

## EMBODIED LEARNING AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

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### Abstract:

This piece considers the role of the physical body in learning, as we navigate the intricacies of social distancing and virtual schooling. It asks what happens when we consider the body as text? What might we discover about how different bodies experience our current reality? How might these questions help educators learn from and support communities especially affected by the systems of inequity made even more apparent at this critical moment? To respond to these questions, I center the voice of Desa (pseudonym), a high school student with whom I worked during the past year of fieldwork at a youth internship program for a local community garden and farm. One experience Desa shared with me has helped to ground and deepen my inquiry into the ways in which food, in particular, can be a lens through which we can better understand embodied learning and community resilience. With her permission, I share her stories, and the thinking they inspired, with you.

**Keywords:** Embodied learning, critical literacy, community health, food literacy, youth civic engagement

### Activating memory and imagination

I'm gonna tell you exactly how I had my first, like, dream... the first one I ever understood. [Mr. S] had just taught me about the okra and how okra had gotten to the land and how women were literally throwing themselves over the boats with they babies. And like I was imagining everything while he was talking. It was just like I can feel this in my heart like my whole entire body could feel it. Like what they were feeling. And when I went home, I had walked straight past my mom... and I walked upstairs and laid down and I was laying down for like, ten minutes, just like looking up at the roof or at the ceiling and then I had gone to sleep. And I had a dream of exactly what [Mr. S] was telling me about, but I had imagined myself in the dream... And that's the first time I realized, okay.. I need to be at this farm. As long as I can, I'm gonna be there. (Desa, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

Desa shared this reflection with me after we finished packaging supplies for youth interns working at the farm. Because of COVID-19, this year's cohort of interns would not be working together in the regular fashion. Instead of attending in-person, land-based lessons on African Diasporic farming traditions, wellness practices, and cooking, interns had virtual lessons. Youth leaders like Desa and program educators like myself worked to get cooking and gardening kits ready so they could be delivered to interns' homes in time for their virtual lessons.

Desa worked diligently on this task, retrieving supplies from obscure nooks in the farm's education center with ease. This was her fourth summer at the farm and at 18, she was part of a small cohort of "veteran" students who took on leadership roles at the farm. I took much of my direction from her. As she gave me gentle instructions on what to label and where to put supplies, she wove in storytelling. The story from the opening quote references a lesson she had learned from "Mr. S." Leah Penniman, farmer, educator, racial justice activist, and colleague of Mr. S, writes of this story in her book. She talks about the great, great grandmothers of early 19th century West Africa, who

As insurance for an uncertain future...began the practice of braiding rice, okra, and millet seeds into their hair. While there were no report-backs from the other side of the transatlantic slave trade, and rumors abounded that white people were capturing Africans to eat us, they still had the audacity to hope to imagine a future on soil. (Penniman, 2018, p.150)

It did not surprise me that Desa was so gripped by the story of Leah's and her ancestors braiding seeds into their hair before facing unthinkable atrocities on the transatlantic slave trade. Desa took what she learned at the farm seriously. She spoke to me about how her Sierra Leonean roots inform how she perceived what she learned. Desa's dad is from Sierra Leone, he moved back there a while ago and she does not get to see him as much anymore. Desa shared that some of the dishes she learned at the farm reminded her of the dishes her dad made while she was growing up. In particular, she noted that using palm oil, which is prevalent in West African cuisine, to cook dishes at the farm made her feel more connected to her dad and to her culture. Desa's educational experiences at the farm, of cooking with palm oil and learning about the history of okra, speak to the ways in

which food can activate an embodied sense of memory and imagination.

Desa's stories are part of a wider narrative around how food can activate learning and agency. In her ethnography of Black food geographies in Washington DC, anthropologist Ashanti Reese notes, "The ways residents remembered, imagined, and engaged the past were important, because they measured (or critiqued) food access and consumption in the present based on the nostalgic food imaginaries they created" (Reese, 2019, p. 89). The residents in Reese's study found ways to exert agency even amidst macrosociological and geopolitical forces that inhibited equitable food access, quality, and security in their town. Reese's findings, like Desa's experiences, highlight the role that memory and imagination can play in helping us critically navigate the structural constraints that affect our personal and communal food landscapes. In the opening quote, Desa indicated that after internalizing the story of the Okra, of the women who sewed seeds into their hair and of the women who "were literally throwing themselves over the boats with their babies," she had a strong desire to be at the farm, to be part of a community dedicated to teaching and learning around issues of food justice and sovereignty.

Food can also be an important tool for engaging an embodied sense of criticality in more traditional educational contexts. Scholar of Indigenous Studies, Troy A. Richardson, argues that food-centered experiences in schools can go beyond a "food, folk, and fun" paradigm that "exoticizes difference, does not address a comprehensive curricular agenda on diversity, and avoids engagement with structural inequality in schools and society" (Richardson, 2010, p. 108). Instead, he urges educators to consider how everyday embodied acts of purchasing food, preparing food, eating, disposing of food, talking about food, etc., can promote opportunities to activate embodied criticality around issues of civic engagement, community building, social reconstruction, and cultural negotiation.

### **Critical, embodied learning**

As an educator and emerging literacy researcher, I'm interested in what a critical engagement with food "before and beyond the plate" (Widener & Karides, 2014) can do for how citizens read the word and the world (Friere & Macedo, 1987). Many critical theory, literacy, and food studies scholars argue that this sort of critical engagement goes beyond the act of eating locally or assiduously reading nutrition labels; rather it is about recognizing which values and which groups of people tend to be represented, privileged, or ignored across all levels of the food system, and using this understanding to address issues of injustice both within and outside of the food system (Cairns, 2008; Franzen & Peters, 2019; Renwick & Powell, 2019; Yamashita & Robinson 2016). Desa's experience learning the history of okra, to me, reflects a type of critical, embodied learning. As She read her body as text and indicated that this reading activated questions and concerns in her that make her want to pursue learning at the farm.

Desa conveys her criticality in a way that Johnson and Vasudeven (2012) might argue could be "underrecognized" or could "defy rationality" in traditional learning spaces. Johnson and Vasudevan argue for a turn to the "local, daily texts of the body" in order to understand how young people "embody criticality as they perform themselves in various contexts" (2012, p. 39). They encourage educators to explore what happens when we put embodied learning at the center of our pedagogy. For Desa, learning about the history of okra in this country was not just intellectually stimulating, it activated her conscious and subconscious embodied sense of self. In the opening quote, Desa spoke of being able to feel the story of her ancestors in her "heart" and "whole entire body", of being able to "feel what they were feeling." She was specific about the embodied actions she engaged in after learning about the history of okra (e.g. walking passed her mom, laying down, staring at the ceiling). In her dream, she experienced these stories not as a witness, but as an agentic participant.

The stories of braiding seeds into hair and of facing uncertainty, brutality, and mortality along the Atlantic, awoke in Desa a sense of viscerality that prompted her to project herself into the narrative of her ancestors. Dancer and scholar, S. Ama Wray, argues that "embodied cognition," – which privileges the notion that "mental perceptions are arrived upon through the totality of the body and the environment, rather than in spite of them" (Wray, 2017, p. 25) – is informed by social and cultural phenomena. She highlights that many embodied actions, including but not limited to those represented in traditional West African dances, carry with them ways of knowing and being that connect people within cultural groups across time and space. Learning about a culturally specific embodied action (e.g. braiding hair into seeds) helped to inspire Desa to commit to spending time at the farm where we now work, a space dedicated to helping young people engage questions of power, history and culture within the food system, for "as long as [she] can." Desa's experience, to me, highlights one of a myriad of ways in which culturally specific embodied actions can inform critical inquiry.

### **Implications for learning in the midst of global crises**

As we navigate the intersecting crises of COVID-19 and persistent regimes of racial injustice, it is important to consider how different bodies are affected by the current reality. Youth of color are tasked with learning how to be citizens and leaders while navigating a global pandemic exacerbated by the health inequities and environmental racism already baked into an unjust food and social system. In the face of these monumental challenges, many youth of color, like Desa, continue to work with their communities to secure a healthier, safer, and more just future. These young people are drawing from various embodied ways of knowing and being, spread across various cultural Diasporas. As schooling moves into the home and into the community, it may

be an opportune time to consider the nuanced ways in which families and communities learn and grow together.

The teachers and school leaders I work with as part of my graduate work as well as at the farm are facing difficult choices and tasks as the world tries to figure out what education looks like in the age of COVID-19. As we experience the complexities of physical distancing and virtual schooling, I wonder if there are ways we can engage critical, embodied learning. I wonder what we can learn from the communities who are affected most by the injustices this pandemic is only making more apparent. As I continue to learn from young people like Desa, I am struck by the innovative ways they are cultivating reflective practices that connect them to their bodies, to their ancestors, to their communities, and to the land. I recognize that this is not a panacea, that we must proceed with care and caution as embodied learning can be painful and traumatic especially given the current climate. However, at the moment, I am inspired by what I see, and I am hopeful.

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