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Schools Are Where Trees and Children's Livelihoods Go to Die: A Teacher's Reflection on Revitalizing Land-Based Education

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> *But in indigenous ways of knowing, we say that we know a thing when we know it, not only in our physical senses—with our intellect, but when we engage in our intuitive knowing, of emotional knowledge and spiritual knowledge…traditional knowledge engages us in listening, in [asking] what is the story that being might tell us.* Robin Wall Kimmerer (Tippett, 2016)

With palms facing the sun, hands laid gently prostrate against their laps, and eyes closed, my 10th-grade English students and I listened to Muwekma Ohlone's blessings to the land. Then Angus shared his family's ancestral prayer in Pinyin:

> *Dàjiā hǎo, wǒ jiào yú ān gé sī. Gǎnxiè nín ràng wǒ jīntiān lái dào zhège shénshèng de kōngjiān. Wǒ yāoqǐng wǒ de zǔxiān yǔ wǒmen tóng zài. Zhù dàjiā shēntǐ jiànkāng, shòu hǎo jiàoyù, xīn xiǎng shì chéng.*

Lorenzo closed our ceremony with a Nahuatl song offering:

> Monana, motata choka, Pampa ta timonamiktia
> Monana, motata choka, Pampa ta timonamiktia
>
> .Xikijli axkanaj ma choka, Pampa axkanaj timikita
> .Xikijli axkanaj ma choka, Pampa axkanaj timikita
>
> .Tokomalej uan tokompalej, Xikonikajya, se uinojts
> .Tokomalej uan tokompalej, Xikonikajya, se uinojts

Angus and Lorenzo shared offerings from their ancestral lineages that both children researched (from parents and trusted community members) and practiced as part of our program's curricular pathway. That year, we were committed to all of our children learning to honor the indigenous practices of the land we resided on (Turtle Island, Ohlone Land), as well as their own ancestral, indigenous practices. We taught our children that they, too, are indigenous to somewhere and therefore Indigenous People, and their well-being could be intimately connected to the cultural medicines of their people.

We gathered under an oak tree. We used ceremony to commence our class sessions. We had abandoned the four walls of the traditional classroom, with its confining, individualistic culture, and sat freely amongst the trees, asking for permission to proceed with the day's lesson. We were not alone; I co-taught and learned with the trees, the ancestors, and the thousands upon thousands of living species who are always with us, who we, that day, humbly acknowledged.

Our learning environment had not always been motivated by these norms. Teaching in a San Francisco Bay Area public charter school, even with all its progressive rhetoric, still centered achievement and college matriculation as the most important pathways toward self-determination for our young people. Even for me, coming to understand the critical importance of our connection to the environment and trees and how that related to the histories of our families and of Western colonialism was a long process. And I, certainly, had not always been a lover of the natural world. As a teenager, I avoided

school camping trips and other engagements with nature. Preserving the freshness of my Nike Airmax sneakers outweighed my perception of anything "getting dirty" had to offer.

I now understand my disdain of the land and its centrality to well-being to be an outcome of my advanced schooling. I had come a long way from my ancestral roots, a descendent of Yoruba people in West Africa kidnapped and brought to Turtle Island, and more recently of educators and land stewards on Caddo, Chickasaw, Osage, Quapaw, and Tunica land, or as we know it, Arkansas. This distance was in part because of my pursuit of higher education. And the more I matriculated, the less grounded I became— disconnected from my ties to land, people, and their magic, and from critical lessons housed in the trees.

THE CRISIS OF THE BLACK INDIGENOUS

> *The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.*
>
> Toni Morrison
> (Manufacturing Intellect, 2019)

In their article, "Decolonizing Place in Early Childhood Studies: Thinking with Indigenous Onto-epistemologies and Black Feminist Geographies," Nxumalo and Cedillo (2017) lay the groundwork for bringing together the histories of peoples indigenous to Turtle Island and Black histories and knowledges. They write, "In examining possibilities for ethico-political engagements with place and environment in early childhood studies, we begin with the premise that, within the context of North America, environmental vulnerabilities, human exceptionalism, anti-blackness, and settler colonialism are interconnected" (p. 104). They document parallel histories of erasure of cultural knowledges and forced and violent removals from ancestral homes, as well as related epistemologies that highlight the enmeshment of humans and non-humans, including the land, water, and all of nature. While highlighting the strong potential of bringing these together, they simultaneously caution that "working with these place stories, as someone not Indigenous to a particular place, also creates many frictions" (p. 104), including the co-opting of the stories in ways that do not serve Indigenous communities, romanticization, and even erasure.

Keeping these concerns in mind, it is important to distinguish the honoring of the cultural ways of being of people indigenous to Turtle Island from the ways in which indigeneity is often withheld from Black people or considered a function of blackness. To honor the rich and diverse cultural traditions of Indigenous People on Turtle Island, I emphasize teaching methods in my role as an educator that respect their practices and the lands we use for our healing modalities. I engage the Indigenous scholars native to these lands to inform our reverence, to guide how my students and I should engage with the land. I also understand that indigeneity is not unique to Turtle Island, that Indigenous People from various parts of the world convene on Turtle Island for various reasons, often influenced by colonialism, and that while we are not on our indigenous lands, it does not strip us of our indigeneity. It is possible to be indigenous while not being on your indigenous land. Such is the case for me and other Black people living on Turtle Island.

This paper details a return to my indigeneity and the role that treescapes play in my maturation as a

critical educator. I am aware of the hegemony surrounding indigenous identity and who can claim it, that as a Black woman, it is incredibly controversial to identify as indigenous. While there are several instances that question Black people's rights to indigenous status, I believe the Dred Scott Decision makes for an important historical event to situate this dynamic. The 1857 decision upheld slavery in the United States, denying Black people legal citizenship. According to the decision, holding indigenous identity means having a home and an associative language, which were forcibly stripped from Africans living on Turtle Island (Von Blum, 2018). Undergirding this logic is a belief that Black people exist between two identities—property (owned beings) and nothingness—neither being human statuses, let alone providing the rights to indigenous identity (Blum, 2018; Hartman & Wilderson, 2003). Black people then occupy the space of the unthought (as the ground that people walk upon), and peoples native to Turtle Island (who continue to experience genocidal efforts amidst a developing colonial society) are situated as pawns within a larger, more successful, colonial effort to divide and conquer (Hartman & Wilderson, 2003). Despite our (African and Native) medicines and creation stories often overlapping (Booth, 2020), the language and definitions of the United States legal system—the same court that continues to compromise Native self-determination— maintains itself as the sanction for legitimizing indigeneity. These frameworks support gatekeeping of indigenous identity and the further subjugation of Black people (Resendez, 2016).

This paper disavows any mandate that perpetuates the logic and practices of the Dred Scott decision that requires Black people to stand on trial for their existence. I have learned from the trees that this form of witnessing only concretizes one's suffering. Take the case of Witness Trees during the Civil War or any other American war. These trees were forcibly renamed, made into shields and other equipment of war, and because of colonial efforts, we know them solely by the scars they bear. For Black people and trees residing on these lands, our nonhuman status has worked against us to sustain the colonial project. As a result, my journey to remember my indigeneity transcends human status. Trees and treescapes represent a vital rubric for self-determination. Trees do not attempt to convince us of their status or significance. Instead, their mere existence is radical. They provide the world's life source and continue to outgrow coloniality. I aspire toward this form of indigeneity, and my return to treescapes has been vital toward these aims. Beyond a pedagogy of convincing is the pedagogy that exists amongst the trees. Their pedagogies tell stories of cooperation, eco-solidarity, and sustainability.

Finally, I make connections between my own Yoruba heritage, my family's rootedness in Arkansas, and my work as an educator. My goal is to reflect on my experiences with education as both a student in K-12 and higher education and as a classroom teacher of 18 years. I offer a critique of Western schooling, and discuss my own reconnection to the wisdom of my elders and ancestors. Their interrelatedness with trees and the land offers an impetus for a curriculum that supports youth to reconnect with their own indigenous traditions and other ancestral ways of thinking and being.

ARKANSAS ROOTS AND EDUCATION

My southern ancestors—both human and tree—suffered tremendously from the blows of settler colonialism. Both were forced to participate in the enslavement process. My human ancestors were kidnapped from their West African lands, while my tree ancestors were forced to serve as the foundation material of slave ships and the site of lynchings. Eventually, my African ancestors transitioned from worshipping trees to hanging from them. Yet their continued efforts to remain in symbiotic relationship with each other remains a critical component of their self-determination.

In Arkansas, my maternal great-grandmother's grandmother, Mae Willis, escaped slavery as a 10-year-old. She spent the next 82 years of her life in Arkansas, tending to the land. Escaping slavery meant, in some ways, that Mae Willis could return to loving stewardship of the land, rather than to the

exploitation of both herself and the land that she endured in slavery. Her life demonstrated, as bell hooks (2008) states, "When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully" (p. 34).

My strongest memories—the memories and place I have now returned to as an adult—are set in Arkansas. As a city kid, summer respites in Pine Bluff provided a life-altering juxtaposition between the urban struggle to remain afloat amid the increasingly unrealistic cost of living and a self-sufficient artisan Southern life. I remember fishing with my great uncle, Lewis, at the lake behind the house that he built. Our reward: mild, green, melony flavor notes emanating from our fried fish dinners. Having to catch, clean, and cook our own food encouraged a unique appreciation of the life cycle.

My family and I were humbled by the Southern, no-waste sensibility. Lewis' wife, my Auntie Ezerene, cared deeply for the tomatoes, peppers, corn, butter beans, squash, cucumbers, turnips, and mustard greens that grew in her garden. In my memory, Arkansas elders sat for hours, feet exposed, immersed in the soil, under the trees. As they told stories, their bodies were locked in a swaying choreography with the trees; and it seems that swaying is a natural response to dissipating energy that is exerted upon us. Both the trees and my human family survived the winds of colonialism. There was freedom in how they chose to sway with the trees rather than to hang and sway from them. Their laughing and singing—a crescendo as long as a southern day—attenuate the impacts of historical and contemporary racial terror.

Both sides of my Arkansas family were educators whose pedagogy, I believe, was greatly informed by their role as land stewards. Their patience, love, attention to detail, reverence, and humility for tending to the land influenced their understanding of educational dynamics around growth, learning, and especially child development. My Auntie Ezerene recently shared, "A quiet classroom ain't no place of learning."

IMPACT OF SCHOOLING ON SELF-DETERMINATION

My Arkansas family's connection to the land, education, and healing are consistent with many of the daily practices of our ancestral kin. One Yoruba proverb states: Bí a bá ní ká be igi, a ó bee èèyàn (If one attempts to cut a tree, one will cut people) (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 155). Despite my ancestors' profound love of the earth and practices of sustainability, many of their constructive ways of life were compromised as a result of European conquest. Indigenous peoples were routinely prohibited from access to land, intergenerational dynamics, and the ancestral wisdom and communal legitimacy necessary to maintain the health and wellness that would allow them to heal and sustain themselves (Somé, 1999; Smith, 2012).

For me, as the descendent of Indigenous Yoruba people forcibly removed from our homelands and taken into slavery in America, schooling has carried the complex and painful history of delegitimating ancestral knowledge, of disregarding the validity of Indigenous knowledges, of naming our land-based practices as uncivilized, savage-like, or even witchcraft (Somé, 1999, Smith, 2012). For Black Americans, as for Native Americans, schooling has subjected us to that which often accompanies domination: spiritual illness, scarcity, economic instability, the illegitimacy of our systems of knowledge and practice, and attempts to destroy our connection to the land. hooks (2008) argues that separation from our lands "and engagement in mind/body splits made it all the more possible for Black people to internalize white supremacist assumptions about black identity" (p. 38). To prevent the self-determination of a people, one must disconnect living beings from their life source.

To this day, success at school for Black children often demands an estranged relationship with the land, disconnection from one's cultural ways of being, and alignment with the capitalist values that encouraged the enslavement and genocide of their ancestors. Yet shortly after the completion of my

doctoral studies, I sat with teenagers and the trees reclaiming our ties to our indigeneity and our connection to land and to ourselves. My process of reconnecting to land, like most great epiphanies, emerged from suffering—my own, as well as the suffering of the students and communities I served.

THE SHIFT TO WELLNESS

Plainly said: Schools are where trees and children's livelihoods go to die; both are cut down, gutted, and their desecrated remains used for the maintenance and reproduction of the establishment. Yet for years, against my better judgment, I looked to my students' ongoing participation, particularly through college matriculation, as the panacea for their social traumas. I understood schooling as a way to respond to the traumas that devastatingly impacted their lives. In doing so, I left understudied and unstated the trauma that is schooling.

I had a critique of schooling—its ties to individualism, harmful social reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1971) and the centering of white supremacist ideologies (Ladson-Billings, 1998)—yet I still believed in its reform, especially through educators like myself. I had studied in the nation's top universities and graduate programs, learned the most cutting-edge, methodological approaches to education, and entered schools with what I named critical, but more likely, neoliberal approaches to educating youth. Utilizing Freirian praxis (1970) to develop sophisticated analysis of the oppressions that were most compromising our students' lived experiences, we employed Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) models (Cammarota, 2017) for our youth to be at the forefront of their own paradigmatic shifts. Seemingly, the young people were inspired, their grades and attendance records gleaming. In fact, for over a decade, 100 percent of my students were accepted to four-year universities.

However, after the fanfare of their college acceptances waned, my teaching team began to track the progress of our students. We noticed patterns of mental illness, hopelessness, and dropouts among our highest-achieving alumni. Sadly, our students told us that they were internalizing these outcomes as a result of their own inadequacies, rather than the inevitability of a people separated from their cultural medicines. Michael Dumas (2014) notes: "Marginalized groups suffer doubly in relation to schooling: First, the drudgery and futility of the school experience itself, and second, through the loss of hope for oneself individually, and for the group, collectively, in terms of improved social recognition and economic stability. Neither stage of suffering is deemed legitimate" (p. 8).

Based on our students' compelling reflections, it seems "the knowledge, skills, and experiences that they [brought] to the institution [were] rarely valued, except perhaps through tokenistic 'recognitions' of cultural diversity that make the institution appear to be welcoming, but otherwise do not threaten the status-quo of their operations" (Andreotti et al., 2015, p. 32). My youth were experiencing what Bettina Love (2019) names as dark suffering. Much like Dumas, she describes an "educational survival complex, in which students are left learning to merely survive, learning how schools mimic the world they live in, thus making schools a training site for a life of exhaustion" (Love, 2019, p. 27). During this time, my educational discourse inadequately pointed to school as both the problem *and* the solution, when intuitively, I was beginning to understand schooling and its culture solely as the former.

That same year, my family's paternal matriarch, Grandma Nette, transitioned to the ancestral realm and I returned to Arkansas to grieve and celebrate her return to the land. Getting off the plane in Arkansas was one of the first times I had felt a sense of home. While I was there, time crawled, which allowed for intentionality to catch up to me; I had ample opportunity to sit in my Uncle Louis' backyard. The trees danced with such grace there. They lulled my anxious teacher body. I sat with elders who were not attached to their phones, pending deadlines, or state curricular standards. My daily practices shifted from scurried attempts to survive the school day toward deliberate reconnection to self.

While there, I started my study of Indigenous approaches to education. In particular, I read Malidoma Somé's (2019) *The Healing Wisdom of Africa* and Deborah Miranda's (2012) *Bad Indians*. The texts I read centered three pivotal components of education: love of the land, love of self, and love of one's people. I even began to sit with the trees, and they prodded my ancestral memory. Re-memory informed a drastic shift in my practice. When healer and now ancestor Malidoma Somé returned from his collegiate studies in the US to Burkina Faso, he was not allowed to return to his community because his elders understood the ways in which schooling sickened him and they wanted to protect themselves and the livelihoods of their communities from him. He was sent to a healer, amidst the trees and his ancestors, to heal from the impacts of schooling.

In Arkansas, under the trees in Uncle Louis' backyard, it hit me that my students and I needed a similar ceremony—that in order to engage in the transformative power of education, we needed to heal from schooling.

RECONNECTION TO THE LAND

Elements of nature, if we dare to look for them, have been a fundamental vehicle toward health and wellness in Black literature. In Morrison's (1998) groundbreaking novel Sula, Sula and Nel engage nature as a way to cope and attenuate the hazards of returning to the Bottom, an area that had at one time been a Black neighborhood but was later gentrified and dominated by Whites. In the novel, the girls lay in a bed of flowers, essentially generating their own spaces of belonging, their own spaces of quiet, amidst a tumultuous city plagued by oppressive gender norms and the psychosis that accompanies racism. In Hurston's (2006) Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie disrupts Western understandings of time to examine the bees' engagement with the flowers that grow on the pear tree; the cultivation of quiet makes room for the possibility of life, desire, and love for Janie as the novel progresses:

> *She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. (p.15)*

In *Purple Hibiscus,* Adichie (2004) engages nature, flowers particularly, as a way to challenge the constructs of time: "But my memories did not start at Nsukka. They started before, when all the hibiscuses in our front yard were a starling red" (p. 16). She also imagines Black life outside of white social control: "Aunty Ifeoma's experiential purple hibiscuses: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom…a freedom to be, to do" (p. 16). The use of what Royot (2007) calls ecological writing functions to draw our attention back to nature as a way to make sense of complex social issues, to provide us with more politicized understandings of social phenomena.

Ecological writing helps readers problematize the characters' lived experiences, signifying that our social critiques cannot be far removed from our physical environments (Royot, 2007). In *The Color Purple,* Walker (1982) writes and understands Celie's complex nature as a symbol of and in relationship with flowers. Celie's letters to her sister, Nettie, constantly reference the blooming of the flowers around her. Celie sees the conditions of her environment as symbolic of her well-being, despite her experiences with the social actors who compromise her health, like her abusive partner, Mister. She is absorbed within a space of quiet as she watches the flowers bloom, and from them, she understands that her healing is inevitable. Nettie responds in a letter to Celie with daisies as her medium, offering an understanding of her developing identity and relationship to her social worlds. She explains: "Europeans are white people who live in a place called Europe. That is where the white people down home come

from. She says an African daisy and an English daisy are both flowers, but totally different kinds" (p. 122).

The references to flowers continue throughout the novel. Shug, Celie's rock and sister-lover, encourages Celie to engage nature as a way to disrupt the blows of male domination: "Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say shut. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock" (p. 199). From Morrison to Walker, the engagement of nature mediates a type of stillness, which pauses time long enough for them to imagine their humanity outside of the confines of their defined racialized existences. Nature functions to create *something else,* a space that imagines new environments and possibilities for health and vitality.

These passages remind me of my ancestors and their engagement with land. While the vestiges of slavery would devastatingly haunt my great-aunt, Mae Willis (at 92 years old, she died after a long day's work of sharecropping), her semblance of freedom, like the emerging purple on an African violet, allowed for the development of a more intentional and consenting relationship to land custodianship. She had the opportunity to "move with the 'slower' rhythms of deep time—a practice which allows us to live in the present moment with the living Earth all around us—without pretext or filters. As we chase freedom in a world built by slaves, the ways we achieve it are just as important as the reasons why" (simple ant, 2020, p. 91). Aunt Mae's reception to the slowness of the country, the ebb and flow of seasons, the patience required to grow sweet potatoes, helped atone for a fast-paced, capitalist, and terror-filled plantation life. No longer the days in which "it did not matter if the body was well, only that it appeared well" (hooks, 2008, p. 39). She could now utilize her body, mind, and spirit in concert to protect and sustain (all) life. She knew the land intimately and the land knew her.

As I developed my curriculum to better align with the powerful land-based educational literature I was studying, I realized that my students were ahead of me in this process. In looking more closely at my high school students' work, I noticed that an emphasis to return to the land was prominent; I just hadn't had the tools to notice. My curriculum arc consisted of the following elements:

1. **The Development of Memoirs:** Students produce a body of writing that engages a history of colonization as a way to understand and explain their adverse social and health conditions and connect learning to various cultural understandings of health and well-being as a model for social transformation

2. **Health-Centered Youth Participatory Action Research Projects and Presentations:** Students engage socio-historical critiques of society to develop research projects that promote social transformation, specifically change that improves their material conditions.

3. **Normed Cultural Practice:** Activities range from the learning of the students' indigenous mother languages to travel to their ancestors' homelands. For example, we hired Nahuatl educators to teach our students with Nahuatl lineages their ancestral languages; we used Zoom to connect with teachers from Ghana and Nigeria to support our Black students to learn Yoruba and Twi. Parents who have maintained their indigenous languages joined us in passing on these medicines to their children. We fundraised and traveled to Aotearoa (among other sacred places) to learn with and from my Maori colleagues and friends about language revitalization and land stewardship; they taught us the art of "mixing medicine," that the value of learning about one's indigeneity is not confined to uplifting one's peoples, but of collective self-determination; it is an honoring of our mutual indigenous lifestyles that, through relationship and reverence, can co-exist and provide mutual aid.

4. **Rites of Passage Ceremonies:** With their intentional acts of social belonging, students are celebrated by their communities for their dedication to learning about their histories and cultures and promoted to new levels of social responsibility.

Themes of disconnection from the land were ever-present/prevalent in their memoirs. A central component of their YPAR projects were issues related to land (gentrification, gang rivalry, environmental racism). As our students reclaimed their mother tongues, many of the songs they learned that had survived colonialism gave reverence to the land. And, at the request of our young people, our Rites of Passage Ceremonies transitioned from our school to outdoor spaces.

It was clear to me and my teaching team that it was time to expand our understanding of learning space and take heed of a greater calling toward land-based education. It was time for my students to remember their sacredness and such a feat could only be accomplished by connection to land. Camangian and Cariaga (2022) argue that "if dispossessed young people do not know how autonomous, resourceful, and abundant their civilizations were prior to their relationship to colonialism, then it becomes difficult for them to imagine something radically different than the material conditions they currently find themselves in" (p. 3). These lessons, of ourselves as autonomous, resourceful, and abundant people were housed within the natural world, amongst the trees, and it was vital that we transitioned with urgency.

HEALING AMONGST THE TREES

The more we engaged in the critical work of education, the less we did school. According to Shujaa (1993), schooling is a process intended to perpetuate and maintain society's existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements. We instead prioritized education: the process of transmitting from one generation to the next knowledge of the values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, and all things that give a particular cultural orientation its uniqueness (Shujaa, 1993). In my education as an educator, I was beginning to understand that education is not limited to school structures.

"We are always thinking, learning and creating. Schools, at best, compromise our humanity and relationships with creating and learning because they are sites of social death" (Marie & Watson, 2020, p. 22). And the more my students learned about themselves and their cultural ways of being, the more they desired to be in relationship with the land. So we continued to make arrangements for them to engage in land-based education. With the support of their parents and comrades from our school community, we left the four walls of the school more and more often.

On an excursion to Golden Gate Park, my students and I rented bicycles (some brought their skateboards, as well) and we embraced the San Francisco chill brought on by the speed of our vehicle of choice. Isaiah clung near me (since he had not ridden a bike in years) yet embraced the new challenge with more tenacity than his Individualized Education Plan would say he possessed. Jarius traveled back and forth along our caravan to ensure the safety of his peers. And when we all saw a cave ahead of us, we agreed, through a simple nod, that we would scream at the top of our lungs as we accelerated through the dark. We had so much fun that day.

Some time before we needed to return our bikes, we stopped at a grassy oasis to give reverence to a particularly gentle giant amongst several other Coastal Redwoods *(Sequoia sempervirens)*. We admired the depth of its stance, which seemed to tickle the surface of the sky. With bikes parked and skateboards close by, I began class. I held math and science class, sharing that visible rings within a tree result from change over time; so one ring generally marks the passage of one year in the life of a tree. I asked the youth to hypothesize the age of the gentle giant. Educated guesses sprang forward as we proceeded to humanities. While examining the tree, I asked what stories the young people believed it possessed.

Based on the guesstimates of the tree's age, the young people spoke about European conquest and changes from Ohlone land to what we know as the San Francisco Bay Area. We then transitioned to art, honoring the complexity of the lineages shaping the architecture of the tree. The interdisciplinary nature of our learning experience amplified a culture of meaning-making and critical literacies, all through the reverence of tree space. Days after our excursion, the young people continued to ask why our school days couldn't be more like what we experienced in Golden Gate Park.

That day marked a nexus of sorts, connecting us to our futures by hinging us to ancestral ways of thinking and being. Eventually, students like Angus, Lorenzo, and Malia would guide our lessons with the land. They took pride in leading ceremony, uttering remembered tongues, lineages, and stories. Outside the gaze of state standards, pressures from college applications, and strict discipline policies, they healed amongst the trees, keeping at bay the ways in which our "bodies house the unhealed dissonance and trauma of our ancestors" (Menakem, 2017, p. 10). The land embraced songs that maybe hadn't been proclaimed there since they were beaten from the mouths of Ohlone people. As all teachers should, I became their student (both the youth and the trees), remembering the interconnectedness of belonging and relationship with the natural world, with no regard to the cleanliness of my shoes. There, we took steps toward healing from many of the normative ills of society, "the pervasive sense of loneliness and isolation from which many modern people suffer; the absence of a supportive community to help individuals weather the storms of life (Somé, 1999, p. 15).

As educators, it is vital for us to understand these spaces as conduits for healing, innovation, and connection. In this discussion, however, I want to push back against neoliberal understandings of experiential learning by engaging with the natural world. These pedagogical interventions are not vital if they are used as a means for youth to conform better to schooling or as a way for them to become healthier in order to endure the education structures that perpetuate their sicknesses.

Similarly, this work is not a rallying cry for neoliberal understandings of healing the land. As Amber McZeal (2020) states, "our entire concept of manifest destiny is a whole ethos about how the Earth is void and without form and desperately needs us, humans, to come and fix it" (35:21). Rather, these practices are radical in nature, because they support youth to return to ancestral ways of being and knowing; these practices are eventual processes of abolition—to the epistemological, structural, and spiritual energies that compromise their well-being, including schooling. Their ancestors who escape (ongoing, in the present tense) the confines of slavery and genocidal attempts use knowledge of land and intimate relationship with tree space for their own liberation. simple ant (2020) refers to this as fugitive ecologies: "the practices of being connected with the Earth, of moving in tune with the rhythms of the seasons. Fugitive ecologies are the practices of being home—socially, spiritually, and ecologically—in an era which criminalizes these connections in favor of carving up land and life for personal, private consumption" (simple ant, 2020, p. 92).

My time with young people and the land helped me contextualize the ways in which the body and the land have memory. As a result, our stress response systems have enabled us to adapt, survive, and flourish (hooks, 2008). The more we remember healing modalities, the healthier we remain. Therefore, healing must come with "self-determination in relation to the body that is the earth and the body that is our flesh" (hooks, 2008, p. 25). The "individual psyche can be healed only by addressing one's relationships with the visible worlds of nature and community and one's relationship with the invisible forces of the ancestors and Spirit allies" (Somé, 1999, p. 17). If we truly care about youth wellness, critical literacy, and social transformation, we will invest in a return to land-based reverence and education.

Finally, while many of our experiences acknowledged the ways in which we benefit from the land, the

ultimate goal of these pedagogical interventions should be toward a reciprocal relationship with the land, toward the re(m)atriation of land, "that is *all* of the land, and not just symbolically" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 7). As Robin Wall Kimmerer says, "It's a really liberating idea to think that the earth could love us back, but it also opens the notion of reciprocity that with that love and regard from the earth comes a real deep responsibility" (Tippett, 2016, 43:38). Our time with nature, particularly amongst the trees, have told an important story throughout several generations, and how we've treated the earth reflects the love that we have for ourselves. If we disconnect youth from stewardship and reverence of the land, we support pathways of self-hate. Only by helping youth understand that they, too, are extensions of the land, can we build toward a more liberated and sustainable future.

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