

Loose Lug Nuts, Lobbed Beer Bottles, and Buckets of Crawdads: Reflecting on Questions of Race and Class Uncovered through Cross-Cultural Transdisciplinary Action-Research Partnerships

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Introduction

An outreach position in a professional landscape architecture program in a land-grant institution will occasionally present opportunities to collaborate on the development, implementation, and evaluation of projects and programs that address fundamental needs in communities that are historically underserved, and little understood, by university outreach and extension faculty in general, and by the design and planning professions (architecture, landscape architecture, community design and planning) specifically. Such an opportunity arose in 2001, when a national nonprofit organization, the Walking Shield Foundation, which recruits and funds technical assistance for infrastructure projects in First Nations communities, contacted the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Wisconsin–Madison about an affordable housing project being planned by the Tribal Housing Authority of the Red Cliff Ojibwe, one of our neighboring First Nations. We responded by assembling a faculty/student outreach team that I co-led with Shawn Kelly, a licensed landscape architect. Through a series of meetings and community workshops over a period of three months, we produced the Eco-Cultural Solar Masterplan for a model “green affordable housing community.” The roads were constructed in 2005, and the first 24 homes were built in 2008. Another 24 homes are scheduled for construction in 2009–2010.

Over the years following that first contact, upon the recommendation of our professional colleagues and local leaders from the Red Cliff Nation, and with the support of the state and federal agencies and nonprofit organizations with whom they work, the outreach team instituted the Green Communities and Green Affordable Housing in Indian Country Initiative in partnership with several First Nations across the Upper Midwest (<http://www.affordablegreenhousing.org>). These partnerships have engaged a broad scope of projects and programs, including “Eco-Cultural

Land Use Planning” and “Eco-Solar Masterplanning and Site Design” for housing, commercial centers, public facilities, ceremonial facilities, and recreational facilities; professional development programs for planning staff, housing staff, and elected officials; and “hands-on” on-the-job training in “green” home construction. Participants have included local professionals, elected officials, nonprofit staff, community members, faculty and students from nearby tribal colleges, local artisans and tradespeople, and faculty and students from several professional programs at the university. Venues have included community centers, construction sites, studios, classrooms, and conference rooms.

I consider these examples of the work the team has done to be “transdisciplinary action-research.” V. A. Brown (2005) defines transdisciplinary action-research as the integration of three knowl-

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edge systems: place-based knowledge (residents and local leaders), disciplinary knowledge (university-trained experts), and strategic knowledge (bureaucrats). As one might imagine, facilitating this integration in partnerships between design and planning professionals and First Nations has been challenging. Conflicts between local conventions and expert protocol intersect with issues of race, class, and education, contextualized by history, economics, culture, and

ecology, often with surprising results. Over the years critical reflection on the complexity of these conflicts, intersections, and contexts has informed the iterative project development and evaluation processes. These complexities and this iterative process have increasingly become the focus and the methods of my research, toward the ends of identifying and overcoming the barriers to transdisciplinary action-research partnerships, specifically with communities of color. I have learned that we have much to learn.

In this essay, I will to share some of my reflections and questions about race and class that have emerged from my experiences. I begin with a collection of vignettes illustrating various encounters over the years that have given the various participants, including me, pause, and much cause for critical reflection. Following these vignettes are reflections that illustrate my ongoing journey from a vague, detached historical awareness to a more nuanced understanding

of the multiple and intersecting dimensions of race and class. This more nuanced understanding encompasses aspects ranging from culture group consciousness to individual truth; from macroeconomic structure to family dynamics; from expert paradigm to local knowledge; from receptivity to willful ignorance; and from embrace to hatred. Recognizing all this complexity on both sides, while realizing that sometimes there are no “sides” and at other times there are several, is necessary for university outreach to effectively serve the full spectrum of partner communities.

Part I: Encountering Anomalies and Confronting Assumptions about Race and Class

The first vignette sets the stage for the narrative of this ongoing journey. Subsequent vignettes flash back to previous events and flash forward to subsequent ones. Interwoven among these vignettes are reflections and interpretations, and reinterpretations in light of lessons learned years later. The names of specific communities and people have been avoided to protect anonymity.

Vignette 1: Expatriate and child return home. In summer 2005, the outreach team introduced above attended an annual event held in one of our partner First Nations communities. One of our local colleagues invited us to an evening gathering of expatriate First Nations professionals who had come home for the occasion. These highly educated, middle-class and upper-middle-class men and women had left the close ties of traditional family and rural community for various educational and career opportunities. Every year they came from across the country with spouses and children to participate in the centuries-old traditions associated with this annual event.

The evening gathering took place in a nearby village, in a hotel room with a balcony overlooking a lake. At one point in the evening a group of young people, White and obviously wealthy, passed under the balcony, where a small group of us had gathered in quiet conversation. Much to my astonishment, the well-mannered, well-dressed child of the expatriate with whom I had just spent several minutes discussing federal law relative to tribally owned land, casually wandered in from the adjacent room, leaned over the balcony and with a great deal of noise, generated a considerable volume of the substance that one clears from one’s throat, and with considerable velocity, spat upon the group of young people below, and then just as casually wandered back into the adjacent room.

My astonishment and revulsion was immediately followed by incredulity when the parent’s only response was a silent but obvious

rage at my equally silent but equally obvious shock at the child's behavior. For a moment I was transfixed by the raw emotion I saw in her face. The group on the balcony went silent. I was suddenly confused and embarrassed by a notion that I had transgressed some code of etiquette. Thankfully, the tension of the moment was somewhat dispelled by nervous laughter when another group of people, obnoxiously drunk, passed under the balcony, and a White colleague who grew up in the community jokingly called for the child to come back.

That moment has come back to me many times over the years. It cast my past experiences and understandings of race and class, and the intersection of the two, in new light and caused me to reflect and reexamine my interpretations. It is very important to note that I do not mean that this experience gave me answers; on the contrary, over the subsequent years I have come to realize how that moment opened my mind to a whole new spectrum of questions. I recall telling a colleague at the time that I was reminded of a simple example offered by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962):

“It is also very important to note that this moment was not the first or last time I was compelled to confront my own assumptions about race and class.”

At one time in the history of science a geologist would find a layer of rock and ask, “What type of rock is this?” and commence analysis of minerals and metals. The question “How did this rock get here?” did not occur to geologists until the concept of plate tectonics opened up a whole new spectrum of questions about the movement of the earth's crust.

It is also very important to note that this moment was not the first or last time I was compelled to confront my own assumptions about race and

class. Again to the contrary, there were several instances prior to that moment that gave me pause, but, upon reflection, I realize that I did not have the capacity to question my own sensibilities at the time, or a conceptual framework to interrogate my own experience.

I was well aware of hatred born of racial prejudice in the ignorant, regardless of race. I was well aware of the fear and distrust between races, regardless of education or class. I was also aware of the contempt with which some people of wealthy classes treat the poor, regardless of race or education. However, that a successful, well-educated individual could harbor the hatred I saw in that face was a shock; that the hatred was aimed at me was bewildering.

Moreover, the deeper implications of the casualness and impunity of her child's salivary assault on strangers frightened me. In that moment my sensibilities were so shaken that I was compelled to recognize a fundamental flaw in my understanding of the intersections of race and class.

Several instances since that have challenged and refined nascent ideas purposed to reconcile that experience with other experiences, both prior and subsequent to that pivotal moment, with each subsequent instance bringing another round of flashbacks and another round of reflection, reinterpretation, and refinement. The next series of vignettes illustrate some of this iterative process of reframing and reflection.

Vignette 2: Flashback to Indian student experience on campus. Several months before the event overviewed in Vignette 1, the outreach team ran a special session summer class in partnership with one of the tribal colleges in the northern part of the state. Scholarships, stipends, and housing were arranged to allow three adult students to participate in a 3-week session on our campus. In addition, on-campus child care was arranged for one of the visiting students' 2-year-old son. While the experience initiated ongoing friendships with the students who participated, two incidents occurred during their stay on campus that added another layer of nuance to my questions about race and class.

I was leaving school one evening at the same time one of the visiting students drove up. I was too far away to hear what transpired, but I observed that a university parking patrol pulled up immediately behind him, blocking his car in the "handicap parking" space he had pulled into. Before I had time to intervene, a \$200 ticket had been issued. In all the years I had been on campus up till then, and in all the years since, I have seen many people pull into that spot for drop-off/pickup purposes, but I have never seen or heard of anyone being ticketed while they were standing at their car.

I was forced to contemplate the idea that the parking patrol staff person had noticed the vehicle—big, old, needing a muffler, and driven by a person of color—had followed it, and upon seeing it pull into a restricted parking place, motivated by racial prejudice, pounced on an opportunity to write a ticket. My ability to convince myself that this was coincidence was somewhat undermined by the fact that the same visiting student told me that someone had urinated in that same car while it was parked on campus the next day. When I mentioned this to my coteacher, he was equally incredulous, and suggested that it was more likely that the 2-year-old had accidentally wet in the car.

Vignette 3: Flashback/flash-forward: Historic controversy and ongoing animosity. One of our partnership projects happened to be with the home community of BK, a student from the American Indian Studies Program on campus. BK heard about the project and arranged an independent study to work with us in 2005–2006. During that time there was an incident on campus that would have likely gone unnoticed by me if it were not for BK’s presence and insights. A young Navaho man had been injured when a beer bottle was thrown at him as he walked down the main street in the college town. BK told us that this young man was part of a group of First Nations students with whom she spent time outside class. BK had witnessed, on more than one occasion, “attitude” from White students in response to the young man’s clothing and his proud wearing of turquoise jewelry that identified him as “Indian.” The young man withdrew from the university shortly after the incident.

Over the year, we learned that BK had a relative who was regarded with honor among many of the First Nations communities in the Upper Midwest for his role in a controversial treaty rights dispute that was eventually resolved by the US Supreme Court. The issue involved spearfishing and whether or not members of the First Nations communities were allowed to use this method of fishing during certain times of the year. The court ruled in favor of the First Nations. However, there was considerable racial tension in some rural areas of the Upper Midwest during and subsequent to this controversy. In the wake of these events, “Indians” were, and in some areas still are, subjected to verbal and physical violence if they venture into nearby White settlements. Over the years, historic records, newspaper clippings, and conversations with residents, both White and Indian, have repeatedly confirmed BK’s insights. And, recalling the incident in Vignette 2, I am increasingly less inclined to doubt that the parking ticket was issued in malice, and I am increasingly more inclined to doubt that the 2-year-old had accidentally wet in that car.

Vignette 4: Flashback: A state vehicle on the reservation. It was sometime before any of the events outlined above, upon our return trip from our very first visit to one of our neighboring First Nations, almost 6 hr from campus, that the outreach team stopped to fill the tank of our university vehicle. My colleague, Shawn, being very conscientious about car maintenance, with such a long trip behind us and another long trip ahead, decided to check the tires. He found that every lug nut on every tire was loose enough to turn by hand. We were baffled, and shocked at the idea that the fleet maintenance crew could be so careless. That seeming so unlikely,

the possibility of sabotage occurred to us; might driving a vehicle with state plates on a reservation give occasion for a resident to consider sabotage? Full of confusion and doubt, we stood there looking from one to another, then to the tires, then back to each other. I followed Shawn around the car as he did a thorough inspection. He paused at the back of the car, looking down at the back bumper. He pointed out a small round hole. When I asked what it was, he told me it looked to him like a bullet hole.

At the time I was able to convince myself that the loose lug nuts and the hole that looked like a bullet hole could be explained without consideration of racially motivated sabotage. However, over the years a number of events, particularly the incident that so quickly and completely changed the demeanor of that highly educated, successful individual mentioned in Vignette 1 from amiability to undisguisable rage, have compelled me to reexamine my interpretation of that event. And over the years I have become increasingly less inclined to doubt that the lug nuts were loosened in malice, or that the hole in the bumper was indeed made by a bullet.

Vignette 5: Students' reflective journaling. Our classes occasionally include opportunities to work on site with colleagues in our partner First Nations communities. One of the requirements of these classes is the keeping of a reflective journal. Based on memories of frustration when, as a student, I was asked to “reflect” without any parameters, I composed a series of prompting questions framed by Habermas’s (1971) three domains of learning—instrumental learning, communicative learning, and transformative learning—and asked students to reflect on all three domains in their journals. The excerpt below contextualized the previous vignettes.

I am grateful that the _____ community generously allowed us to participate in their community dialogue. It was definitely an eye-opener to meet a group of people that cared deeply for, and respected each other, and their traditions. Very different from what I was told regarding the Indians while growing up in _____. The spearing rights conflict, and the disputes over spearfishing were reaching a climax during that period, and I was educated to hold Native Americans in contempt and distrust. Now I am quite disappointed that my childhood education (both from family and school system) did not prepare me as to the extent of oppression and marginalization

of the _____ and other Native Americans at the hands of the Euro-Americans. Perhaps linking higher education with community building efforts is the best way to repair some of the damage. . . .

That excerpt is not typical of student journals, but it does reflect the spectrum of sentiments voiced and written by student participants over the years. Coupled with my own experiences, these journals offer some evidence of the potential for transformative learning inherent in transdisciplinary action-research. The insights I have gained over the years by listening to students and reading reflective journals have strengthened my commitment to integrating service-learning into our ongoing partnerships. They have also grounded much of my own experiences.

In light of what I had learned from BK about spearfishing rights, and with the jolt of my experience with the expatriate and child still reverberating, that journal excerpt reframed the historic animosity between the people of the First Nations and the people in the neighboring villages in terms of competition for scarce resources. Interpreted in this light, the animosity was more about similarities of class than difference of race. Both of these groups relied on fish to support their families, whether directly as food on the table, indirectly through the recreational tourism industry, or both. What is interpreted as oppression of a minority group when framed in terms of race is interpreted as unfair competitive advantage when framed in terms of class.

However, it is important to stress that by noting class similarities in my reflections I have no intention of discounting the long history of colonialism, the animosity and violence between racial groups, or the effect of that history on individuals from both groups. Conversely, that excerpt from the student reflective journal clearly illustrates the long-term effects of that animosity on individuals.

The phrase about being educated in “contempt and distrust” in the student journal, the hatred on the face of that expatriate, the loose lug nuts, and the hole in the bumper all came back to me a few years later at an academic conference. A White colleague from another institution responded to my presentation with a derisive “You are wasting your time with them, you’ll see. They will trash those houses in no time.” The tone and the undertone recalled the parting comment made by that expatriate, delivered with a pointed look, just out of earshot of the rest of the group: “We don’t want White architects coming here and building houses for Indians.”

Part 2: Race and Class: Collective Consciousness, Individual Truth, and Economic Reality

A vague, detached historical awareness of the history of racial animosity between First Nations peoples and colonial peoples was not sufficient preparation for reflection and interpretation of the events depicted in the vignettes above. That these events were so shocking is evidence that they were anomalies rather than the norm in my experience. For the most part, the outreach team, if not warmly welcomed, is treated with professional courtesy by groups and individuals from our neighboring First Nations. And for the most part, faculty, students, agency, and professional colleagues behave in kind. However, experiencing these anomalies has “tuned my ear” to listen for nuances in tone and language during trans-disciplinary encounters. Because these partnerships are focused in large part on the issues of affordable housing, this iterative framing and listening has also generated new questions about the collective experience at the intersection of race and class.

Thus, while the first half of this essay framed questions in terms of individuals, the remainder illustrates my growing awareness of the links between individual truth lived day to day, social group consciousnesses, microeconomic realities, macroeconomic history, and race. An anecdote

about buckets of crawdads sets the stage for Part 2 of this narrative (crawdads are an aquatic species common in the Upper Midwest; they look like tiny lobsters).

Buckets of crawdads. There is a story about two fishermen I have heard several times from First Nations colleagues: One man is White, one is Indian. Both are using crawdads for bait. The crawdads in the White man’s bucket repeatedly climb up each other, tip the bucket over, and crawl out. The White man keeps scooping them up and putting them back in the bucket. After a while the White man asks the Indian man why this is not happening to him. The Indian man replies, “These are Indian crawdads; they keep each other down.”

As a female from a large working-class Irish-Catholic family, I understood the concept of “lateral oppression” when I first encountered the term many years ago. However, it was not until I started

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working with First Nations that I became aware of the multiplier effect of lateral oppression in communities of color. Obligations of shared child care and shared elder care, tasks and roles dictated by custom and tradition, and shared housing and transportation during times of economic or domestic crises are only a few characteristics of the milieu of an interdependent extended working-class family system I recognized both in “Indian Country” and “back home.” The emotional demands, conflicts, and investment of time that come with attempts to extract oneself from these relatively tacit familial and community obligations to pursue individual educational and career goals can be extremely stressful.

New to me, however, were the overt racial manifestations of lateral oppression I have learned about in Indian Country. “Apple” is a term of derision: red on the outside, White on the inside. I have heard stories of schoolchildren being beaten up for “acting White” when they participate in enrichment activities. Aspirations for higher education are interpreted as “learning to leave” by some elders who recognize that the lack of employment opportunities “On Rez” means eventual abandonment of family and community ties. Over the years I have come to think of this “clan system” approach to lateral oppression as a significant factor in the perpetuation of generational poverty in many First Nations while simultaneously being the single factor that accounts for the astonishing fact that these communities continue to survive over centuries of colonialism, racism, poverty, and the boondoggles of treaties and federal bureaucracies.

Survivor Communities and Survivor Communities of Color

In an earlier article (*Thering, 2007*), I drew on sociological and political science theory to analyze case studies of transdisciplinary action-research partnerships with former “coal towns” in Appalachia, former sharecropping communities in the South, and First Nations communities in the Midwest. While the causes of the adverse conditions vary widely, in each case external macroeconomic forces were at the core of the devastation. In subsequent interviews with the project coordinators, I found that they used similar terms to characterize these communities. These include “despair,” “defeatist attitude,” “jaded,” “disheartened,” “futility,” and “cynicism.” In each case, the analysis suggested that those who remain have neither the individual capacity to leave nor the collective capacity to overcome the repercussions of the devastating macroeconomic event. In that article I suggested that it would be

helpful to approach outreach in these communities in terms that acknowledge the social dynamic associated with the generational poverty that these communities have in common, rather than in terms that differentiate them based on factors of ecological, geographic, cultural, racial, or ethnic heritage. I suggested *survivor communities* would be a useful term and a useful heuristic and offered examples.

Reflecting on our partnerships with our neighboring First Nations has not caused me to abandon this heuristic. But it has caused me to examine its usefulness when parsed across these differentiating factors, particularly the factor of race. I have become increasingly aware that in many areas of the country individuals of color from communities that fit the description of survivor communities are required to manage the stresses of both generational poverty and intraracial lateral oppression at home while managing the stresses of fear and isolation when in predominantly White communities.

Toward a More Nuanced Approach

Reflecting back on the circumstances leading up to the events depicted in Vignette 2 illustrates how much we have learned over the years. We had asked our colleagues from the tribal college to nominate students for that first summer program. At that time, one of our goals was to formalize a transfer student relationship between the 2-year tribal college and our university. We had generated funding for scholarships for three students, and we were very pleased to be able to offer the opportunity. The faculty at the tribal college very gently told us that, while they appreciated our attempts, the majority of their students were adults who could not accept the nominations because they needed summer jobs to support families. We went back to our sources and generated the additional funds to offer stipends and housing. We then learned that one of the students had a young child and could not participate unless child care was provided. After some scrambling, we were able to find support for a teenage cousin to accompany the students and care for the child during class hours. Then, while they were about halfway through the summer program, one of the students told me that while they had pooled their grocery money and were cooking meals together, the cost of living was so much higher in the city that they had run out of food money. I went to my deans, who arranged a short-term loan, to be paid back when the students received their stipend checks at the end of the month.

In retrospect, I feel a bit silly for not having anticipated these needs. I was well aware that most students at 2-year colleges are adults and many have children because I had started my academic career at a tech college when I was a young mother many years ago. Most of my family and friends did the same. It was a bit of a shock to realize that in the intervening years I had become so acculturated into the “ivory tower” that the reality of the working-class student was only a vague memory. It also became very apparent that the majority of the people I worked with in that ivory tower had no idea of the reality of the working-class student or the survivor community dynamic I was only then beginning to discover. None of us had any idea of the individual truth of the day-to-day life of a member of a survivor community of color.

Now our transdisciplinary partnerships reflect a more nuanced understanding of the spectrum of needs, preferences, and aspirations of individuals from our partner communities. Three broad principles summarize our more nuanced approach.

- *Expanding the range of opportunities for all.* We understand that some individuals hold the “old ways” very dear, while others participate in the old ways just to please their elders, while some despise the old ways because they think the old ways “keep them down.” In response, we work closely with our local colleagues to develop programs and projects that support the old ways, or at least do not undermine them, while expanding the range of opportunities available to all.
- *Faculty are gatekeepers and bridge builders.* Some individuals resent any White presence on the reservation, while others put up with our presence as a necessary evil when they do not have the technical expertise in their community to forward common goals, while some are open and welcoming and have become valued friends. In response, the outreach team is careful to invite only those outsiders who have demonstrated sensitivity to the issues to join us when we visit our neighboring First Nations, and we are careful to model respectful professionalism when we bring students and visitors with us.
- *Train-the-trainers approach.* We have not given up on formalizing a transfer student relationship between the tribal college and our university, but we are now more focused on cultivating resources to support outreach and adult education

at the tribal college and cultivating internship opportunities with local employers than on recruitment.

From Campus-Based to Community-Based and Back Again

Over the years I came to realize that transdisciplinary action-research partnerships with survivor communities would demand significantly more time and resources than partnerships with communities that enjoyed the economic and social benefits of abundance. I visualized a geometric relationship between time and class, such that the greater the class difference between the faculty and the community, the more time it takes to overcome the communication and perception barriers to effective partnerships. Scholarly investigation of the parameters of that relationship defined a significant aspect of my research program. However, my ongoing journey from a vague, detached historical awareness to a more nuanced understanding of the multiple and intersecting dimensions of race and class suggests that the issue of race renders that relationship, and the parameters of that research program, exponential.

Thus the most important question, relative to issues of race and class, is the one that asks if our university extension and outreach programs have the capacity to effectively serve these communities. If the answer is no, the changes we institutionalized as we gained a more nuanced understanding of the spectrum of needs, preferences, and aspirations of individuals from our partner communities may offer some insights to serving these communities more effectively. Expanding the range of opportunities, building bridges, keeping the gates, and training the trainers in partnerships with survivor communities and survivor communities of color will require leadership at the college or university level to facilitate transdisciplinary action-research teams, creative grant writing, interdisciplinary degree programs, and partnerships with government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. It will also require criteria and venues for evaluation and peer review of research and appropriate standards for tenure and promotion of faculty. Finally, it will require recruitment and retention of students and faculty from survivor communities and survivor communities of color to facilitate community partnerships and engage in a research program that investigates the multiple intersecting dimensions of race and class.

Thankfully, over the years many funders and most of my colleagues and administration, the majority of whom come from privileged

backgrounds, have been willing to trust my instincts and support the unconventional activities that characterize this type of outreach scholarship. However, some do not. I can account for some of the less-than-supportive interactions with some sympathy for the powerlessness of low- and mid-level administrators in the bureaucracies of state land-grant universities, extension systems, and nonprofit organizations.

I have less sympathy, however, for those who do have discretionary decision-making power but refuse to recognize the validity of action-research, community-based research, or outreach scholarship in any form. At times I have been appalled by scathing refusals of requests for “special treatment” and rejections of proposals with suggestions that these types of projects should be managed under government or charitable social service programs. While I have not heard any overt racial motivation, it seems reasonable to suggest that if unconventional approaches are the only way to facilitate outreach partnerships with communities that are not served by conventional approaches, the outcome is the same, regardless of the motivation.

While we are very pleased with the support and successes to date, and I am generally optimistic about the future, I do occasionally become discouraged and frustrated. I recently caught myself fuming over a particularly uninformed comment from a peer reviewer. I rather scathingly suggested there was irony in the fact that the term “willful ignorance” was coined inside the ivory tower and directed out. Then, hearing the cynicism in my own voice, I recalled the incident of the expatriate and child, and added yet another question to inform continued reflection: Perhaps the frequency and magnitude of my fumings, relative to that expatriate, are measures of the difference between being an expatriate of a survivor community and being an expatriate of a survivor community of color.

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About the Author

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