Black and Indigenous Theoretical Considerations for Higher Education Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

In this conceptual paper, the authors make the case for why and how researchers can incorporate Black and Indigenous standpoints in higher education scholarship. We begin by drawing parallels between the racialized contexts of higher education for Black and Indigenous communities in the United States (U.S.). Next, we explore ethics of communality among Black immigrant and refugee populations, as well as Indigenous knowledge systems of relationality. We conclude by posing 10 research questions to be taken up by higher education researchers.

Keywords: Black immigrants and refugees, cultural sustainability, higher education, indigenous knowledge systems, intellectual solidarity

INTRODUCTION

"We sustain what we love" is the guiding statement offered by Django Paris and H. Samy Alim's work of Cultural Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) (2017, p. 12). In the context of *sustaining*

what we love, we understand sustainability as not simply an understanding of environmental protection of ecological resources and environments, but also as a practice that ensures the continuity of knowledge systems that require care and safeguarding. This expanded view of sustainability is needed for the vitality of higher education. Among the United Nations'(UN) (2016) sustainable development goals, targets number 4 and 11 call for educational equity and environmental sustainability, respectively. After establishing initial targets, the UN put forth multiple amendments, including Amendment 4.6, which advocates for the "...further strengthening the commitment to equity by specifically mentioning women, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples" (UN, n.d., para. 1). This amendment suggests that definitions of sustainability are constantly evolving. Meanwhile, Brundiers et al. (2021) conducted a Delphi study of 14 institutions and identified a set of sustainability focused learning objectives and competencies for students: environmental justice, scientific inquiry, and futures-oriented thinking that opens space for us to understand that what we do today will have an influence on futures. As Indigenous and Black scholars, we build on these existing and evolving definitions and are also inspired by Paris and Alim's intentional work on sustaining lifeways that, "seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistics, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation" (2017, p. 1). In the remainder of this paper, we build a conceptual case that practices of cultural sustainability need to take into account Black and Indigenous standpoints.

Specifically, we explore cultural sustainability through a discussion of Indigenous relationality and Black ethics of communality in U.S. society more broadly, and within the context of U.S. higher education narrowly. We begin this conceptual argument by stating explicitly that Blackness and Indigeneity are not mutually exclusive identities. And while we do not attempt to create an equivalency between the two groups, we recognize that there are parallels to their

racialized (and politicized) identities and the interplays between postsecondary education contexts and the larger society. In our next section, we explain some of these parallels.

Parallel Invisibility in National Data

Black ways of being are highly diverse, encompassing people, cultures, and communities from across the globe. Because national data sets have not historically disaggregated by ethnicity or national background up until the 2020 census for Black populations, it is difficult to determine the exact number of Black migrants (immigrants, asylees, and refugees) in the U.S., obfuscating the unique cultural dimensions of complex and diverse Black communities and instead homogenizing the Black experience. The figures that do exist are often compiled by private organizations, offering an incomplete demographic portrait of Black migrants. For example, researchers from the Pew Research Center estimate that there are 4.2 million Black immigrants in the U.S. (Anderson & Lopez, 2018). Meanwhile, researchers from the Migration Policy Institute estimate that as of 2020, approximately 10% of the 85.7 million first- and second-generation immigrants in the U.S. are Black (Batalova et al., 2020). The inconsistency in these figures demonstrates that Black migrants are not well represented in national level data.

Native populations, in educational research, are often relegated to a footnote under an "asterisk" that justifies exclusion from research studies because of low numbers, or are completely ignored, pushed from the language of underrepresented to invisible (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2010). These types of exclusionary measures signify "statistical extermination," which are formulas sanctioned by the federal government that quantifies the validation of the removal of Indigenous existence and presence (Jaimes, 1992, p. 137). Ultimately, the conspicuous absence of Native people from federal data sets suggests a lack of commitment to Native peoples' and their

knowledge systems, which work to reinforce settler colonialism through the ongoing erasure of Indigenous presence and the ongoing theft and power over Indigenous lands (Wolfe, 2009).

Parallel Subjection to Troubling Federal and Local Education Policies

National policies like Executive Order 13769: Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the U.S. (commonly known as the Muslim ban) is an example of a troubling policy that affected Black students in higher education. Out of the 13 countries that were on this list, four of them were African nations, resulting in more limited mobility for Black students. Reflecting on the impact of this policy, Kanno-Youngs (2020) explained why this restrictive policy was particularly harmful for Black people:

> The effect on Nigeria, not only Africa's most populous country but also its largest economy, could be particularly severe. The United States issued more than 7,920 immigrant visas to Nigerians in the 2018 fiscal year, the second-most of any African country. (para. 8)

Overall, the previous presidential administration enacted a slate of restrictive laws designed to quell immigration, particularly from majority Black countries. These policies include: narrowing the number of reasons for which a person can seek legal asylum in the U.S.; increasing the eligibility requirements for H-1B work visas and increasing the number of questions on the U.S. citizenship test (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). When working in tandem, these policies make it more difficult for Black people – particularly students – to enter and safely live in this country. Broadly speaking, these policies are particularly insidious because in higher education scholarship and practice, the inherent value of immigrant, refugee, and undocumented people are tied up with their educational attainment. However, among the 3,313 non-profit colleges, universities, and community colleges in the U.S., only about 100 institutions have explicitly pledged their campuses as sanctuary campuses, where undocumented students can be safe from deportation (Funke, 2016; Moody, 2019).

Indigenous peoples are not immune to these types of racialized policies. For example, in the southwestern region of the U.S., the Tohono O'odham Nation have been battling the federal government over the imposed wall that separates families as well as restricts the participation in cultural knowledge and events that have been practiced since Time Immemorial. Former Vice Chairman Verlon Jose of the Tohono O'odham nation stated, "A wall built on the border, we believe is not the answer to secure America. Walls throughout this world have proven to be not 100 percent effective. We believe that what is effective is cooperation…These are our homelands and we want to protect them too" (Tohono O'odham Nation, n.d.). Too often, perspectives from U.S. Tribal Nations are left out of the conversation on borderlands.

Moreover, educational policies as well as on-going proposed legislations continue to threaten Indigenous and Black lifeways and reinforce assimilation aims of advancing homogeneity whiteness and neoliberal capitalism (Silversmith, 2021). Threats include: banning of race-conscious curriculum, like 1,619 project and Critical Race Theory from federal training programs; carceral networks and strategies in schooling, the oppression of trans students, and yes even exclusionary practices during graduation celebrations (i.e., not being able to wear a feather on a graduation cap (Silversmith, 2021; Pember, 2021). Although some of these policies were repealed under the Biden presidential administration, they reflect a pervasive ideology that perpetuates oppression and erasure.

Parallel Entanglement of Black Labor and Indigenous Lands that Universities Materially Benefit from Today

While Black and Indigenous students are the least likely to graduate with a college degree as well as the most likely to accrue college debt (Addo & Baker, 2021; Nelson et al., 2021), many colleges could not have emerged without and continue to benefit from a history of the enslavement of Black people (Wilder, 2013) and the theft of Indigenous lands (Nash, 2019; Lee & Ahtone,

2020). Specifically, the Morrill Act of 1862 created a higher education system that further dispossessed Native peoples from land under the rhetoric of "public" lands for the "public good" (Lee & Ahtone, 2020). The Morrill Act erased the reality that those "public" lands were already occupied by Indigenous peoples since Time Immemorial as well as "ignored the treaties that safeguarded the well-being of Native peoples" (Nelson et al., 2021, p. 17). Millions of dollars were funneled into endowments that supported (and to this day benefits) land-grant university systems. Moreover, the second Morrill Act of 1980 stipulated actions to provide college access for Blacks, but instead was part of a broader plan to settle national conflict over slavery and appease White land-grand institutions by maintaining inequitable distribution of dollars (Wheatle, 2019). Juxtaposed to these historical perspectives and current realities, 86.4% of Black and 76% of American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) students who graduated with a four-year degree borrowed on average $34,010 (for Black students) and $26, 380 (for AIAN) in student loan debt (Espinosa et al., 2019). Native and Black students are then faced with enormous debt upon leaving college, which can threaten their ability to achieve equitable wealth and well-being success and reinscribes debt bondage and suffering for generations.

Based on these parallels, we argue that higher education cannot be sustainable in the long term without considering the positions of and relationship between these two communities. After a theoretical discussion of Black and Indigenous thought in higher education in subsequent sections, we also pose a set of broader questions that researchers may consider when moving this discussion forward.

Intellectual Solidarity and Positionality of Authors

The two authors engage in this discussion because of a shared commitment to longevity and viability of Indigenous and Black cultures in higher education. While higher education has a long

history of being oppressive toward Black people (Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019; Grosfoguel, 2013; Wheatle, 2019) and Indigenous people (Tachine, 2018; Nash, 2019; Wright, 1991), we believe that the future of postsecondary education can and must be different. Echoing La Paperson's (2017) conceptualization of a "third university," we understand that a more liberatory university is: "...anti-utopian. Its pedagogical practices may be disciplining and disciplinary. A third world university is less interested in decolonizing the university and more in operating as a decolonizing university" (p. 10). We can advance the work of a decolonizing university by thinking about how the knowledge of marginalized groups – such as Black and Indigenous peoples – can be more prominent.

This conceptual piece is the first (of what we hope is many) collaborative writing that cultivates what Black scholar Keon McGuire referred to as, "intellectual solidarity" efforts (personal communication, n.d.). As a collective, the two authors and Keon McGuire practice intellectual solidarity by engaging in knowledge systems of Black and Indigenous thinkers that is intentional, meaningful, consistent, and deeply reflexive. We do this by meeting on a bi-weekly basis and reading texts that bridge and break apart Indigenous and Black knowledge systems, while also discussing and asking questions of the collective as a way to further connect with each other's lives and histories. When we first sought to forge this intellectual solidarity, we were inspired by the Combahee River Collective's origin stories as the creators first engaged in study groups with shared readings and discussion to help move against isolation in academe and work toward political action (Taylor, 2017). In one of our periodic reading group sessions, we clarified that solidarity should be more than intellectual engagement with written text, but a developing relationship of understanding and learning of lives, love, death, injuries, tensions, ethical commitments, and aspirations. To better understand who and how we come into intellectual solidarity efforts, we locate our social positioning in relationship to our evolving work.

The first author, Meseret, is a first-generation Black immigrant woman who does research about Black women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics higher education. She uses a variety of critical frameworks – such as critical race feminism, transnational theory, and social and cognitive career theory – to study gender equity in postsecondary education. The second author, Amanda, is an enrolled member in the Navajo Nation. She is from the Red Running into Water clan, born for the Many Goats clan. She is connected to Diné Bikéyah, the original home(lands) of the Diné people, coming from Ganado, Arizona in *what is now* America. *What is now* signifies that her ancestors were thriving before America came to be. She explores the relationship between systemic and structural histories of settler colonialism and the ongoing erasure of Indigenous presence and belonging in college settings using qualitative Indigenous methodologies.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this next section, we share what intellectual solidarity may look like by considering Black immigrant and refugee populations and ethics of communality and then we turn to Indigenous knowledge systems of relationality.

Black Immigrant and Refugee Population's Education Practices of Ethics of Communality

There is evidence that suggests how Black migrant populations move toward an ethic of communality after arriving in their host country (the U.S.) because of the experience of being minoritized (Chacko, 2003; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Showers, 2015). Arguably, that ethic of communality is deeply entwined in racial identity and politics. For a Black person who lives in a majority Black country in Africa or the Caribbean, racial identity may not be a prominent feature of their development and educational socialization. However, once a Black person moves to the U.S., they are compelled to articulate and reckon with their racial identity since racial logics are a

part of U.S. society. As Hughes (1945) explains, race is a dominant status in this nation. This means that, in terms of socially consequential identities, race matters more than anything else. For Black immigrants and refugees, race also intersects with foreign status. This notion of racialized foreignness has been well documented in education literature (Agyepong, 2017; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). For example, noticeably foreign names and accents mark Black refugees and immigrant people as Other (Adjepong, 2018; Tesfai & Thomas, 2020).

In response to this shared experience of racialized foreignness, Black immigrants and refugees may engage in ethics of communality, which are collectivist education practices that are culturally sustaining. In many ways, this ethic of communality builds on the rich history of African American people who have lived in the U.S. for many generations. For instance, Black Greek Letter Organizations on higher education campuses have a long history of cultivating community and improving educational outcomes for Black students (Croom et al., 2017; Miller & Bryan, 2020). For Black immigrants and refugees who are relatively recent arrivals in the U.S., they continue this Black tradition of communality in their own ways by sharing information and resources.

For example, Habecker (2012) observed communal approaches to living among Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants in the Washington DC Metro area as: "Informal groups such as the mahaber ('association' or 'social club') and the ekub (a rotating savings and credit association) are forums for providing mutual social and financial support" (p. 1209). Similarly, Habecker (2012) extended the construction of cultural spaces to also include: bars, restaurants, grocery stores, and religious institutions. Often these spaces are spots for Black immigrants to cultivate community ties for survival. In Arizona, a non-profit organization called "Refugees and Immigrants Community for Empowerment" connects recently relocated populations to educational workshops

and resources, including co-curricular programming for Black immigrant and refugee youth who desire to pursue STEM careers (R.I.C.E, n.d.). Meanwhile, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (headquartered in New York City) engages in political advocacy on behalf of Black immigrant girls and women in schools (Labiran, 2020). Cumulatively, these pockets of communal work and care help Black refugees and immigrants have access to CSP teachings of "we sustain what we love."

The construction of ethics of communality among diasporic Black populations is beneficial. In the context of higher education, this involves sharing information, mutual labor and investment, pooling resources, and cultivating academic networks. The ethics of communality are necessary for achieving culturally sustainable education for Black immigrants and refugees. While the cultural practices of immigrants are largely undervalued or rendered invisible in dominant society, recognizing them in research is necessary for supporting the wellbeing of this student group. This ethic also runs contrary to--and provides us an alternative to--many unstainable norms in higher education, including: opportunity hoarding (Hamilton et al., 2018; Hanselman & Fiel, 2017), hyper competition (Edwards & Roy, 2017; Streitwieser & Beecher, 2017), and privatization of educational goods and services (McMillan Cottom, 2017) that are rooted in neoliberal capitalism. We now turn to Indigenous knowledge systems of relationality as another example that speaks to the value of collective networks.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems of Relationality

When we talk about Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), we should be careful and avoid extracting, abusing, commodifying, and misappropriating IKS while simultaneously appeasing or legitimizing settler universities to feel better about themselves, to check off the inclusion/diversity box, that positions them in ways that ascribe "moves to innocence," (Tuck &

Yang, 2012, p. 3) and then to only maintain their power of land and lives. Stein (2020) asked of us,

> Can universities shift from relationships premised on ownership and mastery (of land and knowledge) to ones premised on answerability, that is, 'being responsible, accountable, and being part of an exchange' (Patel, 2015, p. 73)? What would be the biggest challenges involved in making such a shift? (p. 17)

These questions are much deeper and expansive than Indigenous land acknowledgements that are in many ways proliferating amongst universities across what is now America and Canada (Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021; Red Shirt-Shaw, 2020; Vowel, 2016). IKS is not a performative endeavor, it is "rooted in the lived experiences of peoples" (Brayboy, & Maughn, 2009, p. 3). We are not here to mess with the sacred lives of Indigenous peoples.

U.S. institutions sustain and privilege ideas, processes, and systems of knowledge production. When taking up IKS, we clearly state that Indigenous peoples have been calling out, for centuries, that there are different knowledge systems that must be sustained for the betterment of not just Indigenous peoples, but for all peoples. Inspired by Cree Nation scholar Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt (1991) who discuss the four Rs: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility as dimensions informed by IKS when working to transform the landscape of higher education. We see these four Rs as centered upon relationality. They argue that students coming to the university are expected to adapt to normalized ethos, behaviors, and the culture of the dominant White society. And when Indigenous students do not conform or assimilate to institutional norms and behaviors, they are deemed deficit and problematized as unable to succeed (Brayboy & Chin, 2020). Deficits are linked to a hierarchy of dominance and rule of Indigenous lands and minds. Programs and strategies springing forth from this dilemma are often rooted in

individualized-oriented solutions that include bridging programs, student support services, tutoring, and mentorship. These initiatives are important and do help with the transition of Indigenous students, but they also are in constant battle for legitimacy and serve as "band-aid" fixes that dismiss larger, structural issues of White dominance and hegemony on college settings. Rather, higher education institutions must take up the four Rs (respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility) that are, "framed in more humanistic, culturally-sensitive terms … And as such, reflect a larger purpose than simply obtaining a university degree to get a better job" (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 5). Each of the four Rs are elaborated to better understand the significant interplay between them as they emphasize the relational sustainability of IKS.

Respect is the assertion of cultural knowledge, traditions and core values from Indigenous peoples as legitimate and viable knowledge. What is critical here is not only increasing the enrollment of Native peoples, but also increasing the domain of ways of knowing and respecting the cultural integrity of Indigenous peoples. Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson asserts that, "I want them [future generations] to live without fear because they know respect, because they know in their bones what respect feels like" (2017, p. 8). What would it mean for institutions of higher education to be places where future peoples know in their bones what respect feels like? The affective aspect here is critically important because IKS recognizes that knowing (epistemology), being (ontology), teaching (pedagogy), and values (axiology) are not separated, but intimately related and expansive (Brayboy & Maughn, 2009).

Relevance is a deep consideration of the types of qualities – aligned with IKS – that govern policies and practices in institutions. For example, how might sustainability efforts align with the rematriation of land and waterways and the infusion of cultural knowledge systems? Relevance in this way is in community with *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (Paris & Alim, 2017), which ask

us, "what knowledges must we sustain in order to overcome and survive when faced with a power that seeks to sustain itself above and beyond – and sometimes shot through – our bodies?" (p. 14).

Reciprocal relationships provide possibilities for universities and local Tribal Nations to work together, learn from each other, with the understanding that institutions have to make efforts to be vulnerable, in ways that position and formulate new possible frameworks. Vulnerability is critical here, as it provides a space for institutions to critically examine ways that they maintain White supremacy, anti-Blackness, heteropatriarchy, and capitalist regimes that choke up myriad lifeways and are in many ways antithetical to IKS. Stein (2020) asserted that in the context of the settler nation state of Canada that, "we cannot begin the long-term process of changing this relationship until settlers are first willing to face the full extent to which colonial violence has shaped Canadian higher education for over three hundred years" (p. 3). IKS are centered upon relationality, a deep relationship with each other, to the land/waterways, more than human relatives, and to the universe. A constellation of relationships that is based upon kinship, presence, love, self-determination, and futurity.

Responsibility understands that acquiring a college degree, for many Indigenous peoples, is a matter of survivance (Vizenor, 1999). Minnesota Chippewa scholar Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance is described as, "moving beyond our basic survival in the face of overwhelming cultural genocide to create spaces of synthesis and renewal" (p. 53). Responsibility is recognizing that for many Indigenous peoples, attending institutions of higher education is an opportunity to give-back to communities and home(lands) (Lopez & Tachine, in press) which is deeply centered upon a cyclical relationship rooted in IKS of relationality, reciprocity, and a sense of nationhood (Reyes, 2019). Nationhood here is not to be confused with settler nationhood, but in the sovereignty of Native Nations. Responsibility is also what bell hooks states as, "taking

responsibility means that in the face of barriers we still have the capacity to invent our lives, to shape our destinies in ways that maximize our well-being" (hooks, p. 57). To create destinies that strengthens community well-being is our responsibility as people working in institutions of higher education. To this end, we must recognize that Indigenous peoples are not going to wait for institutions to transform, they are going to do the work (as they have always done) to create the destinies that strengthen survivance.

Possibilities for Ethics of Communality and Relationality

When considering the future of sustainable higher education, we wonder about what is worthy of sustaining? Worthy is intentionally utilized to acknowledge that there are normalized and dominant knowledge systems that have for centuries work to disrupt, tear apart, destroy Indigenous and Black lives and their connections to home(lands). Therefore, it is imperative to consider the relationship between Black and Indigenous peoples when framing sustainability. Specifically, political and intellectual solidarity should be a necessary endeavor. One of the greatest and most effective strategies of colonialism and white supremacy is dividing and stirring up tension and conflict amongst Black and Indigenous peoples who have much to be gained from a joint commitment to one another, as the Combahee River Collective shows. In education practice, the open-access virtual conference titled "Cultivating Black & Native Futures in Education" is another example of collaborative conversation and world-making, where conference organizers are providing space for "...Black and Indigenous peoples to know our shared history as survivors of state violence, genocide, and settler colonialism, and move together toward imagining collective liberation and celebration of ourselves, one another, our people, and the land/waterways" ("Call for Proposals," n.d.). Moving forward, Black conceptions of ethics of communality and Indigenous views on relationality can help institutions of higher education seek ways to build transformative

and sustaining developments in postsecondary practices and policies. Future scholarship should emerge both from these separate and distinct projects. In doing so, scholars live out Taylor's definition of solidarity:

> Solidarity did not mean subsuming your struggles to help someone else: it was intended to strengthen the political commitments from other groups by getting them to recognize how the different struggles were related to each other and connected under capitalism. It called for greater awareness and understanding, not less. (2017, p. 11)

We conclude this conceptual piece with 10 questions that higher education scholars may consider as they move this discussion forward:

1. In the place of your specific university, what are the histories of Black and Indigenous peoples? In this specific research area, what are the shared histories of Black and Indigenous people?

2. In what ways has similar research in the past harmed Black people? Indigenous people?

3. In this specific area, what are the historical areas of incommensurability among Black and Indigenous people?

4. How does this work build on the ethic of community cultivated among Black people? Among the relationality of Indigenous people?

5. How does this research cultivate respect for Indigenous peoples? For Black people?

6. How does this research cultivate relevance in the service of Indigenous peoples? In the service of Black people?

7. How does this research cultivate reciprocity with Indigenous peoples? With Black people?

8. How does this research demonstrate responsibility toward Indigenous peoples? Toward Black people?

9. In what ways have Black and Indigenous communities exhibited cultural sustainability that could shape our thinking about methodology in this research area?

10. How does this research lend itself to the sustainability of Black and Indigenous lifeways and cultures?

By taking up these questions in scholarship, we are hopeful that higher education will advance higher education sustainability.

AUTHOR NOTE

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