

Baltimore and Johns Hopkins University: How Community Voices Offer New Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This case study discusses the development of a community-engaged undergraduate history course on the 1960s at Johns Hopkins University. It speaks to the specific limitations of contingent faculty and the challenges of bridging historically deep divides between a predominantly White institution (PWI) and many surrounding communities. It focuses on structural and individual support, the partners' needs and priorities, students' potential, and the ways elevating community voices can change the narratives about U.S. cities, their past and present.

Keywords: narratives, 1968, uprising, museum, middle school, PWI

Most community-engaged teaching and participatory action research requires years of preparation, trust-building efforts, and the investment of social, cultural, and financial capital. But what happens if faculty have neither time nor resources? In today's academic setting, fewer and fewer faculty are afforded the opportunity to stay at one institution long enough to make long-term commitments. Therefore, contingent faculty have to chart their own path to creating critical community service-learning experiences with which they can change the ways they teach, learn, and research.

Although contingent faculty work in precarious conditions, this case study attests to the developmental nature of subversive learning experiences. It proposes ideas how even contingent faculty can engage with the communities in our temporary hometowns to help chip away at the epistemological hegemony of White supremacy that many higher education institutions sustain to this day (Mitchell, Donahue, Young-Law, 2012). In what follows, I will outline the development of a community-engaged undergraduate history seminar at Johns Hopkins University

("Hopkins" hereafter) and the individual and institutional assistance I received. I will discuss the specifics of my positionality and the challenges for equitable community relations at Hopkins generally before sharing outcomes and lessons learned.

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

When I first arrived at Hopkins in the fall of 2018, I taught a seminar titled "1968: The Year of Rebellion." The Eurocentric Cold War framework reflected my training and expertise. While a survey of the sixties in the United States served mostly as a backdrop to usher students into the topic generally, for the most part we compared "national" case studies such as the Prague Spring, the French May 1968, West Germany's 1967, and Poland's anti-Semitic purges, and discussed larger contiguous topics such as the Vietnam War and decolonization.

Left out of the original course design was Baltimore—even though the city played a pivotal role and many of today's challenges can be traced back to the White backlash to the civil rights movement and Black self-empo-

werment in the 1960s and '70s (Levy, 2018). The Eurocentric course design did injustice to the history of Baltimore and its communities, to my students' interests, and contemporary concerns. As it stood, the class—exacerbated by the socio-cultural set-up of Hopkins as such—perpetuated White privilege.

Historically, Johns Hopkins' relationships with the communities of Baltimore have been, to say the least, fraught. Exploitative research, displacement of local communities, and the frequent absorption of public resources have marked the trail this private institution has left in the city (Skoot, 2010; Gomez, 2019). Despite recent attempts at diversification and declarations of community commitment, Homewood Campus, where I teach, has remained a White space, the proverbial ivory tower in a majority African American city (Daniels, 2020; Johns Hopkins University, 2017).

Feeling uneasy about my course, in December 2018 I found myself listening to a presentation on community-based learning (CBL) by Dr. Shawntay Stocks, the assistant director for Engaged Scholarship at Hopkins' Center for Social Concern (CSC). Dr. Stocks introduced the principles of CBL, such as equity, reciprocity, and sustainability (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Assistant Professor Dora Malech illustrated these points with a multi-year-poetry writing seminar she runs in collaboration with the Writers in Baltimore Schools and the CSC. It was apparent that CBL had the potential to counteract the inequitable power hierarchies between Hopkins and many of the communities in the city and propose alternatives to a predominantly White epistemic system that I, too, upheld in my classroom. As a counterexample, the seminar was to demonstrate that ignoring, silencing, and even destroying communities of color was not only unjust but detrimental to the intellectual and personal progress of Hopkins' students. Cutting community voices out deprives them from gaining a fuller understanding of history, of how structural racism and White privilege operate within society and have often shaped the relationship between

institutions of higher education and communities surrounding them.

As a foreigner, a White European and recent arrival to Baltimore, I lacked not only the social capital in form of connections to local communities, but also the expertise in working with them. Fortunately, Dr. Stocks embraced the tentative idea of enhancing the 1968 seminar by adding CBL-elements in the fall of 2019. It quickly transpired that her professional advice would help me tackle the challenges of my positionality and prepare me for a mutually beneficial, respectful engagement with community partners. The endeavor promised new professional and practical competencies and opened up novel opportunities for students to learn and grow. Close counseling through the CSC was aimed at reassessing faculty positionality, teaching competencies, and preempting the pitfalls of entrenched pre-existing mentalities of racist essentializing and "othering" (Becker & Paul, 2015).

During the annual first year orientation, students are actively discouraged from leaving campus. Additionally, the strenuous study regiment and constant focus on resumé-building hardly leaves time to explore Baltimore independently beyond the so-called "white L," the wealthy neighborhoods stretching from Homewood Campus to the Inner Harbor (Brown, 2016, 2020). Nevertheless, the great interest in tutoring and service programs among students suggests that not all agree with the administration's characterization of Baltimore and seek alternative solutions to the city's myriad challenges.

In February 2019, the idea received new urgency when the Maryland General Assembly held hearings on a bill that would grant Hopkins its own private police force. The university administration's plan was met with resistance from activists, faculty, and students alike. In a city notorious for police violence toward people of color (most prominently Freddie Gray in 2015), where millions of dollars are spent on surveillance and police overtime, a private police for Hopkins threatens to preserve the status quo if

not further entrenchment (i.e. White privilege at the expense of everyone else) (Williams & Goldstein, 2016; Noor, 2019; Editorial Board, 2020). The president justified the creation of a private police force by suggesting that Baltimore was inherently dangerous and threatening. The bill was passed on April 1, 2019, reinforcing the notion of a fortress, of “us versus them.” The plan, which was put on hold in June 2020, pandered to the assumption that only strangers, non-affiliates from the city at large, bring crime and violence to “our” campus and adjacent neighborhoods. The equation of crime with people of color is implicit, compounded by the racial profiling students of color have reported and Baltimore’s reputation as “crime-infested,” a “murder capital” that is a *de facto* majority African American city. The administration chose to resolve the ensuing five-week-long student occupation of an administrative building on Homewood campus by calling in the Baltimore City Police and having four of its students arrested (Anderson, 2019).

INSPIRATION AND PREPARATION

In March 2019, in the midst of the protests against the private police, Dr. Stocks held a workshop titled “Faculty Positionality and Community-based Learning” to draw attention to foundational questions such as: “What does it look like to share power with students and the community in the class? How do we ensure ongoing collaborations throughout the semester? How do we present our community partner as co-educator/co-professor for the course?” (Stocks, 2019). Such trainings proved crucial for competence and capacity building.

The workshop was the beginning of months of continuous self-assessment. Not only are our identities complex and positionality always relational but community engagement also confronts us with how others see us. Regular consultations proved indispensable for myself as instructor and paved the way for a critical pedagogy and an unexpected servant leadership experience (Jeyaraj & Gandolfi,

2019). Guided reflection and constructive criticism during meetings with Dr. Stocks and other CBL faculty helped me reassess my positionality, precisely identify the objectives of our community engagement, and tackle the challenges specific to this institution and this city (Muhammad et al., 2015).

To train instructors, the CSC offered discussions that combined and alternated between theories and case studies. For instance, Dr. Jean Lee Cole presented a food justice project at nearby Loyola University. Dr. Jennifer Kingsley discussed “Housing Our Story,” a project she had recently concluded in collaboration with Professor Nathan Connolly, Dr. Shani Mott, and Sheridan Libraries. To counter the traditional archival silences PWIs enforce, the three instructors and their students had interviewed Hopkins staff, many of them working in the security and catering services (Pettit, 2019). Throughout the fall of 2019, Dr. Joseph Plaster, another CBL Faculty Fellow, organized the “Public Humanities Speaker Series,” which hosted Dr. Lawrence Brown (Morgan State), Dr. Brett Stoudt (City University of New York), Dr. Stéphane Martelly (Montreal), and Dr. Nicole King (University of Maryland Baltimore County) (Plaster, 2019). Their projects, although different in size, aspirations, and partner demographics, offered lessons, models, and, most importantly, inspiration. They challenged my own attitudes, highlighted structural and personal limitations, and helped me think through larger issues of social justice. Many presentations offered opportunities of self-reflection, discussions of White (and) institutionalized privilege, and lessons of the developmental nature of such projects. Moreover, these events created a sense of solidarity among community-engaged faculty and shaped a new culture of understanding, teaching, and learning on campus that helps us move away from a predominantly White culture and narrative.

Respect for Baltimore and its communities warranted self-education and a closer study of the city’s history. For the 40th anniversary of 1968, the University of

Baltimore (UB) had spearheaded a model research project, which resulted in a comprehensive open access online resource and the anthology *Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth in an American City* (Elfenbein, 2009; Elfenbein, Hollowak, & Nix, 2011). This project inspired Peter Levy's paradigmatic *The Great Uprising: Race Riots in Urban America in the 1960s* (2018). Levy's chapter on Baltimore demonstrates how persistent anti-Black policies and a growing White backlash preceded the uprising of April 1968. Hopkins' own university archive presented the picture of an activist campus beyond my imagination—a legacy that, just like its misogynist and racist policies, has been largely neglected in official histories (Hollmuller, 2018). Meanwhile, the administration defended the reverence shown for former president Steven Bowman, who oversaw anti-Jewish quotas at a time when Hopkins educated White men (almost) only, and the Hopkins alumnus and former U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, after whom a prestigious undergraduate research fellowship is named (Editorial Board, 2019). Despite protests, their busts still sit in prominent places on a campus once owned by the Carroll family who enslaved people of color on the very premises (a fact Hopkins publicly acknowledges). Only the countrywide protests of 2020 initiated a rethinking of the official position. Reverence for such figures without acknowledging their racism and silence about resistance consolidate the university as a White space. It shows how a White narrative and culture is maintained despite verbal commitments to diversity and changes to the makeup of the student body.

The UB project encouraged me to focus on elevating voices in the community and changing the (White) narrative about the 1960s and protests in Baltimore generally. Powerful institutions like Hopkins, a private research university, have long analyzed and catalogued communities of color and have made policy recommendations to solve social “problems,” real and constructed, without reflecting their own roles (Doerr, 2019). Often

scenarios, in which White scholars and researchers assess communities for the benefit of their own careers and institutions, have been guided by deficit-oriented thinking (Yancy, 2017; Gordon da Cruz, 2017). Thus, my goal was not a traditional service-learning experience, in which charity might be mistaken as social justice, but critical community engagement and a *subversive* learning experience, which undermines the existing power structure and epistemological hierarchies (Mitchell, 2020).

FINDING PARTNERS

Throughout the spring of 2019, in search of potential partners, I attended activist events in various locations in the city (Impact Hub, Baltimore Community Mediation Center, Red Emma's, etc.), including the Reginald F. Lewis Museum for African-American History and Culture in Maryland. Some of the local community leaders and activists refused to work with Hopkins out of concerns they might lend a historically exploitative institution undue legitimacy. Acknowledging and expressing understanding for such reservations became part of my introduction.

Eventually, I developed two proposals that might appeal to community partners and would allow them to benefit equally and co-determine the specifics: 1) a joint 1960s-themed museum visit with a Baltimore City public school, and 2) a public roundtable with eyewitnesses of Baltimore in the 1960s. Both events were to take place off campus to highlight our commitment to leaving our campus fortress, engaging with others, and creating more equitable relationships. Moving off campus also afforded my students the opportunity to experience an environment other than campus. After months of searching and worrying, I was relieved that the Lewis museum's educational program manager, Terry Taylor, generously agreed to host not just one but both of the events I proposed.

Different gatekeepers recommended a teacher at Graceland Park/O'Donnell Heights elementary and middle school by the name of

Dr. Amy Rosenkrans, a social science teacher and a former Director of Humanities for Baltimore City Public Schools. Terry Taylor and Dr. Rosenkrans knew each other well and in August all three of us met to discuss the joint museum visit. We planned a scavenger hunt through the permanent exhibition, followed by group work with primary sources. Dr. Rosenkrans proposed inviting eyewitnesses for her seventh graders to interview too. To create a more sustainable relationship, we decided to organize a Homewood campus tour in the spring of 2020 at Hopkins' expense. We wanted to give the middle schoolers, many of whom come from families with recent experiences of immigration, the opportunity to visit our campus, engage with our students for a second time, and learn about the resources available. Ultimately, we wished to inspire them to consider college a viable option and familiarize them with campus life and processes such as admissions and financial aid.

SEMINAR START AND OTHER CHALLENGES

Although the CSC provided an institutional framework and some financial support, I needed to acquire additional funding: My students' museum entrance fees had to be covered and the participants in the roundtable were to be remunerated for their time and expertise. Fortunately, Professor Lawrence Jackson and Dr. Kali-Ahset Amen agreed to co-fund our community events through the Billie Holiday Project for Liberation Arts, which supports research and cultural-educational events about and with the communities of Baltimore.

Once the semester started, my initial worries about how students might react dissipated: Either the current generation of Hopkins students is generally more open-minded and inclined to transgressing traditional boundaries, or the new seminar title, "The Year 1968: Rebels, Revolution, and the Right-Wing Backlash," attracted a specific cohort predisposed to activism and community engagement. In fact, the composition of this

seminar proved more diverse across gender, race, religious, and social identities than one commonly expects at Hopkins. Additionally, many had already been or were currently engaged in community services.

Prior to the museum visit, we discussed our partners' expectations, interests, and needs as well as our own institutional positionality vis-à-vis the two partners, the museum, and the middle school. The majority was aware of Hopkins' history of exploitation and displacement. Several knew of Henrietta Lacks, a woman of color whose tissue was harvested for research without her consent. Another undergraduate student came in to share his recent work on the displacement of communities in Baltimore's Middle East neighborhood for the expansion of Hopkins Medical Center. We discussed how we may not personally be responsible for Hopkins' past, but through our institutional affiliation we are tied to this history and are, willing or not, beneficiaries thereof. This perception often shapes the way others in the city perceive Hopkins affiliates. We collectively concluded to acknowledge this legacy and work toward healthier engagements with the communities in Baltimore.

In October 2019, we finally met the 35 students from Graceland Park/O'Donnell Heights. The diversity of my classroom and the students' past experiences proved an asset in lowering the barriers between college and middle school students. We matched ESL students with those Hopkins students who had grown up bilingual themselves (and those who had learned Spanish in school). As an icebreaker, we played "living statistics," a quick, interactive game to discover common ground between supposed strangers. Everyone was asked to line up according to their birthday, the number of siblings, and the number of languages they knew. It was a "happy mess" as everyone scuttled across the room and started talking to each other.

Next, we split the over 60 college students and middle schoolers into groups of four or five. They either went on the scavenger hunt or worked on primary sources, mostly

photos from the *Baltimore Sun* and the university archives from the 1960s. Dr. Rosenkrans had frontloaded information about segregation, racism, and the Civil Rights Movement. The Hopkins students resolved to “only” facilitate the conversations, ceding the floor to the middle schoolers who showcased their knowledge and aptitude in working with the sources. Finally, three speakers—Ralph Moore, a Hopkins graduate of 1974 and life-long racial justice advocate; Robert Bell, the first African American judge on the Maryland Court of Appeals; and Joyce Dennison, a Morgan State alumna and U.S. veteran—shared their memories of growing up in Baltimore and working to effect change. All three encouraged the students to take action in the face of the lingering social injustices in this country.

A week after the visit, Dr. Stocks, the CSC’s Assistant Director, joined our class for a debriefing. The students took the opportunity to reflect on the content of the exhibition and the group work as well as their engagement with the students. They shared some of their observations and, without actually being prompted to do so, reassessed their own positionality vis-à-vis the communities of Baltimore, their home institution, and our new friends from Graceland Park/O’Donnell Heights.

ROUNDTABLE AND FURTHER CHALLENGES

On multiple occasions, the roundtable, scheduled for two weeks after the museum visit, almost failed. Since I had no clue about potential eyewitnesses, I resorted to reaching out to three Hopkins faculty members, all scholar-activists and people of color. Unfortunately, I found myself perpetuating a troubling injustice that is commonplace at PWIs: a White faculty member asking colleagues of color to share their socio-cultural capital without benefit to themselves. Even more troubling was that they were the only ones in a position to respond to that inquiry. Two recommended reaching out to

Eddie Conway, a former Black Panther who was framed by the FBI and incarcerated for over 42 years (Democracy Now, 2011). Conway now serves as executive producer of *The Real News Baltimore* and often hosts a biweekly roundtable, “Real Talk Tho,” at *Ida B’s*, a soul food restaurant in downtown Baltimore. After I had attended several of the roundtables, Mr. Conway suggested we talk on the phone. What led him to agree was his lifelong commitment to youth education and that maybe I was not just another White person from Hopkins seeking superficial brief encounters that would console White guilt but leave the existing structures intact. From his autobiography I knew he had been stationed at a U.S. Army base not far from where I had grown up (Conway, 2011).

In September, the one female eyewitness, a Hopkins graduate of 1970 who had been a Freedom Rider in 1964-65, unexpectedly dropped out. Fortunately, she was the one who recommended Ralph Moore. Although both men, Mr. Moore and Mr. Conway, were born in the neighborhood of Sandtown-Winchester, their lives took very different routes, which promised a consciously critical conversation. Just days before the event, one of the participants excused himself because of a scheduling mistake. Our partners at the Lewis Museum were displeased and considered cancelling the event altogether. Fortunately, we were able to reschedule for a week later and, thanks to Dr. Stock’s mediation, even managed to invite an additional speaker, the culture activist Denise Griffin-Johnson, also born in Sandtown-Winchester. As a woman of color over a decade younger, Mrs. Johnson offered views complementary to those of the two men. A food justice and youth empowerment activist by the name of Dominique Hazzard, who works on a PhD project about Black-owned businesses in Anacostia, agreed to moderate the roundtable. Unlike most of the audience, all of the speakers had been in Baltimore during the uprising in 2015 following the death of Freddie Gray in police custody.

To get the roundtable started, mindful of their agency, Ms. Hazzard invited the eyewitnesses to introduce themselves. Ninety minutes of captivating exchanges exposed the cultural capital residing in the communities of Baltimore, represented by the three speakers. Evoking the roundtable's title, "Baltimore '68: Memories and Legacies," Mrs. Johnson for instance recalled the shock she felt when confronted with the excessive police and troop presence both in April 1968 and in April 2015. The speakers shared their experiences and opinions freely and used the space and their own voices to address such fundamental aspects of the African American experience as structural and everyday racism, school (de)segregation, and excessive use of violence toward people of color.

CHALLENGES

Communication had its challenges. Emails went unanswered or only partly read. One such instance almost foiled the idea of a *public* roundtable, when the museum newsletter announced single tickets for the event would cost \$12. It seemed detrimental to the idea of making the event as accessible as possible. However, we also did not want the museum to incur extra costs for collaborating with Hopkins. Thus, we agreed on a discount code for students that brought the fee down to \$5. For outstanding costs, the museum was compensated from my research funds.

An honest reckoning has to address the fact that we failed to attract media attention, which had been our partners' expressed wish. Invitations to the official Hopkins news portal and the student newsletters went unanswered. The Hopkins Media Office, which informs local reporters about such events, deemed the roundtable "unattractive." Moreover, hosting the event off-campus was almost self-defeating. Despite vigorous campaigning, I was unable to convince a single Hopkins faculty member to join us for the 6 p.m. roundtable in downtown Baltimore. Nevertheless, 50 people showed up, meaning regular guests, including Morgan State students and

the South African filmmaker Kurt Orderson, actually outmatched "our" numbers.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I will highlight some findings from this case study with regard to my own role as instructor, the development of our projects in conjunction with our community partners, the benefits for the students, and the institutional framework. Being mindful of our partners' needs and resources, we had to be flexible and accommodating, including when needs and priorities changed. Creating sustainable, respectful relationships requires showing up also on occasions that do not immediately benefit us. As a result, unexpectedly, the course turned into a lesson of "servant leadership" for myself (Jeyaraj & Gandolfi, 2019). This case study shows how projects of critical community engagement rarely look the same at the end as at the beginning. Moreover, there is no "one size fits all" approach to subversive learning experiences and critical community engagement, which further highlights the importance of a support network and regular self-reflection. For contingent faculty it is important to discover related projects and learn from other examples, since our time for "trial and error" is limited. Bonding with and learning from like-minded faculty at our or other institutions of higher education provides support and inspiration and relieves us from the daunting sense of trailblazing.

Without our partners' support, the structural framework provided by the CSC, and Dr. Stock's guidance, this course would not have been feasible. The continuous assessment and critical feedback loop that Dr. Stocks, a quintessential "boundary spanner," provided was crucial for creating equitable, constructive relationships with our partners and preparing our students (Farner, 2019). Exceeding her institutional role, Dr. Stocks generously shared her expertise and advice and helped me navigate organizational hiccups, moments of despair, and the flaws of the existing institutional framework. Having a

competent, critical, and trusted sparring partner is, particularly for contingent faculty like myself, paramount. Learning from other CBL faculty helped refine my project and tackle some of the challenges inherent to community engagement, especially regarding White privilege (Bowen & Kiser, 2009). Solidarity among engaged faculty is paramount to changing the institutional culture. There is strength in numbers when it comes to pushing the institutional boundaries and acceptance of critical community engagement. In face of mostly token gestures toward racial equality and diversity but in the absence of a clear anti-racist commitment, only repeated demonstrations of the benefits for students, the institution, and Baltimore's communities can wear down the existing entrenchment.

Another important lesson I learnt was to trust my students. They were the greatest asset and source of inspiration. Their attitudes and awareness revealed how wrong I had been to excessively worry about reinforcing racist perceptions and entrenching White privileges (Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012). They seized the opportunities to leave the comfort zone of our campus and revisit the dominant narratives about Baltimore and the university. In light of the heterogeneity of the cohort, the work with community partners turned out to be immediately culturally relevant to them, a possibility I had completely underestimated. This generation may be very different, more involved, more engaged as the remarkable diversity during the often youth-led protests this summer has shown. The students' final research projects reflected the impact of our critical community engagement: Many chose to write on issues—e.g. school integration, White flight, Governor Spiro Agnew—that had been raised during the roundtable or that they had encountered during the museum visit. The positive feedback, which the CSC surveyed in an anonymous class poll, has allowed me to draw more attention to CBL projects and advocate for increasing funding and enhancing the institutional framework. Unfortunately, the administration prevented the use of the data,

since we only asked for participants' consent to their use for research but not publication purposes. To my dismay, as the fall semester of 2020 moved to remote instruction due to the coronavirus pandemic, the faculty support program has been suspended.

Both community events elevated voices usually not heard in college education, particularly not at PWIs, and inverted the traditional academic knowledge hierarchies by making the community the asset holders, highlighting its social capital and non-traditional resources. The eyewitnesses precisely identified how White supremacy has shaped and often limited their lives. Thanks to our partners, we bridged the visible and invisible divides between campus and the communities of Baltimore, at least temporarily. It was one of many steps toward breaking down institutionalized inequities and White supremacy in education. That both sides benefitted from the events is illustrated by the fact that, despite Hopkins' suspension of the faculty support program and the challenges the pandemic poses, the Lewis Museum and two of the eyewitnesses agreed to build on our experiences, continue the partnership, and engage anew, even if only remotely, with college and high school students in the fall of 2020.

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