

Grounding Community Psychology in Practices of Ecopsychosocial Accompaniment  
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[Published in Carolyn Kagan, Jacqueline Akhurst, Jaime Alfaro, Rebecca Lawthom, Michael Richards & Alba Zambrano (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Community Psychology: Facing Global Crises with Hope*, 2022]

**Abstract**

Ecopsychosocial accompaniment is a practice that has the potential of repositioning community psychologists from a place of elevated expertise to a horizontal position on more equal footing from which solidarity can emerge. It requires radical availability, steadfast witnessing, self-reflexivity, attunement to the knowledge, needs, and desires of others, and committed responsibility. Accompaniment can be engaged in with a person, a human community, other-than-human animal(s), a mountain, or river. Accompaniment is at the heart of building inclusive spaces graced by efforts to build justice and mutual security, trust, and respect. Such spaces preempt violence by cultivating dignified and equitable conditions where life can thrive sustainably. Ecopsychosocial accompaniers are students of the historical context of the situation in which accompaniment is taking place. They work alongside others to transform sociocultural contexts which have generated pervasive social and ecological misery through ongoing coloniality, rapacious capitalism, and racism. The authors use forced migration — an outcome of all the interdependent crises articulated in the Introduction — to explore ecopsychosocial accompaniment as an essential practice in Community Psychology.

*El acompañamiento ecopsicosocial es una práctica que tiene el potencial de recolocar a los psicólogos de la comunidad desde una posición elevada de experto a una posición horizontal en*

*una base de más igualdad desde la cual puede emerger la solidaridad. Esto requiere extrema disponibilidad, acérrima presencia, autorreflexión, ajustarse al conocimiento, necesidades y deseos de los otros, y una involucrada habilidad de respuesta. El acompañamiento puede comprometerse con una persona, una comunidad humana, aparte de humanos, animal-animales, una montaña o un río. El acompañamiento es el corazón de la construcción de espacios inclusivos honrados por los esfuerzos para construir justicia y seguridad común, verdad y respeto. Tales espacios previenen la violencia cultivando condiciones dignas e igualitarias donde la vida puede desarrollarse sosteniblemente. Los acompañantes ecopsicosociales son estudiosos del contexto histórico de la situación en la que el acompañamiento tiene lugar. Trabajan junto a otros para transformar contextos socioculturales que han generado miseria social y ecológica generalizada a través del continuo colonialismo, el insaciable colonialismo y el racismo. Los autores usan la emigración forzada – resultado de las crisis interdependientes articuladas en la Introducción- para explorar el acompañamiento ecopsicosocial como práctica esencial de la Psicología de la Comunidad.*

### **Ecopsychosocial Accompaniment**

*To accompany someone is to go somewhere with him or her, to break bread together, to be present on a journey with a beginning and an end. There's an element of mystery, of openness, of trust, in accompaniment. The companion, the accompagnateur, says: "I'll go with you and support you on your journey wherever it leads. I'll share your fate for a while—and by "a while," I don't mean a little while. Accompaniment is about sticking with a task until it's deemed completed –not by the accompagnateur, but by the person being accompanied.*

*Accompaniment is an idea so radical and difficult for us to comprehend that its power and significance reveal themselves to our Western and Northern minds only slowly and with great difficulty.*

Marie Dennis, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Joseph Nangle and  
Stuart Taylor, 1993, p. 21

The Western professionalization of psychosocial understandings has created unintended consequences, too often disempowering community members whom it seeks to serve, neglecting the knowledge indigenous to a group, and usurping leadership. The shadow of acquiring an expert status through the academy can be unacknowledged hubris, born of coloniality. Critical community psychology is concerned with the decolonization of oppressive social systems that reproduce themselves within community psychology and invade psychological space (Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom & Siddiquee, 2019). As community psychologists try to struggle free of colonial ways of seeing and being, the practice and ethics of ecopsychosocial accompaniment, with roots in liberation movements and liberation theology and liberation psychology, help provide a potential pathway to solidarity (Kagan et al., 2019; Watkins, 2019). We seek to lift up the practice of ecopsychosocial accompaniment, so that it can orient relationship building in community psychology and disable power structures of oppression as we join *with* others to strengthen and build beloved communities where justice, dynamic peace, and ecological well-being can co-flourish.

The root of *acompañamiento* is *compañero* or friend. It draws from the Latin *ad cum panis*, to break bread with one another. In contradistinction to a relationship skewed and dominated by

one partner with expert status and higher social privilege intervening from above, accompaniers desire horizontal and mutual relationships where multiple voices can come forward and through their dialogue discern a path of action together. Like musical accompanists, they try to attune themselves to how to support the best efforts of others. Kagan et al (2019) explains that accompaniment is an “active process of being in the presence of another person and journeying with her or him” (p. 231). In this practiced and intentional humility lay the seeds for deep listening, learning from the others’ knowledge and life experiences, bearing witness, and working in solidarity. This is not a question of uncritical deference, offers activist-accompanier Staughton Lynd (2010), but of equality.

Beyond critical psychology, “accompaniment” is a term used in arenas as diverse as social medicine, peace activism, human rights, pastoral support, social psychology, animal rights, and liberation psychology. The concept is used when speaking of accompanying the ill who are also poor (Farmer, 2011), those caught in prison and detention systems (Lykes, Hershberg, & Brabeck, 2011; Ragbir, n.d., New Sanctuary Coalition), political dissidents (Romero, 2001), refugees (Jesuit Refugee Service), those suffering under occupation (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine), those with intellectual disabilities (Vanier, 1992), victims of torture and other forms of violence (Rodríguez & Guerra, 2011), those forcibly displaced (Sacipa, Vidales, Galindo, & Tovar, 2007), those suffering violations of human rights (Mahoney & Eguren, 1997), and those attempting to live peacefully in the face of paramilitary and military violence, as in the peace communities in Colombia (Koopman, 2014). In countless other situations of human and environmental duress, what we are describing as accompaniment is engaged in without recourse to the term. In Latin America, “psychosocial accompaniment” has arisen as a role that is distinct from that of psychotherapist or psychological researcher, though it

may include elements of each. Colombian community psychologist Stella Sacipa Rodrigues (2014) describes it as the creation of psychosocial spaces for compassionate listening and witnessing, where mutual respect and acknowledgment can be engendered so that social bonds and support can be established and then strengthened (p. 67).

The adjective “psychosocial” emerged as a corrective to psychological understandings that neglected the importance of social context due to an underlying individualistically-oriented paradigm. It is past time for us to include “eco” to “psychosocial” to correct psychology’s failure to focus on the environmental and place-based context of human being. While community psychology has pursued “ecological” approaches that restore the connections between the individual and the social, “eco-“ has not referred specifically to built and natural environments. Psychosocial well-being is not independent of ecological or environmental well-being. Ecopsychosocial accompaniment requires radical availability, steadfast witnessing, self-reflexivity, attunement to others’ needs and desires, and committed response-ability. Accompaniment can be engaged in with a person, a human community, other-than-human animal(s), a mountain, or river. It can be accomplished at various levels of organization, from grassroots relationships to policy creation and implementation to create deep structural change. Accompaniment is at the heart of building inclusive spaces graced by efforts to build security, trust, and mutual respect. These preempt or redress violence by cultivating dignified and equitable conditions where life can thrive sustainably. For critical psychologists, this mutual accompaniment includes supporting decolonial struggles, partnering to assist marginalized groups to reclaim identities and represent their own social worlds (Kagan et al 2019). Accompaniers—inside and beyond community psychology-- seek to transform the legacies of

sociocultural and historical contexts which have generated pervasive social and ecological misery, opening spaces that struggle to be free of coloniality, rapacious capitalism, and racism.

Accompaniers work within their own community or they may be “outside accompaniers” (Watkins, 2020), invited to participate. Rather than positioning themselves as “allies,” outside critical psychologists can seek to “accomplice” (Indigenous Action Media), shouldering the risks facing community members. Outside accompanists may have more privilege than community members they work alongside. If so, care needs to be taken to track and be responsible for the effects of this privilege and to be open to critique and counsel concerning them. For instance, peace accompaniers in conflict situations—who live with a community that is less likely to be attacked if there are international accompanists present-- may desire a world without privileging whiteness, even as they use their whiteness in an effort to protect communities of color who are building peace (Mahrouse, 2014).

Community psychologists need to become students of the situation in which they accompany, learning about the history behind the present moment and the structural pillars that sustain social and ecological misery. This assists them to be accompaniers across levels of organization, working not only to ameliorate suffering but to work together to transform its generation. To illustrate the principles, practices, and ethics of ecopsychosocial accompaniment, we will address forced migration — an outcome of all of the interdependent crises articulated in the Introduction, and one we are each intimately involved in from different vantage points: Watkins in accompaniment of migrants, Bradshaw in trans-species accompaniment, and Barnwell in earth accompaniment.

## **Ecopsychosocial Accompaniment of Forced Migrants in the U.S.**

According to the United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency, conflict and climate change forced 79.5 million people to flee their homes in 2019. One percent of humanity, 1 in 97 people, is currently displaced. Right-leaning, xenophobic, and racist governments have built walls around the world to deter forced migrants from entering their countries, as well as gulags of detention prisons to contain them. Often having suffered persecution, torture, violence, and/or the destruction of their homes and livelihood, far too many forced migrants find themselves stranded at militarized borders and jailed in detention prisons, in need of accompaniment. Too often, they are met with disdain, death-dealing neglect, and even hatred, rather than the welcome they so desperately need.

Many individuals and groups have mobilized to accompany migrants from the inception of their journeys through the point of their establishing a secure home in another place. Accompanying migrant caravans, providing human rights and asylum process training, visiting detainees in immigration prisons, accompanying migrants to immigration court, offering support to their families if they are deported, and extending a hand in finding housing, employment, and health care are some of the work of accompanists. Community psychologists in solidarity with migrants and the groups that support them can provide targeted assistance, deploying their skills and learning new ones.

Activist-accompanier, historian, and lawyer Staughton Lynd advocated for “reciprocal accompaniment,” and urged would-be accompaniers to find skills that could be of use in a given situation.

“Accompaniment” is simply the idea of walking side by side with another on a

common journey. The idea is that when a university-trained person undertakes to walk beside someone rich in experience but lacking formal skills, each contributes something vital to the process. (Lynd & Grubacic, 2010, p. 20)

Community psychologists have learned new skills to meet the particular needs of those they are accompanying. For instance, the Colombian social psychologists at The Social Bonds and Cultures of Peace research group devote themselves to accompanying victims of violence who were displaced from the countryside by armed conflict. Through their listening and witnessing, they became aware that many of the displaced families wanted it to be clear in public records that their loved ones were falsely assumed to be guerillas. They also wanted to know where their loved ones' remains are so that proper burials could be conducted. Honoring these deep desires, the psychologists needed to become knowledgeable about and effective in interfacing with relevant judicial and public authorities and processes (Sacipa et al, 2007).

Psychologists team up with immigration lawyers to offer forensic evaluations of asylum seekers, helping to document and to explain to the immigration judge the kinds of traumas a person has undergone, the effects of these on their mental health and testimo, and the probable psychological consequences of being deported. This form of accompaniment provides an opportunity for forced migrants to convey their life story to someone who can witness not only their challenges, but their strengths, courage, and resilience (Gangsei & Deutsch, 2007). Their stories retain the social, ecological, economic, and political contexts which is too often lost in clinical encounters narrowly focused on PTSD symptomology.

Community psychologists Regina Langhout and Sylvane Vaccarino-Ruiz (2021) have studied the deleterious health effects of deportation raids on children and adults in their community of Santa Cruz, CA. They have accompanied 9-12-year-old immigrant youth and helped them claim



their experience of these raids in the face of the wider community's efforts to disappear them, denying their destructive impact on the whole community. Their work, along with others, was used to develop an SCRA (Society for Community Research and Action, 2018) policy brief that offered national and judicial policy recommendations. local jurisdiction policy recommendations, policy recommendations for neighborhoods and institutions.

I, Mary Watkins, accompanied young adults to create an oral history of their families' forced migration and their experiences living in Santa Barbara, CA without immigration documents (PUEBLO, 2008). The youth used these stories to educate and dialogue with the Anglo community. They hoped to shift destructive narratives about their community, to engender empathic understanding, and to mobilize their citizen neighbors to work in solidarity with them to promote supportive legislation and to combat harmful practices of the police.

Sadly, the challenges of many migrants without documents also include forced deportation, negating the value of the deep sacrifices that were already suffered to make the journey. Through the Post-Deportation Human Rights Project (PDHRP), liberation and community psychologist Brinton Lykes has been collaborating with human rights lawyers, immigrant community groups in the U.S., deportees, and families without immigration documents to explore the effects of current U.S. detention and deportation policies on Salvadoran and Guatemalan families residing in the Northeast U.S. Lykes, Hershberg, and Brabeck (2011) describe how through their accompaniment of family members who have suffered deportation directly or indirectly, they learn from the experiential knowledge of community members. This enables them to discuss the relevant issues with fellow citizens, in hopes of bridging the growing chasm between citizens

and non-citizens and to construct a shared understanding of and response to injustices that immigrant families (many of which include U.S.-born citizen children) face.

Accompaniment can also be expressed through immigration prison abolition efforts, as well as advocacy for non-punitive paths to citizenship. Accompanists can work against the criminalization of forced migrants, shining light on the destructive functions of such derisive and false narratives. They are critical for anti-racist work that is essential to the dismantling of immigration prisons and harshly restrictive ‘walls’ of governmental policies.

These kinds of accompaniment are antidotes to the walls that have been built and the restrictive and punitive laws that have been passed to stem the flow of migration; they are, as well, an affective antidote to the hatred, disdain, and disregard that flow from racist xenophobic orientations. Community psychologists can be of help in accompanying immigrants throughout their struggle to find a safe home, leveraging their institutional and cultural resources to support migrants and the organizations that support them (Fernández, 2020).

Accompanists need to continuously engage in reflexivity, acknowledging and reflecting upon the potential ill-effects of their privilege on those they are working with—be it professional, class, race, citizenship privilege. They need to take care to divest themselves of habits—including those born of White privilege-- that can thwart and even unintentionally insult grassroots leadership. In addition, they need to critically address and replace narratives of “giving aid” and “helping” that fail to recognize the reciprocal and mutual nature of accompaniment. Jonathan Weigel of Partners-in-Health differentiates aid from accompaniment. He describes “aid” as a short-term, one-way encounter where one person helps and another is helped.

Accompaniment seeks to abandon the temporal and directional nature of aid; it implies an open-ended commitment to another, a partnership in the deepest sense of the word...To replace the hubris of traditional frozen assistance with humility, trust, patience, and constancy—to replace aid with accompaniment. This is not an easy approach. It entails radical availability” (Weigel, 2013, pp. xxv-xxvi).

### **Standing with the Wild**

In the *Canticle of the Creatures* Francis . . .looks to nature for guidance on how we are to model our relationships. . . We are co-responsible with and for one another, especially for the poor and excluded. We are co-responsible for the life of the natural environment, showing gratitude and respecting nature’s proper limits.

Perry, 2020

The “community” that most community psychology addresses is far too limited. It is ironic that while community psychology uses the term “ecological,” it is not addressing what Quechuans call the *ayllu*. A schoolteacher, Justo Oxa, describes the unbroken wholeness of a Quechuan way of being in community where nonhuman life is an integrated substrate of everyday life and values:

The community, the *ayllu*, is not only a territory where a group of people live; it is more than that. It is a dynamic space where the whole community of beings that exist in the world lives; this includes humans, plants, Animals, the mountains, the rivers, the rain, etc. All are related like a family. It is important to remember that this place, the community, is not where we are from, it is who we are. I am not from Huantura, I am Huantura. (Oxa, quoted in de la Cadena, 2015, p. 239).

While the Quechuan concept of a transspecies community, interwoven in, not separate from the rest of Nature may seem radical relative to present, modern day living, relative to the anthropological record, colonialism's mandate of domination of Nature is anomalous, representing 1% of the entire human species (Narvaez, 2013). Many traditional Indigenous peoples exemplify ontologies of oneness where human lives and identities are patterned with those of other beings (Deloria, 2013). John Fadden, Mohawk (Ganienkehaka) Iroquois, similarly speaks of his peoples' land ethics:

The Haudenosaunee ("People of the Longhouse") view everything as a circle with everything more or less equal. We're all related. In a sense, we are related to all things of reality. The earth is our mother. The moon is our grandmother. The sun is our elder brother. That view, also, reflects the Haudenosaunee land ethic. . . . On my mother's side we've been here thousands of years. It's a nice feeling to know that part of my genetic makeup has been here for that long period of time. We are a part of this place. (Fadden, 2020).

A parallel, positive convergence has developed in Western science. Fortified by quantum physics' principles and echoing what depth psychologist C. G. Jung began to envision, neuroscience admits to what has been tacitly accepted since Charles Darwin – Animals and Plants possess the same mental and emotional capacities as humans (Low et al, 2012; Bradshaw, 2017). Instead of viewing the Earth through the kaleidoscope of reductionism, parsing every millimeter of life into smaller and smaller shards, science has joined nondual Indigenous and spiritual traditions where it is understood that lifeform diversity springs from the substrate of one (Kimmerer, 2013; Francis, 2015). Gaia is sentient with each of her family a unique thread in the seamless tapestry of life.

The need for reparation with Nature is vital. Every continent, every ocean, and sky has been denuded. Grief pours from emptied canyons, forests, and waters once bursting with the calls and cries of arcing Eagles, proud Pumas, scarlet Salmon, and uncountable other species. Climate change and human appropriation of diverse ecosystems have forced innumerable, diverse species ranging from Frogs to Polar Bears to migrate far and wide from their native habitats in search of food, water, and shelter (Abate, 2019). The wild has become a refugee in its own home. Centering the *ayllu* in community psychology opens accompaniment to include transspecies relations.

While aid is given to endangered species through conservation, it has not reversed the growing list of extinctions. Something more is needed: profound transformation of human psyche and culture. It is a challenging task. Nature accompaniment asks the accompanier to disable the psychological, social, and cultural struts which hold humans aloof and above other creatures and to literally stand on equal footing. In so doing, human accompaniers begin their own profound healing from the ravages of colonialism. Accompaniment's horizontality unleashes the psychological imprisonment rendered by human privilege and the primacy of the human-human contract. John Muir writes of this liberation:

We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun, —a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal. Just now I can hardly conceive of any bodily condition dependent on food or breath any more than the ground or the sky. How

glorious a conversion, so complete and wholesome it is, scarce memory enough of old bondage days left as a standpoint to view it from! In this newness of life we seem to have been so always!” (Muir, 1911, p. 10).

It is in this shared, unimpeded relational space, outside the walls, exits, and retreats afforded by modernity’s synthetic world, where companions learn to occupy their *Homo sapiens* form, and bring the resources and abilities that such membership bestows, while simultaneously journeying in solidarity with Animal kin.

There is often a feeling of unguarded nakedness, vulnerability, and disorientation in the early stages of this metamorphic transformation from encasement to radical availability. Yet, in the presence of the wild, colonial-wired reactions soon discharge and the companioner is embraced by a “glorious . . . conversion, so complete and wholesome” (Muir, 1911, p. 10).

By dropping the shield of privilege and control, senses long-suppressed awaken and their ancient intelligence revitalizes. This is the point where deep listening begins. This is the space to hear the voice and needs of the accompanied: the old growth forest threatened by rapacious industry; the Orca torn from his family, condemned to live and die in a cement tank, the Wolves hiding by day and hunting by night to flee the hunter’s gun; and Hummingbirds desperate for succor, traditional migration paths dried up by climate change and smothered by expanding roads and houses must fly hundreds of off-track miles to find flowers. An indicator of the impact of human-forced Wildlife migration is the spate of unprecedented sightings. Lions and Cougars venture into empty city streets; absent for two centuries, a Northern Gray Whale swims in waters off Israel; North Atlantic Gannets appear in California’s coastal waters while Pacific Auks have been forced to the Atlantic. While this has brought Animals and humans into closer contact, no

corresponding ethic and practice of mutual accompaniment and inclusivity have followed.

Cougars and Bears found near humans are viewed as dangerous interlopers and are summarily shot or trapped and killed.

A global movement has begun to stand with these individuals and their societies to forge a communal ethic. The work of Canadian naturalist Charlie Russell provides detail of how mutual accompaniment to foster a transspecies community readily evolves.

Charlie lived around Grizzly Bears his entire life, from 1941-2018, in the rugged mountains of Alberta's Front Range, British Columbia and Alaska. He spent nearly every day in the mountains with the purpose of understanding Grizzly Bears and supporting their right for self-determination.

I've never wanted to know about bears, I've only wanted to understand them. As a result, my questions aren't the same as what biologists want to know. . . People say in order to understand someone you have to love them – I think that's probably why I can understand bears a little, because I love them. Understanding someone means you care about them. Learning becomes something that isn't just about you, collecting facts for your own purpose. It's about seeing the world through their eyes and getting to know what is important to them. (Bradshaw, 2020, p.20)

In 1996, during his sojourn in Russia, that Charlie plumbed the depths of accompaniment to radical availability. The purpose of his stay in the Kamchatka wilderness was to show, and test for himself, that humans could live peacefully with Brown Bears, (Eurasia's counterpart to the North American Grizzly) absent the constant threat of persecution and death.

Shortly after his arrival, Charlie was asked to rescue, rear, and reintroduce orphaned Brown Bear cubs whose mothers had been slaughtered illegally for their body parts. Charlie built a cabin under the spectacular volcano near the sparkling Kambolnoye Lake and began his education to become a mother Bear. Typically, cubs stay with their mother for three to four years, spending not only spring and summer, but denning with her through the winter. Despite his intimate experience with Grizzlies, Charlie needed to cultivate the sense and sensibilities of a mother Brown Bear. “Knowing about bears was all well and good, but these weren’t ‘any old bears.’ All ten cubs were completely unique. You have to pay attention to the bear right in front of you” (Bradshaw, 2020, p. 38).

There were intrinsic obstacles to overcome in the process of mother-bearing. Charlie had to stand at the razor’s edge of life’s paradox – the simultaneous existence of separation and union. On the outside, he inhabited a human form. On the inside, he had to be bear-like. To think and make decisions like a mother bear, Charlie needed to become one from the inside out, and that began with learning how to think like a bear. He existed as a human, but to accompany the cubs, and his neighboring Bear community, Charlie had to become part of the Brown Bear world of experience, their *umwelt* and exquisitely attune to the needs and desires of the Bears.

This involved letting go of human identity by dissolving internalized beliefs and attitudes towards human constructed reality which walls off our species from the rest of Nature. Charlie did not consider himself a Bear, but he relinquished any vestige of privilege and ways of being that were not congruent with those of Nature.



Such species-pluralistic ethic and culture, wherein humans and Bears are guided by shared values and precepts, is reflective of how all Wildlife lives. While each individual Animal is constrained by his particular physiology and form, he is connected and guided by the vast, unbroken intelligence underlying all life. Charlie followed these rules and as a result, in addition to rearing his own cubs, was invited by a wild mother Brown Bear, whom he called Brandy, to watch over her precious children. Over those ten years, Brandy and Charlie lived in mutual accompaniment. She taught him Bear ways, and he learned through giving care to her cubs.

In Charlie's eyes, being open to Bears meant moving in synchrony with Nature's pulse, unhampered by strictures of human domination. He understood that the bodies we occupy are secondary to the being who lies within. The mutuality of such accompaniment was clear to Charlie: "If you are completely open and honest and love someone and you are with them, no one and nothing else matters. That's how you begin to learn who they are and they learn who you are. "

Charlie was responsible for the cubs until they were able to live on their own. He stayed until three sets of cubs successfully grew into adults and joined wild Brown Bear society to raise families of their own. He stayed with his task to accompany Brandy and the cubs until they deemed it complete, at which point, Charlie left for Canada. He may have returned home, but he was forever changed.

Russell's story is replayed again and again as rescue and sanctuary movements attempt to respond to the massive displacements of not only humans but other-than-human-animals impacted by human appropriation and destruction of their habitats. To care for the billions of Snakes, Parrots, Tortoises and the multitude of Animals who have been displaced and harmed,

individuals and groups are changing the fundamentals of their lives and social patterns to be able to provide for these refugees. Were community psychology to reframe “community” as “*ayllu*,” such transspecies accompaniment would need to be included.

### **From Separation Towards Mutual Restoration Through Earth Accompaniment**

Colonialism and neoliberal capitalism have unraveled ecologies at an unprecedented rate (Moore, 2016). More than three-quarters of the earth's land surface has been dramatically altered, according to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (Díaz, Settele, Brondízio, Ngo, Guèze, Agard, ... & Zayas, 2019). For capitalism, a river, a forest, or a mountain is often worth more diverted, cut down, or mined out than if they were left to be – having the right to flow, flourish, and exist. Today, the world faces a dangerous triad of land degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change. The ramifications of these crises are astronomical. By 2050, deteriorating ecological conditions owing to the climate and environmental crisis are expected to produce between 25 million to 1 billion internal and cross-border migrants.

From climate justice to environmental racism, community psychologists are presented with many opportunities to work towards solidarity with the earth and those resisting neoliberal capitalism. Earth accompaniment – as Watkins (2019) has termed the process of standing in solidarity with earth and the life that lives upon her – demands critical reflections on how we reached this point and emancipatory action rooted in compassion for all life.

Vandana Shiva (2006) has pointed out this absurdity that real life is diminished and corporations are bolstered for the purpose of mass extraction and the accumulation of wealth. Shiva calls for

an alternative earth democracy that recognizes that all life has intrinsic worth and that its diversity should be defended and allowed to flourish. In all its forms, this approach of accompanying the more-than-human world takes on a position of "nonviolence and compassion, diversity and pluralism, equality and justice, and respect for life in all its diversity" (Shiva 2006, p. 7). In practice, it calls for policies to promote local solutions, community rights and ecological sovereignty (Shiva, 2020).

Accompaniment presents community psychologists with opportunities to play a meaningful role in grassroots community struggles. For instance, I, Garret Barnwell, have accompanied the grassroots community organization Dzomo La Mupo (DLM) – meaning "the voice of creation" in the local Tshivenda language – through documentation and advocacy. DLM was established by community members to restore indigenous forests, protect indigenous seeds and sacred natural sites, and revive traditional knowledge systems after years of apartheid-era violence in Vhembe district in South Africa. I came to this work with DLM after getting to know individual members by participating in a community-based ecotherapy project. When hearing that I was working on the psychological impacts of environmental degradation, it was suggested by the project's coordinator and members that I focus on the area. This relationship soon evolved beyond research, however.

Apartheid — whose name means "separate" in one of South Africa's eleven official languages, Afrikaans — institutionalized segregation and white supremacy. Early in its claim to power, the apartheid government saw strategic economic value in the soil created by the dense Afromontane forests in Vhembe to establish exotic pine plantations. Underpinning the environmental racism of apartheid was the view that Black South Africans could, objectified and eliminated, and that the

world they lived in could be commodified and treated as an open access system through which initially the colonisers and now the corporate elite accumulate wealth. These processes were often characterized by violence, displacement and ecocide.

Today, DLM's actions are rooted in traditional views – *Mupo* – that embodies all life as sacred and interconnected. This way of being is in stark contrast to apartheid violence that took place in the late 1940s onward in the area. Through the interactions that I have had with DLM members, they've explained that bulldozers tore through ancestral lands, decimating 22 square miles of life, in and around some of the most sacred places where people had lived, farmed, and performed essential rituals for generations.

As part of my research that documented these processes, a community member described his experiences as a child: "I used to live here with my father and the family, but we were chased away so that they could plant the pine tree... This used to be a beautiful place."

Today, he explained: "Most rivers have dried up or have been contaminated by chemicals used on the plantations."

"We tried to remove the pines but we couldn't." He continued: "All the people were chased away and their homes were destroyed... The animals that were... here didn't have homes. There were lots of wild animals, but people started pouching... They [the white man] could even kill 6 or 7 impalas [deer] per day."

People were removed from their land so that apartheid-era government owned corporations could establish large-scale pine plantations. During this ecocide, entire communities were internally displaced.

A traditional leader explained to me: “There was a lot of emotional strain on the community because it [forced displacement and removals] immediately breaks families. It breaks communities. It breaks their wellbeing.”

After the fall of apartheid, community members gathered in dialogue to remember the rivers, villages and other vital places in what DLM refers to as ecological dialogues. These inclusive community processes were recollective and ignited a struggle to reconnect, restore and protect ancestral land and these sacred natural sites – known as *Zwifho* in the local Tshivenda language. “These sacred places are the roots of our clan,” another participant reported.

Communities have conducted rituals in these sacred spaces – forests, mountains, or rivers – for generations bringing community, ancestors, and other-than-human communities together. For DLM members, these spaces were said to have motivated their struggle and is central to healing. However, they are contentious spaces that are threatened by ongoing environmental and land injustices.

Today, pine and tea plantations surround the sacred sites. DLM’s ecological dialogues are a form of what liberation psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994) referred to as *conscientización* (conscientization). Through gradually uncovering not only the mechanisms of oppression, but also the relationship with the *Zwifho* within a group process, new possibilities for action were imagined. DLM's has around 200 members who participate in different forms of earth

accompaniment. For instance, DLM members have started a project of rewilding. Trees have been planted around the community, along eroding riverbanks and around the sacred natural sites to reforest communities. A member of DLM reflected on the rewilding action that emerged through ecological dialogues: “It is healing to me. I feel happy when I am planting them [the seeds and trees]. My heart is filled with joy. When I see other villages looking for trees and planting them wherever they have shortage of trees, it gives me strength.”

DLM also engages directly with the government to decolonize traditional ideas about heritage, which in South Africa may open communities to extractive forms of tourism owing to the National Heritage Act not recognizing the sovereignty and sanctity of these spaces. These approaches resist top-down policies and motivate for community-based governance, as do similar struggles emerging around the world (Shiva, 2020). As a part of these processes, through community dialogues, DLM has established principles to safeguard the *Zwifho*. These principles state that sacred sites are not for entertainment, tourism or dumping waste. Nothing from the *Zwifho* should be removed and any activity that contributes to deforestation or harm of the *Zwifho* is prohibited. DLM are guardians of the sacred natural sites and work with traditional leadership and governance structures. Shiva explains: "The recognition of sovereignty and indigenous knowledge create a major shift in the political context of the ownership, use, and control of generic resources" (Shiva 2020, p. 79). Around the world, accompanists may align themselves with initiatives that counter extractive practices by assisting in restorative justice and promoting community sovereignty.

Despite spurious protections – such as heritage status – many of these sites are still unprotected. As a form of ecopsychosocial accompaniment, Barnwell has assisted the DLM members in the

witnessing that ongoing barriers to access, lack of protection, and land injustices place stress on communities and affirms restorative justice. The findings of multiple individual and group dialogues have translated into ecopsychosocial reports that are being used by DLM to complement movements towards community protections for three sacred sites. The research and reports produced have been used in lobbying the South African Heritage Resource Agency whose mandate is being challenged to protect these sites in a way that does not lead to their commodification that is sometimes that case for heritage status.

The documentation of the psychosocial impacts of environmental degradation is not unique. For instance, James Thornton, the founding CEO of ClientEarth, an environmental legal organization that uses the law to bring about climate and ecological justice, noted already in the 1990s that psychology could be used to enable effective environmental policies. Thornton (1997, p. 3) stated: "if they (psycho-legal arguments) can be based on a clear showing of negative impact on humans, there is a much better chance of success [in the courts]". In his seminal book, *A New Species of Trouble*, Kai Erickson (1996) has practically demonstrated how psychosocial case studies can be a form of ecopsychosocial accompaniment, supporting communities in the documentation of the impact of human-made environmental disasters for reparations.

However, earth accompaniment is not only focused on ecological harms, such as pollution, ecocide, and the reparation thereof, but is also grounded in concern for and the promotion of ecological goods. In his work, I have tracked the socio-political histories and how the intergenerational relationships with the more-than-human world shape and mutually create community life. The reports do not only bear witness to collective trauma, but also the meaning of *Zwifho* and the affective bonds that individual community members have to these sacred

spaces. These ecopsychosocial reports can then compliment broader community land restitution processes. This affirming stance requires epistemic disobedience to mainstream psychology's framing, which tends to de-politicize psychological distress and de-animate people's relationship with the other-than-human life. Thus, earth accompaniment is centered on community and ecological strengths and refrains from damage-centered narratives that have historically harmed communities (Tuck, 2009).

A challenge for earth accompanists is to articulate the intergenerational bond between communities and places to allow for the voice of place to be present in whatever action is taken. Schlosberg (2009, p. 188) explains: "to attain both environmental and ecological justice, we must be sure that views from the margins, the remote, and the natural world are recognized and represented, either directly or through proxies." Testimonies were taken at *Zwifho* for the ecopsychosocial reports, and public dialogue between the government and community members convened by DLM were held at the sacred sites. Community custodians are considered proxies – not only representing the community interests but also the inherent rights and responsibilities towards Mupo (creation). Thus, earth accompaniment requires community psychologists to move towards the margins to find practical ways in which the earth's voice may be seen, acknowledged, and adequately represented. From data collection to practical acts of solidarity, the accompanist relies on deep listening that may challenge traditional ways of knowing, which may demand non-local or non-indigenous accompanists to move into the role of the learner and/or co-creator.

To meaningfully work with the wounds of what Rob Nixon (2011) terms *slow violence* – the insidious environmental injustices that creep across boundaries and evade temporality – requires



accompanists to follow a community's pace. The accompanist may add reflexivity but responds to what the accompanied views as being needed at the time. In terms of Barnwell's reports, the recommendations were related to safeguarding the *Zwifho* and addressing historical injustices, such as access issues that perpetuate dialogical distress. These reports form one minor piece in what has been an intergenerational struggle that will surely continue for generations.

Accompanists are mutually transformed through this life-affirming praxis. Conscientization is an ongoing process with no end state (Freire, 1996) and I have been confronting my history of being a white male in South Africa who was privileged owing to the brutality of apartheid. Through the process of earth accompaniment, I have not only been able to work within a more extensive process of transitional justice in South Africa, which has assisted in confronting and reconciling my heritage, but I am slowly uncovering a deeper understanding of the more-than-human world and, in so doing, realizing my responsibilities. This liberatory process has only been possible through my relationships with DLM members and people like Mphatheleni Makaulule.

Many forms of earth accompaniment are emerging at a rapid pace. A recent special issue in *Community Psychology in Global Perspective* draws attention to the possibilities for accompanying communities in resistance to climate and environmental injustices (Fernandes-Jesus, Barnes & Farias Diniz, 2020). Psychologists are creating supportive spaces to work through the complicated feelings that are associated with the climate crises (Climate Psychology Alliance) and are actively participants in non-violent movements, such as Extinction Rebellion (XR Psychologists) and Fridays for the Future (Francescato, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

*...the choice is between accompanying or not accompanying the oppressed majorities.... This is not a question of whether to abandon psychology; it is a question of whether psychological knowledge will be placed in the service of constructing a society where the welfare of the few is not built on the wretchedness of the many, where the fulfillment of some does not require that others be deprived, where the interests of the minority do not demand the dehumanization of all.*

Ignacio Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 46

As we claim our place in the *ayllu*—those webs of life that include humans, other-than-human animals, soil, water, trees, and air—community psychologists will be better able to grasp the interdependence of the well-being of all community members. Forced displacement and migration are symptoms of *ayllus* that have been exploited, becoming zones of abandonment. Ecopsychosocial accompaniment can occur at the original sites of displacement, along the paths to new destinations, and at the places of resettlement. Relationships of mutual accompaniment lay the foundation for understanding how to redress conditions that have become unlivable, as well as how to create places of sanctuary and renewal where life can regain conviviality. Mutual accompaniment welcomes the interchange of knowledges, visions, and actions for the sake of not only healing, but the bodying forth of vibrant and just relationships of solidarity.

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