

Kaila Skeet Browning

Professor Michaels & Yasmine Lalkaka

Assignment #3: Personal Theory of Change

11 May 2021

As I work towards building my understanding of what makes our world deeply unjust, and how I view my role in building liberatory futures, I have found myself shifting from the question “what do I owe other people?” to “what do we owe each other?” I was only able to name this shift recently, when reviewing feedback from a paper that I had submitted for a Praxis Design course as one of three required essays outlining my frameworks of change. In this essay, I opened with a narrative illustrating the complex ways I have navigated my identity in classroom settings, and the fact that I enter every space not just a white woman, but also a disabled white woman with PTSD. I discussed how I understand these identities as not additive, but rather constantly informing each other. I had moments where I failed my classmates of color in regards to my honesty and willingness to engage in racial dialogues, while also experiencing having my access needs dismissed by my peers. They deserved more from me in many ways, and I deserved more from them in others, but I was not looking to understand this “owing” as transactional, but rather deeply rooted in care and accountability.

An example that I think illustrates the importance of incorporating care and accountability to all areas of our lives, is how my relationship to money has changed. I used to think of money very narrowly, in terms of just “transactions” and “owings”, but this viewpoint has changed a lot over time as I consider the deeply racialized and colonial creation of capital itself. The idea of generational wealth was always an easy one to grasp, considering how much

both my grandparents supported my family. Although my parents rotated through middle to working class jobs, my father as a summer camp director and my mother as a social worker, food service worker, and janitor, my grandparents were always giving my parents money to support myself and my siblings, especially when it came to helping us be able to go to college. Yet as I learned more about race and racism throughout high school and college, it became abundantly clear to me that every dollar my grandparents had made was a result of directly reaping the benefits of white supremacy and contributing to the exploitation of people of color locally, nationally, and globally. My mother's grandfather had worked overseas in Oman for the gas company Shell, and my dad's father was a tenured professor of Sociology at the University of Austin, Texas, an opportunity he never would have had had he not been white.

In the face of this realization, I resorted to the question that I thought would be able to help me understand and act best, which is "what do I owe other people?". My answer, without a doubt, was that I owed reparations to Black and Indigenous people, and I began generously and regularly giving away my money through mutual aid fundraisers, and creating systems of accountability with my parents and grandparents to do the same. Although I felt better about my personal choices around my inherited wealth, it didn't take long to realize that no amount of money I could give was ever enough. There were always more mutual aid requests, mothers sleeping in cars with their children, trans Black women in need of safe housing, families experiencing joblessness due to illness. I was doing everything I could to answer the question "what do I owe other people?" when it came to how I related to money, but it was never going to be enough because the question itself was wrong.

Shifting to "what do we owe each other?" was a shift from thinking individually, to collectively. It is an acknowledgement that there are histories behind our owing, and rather than

deny these histories (in this instance the ways in which my grandparents accumulated generational wealth), we can make decisions informed by these histories. I can continue giving individual reparations, but what will ultimately be more effective is working towards a world in which the government is the one giving reparations, and imagine that a world free from capitalism is actually possible. A world in which all housing is safe housing for trans Black women, in which healthcare is accessible and free, a world that challenges relationships to property and ownerships and landlords are not evicting people for being short rent on unceded Indigenous land. When I shifted to thinking relationally, I began to grasp the ways in which struggles across class are inextricably linked to so many other struggles for freedom.

Asking myself this question also allows me not only to advocate for others, but for myself and the marginalized communities that I am a part of. For example I have found it deeply healing to acknowledge and demand back the power that has been taken from me repeatedly, interpersonally, and structurally due to my gender, and hold people accountable to the safety I know I always deserved. Asking this question also pushes me to think about the privileges and power that I still hold as a cisgender woman, and the ways in which the gender binary has violently denied others the same safety that I experience as someone who fits within this binary.

“What do we owe each other” to me is a call to accountability and care. Yet I often find myself gravitating to these terms without actually taking the time to understand what care and accountability necessitate. It was only after reading Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, that I am realizing how I have always experienced love as the root of both care and accountability, and that it is also not only helpful to clarify this truth, but necessary. As Freire writes “Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others...as an act of bravery, love cannot

be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation” (Freire, 1970 p. 89,).

I think that along with love, working towards acknowledging the complexity of people and their situations is necessary to accountability and achieving any kind of social change. In both previous papers I’ve written for my Praxis Design class, I’ve incorporated narratives that felt multilayered and multi-dimensional, and that acknowledged that power and privilege exist in everyone all the time. In my work, I strive to always resist a binary between “indecipherability and simplicity” as author Billy Ray-Belcourt writes w (Belcourt, 2020 p. 115). In his book “A History of My Brief Body”, he goes on to say that “simplicity is a mode of being in the world available to those enmeshed in white structures of feeling...simplicity hides a flurry of forms of social and political violence that rip the lives of the marginalized from the freedom of a good life, from a life emptied of historically contingent turmoil.” (Belcourt, p.115). I want the ways I advocate for myself and others to work against simplicity, or what I think of as “betraying” simplicity.

This betrayal is an active, lifelong practice. I believe there are many ways to work towards *unmeshing* ourselves from “white structures of feeling,” and the first one is listening, of engaging the ways that others' stories may challenge, disrupt, and expand (insert dominant groups) core understandings of the world. Although this awareness is a natural result of being exposed to people who must navigate the world differently than you, to frame it as the end goal is incredibly harmful. Framing the end goal of storylistening cannot be “empathy” and “raising awareness”, because in its nature “raising awareness” is catered towards those who do not yet recognize the humanness and struggles that marginalized groups live day to day. As Professor Asha Best wrote in a manifesto draft for a research collective we are part of together, regarding

empathy as an end goal, “is a particular sort of violence that takes for granted the privilege of being able to rationalize the existence of others and otherness. If we engage in storytelling, it is not for the purposes of creating “human interest” stories”.

I want to use a story that I highlighted in my second essay for my Praxis Design course, which was focused on how we understand social inequity, to highlight. I wrote about an experience I had as an intern for a program called “Girls Promoting Safety” (GPS) run out of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) of Worcester. All of the girls in the program identify as Black and Afro Latina, while my supervisor and I are white. In my essay, I focused on an interaction I remember clearly, that took place while the girls were playing “The Superpower Game”. The game consists of each student getting a list of superpowers such as “being able to speak in any language” or “having the ability to turn back time”, as well as a list of problem scenarios. The goal is for students to work together and decide whose superpower would work best to address the scenario, as each superpower can only be used once. The “problem scenario” that has been identified is as follows: a group of older boys in your neighborhood are selling drugs and making the park unsafe for young people and families. The “superpower” options that are left include “healing powers”, “the power to turn back time” and “the power to turn invisible”.

The girls unanimously decided to pick “healing powers”, stating that they would heal everyone from drug addiction so that the boys selling drugs will have to find different jobs, and the park will stay safe. The girls’ response reveals the minefield of social and political violence that they and their communities must navigate on a daily basis, and the creative, life-affirming solutions they derived to survive it. In their response, they responded with healing as a solution to drug addiction, rather than punishment. But rather than simply affirming the girls’ creativity in addressing the immensely complex structural and interpersonal harms they experience, I want to change

the social conditions that require this resilience, or in the words of Belcourt, I want to treat others stories “so as to read and act in the direction of the world it begets.” (Belcourt, pg. 117).

I believe that freedom is necessitated by the strength of our relationships to each other, by how deeply we love each other and love the world we want to build together. I believe in both listening and acting. And then listening again to the ways that the impact of your actions were felt. Constantly readjusting and adjusting to develop a framework of change that honors and works towards the liberation of all oppressed peoples.

I hope to incorporate this framework of listening, acting, and then listening again throughout both the design and implementation of my praxis project. Two years of listening to the stories of the youth in the GPS program, as well as witnessing the conditions in which they were expected to grow and learn, were more than enough to communicate the urgency of the situation. These youth are navigating a schooling system that simultaneously denies the impacts of race in our society while being an institution that was founded on white supremacy and upholding racial categories. Youth were being both denied their racial reality, as well as the resources necessary to navigate a system stacked against them. This story-listening is the origin and my praxis work, and it is the stories of these youth that I remain accountable to as I work towards trying to make educational spaces more just.

The “action” stage of my praxis work will be co-designing a curriculum that aims to address the lack of spaces for youth to talk about race and racism, in the hopes of providing youth with a space to discuss its impacts on their lives. Art will be used as the primary pedagogical tool for allowing youth to express themselves and react to the injustices they see in their personal lives and in their communities. I will then circle back to the “listening again” aspect of this framework, as I explore through recordings, interviews, and observations how youth engaged with the curriculum. I will explore whether it was meaningful to them, and what criteria makes a race dialogues curriculum meaningful to youth.

I want to clarify that these different stages of the framework do not work so distinctly from each other as it may appear. Throughout our session during the “action” stage, if direct feedback comes up

from the youth, we will of course listen, address, and incorporate this feedback in any way we can. Similarly, during the “listening” stages, there are many decisions we must make around what kinds of questions we are asking, such as who our primary audience is and ways we are also capable of perpetuating harmful ideologies and power dynamics. My hope in analyzing my research plan through this specific framework is to provide concrete examples for the ways that my praxis project engages stories and responds to these stories in a way that centers intentional and justice-centered action that welcomes feedback, transparency, and accountability from those it claims to support.