CHAPTER 7

Afterword

CRITICAL PLACE-BASED PEDAGOGY
IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

We received a not-so-gentle reminder of how the social context shapes teaching and learning when the COVID-19 crisis unfolded as we were writing this book. Not only did place matter, but we became acutely aware of how interdependence shaped everyday tasks that used to be straightforward. And at the same time the legacy of structural injustice became clear as the spatial patterns of COVID-19 emerged—where we live, work, and play mattered. Communities of color were affected by much higher infection rates—partly because many who lived in these communities were exposed to the virus when working on the front lines, partly because these are the same communities that lack access to adequate health care, and the resources that prevent the spread of the virus. Many live in densely populated areas and often hold jobs that cannot be done remotely. Having both a computer and internet access for telework was a luxury that was not available to everyone.

In our classes, we were forced to modify our place-based inquiry assignments, taking into consideration issues of equity, access, and safety. Some of our students maintained their access to online materials, while others did not. The pandemic offered a poignant illustration of how “where you live matters.” Some of our students traveled home to communities that had yet to experience high rates of infection—they feared bringing the virus home to their loved ones. Other students chose to
remain close to campus because their home community was considered a hotspot. Access to technology varied dramatically, introducing inequalities in the classroom that had not been a concern at the beginning of the semester. While some of our students experienced a seamless transition from the traditional classroom on campus to remote locations, others found their internet connection at home unreliable or nonexistent, becoming disconnected and struggling to keep pace. Still, other students had to share their bandwidth at home with parents and siblings, making online access difficult at best.

On the one hand, using the community as a classroom makes sense when school buildings and campuses are closed; on the other hand, while place-based learning can easily be incorporated into an online course, the assignment of sending students out into a populated community takes on a new dimension during an era of “social distancing.” Even in less-populated areas, weather disruptions can make an outdoor excursion inadvisable; for numerous reasons, planned fieldwork may need to be modified. If you can’t reschedule the fieldwork/data-collection assignment for another time in the course, remote sensing and open datasets can help fill this gap. In remote sensing, data such as images, temperature, pressure, etc. are obtained from satellites, aircraft, drones, or other sensors. The scanners and cameras allow remote users to identify and measure objects. As we discussed earlier, more and more open datasets and geotagged data are out there now, and students can pull in real-time data that update within a GIS dashboard that may include maps, charts, and other indicators. As always, it is important to take into account the ethical considerations associated with many of these geolocated resources.

In Elizabeth’s class the students’ place-based learning assignment included revised options that allowed students to capture evidence of COVID-19. Their resulting Esri StoryMaps included a variety of products such as:

- Maps that pulled in live data of local COVID-19 cases with an overlaid data layer on poverty.
- A map of the blocks around one student’s apartment with photo documentation of local business closures and COVID-19-related signs.
- A map created from the geotagged photos sent by a student’s sister in Saudi Arabia documenting scenes from local healthcare facilities.
In one of Janine’s classes, the students’ final project involved demonstrating mapping skills by creating a map. Rather than specifying that all the maps needed to use a particular technology (i.e., Esri StoryMaps), students were given an option to create maps using a range of tech tools. As a result, some students created a series of hand-drawn maps in a Word document, others did PowerPoint presentations and still others used the Esri StoryMap platform. Their topics were equally diverse—ranging from spatial aspects of the pandemic to illustrating bird migration for first graders. Having assignment flexibility became an essential (re)design consideration. Learning a new technology during a pandemic offered an escape for some students, while for others, access to a new technology presented one more barrier that was too difficult to overcome. In all cases, students were managing information overload. “Less is more” became our mantra.

The COVID-19 maps that appeared in the news coverage of the pandemic presented an instructional opportunity and call for much needed geospatial literacy. The very earliest maps that appeared showed the number of confirmed cases in each county or local community. These maps became of limited value once the virus began to spread, providing only a partial picture. Without providing additional information such as the number of confirmed cases per number of people living in a given area (infection rates) it was difficult to make comparisons. Assessing the prevalence of COVID-19 infections required that the map data be adjusted for the number of people who were living in a particular location. Similarly, maps that counted confirmed cases by zip codes were problematic when it came to making comparisons between locations because these areas do not have uniform shapes, sizes, or populations. To confront the pandemic, researchers looked for patterns that identified who was most vulnerable. Uneven reporting procedures made it difficult to unravel the intersection of race and place. Johns Hopkins University mapped the states that were reporting COVID-19 infections by race (Johns Hopkins University, 2020); the absence of data generated concern because responding to community needs is dependent on accurate reporting:

... while Black Americans represent only about 13% of the population in the states reporting racial/ethnic information, they account for about 34% of total Covid-19 deaths in those states. Asian Americans and Latinx Americans also show elevated impacts in some regions... This data could help local, state, and national policymakers identify which populations
may need additional access to resources such as testing, personal protective equipment, education, and support to implement recommended social distancing practices. (Johns Hopkins University, para. 3, 2020)

During the pandemic, some of the spatial patterns that emerged underscored the need for a critical approach to place-based learning. One of the more stunning spatial patterns that emerged during the pandemic illustrated what we already knew about race and place. When looking at the connection between COVID-19 and the health of people living in communities of color, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that “a disproportionate burden of illness and death among racial and ethnic minority groups” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, para. 1, 2019). Our students who live in these communities don’t need to listen to the news or read the newspapers to understand the disproportionate impact of COVID-19; for many, the virus had presented their family members, friends, and neighbors with endless challenges (Aubrey, 2020; Elving, 2020).

The course of these contemporary events provided clear reminders that even if we choose to exclude certain information from our classroom assignments, our students will bring life experiences that shape their performance in the classroom. Validating and exploring those life experiences is important for all students, but especially for students who are coming from marginalized or underrepresented communities of color.

**Place Today: Mapping Structural Racism**

If a global pandemic wasn’t enough to underscore the importance of a critical place-based pedagogy, then the outrage expressed over the murder of George Floyd most certainly highlighted the role of place in America. Millions around the world watched the video footage that captured Floyd’s arrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020. Any effort to dismiss Floyd’s death as an isolated incident became impossible when considered as one more of many events that occurred in the long history of police violence experienced by communities of color.

Community activists have used collaborative mapping to record and display incidents of police violence across the U.S. Mapping Police Violence (https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/) and Fatal Encounters (https://fatalencounters.org/) were two such efforts. Spatial patterns connected race and police violence, suggesting a greater likelihood of
encountering violence depending on where you lived. While the number of deaths resulting from police violence in cities has recently declined, researchers found that by “examining the geography of police killings based on population density…, police killings in suburban and rural areas appear to have increased during this time period — offsetting reductions in big cities” (Sinyangwe, para. 8, 2020). Again—our Black students and students of color are well-aware of the ongoing connection between race, place, and police violence.

As a nation we were forced to confront the many different places where racial discrimination occurs routinely. These everyday occurrences are “surprising” to some, and at the same time the subtext of interaction for students of color. Racist rules about who is supposed to be where, simply based on the color of their skin is a call to action for educators and students alike. A team of faculty and students at the University of Minnesota documented the legacy of segregation in Minneapolis by mapping the long history of racial covenants extending back to the turn of the century (see The Mapping Prejudice Project, https://www.mappingprejudice.org/). Covenants limited who could live where, and these racial boundaries were reinforced later when discriminatory lending practices such as redlining and variable interest rates made the price of homeownership much, much higher for African American and minority residents (Miller, 2020). The project took hours of volunteer time and resulted in a spatial visualization of structural racism in that city. The students, faculty, and community members’ efforts in Minneapolis made it possible to visualize structural racism and construct a counter-narrative to challenges common assumptions associated with the racial wealth gap (i.e., patterns of homeownership are the result of hard work or making good choices). Documenting the impact of racial restrictions offers a powerful pedagogical tool that helps students to gain a deeper understanding of how governmental policies have systematically shaped wealth accumulation among community groups who were restricted by these covenants. The same course of events can be documented through mapping in many other cities throughout the USA.

It is imperative that our course activities examine the origins of structural inequality when it comes to the spatial dimension of racism. If we limit our observations and those of our students to the present day, we overlook the long legacy of segregation that was continuously reinforced long after Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity legislation was enacted.
The intersection of race and place has been one way that racial injustice is maintained, and is experienced daily by some of our students while escaping the daily encounters of others. Bringing this long legacy into the classroom through a critical pedagogy of place is essential for realizing true change in the USA.

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