

But There's Still Going to Be a Pipeline: Ecological Microaggressions, Racism, and Social Justice Literacy Education in the Age of Trump

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*Dig up the earth with machines shaped
like an old woman's arthritic hand
clawing and grasping, digging.*

—Jennifer Greene, Poet, “My Reservation”

Indian issues are becoming everyone's issues. Because it is about the environment, it is about environmental justice, it is about clean water, which are things that everybody can relate to now.

—Dina Gilio-Whitaker, Native American Studies Scholar, Author, and Freelance Writer

On Sunday, December 4th, as the first leg of my trip home to Montana from the Literacy Research Association (LRA) conference in Nashville touched down in Denver, I (Robert), too, cheered as I read on my Facebook feed that President Obama denied the easement for construction of the North Dakota Access pipeline. His decision effectively ensured that the pipeline would not be put in just north of the Standing Rock Reservation, which had it been, would have undoubtedly toxified the water supply for the Lakota tribe.

#ObamaNoDAPL

When I read the news, I instantly thought of Margaret Meade's words—“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has”—and the moment felt like some type of small victory in what had otherwise felt like a recent onslaught of devastating and deflating struggles for equity and justice in the United States. Of course, though, there is nothing new about these recent manifestations of historicized and ever-present, ongoing, infrastructural forms of oppression, particularly regarding racism, in the U.S.:

#NoDAPL

#blacklivesmatter

#Flintwatercrisis

#EducateDontIncarcerate, #School2Prison, #Dontlockusout

And all of these are accentuated by the recent election for President of the United States a man who minimizes as “locker room talk” expressions of sexual assault via grabbing women’s genitals and espouses xenophobic promises of building walls and deporting entire groups of people because of their religious affiliations. And in the wake of this election, amidst a surge of hate crimes, including incidents involving Confederate flags and swastikas, our public schools have become increasingly hostile environments for many youth (e.g., youth of color, immigrant youth, LGBTQ+ youth).

#overwhelmed

As I scrolled from article to article of Obama’s decision—everything from forwarded messages from friends to alternative and even some mainstream media stories—a text message from my colleague and good friend, Melissa came through:

Melissa: Did you see Obama’s denial for the easement?!

Rob: Yes!

Melissa: So happy... but still ambivalent

Rob: I know, me too

Melissa: It’s going to be moved...

Rob: But there’s still going to be a pipeline

Melissa: But there’s still going to be a pipeline

But there’s still going to be a pipeline.

Just a week before that text exchange, the two of us had driven together from Montana to North Dakota to spend time at the Oceti Sakowin Camp—Standing Rock—in Cannon Ball, North Dakota. We decided to go there in response to an internal “call to action” of sorts, not unlike the call to action that had initially led us to pursue careers in literacy education focused on issues of equity and social justice. We went to North Dakota so we might better learn about the situation, particularly given scant media coverage, and see how we might be able to contribute—as social justice literacy educators and allies.

In literacy education, particularly in relation to critical and social justice epistemologies, we do our best to uphold an ethos of transparency regarding positionality. This practice allows us to acknowledge how our race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other aspects of our subject positions influence our thinking and acting in relation to our teaching and researching. In this spirit, while traveling to and being participants at Standing Rock, the two of us discussed our respective positionalities in terms of race, culture, and geography, and how those related to the politics of Lakota unceded territory, cultural practices that tie the tribe to the land, and the purpose of the camp as stated by the tribal chairman.

For Robert, he wondered about his being White, from an urban center on the East Coast, and his professional role at a westernized and colonizing institution that operates from a White, Eurocentric epistemology. Was he just being a “liberal do-gooder” by going to Standing Rock? How might his race and White privilege obstruct his abilities to see and learn and listen and support? For Melissa, she wondered what compelled her to join the cause of protecting water and allying alongside 300+ tribal nations against a conglomerate oil company, when she identifies as a White woman. Was it her familial Chippewa lineage and her memories of nuclear relatives talking in hushed tones about their identities as “Indians”? Or was it the ultimate suppression, by her Chippewa grandmother, of any lingering cultural practices in the family that came along with the decision to raise her children to identify as and “be” White? Together, we wondered: Did we even have a place at Standing Rock? Ought we go at all to learn and support the cause? In what ways might we contribute given our positionalities? To what extent—and how—might we represent these experiences to others, if at all?

While at Standing Rock, we learned much about not only that specific present-day manifestation of a legacy of oppression aimed at indigenous populations in North America, but also about the oil industry and oil pipelines more specifically—about their environmental impacts, about their short life spans, about their “typical” daily leakages, and about the many cover ups of larger spills over the years. For us, this convergence of environmental concerns with the oppression and racism inherent in the situation at Standing Rock enabled us to make different sense of the situation than we had considered prior to going there, particularly in relation to our own positionalities. We began to wonder, for instance, about the implications of a “successful” nonviolent direct action: What if this movement actually works, and the pipeline gets re-routed? Then what? The pipeline will be re-routed. But, there would still be a pipeline—just somewhere else. Oil will still leak, and somewhere, water will still be polluted and people’s lives will be adversely affected. True, it may not be near or at Standing Rock, but it will still happen.

In fact, within a week after President Obama’s easement decision, an oil pipeline leak was reported, with little media attention and no protest, in North Dakota, just 150 miles northwest of Standing Rock. At the time of the first draft of this article, the pipeline had leaked 176,000 gallons of oil into Ash Coulee Creek, near Belfield, North Dakota.

But there’s still going to be a pipeline.

As we drove the last leg of the 1,044-mile round-trip from Montana to North Dakota, we calculated that in the process we consumed approximately three barrels of oil—the same oil we had stood on indigenous territory protesting while we joined the ranks of “water protectors.” We then traced our ethical footprints as best we could in relation to our recent trips to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) annual convention, the LRA annual conference, and our respective research and

teaching sites—all of which involved us, to some extent, engaging social justice literacy education work. As we did, what revealed itself to us in undeniable and ironic ways was that the very oil we consumed in our travels implicated us in the exact systems of oppression we had gone to North Dakota and these other locations to protest and to speak out against. So focused on the glaring demonstrations of racism and environmental devastation right in front of us, we missed what was hiding in plain sight as “normal”: our own complicit involvement through our everyday acts and consumptions. In other words, in the process of fighting for social justice we managed to contribute to quite a bit of *injustice*.

Discussing this irony as we continued to burn fossil fuel across Eastern Montana, Melissa drew our attention to our experience at the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta during NCTE just the week before. After walking through the display that made visible, via looming silhouettes, the most oppressive, vehemently racist, misogynistic, xenophobic leaders the world has seen to date (e.g., Hitler, Kim Jong Un, Bashur al-Assad), we had made our way to a much less visible display of everyday, ordinary things that most likely everyone reading this article possesses and/or has consumed at some point: chocolate, flowers, food containing palm oil, various brands of clothing and locations of clothing manufacturing, soccer balls, cell phones. Systematically, this display explained how manufacturing and consuming these items contributed not only to environmental destruction but also to worldwide oppression of people (mainly poor people of color, often children and women).

For instance, the display explained how minerals used in items like cell phones and computers and other electronics are mined in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo and contributes to intense conflict there, as well as the enslavement of children to work in the mines. The display explained how the demand for flowers, particularly during specific times of year (i.e., Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day), exposes hundreds of thousands of workers, mostly women, in countries like Ecuador and Colombia, to toxic pesticides that cause severe health problems, including miscarriages. Melissa noted how this display—in sharp contrast to the previous display of such obvious and overt examples of despotism, tyranny, and blatant -isms—revealed “us.” The collective “us.” And the myriad seemingly invisible and quiet ways this collective “us” contribute daily to global inequality, racism, sexism, and general oppression.

While we tend to focus on the obvious, in-our-face instances of oppression—the large silhouettes of tyrannical figures, so to speak—we so often miss the ways we ourselves, in the most seemingly “normal” ways, contribute to the very things we are committed to redressing as social justice literacy educators and scholars. In reality, we are ceaselessly committing and complicit in what the two of us have come to think of as *ecological microaggressions*—that is, a practice of environmental consumerism (e.g., “Made in Vietnam”) and ethical choices that support broader economic and sociopolitical systems that contribute to the continued oppression of certain populations. As the display helped make visible, these ecological microaggressions are not only to be found in the energy we consume; they are also in the clothes we purchase and wear; the food we eat and the water we drink; the blood diamonds we give to one

another to celebrate anniversaries and engagements; in the electronic devices we utilize for our work and lives; and even in the soccer balls our children kick around. Similar to how race scholars have helped us understand the many ways racism occurs not only in grand, visible ways but also in “microaggressions” (e.g., Sue, et al., 2007) among ordinary people in everyday circumstances, these ecological microaggressions—though they look much different than an oil company drilling into sacred lands—are no less toxic to the earth or any less complicit in the oppression of people.

Though what we are sharing here may not necessarily be new, by drawing attention to it, our hope is that, particularly within the context of current events whereby issues of racism and environmentalism so visibly converge (e.g., Flint water crisis, DAPL), we, as a field, might more explicitly address what we refer to as *ecological positionalities* in our research and teaching, especially as it pertains to social justice work. An ecological positionality asks that we both acknowledge and attempt to understand one’s environmental relationship to oppression, and reflect on that relationship as a means to understand how it interplays with research and teaching, especially regarding any blind spots our “environmental privilege” creates. This acknowledgement and reflection can assist us in illuminating and providing counter action for the ecological microaggressions we commit every day.

In this way, we are arguing for a social justice literacy education that takes more seriously and makes more visible our ecological positionalities and the ecological microaggressions we perpetrate through our environmental choices, including through our research and teaching endeavors. By doing this, we are better-positioned to ask ourselves questions, such as “How did buying my clothing from _____ [fill in the blank with your favorite chain retail store] and getting onto an airplane bound for NCTE contribute to the oppression a social justice literacy education works to dismantle?”

The critical introspection we are calling for is not unlike questions we ask from any position of privilege when contributing to social justice work—questions that continuously remind us of the power that systems of oppression seek out and rely upon to exist as invisible and “normal.” In other words, we hope this piece encourages a type of analysis of how privilege is actually being reinforced by people who identify as allies to/for social justice. By doing so, we hope to continue building consciousness that results in a more comprehensive awareness of (environmental) privilege and (ecological) positionalities and their consequent implications. From there, we might want to consider questions such as the following so that we might be better positioned to more effectively do the work of social justice literacy education:

- How do we do the work of social justice when doing the work of social justice compromises our core values (i.e., using fossil fuels to drive to Standing Rock or attend a conference)?

- How do we do the work of social justice when the act itself reinforces (environmental) privilege (e.g., we can go to Standing Rock and then come home to our safe water supply)?
- How do we, as individuals and as a field, navigate increasing awareness and consciousness of our (environmental) privilege, and (ecological) positionality while still feeling like we are able to contribute to and actively ally alongside causes that promote equity?

As we enter an age wherein our elected and appointed government leaders understand climate change and global warming as being a creation of China to make the U.S. economy less competitive and as “an expensive hoax!”, and want to defend against “attacks” on fossil fuel industries, the questions and issues inherent in a greater emphasis on *ecological positioning* and the *ecological microaggressions* it helps make visible are now paramount to social justice literacy education. The stakes are just too high.

As novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues in her recent *New Yorker* article, “Now is the time to talk about what we are actually talking about,” about the election of Trump; “Every precious ideal must be reiterated, every obvious argument made, because an ugly idea left unchallenged begins to turn the color of normal. It does not have to be like this.”

#stillgoingtobeapipeline?

References

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