23 Decolonizing Community Engagement

Reimagining Service Learning through an Ethnic Studies Lens

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Introduction

In the late 1960s, students of color and working-class white students shut down universities to demand the creation of ethnic studies courses and greater access to education for working-class and underrepresented groups. Lasting almost half a year, these student movements, the longest student strikes in the history of the United States, occurred at San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, in 1968 and led to the creation of the first ethnic studies departments in the United States. The broad coalition of African American, Asian American, Chicana/o, Latina/o, Native American, and white students, known as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), emphasized the general principles of educational relevance: third world solidarity, self-determination, social justice, and "to serve people" (Umemoto, 1989).

Influenced by anticolonial movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America, the TWLF radicalized the purpose of higher education in order to link social justice with demolishing settler colonialism and capitalism. Settler colonialism is a form of politics that has both structural and ideological components. More than a singular historical event, it dynamically frames and codes society while removing indigenous people and affirming property rights over land and resources. Through structural and symbolic violence, settler colonialists regulate material and discursive spaces by occupying land and by reinforcing a restrictive private property system and forced labor regimes (Kauanui, 2008; Nakako Glenn, 2015; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

These distinct origins shaped the discipline's approach to "civic engagement" and "service learning" in higher education in the United States. Organizing under the umbrella of "to serve the people," ethnic studies offered some of the first courses with political engagement that centered community and indigenous knowledges, ontologies, cosmologies, and epistemologies. The first wave of ethnic studies classes interpreted community engagement as destabilizing Eurocentric, colonizing curriculum and hierarchically classroom structures. Initially, ethnic studies classes were democratically run with community members as facilitators and included community language courses co-taught by community members and students. Carrying forward its community-based and decolonizing origins, many ethnic studies programs and departments continue to frame "service learning" in terms of unmasking hegemonic power structures and fostering autonomy and self-determination. In this interpretation of "community engagement," students participate in community and link experience with education in order to consider and grapple with the multiple facets of settler colonialism and capitalism.

This chapter draws from two case studies to explore how ethnic studies as a discipline has crafted community-based learning from social justice frameworks. In doing so, it highlights key elements in an ethnic studies' decolonizing approach to community engagement: recognizing education as part of the settler colonial state; centering indigenous knowledges, cosmologies, epistemologies, and methodologies; exploring the intersections of many axes of stratification; and empowering marginalized communities to destabilize technologies of colonialism (Grande, 2004; Kidwell & Velie, 2005; Omatsu, 1994; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Grassroots Organizing for Legislative Change

"Grassroots Movements: Immigrant Women, Domestic Workers, and Cultural Citizenship" was a course located in an interdisciplinary and comparative Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies program at a highly selective research university in California. The class emerged to support the passage of AB 241-Amniano, the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. It brought together content focused on domestic work, immigration, citizenship, the legislative process, and social movements with an intent to prepare students to participate in and learn directly from those engaged in transformative political organizing. The domestic workers' rights movement did not have a high profile among students, but the instructor was deeply engaged in the movement, having worked for more than fifteen years with cultural citizenship organizations supporting domestic workers. Through participation with domestic worker organizations in San Francisco and Oakland, students learned first-hand how this movement sought to transform the care-work industry through multilingual and multicultural alliances led by primarily non-English-speaking working women of diverse immigration statuses. In response to changes in the organizing tactics of the domestic workers and lessons learned from previous efforts to pass the legislation, the course changed radically over the four years in which it was offered.

Assigned readings and written assignments put scholarly studies of citizenship in dialogue with the theory and practice of the domestic workers' rights movement as a transformative social justice movement led by immigrant women of color. While the class was located in Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies, it built on intersectional analyses and theories of change from black feminism and disability studies to help students appreciate organizing strategies that challenged both structural injustices and cultural attitudes around care work. Domestic work as a labor practice is well situated in ethnic studies because of
its historical link to slavery, indentured service, migration, and immigration. It is a labor force that “interlocks the race and class status of women” (Parreñas, 2000, p. 562) and “simultaneously structure[s] race, gender, class, and sexual relations within and between colonists and the colonized” (Nakano Glenn, 2015, p. 57).

Ethnic studies frequently draws from a community-centered, movement-building practice aimed at developing knowledge, identities, connection, and power. Classroom activities included popular education exercises from the movement, such as reflecting on our relationships to domestic work and our family’s legacies, interviewing family members and friends, and situating ourselves in the literature and contemporary issues. Students also attended community organizing meetings of workers and solidarity-minded employers, rallies, demonstrations, and lobby days at the state capitol. Course readings and community guest lectures connected this state-level legislative campaign to national and international issues. In efforts to decolonize the curriculum, speakers included worker-leaders and organizers who were also actors in a global domestic workers’ rights movement. The voices of domestic workers were prioritized and they regularly lectured in class, with their knowledge and contributions given the same attention and recognition as that of key theorists and contemporary researchers.

The service activities were identified by community partners and notions of service expanded to focus on activities oriented toward passage of the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. Recognizing domestic work in the United States as part of the “ongoing structure” of settler colonialism, this legislative movement was an opportunity to challenge and change the conditions faced by domestic workers. Using this decolonizing approach to community engagement, marching on the state capitol was as acceptable a service activity as providing childcare. Students were told that flexibility would be required of them in order to adapt, on a quarter schedule, to the dynamic conditions of engagement with a community campaign in progress. To that end, students also researched key legislators, offered their own testimonies to legislators on worker-led delegations, and organized campus-based education and outreach activities for their peers. Some students participated more actively in legislative visits, sharing their own stories of the ways their lives had been impacted by the issues and why they cared about the policy debate. Others painted signs, served food, or helped provide childcare at events. Whether or not students wished to lobby or do arts and crafts with children at events, serve lunches, or clean up after meetings, all their contributions were equally valued as long as students could articulate how their service contributed to the workers’ movement.

The class aimed to give students time and space to acknowledge their relationships to the issues, from all positions of power and privilege. This created opportunities to build solidarity and connection across lines of difference. Students from working-class immigrant families, including the children of domestic workers, saw people and stories familiar to their own and recognized them as legitimate sources of academic knowledge and political leadership. As domestic workers became classroom facilitators, workers’ experiences, and those of their children and grandchildren, were valued. For those who grew up in homes with domestic worker employees, new understandings of their complex and diverse relationships to this labor and the contemporary workers who do it emerged. Many students who began the class with a very clear sense of their family identities as “workers” or “employees” discovered multiple and overlapping identities and affiliations that they had not understood about their own heritage. For example, uncovering histories and renaming experiences shifted the perspective of students who previously had not recognized the other-mothering of neighbors or the live-in care provided by a college student as domestic work. Moreover, it encouraged students to involve loved ones in the campaign—sharing their stories as employees or employers as well as financial support for the campaign. By recognizing their different relationships to domestic work, students and community members were able to link their understanding of this labor system to the settler colonial state of capitalism.

Because the class centered the lives and experiences of domestic workers—both the classroom and community components—and the political movement, students were invited to see low-income women of color not as people in need of service but as leaders in a legislative campaign and indeed a major labor rights movement. The class required students to recognize domestic workers as social and political analysts as well as agents. Rather than seeing scholars interpreting the raw data of grassroots practice as theory, students saw community activists create theory through practice. Further, they participated alongside activists and had the opportunity to explore and interpret theory through their own experiences as researchers, lobbyists, and advocates supporting the passage of the legislation.

The California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights was signed into law in September 2013 and went into effect on January 1, 2014. The legislation provides overtime protections for domestic workers, a modest but important victory. Through grassroots movements students were able to see and contribute to a movement for change that offered tangible results for the workers served by the legislation. Students were witness to the legislative process—seeing legislators lobbied, votes cast, legislation signed—as they worked alongside organizers and participated in various strategies aimed at gaining support for the bill. The collaborative structure of the project moved beyond bridging communities to participate in civic life. Learning with and from domestic workers while actively engaging in a change-oriented movement advanced “decolonization as a necessary goal in the quest to achieve race and gender justice” (Nakano Glenn, 2015, p. 54).

Community Archives, Allyship, and the Politics of Aesthetics

On a Saturday afternoon, a group of Tongan community members and college students unfurled heavy material that was rolled up like a carpet. Embellished with dyed stencils, the cloth piece spanned fifteen feet wide and
extended more than fifty feet from the street to the house. As the material was spread out on the driveway, other community members set up over sixty "smaller" pieces inside a large old house owned by a college. A faculty member and college students assembled lights, video cameras, and tripods in one room while others arranged food and nalolo (a fruit drink) in another. Later, in a packed living room full of people ranging in age from four to the mid-sixties, two female elders, Kalolaine Pese and Veiongo Soakai, led the group in an opening blessing and song and spoke eloquently about the meaning of the pieces to the intergenerational Tongan diaspora.

This moment was part of a collaboration between the students and faculty of a team-taught Asian American Studies course “Globalization and Oceania: Tonga and Hawai’i” and community scholars from the Tongan diaspora residing near Pitzer College in Southern California. The Kingdom of Tonga, located in the South Pacific, is a sovereign state governed by a constitutional monarchy yet mediating a prodemocracy movement. A steady flow of outmigration since the 1960s means that a larger number of Tongans live outside Tonga than on the islands. This project explored how Tongan women living outside Tonga produced and adapted handmade textiles to rearticulate their cultural traditions in the diaspora. Ngatu is a form of tapa cloth made from a paper of the bark of a mulberry tree that is pounded and dyed (Adoo, 2013; Herda, 1999). A central part of Tongan community life, the creation, presentation, and gift exchange of ngatu (along with other materials called koloa) happen at significant life events, including births, weddings, funerals, and title installations. Integrating a decolonizing approach to community engagement, the class emphasized centering indigenous knowledges and epistemologies through a social documentation project of an indigenous aesthetic expression in the Tongan diaspora. The Tongan community near the Claremont Colleges decided the best collaboration for the course would be creating a community archive of videos and photographs of ngatu and koloa along with videos of community members discussing their pieces.

The Tongan community partners taught and participated in the class on a regular basis. The lead community partner, Ellen Soakai, along with her siblings who lived in the area (e.g., Seini, Lolofei, Alisi, Maikolo, Etuini, Ongi, Lita, and Vilami), contributed their vast knowledge of the Tongan community in the Inland Empire and drew from their experience in community organizing learned from their parents, Veiongo Soakai and the late Kisa Soakai. The relationship with the Soakais for this project stemmed from the Soakais’ co-leading the Saturday Tongan Education Project, started by the Asian American Resource Center at Pomona College.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the course faculty assigned readings spanning from policy documents and ethnographies of the Tongan diaspora to creation stories, community narratives, museum catalogs, documentaries, poetry, and short stories. Classroom activities ranged from mapping timelines and creating a vocabulary list of terms related to koloa to brainstorming concrete actions of an ally and sharing social autobiographies.

Through regular guest lectures and class participation by Tongan community scholars, the class learned about the adaptive community cultural wealth of the Tongan community and social inequalities that the community mediates, such as racial profiling, underemployment, food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare. In addition, when meeting with community scholars, museum curators, and an art historian who specializes in indigeneity, students reflected on the social construction of empire, race, class, and gender in relation to the politics of what is categorized as “art,” who are considered “artists,” what is considered an “archive,” and what should be “archived” and for whom (Page, 2009).

As settler colonial faculty collaborating with indigenous community scholars, we mindfully created mutually respectful relationships that centered Tongan ways of knowing. Utilizing a community-centered approach to community engagement, the course subverted objectifying communities as a lab for college students. For example, we disrupted everyday language with signage and a curriculum that prioritized the Tongan language. In addition, the community defined the project’s scope and methodology. Privileging Tongan knowledges, epistemologies, and cosmologies translated into elders helping construct the syllabus, lecturing at the college and the community, and offering blessings and songs in Tongan. The linguistic and embodied collective practices reinforced the lived realities of the Tongan community partners (Friedel, 2011). Troubling colonial dynamics of power, albeit briefly, the collaboration emphasized indigenous scholars as determining the curriculum and being the center of it versus simply “adding on” Pacific Islanders under the rubric of Asian Americans.

Since settler colonialism is a widely circulated set of beliefs that continue to normalize social inequalities, this project attempted to destabilize the ongoing structuring of indigeneity as a homogeneous, subordinate, and static relic of the past. The koloa social documentation project reimagined archiving as a radical act rather than academic tourism or elite consumption of Tongan culture. This included supporting a small museum and a local Tongan community to photograph and catalog their respective collections. Given the dearth of curricula about and by Tongan diasporic communities, the photographs of koloa and hours of interviews served not only as a community archive but also as a potential resource for Tongan students to write about their dynamic and changing community cultural wealth, such as koloa, from community-generated sources.

In addition to documenting indigenous ways of knowing, the class linked aesthetics with addressing the ongoing material effects of colonialism in the United States. The Claremont College students in the course engaged with wide-ranging interdisciplinary activities that proactively and reactively addressed social inequalities relevant to the Tongan community, such as racial profiling and the criminalization of Pacific Islanders. For example, ASAM189 students read about the disproportionately higher Pacific Islander incarceration rates (a disproportionately high 144 percent increase in California over
the last ten years) and learned that the passage of California state Proposition 47 had the potential to positively impact the Pacific Islander community by expunging specific nonviolent felonies from records and thus mitigating some barriers to jobs and housing (EPIC, 2014). At the suggestion of a Tongan community leader and a faculty collaborator, the class integrated a voter awareness project about Proposition 47 for the election. This short-term initiative collected more than 400 responses to an online survey gauging voter awareness about Proposition 47. The combination of projects engaged with different facets of settler colonialism, ranging from the structural (Proposition 47 and the Pacific Islander prison pipeline) to the ideological (the koloa social documentation archive).

The intertwined projects yielded some constructive gains while illuminating the complexities of enacting decolonizing frameworks within an institution that is part of the settler colonial state. Decoding how settler colonialism problematically shapes what is considered "art" and who are considered "criminals," this community engagement project beside and with a Pacific Islander community changed the college approach from multiculturalism to a focus on difference and culture. This partnership moved from learning how to provide a service to a community to learning how to be an ally in which decolonizing is an ongoing project of restructuring in both discursive and material spheres.

**Closing**

These two examples of community engagement aim to illustrate the ways that ethnic studies, as a distinct field of inquiry, has fostered and continues to foster critical consciousness and social action through attention to and work for community issues that disproportionately impact communities of color and other subordinated communities. The interdisciplinarity inherent in ethnic studies courses, programs, and departments may be seen in these community engagement examples—through the readings and assignments, but also in the projects themselves. Community engagement through an ethnic studies lens can be expressly and explicitly political in relation to the state, as in the domestic worker legislation example, or can focus on discourses of settler colonialism and the politics of aesthetics, as shown in the collaboration with the Tongan community in the social documentation project. Both courses, through their attention to dialogue, recognize that the work involved in listening to and facilitating the telling of marginalized stories—whether to lobby state legislators or to create a community archive of koloa—can be a progressive action in relation to social justice.

Ethnic studies, from its beginning, has been anchored in "action research, activist scholarship, and community service" (Garcia, 2007, p. 208). The decolonizing community-engaged praxis that continues to be central to the curriculum complicates the intersection of the academy and the community. While we recognize and appreciate the opportunities that community engagement offers for college students to learn about themselves and to engage in meaningful ways with community members, what inspires us about an ethnic studies approach to community engagement is its focus on recentering the community (and specifically communities of color and other marginalized communities) as the primary decision-maker in the collaborations. Whereas service learning and community-based learning in other disciplines prioritize the student experience, an ethnic studies interpretation of community engagement shifts the focus to what is happening in and to the community. This type of engagement practice acknowledges and honors "the specific histories of racialized minorities" (Nakano Glenn, 2015, p. 71), and it recognizes community leadership in order to be respectful of and responsive to the needs of the community with the larger goal of social justice. In these experiences, we intended for the communities who have been so generous to partner with us to dictate the terms of the engagement. In a limited, but important way, we aimed to restructure campus–community partnerships so that an element of decision-making power is retained in the community, and our classes (meaning our students and ourselves) are responsive to the needs, demands, and expectations of our partners. This decolonizing approach, as a counter-narrative to traditional community engagement practice, redefines the uneven power dynamics between higher education and community partners as a means to foster community empowerment and to destabilize historical and institutional forms of colonialism and empire.

Our intention is to make sure that communities lead, inform, and strengthen our community engagement practice and that this dialogical relationship connects to fostering social justice, including interrogating higher education as an agent of settler colonialism. Certainly, community engagement from an ethnic studies approach is an important pedagogical strategy to more deeply educate and inform students about the culture, history, and lived experience of oppressed peoples. More important, an ethnic studies framework of community engagement invests in working collaboratively with community leaders to create wide-scale change. More than just inserting indigenous epistemologies and community perspectives into the curriculum, a decolonizing ethnic studies approach to community engagement tackles the asymmetrical power dynamics of community–campus collaborations, recognizes that institutions and community-based learning often operates on native lands, and unveils the strategies and structures of settler colonialism. Rather than a singular historical event, decolonizing community-based learning disrupts settler colonialism on many fronts and over time, whether it involves destabilizing hegemonic codes such as creating a Tongan community archive or unveiling capitalistic regimes such as the domestic worker labor system. This decolonizing approach to community engagement in higher education disrupts the marking of ethnicity, culture, and difference in ways that challenge subordinations and problematize higher education’s settler colonial narratives of diversity,
global citizenry, intercultural understanding, and inclusivity. An ethnic studies approach to community engagement in higher education calls for settler colonial scholars to understand (and to foster an understanding of) historical oppressions in ways that challenge settler colonial culture and institutions of power from reproducing social inequalities.

References


Notes

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