



# Community geography: Toward a disciplinary framework

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## Abstract

Community geography is a growing subfield that provides a framework for relevant and engaged scholarship. In this paper, we define community geography as a form of research praxis, one that involves academic and public scholars with the goal of co-produced and mutually-beneficial knowledge. Community geography draws from a pragmatist model of inquiry, one that views communities as emergent through a recursive process of problem definition and social action. We situate the growth of community geography programs as rooted in two overlapping but distinct traditions: disciplinary development of participatory methodologies and institutional traditions of community engagement in American higher education. We then trace the historical development of these programs, identifying common themes and outlining several challenges that community geographers should prioritize as this subfield continues to grow.

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## Keywords

community geography, engaged scholarship, mixed methods, pragmatism, praxis

## I Introduction/framing

Scholars have long debated the social relevance of academic inquiry, whether suggesting policy applications of empirical analyses, assessing the practical implications of theoretical engagements, or questioning the distance between the ivory tower and the publics outside its walls (Godfrey-Smith, 2003). The discipline of geography has hosted its share of epistemological fights, including both assertions of positivist science during the quantitative revolution through critiques of scientific certainty common in post-structuralism and non-representational theory (Livingstone, 2008). Many critical geographers have advocated for ground-up processes of knowledge production and exchange, ones that incorporate everyday experiences and perspectives of often excluded populations and question the often privileged, Western perspective of academic scholarship (Roy, 2009; Derickson and Routledge, 2015).

This paper focuses on the emerging subfield of community geography as a useful framework for socially-relevant, purposely-embedded scholarship. We define community geography as a praxis rooted in collaborations between academic and public scholars resulting in mutually beneficial and co-produced knowledge. It draws from and contributes to geographic theorizations of space and place, engaging with research in fields including development, urban geography, political ecology, critical food studies, and health geography. Community geography employs a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, often makes use of participatory research approaches, and has, as its epistemological framing, a commitment to address pressing social, economic, and environmental problems and work toward systemic change. A commitment to praxis entails a fundamental

integration of research and action, one that explicitly values excluded and marginalized perspectives and fosters just and sustainable communities.

In recent years, geographers (including the co-authors on this manuscript) have begun to articulate a framework for community geography, primarily through attention to the kinds of methodological approaches and methods that community geographers have employed (see Robinson, 2010; Hawthorne et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2017). This paper both provides a more thorough definition of community geography as a subfield and situates it within a historical and institutional context. It is part of a larger writing project, including separate pieces on the methods often used in community geography research (Fischer et al., in progress) and the ways community geographers have employed this praxis in classroom instruction (Rees et al., in revision). Community geography is not without its limitations: it has thus far been practiced mostly by white scholars at US-based institutions, drawing in part from histories of institutional engagement that may inhibit activist and critical scholarship. Still, we argue that the growth of community geography programs provides an opportunity to decenter the academy as the ultimate producer of knowledge while amplifying excluded voices and ontologies and promoting progressive social change.

## II Defining community geography

Community geography programs have emerged at multiple US academic institutions as institutional models that support participatory methods of geographic inquiry. The exact structure and emphases of these programs vary, but through their designation of one (or more) department members as community



geographers, they share a common commitment to developing alternative models of scholarship that explicitly value community-engaged research and teaching. Substantively, these programs have involved faculty, students, and public scholars in researching a wide set of issues including food insecurity, refugee resettlement, and environmental change (Robinson et al., 2017; Hawthorne and Jarrett, 2017). An increase in community geographer positions across multiple institutions is evidence of faculty and administrative interest in this model. The growth of community geography also indicates an interest not only in participatory methodologies, but also in generating a set of replicable models for recognizing and rewarding the use of these techniques for teaching and research within institutions of higher education.

The term community is intrinsically problematic. A focus on the *community* can reify or romanticize a diverse and even antagonistic group of actors at the local scale (Joseph, 2002). In this article, we understand community as emergent from a process of social inquiry, rather than denoting a pre-existing public awaiting engagement. In line with long traditions of work in pragmatism and participatory research (Dewey, 2016; Harney et al., 2016), we view community geography as a framework for convening a set of actors committed to naming and resolving pressing social problems such as social exclusion, environmental degradation, and economic exploitation, one which is representative of all affected groups. The use of ‘community’ in the title thus refers both to the inclusive and heterogeneous nature of these partnerships and to the ways that their collective work produces new practices and stronger capacities to enact social change.

By framing community geography as praxis, we emphasize the interplay between theory and practice. The cyclical nature of social inquiry within pragmatist thought, as we describe below, combines action and reflection throughout a fundamentally inductive research process

(Dewey, 2016). The generative nature of this approach – its emphasis on generating new practices, knowledge, and social identities rooted in particular times and places – is a common feature of participatory research (Kindon et al., 2007). This is in line with Freire’s description of praxis, which emphasizes how ‘knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other’ (2000: 53). A process of impatient and inclusive inquiry is at the core of community geography’s identity. More specifically, we identify five guiding principles for research in community geography, summarized below.

### *1 Focus on place and place-based concerns*

Local coalitions of academics, policy-makers, residents, and/or activists often play a foundational role at defining the scope of teaching and research in community geography, and community geography programs are often heavily reliant on these partnerships. Regardless of whether a given research project is of shorter or longer duration, the success of such partnerships is in many ways dependent upon ‘the consistent presence and long-term commitment of community geographers in their local communities’ (Robinson et al., 2017: 6). Indeed, it is often the long-term, place-embeddedness of community geographers themselves that can sustain the partnerships essential for research praxis. This can sometimes be limiting. Community geography programs are currently all located within the United States and thus often reflect that context, though some rely on international partnerships (see, for instance, Solís et al., 2018). In addition, by identifying the varied cultural, political, economic, and environmental connections that shape and produce places, research can reframe discussions of accountability for locally-identified problems away from only local actors (Solís et al., 2017). In sum,



community geographers are deeply engaged with place, and all the complexities that term implies, as a starting point for research and teaching.

## 2 Diverse positionalities

Community geography actively seeks to equitably include a diverse set of positionalities across racial, classed, gendered, and institutional boundaries in ways that broaden a predominantly white discipline (Pulido, 2002). Research projects offer students and public scholars an opportunity to learn how geographic approaches can be used to address community issues along with the opportunity to share the results of their projects to broad audiences within and outside the discipline. This process takes time, however, as trust must be built between project partners (Robinson et al., 2017; Boll-Bosse and Hankins, 2017). Such patience can be difficult for both students, who have a class to finish, and community members, who do not necessarily want to wait for the results of a study.

Faculty, students, and community members may also have multiple positionalities within a given project. Faculty members and students may be part of the community in which a project takes place and may or may not share (racialized and/or classed) identities with the community partners with whom they engage. Community members themselves may have a wide range of past experiences with a university. While specific projects may vary widely in research design and substantive focus, the cultivation of a diverse set of researchers is fundamental to the research praxis emphasized within community geography. This includes recognition of already existing diversity among students, community scholars, and faculty members, as well as intentional engagement with communities of interest not already at the table.

## 3 Committed and reciprocal community partnerships

A related tenet of community geography praxis involves the establishment of committed and reciprocal research partnerships. While the terms and scope of every partnership will undoubtedly vary, community geographers are committed to the often messy give and take of developing working relationships that often require extensive time. Through these commitments, community geographers resist shallow forms of engagement, including ‘mainstreaming’ (Elwood, 2006) or ‘crowd-harvesting’ (Breen et al., 2015), whereby partnerships and participation are merely representative modes of engagement that only serve to validate the claims of the academic researcher. Instead, these partnerships should follow the lead of past work in participatory action research, emphasizing the integration of community members into each phase of the research process and using results to directly inform social and political action (Kemmis et al., 2013; Kindon and Elwood, 2009; Mrs Kinpaisby, 2008; Kindon et al., 2007).

Negotiating the focus and outcomes of a collaborative project can be challenging. As Hankins summarized in a panel discussion on community geography, ‘Often times community partners don’t know what we, as academics, can do and we don’t know what they need’ (Hankins, 2017). Commitment to sustained communication can be key to developing successful partnerships that clarify the possibilities and direction of a given collaboration. Through these partnerships, community partners benefit from access to tools for digital mapping and from the research expertise of university scholars. In other contexts, the legitimacy provided through connections to academic institutions or opportunities for funding through university-sponsored research or external grants can also be beneficial to community members.



Committed partnerships can vary in duration, from all or even part of a single academic semester to multiple years. In some cases, short-term collaborations can lay the foundation for deeper engagements. At the University of Georgia, a short-term, largely quantitative project with the Atlanta Community Food Bank studying food insecurity (Shannon et al., 2018) led to a more intensive participatory study with several local food pantries on the factors contributing to household instability (Kurtz et al., 2019). The length and depth of specific projects may vary greatly, but the relationships created through these collaborations require long-term investment from all parties.

#### *4 Flexible epistemologies and methods*

In addition to diverse positionalities, community geography also values diverse modes of inquiry and ways of knowing. This emphasis comes most directly from pragmatism, where both theoretical and epistemological frameworks are socially situated and historically contingent. For community geographers, research questions and methods are created in the context of research collaboratives, meaning that knowledge creation serves specific social ends. As Elwood (2006) notes, these collaboratives may study and portray their communities in multiple ways depending on their goals and the intended audience.

This epistemological flexibility also reflects the influence of public participatory geographic information systems (PPGIS), which similarly emphasize local engagement and immediate social relevance using an array of techniques including sketch mapping, community-based data collection, and indigenous forms of mapping or representing of spatial phenomena (Brown and Kyttä, 2014; Johnson and Sieber, 2013; Ghose, 2007; Rambaldi et al., 2006; Sieber, 2006; Craig et al., 2002; Elwood and Ghose, 2001). While not all community geographic work includes mapping and spatial

analysis as a component, the use of a range of techniques to construct and represent community-based expertise is a key component of this subfield.

#### *5 Open research practices and public scholarship*

Community geography borrows from ongoing work in open science in emphasizing the need for reproducible research and public accessibility (Nosek et al., 2015; Munafò et al., 2017; Singleton et al., 2016). This includes using free and open source tools where possible or developing programs that ensure access to university-funded software licenses for non-academic researchers. Community geographers also utilize or develop platforms for creating and sharing data collected during research, such as OpenStreetMap for data collection (Solís et al., 2018) to open archival storage of interview recordings and historical artifacts using electronic presses (Columbus Community Geography Center, 2019). A related paper (Fischer et al., in progress) provides more discussion of resources for sharing tools and data.

A reliance on scholarly writing conventions, complex analytical methods, and specialized terminology can also present barriers to a public audience. Community geography thus values other models of public scholarship, such as blogs, podcasts, and video abstracts of published papers. The politics and practices of creativity can be also considered as an alternative model of public scholarship (Hawkins, 2013; Marston and De Leeuw, 2013). Diverse creative practices – whether of painting, knitting, theater, weaving, drawing, etc. – enables us to understand and imagine our everyday space from a new perspective and to build a community space (Derickson and Routledge, 2015). Using these alternative forms of creative outputs requires that community geographers have the ability to communicate effectively in multiple formats and the insight to know which form



of communication is strategically appropriate for the context.

### III The roots of community geography

Community geography's development draws from several traditions of geographic thought, most notably American pragmatism's focus on the production of knowledge that is action focused, locally embedded, inclusive, and societally relevant. Support for the creation of community geography programs also draws from ongoing critical scholarship in feminist and Black geographies. At the same time, broader institutional support for these programs is based on long traditions of public engagement in American higher education, most notably the land-grant mission. In the following section, we trace the influence of these traditions.

#### I Pragmatism

Pragmatism is an anti-foundationalist philosophy emphasizing the primacy of experience and social interaction over systematic theorization. For pragmatist philosophers including John Dewey (1963, 1997, 2016), knowledge is always provisional and historically situated, a set of practices and beliefs useful for living in the world. In contrast to systematic philosophy, pragmatism defines knowledge through its usefulness, treating ideas 'like knives and forks, implements to accomplish particular tasks, and not transcendent truths' (Barnes, 2008: 1544). So rather than arbitrating truth claims based on coherence within a philosophical framework, knowledge and ideas should be judged through 'the test they considered the most demanding of all: our experience as social and historical beings' (Kloppenber, 1996: 102). Thus, pragmatism views all knowledge as provisional and historically situated (Hepple, 2008) while also focusing on the 'fruitfulness' of inquiry for

identifying and addressing social problems (Longino and Lennon, 1997).

Pragmatism is perhaps most distinguished by its commitment to a deliberative epistemology, where social problems and their solutions are identified through dialogue among diverse, socially-embedded actors. The process of inquiry unsettles existing social 'habits' when those are judged to become inadequate – i.e. no longer contributing to social well-being. Through inquiry, new habits are formed through a process that includes 'all those who are affected by the indirect consequences' of existing systems (cited in Barnett and Bridge, 2013: 1027).

Pragmatist inquiry thus describes a process of collective action and reflection, a form of praxis, that revises social habits. Through critical reflection, communities of inquiry can collectively name current problems and envision new futures. Freire uses this process as a cornerstone for critical pedagogy meant to challenge the reproduction of hegemonic norms and support social transformation (Freire, 2000). Similarly, authors such as Omi and Winant (2016, esp. 146ff.) emphasize the ways that pragmatist praxis generates opportunities to both name existing hegemonies (such as the racial state) and creatively envision both new subjectivities and social structures. Cornel West (1989) has promoted a form of 'prophetic pragmatism' that resists the pessimism of some post-modernist approaches (he particularly singles out Foucault) that emphasize structural power over individual agency. 'For prophetic pragmatists,' he writes, 'human agency remains central' (p. 225). For him, pragmatist praxis is a form of 'creative democracy' that prizes individualism and collective action for progressive change. Smith (1984) makes a similar case, arguing that pragmatism can 'revitalize a sense of the reality of ethical choice' by foregrounding the social processes that generate knowledge and action (p. 364).



There has been a recent uptick of interest in pragmatism within geography, as evident in a special issue of *Geoforum* (Wood and Smith, 2008) and subsequent reviews of the philosophy in other well-known disciplinary journals (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010; Barnett and Bridge, 2013; Lake, 2017b). Given that pragmatism is in essence a philosophy of practice, one main question from geographers has been, in Hankins' terms, 'how to do democracy' in a pragmatist framework (Hankins, 2017: 502). Harney, McCurry, Scott, and Wills (2016) advocate for what they term 'process pragmatism', an approach that 'seeks to use the process of research and knowledge production to construct new publics, new understandings and new capacity to act' (p. 9). They trace a lineage that includes Saul Alinsky's (1971) community organizing efforts and the Detroit Geographic Expedition and Institute (DEGI) (Bunge, 1971). In contemporary work, they point to projects such as the 'communiversity', which uses participatory action research to facilitate joint action by academics and community members (kinpaisby, 2008), or their own work through a university-community alliance, Citizens UK. The coalitional and engaged nature of this process is part of what Derickson and Routledge (2015) call 'resourcing' disempowered groups as part of scholar-activism and is also evident in Trauger and Fluri's (2014) description of service research.

For community geographers, pragmatism provides a way to reframe the production of knowledge by placing engagement and experience at the core of social inquiry, present from the outset of the endeavor. It also downplays pre-existing commitments to particular ideological frameworks or theory development. Because this work welcomes a diverse array of participants, it is often messier than traditional research approaches, rarely fitting within conventional epistemological or theoretical frameworks (Law, 2004). Indeed, the most generative moment for pragmatist scholars is not

inside the academy through seminar discussions, lab work, or the development of new methodologies, but in the moments of engagement and dialogue outside the university's walls. By adopting a pragmatist stance, community geographers do not simply apply existing geographic approaches to discrete, already-defined social problems. Rather, through collaboration and experimentation they collaboratively develop new articulations of these issues that are potentially transformative both for academic and non-academic communities. Pragmatism's insistence on equity and inclusion implicitly recognizes the exclusionary processes through which capitalism, patriarchy and racism disrupt and displace socially marginalized groups (Lake, 2017a). Through the labor of building and sustaining locally-embedded communities of inquiry, community geographers thus help organize research collaboratives relevant to their local social and political contexts (Shannon et al., 2019).

## 2 Feminist and Black geographies

Community geography also draws substantially on the contributions of feminist and Black geographies in order to create new pathways out of the discipline's history of masculinist, patriarchal, racist and imperialist perspectives. Both approaches share an epistemology that focuses on the situatedness of knowledge production and the importance of recognizing alternative means of producing and representing (spatial) knowledge. Similar to place-based research, both feminist and Black geographies emphasize the need to critically examine where research is being done and who is included as researchers – grounding projects in a specific social and political context.

A central focus of feminist inquiry, both within and beyond the discipline of geography, is a broader interrogation of the processes surrounding knowledge production (Staeheli and Lawson, 1994). In particular, feminist scholars



have worked to destabilize the hegemonic systems that produced and reified the values of geography's quantitative revolution (Moss, 2002). In critiquing the idea that an observer could be distant from the researched object and free from bias, Donna Haraway calls this practice the God trick, 'seeing everything from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988: 581). Alternatively, she calls for a commitment to feminist objectivity, a research practice beholden to 'objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections and ways of seeing' (Haraway, 1988: 585). The grounding of knowledge in contextualized experience can help to achieve a more complete understanding of the world, or what Harding (1986, 1987) has referred to as strong objectivity.

In order to put these critiques into practice, feminist scholars have developed the notion of reflexivity in an effort to explicitly articulate their own and other scholars' positionality vis-a-vis knowledge production (McDowell, 1992; Rose, 1997). This prompts researchers to look both inward, to examine their own identity, and outward, to examine their relationship with those being researched and the wider world (Rose, 1997; Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata, 2002), a process vitally important to the socially engaged research featured in community geography. An over-concern for issues of positionality can paralyze scholars, preventing them from engaging in the messy work that reflexivity requires. If performed with too tight of a focus, reflexivity puts researchers at risk of essentializing the otherness of research partners and collaborators (Domosh, 2003), or it can create reticence to engage in collaborative work for fear of unintentionally reproducing exploitative power relations. As described in this article, community geography programs have attempted to incorporate a reflexive awareness of positionality through explicitly incorporating non-academics into the process of both research and evaluation, recognizing the importance of

outside perspectives and the need to explicitly recognize the value of community benefits outside of peer-reviewed publication.

The development of participatory methodologies, such as participatory action research (PAR), has drawn in part from the contributions outlined above by feminist and other critical scholars, noting the need for explicitly situated models of knowledge production (Haraway, 1988; Kindon et al., 2007). These methodologies focus on an inclusive and recursive process, including all stakeholders from the development of a research question through the communication of results and formulation of next steps. They also highlight the varying expertise brought by both academic and community scholars. Public participation GIS (PPGIS) and participatory GIS (PGIS) grew as research traditions in the early 2000s as an attempt to apply participatory approaches to rapidly developing techniques in geographic information science (Schuurman, 2000; Sieber, 2006). Community geography has explicitly drawn from these traditions (Robinson, 2010; Robinson et al., 2017), in part by creating institutional models that support these participatory methodologies.

In addition, the whiteness of geography as a discipline has been one of several persistent exclusions 'so naturalized that no one, including the researcher, has even thought to question them' (Kobayashi, 1994: 77–8). Black geographies have sought to draw attention to the practices – and ontologies – of Black life, agency, resistance and resilience, which have been largely overlooked or ignored by a predominantly white discipline. Though geographers have long investigated questions of race and blackness (see the Black Geographies bibliography, 2016, for examples), this burgeoning sub-field traces its lineage to the work of scholars such as Harold Rose (1971, 1976), who created space for Black subjects through work on the political, social, and economic conditions shaping uneven urban development.



More recently, Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods' volume *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (McKittrick and Woods, 2007) argued that Black geographies was (and still is) necessary for spatial liberation. In an attempt to resist the reductionary narratives and persistent rhetorical and physical displacement of Black people, communities and histories, they use Black geographies to reconfigure the mapping of blackness, showing instead how relationalities, identifications, networks, and power of and about Black subjects critique the contours of conquest and relegation of blackness to the 'un-geographic'. Instead, Katherine McKittrick emphasizes how 'black matters are spatial matters', calling on scholars to identify relational geographies of struggle and resistance and showing how spatial practices of domination are always 'alterable terrain' (McKittrick, 2006: xviii). Similarly, the prolific work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore has provided frameworks for understanding how racial constructs enable spatial practices of global capitalism (Gilmore, 2002).

Of particular relevance for understanding the connection between Black geographies and community geography is Clyde Woods' conceptualization of the 'blues epistemology' (Woods, 1998, 2017). Through this notion, Woods recognizes the indigenous ways of knowing by Black citizens and resituates their perspectives as the key means by which to understand the shaping of power, space, and knowledge. Drawing on knowledge produced through both place-based political struggles and Black texts and forms of creative expression, Woods' work calls for the discipline to explicitly incorporate the historic and current agency of Black subjects and collectives even within marginalizing political and economic systems. A rapidly growing body of work in this area has sought to re-center geographic scholarship around a 'Black sense of place' (Eaves, 2017: 81), reframing discussions of food access (McCutcheon, 2013; Reese, 2019), urban

development (Summers, 2019), gender and sexuality (Eaves, 2017), and relationships to nature (Finney, 2014) and land (Moulton, 2017; Purifoy, 2019).

We provide just a brief summary of this diverse set of literatures in this article due to space limitations. Still, drawing from feminist and Black geographies, community geography prioritizes ongoing, reflexive evaluation of the conditions of knowledge production. It prioritizes participatory research methodologies that center marginalized and excluded perspectives. Through the creation of partnerships that straddle, even blur, the academic/community divide and increasing, intentional inclusion of scholars of color, it aims to erode the deeply entrenched whiteness of geography as a discipline and of institutions of higher education more broadly (Kobayashi et al., 2012).

### 3 The public-serving university

Community geography programs have thus far been based in US universities, which have long histories of models for public engagement. Most significantly, the land-grant university model was established in 1862 through the Morrill Land-Grant College act, which provided federal lands for state universities to provide teaching, research, and service to the state's population (Goldstein et al., 2019). This model was revised and extended through the second Morrill Act of 1890, which gave land-grant status to several historically Black colleges and universities, and the creation of the Cooperative Extension Service in 1914 (Goldstein et al., 2019). In many states, Cooperative Extension offices have been a primary source of information on university-based agricultural research for farmers. These models have been critiqued by some scholars for either failing to achieve their goals of equitable access or using a top-down model of scholarship that excludes local expertise and replicates gendered and racial inequalities (Goldstein et al., 2019; Trauger et al., 2010).



Despite these limitations, institutional support for community geography positions and programs often stems from its alignment with the land-grant mission of public outreach and engagement. As a related model, drawing on the work of Ernest Boyer (1990), the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has for many years offered a Community Engagement certification for institutions with demonstrated commitment to ‘the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity’ (Swearer Center, 2020). Campus Compact (2020) has a similar mission, supporting models of higher education that ‘build democracy through civic education and community development’. For schools with active or historical religious foundations, faith-based commitments to public service may also motivate institutional commitments to engaged scholarship (Schaffer, 2004). Taxonomies of institutional engagement, from Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969) to more recent iterations (Barker, 2004; Doberneck et al., 2010), have also helped articulate pathways for educational and governmental institutions to effectively partner with broader publics. The work of these initiatives and scholars provided models of institutional support for service-learning and engaged research that laid groundwork for the community geography programs described in the next section.

#### **IV Tracing the growth of community geography programs**

The term community geography was not formalized until the creation of a program at Syracuse University in 2005, but this program drew upon prior work in PPGIS and participatory methods. One earlier model that has been influential was the Fredrick Blum Neighborhood Assistance Center (NAC) at Chicago State University, a small public Predominantly Black Institution (PBI) on Chicago’s South Side. The center was

founded in the late 1980s. Fredrick Blum, the founder and longtime chair of the geography program, was particularly focused on the role that a civic-minded academic department could play in helping support the surrounding community, also home to many of its students. Mark Bouman, a young assistant professor, worked with Blum to create a center for collaborative work that focused on community-led development. The NAC was initially lightly funded through the university budget (funding was given for a graduate assistant and later for one staff person), but then was supported through a three year grant from an anonymous donor which allowed for the hiring of a director and an additional faculty member. At the end of the grant, these positions became hard money positions within the general budget of the university. They remained this way until 2017, when the university cut funding for all centers during a severe financial crisis, and the NAC is currently unfunded. The NAC has aligned with Chicago State’s institutional mission statement that prioritizes ‘community development including social justice, leadership and entrepreneurship’ (Chicago State University, 2017).

The focus of the NAC has been to assist in the development of neighborhood planning projects in ways that enable neighborhood residents to develop their own strategies for neighborhood maintenance and revitalization. These projects have been diverse in size and focus, ranging from organized research to facilitating collaborative networks. Initial work was around a proposed third Chicago airport, to be built in the Lake Calumet region, a largely industrial area near the university. This led to Chicago State hosting the Lake Calumet Ecosystem Partnership, which brought together local environmental and business groups on shared projects and worked with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to choose grantees for small community-focused environmental grants. Later projects focused on food access and food justice, such as working with community



organizations, students, and an interdisciplinary research team to collect and analyze food access on Chicago's West Side (Block and Kouba, 2006) and facilitating a local urban agriculture network.

Syracuse's program grew out of a one-time collaboration between geography faculty at Syracuse and a local non-profit, the Syracuse Hunger Project (Robinson, 2010). The final report from the project included recommendations for ongoing work, including a staff position and center to support community partnerships. A working group of 'faculty, Syracuse Hunger Project participants, ... campus engagement office, and a local charitable organization' acted on this recommendation by creating and seeking funding for a permanent position (Robinson, 2010: 90). Institutional support for this position was based in part on the existing chancellor's commitment to community-engaged research, a 'Scholarship in Action' initiative (Robinson, 2010: 91) stemming partially from historical ties with the United Methodist Church (Madren, n.d.). Within the Geography Department, faculty had strong interest in supporting participatory research methods. The university agreed to create a staff position (later moved to tenure-track faculty) with appointment terms with reduced formal teaching responsibilities, resulting in the hire of Jonnell Robinson. Funding for this position was originally shared between Syracuse and local foundations, but over time the university has taken on all funding for the faculty position.

The projects undertaken by Syracuse Community Geography have varied in scope. The program's website ([communitygeography.org](http://communitygeography.org)) lists mapping of urban agriculture activities by refugees, analyses of business and service locations meant to facilitate community development, and historical research on past industries in the area such as brewing companies. Many, but not all, projects have involved the use of GIS. In the early stages of this program, project proposals were generated by both community

groups and academic researchers, but to ensure a community benefit and in line with participatory research principles, all current projects must originate with community partners external to the university (Robinson, 2010: 100–1). These proposals are reviewed by an advisory board including multiple community members who assess the community benefit of the research and its alignment with the focus areas of the program. The Syracuse Community Geography Program has been a main model for subsequent programs.

One of these is at Columbus State University, a teaching-focused state university in Georgia. In 2010, Amanda Rees and Tim Hawthorne developed a new pedagogical focus for the geography minor: community geography. In 2012, Columbus State hired its first GIS/Community Geographer, Brad Huff. Community geography was chosen to address three issues: the dearth of resources in the community after the 2008 Financial Crisis, a shift in pedagogy to engage a more diverse student body, and changes to institutional funding that directed attention towards student success measured by retention, progression and graduation.

Established in 2010, the Columbus Community Geography Center (CCGC) is the public face of community geography at Columbus State. CCGC is a collaborative between GIS and Geography faculty and community partners. It has no budget and does not report annually to the administration. Because of these fiscal constraints, projects usually occur within an existing course or courses. However, in setting up our various reciprocal relationships and in project reporting, community geography practice extends well beyond each semester, and projects can extend several years. Most reports, digital humanities projects and maps are published through the Columbus Community Geography Center ePress, while some projects result in academic publications (Rees and Melix, 2018; Rees et al., 2016). Between 2010 and 2020, the CCGC partnered with



approximately 30 organizations that fall into one of five community partner types: nonprofit and citizen groups; city, county and state government; education; chambers of commerce; and for-profit organizations. A 2019 internal analysis of students revealed that this program had contributed to the growth of a more diverse student body.

At the University of Georgia (UGA), many faculty had existing interests in public and community-engaged scholarship, and as a result had placed the hiring of a community geographer in the department's strategic plan. This was rooted both in past work on feminist and participatory methods as well as an interest in public scholarship among faculty in atmospheric science and physical geography. When Jerry Shannon, who was already serving in a visiting faculty position, indicated interest in taking on this role, the university agreed to create this tenure-track position in 2015. This position had a reduced research component and an expanded service expectation. Shannon created the Community Mapping Lab as a forum for multiple community-engaged research projects, including analysis of bike safety and gentrification, open digital tools for community-based housing assessments (Shannon and Walker, 2018), and participatory planning around charitable food sites (Shannon et al., 2019). Results of this research have been published online as white papers and blogs as well as in peer-reviewed journals that include all participants as co-authors. Institutional support for the creation of this position stemmed in part from the land-grant mission of the university. While this lab is not explicitly funded, UGA's Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities has also funded multiple undergraduate research assistants to work on these projects, and a regularly offered course, Community GIS, has also provided classroom engagement with larger projects.

The Citizen Science GIS program at University of Central Florida (UCF) was started with

the hire of Tim Hawthorne in 2015. UCF has trademarked the term 'America's Partnership University', and this commitment to external outreach has motivated significant funding to this program. Hawthorne's position was part of a three-person cluster hire in Geospatial Technologies, which included a substantial start-up package used to create lab space and purchase various research technologies, including large screens and unmanned aerial vehicles. Citizen Science GIS has had two primary research foci. First, funded by a National Science Foundation Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) grant, it organizes a summer research program mapping reefs and coastal communities with residents in Belize. Second, it organizes a significant amount of K-12 outreach, bringing teachers and students to campus and most recently retrofitting a bus for school visits. These events focus particularly on the use of GIS and drone mapping to create excitement and interest around science education.

In addition to these programs explicitly designated as community geography, other national centers have participated in ongoing meetings and collaborative projects around this subdiscipline. At Arizona State, the Knowledge Exchange for Resilience ([resilience.asu.edu](https://resilience.asu.edu)) is supported by the Piper Trust, facilitating research with community partners around a broad range of issues related to sustainability and community development. It prioritizes the creation of new connections between community partners and facilitating data sharing between these agencies and with a broader public. Patricia Solís, the executive director of the program, has also been active in the YouthMappers initiative (see <https://www.youthmappers.org>), connecting students at universities across 50 countries to collaborate on data creation in OpenStreetMap for humanitarian projects. Similarly, the foundation-funded Center for Resilient Communities (see <https://resilientcommunities.wvu.edu/>) at University of West



Virginia, directed by Bradley Wilson, sponsors collaborative research among a diverse group of participants. It provides academic resources and expertise to community groups and partners while also providing opportunities for reflection and retreat for those community members.

While faculty and staff directing these programs have been in conversation with one another, they have largely operated independently. In recent years, many community geographers have worked collectively to develop a community of practice. This has included several publications, including a special issue of *Professional Geographer* devoted to community-engaged research (Robinson and Hawthorne, 2017; Robinson et al., 2017; Block et al., 2017; Boll-Bosse and Hankins, 2017). A small, informal meeting in March 2018 in Atlanta laid the theoretical framework for community geography discussed in this article. A larger, National Science Foundation-sponsored workshop in January 2019, also in Atlanta, brought over 70 participants together to share research strategies, make relational connections, and create a vision for future collaborative work. The Community Geographies Collaborative is a new group stemming from this project, with a goal of creating opportunities for future gatherings, providing resources and models for community geography programs, and securing financial support for research collaboratives.

This brief history of the development of community geography programs at multiple institutions emphasizes multiple commonalities. First, these initiatives have had two distinct sources of institutional support. Within departments, there has been clear interest in formalizing arrangements that support and reward participatory research methods. For institutional leaders, the motivation has often been tied to explicitly stated commitments to community benefits, including the land-grant and community-focused missions. As an administrator at one of our institutions one remarked, these programs make it easy for institutions to ‘check the box’

for community engagement, and in an era of reduced public funding for universities, community geography programs often provide clearly legible evidence of public relevance. These two motivations may overlap, but they are not identical. For example, scholar-activist projects that focus on political advocacy and are critical of existing leaders and institutions are very much in line with past efforts in critical human geography, but they may not be welcomed by university administrators. Similarly, some projects may address immediate local needs, such as mapping transit routes or access to social services, without explicit attention to structural inequalities. Still, the general goal of creating institutional arrangements that prioritize university-community partnerships is built on overlapping interests between these two groups.

Second, most community geography programs involve college undergraduates, in line with an action or service-learning model of instruction. This can be done through institutional funds for research assistantships (as at Syracuse or University of Georgia), classroom instruction, or grant-funded opportunities such as the National Science Foundation’s Research REU program. At Syracuse, Jonnell Robinson’s position includes supervision of undergraduate researchers as part of her teaching responsibilities while at University of Central Florida; the REU program is an aspect of summer teaching and research activities. This aspect of the sub-discipline is distinct from participatory action research or PPGIS, both of which emphasize collaborative projects but do not necessarily include a pedagogical component. By incorporating an action learning model, these programs attempt to expose students to praxis as a pedagogical model and demonstrate the relevance of geographic thought and methods for addressing immediate social problems (for more, see Rees et al., in progress).

While the substantive work of these programs varies, the projects they undertake are



often related to issues of community development and conservation. Multiple institutions have completed projects focused on community food systems and hunger, and UCF's program focuses most explicitly on coastal reefs and the vulnerability of coastal communities. Syracuse and Columbus State have both completed historical projects meant to highlight voices excluded in past accounts. While these programs often address immediate social problems and partner with excluded and vulnerable stakeholders, many have not taken an explicitly activist stance. This arose as a key issue at the January 2019 workshop in Atlanta, with many attendees desiring a clearer commitment to advocating for social and environmental justice within community geography.

Institutionally, there are still multiple models of how community geography programs are structured. At multiple institutions, tenure track faculty are hired as community geographers, often with expectations different from those of conventional appointments, increased teaching or service. At Columbus State, the community geographer position is an academic staff appointment with limited expectations for academic publication. At Syracuse, the research appointment was modified so that community reports and white papers could be considered alongside peer-reviewed publications. The tenure review process at Syracuse also included evaluation letters from community partners as well as academic faculty. As noted above, the program at Syracuse also has a community board that reviews all proposed projects. At University of Georgia, community relevant research products would be considered under service, similar to appointments in Extension for other public-service faculty. Funding for programs varies, including dedicated institutional funds; federal, non-profit, and foundation grants; and a reliance on existing programs for experiential and service-learning.

As is clear from the above, the main focus of these programs has been on creating models

supporting community partnerships for academic faculty and staff in existing geography programs and usually include students – especially undergraduates – as a part of this research. Scholars and community partners outside these institutions have a place in this process through inclusion in boards, project requests, and participatory involvement in the research process. Yet the main focus has been on creating academic models that legitimize and reward these participatory methods. Other models of community-engaged work, such as community-based courses that can receive academic credit or alternative academic programs, have not yet figured prominently in these efforts (see Bunge, 1971, and Mrs Kinspaisy, 2008, for examples of these initiatives). Academic positions for community geographers are thus central to their operation thus far, providing security for individuals who can act as 'intermediaries' and 'facilitators' with groups and individuals outside the academy (Robinson et al., 2017).

## V Reflection and future directions

At the outset of this paper, we questioned the role of knowledge production in the academy and the relevance of these processes to the everyday lives of those outside of it. In this paper, we have described community geography as providing a framework for addressing this question. Community geography provides an alternative praxis drawn from pragmatist models of inquiry, viewing knowledge creation as an always historically specific, social process. We place community geography at the confluence of two overlapping but distinct traditions. First, within the discipline community geography stems from efforts to develop participatory, reflexive, and inclusive approaches to academic work, evident in subfields including feminist and Black geographies. Second, institutional support for community geography is rooted in longer traditions of public outreach



in American higher education, such as the land-grant mission, cooperative extension, religious affiliations, and scholarship on community engagement sponsored by agencies such as the Carnegie Foundation. The unique aspects of community geography positions and programs – increased service expectations, evaluation and input from community partners, and a focus on service-learning – draw from these traditions.

Community geography has several key challenges and opportunities as it grows as a sub-discipline. First, while this subdiscipline benefits from historical models of engagement in American universities, it shares some of the same limitations of these models. Most notably the self-identified racialized identity of most community geographers is white, mirroring both the larger discipline and the American academy more generally. In their recent paper re-envisioning a progressive land-grant mission, Goldstein, Paprocki, and Osborne (2019) note how HCBUs and tribal colleges have been historically marginalized in this tradition. Indeed, Megan Ybarra has suggested the term ‘historically White colleges and universities’ for these institutions (Ybarra, 2019). Moreover, the very land used to establish these universities came from a process of land seizure and forced removal (Lee and Ahtone, 2020). A 2014 survey by Solís et al. highlighted the need both to intentionally engage underrepresented students at land-grant universities and support the development of geography programs at HBCUs and tribal colleges (Solís et al., 2014).

It is worth noting that two early hubs for community geography – Chicago State and Columbus State – have high enrollment rates for students of color (College Factual, 2020a, 2020b). At Columbus State, the community geography program was created explicitly to increase racial diversity by demonstrating the salience of geographic methods and theories to ongoing racialized disparities in students’ home communities. As geographers reckon with the discipline’s historic complicity with systems of

white supremacy, community geography may provide one pathway toward imagining the land-grant mission otherwise. In doing so, we may look to past efforts such as the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory headed by W.E.B. Du Bois (Wright, 2005) and current calls for structures that support and mentor scholars of color (Faria, 2019). Future work may also examine how the traditions of engagement and public scholarship rooted in pragmatism interact with ongoing, activist-oriented scholarship in Black geographies and settler-colonialism within this subfield. Developing a critical reflexivity about institutional history, engaging with HBCUs and tribal colleges, and making room for scholars of color are thus all crucial to the future of this field. Without them, community geography may become just another form of charitable academic action that fails to address drivers of ongoing inequality instead of a potential pathway toward more inclusive forms of scholarly praxis (Lamer, 2014).

As is clear from the examples given in this paper, community geography is practiced predominantly in the United States, and developing partnerships and networks beyond this context is also a necessary part of its growth. Several existing projects, such as Youth Mappers and Citizen Science GIS, engage with scholars from the Global South. Yet these programs are still US-based, and building partnerships and programs outside of this national context requires an awareness of other institutional histories. In an attempt to address these persistent trends, funding for the January 2019 workshop on community geography in Atlanta was prioritized for scholars of color, and presentation topics included research on environmental justice and Black Lives Matter, as well as research centered in regions of the Global South (Community Mapping Lab, 2019). Similarly, presentations at the 2020 AAG virtual conference based on an ongoing special issue of *GeoJournal* featured several collaborative projects involving indigenous scholars and communities. Through



intentional engagement, community geography as a subfield has sought to align with and include researchers working to diversify the discipline.

Second, community geographers begin with a focus on the local scale, or place, to develop deep partnerships that address issues with immediate relevance. At the same time, as the ranks of community geographers expand, community geographers should continue to identify new ways to forge connections across localities, developing a broader research agenda for the field and creating networks of solidarity on pressing issues such as housing displacement, climate change, migrant rights, resilience, and environmental and food justice. Creating such networks among community geographers requires developing and sustaining forums to be in conversation with one another. This paper and the two others developed alongside it grew out of one such event—a small workshop held in Atlanta in the spring of 2018. A National Science Foundation-sponsored workshop in early 2019 provided another such opportunity. Through physical and online forums, community geography should develop items for a shared research agenda, one focused on deepening community engagement, innovative methods for research and teaching, and creating opportunities for research collaborations around issues of shared concern.

Just as importantly, this paper has noted the ways that community geography draws strongly from traditions of engaged scholarship specific to the United States, most notably land-grant universities. As it develops, it will be crucial to build alliances with similar efforts to institutionalize participatory methods, particularly in the Global South, that provide opportunities for reflexivity and resource sharing. The Youth-Mappers program mentioned earlier in this paper provides one model of this form of engagement. This includes potential collaborative work with scholars employing methodologies such as service-learning (Oldfield, 2008),

scholar-activism (Chatterjee et al., 2019), participatory mapping and data analysis (Cinnamon, 2020), or popular education (Freire, 2000) outside the Global North, as well as institutional models such as the African Centre for Cities (see <https://www.africancentreforcities.net>) that prioritize participatory research linked to social action. The intellectual labor and energy required to build for these translocal connections is significant (McFarlane, 2009), but it offers the opportunity to link engagement with local communities to a regional or global perspective on the processes affecting those communities.

Third, given the diversity of community geography projects developed and the emphasis on public scholarship within the field, resources providing models of community geography in practice are needed. These include publicly accessible materials describing past and current projects, guides to using particular methodologies, such as photo elicitation methods, participatory mapping, and research technologies, such as qualitative coding or open source GIS softwares. In addition, providing models of how community geography obtains and sustains institutional support can help inform the creation of new programs. Institutional support includes items such as promotion and tenure guidelines that explicitly value community engagement and public research products, guides to obtaining support for community-engaged work, and reflections on navigating differences in institutional contexts between academic and community scholars. It also includes the need to carefully reflect on the socio-economic-political landscape of research funding and of philanthropic grantmaking to non-profit partners.

By emphasizing the value of local engagement, flexible and mixed-methods research approaches, and public scholarship, community geography is an emerging viable and innovative model for geographic research. In this paper, we have outlined its roots in past theoretical



traditions and provided a framework to better define it as a unique subfield. In line with its pragmatist inclinations, community geography remains a work in progress, and it will continue to develop as new voices from new places join in our collective work. As geographers work to fashion transformative models for research and teaching, community geography provides a promising framework for social engagement and action.


### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article was written with financial support from a grant by the National Science Foundation (BCS-1832252).

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**Jerry Shannon** is an Associate Professor of Community Geography in the Departments of Geography and Financial Planning, Housing, and Consumer Economics at the University of Georgia. His research develops models of community engaged research around issues of food insecurity, housing, and community development.

**Katherine B. Hankins** is Professor of Geography in the Department of Geosciences at Georgia State University. She studies urban change and how social and spatial inequalities are expressed and contested in the urban landscape, primarily at the neighborhood scale.

**Taylor Shelton** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geosciences at Georgia State University. His research focuses on how urban spaces and social inequalities are represented, reproduced and contested through maps and data, with a particular focus on using mapping and data visualization as a means of better understanding (and challenging) these inequalities.

**Amber J. Bosse** is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Geography at the University of Kentucky and the owner of MapBosse Consulting. She is a cartographer attending to ways in which map design can be leveraged in the fight for community empowerment.

**Dorris Scott** is the GIS Librarian and Social Science Data Curator at Washington University – St. Louis, where she provides consultation on projects that use geospatial data along with providing training in various GIS software, programming applications of geospatial data, and data management. She also serves as a liaison between Washington University Libraries and social science departments assisting faculty with their data needs such as data management and data curation.

**Daniel Block** is a Professor of Geography at Chicago State University. He has completed many food access studies and is the author or co-author of several articles on the regulation of milk in the early twentieth century and the book *Chicago: A Food*



Biography. He is a fellow of the Association of American Geographers and was the inaugural chair of the Geographies of Food and Agriculture Specialty Group.

**Heather Fischer** is a Senior Researcher at Oregon State University in the STEM Research Center. Her research focuses on public participation in scientific research, with a focus on the educational and social value of these public participation programs. Dr. Fischer's background is in geography and GIS, she brings a geographical perspective both theoretically and pragmatically to her research.

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**Jonnell Robinson** is an Associate Professor of Geography at Syracuse University and the director of the Syracuse Community Geography Program. Her research interests include participatory GIS and the ways in which local communities use mapping and

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**Patricia Solis** is Executive Director of the Knowledge Exchange for Resilience at Arizona State University, an interdisciplinary effort to link multi-sector community needs with research innovations around resilience, and Associate Research Professor in the School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning. She is Co-Founder/Director of YouthMappers, a consortium of student-led chapters on 220 university campuses in 50 countries who create and use open spatial data for humanitarian and development needs in collaboration with USAID.

**Hamil Pearsall** is an Associate Professor in the Geography and Urban Studies Department at Temple University. She is an urban geographer, and her research investigates urban sustainability and environmental justice.

**Amanda Rees** is Professor of Geography in the Department of History and Geography and she coordinates the Columbus Community Geography Center. Her course-led community geography instruction engages students in collaborating with community partners on projects ranging from food insecurity and historical interpretation to tourism. Her research focuses on active learning community geography pedagogy.

**Aileen Nicolas** is a graduate student in the Department of Geography at the University of Georgia. Her research interests are in health geography and critical GIS, particularly health access for vulnerable populations.