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Black and Indigenous Thought in Response to the COVID-19 Reality

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Abstract

Community-engaged learning is being profoundly impacted by the global pandemic and racial reckoning that defines the COVID-19 reality. In order to best respond to this COVID-19 reality, community-engaged scholars and practitioners must draw on the knowledge ways produced by Black and Indigenous thinkers for which the intersection of pandemic and state violence is not new. By addressing the field's assumptions of time and space and interrogating the accompanying practices of White adventure and the "real world" dichotomy, scholars and practitioners have the potential to create a community-engaged learning praxis that will thrive in the new normal created by the interplay of COVID-19 and the movement for Black lives.

Keywords: COVID-19, Black and Indigenous thought, community-engaged learning, scholars, practitioners

Unprecedented, uncertain, difficult: These are the words we muster to describe how COVID-19 has shaped reality in the United States, a reality characterized not only by the global COVID-19 pandemic, but by its synchronicity with the ongoing struggle for Black lives. During spring 2020, as colleges and universities hurriedly transitioned into online learning, COVID-19 case numbers rose in lockstep with the national response to police brutality against members of the Black community. The intersection of ubiquitous viral spread and state violence is familiar to many marginalized communities in the United States, but is particularly intertwined with the historic and present-day experiences of U.S.-based Black and Indigenous communities. Throughout the centuries, colonists turned settlers turned citizens leveraged enslavement (both chattel and carceral) and foreign-born illness, such as smallpox, to contain and control the Black and Indigenous communities whose labor and erasure benefited the nation.

Simultaneous attempts at dehumanization of Blackness through state violence and erasure of Indigeneity by pandemic created a platform on which settler colonial actors built the communities we occupy and study within the field of community engagement today. Yet broader U.S. society views the current interplay of the COVID-19 pandemic and racialized violence as unparalleled. The collective amnesia toward the precedent for this moment is unsurprising given the widespread pedagogical mystification of the United States' colonial history. This piece aims to elucidate what can be learned from Black and Indigenous thinkers for which this COVID-19 reality is anything but new. Community-engaged scholars and practitioners, tasked with developing a more nuanced understanding of place and the forms of knowledge produced within it, must critically consider and explore the intersections of Black and Indigenous thought in order to work toward a new normal for the field of community-engaged learning that is best situated to engage with the COVID-19 reality.

Inspired by 4 years of questioning, learning, and listening alongside community partners from Black and Indigenous communities in and around Los Angeles, the reflections offered here build on and celebrate the work and knowledge born from the grassroots. To

ground our discussion, we will begin with a brief exploration of the shared histories of Black and Indigenous communities in the United States. With this historical context in mind, community-engaged scholars and practitioners will be encouraged to reflect on existing community-engaged learning literature, including place-based education, critical pedagogy of place, and land education. The following section will explore the assumptions made within the field regarding time and space and how these assumptions perpetuate White adventure and the "real world" dichotomy. To connect this exploration to the needs of the COVID-19 reality, this piece ends with suggestions for community-engaged praxis informed by the intersections of Black and Indigenous thought.

Background: A Brief Exploration of Blackness and Indigeneity in the United States

In order to situate our thinking around what can be learned from Black and Indigenous communities who have long experienced pandemic and state violence, let us define these admittedly broad terms. First, we note here that Blackness and Indigeneity do not exist separate from one another. Many, including the Freedmen of the Five Tribes, identify as Black *and* Indigenous and possess particular knowledge ways that will not be explored in this piece. For the purposes of this reflection, the word *Black* will be used to describe people in the United States who are part of the Black and/or African American diaspora. This includes those who are direct descendants of African peoples enslaved by Europeans and forcibly brought to what is now called the United States. The term *Indigenous* will be used to describe peoples from hundreds of distinct tribes who have lived on Turtle Island (North America) since time immemorial. The specificity of ancestral connection to Turtle Island is not to negate the Indigeneity of other Indigenous peoples currently living in the United States, but to help us focus on how the interconnected experiences of Turtle Island Indigenous peoples and members of the Black diaspora speak directly to the current COVID-19 reality in the United States.

Prior to delving into the present day, let us build out our discussion of the historic interconnectivity of Black and Indigenous communities in the United States of America. European expansion to the "new world" first brought Black and Indigenous peoples together on a large scale. The settlement of the new world required the forced labor of Black people and erasure of Indigenous communities in order to establish a viable economic market and a strict social order based on the supremacy of Whiteness. Colonial actors used state-sanctioned violence and unabated viral spread to keep Black and Indigenous peoples within the confines of their social strata. The violence was justified as a means to an end of manifest destiny.

Smallpox is a prime example of a European-born illness that decimated both Black and Indigenous populations. The impact of smallpox on these communities was not solely a product of passive viral spread, but was used as a deliberate colonial tactic, as described by Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999): "Stories are told in Canada, for example, of blankets used by smallpox victims being sent into First Nation communities while the soldiers and settlers camped outside waiting for the people to die" (p. 62). The impact of disease in the context Smith describes is physiological, but other thinkers, such as renowned writer James Baldwin, push us to extend our conceptualization of what causes "disease" from the physical to the psychological. Baldwin described the pathologization of colonialism when he recounted his experiences as a Black man living in the United States: "I first contracted some dread, some chronic disease, the unfailing symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and a fire in the bowels" (Baldwin, 1955/1984, p. 96). Other thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon (2004), a trained psychologist born in the French colony of Martinique, have discussed the pathological impacts of colonialism on the body at length and have made a compelling case for the reality of the chronic disease that Baldwin describes.

In response to state violence and widespread pandemic (both physiological and psychological), Black and Indigenous communities created informed conceptions of time and space that envisioned a way to move about the world distinct from the paths outlined by European thought. We can refer to the collection of these conceptions as "ways of knowing." A critical component of community-engaged learning is holding numerous forms of knowledge, or ways of knowing, in conversation with one another. Ways of

knowing are informed by collective and individual experience, cultural ontologies, and language, among other social forces. Now, "to hold alternative knowledge forms is to create the foundation for alternative ways of doing things" (Smith, 1999, p. 36). Some of these alternatives, or Black and Indigenous ways of knowing, are already present, to varying degrees, in community-engaged methodological literature.

Land, Place, and Pedagogical Praxis

Any discussion of Blackness and Indigeneity begins and ends with the land, whether it be the intimate and complex connections between Black and Indigenous peoples and their homelands or their forced dispossession from those same places. It is fitting, then, that our exploration of the presence of Black and Indigenous conceptions of time and space begins with pedagogical practices focused specifically on interacting and learning with the land. Place-based education, critical pedagogy of place, and land education are three pedagogical practices with varying entry points to meaningful discussion of Black and Indigenous thought in community-engaged literature. We will examine both the current utility and shortcomings of these methods, as well as review skills and competencies that could push the methods toward addressing the COVID-19 reality in community-engaged learning.

Place-Based Education

Current literature from the community-engaged learning subdiscipline of place-based education (PBE) regularly discusses the ties of Indigenous and Black communities to place, focusing primarily on these communities' historic interactions with the land. The historicization of Blackness, Indigeneity, and place does not appear to be an intentional pedagogical choice, but a product of PBE's primary focus on the local in its current form (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 9). PBE discusses the "direct bearing on the wellbeing of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit" (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 308). The absence of contemporary discussion of Blackness and Indigeneity in PBE may also be due to an inclination toward rural ecology, which, in the United States context, often becomes a discussion of a predominantly White demographic, despite many Indigenous reservations being situated in rural contexts (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Orr, 1992, 1994; Sobel, 1996; Theobald, 1997; Thomashow, 1996). The shortcomings of PBE lie in its seeming lack of theoretical underpinning. This does not negate its usefulness; rather, it creates space to bring together PBE and a theoretically explicit methodology.

Critical Pedagogy of Place

Critical pedagogy of place, originally proposed by David A. Gruenewald, posits itself as the theoretical backbone of PBE. A critical pedagogy of place stems from critical pedagogy, which draws on the work of scholars such as Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher. Critical pedagogy asserts the importance of grounding teaching and learning in the pursuit of social justice, democracy, and the promotion of *conscientização* or "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 17; Giroux, 2007). Akin to critical pedagogy, critical pedagogy of place focuses on how place interacts with, and at times reinforces, the "assumptions, practices, and outcomes taken for granted in dominant culture and in conventional education" (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 308). Drawing further from Freire, a critical pedagogy of place defines *place* not only by its ecology, but as sites inhabited by humans "which mark them and which they also mark" (Freire, 1970, p. 90). A key distinction between PBE and critical pedagogy of place is that the latter accounts for and analyzes the interactions between humans and the land. The theoretical nuance embedded in critical pedagogy of place creates space for a discussion of Blackness and Indigeneity in relation to place. But without explicit language referring to the ties between Blackness, Indigeneity, and place, critical pedagogy of place loses some of its potential power as a methodology in the COVID-19 reality.

Land Education

Land education refers to an array of land-based pedagogical practices that foreground Indigenous ontologies of land. In this context, *Indigenous* refers to any peoples who draw their ancestral heritage to a specific place, which is inclusive of members of the Black/African diaspora who may not know where on the continent their ancestors lived. Land education emphasizes Indigenous language and cosmology as sites of resistance to place-based education that

often assumes a European canonical understanding of the relationship between land and humans (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 8). That is, where the European canon centers the human and evokes sentiments like "I am, therefore place is," land education positions the land itself as the central knowledge bringer, in effect stating, "Land is, therefore we are" (Bang et al., 2014, p. 45). This positionality facilitates an abiding critique of past and present settler colonial projects, including what is referred to as the settler colonial triad (Wolfe 2006). Colonial settlers, Black peoples, and Indigenous peoples make up the settler colonial triad, which "outlines the necessity of also examining the history of chattel slaves (mostly from Africa) who were kept landless and made into property along with Indigenous land as part of the settlement process in the US and elsewhere" (McCoy, 2014, p. 84). The clear relationships within the colonial triad lend credence to land education integrating an analysis of these same relations within the present-day context.

Land education brings together discussions of Blackness and Indigeneity, but it is currently utilized most frequently within the field of environmental studies. This piece will not make the explicit case for land education to be utilized within the field of community-engaged learning, but its potential as a viable methodological practice in the COVID-19 reality is unquestionable. In fact, any of the methodologies discussed here would provide valuable nuance to community-engaged methodology. Place-based education, critical pedagogy of place, and land education outline processes that can foreground Black and Indigenous thought. But these processes are best facilitated by specific skills and competencies outlined within other sections of community-engaged literature that also have space for making Black and Indigenous knowledge ways more explicit.

Skills and Competencies

In order to extend the aforementioned methodologies into daily interactions within community-engaged learning settings, current literature calls for faculty, students, and staff to hone their understandings of social identity, privilege, and power. Understanding these three social forces is key to adequately partnering with community members outside academic institutions (Tryon & Madden, 2019, p. 3). A deep and reflective knowledge of individual social identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and ability, aids in navigating partnerships with community members whose social identities may not align with their own (Tryon & Madden, 2019, p. 8). Ongoing discussions of privilege, or the structural power associated with certain social identities, help to further contextualize the dynamics created by the identities that people bring to campus and community partnerships (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 638). When describing the knowledge and critical commitments required to cultivate high-quality partnerships, Lina D. Dostilio's competency model emphasizes the importance of

- knowledge of self: self-awareness;
- knowledge of local community: history, strengths, assets, agendas, goals;
- consciousness of power relations inherent in partnerships;
- commitment to cultivating authentic relationships with communities (Dostilio, 2017, p. 51).

Although the knowledge and critical commitments outlined above are crucial to community-engaged learning partnerships, this piece puts into question the "knowledge of local community" that scholars and practitioners draw on to inform their partnerships. The knowledge that most people possess regarding the area in which they live is often based in a dominant narrative. Through a more complicated and nuanced understanding of the local, community-engaged scholars and practitioners can better position themselves toward cultivating partnerships that are well equipped to succeed in the COVID-19 reality. In an effort to address specific components of community-engaged learning theory and praxis, the following sections speak to ways in which we must rely on Black and Indigenous conceptions of time and space in order to address White adventure and the perpetuation of the "real world" dichotomy in our work.

Time and White Adventure

Western thought conceptualizes time as linear and rarely accounts for the role of the past in shaping lived experiences of the present, especially the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Linear time also creates distance, and at times discon-

nect, between the wrongs of the past and the present. This disconnect allows those with power—in our context, those within academia—to act as neutral observers of the communities outside the institution, rather than as actors inextricably tied to the complex histories between institutions and communities (Smith, 1999, p. 43). If left unchecked, an adherence to linear time structures promotes what Smith (1999, p. 78) and hooks (2003, p. 34), among others, refer to as White adventure. The concept, or better yet, practice, of White adventure is discussed at length within decolonial theory, but for our purposes, *White adventure* refers to the positioning of community partners as an unknown other to be analyzed and briefly "experienced" by faculty, staff, and students within academia.

The practice of White adventure speaks to a prominent critique of community-engaged learning which argues that this pedagogical approach facilitates privileged voyeurism of the "other." bell hooks, an educator dedicated to what she refers to as democratic education, describes White adventure as an entry point that provides "them [White people/academics] with the necessary tools to continue their race-based dominance" (hooks, 2003, p. 33). The deliberately extractive process that hooks described still takes place in the present day. But more often than not, White adventure is less explicit, but still must be addressed within the field of community-engaged learning in order to move toward a sustainable future for the field.

Some manifestations of community-engaged learning and research may not explicitly create a dichotomy between the White adventurer intellectual and the community "other." More subtle instances of White adventurism within community engagement exist in the use of language like "the field" to refer to spaces outside the walls of the institution. Another example is the conception of the institution's location as a laboratory in which to examine theory learned in coursework.

The issue of the adventurer is more than problematic semantics. Addressing White adventure in community-engaged learning requires a shift in how scholars and practitioners teach students (as well as themselves) to conceptualize the connections between time and space. Community-engaged scholars and practitioners must take into consideration the "bodies, territories, beliefs, and values that have been travelled *through*" when collaborating with community partners (Smith, 1999, p. 81). What assumptions are you bringing to this collaboration? How much do you know about those you are working with, outside the dominant narrative about that community? These questions position scholars and practitioners to disentangle linear understandings of time and White adventure, and prepare us to address one of the largest barriers in our field, the "real world" dichotomy.

Space and Deconstructing the "Real World" Dichotomy

The financial impact of COVID-19 is pushing higher education institutions to prepare students for the "real world," a space touted as somehow distinct from the educational setting, as if the majority of people tied to these institutions do not begin and end their days outside the reach of campus. In an effort to prepare their students, colleges and universities are pouring funds into high-impact practices, community-engaged learning included, that are touted as strategies by which students can "reap the full benefits—economic, civic, and personal—of their studies in college" (Schneider, 2008, p. 1). The rhetorical separation between the institution and what lies outside its walls may be due in part to the benefits of the dichotomy to the goals of the corporate education model. This structure seeks to educate students to become successful employees, who can later be called upon to donate to the college or university, largesse that is needed now more than ever given present significant financial losses.

The "real world" dichotomy also aligns with Smith's understanding of controlled space, which encompasses three main areas: the line, center, and outside. The line establishes boundaries of space, the center describes orientation to the power structure, and the outside encompasses those who are in "an oppositional relation to the colonial centre" (Smith, 1999, p. 53). The line within a community-engaged learning context can be understood as the literal boundary of campus. The rhetorical separation between the campus and the "real world" does students a disservice as they prepare to leave their institutions and depart from the "center."

Framing the institution as a practice space prior to entering the real world prevents students from making clear and informed

connections between what they learn in the classroom and what they experience every day. At its core, community-engaged learning and research seeks to break "through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, our real life" (hooks, 2003, p. 41). Community-engaged scholars and practitioners can dismantle the separation of campus and community by sharing "the knowledge gleaned in classrooms beyond those settings thereby working to challenge the construction of certain forms of knowledge as always and only available to the elite" (hooks, 2003, p. 41). Although our field may situate itself along the liminal space between the academy and community, we need explicit praxis that grounds Black and Indigenous thought in order to move forward. The following section offers community-engaged learning praxis informed by Black and Indigenous thought in order to challenge our assumptions and prepare scholars and practitioners for the new normal created by the COVID-19 reality.

Praxis in Pursuit of a New Normal

Praxis is often the most difficult question within the field of community-engaged learning, especially when considering engagement with marginalized communities. I have sat in many planning meetings that ended in confusion and disillusionment because the group could not come to a conclusion on how "best" to carry out the various components of our community-engaged learning work. The concern over how to carry out our work is not unwarranted. Many Black and Indigenous scholars affirm the importance of process, given the sordid histories of White researchers entering communities and extracting knowledge without any form of reciprocity. Borrowing again from Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999): "In all community processes—that is, methodology and method—is highly important. In many projects, the process is far more important than the outcome" (p. 130). This may seem discouraging to those who are already conflicted on how to create mutually beneficial partnerships between institutions and marginalized communities. However, Smith continues that "processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate" (p. 130). This focus on process is not meant to discourage, but to ground scholars and practitioners with the knowledge that it is thoughtful action, rather than concerned inaction, that can bring forth a praxis equipped to engage with the realities of our COVID-19 futures.

In the spirit of respectful, healing, and educational process and action, I offer the following pedagogical additions that intentionally structure learning toward interrogating exactly what time and space can begin to mean in community-engaged learning and research.

1. Land Acknowledgments

Institutional land acknowledgments are relatively new to U.S.-based institutions of higher learning. The process of creating a land acknowledgment is often fraught because many institutions rely on their Indigenous faculty, students, and staff to advise or individually craft land acknowledgments on behalf of the institution. This arrangement poses the irony of Indigenous individuals shouldering the labor that allows institutions to sidestep the necessary place-based introspection required to properly honor the lands on which they reside.

Fortunately, land acknowledgments are not inherently flawed; in fact, they are an important sign of respect within many Indigenous cultures. But land acknowledgments require a mindful and reflective approach, rather than the rote memorization that is typical of large bureaucracies like institutions of higher learning. Land acknowledgments are also not a fixed practice. I encourage those I work with to continue to think critically about what it means to occupy land acquired through genocide and built upon through slave labor.

With this knowledge in mind, community-engaged scholars and practitioners are encouraged to begin every project, course, and event with a land acknowledgment that recognizes the past, present, and future stewardship of the land by its Indigenous peoples, as well as naming the labor of enslaved Black people who made that land financially successful for European slave owners and ultimately for the institutions situated on that land. I would emphasize here the importance of recognizing Black and Indigenous connectivity in the past *and* present tense in an attempt to address the continued erasure of these communities' support of the lands on which they live.

2. Teach Black and Indigenous Scholars in Partnership

It is becoming common practice for community-engaged syllabi to begin with a brief discussion of the coursework's connections to Indigenous lands and peoples. Although the intention behind first teaching Indigenous peoples' connection to subject matter aligns well with the growing discussion of Indigeneity within academia, the brevity and distance placed between the "Indigenous unit" and the rest of the subject matter misses important points of knowledge synergy. Community-engaged scholars and practitioners, particularly in the United States, need to think critically about how they can teach Black and Indigenous thinkers together, rather than separately. This is not to imply that Black and Indigenous thought speak directly to one another, but that the intersection of Black and Indigenous thought provides a complex picture of the very communities we seek to engage with in our shared work.

3. Antiracist Workshops

Antiracist workshops can be of immense benefit to community-engaged scholars, practitioners, and students when preparing to work with community partners outside the institution. Though an hour-long workshop cannot address all the intricacies of equitable and reciprocal partnership, such workshops are a good start for learning cultural humility and unlearning harmful assumptions about people outside the academy. In fact, it is common for the majority of antiracist workshops to be "spent simply breaking through the denial that leads many unenlightened white people, as well as people of color, to pretend that racist and white supremacist thought and action are no longer pervasive in our culture" (hooks, 2003, p. 25). This is not to discourage community-engaged learning scholars and practitioners, but to demonstrate, using the experiences of a seasoned educator, just how much work there is to be done on this front.

4. Restorative Justice Healing Circles

Restorative justice healing circles offer an accessible structure for addressing harm and rebuilding community trust. Healing circles, hereafter referred to as "circles," draw on Black and Indigenous community-building processes that focus on emotional, mental, social, and physical wellness (Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, 2020). Circles are grounded around a central fixture complete with items to be held by each individual as they speak aloud to the group. Facilitating a circle requires practice, and it may be in an institution's best interest to hire a trained facilitator, especially when bringing together groups for the first time.

Conclusion

Past and present Black and Indigenous thinkers possess knowledge that can aid the community engagement field in engaging with the COVID-19 reality, a reality characterized by a pandemic and the movement for Black lives, both of which profoundly impact the fundamentals of community-engaged learning: how people come together and learn with one another. By embracing and uplifting Black and Indigenous knowledge ways that have long reckoned with pandemic and state violence, the community-engaged learning discipline has the potential to address White adventure and the "real world" dichotomy in an effort to create a new normal for the field that promotes a sustainable and responsive pedagogy for the future.

It is understandable that some community-engaged scholars and practitioners may be unsure how to embed Black and Indigenous thought, as discussed throughout this piece, into their pedagogy. The arguments and praxis outlined in this proposal were created with the intention of aligning with a variety of disciplines, including the hard sciences. Land acknowledgments are a wonderful place to begin for those who are unsure of what steps to take. I also encourage community-engaged scholars and practitioners who question the applicability of the points outlined here to research Black and Indigenous scholars and practitioners within their own fields and reflect on how these individuals frame their respective work.

Future research and paired reflection on the need for Black and Indigenous thought in community-engaged learning and research has the opportunity to extend the discussion outside the United States. For example, there is a burgeoning amount of community-engaged scholarship coming out of Caribbean studies, from institutions such as the University of the West Indies, that brings together Afro-Indigenous populations to discuss myriad topics, including,

but not limited to, the complexities of possessing both Black/African and Indigenous identities.

It would be unfair to overlook the select community-engaged scholars, practitioners, and institutions already embedding Black and Indigenous knowledge ways into their pedagogy. The University of Toronto is a prime example of an institution that intentionally brings together Black and Indigenous thought in their community-engaged coursework. But the teaching of these forms of knowledge cannot remain in the minority. The continued broad omission of Black and Indigenous conceptions of time and space within the community engagement discipline will only limit the future growth of the field as it enters into a reality in which the fraught and interconnected histories of the communities we work alongside are laid bare.

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