

The Black American Tree Project: Fostering Critical Dialogues in Communities

Journal of Family Diversity in
Education, 2024
Vol 6, No. 2, pp. 171 - 179



L. Danyetta Najoli, MA, CAP

Project Director

Introduction

The Black American Tree Project (BATP) is a unique, participatory educational experience that seeks to foster understanding, respect, truth, racial healing, and reconciliation about the experience of Black Americans from pre-colonial Africa to the present day. The BAPT was developed in collaboration with Pan-African educators, artists, writers, and non-profit professionals, drawing inspiration from our collective experiences with various community organization. What follows is a first-person account of the experiences and ideas that helped shape the development of this project, an overview of the BAPT experience, and reflection on the impact and challenges of this work in local communities.

Foundations of the Black American Tree Project

The BATP began to take shape in the fall of 2019 while I was working at Starfire Council of Greater Cincinnati. I had been with the organization since 2010 as a senior community builder. Over the years, one of my most impactful learning experiences at Starfire revolved around Social Role Valorization (SRV), a theory developed by Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger in the 1980s (Elks & Neuville, 2007). SRV helped me understand why people with disabilities are often devalued and how to improve their lives by fostering valued social roles. This concept became central to my work as I supported individuals in becoming more included in their communities by helping them establish meaningful social roles, improving their skills, and raising awareness about their contributions to local communities.

As I witnessed the transformative power of SRV, I began to wonder about its relevance to the Black American experience, recognizing the systemic dehumanization many Black Americans have endured. I was particularly curious about the intersection of race and disability, questioning how Black Americans with disabilities might face compounded devaluation. I explored this further, including discussions with local researcher Jack Pealer, who shared sobering data on the limited social connections available to people with disabilities. These conversations confirmed that there had been little research specific to Black Americans in this area, which fueled my determination to address it.

In the early fall of 2019, I partnered with Freda Epum, the program manager at Public Allies Cincinnati, to explore the idea of creating an immersive exercise focused on dehumanization and the Black American experience. Freda's willingness to collaborate energized me, and we drew inspiration

from The String Exercise, a powerful immersive activity I had participated in at Starfire. The String Exercise illuminated the dark history of institutional mistreatment of people with disabilities, allowing participants to embody roles and experience these narratives firsthand. I envisioned a similar exercise to confront the dehumanization of Black Americans and began to sketch out what this could look like.

At the same time, I began my involvement in UNDIVIDED, a six-week dialogue series on systemic racism hosted by a non-denominational church in Cincinnati. Participating in these intentional, ethnically diverse conversations deepened my understanding of racial inequities while also emphasizing the importance of personal reflection and action. I later became a facilitator for UNDIVIDED sessions, which strengthened my belief in the power of participatory dialogue. This experience inspired B ATP's participant-led design, giving individuals the freedom to chart their own learning journeys.

Other significant influences were experienced during my time at the Toronto Summer Institute, where I learned about the history of Indigenous peoples in North America and was first exposed to The Kairos Blanket Project. At the institute, I also deepened my understanding of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), a model that focuses on uncovering and leveraging the strengths and assets within communities.

As Freda and I worked to develop a prototype of the Black American Tree Project we utilized these experiences and leaned into community engagement to inform our decision making (See Appendix A). This commitment to community engagement enhanced the development of the project over time. For example, one of the Artists Collective members, the late Cynthia Winston-Ford, recommended playing the song *Echo* by Sweet Honey in the Rock at the project's beginning and a brief snippet immediately after its conclusion. This addition brought in the element of sound and poignant lyrics, which helped ground participants in the experience more deeply. Even the name of the project has been influenced by the community. Initially conceptualized as The Black American String Exercise, community feedback led to the search for a more meaningful artifact that could represent



the historical and contemporary experiences of Black Americans. The tree became the focal symbol, resonating deeply due to its dual representation of life, family, and community, as well as its darker historical association with slavery, lynching, and systemic violence. The tree's imagery reflects the rich ancestral legacies of African American families, often celebrated through family reunions, while also confronting the painful histories rooted in oppression.

The tree's symbolism was particularly compelling for me, as I've long been inspired by its natural forms and functions. The overstory, providing shelter and passage for animals, and the understory, with its complex network of roots communicating and nurturing the soil, offered profound metaphors for the resilience, interconnectedness, and vitality of Black communities. By anchoring B ATP around the tree, the project effectively communicates the layered narratives of Black American life—celebrating heritage while acknowledging ongoing struggles for justice and equality.

Drawing from these diverse experiences, BAPT developed as a project that invites participants to engage deeply with Black American history and identity while fostering understanding, inclusion, and advocacy. By weaving together SRV principles, participatory learning, cultural acknowledgment, and community strengths, I worked to create a tool that would inspire change and build bridges across communities.

Black American Tree Project Overview

Launching BAPT

In February of 2020, our project debuted at the a2ru Emerging Creatives International Student Summit hosted by the University of Cincinnati at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (NURFC). After a successful debut our plans to share the project with more groups was disrupted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Thankfully, we were able to continue the project virtually with the support of organizers from the Toronto Summer Institute (TSI). The project was a part of the Virtual Toronto Summer Institute's Ideas That Matter series, which helped to further spread it to a wider audience and iterate new prototypes. Supportive TSI members stepped in to help us design a virtual expression of the project and through these new iterations, the project received international participation from people in England, Australia, Scotland, and Ireland. The early success of the project drew interest from funders in Ohio and BAPT was able to secure a total of \$31,550 from the Ohio Humanities Council, including the CARES Act grant.

BAPT continues today as a Black women led project and since its inception BAPT has been hosted 31 times with over 758 participants from 9 states in America, 3 indigenous lands, and 5 countries. The project is now accessible both in-person and virtually with closed captioning and translation. Individuals with disabilities were able to participate through the physical presence of a direct support person or by receiving coaching tips from the support staff to prepare for the call, such as positioning the camera for optimal visibility. The project is flexible, allowing for one-time facilitation or multiple sessions to meet the needs of the host organization.



LPH Collective Members: L. Danyetta Najoli, Alicia Hilderbrand, Julia Bean, and Kachelle Davis

The BAPT Experience

BAPT is a participatory history lesson and immersive performance experience that involves kinesthetic learning followed by courageous conversations. Community-organizations (e.g. non-profits, schools, churches, and neighborhood groups) who partner with BAPT are responsible for the recruitment of participants, which can range in number from 10 to 30.

Within an organization, at least three hosts are identified to act as internal leaders championing the project. The BAPT begins with a 45-minute orientation where we review the project description and

background, key project components, view a short film, and provide a content warning as some of the topics may trigger intense emotions. We also share what we have learned from previous iterations. The participants also have an opportunity to ask questions about what they will experience. This orientation is important because the project is considered iterative in nature and as we introduce the project to different participants, we learn more each time. Next, we open the project while everyone is seated in a circle so each participant can familiarize themselves with the hosts, facilitators, and one another. Ahead of time, we tape a one-dimensional tree on the floor with roots spread at the bottom and long branches. Chairs are stationed at the end of each branch and a pair of scissors are on the floor next to each chair. Next, we assign each of the participants a role and position them either standing on the one-dimensional branch or sitting around the tree depending upon their role. The roles pertain to 10 carefully selected vignettes and include a black person, a member of their family, and a person who represents the white institutional forces (see Appendix B).

Each participant is asked to read from a historically accurate script as they are led by the narrator. Although participants are reading from scripts, we do not want them to act out the scenario, but to focus on the power of the words. In each vignette, participants learn about the terrible impacts of racism from the first-hand perspectives of black and their family member. Near the end of the vignette, the white institutional force shares their sentiment that justifies their subjugation. In addition, they are instructed to sever the bonds (cut the black yarn) between the black person and their family, and to escort the black person to the edge of society. This edge of society is marked by a thick line of tape on the floor that each black person stands behind as each vignette ends. This area becomes a growing population filled with a black person from each vignette. The black family members remain on the one-dimensional tree with their severed bonds on the ground next to them. (See Appendix B)

Overall, the project explores the complex and nuanced nature of family dynamics when it comes to each of the vignettes. By placing the gaze not only on the Black American focus person but also the family members, participants are able to develop a broader understanding of the negative impacts of the American caste system based on race. The voices of the family members are lifted in this project in order to give space for them to be heard and for participants to realize the effects of generational trauma.

Upon completion of the narrations, people have the opportunity to organize into affinity groups hold what we refer to as Courageous Community Conversations (CCC). These are opportunities to discuss topics important to them, including issues of intersectionality and the impact of the American caste system based on race on the Black family.

These important conversations often facilitate the real-time discovery of new levels of awareness and affirmation, enabling individual action beyond the project to promote healing for the participants, those within their circle, and their communities. The goal of the project is that participants will be empowered to engage in courageous community conversation with one another.

Learn more about BAPT

- [The Black American Tree Project Website](#)
- [Black American Tree Project Introduction Video](#)
- [Black American Tree Project Orientation Video](#)
- [Inclusion Press – Black American Tree Project](#)
- [Sample Virtual Breakout Group from BAPT](#)
- [WVXU article and radio clip about the project](#)
- [Federation of State Humanities Making Meaning Pod Season 1:](#)
- [Race and Racism Podcast Episode 5](#)

The project hopes to raise awareness through embodied accounts of what it could be like for countless Black Americans living in America under the system of historic and current oppression and racism. We wanted to have a visceral impact that cuts to the core of a person and helps them to recognize their own ability to affect positive social change in majority-white spaces. But we also wanted Black Americans to feel a sense of truly being heard and seen in a country where there's not a singular

collective and structural effort to make amends from the brutality and negative generational impact of American slavery.

The Courageous Community Conversations (CCC) allows for people to engage in authentic, healing, and oftentimes challenging/provocative conversations with people from different ethnic, socio-economic, faith, and cultural backgrounds. We want the project to offer immersive learning that is both healing and approachable for all people. There is an opportunity to engage with different people about the Black American's "shadow" experience in a psychologically supportive space. The project promotes full participation, inclusion, equity, literacy, leadership, learning, and an invitation to allyship for some.

Reflecting on the Challenges and Impact of BAPT

As we have conducted the project over time, we have increasingly recognized how cultural humility has been important to the project's continuance. The courageous community conversations are an exercise in cultural humility because they foster a sense of practicing self-critiquing and self-awareness among and across cultures. Cultural humility is what we don't know and are willing to learn about the person and ourselves. It considers the power imbalances that exist with any leader-member interaction, and it lends itself to a lifelong practice of self-reflection and personal critique. The concept of intersectionality is important in these discussions because many participants have important societal identities that overlap. The project aspires to develop a mutually beneficial partnership within the community, the people we support, and our community-based organizations.

We have found that in the previous iterations of The Black American Tree Project there have been some challenges when engaging in our courageous community conversations. For example, some white Americans become silent during a time when conversation is encouraged. We can only wonder if they are wanting to give Black Americans the opportunity to be heard and acknowledged as they participate in this project. On the other hand, we have found that some Black Americans feel compelled through self-induced pressure to speak on behalf of all Black people rather than speak from their own unique perspective. We can only speculate whether they are attempting to utilize this crucial platform to elevate the voices of those who are not present. Either way, we have learned to discuss racial group dynamics early in the process to create an environment of dialogue and critical thinking

from all participants about their own unique experiences.

What’s Next for the Black American Tree Project

We continue to regularly facilitate the project at the University of Cincinnati in the Community Psychology fall and spring classes each year. We are exploring our connection with other museums and commissions locally and nationally. More colleges, artistic organizations, and museums are beginning to show interest in hosting the project in their institutions (See Appendix C for a list of organizations that have hosted BATP). We will continue to deepen the project’s educational footprint to reach more high school students, college students, and museum patrons. Their level of engagement is ideal for the project's intention. The collaborative relationships sustained at Ohio Humanities Council, Pathfinding Outfitters, and The LPH Collective enable the project to thrive and reach new audiences. Future plans are to work with entities in Georgia and Florida.

Another area we want to explore is hosting the project with a predominantly African-American or BIPOC participant group. Freda and I came from non-profit backgrounds, one of which was a predominately white institution. We are also interested in adding more vignettes around the food industry, sports, religion, environmental, and corporate America. We are continuing to explore how cultural sensitivity and cultural humility are linked to the project. We plan to offer more expanded learning opportunities around those themes.

References

Elks, D., & Neuville, E. (2007). Implementing Social Role Valorization Across a Large Human Service Organization: Lessons & Learning. *The SRV Journal*, 2(2), 37-44.

Tervalon, M., & Murray-Garcia, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of health care for the poor and underserved*, 9(2), 117-125.

Appendix A

The Black American Tree Project Community Partners and Founding Members	
Social Innovation Founding Partner & Fiscal Sponsor/Mentor	Social Justice & Education Partners
Starfire Council of Greater Cincinnati Public Allies Cincinnati Invest in Neighborhoods	All-In Cincinnati University of Cincinnati - Community Psychology cohort pilot
Artistic & Humanities Partners	Virtual Development Collaborators
The Lower Price Hill Artist’s Collective Ohio Humanities Council	Pathfinding Outfitters Virtual Toronto Summer Institute
Co-Designers, Facilitators, Support Team of the Project:	
L. Danyetta Najoli Danyetta first conceptualized the BATP and wrote the narration for the project. She is a founding member of the LPH Collective.	Freda Epum Freda Epum was instrumental in co-developing the project by thinking through the various vignettes. Her writing background supported

	the project and helped guide it through its initial stages.
<i>Kim McKinney</i> Kim McKinney has co-facilitated the project since 2023. She supports the overviews and has co-facilitated in-person sessions in 2024.	<i>Julia Bean</i> Julia Bean provides audio and video support when we host the project virtually. She is also a part of the LPH Collective.
<i>Alicia Hilderbrand</i> A central part of our audio and visual support team. She is a founding member of the LPH Collective.	<i>Kachelle Davis</i> An artistic partner with The Collective. She was instrumental in the inception stages of the project and helped us shape the project into to what it is today. She is a founding member of the LPH Collective.

Appendix B

BAPT Outline and Summary of Vignettes	
<p>The project’s exercise components include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 45-minute overview along with a Q&A ● 90-minute interactive workshop <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 10 Vignettes with three scripts each ○ Narration ○ Black American focus person ○ Black American family member ○ Person representing the institutional force ● 60-minute Courageous Community Conversations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Small groups that can include affinity groups based on race ○ Large group conversation ● Educates audiences about the legacies of slavery and after-effects in housing, the medical establishment, prison system, schooling, and other areas 	
<p>VIGNETTE 1: PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA Black American focus person: Villager Black American family member: Family of Villager Person representing the institutional force: Slave Trader</p>	<p>VIGNETTE 2: SLAVERY Black American focus person: Slave Black American family member: Family of Slave Person representing the institutional force: Slave Owner</p>
<p>VIGNETTE 3: MEDICAL INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX Black American focus person: Medical Subject Black American family member: Family of Medical Subject</p>	<p>VIGNETTE 4: LAW ENFORCEMENT/ PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX Black American focus person: Police Brutality Victim Black American family member:</p>

<p>Person representing the institutional force: Doctor</p>	<p>Family of Police Brutality Victim Person representing the institutional force: Police Officer</p>
<p>VIGNETTE 5: GOVERNMENT HOUSING CRISIS Black American focus person: Homeowner Black American family member: Family of Homeowner Person representing the institutional force: Real Estate Agent</p>	<p>VIGNETTE 6: ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY Black American focus person: Black Minstrel Performer Black American family member: Family of Black Minstrel Performer Person representing the institutional force: Minstrel Club Owner</p>
<p>VIGNETTE 7: EDUCATION Black American focus person: Student Black American family member: Family of Student Person representing the institutional force: Teacher</p>	<p>VIGNETTE 8: NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS Black American focus person: Non-Profit Employee Black American family member: Family of Non-Profit Employee Person representing the institutional force: Employer</p>
<p>VIGNETTE 9: MILITARY STATE ORDER Black American focus person: Soldier Black American family member: Family of Soldier Person representing the institutional force: Southern Congressional Leader</p>	<p>VIGNETTE 10: SOCIETY Document 42: Citizen Black American family member: Family of Citizen Person representing the institutional force: White Vigilante/White Supremacist</p>

Appendix C

List of Host Organizations:
The Lower Price Hill Artist's Collective
Community Matters/Education Matters
Starfire Council of Greater Cincinnati
Design Impact, Affinity group affiliate
a2ru Emerging Creatives International Student Summit, University of Cincinnati
The Neighborhood Summit at Xavier University, Special Event
Toronto Summer Institute/Pathfinding Outfitters – Virtual prototype host
Cincinnati Squash Academy
Miami University Honors English Class
Invest in Neighborhoods, Fiscal Sponsor
Public Allies Cincinnati
Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) - Margaret and Robert Garner Cincinnati Chapter
University of Cincinnati's Community Psychology Course - Cohort Pilot Model
Miami University's Community-Based Leadership and Change Course
Ohio Family Network
Impact 100 (women's philanthropy group)
Keystone Human Services + Keystone Institute
Walnut Hills High School - Ethnic Studies AA Course (4 in-person sessions)
B.Younique Soulistic Care (in-person)
National Commission on Black Art and Entertainment (NCBAE) – Peacemaking Cohort