform. Had Bosse spoken up, for example, correcting the claims of authorship and leadership being made, she could have undermined her partners and perhaps put their hard-earned efforts to develop relationships with this federal entity in danger. To speak up, would have been disrespectful to her partners, would have threatened their work in the community and it would have damaged the standing of the overall partnership. Also, as a graduate student, Bosse was dependent upon the completion of the project and its degradation and failure would have funneled into problems of funding and overall livelihood.

The necessity of navigating these various calculations, of success and failure, respect and personal identity, as they unfolded in the moment demonstrates the boundaries of commitment that community geographers confront between their dedication to collaborate with community partners and their desires to challenge the depiction of universities as sole producers of knowledge. Bosse's partners set out to leverage her positionality and assert her expertise in ways that a description of collaboration, it was perceived, may not. In doing so, they appeared to elevate the perceived legitimacy of the data and map by stressing that it had been produced under the direction of an academic. Such moments demonstrate that there are times where community partners develop their own strategies to leverage co-produced work in ways that are not consented to. Again, having divergent strategies for empowerment is not intrinsically problematic. However, the lack of discussion and transparency around the strategy led Bosse to feel as though her positionality had been exploited.

Discussion

The above case studies reveal the complex relationship between researcher positionality and the experiences of mutually beneficial research. In particular, we draw attention to the moments when a dependency on co-production (a dependency that precarious researchers are perhaps more acutely aware of) results in compromises that place the underlying researcher or the project values within a realm of contradiction. For Barrett, staying silent as community members leveraged her methodological expertise to legitimize their highly contextual and subjective claims contradicted the values of equity and inclusion that motivated the initial establishment of the partnership. Similarly, for Bosse, staying silent as members of her partnering organization leveraged her positionality as a university affiliated researcher contradicted the community-centered methodology that again motivated the initial establishment of the partnership. Although reflective of a broad set of circumstances, we argue that the decisions to make allowances for such contradictions are a result of privileging the longer-term success of the projects. In other words, the pinch of our positionalities, recognizing that we occupied sites of both privilege and precarity, caused us to evaluate our expectations of mutually beneficial research at the completion of the project, rather than in the everyday moments of engagement. Thus, Bosse allowed her feelings of exploitation to go unaddressed because the dissonance of this experience was outweighed by the need to complete her thesis and graduate. Similarly, Barrett was working toward continued community support and positive public opinions of the organization and thus let her discomfort go unaddressed. These moments of discomfort represent a misalignment with the practice of collaboration and the other tenants of community geography (co-production of knowledge and commitments to social justice), while the preservation of mutually beneficial research seems to eclipse all other tenants.

Recognizing the nuances of mutually beneficial partnerships, we chose to frame our responses to these moments with caution, aiming to protect our partnerships rather than directly address our feelings and experiences of dissonance. We consider here how our simultaneous privilege and precarity changed the way in which we could engage with our partners and we ask, how do considerations of positionality impact

experiences of mutually beneficial research? How do these complex experiences impact community geography's capacity to foster political and personal commitments to social justice? These questions, we argue, offer an important intervention into considerations of the practices framing the developing sub-discipline of community geography.

Importantly, we suggest that by overlooking the nuanced experiences of precariously positioned researchers the developing framework of community geography misses opportunities to 1) conceptualize the complex power dynamics of community partnerships, particularly the expertise and strategies of our community partners and 2) support differently positioned researchers. Attention to these two areas, we argue, are integral to community geography's capacity to support the co-production of knowledge, particularly in ways that foster just and sustainable communities. Although we disentangle these two points in our discussion below, they are intimately entwined for it is the privilege and precarity of our positions as graduate students and young professionals that causes us to confront the nuanced expertise and power of community partners in different ways.

Considerations of power in community partnerships

While community geography and literatures on activist research more broadly, are attentive to questions of power and positionality, such considerations often only examine how university-based researchers should be mindful to protect marginalized communities. Of course, there is much need to examine how collaborative research practices pose undue harm and risk to community residents, especially given rising threats of surveillance and the proliferation and mainstreaming of community-engagement models (Elwood 2006; Mattern 2017; McGlotten 2016). However, by limiting the directionality of considerations of privilege, the existing framework of community geography misrepresents the distribution of power within and across the diverse positionalities that form community partnerships. It lacks a holistic conceptualization of community partners as complex, political agents with their own unique agendas and approaches to the questions that research poses and the knowledge that is co-produced. As Cathy Cohen (1997) highlights, by falsely locating power within homogenized

and essentialized identity binaries, such as researcher/community, powerful/powerless, we undermine the transformational potential of activist and more radical politics that informs our work.

By only viewing communities as vulnerable, community geography risks reifying the power of institutions and fails to recognize the important power that community members have over researchers and/or their institutions. As Perla Zusman (2004) highlights, too often writing and research on community partnerships, particularly in North America, falls into the trap of staging the central figure of participatory work as the academic. Indeed, the primary considerations taken-up by foundational thinking in community geography examine ways to make teaching and research institutions accessible to community members and to make community-engaged work valuable to the university. While these considerations are valuable and necessary, the central focus on academic outputs and institutional structures risks minimizing the complex dynamics of community partners. Importantly, it fails to account for how power moves bilaterally between the researcher and the community by only ever viewing power as emanating outwards from institutions, such as universities. Our case studies highlight the ways in which the power dynamics of community-based partnerships need to be reimagined, taking seriously the ability of residents to strategically use community geography projects and the positionalities of community geographers in ways that sometimes lie beyond the control, even the desires, of researchers (Glass 2017).

Support for differently positioned researchers

Although academic positions often accompany a series of privileges, neoliberal pressures on institutions have stratified the power and precarity experienced by faculty and students. One way to observe this is through the hypermobility that is expected from graduate students and early career researchers (Manzi, Ojeda and Hawkins 2019). Required to relocate to attend or work in certain programs, researchers confront a particular type of “out of placeness” that takes time and emotional labor to overcome; this often results in feelings of anxiety, isolation, and exhaustion. For community-engaged scholars, this experience can be intensified, especially because the mode of our work requires us to be mindful of our “outsider”

status and its relationship to the historic exploitation of underserved communities. While participatory work has often challenged the artificial distinctions between the university and the community (Katz 2013) and the framework of community geography, in particular, highlights how the long-term commitment of community geographers to the communities in which they live and learn has the potential to blur such boundaries (Robinson, Block and Rees 2017), researchers who are not intrinsically embedded in place confront this approach differently.

In our case, we both relocated to cities to attend specific institutions and did not live directly in the communities that our work addressed. As graduate students and young researchers, our ability to remain rooted in place and to form community partnerships that aligned with the models of trust, flexibility and reciprocity advanced by the community geography framework has been challenging. Of course, we continue to aspire to these goals and we do not intend to undermine their significance and importance. However, we seek to highlight how our separation from our community partners and our precarious positions within our institutions created additional layers of vulnerability within our partnerships. This vulnerability, we argue, drives us to go to extra lengths to ensure the continuation of our partnerships rather than speak up when we experience feelings of exploitation, dissonance, and misalignments between our values, motivations, and the unfolding development of the community project. Hyper-aware of our vulnerability, we ultimately overcompensated to the detriment of the activist intentions that drive our underlying engagement with community geography.

Directly related to considerations of “out of placeness”, we consider the limitations and pressures around time and funding. Bosse’s funding opportunities were dependent upon completing her master’s degree in two years. However, because she allocated time to building trust and understanding with her partners (perhaps more time than she would have had she grown up in that city), she was unable to graduate “on time” and her funding expired. Though she was hired on for a small research assistantship, it was not enough to cover her expenses living in a major urban area. As a result, she relied on loans to support herself. The pressures faced by precarious researchers, particularly graduate students, have real and sometimes long-term consequences (Smith 2016). In its efforts to

restructure research and teaching institutions, community geography must consider those who occupy precarious positions and examine how it can resist the exploitation of anxiety (Hall and Bowles 2016) re-imagine timelines and funding (Arrigoitia et al. 2016; Gupta 2018; Schwartz 2014).

Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that the developing framework of community geography misses opportunities to conceptualize the tensions, disagreements, misalignments and feelings of dissonance that can occur when precariously positioned researchers partake in collaborative research that strives to be mutually beneficial. As our experiences demonstrate, there are many ways in which the pursuit of collaboratively produced, mutually beneficial work can prompt researchers to compromise on their individual values or commitments to ensure both the ongoing continuation of the partnership and the desired goals of the community partners. While compromises should be expected in collaborative work, we argue that the pairing of privilege and precarity amplifies the feelings of risk experienced when the expectations and actions of researchers and community partners are misaligned. As such, this prompts precariously positioned researchers to make compromises that can significantly contradict some of the principles of community geography and some of their individual commitments to social justice.

Importantly, we want to emphasize that we are not advocating for a model of community geography that decenters or delegitimizes co-production. We both align our work with the emerging community geography framework and firmly uphold the centrality and value of community partnerships to this work. We also recognize the important contributions that foundational efforts in community geography have made by institutionalizing models for community partnerships in both research and teaching.

Instead, we propose that although collaboration is a key component to community geography, our case studies reveal the need for a closer examination of its ability to foster both mutually beneficial and socially embedded research. More explicitly, we argue that the dissonance created for precariously positioned researchers doing collaborative work calls into

question the scale and temporal considerations of mutually beneficial research as conceptualized in the emerging framework of community geography. In other words, community geographers must confront questions of precisely how co-produced work is mutually beneficial, at what scale, for whom, and when? Future research might take up these questions in relation to methodological training, research design, mentorship and advising, and a host of additional areas that inform our practices of knowledge production. Increased attention to the nuances of this developing subdiscipline is critical to ensuring the approach is as inclusive socially as it is methodologically, enabling geography to take on the range of challenges our communities face today.

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