

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL SECTION

Inequitable Ruptures, Rupturing Inequity: Theorizing COVID-19 and Racial Injustice Impacts on International Service Learning Pedagogy, Frameworks, and Policies

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Abstract

This introduction to the special section, argues that this pandemic time has been one of ruptures which unveiled ongoing and intersecting social pandemics such as anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, and ableism in the context of the COVID-19 global health pandemic (Brand, 2020). We proposed three ruptures as moments for imagining - and doing - otherwise: (i) the Black Lives Matter movement and increased mainstream attention to racial inequity, (ii) COVID-19 and new imaginings of travel, mobility, and safety (iii) mutual aid as increasingly necessary in a pandemic and as a possible relational way forward. We take these ruptures as a starting point for re-imagining learning and movement as relational. This introduction takes up a contextualization and conceptualization of the field of GSL, an overview of the critical literature in this space, and introduces the two articles in the special section. It ends with the hope that the grapplings and reckonings in this section will help scholars and practitioners think through this present moment and re-orient GSL in more just and equitable ways.

We (the editors) have been working both separately and together in the field of global service learning (GSL) for many years. In the first year of her undergrad, Katie traveled to Ecuador for a month and a half on a trip coordinated by an international student from Ecuador and a university in Quito. During that trip as an inexperienced 19-year-old, Katie helped build bathrooms and learned rudimentary Spanish. Coming home from this experience, Katie started a long academic journey thinking about the very possibilities and tensions of this trip. In her

1. Intercordia Canada was a small Canadian international service learning (ISL) organization that partnered with Canadian universities to provide opportunities for students to receive academic credit for their ISL experiences. It was founded in 2003 and closed in 2018.

third year of her undergrad, Jessica also traveled to Ecuador with a small GSL organization. For three months over the summer, she lived with a host family and volunteered in an elementary school. The ethos of the experience was to be with those who are different and learn from them on their own terms. Jessica was also drawn to an ongoing journey of learning about the harms, tensions, and transformational possibilities of GSL and adjacent fields of inquiry.

We met working with Intercordia Canada¹ as campus representatives—working with students as they prepared to spend three months living alongside folks in poverty. We shared a goal of thinking about the problems and possibilities in encounters across differences for both personal and political transformation. Eventually, we became co-directors of Intercordia Canada until its closure in 2018. As collaborators, we have conducted an international research project in five countries, centering host experiences of GSL.

Living the COVID-19 pandemic, watching mobility become increasingly limited for many, witnessing the challenge of developing a communal consciousness for public health, and struggling with the reality of parenting young children through a pandemic, we began to think about what these struggles might help us and others to think about in practices of GSL. We saw some of the main themes of our research playing out through the pandemic—the need for intentional and communal shared struggle (being *in* something together), the uneven labor impacts on women and racialized people, and how the super-rich are able to continue on as normal in the midst of massive disruption and harm. Through many (many!) voice to text conversations, we wanted to begin a conversation about how we might bring this learning to help us think and do otherwise in GSL.

Working with the team at the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning (MJCSL)* was a dream, and their support and mentorship helped us build the call for papers and connected us with Richard Kiely and Eric Hartman, with whom we have written the outro to this special section. All of us in collaboration developed the call for papers; it was a shared labor that felt like a meaningful way to materialize doing otherwise in GSL. The whole process has been important and generative; it has been life-giving in pandemic times that have felt overwhelming and isolating.

In the call, we said that 2020/2021 (and now 2022, because the pandemic is ongoing and disproportionately impacts those most marginalized) has presented a time of ruptures that unveiled ongoing and intersecting social pandemics such as anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, and ableism in the context of the COVID-19 global health pandemic (Brand, 2020). We proposed three ruptures as moments for imagining—and doing—otherwise: (i) the Black Lives Matter movement and increased mainstream attention to racial inequity; (ii) COVID-19 and new imaginings of travel, mobility, and safety; and (iii) mutual aid as increasingly necessary in a pandemic and as a possible relational way forward. This special section takes these ruptures as a starting point for reimagining learning and movement as relational.

We invited articles to take up these ruptures not only as a space for possibility as the pandemic and new orientations to travel might break down GSL completely (which it did for a time) but also because these ruptures further disturb the idea that GSL is in itself a harmonious or reciprocal practice. In this call we use the term *global service learning* as a phrase to capture a multiplicity of programs that occur, facilitating service work for

people across borders (by borders we mean not only those boundaries between nation-states but also other examples including but not limited to racialized borders, cultural borders, and nation-to-nation borders such as those between Canada and many First Nations). Much of the framework of GSL is based on the affective experience of living alongside hosts in the Global South as a pedagogical tool for transformation (Conran, 2011; MacDonald, 2016); the assumption of GSL pedagogy is that as students begin to care about those they get to know during GSL experiences, they will begin to care more broadly about the world. However, the critical literature suggests that this assumption is in fact problematic (Mahrouse, 2015; Mostafanezhad, 2013) and that affect and pedagogies are much more complex than this simple causal narrative would suggest. Indeed, while hosts recognize the power and importance of relationships to coalition building, movements, and the transformative potential in GSL, the labor required to build and maintain these relationships should not be forgotten (Hernandez & Rerrie, 2018).

Context and Conceptualizing the Field

There is a significant body of literature discussing differences between programming choices and the impact these differences make on learning and the experiences of hosts. Hosts are those who are facilitating the service work for people across borders: those doing the caring, the cooking, the translating, the washing, the teaching, the driving, the accompanying to doctor's appointments, the supporting, the hand-holding, the training, all of the labor it takes to welcome, orient, and support students from the North to their communities, places of work, and homes. The first conceptual area of programming is international service learning (ISL), which has been defined by Bringle and Hatcher (2011):

A structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experiences in such a way as to gain a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, globally. (p. 19)

Other scholars have developed alternate terms to capture particularities of programming. For example, Hartman and Kiely (2014) outline GSL as a specific practice of service learning distinct from other forms of service learning:

(a) GSL is committed to student intercultural competence development; (b) GSL has a focus on structural analysis tied to consideration of power, privilege, and hegemonic assumptions[;] (c) GSL takes place within a global marketization of volunteerism; (d) GSL is typically immersive; and (e) GSL engages the critical global civic and moral imagination. (p. 56)

Important to this work is recognition of the context in which GSL is operating. Other discussions have developed outlining fair trade principles that prioritize relationship and reciprocity with host communities (Hartman et al., 2014). In 2018, Hartman et al. revisit the 2014 discussion and invite us to think about GSL as:

a community-driven learning and/or service experience that employs structured, critically reflective practice to better understand global citizenship, positionality, power, structure and social responsibility in global context. It is a learning methodology and community-driven development philosophy that cultivates a critically reflective disposition among all participants. (p. 21)

The conversation around GSL has now grown to capture the community-driven nature of the practice and ways it prompts reflection from *all* participants. The shift to imagining learning as reciprocal and not just something that Northern students are doing is still very unevenly lived in practice; it is at best aspirational in much of GSL programming. MacDonald and Tiessen (2018) have argued for the use of the term *transnational service learning* where *transnational* is used in the following way:

neither to reify the nation-state, nor to stop at simply an articulation of difference, but rather to attend to the “asymmetries of globalization” (Nagar & Swarr, 2010, p. 3). In the adoption of the word “transnational” to describe the approaches to programming, [the transnational attends to] the unequal effects of globalization, the assumptions embedded in service learning as a practice and the necessity of reflection in service learning that takes serious positionality, inequality and how all participants are imbricated in these processes. (p. 8)

In this special section, we use the term *GSL* as a catch-all to capture the multiplicity of programs available. While we agree that these distinctions are important, for the purposes of this call we are less interested in a typology of programs and more interested in the questions the above outlined ruptures bring to practices of service and volunteering as it happens across borders.

Critical Literature and History

We locate ourselves as settlers living, working, and collaborating on Turtle Island, complicit in and struggling against logics of the settler colonial state. Attention to land is central to this work and specific to the contexts in which GSL takes place (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We situate ourselves as writing within and against the university. Walcott (2020) reminds us that the university is a site of labor, injustice, and resistance. We invite scholars to critique institutions as a site from which GSL emerges and also to think in decolonial ways to what Yang (2017, under pen name *la paperson*) asks us to think about as the possibility of a third way: a third university. We discuss this further in the outro to this special section.

This special section builds on important work in two special issues of *MJCSL* in 2014 and 2015 edited by Eric Hartman and Richard Kiely. In their introduction to the 2014 special issue, Hartman and Kiely outline

the ways that GSL could learn from other critical developments in fields such as international relations and international development and the ways in which the local and global are entwined. They tell us that “GSL is disruptive of students’ settled understandings and expectations” (2014, p. 57). What a beautiful invitation for students, to have their understandings and expectations unsettled, disrupted, an unsettling of racism, of ableism, of who is teacher and whose ways of being are logical or normative. They remind us that for the field of inquiry of GSL, “none of this is ‘merely academic.’ GSL practice must be engaged with the utmost of care. When done poorly, GSL can have adverse effects on communities” (2014, p. 60). Holding these two possibilities together—care and harm—and thinking relationally about how practices of and positions within GSL have been ruptured, intensified, and broken open in new ways are where we are inspired to think and bring attention in this special section.

This section is also inspired by work that asks us to engage with deep critiques of larger structural uneven power relations that GSL reproduces, the depoliticization and decontextualization that shapes programming, the centering of Northern practices and pedagogy, and the centering of Northern students as the primary (or only) participants in GSL experiences (Hickmon, 2015; Zemach-Bersin, 2007). The internationalization of higher education has been undertaken institutionally in a significant way over the last two decades and has happened in uneven and inequitable ways, reproducing larger uneven global relations of power (Pashby, 2012; Shultz, 2007). The calls for different and more critical conversations, engagement, and embodied practices (Stein et al., 2016, 2019) are plural and imagine new ways of moving forward. The challenges of doing this work within and against the neoliberal university logics are multiple and complex (Andreotti, 2016; Charania, 2011).

Recent scholarship has examined the ways in which the participation in education abroad has shifted from primarily white student-volunteers (Angod, 2015; Razack, 2001). Hartman et al. (2020) argue that service learning must recognize the cultural wealth that students of color bring to their experiences and make six recommendations to improve programming emerging from the recognition of the complex diversity of student and host participants. We are mindful, however, that these programs remain rooted in complex institutions that have multiple effects. Butin (2006), Mitchell et al. (2012), and Bocci (2015) argue that while the participants of service learning may not all be white, GSL pedagogy itself is a pedagogy of whiteness; “strategies of instruction that consciously or unconsciously reinforce norms and privileges developed by, and for the benefit of, white people in the United States” (Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 613). A recent special issue of the *Journal of Higher Education*, “Outreach and Engagement,” focuses on the ways in which service learning practices are taken up outside of the United States and Canada, where a significant amount of the literature is concentrated (Furco & Kent, 2019). We also look forward to the forthcoming issue of *Frontiers* focused on “Listening to and Learning from Partners and Host Communities: Amplifying Marginalized Voices in Global Learning.”

Overview of Special Section

This special section emerges from this critical literature and asks scholars and practitioners to think through what these ruptures offer to practices of GSL. We ask, What could a GSL framework look like without travel while rooted in meaningful, reciprocal engagement with hosts and attending to larger structural processes of

inequity? What do these moments of rupture highlight about changes needed in our current theories, assessment practices, pedagogies, and partnership approaches to GSL? How do these speak to or account for changes that were already being asked for by hosts but resisted because they did not meet the logics of a GSL rooted in the neoliberal university (Cameron et al., 2018; Stein et al., 2016)?

The two articles in this special section both delve into thinking about how the COVID-19 pandemic forced a pause on assumed mobility options for many students in the Global North. These papers provide reflection on practice and policy with the intention of developing reciprocal partnerships and challenging the centrality of physical proximity to the pedagogical frame of GSL. We offer this special section as a pause in GSL scholarship, in order to consider the complexity of challenges to, and complicity in, transnational inequities. We see these two pieces as adding to an emerging scholarship that questions the necessity of travel in attaining the outcomes desired through GSL practices and as a call for deepened commitments to mutuality.

The first article, “Critical Commitments to Partnership in Global Service-Learning” by Kaitlin Long, Mac Benavides, Trisha Gott, and Chibuzor Azubuike, provides evidence from a qualitative study with community partners about policies in the context of GSL and COVID-19. Drawing on this process and learning, they offer a set of guiding questions intended to deepen reciprocal partnerships and prompt critical reflection. These questions raise issues of uneven benefit, power, and choice. As we consider these dynamics in the face of failing public health measures, we ask how a sense of reciprocity and mutuality may turn GSL practices away from charity models toward models of mutual aid and solidarity and what this re-orientation might do and what it might unsettle.

The second article in this collection, “The Power of Proximity: Navigating Physical and Psychological Connection in Service-Learning Courses Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic” by Lynne-Marie Shea, Lauren I. Grenier, and Debra A. Harkins, presents a case of students participating in a service learning mentorship program that shifted rapidly from in-person to online learning. Through their examination of this case, the authors suggest that physical proximity as a tool for transformative learning should be questioned and that more central to learning are mutually beneficial relationships. This article also offers an example of how important context is to understanding student learning assessment—student learning is about not only their formal education or planned experiences but also the world around them. As evidenced in the excerpts of the article, experiencing a global pandemic also impacted students’ interpretation of inequity.

Finally, in the conclusion to this special section, the editors of this issue (Katie MacDonald and Jessica Vorstermans) invite Richard Kiely and Eric Hartman (editors of the 2014 and 2015 special issues on GSL) into conversation about how COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and mutual aid can reshape or reimagine GSL practices. Specifically, we discuss how the increased awareness of inequity and the need for mutual aid and solidarity can be centered in our GSL practice, even as those institutions and cultural norms in which we work might push back.

Conclusion

We hope that the ideas, grapplings, and reckonings in this section help scholars and practitioners think through this present moment and reorient GSL in more just and equitable ways. We want to think deeply about ways

that care and harm happen in uneven and relational ways in the space of GSL. We began this section with our stories of how we arrived to GSL and thinking about Hartman and Kiely’s call that “none of this is ‘merely academic’” (2014, p. 60). We thought we would wrap up this introduction with two stories of our current engagement with transnational transformative learning within the context of the ruptures of pandemic times. I, Jessica, taught my graduate course Human Rights and Health Equity in a radically new way in winter 2021. I teach at York University in Toronto, Canada. I partnered with the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) Project (<https://www.bher.org>), which usually sends professors from my university to the Dadaab Refugee camp in Kenya but quickly shifted to enroll students in Dadaab in our remote courses. Six students from Dadaab enrolled in my graduate course, alongside about a dozen York University students. We worked together to build a classroom that centered generative learning across time, space, and differences. We built relationships over WhatsApp and Zoom. The major work students from across Canada and students in Dadaab collaborated on was innovative, engaged plural methodologies and forms, and was a really exciting time of rich, reciprocal learning. One group wrote a children’s book in English and Arabic guiding children through living the upheavals of the pandemic inspired by adrienne maree brown’s *Emergent Strategy* (2017). Another group, students who were current refugees in Dadaab and one who came to Canada as a refugee, wrote a collaborative piece that engaged intersectionality as a way to get at plural experiences of health, wellness, and rights for refugees in different contexts.

The pandemic marked lots of shifts in my life: I (Katie) had a child, shifted from working in housing research and policy to an academic position at Athabasca University, and learned more about remote and distance education. Living in the pandemic, thinking about futurity differently as I watched my child grow, and learning from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) scholars and activists, I began to reflect on the ways in which my whiteness formed my desire and expectations for change to happen immediately. This began to shift my research interests from thinking about the complexity of encounters in GSL as they happen to thinking about the impacts of transformative learning across a life span. My new research projects in the field of GSL ask about the long-term impacts of transnational experiences and if they are generative of commitments that reflect solidarity, mutual aid, and communal struggle.

We look forward to seeing how these inquiries and practices move forward. Please do reach out to us with ways you have been reflexive in your own scholarship and practice of GSL in these pandemic times of rupture and reckoning.

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Author Bios

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Jessica Vorstermans is an Assistant Professor in the Critical Disability Studies program, Faculty of Health at York University, Treaty 13 lands. Her research makes critical interventions into the field of international experiential and service learning and global citizenship, engaging plural ideas of human rights, disability and equity. She uses Critical Disability theory and the lens of intersectionality to complicate North-South encounters engaging impairment and disablement.