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Reading the Local in the New Now: Mapping Hidden Opportunities for Civic Engagement in the First Virtual City as Text™ Faculty Institute

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Reading the Local in the New Now:
Mapping Hidden Opportunities for Civic
Engagement in the First Virtual
City as Text™ Faculty Institute

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In spring 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic in full force, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) Place as Text (PAT) Committee reimagined its longstanding City as Text™ (CAT) Faculty

Institute model as an experimental virtual training titled “Reading the Local in the New Now” (RLNN). With the cancellation of two scheduled CAT Faculty Institutes because of the pandemic, the committee quickly shifted gears to develop and offer a fully online version of the program. Shorter in length, with participants joining from their homes across the country, the Institute was designed with key CAT principles as its foundation (Braid and Long; Long; Machonis). In this chapter, the RLNN facilitators outline how we conceived of and created the Institute, and we describe the participants’ processes of engaging with it. In retrospect, we realized how closely both groups—facilitators and participants—practiced mapping, observing, listening, and reflecting as an integral part of our co-engagement, illustrating how well these time-tested CAT strategies stand up to the challenges of our contemporary moment.

At the same time, the historical context of this Institute meant that Reading the Local in the New Now Institute could not be identical to the Faculty Institute structures offered for over thirty years through NCHC. Necessitated by government-imposed restrictions, CDC and state health guidelines, higher education and K–12 policies, and personal and familial precautions, we were essentially called home to protect our communities. As a result, facilitators needed to adapt the well-established methods of place-based exploration to new strategies for exploring places as text.

The changes strikingly revealed new possibilities for civic engagement. In *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, Thomas Ehrlich defines civic engagement as “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference” (vi). Feeling some connection with a community is a first step to becoming engaged enough to “make a difference” in it, but what happens to civic engagement when individuals are forced by a global pandemic to isolate from one another and their community spaces? What strategies might help people stay connected with their communities given health and safety mandates that require isolation and physical distancing? Such questions were

foundational in the development of the experimental virtual CAT Institute.

What the Reading the Local in the New Now Institute revealed, as participants scouted their own routes and created multimodal maps to capture their experiences, was a new kind of cartography. Their collections of observations, interpretations, and reflections organically documented the need of all of us to participate in civic engagement as a developing theme of the Institute. As RLNN participants conducted their walkabouts, some were fearful of how their movements would be perceived. Participants moved, often on their own, along silent streets, cul-de-sacs, and campuses void of commotion. They explored open spaces in pairs or, most frequently, alone, or they mindfully observed their suburban backyards, ranches, or farms as if seeing the familiar for the first time. The transect of the internal and external landscape cut sharply through the walkabout, and new maps were literally drawn that emphasized the unseen systems of place, where people were excluded, and points for civic deliberation and action. In the absence of others and of the foundational CAT strategy of sending participants out in small groups, where routes within a centralized location could not be scouted in advance, the most poignant thread in the group conversations turned to race. Inclusion and access led to a broader, resounding question of how everyone could engage in CAT explorations as the Black Lives Matter protests and social injustices loomed large.

DESIGNING READING THE LOCAL IN THE NEW NOW CITY AS TEXT INSTITUTE

While facilitators were planning the RLNN virtual CAT Faculty Institute, we were also adjusting to new ways of connecting digitally and noticing the impact these changes had on ourselves, our colleagues, and our students. With the spring 2020 pivot to remote learning and nationwide shutdowns of colleges and universities, we found that we were both more separate from and more connected to our communities because of our reliance on applications like Zoom. The quick shift to secure public health by isolating, wearing masks, and maintaining six feet of physical distance only

briefly preceded a wave of unrest as city streets surged with protests against social injustice, sparked (this time) by George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers. The racial unrest that plagued the nation during the summer of 2020 and beyond did not leave us immune. In living these moments, we noticed that we *see*, now more than ever, into the private lives of others. The new digital landscape that slammed the traditional classroom door at the start of the pandemic also flung open a new window that forced us to move beyond our own intellectual comfort zones and begin to rethink what it means to engage civically from our mostly privileged position within honors colleges and programs across the U.S.

We *see* our students attend synchronous Zoom sessions from the front seat of their cars with what looks like a back seat full of their belongings. We *see* our students, who are clearly exhausted from their overnight shifts monitoring protests, attending to those with COVID at the local ER, and restocking nearly empty grocery supply shelves. We *see* most of them work just as hard to submit their homework in a timely fashion. All of us have been confronted by the two-inch square digital boxes that move into our intimate spaces (Zoom, GoogleMeet) and put our formerly private places on display for all to witness. In theory, this forced move to online honors education provides us the opportunity to attend to the often-invisible systems that construct our students' and colleagues' personal landscapes. Living ever more presently in this ever-expanding digital realm, we realized the potential for civic engagement begins even before we cross the threshold of our own front door into the greater world.

With this context in mind, we designed RLNN to mirror, though not replicate, the foundational elements of CAT Faculty Institutes: daily explorations, written assignments, and a workshop focused on helping participants develop their own projects at their home institutions. RLNN was held over three days with approximately three hours of synchronous Zoom meetings per day. On day one was a required "Initial Impressions" walkabout and, on day two, one longer "Exploration." An additional "Exploration" was designed and offered as an optional opportunity. Instead of working in teams,

participants were sent out individually to locations of their choice near their homes and colleges, and then they Zoomed into the daily debriefs and discussions. Reflective assignments were key to the Institute and included “Initial Observations” and “Turning Point” assignments. Participants were encouraged to use multimedia platforms to create these assignments, combining text, image, sound, and technology in a variety of ways. The opportunity to workshop participants’ own CAT projects was included on the third day.

As the facilitators planned RLNN, we imagined how the fabric already uniting City as Text pedagogy with civic engagement might be woven anew to better serve the contemporary moment. In fact, the term “New Now” was specifically selected for the title in order to represent the pandemic era’s demand for physical distancing, the shutdown of many communities across the country, and how, unlike typical CAT Faculty Institutes, participants were likely going to be unable to interact with other people while conducting the observation assignments. The “New Now” also prompted participants to relate the explorations of familiar spaces with larger questions of civic engagement, public health, and social unrest as other lenses for understanding the complexity of place.

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS: MAPPING, OBSERVATION, AND RADICAL CARTOGRAPHY

In-person CAT Institutes have long relied on maps and cognitive mapmaking as an essential part of the experience. At the beginning of Institutes, participants are given a map—usually one from the local tourism office—and asked to use it to plan routes to their exploration sites and around the location. They are explicitly directed not to rely on their phones for turn-by-turn directions. When participants work to situate themselves and navigate without using GPS, they engage their hippocampus, which is the part of the brain that helps people orient themselves spatially, recall past events, and imagine themselves into the future. To imagine oneself into the future includes not only literal and spatial imaginings (“If I turn right on this block, I’ll end up at the park in three blocks”) but

also an understanding of self-awareness, choice, and consequence. For example, in a recent op-ed, M. R. O'Connor, a science journalist and author of *Wayfinding: The Science and Mystery of How Humans Navigate the World*, connects this exercise of the hippocampus with creating a love of place, which is an essential step in fostering civic engagement. O'Connor writes:

Practicing navigation is a powerful form of engagement with the environment that can inspire a greater sense of stewardship. Finding our way on our own—using perception, empirical observation and problem-solving skills—forces us to attune ourselves to the world. And by turning our attention to the physical landscape that sustains and connects us, we can nourish ‘topophilia,’ a sense of attachment and love for place.

Conventional Institutes are always pre-scouted by CAT facilitators who engage with routes in advance, but in the RLNN Institute, members were on their own. We had to address not relying on any single paper map. In fact, since many participants were exploring neighborhoods and landscapes already familiar to them, the use of maps at the outset of each exploration would have been significantly less useful than during a regular Institute. Instead, facilitators simply distributed the “Initial Impressions” and “Exploration” assignments and left it up to individuals to decide how to navigate the terrain. Oddly enough, in contrast to past Institutes, many colleagues created their own maps of their locations and turned these maps in as assignments. Thus, maps surfaced in a new way as an artifact of participants’ reflections, replacing the typical written reflection of Institutes with a multimodal one.

Part of the popularity of mapping as the artifact of the “Initial Impressions” assignment in RLNN was that facilitators offered Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping platforms as a potential technology to create multimedia reflections. Computer-generated maps, such as Google Maps, gave geographic reference points (streets, parks, rivers, shopping malls) in a simplified aerial view onto which participants could layer their observations and experiences. In effect, many participants created their own “story

maps” by enhancing a computer-generated map with written statements, photographs, videos, and audio clips to create an interactive archive of their neighborhoods and town centers. Such maps helped latch the known world to their experiences of it, effectively combining personal experience and knowledge and revealing a deeper sense of place.

Through these maps, participants also challenged the most common narratives of the places they explored as they engaged in defining underlying power structures and systems. In a sense, this engagement is a form of radical cartography, which can be defined as “the practice of mapmaking that subverts conventional notions in order to actively promote social change” (Bhagat and Mogel 6). Through inquiry and engagement, this form of cartography asks creators to make maps that marry issues to place, whether the issues are land use, migration, surveillance, or something else altogether. For instance, one participant mapped self-made videos onto a public garden, revealing a complex history of socioeconomic class and access in his town. Many others mapped flags and street-facing displays supporting Black Lives Matter, presenting rainbows, or suggesting other beliefs and political views tied to neighborhoods. A participant in Alabama mapped signage related to the Civil Rights Movement and the Confederacy, finding that many of these signs were located in the same few city blocks and leading to a fruitful discussion about the significance of conflicting messages sharing space.

During the virtual CAT Institute, several participants who made their own maps using free technology realized that the base layer of their maps came with information that they did not want to highlight. While important navigational features are often named on these maps, some platforms also highlight businesses that have paid for advertising. Some of these businesses, mostly big box stores and chains, were more visible than the street names of the business location. In designing their own maps, participants realized that many of the things they wanted to make visible—things they noted during their reflections—were not necessarily represented on the free institutional maps. Once tied to colonialism and now tied to capitalism, cartography is not as neutral as it may appear.

This realization highlights one way that maps can be used as a rhetorical tool in our own honors classes to help students pinpoint their values. As the Institute for Applied Autonomy points out in an essay on tactical media and cartographies:

maps don't merely represent space, they shape arguments; they set discursive boundaries and identify objects to be considered. When individuals make their own maps, they offer an expression of what they consider important, what they consider to be 'of interest,' and for what they are willing to fight. (35)

By tying issues to place, the increased use of mapping in this Institute has provided another pathway to consider CAT's role in civic engagement.

EXPLORATION I:

OBSERVING, LISTENING, AND AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

A key element of CAT pedagogy is asking participants to engage with people who live and work in the location where the Institute is being held. In part for this reason, many CAT Institutes have been held in urban areas where human interaction is readily present and accessible. Densely populated cities like Chicago, Boston, and Las Vegas lend themselves easily to the types of explorations for which CAT is best known, implicitly inviting participants to connect with the built and human communities. Even when CAT Institutes are held in non-urban spaces—Yellowstone National Park, for instance, or Harlaxton, England—there is an expectation that interaction with other people—rangers, tourists, and servers at the local dive—will be a central part of the daily explorations. In the case of RLNN, however, because participants were staying home, some in rural areas, we needed to construct an experience that was true to the spirit of CAT even though participants might not see another person during their walkabout nor have the opportunity to engage in or eavesdrop on conversations. If a participant cannot speak directly with another human on the walkabout, can he or she,

alone, converse with the landscape instead and still draw meaningful conclusions about culture and society? To address this question, the facilitators created a series of alternative “rural” assignments that guided Institute participants to make connections between the physical and cultural constructions of landscape.

The rural alternative assignments took the traditional CAT prompts and added considerations that might be useful for participants exploring spaces where there could be little to no face-to-face human interaction. Assignments asked participants to home in on sensory description rather than interpersonal interactions and then to consider the descriptions in associated reflections. For example, in one of the Exploration assignments, participants were asked to do the following:

Listen to the landscape mindfully using all of your senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, movement, and muscle memory. Are there visual observations you haven’t already considered? Perhaps find a place to sit quietly and close your eyes as you attend to each of these senses individually. What do you hear (animals, leaves rustling, mosquitos, traffic, machinery, voices)? Describe the quality of the sound. What do you smell (manure, exhaust, rain, berries, grass)? Go for a walk. What do you taste (fruit or vegetables growing, a scent so strong you can taste it)? Touch something and describe that sensation. Consider how the landscape directs your movement. Do you move differently in certain areas of the landscape than in others? When does muscle memory take over (scooping feed, weeding a garden, avoiding a known obstacle)?

Sensory awareness and description are fundamental components of CAT and essential tools of observation. For the RLNN Institute, we welcomed the collection of sensory imagery as a conversation that could be heard when no other human voices could be found.

It turns out that, while one of the facilitators owns a rural horse-property, most of the thirty-seven facilitators/participants lived in urban or suburban areas. Because of state and local social

distancing guidelines, however, many members still chose to combine elements of more traditional CAT prompts with the alternative rural guidelines to explore parks, forests, or neighborhoods with which they had intimate connections. As a result, CAT explorations reimagined for rural spaces became a way for colleagues to connect to the community they were exploring whether it was urban, suburban, or rural. All had the opportunity to deepen their understanding and empathy for those spaces and for the people, animals, and plants that exist there.

Much scholarly energy has been dedicated to conceptualizing landscape as larger than our surroundings because considering landscape requires active engagement on the part of the explorer. Lucy R. Lippard, a visual artist-academic, argues that “landscape can only be seen from outside, as a background for the experience of viewing. The scene is the seen” (8). Here, she uses language from the perspective of an ethnographer, a lens generally adopted to conduct traditional CAT explorations. The researcher looks from the outside to the inside with the aim of bringing together observations about human interaction in an ethical manner. The RLNN facilitators’ task was to translate this ethnographic approach to an auto-ethnographic approach and create a scenario wherein participants on their own could explore their home and neighborhood spaces as others might so that, as in traditional Institutes, they could reflect on and draw conclusions about place. The participants’ challenge was to explore their daily settings not as settings but as landscapes. Could they actively make seen the hidden-in-plain-sight connections between their own lives and intimate spaces and the greater socio-cultural picture?

An example of “making seen” was captured in a participant’s YouTube video that served as the Turning Point essay. This individual described walking beside a fence near her home and wondering what purpose it served: “curious if it has to do with the ‘undesirables’ from the shopping plaza nearby, as there is a fence on that side of our neighborhood but not on the other.” She recoiled at the sound of a shopping cart, out of place and alarming, as a man rolled toward them, “mumbling questions about food and money.” He was

not wearing a mask. “Sorry,” she said multiple times, admitting that “sorry means I do not feel safe, please go away.” This participant both described her observations and referenced the broader socio-economic landscape reflected in her awareness:

The second I step outside of my problematically cloistered subdivision, the second I begin really questioning its origin with no small amount of judgment as to the isolationism of suburbia and how it is tied up in white flight and all sorts of other problematic aspects of American history. Two minutes after I question the fence, I stand examining my own choices, my own vulnerability and fear, saying sorry, sorry, sorry.

Not only was the man pushing the cart seemingly out of place, but so, too, was the noise generated by the cart itself. Julia Corbett articulates how noise (person-made sound in excess) is “utterly undemocratic because the amount of exposure is biased by social class and species. Who lives in a gated community versus next to a jam-packed highway?” (101). The participant’s discomfort with the shopping cart was self-admittedly a response in part to the (homeless?) man pushing it, but it was also due in part to noise that crossed the literal boundary constructed to protect those of a higher-class status from the cacophony of the shopping plaza parking lot.

As this extended example illustrates, perhaps more useful than the Institute’s optional focus on actual rural land was the close alignment of the alternative rural assignment descriptions with auto-ethnographic interpretive methods. Participants were prompted to attend to their sensory experiences to interpret human-made objects as representative of the culture in which they were observed. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle coined the phrase “thick description” in the 1960s to distinguish between a simple factual observation of a behavior or object (thin description) and the complex context in which that behavior or object is situated (thick description) (480–96). Anthropologist Clifford Geertz expanded Ryle’s conceptualization of “thick description” into an approach to ethnographic research that is still used by practicing

ethnographers and auto-ethnographers today. Geertz writes that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun[;] I take culture to be those webs” (5). As in the RLNN example, most participants in Faculty Institutes begin to connect their simple observations (thin description) with their fields of expertise and their developing insights about the culture studied, weaving ever more complex webs of understanding. The resulting “thick description,” according to Geertz, aims “to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics” (28).

Lippard similarly observes that “as we walk or drive through any landscape, paying attention to its details and contours accentuated by light and shadow, we can fantasize (or hypothesize) about all the fences, lumps, bumps, furrows and tracks that cross it” (125). Even from their own backyards, campuses, parks, or city streets, RLNN participants used such hypothesizing to challenge their pre-conceived notions and expectations of their communities and to “draw broad conclusions” about society (Geertz 28). This participant described the walkabout experience as follows:

I began by turning left out of my garage when I normally would turn right. I looked—really looked—at the fence that separates our complex of townhomes from the fire department and shopping plaza nearby. I noticed that the slats in the fence were different colors. Some were clearly newer. I both wondered about the cause of the removal of the old slats and marveled at the ombre effect that was created. I also began to think about the history of planned communities and HOAs, and what it meant that there was a fence on one side of our complex and not the other.

How does one see, in a broader and deeper context, a place we think we already know? What can we begin to uncover when we examine these landscapes and the social, cultural, political, economic, and geographic strands that weave together within a complex network of systems? These intersections are usually unseen—the stories within a story of place.

Can creating a thick description and engaging in the auto-ethnographic process lead us toward civic engagement? If we are willing to listen, this process can certainly highlight our assumptions, motivate us to learn more, and potentially prompt us to take action. As Lippard notes, “looking at land through non-expert eyes, we can learn a lot about our own assumptions and about the places we live in and pass through” (125). In the Turning Point reflection assignment, another RLNN participant revealed the following:

I was struck by the awareness—and sensitivity—among participants in this workshop to topics of identity (race, class, nationalism, etc.) in the spaces/places we navigated. On a personal note, I’ve seen my “local” change: my home town has been transformed to a place of escape for the privileged. People with places to stay here are “escaping” (I presume) from Florida, Georgia, Texas, and other “hot spots.” Second homes, family, friends, friends of friends. For me, it’s been an exercise in being non-judgmental/unbiased. I’ve been thinking lots lately about Native American populations as well (historically and currently). My ancestors colonized America, what is my responsibility today? How does one decolonize during a pandemic?

EXPLORATION II:

REFLECTION, RACE, AND THE WALKABOUT

Honors education in this country has long struggled with questions of race and inclusion, and as one of our premier pedagogical activities, CAT is not immune. A fundamental element of CAT pedagogy and practice is the “Initial Walkabout” assignment, wherein facilitators ask participants to explore in groups a preassigned territory, which we would usually walk ourselves to prepare for the exercise. We then encourage these groups to get lost among the streets, alleyways, fields, and monuments of a given place. We encourage them to talk to strangers and to ask questions about the community. Historically, many CAT facilitators intentionally send students out in small groups to places we have previously explored.

But for RLNN, faculty and staff were largely exploring in isolation, which—combined with the sociopolitical moment in which the Institute was situated—prompted facilitators and participants alike to reflect more on the intentional design of explorations than we might have in previous iterations of CAT.

The careful design of the walkabout, with a new eye toward all members being safe, became an undercurrent of much of our discussion at the RLNN Institute. Not only were we in the midst of a global pandemic that made interaction with other people a health risk, but RLNN was also hosted in the immediate wake of the racial unrest that arose in the weeks following May 25, 2020, when a white Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, killed an unarmed black man, George Floyd, during a routine arrest. While we engaged as a community of learners, this tragedy was absolutely on our minds. We found ourselves wondering how we might best facilitate “wandering,” which is a central component of the walkabout, when some of us were not free to wander. How do facilitators prepare for the different realities that members of our honors community face when they participate in a walkabout, especially a walkabout completed alone? The seemingly simple act of exploring a neighborhood is categorically different for people of color and women than it is for our white, male students and colleagues. A participant of the RLNN Institute asked this precise question of how NCHC has considered the experience of black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) during a CAT walkabout. This consideration carries with it the urgency of the present moment.

Race is a complicated concept, and, like gender, largely a social construction. Stuart Hall argues, “I refer to ‘race’ here as one of those master concepts (the masculine form is deliberate here) that organize the great classificatory systems of difference that operate in the human sciences. Race, in this sense, is the centerpiece of a hierarchical system that produces differences” (32–33). In this decidedly Foucauldian definition, Hall articulates a systematic and deliberate social construction intended to provide a hierarchy in which White is seen as superior while Black is seen as inferior. Achille Mbembe goes further and ties race to neoliberalism: “It would be a mistake to believe that we have left behind the regime that began with the

slave trade and flourished in plantation and extraction colonies. In these baptismal fonts of modernity, the principle of race and the subject of the same name were put to work under the sign of capital” (13). The link between race and class has been formulated countless times and by various scholars, yet the arguments put forth by Hall and Mbembe constitute a real advance not only into how these concepts are entwined but also into how we think of ourselves and our place in the world.

Black is often problematically conceptualized as a threat, something lurking in the midst. This so-called threat to societal order is indispensable to the construction of the supposed superiority of White. In addition, this threat connotes a nomadic ontology wherein those without a home, without a sense of stability, threaten the stability, the home, of the dominant race. Of course, one of the pedagogical strategies of CAT is to deploy participants to various neighborhoods to map and explore. The walkabout encourages students to “become lost” as they explore in hopes of making the strange less strange. For people of color, though, particularly for black males, this well-intentioned act of “becoming lost” could become a serious problem. While we may empathize, those of us who are white never tangibly experience the potentially life-ending reality of our skin color being perceived as threatening while we walk down the street or into a store. This innate sense of security and safety is white privilege at its most basic level.

Writing for the *Washington Post* in 2016, columnist Christine Emba defines white privilege as

the level of social advantage that comes with being seen as the norm in America, automatically conferred irrespective of wealth, gender or other factors. It makes life smoother, but it’s something you would barely notice unless it were suddenly taken away—or unless it never applied to you in the first place.

The systemic racism that has informed this country from before its beginning has created a system in which change is nearly impossible as long as we fail to confront that embedded racism. As Zadie Smith argues in a recent essay, “real change would involve

a broad recognition that the fatalist, essentialist race discourse we often employ as a superficial cure for the symptoms of this virus manages, in practice, to smoothly obscure the fact that the DNA of this virus is *economic at base*" (81). The economic differences to which Smith alludes often reveal themselves when we go out into neighborhoods that display stark differences, even if those differences are only a street away. When a global pandemic is added to the mix, we can see how these economic inequalities affect entire populations differently. That CAT facilitators remember that not all participants in a walkabout are equal is critical.

To date, the romantic notion of the *flâneur* (an idle or wandering person) does not apply to BIPOC people. The word can apply to women and some LGBTQ+, but they also take additional risks when venturing out to explore. To people of color, though, the simple act of exploring any space without support can have negative and sometimes harmful consequences. Although participants in walkabouts are not necessarily *flâneurs*, the spirit of that concept as it has attached itself to explorers of the city or rural countryside is undeniable. The walkabout exercise—indeed, the whole of the CAT pedagogy—is an intellectual exercise that refuses to abandon the imaginative and whimsical nature of lostness even when we ask our students to engage in the serious work that is the ethnographic process. The RLNN Institute took the walkabout and, out of necessity, gave it a solitary spin, a spin that one might associate with the *flâneur* as a solitary observer of the landscape.

We learned from facilitating the first-ever NCHC Faculty Institute walkabout in social isolation that there are unforeseen challenges of doing CAT in the “new now” and that future facilitators will necessarily need to consider them along with some new questions and issues. When participants cannot do the walkabout exercise in small groups in pre-visited neighborhoods and places, how do we adapt? How do we conduct the walkabout amid the civil unrest that plagues this country? With faculty participants of the RLNN Institute, we felt confident that we could leave the judgment of how to best conduct the solo walkabout in their hands. When preparing to conduct CAT exercises with students, however,

facilitators will likely want to have a more defined plan. What better way for honors to lead the way to a more diverse, inclusive world than by experimenting with one of our standout pedagogical practices to embrace the new now more fully.

As honors educators, we have a civic duty to consider the new now in the choices we make moving forward. “The call for public conversations on race and racism,” declares Angela Y. Davis, “is also a call to develop a vocabulary that permits us to have insightful conversations” (88). Attending to the well-being of CAT participants has always been of utmost importance, and what has arisen from the present moment is how much we have to learn from acknowledging and rethinking the plight of people of color. Higher education must search for a new vocabulary with which to combat the systemic racism that plagues our pedagogical practices. Davis elaborates: “if we attempt to use historically obsolete vocabularies, our consciousness of racism will remain shallow and we can be easily urged to assume that, for example, changes in the law spontaneously produce effective changes in the social world” (88). Honors has historically been at the forefront of cutting-edge thinking and is now the place where we must take a stand against the refusal to challenge historically determined concepts of race. Considering the lived experiences of all participants during the CAT walkabout exercise in the present moment is an especially meaningful place from which we may cultivate a new way of seeing, hearing, and, ultimately, knowing.

TURNING POINT

CAT carries within it a sense of idealism. The facilitators wholeheartedly believe in this pedagogical approach, and our combined experiences with CAT practices span nearly a hundred years. We see innate value in a traditional, face-to-face CAT walkabout, wherein we interact in small groups with communities in meaningful and productive ways. We present bright and curious minds to members of these communities, engage in discussion and intellectual exchange, and learn a bit about the places we are exploring and about ourselves along the way. Partnerships can be formed

while participants are asked to see the world through new eyes. What do we do, however, when the world confronts our ideal and requires us to explore in new ways rife with unexpected challenges? In spring of 2020, the main unexpected challenge was the growing civil unrest in our nation and the ways that hosting a walkabout in isolation would keep this challenge at the front of our minds while we also confronted the expected technological challenges: access, bandwidth, skills, and distractions.

Iris Marion Young's *Inclusion and Democracy* centers on notions of democracy and on what inclusion means and looks like. As CAT facilitators, we are well aware that the cost to attend CAT Faculty Institutes can be prohibitive for many faculty who might like to attend but who simply do not have the travel or professional development funds to support their participation. Offering an Institute virtually meant that we could reach a potentially broader audience, and we found that participants indeed "attended" from all over the United States to take part in this new kind of CAT experience. Being virtual meant that people did not have to leave their homes, families, and other responsibilities. The distance to travel in order to participate shrank to the literal steps one had to take to turn on the computer and join a Zoom call. While this virtual environment might be more democratic in terms of opening up opportunities to attend, many of us found ourselves distracted or pulled in multiple directions. By not escaping the everyday environment of work and home, some participants were pulled away from the Institute and into unrelated meetings or assignments. Some needed to attend to household, childcare, or other familial responsibilities. The distractions ever more common in our contemporary work/study-from-home lives interrupted the active involvement so central to the enterprise of civic engagement. Still, seeing faculty and staff grappling with these distractions helped us to better understand the present lives of our students, which are equally filled with all types of activities that divide their attention.

Although the pandemic forced people to be apart, technology brought people together in a different way. The virtual Institute asked participants to incorporate multimedia platforms to bridge

the gap of isolation during the walkabouts as they mapped their observations and reflected on the connections they were making. Combining various technologies into the time-tested CAT strategies created both opportunities and challenges. Internet bandwidth, along with the level of comfort different participants had using digital platforms without adequate technical training, revealed unseen systems of access and education. Still, the decision to add multimedia technology for the daily assignments opened up a whole host of creative approaches to CAT not previously explored (as far as we are aware). That much of the technology was new to all of us created a greater sense of collaboration and cooperation to complete the work at hand.

Other critical elements related to the civic nature of the CAT walkabout were highlighted by our required isolation, and in this space the civic aspect of the CAT walkabouts aligned closely with our obligation as facilitators and educators to deliver responsible programming and educational practices. Let us remind ourselves of Bernice Braid's original call to action:

NCHC Honors Semesters [of which CAT plays a prominent role] provide American higher education with a model worth adapting, in whole or in part, to local circumstances. In their pedagogy, they demonstrate the efficacy of providing the impetus to engage in the construction of a sense of place. In their lingering impact on former participants, they validate the transformative nature of active learning. (6)

The term "engagement" demands reconsideration in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. What does it mean to engage actively and civically in a world where physical isolation is necessary and even mandated? How do we support BIPOC students when they face challenges unknown to the majority of students who make up our honors communities? City as Text is built on notions of engagement with ourselves and with others, so how can we use this pedagogy to engage further with these important questions of the new now?

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