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Research Note:

Ethics and Epistemology: Giving Back in the Klamath

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Note. This research note is part of the thematic section, Giving Back Through Collaboration in Practice, in the special issue titled “Giving Back in Field Research,” published as Volume 10, Issue 2 in the *Journal of Research Practice*.

My research is concerned with the history and politics of watershed management in Northern California. The waters of the Klamath are shared by farmers, ranchers, fishermen, hydroelectric dams, Native American communities and one the most biologically diverse and threatened ecoregions on the planet (DelaSalla, Reid, Frest, Strittholt, & Olson, 1999). The politics of knowledge within this context makes the process of doing research a contentious and potentially divisive endeavor. I was fortunate enough to have been welcomed into a community of scientists and activists who helped steer my research questions and approaches through these contested waters. Through a collaborative institutional framework, a formal research-oversight process was instituted to guard against misappropriation of knowledge, culture, and property, and ensure that research ultimately gives back to those who share their time and knowledge with researchers. While the terms *giving back* and *guarding against misappropriation* have proven difficult to define, I now realize that the legitimacy of my research ultimately derives from its ability to improve the lives of those who have welcomed me into their homes and communities.

In my first semester of graduate school, my perspective on science changed drastically when faced, on one hand, with the work of participatory action researchers such as Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda, and on the other, with sociological, feminist, and postcolonial perspectives on science (Anderson, 2002; Fals-Borda, 1982; Freire, 1970/2007; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 2008). From the participatory research literature, I learned about research done by and for communities, where praxis and social transformation provided the standards for determining the legitimacy of knowledge rather than ivory-tower epistemic virtues of “objectivity” or “disinterestedness.” From the science studies literature, I gleaned a perspective of science as practice and culture, a dynamic, power-laden process of negotiation and association among actors, human and otherwise. Inspired by the teaching of Jeff Romm, I began to see how social assignments of similarity and difference structure resource management institutions in ways that stabilize racial formations and unevenly distribute resource benefits and burdens. Through Romm, I learned about resource conflicts taking place in the Klamath River Basin of Northern California and Southern Oregon involving tribes, farmers, fisherfolk, transnational hydropower corporations, state agencies, and environmental NGOs.

I was instantly taken by the way that controversies rooted in different ways of understanding and valuing the world and stemming from legacies of genocide and dispossession were being diverted into disputes over watershed science. Considerations of justice in complex issues such as water allocation and land-use regulation were being sorted out through technical battles in courts and administrative hearings over such issues as what temperatures would trigger toxic algae blooms or whether instances of groundwater pumping could be connected to low in-stream flows. I wondered whether there could be any room for a reflexive, praxis-driven and community-engaged science in management forums saturated with such elaborate *performances of objectivity*.

Through Romm, I was introduced to Ron Reed, the cultural biologist for the Karuk Tribe. Reed has taught me about the intricate dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in Klamath resource management practice. Historically, management practices performed under the banner of science excluded the Karuk people from decision-making arenas and criminalized their resource uses and ceremonial practices. “Best-available science” legitimized state authority over Karuk ancestral territory and justified the exploitation of the timber, mineral, and water resources of the Klamath. However, in recent decades, Karuk officials, activists, and scientists have carved out space for indigenous voices in watershed science and Klamath resource management policy. To some extent, “shared science” has provided a context in which Karuk actors have been able to gain political and cultural representation in policy arenas and make management practices more accountable to people and place. However, the benefits of sharing knowledge such as jobs, grants, or access to resources do not always accrue to either those who share their knowledge or to the communities implicated in the research.

In 2008, Reed and colleagues at the Karuk Department of Natural Resources laid out a vision for a formal collaboration between the Department and the University of California, Berkeley, United States (UC Berkeley), to facilitate dialogue between students, professors, and Karuk scientists. Such dialogue would be aimed at “eco-cultural

restoration,” restoring Karuk ancestral lands, empowering the Karuk community, and healing the historically extractive and exploitative relationship between UC Berkeley researchers and the Karuk Tribe (for more on eco-cultural restoration, see Karuk Tribe of California, 2008). The Karuk-UC Berkeley Collaborative (KBC) came to life through the efforts of Karuk scientists Ron Reed and Bill Trip, United States Forest Service fire ecologist Frank Lake, UC Berkeley professors Tom Carlson and Jennifer Sowerwine, and Berkeley graduate students Sibyl Diver, Arielle Halpbern, and Carolyn Smith. The KBC has since become a laboratory for developing knowledge-sharing processes that bridge the various epistemic communities we bring together. A main focus of the KBC has been developing a research protocol that simultaneously guards against misappropriation of tribal cultural and intellectual property, and ensures that our research “gives back” by working towards local ecological restoration and community empowerment.

In attempting to design a consent and oversight process, we have found it difficult to anticipate exactly how certain research activities might distribute risks and benefits across the different individuals, families, communities, genders, age groups, and geographies they implicate. The ethics and politics of knowledge shift depending on the type of knowledge and the context of knowledge production and dissemination. Though we have attempted to make “giving back” a principal condition of doing research through the KBC, it has been difficult to clarify the notions *intellectual property*, *shared authorship*, and *compensation for interview time* once and for all, as each research project brings into play a unique range of ethical, cultural, and political issues depending on the resources, individuals, and families involved. It has also been difficult to decide how to best publish and communicate findings or where to securely and conveniently house data and research material. We have also struggled to find a way to ensure consistent and thorough tribal oversight while not overburdening our already busy colleagues. While we have yet to solidify the final details of the protocol, we have put in place a structure for communication between researchers and a committee of Karuk tribal members, representatives and community members to ensure oversight and accountability for outside researchers and journalists. In the meantime, the KBC has provided support on grant writing and restoration planning, and is currently conducting research projects aimed at community-identified issues such as food security, fire management, and watershed restoration.

In my own research endeavors, I have attempted to give back in various ways such as helping with land management planning and grant writing, tracking down old maps, ethnographic field notes and aerial photos, making dinner, doing garden work, feeding animals, or running errands for research partners. Eating and boarding with community members and their families has been the best method for obtaining feedback on my research ideas and making sure that my questions address relevant community issues. While this dialogue has significantly shaped the main approach of my research, it has been difficult at times to ask questions that are of value in both my field community and my academic community. It has been difficult for me to position my research in a way that both responds to the demand for objectivity in resource management forums and is critical of the exclusion and dispossession occurring in the name of science. In discussions with community partners and colleagues about my methods, many of the

same themes have surfaced regarding the inclusions and exclusions associated with scientific practices, the legacies of racism in resource management, and the strategic value of performing objectivity in resource conflicts.

Donna Haraway's notion of *situated knowledge* has helped me come to grips with the partiality of my own perspective, the "unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions" (Haraway, 1988, p. 579) and has encouraged me to seek out other partial perspectives and work towards a "more adequate, richer, better account of a world" (p. 579). I have been constantly forced to come to terms with the ways my own perspective as a white, male, non-Karuk outsider is raced, gendered, politically positioned, and situated socio-culturally and economically. By studying collaborative watershed institutions in my own research, I am attempting to analyze the process of multi-perspectival inquiry itself to observe the inclusions and exclusions of knowledge-producing and knowledge-sharing practices as they emerge and become institutionalized. I am currently working with community partners to develop a framework that evaluates the processes and outcomes of collaborative watershed management according to community and place-based indicators. It is my hope that articulating the principles of procedural and distributive justice for resource management in local watersheds will give back to the people who have housed, fed, and taught me. I have come to see that the legitimacy of my research ultimately depends on its ability to improve these people's lives. The relationships I have built with community members and the formal processes put in place to facilitate dialogue between us will hopefully keep my research working towards local watershed restoration and community empowerment.

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