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Article abstract

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ABSTRACT   Feminist scholars and activists have a long history of integrating feminist praxis in the curriculum through community engagement initiatives. Using feminist critiques, they have investigated possibilities as well as limitations of these initiatives in neoliberal universities (Boyd & Sandell, 2012; Costa & Leong, 2012; Dean et al., 2019; Johnson & Luhmann, 2016; Kwon & Nguyen, 2016). Nevertheless, most of the existing studies focus on feminist community engagement within institutionalized Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) departments, programs, and courses. This article demonstrates how feminist community engagement can expand its scope outside the institutional boundaries of WGSS programs. It contributes to the existing feminist literature in several ways. First, it explores how feminist and decolonial praxis can manifest in a non-WGSS setting and the resulting challenges and possibilities that arise. Second, it argues that the transition from traditional service learning to feminist and decolonial community engagement is a complex, contentious, and iterative process rather than an end goal. Lastly, it elaborates on how faculty can not only avoid the tendency of "learning elsewhere" and framing the community as "unprivileged Other" but also build and organize with community through creative subversion of various structures of the neoliberal university.

KEYWORDS   Feminist community engagement, neoliberal university, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, service-learning, decolonizing

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) programs in North American universities have a long history of integrating feminist praxis in the curriculum through various forms of community engagement initiatives. On the one hand, these initiatives develop a critical consciousness among students about the neoliberal structures within which universities, nonprofits, and communities operate and interact with each other. On the other hand, feminist community engagement often risks framing the community as an unprivileged "Other" (Dean, 2019) and complying with neoliberal forces of the nonprofit industrial complex (Kwon & Nguyen, 2016). Scholars and practitioners have explored how to make the most productive and egalitarian use of feminist praxis in university-community engagement and address the limitations of exceptionalist institutionalized service learning approaches (Boyd & Sandell, 2012; Costa & Leong, 2012; Dean et al., 2019; Johnson & Luhmann, 2016; Kwon & Nguyen,

2016). Nevertheless, most of these studies focus on feminist community engagement within institutionalized WGSS departments, programs, and courses.

Feminist community engagement does not happen only within the institutionalized boundaries of WGSS. Non-WGSS programs can also benefit from utilizing feminist philosophies, pedagogies, and practices in their community engagement initiatives in creative ways. In fact, in a world struck by a global pandemic and coronavirus capitalism (Klein, 2020), and in the face of drastic budget cuts in neoliberal universities, it is necessary to consider how feminist community engagement can expand its scope outside the institutional boundaries of WGSS programs. Against this backdrop, this article contributes to the existing feminist literature of university-community engagement in several ways. First, it explores how feminist and decolonial praxis can manifest in a non-WGSS setting, alongside the challenges and possibilities that arise. Second, based on our experience of navigating bureaucratic hierarchies and organizing faculty, staff, and students in a neoliberal university, we argue that the transition from traditional service-learning to feminist and decolonial community engagement is a complex, contentious, and iterative process rather than an end goal. While it might be impossible to entirely decolonize community engagement practices within imperialist universities, which hold a long and violent history of exploiting communities, it is worth engaging in the struggle and doing the best we can with what we have. Lastly, our experience and analysis responds to scholarly critiques of the homogenous, simplistic formation of the "university" and "community," particularly in exceptionalist institutionalized service learning literatures and practices (Dean, 2019; Stoecker, 2016). We demonstrate ways to not only avoid the tendency of "learning elsewhere" and framing the community as "unprivileged Other," but also to build and organize *with* community through the creative subversion of various structures of the neoliberal university.

Feminist and Decolonial Critiques of Exceptionalist University-Community Engagement
Many feminist and decolonial scholars and activists have conceptualized the ways North American universities have established imperial, neoliberal, and corporate cartographies, the ways these institutions now comply with militarism and the academic-prison-industrial complex, and normalize state power (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014). University-community engagement in the forms of institutionalized community-engaged research, practica, internships, community placements, or experiential learning—all of which may fall under the broad umbrella of "service learning" or "civic engagement"—often transform into further mechanisms through which to implement the imperial and neoliberal philosophies and practices of North American universities. Many North American universities promote institutionalized engagement programs to offer professional skills and "real-world" exposure for their students, as well as to bolster the brand images of the institutions by demonstrating that they "do good" for surrounding communities (Dean, 2019; Luhmann et al., 2019). The mainstream community engagement literature and practices rarely address the problematic dynamics of these increasingly popular university-community engagement initiatives. For example, they seldom reveal how these initiatives focus extensively on developing quantifiable

assessments of the way proposed curricular programs affect the civic knowledge, skills, and values of students.

Service learning, in its institutionalized form, relies on the philosophy of "giving back" with an assumed universal privilege of all students regardless of their background and without asking what has been "taken from" the communities. It does not provide a grounded critique of the political and economic structures that sustain violent institutions and discriminatory practices. The romanticized notion of "giving back" in the institutionalized service learning literature perpetuates an exceptionalist illusion of "reciprocity" and "mutual benefit" between universities and communities when, in fact, universities are universally constructed as a site of privilege separate from the community and are seen as performing their civic responsibilities. Communities—which are often assumed to be represented through nonprofit organizations— are homogenously constructed as "unprivileged Others." Exceptionalist constructions of service learning rarely question who the "we" is within the university and community relationships, or the power hierarchies that undergird relationships between various "we's." For example, in the exceptionalist framing of service learning, students are represented through powerful, imperial universities that often hold the upper hand in determining the terms and contracts of service-learning projects. And yet, the students—especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), working class, and other minoritized students—who are expected to "give back" through service learning—do not enjoy the same levels of privilege. As a result, the question of who is working toward the "we" means within the university remains unresolved (Dean, 2019; Stoecker, 2016, pp. 46–62). Similarly, the "we" within the community also remains unaddressed because of the widespread tendency to perceive non-profit organizations as equivalent to the "community," without recognizing that non-profits do not always have egalitarian, organic connections with the communities they work with (Kwon & Nguyen, 2016).

Emerging feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous theorizing of university-community engagement literatures recognize the imperial-capitalist-racist-sexist assumptions that undergird exceptionalist institutionalized community engagement. It demonstrates how a quantifiable, outcome-oriented, and best-practice-focused approach does not challenge the growing corporatization of higher education as it trains model neoliberal citizens through a benevolent model of "doing good" through charity work (Dean, 2019). The emerging literature also reveals that institutionalized community engagement is often based on collaboration with apolitical service-oriented non-profit organizations that typically provide services to individual clients and are barred from spending more than a fraction of their resources on political lobbying to push for structural changes. In many cases, institutionalized community engagement is based on a short-term "hours model" where students tend to complete the required hours without contributing meaningfully and thereby drain limited resources from the community organizations. Their hours often serve as a "resume booster" and "poverty tourism" for students, most of whom are white and privileged, thereby alienating BIPOC and working-class students (Stoecker, 2016). In this way, feminist, decolonial and Indigenous critiques go a long way in challenging the exceptionalist imaginaries created and circulated by institutionalized service learning. They play a significant role in disrupting the hegemonic practice of promoting

"neoliberal governmentality," which Dean (2019) describes as the disproportionate emphasis on individual responsibility and agency in community service, without a desire to dive deeper into a systemic analysis of intersecting modes of oppression. These critiques also contest the binary and homogenous constructions of "the university" and "the community," recognizing that universities are not necessarily separate from nor superior to a community that is often assumed to be the poor, racialized, feminized, and marginalized "Other" (Dean, 2019).

University-Community Engagement within Institutionalized Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) Programs and Beyond

Despite these critiques of community engagement initiatives, such initiatives serve WGSS programs in myriad ways. University-community engagement opens up possibilities for WGSS programs to challenge the dichotomies of individually/collaboratively produced knowledge, academia/activism, and theory/method, as a necessary step towards accomplishing the radical goals of feminist praxis as defined by Richa Nagar and Amanda Swarr (2010).[1] From a more material point of view, adopting a "praxis"[2] component offers many WGSS programs a means to survive and justify their existence in neoliberal universities (Johnson & Luhmann, 2016). University-community engagement can create opportunities to collaborate with feminist and social justice-oriented nonprofit organizations, thereby offering students a deeper understanding of the nonprofit industrial complex,[3] which shapes the politics of funding, governance, and advocacy work (or lack thereof) and the restrictions that these organizations face in relation to being able to mobilize grassroots collective struggles. It can, therefore, nurture an empathetic understanding among students about the work of feminist practitioners and feminist nonprofits that must constantly fight against and negotiate with neoliberal structures in creative ways (Muzak, 2019; Taylor, 2019). The embodied encounters in community engagement initiatives can also help students understand their positionalities and power dynamics in relation to those they work with, providing valuable lessons that can translate into their future professional and activist commitments (Himley, 2004). Nevertheless, Amber Dean (2019) provides a cautionary note that the transformative potential of university-community engagement initiatives can only be achieved when they can avoid fetishizing the marginalized, least privileged "Others" on the receiving end of project outcomes, when they question their inherent biases and conformities

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1 Amanda Swarr and Richa Nagar (2010) note that academic spaces of producing knowledge, such as classrooms, seminars, conferences, workshops, and research sites, should be recognized as collaborative spaces because they create knowledge in cooperation with various academic and non-academic communities. Nevertheless, the academic structure ignores the collaborative mode of knowledge production and nurtures a celebrity culture where individual academicians perform as academic stars. As a result, the notion of the individual knowledge producer creates dichotomies such as "individually/ collaboratively produced knowledge, academia/activism, and theory/method" (pp. 1-2).
2 In this article, we adopt Luhmann et. al.'s (2019) definition of praxis that refers to various ways through which social justice programs seek "to integrate a variety of different opportunities for experiential, community-based learning into degree program" (p. 1).
3 Dylan Rodriguez defines nonprofit industrial complex as "the set of symbiotic relationships that link together political and financial technologies of state and owning-class proctorship and surveillance over public political intercourse, including and specially emergent progressive and leftist social movements, since about the mid-1970s" (Rodriguez, 2016).

to neoliberal governmentality[4] and the nonprofit industrial complex, and when they strive to challenge colonial logics and implications within their delivery. Dean also points out that feminist, postcolonial, and Indigenous critiques should be put forward with caution so that they are not appropriated by neoliberal institutions that might use them as an excuse for not doing anything or for promoting collaboration with profit-driven businesses and industries instead of social justice-oriented nonprofit organizations (Dean, 2019).

In most cases, feminist critiques of university-community engagements stem from the experience of feminist community engagement-focused curriculums and practices within institutionalized WGSS programs. Therefore, the existing literature overwhelmingly focuses on WGSS programs and WGSS curriculums and how these programs and curriculums aspire (or do not/cannot aspire) to bridge the gap between theories and praxis through community-based learning (Boyd & Sandell, 2012; Costa & Leong, 2012; Dean et al., 2019; Kwon & Nguyen, 2016). This dominant trend makes sense, given that WGSS programs in North America have a long history of incorporating pedagogical praxis, which follows Paulo Freire in calling for "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1970/2000 cited in Luhmann et al. 2019, pp. 1). In Canada, for example, nearly half of the WGSS programs have some form of mandatory or elective internship, practicum, community placement, or co-operative education component (Dean et al., 2019, pp. 1). However, WGSS programs are not the only spaces that can benefit from the transformative potentials of feminist and decolonial community engagement pedagogies and practices, and such engagement does not happen only in WGSS spaces. Our study addresses a significant gap in the existing feminist literature on community engagement by looking beyond the institutional boundaries of WGSS programs and curriculums in the United States. We examine how non-WGSS social-justice-oriented programs—the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Honors Program of Lesley University in this case—can (or cannot) creatively nurture feminist and decolonial praxis. Specifically, we explore how these programs navigate institutional resources and negotiate with neoliberal bureaucracies in service of the long-term goal of using institutionalized university-community engagement to support radical grassroots political organizing.

Demystifying the "We": Conceptualizing Our Positionalities within the Neoliberal University

One of the core contributions of feminist, postcolonial, and Indigenous theorizing of community engagement is a call for working towards demystifying the "we" of any community (Dean, 2019, pp. 34). We acknowledge that it is important to critically investigate how we conceptualize ourselves and the "university" we operate within. Exploring our personal positionalities, privileges, and vulnerabilities before we elaborate on our experiences of collaboration on feminist and decolonial community engagement at a neoliberal university can reveal who we are and how we occupy various complex and contradicting spaces.

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4   Dean uses the phrase "neoliberal governmentality" to describe the ways conventional community engagement practices nurture a sense of individual responsibility and agency among students who are trained to become "model neoliberal citizens" and engage with communities to increase the value of their degrees instead of expressing solidarity with collective struggles of the communities (Dean 2019, p. 24).

Nafisa Tanjeem is an immigrant, Muslim, woman of color and identifies as a transnational teacher-scholar-activist who has lived, studied, worked, taught, and organized in Bangladesh, Canada, and the United States. She passionately incorporates her scholarly research, public scholarships, and community organizing experiences into teaching, university "service," and mentoring minoritized students. Her activist background as an organizer of *United Students Against Sweatshops* and *Service Employees International Union (SEIU)* in the USA, *Council of Agencies Serving South Asians* in Canada, and *Bangladesh Garment Sromik Sanghati* (Bangladesh Garment Workers' Solidarity) and *Meye* (Women) network in Bangladesh inspires her to recognize the power of decolonial and feminist critical community engagement, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration, and bridging the gap between the "global" and the "local" in feminist classrooms. Tanjeem is an Associate Professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Worcester State University in Massachusetts, United States. She served as an Assistant Professor of the Gender, Race, and Sexuality Studies and the Global Studies programs and as the Assistant Director of the Honors program of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) at Lesley University until June 2022. Her teaching and research interests include transnational, postcolonial, and decolonial feminisms; critical race theory; feminist globalization studies; critical university studies; and transnational social movements with a specific focus on the United States and Bangladesh.

Michael Illuzzi is a first-generation college student whose parents were first- and second-generation immigrants from Italy. He grew up in a middle-class suburb of New Jersey, with the privileges of being white, male, cisgender, and Christian. He is trained in the history of political thought with a focus on American race, class, and gender inequities. He has passionately pursued pedagogical innovations that give students space to learn through hands-on projects and applications to contemporary life, including integrating activist campaign projects, podcasting, and new technology assignments, frequent role playing, adopting "Reacting to the Past" simulations, and teaching about race and gender inequities through the application of the scholarship to popular TV shows in his classes. He currently serves as an Associate Professor of Political Science and as the Director of the CLAS Honors Program of Lesley University.

Michael Illuzzi joined Lesley University in Fall 2012 and Nafisa Tanjeem joined in Fall 2017. We shared an office starting in Fall 2017 for two years. During our overlapping office hours, we used to exchange thoughts on our pedagogical philosophies, practices, and politics. Conversations between a woman of color transnational feminist scholar from the Global South and a U.S.-based white male political theorist were interesting, enriching, and often contentious, but both of us learned a lot through our transdisciplinary and cross-border exchanges. We started co-teaching in Fall 2019 and running the CLAS Honors program of Lesley University in the capacity of the Director and the Assistant Director. We also began to organize with the Lesley University Core Faculty union as stewards, participated in the negotiation of our collective bargaining agreement with the university, hosted a series of social justice events on campus, and mobilized campaigns with faculty, staff, and students to address working and learning conditions on campus on many occasions, most recently COVID-19-induced austerity and budget cuts. Along the way, we—two coworkers and co-organizers with very different scholarly

training and lived experiences—engaged in scholarly, pedagogical, and activist solidarity that eventually turned into a deep sense of what feminist scholars have described as "dissident friendship" (Chowdhury & Philipose, 2016; Gandhi, 2006). We consciously attempted to learn from each other's stories and politics, unlearn our biases and stereotypes about each other, and acknowledge the different power positions we occupied (or did not occupy). Our dissident friendship went beyond our individual interactions and relationships and was built on a transformative vision of nurturing feminist and decolonial solidarity and praxis on campus. It motivated us to continue to organize with our faculty, staff, and student allies to unsettle the structural power of the imperial and neoliberal university within which we were situated. We acknowledge that as part of a unionized core faculty body with relatively secured contracts, we were also actors of the neoliberal university. There is no way to establish ourselves as separate from the imperial university since we reaped the benefits of our affiliation. Yet, we continued to critically reflect on our power, privileges, and positionalities and work within the system and used our privileges to challenge hierarchies and bring structural changes.

Doing Feminist Community Engagement Outside of WGSS Programs

Our desire to push for a critical version of community-engaged learning at Lesley was aimed at countering the curricular shift towards professional skill development and away from teaching students to be "catalysts shaping a more just, humane, and sustainable world," as mentioned in Lesley's mission statement (Lesley University, n.d.). We were both faculty members in what Lesley calls the "Social Sciences Department" and as of Spring 2021, the Political Science major had nineteen, and the Gender, Race, and Sexuality Studies minor had ten enrolled students. While our status as core faculty in small programs gave us a great deal of autonomy to create and shape and teach new curriculum, we found the Honors program to be a better fit for pursuing what we called "critical community engagement" initiatives. As the Director and the Assistant Director, we had more control over the policy-making and budget distribution of the Honors program. Moreover, compared to our smaller affiliated programs, Lesley's CLAS Honors program enrolled 151 students from a wide range of majors and minors as of Spring 2021. Therefore, we decided to pursue critical community engagement not as part of our affiliated programs but as part of the Honors first year, sophomore, and senior capstone seminars in a scaffolded framework.

Our experience of implementing feminist principles, practices, and theories within the neoliberal university mirrors larger debates within WGSS programs. In the early 1990s, feminist scholars debated whether the newly emerging field of Women's Studies should be institutionalized as an autonomous unit or whether the focus should be on transforming liberal arts landscapes by integrating feminist perspectives in the wider curriculum (Howe, 1975, pp. 159–160). The historical autonomy/integration debate still persists today alongside questions of whether a department or an interdisciplinary program can transform institutions of higher learning (Froines, 2004, pp. 10–12). This debate can guide us in thinking about how we practice feminist community engagement in North American universities. Does it make the most sense to pursue feminist community engagement solely as part of WGSS programs? Or

is it also productive to design feminist community engagement initiatives outside of WGSS programs, integrating into the broader community engagement or so-called "service-learning" initiatives on campus? The way we pursued feminist community engagement at Lesley University demonstrates that the "autonomy" vs. "integration" debate does not need to be an either/or outcome. Our experience and analysis reveal that feminist scholars and practitioners can pursue autonomous community engagement initiatives in WGSS departments and/or integrate feminist community engagement initiatives in non-WGSS platforms depending on the availability of resources and what works best for individual situations. In our case, the Honors program of Lesley University offered us a much more feasible and effective platform to integrate feminist community engagement in the broader Honors curriculum. Instead of limiting feminist community engagement within the Gender, Race, and Sexuality Studies minor of Lesley University, pursuing it as part of the larger Honors program put us in direct conversation with the Office of Community Service, Office of Internships and Field Placement, and other actors and bodies that pursue "service-learning" or "community engagement" on campus. As a result, we were able to push them to think differently and to integrate feminist and decolonial practices to some extent in the ways they designed their programs. Students who took our critical community engagement focused Honors seminars also demonstrated a trend of becoming interested in feminist perspectives and enrolling in Gender, Race, and Sexuality Studies courses in the following years.

Framing our ideas for the university's higher administration required some strategy. Our choice of the phrase "critical community engagement" was inspired by Randy Stoecker's (2016) framing of critical service-learning, which he describes as the "the most conscious response to the creeping influence of neoliberalism in institutionalized service learning" (p. 60). We also drew on the literature on critical community service learning (CCSL) that recognizes power, privilege, oppression, and systemic inequities in traditional institutionalized service-learning, incorporates critical pedagogies in the classroom, questions the complicity of the "learning" part

Figure 1. Lesley Honors interacting with Robin Wall Kimmerer – the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass* in 2019

of service-learning with structural oppression, and is shaped by insights from feminist theories (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). We consciously avoided using the phrase "feminist community engagement" so that the university administration did not limit us within the institutional structure of the resource-deprived Gender, Race, and Sexuality Studies minor. Also, the phrase "critical community engagement" instead of "feminist community engagement" offered us the opportunity to reach out to a broader group of Honors students majoring in sciences, humanities, social sciences, psychology, and education programs and did not restrict us to the tiny number of WGSS minors. Even though we did not use the phrase "feminist community

engagement" in our official documents, our pedagogical strategies and curriculum were deeply inspired by feminist and decolonial theorizing of community engagement. We assigned many feminist texts and designed assignments and feminist community engagement strategies to address power, privilege, and positionality while working *with* as opposed to working *for* communities (Froines, 2004, pp. 10–12; Howe, 1975, pp. 159–160; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019; Stoecker, 2016, p. 60).

Our (Failed) Attempt to Navigate the Neoliberal Bureaucracy and Bring University-wide Transformation

Initially, we had broad plans for transforming the way Lesley University ran "service-learning" and incorporating feminist and decolonial perspectives in university-wide community engagement initiatives. We came up with a proposal for instituting a Bonner program[5] that would offer low-income, first-generation college students a pathway to college education and engage them in grassroots community organizing. We also wrote a plan, which faculty in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences unanimously approved, to develop a campus-wide civic action plan that would help various community engagement bodies decolonize service-learning on campus and train students in feminist community mobilizing. After two years of writing proposals, one-pagers for potential donors and trustees, and unsuccessful internal and external grant applications, we realized that trying to make a university-wide transformation in community engagement initiatives was not feasible without meaningful endorsement from the various Presidents, Provosts, Vice Presidents, and other powerful decision-making bodies or in the absence of a strong faculty- or student-led movement. Therefore, we decided to pull back and figure out where we had the power to introduce transformative changes and to start working at a smaller level with the Honors program that we directed together.

Looking back on our work since 2018, it is striking how many institutional nudges *not* to prioritize feminist and decolonial critiques of power, privileges, and inequities we experienced. Social scientists have used the concept of "nudges" in health policy in the U.S. and the U.K. as a way to promote change by embracing a logic comfortable within neoliberal discourse and institutions (Sunstein & Thaler, 2003). A nudge has been described as an approach focusing on:

> 'choice architecture' – the ways in which individuals' behaviors are inescapably nudged in particular directions by their social and physical environment, and how these features of everyday life (such as the layout of food in a supermarket or school canteen) might be harnessed to 'move people in'[different directions]. (Brown, 2012, p. 306)

We were struck by the neoliberal university's efficacy in creating choice architecture that discourages feminist and decolonial praxis. The university was designed like a supermarket

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5 The Bonner program was initiated by the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner foundation in 1990 to create a consortium of diverse, multi-state colleges and universities to "transform students, communities, and campuses through service" (The Corella & Bertram F. Bonner Foundation, n.d.).

funneling all the actors—students, staff, and faculty—down the aisles of programs that could be advertised as leading directly to jobs. The neoliberal university set up incentive systems that nourished and supported practices and curriculum like professionalizing internships and resume padding experiences and discouraged and starved practices and curriculum like sustained activism that aimed to disrupt structures of oppression.

The Beginning of Our Work and Playing with "Institutional Nudges"

Our work of integrating feminist and decolonial community engagement in the Honors program started with designing a unique Honors first-year seminar. We began to look for community partners willing to work with our students and align with our course objectives. The first hidden nudge we found was that the infrastructure at the university was constructed to emphasize "service," "charity," and/or professionalization experiences but not the grassroots political organizing we wanted to support. When we reached out to the Office of Community Service, the coordinator pointed us in the direction of the Internships Office since her office was mostly focused on arranging short-term volunteer projects that could be fit into students' free time as well as events, such as MLK Day of Service and Alternative Spring Break. We discovered that most of the community partnerships the university had forged in the Cambridge area were through the well-established undergraduate Internship Office. As a result, there was no infrastructure to support what we were most interested in—grassroots political activism and organizing. Therefore, in the first year of designing and offering our community engagement-focused Honors seminar, we ended up doing what seemed most feasible: we built upon connections

Figure 2. Honors Students participating in "Mapping Feminist Cambridge" – a historic tour focused on the feminist movement in Cambridge, MA from the 1970s-1990s, organized by the City of Cambridge in 2019

made through the internship programs and collaborated primarily with apolitical service-providing 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations—something that has been criticized by many scholars and practitioners of critical and feminist community engagement (Kwon & Nguyen, 2016; Muzak, 2019; Stoecker, 2016).

The other significant nudge that impacted us was the semester model of the neoliberal university and its emphasis on a problematic "hours model" (Stoecker, 2016, pp. 53–54). Both of these timelines made addressing questions of sustainability very challenging. We decided that a four-credit class, instead of a conventional three-credit one, would give us additional time to work with students and give students credit for the additional work that community engagement projects would entail. Unlike some other universities, there was no office that could support community-engaged partnerships as part of the coursework, so the fourth

credit would also potentially provide some compensation to the faculty for the extra work of coordinating the projects. While we were aware of the feminist critique of "learning elsewhere" outside of feminist classrooms and the innovative potentials of student-led classroom-based projects in place of placements arranged by the Internship or the Community Service Offices (Francis, 2019; Srivasta, 2019), we also felt the institutional pressure to quantify and justify the additional credit hour so that it met the NECHE (New England Commission of Higher Education) accreditation standards. All the internship courses had specific hours requirements, and the systems created for supervising those internships included hour logs, so this was the model expected by the curriculum committee, supervisors, and administrators, as well as our community partners who already had experience with the Internship Office.

In the first iteration of the course in Fall 2019, we chose to set a minimum of twenty hours of community engagement and pledged to try to figure out how to move away from the hours model in our next iteration. The relatively small engagement commitment increased our concerns about superficial projects and overburdening supervisors—specifically those at smaller community-based organizations. We feared that by trying to meet bureaucratic requirements, we would reproduce the problem of putting too much focus on the learning and development of student capacities, rather than on increasing the capacity of community groups to effect social change at the individual and collective levels (Stoecker, 2016). Furthermore, the semester model necessitated a relatively short-term commitment that would end with the semester and worked against building a sustainable model of collaboration. While all the students in the class had chosen to enter the CLAS Honors program with its declared focus on critical community engagement, the semester model made it harder to escape the "required" nature of community engagement. Furthermore, with a student body focused on mostly non-WGSS professional majors, we needed to adjust the experience for the students we had, which in some cases diverted us away from our feminist and decolonial goals.

We managed to navigate the institutional nudges in a way that brought about two fortunate changes. First, when the previous coordinator of our Office of Community Service stepped down, we were able to petition for a change in the job description that led to hiring a coordinator with experience facilitating institutional change around decolonial community engagement as well as training and supporting faculty in community-engaged learning. This alteration eventually created a great deal more capacity for faculty support. Second, when the VP of Enrollment was re-assigned, we were able to redesign the Honors application process to target students invested in social justice causes who were passionate about social change. Nevertheless, the constant pressure from the admission authorities to hit the university's enrollment and revenue targets continued to work against a more thoughtful selection process for our program.

Our First Iteration of the Feminist Community Engagement-Focused First-Year Seminar and the Challenges We Faced

The Fall 2019 course was called: "Doing Good or Looking Good: The Ethics and Politics of Community Engagement." Our choice of the phrase "Doing Good or Looking Good" was

inspired by Margot Francis's (2019) critique of the way Canadian imperialist and colonialist projects are shaped by benevolence and an intention to "do good." Dean (2019) utilizes Francis's framing of "doing good" to reflect on how exceptionalist community engagement projects run by academic institutions entail "a colonial and imperialist logic of benevolence" (p. 23). The title also indicated our intention to break free of the colonial and imperial community engagement models and center our work around feminist and decolonial critiques of institutionalized service learning. In the class, our major themes included addressing the political economy of community engagement, exploring intersecting systems of oppression, and investigating the politics of funding and the nonprofit industrial complex. In the first few weeks, we discussed with students the concepts of positionality and reflexivity, and specifically assigned articles written by Stoeker (2016) and Dean (2019) that provided our theoretical grounding for critical, feminist, and decolonial community engagement. We also combined texts incorporating an American anti-racist organizing context with transnational feminist analyses of how the nonprofit industrial complex hurts marginalized communities not just in the United States but around the world and specifically in the Global South. Our academic training in the history and politics of institutionalized racism in the United States, which is Michael Illuzzi's specialization, and transnational social justice movements, which is Nafisa Tanjeem's area of expertise, equipped us to highlight the co-constitutive and co-existing nature of the "local" and the "global" in our classes.

As expected, we encountered some challenges while running this new model for the first time. Our assigned readings and theories taught our students about the criticisms of "service," "charity," and "giving back." Nevertheless, many of our partner organizations were uncritically reproducing these concepts and were bereft of an understanding of how gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality or other differences and power relationships shaped their top-down involvement with various communities. Furthermore, having started the semester with Dean and Stoeker's analyses criticizing the committed hours model, some of our students felt there was no point in the 20-hour requirement. In addition, among some students in the class—primarily white students from middle- or upper-class backgrounds—there was a lack of recognition of privilege and positionality, despite the relevant readings and a series of classroom conversations and assignments. Finally, we realized that the model we had chosen had real drawbacks for BIPOC, working-class, and other minoritized students. Though we had offered free transportation cards for students who requested them, students who needed them did not request them, perhaps because they did not want to stand out or be stigmatized. We had a couple of working-class commuter students who lived far away, so having to come in to do extra community engagement work in the Cambridge area was much more burdensome for them than for students who lived on campus. BIPOC students who had really tight school and work schedules, due to paying their way through college, were disproportionately impacted by the community engagement requirement. Dean (2019) urges us to question the framing of "we" in university-community partnerships and to recognize the dangers of an imagined "shared struggle" (pp. 34–35). Our effort to involve minorized students in feminist community engagement reiterated the futility of assuming a universal "we." Working towards meaningful,

transformative feminist community engagement, we cannot expect students to have certain privileges by default—a factor not often explored in mainstream or feminist community engagement literature.

An Imperfect Transition from "Ethics and Politics" to "Decolonizing"
In our second iteration of the course in Fall 2020, we moved away from the focus on "ethics and politics" and changed the title to "Doing Good or Looking Good: Decolonizing Community Engagement." Based on our experiences and the challenges we faced in our first iteration, we realized that a focus on "ethics and politics"—which we initially adopted to indicate our motto of critical community engagement—is not enough to achieve feminist and decolonial goals of transforming community engagement in neoliberal universities. Our turn towards "decolonizing" was inspired by a feminist and ethnic studies conceptualization of community engagement. Yep and Mitchell (2017) summarize the ethnic studies' decolonizing approach to community engagement as:

> [R]ecognizing education as part of the settler colonial state; centering indigenous knowledges, cosmologies, epistemologies, and methodologies; exploring the intersections of many axes of stratification; and empowering marginalized communities to destabilize technologies of colonialism. (p. 295)

Although we continued to use the phrase "critical community engagement" in the official documents of the Honors program for strategic purposes, in our second (Fall 2020) and third (Fall 2021) iterations of the course, we tried to move beyond just incorporating a critical lens around power, privilege, and oppression to deal with various aspects of gender, race, class, and other identities in the curriculum. We attempted to practice what Santidago-Ortiz (2019) calls "epistemic disobedience," acknowledging that our very own critical community engagement initiatives perpetuated colonial matrices of power. This meant working to decenter Western, Eurocentric production and circulation of knowledge, and bringing about material changes through solidarity building among students and with communities as anti-colonial praxis (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019, pp. 48–51). We do not claim that we were able to decolonize exceptionalist institutionalized service-learning in our community engagement endeavors, but our initiatives demonstrate that decolonizing community engagement is a process and not necessarily a finished product with specific end goals. It involves long, contentious, and frustrating struggles that incessantly challenge the colonialist nature of service-learning in neoliberal universities. Consequently, we aspired to go beyond a metaphorical use of "decolonization" (Tuck & Yang, 2012) in the title of our course by striving to build decolonial praxis between the Office of Community Service, faculty staff, students, and community partners interested in critical aspects of community engagement. Through our collaboration we sought out creative ways of challenging the colonial matrices of power, pedagogy, and epistemology. Our attempts were shaped by anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-sexist values and informed by postcolonial, transnational, and decolonial feminist insights.

In our second iteration in Fall 2020, we moved away from collaborating with apolitical service provider 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations and partnered with smaller advocacy-based and grassroots activist organizations. Although we could not entirely avoid problematic alliances with the nonprofit industrial complex, we recognized that many of our initial nonprofit partners were operating in a depoliticized landscape and complicit in the neoliberal project of governing "problematic" populations aiming to transform their behavior and activities through services. Our partners for the second iteration included Uprooted and Rising (https://www. uprootedandrising.org)—a food sovereignty movement for ending higher education's support for big food corporations and white supremacy in the food system; New England United for Justice (https://neu4j.org)—a community organization fighting for social, economic, and racial justice in the greater Boston area; Matahari (https://www.solidaritymass.com/matahari-women-s-worker-project)—which works to secure legal rights for domestic workers in Massachusetts; Sunrise Movement (https://www.sunrisemovement.org)—an environmental advocacy organization which describes itself as "the climate revolution"; and Lesley Votes (https://lesley. edu/life-at-lesley/student-activities-support/lesleyvotes-2020)—a Lesley student-led voter campaign. Although these organizations operated within the nonprofit industrial complex, they also diverged from it in creative ways. Sunrise Movement, for example, is registered as a 501(c)(4) instead of 501(c)(3) organization, which allows them to engage actively in political organizing and advocacy, unlike 501(c)(3) organizations that are "absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaigns" by IRS regulations (IRS, n.d.). Uprooted and Rising is a campaign of Real Food Challenge (https:// www.realfoodchallenge.org/) that is a "committed group of student activists, national food movement leaders, and higher education sustainability experts" (Real Food Challenge, n.d.). Real Food Challenge is a self-funded, fiscally sponsored project of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit called "Third Sector New England (TSNE) MissionWorks." Since Real Food Challenge itself is not a 501(c)(3) organization, it does not have any restriction on political organizing. Lesley Votes is a student-led voter campaign that started as a project of the Office of Community Service of Lesley University. These creative ways of avoiding restrictions imposed by the 501(c)(3) status enabled these organizations to engage in grassroots anti-capitalist and decolonial organizing. Our collaboration with these organizations supported the possibility of reviving the political mobilization which, as Kwon and Nguyen (2016) argue, gets lost in contemporary university-community engagement.

In our first two iterations, we struggled with how to address the hierarchy between the university and smaller grassroots community partners, including how not to put the burden of training and supervising our students on organizations already overburdened and understaffed. We recruited five students who took previous iterations of our course as course assistants (CAs), who were also able to register in the Fall 2021 class for credit. Each led a project or projects on one of five topics: food justice, educational equity, housing justice, climate justice, or voter engagement and electoral justice. These changes in the third iteration strove to work against the nudges of the neoliberal university. In order to partially address the problematic dynamics of "learning elsewhere" (Luhmann et al., 2019, p. 2) and framing the community

as an underprivileged "Other" (Dean, 2019, p. 29), the CAs worked with students to develop projects that engaged with some part or parts of the Lesley University community. Mostly the student-led groups decided how to work with other undergraduate students within the community who were already mobilizing around different social justice issues. The food justice group, for instance, met, coordinated, and arranged actions with a couple of other groups who were revamping the community garden on campus and working on campus-based food insecurity issues. The education reform group connected with the Urban Scholars Initiative[6] and other campus groups to help create an affinity group to reflect upon how power inequities had affected students' lived experiences and their ability to navigate injustice in educational policies. We departed from the hours model by making the community engagement project-based. We reserved class time five times during the semester for each group to meet, strategize, plan, and act so that commuter students and students holding multiple jobs did not have to spend out-of-class time on their unpaid community engagement projects.

The semester long course also operated as an incubator for increasing student activism on campus. This included encouraging students to collaborate with existing activist groups on campus and working against the limitations of the semester-based model so projects could extend beyond the short span of the semester. The changes helped blur the boundary between classroom and community, transforming the academic space into a community where students turned into community organizers and ran activist campaigns of their choice. CAs, first-year students, and the Community Engagement Coordinator from the Office of Community Service—who helped with coordination and communication between CAs and student groups—became the main actors carrying out and planning the projects within a semi-horizontal space. Nonetheless, students reported that the high level of group autonomy sometimes left them feeling like they were not sufficiently supported and wanting more guidance to create projects as thoughtful and effective as they had desired. Multiple students also mentioned that the course would be better as a two-semester sequence that extended to the spring semester (an option that had been considered but was resisted by the Deans and Provost in the past). We also observed that many of our students from present and past iterations of the course became very active in various activist initiatives on campus. A number of students who took our course joined the leadership of Lesley Housing Justice and Outreach Collective, and others joined the Community Engagement Summer Fellows Program and the Community Leadership Education & Action Program (L.E.A.P), thereby increasing the critical mass of students engaging in social justice organizing on campus.

Conclusion

In a world struck by coronavirus capitalism and deeply impacted by the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and local and global protests resisting the continuing police brutality against Black people, neoliberal universities in North America have started to pay renewed attention

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6   Lesley University's Urban Scholars Initiative (USI) assists first-generation and low-income college students through financial, academic, and emotional supports. For more information, please see https://lesley.edu/about/diversity-inclusion/urban-scholars-initiative.

to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. While many university-community engagement initiatives face drastic budget cuts due to the pandemic-induced financial crisis, these initiatives are also being used to showcase university commitments towards achieving social justice in a world that demands more from institutions of higher learning. As a result, faculty and staff committed to critical feminist and decolonial community engagement are expected to do more with fewer resources. Therefore, at this crucial juncture, it is essential to figure out how to resist the tendency of locating racial differences in "diverse bodies" (Hundle, 2019, p. 290)—a popular easy fix for neoliberal universities—and how to work towards decolonization within institutional restrictions that prefer professionalization and resume-building over challenging intersecting systems of oppression. Within the specific context of WGSS, it is even more critical since many WGSS programs are currently under attack because of neoliberal forces within and outside the university system at a time of COVID-induced austerity. Stoecker (2016) points out that the critics of institutionalized service learning offer useful critical analysis but do not provide insights on what to do instead. Some steps involved asking students to reproduce critical reflections and focused on proposing pedagogical practices inside the classroom, but the community engagement itself did not focus enough on social change (Stoecker, 2016, pp. 60–61). Feminist scholars and activists responded to this critique and demonstrated various ways of addressing the social change aspect of community engagement (Dean et al., 2019). This article offers ways to think about expanding feminist pedagogies and feminist community engagement practices beyond the institutional confines of WGSS programs and addressing the challenges and possibilities that arise from attempts to do so. Along the way, we make a case for a wide adoption of feminist community engagement regardless of departmental and disciplinary gatekeeping, which can be instrumental in disrupting exceptionalist imaginaries of institutionalized service learning and transforming hierarchical power relationships between the "university" and the "community."

Subverting the neoliberal university, apolitical community partners, and the nonprofit industrial complex while working within the system is not an easy task. Our experience and analysis demonstrate that the transition from service-learning, to critical community engagement, to feminist and decolonial community engagement, is an imperfect and iterative process. In our case, it involved adopting strategic phrases, such as "critical community engagement" instead of "feminist community engagement," to appease the university's neoliberal governance teams and funders, making use of the existing limited resources, and reaching out to a larger student group beyond the small, resource-strapped Gender, Race, and Sexuality Studies minor as we continued to work towards achieving feminist and decolonial goals. It involved a learning curve and continuous struggles.

Our first iteration of the "Doing Good or Looking Good" seminar incorporated feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial theories and analyses in the curriculum, but we had to work within the confines of the nonprofit industrial complex and a strict hours- and semester-based model. Being able to establish partnerships with nonprofits and teach the class was the most significant achievement of our first iteration, since the course was one of the very few attempts at Lesley that brought meaningful critical and self-reflexive conversations about the institution's

community engagement practices into the classroom. Although we were far from decolonizing community engagement in our first iteration, it paved the way for achieving feminist and decolonial goals in our subsequent iterations. In our second iteration, we used our community partnerships as a space for building solidarity with smaller activist and advocacy-based organizations and engaging our students in grassroots political action. In our third iteration, we implemented a creative collaboration model where student course assistants, who took our class in previous years, worked with current students to determine the extent and nature of their activist campaigns. The Honors program of Lesley University continues to learn from the achievements and failures of various iterations of the "Doing Good or Looking Good" seminar with the long-term goal of developing a scaffolded program that uses community engagement as a political tool for challenging intersecting systems of oppression.

The transformation of our pedagogical choices and community engagement strategies over the last three years signifies the limits of rigid, and often romanticized, binaries between the "university" and "community." Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) problematizes the notion of "community" as characterized by sameness, overlaps, comfort, and familiarity. She does not reject the notion of "community" and identity categories but rather invites us to engage with contradictions and to build political coalitions across differences. She challenges the utopia of unity, yet calls for a more nuanced understanding of belongingness (Anzaldúa, 1987). Inspired by Anzaldúa's framing, we have demonstrated that the homogeneity of the "university" and the "community" cannot be assumed. The neoliberal university is run by powerful, top-down, corporate-capitalist decision-making bodies, yet there are possibilities for nurturing spaces of resistance within the system where faculty, staff, and students can engage in solidarity and dissident friendships. Our work, especially the third iteration of our course, illustrates ways to avoid the tendency of "learning elsewhere" and the framing of the "community" as the unprivileged "Other," as well as to build community within the neoliberal university and to engage students in grassroots political action. Through our work, we also demonstrate how feminist and decolonial community engagement can offer creative avenues to merge the binaries of between theory vs. praxis and academia vs. activism. The neoliberal requirements for teaching, service, and research that puts faculty in siloes, disconnected from each other, can also be reckoned with as a result of our pedagogical, scholarly, and activist overlaps and commitments.

We have yet to decolonize our institution's community engagement practices. It is perhaps impossible to achieve this goal since university-community engagement practices are situated within and surveilled by violent, colonial, and neoliberal institutions of higher learning that have a long history of exploiting Indigenous lands, knowledges, resources, and communities. Nevertheless, our experience and analyses illustrate the challenges that emerge while working towards achieving a decolonial future and the creative ways through which a feminist community engagement initiative within a small liberal arts college can navigate them.

Acknowledgements

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