



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Reaching to Offer, Reaching to Accept: Collaboration and Cotheorizing

Allison M. Guess, Mistinguette Smith, Eve Tuck

American Quarterly, Volume 68, Number 2, June 2016, pp. 409-412 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0027>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/622097>

# Reaching to Offer, Reaching to Accept: Collaboration and Cotheorizing

*Allison M. Guess, Mistinguette Smith, and Eve Tuck*

The mountains that we see around us are black. . . . In the Spring, the hot black soil melts the crust of snow on the mountains.

—Alice Walker, *Diary of an African Nun*

From our vantage points, land is a *Black coconspiring eternal ancestor*, supporting life and freedom. At the same time, in the Black or African Diaspora, Indigenous people make ancestral, sovereign relationships to that selfsame land. This complexity is at the heart of the collaboration funded by an ASA Community Partnership Grant described here. Land as a Black coconspiring eternal ancestor is evident in the struggles of historical Black women geographers such as Harriet Tubman, Queen Nanny, and Mamá Tingó and their respective abolition and maroon geographies.

Formed in 2011, the Black/Land Project (BLP) follows the examples of Black women geographers by attending to matters of Black life, histories, and futurities in particular places. As a researcher working decidedly outside the academy, BLP founder Mistinguette Smith was wary of academic researchers in BLP's existing work in Black communities about relationships to land and place. BLP has caringly conducted more than thirty interviews, followed by workshops called "Black/Land conversations," with Black residents of several communities across the United States. Smith's sense was that many academic–community partnerships are interested in community-based research, but their goals and measures of success remain firmly embedded in the academy. Community-based researchers are expected to translate their work to accommodate academic audiences and to take on their preoccupations. As BLP grew and gained public recognition, academics who approached BLP with proposals of collaboration rarely understood the impact of dedicating energies to produce the emotional and intellectual labor of this translation, especially related to accommodating the gap between lived experience and the formal study of that experience.

Smith met the Unangax scholar Eve Tuck in 2011 moments before Tuck and Monique Guishard cofacilitated a workshop on participatory action research ethics in New York City. Smith and Tuck discussed settler colonialism and the persistence of meaningful relationships to land among Indigenous peoples and Black peoples. In 2012–13 we received funding from the ASA's Community Partnership Grant for Tuck to provide strategic support to BLP in analyzing the Black/Land conversations and interviews. For Smith, working with Tuck fulfilled several interconnected desires: to engage overlapping analyses of traditional knowledge, nonacademic ways of knowing, meanings of knowledge, and relationships to land, specifically connecting Black relationships to Indigenous relationships to land; to work with individuals who were not trying to help (themselves) to Black/Land's work in an appropriative way; to increase skills in positioning Black/Land's research as meaningful but also beyond academic research; to produce materially useful tools for community organizing. Our collaboration grew exponentially as we were joined by other cotheorists and co-researchers, including Allison Guess, Tavia Benjamin, Brian K. Jones, and Kondwani Jackson. Our collaboration was contingent—it did not ask for anything more than it could give. It was tentative, vulnerable, willing, yet with closed boundaries in many significant areas.

Though our funding from the Community Partnership Grant has concluded, our collaboration is ongoing and takes new shapes. There has been so much reaching across to each other so far, reaching across assumptions and contesting Black life as nowhere;<sup>1</sup> reaching to offer, reaching to accept; reaching across moments of misunderstanding by building interpersonal relationships, incremental personal disclosures, which allowed us to continue to work together. The contingent qualities of our collaboration make room for BLP to not work in a dressed-up language that would put the project out of conversation with Black knowledge holders who participated in their interviews.

This essay has prompted us to consider what we—those of us who conduct our research outside but sometimes in collaboration with the academy—expect from partnerships like the ASA grant. Much research has been conducted in a way that is exploitative, and while many disciplines have made their “turns,” possibilities for exploitation are not just a thing of the past. Much of academic scholarship is still concerned with documenting the trauma of Black people and Indigenous people while overlooking Black and Indigenous resistance and strength and wisdom. In some ways, we see research as in need of defibrillation (in Guess's words), an electric move away from research that can only predict early death toward research that can bring forth life, freedom, balanced

optimism, and abundance. This is particularly needed in partnerships with community researchers, so that research which comes from these partnerships attends to futurities.

The primary themes in BLP interviews are about the relationship between damage and resilience, lack and regeneration, and resilience in the face of pain. Our work allowed us to co-create analytical frameworks that reflect these relationships, thereby directly serving and honoring the wisdom of the communities we interviewed, and prioritizing their ways of knowing rather than insisting on the continual production of Black deficit. This is why, apart from her work with the Black/Land Project, Guess has begun to painstakingly call for recognizing (Black geographic) abundance. Abundance situates Blackness as endless and bountiful, entirely at odds with global capitalist development and its hegemonic assumptions. Black relationships to land make up continual stories of Black geographic abundance in which Black people plan, develop, and construct wealth and freedom out of *seemingly* nothing.

In collaborating, we learned how to systematically describe experiences of damage and resilience, lack and regeneration as inextricable from one another. Our partnership allowed us to dip into academic methods and language but only to create materials that would be useful for Black communities. We wanted to make research that could not be used against us. BLP's research has helped us to know the ways in which Black stories about land are complex and powerful—deeply abundant and ocean deep. Black geographies inform Black stories, and in this, we draw links between the very rich and expansive places from which we come. With this in mind, we created capacity for research that does more than simply critique, but work that is actionable, relentlessly committed to putting oppression completely out of business.

A last reminder: when we collaborate, our stories do not belong to researchers, whether inside or outside the academy. Our stories are ours, though we hold them as communal. We hope that you can imagine how your research belongs to us—a tool that collectively we will use (on our own terms) to get us free. Communities expect research to be a tool that generates material and political results in the form of an abrupt abolition of current systemic and social relationalities that cause the “pain” that many researchers seek to highlight. Partnerships are opportunities for communities to decide (on our terms) if, and how, our very complex stories are told. Even better, they are times in which communities ask the questions.

**Note**

1. Eve Tuck, Mistinguette Smith, Allison M. Guess, Tavia Benjamin, and Brian K. Jones, "Geotheorizing Black/Land: Contestations and Contingent Collaborations," *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 3.1 (2014): 52–74; Eve Tuck, Allison M. Guess, and Hannah Sultan, "Not Nowhere: Collaborating on Selsame Land," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* (2014), [decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/26/not-nowhere-collaborating-on-selsame-land/](http://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/26/not-nowhere-collaborating-on-selsame-land/) (accessed November 18, 2015).