Political grace and the struggle to decolonize community practice

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[Political grace] is an act of seeking not to participate in structures that profit one but not another, to not profit at the expense of others, but to be part of that which changes the structure, that is, to be redemptive, penitent, reconciliative, revolutionary.

Wes Rehberg (1995)

Decolonization involves both engagement with the everyday issues in our own lives so that we can make sense of the world in relation to hegemonic power, and engagement with collectivities that are premised on ideas of autonomy and self-determination, in other words, democratic practice.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003)

In the midst of national and international economic malaise and its consequences, disenfranchised communities everywhere are forced to contend with conditions of political, economic, and social alienation, as they struggle to survive the erasure of history, the erosion of dignity, and obstructions to community self-determination. Unfortunately, even within the context of well-meaning community practice, there persists a tendency toward mechanistic approaches that render the poorest and most marginalized sectors of the population silent and passive in the face of their own historical and contemporary suffering. Experiences of debilitating democracy, and the manner in which these resonate with many of the problems experienced by poor and racialized working class communities who seek greater horizontal relationships of self-determination, serve as the impetus for this reflection on the need for a decolonizing community practice—one that cultivates political grace among those who aspire to create both social and material change.

In the U.S. today, the negative consequences of globalized neoliberal policies are devastating. The concentration of wealth and power held by the international elite is

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staggering. The Bush administration alone spent over $650 billion on the war in Iraq. We face unparalleled pollution of our waters and lands. Poor communities around the globe are forced to contend daily with the horrific impact of environmental destruction. Unprecedented surveillance of the population persists. An alarming consolidation of the mainstream media infuses new meaning to the old "culture industry" thesis of the Frankfurt School. The U.S. incarceration rate—over two million—is the highest of any industrialized nation. Working class populations across the country are experiencing the intensification of economic apartheid and resegregation of their communities. Economic safety nets for the poor are all but extinguished. Forty-five million are without health care benefits. The disappearance of jobs in the last decade has left millions unemployed.

These conditions signal the urgent need for fundamental political change at both the structural and communal levels. But change in today's world seems especially difficult, given the manner in which corporations and public and private institutions remain entrenched in political processes of narcissistic proportions that obstruct democratic life. But all this is more than just about a bad president; it is about a bankrupt philosophy of power and its exercise within public life. This suggests a pathology of power, with its elitism, arrogance, and privilege, that brazenly justifies and rationalizes both foreign and domestic policies of domination and exploitation, in the name of democracy and national security. And as such, its agents (whether astute or naïve) arbitrate dominance and aggression as worthy and legitimate strategies that, wittingly or unwittingly, preserve the status quo. The result is the perpetuation of social and material conditions that reproduce social estrangement, human suffering, and wholesale abandonment of those who pay the greatest price for the excesses of capital. Even so, capitalism fails not only because of its morally wretched impact on the poor, but also its alienation of those it allegedly benefits.

Hence, it should be of no surprise that many of the ideas utilized to make sense of this phenomenon are inspired by Paulo Freire, the world-renowned Brazilian educator and the decolonizing reflections of Frantz Fanon, whose efforts sought to address the impact and limitation of social dynamics between those who with power, privilege, and access and those who exist as disenfranchised subjects of history. Much has transpired since Freire (1971) first wrote his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, or Fanon (1952) penned *Black Skin, White Masks,* yet what seems to remain constant are the structures and politics of inequality that breed poverty and human suffering. And, despite the recent election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States, impoverished populations, here and

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abroad, will continue to face the dreadful consequences of intensifying economic exclusion for years to come. Many of these communities are also subjected to the dehumanizing effects of serving as quasi-laboratories for the benefit of corporate experiments, university researchers, and professional organizers. And, although some of these efforts may have positive outcomes, more times than not, the gains are short lived, as professional community organizers take on single issue campaigns in ways that paradoxically disempower those most in need. Given rising impoverishment around the globe, there is a serious need to nurture radical organizing strategies that embody the courageous power of political grace to support both acts of resistance and revolutionary transformation.

Disrupting Community Practice

It is on the assumption—that [humans] are sheep—that the Great Inquisitors and the dictators have built their systems. More than that, this very belief that [humans] are sheep and hence need leaders to make decisions for them, has often given leaders the sincere conviction that they were fulfilling a moral duty—even though a tragic one.

Erich Fromm (1964)

Despite an espoused rhetoric of social justice in community practice, many conflicts prevail that disrupt efforts to ameliorate symptoms of inequalities within disenfranchised communities. This phenomenon is often tied to the way both “dominance” and “empathetic” approaches (Yiamouyiannis, 1998) function to disrupt community dialogue, solidarity, and grassroots actions to transform conditions of poverty and alienation. Recently, for example, a number of activists and organizers came together in a small Mid-western university town to work on an environmental justice project that involved a historically marginalized Black working class community.

Twenty years earlier, a major power utility plant shut its doors, leaving behind a flimsy-fenced off contaminated toxic site in this community. Over the years, a growing number of what seemed to be toxic related cancers begun to erupt all along the perimeter of the toxic waste site. In response, an official campaign was initiated by a community coalition that included a non-profit organization, some university faculty and students, and members of a grassroots community group.

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Unfortunately, despite an expressed commitment to the community's welfare and empowerment, it did not take long before major conflicts erupted between community organizers, over conflicting views about the best approach to contend with the issue.

The leadership of the non-profit organization (an established professional change agency) favored attacking the problem from the standpoint of a human rights campaign. Several university students working with the organization proceeded to interview residents of the area, hoping to get them on board with their particular vision. In concert, the organization's leadership publicly focused on their past successes with other health related campaigns, whereby highlighting their extensive knowledge and expertise.

However, not all of the members of the coalition were necessarily impressed by the often touted resume of accomplishments. Instead, grassroots community members advocated for a very different approach. That is, given the long history of problems faced by this community, there was a desire to create a community-centered and decolonizing approach to carrying out the work. Grassroots community organizers called for a dialogical or (de-objectifying) approach, anchored in the individual and collective histories of the residents. This would require greater time and space for the area residents to become involved in an *active* process of participation and decision making. The activists and organizers who held this perspective felt that, despite the blanket of urgency draped over the toxic waste issue by the non-profit organization, it was absolutely necessary to use this opportunity for community members to establish greater political confidence and collective empowerment among themselves.

The grassroots organizers expressed an unwavering desire to bring together community concerns related to toxic waste with other significant issues of environmental racism—namely, severe unemployment, police brutality, the miseducation of children, the instrumentalizing of community by academic researchers, and historical government neglect of the area. Moreover, it was deemed vitally important to recover people's histories of struggle, from which to enhance community self-determination (Darder, 2002). The hope, of course, was that community members would become better armed not only to contend with the negative impact of the utility plant on the lives of the residents and their children, but to struggle together on community issues that would persist, once the toxic waste issue was mediated and rectified.

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The deep fundamental differences in defining both the issue and organizing approach resulted in a major rupture in the relationship of the coalition's community practice. Distrust over unilateral decisions by the non-profit organization's leadership to define the campaign as a "rights" movement intensified the debate, creating an environment in which critical dialogue was almost non-existent. To make things worse, a racializing division also resulted, with the white leadership of the non-profit organization choosing to sever its organizing relationship with several key members of the grassroots community group, who all just happened to be of color.

Objectifying "Rights"

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Frantz Fanon (1967)

The non-profit organization aggressively pushed for a "rights" approach, insisting this was the most effective strategy for contending with environmental issues. Their track record as an advocacy organization was used to legitimate their entitlement in directing (or controlling) the actions and decision-making of the coalition. There was no question that the non-profit organizational leadership and staff felt comfortable and safe in their grand task as advocates of the poor. Unfortunately, the power and privilege they wielded, through the control of organizational networks and non-profit resources, remained hugely unacknowledged even when grassroots community members objected to the disparities in power. Meanwhile, their universalizing attitudes towards human rights conveniently allowed them to "ignore the localities, particularities and daily manifestations of the oppression in their midst" (Rehberg, 1995, 85).

Another objection by grassroots organizers to an approach they saw as individualistic and objectifying, was that of legal actors being prematurely summoned to take on the case of the toxic site, without community residents ever having an opportunity to come together to consider their priorities and strategies for contending with the twenty-year-old problem. In this community, longtime residents knew that legal matters had seldom favored their needs or priorities;

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often signaling only greater discrimination in the application of legal decisions. Hence, grassroots organizers conveyed their objections to this decision, by explaining that a “rights” solution was actually foreign to the community; and the premature implementation of its requirements could easily function to thwart other creative and more empowering solutions that could be built upon the strengths of existing communal relationships. These sentiments are summarized by Jaime Martinez Luna (2006) in his reflections on Oaxacan indigenous communities, autonomy, and self-determination. “One always reasons in terms of the individual right, one never thinks of the communal right; that is to say, one always reasons in term of the interests of an individual and it is understood that all positions derive from an individual interest. One never incorporates the possibility of understanding that the attitude is the result of a social fact, and better say communal fact, that thus merits a different treatment.“

From a marginalized perspective, all “rights,” including civil rights, must be social (collective) rights, since any individual right can be taken away and any individual singled out, without committed community support to protect that person. Therefore, it is the strength, acknowledgement, and dialogue of the community, which provides the protection, not abstract or legal guarantees. When, for example, a Black community member is lynched by a white mob (despite laws to the contrary) and the perpetrators are exonerated by a jury of their peers, protection from further injustice and restitution of practical justice emerges from the Black community’s own organization, action, and resistance, not external “expertise,” sentiment, or abstract principle. These things only have purchase when attached to a structure of power. If that power structure is embedded or invisible, as it is often with the dominant culture, it can lead its members to believe that they somehow enjoy “natural rights” or privileges. Those subordinated to the power structure know better and are in a far better position to construct rigorous, effective strategies of resistance and creativity, unclouded by liberal romanticism. This is so, because their concerns are born from a raw, more intimate, and less mediated or processed experience with the world.

From a dominant perspective and experience, “rights,” even civil rights take on the character of individual rights, precisely because members are led to believe that their favored positions are a natural feature of the world. This sets up not only a discourse of “do-gooding” for liberal dominant members but one in which some kind of fault or deficiency must be imputed to the marginalized, so-called “underclass” of society. One sees this constantly in discourses in educational environments around

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“closing the achievement gap,” whereby usually white enthusiastic young idealist try to bring hope, a joy of learning, and a prep school curriculum to transform and lift out the disadvantaged from their dire social, economic, or familial straits. If rights are an individual possession, then they become easily conflated with one’s individual identity, fanning the prevalence of identity politics and single-issue voting, this further compartmentalizes and debilitates civic public action around shared concerns.

Given these concerns, insistence on a “rights” approach by the non-profit organizational leadership (more interested in accomplishing an “organizing product” than community empowerment and self-determination) served to disrupt the ability of the coalition to construct a “site of resistance” or a space of political grace (Rehberg, 1995). More specifically, this disrupted the necessary relational space for community organizers and residents to join together, across their differences, to co-create the transformation not only of the toxic site, but of the community they called home. This reinforces the notion that the meanings co-created within community practices are always partial and must be understood as contingent on the lived conditions which inform their production. What this example of interrupted solidarity clearly demonstrates is the unfortunate temptation to reinscribe dominance within community practice unto those who resist mainstream definitions and solutions.

Given this discussion, it should not be surprising that a politics of expediency, prone to expert quick-fix and task driven solutions, functions as one of the cornerstones of liberal strategies to community “intervention” (the word itself connotes a “platooning” in from the outside). Rather than to seek organic opportunities for voice, participation, and social action among community members themselves, the premature leap into a well-defined “Rights” campaign leads to a “true-and-tried” solution. What can not be ignored here is that mainstream solutions anchored in a “rights” approach are often much more compelling to mainstream (often “white”) community organizers, since it allows them to feel far more secure, competent, and comfortable in leading the charge. This, despite their lack of lived knowledge about how generations of racism and poverty can disable community empowerment, through contradictions, conflicts, dependencies, and despair (Darder, 2008). With this in mind, both Freire and Fanon’s writings reinforce the need for establishing decolonizing dynamics that instill a sense of intimacy and openness or “authentic conversation,” in grappling with class, cultural, gendered and racialized differences, within the context of community struggles.

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In this light, our responsibility to a decolonizing practice must be connected to a consistent commitment to remain ever vigilant of self and the social and material conditions that challenge our privilege, entitlement, and certainties of efficacy. This is particularly so where communities have been subjected to long term abuses, predicated on historical legacies of genocide, slavery, and colonization—with their lasting impact on both the oppressed and the oppressor. Given its emancipatory purpose, revolutionary community practice requires the exercise of an integral process—one in which the mind, heart, body and spirit are welcome in the active service of liberation. This integral dynamic generates the conditions for political grace to touch our communal exchanges. In its absence, our community practice can easily, albeit unwittingly, degenerate into acts of dominance and debilitating empathy that ultimately thwart dialogue, empowerment, and social transformation.

Shattering Oppressive Economic Norms

The system we are fighting is not merely structural; it's also inside us, through the internalization of oppressive cultural norms that define our worldview. Our minds have been colonized to normalize deeply pathological assumptions.

Patrick Reinsborough (2004)

The struggle to decolonize community practice must unquestionably abandon mindless practices that adhere to the *American Dream.* This begins with a critical interrogation of unexamined assumptions and commonsense notions about why people are poor, homeless, or unemployed, as well as challenging pre-packaged and recycled solutions to poverty based on ignorance. Such interrogations are important, given assumptions about poverty based on oppressive myths—myths which ascribe superiority, entitlement, or privilege to those granted full subjecthood under norms that conserve racialized, patriarchal, and capitalist desires. A decolonizing approach, on the other hand, requires that we confront misguided loyalties to economic values that normalize abject poverty, unprecedented incarceration, war policies, and a host of other economically-instilled conditions of human suffering.

With this in mind, a political vision that can inform a decolonizing community practice must work to dismantle those values and assumptions that normalize colonizing dynamics. It is impossible to consider these norms effectively without

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attributing their stubborn persistence to the reproduction of class formation and the vastly unequal distribution of wealth. The growing gap between the rich and the poor, generated under neoliberal policies around the world, are consonant with the imperialist features of advanced capitalism. True to its Darwinian economic principles, neoliberal policies of deregulation, privatization, and cuts in government spending for the poor has left those who reside in the underbelly of the economy abandoned and forgotten. It is a culture of corporate profit, accumulation, and speculative diversion which favors money-makers and military expansionists, anchored by an overriding purpose to preserve its dominion over the world's wealth and natural resources. In its wake, the have-nots are deemed disposable and expendable, left to survive the ruins of the economy.

In the U.S., we live with the overriding capitalist myth: "free market is equal to democracy." Hence, any sort of regulation by the public sphere is considered in the current neoliberal climate as a detriment to democratic life. The reign of the marketplace is responsible for the commodification of almost every aspect of human life. Nothing that can be converted into exchange value is sacred, leaving all up for grabs to the highest bidder. Alongside, all welfare programs have been put on the chopping block, as they are shamelessly called "a drain on the economy." Over the last 20 years, Keynesian economics, with its belief in government responsibility for its most vulnerable, has systematically eroded, as neoliberal rule intensified both nationally and internationally. The abandonment of poor racialized communities is felt in a variety of ways—gross unemployment, absence of adequate healthcare, poor education, and environmental injustices that have left many communities living in the time-bombs of toxic waste and land erosion. And when, for example, neglect of the environment results in major disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, corporate pirates immediately swoop down. Inspired by their narcissistic greed, they offer a fraction of land worth to area residents, still dazed from the shock of devastation (Klein, 2007).

Speculative economic pursuits coupled with deregulation of major corporations across the country have left millions of working people in dire straits—many who at another moment in history lived the "good life." Today, the myth of the "good life" tied to consumption still gains traction in the corporate media; but the promises of neoliberal speculative schemes fall flat for the majority who became prey to the "prosperity" glitz. In *Decolonizing the Revolutionary Imagination*, Reinsborough (2004) argues that a "key to debunking the neoliberal myth of growing prosperity" is to understand through our community practice that,

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None of the money circulating in the speculative economy feeds anyone, clothes anyone, nor does it provide anyone with meaningful jobs. Rather, the speculative economy is mostly just a way for rich people—through their corporate institutional proxies—to use the money they already have to make more. Moreover, this massive speculative economy is a powerful destabilizing force that threatens local economies and ecosystems, since speculation is the opposite of sustainability and encourages a deeper disconnect between ecological realities (213).

Characteristic norms of economic inequality are often enacted within community relationships that inadvertently affirm the very system they seek to challenge. The centralization of power is generally embraced at the expense of community autonomy and self-determination. People enamored by the “little kingdom” they establish become easily competitive and threatened by community people who challenge their arbitrary authority. The consequence here is that authoritarian views are preserved, reinforcing reliance on both physical and ideological relationships of dominance and control. Often media fabricated stereotypes of “the other,” fuel distortions and delusions which seep into the organizing arena, potentiating false, racialized attitudes and beliefs that further fragment community relationships, rendering cultural knowledge as irrelevant. The far-reaching web of capital has cleverly eclipsed the relational significance and relevance of subordinate cultures, by way of messages that reinforce materialism and blind consumption, as well as an unwarranted faith in the power of technology. There is no question that capitalism has effectively driven the planet closer to ecological collapse, as important support systems have been undermined by pathologies of power and hopelessly flawed values that seek to homogenize the very meaning of being human.

Most unfortunate here is the manner in which the “overconsuming class” fails to connect their affluence to the brutal poverty of three quarters of the world’s population. In stark contrast, those who live in the shadows of monstrous affluence know only too well that the world remains in an economic vise (Reinsborough, 2004, Darder & Torres, 2004). Even in the U.S., where a system of apartheid, predicated on wealth, power, and privilege is the norm, there is deep denial reinforced by a pervasive bootstrap mentality. Yet, as noted earlier, the relational rigidity and oppressive dynamics informed by unrestrained capitalism dehumanize all members of society, including those with privilege. By naturalizing the notion of life as toil and dreariness from which one must escape, rather than life as a blessing that inspires infinite creativity and connection, capitalist norms provide fodder for its structural and ideological machinery. If I cannot partake of political grace, deep relationships,

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and authentic dialogues with others in community, then I am easily colonized by notions of dreariness, whose respite is fantasy and escape, either to a tropical island for vacation, or to «saving the world,» or to a homogenous *American dream* peddling mechanistic formulas of consumption and work. How can I challenge the status quo if I depend upon it for my very identity, worth, and sense of value? How can I say no to a system, which insists that I age and make decisions according to my exploitability—where my productivity and retirement are tied to my ability to generate quantitative profit?

There is little doubt that the Western mind is largely conditioned to enact dominion and mastery over all life, in its search to reach beyond human confusion, emotional anxieties, and corporeal disruptions—including the sweaty, burping, farting, lusty body. This misguided yearning for transcendence from the earth into the heavens engenders mystifications and authoritarian fantasies of absolute control that alienate and interfere with organic relationships and ecological respect. In contrast, decolonizing approaches work to shatter social norms that displace the body and emotions in the act of knowing, in order to support communal relationships of embodied solidarity, trust and faith, shared responsibility for the welfare of the community, and respect for the sacredness of all life. Within such a context, love as a vital revolutionary force infuses political grace into our community struggles, guiding us toward new possibilities for a more just world

Political Grace and Decolonizing Community Practice

The human being, this vast and complex combination of pain and joy; solitary and forsaken, yet creator of all humanity; suffering, frustrated, and humiliated, and yet endless source of happiness for each one of us; this source of affection beyond compare, inspiring the most unexpected courage; this being called weak, but possessing untold ability to inspire us to take the road of honor; the being of flesh and blood and of spiritual conviction—this being is you!

Thomas Sankara (1990)

Paulo Freire consistently sought to ask, as should we, how those who enter oppressed communities can labor in ways that respect the wisdom, cultures, and histories of the oppressed. This is particularly significant, given the mainstream culture of “expert” intervention, with its emphasis on profit, product, or quick-fix

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solutions. Too often such efforts, inadvertently, splinter and uproot community self-determination (albeit unintentionally), as community members become colonized objects of study or organizing pawns to be instrumentalized for purposes beyond their own interests. Rather than supporting the creation of conditions for greater democratic life within oppressed communities, often practices and relationships utilized in grassroots political organizing only serve to further intensify subordination and harden inequalities. The outcome is mistrust and isolation—not just for disenfranchised communities, but for those “experts” who in their unexamined ignorance miss precious opportunities to support collective transformation.

Hence, decolonization is necessary for all participants in a community, including those who occupy dominant or privileged social position. One cannot effectively exorcise damaging social beliefs and habits on the personal level without practically and theoretically identifying and challenging the collective structures that give rise to their production. In this process of decolonization, both oppressor and oppressed must reclaim and reassert the primal and central value of human life. This is made more difficult by privileging a rationality which has been narrowed to exclude “subjective” qualitative experience, as simply a luxury, a diversion, or a matter of inconsequential taste. This subjectivity is counter-posed with an authoritative objectivity that pretends it exists only as natural law, without human roots. Again the alienation is evident.

The rationality that sustains such alienation is by necessity emotionless and spiritless. Those that would inscribe exploitation as human nature or as necessary means to desirable “profit” must find a way to deny that suffering or other qualitative states of being or experience have any value. Indeed, these attributes might otherwise be contemplated and weighed as costs, against the supposed benefits of exploitation. In the light of full examination, many, if not most, community members would judge the personal and social costs of exploitation too high and the systems that run on them (i.e. unrestrained capitalism) as invalid. So a kind of conceptual disciplining is enacted to exclude those costs from consideration. Love, for example, is made suspect, worthless or mere grist for fantasy; uncertainty an invitation to nihilism. Trespassing into subjective or uncertain realms are discouraged or prohibited (particularly for those seen as “Other”), otherwise the larger claims to order, control, and predictability might be exposed as charades, along with the authority occupying “objective” structures. Fear of difference becomes the sentinel, denial a means of self-protection. Vulnerability becomes a

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kind of crime or, at the very least, an act of an irrational or naïve person. While, systematic cynicism reinforces hopelessness and despair.

The empowered community, embodied by political grace, threatens to undo all these pretensions. Hence, it is no wonder that systems of exploitation, including unrestrained capitalism, function to deny those collective practices which inspire political grace. Even assistance to the marginalized must reinforce dependency and resist challenges to this system—becoming a form of projection and fantasizing, whose aim is to fulfill individual narcissistic perceptions or identity about how the helper (i.e., organizer, teacher, community leader, etc,) wishes to be regarded, rather than on changing the structural problems and conditions that give rise to voicelessness, suffering, or exploitation.

Hence, what gives the concept of political grace its significance in decolonizing community practice is its relational power as a catalyst for resistance and transformation. To better reckon with what this means requires us to comprehend all people as full human beings. That is, an understanding of humanity as predicated on the intersections of physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual life. Key to this perspective is an abandonment of Western scholarly traditions that relegate to inferior status or popular metaphysics anything that cannot be directly seen and measured. In its place, a decolonizing view of life embraces all aspects of our humanity, within the relational encounters that are essential to our participation as full subjects of history (Darder 2002).

In fact, Rehberg (1995) in ***Political Grace: the Gift of Resistance*** affirms, “that the gift of political grace is the offer of full participation (26)” and characterizes its presence and function as a decolonizing force in the following way:

It is an ‘other’ which refuses categorization and systemization, rationalization, yet which phenomenally appears to assemble in ways that privilege the unprivileged. This ‘other’ offers itself as another dimension to the…’wretched of the earth.’ Though it defies naming, it discloses itself while its divine aspect remains partially unrecognizable…This is ‘grace that definitively sides with the impoverished, that impels alternative possibility from its own radical alternative, that only has power of becoming material when people act in accordance with its gift. It infuses. It interrupts. It creates coincidence. It calls, yearns, struggles to be ‘visible,’ yet cannot entirely be so because of the limitations of the phenomenal realm (22).

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Political Grace, then, can best be understood as an integral human experience that is the collective outgrowth of decolonizing dynamics. It constitutes an embodied force that is ever-present and exchanged freely, through relationships that embody respect and faith in the participants' capacity to name their world and, through this process, participate in transformative acts of co-creation. As a revolutionary force, shared political grace enables the establishment of "sites of resistance" where community members can reflect on their social and material conditions and grapple to find solutions, solidly anchored upon their histories, the priorities of their daily lives, and self-determined emancipatory dreams. It speaks to the enhancing power of communal experiences, which emerge freely through open, interconnected, and grounded relationships of decolonizing struggle, within the process of political transformation.

Within such an understanding of community practice, all lives are acknowledged as subjects to those who live them and, thus, have the potential of inspiring and transforming others. No one is expected to be sidelined, in order to assuage the narcissistic whims of another. Political grace, in this context, is enhanced by collective heartfelt relations that promote more equitable distribution, of time, attention, material resources—and the decision-making power attached to these—among those most affected by the structures that reproduce injustice.

At this juncture, it is helpful to note that decolonizing relationships that inspire the exchange of political grace are not necessarily neat and orderly. They often are forged within radical moments of suffering that establish on-going contexts where affirmation, challenge, critique, resistance, disagreement, anger, joy, frustrations, confusion, confidence, and other human expressions of naming the world are welcomed and expected, in the course of passionate engagement as responsible citizens of the world. Within the process of decolonizing community practice, both passive and active articulations of power are recognized as necessary parts of any dynamic that promotes democratic life. Unlike the "professional," "safe," comfortable, and carefully manicured rules of engagement of "group relations," a decolonizing dynamic supports a sacred place of convening, enlivened by passion, desire, activity, movement, fluidity, change, fears, tensions, rage, laughter, joy, noise, and tears. Accordingly, participants find "breathing room" to be, to offer, to examine who they are—all from the authority of their lived experiences and their process of unearthing subjugated memories.

This encompasses a collective presence that coheres and transforms not by way of domination, but by way of political grace, generated freely within all present. In the

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absence of practices that humiliate and shame, freedom to exist flourishes, as participants accept greater responsibility for naming and renaming the world—a precious gift of life that we collectively nurture with humility and respect. In the presence of collectively inspired power, possibilities beyond our wildest imaginings emerge, to speak, to act, to be known; for also found in the experience of political grace is the radical courage necessary to risk the collective embrace of life-affirming love.

Political grace is, thus, generated within recognition of the comprehensive damage done to all members of a community when any participant is objectified. To objectify other persons in this space is to harm them, to reduce their subjectivity to an instrument for one's own pleasure or profit. However, objectification also precludes the humanity of the participant doing the objectifying, creating alienation and isolation. For in the process of eliminating the self-expressed subjectivity of the other and replacing it with one's own design, one eliminates relationship and the possibility of authentic dialogue. One is walled into one's own perceptions, desires, falsehoods acted out in a world of objects with no true human beings, merely projected representations of humans. Therefore one becomes an object of one's own gaze, driven by unexamined and unchallenged ideas, emanating from a preserving self-reference to one's own humanity, obligation, and contingencies, made void of the capacity to care or love that which resides outside the narcissistic realm (Fromm, 1964).

Through human connections bathed in political grace, a liberatory sense of love is generated, which is neither projection, domination, romanticism, or ideology, but rather more like the sustenance water, sun, and soil give a seed. This signals a sense of support that retains and honors the creative tension, as a precondition of human relationships. This kind of support, in both individual and communal relationships, respects and honors the presence of an organic space of "betweenness"—a generative gap, between our commonalities and differences—necessary for the emergence of transformative possibilities and collective co-creation to take root (Yiamouyiannis, 1998). In this light, our community accomplishments are collective works in the art of living, where the fuel for our co-creation is generated by the spiritual dialectic of our multiple encounters. Community practice from this vantage point is fundamentally decolonized when we acknowledge freely that no human endeavor is ever truly the product of a sole creator.

Last but not least, a decolonizing community practice must also be tied to our

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capacity to bear witness to life, not as passive spectator, neutral observer, or jaded critic, but as full participant in a revolutionary process to save ourselves and each other from the hellish conditions of alienation and greed. Herein, we bear witness to suffering and beauty, to war and peace, to anguish and joy, to the living and the dying. As such, political grace emerges and regenerates through the power of our connections to one another and to the earth; to life and our inner being. Ultimately, it is this powerful force that inspires our life commitment, beyond our alienated and fractured self-absorptions; to bear witness to the wonder of our sisters and brothers; and in solidarity with them, take back the dignity, freedom and self-determination that are our only birthrights as integral human beings.

Youth Speaks! Decolonizing Community Practice in Action

Even after a document was signed proclaim we were free
You still raped our women and hung men from the trees
And yes we were strange fruit
But you'll never take our roots
We will continue to create
And maybe you will continue to hate
But that too will end up on my pen and paper
I let everyone know you are a hater

(Youth Speak poet)

The word speaks to culture, struggle, education, politics, Hip-Hop and community…informing potential…continuing our oral tradition.

(Youth Speaks website)

The communal tradition of spoken word summons the two-fold nature of resistance, which encompasses the communal embrace of political grace and new articulations of power as co-creations of new possibilities and transforming histories. First words become tools of resistance, which unmask the contradictory notions of law and justice—the gap between the legal and cultural image of justice and the practical lived reality of marginalized groups. Secondly it confirms a collaborative and horizontal empowerment, generated internally by the community and the lived

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experiences of its members. Radiating outward and onto the creative act, such resistance is *not* conferred by an orthodox hierarchical authority. Instead, it asserts its own kind of moral and historical authority to put 'the system' itself on trial and under a microscope, to be probed and observed, subverting colonial dynamics of power.

The creator and cultural worker of the lyrics above, and many others like her, are part of a growing creative and collaborative movement known as *Youth Speaks*. The organization is a community, youth-inspired space [2] that generates offerings of "slam poetry," a penetrating, incisive expression of lived perspectives, which challenge the gauzy fantasies peddled to youth by the commercial, economic, and political status quo. What makes this movement unique is its commitment to supporting the creative production of knowledge among its members, rather than simply the typical creative space of reception/rejection. *Youth Speaks* attempts to "shift perceptions of youth by combating illiteracy, alienation, and silence to create a global movement of brave new voices…[challenging] youth to find, develop, publicly present, and apply their voices as creators of social change." What started as a community effort to involve youth has now evolved into established efforts to create a 'history department' in the Living Word Project, "using the model of performed ethnography to develop a consciousness around the social impact of historical elements that are somehow 'missing' from traditional educational texts."

The personal transformative effect this has on the *Youth Speaks* community, as well as the social effects it has for those who participate as witnesses of these co-creations is striking. Mateo, a 27 year-old Filipino American, *Youth Speaks* participant, who was recently profiled in the ***San Francisco Chronicle*** [3] grew from a 17 year-old participant of the program to a mentor and director of one of the community programs. As he puts it: "It's hard to know where I would be without poetry, but I know where I am with it… Through words, poetry has the power to change the world. You make your parents laugh and cry by the words you share with them. You vote for your president by the words they speak."

Community members of all ages, who witness the spoken word events, gain a palpable understanding of the powerful ways in which the messages, habits, and philosophies of capitalist exploitation, in particular, are experienced and challenged by the courage of transgressive youth to speak the unspoken. Where capitalism accentuates ignorance and inspires insularity—for the purposes of maximizing profit—*Youth Speaks* brings together co-creating young poets in order to deepen their awareness of self and others. They find solidarity, not just from their

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camaraderie, but through the ways in which each is the other's witness. Through their communal relationships of affirmation and challenge, their shared passion and honesty helps participants to reach more deeply into the well of their integral humanity, so they can experience the fluidity of political grace among them, in order to create and express that which is most hidden and vulnerable, but often most meaningful.

Where capitalist norms engender emotional holes, deficits, doubts, insecurities, plastic pleasure, and fabricated needs to be filled by neurotic consumption, *Youth Speaks* participants explicitly challenge these manipulations, name the holes and deficits they create, and call into poetic account the personal and collective damage perpetrated upon the oppressed. For example, one poet expressed through his spoken word how body images in magazines assault his girlfriend; encouraging her to hold unhealthy attitudes about herself, and affecting his ability to form deeper connections with her. What makes these young people critically conscious is that beyond their individual concerns, they know that their struggles are collective and involve the well-being of their communities. It is a sense of community wellness and health that extends beyond individual concerns into the realm of collective empowerment.

Where capitalism requires a zero-sum, homogeneity of value—a fabricated "single scale scarcity"—*Youth Speaks* promotes heterogeneity and abundance as a necessary precondition of good spoken word. There is a sense of understanding that the word is born long before it is spoken (as Freire so rightly claimed) and encompasses the interconnectedness of communal distinctions. Different voices, different subjects, different ethnicities, different experiences, different sexualities, all express value as they are shaped and experienced coherently, through a free and ever-changing poetic medium of spoken word. No matter the source, a poem's ability to evoke and call into reality powerful truths that transcend the individual poet is not only what creates value and meaning, but what enhances the communal relationships that dialectically nurture political grace.

Inherent in capitalist relations is treatment of members from disenfranchised communities as mere recipients, hardened passive objects at the service of capital, rather than sentient and actively engaged citizens of the world. *Youth Speaks* supports youth as co-creators, as sensual subjects of history, through enacting their collective power and capacity for co-creation and collaboration within a dynamic process of community life. The *Youth Speak* community is composed of passionate initiators and active witnesses, in stark contrast to community projects that favor

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the passive spectators and referential servant.

The norms inspired by capitalism emphasize physical and/or quantitative material as holder and arbiter of value. *Youth Speaks* emphasizes the emotional as the holder and channel of value. Where capitalism feeds on fear, secrets, and privileged, surveilled access, the community of *Youth Speaks* poets and participants feed on courage and transparency, in the process of revealing their hidden truths, struggles, hopes, and dreams within the human condition. Where capitalism promotes a splitting apart of the public and private, in its effort to privatize and shatter the public, *Youth Speaks* stridently encourages the sacred alliance of public and private, in its bold public offerings of searing and poignant insights, traumas, and triumphs.

The spoken word of *Youth Speaks* poets shatters those myths of capital that deceptively promote leisure and untroubled neutrality as exemplars of the "good life." Instead, the *Youth Speaks* community offers troubled waters of nitty-gritty realities that bear witness to our complex humanity, incited by revolutionary imaginings inspired by passion and purpose. This is a courageous community of youth that seeks to remain vigilant, rather than to escape into fantasy and magical thinking as the "medium" for coping or deriving pleasure. They reject capitalism's relational investment in producing remoteness from Bourgeois assumptions about a cruel, dreary, or boring world. Decolonizing communities like *Youth Speaks* thrive on intimacy and presence; moving closer to the subject and one another, not farther. Inherent here is an intuitive impulse within this community of youth that sparks them to fend off their objectification and alienation, by delighting in the power of communal presence and the precious gift of being alive.

Political Grace and the Courage to Love

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

Audre Lorde (1984)

Youth Speaks, as a "site of resistance" exemplifies one of the most salient contemporary responses to Audre Lorde's often recited dictum. Youth in these communities, along with those who witness and support their efforts, reassert the communal power of oral tradition in their own cultures and, as such, the

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transformative potential of political grace, unavailable to the oppressed in the "Master's house." *Youth Speaks*, Oaxaca's indigenous people, independent media groups, and many other community-grounded communities and organizations around the world recognize that liberation is neither a process that can be guaranteed nor an object that can be possessed. Instead, it demands our full presence and the collective courage of political grace born from resistance and struggle. Only in this way might we, together, forge the wisdom, faith, and strength of revolutionary consciousness to leap into the fire of human anguish and suffering, so that we might liberate ourselves and one another from the colonizing legacy of Western imperialism.

Just as young cultural workers of *Youth Speaks* reach out to one another, utilizing the tools of their own histories and lived experiences, we too must find the courage to struggle in solidarity to break with the alienating morass of capitalism that deadens our lives and betrays our revolutionary dreams. Our collective struggles to decolonize community practice are, intimately, tied to our personal struggles to liberate and awaken our minds, bodies, hearts, and spirits to the communal dance of life—a dance inspired by political grace and our renewed commitment to the power of love.

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Notes

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[1] Darder, A. and Z. Yiamouyiannis (in-press). *Political Grace and the Struggle to Decolonize Community Practice* in Jennifer Lavia and Michele Moore (eds.) **Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Policy and Practice: Decolonizing Community Contexts**. London: Routledge.

[2] (see:www.youthspeaks.org)

[3] “Youth Speaks Encourages Young Poets,” Delfin Vigil, March 30, 2008: http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/03/30/PK4TVMO2S.DTL

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