

Activism Beyond the Classroom
Philadelphia Communities Podcast Introduction

Recorded by Jessica Ch'ng and Rehana Odendaal on Tuesday, November 26
at Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania

Jessica C.:

And we're live from Van Pelt Library.

Rehana O.:

Hi everyone. My name is Rehana Odendaal, and I am recording today with my great teammate. Jessica, do you want to introduce yourself?

Jessica C.:

Hi everyone. My name is Jessica Ch'ng. I'm a master's student at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

Rehana O.:

We are two members of the team that have been working with the Activism Beyond the Classroom course that we're doing and have focused our team section on Philadelphia communities. So we created a two-class syllabus that looked at both the erasure of different communities in Philadelphia and the place that we now call Philadelphia, as well as some of the ways in which communities have resisted and reclaimed space in, in this city. In our course, well, in our syllabus and then through the interviews that we did, we really tried to act as a starting point for these conversations and we recognize we could never capture all of the stories about Philadelphia communities, but we wanted to create an opportunity to think a little bit differently about what history, erasure, resistance and reclamation means in this place that we call Philadelphia.

Jessica C.:

Yeah. And so in this recording, we're attempting to provide an introduction to our introduction to Philadelphia communities and give you an overview of what we covered in these two classes and in our subsequent podcasts. So in both classes we opened with a land acknowledgement, which I will read for you all. We acknowledge that the land on which we gather today are the ancestral lands of the Lenni Lenape people whose presence and resilience and Pennsylvania continues to this day. We take this opportunity to honor the original caretakers of this land and recognize the histories of land theft, violence erasure, and oppression that have brought our institutions and ourselves here. And I think it's important to do these land acknowledgements, not just because it's a nice thing to do, it's also the right thing to do. It's a way of disrupting those cycles of erasure and marginalization.

Rehana O.:

Could you say a few words about what a land acknowledgement is and why it's important?

Jessica C.:

Land acknowledgements often take place at the beginning of public events or ceremonies or presentations and they serve as a way to, I think, acknowledge the history of the spaces that we

are on, and for institutions to recognize that they're often located on lands that were unjustly taken from indigenous peoples. I think land acknowledgements, they shouldn't just acknowledge the peoples on whose lands institutions occupy lands that were, again, unjustly taken. They should try to disrupt indigenous erasure. And so I think there's necessarily a critical element to land acknowledgements, this sense of, do we and do our institutions really belong here? If we want to honor and celebrate the, the former caretakers of this land or the ancestral caretakers of this land, what does it mean for us to be here? And how do we advance justice knowing that we are on land that was stolen from indigenous peoples?

Rehana O.:

And I just wanted to say like, as someone coming from South Africa, this was the first time that I really, heard a land acknowledgement done in this particular way, but we definitely have our own politics around indigenous erasure and genocide in South Africa. And what I found really powerful about this is that it did really have that effect of not only recognizing the Lenni Lenape people that were on this land, but also just reminding me about the shared struggles of indigenous people across the globe. And I think our listeners will hopefully be able to think about critically in the spaces, uh, that they interact with in their lives.

Jessica C.:

Yeah. And I'm definitely indebted to many, many, many other scholars, particularly indigenous scholars who discuss the importance of land acknowledgements and also the insufficiency of land acknowledgements, that they are not really enough, um, in addressing injustice. There's a quote by Chelsea Vowel, who is an indigenous scholar, that I think really sort of captures the purpose of land acknowledgements well. She says, quote, "If we think of territorial acknowledgements as sites of potential disruption, they can be transformative acts that to some extent undo indigenous erasure. I believe this is true as long as these acknowledgements discomfit both those speaking and hearing the words. The fact of indigenous presence should force non-indigenous peoples to confront their own place on these lands." End quote. And I also think that in doing a land acknowledgement it's, it's very much related to the theme of our syllabus, right? If we're talking about spaces and belonging, um, you know, the history of indigenous land theft is, I think, a prime example of communities being told that they do not belong to a place or a land. Um, or even just completely changing the, um, the way that we think about space and land ownership. Right. Um, so I think it's very, very much related to the theme of our syllabus.

Rehana O.:

And so we split our syllabus up into two courses or two classes. We, the first class that we focused on one of our really grounding concepts was this idea of belonging and thinking about who belongs in particular spaces. Um, and for that the central piece that we read was "Belonging and the politics of belonging" by Nira Yuval-Davis. We've got two quotes that we felt really captured the essence of, of her reading. The first one is, quote, "People can 'belong' in many different ways and to many different objects of attachment. These can vary from a particular person to the whole of humanity in a concrete or abstract way. Belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others in a stable, contested, or transient way. Even in its most stable primordial forms, however, belonging is always a dynamic process. It is not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power

relations," end quote. And I think that although there are a lot of big and complicated sounding words in there, that quote really captures the fact that belonging is not something that is done in isolation. It is not something that people outside your experience can declare that you do or do not belong because it is also an experience thing. Um, but that it is also not something that is stable in the sense that it doesn't change in response to the environments, the person that you, that you are as, as you develop and the way that society around you develops. The second quote is, quote, "The politics of belonging involves not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community, of belonging by the hegemonic powers, but also their contestation and challenge by other political agents. It is important to recognize however that such political agents struggle both for the promotion of their specific projects in the construction of the collectivity and its boundaries. And at the same time use these ideologies and projects in order to promote their own power positions within and outside the collectivity," end quote. And really what that quote captures is the fact that belonging isn't just a feeling, but it's a political process that has been used across our history to, um, exert power over people, for people to claim power and for people to maintain their own sense of power.

Jessica C.:

And I think this reading shows both the internal and external dimensions of belonging, that belonging is something that we ourselves identify with and experience. And we ourselves to some degree can decide to whom we belong, where we belong, and so forth. But it's also in some ways externally determined to um, and politicized externally. Um, other people can police the boundaries of community or, um, sort of disconnect people from spaces and um, other things that people might feel like they belong to. Um, so belonging is not only sort of an internal experience and identification, it's also politicized and it's also externally influenced as well.

Rehana O.:

Yeah. And the last part also I think really emphasizes the fact that these boundaries are not only physical boundaries, so it's not only about being forced off land or kept in particular communities, but they can be, um, you know, abstract in a sense in that it's cultural boundaries, um, stereotypes and those sorts of things, which, which stop people from belonging. And I think it also poses an important question, uh, to the readers around in the ways that we feel that we identify with the community or not, who are those who are outside our own boundaries of belonging. And that's not to say that they shouldn't be some people who are outside those areas, but sometimes being conscious of who we think of as our own communities and how we think of other communities is really important in, um, in this dynamic.

Jessica C.:

Yeah. And I think another question, these readings prompt for readers is a question sort of about how, how does belonging and the politics of belonging overlay existing power relations, um, how do people who have power get to decide who belongs in a community or even in other communities? And how can we think about power from below, power laterally, as we think about our own communities? And so our additional readings focused on black communities and indigenous communities and what is presently Philadelphia and Pennsylvania. As we read these texts and as we discussed in class, we asked ourselves, "Who is constructed as belonging in what is currently Philadelphia and at the university of Pennsylvania? How have communities of color

and indigenous communities been pushed out of Philadelphia physically, symbolically and narratively?"

Rehana O.:

Our second class we considered how communities in Philadelphia and beyond are resisting erasure and reclaiming spaces. This idea was to balance out the sense of not belonging by looking at the ways in which often activism and resistance and reclamation says we do belong in particular spaces. You do need to remember us. Um, we've read a chapter from George Lipsitz's book, *How Racism Takes Place*, on the black spatial imaginary. We read "Indigenous survivance and the urban musical practice" by Liz Przybylski. We read "Immigrant resistance in the age of Trump" and about the resistance zones in Philadelphia and that was really for us to recognize that immigrant communities are also part of the space that we are occupying. We read "Black Cultural Capital," which is not about Philadelphia specifically, but really speaks about ways in which different communities can claim understandings and belonging through a positive identification of cultural capital. And we included videos and podcasts that featured both local stories and local voices as a mechanism for us to get to know the stories that we don't currently or we didn't know beforehand.

Jessica C.:

And these readings discuss how we might think about space and collectivity differently, how we might think about synthesis, renewal and creativity as forms of resistance, and how we might navigate and negotiate the various intersections, contradictions, incommensurabilities, and solidarities between different resistance movements.

Rehana O.:

For these interviews we wanted to hear the stories behind the histories that we'd been reading about in class and think about different ways of engaging with history and space. We interviewed Adam DePaul a leader of the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania and Kalela Williams of Black History Maven, which has a Facebook page for people who are interested in learning about the histories of the space that is now Philadelphia.

Jessica C.:

We hope that our syllabus and podcasts provide a starting point for our listeners and our readers to learn about what is currently Philadelphia and our relationship to this city, this land and this community. We hope you enjoy.