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Towards a critical service learning in geography education: exploring challenges and possibilities through testimonio

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ABSTRACT

There has been an increasing interest in exploring the transformational possibilities of experiential learning approaches like service learning, across post-secondary education, including geography. At the same time, scholars caution that such initiatives can entrench neoliberalism, white supremacy and other power structures and call for implementing a critical service learning (CSL) approach that is rooted in action against injustice. In response, this paper uses testimonio methodology to explore the experiences of a student and instructor engaging in a graduate geography course that implements CSL. We demonstrate how CSL is a complex process that is mired in the very power structures and institutional barriers it attempts to disrupt. Nonetheless, CSL creates opportunities for social change in the classroom and community, which make it a promising pedagogical strategy for geographers aiming to create alternative teaching approaches in their classrooms.

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Introduction

Service learning is a form of experiential education that combines classroom instruction with meaningful community service. As a form of engaged pedagogy, students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences working within a community setting, in order to develop greater theoretical competency and a sense of civic responsibility (Butin, 2010). Evolving from early theories of experiential and liberatory education (Freire, 1970; Hayes, 2011), service learning has gained significant traction in post-secondary education in the United States (Butin, 2010) and more recently in Canada (Chambers, 2009). Geographers have been part of this trend, experimenting with community engaged pedagogies and grappling with the challenges and transformational opportunities of implementing these approaches (Buckingham-Hatfield, 1995; Dorsey, 2001; Elwood, 2004; Ives-Dewy, 2008). However, critical scholars and practitioners have offered robust critiques on the ways service learning courses have reinforced power hierarchies and white supremacy (Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012; Verjee, 2012), privileged post-secondary institutional needs over the community (Bortolin, 2011; Cronley, Madden, & Davis, 2015), and furthered a neoliberal

agenda (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012). It is precisely because of such limitations that some educators have pointed to the importance of inculcating a critical approach in tandem with experiential and community engaged learning initiatives (Castleden, Daley, Morgan, & Sylvestre, 2013; Mitchell, 2008; The University of Kentucky Critical Pedagogy Working Group et al., 2015). In this paper, we expand on these debates and bridge conversations between service learning in other disciplines and geography by drawing on our experiences as a student and instructor using testimonio – a methodology that draws on an experiential, self-conscious and narrative practice (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012).

Through our collective analysis we explore how a graduate geography service learning course, Planning for Change: Community Development in Practice (PFC), attempted to challenge perceptions of oppression in the classroom and community by employing a critical service learning (CSL) approach. Our analysis is built on Tania Mitchell's (2008) analytical framework that differentiates CSL from "conventional" service learning by describing it as a pedagogy consisting of three key elements: the development of authentic relationships, a social change orientation and a redistribution of power in the classroom. Explicating how these elements were implemented in the course, we identify facilitators and barriers to operationalizing elements of CSL and show how a student and instructor attempted to navigate power differentials and structural limitations. Relative to conventional approaches to service learning, we find that the engagement processes of CSL demand high levels of ongoing collaboration, can be resource and time intensive and are often at odds with institutional demands. Further, CSL projects tend to be quite complex, demanding participants accept unpredictability, be open to feelings of discomfort and wrestle with the meanings and applications of social justice. Our conclusions highlight how CSL can serve as a valuable, but complex strategy to teach about the theory and practice of social justice and how testimonio as a methodology can enhance a critical analysis of our experiences and strengthen scholarship, pedagogy and practice in geography.

CSL and experiential education in geography

While there is no single agreed upon definition, service learning is often described as an engaged form of pedagogy that aims to cross university-community boundaries and bridge theory and action (Butin, 2010). The Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning (n.d.) defines service learning broadly as an "educational approach that integrates service in the community with intentional learning activities." "Community" in service learning can be a specific social group, members of a neighborhood, the university campus, or a region; and "community organizations" can range from large nonprofits to smaller-scale grassroots collectives (Felten & Clayton, 2011). To ensure that a student placement is not merely an add-on component of a course, Bringle and Hatcher (1996) posit that reflection is an integral aspect of this pedagogy. Reflection has been shown to generate learning and enable students to develop a comprehensive understanding of social problems and potential solutions (Dorsey, 2001; Felten & Clayton, 2011). Ultimately, service learning activities are intended to reinforce classroom content while also providing a useful service to the community.

Yet, simply including elements of community engagement and reflection do not necessarily lead to addressing power inequities or advancing social justice (Cipolle, 2004; Walker, 2000). In fact, many service learning programs have been criticized for failing to respect

the experiences and knowledge of community groups and for reinforcing oppressive power structures and elitism (McBride, Brav, Menon, & Sherraden, 2006). For example, as service learning has become institutionalized in post-secondary education, it has primarily engaged white privileged students to provide services in racialized, low-income communities (Butin, 2006; Green, 2003). This reality coupled with erasures of race in the classroom, can prevent students from understanding how social processes are interconnected with racialization and identifying their role in perpetuating white supremacy (Mitchell et al., 2012). In addition, service learning can fit precisely into neoliberal logics. For example, as universities have become focused on ensuring students are job-market ready (Levkoe, Brail, & Daniere, 2014), the restructuring of the welfare state has pushed community organizations to take on the delivery of social services without sufficient funding, compelling them to rely on unpaid student labor (Trudeau, 2012; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Therefore, without an explicit critical approach encouraging students to investigate the structural causes of social problems and the intersections of race, class, and other axes of difference, service learning can reproduce or even accentuate power relations that create the need for these projects in the first place (Green, 2003; Mitchell et al., 2012; Pompa, 2002).

Due to the shortcomings of conventional approaches to service learning, we look towards CSL as a pedagogical strategy that explicitly fosters critical analysis and action against the root causes of injustice (Hayes, 2011; Mitchell, 2008; Porfilio & Hickman, 2011). CSL is “experiential learning that empowers people to recognize, expose and eradicate the social injustices that structure their lives within a hegemonic social order” (Hayes, 2011, p. 47). For instance, conventional approaches might encourage students to volunteer at a food bank or initiate a food drive. In contrast, CSL would engage students in a critical study with community partners (e.g. anti-poverty or other social justice organizations) around the root causes of poverty while advocating for policies that guarantee a human right to food. Furthermore, through curriculum focused on community assets, power systems and critical reflection, students would be encouraged to participate in developing action oriented projects that address social, economic and political inequities (Deely, 2015; Porfilio & Hickman, 2011).

In this paper, we draw on Mitchell’s (2008) three key elements of CSL supplemented with complimentary perspectives from various theoretical and interdisciplinary applications of CSL. First, building authentic relationships involves engaging all participants through principles of interdependence and reciprocity, which can destabilize dichotomous relationships of server-served and student–teacher (Dostilio, 2014; Varlotta, 1996; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). This can occur through developing long-term relationships over the course of multiple service learning placements and engaging in democratic forms of communication (Dostilio, 2014), which necessitate greater time inputs (Mitchell, 2015). Second, a social change perspective requires that students work towards dismantling, the social, political, ideological and economic forces that produce inequities (Cipolle, 2004; Mitchell, 2015). Mitchell (2008) argues that CSL aims to foster a critical consciousness among students, so that they are able to historicize social problems and see their implication in sustaining or changing the status quo. Third, power is redistributed in CSL through centering the experiences of students and the voices of community groups working for social change, instead of the university’s agenda to produce research outputs (Bortolin, 2011). As such, all participants should be deeply involved in creating service learning projects and developing the curriculum. In summary, CSL moves beyond conventional theories and practices of

service learning to address power dynamics and promote personal and social transformation within the academy and community sectors.

In human geography, there have been longstanding discussions on the complexities of implementing student centered learning, experiential approaches and critical pedagogy (for example, see Castleden et al., 2013; Dorsey, 2001; Elwood, 2004; Hammersley, Bilous, James, Trau, & Suchet-Pearson, 2014; Mahtani, 2014; Mohan, 1995; Oldfield, 2008). Oldfield's (2008) study of an urban geography course in South Africa, shows how service learning projects are embedded in uneven power relationships that irrevocably shape processes and outcomes. Furthermore, she asserts that educators need to rethink what it means for a project to be mutually beneficial and that intangible reciprocal knowledge exchanges between students and the community are valuable outcomes. Similarly, Hammersley et al. (2014) trouble the concept of reciprocity in experiential learning, and put forth an ethics of reciprocity that draws on feminist and critical approaches to account for the ways power structures are negotiated in community-engaged fieldwork. Castleden et al. (2013) found that centering Indigenous perspectives in course curriculum and adopting a transformative learning approach in a geography field course was an effective way to challenge power structures like colonialism in community-engaged learning. Yet, courses aiming to incite critical analysis and transformative learning experiences are only a starting point as personal and societal transformation does not occur over a single semester. To date, there is limited study of critical and engaged pedagogies in post-secondary geography curriculum. Therefore, there is a need for further examples and analysis, especially with the discipline's historical complicity in colonialism and white supremacy (Castleden et al., 2013; Mahtani, 2014; The University of Kentucky Critical Pedagogy Working Group et al., 2015).

The remainder of this paper builds on these discussions by offering an in-depth exploration of how a graduate geography course attempted to implement CSL, focusing on the possibilities and challenges of using CSL as a transformative educational tool. We seek to enrich ongoing discussions of critical pedagogy by employing *testimonio*, a methodology that is prevalent across Chicana Studies and Race and Ethnic Studies (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012), but underutilized in geography and service learning literatures.

Research context and methodology

PFC is a graduate-level service learning course offered through the University of Toronto's Department of Geography and Planning. The course has been taught for four years (2012–2016) and is made up of a two-hour seminar and five hours of student service per week over a span of eight months (two semesters). The primary goals of PFC were to provide students with an opportunity to connect critical theory to community development while strengthening their research, analytical and interpersonal skills. Led by two instructors with extensive experience in geography and the community sector, the course was comprised of a placement with community partners as well as in-class seminars, readings, guest speakers, films, discussions, writing and regular reflections. During the weekly seminars, students explored topics including CSL pedagogy, the non-profit industrial complex, democratic participation in urban planning, anti-racism, and feminist and action research.

The placements were intended to provide students an opportunity to gain practical experiences, assist organizations to design and implement projects, reflect critically on

their education as geography students and to build relationships with communities and neighborhoods throughout the city. Interweaving theory, practice and critical reflection, the course used a social justice lens to better understand the political, economic and social contexts that structure the urban environment. Toronto was an ideal location for PFC as students were able to interrogate issues of social justice with their community partners. A recent report by McDonough et al. (2015) shows that income inequality among Toronto households is twice the national average. Coupled with the growing concentration of poverty among racialized communities, it is increasingly difficult for households to make ends meet leading to further inequalities in health, education and employment. Most partner organizations provided direct supports to marginalized communities and had an explicit mandate embracing social justice. Service learning projects were co-developed according to the needs of the particular organizations and the specific skills and/or research interests of the students. Projects included researching/advocating for local food procurement policies, establishing multi-service community hubs, developing creative place-making initiatives, identifying sustainable transportation solutions and supporting community-based planning projects, to name only a few.

Charles Levkoe (an instructor and co-author of this paper) kept detailed notes documenting personal experiences teaching PFC and conducted annual anonymous pre- and post-course surveys with students to understand their experiences ($n \sim 54$). This information facilitated the reflections and analysis presented here. Madelaine Cahuas (a student in the 2013–2014 PFC course and co-author of this paper) used critical reflection to explore and give voice to her experience as a Latina student. In this paper, we build on this practice by sharing an analysis of our collective CSL experience through testimonio in conjunction with student data gathered through the survey.

Testimonio is a genre, methodology and pedagogical tool with deep roots in oral cultures and liberation struggles across Latin America (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). It is one of a number of decolonizing methods for articulating and making sense of collective histories in the pursuit of social justice (Smith, 2012). Testimonio is a “first person oral or written account, drawing on experiential, self-conscious, narrative practice” in order to expose injustice, raise consciousness and build solidarity (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012, p. 525). Although, it may appear similar to autobiography or autoethnography, which have a defined history in geography (Butz & Besio, 2004; Moss, 2001), testimonio is distinct because it is an urgent, intentional and political call to action (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). It requires the teller or testimonialista to critically reflect on their experiences within the social forces that shape their life and use their personal, family and community histories, experiences and memories as valuable sources of knowledge (Burciaga & Tavares, 2006; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). In these ways, testimonio works from a non-Eurocentric worldview that is firmly grounded in Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Chicanx¹ ways of knowing (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Smith, 2012). Furthermore, The Latina Feminist Group (2001) frames testimonio as a way for members of marginalized communities, like students of colour, to recover *papelitos guardados*,² share their stories with one another, build community and heal. There is also a significant history of Latinx and Chicanx educational research that employs testimonio to express the marginalization of Latinx and Chicanx students in schools in a way that is culturally responsive (Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006; Flores & Garcia, 2009; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). In this spirit we use testimonio

to highlight the importance of addressing power structures and the need for alternative pedagogies in graduate geography education.

The testimonios that follow were initially sparked by Madelaine's interest in better understanding why CSL had such a profound impact on her graduate school experience, and what lessons could be gleaned from this experience to better support racialized students in post-secondary education. Upon sharing this interest with the co-author of this paper after completing the course, both authors engaged in dialog about how to strengthen alternative pedagogies that value the presence and voices of students from marginalized communities. Although the community partner was sympathetic to this goal, due to time constraints and limited capacity precipitated by the loss in funding and staff, they were not able to participate in this ongoing dialog or in the writing of this paper. We believed that Madelaine's story was a particularly important starting point for exploring CSL, since she was one of the few racialized students in the class and worked directly with members of her ethnic community. While this experience was fairly unique relative to other students, it highlights the possibilities of CSL as a critical pedagogy in geography education. In addition, we triangulate this account with other student narratives.

In the following subsection, we begin by reflecting on our positionality and what led us to CSL. We then put our testimonios into dialog organized around Mitchell's (2008) model of CSL to reflect on how building authentic relationships, fostering a social change perspective and redistributing power in the classroom worked in practice.

Exploring CSL in practice: testimonios from a student and instructor

Placing ourselves through testimonio

Charles: I am a third-generation Jewish settler. My grandparents left Poland before World War II in search of a better life, as anti-Semitism was making Eastern Europe an increasingly hostile place. Active in the Communist Party and with social justice efforts, they became part of various communities and movements that aligned with their ideals. My parents grew up in Toronto and were the first of their family to attend university. Both became teachers in the public school system and modeled values of life-long learning as well as using our histories as a basis for engagement in social change initiatives. This all played an important part in my decision to work in the non-profit sector as I became deeply involved with activism around social and environmental justice.

Over ten years ago, while coordinating an urban agriculture program in downtown Toronto, I witnessed how structural inequity manifested in people's day-to-day lives. This motivated me to better understand ways that food insecurity disproportionately affected marginalized peoples and to become active in the growing food justice movement. Part of this commitment was a decision to return to academia where I saw an opportunity to create new alliances with social justice advocates. I was also pushed to confront my own privileges as a white man in academia. I am compelled to think about the implications of my presence and voice in university and community spaces, and how I may be contributing to inequities despite my intentions. In my research and teaching I try to actively listen to, and value the knowledges of the students and communities I work with. At the same time, I am pushing myself to challenge feelings of discomfort when engaging in discussions on race, gender and class-based oppression.

PFC was first proposed in 2010 by Amrita Daniere, who was a Vice Dean at the University of Toronto. Her motivation stemmed from observations of the ways service learning courses at other universities had benefited student learning, faculty research and the social justice goals of community partners. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to take on PFC as a way to bring together my activism, research and teaching interests.

Madelaine: I am the “well-educated” granddaughter of a woman who would be considered uneducated by Western standards. My abuelita was born in Huancavelica, Peru at a time when many Indigenous peoples living in the Andean countryside were forced off their lands to search for work in the capital, Lima, a colonial process that continues to this day. With her mother and brothers in tow, she arrived at the sleepy coastal town of Huaral two hours north of Lima, to work in the illustrious haciendas that now stand empty and haunted. Nearly sixty years later, in 1987, she was in *el norte*, raising me the first daughter to her son, my father.

I begin by reflecting on my abuelita’s life to honour her knowledge as she is the one that taught me how to express myself through stories, before I ever learned how to read or write. I remember her stories of being denied schooling, spending years in a sanatorium away from her children, while quickly memorizing the colours and positioning of shapes to pass for literate and gain access to employment sorting medical instruments. I now consider these stories as testimonios that taught me what it meant for a young Indigenous woman to forcibly become a mestiza in mid-twentieth century Peru, and survive.

The stories from my abuelita, parents, family and community continue to resonate with me and shape who I am, how I know, what I know and the stories I now choose to share. Their lived experiences related through their words and my own observations of their struggles have deeply shaped my worldview. I, unlike my abuelita and many members of my family, was born and raised in Toronto and have been bestowed many privileges because of it and their sacrifices, like my Canadian citizenship and largely middle-class upbringing. My struggles are different than my abuelita’s as a racialized, mixed-race Latina living in a settler colonial state. I have not been spared the exotification of my body and the denial of my culture by a violent Eurocentric schooling system, like countless other Chicana and Latina students (Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Pérez, 2009; Pizarro, 2005). But, witnessing my family’s and community’s strength, their refusal to submit and propensity to overcome has motivated me to become involved in a number of community-based organizations by and for racialized communities, particularly Latin American communities in Toronto. This is what led me to MUJER, a Latin American feminist organization where I did my placement for the PFC Course.

Building authentic relationships: navigating honesty, reciprocity and time

Building authentic relationships, the first element of CSL, is a context-dependent process that cannot be prescribed for exact replication (Butin, 2010). It requires fostering respect, trust, honesty, mutuality and reciprocity with all partners (Dorsey, 2001; Mitchell, 2008). The following testimonios provide a partial glimpse into how we attempted to build authentic relationships in PFC.

Charles: When we invited each of the community partners to join the course, it was intended to be a reciprocal process. In most cases, I began by having one-on-one conversations with individuals from organizations I had collaborated with in

the past. Having this prior experience allowed me to better gauge how students might support their goals. While we attempted to prioritize the needs of each community partner, it was also essential we were transparent and honest about the amount of work involved to host a student and what might be realistically accomplished within the timeframe. Most organizations were enthusiastic about being part of the course, but some chose not to participate for various reasons. For example, because of government cutbacks one organization did not have their funding renewed and no longer had staff that could supervise the student.

Since CSL requires a high level of commitment from everyone involved, there were many challenges we faced building and sustaining relationships. For example, one year, a student dropped the course halfway through for personal reasons. To uphold the relationship, I spent a significant amount of time working with the organization to wrap up the project. This additional labour is not something most educators would look forward to, as teaching tends to be undervalued in most research-intensive universities. Furthermore, due to mounting austerity measures, many social science departments prefer not to run full year courses because they require additional resources. These sentiments regarding time and energy commitment were echoed by many students who were deeply engaged in the partnerships and pointed to difficulty negotiating PFC along with other course work and personal responsibilities. In the annual survey, one student explained, “the course was really time consuming for me but it’s because I allowed it to be. I was really invested in the project and I really wanted to do my absolute best.” To mediate these challenges, supports like the University’s Centre for Community Partnerships were critical in providing guidance on how to navigate institutional bureaucracies and negotiate the terms of student placements with community partners and students.

At the same time, for many of the PFC students, the service learning placement was an opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge of the work of a community partner and build relationships over an eight-month period. In the annual survey, one student emphasized the value of “practical experience and getting to work with an organization that I planned to work with in the future for my research and my activist interests.” Another student commented on the university as a generally “wasteful and indulgent system” in respect to students’ intellectual labour, but that CSL established “effective ways to transmute student labor into more meaningful outcomes aligned with social justice which benefited both community and the students.”

When Madelaine proposed bringing in a new community partner, it presented an interesting opportunity, but we were cautious that it might pose challenges. Personally, I had little experience working with an organization like MUJER and was unfamiliar with many of the issues they were engaged with. Reflective of my own positionality, I had never sought out spaces that addressed gender-based violence against racialized migrant women. After discussing the prospects with me and better understanding her motivations and goals, I became aware that I needed to address my own feelings of discomfort, uncertainty and lack of control. Trusting her experience and facilitating a space to collaborate with people in her community through the course became an integral part of my role in the CSL process.

Madelaine: MUJER is a non-profit community-based organization that was established by and for Latin American women and girls in Toronto in 2002 (see <http://mujer.ca/home/en/>). MUJER has delivered programming in violence prevention, youth leadership and health education using an anti-racist, feminist framework. One of its most successful programs has been the Latina Youth Leadership Summer Camp that was offered free of cost to Latina youth living in Toronto’s northwest end. I began volunteering as a mentor for the camp during the summer of 2013,

after my first year in the Geography PhD program (before taking PFC). I sought out this opportunity as a way to heal and reconnect with my community after a difficult and lonely first year in a discipline I quickly discovered was “as white an enterprise as country and western music or professional golf” (Delaney, 2002, p. 25). As Pulido (2002, 46, 47) reminds us, being one of the few people of colour in any academic space demands significant “psychological and emotional energy” and indeed, I was exhausted.

Through this experience I was able to build meaningful and trusting relationships with members of the organization and young women participating in the programs. This was not a simple or straightforward task as it involved quietly listening to how community members would find my participation useful and delving into a collective process of vulnerability. Together, we shared our life stories, identities, experiences of exclusion and encouraged one another to persist. For example, my encounters with community members almost always started out with the question you’re not supposed to ask, “¿De donde eres? Where are you from?” Unlike our day-to-day experiences with this painful reminder that we are eternal outsiders, it was an invitation to talk about our familia, where we grew up and how we saw ourselves. In other words, it was a way to acknowledge our complexities and begin developing a relationship based on honesty and mutual support.

Connecting with community members and doing organizational work before my placement at MUJER began facilitated my transition into CSL. This was crucial in my case as having students parachute into a marginalized community and leave without sharing the knowledge they have gained often does more harm than good, even in cases where students identify culturally with the community they are involved in (Smith, 2012). As the camp ended I wanted to find a way to continue being active and bridge both my academic and community life. However, I was concerned about the limited time I had to dedicate given the increasing demands of academic work, but my hope was renewed when I saw that PFC was being offered.

Although, PFC gave me an incredible opportunity to weave my community work into my academic life, it was a significant time commitment to begin and sustain the relationships. I’m also aware that this lengthy process of community engagement isn’t as valued as finishing your comprehensive exams in your first year or proposal in your second, both things I failed to do. Yet, the experiences and relationships I gained have allowed me to take on more leadership positions within my community promoting gender-based violence prevention and anti-racist feminist education, which I deeply value. Therefore, I strongly believe that in order to meaningfully move towards CSL, the standards for being a “successful” student need to be reimagined and a greater appreciation for the contributions of students from racialized communities is required.

Reflecting on our experiences, it is clear that key to building authentic relationships with community partners involves starting this process well in advance of the course’s commencement. Prior knowledge and experience were critical to promoting reciprocal and trusting relationships. At the same time significant resources went into fostering these relationships, especially time. Mitchell (2008, 2015) similarly found that CSL is a time-intensive commitment, and can pose a significant barrier to instructors and students operating on institutional schedules. The stories shared here indicate that the actors can push back on institutional expectations, which parallels The University of Kentucky Critical Pedagogy Working Group et al.’s (2015) call for “slow scholarship.” Yet, low-income, precarious and

racialized students and instructors will most likely find it difficult to navigate the time commitments of CSL without institutional changes (Verjee, 2012). It is also important to note that sustaining relationships with community partners was impacted by precarious non-profit sector funding and suggests that organizations with less funding supports may not be as able to take part in CSL. Thus, broader institutional changes are needed for CSL to be made more accessible to marginalized students, educators and underfunded organizations.

Fostering a social change perspective: connecting theory and action

As the second element of CSL, we conceptualize fostering a social change perspective as challenging students to understand how social, political, ideological and economic forces create inequities. The testimonios that follow illustrate how we attempted to implement a social change perspective in the classroom and community.

Charles: Students came to the PFC course with different experiences and ideas of social justice. Developing a critical consciousness is rarely an instantaneous moment, but takes time and patience. To do this, we developed a syllabus that explores the historical precedents of social inequity and through class discussions, relate them to the work being done in their placements. We use texts that introduce concepts like racism and heterosexism in planning and service delivery, the non-profit industrial complex and neoliberalism to inculcate a social change perspective. However, I have encountered a number of students that were uneasy and at times resistant to engaging with power structures in readings and discussions. One year, a young, white woman that had not spoken in class, expressed discomfort and that she did not entirely understand ideas of class privilege. I encouraged her to attend my office hours where I was able to listen and ask questions about why she felt uncomfortable. Despite my efforts to convey the importance of understanding power structures in any context, she remained unwilling to reflect on her assumptions and positionality. Through experiences like this I've learned that my role is not to change people's minds, but present alternative perspectives, especially as a white academic who will face significantly less consequences for openly speaking about race, gender and class inequities.

Madeline: When I walked into the PFC class on the first day, the room was packed and I barely found a place to sit. I picked up a syllabus and immediately I knew this wouldn't be a typical service learning course. The required readings: Week 1, *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks (1994); Week 2, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2007); Week 3, *Traditional vs. Critical Service Learning* by Tania Mitchell (2008). It was incredibly exciting to see the contributions of women of colour scholars and activists reflected in my syllabus across each week and not squeezed into one thematic section or presented as supplemental readings.

The curriculum was critical in bringing to the forefront issues of race, gender, class and power in the classroom, but also offered a template to understand my own experiences in post-secondary education. hooks (1994) explains how many working class, students of colour in university are pushed to assimilate and be estranged from their class and cultural roots as a way to gain social mobility. She suggests that they must learn to (re)invent ways to inhabit both worlds. It was through CSL I found an opportunity to do just that. Also, starting from a point of critically reflecting on the non-profit system, motivated me to not shy away from engaging with the contradictions of my placement with MUJER. I would continuously ask myself whether I was advancing social justice or further

entrenching neoliberalism by doing the work of someone who could no longer be paid at the organization due to insufficient grant funding. My volunteering filled the gap of a previously paid staff member whose contract was not renewed. This is a hallmark example of how neoliberal roll-backs in state funding for social welfare programs put greater pressure on already overburdened communities to deliver services with fewer resources, making non-profit workers precarious and ultimately reifying neoliberalism (Bannerji, 2000; Mitchell, 2001).

Charles: Although many of our community partners are working towards social justice goals, at times, student placement projects do not seem to directly tackle power inequities. At first this appeared to be a concerning issue, but after listening to the needs of community organizations, it became clear that certain tasks and projects urgently needed to be completed in order to work towards larger goals of social change. For example, two students working on an evaluation of an oral history project in a low-income neighbourhood were initially frustrated that they were not more deeply engaged in activism and direct contact with the community. As the project developed, they realized how important their research was for the community to learn from past activities and move the project forward successfully. During the class, we held one-on-one meetings and used seminar discussions to encourage students to think about how their projects were situated within broader power structures and entangled in multiple contradictions. This provided students the opportunity to connect theory to practice and critically reflect on the limits and potentials of their placement work. From the annual survey, one student noted that CSL contributed to their “lifelong commitment to civic engagement and social change. I think it also gave students a more realistic picture of how to generate particular kinds of social change, and the opportunity to ‘field-test’ theories about how the world *really* works.”

Madelaine: I worked on MUJER’s Hasta Aquí No Mas/Draw the Line campaign as part of my service learning placement. The purpose of this campaign was to inform and motivate Latin American community members to take action against sexism and sexual violence in their communities. It involved creating two Public Service Announcement (PSA) videos that would help to identify and challenge sexual assault and harassment. Latin American community members across Ontario participated in the project by sharing their perspectives through focus groups, an advisory committee and giving feedback before and after the videos were launched in April 2014.³ My role in this campaign was to collaboratively develop storylines with advisory committee members based off key themes I identified in focus group transcripts.

When analyzing transcripts, at times I encountered deeply sexist comments and wasn’t sure how to represent them in the storylines as I didn’t want to contribute to deficit narratives of Latin Americans. The problems with non-profit workers, researchers and planners perpetuating false, racist and victimizing narratives of racialized communities was a topic we continuously engaged with in the course and I really didn’t want to slip into this pitfall. I voiced my concerns with my community partner who shared she was feeling pressure from outside agencies to play into tropes of the “Latin lover” to make the videos more marketable. To challenge the racist notion that Latin American men are more inclined to be sexually aggressive, we used a strength based approach to creating the storylines by focusing on our community’s values, like educación. Educación is holistic notion of education and incorporates principles of respect, responsibility, cultural pride and humility. The manual I developed as part of my placement project, underscored these values and situated the project within larger systems of oppression that propagate gender-based violence. Thus, we attempted to move away from

a narrative of cultural deficit to what could be understood as a counter-story in Critical Race Theory (Delgado, 1989).

Despite our success, I realized that these kinds of educational campaigns often fall short in addressing other factors like discriminatory hiring practices, the rising cost of living and precarious immigration status, that make racialized, low-income migrant women more vulnerable when abuse occurs. I remember sitting at my desk scrolling through focus group transcripts, when a pregnant woman entered the community centre and approached me, asking in Spanish if I could help her access housing. Although I took her upstairs to see the social service worker I was reminded that despite the efforts of this campaign, it is unable to address larger systemic barriers that are beyond its scope.

Fostering a social change perspective in PFC was a complex process between the instructors, students and community partners. For Madelaine, course readings and MUJER's commitment to implementing an anti-racist feminist approach, strongly supported inculcating a social change orientation. Yet, not all students had placements with a direct social justice focus or were committed to using a critical lens. Instructors approached this challenge by supporting students to connect theory with action regardless of their placement projects, not by compelling community partners to adjust their initiatives. These tensions reflect Holdsworth and Quinn's (2012, p. 403) finding that student volunteering cannot simply be regarded as a "win/win activity," since there are complicated power processes at play that can serve to perpetuate and challenge inequity. Our case study echoes what human geographers have shown before – that the university and non-profit sector are paradoxical spaces (Oldfield, 2008; Trudeau, 2012) – but, builds on these discussions by showing how students and instructors can navigate, and even confront institutional barriers. Yet, it's important to state that pushing against institutional barriers still carries negative consequences, especially for racialized academics (Mahtani, 2014) and in this case the instructor most likely did not due to his positionality. Furthermore, it's clear that a CSL process works towards, but does not guarantee complete social transformation and that this goal would be beyond the scope of any student project or course.

Redistributing power in the classroom: negotiating unpredictability and working across difference

As the third element of CSL, Mitchell (2008) proposes that redistributing and sharing power more equitably in a CSL classroom stems from disrupting dichotomies of student-teacher and server-served. In the following testimonios we share experiences of redistributing power and contesting dichotomies in the classroom.

Charles: Through the design of PFC, we attempted to trouble assumptions about teachers (as instructor) and students (as learners). During the early weeks of the course we tried to establish a learning space where students and instructors felt open to having critical and sometimes difficult conversations about power inequity. In the second week, we created a community contract that outlined the kinds of interactions we collectively wanted to encourage and discourage within the group. Also, the syllabus was open to revision as we progressed through the course and the second term was designed and facilitated by the students. In the annual survey, a student commented, "What I found really valuable was that the instructors tried to make us all feel comfortable with one another and to express our points of views. It's a very unique classroom setting I experienced. This is

the first time it felt okay to express personal opinions and share them in front of a bigger audience.”

However, this is not always an easy place for a course instructor because it redistributes control of the classroom among the students and can be extremely unpredictable. Unpredictability impacts students as well. For many, this was the first time they had taken a CSL course and were inevitably concerned about their final grades. I tried to navigate this challenge by suggesting that this course be evaluated as a pass/fail, which unfortunately was not an option in the department. In response, we implemented a collaborative grading process that involved input from students and the community partners in assessing their experiences with the CSL process. Beyond scaffolding assignments, we solicited qualitative feedback at multiple points throughout the course and used formal feedback, regular meetings and reflections to collaboratively assess communication and participation. Thus, evaluation was not simply based on the final product or the output of the work, but focused on the processes of engagement.

Madelaine: It was explained that we would be responsible to determine the topics and lesson plans based on issues we encountered in our placements. I had never seen this approach before, and at first it felt overwhelming – what did I know about service learning or the non-profit sector? Having instructors provide supports with developing lesson plans made this task less daunting. Yet, power differences within the student group were not entirely addressed as I felt my voice was at times not heard or appreciated. This challenge was compounded by the large class size which, at times, made it difficult to engage with the wide range of student interests and needs. When we were discussing what topics to cover, I suggested it would be important to focus on the politics of engaging racialized communities in the context of our different placement projects. But, the group did not share these interests and took another direction that did not engage with race. I decided that this was not the space to push harder and instead take up these issues in my final assignment.

Since there was so much information collected through focus groups, my immediate thought was to write a research report. However, after discussing it with my placement supervisor we came to the conclusion that a report may not be the most accessible way to share knowledge. My instructor suggested that I design a manual that would support the dissemination of MUJER's PSAs I was working on. My placement supervisor was excited by this prospect as it would allow her to produce an educational tool that would help amplify discussions in the community and serve as an additional output to present to the funder. Although I took the lead in shaping and writing the manual, I regularly discussed the content with the community partner to ensure that it was communicating a strengths-focused, anti-racist and feminist perspective.

In PFC, instructors attempted to redistribute power by providing students (and community partners) with opportunities to shape the course according to their needs and interests. Also, by employing a collaborative approach to grading and constructing student projects, traditional roles and one-way relationships between the instructor (as teacher), the student (as learner) and the community partner (as host), were disrupted. This echoes Hammersley et al.'s (2014) call for student assessments to be focused on their engagement of the process, not the tangible outputs they produced in community engaged learning courses. Yet, in this case, grades still had to be assigned and given formally by instructors, which reinforced the teacher-student hierarchy. These testimonios point to the ways that redistributing power is fraught with the challenge of unpredictability, which institutions are not set-up to handle.

Further, it is important to note that power differences among students were not addressed in the story shared above, and that greater steps need to be taken to address the (re)production of whiteness in geography classrooms (Castleden et al., 2013; Delaney, 2002; Pulido, 2002).

Discussion and conclusions: learning from testimonio

This paper has explored the complexities of implementing CSL in the context of a graduate geography course. By telling our testimonios as a student and instructor, we have underscored the importance of lived experience and memory as valuable sources of knowledge that can inform pedagogical practice. In writing our testimonios alongside one another and in conversation with other student voices and the scholarly literature, we have articulated a series of facilitators and barriers to operationalizing CSL. We have shown that authentic relationships can be supported by high levels of collaboration and building on existing partnerships, but that this process can be limited by the significant resources required. Making explicit connections between theory and practice through critical reflection is a key aspect of fostering social change perspectives. This can be aided by carefully and collectively selecting course content and recognizing that students can have different experiences and perspectives of social justice which need to be unpacked and addressed. Finally, redistributing power in the classroom can disrupt expected roles of participants which can lead to unpredictability. While this can result in positive learning and action outcomes, it can also be challenging in the context of institutional structures and expectations.

Together, our testimonios demonstrate how using a CSL approach opens opportunities for confronting power structures and institutional barriers in the university and non-profit sector. For example, this CSL course provided Madelaine a means through which to stay connected to her community at time when she felt very isolated in a predominantly white discipline. Furthermore, CSL also enabled her to engage in anti-violence activism in a culturally responsive way. Other students echoed the importance of CSL in giving their academic work purpose beyond the university, but practically in the service of the goals of marginalized communities. At the same time, our stories point to the ways CSL is limited in its capacity to achieve social transformation, as it is mired in the very power structures it attempts to challenge. Yet, despite its limitations, moving away from conventional service learning towards CSL is still a significant step to take for educators committed to social justice as a way to begin addressing power and inequity in the university and society.

While this paper does not examine the perspectives of community partner organizations, the testimonios shared, along with other student voices, demonstrate the potential of CSL in forwarding social justice inside and outside the classroom. PFC's focus was on community development and applied urban geography education, yet CSL was used as an alternative pedagogical approach to connect students, community partners and academic faculty in a larger project of social transformation. Since a key facet of CSL is to be responsive to the context in which it is being carried out, CSL experiences can be very diverse. As such, the purpose of these findings is to illuminate how CSL was carried out in this particular context, so that others can develop creative ways to apply CSL principles in their classroom. For example, undergraduate and graduate courses in social and cultural geography, feminist geography and urban geography focusing on a range of topics from globalization, migration to gentrification could implement a CSL approach by working to build authentic relationships with communities, redistributing power in the classroom and implementing a social

change orientation in curriculum and placement projects. To this end, we have developed a list of initial questions to serve as a starting point for educators to consider when engaging in the process of CSL.

- What kinds of privilege do I bring to my role as an instructor and/or how have I been marginalized within the academy?
- How does my syllabus and other course material attend to race, gender and other axes of difference? Are there gaps in these areas and what can I do to address them?
- Who do I understand my students to be? How can I make a welcoming and safer learning environment for racialized students and students from other marginalized communities?
- How can I make space in my classroom that bolsters meaningful conversation and supports student input and creativity?
- What relationships do I already have with local communities? What work would need to be done to strengthen those relationships or build new ones?
- How can I connect students to appropriate service learning placements that meet academic and community needs?
- Am I listening to, and understanding the needs and goals of community partners?
- Where may I encounter challenges and what supports do I need to navigate them?

Further, there is a need for more research in human geography using testimonios from students and community-based organizations that would provide greater insight on the lived experiences of CSL participants. Testimonios are especially important as these rich narratives illustrate a nuanced and contextual portrait of the limitations and efficacy of CSL in practice that go beyond the information that can be extracted in survey data. Future studies could also shed light on how CSL can be made more accessible and impactful by focusing on the perspectives of students from marginalized communities and non-profit organizations mired in neoliberalism.

CSL should not be interpreted as an immediate solution to dismantling oppressive power structures. As the testimonios demonstrate, the ways that questions of difference and race unfolded in the CSL classroom were difficult to navigate and at times resulted in failure. Therefore, our testimonios echo what critical geographers have called for over the last three decades – the need to address race and white supremacy in geography education and scholarship (Delaney, 2002; Mahtani, 2014; Pulido, 2002). It is also apparent that institutional practices continue to thwart CSL efforts. Thus, implementing CSL pedagogy will require a sustained commitment to transforming the university and non-profit sector. As a number of scholars have already noted, part of the work of transforming the academy is sharing examples of critical pedagogies in order to learn from one another and build innovative techniques (Mahtani, 2014; The University of Kentucky Critical Pedagogy Working Group et al., 2015). We hope that our testimonios can contribute to these efforts and serve as pedagogical tools for educators and students interested in exploring alternative teaching strategies that grapple with difference, power and social justice.

Notes

1. Latinx and Chicanx are gender-neutral terms that refer to people of Latin American descent, and Mexican descent respectively, who identify across a spectrum of gender identities.

2. Papeletos guardados directly translated into Spanish means protected written pieces of paper. It refers to the ways women of colour safeguard their experiences, memories and notions of self that are silenced, but recovered through their telling (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).
3. The videos are available at <http://mujer.ca/home/en/>.

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