



Blog: My Upcoming Plans to Decentralize Colonialism and Provide Space for Indigenous Ways of Knowing

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I am planning eco-community fieldwork with a non-profit organization in Barbados. This group uses a process called *permaculture* to restore an environment that was decimated by the colonial sugarcane industry and the human damages of slavery. The organization is located on Walker's Reserve, a 300-acre piece of privately owned land that is currently in the process of being transformed from a sand quarry to a biologically diverse ecosystem. They work in alliance with two other non-profits, forming a diversely networked coalition composed of both local and international members. This is useful for things like sourcing funds and gaining media attention, but it has its colonial implications/dangers as well.



Figure 1 Photograph provided by the author.

Highlights

White cultural complexes can be embedded in non-profit organizations.

"Sustainable" practices are often rooted in Indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous cultures and their history of land-care need to be honored.

“The soil biochemist, scholar-activist, and farmer must all study the plot as a place of intra-connection between psyche, nature, and culture, body and place, spirit and material, so as to learn how human systems and agro-ecological systems can live in more balanced relationships.”

I intend to take a critical look at the field of permaculture. Permaculture is a transdisciplinary set of ethics and principles that guide a holistic approach to designing farm systems, houses, landscapes, etc. It seeks to integrate natural ecosystems and human culture in the most balanced and harmonious ways possible. Even though permaculture design courses and trainings necessarily integrate Indigenous horticulture and other land-based practices, issues of ecological justice, epistemic justice, and racial justice are rarely (if ever) addressed. Therefore, permaculture has been widely critiqued for a lack of intersectionality.

Permaculture and other forms of sustainable agriculture must take a decolonial approach to the environment and center Indigenous psychologies, knowledge, and land-care practices. I take this opportunity to deconstruct my own position as a white-bodied cis-gendered male of numerous privileges coming into this setting as an "outsider" graduate student.

The sponsoring organization in Barbados has asked me to support their team in building compost and vermicomposting (worm composting) systems. As a former garden educator, it is my hope is that these systems will be implemented as a learning tool on ecological stewardship for both adults and youth. Compost also serves as a powerful metaphor for the act of intellectual deconstruction, which “does not reject what it deconstructs...it makes room for something different” (Derrida, 1993; St. Pierre, 2020, p.5). As a white-identified person, an important part of my work is to not disregard those psychic-historical fragments that modernity suppresses (i.e. displacement, the legacies of slavery, ecological grief, etc.), but to compost them; to reframe them in such a way that allows for new knowledge and meaning to emerge.

In pre-Columbian Barbados, Amerindian peoples possessed “specialized knowledge in the cultivation of cassava and potato roots as well as maize grain” (Beckles, 2006, p. 5). Before the onset of extractive economics and the enclosure of the commons, pre-capitalist societies did not grow food with homogenous monocultures, and the horticultural areas resembled forests more-so than they did typical agricultural plots. The blending of garden and nature, called “eco-mimicry” by ecologists today,

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

This work focuses on the importance of local empowerment, sovereignty, and mutual care from kinship rather than institutionalized forms of aid. Solidarity with the community can emerge through shared vulnerability, intimacy, and relationality. This connects to critical Community Psychology beliefs that deconstruct the use of western theories and methods in other settings. Models of intervention must therefore be localized and grounded in direct experience with a given community, and center their knowledge, meaning-making systems, and spiritualities.

is a key element of permaculture that has been used widely by Indigenous cultures for centuries. This work is an important warning call to anyone looking to get involved in land-based work, especially non-profit work within the broad field of sustainable agriculture and food systems.

Many NGOs working in the "global South" with missionary/international agendas of ecological sustainability enact a white savior complex that ends up causing harm in the name of being a "good helper." The phrase "global South" refers broadly to what were previously called "third world" or "developing" regions in Asia, Africa, and parts of Oceania (some choose to exclude Australia).

Whereas the phrase "third-world" denotes low-income and otherwise marginalized peoples, the term "global South" attempts to shift the focus away from economic development and cultural difference and center geopolitical relations of power. Being mindful of this dynamic may prevent graduate students such as myself, as well as Community Psychologists, from unintentionally harming local peoples. Ranzjin and McConnochie (2013) describe the coloniality of the "helper" in an account of white psychology students in Australia who held a desire to help aboriginal communities in their healing from historical trauma. When confronted with the reality that "it was important for Indigenous people to take the lead in working out what kind of "help" would be most helpful," (p.449), these students became very uncomfortable. They had to come to the realization that they may still be able to assist in community praxes, but to do so without reproducing colonial harms, they must de-center themselves and their knowledge.

Methods

I plan to use an auto-ethnographic journaling practice that formed the basis of what community psychologists term, "critical self-reflexivity." Auto-ethnography is a queer method that moves away from scientific ideals of objectivity, and examines identity, embodied subjectivities, and positionality. It is centered on learning about a culture through one's own direct experience as a member of that culture/community, rather than learning about a culture through more typical ethnographic methods such as interviews. Exploring this organization's hidden cultural complexes requires tapping into my own participation in white/US-Eurocentric culture, which is anchored in my own experience as a white-bodied person. The word "journaling" may be a misnomer, as auto-ethnography is not a personal narrative (it is not a memoir). Rather, it is a non-representational and creative enactment of one's embodied experience in community. For example, Urmitapa Dutta (2020) uses poetry in her community praxis to decolonize the use of narrative prose in ethnographic fieldnotes.

Implications

- The colonial implications of the non-profit industrial complex can intersect with white supremacy to retain power and suppress local needs.
- Land-based work within Indigenous ways of knowing can recognize the interdependence and intra-connectedness of all life in ways that normative white, western culture cannot.

Please see Loggins, L. (Spring, 2021). *Seeding change: Overcoming economic dependency and social stigma within the food system*. *The Community Psychologist*, 54(2), 32-36.
<https://www.scr27.org/publications/tcp/tcp-past-issues/tcpspring2021>

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