

A Pandemic of Inequity

By Stacey L. Stevens

We are in the hot spot of a global viral pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus which is referred to as novel coronavirus or the disease caused by the virus, COVID-19. This viral pandemic had already taken the lives of so many people in Asia and Europe and as we¹ were preparing for its arrival here in the United States, we were led to believe that this virus was impacting only the elderly and immunocompromised people in deadly ways but not the young or anyone under 60 years old. To date, the United States has seen over 1 million cases and more deaths than all the deaths of US soldiers during the entire Vietnam War. In raw numbers that is over 56,000 deaths in just over 3 months' time. During March, at the onset of the virus, we started hearing messages like "we are all in this together." Corporations began using dollars to create commercials that stealthily play on one's heartstrings making one think that this virus knows no boundaries. Talk show hosts and reporters continually claimed, "[t]his virus doesn't discriminate," (Prior). Yet, what we have seen is that the IMPACT of the novel coronavirus indeed DOES discriminate. And more importantly, we are not all in this together.

As data continues to be released, state after state are showing that Black and Brown communities are being impacted at devastatingly higher rates than white communities. There is a very deep disparity nationwide among the cases and deaths in the Black community specifically. Of the known demographics of the cases, 30% nationwide are of people who identify as Black, while the national demographic of Black people sits at about 14% (Stafford). In Washington, DC, Black people are about 43% of the population and represent 75% of the deaths. In Wisconsin, approximately 5% of the population is Black but almost 40% of the deaths are of Black people; and here in Michigan the story is no different.

When we drill down in Michigan, what we see is a tale of two states, one Black, one white, separate and unequal. Thirteen percent of the population of Michigan is Black and 47% of the deaths due to COVID-19 are in the Black community (Stafford). On April 15, 2020, white folks from all areas of Michigan took to the streets in the state capitol of Lansing to protest the Stay-At-Home order put in place to protect the people of Michigan by Governor Gretchen

¹ Please note that the "we" refers to reasonable people of reasonable mental capacities with the ability to process sound evidence and reports from experts.

Whitmer several weeks earlier (Coaston & Rupar). In addition, three separate lawsuits are open against the Governor by white people claiming that their rights are being infringed upon by the policies to protect the larger community. The lawsuits and the protesters are both prime examples of white privilege at play and begin to define the geo-political play as pointed out by @taylorryharrell who tweeted “White Privilege is violating the Governor’s Executive Order and standing on the Capitol with assault weapons and guns without being fined or tear gassed by police yet Black and Brown Detroiters were fined \$1,000 for going to the park.” In Michigan for instance, the difference in experiences in the urban and rural (blue and red) communities is stark. In Northwest Detroit, near Sinai Grace Hospital where national headlines captured horrendous conditions a few weeks ago as night staff walked off shifts because they no longer had what was needed to care for patients, the zip codes reflect cases numbering between 500-700 per 10,000 people. Yet if you look at data from rural Oakland County, about 40 miles away, you will find cases ranging from 13-24 per 10,000 people (Ferretti).

Several questions arise as we think, feel, and see with a lens of social, racial, and environmental justice. As a student in a school centered in Detroit, these questions must be asked and, more importantly, must be answered using critical race theory. Some of the relevant questions that need to be asked and will try to be answered in this paper are: why are Black folks in Detroit impacted differently than white folks in the rest of Michigan and what is being done to mediate these impacts? How do national policies and rhetoric affect these outcomes? What histo-political frame can be used to understand more deeply the impact of institutional and systemic racism in Metro Detroit? Answering these questions can feel something like shaking the magic eight ball. However, several authors from our readings have provided us with tools that can shape our insight and reflection. Thomas Sugrue helps us understand the historical context of whiteness in the structural policies set forth in the building of a metro Detroit. Marion Young unpacks the true meaning of justice by showing how communities like Detroit and the people who live in these communities are, by design, fighting systems of injustice that prey on their self-determination and leaving many in the dust of oppression. Patricia Collins gives us a way to understand the lived experience of those marginalized by whiteness as a valued lived experience, shaping and framing theory and practice. Finally, Michael Shuman’s writing opens a pathway to thinking about a different economy that shares the wealth within the community rather than one that extracts or pulls from the community.

White supremacy in our society is as much a part of white culture as baseball and apple pie. The effects of white supremacy are built into the systems and structures that impact the lived outcomes for Black and Brown people every day. Thomas Sugrue, a historian by trade and a Detroit native, writes in his infamous book, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Post-War Detroit*, about the new urban poverty as one that was created by several factors including the loss of jobs due to the automation in factories, the relocation of factories to the rural lands of the suburbs, and the other policy changes such as overtime for individual employees (*Historically Speaking*). In addition, Sugrue reflects upon the overall impact that the Civil Rights Movement had on workers experiencing discrimination and their overall access to opportunity, despite incredible wins in other arenas of the movement. Finally, he identifies the root of “new urban poverty” as “the most vexing and unresolved problem in race relations in 20th-century America...residential segregation by race.”

These structural, policy driven practices of managing society through housing, jobs, and economic development excluded African Americans in ways that have had monumental impacts on the generations to follow. Some of these impacts are seen in the 22:1 racial wealth gap or the over representation of Black men in the prison system or as early as the New Deal which excluded domestic and farm workers from receiving social security benefits, professions disproportionately represented by African Americans. In chapter two of Marion Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, she states that “marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination,” (53). Economic exclusion due to racist policy is a form of marginalization that impacts Black Detroiters today. Yusef Shakur writes an opinion piece for Deadline Detroit laying out the real story of social distancing for Black Detroiters. In this piece he is reflecting on a shared lived experience with those that are acting out of the executive order to social distance. Something many privileged people have criticized, and law enforcement have penalized. He states, “The “hood” is the center of many conversations about why folks are not staying at home, as the virus continues to spread and claim lives across. But it is in the “hood” that people have been forced, socially and economically, to survive (not live) in their own world.” He continues, “Social distancing is not new to Detroit. Black people in the city have never been allowed distance from the poverty, poor health, violence, and systematic racism...”.

In the here and now, we are seeing, in widescreen format, the full picture of the impact of residential segregation on the daily lives of African Americans in Detroit. With a city that is 85% Black and most suburbs lingering around 85-95% white, Detroit is a city where “one-third of all of its residents and nearly half of its children [are] living in poverty, Detroit ranks as the nation’s poorest big city,” (Perkins). As I have been engaged in the City of Detroit and what I know of the neighborhoods on our D-Tour guide, the “comeback City” of Detroit is leaving many out of the comeback. The Downtown and Midtown areas are home to fancy upscale restaurants for well-heeled customers or boutique hotels that locals could never afford even for a special occasion. Public park spaces that are policed by private security forces are in neighborhoods that also have a very different rate of COVID-19 than the neighborhoods in Northwest Detroit. Looking at the data in the map included in a *Detroit News* article, we can see that Downtown, Midtown, and New Center areas have cases ranging from 45-200 per 10,000 people and the zip codes where majority Black people reside we see the numbers are significantly higher as mentioned above². One answer to the question of why the numbers are so starkly different is that those that live in majority Black neighborhoods are the people that are of the working poor in the City. They are the people working in the grocery stores, restaurants, hospitals – in positions that are serving people. They do not have the privilege of staying home and working from their home office. They are exposed daily to the virus in ways white middle-class people are not. Additionally, practicing social distancing can be more difficult when you have multi-generations of family living under one roof.

What we know of COVID-19, is that this disease triggers an immune response in the body that exacerbates chronic health conditions, like diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and asthma and we find these health conditions “far exceed those of the state of Michigan and nation” in the Black community (Perkins). We also know that chronic health conditions, like those mentioned above, come from poor air quality, food insecurity, concentrated and generational poverty, etc. Many white people in the suburbs or those living in the Downtown-Midtown areas, just don’t experience this concentration of health issues in an impactful way on large groups of people. Therefore, the tangible impacts in a crisis are just not the same. Yes, technically speaking this virus doesn’t discriminate, but our health systems, our food systems, our health insurance

² It needs to be mentioned here that data for SW Detroit, the predominately Latino community of Detroit is likely skewed due to extreme underreporting for fear of deportations by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

systems, our transportation systems all can and do have grave impacts on a whole race of people. Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, former Detroit Health Department Director, states:

In Detroit, a history of poor public policy decisions is behind the systemic poverty that has made folks in the city ‘so much more susceptible’. When you talk about any epidemic, it’s not enough to look at the virus or pathogen; you also have to look at the host and environment, and in Detroit you have hosts who are, for many reasons outside of their control, systematically less healthy, in general (Perkins).

Given the above assertions that the results of low opportunity and equity in health outcomes is directly correlated to the systems that have been created to discriminate against an entire race of people, built on an ideology of white supremacy, we as community developers must be armed with anti-racist theory and practice to do our work. It is not enough to look inside a community and see areas where growth and redevelopment may occur then go inside and begin that redevelopment in a vision determined by those outside of the community. We as community developers, must use critical thinking as a weapon to fight the insidious beast of white supremacy and promote ideas that can manifest the eradication of marginalization and set pathways toward self-determination and self-development.

As a community developer, it is imperative that we use critical race theory to unpack this data. It is not enough to just acknowledge the disparity, but it becomes our mission to think, see, and feel this data in the lived experiences of those we work with in community. Marion Young lays out the foundation of social justice for anyone who is of like minds and values and is wanting to engage in the work of transformational change. Young defines precisely what social justice is and how we can see in real time social justice at play in someone’s life. Young states, “social justice concerns the degree to which a society contains and supports the institutional conditions necessary for... 1) developing and exercising one’s capacities and expressing one’s experiences, [and] 2) participating in determining one’s action and the conditions of one’s action,” (37). Young goes on to state, “[t]o these two general values correspond two social conditions that define injustice: oppression, the institutional constraint on self-development and domination, the institutional constraint on self-determination.” This here, defines precisely the conjoined ideas of oppression and domination and shows how they are connected to the limiting of the human spirit in society. This is what the impact of injustice looks like on the human individual.

However, what is so incredible about Young's work is that they tie social injustice, or the presence of oppression and domination, to the institutional conditions or the systems that impact individual lives. Therefore, social justice is inherently a theory and practice that looks to deconstruct, uproot, and destabilize institutions and systems that oppress or dominate which in turn causes unjust impacts on individuals and social groups. Oppression, therefore, is the limiting of personal self-development such as having low access to quality education. Domination is the obstruction placed on social groups by systemic measures to hinder the complete fulfillment of the individual or group of individuals fullest potential, in their own way, as they see fit.

It is the use of critical thinking that allows one to see and understand the different impacts of poverty and economic disengagement on white and Black communities. In April 2020, Governor Whitmer created a task force to study the stark disparities experienced by Black communities around confirmed case rates and the death rate. These disparities have drawn attention back to the ongoing struggle Black people are fighting against systemic racism and white supremacy. This task force has the opportunity to be a catalyst for sweeping transformational change if recommendations are created applying an anti-racist lens that looks at all the contributing factors to the oppression and marginalization of Black people. One of the first steps of this task force should be deconstructing the anti-blackness ideology in everything we think, feel, and do. Deconstructing anti-blackness is critical and continuous work and it begins when we as white people and policy makers consciously choose to dismantle it as we perpetuate our ancestors' systems of power, control, dominance, and supremacy in the systems, structures, and institutions of society today. Most pointedly, we see white supremacy continue its reign through color-blind and one-size-fits-all approaches to laws, policies, and the recommended implementation of said laws and policies. Patricia Collins writes "Black feminist thought's core themes...rely on paradigms that emphasize the importance of intersecting oppressions...expressing these themes...has not been easy because Black women have had to struggle against White male interpretations of the world," (251). It is imperative to anyone wanting to be anti-racist that they must continually deconstruct anti-Black ideology to be able to think, feel, and see the experience of Black people through their lens, not a white lens.

Additionally, the task force must be constantly in tune to what agenda is being lifted up and who the task force is accountable to. This is hard for policy makers and community development organizations to even understand that they are pushing a "white agenda" when they

are working in communities of color but understanding who benefits the most in the agenda is critical to unpack whiteness. In order to know their story and be connected to it, we must engage those most impacted by populating the decision-making tables with those often not seen or heard as the voices of power and emphatically listen to the stories and information being shared. Collins writes about the Ethics of Caring in *Black Feminist Thought* as “talking with the heart” in Black feminist knowledge seeking and understanding. In the ethics of caring, Patricia Collins highlights three ideas: 1) emphasis is placed on individual uniqueness and this is from African ideology; 2) emotions are present in knowledge; and 3) we must have empathy when we listen. (263) As white people centering the other and listening, we cannot dig into the life or the community or the lived experience of the oppressed/marginalized person, we can only seek to understand and relate how we will transform our knowledge to transform the system of oppression.

In work created to respond to COVID-19 during and post-pandemic it is necessary that equity, and not just equality, is applied in order to annihilate the systems that keep opportunity low in Black and Brown communities. We have to build plans of development around preserving the common good and creating equitable development. We have to invest in improving the life of existing residents in neighborhoods segregated from opportunity without displacement. We must unequivocally be about seeing, hearing, and knowing the humanity in each other, in those we often don't see as connected to our story. We must know their story; their voice must be the voice that informs the plans in order to work to end inequity and injustice. It is concerning that the majority of the Governor's task force is not proliferated with the very residents they are hoping to impact to during COVID-19 epidemic. When we work for true transformation in racial justice we work to transform all spaces, especially ones where policy is shaped and created.

Community developers have a unique role in the coming months and years as we transition out of the pandemic and into what some refer to as a “new normal.” Michael Shuman writes in his book, *The Local Economy Solution*, a critique of current economic development practices and their impact on local communities across the United States. He outlines case after case of big dreams fueled by resident taxes with low impact for quality of life changes, especially of the most vulnerable in a community. A critical analysis using a race equity lens would first align with the ideal that local, small social enterprise businesses are the way to grow and help a community thrive, but this process cannot be race neutral. The history of race-based

policy in housing, transportation, and in practice today, along with the cunning culture of white supremacy, leave community developers primed to repeat bad practices and go with the everyday flow of market capitalism. This type of development will continue to have crushing impacts on low income communities of color as they become targets for the redistribution of the burdens of economic growth. The essential worker is Black. The essential worker is Brown. And we (white people and white systems) have to begin to unpack whiteness, systemic racism and bad policy to protect the people that are currently pushed to the margins of this society-pushed to the poorest, least resourced neighborhoods in Detroit, pushed to the margins of positive, resident driven growth. Our humanity depends on preserving the humanity of those in the margins-we must begin to think, see and feel with racial equity as a baseline and we have to challenge ourselves to awaken our humanity and define that by the actions we take to build a better tomorrow today.

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