LAYERS

The cover image is by Renzo D'Souza on Unsplash.

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FEATURE

CREATING CHANGE THROUGH COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH: AN OPEN RIVERS COLLECTION
By Laurie Moberg

"Why are you doing this work?" P'Ong's question caught me a bit by surprise. I was sitting with P'Ong on a thin bamboo mat covering the tile floor of his home near the Yom River in northern Thailand. P'Ong had spent the day introducing me to his village including both the people and places that were part of the anti-dam protest movement there. After I'd spent the day asking him question after question about the village and protests, I was surprised to have a question thrown back to me. I paused, trying to find my words, and that was not only because I needed to articulate my response in Thai, but because I needed to frame a response altogether. Why *was* I doing this work? I didn't want the answer to be simply about my dissertation, my Ph.D., or my future.[1]

Detail from 'Storying the Floods: Experiments in Feminist Flood Futures' Watershed meeting in Coon Creek. Image courtesy of Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Margot Higgins, Tamara Dean, Eric Booth, and Rebecca Lave.

P'Ong accepted my pause as an opportunity to continue. He explained that *farang* (Thai for foreigners, particularly white people) researchers had been coming to this village for many years studying everything from Buddhist tree ordination to water quality in the river, from political protest campaigns to the forest biome. However, little of that research was for the benefit of the community or came back to be shared with community members; even less of that work took into account what the village considered the most important questions and concerns. This pattern left much of the community a bit disillusioned; while people were willing to share their stories with me, they had little expectation that I would do anything more than past researchers had done. Even if my questions were different, they were still MY questions. P'Ong was asking me to be a different kind of researcher. By asking why I was doing this work, he was giving me an opportunity to make this work better and more useful to this community.

Ultimately, P'Ong was pointing to the possibilities and power of community-engaged research. As a mode of collaboration, community-engaged research involves engaging and working with groups of people rather than merely studying about them. Bringing together both researchers (often affiliated with institutions of higher education) and community partners to shape includes a variety of collaborative steps throughout the research project: identifying a concern, developing questions, shaping methods, conducting research, analyzing data, articulating outcomes, and enacting interventions. Starting from the concerns and experiences of community members shapes research that is intentionally responsive to community needs.

This commitment to community-academic collaboration aligns well with our priorities at *Open Rivers*. As a journal of public scholarship, *Open Rivers* creates a space for people to speak across disciplines, across professional sectors, across areas of expertise, and across communities to begin to understand different perspectives on the urgencies and tangles of environmental and socioecological challenges. We publish content that contributes to the interests of public discourse, speaks to public concerns, and strives to impact public action. Because our values resonate with those of community-engaged research, it isn't surprising that *Open Rivers* has become a platform for work that comes from this kind of research, specifically work that highlights pressing community environmental concerns.

Community-Engaged Research as Challenge and as Social Change

To understand the potentials and challenges of community-engaged research, we must first appreciate the values underlying this work. Community-engaged research focuses on cooperation and, better still, collaboration between researchers and communities. Typically, these communities share some kind of commonality—from geographic proximity to common interests to shared concerns about issues affecting their well-being—and through this shared affiliation, they have insight, experiences, and questions that can shape a collaborative research project (Johnson and Jelks 2021). This approach also recognizes researchers as community members themselves, sometimes engaged in research in which they are part of both groups—researchers and community members.

Over the past several decades, this kind of research has gained momentum as a valued approach, reconfiguring the way academia and communities intersect and work together. Community-engaged research—done well, done collaboratively—asks for a shared investment in

the work and a shared commitment to the outcomes. This shift in focus—from academic inquiry to community needs—changes not only the questions we ask and how we do the work, but also redirects the values of the research itself. And the central value of this work is that it is of value to the community. Work stemming from this kind of engagement is, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2019) points out, "of compelling interest to the public that the project engages, precisely because that concern belongs to them" (175). Bringing campus researchers and community partners together to collaboratively guide the work makes the questions and processes more robust, more useful for effecting change, more able to make public impact, and more ethical (Jacquez, Ward, and Goguen 2016).

Yet the promise of community-engaged research does not diminish its challenges—and they are manifold. From lack of institutional support, tenure and promotion policies that do not favor community-engaged work, the extensive time required to move at the pace of trust that exceeds the timelines of funders, and communities' distrust of researchers due to previous interactions, community-engaged research is complex and demanding (Fischer 2023, Fitzpatrick 2019, The TRUTH Project 2023, Tuck 2023). At the same time, the problems we face today—from climate change to racial injustice to political unrest and beyond—are messy and best addressed with expertise from varied sources, both within and beyond academia. This, then, is the crux of the paradox: done well, community-engaged research is incredibly challenging and yet vitally important. Put another way, doing community-engaged research "involves shared and equitable decision-making that leads to equitable ownership for the research process, which is imperative for meaningful and relevant answers to research questions. This, in turn, can lead to social change" (Jacquez, Ward, and Goguen 2016, 79).

Open Rivers Collection

This potential for social change is at the heart of the material we've gathered for this *Open Rivers* collection. Below, we offer a selection of articles previously published in *Open Rivers* that demonstrate community-engaged research methods and the core commitments of these methods: collaborative work, equity, and public impact. This sampling of the community-engaged research articles published in *Open Rivers* is not exhaustive, but we've collected them here because these articles specifically highlight the power of community-engaged research to effect social change. Specifically, the articles here speak to the potential for transformation that might contribute to solving—or at least improving—pressing environmental challenges and the social systems that shape them. From a mapping project with tribal partners to reflections from researchers doing community-engaged work on hydrological and social systems, these articles offer insights for others on both the challenges and value of doing community-engaged work.

We've organized the material into a series of categories that demonstrate commonalities we see in the ways these articles effect change. The categories focus on evoking the voices and expertise of community partners, transforming institutional practices, and reframing the kinds of products shared through community-engaged research to ensure they serve public interests and needs.

Agency, Stories, and Expertise of Community Partners

One of the fundamental premises of quality community-engaged research is recognizing and honoring the contributions of community members as partners and collaborators. This commitment to community voices is even more important when addressing questions that affect communities that are disenfranchised or otherwise dismissed. Based on the Minnesota Humanities Center's Absent Narratives Approach™, intentionally creating space to include the perspective, stories, and expertise of people and communities who might otherwise be "absented" enriches our work, our relationships, and our capacities for identifying solutions and strategies for change. Organizers for We Are Water MN, a traveling exhibit organized by the Minnesota Humanities Center among several other state agency partners, wrote in *Open Rivers* that taking time to build relationships with community partners confirms a powerful conviction:

It's the belief that the people in our communities have something to teach us and that we can create new understanding together, that there is value in taking time to learn from and with each other, that building relationships with people can spark change by creating new pathways for solving problems and making decisions. (Gangeness and Tonko 2019)

We've selected a handful of articles here that prove this point. The authors share the stories of community partners in ways that validate their agency and expertise and give these perspectives circulation and credibility with broader audiences who might not otherwise learn to value these community stories. In addition, the content is included in *Open Rivers* in part because our commitment to making work broadly accessible means the community partners will have access to the work—to their own stories—as well.

"Restorative Cartography of the Theakiki Region: Mapping Potawatomi Presences in Indiana" by Elan Pochedley

In this article, Elan Pochedley (2021) writes about his collaboration with the Cultural Heritage Center of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation to "make visible...historic Potawatomi presences, ecological roles, environmental ethics, and narratives of geographic belonging" through decolonial mapping. Drawing on archival records as well as the expertise of partners, Pochedley offers a set of stories and interactive maps as starting points for reclaiming histories and places and reimagining collective futures. Pochedley (2021) writes: "As I've learned from visiting with relatives in Oklahoma and Michigan, as well as from Neshnabék writers and scholars, the sharing of stories is critical for teaching communal ethics and lessons, while also creating space for individual interpretation and meaning making."

Wild rice and the 1833 Survey of Menominee's Reservation. Image by Elan Pochedley.

"Forgotten Places and Radical Hope on Philadelphia's Tidal Schuylkill River" by Bethany Wiggin

Describing the industrial, urban areas of the lower Schuylkill River in Philadelphia, author Bethany Wiggin (2017) explains that "this stretch of river can be described by what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls a 'forgotten place,'" yet it also "teems with personal and local histories that intersect with histories of land use and social and environmental justice in and along the lower Schuylkill River." Wiggin and the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities worked with artist Mary Mattingly as well as other local activists and community partners to create public engagement around *Wetland*, a floating art installation, and

lab on the Schuylkill River. Drawing attention to issues of water quality, social practices that affect ecosystems, and human relationships with water and place, the work of *Wetland* gives voice to the river's myriad stories.

WetLand + Refinery: View from The WetLand Project's floating lab motoring up the Schuylkill River. Image by Phil Flynn. Image courtesy of Bethany Wiggin.

"What's in My Backyard? Empowering Indigenous Voices on Firefly Creek at Blue's Bottom" by Tianna M. Odegard

Gathering stories from her family and friends in the Upper Sioux Community that demonstrate the environmental changes of Firefly Creek, Tianna M. Odegard (2019) explains her commitment to community-engaged research as follows:

> I wanted to do research and produce work that connected to my home. This work thus provided me with personal growth while also educating me about areas of concern in Minnesota. I wanted to demonstrate that we do not need to look far and wide to see the challenges of climate change that need to be addressed; instead, we can find many environmental issues within miles of where we live.

Written as a series of interview questions and responses, Odegard's work not only evokes experiences of a changing environment, but also gives space for Indigenous voices to share this expertise.

Firefly Creek. Image courtesy of Tracy Blue.

Formless Like Water: *Defensoras* and the Work of Water Protection by Natalia Guzmán Solano

Illuminating the complex struggles for water against extractivist industries in northern Peru, Natalia Guzmán Solano partners with *defensoras*—water and environmental defenders—who share their stories and struggles for their communities and for water. Guzmán Solano relates the ebbs and flows of the anti-extractivist campaigns led by *defensoras*, letting the voices and actions of these women teach us not only about the details of this struggle, but also about the agency of both women and water. As Guzmán Solano (2022) explains, "to love water is to love ourselves and coming to water's defense means defending our lives."

Defensoras and allies on retreat in Celendín. Image courtesy of Natalia Guzmán Solano.

Transforming Institutional Practices

A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* argues that community-engaged research is a way for colleges and universities to demonstrate their public value "by using their expertise to solve concrete problems and shape public policy" (Fischer 2023). Making academic work valuable and useful to public audiences is a laudable goal, but it is only the first step. Collaborative work with partners is not simply about sharing academic expertise; it is about drawing campus knowledges together with community expertise to transform how we do work together and, by extension, what that work means. At its heart, community-engaged research prioritizes this kind of collaboration and equity; it works toward public impact, recognizing that "knowledge is cocreated via shared decision making for the purpose of social change" (Jacquez, Ward, and Goguen 2016, 77). These practices disrupt existing academic cultures; as colleges and universities embrace community-engaged research, they compel academic structures and cultures to shift as well (Post et al. 2016). As it diverges from standard academic research, community-engaged work disrupts institutional norms and has the potential to move academic practice toward greater public good.

The articles in this section highlight some of the ways community-engaged research transforms our institutional practices, from reconfiguring lab structures and classrooms to building the foundations for being good relatives.

"Reflections on Negotiating the Science-Society Relationship Together" by the Tropical Rivers Lab

In this article, the members of the Tropical Rivers Lab at Florida International University share their processes of grappling with the relationship between their academic work, their experiences and identities, and their community partners. The article involves a discussion of community-based scientific ideals—both their challenges and their potential for moving toward equity justice in scientific work. As the scientists in the lab explain, "traditionally, institutional science has not prioritized conversations that delineate what scientists' place and community are and how to engage them at an individual and collective level." The work of this lab draws attention to the limitations of traditional scientific inquiry and demonstrates a shift in the paradigm for scientists to take seriously the ways that "who we are informs our scientific practice."

Daniela Daniele took this picture to show that her research interests began with the canal that flows behind her apartment. This semester she's defending her master's thesis on the historical ecology of the Miami River. Image courtesy of Daniela Daniele.

"Navigating the Ethics of Partnership" by Monica McKay

For students as well as faculty and staff at a university, engagement with community partners has gained importance and value. Monica McKay discusses some practices for guiding students to be good partners in community-engaged work. She reminds us that in doing this work, "we are always working in networks of committed individuals, each of whom brings resources, knowledge, and skills to the shared collective task of creating change on issues we all care about. In an ideal world, these networks are characterized by the constant exchange of these assets" (McKay 2017). In this article, she demonstrates strategies for transforming how we teach the foundations of community engagement to the next generation.

University of Minnesota students worked with Corporate Accountability International in 2008 to secure a ban on the sale of bottled water in Minneapolis City Hall. With the students in the photo are then-mayor R.T. Rybak (center) and current mayor Betsy Hodges (left), who was then on the Minneapolis City Council. Photo courtesy of Amber Collett.

"Navigating Indigenous Futures with the Mississippi River" by Vicente M. Diaz, Michael J. Dockry, G.-H. Crystal Ng, Virajita Singh, Daniel F. Keefe, Katie Johnston-Goodstar, Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould, Jim Rock, and Christine Taitano DeLisle

In 2019, several University of Minnesota researchers as well as tribal and community partners gathered on the banks of the Mississippi River to host an event that was part of Dr. Joan Gabel's inauguration as university president. The event showcased not only two community-engaged research projects, but also the relationships, trust, and possibilities these quality projects developed. Demonstrating quality campus-community collaborations, the projects also press the university to transform its practices, to learn from these projects and, most importantly, from the community partners involved. As the authors write, they seek to

> call attention to the larger political, social, and cultural stakes that our research projects, individually and collectively, raise for and with our Indigenous community partners. Central among these stakes are the relations of ethics and kinship that attach to water and knowledge pertaining to water for Dakota and Anishinaabe and other Indigenous communities, as well as how such relations point to yet larger domains of belonging and connectivity beyond water, and about which academic research would do well to recognize, understand, and work with. (Diaz et al. 2020)

The article issues an appeal to academic researchers and institutions to not only do community-engaged research in partnership, but to go a step further and find ways to be good relatives.

President Gabel and project members and community representatives take "a spin" aboard the waa herak NOAA's Arc. From front to back: Mat Pendleton, Lower Sioux Community, Indigenous Futures Project; Eric Chapman, Lac du Flambeau Tribal Council member, Manoomin Project; President Gabel; Dockry, Manoomin Project; and Diaz, Indigenous Futures Project.

Reframing Products for Public Impact

Because community-engaged research is driven by community interests and needs, the outcomes have the potential to be of great value to participants. The challenge and the opportunity is to share these outcomes in ways that will reach and serve the public; this requires looking beyond the avenues of typical academic research (Isler and Corbie-Smith 2012). In some projects, "the product [is] as much about the process as the intended impact"; the collaborative work itself serves the community (Jacquez, Ward, and Goguen 2016, 87). For other research projects, researchers and community members must work together to identify what type of product will purposefully resonate with intended communities. Creating ways for research outcomes to support the community is a key part of how community-engaged research effects social change—by offering content that addresses a public concern in a way that is accessible and meaningful for those most impacted.

The articles in this section provide examples of a variety of different kinds of research outcomes that directly affect communities that are part of the research process. From investment in sustainable agriculture practices to public art displays, these products demonstrate creative ways of disseminating content to address public concerns and speak to the greater public good.

"Agriculture and the River: The University's Role in Societal Learning, Innovation, and Action" by Nicholas R. Jordan, Carissa Schively Slotterback, David Mulla, and Len Kne

Across Minnesota and beyond, "the agriculture-water relationship—now and in the future—is complicated," yet this relationship is at the center of myriad ecological, social, and political debates (Jordan et al. 2017). Focusing on a portion of the Minnesota River watershed, this project draws together campus researchers who have proven the ecological value of "some 15 winter-tolerant and perennial crops" and community stakeholders from local communities, state agencies, environmental organizations, farmers, and agriculture commodity groups. Together, these disparate partners worked to understand the various perspectives of the different stakeholders, identify and design possible solutions, and begin the implementation of agricultural practices to improve water quality. The project facilitated the collaborative learning, innovation, and "coordinated action that are essential to address issues related to agriculture, water, and a climate for the common good" (Jordan et al. 2017). For this project, the process of collaboration, of working together across the divergent interests and perspectives of many stakeholders, made possible the implementation of new agricultural practices.

Eroded stream and river banks allow excess sediment — primarily clay and silt — into waterways. Sediment is considered a contaminant and contributes to cloudy, murky water, which degrades habitat for fish and aquatic life. Image via MPCA Photos, Flickr.

"Professor Jiao Xingtao and the Yangdeng Art Cooperative Project" by Jiao Xingtao and Mary Modeen

Over the course of several years, 37 artists visited Yangdeng, a small rural village in China, to participate in the Yangdeng Art Cooperative Project. In collaboration with local community members, the artists worked to craft public installations that share the patterns of everyday life in the village. From wall paintings on houses to benches on the main bridge over the Yangdeng River, the artworks themselves are intended to serve the community. Some of the artwork evoked stories from community members; other installations inspired people to reimagine their community, such as when one villager turned a stretch of riverbank into a pleasing public social space. The creative projects stemmed from community stories and interests and simultaneously transformed the community itself.

The Twelve Jing Xiakou, a real scene, Taishan Shigandang. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.

"Putting Suppliers on the Map" by Kelly Meza Prado

Working with a watershed organization in Colombia's cloud forest, researchers from the University of Minnesota and the University of Hawaii set out not only to understand the effectiveness of various water conservation efforts on water quality and quantity, but also to understand what motivates landowners' participation in conservation efforts. The collaborative project began with a commitment to "create a research product that would be beneficial" to the watershed organization and local communities. As a result, the team created a website with dynamic mapping to share the experiences and stories of local participants. The stories on the website were an effective tool: they have become a communication tool for the watershed organization, and they helped researchers, the watershed organization, and other community members understand the varied motivations and values that drive water conservation practices. By aligning the product with community interests and needs, everyone benefited. As Meza Prado (2018) explains, "we hope that this work is one more example of how community-engaged research projects might create products that are useful to partners, especially when they are grassroots organizations that tend to be under-resourced and overworked." This commitment to products for public impact is central to community-engaged research and to creating real social change.

Baudelino Rivero shows one of the streams under protection of the Asobolo watershed organization. He visits this point in a weekly basis as part of his duties helping to monitor water quality. Image courtesy of Kelly Meza Prado.

"Storying the Floods: Experiments in Feminist Flood Futures" by Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Margot Higgins, Tamara Dean, Eric G. Booth, and Rebecca Lave

Written by both campus and community partners, this article examines a collaborative, "community-driven oral history effort in south-western Wisconsin…[and] the work it inspired developing participatory flood models" (Druschke et al. 2022). After the area flooded in 2018, this oral history effort began collecting stories of how people negotiated the floods and the different kinds of grassroots interventions and support structures communities organized. Collected on a website, Stories from the Flood is an extensive archive of community content. The stories demonstrate that local communities "are already creating and sustaining creative responses to flooding, and have been for well over a century, inspiring us to argue for new flood management methodologies that attend to improvisation, narrative, and mutual support" (Druschke et al. 2022). The sharing of stories itself—the process of this research—gave community members a sense of support and agency. Sharing the collection on a website—a more durable product—allows these stories to give testimony, to highlight a variety of systemic failures of flood recovery efforts, and to build community cohesion for the future.

Fortney Farm in Soldiers Grove. Image courtesy of Tim Hundt

Conclusion

Publishing these stories in *Open Rivers* is another way that all these authors have sought to create research products that speak to broader public audiences. The community-engaged research projects shared in this collection are rooted in the relationships between campus and community partners in place; the questions and products, then, are specific to those community interests and needs. Yet the projects offer examples for how to do quality community-engaged research. In this way, they have the potential to create wider public impact. Sharing their work with *Open Rivers*, a journal committed to publishing content that is accessible to a broad audience and contributes to public concerns, is one way that authors continue to effect social and environmental change beyond the project itself.

Community-engaged research is a powerful process for creating change. To do this work well, however, is not always easy, but it is invaluable. Turning research toward public impact is imperative for mobilizing collective action to address current and forthcoming social and environmental challenges. Researchers who are deeply committed to this work argue that

> equity-driven, collaborative, and intentionally change-oriented research practices may extend our direct impact as researchers but stretch our institutional capacity to support such approaches to research. Attending to existing research structures, policies, procedures, and practices within higher education institutions and how they need to strengthen or change to accommodate collaborative engagement research is imperative as we enter this next generation of community campus engagement. (Jacquez, Ward, and Goguen 2016, 93)

As campus and community partners galvanize our commitment to community-engaged research, the work will continue to change our society, our institutions, and ourselves.

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Footnotes

[1] Laurie Moberg, "Fluid Landscapes: Materializing the Future on Thailand's Flooded Rivers" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2018).

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About the Author

Laurie Moberg is the editor for *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, a digital journal of public scholarship published at the University of Minnesota (UMN) by the Institute for Advanced Study and UMN Libraries Publishing. She earned her Ph.D. in anthropology from UMN in 2018. Her doctoral research investigates recurrent episodes of flooding on rivers in Thailand and queries how the ecological, social, and cosmological entanglements between people and the material world are reimagined and reconfigured in the aftermath of disasters. In her current work, she approaches public scholarship as a critical strategy for expanding whose stories are heard, for shaping our public conversations, and for forming solutions for our shared ecological challenges.