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# 'I knew this was gonna be chaos': Voices Collide While Decolonizing Intersectional Injustice

*Danielle Kubasko Sullivan and Mary L. Fahrenbruck*

## *Abstract*

Events following a display of archival photographs depicting a Navajo Civil Rights march that was sponsored by One Book/One Community of San Juan College illuminated racial tensions and competing injustices in the community of Farmington, New Mexico. These events are analyzed through a paradigm, indigenously-sustaining literacy, which could benefit common reading programs that conduct literacy work in communities with populations of indigenous people or border Native American reservations and are seeking to decolonize community literacy practices

One late November afternoon, five members of the One Book/One Community (OBOC) committee hung archival photos of the 1974 Civil Rights Protests in Farmington, New Mexico, in a gallery space on the campus of San Juan College, located in Farmington. Several students stopped to look the 26 poster-sized photos selected by the committee from the Bob Fitch Photography Archive Movements of Change. The display was part of the OBOC programming associated with the committee's selection of the graphic memoir *March* (Lewis et al.), a retelling of Congressman John Lewis's civil rights activism. The committee recognized that *March* could provide an interesting connection to the 1974 Civil Rights protests in Farmington that resulted from the minimal sentencing of three white teenagers who had murdered three Navajo men and provide an opportunity for students and community members to explore this legacy and their situatedness in the community.

The photos were compelling. One photo showed protestors marching down Farmington's main street. Another depicted a Navajo man holding a cardboard sign that read "veteran WWII. Holder Purple Heart. My son was kill [sic] by a white boy on the reservation." Three of the photos depicted protestors holding upside down American flags. Other photos showed groups of Native Americans facing off with law enforcement. Onlookers identified relatives in the photos and expressed their gratitude for showcasing an important moment in local history. Others stated they had no idea that there had been civil rights protests in Farmington and were glad to learn about them through the display. One onlooker, though, was not supportive. He said that the committee should not hang any photos near the glass display located in the gallery that is dedicated to veterans. Committee members agreed with the man, citing the need to be respectful. Still, displeased, he asked why the committee was displaying the photos. (Danielle), the director of the OBOC committee, explained the historical nature of the photos and the connection to the OBOC selection. She also explained

that she had obtained permission to display the photos in the gallery. The onlooker seemed satisfied and left.

The committee completed the display and many members went out for dinner to celebrate the implementation of an important event in the OBOC programming. During dinner, (Danielle) received notification that someone had removed three of the posters and two other posters had been defaced. All committee members were stunned with the exception of one who grew up in the area, and said, "I knew this was gonna be chaos."

Word of the photo removal and defacement travelled quickly, and by the following morning, campus was abuzz with the event. A campus investigation revealed that the event was two separate incidents. In one incident, the photo of the WWII Navajo man holding the sign about his son's murder by a white man had been defaced by a student who had taped a sign to it that said, "who cares if your son was killed by a white man. If he's dead, he's dead." The same student had glued a piece of paper that said, "this is racist" to another poster that depicted a group of children holding a sign that said, "whites blow away with the wind."

The second incident was committed by the onlooker who had questioned the committee as they were hanging up the photos. The man, a white veteran and college employee, was offended by the depiction of the upside-down flags in the photos. The man had removed the photos and taken them to the college dean, urging him to take action to prevent the committee from displaying the photos as they were "offensive to veterans." Citing the first amendment, the president supported the committee in reprinting and displaying the posters again.

College administrators decided to host a forum the following week to address the event because it was creating tension on campus and in the community. The OBOC committee had no input in the forum. The forum was comprised of an equal number of Native Americans and veterans and was moderated by one of the deans. Each speaker had the opportunity to state two to three minutes of prepared statements followed by a formal commenting period whereby a moderator read aloud comments or questions submitted by attendees. Approximately two hundred people attended the forum, the majority of whom were Native American.

In the forum, two white veterans spoke about the importance of having their service honored and how a depiction of an upside-down flag dishonored that service. One of the veterans said that she never felt dishonored by an upside down flag and stated that one of the reasons she enlisted in the military was because she wanted to live overseas, not necessarily out of a sense of honor and duty. One of the Native American speakers with ties to the military said she had trouble dichotomizing the issue since both identities were important to her and her family. The librarian who originally selected the photos was also representing the "Native American voice" in the forum and expressed feeling scared since she knew the student who defaced the photos because he was a frequent patron of the library. Another spoke of her family being depicted in the photos and explained that it was offensive to her that her history was not valued. The commenting time following the forum was fairly stilted and many Native Americans left feeling as though they didn't have an opportunity

to express their opinions or share their stories. Several Native American campus and community members stated that they felt that the white veterans' voices were privileged in the forum, in part because of the format that gave equal weight to these voices although in the community, there were far more Native Americans who were upset about the acts of vandalism than there were veterans who were upset about the photos depicting an upside down flag. Many left feeling disillusioned and devalued and that acts of racism and violence were being minimized. There were no additional steps taken to address the act, such as an all-campus email denouncing the act of vandalism and reassurance of community members that the campus was inclusive and safe. The posters remained on display throughout November, with a security presence for much of the time to prevent future acts of vandalism.

In this vignette readers witness the value and challenges of community work around sensitive issues and events. They see efforts of the OBOC committee to provide experiences like displays around *March* that provided a forum for community voice and activism. Readers will also see the missteps and missed opportunities that occurred during the programming.

### *OBOC And Farmington: Intersectional and Competing Interests*

Farmington, the home of San Juan College and the community OBOC program, is a conservative community located adjacent to the Navajo Nation in northwestern New Mexico. In 1974, Farmington was the site of civil rights protests following the murders of three Navajo men by three white high school students who received minimal sentences. The New Mexico Advisory Committee to the United States on Civil Rights Commission launched an investigation and released *The Farmington Report: A Conflict of Cultures* in 1975, which included findings and recommendations to address the treatment of Navajo people (*New Mexico Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights*). In 2004, the follow-up report found that substantial improvements in areas of "equal protection" had been made, but that "problems continue to persist" (*New Mexico Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights*, ii).

Community literacy leaders have discussed the value and challenges of community work and the importance of attending to difficulty in negotiating community relationships, as this difficulty is what gives the collaborative work meaning (Rosenberg). The committee realized by selecting *March* that engaging in projects and collaborations around civil rights events in a community that had been the subject of a civil rights investigation could be difficult but deeply meaningful. However, the committee underestimated the degree to which the archival poster display would illuminate racial tensions that still exist in Farmington.

When planning literacy programming, the OBOC committee attempts to host events that reflect and address different community issues, but often they have to make decisions about whose needs to privilege in the programming. These decisions are further exacerbated by the fact that OBOC committee members are overwhelmingly liberal and educated, which does not reflect the greater community of Farmington. Additionally, while the OBOC committee includes members of the Navajo tribe,

Latinx members, and whites, the committee's diversity does not match the cultural diversity of Farmington, as it is more heavily white than the community of Farmington, a fact that the committee was aware of when planning community events. The committee knew that they had to navigate competing community voices and chose to privilege Native American voices in much of this year's programming, largely because of the connections between *March* and the civil rights investigations that occurred in Farmington and because the committee recognized that many civil rights issues were still unaddressed in the community.

For this article, the authors analyze the events presented in the opening vignette. This analysis is conducted through the lens of critical constructivism coupled with tenets of racial literacy and oral literacy, a paradigm that we call indigenous-sustaining literacy, which may be useful in analyzing community book selections and associated literacy work in communities that struggle with systemic oppression and seek to decolonize community literacy practices, particularly with indigenous cultures. The analysis is also informed by both authors' power and privilege of being white and by Danielle's position as the director the OBOC program.

### *Avoiding the "White Gaze"*

Jackson and DeLaune discuss the difficulty of imposing a conceptual framework on discussions of indigenous literacy, arguing that these frameworks for "western minds" belie decolonization, arguing that the collaborative nature of community storytelling and listening decolonizes rhetorical listening that is ubiquitous in western institutions. This approach sustains cultural knowledge of indigenous people. Ideally, Jackson and DeLaune's approach would be the default in work with indigenous communities; however, in many institutional settings that border Native American land such as Farmington, competing philosophical orientations must be navigated. For example, Danielle is white and administering a program in higher education that values theoretical frameworks. Rather than avoid frameworks altogether, we find it more useful to analyze work with indigenous communities and attempt to define a paradigm that may be useful for others in similar situations. Notably, we present a paradigm rather than a framework. A paradigm serves as a model and does not carry with it the authority nor the confines of a theoretical framework. This paradigm is potentially useful as a form of guidance for whites working to foreground indigenous voices and acknowledges the problem of the "white gaze" (Paris and Alim) and the need to hold both traditional and evolving cultures in pedagogy.

Indigenous-sustaining literacy acknowledges the critical role of co-construction in oral/aural storytelling that Jackson and DeLaune discuss. It is also rooted on the premise that colonization is endemic to western societies, the primary tenet of Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) posed by Brayboy. Indigenous-sustaining literacy is based on the theoretical frameworks critical constructivism, racial literacy, and oral literacy, but rather than viewing it as a framework, we suggest that the paradigm can be a model to hold whites, who are often in positions of authority in

communities that border Native American land, accountable for foregrounding indigenous knowledge.

Critical constructivism uses critical pedagogy as an orientation while recognizing that all knowledge is context-bound and co-constructed (Kincheloe). The focus of critical pedagogy is to awaken the critical consciousness to achieve a state of *conscientização* (Freire). This pedagogical focus mandates that educators like the OBOC committee have a role to guide learners not as consumers of knowledge but as people with agency who can play an active role in society, a role that has often been systemically subverted for many, including Native American communities.

Critical constructivism necessitates framing pedagogy in socio-political contexts (Freire). In alignment with critical constructivism, the OBOC committee schedules programming that we hope facilitates sharing of experiences. Using this approach required each committee member to become a critical analyst, “learning to be an emancipatory teacher, and assuming the role of a producer of dangerous, world-changing knowledge” (Kincheloe 11). When working with marginalized cultures and seeking to decolonize literacy practices, “dangerous, world-changing knowledge” necessitates creating opportunities for agency. In literacy practices, agency can come from creating opportunities to share experiences that foster voice and mutual understanding in marginalized cultures.

Critical constructivism alone is not enough to counter the hegemonic practice of erasure that Native Americans and other marginalized groups have experienced, which is why an overlay of racial literacy is necessary. Racial literacy draws on critical pedagogy and critical constructivism through the emphasis on systems of power and on social justice and agency; however, racial literacy makes the role of race specific, central, and dominant over other issues of marginalization. Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor explain that “racial literacy helps students think about the social cultural and political aspects of their experiences with a focus on race” (83). Racial literacy forces all participants of literacy transactions to consider how race shapes their identities. Racial literacy informed the committee’s decision to defer to committee members who are Navajo when planning events associated with Native American civil rights, such as selection of the archival photographs; however, that put the indigenous committee members in the role of what Cote-Meke calls the “native informant,” whereby a member of a racially minoritized group is asked to speak for all members of that group and dominant members of the group are absolved from examining their own values and beliefs because they referenced the “native” speaker. Aside from asking Navajo community members to select the photos, the committee did not involve Navajo community members in other aspects of the archival display and did not include additional programming associated with the display, the result of which was a failure to privilege rather than defer to Native American voice. Dialogue, even with a critical constructivist approach, was not enough to counter a legacy of entrenched racism in the community. The forum that followed the defacement was so regulated and allowed for only two Navajos to share their experiences in a two-minute time frame despite the fact that over 150 Navajos attended the forum in hopes that they could share their experiences. Cote-Meke explains that acknowledging and validating

the collective history of oppression and colonization is a critical aspect of decolonization and healing: “it is important to contextualize any discussion on colonizations within an understanding of violence and how violence has permeated the daily life experience of Aboriginal peoples” (25). Racial literacy provides an avenue to combat the contradictory cultural values inculcated by a country that espouses justice and equality while systematically committing racial atrocities and should have been a primary consideration in the initial roll out of the archival poster display and more importantly, in the forum that followed the defacement.

The final component of the indigenous-sustaining literacy paradigm is oral literacy. Many Native American cultures are centered around the oral tradition; however, Piquemal explains that oral cultures are often characterized as being illiterate according to the Eurocentric notion of literacy which is focused on reading and writing. This view delegitimizes orality and according to Battiste creates a system of cognitive imperialism that “maintains legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference” (20). This frame of reference is especially important to consider since Eurocentric forms of literacy were frequently used to manipulate Native Americans out of rights and lands and force them into mission schools designed to obliterate their culture. While oral literacy is an effective aspect of the paradigm in that it legitimizes Native American positionality, beyond that, it has attributes relevant to all literacy workers who operate in culturally plural environments because this tradition values the narrative form and listening, which are imperative when operating in communities with competing and intersectional injustices when seeking to create generative spaces for pluralistic literacies. Paris and Alim advocate for a culturally sustaining pedagogy that sustains “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism” (88), and storytelling and listening are essential practices for this type of pedagogy. In hindsight, the committee should have hosted an opening event associated with the display so that Navajo community members could share their stories of the historic march in Farmington and of the racism that they experienced then and now. Not only would this have provided the opportunity for story sharing, a key aspect of indigenous-sustaining literacy, it could have offered important context to the display and potentially mitigated some of the tensions that ensued.

### *When Voices Collide: The Event and Intersections*

The civil rights display of photographs ended up revealing competing and intersectional injustices, which the committee did not foresee. Had the committee used a paradigm such as indigenous-sustaining literacy to consider the implications of the display, they may have been able to anticipate and then mitigate issues prior to the event.

The display was planned after selecting *March*. Honoring the 1974 New Mexico Navajo protest and subsequent civil rights investigation was a primary reason *March* was selected. One OBOC committee member noted that many community members were unaware that this event had even taken place or that Farmington was under a civil rights investigation through 2004. The committee was acutely aware of the potential erasure of the event and the need to not only show the violence, a potential

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deficit approach, but to showcase the effectiveness of the protests that resulted in a civil rights investigation that addressed longstanding, rampant racial injustices in the community. The committee wanted to avoid the perception that Native American community members' "poverty and powerlessness are the result of their cultural and racial status and origins" (Battiste 21). Another committee member who is Navajo was a child during the events and added important historical context about the marches. She explained that although the marches began in protest to the murders and subsequent light sentencing of the white teenagers, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was active at the time and used the protests as a catalyst for advancing some of their economic agenda, to the dismay of many Navajos who felt that the presence of AIM detracted from the injustices that initially spurred the protests. Because of her knowledge, our committee asked her to play a critical primary role in the photograph selection to ensure that the photos selected were of Navajos protesting the murders, rather than members of AIM. Other Native members of the OBOC committee shared their different Native perspectives about the events, which largely stemmed from generational perspective differences, thus avoiding putting anyone in the role of "native informant." These committee members also ensured that the photos selected were culturally sensitive and appropriate for display.

The way that the forum was set up falsely dichotomized the events as pro-veteran or pro-Native American and failed to account for the possibility of multiple viewpoints or intersectionality of identities. Approximately nineteen percent of Native Americans serve in the military, a rate that is higher than any other ethnicity, and many have long familial identities that tie to military service. This fact was not acknowledged in the forum and left attendees with the impression that one was either a Native American or a veteran, failing to present Native American culture as evolving. In their presentation of a culturally sustaining pedagogy, Paris and Alim state the importance of cultivating "contemporary understandings of culture as dynamic, shifting, and encompassing both past-oriented heritage dimensions and present-oriented community dimensions" (90). This forum did not account for a present-oriented Native American culture, nor did it foreground the role that racism and racial violence play in the present experience of Native Americans. Instead of offering opportunities for meaningful dialogue and sharing of stories, voices were highly regulated by the format of the forum. Although the OBOC committee was not invited to speak at the forum and was not involved in planning it, the committee was criticized for the forum because the events surrounding the archival display were initiator of the forum. Danielle, the director of the OBOC, was put in the position of having to answer questions about the format of the forum.

The choices that the committee made to display the photos stemmed from a recognition that Native American voices needed to be privileged in the decision making around the event. In this manner, the dialogue around the photograph selection was effective in that it put race and racial violence at the center of the committees' decision-making. Recognizing that this display might make people uncomfortable, the committee was aligned that the discomfort was one of the reasons the display was needed. The committee's intentions were short-sighted, though, and perhaps had they

considered the possibility that the community had not fully healed from this legacy, committee members could have anticipated chaos from the photo display.

The committee could have done much more to effectively set up the display by emailing the community and campus to explain its nature and intent. Including an open mic so that community members could discuss their ties to the historical event and connections to their present identities could have helped as well, although the people who had defaced and removed the posters might not have attended these events. Regardless, these actions would have provided an opportunity for many people to hear and learn from this history, which could have created a sense of *esprit de corps* in the community that would have fostered understanding rather than divisiveness. Jackson and DeLaune argue that story “creates resistant spaces for cultural regeneration and community building both within Native communities and beyond them” (41). Informing the community and including an opportunity for story sharing could have disabused community members, including OBOC committee members, of naivete that racial violence is in the past and forced whites to confront the reality that they are still benefitting from a colonial legacy, a fact that is uncomfortable, but necessary for community healing.

Adding a preemptive informative email and opportunity for story sharing also would have mitigated potential retraumatization of Native Americans. Cote-Meke discusses the need to accurately report and reflect historical colonial violence but asserts that it must be done with consideration for how revisiting the past can affect people who cope with racial violence regularly. The committee did consult with the Native American center, and members were enthusiastic about the display, but the onus was on the committee to consider the ramifications of the display more carefully

### *Marching On*

This series of events taught the OBOC committee that they need to proceed with intention in situations where values collide. Although it is important from a community understanding perspective to listen to these competing injustices, it is easy for more privileged voices to subvert less privileged community voices. The paradigm of indigenous-sustaining literacy, which foregrounds racial literacy and orality, can be useful in these situations to counter hegemony in community literacy projects and has become instrumental in planning for future OBOC committee work.

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