




Toward Transformative Engagement



Reflections & Provocations for Research Futures

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"People, in community, within relationships are the key to transforming our conditions for the better. How we related to one another, as unique individuals, with valued lived experiences and knowledge, begins with respect. As a practice, this respect can and must be nurtured, such that collaboratively developed understanding and perspectives can be cultivated to engage the complexities of our time through solidarity-building, mutual aid, knowledge sharing and action. When we do it together, for each other, care for one another, and struggle for more, we all benefit." – Aneil J. Joseph

Land Acknowledgment

The conveners and contributors to this research project acknowledge many of the lands we live and work within as traditional Indigenous territories. We uphold an ongoing responsibility to consider and engage with the colonial contexts that have been, and continue to be, perpetuated by status quo approaches to research, teaching, and engagement practices. The contributors to this project, our organizations and institutions recognize and acknowledge that our work is located in the traditional territories of many First Nations, Inuit, and Matis peoples, including:

- The Wabanaki Confederacy, unceded and ancestral Mi'kma'ki territory,
- The unceded Coast Salish Territory -the traditional lands of the x^wməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō, Səlílwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) and k^wik^wəłəm (Kwikwetlem) Nations,
- The treaty lands and territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, Attiwonderonk, the Haudenosaunee, and the Six Nations of the Grand River.
- The Anishnaabe (Anish-nah-bay) and those within the lands protected by the "Dish with One Spoon" wampum agreement.

With respect and gratitude to the Indigenous peoples who have long lived and continue to care for these lands, this acknowledgment is a statement of solidarity and deepening responsibility to engage in community, learning, and shared action toward anticolonial futures through our work, in our communities, and through our institutions.



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About This Project

This research reflection and provocation emerged from a series of dialogues convened and facilitated by members of the University of Guelph's Community Engaged Scholarship Institute between 2021 and 2025. During this time, the field of community engaged scholarship has been under increasing pressure to adapt in the face of deepening socio-political and ecological polycrisis driven by dominant paradigm capitalist and colonial approaches to societal change. Today, institutions and communities committed to community engaged methodologies face ongoing, historically-rooted critical challenges that often hinder work for transformative change. In the face of continued underlying unjust institutional and societal dynamics, education and research paradoxically continue to be both sources of inspiration and agency as well as enforcers of the status quo.

This project reflects an evolving set of questions, commitments, perspectives, and practices that emerged from contributors' insightful conversations about the constraints, strengths, and possibilities they witness in the field of community engaged scholarship. Project contributors share a need and desire to be in deeper learning and practice with others in the field who are committed to supporting movements for social justice through their work and scholarship; their voices and perspectives, however, are diverse. This document seeks to uphold contributors' multi-vocality and diversity of perspectives rather than to create a seemingly unified voice. Therefore, the following includes shared provocations, direct quotes from dialogue contributors, and pop-out field notes that reflect the collaborative process/inquiry. Rather than a comprehensive study, what follows is a snapshot in time of the evolution of the field of community engaged scholarship and reflects the views of the contributors along this journey of deepening practices. Our conversations primarily focused on dynamics within the relationship between academia and communities which influence everyday praxis of transformative engagement and research futures.

The following is offered as a resource for conversation, practice, and relationship building that can support community engaged scholars, practitioners, institutes, and community organizations in advancing toward transformative engagement through learning and leading together within, between, and across communities and universities.

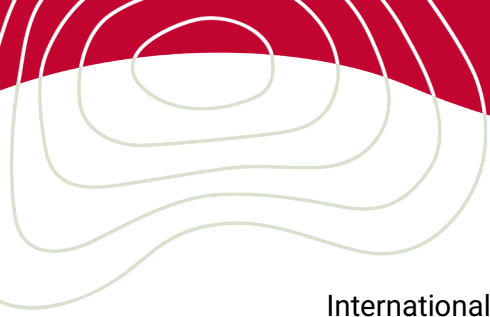
Gratitude and Attribution

Gratitude

Thank you to all the contributors to this exploration, those listed below and those who engaged anonymously, for your insight, inspiration, and radical commitments to transformative practices and critically engaged futures.

Project Contributors

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Afterword: What Kind of University do we Want?

By Am Johal

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Project Overview: Toward Transformative Engagement: Dialogue Sessions

Through this experimental dialogue project, a group of scholar-practitioners and community-practitioners, folks who work and collaborate between academia and community organizations, were brought together in online dialogues to explore the future of transformative community engaged research and scholarship.

This project was convened by and engaged folks who work at the intersection of community/scholarship, which included community organization leaders and academics working within traditional university contexts who lead community engaged research institutes/programs. This project overview is intended as a provocation first and foremost for folks working in these contexts. That said, the dialogues that took place through this project and the perspectives that follow, are reflective both of the practices of contributors and also the work that is being done around the world to reimagine the role of research, universities, and community engagement through transformative methodologies. For individuals, organizations, institutions, and communities interested in engaged research practices the following is offered as provocation, affirmation, and amplification of the need and evolving role that community engaged scholarship can play in fostering critical hope and transformational change.

Through this project contributors were engaged through a series of virtually convened collaborative/critical dialogues as a method for engaging in shared knowledge co-creation. The common interest between contributors convened included:

1. A common commitment to advancing the practice of critical community engagement,
2. Face the shared challenge of delivering on a fundamental commitment to critical/transformative change while at the same time operating within, or collaborating with, conventional higher education institutions and community organizations,
3. Are actively meeting the needs of diverse stakeholders such as community members, students, faculty, staff, and/or administrators, and
4. Have the common interest in sharing knowledge/practice between each other and their initiatives to contribute toward the field of transformative community engagement.



Contributors' perspectives and practices for transformative/critical community engaged scholarship were explored through shared reflection and engaging questions such as:

- What constitutes the "critical" aspect of critical community engagement?
- What practices catalyze "transformative," "radical," or "systemic" engagement?
- What are the enabling factors that contribute to transformative engagement?
- What barriers do practitioners face when intending critical or transformative change?
- How might the field of community engagement need to evolve to address the increasingly complex societal challenges, today, and into the future?

"Research is about our shared futures, and therefore we need diverse voices and engagement to be able to contribute, inform, and shape those shared futures. This required fostering new ways of knowing, doing, being, and collaborating; updating underlying beliefs and passions to support change in, through, and beyond our institutions." – Scholar-practitioner dialogue contributor


"So many social programs are needing more than they're getting, and perhaps needing to do more research to figure out their direction and how to move forward. At the same time there's a huge opportunity to engage scholars with community and for scholars to put themselves out there and learn from and with the people who are actually living the day-to-day life of communities and organizations they hope to engage." – Community-practitioner dialogue contributor

Project Summary: Reflections and Provocations: Transformative Engagement

The following is a qualitative thematic overview of the highlighted themes and recommendations and/or perspectives and practices from both groups of contributors.

Findings are organized by each group in the key inquiry areas of focus which included:

- Future of the field
- Contributors toward transformative engagement
- Barriers toward transformative engagement
- Transformative perspectives and practices



The following are offered as provocations toward transformative engagement and critical research futures:

Future of the Field

This section explores reflections upon the current state of the field and the shared aspirations for community engaged scholarship to meaningfully contribute toward transformative engagement:

Scholar-Practitioners: Themes & Recommendations

The contributing group of scholar-practitioners reflected upon and offered the following provocations:

Shared Futures

Research is about our shared futures and therefore we need diverse voices and critical engagement to be able to contribute, inform, and shape those futures. This requires disrupting institutions themselves, and fostering new ways of knowing, doing, being, and collaborating; updating underlying beliefs and passions to support change in, through, and beyond academic institutions.

Community-Led

For the field to evolve beyond the status quo, we need to de-center universities, engage in true partnership, and go beyond engagement toward community leading projects not just being engaged by academia.

Being Good Neighbours

Making our communities and cities come alive as places for community members and learners to contribute and learn together. Dismantling academic hierarchy and recognizing students and faculty as community members first who also have entwined responsibilities, needs, and hopes within their communities.

Transdisciplinary Methodologies


Working at the intersection of arts/creativity, sciences, politics, and social justice as a foundation for ethical engaged scholarship and promoting alternative methodologies while making them accessible within and beyond academic institutions.

Cross-Collaboration & Field-Building

Engaging in deeper and broader cross-collaboration between community, institutions, students, and multi-stakeholders to build the field of transformative engagement and foster shared learning and practice building.

Scholar-Activism

Acknowledging historical and present-day harm enacted through colonial and capitalist academic systems of oppression, and boldly working with black, indigenous, racialized, queer,



trans, and two spirit communities through activism and allyship as a fundamental element of engaged scholarship.

Community-Practitioners: Themes & Recommendations

The contributing group of community-practitioners reflected upon and offered the following provocations:

Evolving Engagement

1. Faster, more flexible, and lower barrier opportunities for engagement and implementation,
2. Capacity building and educational opportunities for community organizations and community members interested in engaged practices,
3. An array of micro community engagement practice/process informational materials for community organizations/members shared use/learning,
4. Speeding up research timelines/support to be more responsive to the urgent needs of community members/organizations, and
5. Matchmaking thought leaders across the field and between communities, community organizations, and academia for co-learning and collaboration.

Community Advocates

1. Community engaged institutions advocating across departments/programs for community-based research agendas/ opportunities,
2. Community engaged units as relationship and knowledge sharing ambassadors/intermediaries between universities and communities, and
3. Advocate for bottom-up research strategies through which community projects and their needs shape university research commitments i.e. from classrooms, to projects, to broader longitudinal university research agendas.

Deepening Critical Engagement

1. Linking community research projects to broader sectoral and cross-sectoral change initiatives,
2. Support day-to-day service providers with opportunities to address systemic root causes that continuously marginalize community stakeholders,
3. More agile, open-ended, and exploratory research frameworks that allow space for community partners to determine the scope and benefits of engagement processes,
4. Developing longer-term relationships with community partners/members, and
5. Acknowledging and/or addressing systemic capitalist mechanisms/barriers to critical community engagement.

Contributors Toward Transformative Engagement

When reflecting upon their work and lived experiences, practitioners identified contributing practices within their areas of focus and underscored academic practices that support critical engagement and community engaged activist practices within academia and communities/organizations.



Scholar-Practitioners

The contributing group of scholar-practitioners reflected upon and offered the following provocations:

Academic Practices

- Being able to distribute resources to community collaborators
- Identifying, building trust, and relationship with grassroots organizations, nonprofits, and social service agencies that are doing the work on the ground
- Institutionally there can be advantage of being under the radar to be able to take risks i.e. asking for forgiveness rather than permission
- Humility to lift up others through collaboration
- Valuing the skill that knowledge brokers/ connectors bring to the work of developing cross-sectoral partnerships
- Diversifying the student body so that the classroom reflects all communities and communities are represented in the classroom
- Learning from fellow practitioners about how to best care for ourselves and families while we do this work, especially in times of great crisis
- Supporting and celebrating community ownership of research

Community Engaged Activist Practices Within Academia

- Practicing mutual aid, solidarity building, and knowledge sharing with communities
- Anti-colonial and decolonizing practices at the forefront of community engaged practices
- White supremacy and the characteristics of white supremacist culture map onto kind of systematic institutional pressures within universities, therefore, engaged scholarship needs to be working to address white supremacy culture in order to be transformational
- Working within and beyond institutional walls to address societal inequities and support community members/org's who are committed to applying radical practices
- Making room for new imaginaries/ futures to emerge i.e. abolition, mutual aid, critical futures

Community-Practitioners

The contributing group of community-practitioners reflected upon and offered the following provocations:

Community Engaged Activist Practices Within Communities and Organizations

- Creating space for peers/communities to meet material needs, while also focusing on systems level changes and advocating for changes to the structures that produce inequity and harm in the first place
- Providing ideas, methods and inspiration for community members, including other groups, organizations, and individuals, who make change in their communities, centered around social inclusion, local economies, and community wealth building
- Slowing down engagement process, timelines, and deliverables to make room for peer-learning, relationship building, and individual and collective care

- Integrating rigorous community engaged research/scholarship expertise and skills into the daily work of organizations in order to more meaningfully address the complex needs of beneficiaries and the larger community
- Making research methodologies accessible and attainable for community members and organizations including guidance, support, funding, and skill development
- For community organizations research first approaches support responsive community interventions that are based upon community informed data rather than upon assumptions or preferences

Academic Practices

- Changing mindsets in academia away from rigid research process to practical community benefits
- Academic commitment to tangible community benefit/change and follow through with community partners throughout the whole process
- Flexibility when working at the community level and the recognition that time is urgent, often resources are scarce, and this is not a lab, life happens
- Understanding the need for very good communication and to keep an open mind to community contexts and needs
- University/institutional prompt responsiveness when issues with/in communities arise in engagement processes
- Going beyond traditional research methods, such as, surveys, statistics, standard quantitative research etc. toward multimedia and arts-based storytelling i.e. direct quotes, infographics, maps, and narrative that tell the human side of complex problems
- Researchers' commitment to building trust by engaging communities through accessible language, cultural sensitivity, and an understanding of the diverse needs/contexts of community members
- Balancing/prioritizing community norms with/before insensitive academic procedures i.e. have a get-to-know-you conversation before asking someone to sign a form
- Having community engaged institutes partner as third-party contributors to research practices to support ethical engagement and support creating impactful outcomes for community service providers
- Community engaged scholars acting as advocates for community organizations and lived experiences within and beyond academia
- Community engaged researchers dedicated to being open, flexible, and asking good questions
- Providing community partners platforms to share their work, knowledge, and offering them collaboration opportunities

What is Community?

Contributors to the dialogues defined community in a variety of ways and suggested multiple priorities and perspectives are at play in any given definition of community depending on context, such as:

- Community can engaged ideas about common locations, social activities, populations/identities, social structure, beliefs/sentiments/connections, and interests. It is important to think about all aspects of community when using the word
- Community cannot be defined with one sentence or statement, as it can look different to each individual/community/context
- When we think about community, it tends to be described as the people or places someone belongs, interacts within, or finds social engagement. The definition can be much larger when you take into account that it really is any place someone shares something in common or is working towards the same goal or vision. Community encompasses the entire person or group, with a shared set of values, norms, characteristics, etc. Strong communities encourage members to express their thoughts and build relationships with others
- Beyond community, we may need new terms of engagement such as transformative solidarity

Barriers Toward Transformative Engagement

When invited to reflect upon barriers to transformative engagement within their work, practitioners shared a variety of drivers of status quo outcomes and barriers to advancing critical practices within their given contexts as outlined below.

Scholar-Practitioners: Status Quo Drivers in Academia

The contributing group of scholar-practitioners reflected upon and offered the following provocations:

- Non-diverse academies making many decisions on behalf of diverse peoples
- Academics tend to and/or need to dance to the neoliberal tune of dominant culture
- The centering and reinforcing of universities as institutional and colonial power and knowledge brokers
- Community engaged scholars having to fight to prove the value of engaged approaches
- Many small and/or rural universities and colleges do not have the capacities and are not supported/funded to do critical engaged scholarship
- Positioning faculty and students as neutral actors who are above communities rather than community members and fellow citizens with their own positionalities/stories
- Ongoing academic hierarchical staffing changes putting critical/engaged practices and teams at risk and continuing the need to re-justify engaged work and staff positions
- Critical transformative agendas being co-opted and instrumentalized/weaponized by dominant culture
- Status quo approaches to treating people and their stories as analytical data points
- Conventional/dominant institutions tend to prioritize majority needs over minority needs
- Citation, publication, grant application practices reinforcing academic hierarchies and individualism over community and collaboration
- Primacy of hierarchical scholar publication and grant ladder i.e. tenure track

- Academic timelines: semesters, grant/ funding cycles, staffing contracts etc. effect both timelines for community engaged relationships and the ability of critical scholars to contribute toward long term systemic changes
- The ongoing need to work around and/ or be under the radar of institutional policies and practices in order to meaningfully support and engage in critical community engagement
- Traditional teaching and learning strategies reinforce status quo
- Academic jargon vs accessible community language
- Continued need to "play the game" to stay in academia
- Emotional and physical exhaustion/ burn-out of ongoing fight for critical scholarship
- The ongoing marginalization of rural communities, their access to academic engagement/institutions, and devaluing of lived experiences
- Extractive/exploitive processes and practices for research funding across conventional academic funding streams

Critical Barriers: Academia

- Lack of collaboration between internal colleagues, less resources institutions, and cross-institutionally
- Lack of accountability mechanisms in the university geared toward respectful critical community engagement
- Lack of processes/support for repairing community relationships if/when harmful incidents occur
- Lack of ethical principles, oversight, and accountability mechanisms for community engaged teaching and learning
- Lack of faculty accountability for service learning initiatives and/or community engagement
- Conventional scholarships blurred lines between knowledge mobilization, dissemination, and community engagement leading to the primacy of academic hierarchy
- Need to make community engaged knowledge/media more accessible (i.e. podcasts/open databases) and recognized as scholarly contribution
- Lack of and barriers toward academic staffing diversity
- Lack of and barriers toward academic student diversity
- Spoken and unspoken individual and systemic reinforcement of white supremacy in and beyond academia
- Lack of institutional support for navigating crisis i.e. covid pandemic vs. business as usual
- The danger in sharing critical practices/tactics/interventions and the pervasive dominant cooptation of critical forms of resistance

Community-Practitioners: Status Quo Drivers in Community/Organizations

The contributing group of community-practitioners reflected upon and offered the following provocations:

- Many organizational programs and projects get designed without data, instead, often in the non-profit space "the squeaky wheels" get attention first and we jump to implementation

- Many community partners struggle with the timeline of academic processes which can lack flexibility in many areas such as ethical approval timelines
- Academic systems' encouragement and structure around individual authorship/publishing, peer competition, and exceptionalism fosters extractive relationships with communities
- Need to develop partnerships even when funding is scarce
- Pushback from social agencies to embrace change when community stakeholders are "screaming for something different"

Critical Barriers: Community/Organizations


- Having to juggle community needs and academic boundaries, loopholes, and rules can lead to community organizations feeling like they have "one hand tied behind their backs"
- The dichotomy between academia acting in condescending ways toward community partners, and, at the same time community partners can have unfeasible requests within the context of academia
- Unprepared teachers/students who have not been properly oriented toward community context/needs
- Lack of funding stability in the social (and academic) sector
- Lack of and declining consistent staffing in the charitable sector
- Increasing upheavals in personal lives affecting social benefit sector organizations i.e. continuous stress, pandemics, etc.

"As a community organization, it is important to align and engage with those that have the expertise and skills to achieve our goals, as well as offer out knowledge to support others. Being matched with those in other fields, to collaborate and share resources is important to continue building bridges across sectors. Each partner brings its own unique vision, making any project stronger through learning, creating space for open conversations and ensuring diverse results by adding unique perspectives." – Sara Ropp

Art in a Just Recovery: Transformative Community-Engaged Project Reflection & Conversation

With Amy Kipp and Michelle Peek

In February 2023, community members and artists from across the city of Guelph came together to co-create Art in a Just Recovery. This community mural project was organized by Art Not Shame, the Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition, social artist Melanie Schambach, and Amy Kipp – a community engaged researcher from the University of Guelph. Through the mural project, community members created art pieces reflecting on experiences of community care in the context of the pandemic, and imagined what a more caring city could look like. Interested participants were invited to share their art, as well as their experience making it, as part of a



research-creation project building knowledge about community care and collective artmaking. In what follows, Amy Kipp and Michelle Peek – Executive Director of Art Not Shame – reflect on this collaboration and its transformative possibilities.

Amy: For me, part of what made Art in a Just Recovery feel transformative is that it was first and foremost a community arts initiative. This meant that research was never our only, or main, priority. Instead of centring research questions, we centred principles of community-engaged arts. We took a ‘come as you are approach,’ paid attention to process over output, and practices consent in an ongoing way. These principles aligned with Art Not Shame and GNSC’s existing community practices and I think helped to create a caring container within which the research could take place.

Michelle: I agree. Centering process over output, and practicing ongoing consent by seeing it as fluid and evolving (in ways that best support the participants) – rather than fixed and rigid – are the kinds of values that make for an ideal partnership. I do believe AIJR is a model for how collective artmaking and research can work together, which stands in contrast to research projects that I have seen use the arts in ways that felt very extractive to me.

Amy: I remember when we first met that you said you were often hesitant to work with researchers. This hesitancy also came up in conversations I had with other participants of the Mural Project during participatory planning sessions. Many spoke about the harm that they had seen research do in the past. I think it was really important to collectively acknowledge this, and that we wanted to do things differently through our research. We had to make space for people’s experiences and concerns, as well as space to figure out a different way forward together.

Michelle: You’re right, I was admittedly cautious about how to bring research into this work, but I felt very much from the beginning that you (and the rest of the team) understood the importance of things like mutuality, respect, consent, as well as adaptability. I could see you modeling this throughout, and also witnessed how you stayed with the trouble when things were rocky.

Amy: It means so much to hear that. It was a huge privilege to be welcomed into this community arts project as a researcher, and I really felt the weight of this responsibility. There were definitely times that I felt like giving up – for example, when we were struggling to get ethics approval – but you and other community partners modelled the importance of continuing to move forward (slowly and carefully) even when things were challenging. Ultimately, what I learned from Art in a Just Recovery was that showing up and staying with the messiness is how we can learn to build knowledge in more just and transformative ways.

Michelle: You took the words right out of my mouth. If we can stay with the messiness, and continue to show up for the project’s greater purpose, transformation is almost always possible. It can be so easy to retreat into our silos – and sometimes a retreat, or pause, or even a complete break is absolutely necessary and a kind of transformation itself – but when we stick with it, beautiful things are possible.

Amy: Beautiful things like the Art in a Just Recovery mural, as well as the community connections and new knowledge created through it. I see the final mural every time I go to the

Farmer's Market and it reminds me of the complicated, beautiful stories it holds about community care and collective artmaking. Beyond that, I can honestly say this research project transformed my practice. During a conversation we had as part of the research you shared with me, "Belonging, like community, is in the doing, in the holding." This idea shifted how I do research, and how I am in community with others.

Michelle: That's really special to hear. I think what I am taking with me is the way these kinds of projects enact hope, possibility, and aliveness, while grappling with, and not shying from, discomfort, pain, and difficult histories (and futures). I think that's really what I mean by holding: what we're holding and how we do the holding matters. I truly believe we all have the capacity to hold ourselves, each other, and this world, in loving, justice-oriented ways, but/an we need spaces to practice this.



Image caption: The unveiling of Art in A Just Recovery: Reconnecting to Us. The Art in a Just Recovery Mural: Reconnecting to Us, co-created by 70+ community members with social artist Melanie Schambach and in partnership with Art Not Shame and the Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition. Photo credit: Michelle Peek. June 2023. Explore this project further: <https://artnotshame.org/art-in-a-just-recovery>

"If we can stay with the messiness, and continue to show up for the project's greater purpose, transformation is almost always possible. It can be so easy to retreat into our siloes – and sometimes a retreat, or pause, or even a complete break is absolutely necessary and a kind of transformation itself – but when we stick with it, beautiful things are possible." – Michelle Peek



Image caption: The Art in a Just Recovery Mural: Reconnecting to Us. Two colourful circles intersect with images of faces, the moon, books, and other artistic renderings.

Transformative Perspectives & Practices

Drawing inspiration from perspectives and practices being cultivated in communities, movements, organizations, and within academia, contributing practitioners offered an array of critical perspectives and practices that support transformative engagement:

Community-Practitioners

The contributing group of community-practitioners reflected upon and offered the following provocations:

- Working at multiple levels of transformation:
 - Meeting direct needs such as housing, finding jobs, etc.,
 - What's most missing is more systemic changes, not only being responsive to needs, but fundamentally addressing the root causes of those unmet needs,
 - Shifting mindsets from addressing symptoms to root causes
- Engagement through the whole process: Identify barriers, perform research, receive community feedback, communicate findings to relevant departments/funding opportunities, connect dots between addressing systemic issues that lead back to benefits for key community stakeholders
- Remembering that advocating for and changing systems is very hard, complicated and complex; more like a marathon than a sprint
- Looking to national and international examples of addressing community barriers, performing literature reviews to support research question identification, and building on and contributing to real-world case studies that link back to the local contexts in order to advocate from informed positions
- Ongoing check-ins between community engaged scholars and community partners throughout projects
- Suiting research methods and processes to the unique needs of communities and community members
- Prioritizing lived experiences and stories as the driving force for policy change i.e. bottom up
- Intentionally matching students/ researchers who can ask good questions, and have real interest in the community and stakeholders of focus

Scholar-Practitioners

The contributing group of scholar-practitioners reflected upon and offered the following provocations:

- Being in allyship with those enacting and embodying queer Black feminist analytic
- Honoring indigenous rights and settler responsibilities in relationship to ownership of data/knowledge/cultural protocols
- Interrogating social, political, and historical context as a fundamental aspect of engagement
- Acknowledging complicity in unjust systems of oppression
- Tending to the needs of the most intersectionally marginalized
- Relentless feminist and anti-racist v1s1on
- Constant process of intentional empathy, deep listening, humility, and frank learning/failing
- Explicit and ongoing commitment to anti-oppressive practices at all levels, in collaboration with those most affected by the issues at hand
- Creatively challenging the status quo and turning the critical gaze inwards to self and institution to ensure anti-oppressive practices
- Personal reflection, dialogue with partners (students, community...etc.)
- Being accountable to communities and co-producing the process to the community can lead


- Working with communities and neighbourhoods to identify their needs, their struggles, their hopes and their goals while prioritizing; reciprocal and ongoing relationship
- Contextual asset-based relationship/capacity building (rather than decontextualized lack/deficit imposition and/or expert-oriented problem solving)
- Honoring historical contexts and lived experiences
- Advancing community ownership of data/research outputs
- Justice-oriented allocation of resources toward engaged community members and partners, as well as those disproportionately impact and/or left out of conversations

Transformative Engagement/Critical Questions

Reflective of the perspectives and practices of the folks who contributed to this dialogue project, the following critical questions are offered as a support for shared learning, practice, and engagement with transformative approaches to community engagement and scholarship.

The following is not meant to be an exhaustive list but a range of entry points into conversation, inquiry, and engagement with opportunities to learn and practice as individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions:

- How, and with whom, are you imagining critically diverse futures?
- What and whose practices are you including and engaging with when envisioning shared futures?
- Whose practices and/or futures are not included in your approach?
- Does your current research practice engage with future possibilities that reinforce or disrupt the status quo?
- As a community member, how can our organizations move away from “the way we have always done it” to changing and keeping with the insights generated through research and scholarship?
- How can research support the critical priorities of those who are harmed by dominant approaches to academic and development?
- Who benefits from your inquiry, learning, practice, and work?
- What power do you already hold, how do you use it, and how willing are you to share and/or cede your power?
- How willing are you to take risks, to feel uncomfortable and to interrogate your own or shared currently held beliefs, practices, and privileges?
- Does your research reinforce or unsettle dominant paradigm narratives?
- In what ways does your work challenge or support harmful colonial and capitalist approaches to research and community engagement?
- In what ways does your practice engage in reconciliation, land back, abolition, reparations, or mutual aid?
- What communities do you engage through your practices?


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- In what ways do community members benefit from, shape, and lead your research agendas?
 - How can your local community organizations and academic institutions better be in union and action with the communities with whom you work?
 - Do you know your neighbours?
 - Does your work, learning, scholarship benefit and engage the folks and place where you live? If not, who does it benefit?
 - In what ways can you connect your research with the communities that you may not yet have connected with where you live and work? What might be the risks or harms of doing so?
 - How might you connect your work with others around the world who share similar commitments?
 - How can research become a source of societal healing, connection, and transformational change?

"To my mind, transformative engagement arises from cross-sector collaborations that draw attention to what participants have in common whilst simultaneously valuing their distinctive contributions. Often, it's the difference between partners that adds value. Effective collaborative leadership is required to support all involved to feel safe to openly communicate their knowledge and perspectives. More than this, to take risks, to leave their comfort zones and perhaps, to question and transform their own previous ways of doing, being and knowing. Therein lies the seed for creative solutions." – Ed Stevens

"If we are going to honour the skills of activism and create an even platform for collaboration between academics and activists then academics cannot be paid well and catered to, while activists, hungry and housing insecure, fight to find ways to enable their work – constantly defending and guarding their boundaries and values from buy out and cooptation. Engaged scholars must move beyond community engaged scholarship to community led action. The goals and approaches of engaged scholars must encourage us into union and more importantly, action." – Marsha Myrie Obi

Afterword: What Kind of University Do We Want?

By Am Johal



Can the public university today be a site for decolonizing practices, justice, equity, and community solidarity? In a world where the ground shifts rapidly beneath us, disorientation can cloud our ability to think clearly and act boldly. Amid cascading crises, should universities retreat inward-or is now the time to recommit to their public purpose? I would argue that we need a renewed and urgent commitment to transformative university-community engagement. This is not peripheral work; it is central to the mission of a public university. As scholar Timothy Eatman warns, we must resist "the shrinking imagination" and instead push our institutions to go further, not fold inward.

In *Ill Fares the Land*, Tony Judt wrote with moral clarity about the erosion of public institutions, warning that: "If we have learned anything from the last century, it is that societies need shared narratives, collective hopes, and a sense of moral purpose. Without them, they decay."

Today, many universities resemble managerial bureaucracies more than moral communities. Their role as stewards of the public good is under threat. In a time of deep financial instability, sector-wide cuts, and global uncertainty, universities seem to be moving away from their public mission just when it is most needed. Worse yet, they are attempting to draw a line between their academic mission and their public mission.


Why, when democratic practices are fraying and social infrastructures are collapsing, are universities not rising to meet the moment? Why are they not leading as engaged civic institutions, deeply embedded in the communities they exist in?

We must reimagine the university-not as an insular institution but as a site of solidarity, partnership, and public engagement. A place where teaching, learning, and research are entangled with the needs and struggles of the communities they are embedded within. Without this commitment, the university risks becoming irrelevant-or worse, complicit in the very systems it should be challenging.

This work is fragile. Colleagues across Canada doing community-engaged scholarship often operate in precarious contexts, vulnerable to cuts and shifting institutional priorities. Their work is frequently misunderstood or undervalued by senior leadership, who may see it as outside the "core" mission of the university.

In a time when narrow thinking prevails, holding space for radical imagination is itself a transformative act. Transformative community engagement is ultimately a method by which teaching, research, scholarship, and community partnerships enhance the public mission of the university through their considered entanglement. The academic mission and university-community engagement are inextricably linked to the public mission of the university. Engagement is not something apart from the university-it is wrapped up in its very public purpose. It enacts the university's mission in lived, relational, and measurable ways.

Engagement, as Barbara Holland argues, must be intentional, accountable, and transformational-not only for communities, but for the university itself. When done well, it reshapes institutions. It demands humility, reciprocity, and the courage to share power.



We know what is at stake. We see the consequences of moral panic, technocratic control, and institutional risk aversion.

In response, we must act. Let us reimagine the university by testing its limits and expanding its possibilities. Let it be a place where the impossible

becomes thinkable, where dominant orders are questioned, where knowledge is co-created and shared. A university in relationship to justice – not as a finished project, but as something always on the horizon.

This kind of university will not be easy to build. It requires commitment, courage, and collective imagination. It means upending the institutional inertias that maintain the status quo.

Let us dare to create the university we need: alive, insurgent, and rooted in the public good. A university that is proactive in building more just futures. One that remains, in its most vital moments, a living experiment in imagination, collective transformation, and borderless solidarities – where community knowledge is truly valued as expert.

Resources from the Field

The following is a mashup of resources to read, watch, engage, or learn from/with which are recommended by contributors to this research project. The following reflect perspectives and practices for transformative community engagement, scholarship, and research exemplified by scholars, practitioners, activists, artists, organizations and institutions exploring and embodying various research-oriented approaches to transformative engagement:

Anti-Racist Community Engagement: Digital Companion : <https://compact.org/resources/anti-racist-community-engagement-digital-companion>

Canadian Women's Foundation: Anti-Racist Intersectional Research Guidelines: https://canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CWF_Anti-Racist_Intersectional_Research_Guidelines_EN_final.pdf

Community Engagement for Equitable Systems Change: Tools & Frameworks: <https://www.equitableystems.org/tools-and-frameworks/>

Critical Community Engaged Scholarship: A Snapshot of Current Literature and Praxis: <https://www.cesinstitute.ca/critical-community-engaged-scholarship-snapshot-current-literature-and-praxis>

Evenings & Weekends Consulting: <https://www.eveningsandweekendsconsulting.com/>

Gesturing Toward Decolonial Futures: <https://decolonialfutures.net/>



Hemispheric Institute: <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/>

30th Anniversary Hopper Lecture: Theories of Water ft. Dr. Leanne Simpson:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIQYojlnUtA>

Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science: Dr. Gregory Cajete Talk:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFeNlOqlbzw>

Pause and Effect: <https://www.pauseandeffect.ca/>

Planetary Civics Initiative at RMIT: Wild Hope: Indy Johar Keynote:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQJfCSPvJI>

O My Friends, There is No Friend: The Politics of Friendly at the End of Ecology:
<https://www.transcript-publishing.com/978-3-8376-7026-4/o-my-friends-there-is-no-friend/>

Research 101: A Manifesto for Ethical Research in the Downtown Eastside:
<https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubccommunityandpartnerspublicati/52387/items/1.0377565>

Re-Vision Centre for Art and Social Justice: <https://revisioncentre.ca/>

Introductory Resources for Community Engaged Research:
<https://www.sfu.ca/cei/resources/resources.html>

SFU Community-Engaged Research Initiative: Facilitation for Community Transformation:
<https://www.sfu.ca/cei/publications/2024/Facilitation-for-Community-Transformation.html>

Sociological Review Annual Lecture 2019: Decolonising Methodologies, 20 Years On: Linda Tuhiwai Smith: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSX_4FngXwQ

THE EMERGENCE NETWORK: <https://www.emergencenetwork.org/>

The Urgency of Intersectionality: Kimberle Crenshaw:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o>

Toolkits, Guides, and Case Studies: Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/social-justice-community-action/toolkits/>

Transdisciplinary Field Guide: Utrecht University:
<https://www.uu.nl/en/research/transdisciplinary-field-guide>

Transformative Research Toolkit: Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley: <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/transformative-research-toolkit>