

“We’re Not Done Yet”: Public Intellectuals, Rural Communities, and Racial Equity Organizing

Alexis Grant-Panting
Texas Woman’s University

Citation: Grant-Panting, A. (2021). “We’re not done yet”: Public intellectuals, rural communities, and racial equity organizing. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 37(7), 94–104. <https://doi.org/10.26209/jrre3707-10>

8 minutes and 46 seconds. This was the amount of time it took me to watch George Floyd, an unarmed Black man be murdered at the hands of the police. While George Floyd’s death was not the first Black murder to happen while in police custody or in 2020, his death served as a catalyst that reignited something in me, millions of around the globe, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. While the nation focused on the impact of BLM movement in urban communities, the impact in rural communities was left from the conversation. Rural communities have a complex history of systemic racial, social, educational, and economic inequality, and because of these histories they are uniquely situated to respond to racial inequality in meaningful and authentic ways. Even so, as a Black woman, trained sociologist, and educator situated in a rural, conservative, predominately White community in Texas, organizing and engaging the public in racial justice work has challenges. However, through coordinated and specific efforts it is possible to mobilize the community for change. This essay reflects on those efforts. Drawing on public pedagogy frameworks that explore public educational sites, W. E. B. Du Bois’s public sociology, scholar-activist “liberation capital” theory, I try to make sense of applying these perspectives as a tool for engaging my rural town in the BLM movement. Through my observations, reflections, and analysis, I hope to provide practical methods and tools for scholars, researchers, and rural community members that center on how to engage each other and ultimately create capacity for impactful organizing on racial equity in rural communities.

Prologue: Who I Am Matters

My personal experiences steer my life choices and my research, academic training, and public work. I am a Black, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, married, nondisabled female. I am a mother. I am educated. I am a sociologist. I am an activist. I am a feminist. I have lived through hunger, fear, hatred. I am the woman who has been called a “nigger.” I have been the only person of color in a room, forced to claim my space at the table. Through my voice and educational practice, I have reflected on these experiences and have learned to demand that people understand me. In reflection, I wrote the following poem.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alexis Grant-Panting. Mrs. Grant-Panting is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology, Texas Woman’s University, P.O. Box 425889, Denton, TX 76204. Email: agrantpanting@twu.edu

This article is part of a special issue of JRRE that explores Black Lives Matter and rural education. Click [here](#) to see the full issue.

JRRE is associated with the Center on Rural Education and Communities at Penn State, and is a publication of Penn State Libraries Open Publishing.

My name matters

Who I am matters

How I show up matters

My experiences matter

My existence matters

Life was breathed into me so that I can breathe it into others.

My body creates life. Sustains life.

I am powerful because of my voice, my drive, my work, because I am me.

Because I exist.

The fight for Black liberation and demanding that Black lives matter summon the provocative spirit it takes to be Black, a woman, and an educator living in America in 2020. When the ball dropped at midnight on January 1, 2020, I did not expect 2020 to push me into similar paths as other Black liberation activists, sociologists, and educators like Anna Julia Cooper or W. E. B. Du Bois, but nevertheless, it did. As an educator, a disseminator, and a cultivator of knowledge, I can transform thinking in radical ways by challenging anti-Blackness thinking and practice. But where is this education meant to happen?

Who is responsible for “educating” people on how to be antiracist? Whose responsibility is it to take up the work? How do we engage our local communities—mainly rural communities—in this work?

Introduction

The year 2020 felt as though every other minute a Black person was murdered at the hands of the police or some random vigilante in the name of justice or self-defense. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 only exacerbated this feeling. Being a Black educator during this time has added another layer of complexity. Teaching sociology courses about current social problems or race and ethnic groups in America to full classes of students who all have different backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences with policing really pushes you to critically reflect on how to transform thinking about racial injustice. Engaging in this work in rural communities comes with its own unique set of considerations.

Urban communities and the organizing that happens within them make national news every day. However, rural communities have been consistently erased and disconnected from the conversation around racial justice work, making the need for community organizing vital. Public organizing is not new to rural communities. Some argue that the Civil Rights movement was rooted in Southern rural communities (Janken, 2001). Rural communities face numerous challenges from shrinking government funding, natural disasters, growing poverty levels, and so on. While rural communities are not strangers to urban communities’ social and economic problems, they are also not immune to the effects of racism and the Black and White divide. For many members of rural communities, their lives are intricately intertwined (Changa, 2020). This deep interconnectedness had drawn many non-Black and Brown people to show up for their fellow community members at Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations (Simpson, 2020) and raise fundamental questions about the state of racism in their communities.

Engaging in public intellectualism is of importance to us public sociologists. As Scott (2005) noted, public sociology “is seen as the autonomous and reflexive engagement with external audiences in which the preferences of the sociologist him or herself are made clear and those audiences are spoken to as equals” (p. 406). The goal of this article is to reflexively engage with my experience as a public intellectual through the lens of public sociology. This piece is not intended to embrace the traditional style of academic writing. Rather it is intended to be read as an autoethnography and/or narrative account of my experience as a public intellectual who is organizing and engaging in a racial justice project as a Black woman in a predominately

White rural community. I begin with a discussion of my journey to becoming a public intellectual, followed by an overview of the situational context that served as the catalyst for my engagement in the BLM movement. Next is a brief discussion of the theoretical frameworks and an overview of the “main event” that I organized in my small rural town. I then summarize key lessons I learned from this experience: the importance of coalition building, understanding the dynamics of racial relationships in rural communities compared to urban, storytelling, and incorporating youth voices. Through these lessons learned, I also consider the connection to scholar-activism. Finally, I reflect on how to move forward and keep this work going in rural communities.

My Journey to Becoming a Public Intellectual

Have you ever been followed in a store? Have you ever seen a police officer and been consumed by an all-encompassing sense of fear? I have. My life has been checkered with blatant experiences of racism. I grew up with parents whose childhood experiences in the 1950s and 1960s were rooted in the Jim Crow laws’ last remnants. I grew up in a family whose parents taught the importance of not only saying “Black Power” but actively encouraging us to learn what that meant and represented to our Black community. I grew up in a family that stressed the importance of knowledge and education. While each of these experiences exposed me to marginalization and the experience of disadvantage, they have also become a source of power and privilege. My background, upbringing, and educational training afford me a unique knowledge and understanding of minority experiences and communities. These experiences and lessons represent the core of my beliefs and practice as an activist and Black feminist intellectual. They also serve as the historical context of my life as a public intellectual and the source of understanding my involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement.

While this piece is not primarily concerned with reflecting on these intersecting identities, it does serve as a guiding point to how I pursued public intellectualism through engagement within the Black Lives Matter movement in rural communities. This article is concerned with providing context to how academics, scholars, or intellectuals can embrace the Duboisian notion of public scholarship. Situated within the context of “the community meeting,” I use personal narratives and reflections that highlight the events that led up to the meeting. I address how I engage my professional academic training as a sociologist and womanist/Black feminist to employ liberation capital theory to organize and engage rural communities in the Black Lives Matter movement outside of the traditional classroom.

Engaging the Intellectual with the Rural Public and Black Lives Matter

The Catalyst

I don't know if I was bored or just taking a break from classes, but either way, I found myself scrolling through my social media account. My feed was full of [#GeorgeFloyd](#) posts. Then I saw a link to the video. I told myself that I needed to watch. I needed to know exactly what happened to make decisions about how to respond that were based on having all the knowledge and facts. Eight minutes and 46 seconds. This was the amount of time it took me to watch George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, be murdered at the hands of the police.

The next few days were full of reading Facebook posts and repeatedly watching the video. I remember having a conversation with some of my Black men friends about how they felt. The one thing we all could agree on was that we were tired. We were tired of watching people who look like us die for just living. For walking. For running. For watching television in our homes. Listening to George Floyd say, "I can't breathe" while watching a White man kneel on his neck brought back memories of stories I heard in my childhood. I was terrified and felt I needed to do something. What that was, I wasn't sure of. But I found myself getting angry. I found myself obsessively following posts on social media and commenting on everything. While George Floyd's death was not the first Black murder to happen in police custody or in 2020, his death served as a catalyst that reignited something in me, millions around the globe, and the Black Lives Matter movement. In the middle of a pandemic that has negatively affected Black people and communities of color at unprecedented rates compared to White people, millions of people across the globe took to the streets to protest for Black lives. What was I going to do? Sit and watch? For the time being, yes. It was not my time yet.

Theoretical Frameworks

My analysis is situated within womanist/feminist theory (Maparayan, 2012). It draws heavily on public intellectualism and subsequent public pedagogy frameworks that explore public educational sites, through the lens of Du Bois's public sociology, and scholar-activist liberation capital theory (Morris, 2015). I draw upon these perspectives because each approach is concerned with engaging with nonformal knowledge production and knowledge dissemination in a public community sphere. In other words, they inform intellectuals on how to engage academic knowledge and the community, or as I like to

say, "take the schooling to the streets." Additionally, they help me to theorize my role as a scholar-activist and rural community member.

Womanist theory allows me to ground my lived experience within academic situations and context. It gives reasons for my public scholarship choices. Lastly, it embodies the community-first perspective that is at the core of public intellectualism. As Black feminist scholar and poet Audre Lorde (1984/2007) said, "It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting" (p. 113). Lorde (1984/2007) urged us

to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices. (p. 113)

I saw public engagement as an opportunity to embody womanism through building bridges—bridges between communities with different belief systems and perspectives about the world, including human beings on all levels, from diverse ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, religious/spiritual beliefs, class, and so on.

This idea of building bridges ties directly to my belief that scholar-activism must be transformative, which aligns with the womanist and Black feminist theoretical approach. Womanists place and acknowledge the everyday experiences of women of color in their work. We seek to understand how interlocking systems of oppression like classism, sexism, and racism are imposed on women of color (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 68). This approach does not disregard men. Instead, it seeks to bridge women's experiences with issues that affect all humanity (Collins, 1996). I borrow from Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (1981), who said,

Con este puente ... hemos comenzado a salir de las sombras; hemos comenzado a reventar rutina y costumbres opresivas y a aventar los tabúes.... Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar;

With This Bridge ... we have begun to come out of the shadows; we have begun to break with routines and oppressive customs and to discard taboos....Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.

In Anzaldúa and Moraga's letter, I find a feminist/womanist call to action: demand for building bridges of change and transformation. Since my childhood and being raised in

minority communities, I have placed community change at the forefront of my life mission. In this way, I embrace transforming my personal experiences into political experiences incorporating the feminist/womanist saying, “The personal is political” (Lorde, 1984/2007; Taylor, 2017). This perspective applies to why I choose to engage in scholar-activism work and liberation work and pursue the specific topics of my teaching and research, like rural inequity.

Since I am passionate about uplifting poor communities and building bridges, I need to understand my home community and communities that are different from my own. I cannot be afraid to engage with someone different from me. Therefore, if I want to understand racism and/or classism, it is vital to explore what it means and looks like in various communities—low-income White communities, Indigenous, rural, Black, Brown, and rural communities. I need to understand what each community believes and values to identify what we have in common and hopefully build a bridge that creates unity and, importantly, social change.

As a womanist, I intentionally seek to bridge the academic world with the worlds of everyday women outside of academia. It is an approach that combines the spiritual, social, and ecological aspects of life. Its core seeks to be practiced at the grassroots level (Collins, 1996; Harris, 2017; Hudson-Weems, 2000; Maparayan, 2012). First, it is essential to outline some general beliefs about what constitutes public intellectuals. They help to articulate the perspectives of people who don’t have the skills to do so. In some cases, they help create ideas to address problems in the community. Lastly, public intellectuals are not stuck behind the lectern in the classroom. There are many definitions of a public intellectual, my experience closely aligns with the models of Black intellectuals like Anna Julia Cooper and W. E. B. Du Bois (Morris, 2017). For the purposes of my analysis, public intellectuals are educators as organizers. I embraced this role throughout the process of organizing as an educator in my rural community. We use public spaces as educational sites. A public space can be formal like a town hall meeting or community meeting, or it can be informal like social media groups or coffee shop talks. In my case, it took place at a community meeting in a local historical park.

Du Bois’s work has been at the heart of many contemporary public intellectual conversations. In sociology, much of his work is referred to as *public sociology*. I use both terms, public sociology and public intellectualism, interchangeably throughout the discussion. Scholars argue that Du Bois always practiced as a public intellectual and note evidence throughout his work. Most notably, in his career he integrated the Black freedom struggle and sociology that ultimately pioneered modern-day Black studies (Morris,

2017). Aldon Morris (2017) noted that Du Bois insisted that the purpose of academics was to “produce valid knowledge useful to liberation struggles” (p. 11). Du Bois learned that people have to do more than just get angry. They have to organize communities and turn their anger into projects of transformation. With that, Du Bois, like Cooper and other Black intellectuals, worked with community members and activists to lay the groundwork for their time’s civil rights movement. Du Bois’s work walked the middle ground of scholar and activist, so much so that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “It is never possible to know where the scholar Du Bois ended and the organizer Du Bois began” (Morris, 2017, p. 12). He showed intellectuals how to be “public” and how to engage communities for transformation, leading to liberation.

Liberation capital theory is a scholar-activist theory rooted in the work of Du Bois. Coined by Morris (2015), *liberation capital* is defined as “a form of capital used by oppressed and resource-starved scholars to initiate and sustain the research program of a nonhegemonic scientific school” (p. 188). The laborers in this group are typically either volunteers or minimally paid members of oppressed groups. They work toward new methodologies that facilitate research on the conditions of the oppressed group or “programmatic innovations” that will be used as “weapons of liberation” (Morris, 2015, p. 188). Morris argued that liberation capital is what helped Du Bois become a formidable public intellectual. As Du Bois mobilized Black public intellectuals’ liberation capital, so do I engage in racial justice work in rural communities by drawing on local teachers, coaches, pastors, and students in the community.

While I draw heavily on these paradigms, I find myself most frequently embracing a critical feminist/womanist theoretical framework. As this analysis is primarily a critical reflection, it is essential to acknowledge that it is mainly situated within a feminist perspective of womanism and Black feminist thought. Embodying womanism is crucial to understanding my academic and personal drive to embrace public intellectualism. This perspective is essential for understanding the interconnectedness between my personal self and my academic self and, ultimately, how it transforms into my public intellectual self.

Setting the Context: Historical Background of Itasca and Hill County

Situated 45 miles south of the cities of Fort Worth and Dallas, Itasca is located in Hill County, Texas. According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau (2019) data, the population of Hill County in 2019 was 35,689, with a total of 12,992 households. Itasca’s population is 1,392. The poverty rate is 15.3%. Only 7% of the community has a

bachelor's degree or higher. The community is 74% White, 20% Hispanic/Latino,¹ 14.3 % Black/African American, and 8.2% some other race. Geographically, Itasca covers 1.5 square miles. Hill County and Itasca are known historically for cotton farming. Notably, community members have shared many stories regarding the history of slavery and lynching in the county.

May 2020—The Blue Paint

The main source for local news in our community is the local public Facebook group. This group has its own history of controversy and spurring public disagreements. When I logged in to see what was happening around town, scrolling through the page, I came across a post that a local community member added. The post had a link to an article about Chinese police officers spraying protesters with blue-dye water cannons to mark them for arrest later, and it explained how this should happen to BLM protestors in America. Community members immediately began to respond with comments in support like, "Come to our town our shotguns are ready." As I read these comments, I was transported back to images and videos of civil rights activists' being lynched by White mobs. I got angry, and I responded:

Just the fact that the admins approved posting this here and allowed these comments tells me exactly how my community feels about Black people.

I asked the poster and the group moderator to remove the post. However, it seemed that my reply only made them angrier. People responded to me, asking if I would go and riot. They told me that they had a shotgun waiting for "us" to arrive. They posted images of their shotguns in their cars with them.

It was a threat. It was a blatant threat to my life. Essentially, community members were telling me that if I were to bring an organized protest—which they described as "riots"—to their town, I should be prepared to die by their guns. I did not take this threat lightly. I responded, saying:

I never said that I condone rioting. However, I will not attack people for rioting after watching our people continuously get murdered at the hands of the police and vigilantes just for existing. If you want to understand where I am coming from, you can come see me in person.

Making the Decision to Organize

My response was a blatant call out of local community members who I felt were perpetuating violent behavior and rhetoric toward communities of color that were organizing for racial equity. Over the next few days and weeks following George Floyd's murder, I became immersed in the BLM protests and uprisings. Below is public documentation of my response and move to action through a public forum and with transparency.

May 29, 2020

So I have been quiet. I had to watch the video. I had to see what happened. As I was in the middle of watching, my 4-year-old sat on my lap. I said this ain't for you. She said, is that a police officer. I said yes and turned the video off. By that point, it was too late; she heard [#GeorgeFloyd](#) pleading.

Her response:

"Mommy if we see a police officer do that, we have to tell him to get off him. He can't breathe you can hear him cry; they are not supposed to do that."

Sad, even a 4-year-old knows that was wrong.

June 2, 2020

Anyone in my community willing to help me host a community dialogue and planning meeting regarding racial issues in our community? After reading the comments on the community page, we are way past due! It's time for Hill County and Itasca. Who's down?

June 3, 2020

Join us! It's an opportunity for open community dialogue.

Also, I will be wearing a face mask. I ask out of respect for the vulnerable populations I come in contact with that you do as well. I will also make hand sanitizer, disinfect wipes available. If anyone wants to contribute facemask, it would be greatly appreciated!

¹This estimate is based on the most recent [U.S. Census data](#).

After a few passing conversations with family members and others in the community, there was hardly any pushback discussed on the public forums. I met with city officials to discuss the use of space and meeting restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They were equally supportive. However, as I reached out to various groups, I received no immediate response to my invitation.

June 3, 2020

I can already tell which community groups will be supportive of this community meeting. Posted on the Police Department page, I think it was deleted. Posted in neighborhood news, has yet to be approved. It's a small town I doubt they are getting thousands or even hundreds of requests.

The community event had to be organized in less than 10 days. I had no financial support. We had no physical meeting space due to COVID-19 restrictions. To add to the stress, I had only been a member of the community for less than three years, so my connections and network was limited. I struggled to find organizers and speakers. I received several messages of support from various community members. Some reached out and informed me that they were organizing a prayer circle. Others solely expressed interest. In the end, I pulled on my in-laws to help organize and move the event forward.

June 3, 2020

Looking for a couple more people to join the panel. If you are under the age of 18 and are interested, or if you know someone under the age of 18 that would be good on the panel please PM me!

June 4, 2020

Another update: if we have more than 25* people we cannot use the community center would love ideas and suggestions. Please feel free to PM me.

They just updated me. It's now 25 not 10 people allowed.

June 6, 2020

Yall I LOVE my family From the DMV to Florida to the Midwest. But I need to give a special shout out to my in-laws! They are always showing up, coming through for me, and supporting me

beyond what I could ever wish or hope for! So lucky and blessed to have them!

[#UnitedWeWin](#) [#BlackLivesMatter](#)

[#EducateYourself](#) [#StillIRise](#)

June 8, 2020

****LOCATION CHANGE**** We are moving this party outside to accommodate as many people as possible. The only request is that we continue to practice social distancing and wear face mask when appropriate.

Please bring your own chairs, bug spray, or whatever else you need to be outside for at least an hour and half.

June 11, 2020

Judge Justin W. Lewis just called and said he will not be able to make this one tonight. I wish I would have invited him sooner. He thanked us for having the conversations and wished us the best.

Let's make sure to invite him to Part 2.

June 11, 2020

Wheels are turning! Movement is happening. Can't wait to see everyone tonight at the community meeting on race! I will be facilitating and hopefully we will have some very impactful conversations! Thanks to everyone who is helping to make this all come together! It takes a village!

The Event: Itasca Forum on Race and Racial Issues

June 11, 2020

That was an amazing turnout! Thank you to everyone who Showed up, Spoke up! Woke Up!

The actual event was an open community gathering that included a panel of local community members. These community members were White, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Indigenous. They mostly represented low- to middle-income populations in the community; some were teachers, coaches, college students, retired military, and private industry workers. The planning committee—which consisted of my in-laws and a couple of community members—did not want to host a walk or protest but wanted

to provide a space where everyone could come together, learn, and have an opportunity to express their feelings. The idea was to give space for community members to share stories of their experiences, voice their feelings regarding the current state of policing of Black people and racism, and define the meaning of the Black Lives Matter movement. The panelists and committee were also concerned about maintaining community unity. There was a fear that if we marched or protested that their generational ties of friends and family members would feel angered and create more division. There were repeated conversations about how ties went back generations, and they did not want to break those ties because it is a small community, and they considered everyone family regardless of their views on the BLM movement and policing. In other words, there was a high level of concern for the impact on community sentiment and unity.

The event took place on a Thursday evening in a local historical park, known to locals as the “Black park.” Over 75 people were in attendance—younger community members, older community members, White, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Indigenous. Democratic U.S. House of Representatives candidate Julie Oliver was in attendance as well as the chairman of the local Republican party. Officers from the local police department also attended. It publicly streamed on three different accounts and was made available for anyone to view after the event. Over 500 people streamed it online.

We began by identifying ground rules for the meeting. Next, my husband hosted an opening 15-minute activity to get people thinking about their experiences with racism and privilege. Once the activity ended, we reconvened in our communal space in the park and introduced a panel of six local community members—a teacher at the local elementary school, a local community sports coach, a school board member and church leader, a military veteran, a local college student, and third-generation local business owner. The conversation was guided with discussion questions addressed to the panelists, but attendees were also able to speak at the microphone and voice their perspectives.

The process of organizing this event raised many questions for the organizing committee regarding what would be most important for our small rural town to get out of a community public forum. Was it most important for the Black community to show up in force and protest the murder of George Floyd and countless others to bring awareness about the policing of Black people in 2020? Was it more important for Black people to show their anger, or was it more important to explain the purpose of saying, “Black Lives Matter”? Attempting to define a concrete goal for this meeting was the most contentious aspect of planning the event. Even so, everyone agreed that the most important goal was creating unity in the community.

Lessons Learned

Engaging in public intellectualism is not an easy feat. There were many lessons learned from crossing into public intellectualism, particularly in a rural community. As an educator dedicated to empowerment and transformation, I would be remiss if I did not discuss the lessons learned. Here are my key takeaways:

1. Coalition building is key.
2. Racial relationships in rural communities are more interwoven than I have experienced in the city.
3. Storytelling is important.
4. Youth voice is needed.

Coalition Building and What That Looks Like

After the event ended, I had every intention of carrying on the conversation. The theme for our meeting was, “We’re not done yet, there is more work to be done.” However, as a Black woman who has experienced racial trauma, engaging in this work was emotionally and mentally hard. The amount of labor it took was also taxing, and I must admit, in the months since, while we did have a group meeting, we have not had another community-wide meeting. Additionally, as I was the main organizer behind the event, I lacked the financial resources, time, and physical capacity to do it alone. To build a coalition, it is important to embrace the techniques of those who came before me and acknowledge that for a movement to be successful one person cannot be the engine driving it. One person cannot do it alone because of the energy, time, and collaboration that are needed to be successful and transformative.

While I had organized events before in cities and urban contexts, this event was my first in a rural community. I assumed that there would be more resources and people available to help. I also assumed that there would be an experienced community in this small town. Neither was the case. As public intellectuals, it is essential to connect with individuals in your community who are known leaders. As I mentioned previously, my in-laws played a major role in this event coming together. Since their family has been in this town for over four generations, they each had clout and connections. They were able to connect me with the mayor, city council, school board, local pastors, and every person who was on the panel. If I were trying to organize on my own as an outsider, I would not have had the same social capital or connections needed to pull together this event.

It was all organized through my in-laws’ word of mouth—the most important aspect of my familial coalition. They also took some of the organizing labor from my shoulders. This event was also an opportunity for them to

learn how to organize a community meeting. While they looked to me as the expert and facilitator because of my professional training, they still felt ownership of the event. This ownership has kept many of them engaged in the BLM movement and inspired them to participate in a rally in the next town over the following week.

The Relationship Between Black and White People in Rural Communities

While urban communities are dealing with reverse housing segregation due to racist housing policies (Taylor, 2019), rural communities do not face this same challenge, and various racial groups intermingle frequently. Many of the families in our town are descendants of families who established this town, and others have been here for over five generations. As a result, many families are mixed race and multiethnic. Due to the long-shared history of the people in the community, it was easy for them to come together and have this conversation. While not everyone agreed, they respected their differences. Racial tension was openly discussed. Racist experiences were openly shared. In short, racial tension was not as high as I expected.

While the conversations flowed easily and stories of personal experiences were accepted with no resistance, I do not remember experiencing this same level of camaraderie in the urban areas I was used to. Everyone knew everyone, which made it easier for them to “hear” each other. This sense of camaraderie made me feel hopeful and motivated to continue these conversations.

The Importance of Storytelling

The event attendees had the opportunity to share, what we called “open mic,” how the death of George Floyd had affected their lives. They had an opportunity to express what BLM meant to them. Many of the attendees shared personal stories to connect their feelings about his death and the nation’s response. Recently a *New York Times* columnist asked, “What if there were no George Floyd video?” (Kristof, 2020). The columnist, Nicholas Kristof, asked readers to imagine that no one had documented the eight minutes and 46 seconds that lead to George Floyd’s death. Kristof (2020) observed, “there is no viral video to galvanize us about other racial inequities.” This statement highlights the importance of documenting and sharing injustices through conversation, storytelling, and knowledge sharing to galvanize movements and social change.

Sharing knowledge of experiences to incite change is not a new concept. In African culture, there is a proverb called “Sankofa.” Its rough translation means “go back and fetch it,” “return to your past,” or “it is not taboo to go back and retrieve what you have forgotten or lost” (Temple, 2010,

p. 127). It is used to stress the importance of gaining the wisdom of those who have come before and reconnecting (Deterville, 2016) with lost histories that inform the present. Adeeba Deterville (2016) noted that this concept is valuable because it speaks “to the whole person in relationship to community and a living world” (p. 118). It is a form of historical recovery and, in this way, innately womanist, feminist, and labor of liberation. Additionally, storytelling served as a key component in engaging community members from all perspectives, as well as an opportunity to assess and interpret the challenges and needs of our community. Lastly, the sharing of these narratives also created a new level of trust within the BLM movement in our community.

Youth Voices—Their Importance and Absence

All people have situated knowledge that shapes the way we see and experience the world, including young people. This means, like Rafiki so eloquently sings in *The Lion King*, “Everybody is somebody, even a nobody.” Historically speaking, young people have played crucial roles in social movements globally. Consider student involvement in the creation of powerful civil rights organizations, first in 1930s with the creation of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (Franklin, 2014), and then in the 1960s, when students not only created innovative tactics like the Freedom Rides but also built powerful organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Costanza-Chock, 2012). The creation of the Chicano Movement out of East Los Angeles in 1968 also started with thousands of students walking out of their high schools (Muñoz, 2007). More recently, we see young people like Greta Thunberg dominating the environmental movement in the fight against climate change. From this perspective, young people have a vital role in community organizing.

While young people have inevitably experienced the effects of racial injustice in America, this rural community stood steadfast in excluding the voices of young people from the conversation. For example, in the planning meeting I requested to have youth representation on the discussion panel, and everyone on the planning committee was against it. Additionally, while the community meeting was happening, kids were around, but parents told them to go play and not partake in the meeting.

While I have many theories as to why youth were not invited to this event, it was difficult for me to grapple with intentionally excluding young people. As a feminist and public intellectual who closely aligns with the teachings of Cooper and Du Bois, I strongly argue that all marginalized voices should be at the table. Not only do they have valid and valuable experiences worth sharing, but they are also the ones who will carry the movement forward. Research has shown that youth involvement can produce major

impacts at the community level (Christens & Dolan, 2010), but all involved in the process must move beyond the hierarchical perspective of adult-dominated narratives and decenter themselves from the picture. Such change is true transformation.

Reflecting

During 2020, I learned a lot about myself. Since I began writing this piece, over a year has passed since our event and George Floyd's death. Has my town, my community, experienced transformation and liberation? I can only say that it is an ongoing process. While we did bring attention to the current feelings of Black people in our community and established a list of willing and committed allies, much work is still to be done. A week after our event I was invited to speak at a BLM rally in a neighboring small town. Hundreds of people were in attendance. We held voter registration drives and gave people an opportunity to meet and talk with the police chief. Many other small neighboring towns held events of their own. Shortly after the Itasca event a local political figure posted some racist remarks on social media. I was contacted immediately by the local head of their political party to discuss how it was being addressed and handled. They chose to hold him accountable, and he was asked to resign. To me, this response was progress, but it reiterated how much more work needs to be done.

Nevertheless, the event and subsequent reflections have taught me that regardless of what race you are, what ethnic group you belong to, whether you grow up in the city of concrete or in the backcountry on dirt roads, we are all human beings just trying to live our best lives. I have also learned that, as an intellectual, a Black woman, a feminist, and an activist, I must not shy away from what is hard or hide in the ivory tower of academia. Like Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson, I believe that we must expose, address, and challenge where, how, and what it means to share knowledge. People and communities must learn to educate themselves as well as think and act for themselves. Woodson (1933) stated, "The mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself" (p. xii). His words instill the need to always seek truth and look at things from the perspective of the community that I am working in and seek to change. But we must also respect the privilege and power we have as intellectuals. All my learning, self-education, and experiences were valuable not only to me but also to my rural community, which previously had had no public conversation or forum like the event we organized after George Floyd's murder. In this way, any project I embark on as a public intellectual is a source of power.

As I approach my research and work, I must recognize this power and what it means. My identity encompasses multiple interlocking identities—Black, woman, Black-woman, mother, poor, educated, and so on. These identities allow me to possess powers, depending on the situation and the community I am in. However, to put it in the context of power relations in my public intellectual work first, I consider more words from Audre Lorde (1984/2007): "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (p. 112). To enable change in a community, it must come from within that community. I must also understand the historical context of the communities where I implement my theory as practice for liberation.

In other words, privileged academics like myself will often try to "give" voice to marginalized groups. In this way, we reinforce their marginalized status. Rather, we should let them speak for themselves. Otherwise, the knowledge produced is only produced in the interest of the intellectuals (researchers). This approach changes the power dynamics of my projects. It allows my participants to have more power. Employing this perspective, always remembering whom this is for and why I am doing this work, also gives me more freedom and power to approach this work from an authentic place. This approach is womanism, public intellectualism, and ultimately liberatory practice at its best.

One other point I must note is the experience of organizing as a scholar-activist engaged in the movement for Black lives in rural communities. It is a lonely task. By this I mean, there are not a lot of us. I have not found a network of scholar-activists with whom to share ideas, stories, or strategies. I was able to connect with two organizations that are engaging in similar work, one about an hour away and another in Oregon. But I have not found an academic community to connect with. Much of my time is spent making the case for why rural communities need to be included in the overall BLM movement narrative and in conversation both within and outside academia. It is as if the rural community is forgotten about and maybe even erased. I was not expecting to have to fight this battle.

"We're Not Done Yet"

The consistent theme acknowledged at our event was that there is more work to be done, and it is just as important to address here what still needs to be done. However, when considering what is next, to be honest, I do not know. When I first began reflecting on George Floyd's murder, former police officer Derek Chauvin had not been charged. However, since then he has been charged, faced trial, found guilty, and convicted on all counts in George Floyd's death.

Although he now faces up to 75 years in prison, he is still fighting his conviction in the hope of only serving probation and never spending another day behind bars. While the verdict brought a sigh of relief and joy when considering it as a first step in police accountability for a lot of Black Americans like myself, it was bittersweet. For us, we won one case but still cannot get back the life lost. Nevertheless, the hope it ignites is something that I hold dear as I continue to fight as a scholar-activist for racial justice and police reform.

As a result of George Floyd's death and Derek Chauvin's conviction, on the national level Democratic party leaders within the U.S. Congress have not only pushed police reform to the top of the priority list but introduced a bill called the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (2020). Unfortunately, the bill only passed in the U.S. House of Representatives and not the U.S. Senate. Even so, more than 50 states have introduced a combined total of over 3,000 new legislative bills that address concerns such as general police reform, policing of ethnic groups, transparency, oversight, and use of force (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). While this legislative activity seems like a step in the right direction, some states have introduced bills that make it harder to hold police accountable, harder to restrict police funding, and harder to have general police reform.

The unfortunate reality for racial equity organizers is that police reform at the national level has not been sufficient. Furthermore, police reform at the local level has been inconsistent. Moreover, in rural communities, more specifically my rural community, not much has changed. Unfortunately, our town has faced challenges around the policing of Brown and Black people. Since we have such a small police department, reform and change often come in the form of firing someone who could potentially be your neighbor, kin, or a long-time family friend. This situation has created almost a silent tension throughout the community. Nevertheless, conversations around racial equity in our small rural community are not as scarce as they once were. Community members have even gathered to organize and hold our first-ever Juneteenth event in commemoration of the emancipation of enslaved Africans in Texas in 1865.

Another important note concerns education and the role of educators in the movement for racial equity. As mentioned earlier, state legislators have introduced thousands of bills to address policing. Simultaneously, here in the state of Texas, lawmakers—like lawmakers in nearly a dozen other states—have introduced and/or passed bills to remove or ban the teaching of critical race theory in K–12 public schools. Researchers have shown that educators can play a vital role in dismantling racism (Ruiz & Cantú, 2013). They can respond in a way that provides fundamental transformation that influences not just education institutions but the policies and practices that affect the communities they serve. We see

this phenomenon through organizing within teacher unions and in my case within a small rural community in a park. As an educator I can use my pedagogical training and skills to help rural communities to name racial inequities, identify ways to critically address those issues, and create policies for change. However, if federal, state, and local legislatures continue to create policies to suppress critical conversations around racial inequity in K–12 classrooms, educators will need to embrace public intellectualism by engaging in educating in the public sphere. This need will become increasingly important.

Even though we did not solve the problem of over policing of Black people and racial inequity, we have demonstrated that our community members have the power to address it in our small rural town. Change and progress are slow and take persistent work. There is so much to be done in this “big little town” of mine. However, I do know that I will continue to mobilize with other small rural activist groups, have conversations with community members, show up to town hall and council meetings, and be available if called on again.

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