Revolutions of the Heart: Cultivating Love as a Means for Personal & Collective Transformation

By

Courtney Rampe Supple

Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology (2005)
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies & Planning in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in City Planning at the MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 2014

© 2014 Courtney Rampe Supple All Rights Reserved

The author hereby grants to MIT permission to reproduce and to distribute publicly paper and electronic copies of this thesis document in whole or in part in any medium now known or hereafter created.

Author

Signature redacted

Department of Urban Studies & Planning
May 22, 2014

Certified by

Signature redacted

Professor Ceasar McDowell
Department of Urban Studies & Planning
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by

Signature redacted

Associate Professor P. Christopher Zegras
Department of Urban Studies & Planning
Chair, MCP Committee
Revolutions of the Heart: Cultivating Love as a Means for Personal & Collective Transformation

By

Courtney Rampe Supple

Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology (2005)
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies & Planning
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master in City Planning
at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of people and places who, through our own lived experiences, have come to realize that the physical, ideological, and institutional separation caused by dominant American cultures and institutional arrangements has had injurious effects on ourselves and our society. By listening to our own hearts and finding fellowship with others who are on a similar path of reconciliation to self and others, we have recognized the need for and power of human connection. I begin with a discussion of the manifestations of our disconnection through the particular example of my home, Oakland, California. I outline how our disconnection has affected us in terms of disparate geographic, economic, education, and health outcomes. I then analyze how we came to be so disconnected, focusing on two strands in particular: American political economy and modernist concepts of self. I then transition to a discussion of love and how, theoretically, a love-infused praxis can be an antidote to the disconnection discussed earlier. My cases provide a space to explore theory in action. The cases are: East Point Peace Academy, the East Bay Meditation Center, and the KPFA Apprenticeship Program — all of which are in Oakland. I pay close attention to how the cases operationalize the elements of a love-infused praxis and provide some reflections on what this means for planning.
Acknowledgements

To my mother and father, who were the first people to teach me what love looks like and feels like, thank you for this gift of life and love. Meghan, how could I have done this without my big sister? Thank you for supporting me in all kinds of ways as I struggled to make it to and through grad school. Thank you to my KPFA family – Shaunnah, Shana, Sukari, Xago, Jane, Lamont, Lindsay, Renee, Frank, Joy and all the apprentices who have come before and after. The community that we nurture through our love and struggle and dedication is one of the greatest blessings of my life.

Thank you to Charlene Wedderburn, who took me under her wing, showed me what strength and compassion look like in concert, and challenged me to speak, even when my voice trembled. Thank you to Ellen Fuller, who let me see that the world of academia, while it has its issues, can be a place of exploration, discovery, inspiration, and empowerment – as well as good friends. Thank you to Mr. Rudgers (yep, I’m always going to call you that), who let me know, as a young girl in less-than-challenging academic surroundings, that the world is full of beauty and wonder and people who endeavor to think and feel and create. Thank you for pushing me and loving me and sticking by me when I didn’t return your phone calls for months! Thank you to my husband, my rock, Dennis. Your patience, support, and cheerleading have been invaluable. You taught me what faith is and I am forever grateful. Finally, Molly. The sister I choose. You remind me to listen to my heart, you help me to figure out what it’s saying, and, sometimes, when all I can do is emote, you give words to those feelings and I revel in our ability to see, honor, and love each other. I could not have done any of this without you. I’m so excited to write the next chapter of our life together 😊

Thank you to my cases, for existing and showing the world what is possible. Brenda Salgado and Larry Yang at the East Bay Meditation Center; Kazu Haga at East Point Peace Academy; everyone in the KPFA Apprenticeship Program – the time, care, and wisdom you shared with me during the interviews and over the years mean more to me than I can put into words.

And to Oakland. My heart is yours. Thank you for nourishing it and giving me a place to express it with all of the beautiful people who call you home.

I am who I am because of all of you. Each of you has been a beacon in my life; by standing in your lights, I’ve learned to let mine shine, as well. You make me brave. You help me love. Thank you.

I must also give special thanks to the William Emerson Travel Award committee for making my research in Oakland possible. I couldn’t have done it without you!
## Table of Contents

I. Beginnings ........................................................................................................... p. 7  
II. Symptoms of Our Disconnection ................................................................... p. 10  
III. The Political Economy of Our Disconnection ................................................. p. 18  
IV. Concepts of Self that Disconnect & Reconnect ........................................... p. 26  
V. A Love-Infused Praxis: An Antidote to Our Disconnection ......................... p. 32  
VI. Cases of Reconnection .................................................................................... p. 42  
VII. Where Do We Go From Here? ..................................................................... p. 78  
VII. Bibliography .................................................................................................. p. 84
“The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?"
Beginnings

I came to this thesis with the desire to tell a story. So, what is this story about? Broadly, it’s about Us. It’s an investigation into how we, as Americans, have become disconnected and the deeply harmful ramifications of such alienation. But it is also about how we come together, continuously and daily, in spite of the ideological, material, and institutional forces of separation that constitutes our lives. We, as people, are meaning makers. We come into a world of chaos and through continuous, value-laden interactions with other people and the world around us, we make sense of it all. This is the inherently interdependent nature of our existence. You, me, the world – we constitute each other, in terms of how you and I see the world and learn to act in it. But we don’t come into a vacuum, free of pre-existing meaning or material privileges and penalties attached to those meanings. We are born into institutional arrangements and cultural ideologies that structure our experiences and mitigate the expressions of our own innate capacities and desires.

Yet we aren’t mindless automatons, coming off of a cultural conveyor belt of life, either. While you and I are shaped by these structures and institutions, we also play a role in constructing them through our daily behaviors. It’s a feedback loop of mutual production. The thing is – we’re the only ones with the conscious ability to affect the loop, to maintain or disrupt the systems, to uphold the status quo or to throw a wrench into the works when we feel like, “wait a minute, this isn’t working for me.” It’s this interplay between the structural and the individual that make me curious. How have we come to make meaning in America? What mechanisms and processes are involved? What have the consequences been? What can be done so that we can all participate in figuring out what does work for us?

Many of our American institutions and cultures, those forces that structure our lives and influence our life outcomes, have disconnected us – from ourselves, each other, and the world around us. This disconnection has grown out of a very specific history, one rooted in a political economy of domination and enabled by a modernist conception of an autonomous Self. This historical construction has, however, become naturalized and decontextualized. Today, the symptoms of a nation born of slavery, genocide, and the denial of life are all around us, yet we don’t necessarily connect these symptoms to their sources or see our roles in upholding or disrupting them. Mass incarceration, deportation, staggering health inequities, disparities in educational attainment, marriage inequality, spatial segregation, a growing wealth gap, and a disregard for the earth are just some of the manifestations of our disconnection.

But our history and our present are also full of wrench throwers – people whose own lived experiences and internal voices don’t match up with the systems of ideas and institutions surrounding them. From united slaves and indentured servants at the beginning of North American colonization to abolitionists, suffragists, union organizers, Populists and Progressives, Civil Rights activists, Stonewallers, Riot Grrrls, Dreamers, and the cases in this thesis – the United States has a long, if simultaneously complicated and contested, history of people disrupting the dominant narratives and institutional arrangements of separation by speaking and acting upon the truths of their hearts.
We are the evidence of our actual and desired connectedness. Realizing and embracing the mutual, reciprocal nature of our existence is how we free ourselves and each other from the straightjacket of a culture that doesn’t reflect the full spectrum of its participants. It’s how we honor what is most human in us and allow ourselves to express and embody these elements of ourselves. It’s part of how we begin to figure out the ways in which we can actually live together.

So, how do we come to see, to accept, and to embody our interconnectedness? In a word, love. Love is the liberating force that leads to our redemption. It’s what allows us to see each other as mutually constituting beings, to take on the reality that we are active participants in a larger process of creation, and to transform our fear of the unknown and the different into faith in ourselves and each other. For generations, our moments of disruption have been palliative reactions to the symptoms of our disconnection. Movements that have secured more rights for more people have not necessarily aimed to reconnect us all as humans. It’s my intuition, which I hone more clearly through the literature and the cases, that we are in need of a revaluation of both our goals for social justice and, by extension, our strategies to reach those goals.

My thought is that reconnecting to ourselves, each other, and the world around us through love is both our means and our end. Rather than gaining more rights, in the transactional sense of justice, we need to explore, cultivate, and practice our loving nature. This is what will actually allow us to achieve the rights — the justice — we seek and deserve. Seeing each other as humans that are part of the community of care and self-determination is what allows us to move beyond working on labor rights, women’s rights, immigrants’ rights, incarcerated people’s rights in silos and move toward creating a context in which all life can flourish. It’s what transforms “enemies” into friends and allies, or, at the very least, people with whom we can work and respect. Practicing love and reconnection prepares us, individually and collectively, to reshape the institutions and structures that shape us to reflection our collaboratively determined intentions and desires. It creates a bigger Us, let’s Us think and feel more clearly about what we want and need, and it creates the possibility of more of Us actively participating in bringing that desired state into being. It begins and ends with Us — and we do it through love.

This thesis is an exploration of several cases in which love is employed in diverse settings and communities, with various agendas, and toward different immediate ends. In this way, the thesis is not just about “love.” This is not a story of folks coming together to hold hands and sing kumbaya. It’s a story about experimentation and work. Recreating ourselves through love is a daily practice and this is an investigation of some promising tools, mechanisms, and contexts that nurture spiritual growth that can lead, and have led, to material change. I will begin this story, however, by laying out why this question matters, not in theory, but in terms of the tangible effects our disconnection has had on our people. I’ll then explore one strand of the founding genealogical line of our disconnection: America’s historical political economy. Next, I will discuss what I mean by love and how, theoretically, the practice of love is an antidote to the disconnection discussed earlier. The cases then provide a space to explore this theory in action — the challenges to cultivating love, the successes in building connections and community, the key ingredients, and the conducive contexts. Finally, I’ll synthesize major lessons from the theory and practice to help folks who feel like there’s something to this idea of reconnection and are seeking insights and lessons around how to cultivate it in their own contexts.
"What's the matter, Martin? You seem very agitated."

"We've fought long for integration. It looks like we're gonna get it. I think we'll get the laws. But I'm afraid that I've come upon something that I don't know quite what to do with. I'm afraid that we're integrating into a burning house."

"What should we do?"

"Become the firemen. Let's not stand by and let the house burn."

- Martin Luther King, Jr. in conversation with Harry Belafonte
Symptoms of Our Disconnection

I come to the writing of this thesis through my own experiences. The ideas discussed herein have been distilled through investigation and surprise – that is to say, through thoughtfully living life with the people around me and trying to learn from each day. As a student of a preeminent research institute, I feel as though I’ve been inculcated by the idea that starting from such a subjective, embedded place is somehow intellectually inadequate or will lead me down perilous roads to biased, inaccurate conclusions. But I’m actually quite confident that speaking through my own lived experiences of the world may be my most legitimate place from which to speak. I will do so with an effort to be transparent, self-aware, and humble – intentions and abilities that are themselves derived from my lived experiences, many of them with the cases herein. I will attempt to be a witness to a journey I have shared with family, friends, strangers, colleagues – all of us teachers, all of us students. We’re all embedded in webs of relationships and circumstances that help to shape our subjective interpretations of the world. That being said, I will start from a place of honesty about my process and a reverence for the evidence that life has delivered over the years. And I will wonder what parts of this story will resonate with yours.

The place where I feel most deeply embedded and to which I am lovingly committed is Oakland, California. I moved there in 2007 on a hunch that I would find kin. Over the next five years, I found and created that family. These people and our place were my teachers, my partners, my lovers, my weaknesses, my strength, and my friends. I’ve learned more on the streets, at the bars, in the clinics, on the corners, and in the homes of people in Oakland than in any classroom. I worked for a network of community health clinics located throughout Alameda County, focusing mostly on addressing the social determinants of health, namely poverty and racism. I was an apprentice at a community radio station in Berkeley, the mission of which it is to tell the stories that don’t normally make it on mainstream airwaves. I came out, addressed substance abuse and depression, and began dealing with a chronic illness. I took part in organizing around housing rights, mass incarceration, violence, and economic inequality. I observed, participated, collaborated, screwed up, tried again, and grew; I was mistrusted, schooled, tested, embraced, and loved. Oakland, and my family there, is the reason I’m writing this thesis.

It was in this context that I began to see the interplay between the structural and the individual. It was hard not to see it in Oakland. Structuralized racism and poverty are stark here. Low-income and high-income neighborhoods are easily drawn on a map. The level to which race and ethnicity match up with this income segregation is...not surprising.
Neighborhood Poverty Level by Census Tract

Who Lives in Neighborhoods of Varying Poverty Levels by Race/Ethnicity

source: Alameda County Health Department
This is a place in which nearly one in three Black babies is born into poverty, while only one in fifteen White babies is born into the same context. One in two poor white residents live in affluent neighborhoods, whereas only one in seven Latinos can say the same. Health, wealth, and educational outcomes can be mapped to these very same neighborhood demarcations. People living in areas of affluence have different lines of work, and if the spaces of work overlap with that of low-income residents, the pay scale is quite different.

**Access to Jobs that Pay Adequate Wages:**

**Top 5 Occupations by Neighborhood Poverty Level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Category</th>
<th>&lt;10% Poverty (Affluent)</th>
<th>Median Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Management (14% of civilian employed pop age 16+)</td>
<td>2. Office &amp; Admin Support (13%)</td>
<td>$91,324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Office &amp; Admin Support (13%)</td>
<td>3. Sales &amp; Related (11%)</td>
<td>$39,497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sales &amp; Related (11%)</td>
<td>4. Computer &amp; Math (7%)</td>
<td>$44,887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Computer &amp; Math (7%)</td>
<td>5. Business &amp; Financial (7%)</td>
<td>$94,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Business &amp; Financial (7%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alameda County Self-Sufficiency Standard for 1 Adult in 2011 = $27,456

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Category</th>
<th>30%+ Poverty (Very High Poverty)</th>
<th>Median Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Office &amp; Admin Support (11%)</td>
<td>2. Food Preparation &amp; Serving (10%)</td>
<td>$28,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Food Preparation &amp; Serving (10%)</td>
<td>3. Construction &amp; Extraction (10%)</td>
<td>$16,135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Construction &amp; Extraction (10%)</td>
<td>4. Sales &amp; Related (9%)</td>
<td>$29,495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sales &amp; Related (9%)</td>
<td>5. Building &amp; Maintenance (8%)</td>
<td>$23,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Building &amp; Maintenance (8%)</td>
<td>$20,967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: American Community Survey, 2007-2011

Oakland is a place where 34% of residents of very high poverty neighborhoods don't have a high school diploma, whereas 9% of residents of affluent areas do not. Only thirty percent of Oakland Public School third graders from very high poverty neighborhoods meet English-Language Arts proficiency; seventy-two percent of children from affluent neighborhoods do. Homicide rates are 1:8 in affluent versus very high poverty neighborhoods. In affluent neighborhoods like the Oakland Hills, 1 out of 200 youth ages ten to seventeen are incarcerated. On the other hand, one out of forty young people in very high poverty neighborhoods throughout West and East Oakland are locked up. In my old neighborhood in East Oakland, there were five liquor stores within two blocks of my apartment and only one grocery store within two miles that had a meager selection of healthy foods I could afford to purchase.

Hypertension, a disease primarily caused by stress, is nearly two times as prevalent in high poverty neighborhoods versus affluent neighborhoods of Oakland. Housing is less available and takes up a larger portion of people's income in very high poverty neighborhoods compared to affluent neighborhoods. Residents of very high poverty neighborhoods are less likely to own cars and more likely to be injured or killed on a sidewalk than their counterparts in affluent Oakland neighborhoods. Exposure to toxic chemicals and fuels, mainly from the Port of Oakland and other industrial and transportation hubs
Located in areas of high poverty, is four times higher in these neighborhoods, than in affluent Oakland neighborhoods that are free of such waste producers.

Hypertension:
Hypertension Hospitalization Rates by Race/Ethnicity

Source: Alameda County GIS/PC files, 2009-2011

Racism (Not Race) Harms Health
Percentage of Low Birth Weight Babies by Mother’s Race/Ethnicity and Place of Birth

Source: Alameda County Vital Statistics files, 2009-2010
In Oakland, as in cities and towns across America, wealth equals health. It also means educational attainment, access to food, cars, jobs, etc. But there’s more to it than that. Regardless of income or neighborhood, black folks have the highest rates of hypertension and the lowest birth weights in Alameda County. An African American child born in the flatlands of West Oakland can expect to die fourteen years earlier than a white child born in the Oakland Hills. But a white person in the Flats can expect to live a good five to six years longer than an African American person in the same high poverty neighborhood, and only one year less than an African American in the affluent Oakland Hills. The ways that we experience the world are affected by the color of our skin. This isn’t a mind-blowing statement, I know, but maybe it should be. In Oakland, if you’re a person of color, particularly a black or brown person, you’re more likely to live in poverty and feel the negative ramifications of the social determinants of health. If you’re a white person, you’re more likely to live in an affluent neighborhood and feel positive effects. But if you’re black, not matter where you live or what you earn, your life is likely to be more stressful and shorter.
Life Expectancy at Birth in Oakland Flats vs. Hills

These statistics and charts, dry and impersonal as they may be, illustrate in stark terms how our lives, our very bodies, are shaped by the economic, political, and social structures into which we are born. They paint a fairly discouraging picture of Oakland, to be certain. It is a picture of physical, racial, economic, and social separation. It is my contention that the racialized disparities in health, education, wealth, incarceration and access to a plethora of resources are manifestations of a culture that has been deeply traumatized by years of ideological and material disconnection.

That being said, Oakland is also home to innovative social entrepreneurs, who are re-imagining Oakland’s economic and social landscape. Young b-boys and -girls and slam poets are turning the interpersonal and institutional violence they’ve witnessed and experienced into beautifully empowering art and opportunities for transformation. Oakland is a place where former and current gang members and incarcerated men and women become community organizers who collectively strategize with their neighbors to change the political and social dialogues of their neighborhoods. Urban gardeners till soil once poisoned by military and industrial pollution and create beautiful spaces where folks come together to feed their families and nourish their community’s spirit.

Oakland – like cities and towns across the world – is the experimental proving ground for the resiliency of people who have been historically and systematically excluded from or exploited by the dominant economic, social, and political institutional arrangements in the United States. These resilient people and places create the potential for reunification and collaboration. This is where the hope lies. Learning from and with people who don’t hear their stories reflected in the larger cultural narrative of
disconnection and who have found and built communities to help them express what they feel to be their truths provides all of us with an opportunity to reckon with our past and present, to heal from the trauma and disconnection therein, and to build new connections that lay the groundwork for life to flourish. From my own experiences, being engaged with and a part of communities like this has afforded me the blessing of witnessing and feeling the power of questioning the naturalized status quo, to see how I am shaped by and participate in this state, and to explore possibilities of changing the structures collectively. Importantly, this process involves deeply and continuously questioning myself and my own position in these structures and to think and feel my way through to my inner intentions and senses of right and wrong. This is a personal and spiritual journey, experienced through living and working with others, together engaging in the world. It’s what set me on a path to explore the need to reconnect to ourselves and each other, through loving practice, as requisite piece of transforming the structures and institutions that separate us.
"Who made you?" was always
The question
The answer was always
"God."
Well, there we stood
Three feet high
Heads bowed
Leaning into
Bosoms.

Now
I no longer recall
The Catechism
Or brood on the genesis
Of life
No.

I ponder the exchange
Itself
And salvage mostly
The leaning.
The Political Economy of Our Disconnection

How did we come to be so disconnected? This piece of our story is complex and multifaceted — too much for one chapter of a master’s thesis, to be certain. The following section is an attempt to explore one facet of the historical roots of our separation: our historical political economy. I attempt to pay close attention to the co-creative interplay of ideology, institutions, power, and material reality. While this story could start long before the United States was even a glimmer in anyone’s eye, I’ll begin with the colonization of eastern North America and one of the first “origin stories” of internal and external separation, which helped to create one of the most powerful tools that has been used to divide us ever since: race.

In the early American colonies, a Christian could not be permanently enslaved — and the Christian church actively sought any and all converts. The ability to move from property to person and to feel connected to other workers was economically inefficient for landowners, as shared experiences of labor exploitation and uncertainty forged common understanding and solidarity between indentured English and enslaved Africans. A more permanent and emotionally powerful identifying concept would be necessary. This concept was race. Over the years, the ideological concept of race was both fed and reinforced by institutional structures and individual practices. “These laws and social practices were put in place by propertied white men in order to define whiteness generally, as well as specifically, for their own benefit” (Powell, 2012, 35). In effect, it was about defining and protecting property for the benefit of the owners of said property.

This process began in the early years of colonial North America, a time when race was not a defining characteristic of new residents of the continent. Most English colonists were indentured servants or poor workers; Africans were brought through the Caribbean, where they learned to speak English and became familiar with European and Anglo customs. In contrast to the following centuries, few laws regulated the interactions amongst English, African, and Native American people. In fact, common lived experiences engendered relationships and solidarity amongst poor and indentured whites and African slaves, particularly around the exploitation of their labor by English elites.

In 1676, this shared suffering and common language led a group of black and white workers to bear arms against white landowners and indigenous people, demanding political change and land reform (Powell, 2012, 151). The initial success of the armed uprising, called Bacon’s Rebellion, was troubling enough for English elites, but the truly terrifying prospect that it revealed was the potential power to be exercised by united workers — the number of which far surpassed landowners — long into the future. The elites recognized that to maintain their power and positions atop the current hierarchy, there would need to be both ideologically and materially significant boundaries drawn between Africans and poor English.

To this end, landowners, who were also the lawmakers and public-opinion shapers, gave poor whites a stake in disconnecting from or “otherizing” Africans. They did so by removing the possibility of slavery from white existence (at least legally). In essence, blackness was coming to be defined as “slave” and whiteness as “not-slave.” In towns throughout the colonies, poor whites were organized into patrols and
given the power to police slaves. The story of Bacon’s Rebellion was retold as armed insurrection of African slaves against English Christians. Finally, as the years progressed, Africans were sent directly to the colonies without time in the Caribbean. Without knowledge of Anglo culture or language, these Africans were more easily seen as “other” and construed as “dangerous.” “At its inception, then, the creation of whiteness was a deliberate strategy to keep poor Europeans, mainly English, and Africans from uniting. This turn to whiteness yielded important property and membership rights to the group that affiliated by color with the ruling elite, along with — most importantly — the right never to become a slave” (Powell, 2012, 152). So poor and indentured whites still could not make laws, vote, or exercise much power within the public sphere, but they could receive status and material benefits in the political and economic hierarchy, and at the very least, they couldn’t be slaves.

But the creation of race was not simply a function of landowners’ fears around class unification. According to Ron Takaki, teacher, historian, ethnographer, and pioneer of critical ethnic studies, the creation of race in America was also fundamental to the formation of a new American identity — one rooted in ascetic republican ideals and private, capitalist production. The War of Independence was both a spiritual and economic separation from the luxuriant, self-indulgent (and therefore weak and deplorable) King of England, as well as the limitations imposed on American enterprise by the Crown. Rather than subjects of a king, Americans were to be autonomous, reasoned individuals who could govern themselves — in all ways. Political and economic leaders and culture-shapers like Thomas Paine, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush insisted that American people needed to separate themselves from the weakness of the old ways and be pure, virtuous people free to control their own vices and destinies. In fact, the very idea of self-governance, of the American republic, rested on the idea that virtuous, frugal, enterprising people would govern themselves, not just politically speaking, but morally and individually, as well (Takaki, 1978).

So the creation of America would require the creation of virtuous, reasoning individuals. The creation of these individuals would involve, as Takaki puts it, the “division and denial of each person’s ‘wholeness’” (Takaki, 1978, 10). Raised were the elements of reason, independence, and control. Reviled were the elements of passion, body, and spontaneity (you know, the things that directly connect us to ourselves, each other, and the world around us). These elements were then reserved and inscribed, culturally, economically, and politically — republicans were (propertied) white men, black, red, female “others” were not. “As republicans in the new American nation, white men felt they had to guard themselves against the needs of the instinctual life which they claimed were ascendant in people of color” (Takaki, 1978, 13). Parts of the whole were deposited in women and people of color, who were to be dominated and controlled by the superior, rational, republican white men, in essence denying everyone our whole selves and projecting what they have deemed within themselves to be vile, onto “others,” who embody and hold these characteristics for the white male self-deniers.

“Afraid of the diversity within themselves, they feared cultural and racial diversity in the society around them” (Takaki, 1978, 14). In the First Congress of the United States, the propertied white men who made the laws and inhabited the institutions passed the Naturalization Law of 1790. In it, they made it clear that they intended to ensure a virtuous and culturally homogenous republic. The law required a rigorous screening process that involved living in the United States for two years and providing proof in a court of common law that a potential citizen possessed good character. Because the latter requires
self-control and reason over passion—characteristics lacked by peoples of color—new citizens must, above all, be white.

The Naturalization Law of 1790 explicitly linked race to republican nationality. It not only defined the norms of conduct and thought for Americans in the new nation: Citizenship was reserved for republicans, and citizens were expected to have republican manners and morals. It also specified a complexion for the members of the new nation as it gave expression to the hopes and fears of a republican society determined the cage the 'black buck' [Winthrop Jordan] still loose in the fields, increase the 'lovey White' [to quote Ben Franklin], and carry forward the Revolution, which required virtue as the foundation of liberty and which had created a world without a king where men had to govern themselves (Takaki, 1978, 15).

From our inception, America has been a project of separating ourselves and each other. And as the years progressed, this process of institutionalizing and emotionally embedding race and racial hierarchy continued. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* is an example. In 1856, Dred Scott sued for the freedom of his wife and two daughters, arguing that residence in free states and territories with a former owner voided their enslavement and that upon their return to Missouri, a new claimant to their lives and service should be denied. The Supreme Court ruled that because Scott was of African descent, he could not exercise the rights of Missouri citizens, including bringing a case to court. The fact that he was born in Virginia, in the United States, made no difference.

Scott’s exclusion from citizenship, from the American community, was colored and permanent. White inclusion in the American community, and access to the material privileges of citizenship, was also colored and permanent. “In the claim that no black could ever be a citizen of the United States, the Court constituted citizenship as a salient feature of whiteness, and vice versa. In this sense, Chief Justice Taney and his brethren were active participants in the social construction of white identity” (powell, 2012, 143). This identity was one in which real, tangible access to resources and rights were measured against the denial to blacks—that is to say, it was defined by the separation from blacks and reinforced by material benefit.

Following the Civil War, a time of emotional, material, ideological, and constitutional upheaval and transformation, local and national political dealings reinscribed the separation and disconnection of white and black Americans. The Constitution had been amended to prohibit slavery, to include all persons born or naturalized in the United States as citizens to be protected equally under the law, and to prevent the denial of the right to vote based on race, color, or previous servitude (women of all colors would have to wait for their citizenship). Over 2,000 black men were elected to local, state, and national offices (Foner, 2008). In response, Ku Klux Klan members and other violent “redeemer” groups throughout the South terrorized communities and prevented freedmen and Republicans from fully participating in political processes. Southern Democrats exercised power through paramilitary groups like these to suppress votes and solidify control. In 1877, Republican Rutherford Hayes became president in exchange for removing federal troops from the remaining three “unredeemed” states in the South. It seemed as if the Southern elites would relinquish Washington and federal laws, if they could retain control over their own states.

The project to drive material and ideological wedges between whites and blacks was reiterated nationally by the Supreme Court, as well. In the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, the Court declared the
segregation of blacks and whites to be constitutional, further legitimizing and naturalizing a
disconnection and otherizing of the two groups. To look at him, Homer Plessy was a white man.
According to Louisiana state law, the fact that one of his great-grandparents was not white made him
black. Plessy, along with a multiracial group of concerned citizens, challenged a state law that required
all public transportation to be segregated by race, even though Plessy could and did ride on “white”
cars. The plaintiffs asserted that to separate people by race was a denial of equal rights and, more
broadly, a means of depriving citizens of property (or the opportunity that whiteness afforded).

The Supreme Court rebuked the Citizens Committee’s argument and claimed that separating blacks
from whites under the law did not violate equal protection under the law or deny any rights or property
to anyone correctly in possession of those rights or property. Clearly, the lived reality of “separate but
equal” stands in sharp contrast to the legal narrative cast by the justices. It’s this reality that was
allowed to stand and to become again and again reified in the daily lives of people across the United
States. As UC Berkeley law professor John Powell writes, “For many, being white automatically ensured
higher economic returns in the short term as well as greater economic, political, and social security in
the long run. Being white meant gaining access to a set of public and private privileges that materially
and permanently guaranteed basic needs and survival. Being white increased the possibility of
controlling critical aspects of one’s life rather than of being the object of another’s domination” (Powell,
2012, 43).

This process of mutual construction – of institutional decisions and arrangements feeding personal
conceptions and behaviors and vice versa – continued into the New Deal and post-WWII eras. During
this time, several “universal” programs were passed by the federal government. These efforts were
promoted, and largely continue to be viewed today, as valuable public programs meant to help
Americans achieve the American Dream. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that only
some Americans were intended to achieve. New Deal labor laws, for example, excluded agricultural and
domestic workers, thereby denying them access to the new powers, and the accompanying economic
and social benefits, carved out for unions following the greatest economic catastrophe in US history.
These excluded workers were overwhelmingly black, brown, and/or female. Veterans Administration
programs implemented after the two World Wars allowed my white grandfathers and many other
Americans like them to go to college, buy homes, and start businesses. Implicit and explicit racial
barriers kept non-white and non-male members of the American population from receiving these
benefits (Powell, 2012).

A mix of congressional traditions and racialized political dealings partly explain the origins of these
purportedly universal programs, which maintained a racial hierarchy that both required and
reconstituted the physical, ideological, and political separation of blacks and whites. Chairs of
congressional committees were determined purely by seniority. Poll taxes, literacy tests, intimidation of
laborers, and a general atmosphere of terror kept the majority of the southern population – poor blacks
– from participating in electing their congressional representatives. As a result, southern whites often
had the longest tenures in Congress and could control which bills made it through to committee and
eligible for a vote to become law. These same Southern Democrats had vested monetary interests and
psychological desires to maintain racial hierarchy in which the white “we” was included in program
benefits and the black “they” was excluded. According to Ira Katznelson, sacrifices were made in order to pass legislation – and these sacrifices did not look like my grandfathers (Katznelson, 2013).

While Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made the segregation of public spaces illegal, the legacy of seemingly universal programs and generations of racialized separation helped to create a context in which the disconnection between blacks and whites, poor and middle class, urban and suburban continued to be naturalized. On top of this naturalization, they were now also depoliticized and de-racialized. While redlining and more explicit forms of racial segregation and exclusion are discussed - and outwardly deplored – to some degree in our contemporary cultural history, the same attention and understanding does not apply to programs like the GI Bill and federal transportation funding. Over time, these policies create a picture of people of color concentrated almost exclusively in low-income, high crime geographic areas. In fact, in 2000, almost 70 percent of residents of high-poverty neighborhoods were black or brown (powell, 2012, 53).

What’s left out of this simple picture is a history of racial fears played out in a context of white flight, where new suburban homes were made accessible to white families through mortgage and infrastructure subsidies from the federal government. This is a prime example of the mutually-constituting force of personal biases and institutional practices. They feed each other, reinforce each other, and make each other seem naturally given.

As the country moved through the Civil Rights Era, obvious and undeniable strides were made. People transformed themselves and their communities. Relationships and alliances were built across communities. Civil Rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph, Ella Baker, and, increasingly, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. strategized, organized, and advocated for the unification of economic and political struggles for justice. Black and white people sacrificed their lives in a struggle to create a society in which people lived dignified lives of their own choosing. But as with the eras before it, backlash ensued and efforts to separate communities and selves were redoubled. The lessons learned, consciously and unconsciously, in the previous eras gave political and economic leaders the sense and capacity to transform the tried and true divide-and-conquer strategy from one explicitly based on race to one cloaked in rhetoric around public safety and deserving/undeserving poor – but always the same old “us” vs. “them.”

By the 1960s and 70s, America had been soaking for generations in a brine of ideological, institutional, and material separation and otherization. The economic, political, and social instability of the 1960s and 70s created a context in which political and economic elites could tap into the fears that had become seemingly natural and reasonable. In 1968, Richard Nixon ran on a Law & Order platform that explicitly called on voters to “reject the lawlessness of civil rights activists and embrace ‘order’ in the United States.” One campaign ad ended with “This time vote like your whole world depends on it” (Alexander, 2010 46). As Nixon’s chief-of-staff, HR Haldeman quotes the President as saying, “you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to” (Alexander, 2010, 43). They did just that and called it the “Southern Strategy.”

Blacks were to be blamed for crime, rather than economic restructuring of global economy during the late ‘60s and ‘70s. Civil rights protests were recast as “criminal” rather than “political” actions. The narrative campaign was so successful that by 1968, 81% of those responding to Gallup Polls agreed that “law and order has broken down in this country,” and the majority blamed “Negroes who start riots”
and “Communists.” (Alexander, 2010, 45). By the 1970s, researchers found that “racial attitudes – not crime rates or likelihood of victimization – were important determinants of white support for ‘get tough on crime’ and anti-welfare measures” (Alexander, 2010, 53).

Because of its racially coded language, the Southern Strategy not only helped to reinforce ideas around the racial other, but also around the American concept of the boot-strapped, rugged individual. In her landmark book entitled *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander writes, “The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the dramatic erosion in the belief among working-class whites that the condition of the poor, or those who fail to prosper, was the result of a faulty economic system that needed to be challenged” (Alexander, 2010, 46). The use of race was once again able to break up liberal alliances amongst poor, working-, and lower-middle class constituencies and shift political self-identification to race, rather than class.

The de-racialization of disconnected, racialized institutional arrangements and personal identities continued into the 1980s and 90s, as “Negroes who start riots” and “Communists” became “gang bangers” and “welfare queens.” Proponents of the War on Drugs and Tough on Crime approaches, like the Southern Strategy that spawned them, were able to tap into existing fears, while also actively promoting their agenda to maintain them. In 1985, President Reagan sent Robert Stutman to the New York City Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) office to sure up public and congressional support of the Drug War. Stutman admitted that, “In order to convince Washington, I needed to make [drugs] a national issue and quickly. I began a lobbying effort and I used the media.” The articles featured black “crack whores,” “crack babies,” and “gangbangers,” reinforcing and helping to create stereotypes of lazy black women and predator black men. Between 1988 and 1989, the Washington Post alone ran 1,565 stories on the “drug scourge.” An August 1989, a New York Times/CBS poll found that 64% of Americans thought drugs were the most significant problem in US – even though drug use was not significantly higher than in the previous decade (Alexander, 2010, 54).

This allowed Reagan to inject billions of federal dollars into the Drug War and Clinton into his Tough on Crime policies, the latter of which resulted in the largest increases in the number of federal and state prison inmates of any president in American history (Alexander, 2010, 55). A look into the color of these inmates and their reasons for incarceration are revealing and disturbing. The vast majority – 4 out of 5 – drug arrests were for possession, only 1 out of 5 for sales. And most people in state prison for drug offenses have no history of violence or significant selling activity (Alexander, 2010, 59). A 2000 study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse reported that white students use cocaine at seven times the rate of black students, use crack cocaine at eight times the rate of black students, and use heroin at seven times the rate of black students. The same survey revealed that nearly identical percentages of white and black high school seniors use marijuana. And yet a 1995 study published in the Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education asked: “Would you close your eyes for a second, envision a drug user, and describe that person to me?” Ninety-five percent of respondents pictured a black person. African Americans constituted 15% of drug users in 1995, and that remains roughly the same today (Alexander, 2010, 103). And yet three-quarters of all people imprisoned for drug offenses have been black or Latino (Alexander, 2010, 97).
Once men and women have been released from prison, they are often denied access to federal assistance in terms of housing, food, or higher education. They are required to check that fateful box on job applications that asks if they’ve ever been convicted of a drug crime. If the answer is yes, the job is often a no. The probation system that follows time in prison is set up in a ways that keep people cycling in and out of jail, often because they simply don’t have the money (because they can’t get a job or receive any assistance from the government) to appear or pay for court fees. In many states, people who have been convicted of felonies and released from prison after serving their sentences are denied the right to vote. The one right that truly makes you a citizen, gone forever.

So here we have a disproportionate number of people of color locked up for drug offenses and then released into what is essentially an institutionalized caste system. It’s through this institutionalization and the ignorance of the actual usage and selling of drugs that allows the process of disconnection and otherizing to become naturalized, deracialized, and depoliticized. This is simply what happens to bad people, rather than, this is what happens in a country whose political and economic systems, since their inception, have been rooted in the exploitation and domination of some for the economic and political benefit of others.

These narratives feed into policies and institutions that serve to co-create and reinforce both the narratives and themselves – it’s a feedback loop of mutual construction in which we’re all participating. Similar processes of mutual construction – of ideological and material co-constitution – can be seen around immigration, gender, sexuality, nationalism, ability. Each has specific mechanisms, histories, motivations, and effects – but all share the ability to separate and to seem natural. The material and ideological separation allows the constructed nature of our current institutional and cultural states to remain hidden to those not in a position to see it – namely, those who benefit from it in ways that have been elevated and sanctioned by our society. This obfuscation creates a context in which the conditions of women and non-white men – and, by extension, that of white men – are de-historicized and depoliticized. We are who we are because that’s who we are. Our individual choices, with individual circumstances, determine our life outcomes. We walk around with the idea that we know ourselves and our history, when, in fact, we don’t.

So not only does our historical political economy create institutional arrangements and ideological attachments that separate us materially and psychologically, but the ignorance of the constructed nature of this process of becoming who we are robs us of the agency to see ourselves as interconnected and powerful to actually change ourselves, our institutions, and the results they create. The next section is an exploration of how concepts of self both reinforce, but also have the potential to unlock us from, our separated selves.
Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself.

(I am large; I contain multitudes.)

- Walt Whitman, Song of Myself, Leaves of Grass
Concepts of Self that Disconnect and Reconnect

The discussion thus far has focused on structural, institutional processes. But these structures and institutions are created and upheld by the actions of people—who are themselves continuously shaped by these institutions and structures. That is to say, there is a dialectical relationship of mutual construction between Americans and our political economy. The following section is an exploration of this relationship.

The concepts of self that structure our thoughts and feelings, conscious and unconscious, about who we are and what our place in the world is, have changed throughout human history. In Western society, we once defined ourselves in relation to the human/earth and the divine/heavens. All people, animals, things had their place in this cosmic order. These ideas began to shift during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Humanism put the individual at the center of creation and definition—"man is the measure of all things," as my high school history teacher used to say. To be clear, the "individuals" that came up with these ideas and the "individuals" who would be doing the defining and creating and measuring were men with property, power, and time on their hands, much like their philosopher predecessors of antiquity.

The self, as formulated by Kant, Descartes, and Locke—philosophical founders of the American republic—was a discrete entity; it was individual and indivisible. Our own internal, independent capacity to reason is what makes us human. In other words, our inherent objective distance from the world (experience) and our separation from the other people and things in it (mitigating factors of that experience) are our defining ontological characteristics. I am distinct from you. I am born with an inherent capacity to discern the world around me. "We"—in an ontological sense—do not exist.

There is no discussion, of course, about who, in practice, gets to be a human. "All men are created equal" doesn't necessarily mean that all human beings are treated as equals, or even more fundamentally, included in the human family. In fact, this exclusion from humanity has historically been the key mechanism by which promulgators of the modern Self maneuvered around inconsistencies between words and practice. All men are created equal, yes. When it is politically and economically incompatible with the accumulation of power, some people just aren't allowed to be people. Women are not people, slaves are not people, immigrants are not people, prisoners are not people, queers are not people, the undeserving poor are not people. Some people are people and some people aren't. They're property—things to be dominated, controlled, and used.

The ability to prop up and maintain the idea of a unitary, impervious self is the result of historical circumstances, a few centuries of which were discussed above. Thinking back to both the symptoms of our disconnection and the historical account of the political economy that helped create such separation, one of the most salient features is race. It has been and continues to be a powerful source of division within American culture, even though many consider us to live in a post-racial society. This is because concepts of race are deeply intertwined with our very concepts of Self. It has become so naturalized that most of us don't give this concept or the process of its creation much thought, let alone sit down and really try to think on a subject as emotionally charged as race. But, "[w]hen one considers the timing of the racialization process in colonial America, the powerful impacts of the racial structuring
of the collective and individual self become even more pronounced. In many respects, current ideas of the self were born during this period. The self that was being shaped in this context had any number of potential growth trajectories, and this was particularly true for the residents of the new world colonies. Concepts of freedom, democracy, liberalism, citizenship, private property, the modern nation-state, and individualism all were developed and propagated then and there” (powell, 2012, 153).

From the beginning, the concept of whiteness has been bound up with the concept of blackness—or, more specifically, white identity depends on a non-white other, in this case the black other, for its existence. Without a group to exclude or be different from, there is no separated, isolated, distinct, in this case white, self. Powerfully, one’s sense of self gives meaning and value to one’s life. To feel, whether consciously or unconsciously, that one knows who she is provides a sense of calm in a world of vast stimuli that appears to be begging for structure and meaning. To step outside of one’s sense of a unitary, coherent self is to relinquish this anchor. In American culture, with our historical and contemporary institutional arrangements, stepping out of one’s whiteness means recognizing privilege, it means seeing one’s place in a racial hierarchy that both creates you and that you help to create, and it means potentially seeing yourself as part of the other—the black other—“a self that is owned, dominated, and regulated” (powell, 2012, 157).

This can be terrifying. But interestingly, stepping outside of the individual, static self created by America’s dominant narratives and our institutional arrangements is precisely what affords us hope. And unsurprisingly, the people who are in the position to lead this “stepping out” are those whose stories do not match up with dominant historical narratives and institutions. The kin I found in Oakland are an example. Queer, gender nonconforming, low-income, of color, incarcerated, immigrant—all the folks I mentioned above who, throughout our history and into our present—have been denied their full participation in the dominant political and social community. These are the people whose lived experiences afford them a vantage point and skills to lead the undoing of the modern, inviolable self and to help those who have not been as traumatically or lovingly prompted to see the cracks in the façade of this self.

Our lived experiences, thrown into stark contrast when held up against the dominant narrative through various institutionalized structures of oppression, are the evidence of what is called the intersectional self, a key concept in the undoing and remaking of our selves. People everywhere find themselves not fitting into the dominant narratives, in some way or another, in different situations and not others. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, “systems of oppression combine in synergistic ways. Furthermore, because all categories exist in relation to other categories, the intersectional self is descriptive of all individuals, not only those victimized by multiple systems of oppression. In this way, intersectionality subverts the notion of the modern self” (powell, 2012, 172).

What exactly is this “intersectional self” and how is it created? Intersectionality is the complex mix of identities which influence the way an individual participates in society. Human beings are essentially meaning makers and we use categories to construct that meaning and give order to a chaotic world of stimuli. These categories help us to internalize the objective world, which is influenced by and performed through pre-existing and ever-negotiated social relationships, institutional arrangements, structures of power, and daily practices. According to Berger and Luckman,
Identity, objectively defined as location within a particular world, is understood subjectively as something that is appropriated together with that world. The world the individual internalizes, the reality that he or she constructs as the reality, is not abstract; it is this concrete, historical reality, this concrete symbolic universe, congruent with the ruling political system or at odds with it. The reality internalized by the individual, inherent in his or her political identity, involves distribution of power, a hierarchy of values, [and] an organization of social needs... (Martín-Baró, 1994, 75).

The intersectional self is interdependent, contextual, and mediated through power. I am female, white, college educated, cisgendered, chronically ill, queer, tall, thin, middle-class, born in the United States, young, traveled, Oaklander, feminist, child of very loving parents who divorced when I was 10, from many parts of the country, grew up with a creek in my backyard. All of these things, and obviously many more, are parts of my identity. They mean different things in different situations and with different people. They afford me different privileges and penalties depending on these varied contexts and relationships. I learn their meaning and how to employ them through my interactions with the world – a world that contains institutions, popular cultural representations, and individual behaviors that tell me what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, what is valuable and what is not valuable. It tells me the meaning of what I am. I learn – I become – by doing, though I’m not necessarily conscious of that learning or that becoming.

According to Salvadoran psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró, “reality is shaped not simply by the transmission of an objective structure or knowledge but by the acceptance of an evaluative scheme for analyzing that supposedly objective reality. Socialization involves both the formation of people’s ways of knowing and the criteria they use for evaluating what is known” (Martín-Baró, 1994, 76). Our ways of knowing and our criteria for valuation is deeply embedded in colonial, capitalist, rational, racialized, and gendered histories, institutional arrangements, and daily practices experienced and performed through a sieve of inequitable power relations. “[S]uch domination is not firmly established until individuals accept it psychologically, until it becomes a conception of life, and indeed common sense. Social colonization puts down roots only when it is ideologically articulated in the mindset of persons and groups, and is this justified with the seal of what seems to be natural rather than historical” (Martín-Baró, 1994, 214).

We have been socialized to deny our connection and we have built institutions, policies, neighborhoods that reflect and shape our mindsets and habits, which uphold and naturalize the disconnection and keep us from having to confront the denial and its ramifications as something we create, rather than a given order of things. This naturalization robs us of our accountability and our agency. To not see the mutual constructedness of our existence, to not see the history of this construction, to believe that the current state of affairs is a given expression of a given reality rather than the result of a history of social relationships played out through material and ideological power is to deny our responsibility for the current state in which we live and to deny us of the power we have to shape something new.

As I have endeavored and will continue to show, we are, in fact, powerful, creative, multi-layered, mutually constructed, contextual creatures. And thank goodness. We become the many “whos” that we are, in large part, through acting with others. Rather than the inviolable, distinct individual selves of the
Enlightenment, we are active creators of our selves, responsible and able to liberate ourselves from the confines of the modern self for our more empowered selves. In this way, we ready ourselves to transform the systems that deny our connected nature and prevent us from embodying it through thoughts, institutions, and actions. This is a continuous process of construction of all constituent pieces and of the whole. We are not puzzles made up of discrete, static pieces that we consciously or unconsciously put into play, depending on the power dynamics or circumstances of our particular context. We are in a constant process of transforming—or creating and becoming. The whole puzzle changes as the pieces change, and vice versa.

The realization that this process starts with us, with the recognition of our intersubjectivity, our inherent connection, and our power, is key. Haven’t we found that time and time again, in movement after movement, court ruling after court ruling, a backlash reliably ensues? Bacon’s Rebellion, Reconstruction, the Progressive Era, the New Deal, Civil Rights, Women’s Movement and so on—invariably, these steps forward are followed by a step (or two) back. These moves toward justice and equality haven’t fully addressed the questions of “who we are,” “why we are the way we are,” and “how do we move toward something better for all of us.” They have shown us that moving forward in policy or law is not enough. A wise woman once quoted Marge Piercy to me, “If what we change does not change us, we are playing with blocks” (Piercy, 1972). No doubt that policies and laws change circumstances and these new circumstances change us, but this is only one side of the coin. If we are engaged in a process of mutual construction, both must be addressed. We need to address hearts and minds, as well as laws and policies.

But how do we “move toward something better” or even know what “better” is? It took me many years to come out of the crisis of meaning that was generated by studying and looking at the world through the lenses of the intersectional and intersubjective self. If it’s all constructed, then how do I say what anything really means? What’s right? What’s wrong? Good? Bad? How do I know? Cultural relativism was unsatisfying and enfeebling, yet I felt fear and guilt about my own inner voice. I’m just a product of my culture, after all, and lord knows American culture has the potential to really do a number on you, in different ways for different identities. It took years of muddling, of quietly observing, of being timid, of feeling like this quest for knowledge just wasn’t quite right and that maybe I was looking for the wrong thing, in the wrong places.

But it was this same living that got me out of the cultural relativist quicksand. I stopped needing to know and discovered that I needed to feel. I needed to trust myself and I needed to be surrounded by fellow searchers who also realized that we weren’t actually looking for a thing or a place or an answer. The searching—the conversations, the experiments, the failures, the heartaches, the nights in jail, the long waits at the ER, the birthday celebrations, the wakes, the protests, the late-night strategy meetings, the gardening, the dance parties, the eating, the fighting, the loving—the doing of life together was where we figured out the meaning, together. It’s how and where we listen to ourselves and each other, come to know ourselves, each other, and our histories. We negotiate, sometimes more successfully than others, what we mean to, with, and for one another. Where we stand. What we choose. Today, tomorrow, and the next day. It is this living, and my community, that teaches me to trust what I feel, to
trust how it changes when we endeavor together, and to trust what we make in that togetherness. Those are the only things I know, in any meaningful sense, to be real.

So, what does this mean? It means one looks at the multi-layered, shifting, constructed self and world differently. It means thinking about the various categories, or puzzle pieces, that constitute our identities. These same categories, the ones that help us make sense of the world, have been used to separate and rank us through disparate, category-based distribution of resources, privileges, and penalties. But neither the ability to separate and rank, nor the fact that these categories are socially constructed, means that we can or should abandon them altogether. Personal and collective strength is also derived from these categories, and this strength can be particularly powerful and important when it comes to groups that have been systematically and historically exploited or oppressed.

"Recognizing that the self is multiplicitous does not require the conclusion that there is no essence to it" either (powell, 2012, 177). We can be multi-layered and moving, but we can also hold onto our many parts and consist of essential characteristics. An ability and a desire to create categories and to connect are essential parts of the human experience. We need to be aware of this power and potentiality that categorization holds. We have to ask what a category means, how it has been developed, what purpose it serves, what potential, and as yet unforeseen, consequences it may have.

Knowing the multiplicitous, intersubjective self sets the stage for connecting with others across joys, suffering, and other commonalities. It allows you to see and feel the connections between us, as well as to feel grounded in who you are in a context of intersectionality. This self- and collective-knowledge allows you to stand and speak your truth from a solid place of internal and connected power. It allows you to negotiate with others about who you all are and where you want to go, together. But this new way of seeing is not enough. Understanding the intersectional, constructed nature of our selves may be the stage, but love is what allows us to act on that stage. Love is the force that helps us to reconnect and to heal from the trauma caused by years of ideological, institutional, and material separation, disparity, and trauma, as well as to recover from the deeply unnerving process of liberating ourselves from the familiar confines of the status quo. It enables us to create new ways of both seeing and being.

The following section explores the combined power of love and action – of love as a force that enables and infuses the practice of personal and social transformation.
“Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”

— James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time
A Love-Infused Praxis: An Antidote to Our Disconnection

In this section, I would like to explore two related components of an antidote to the manifestations of disconnection that I outlined in the beginning of this thesis. I don’t have a name for this antidote, but the pieces that I’ve been able to discern seem to be love and praxis. They are related in that they intertwine to produce transformative results, but also in that they constitute each other. Love can be defined in several different ways, as I’ll discuss below, but the essence of my usage here is a feeling and a force that opens, connects, and heals. Praxis has been discussed by scholars, philosophers, and activists since Aristotle, but I am using Paolo Freire’s definition: “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, 79). I believe that a love-infused praxis – a combination of liberation and transformation that honors our humanity – is a possible antidote to our disconnection and a potential instrument by which we start building new ideas, institutions, and daily practices that value and respect the full spectrum of the human community.

My discussion of love draws from six seminal authors that have influenced my own thoughts and experiences with love: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., bell hooks, Thich Nhat Hanh, Eric Fromm, Ignacio Martín-Baró, and Paulo Freire. Each of them has had a unique “professional” and personal path, but all of them have employed and advocated an unflinching belief in the power of love. In their work, they pull from the interlocking realms of spirit, emotion, critical reflection, and lived experience. From them, I hope to present key components of love that will help to inform the project of a love-infused praxis. I will do this by talking about what this kind of love is, what this type of love does, and what the key components are for our purposes. The cases that follow are investigations of spaces where this love is cultivated and contested in the experiential world.

So, what is this love stuff that I keep talking about? In his sermon, “Loving your enemies,” Dr. King makes a helpful distinction between the three Greek words for love: eros, philia, and agape. Eros, the romantic love than one has for another, and philia, the reciprocal love that one has for a friend or relative, are not the forms of love that I am engaging with when I talk about a love-infused praxis. I am wrestling with agape, love that is “understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. An overflowing love which seeks nothing in return, agape is the love of God operating in the human heart” (King, 1963, 52).

I don’t believe in God, but I do believe in agape. Or I should say, I feel agape, I have seen it at work, and I strive to cultivate it. Dr. King’s religious faith informed his interpretation of this Greek concept and he was, after all, delivering this sermon to a packed house at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. But I don’t think that religious affiliation is necessary to understand or relate to the concept of redemptive love. It is a love that honors my intuition to see myself in others and others in myself – to honor the connection that makes and sustains me. In a sense, through loving myself and my nature, I am able to love an other. Agape comes from an unconditional openness and mutuality that exists between beings that constitute one another. Conscious, purposeful agape is an understanding of a relationship that is at once performed through, yet is also bigger than, the participants. In this way, it is a deeply spiritual, though not necessarily religious, feeling and practice.
bell hooks and Eric Fromm provide additional layers of love that I think are helpful for the purpose of defining a liberatory, transformative love. In her book *All About Love*, bell hooks offers psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck’s definition: “...the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (hooks, 2000, 4). By spirit, she means “a life force (some of us call it soul) that when nurtured enhances our capacity to be more fully self-actualized and able to engage in communion with the world around us” (hooks, 2000, 13). Psychologist and prolific writer Erich Fromm, to whom hooks refers frequently, offers that “Love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love. Where this active concern is lacking, there is not love” (Fromm, 1956, 20). By defining love as both a will and an action, we illuminate the presence of intention and choice. If love is simply a feeling or a thing, it is out of our control—parents have it naturally for their children, you “fall” into it with your girlfriend, God provides it omnipresently. This obscures our ability to cultivate and practice love and allows us to shirk responsibility for doing just that. Love is something that we are inherently capable of, but it is also something that we must choose to do. This helps us to think of love as a tool that we already have within us, but that we can also explore and hone to liberate ourselves and each other so that we are able to transform systems and structures into ones that honor and embrace this inherent capacity.

But how does love “work?” And what does it do? For Dr. King, love was reconnective, reconciliatory, and redemptive. He was, of course, talking and thinking about love in the context of history and current events, including the Civil Rights Movement, the War in Vietnam, the Cold War, and the Poor People’s Campaign. These situations all contain seemingly opposing sides, enemies that Dr. King believed could be reconnected, reconciled, and redeemed through love. Again, in his “Loving your enemies” sermon, he says that “[h]ate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that” (King, 1963, 53). In order to stop the cycle of violence and hate, given the escalating arms race between the US and Soviet Union that posed a very real possibility of mutual annihilation, Dr. King asserted the need for the disruptive and creative power of love.

In the context of this thesis, with an eye on reconnecting people and communities that have been separated by a dominant culture, institutions, and practices of alienation, we might ask how we are to actively love those who are not “like us” or even those who actively work against the expression of our full humanity? According to Dr. King, the first step is learning to forgive. This does not mean that we don’t address wrongdoing or harm. Rather, it means that the act of harm does not remain a barrier to connection between two parties. Forgiveness “is the lifting of a burden or the cancelling of a debt” (King, 1963, 50). It is what allows reconciliation and reconnection; it is a precursor to healing a wounded relationship.

The second precept of loving those who would do us harm is to “recognize that the evil deed of the enemy-neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all the he is” (King, 1963, 51). The things that we do are expressions of an amalgamation of thoughts and experiences. Just as our selves are multi-layered and always shifting, so are the behavioral manifestations of those selves. This second tenet speaks to the connective power of empathy. We can see that each person, much like our own self, is complex and, just as we hold a capacity to harm and to love, so do they. We are all complicated human
beings embedded in cultures and power relationships that have material and psychological effects on our spirit and behavior. If we are to reconnect, we must see this sometimes ugly, sometimes, beautiful, but always common, humanity in each of us.

Thirdly, “we must not seek to defeat or humiliate the enemy but to win his friendship and understanding” (King, 1963, 51). There will be opportunities to crush, literally or figuratively, those who do you harm. For King, however, this is not the goal. The goal is to reconcile and reunite; it is to find the common thread of humanity and heal the wounded relationship. His use of the term “understanding” is particularly important, as the capacity to know one’s self and others’ selves is a precondition for seeing the humanity in each other and of feeling love for one another. I will expand on this below.

Dr. King also discusses compassion and empathy as key aspects of one’s practice of love. Pity is insufficient. Feeling bad for someone, without connecting to the feelings that they are experiencing – that is to say, extending empathy and compassion to an other – depersonalizes and abstracts the interaction. This depersonalized interaction creates greater disconnection between two beings. This kind of disconnected intervention can lead well-intentioned philanthropists, planners, and activists to do things for, rather than with communities, for example. “Excessive altruism,” as Dr. King refers to this concept, is a call to engage with others and to find connections through our suffering and our joy. King explains that this kind of empathy and compassion allows us to fully extend ourselves to another – to love another. Love motivates and enables us to go beyond that which the laws of society require of us. “Unenforceable obligations concern inner attitudes, genuine person-to-person relations, and expressions of compassion which law books cannot regulate and jails cannot rectify. Such obligations are met by one’s commitment to an inner law, written on the heart” (King, 1963, 37).

This is not to say that Dr. King didn’t believe in the power of government. “Desegregation will break down the legal barriers and bring men together physically, but something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right... We cannot long survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together. In the final analysis, I must not ignore the wounded man on life’s Jericho Road, because he is a part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me’ (King, 1963, 38, emphasis added). Here, King touches on the heart of the interconnected nature of human existence. We are social creatures – we make meaning through each other, we construct one another’s identities and shape the material, institutionally-maintained world in which we live. Love is the force that allows us to liberate ourselves from isolation and transform our institutional arrangements so that they honor and enhance our humanness.

Some may say that this is idealistic, but King is actually being quite practical in his call for friendship, understanding, and the extension of oneself. Continuously harming one another does not lay the foundation for a healthy, connective relationship – only for more disconnection and harm. I heard Kazu Haga, founder of East Point Peace Academy, one of the cases in this thesis, repeat the adage that “hurt people hurt people.” If our intention is to create systems and institutions that support full human flourishing, they cannot be constituted through harm – that is, through mechanisms that do not support the flourishing of humanity. The ends are the means and the means are the ends.
For King, those ends and means are agape: "...love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend" and in this, we find redemption (King, 1963, 54). What does it mean to redeem? Etymologically, it is from the Latin redimere, to ‘buy back.’ It later took on the meaning to be delivered from sin, but even in this usage, there is an essence of exchange and a return to an original state. Love is a force that can reshape one state for another; it can redeem us from our disconnection and reunite us with ourselves and each other. Agape, the unconditional love that one has for another human being simply because they, like you, are human, is part of healing the wounds created by an ideological and institutional political economy of disconnection and domination. It employs a capacity that we already have inside of us to create a context in which new ideas and institutions, ones that support human development, can be built.

Thus far, I have defined love as a willful act that liberates us from the disconnected modernist concept of the self by reconnecting us to ourselves and each other as mutually constructive beings. I have claimed that it lays the groundwork for transforming the structures, institutions, and behaviors that reify the disconnection ideologies into ones that honor and enable a multilayered, intersubjective self. I’ve also claimed that, while modernist ideology and institutions have worked to suppress the connected self, the capacity for this kind of liberatory and transformative love is already inside of us all, as the social beings that we are. To exercise the ability to practice the willful act of love in the face of modernist ideology and institutions, we need to understand what constitutes it and how to cultivate it.

From my own experiences of living a reflective life, the wisdom shared by mentors in this life, and an investigation into literature on liberation psychology, education, feminist and critical race theories, and spiritual traditions, which will be discussed below, I’ve distilled five key aspects of liberatory, transformative love. The following are all needed and nurtured by this kind of love. And they are all cultivated and constituted through reflective practice, or praxis:

1. Knowledge and understanding
2. Self-love
3. Courage
4. Fellowship
5. Faith

I begin my investigation into the first element of a love-infused praxis, Knowledge & Understanding, with a quote from James Baldwin, found in a letter that he wrote to his nephew in 1963:

The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity...But these men are your brothers – your lost, younger brothers. And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we,
with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it (Baldwin, 1963).

Knowledge and understanding are the bedrocks of love. To know ourselves, each other, and our histories – the context in which we practice – is a prerequisite for liberating ourselves and transforming our notions, behaviors, and institutions to be aligned with love and connection, rather than domination and disconnection. Here it is helpful to introduce a term coined by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: conscientização. The literal translation into English is consciousness or awareness, but its full meaning is much greater. "The term conscientização refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, 35). For the sake of ease and readability in English, I will call it critical consciousness.

According to Freire, in order to overcome oppression, an understanding of our situation is necessary. This includes knowing our histories, but also thinking critically about who we are, how we come to be, and how we relate to one another. So to surmount our disconnection, we must understand it and our places within it. By knowing the world, each other, ourselves, and the processes that relate us, we become empowered to make choices about what we perceive and how we act. "That which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications (if indeed at all) begins to 'stand out,' assuming the character of a problem and therefore of challenge. Men and women begin to single out elements from their 'background awareness; and to reflect upon them. These elements are now objects for their consideration, and, as such, objects of their action and cognition" (Freire, 1970, 83). To quote an old anthropology professor of mine, the familiar becomes exotic and the exotic becomes familiar. That which once went unquestioned as natural or railed against as terrible, but given and immutable nonetheless, is now revealed as constructed and malleable. With this realization comes the power of creation and of new possibilities. People "begin to discover themselves in their mastery of nature, in their actions that transform things, in their active role in relation to others. All this allows them to discover not only the roots of what they are but also the horizon, what they can become. Thus the recovery of their historical memory offers a base for a more autonomous determination of their future" (Martin-Baró, 1994, 40).

In this way, “knowledge” is not something that is received. It is something that is created, through the dialectic relationship between critical thought and action – praxis. Awareness is a precondition for intentional, create-ive action (I don’t mean, “creative” in terms of artistic, but in terms of creation/production). This is purposeful, chosen, transformative action. We are always in a dialogical process with the material and ideological worlds. That is to say, we are already in a process of transformation. But to see this process, to see the results it has produced for the spectrum of participants throughout history, and to see ourselves as one of those participants is empowering. It allows us to see the world as dynamic and constructed, and to see ourselves as active and creative – as powerful and responsible, in different ways, for the past, the present, and the future. “A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation. Resignation gives way to the drive for transformation and inquiry, over which men feel themselves to be in control” (Freire, 1970, 85). We come to know ourselves through acting and thinking critically – through the dialogue between these two processes.
Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Salvadoran psychologist who was assassinated by a government death squad in 1989 for his Freireian-inspired writings and practices on liberation psychology, highlights important aspects of the process of cultivating and practicing critical consciousness. First, unveiling the ideologies and rationalizations that naturalize the status quo (and your identity), and revealing its constructed nature can be challenging and disturbing. But it is also freeing. And it is necessary if we are to change our conditions in a way that recognizes and engages the needs of the full spectrum of community members. In this way, critical consciousness lays the groundwork for a loving justice.

Second, critical consciousness utilizes dialogue as a mechanism for self and collective rediscovery and connection. It is a process of mutual discovery and learning, which disrupts the current condition of dominance and submission and allows us to consciously and subconsciously embody and practice our connected nature. Developing and practicing critical consciousness through dialogue allows us to discover by thinking and doing and thinking again, together. Teaching ourselves and each other disrupts the historical tradition of some people having the power to define, objectify, create boundaries and institutional arrangements that reify these imposed definitions and borders. Instead, we're learning new ways of both seeing and being with ourselves and each other.

Finally, critical consciousness engages both our personal and our collective identities. “No learning process, vocational guidance, or therapeutic counseling can hope to see the development or realization of persons if it does not place the individual in his or her social and national context, thereby setting forth the problem of one’s authenticity as member of a group, part of a culture, citizen of a country” (Martin-Baró, 1994, 42). There is no larger movement building without recognizing that individuals are parts of larger wholes and that larger wholes are made up of individuals. We need to know who we are in order to form more inclusive wholes – to build strength not only in numbers, but in relationships of mutual understanding and empathy.

The last four aspects of liberatory, transformative love – self-love, courage, fellowship, and faith – are both needed and nurtured by love itself. Or to return to our recurrent theme, they create love and are created by it. I’ll begin with self-love. The Buddha said “[t]he object of your practice should first of all be yourself. Your love for the other, your ability to love another person, depends on your ability to love yourself” (Hanh, 2006, 44). hooks would agree:

“Self-love is the foundation of our loving practice. Without it our other efforts to love fail. Giving ourselves love we provide our inner being with the opportunity to have the unconditional love we may have always longed to receive from someone else. Whenever we interact with others, the love we give and receive is always necessarily conditional. Although it is not impossible, it is very difficult and rare for us to be able to extend unconditional love to others, largely because we cannot exercise control over the behavior of someone else and we cannot predict or utterly control our responses to their actions. We can, however, exercise control over our own actions. We can give ourselves the unconditional love that is the grounding for sustained acceptance and affirmation. When we give this precious gift to ourselves, we are able to reach out to others from a pace of fulfillment and not from a place of lack” (hooks, 2000, 67).

Let me return to the working definition of love for this thesis: an intentional act that liberates us to our intersubjective, co-creative existence for the purposes of expressing our creative will and negotiating
our collective reality. Loving ourselves — which begins with engaging and understanding ourselves — prepares us for loving others. In order to stand in a place of honest power and negotiate with others, one must know herself and understand the ways that she is embedded in the web of social relationships, as well as the personally and collectively traumatic, joyous, and banal events that constitute her world. How are we to transform institutions to be reflective of our humanity, if we cannot see and embrace our own? How are we to collaborate with others to discern what new institutional arrangements and cultural practices reflect our humanity if we cannot reckon with our own varying and ever-shifting stakes in the hierarchy of imposed and performed identities? I need to know how all of the bits of my identity privilege and punish me and to see how this affects others, if I’m to start thinking about and acting around undoing any of the behaviors and institutions that support this hierarchy. Again, knowledge and understanding, discerned through praxis, are the bedrocks of love.

Part of loving yourself, and therefore being ready to love others, is learning to be courageous. To sacrifice one’s life in the struggle to humanize ourselves and each other, as people have done throughout every single radically progressive movement of human history, is courageous. But so are more seemingly mundane actions. The Latin root of the word courage is cor, or heart. To express the truth of one’s heart, in the face of cultural mores and institutional arrangements that could harm you gravely for such a thing, is one of the greatest acts of bravery possible. To look deeply at oneself and be open to what one finds, to be willing to explore the shakiness of one’s identity, to question the status quo, especially if one has been convinced that she has multiple stakes in upholding it, are courageous acts. “Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known. When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat. When we choose to love we choose to move against fear – against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect – to find ourselves in the other” (hooks, 2000, 93).

Part of being courageous is learning to embrace our suffering. According to Thich Nhat Hanh,

> The flower is on its way to becoming refuse, but the refuse is also on its ways to becoming a flower. This is the nonduality principle of Buddhism: there is nothing to throw away. If a person has never suffered, he or she will never be able to know happiness. If a person does not know what hunger is, he or she will never know the joy of eating every day. This pain and suffering are a necessary condition of our understanding, or our happiness... We know well that suffering helps us to understand, that is nurtures our compassion, and that for this reason it is vitally necessary for us. So we must know how to learn from suffering, we must know how to make use of it to gather the energy of compassion, of love, of understanding” (Hanh, 2006, 70).

This is not to say that we should resign ourselves to unjust conditions or suffering caused by oppression. This is not meant to assuage our suffering so that we accept it and its sources uncritically. Rather, we should realize that our suffering is a powerful source of knowledge and understanding. It allows us to see the cracks in the systems that structure our lives. It gives us insights in what is not working and how things could be done better. Dr. King asserts that suffering can be redemptive and transformative. Rather than resignation or bitterness, Dr. King says that suffering is a source of understanding, compassion, and motivation. So suffering not only allows you to see the cracks, but it can give you the capacity to heal them – within yourself and with others.
But this is only an opportunity, not a guarantee. To understand ourselves and each other, to love ourselves, to live courageously enough to transform our suffering into active love – we need help. According to hooks, “Those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone” (hooks, 2000, 101). To come to know yourself and honor yourself – and to act in the world in a way that expresses this – allows other people to be brave. You show others what is possible and give them permission to look at, listen to, and honor themselves and to participate in the collective process of intentional creation.

In this way, fellowship is critical for the cultivation of love and it is one of its greatest creations, as well. “Realistically, being part of a loving community does not mean we will not face conflicts, betrayals, negative outcomes from positive actions, or bad things happening to good people. Love allows us to confront these negative realities in a manner that is life affirming and life-enhancing” (hooks 139). A community of support both challenges and encourages. It is a safe space for speaking our truths, for stepping out of our comfort zones, for disrupting ourselves and others with care and intentionality. It is a place to screw up and try again. It is a space to experiment and learn. Being in fellowship with others is the opportunity connect, to collectively build knowledge and understanding, to cultivate self-love and courage, to practice new ways of seeing and being with one another.

The last critical aspect that love both needs and nurtures is faith. This is a word with which I have always struggled. I remember taking a long car ride with my father and step-mother when I was in high school. She’s a devout Seventh-Day Adventist and I was a contrarian child who had disliked my nine years of Catholic schooling. We were discussing her god and I asked her how she could know that he exists. She told me she felt him in her life; she could see the ways he was working in her life. These feelings and observations were her evidence and that evidence engendered faith. At the time, this was entirely unsatisfactory; I needed cold hard facts that I could see, too. I needed reason. Try as I might, I simply couldn’t understand her. It wasn’t until years later, years full of living and questioning and exploring, that I began to understand the strength of evidence afforded by my own feelings and intuition. The following statement feels right to me:

Society must be organized in such a way that man’s social, loving nature is not separated from his social existence, but becomes one with it. If it is true as I have tried to show that love is the only sane and satisfactory response to the problem of human existence, then any society which excludes, relatively, the development of love, must in the long run perish of its own contradiction with the basic necessities of human nature. Indeed, to speak of love is not ‘preaching,’ for the simple reason that it means to speak of the ultimate and real need in every human being.... To have faith in the possibility of love as a social and not only exceptional-individual phenomenon, is a rational faith based on the insight into the very nature of man (Fromm, 1956, 112).

Fromm relies a little too heavily on the validity of “rationality” for my taste, but I do take his point and I quite agree. I have tried to lay out some of the reasoning behind the claim that we are, indeed, connected beings. My own experiences in life have provided me with empirical evidence of both our capacity and our desire to connect, despite the cultural, institutional, and material forces that drive us apart.
I remember sitting in my first Kingian Nonviolence two-day core workshop with Kazu, the founder of one of my cases, in Oakland. The facilitator asked the group if we believed that the arc of the universe bends towards justice, as Dr. King claims. The room was silent for what felt like a long time. I wondered if people were honestly thinking about it, or maybe they were afraid to share their initial reactions. I was a mix of the two. After listening to people debate how it could possibly be so, with a history that contains the Holocaust and slavery, I could feel the discontent in the room. I raised my hand and shared what I’d been feeling from the beginning and what I could feel the room wanted/needed. With all that violence, pain, trauma, terrorism in our past and in our present, the fact that there are 25 people sitting in this room endeavoring to know more about practicing nonviolence and building the Beloved Community is a testament to the direction of that arc. We are the evidence that dehumanization, “although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order...” (Freire, 1970, 44).

Just like my step-mother’s faith in her god is based on experiences and observations, so too is my belief in the power of love. This is not blind faith. This is faith based on empirical evidence of life. Your own experiences and feelings are the foundation on which you build deep faith. It is faith in our inherent capacity, not necessarily in our current ability, to create and transform. If dominant cultures have cultivated ideologies and practice in opposition to creativity, love, courage, connection, humility, and faith, this does not negate them from our internal toolbox – it just means they haven’t been attended to and need the space, opportunity, and support to bring them back to working order. This faith sustains and fortifies you. This sustenance allows you, in turn, to feed yourself and others, to be the evidence that nurtures our faith and allows us to act courageously and lovingly.

The cases that follow are spaces where this happens. They are spaces where understanding and knowledge are cultivated, self-love is nurtured, courage is strengthened, fellowship is built, and faith is forged through a love-infused praxis.
And for ourselves, the intrinsic Purpose is to reach, and to remember, and to declare our commitment to all the living, without deceit, and without fear, and without reservation. We do what we can. And by doing it, we keep ourselves trusting, which is to say, vulnerable, and more than that, what can anyone ask?

- June Jordan, personal letter, 1970
Cases of Reconnection

Introduction

In his book Racing to Justice: Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society, John A. Powell writes: “Moving beyond a view of the self as separate and unconnected is a profoundly spiritual project. It is the urge and yearning for connection that lies within us all...We must draw on love’s power to free us from separation and its accompanying sense of loss. Who are we when we are free from the illusions of a separate self? I am talking about bringing something new into being, but I do not know exactly how this space can be created” (Powell, 2012, 162). I remember the smile that crept onto my face when I read these words and thought, “Well, John, I know of some places where that very challenge is being taken up by people who feel both the desire and possibility of reconnecting our selves and building something new, together.”

The ideas that I’ve laid out thus far come from a mixture of first-hand experiences with the three cases I’m examining, as well as academic investigation. The cases are an opportunity to dig into examples of how these ideas play out in messy, contested reality. I have provided key elements of a love-filled praxis, themselves discerned through a combination of lived experiences and academic study, but alone, they don’t necessarily illuminate how to implement a love-infused praxis or what challenges we will face in doing so. When Dr. King wrestled with organizing black and white civil rights activists for the Freedom Summer of 1964, he said that “The answer was only to be found in persistent trying, perpetual experimentation, persevering together... Like life, racial understanding is not something that we find but something that we must create. What we find when we enter these mortal plains is existence; but existence is the raw material out of which all life must be created... And so the ability of Negroes and whites to work together, to understand each other, will not be found ready-made; it must be created by the fact of contact” (King, 1968, 28). We need places that support our intuition that the ways things are don’t feel quite right and that doing things differently could be better. We need spaces to understand and stretch current conceptions of self and the larger contexts in which they are embedded, to collaboratively build new understandings and conceptions, and to practice these new ways of seeing and being with one another. These spaces of experimentation and creation are my cases.

I will begin by laying out what each case is doing and how they are doing it. From the “whats” and the “hows,” I have discerned what I believe to be key operational categories of the elements of liberatory, transformative love that I discussed earlier (knowledge and understanding, self-love, courage, fellowship, and faith). I will show how the cases use the operational categories to manifest these elements of love through praxis. Throughout this analysis, I will pay close attention to challenges and constraints, as well as elements of successes and conducive contexts. I will also endeavor to see the cases as embedded in place, time, and relationships of power, rather than as abstract phenomena to be studied in isolation. Undoubtedly, my framework will be incomplete—we’re always constructing, aren’t we? Each case brings unique elements that don’t fit neatly into any categories that I’ve created. In this way, they are informative and highly valuable, so I will attempt to illuminate them, as well.
Bust first, a quick note on methodology. I have had profoundly meaningful experiences with each one of my cases, and that is the reason I selected them. Each of them spoke to a deep intuition inside of me that was hungry for attention. It's the intuition that prompted me to go to graduate school and attempt to write this thesis. It's the intuition that was fed by people and places and experiences long before I ever dreamed of Oakland or knew of my cases. It is the intuition that draws me towards love and reconnection and imagining a better future. Each of the cases, in their own ways and for their own reasons, is exploring the possibility of us reimagining a world and people who care for one another and create institutions and structures that reflect this care.

I came across my first case, the KPFA Apprenticeship Program, while sitting in a car, listening to the radio as I waited to pick up my girlfriend from work. I heard a man telling a story about his experience with using and recovering from meth. The courageous honesty and vulnerability that I heard in his story and in his voice struck something in me, something that made me want to go towards whatever had allowed him to be so open. After the piece finished, the hosts announced that the program was accepting applications for anyone who believed in the power of storytelling and community building. I graduated from the Apprenticeship Program two years later, with radio production skills and a family and set of experiences that changed my life in ways that I find hard to put into words. The structure of the program, the people that constitute it, and the experience I had becoming a part of both taught me much of what I know about love, which is why I couldn't possibly write about a liberatory, transformative love without it.

Another strong influencer of my thoughts on and experiences of love come from an earlier iteration of East Point Peace Academy. I found it during the height of Occupy Oakland, just before I graduated from the Apprenticeship Program. Tensions were rising over what people called the “diversity of tactics” being used by Occupy participants. Smashing windows and starting fires were favored by some, while nonviolent strategies were asserted by others. The earlier iteration of East Point was providing two-day core workshops around Kingian Nonviolence in various spaces throughout Oakland, for anyone who wanted to learn more about the philosophy and the strategy. I remember sitting at the old East Bay Meditation Center on 19th and Franklin and, as I listened and engaged with the trainers and the participants, I felt like the philosophy and my fellow explorers were giving words to feelings I'd always had inside of me – they were speaking to my heart and helping me to make sense of and expand a bit further, my intuition.

They also introduced me to another case – the East Bay Meditation Center. I had heard of EBMC through my circle of friends, but I’d never been. The Kingian Nonviolence workshop brought me through the door and I stuck around because of the intention and love I could feel in the space and through the people. I live with an incurable, mostly invisible, but always present disease and they offered a group sit for people with chronic illnesses. I went, and remember feeling similar internal spaces being struck by the teachings and the practices here, as were struck at the Apprenticeship Program and the Kingian Nonviolence workshops. It was a space for being open and honest – uncomfortably so, at times – but in a way that was facilitated by a guide and held by fellow practitioners to be productive and healing. Much of what I’m talking about in this thesis hinges on spaces and capacities like this.
Essentially, each case is endeavoring to build the Beloved Community and that’s why I chose to them. Learning from and with my cases, in conjunction with my own academic studies, is where the elements of a love-infused praxis were discerned. This thesis is an opportunity to explore this juncture. I also chose them because of my personal experience with them. Yes, I have loads of bias when it comes to these organizations — and I’m upfront and honest about it and you should consider that as you read. I believe that the information that is made available because of the trusting relationships I have with the organizations and the insights that are derived from my personal experiences with them far outweighs any potential bias that they might cause. And I trust your, the reader’s, ability to critically analyze the ideas I put forth with all of this in mind.

My main modes of information gathering are personal reflection and interviews with leaders and participants from each organization. Within the Apprenticeship Program, I interviewed graduate and for Director of the Apprentice Program, Renee Yang-Geesler via Skype, graduate and mentor Joy Moore, graduate and Technical Director Franklin Sterling, and graduate and mentor Sukari Ivester at the radio station one evening in Berkeley. With East Point Peace Academy, I interviewed founder Kazu Haga and trainer Mica Stumpf, each in person in Oakland. Because of my timetable and the fact that much of the current work that East Point does in the Bay Area involves vulnerable populations (incarcerated people and youth), I was unable to secure the proper clearance to engage with participants first-hand. Kazu and Mica relayed experiences and I drew from my own. At the East Bay Meditation Center, I interviewed Center Director Brenda Salgado several times in person and over the phone and Larry Yang over the phone. EBMC also helped me distribute an online survey to their email listserv, to gauge the experiences of some participants.

Before I get into the results of this investigation, let’s do some introductions:

**First Voice Media Action Program, aka the KPFA Apprenticeship Program**

The First Voice Media Action Program is an apprenticeship program of KPFA Free Speech Community Radio in Berkeley, California. KPFA is the flagship station of the national Pacifica Network, with sister stations KPFK in Los Angeles, KPFW in Houston, and WBAI in New York. The mission of the apprenticeship program is two-fold. 1) It aims to equip women and people of color with access to airwaves and media production skills that enable us to tell our own stories. 2) Using the platform of radio production and storytelling, the Apprenticeship Program also builds intergenerational, multicultural bonds that strengthen our capacity for self-expression, self-determination, and collaboration.

First Voice, as the apprenticeship program is also known, comes out of a long history of struggle for access and equity by women and people of color within the mostly white, male dominated KPFA. In 1973, volunteers at KPFA who had dubbed themselves Third World programmers began demanding paid staff positions and airtime at the station. Confrontation around these demands and the tight control of the national Pacifica Network erupted in physical violence, station lock-outs, strikes, lawsuits, and at least a month of dead air on 94.1 FM. It ended with Third World programmers winning their legal battle and securing a Third World department with one paid staff position and airtime at the station.
From this contentious history of struggle, First Voice was born. In 1983, Norman Jayo, a Third World programmer and paid staff engineer in Control One, the main production studio of the station, realized that the missing piece that would lead to access and representation at the station was the dynamic of inter-generational relationships. With other supportive staff, Norman felt out the idea of an apprenticeship program that integrated learners with students and explicitly aimed to increase equity, expand knowledge, and service to our communities through media. This time, instead of asking for permission from the station, the operations department deliberated and made the decision that the day-to-day work of production engineering would now be done by women and people of color, with Norman supervising and the staff supporting. Group One began its two-year training period that year.

The First Voice Apprenticeship Program has since graduated 39 groups. I am a member of Group 34, Tela Mana. As was stated earlier, the program is meant both to build the capacity of women and people of color to tell our own stories through radio production, but also to build relationships across our communities. It is based on the idea that our stories are valuable and the expression of these stories is empowering for ourselves, as well as our listeners. The program comes out of a history of people struggling for access and self-determination and it is thought that through the telling of our stories and the building of intergenerational and multicultural bonds, we can achieve these things, at the station and beyond.

From the training manual written by our founder, Norman Jayo:

It is the first voice that charges us with the responsibility of self-expression. In the same way freedom cannot be realized without equity, justice also fails without reflection and honest deliberation. The full spectrum of democracy requires the exchange of ideas and the promise of actions that uphold and safeguard the right of everyone to participate in this process.

The first voice is more than an advocate for the right of the individual to speak. It is an advocate for everyone to speak — a catalyst for open exchange, charging every person to express what is on their mind, regarding any and all issues and concerns. The first voice thrives in this exchange, because it unlocks the legitimate authority that allows government to become truly representative.

An individual cannot establish a democracy alone. It is in the exchange, by consent and promise between people that equity is embraced. By this agreement we set the foundation that governs our relationships with the responsibility and hope of achieving this end. The wisdom of this arrangement is a reflection of the literacy of the first voice and when it becomes manifest in our policies and actions it results in diversity and inclusion.

Through participation and representation, we give birth to the framework of the liberties we have come to know and love; to fight for and protect; to deliberate and expand upon for the sake of peace and justice among all people. It is this incredible inner process and its formidable power that has continued to nurture the maturation of our democratic ideals (Jayo, date unknown).

The program attempts to nurture our ability to hear and honor our inner voice, or first voice, and to give us the capacity to hear and honor that of others. Apprentices do this on a daily basis through the structure, supported by the intention and the people, of the program. First Voice apprentices conduct outreach to our own communities, as well as to anyone who can hear the sounds coming from our
transmitter atop the station. This elicits a diverse group of applicants and apprentices who understand the mission and are curious to learn about both media production and community building in a multicultural environment. It also requires diligent and skillfully supported work of learning how to bring our whole selves to the effort and to be with one another. Once in the program, apprentices, as we call ourselves, develop a group identity through rituals that include ceremonial celebrations, breaking bread, forming group agreements, and learning beside one another. Because the program is so demanding and because the point is to do more than produce radio, these relationship-forming processes are primary in the program.

Relationship-building is also cultivated through the intergenerational, each-one-teach-one learning model of First Voice. Graduate apprentices return to the station, or walk over from their desk in the News Department, as mentors to pass on their skills to the next generation of apprentices. This connects current apprentices to their lineage and role models the behavior that they will one day perform when they pass on the knowledge they are receiving and forging to future apprentices. Relationships are also formed through day-shifts, which is how apprentices “pay” for our new skills. The program is monetarily free – skills and experiences are exchanged for labor and a promise to pass on the knowledge. Apprentices produce the community calendars, PSAs, and help organize events at the station, thereby linking the functioning of the station to the apprentices. During these day shifts, older apprentices mentor younger ones and the younger apprentices support the older apprentices production work by taking care of administrative tasks.

When one group graduates from the program, the next group in line takes over production of Full Circle, the one-hour live radio program that airs every Friday night at 7 PM. All of us have jobs, kids, relationships, lives outside of the station. Producing this show, on top of all of that, is damn hard work. The relationships are what make it possible. Many of us come to the program because we love the radio or believe in social justice and KPFA seems like a beacon for such things. But we stay through the grueling two-year program because of the family we create and the promise we feel in this creation.

**East Point Peace Academy**

East Point Peace Academy is a Kingian Nonviolence and Conflict Reconciliation training organization based in Oakland, California. The name goes back to a comment that civil rights organizer Dr. Bernard LaFayette made about the training he received from James Lawson for nearly a year before the Nashville Lunch Counter Sit-Ins of the early 1960s. Lafayette and his fellow participants spent countless hours enacting the sit-ins, practicing their reception of abuse – people ashing cigarettes on their heads, calling them names, striking them – which they would undoubtedly face in the real world. Dr. Lafayette compared the training to that which the US military provides at West Point. Kazu Haga, founder and lead trainer at East Point and student of Dr. LaFayette, says that East Point is a counter to the investments that our country places into war and into violence.

In their own words, “The East Point Peace Academy is an organization dedicated to bringing about a culture of peace through training, education and the practice of Nonviolence and Conflict Reconciliation. We are grounded in the tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, and work with incarcerated populations, youth, activists and community leaders working to bring about the Beloved Community.
Through training and education, East Point transforms the hearts and minds of individuals, connecting them to a broader history of nonviolent social change movements, and inspiring them to become advocates for transforming the policies, cultures and value systems of their communities” (Haga, 2014, website).

East Point works off of what are considered to be the marching orders that Dr. King gave to Bernard LaFayette, then director of the Poor People’s Campaign, on the eve of his death. This is to “institutionalize and internationalize” nonviolence. East Point recognizes the link between larger structures that create and uphold violence through ideology and institutions, and the ways that they are manifested in the everyday lived experiences of people in all of our communities. In order to address the internal and interpersonal violence we experience, East Point is cultivating a nonviolent army of peace warriors, you might say. They work in prisons, schools, faith communities, and other organizations – that is, institutions where people are gathered for one reason or another – to help change the institutional culture through the minds and related practices of the people who constitute these institutions. East Point understands that it is a combination of institutional and individual ideologies and practices that create each other. By giving folks the space to learn about concepts of Kingian Nonviolence, East Point helps people disrupt the current dominant discourse and behaviors of institutional and interpersonal violence, and lean into our innate capacity to connect through our shared humanity. The hope is to, as I’ve said, create new ways of seeing and being with each other, through collective critical reflection and practice.

Two of East Point’s primary venues for their trainings are the San Bruno County Jail near San Francisco and Emiliano Zapata Street Academy, an alternative high school in Oakland. The organization uses role-playing, small group activities, historical and philosophical readings of primary documents, documentary presentations on the history of nonviolence training and actions, and group discussions to explore Kingian Nonviolence. Groups range from approximately ten to fifty participants. The curriculum originated with Dr. LaFayette, now a professor at the University of Rhode Island, and David Jehnsen, a Chicago delegate to the Albany Movement and co-founder of Institute for Human Rights and Responsibilities (1978). In 1990, they co-authored The Leaders Manual: A Structured Guide and Introduction to Kingian Nonviolence - The Philosophy and Methodology. Many of the training modules are drawn from this text, though they have evolved through the practice of Dr. LaFayette and Kingian Nonviolence trainers like Kazu who implement this curriculum with people every day.

**East Bay Meditation Center**

The East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) is a multicultural spiritual space and community of people that was, in their own words,

> Founded to provide a welcoming environment for people of color, members of the LGBTQI community, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented communities. The East Bay Meditation Center welcomes everyone seeking to end suffering and cultivate happiness. Our mission is to foster liberation, personal and interpersonal healing, social action, and inclusive community building. We offer mindfulness practices and teachings on wisdom and compassion from Buddhist and other spiritual traditions. Rooted in our commitment to diversity, we operate
with transparent democratic governance, generosity-based economics, and environmental sustainability.

The impetus for the founding of this organization came out of the lived experiences of diverse practitioners and teachers who did not see their lives, histories, and cultures reflected or actively welcomed in mainstream meditation centers in the Bay Area. Most of these mainstream centers intend to welcome all people, but they are also mostly operated by affluent, white practitioners and teachers without the skills to go beyond an invitation to a place where safe, welcoming, and respectful environments and behaviors are created and practiced. Out of discussions amongst practitioners and teachers who experienced feelings of marginalization in some form of their lives came the East Bay Dharma Center in 2001. The board of directors for this incorporated religious organization was made up of “meditation teachers, community activists, interested members of sitting groups, and members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Over the next few years, one-day retreats, fundraising events, and evening events were organized” (EBMC, internal document, 2014). In 2005, the Dharma Center officially became the East Bay Meditation Center, with input elicited from community meetings and the leadership sangha. The first program, a series of meditation classes for People of Color was held in 2006. The rest is history in the making.

From the beginning, the making of this history has been an expression and a negotiation of the sangha. This is a Pali and Sanskrit word meaning “community” and it is at the heart of what happens at EBMC. The programming here is meant to be accessible to the widest possible audience. They do this in several ways, again in their own words:

We offer all of our programs for no registration fee or cost to the participant (except fundraising programs). Instead, we invite all program participants to make voluntary gifts at the end of each event, to the level of their ability, for the teacher(s) of the event and to the East Bay Meditation Center. This allows us to offer our programs to all individuals, independent of economic means. Traditionally, this is known as the practice of “Dana” or Generosity, and is a part of many spiritual traditions (EBMC, internal document, 2014).

Dana is the ancient Pali word for generosity that arises effortlessly from deep gratitude. It is a virtue necessary for awakening in the Buddhist tradition and it is taught before meditation ever begins. EBMC also makes itself accessible by explicitly creating spaces for people who, like the founders, have not felt actively and tangibly welcomed at other meditation centers.

Some of our programs are specifically for People of Color, or the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex & Same-Gender Loving Communities. This provides a safe space for individuals who daily confront the effects of oppression, racism, or homophobia and heterosexism in their lives, and who therefore may choose to initially avoid mixed programs(EBMC, internal document, 2014).

These programs, which can be sits or workshops, are led by teachers who share daily lived experiences of oppression and teach from these experiences, as well as from the wisdom of their spiritual traditions. The active choices to institutionalize dana and safe spaces model, enable, and normalize generosity and respect as social forces and individual behaviors. And while EBMC programming and structure is meant
to be accessible to the greatest number of people and communities, for these people and communities to heal and strengthen themselves and each other, it is also a space for individuals and communities to be stretched through individual and collective practice and interaction. People come in through the doorway of their identity and once inside, once warmed and readied by the teachings and their individual and collective practice, they are able to stretch themselves to be with the whole house. These capacities are actively cultivated through classes, workshops, and the transparent governance of the Leadership Sangha. Indeed, at EBMC, they attempt to practice what they preach.

**Analysis**

So how do the Apprenticeship Program, East Point Peace Academy, and the East Bay Meditation Center engage the framework I’ve laid out for liberatory, transformation-enabling love through praxis? What lessons are to be learned from their experiments with building the Beloved Community? Below is an exploration of how the cases operationalize the elements of a love-infused praxis. These larger operational categories, which will be made clear through the analysis, are:

1. Setting Intention (Laying the Groundwork)
2. Building Relationships (Community)
3. Creating Containers (Safe & Challenging Spaces)
4. Commitment & Continuity (Doing the Work, Over Time)
5. Suffering & Joy (Bringing Your Whole Self)

These operational categories of the elements of liberatory, transformative love (knowledge and understanding, self-love, courage, fellowship, and faith) were discerned through years of living, working, reading, discussing, and learning with these cases, my friends, some wonderful authors, colleagues, perfect strangers, and myself.

What follows is an analysis of how the cases use the operational categories to manifest these elements of love through praxis. It is crucial to note that the elements of love and the operational categories work in concert – they complement, enable, and enhance one another in dynamic ways. The value-laden elements of love are what push the operational categories to create conditions for liberation, transformation, and humanization. But the elements can’t be made real without the proper operational conditions.

Let me return, once again, to the working definition of love for this thesis: an intentional act that liberates us to our intersubjective, co-creative existence for the purposes of expressing our creative will and negotiating our collective reality. There is little about setting intention, building relationships, creating spaces, committing over time, and sharing our suffering and joy that gets us to this place. But the cases exhibit how these operational categories, infused with the elements of love (knowledge and understanding, self-love, courage, fellowship, and faith) can liberate us to our connected, intersubjective, powerfully creative/productive selves.
I. Setting Intention

Each of the cases began with clear intentions for their broader organizational efforts and continuously sets intentions as part of specific aspects of their programming. The process of collectively discerning our intentions is one way in which we come to know ourselves and each other. It requires us to stop and think about who we are and what we want. It sets us up for building fellowship with one another on a solid ground of mutual understanding. It lays the groundwork for honest relationships to be built in safe, productive spaces that engender courage and faith in ourselves, each other, and the process. It allows, nay requires, that we bring our whole selves to the process, so that what we build is based in our ever-complicated, messy reality. It is the first step in enacting and developing a love-infused praxis (reflective action). Because of this, it is an ongoing process that individuals and communities must continuously revisit.

Brenda Salgado, the new East Bay Meditation Center Director, explains the need for intention quite well. She says that in the West, we often think of life in a linear Do → Have → Be progression. If I do this, I’ll get that, and then I’ll be something. If I go to college, I’ll get that job, and I’ll be happy. If we do this campaign, we’ll have success, and we’ll be freer. According to Brenda, a first-generation San Franciscan whose parents emigrated from Nicaragua before she was born,

In indigenous and Buddhist traditions, you start with being, you start with intention. We ask who we want to be and then the doing will arise out of that intention because it has to be in alignment with it. And then we’ll have the things that we want. So here, I ask the staff, who do you want to be for our sangha, before we even talk about what your work plan is and what you’re going to do. I want to know who you want to be. What’s your intention in being here? A lot of things about love and patience and compassion and transparency and accountability come up. When we know that’s who we want to be, we can think about what we are going to do that meets that intention (B. Salgado, personal communication, March 7, 2014).

When done skillfully and with care, this is a process for investigating and knowing one’s self, the others with whom you are creating, and the context in which you are operating and the context you are trying to create. Being clear about who we are and who we want to be allows people to bring their full selves to the process of negotiation and creation. Because the evolution and growth of individuals and sanghas is continuous, investigating and setting intentions is an ongoing process, as well.

For EBMC, this process of discerning intentions and acting on them comes out of the spiritual traditions of Buddhism, as well as the lived experiences and desires of the founding and current sangha. So while intentions are imbued with spirituality and ethics, they also spring from and meet the needs of the community. According to Larry Yang, member of the Leadership Sangha and a core teacher at EBMC, “The path to freedom includes, generally, a sense of ethics, of ethical behavior. Not just an individual morality, but a collective morality around how we treat each other as humans” (L. Yang, personal communication, March 14, 2014). Setting intentions engages this spiritual tradition and helps us to think about how we want to be with ourselves and each other.

EBMC’s commitment and embodiment of multiculturalism is an example of this.
One of the major impetuses of EBMC’s formation was the consistent lack of fulfillment of diverse needs within the mainstream sanghas in the Bay Area. On a verbal level, these spaces may have the intention of welcoming anybody who walks through the door, but as we know, it takes more than an invitation. In order to create the safety and the skills, you actually have to build an organizational structure that is inclusive. We are one of the only Dharma organizations that I’m aware of that has this multicultural, diverse intention built into its mission. Most of the missions are around expansion of the Buddha’s teaching or creating loving-kindness and awareness in the world. But we are very specific in its application in the diversity of experience. Most of the original and current organizers have some degree of marginalization in their identity, they can, because of that experience of marginalization in whatever piece they experienced it, translate that to other people’s marginalizations, even if they’re not part of those groups. There’s an exchange of self for other that is very tangible. The empathic bridge is easy to traverse.

This is our experience. We focused on the alphabet community, the queer community, as well as communities of color in the beginning. We had sitting groups and day longs, along with the general public. When you are actually successful at not just welcoming, but actually including, and then creating the conditions in which diversity can thrive...those conditions are not easy to live through because there’s difference and conflict, but if you give people the container to do that, other communities will come knocking at your door wanting to know, can they come to the party, too! (L. Yang, personal communication, March 14, 2014)

Setting intention and then collaboratively and continuously figuring out how to enact that intention has built fellowship at EBMC. Their intention, grounded in ethics and experience, has created a space that speaks to the sangha and meets some of its needs. EBMC helped me circulation an online survey to the community and many respondents spoke to this reality:

I was attracted to EBMC’s clear commitment to serve as an open and safe space to a variety of traditionally oppressed communities, such as people of color and the LGBT community. Mindfulness and meditation have been a part of my life, and I was looking for a place to cultivate that, where I felt a connection to the teachings (25-year-old Black woman from Oakland).

It was vital for me to find a sangha that focused on accessibility, POC related, and towards building a deeply connected community (Japanese/Chinese person from Richmond).

I appreciate the fact that EBMC lives the values that it espouses and that it is a diverse community that is earnestly working toward living the dharma. I am also a member because it is a Sangha that is completely dana based. This has made a world of difference in my participation, especially when I was unemployed. That is why I am involved in the monthly giving program (43-year-old black woman from Oakland).

I like that it is local and that there is a social justice focus and that there are teachers of color. The community is mixed and friendly. I feel like I can learn. I volunteer. I like the people and there is a big queer community and queer people of color. I have learned a lot. I feel appreciated and that I can contribute (Black woman from Oakland).
East Point Peace Academy also practices the setting of intentions through its form and content. East Point is very clear on its intention to build the Beloved Community through training, education, and the practice of nonviolence and conflict reconciliation. Like all of the cases, the intentions are part of EPPA’s origin story. Kazu, from his own lived experiences of working with people all over the world to create peace through restorative justice and Kingian Nonviolence, has felt the need and possibility of building the Beloved Community through agape, nonviolence, and conflict reconciliation. His own experiences are preceded by examples laid by those who built the Civil Rights Movement in this country and the Satyagraha Movement of non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and self-sufficiency led by Gandhi in India, as well as numerous other movements and efforts around the world. Each of these has expressed a need for reconnection and built a case for the achievement of such through love.

EPPA embodies its intentions to build the Beloved Community by practicing in places where institutionalization and engagement with traumatized, marginalized, but also resilient and powerful people exist – prisons and schools. In each of these settings, participants engage with the philosophy and steps of nonviolence as laid out by Dr. King and the curriculum developed by Dr. LaFayette and David Jehnsen. Through readings, personal and collective reflections, and group activities, participants learn about and practice concepts of nonviolence and reconciliation. Throughout a workshop, participants are given opportunities to discuss and set their own intentions for the time they’ll share with one another and to hold each other accountable throughout. The activities combine the concepts of Kingian Nonviolence with the participants own experiences, thereby allowing them to ground the ideas in their own reality and make both its discussion and application tangible.

One of these activities is called Paired Introductions. In it, participants are given the opportunity to get to know each other, from their favorite vacation spot to their core values (thereby building knowledge and understanding), so that people will be able to discuss the ideas and their own experiences more easily (engendering courage, fellowship, and faith). It also helps to prime people for seeing each other’s humanity and connecting with other participants throughout the workshop. On the surface, the Paired Introductions exercise seems like a way for people to get to know each other, and while it’s certainly that, it’s also an opportunity to learn and practice the normative elements of love-infused praxis.

The activity includes the group counting off by twos, getting into two facing lines, and, using nothing but eye contact, finding a partner in the other line. The pairs break off with one another and ask each other introductory questions about their family or personal support network, the favorite childhood game, the ideal vacation, the most exciting thing they’ve done in the past sixty days, and their expectations for the training. They are instructed to listen carefully and that notes are prohibited. The group comes back together after a few minutes and each pair shares what it’s learned about each other. Interestingly, the partners speak for each other in the first person, not the third, while the person being introduced is silent. If I am partnered with Dennis, Dennis would say, “Hello, my name is Courtney. My family is....” The audience must also actively engage by looking at the person who is not talking. If the speaker slips into the third person or the audience’s eyes start to wander, the introduction must start again. After each pair goes, the group “shakes it up” (the American Sign Language form of applause – and a lot of fun!), which becomes a favored way of giving praise or affirmation throughout the workshop. All of the expectations are recorded on butcher paper hanging from the wall.
After all groups have gone, the facilitators ask participants about the experience and help them think critically and self-consciously about the reasoning behind the process and the feelings it evoked for people. I remember this experience from my first two-day core workshop with Kazu in 2011 and the conversation that it sparked within our group. The act of looking at the person who is not speaking highlighted our learned, yet unconscious habits – in this case, looking at the person who is speaking. Bringing this out into the open set people’s minds in a place where they could grapple with the idea that we have learned, yet seemingly natural ways of thinking about and doing things, be it about looking at a speaker or about violence and conflict. This primed us for learning new ways of thinking and acting throughout the workshop. The surprise of speaking for someone else using first person pronouns – and not being able to speak as this other person speaks for you – was interesting in two ways. It helped us step into another’s shoes and see things from their perspective, thereby promoting the practice of empathy. It also made us have to think consciously about speaking for others and the experience of being silenced.

Some people really dug this, and some people felt uncomfortable. The group shared our experiences of this and other instances in which we’d felt silenced and by whom. People were also able to share how it felt to consciously speak for someone else – given the diversity of our group, likely someone who looks and sounds very different from you. This was an opportunity for people to think consciously and intentionally about seemingly mundane daily behaviors that affect us and our ability to connect, feel respected and be respectful, and create the Beloved Community. By setting intentions, East Point creates spaces like this where participants and trainers can walk through an exercise where people develop a better understanding of themselves and each other – both on the surface level of “this is where I grew up,” to “this is how I’ve experienced systems of hierarchy and power and this is how I’m experiencing it right now through this exercise.” This space also calls on and engenders courage, as people are prompted to and supported through sharing their experiences. Through this process of creating a shared space by testing out intentions that are infused with love and developed through praxis, fellowship is created amongst participants. This fellowship spurs on more courage and provides the evidence needed to support a faith in the process and the intentions. This faith allows for continued participation and commitment.

I’ve never heard anyone at the Apprenticeship Program talk about operationalizing a love-infused praxis, but they are, and it begins with setting intentions. Again, like all of the cases, the AP came out of the lived experiences of the founders who recognized a lack of access, a resource of talent and passion, and a potential for transformation, and saw this as an opportunity to create something new and better. The AP has two clear intentions: 1) to provide women and people of color with the access and technical skills needed to produce media that tells our own stories, and 2) to use the platform of radio storytelling to build community across cultures and identities. It has embodied these intentions with thirty-nine groups of apprentices since 1983.

When you listen to Full Circle (the live AP radio show), hear an outreach message for the program on KPFA, or attend the AP Open House, you know what the Apprenticeship Program is about. These clear intentions set the tone and the stage to attract applicants who want to do more than learn about radio production. They help to shape the structure of the multigenerational, multicultural program. And they
guide the curriculum — both social and technical aspects — to include the elements of a love-infused praxis. Knowledge and understanding are built through various intentional spaces where apprentices and mentors discuss historical and current issues and isms that we bring to the program. Our check-ins with each other before every class for months and months, while also working alongside people to complete assignments and produce a radio show within the context of our turbulent lives also provides the opportunity for the building of knowledge and understanding — of ourselves, each other, and our context. These spaces and processes also build self-love, by allowing us to know ourselves and honor our experiences. They engender the courage to share our voices. They are the building blocks of fellowship. They are the space for the lived experiences that produce faith in ourselves, each other, and the community that we’re building. In this way, the setting of intention paves the way for the elements of love to be practiced, and the elements allow the intention to be practically transformative.

Enacting intentions through elements of a love-infused praxis lays the groundwork for, but also relies on, the next operational bucket: Building Relationships.

II. Building Relationships (Community)

All three of the cases in this thesis invest heavily in relationship building. And this thesis is about reuniting ourselves with ourselves, each other, and the world in which we live. I contend that we are, in fact, relational beings and the many disparities and injustices we see in the world are manifestations of a denial of our interconnected, intersubjective, relational selves. Building relationships allows us to reconnect, generate self- and collective-knowledge and understanding, love ourselves and others, fortify our courage, see our commonalities and build skills to honor and work with our differences within and across communities, and cultivate faith in our ability to love and live together.

East Point Peace Academy builds relationships through love in both its content and its form. One of the foundational concepts of Kingian Nonviolence is agape, which I discussed earlier. It is taught and debated in all East Point workshops. It is the basis for the kinds of relationships that East Point cultivates. Kazu Haga, East Points founder, describes it this way:

King defined [agape] as disinterested love. With the other forms of love, eros and philia, it’s reciprocal, right? I love you because you love me. And with agape, it’s a kind of love where you have no interest in whether the other person loves you back or not, because that’s not the point. You’re not trying to get anything out of it. When we talk about love in English, it’s important to specify what type of love we mean. I can love my mom and I can love my cheeseburger and it’s the same word. I think that’s why King talked about agape, because it’s a specific kind of love. So when we talk about loving your neighbor or loving your enemy, it’s important to acknowledge that it’s this unconditional love, it’s this love for humanity. It’s not ‘I love you because you love me back’ or ‘I love you because we’ve been through these experiences together,’ but I love you because you’re human. And I think that the core of nonviolence is the faith that even the people who do the most awful things, there’s a moral conscious in there somewhere and there’s a sense of humanity in there somewhere and agape is about recognizing that (K. Haga, personal communication, March 4, 2014).

“I love you because you’re human.” Learning about and attempting to practice agape is an opportunity to explore the idea that there is humanity in all of us. This is a type self- and collective-knowledge generation. Recognizing that even those who have done horrific things share a common humanity also
allows us to connect with others. Importantly, it allows us to connect with and love ourselves. To see ourselves as humans deserving of love, to forgive ourselves, to be compassionate towards ourselves – these practices liberate us and prepare us to see, love, forgive, and act compassionately towards others. This ability to connect with the self and others is part of building relationships.

Agape and nonviolence are also about reminding us of our commonalities. Again, Kazu:

> We spend so much time in our society focusing on how we’re different from one another, whether it’s by race and gender and class and ethnicity and all these things – and sometimes those differences are important to acknowledge. At the end of the day, nonviolence is about reminding us that we’re very similar beings and that we’re all trying to get the same things out of life. We all want to continue to evolve as human beings, we all want what’s best for our families and the people that are close to us. We all want to have good relationships with the people around us. Sometimes we lose sight of that, but when it comes to core human values, we all value similar things, and I think agape is a way to remind us of how similar we are.

> We talk about harm and violence and how in a sense you do need to disconnect yourself with the other person, to dehumanize them in order to harm them. The more we dehumanize people, the easier it is for us to cause harm. And I think that agape tries to reverse that attempt at separation (K. Haga, personal communication, March 4, 2014).

Currently, East Point is doing a lot of work in various jails and prisons throughout the Bay Area. At some facilities their programs are mandatory, at others they are not. In a recent workshop at the San Francisco Women’s Jail, the women were required to be in a very small room with other women with whom they didn’t voluntarily choose to associate. As Kazu tells it, “One woman came into the workshop in the morning and saw a woman that she was beefing with. She didn’t think that she’d be able to sit in that tiny classroom with this woman all day. But apparently the things that we were talking about resonated with her and that night she went to the woman she was beefing with and they went through a reconciliation process. At the end of the two-day workshop, the women embraced. It’s those small anecdotes that add up to culture change” (K. Haga, personal communication, March 4, 2014).

But it’s not just the content of the workshops that affect the ability of the program to build relationships infused with love. It’s also the way that Kazu and other East Point trainers practice nonviolence. Describing a recent session at the San Bruno County Jail near San Francisco, Kazu says,

> We got to break bread with the guys a couple weeks ago, for Black History Month, so we weren’t in workshop and we were just talking. One of the guys was like, “Well yea, you treat us like human beings.” I’m sitting there like “What the fuck? How else am I...what are all of these other programs that they’re bringing you? How are they treating you?” And I think that a lot of the other programs are people talking at them. And a lot of anger management programs assume that they’re the problem. Right? Like, if only you can learn to manage your anger everything will be fine. Rather than looking at the broader issues and being like, ‘yea, you have every legitimate reason to be pissed off. Now what can we do about that?’ Starting from that place is different. I think a lot of the other programs talk down to them (K. Haga, personal communication, March 4, 2014).

East Point operates in a way that respects and engages participants. It welcomes the whole person to enter the room and honors their lived experiences as sources of knowledge that must be valued and engaged if any efforts to teach Kingian Nonviolence are to work. By seeing and embracing the
humanness in each participant, East Point builds meaningful relationships. I ask him why he doesn’t talk down to the men at San Bruno,

Why don’t I? I think I’ve just been working in this community for so long and so many of my mentors, the people I really look up to, used to be locked up for twenty years and to me, doing this work, especially in violence prevention and gang intervention, I’ve seen so many powerful examples of transformation, of what’s possible, and yea, the people that I look up to the most used to be those guys that I work with in the jail, so I know what’s possible.

And I think that obviously, doing this training for so many years, this training is all about looking at people as human beings and understanding root causes versus symptoms. I mean, being committed to nonviolence means trying to see people as human beings. It’s so complicated at times, but at the end of the day, it’s so simple. It’s sooo simple. We’re all human beings. It’s also about acknowledging that I’m not perfect. I’ve done plenty of things where if I’d gotten caught I’d be wearing orange with these men, too. I’ve hurt people plenty. So, just not losing sight of that.

And that’s part of this internal work, it’s recognizing the shit that we’ve done — and continue to do to perpetuate these systems of violence. Being real and owning that. It’s not like ‘Oh I’m a nonviolence trainer so I’m not responsible for any of that.’ That doesn’t work” (K. Haga, personal communication, March 4, 2014).

So Kazu not only welcomes the men to bring their whole selves and honors those selves, he does the same for himself. And here Kazu touches on an important point. In order to build relationship with others, you must build relationship with yourself. This means looking at yourself as a person embedded in a larger social context that shapes you and that you shape. This is not work that you do for others or to others; it’s a way of engaging with your own life that is based in and creates relationship. Exploring and confronting ourselves and our place in a hierarchy of power requires and builds knowledge and understanding, self-love as we begin to know ourselves, and the courage to continue to do so. It’s the building of relationships that allows people to engage with others in a love-infused praxis. Again, the ends are the means.

The Apprenticeship Program also implements a love-infused praxis through relationship building. It, too, does this in both the form and the content of the program. Structurally, the program is based on a multicultural, intergenerational learning model. Three groups train concurrently, each at different phases of the program, with different roles and objectives. The eldest of current apprentices produce the weekly radio magazine, Full Circle, airing live every Friday night at 7 PM. The middle apprentices are learning production skills and assisting with Full Circle production. The newest apprentices are forming their group, providing administrative support, and learning the theoretical underpinnings of radio production. The elder and middle apprentices mentor younger apprent during our day-shifts at the station and graduate apprent teach classes and provide assistance with production. In this way, we are in each other’s lives, day in and day out, helping each other to do the work of learning and producing radio.

But the Apprenticeship Program starts building relationships before anyone ever sees a sound board or even learns about the theory of interviewing. “We have to build relationships before you can do the work of radio production. The program brings in people from so many walks of life. It’s a reflection of who we are as a society. And so the program helps people develop those skills for how to get along, which is difficult. It’s hard work!” (R. Yang-Geesler, personal communication, March 24, 2014). It takes
intentional work and it takes “being together” / “doing together” work, ie. building relationships with the intention to transform. The Apprenticeship Program is very clear in its intention to build community, while also teaching media production skills. In fact, the ability to do either relies on the other. Producing an hour-long weekly live broadcast is challenging, to say the least. Relationships make it possible. And the relationships rely on the opportunity to interact on a daily basis. Some of the strongest relationships are forged in high-pressure situations, with tight and continuous deadlines. In spaces like the Apprenticeship Program, where the intentions and the skills to cultivate relationships and deal with differences is present, the results are transformative.

One of the first ways that the Apprenticeship Program starts forging relationships is with a ritual that each group experiences: Fire by the Water. This is a time for the newest group of apprent to break bread with each other and the larger family of current and graduated apprentices and friends. We gather at a park in the Berkeley Marina; everyone brings food and drink that represents their family or culture, and we share all sorts of sustenance with each other – food, laughter, wisdom, worries. I remember bringing strawberry shortcake, my grandfather and uncle’s specialty. I remember eating pasteles, mofongo, fried chicken, collards, pozole, and a green salad with a lemon dressing, fresh from a Joy’s garden. People hang out, talk about the drama in their lives. Some of the new apprentices are shy, some of them are covering up their shyness with loudness. We’re all feeling each other out in this space. As the sun goes down, we light a fire and gather around to share a bit about ourselves and listen to some of the elders tell us the origin stories of the program. The new group of apprentices then goes off into the darkness to name themselves. It’s one of the first steps in forming our group identity – of forming a collective relationship. When it was my group’s turn, we nestled into some dry grass by the water and talked about what kind of name would represent us. Who were we? Who did we want to be? A couple of us are Spanish-speakers, some white, some Chicano, some black, some Chinese, some African. Some of us are women, some of us are men. Some of us are queer. Some of us are married with children. Some of us have PhDs, some of us deliver pizzas. Some of us are bouncing around homeless shelters. Some of us are artists, poets, DJs, performers. All of us are curious. All of us feel like there’s something bigger than we comprehend at work here – we feel it, but we don’t necessarily know how or need to name it. How do we put the entirety of ourselves and these feelings into a name? Sukari offers up the Polynesian word mana, meaning universal life force. Shana offers up the Spanish word tela, meaning thread. We are each beautiful pieces of thread, woven together into a richer, stronger piece of fabric, together. From that moment on, we are Tela Mana. We come back to the larger group, share our name, and celebrate!

You might be thinking, “well, isn’t that some nice hippie-dippy sh*t.” It may be, but it’s the foundation for nearly two years of intentional formal and informal relationship building – reflective practice – through which skills are cultivated. It’s the very beginning of us generating knowledge and understanding of ourselves and each other. As our formal training begins, over several initial class sessions, we form group agreements about how we will treat each other, which we sign and return to when there is conflict. We also have “check-in” before every single class. This is a time when each person gets to share with the group where they are that day, so that before we do any work, we are heard, seen, validated, and at least on the same page about what each of us might be able to contribute that day. For five minutes, only the person sharing gets to speak and everyone else must listen. This enables us to practice our deep, intentional listening skills, to cultivate empathy, and to create a loving, accepting space.
When you come in here we say, ‘the first thing we’d like you to do it listen to yourselves and each other.’ That’s the inner journey work and elevating and honing a skill that we just take for granted. And not just the words – the body, the emotion. We cultivate that here. Using the palatable, actual skill of producing sound and broadcasting is just a tool or a platform that we used to change a bigger dynamic in society. We’re teaching people to work together in a way that’s truly empathetic, that’s truly open and honest. We’re attempting to live out our stated mission of democracy, of equality, of sharing, of valuing other people, and freedom. We’re trying to realize the ideal. We’re experimenting to strive towards that ideal” (J. Moore, personal communication, March 8, 2014).

The work of producing radio is the space in which to build bonds based on trust – testing, failing, forgiving, and doing again. You have to do the preparation work and then you have to have the space to do the practice. These practices allow us to know each other and ourselves, to bring our whole selves into an accepting space and develop self-love and courage, to develop a faith in ourselves, each other, and the space that we’re creating, and to build the relationships – the fellowship – that makes all of this possible and meaningful. Beyond that, it allows us to work with each other day in and day out to produce the radio show and complete administrative tasks that keep the station running!

The East Bay Meditation Center similarly creates the work of operationalizing a love-filled praxis through building relationships, both in the form of their organization and practice, and in the content of their teachings. Mindfulness is one of the core concepts of Buddhist traditions. “Mindfulness is like a light, enabling concentration to really be there, and that also makes it possible for us to look deeply into the heart of things. From this looking deeply is born deep vision, understanding. Mindfulness brings concentration, understanding, love, and freedom” (Hanh, 2006, 52). The practice of mindfulness is a key aspect of EBMC. But this is not just because EBMC is a meditation center; EBMC is more than a meditation center and mindfulness does more than just let you meditate. The practice of mindfulness, in a space with the skills and intentions of EBMC, allows one to do more than be a light unto one’s self. It allows us to see other selves, to see ourselves embedded in a whole system of selves and other beings. It primes us and allows us to seek and to feel and to understand, without judgment, but with keen attention. Meditation, particularly in a diverse community of practitioners who aim to support each other’s spiritual growth, is a powerfully and constructively disruptive.

In this context, with the intentions the EBMC holds, the practice of mindfulness is not something that one cultivates alone.

“We need friends, brothers and sisters in the Dharma, to be able to do this easily. That is why in Buddhism we talk about the practice of taking refuge in the sangha... The sangha is a practice community in which brothers and sisters in the Dharma practice the cultivation of mindfulness daily: when they eat, when they drink, when they wash the dishes, when they work in the garden, when they drive a car – and not just during times of sitting meditation. So it is necessary to have a bit of training and a sangha, that is, a community of practice (Hanh, 2006, 62).

This community of practice is crucial. It’s what allows you to practice the new ways of seeing and being. It builds courage and sustains you in times of hardship and doubt. It challenges you and motivates you to grow. It holds you accountable when you are not honoring your true intentions. It gives you faith in yourself, your practice, and the collaborative endeavor of the sangha.

Within a multicultural sangha that aims to honor its diversity and create space – in structure and behavior – for all to be present, practice with others is necessary to become mindful of how institutional
arrangements and historical circumstances have created unhealthy relational habits, as well as to
discern and devise new habits of mind and body. Brenda Salgado, EBMC’s Director, explains:

I think the Buddhist practices and mindfulness practices allow us to be more aware of how we
perceive the world and help us to remember how we’re interconnected. They help us to hold our
emotions, our experiences, and our reactions with some skillfulness that we might not have had
before. And the kinds of transformative, and painful and challenging, conversations that we have
to have in this country around race, around oppression, require us to have tools to be much
savorier about multicultural communication and holding space in a way that honors
multiculturalism — in a way that allows people to hold their whole selves, their whole identities,
their whole histories and not having those dismissed.

And I believe that Buddhism, in particular people like Thich Naht Hanh who really inspired MLK,
and this idea of socially engaged Buddhism — Buddhism was never about ‘I’m sitting on a pillow
and I’m saving myself and I’m going to become more aware of myself, but I don’t care about the
suffering of the rest of the world.’ The Buddha was always about ending the suffering of the
whole world. So for me, I’m very present for how the teachings that are offered here and
through many other wisdom traditions makes space for us to be in right relationship with one
another and with the earth and help us break out of this framework of hyper individualism that is
really dangerous to us individually and collectively.

Some of this is remembering old wisdom. I mean, we’re social beings; we’re meant to be in
community. And this fallacy of hyper-individualism and superiority and the independence at all
costs was always a fallacy that has wreaked a lot of pain and suffering in the world.

And so I believe that the transformation of the folks that are othering us is through relationship –
and it’s through curiosity and it’s through engaging with them. It’s not through judgment and it’s
not through attacking. And there’s a way that you can call out behavior without making it about
the person necessarily and helping each other to see why we are this way. There’s a whole
system of indoctrination that we’ve inherited that doesn’t serve you, doesn’t serve me, and it
doesn’t allow us to be in relationship so let’s have a conversation about what it would be like to
be in relationship.

Mindfulness allows us to be aware of how we’ve inherited those patterns that have taught us to
be ashamed of who we are and not listen to our inner truth, to not acknowledge the joy and the
inner hardship — all of our emotions. It’s taught us to tamp down our anger when it’s sometimes
actually quite justified. But to be able to learn from those experiences and navigate them
skillfully and use them as learning opportunities for ourselves and for the greater world — I think
that’s true for the mindfulness stuff.

That’s why this microcosm is important to me. I went to other institutions to learn Buddhism
many years ago and I got the teachings and that was awesome, I learned how to meditate, you
know? But I didn’t have a sense of community there. It was largely older and affluent; it was a
very small sangha, and it didn’t even feel very sangha-ish! So it feels like I went there to get
something and I left. I didn’t feel engaged there, I didn’t feel honored or celebrated there for
what I brought. And what strikes me about EBMC is what a humungous mix of people we have
here! In practice, you know, and on different nights — I know that it’s through relationship that
things are going to change. While I appreciate the people who are working on campaigns and
policy changes — those things need to happen. But if you don’t change hearts and minds, those
things will not last, and it’s why the people who are fearful now are trying to overturn all the civil
rights stuff, all the women’s rights stuff. Because they don’t feel like they care or are in
relationship with the people who got those rights. And so they kind of tamp down or didn’t have public expression of the bias they had at that point because it is illegal to do so anymore, but it didn’t actually keep them from feeling that way about the people they were othering.

So this shift around relationship and seeing each other...I just don’t think we’re going to get there if we don’t actually get into space together and start practicing together. If we’re not starting to have relationship with one another, if we’re not starting to have curiosity about each other and setting different ways that we are in space together, where we allow everyone to be who they are and where we actually acknowledge that we have been living in a container that says “Oh, you’re only ok if you’re X and you have to leave everything else that you are at the door”...it’s like the people who say they don’t see color, well, actually, I have color! You may not see it, but that’s actually part of the problem, because to step into your space with you I have to pretend that I’m not who I am. And changing that can only happen through dialogue and relationship.

Being in practice together and creating those safe spaces to be in dialogue together is really really important right now (B. Salgado, personal communication, March 7, 2014K).

“And changing that can only happen through dialogue and relationship” — or what I might call a love-infused praxis. All of these manifestations of building relationship need and nurture elements of the framework I laid out earlier. The process of learning to bring your whole self and of encountering the whole selves of others is a part of cultivating self-love and creating knowledge and understanding of your self, others, and the context in which you come to be. It allows for fellowship to grow intentionally and organically from skillful practice and being in space together, working alongside one another. As understanding, self-love, and fellowship are developed, courage flourishes. We have had the space and the experiences to hone skills and build relationships that empower us. And through this lived experience, we fortify our faith in ourselves, each other, and the skills and community we’re building, through our reflective practice.

Setting our loving intentions and building relationships based on those creates the context for, while simultaneously relying on the next operational bucket: the creation of safe, yet challenging spaces.

III. Creating Containers (Safe, Yet Challenging Spaces)

The building of relationships relies heavily on the creation of containers – the safe, yet simultaneously challenging spaces where this messy, beautiful, transformative process happens. Each case is keenly aware of the need for us to engage with the reality that we live in a context — ideological and material — of both conflict and connection. The history and current reality of the United States is one in which people who look like me used to be able to buy and sell people with dark skin. This legal practice only ended 150 years ago and it has been followed by years of psychological and physical terrorism performed through lynchings, Jim Crow laws, formal and informal segregation, highly racialized (yet presented as universal) transportation, housing, and education legislation, mass incarceration, school-to-prison pipelining, stop-and-frisk, media portrayals of black men as dangerous criminals and black woman as angry and overly sexual, positive portrayals of wealth, whiteness, and the rugged individual, social movements in which unity seemed to be achieved, but never for long or never fully, and the list goes on.

We have a lot of reasons not to be able to sit in space together and listen or talk with one another. We have lived experiences that tell us that this is likely to be unenjoyable and unproductive. On top of a
history and current reality of oppression and injustice, we also have that pesky sense of the modern, individualistic, separate self. We’ve lived lives, whether they were in a penthouse or the projects, where we saw that it was better to stay closed than to be open. Many of us don’t even think about or find it hard to reach out, to be vulnerable, to let others see us or even to see ourselves. Allowing others to see us, allowing ourselves to see us, is a first step in the process of reconnection. This requires spaces and skillful guides who help us feel safe and courageous in our capacity to be honest with ourselves and each other, while simultaneously feeling challenged and able to engage openly, empathetically, reciprocally, and forgivingly with ourselves and others.

Creating these containers is as messy, beautiful, and transformative as what happens inside of them. In fact, what happens inside is part of what creates and recreates the container. Again, the ends are the means – we create the containers by developing knowledge and understanding, self-love, courage, fellowship, and faith. And the containers – the safe, yet challenging spaces – allow these elements of a love-infused praxis to flourish. Groundwork can be laid with skillful guides, but the people themselves, through their words and action inside the container, create it themselves.

**East Point Peace Academy** provides an example of this through a recent session that Kazu held with men at the San Bruno County Jail. This particular group includes eleven men who are in a train-the-trainer program that meets regularly and goes deeper into the modules of a traditional two-day core workshop on Kingian Nonviolence. On the day that Kazu relayed to me, the men were talking about types of violence and how it’s not just physical, but also emotional:

> When we opened up the conversation, one of the men shared an experience that he’d had recently. He was in court and came face to face with a woman that he’d hurt in some way. Looking at her and hearing her story for the first time really, for the first time, he grasped the impact that his actions had on her. This realization weighed on him heavily. He couldn’t release it. Our conversation opened a space for him to talk about it. This allowed the other men to share. Every single one was sharing stories and sharing tears. In an environment like that, in a classroom with big glass windows, where all the other guys outside can see what’s going on inside – to be in that environment and create that space of vulnerability where people can just release is incredible. And we were hearing from the staff that this space almost never happens here.

> When internal violence happens, it sometimes doesn’t feel so bad. But it’s like the water bottle. If I pick it up and hold it out in front of me for a minute, it’s not so bad. If I hold onto it for an hour, it might feel a little heavier. If I hold onto it all day, my arm might feel like it’s going to fall off. Internal violence works in the same way. It just gets heavier and heavier the longer we hold onto it. Some people deal with it through meditation or exercise or poetry or art. I think one of the most powerful ways of releasing it is voicing it. And this is partly because voicing it allows you to name it. Sometimes you just know that something is there, but you can’t deal with it or release it until you can locate it and know what it is. So I think that creating spaces where people feel safe enough to know what’s going on is a huge part of it.

**Courtney:**

What about the curriculum helps you to create those spaces?

**Kazu:**
Us talking about the concepts of Kingian Nonviolence opens up the space organically. But the curriculum isn’t designed to create that space. It just sometimes happens. So what we’re experimenting with now in the jails is going there every single week with these guys. Working with the same guys every single week is critical. One-time events can be inspirational, but they don’t necessarily create lasting change. Again, it’s this idea of a training academy, establishing trusting relationships over time, making commitments and showing up. Once you have those relationships, once you have that regularity, the curriculum is a great framework. Let’s talk about internal violence, what does that mean for all of us? What does it mean when we say that practicing nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people? ‘Cause expressing this shit hurts and especially in that setting, it takes a lot of courage to be vulnerable. So what does that look like? And so using the curriculum and bringing in tools like a talking circle and restorative circles and things like that allow things to happen (K. Haga, personal communication, March 4, 2014).

Kazu’s intention, the discussion of nonviolence, the relationships that the men have built with one another through these discussions over time have created the space for men to open up, express themselves honestly. Spaces that can hold those experiences are crucial to the healing that must occur in order for us to love ourselves and love each other. These spaces and the work that happens inside of them gives us the capacity, the courage, and the faith to practice this way of being in all areas and aspects of their lives. This only happens through interactions with others.

**The Apprenticeship Program** creates similar kinds of spaces, both organically like with East Point, but also very intentionally, as was discussed earlier in the Relationship Building section. Collecting and telling stories is central to the work of the Apprenticeship Program. It is a deeply personal, but also political experience. Renee Yang-Geesler, a graduate and former Director of the program says, “All these stories help people to heal, when they can express everything their communities are going through. And it’s encouraged. No one in the Apprenticeship Program is telling people to stop talking about those difficult-to-hear issues. Diversity and expression are honored and nurtured in the Apprenticeship Program” (R. Yang-Geesler, personal communication, March 24, 2014).

This is brought out in the first couple of classes with new apprentices. This is long before any technical radio production happens. It’s time and space intentionally set aside to talk about race, gender, sexuality, and all sorts of issues and identities that we experience. We’re encouraged and given the opportunity to have some uncomfortable conversations. This process politicizes people through their personal experiences. Renee continues,

> The Apprenticeship Program politicizes people. You can’t go through and not be transformed. Listening to the news and thinking about politics is one thing. But when you realize your place in the political spectrum, say, as a person of color, and then you start connecting to movements because you realize, ‘Wow, I do have a story, and I came from this place and my grandmother is this woman and this is the struggle that we’ve had in our family.’ The Apprenticeship Program transforms people in a very personal and political way because they see that their story is valid and other people are hearing them and supporting them to explore that part of themselves, as well. It gives people a place to explore who they are.

> When I got in, I was a young lady and I wasn’t political at all. I grew and learned, but it took that time for me to mature. It provides that platform for you to explore yourself politically. And face all the isms and see your place in that.
You may have lifelong beliefs that never get checked. In the Apprenticeship Program, it will get checked. It's kind of like raising a mirror and saying, 'These are the things you’re doing. These are the things that you’re gonna need to work on and places in which you need to grow, cause it's not gonna fly in this group.’ The people in the group will hold each other accountable, and I think that's really important when you’re talking about all of the isms. Those are things that we bring in the door with us and sometimes we don’t know that we’re doing them, but with the classes and the teachers and the other group members, I think that people get to reflect on these things. And sometimes it's extremely painful and hurtful – it doesn’t end well sometimes. But people do have to face that and hash it out, so it's a good place for that (R. Yang-Geesler, personal communication, March 24, 2014).

I remember an instance of this happening in our group, during one of the first couple of classes when we were talking about “isms.” Below is an excerpt from a conversation that I had with graduates and mentors of the Apprenticeship Program while I was back in Oakland in March of 2014. Sukari and I are of Tela Mana. Sukari is a Brooklyn-born, UC Berkeley- and University of Chicago-educated sociologist, mother of two, woman of color whose laugh you can hear from a mile away. Frank is the current Technical Director and a graduate apprentice. He’s from Antioch, a small city just northeast of Berkeley. His father is Native, his mother is a white woman. Frank spent about 10 year addicted to meth; it was his story about giving up the pipe that motivated me to apply to the Apprenticeship Program. He’s the heart of the program and the station. Joy is an African American woman originally from New York City, but who moved to Berkeley in 1969 to live with her grandparents and finish her senior year of high school. She’s also a graduate of the program and while she might not like me saying it, she’s the mama bear of the Program. She always brings us food from her garden, she walks all of the new apprentices through our first session and helps us our group agreements. She is always present, always learning with us, always teaching us, always caring for us.

The exchange that follows is about a conversation that occurred in the performance studio at KPFA, as Tela Mana was gathered in a circle, talking about the stereotypes, biases, and identities that we bring with us every time we walk through the doors of the station. The memory was evoked when I asked Sukari, Frank, and Joy about having “uncomfortable conversations” as part of the Apprenticeship Program curriculum. Lyndsey and Shana are part of the memory, but they are not present for the conversation. They are both white women, around 25 years of age at the time of the remembered exchange. None of us can recall the exact dialogue that led up to the question, but at one point, Sukari asked Lyndsey, “Would you give up your white skin?”

Sukari:

I learned a lot about myself. Particularly around conflict. I tend to shut down and not want to engage. This is something that came to the fore here. I have this New York personality that might just go crazy, so I’ve often thought it was just better to disengage. But from some of those “uncomfortable” experiences, I’ve learned how to approach conflict not as a crazy or a disengaged person, but a middle way.

Courtney:

This makes me think of the interaction that happened in one of our classes, with Shana and Lyndsey. The “would you give up your white skin?” conversation. I remember that being hella uncomfortable and not necessarily getting wrapped up with a neat little bow.
Sukari:

Yeaa...This was supposed to be a space where we could unpack things, so I thought that talking about privilege was something that we could do. I feel like I never really got any closure. It’s interesting, even though neither of them really had an answer to the question, I was able to develop a relationship with both of them. I decided to give myself the room, to not get stuck there, because I recognize that it’s not necessarily the easiest thing for a white person to sit down and address their white privilege, it’s not even necessarily something that they thought much about. So I feel good in that we were able not to get stuck there. Lindsey and I didn’t really develop the best relationship, but the fact that I was able to build a friendship with Shana was powerful and important.

Joy:

Were you asked about giving up your skin? Cause if we’re asking other people to go to a place of non-comfort, then I have to go there with you.

Sukari:

No, I don’t think that happened.

Courtney:

What allowed you to build relationships with them?

Sukari:

I have to say, Lyndsey’s first piece...I unfortunately had some commonality with that and so...we bonded over that, unfortunately. That was powerful. It never made us best friends, but I think it did allow us to see each other as individuals going through our own struggles.

Courtney:

Was this a safe space to bring up stuff? So that you could actually accomplish things together?

Sukari:

To a point. The space is there. But there’s a point where the comfort ends.

Frank:

Yes, this is a safe space, but it still takes that courage within you to bring that up. Is it ever going to be 100% comfortable and safe? No, we’re always going to have issues. KPFA is in the United States, it’s in American culture; even though we all wanna claim progressive thinking and getting along and communicating, we’re still wrapped up in that larger culture. But this is a place where you can bring up stuff. Whether it’s going to be totally comfortable and totally accepted, it’s not going to matter if you have the courage to bring it up and talk about it. It’s a goal of ours to communicate and talk about these things – in the Apprenticeship Program, we purposefully bring up this stuff to get people talking. It’s not totally safe, but it’s safer than most. It’s a place where you can bring something up and find allies (S. Ivester, J. Moore, F. Sterling, personal communication, March 8, 2014).

This interaction and our memories about it show how complicated this process of creating safe, yet challenging spaces is. It isn’t simple and it isn’t a one-and-done situation. In the case of the Apprenticeship Program, it is something that happens intentionally, with some guidance, and a lot of
practice, over time. The program gives participants the space and sets the tone, but importantly, it also trusts them to figure some of this out on their own – to struggle and work through things over time and via various pathways. The interaction amongst Lyndsey, Shana, and Sukari didn’t resolve much for any participants. It did, however, bring latent tension out into the open. Doing so releases it from us, to a certain degree, allowing it to become something we can attempt to address and work through, individually and collaboratively.

The ability to work through it was enhanced by the storytelling and the collaborative production aspects of the Apprenticeship Program, as well. Because we were sharing our stories, Sukari could see Lyndsey as a person, a human being that suffers, with whom she could connect her own experiences of suffering. Self-expression in a safe and challenging space that can hold the discomfort and provide opportunities to work together is critical to our reconnection as humans. Doing this over and over again, having experiences with one another where we are able to test out the safe space and practice our skills gives us courage to test more, reach out more, allow others to see us more. As relationships are built through interactive practice, trust and faith are built, as well. This allows for further action and greater courage and faith. As Sukari said, she and Lyndsey aren’t the best of friends, but they worked together for a year and half and produced numerous high quality shows together.

The Apprenticeship Program provides both formal/intentional spaces for this, as well as informal/organic spaces, as well. These allow us to form strong bonds amongst incredibly diverse people. Frank describes his experience:

Antioch is a pretty conservative place. My dad is a really dark-skinned Native guy, but my mom was like, the polar opposite. I felt like I grew up with some white privilege. When I came to KPFA, there were people that I never hung out with. There was an older black gentleman, an older black woman. I mean, I remember when the first brother came to my high school. Brian. My high school was just integrating when I started going there, you know, cause Antioch was just integrating. But you come here and it’s bam, multigenerational, multicultural. When I came here I was with openly gay people, a transgendered person.

We had an issue in my group with sexual harassment. For a moment, I was fed up with it because every time we were supposed to have a class, we had to resolve this issue amongst our group. It was going on a month of not having classes and instead talking about sexual harassment. The guy was commenting on breasts and repeatedly asking women on dates. So we had to sit around this table with that guy and the women confronting him. It was the most uncomfortable thing to be in this room. I didn’t know how to feel. You know, the station empowers women so they were standing up. Eventually, we had to ask the man to leave the program. I was frustrated with not being taught radio, but I realized I was being taught this other part. It got me thinking about how women feel when you do things. You know, Antioch is a really macho place. But hearing these women’s stories and their feelings, it was just a whole nother world to me.

And becoming friends with a transgendered person...again, in Antioch, I can’t think of a single transgendered person that I know.

KPFA became my family. Fresh outta being on drugs for ten years, it was a whole new family for me. The people I met, especially the women, they were my mentors.

It wasn’t “learning how to work with people that you’d never worked with”...it’s just “working with them,” cause they’re just other people. You know what I’m saying? They’re just regular people. When you sit down and listen to them, you realize that you have commonalities. A lot of
the stuff they’re interested in, you might be interested in. Especially coming to the Apprenticeship Program, the draw is often the social justice and storytelling thing, you all kinda have that little bit in common, but you also have lots of differences. So you take those little bits that you do have in common, just like smoking a joint together after class or something, and you’re just people together. It just opens up a whole new world where uncomfortable isn’t so uncomfortable anymore.

And it’s the same with every group. The uncomfortable stuff is always there and you have to work through it, but also just find those common spots. And you know, maybe you don’t become best friends, but you can come and do your thing and work on a cooperative, professional level and have a working relationship.

So for me, it was about making uncomfortable spaces normal. Finding friends of many ethnicities and genders just became the normal here for me (F. Sterling, personal communication, March 8, 2014).

In both of these examples, the learning comes from doing. And it comes because the space was provided, with intention and room for whatever springs up, which is then facilitated and mitigated by the group itself, with the support of mentors and our own group agreements. We come to know ourselves and each other by reckoning with our histories and identities. We learn to honor and love our own voices by sharing them. We’re given the space to build the courage to share our voices and hear those of others. These experiences allow us to build fellowship with new people. Our shared practice of creating safe, yet challenging spaces gives us the evidence we need to have faith in moving forward with love.

The East Bay Meditation Center is very explicit about creating containers to hold its intentions and practice of welcoming and building a multicultural sangha. I asked Larry Yang, one of EBMC’s leaders and teachers, how they create safe, yet challenging spaces:

It’s both an intentional and an incremental process. You build the safety and you also build the stretch. One of the doorways into EBMC and the Dharma that EBMC teaches is through one’s experience of identity, which is counterintuitive to most Buddhist practitioners because the goal is to transcend identity to transcend self. That’s not how we frame identity. Identity is part of that recurring question of ‘who am I?’ ‘who are we?’ And as we go into the question, we begin to experience ‘who are we beyond the identities that we most commonly associate with?’ As a gay man, as a gay man of color, as an Asian man, as a social worker, as a man – all these identities have some meaning, but they also don’t describe my total experience. So, can I use identity to go into the door of exploration of self and what is beyond self? And that is an interesting, relevant exploration for everyone I know. And so it’s incremental in the sense that you build that safety and that belonging within different pieces of the practitioner’s identity or the community’s identity and then you begin to do the stretch by bringing the communities together. And from the center where I was ordained in Thailand, they said that building community, building sangha, is like putting volcanic rocks in a millstone and you grind against each other again and again and you begin to smoothen out into these beautifully polished stone, if you have the strength of the container.

So we have different classes to build the strength of the container. For example, one of our board members has created a model class called “Interconnected: Being Mindful and White.” It is basically bringing mindfulness and the identity of being in the white dominant culture to consciousness, to develop skills around that, so that when communities begin to mingle, they
have a heightened awareness and sensitivity to what the issues are. Our sangha building classes deal a lot with communication and speech. And we deal with the underlying assumptions that we bring — and these aren’t necessarily bad assumptions that we bring, but just realize that there is both intention and impact, and usually intention is a stand-alone. The goodness of your actions are based on the wisdom and kindness of your intentions. But that’s slightly truncated. Because no, the goodness of your actions are not just based on your intentions, but on the awareness of the impact of your intentions, because it’s a constant learning process. If you don’t learn from the impact of your intentions and actions, then your intentions become reified and unchanging. In this way, we’re sort of a feedback loop and the learning aspect of the Dharma is part of that ability for a community to go through a transformative process.

All of the teachings are language of EBMC in a way that are not idealistic. It’s really very pragmatically driven. How do these teachings land in your particular life? We ask the practitioners this. And this involves a lot of group work. So it’s not so much the didactic transmission of teacher to student. There may be some framing that a teacher will do, but I do feel that the role of teacher is not as hierarchical as other venues. We’re very conscious of the role and power that we hold as teachers. For example, one of my goals, when things are going well, you teach and you lead from behind so that the group actually teaches itself. When there is an issue or a problem is when you take the responsibility and the accountability and you role model how to navigate through it. In this way, it brings a collective experience to the learning and the teaching. When one sits at EBMC you’re not taught by one person, you’re actually taught by the community. And that sense of community is quite loyal to each other (L. Yang, personal communication, March 14, 2014).

I asked Larry what this meant for people when they leave EBMC and go out into the world:

It’s a two-way street. EBMC influences the people who take it out into their lives, but EBMC is affected by those people who come in with that connected collectivity already, whether it’s in social justice or in families or their own cultural experiences. And it’s not always easy. One of the things that we continue to navigate is when you bring so many diverse communities together, it’s a question, whether...for one thing, no single community is ever going to get all of its needs met, so the question then becomes what’s the threshold for getting any one community’s needs met enough, in order for them to stay connected. So collectively, when you ask what is good enough, sometimes what is good enough for one community contradicts the ‘good enough’ needs of another community and sometimes those situations actually harm other communities and that’s a constant landscape that we’re navigating.

And I don’t have exact solutions, like, how culturally many people from many different backgrounds and cultures use the fragrance as a spiritual expression. And yet we have a very large population at EBMC that is fragrance compromised and so it’s not just an intellectual harming, but a medical harming of a physical being. This has been really difficult to create safe enough spaces and do a constant education. An education of a community is never just once. It’s always incremental. It’s like a diversity training. You never get everybody in the organization and there’re always new people coming in...so it has an organic flow to it that even with our best intentions we can’t control, even though we would like to. And that’s where a lot of these practices of being compassionate of being kind of being forgiving — it’s where the rubber really hits the road. It’s not just a goal, but can we be compassionate in the midst of our own feelings being injured, because if you have that skill, then you have the skill to do the social justice work with the sustainability and the open heart that I think a lot of our role models do.
A lot of social justice theory is really wonderful as a framework, but what EBMC offers is the human, relational context to do the work. It’s a both-and. Both components are so needed to understand the theoretical frameworks around oppression or racism, but also beyond all those theoretical frameworks is the direct experience. Both of them inform each other (L. Yang, personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Creating these spaces of safety and stretch is complicated. It involves constant deliberation, negotiation, and co-creation. EBMC helps to facilitate the creative process, but the sangha itself, like the men in San Bruno and the apprentices, create the container, through their shared intentions and interactions – through the elements of their love-infused praxis. Members of the EBMC sangha spoke to this directly in the online survey. Interestingly, the following are all responses to the question, “How do we create the Beloved Community?”:

Three words: Engage the complexities. I’ve been involved in several conversations at EBMC about how some of the groups (POC, ability, LGBTQI, etc.) relate to community members outside of their identities. Some want to “take refuge” in their own groups, and leave “those folks work out their issues.” I believe that our teachings and that those of King actually compel us to work these issues out together and not retreat into what feels comfortable and safe. I think that this means having difficult conversations with each other in the room, led by leaders grounded in the commitment to reconciliation and experienced in guiding these discussions (42-year-old Black female from Oakland).

Openness and authenticity; vulnerability to share our hardest, deepest held secrets, resentments and fears as well as listen to those of other people. Commitment to stay in the work, to be present to each other, to not let go. Listening for intention and attempts on the part of other people to connect, rather than to the words, thoughts and feelings that people convey simply because they don’t yet know how to communicate differently than they’ve been taught... I’m more interested in trying to be with people who are in the work and doing the work than I am with people who are enlightened (I don’t know any of these people yet), because I learn more from watching and working through challenges together than I do from watching perfection (40-year-old Caucasian male from Oakland).

We need to have the tough conversations, gently. We must listen attentively and remember that we are all unique expressions of the same thing. The most valuable practice is one that nurtures the self, and that is where we need to start. I must love myself, and wish myself well; take care of my needs and even a few of my wants. When I feel full and ready, I must love and serve others. We must remember we are instruments to build collective happiness and joy. We must be patient and trust this practice, help each other up when we fall and keep our hearts open to new experiences and perspectives (24-year-old Latina female from Oakland).

I find it interesting and inspiring that respondents see the hard conversations, the engagement with complexity, the figuring out of who we are and how we can and want to be as paths to the Beloved Community. The work that they’ve done inside and undoubtedly outside of EBMC enables, enhances, and complements these intentions and capacities. This work is hard; often because this world can be hard to live in. As Frank said, “Is it ever going to be 100% comfortable and safe? No, we’re always going to have issues. KPFA is in the United States, it’s in American culture; even though we all wanna claim progressive thinking and getting along and communicating, we’re still wrapped up in that larger culture” (F. Sterling, personal communication, March 8, 2014). Unwrapping that culture and learning new ways of seeing and being with one another requires the aspects of love that safe, yet challenging spaces need
and nourish. In safe, challenging spaces, made possible by skillful guides, clear intentions, and concurrent building of relationships, we are able to build knowledge and understanding of one another, cultivate self-love, and develop courage, fellowship, and faith – all through the experiences we make together.

Setting our loving intentions, building relationships based on those intentions, and creating vessels where those intentions can be enacted and relationships can take root and flower, allows for, while again relying on, the next operational bucket: commitment and continuity.

IV. Commitment & Continuity (Training and Practice)

Intentions, relationships, and containers need and nurture commitment and continuity. We cannot honor our intentions or relationships or build the safe spaces we need to become ourselves unless we are committed to training and practicing, with ourselves and with others, over time. Partially, we just need a fair amount of time to unveil and recast our historical selves. But we also need commitment and continuity because co-creation of meaning, community, and material change take time and shared experience. Would Shana and Sukari be friends today if they’d not had another year to work together, to develop shared understanding together, to test each other, fail each other, support each other, forgive each other, trust each other, love each other? I don’t think so.

Each of the cases is essentially a training program that is trying to provide an institutionalized space for creating the Beloved Community. They are training people, over time. They are training the trainers. And they are in it for the long haul. They realize that this can be hard work, while also rewarding and transformative. East Point’s Kazu Haga told me a story about one of the people he’s worked with in the program that illustrates this point in stark terms. David – a white man who participated in lunch counter sit-ins in the early 60s – recounted a story to Kazu about one particular sit in. David was at the lunch counter and felt a hand on his back. He turned around and another white man stood there and brought a knife to David’s throat. The man holding the weapon said, “Nigger-lover you have three seconds to leave this lunch counter or I’ll shove this knife in your throat.” David looked at him right in the eye and replied, “Brother, you do what you have to do. My job is to love you regardless.” The knife wielding man shook silently, with tears in his eyes, and left the lunch counter.

Kazu told me this to illuminate a point about how hard it is to be loving. He tells me,

Agape is a struggle to have. With other forms of love, if you have it, it just flows so naturally, but that love and that recognition of the humanity of your opponent is a struggle and it takes intense training to cultivate that. Showing [agape], even to the person that is threatening your life, can show that you have faith in their humanity, that you have faith that they have a moral conscious, that they can turn things around. It’s like any skill; it takes immense practice and training. And that’s the whole concept of the East Point Peace Academy. We need to train people in creating peace (K. Haga, personal communication, March 4, 2014).

One way to train people in agape and nonviolence is to integrate it into their daily life, over time. This speaks to Dr. King’s marching order to “institutionalize and internationalize” nonviolence. Much of this is about scaling the endeavor, but it is also about continuity and training. Kazu and I had an exchange about it:

Kazu:
When you talk about institutionalizing nonviolence, I think about what it would look like to have nonviolent education mandated in every public school across America as part of the core curriculum. And in the prisons and in the jails. And not just nonviolence, but what would it look like to have undoing racism and undoing patriarchy workshops in every public school across America? And even things like mindfulness, meditation, things like that that develop empathy. I think that empathy is not the norm in our society, so it takes practice, training, and reaffirmations, and reminders of it to cultivate it on a mass scale. And so it can’t just be these one-off workshops. When we talk about institutionalization, we’re talking about institutions investing in nonviolent philosophy as part of their day to day practices. And that could look different in a school where it’s more of training curriculum, but what would it look like to institutionalize nonviolence in a corporation in terms of how they deal with conflict in the workplace. It’s up to the institutions in our society to figure out how to institutionalize the principles and the philosophy of nonviolence so that we are constantly cultivating empathy. It has to happen on a mass scale.

Courtney:

How does that happen?

Kazu:

I’m thinking about the high school in Chicago [North Lawndale College Prep Academy] and the San Bruno County Jail. Showing small examples of what it could look like for an institution to invest in nonviolence, to show an alternative so that slowly things can start to change. You know, we’re working on our 250 year work plan. We need to realize that this isn’t going to happen overnight and we need to be ok with that and we need to both have the humility to realize that we’re not going to change everything and the audacity to plan 250 years ahead.

And at the same time that you need to have the humility and the patience to wait generations for these things to change, you can’t wait. You know, one of King’s books is *Why We Can’t Wait* and towards the end of his life, King’s politics were becoming much more militant and he was saying that we need change on a much more fundamental level in this country and I think that’s part of it.

So part of it is changing values and changing cultures in the long run, but part of it is training our communities so that we can build powerful movements that call for fundamental change and that demands things like undoing racism workshops in every school in Florida [the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case had just been announced]. You know, people talk about justice for Trayvon Martin, but no one’s really explained to me what that looks like. Overturning Stand Your Ground laws isn’t enough. Maybe mandating undoing racism and nonviolence trainings in schools across America would be a step in preventing anything like what happened to Trayvon Martin from happening again.

That being said, what I have seen a lot more of over the last five years, is people realizing that we can have revolution tomorrow and it’s not going to end racism and it’s not going to end how we treat each other. We can have the most egalitarian form of government, but if the people’s minds are corrupt, they’re going to corrupt whatever system we live under and so I think part of movement building has to be internal. I tell people that a commitment to nonviolence isn’t a switch that you turn on for the protest and then turn off for the meetings where you’re organizing the protest. The impact of emotional violence and internal violence of the spirit, a lot of which is self-inflicted and happens in our own families and our own communities because we’re not dealing with our own shit. And so as movement leaders and participants of
movements, part of our strategy to change things out there has to be dealing with our own personal and interpersonal violence, because that’s probably the most prevalent violence—the shit that we do to ourselves and each other on a daily basis. It’s that old saying, hurt people hurt people. When we carry unresolved shit, we’re gonna take it out on people. It destroys relationships, it destroys communities, it destroys movements. I’ve been a part of so many campaigns and as much as we point the finger at “the man” and “the man’s bringin us down” and COINTELPRO and all this—we destroy plenty of movements on our own, we don’t need any help from the government.

Part of being able to sustain the gains that we make is learning to deal with our own shit so that we can continue to work together within the movement. So, dealing with our own shit has to be part of the trainings (K. Haga, personal communication, March 4, 2014).

This internal work is becoming a major focus of the work that East Point is doing. Internal work—a transformation of heart and mind that leads to behavioral change—takes training, time, and commitment. This is on the part of an individual participant, but also on the part of the space and the people who create it with him or her. This is why Kazu brought up North Lawndale and San Bruno. These are places where there is commitment and continuity of intention and training—commitment to building knowledge and understanding, self-love, courage, fellowship, and faith through praxis over time.

The results of this commitment and continuity are manifesting themselves. North Lawndale is a charter school located in gang territory on the west side of Chicago. Tiffany Childress, a Lawndale teacher who came across Kingian Nonviolence at a birthday party, pursued it, and brought it to her school, says “We made a commitment to create peace in our school instead of just paying lip service to it. Schools set academic goals each year, and we wanted to set peacemaking goals. Who sets goals for peace? But we have to dare to dream big, and we have to set measurable goals. We set goals like having 90 percent of our school days earning an “A” in peace, that 100 percent of our faculty and 25 percent of our students will be introduced to this philosophy” (Haga, 2011-2012). They’ve met their goals, again and again, since the school started committing itself to peace.

Commitment means institutional investment of time, trust, and money, and interestingly, making an initial investment of time and trust can actually pay off monetarily. Below is an excerpt from an article Kazu wrote about his experience at North Lawndale:

“Many teachers don’t believe that students can live differently. They think that having metal detectors and police officers in the hallways is normal and acceptable,” said Childress. “Having higher expectations of our youth and believing in them is the first step in reversing the school-to-prison pipeline.”

Horan [school president] agreed: “A lot of adults believe that kids aren’t capable of pulling this off. And that idea plays itself out racially and economically. It’s a justice issue. If we think that kids who go to nice suburban schools can live without metal detectors, why can’t our kids?

“When you believe that kids can pull it off, you can turn off the metal detectors and security guards. Having eight security guards costs you around $400,000, and security guards don’t teach peace. They teach kids to hate security guards. What if you could teach peace with the money you saved?”
North Lawndale did just that. With the savings made from not having metal detectors and security guards, the school created a new program called Phoenix Rising, which sends students to various summer leadership, wilderness, and academic programs around the country.

"The beloved community is possible," Horan added. "It’s just a matter of adults believing in our kids and adjusting the resources accordingly. It will ultimately save the school money, and will teach kids skills that will serve them a lifetime. Treating them like prisoners only teaches them that we don’t believe in them, and that we expect them to screw up.

“Our inability to be peaceful in our school has larger social implications. Our failure to understand peace is a form of enslavement. We have to invest in peace.”

And although “teaching peace” may not seem to fit within a typical school’s curriculum, Dr. King believed that this was one of the critical roles of education: “The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with great reason and no morals.”

In an effort to create peace, society often invests in violence prevention strategies, mistaking the two as the same. We can invest more in metal detectors, policing in schools, and even lock up every single young person in Chicago, and we would theoretically “prevent” a lot of violence. But that does not mean we are creating peace. Violence prevention is not enough. We must invest in peace creation. We have to teach people, young people in particular, the skills necessary to create peace in their lives and in their communities.

As Rasheed [a student at North Lawndale] explained: “Nonviolence gave us the skills to act. And no matter how much violence there is in the world, nonviolence is much, much stronger. The universe is on the side of justice.” (Haga, 2011-2012)

With the proper investment of resources, the teachings of Kingian Nonviolence are able to make material and spiritual differences in the lives of participants. But commitment is not only about monetary or temporal resources, it’s also about committing one’s self to doing the work, to showing up, to living out the intentions, to building the relationships, and creating the containers with love. This doesn’t always happen the way we’d like it to; we often fail ourselves and each other. That’s why making a commitment to nurturing our community of practice is vital to the sustenance and strengthening of that community. Committing to a diverse community of practice that is endeavoring to live out multicultural, democratic, liberatory intentions can be tough, given the skills that our current culture provides us.

Brenda Salgado from the East Bay Meditation Center reflects on it this way:

I think there is a very urgent need for returning to and creating new practices that allow us to be in relationship with each other. And to remember that everyone has wisdom, beauty, culture that is valuable to all of humanity.

And one of the things that I think is challenging is that...Mushim [a leader and teacher at EBM] talks about how oneness is not sameness and sameness is not oneness, as a teaching. And the challenge is that a lot of people who want the oneness want it at the expense of everyone being like “x.” And that’s not oneness; that’s not valuing all of it. So there’s a lot of unlearning and relearning that we have to do of how we relate to each other. And for some people that means stepping back and making room and for others that means stepping up and remembering their power and beauty, when their ancestors were not treated in that way.
So I think that building the Beloved Community means we have to learn how to be in relationship and to be committed to that relationship and we have to be willing to both celebrate the beauty of each other, but also willing to struggle through where we’re not in right relationship with each other yet, and acknowledging the history that that comes from, and not dismissing it as something that’s over, because it’s really not.

There are issues of racial harm being experienced by members of the sangha and volunteers and board members are in conversation about how they can be trained in restorative justice and right communication so that they can work through these issues together. Because people have chosen to commit to the sangha and that space. They’re stepping up so that they can hold space so that the sangha can have those difficult conversations. And that’s going to have real, tangible results in the immediacy. But in the long run, this is a beautiful story that we’ll be able to tell the movement. This is how we’re struggling, this is how we’re working through it, this is how we’re failing, this is how we’re trying, how we’re learning, how they’re trying to move through the struggle and not break relationship.

EBMC is one of many places trying to figure this out. And we’re only going to figure it out together. It’s not going to be the white people in our sangha saying ‘Hey! I’m going to start a peace-making circle so that all of you people of color can be calm and not mad!’ And it’s not POC people coming and going, ‘Hey all you white people! Let me tell you where you’re all wrong!’ There’s actually something in the middle of that that’s going to be challenging, but it’s in the commitment and the relationship to each other that I think we’re going to be able to get somewhere with that (B. Salgado, personal communication, March 7, 2014).

By setting intentions, building relationships, creating containers, and committing to those processes, spaces, and people over time, the East Bay Meditation Center is endeavoring to embody the elements of a love-infused praxis. As I said at the beginning of this section, enacting these elements and building the Beloved Community is hard work that can only be done together. And as Dr. King said, it’s only through experimenting together that we’ll figure it out. Commitment and time allow for the development of skills and trust that enable the hard work to happen.

The Apprenticeship Program also shows how important and fruitful commitment and continuity can be in operationalizing the elements of a love-infused praxis. During the open house I attended at the station before I applied to the Apprenticeship Program, I remember Joy telling us, with a mysterious smile and the soft but stern voice that I would grow to love, “You have to be ready to do the work. You have to show up. This will not be easy. But it will be worth it.” At the time, I thought she was talking about how hard it would be to learn about producing radio. She wasn’t. And she was right. The work that I have described happening in the Apprenticeship Program only happens if you show up and commit to bringing your whole self (bedraggled and tired as that self may be some days), to building relationships and building safe and challenging spaces, to embodying your intentions. That doesn’t mean that you can always live up to the commitments, but others’ commitment to you and your community is what allows you and them to forgive and support each other when you fall short. This commitment to practice builds your fellowship, your courage, your faith in yourself and each other.

The structure of the program assists in this process. The program lasts for eighteen months. Apprentices share working day-shifts with several other apprentices, some of their own group, some of others. We have two class sessions a week. We go out on assignments together, record live performances, and share editing space. All this to say, we spend a lot of time together. Importantly, this time is productive in several senses. We produce radio, which is something that we all wanted to get out of the program.
But, because of the intentions, the relationship building, the container creating, we’re also cultivating a desire to commit to one another. We’re creating an emotional investment in one another and the community we’re building. We’re learning how to be with one another. We’re how to love one another. Commitment and continuity – in a context of love and praxis – allows us to become, together.

Setting our loving intentions, building relationships based on those intentions, creating vessels where those intentions and relationships can develop, and committing to the spaces and the people that embody those intentions and constitute those relationships and containers, again, needs and nurtures the next operational bucket: Suffering & Joy, or the engagement of our whole selves.

V. Suffering & Joy (Engaging our Spirituality – an undivided life)

Through our practice, embedded in negotiated intentions and relationships forged in spaces over time, we’re able to bring our whole selves into our interactions. We’re able to learn from our suffering and our joy – the whole messy complexity of our human experience as connected, intersubjective, multilayered, social beings. This engagement with the complexity of reality allows us to be honest with ourselves and each other, so that we are better equipped and positioned to discern shared ideas about how we want to be together and can work together.

I haven’t quite worked it out yet, but I think there is something to this “bringing your whole self” piece that is important. Seeing and accepting yourself as a whole human is a part of seeing accepting another as the same. All of the cases, from their intention setting to their relationship building, container creating, and commitment and continuity, have been taking up the opportunity to transform our human experiences into redemptive love. Engaging with all aspects of ourselves – from our suffering to our joy – allows us to build knowledge and understanding, to cultivate self-love, and to develop courage, fellowship, and faith by reflectively practicing together. The elements of a love-infused praxis, operationalized in the ways I’ve outlined, provide the contexts in which people can liberate and heal ourselves and each other from the history and lived experiences of trauma and disconnection. These spaces allow us to transform ourselves, so that we are able to transform our institutions and cultures to reflect our common humanity.

One of my fellow apprentices in Tela Mana, Lamont, used to say, often with a determined smile, “All of my emotions are working.” It was something he’d say during our pre-class check-in, when he was feeling confused or conflicted or wound up. To feel ambivalent or angry or sad or exhilarated or anxious or all of these things at once – whatever your feelings were – it wasn’t a bad thing and you could bring them into the space we were creating for and with one another. Knowing and being in touch with your feelings is quite healthy, actually. And being able to tell the group of people that you’re working with what those feelings are is quite helpful. Being our whole selves with others presents us with opportunities to connect across all of those parts of us, if done with intention and skill, in a caring context, over time. It operationalized the elements of love.

From Brenda, at the East Bay Meditation Center,

It’s not just being more able to struggle, it’s being open and awake to the beauty in my life. It’s both things. Our resilience and our power is about more than just withstanding the boot on my neck, it’s to take the boot off of my neck, to move in the world in a joyful way and to realize that I have wisdom and abundance. There’s room for joy and celebration in our movement, too. There’s room for self-care. There’s room for self-development and growth. There’s room for
spiritual community. I think we spend so much time in our movement focused on what’s not working. And in some ways asking permission or fighting somebody else having say over our lives. And so there’s a way we need to resist for sure, but there’s a way we need to stop waiting for permission to be joyful and to be in power of our communities and our lives.

Courtney:

Yea, it’s not just about struggling against, but embracing what we are – allowing ourselves to be the joyful beings that we are. What does it mean for us to hold both of these things – the struggle and the joy – at once?

Brenda:

And that’s hard to hear sometimes, right? Because even though we want joy and freedom... on one level it’s like, ‘Oh, I have responsibility in being free, right now. Not at some future date.’

There are ways in which we’re attached to our identities as activists. So I am an activist and I do activism, but it is not the totality of who I am and it never has been. I’m a wife, I’m a sister, I’m a daughter, and those things play a really central role in my life. I’m really grateful that I came from a culture that made me know how important those relationships are in my life.

There’s always this thing for me about honoring the painful history that we’ve had and what’s been taken away, and how we’ve been treated as less than human in different ways. But then there’s this way of acknowledging that it’s happening and I’m gonna hold my humanity, whether or not you can see it. I think that movements need to have joy and celebration and dancing as much as they have to have struggle and resistance.

And I know it takes deep practice. It takes deep spiritual practice for someone like Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela to emerge. They are important way showers – something to point our intention towards.

The practices give us a spaciousness and a creativity to imagine that other ways are possible. When we are not self-aware, it is hard for us to be in those imaginal spaces.

There’s so much fear about what this other, imagined space is and what it could be – and that’s in all parts of the spectrum, not just one people or place. I think that Buddhism, indigenous practices – anything that allows us to be in relationship and self-aware as we move through struggle – are the things that will help us through this transformative time (B. Salgado, personal communication, March 7, 2014).

This brings us back to engaging with the whole self, the interconnected self. The spaces that I have described in this thesis are places where bringing and sharing the whole self are encouraged and met with care. Nothing is to be denied because no part of us can be denied if we’re to figure out how we can honor our interconnected, intersubjective, multi-layered selves and the multicultural world in which we live. Part of this is realizing that this is not something that we “do” at work or at school, or on the cushion at EBMC or in a workshop with Kazu, or at the radio station with my fellow apprentices. These are spaces where our capacities to engage our whole selves, through a loving praxis, are cultivated, for sure, but they are not meant to be the only spaces where we practice these skills. The capacities that my cases cultivate are ways of life. They’re things that practitioners attempt to embody through living their lives. It’s an ongoing process of deliberation, negotiation, and co-creation in our daily lives. Bringing our whole selves to these places gives us a fighting chance to bring them everywhere we go, so that we’re
infusing all of our actions — in school, at the grocery store, in political debates, at the ballot box, in meetings, at church, in the mirror — with love.

Shana and Sukari have formed a strong friendship since their tense conversation in the production studio. They’ll be flying 3000 miles and dancing with Frank and other apprentices at my wedding in a few weeks. The spaces I’ve described create families that extend far beyond the institutional spaces in which they exist. And this family is what makes me able to get up in the morning and endeavor to revel, to walk through the disappointments and the failures, to forgive myself and others, and to live an intentional, reflective, loving life. “In The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace, M. Scott Peck defines true community as the coming together of ‘a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to ‘rejoice together, mourn together,’ and ‘to delight in each other’ and make the conditions of other’s their own” (hooks, 2003, 197).

That’s what East Point Peace Academy, First Voice Apprenticeship Program, and the East Bay Meditation Center do. They create community. They create a larger human family by working and living together. The building of this human family is one piece of the many tools it will take us to dismantle the unstable house built by our political economy and modernist concepts of self. This process hones our inherent abilities to see each other as humans, to reckon with the traumatic and unjust manifestations of our disconnection, to heal from these wounds, and to continuously negotiate something that reflects the full spectrum of the human family.

So what does all of this mean? What do we make of this? If you’ve been paying attention to what I’ve written thus far, you know that this, of course, is not a question that I believe I can or should answer on my own. But I will offer my opinions and my hopes in the following section.
We reach for destinies beyond what we have come to know and in the romantic hush of promises perceive each the other’s life as known mystery. Shared. But inviolate. No melting. No Squeezing into One. We swing our eye around as well as side to side to see the world.

To choose, renounce, this, or that — call it a council between equals call it love.

- Alice Walker
Where Do We Go From Here?

In the beginning, I said that this thesis came out of my own experiences — my observations of a disconnected world, my lived and learned lessons about how we became so disconnected, and my discovery of ways that allow us to reconnect. I’ve argued that our disconnection is the result of historical circumstances that we shape and that shape us. It is enabled and exacerbated by the modernist concept of an individual, inviolable self. By the slow processes of construction and institutionalization, as well as explicit, covert, intentional actions, both our circumstances and our selves have been naturalized and decontextualized in a way that robs us of agency, and, by extension, our accountability, imagination, and possibility.

This history of disconnection and naturalization has wrought material and ideological manifestations that require undoing. A love-infused praxis is one piece of this undoing, as well as the making anew that must come with it. We must question who we are and how we come to be so that we can address the past and negotiate a future. Part of this building of knowledge and understanding of ourselves, of others, and of our context is developing self-love. Seeing, expressing, and embracing ourselves is a first step in being able to do the same for others. It enables us to meet each other as whole people, able to engage as powerful beings that don't need to dominate or oppress one another. This process of building knowledge and self-love engenders the courage to express the truth of our hearts and to hear that of others. Unveiling who we are and how we’ve come to be in context, and the courage it cultivates, allows us to create fellowship with others, who support and challenge us in the process of co-creating our meaning, our institutions, and our actions. All of this makes faith possible. Seeing ourselves and each other as embedded, co-creative people and practicing/embodying/doing this connected relationship gives us the evidence we need to have faith in our ability to continue to do so and to go even farther with it — to imagine and create what we choose, together, in the face of institutional arrangements, ideological concepts, and cultural practices that work to keep us apart.

As I’ve attempted to show through my cases, these elements of a love-infused praxis are operationalized through setting intention, building relationships, creating containers, committing consistently over time, and engaging our suffering and joy. The elements need the operational categories, and the operational categories are made transformative through the infusion of love. Like us, they constitute each other and make each other meaningful. In Racing to Justice, John Powell writes,

"We cannot reject where we are in hope of being someplace different: we have to lay the groundwork for common space, for sharing our common humanity, and for bulwarks against the dehumanizing tendencies of orthodoxy. This space cannot be created by goodwill alone. It will require structural and institutional support. We can be intentional, however, in reconsidering and building toward this future our larger selves can bring to life (Powell, 2012, 228)."

This is what East Point, First Voice, and the East Bay Meditation Center are doing. They are the spaces where we can learn about cultivating love in ourselves and in our institutions. If we are to transform structures, we must liberate ourselves from the thinking that created them and us. The famous Audre Lorde tenet is appropriate here — “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984, 112). My colleague, mentor, and friend, Charlene Wedderburn, an OG raised by the Panthers and mother of boys who are now men in West Oakland, used to tell me that everything we need is already inside of us. She’s right. The structures and institutions of the Enlightenment and modernist projects
have warped us, in a way, made us forget who we are and what we’re capable of. We are connected, creative, loving beings with the power to jointly transform our world. We do it every day; many of us just don’t realize it. We need to learn about and know ourselves in order to purposefully tap into our latent capacity – the tools that we already have inside of us, but have forgotten.

The cases in this thesis are spaces where people are remembering; they are giving us examples that we can learn from and be inspired by, so that we might start moving and experimenting with love in our own contexts. “This move requires recognition of our interconnectedness and our interbeing...The call for this project to be informed by love is a call for love that is engaged in our situatedness with all its imperfections” (powell, 2012, 227). It is a love that springs from and is embedded in our own experiences of the world, each other, and ourselves. It’s the love that guides the East Point Peace Academy, the Apprenticeship Program, and the East Bay Meditation Center and the organizations and people all over the world who are listening to their inner selves and manifesting our interconnectedness in a way that liberates us and has the power to transform the institutional arrangements that we shape and that shape us.

I’m not saying that love is the answer and that’s that, end of discussion, let’s go hold hands and sit around the campfire. What I’m arguing is that love is the force that enables all the other answers. It’s what enables us to organize our economy in a way that uplifts, rather than exploits people. It’s what motivates us to participate in our democracy and demand more from ourselves and those we elect to govern. It is what allows us to be concerned about the suffering and joys of someone half way around the world and actively promote the achievement of their aspirations, through our own choices and those of our elected officials. Love reminds us that splitting families between nations is destructive to both those families and our own humanity. Love is what gives us hope and keeps us organizing and struggling even when we’re tired and frustrated. Love is the force that lets us see each ourselves and each other for what we are: interdependent, vulnerable, courageous beings working our way through this life together.

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing to prevent us from paying adequate wages to schoolteachers, social workers and other servants of the public to ensure that we have the best available personnel in these positions which are charged with the responsibility of guiding our future generations. There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate wage to every American citizen whether he be a hospital worker, laundry worker, maid or day laborer. There is nothing except shortsightedness to prevent us from guaranteeing an annual minimum – and livable – income for every American family. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from remolding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood (King, 1968, 199).

This sounds as fresh and relevant today as when Dr. King wrote these words in 1967. I have to argue and agree with Dr. King’s assessment. There are things that prevent us from paying living wages, practicing peace, and creating a status quo that honors our humanity, rather than diminishes it. Namely, us – or rather, the ideological, material, and institutional arrangements that we’ve molded and that mold us. But this is where the hope lies. These ideas, behaviors, and institutions are not immutable. We shaped them, just as they shape us. Thankfully, we’re the ones with the power to see this and choose do things
differently. And as the cases have shown, there are ways of cultivating the connective force of love that we can employ to reshape our ideas, behaviors, and institutions so that they support and enhance our ability to choose life. We aren’t powerless—we are full of power.

This being said, the old adage that there is power in numbers can’t help but creep into my mind. All of my cases are essentially training programs that are attempting to institutionalize a love-infused praxis and make this liberatory, transformative force accessible to as many people as possible. But they’re all doing so on relatively small scales. I think about the GI Bill, white-flight-enabling transportation funding, mandatory minimums, immigration laws, changing voting rights laws, Citizens United (let’s not even get into educational curricula, mass media, and sports...). These pieces of legislation and court decisions affect all of us on a massive scale, whether we choose to be affected or not. Their effects are wide ranging and undeniable.

I remember being back in the Bay, working with folks in South Berkeley to address the interconnected, upstream, social determinants of health like wealth, racism, and the built environment—big structural issues that had tangible effects on people’s everyday lives. It’s what drove me to grad school. We had to change systems if we were going to change the materially and spiritually harmful effects of they were wreaking on our communities. Right?

Since coming to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT, I’ve read about all sorts of programs and legislative acts that are meant to fix some of the symptoms of our sickness that I laid out earlier. They’ve all been effective, in that large-scale government or private sector interventions have large-scale effects. For this reason alone, government and corporate interventions are invaluable. How well many of the interventions that we’ve studied have improved people’s lives, is another matter. Many of them have had undeniably good, material effects. I know I like being able to vote, attend college, and not be locked up in an insane asylum if I decide to leave my husband.

Yet...the symptoms are still here; some lessening, some worsening, but still here. And this makes me think about my cases and how they work to not only ameliorate, but to actually heal the root causes of the symptoms and build in preventative measures so that we don’t get sick again. They work person by person, person to person, person with person. As I quoted Dr. King earlier, “Unenforceable obligations concern inner attitudes, genuine person-to-person relations, and expressions of compassion which law books cannot regulate and jails cannot rectify. Such obligations are met by one’s commitment to an inner law, written on the heart” (King, 1963, 37). But laws and programs are effective and, over time, they can change people’s hearts and minds. So it’s a both-and. I started out this thesis wondering about the interplay between the structural and the individual. I’ve tried to show throughout this thesis that we are dynamically connected, that we create the systems and that they create us. But because we’re the ones with the capacity for conscious, critical reflection and transformative action, the onus is on us to make the internal changes that enable the external.

So where’s the middle road—the road where we’re liberating ourselves from our traumatic, disconnected, modernist history and present, with the clear mission of transforming the systems we create? What are the tools that can help us travel along this road? Some of them have been laid out by my cases. Others are to be found in organizing, teaching, faith communities, artistic creation, sports, media, and other outlets of human expression. The silver bullet isn’t located anywhere in these pages. But some of the instruments of our concerted efforts are.
Given that I am currently a graduate student in urban planning at MIT, I can’t help but think about where planning falls on this middle road. I think that, maybe, this is a place where planning and planning schools could play a pivotal role. We’re in this liminal space of mitigating and guiding the interactions between people and institutions. What if we were aware of this location and of our own complicated relationship with these institutions and our history, based on our multiplicitous, intersubjective identities?

Sure, we’re told to be aware of our role in planning processes and community meetings, but it has not been my experience that we are called on to think critically about the history or current context of the places in which we’re working or how we ourselves are personally situated in that history and context. I’ve been asked to think about how we transform places. But I don’t remember being asked to build personal and interpersonal knowledge and understanding, self-love, courage, fellowship, or faith through the setting of intentions, building of relationships, creating of containers, committing over time, or bringing my whole self to classes, practica, or planning in general so that we’re able to liberate and heal ourselves and each other as part of transforming these institutions and places.

Planners task themselves with transforming places, but haven’t necessarily been given opportunities to transform themselves, let alone link this internal transformation into scalable external transformation. So what if planning schools were places that set an intention to cultivate disruption and debate, and then followed through with outcomes of those debates? What if planning schools and planning practitioners decided to step up to the plate and create some of the safe, yet challenging spaces that are needed to do with hard work of questioning ourselves and everything around us, so that we can trust our assertions and come to them collaboratively?

Many of my classmates and the practitioners I’ve come across in my life and here at MIT aren’t outwardly expressing their thoughts on the manifestations of disconnection and how we are personally embedded in the structures that uphold them. I wonder if they’re thinking about them at all. Maybe they haven’t been given the opportunity or forced to reckon with who they are as products and producers of history and of relationships embedded in structures of power and hierarchy. What if planning schools and the practice of planning were that opportunity? Again, we talk of transforming cities, but never about transforming ourselves. Can we do the former if we haven’t tackled the latter?

If the cases in this thesis have shown anything, it’s that praxis — critical, reflective doing is key. I hope that the cases have also shown that infusing this praxis with love can be transformative of both people and places. Both we and the spaces are changed as we act in them and on them, with and through love. Planning schools and planning practice are an opportunity to enlarge the scale of positive impact that the cases present. They are creating people and contexts that shape institutions, which, in turn, affect masses of people. These people, then, practice and perform — either to perpetuate or disrupt — these institutions. And the interplay of individuals and institutions, people and other people, goes on.

So how might planning schools produce planners who engage a love-infused praxis? It’s certainly not just a matter of reading a bunch of history books, or learning about the ideas of Freire, Fromm, King, hooks, and Crenshaw, or thinking about how “wow, I’m an intersubjective being embedded in a history of disconnection that manifested itself in all these ways!” Far from it. Unveiling the constructedness is only one step and it can’t only come from books.
So what if were to teach the whole person? What if we were to ask students to question, analyze, and learn from and through their experiences? What if planning schools and planning practices were a spaces of conscientização – where we are intentionally deconstructing and reconstructing our own and our collective identities, where we are learning from and with each other through action, where we are realizing the malleability (and masking power) of culture? What if planning schools and planning practices were spaces to realize and reckon with the privileges and penalties wrapped up in our and others’ identities? What if these were spaces not just of deconstruction, but also transformation through action and collaboration with communities? What if planning students and practitioners, with all of their resources and the expertise and opportunities that they move with, would honestly look at themselves and ask what they to be in this world?

This is a significant question. It calls on planning schools, students, and practitioners to problematize themselves, their profession, and their academic and professional spaces. My best friend and a respected colleague from another planning institution recently asked me if planning schools, particularly a place like MIT, which is historically enmeshed and seemingly reliant on the military industrial complex and money from right-wing agitators like the Koch brothers, is the right kind of context in which to do this work. My gut reaction is that it’s the very spot for it, because of those issues. Yes, planning schools, MIT being one example, are problematic spaces and we can address this fact – using the elements of a love-infused praxis, operationalized through the mechanisms demonstrated by my cases.

So how might we do this? I alone can’t answer this question, but I have some ideas to offer. All of the cases in this thesis are experimental spaces where people are trying to demonstrate new ways of seeing and being with one another. So maybe we should be thinking of ours as a demonstration project, as well. I’m thinking about a class within a planning school. All of the cases started with collaboratively set intentions that grew out of people struggling to express the truths of their hearts. Our class would have to create opportunities to discern these truths, with their community collaborators. As my cases have shown, the setting of intention can be transformatively connective when it is led by people who have experienced marginalization. We’ll have to think about the existing relationships that we can tap into to connect with people who may be open to an experience like this. We would also have to do a lot of work to build deeper and broader relationships amongst all participants, so that we can effectively build knowledge and understanding, self-love, courage, fellowship, and faith. We could do so through formal and informal means, with both the form and content of the class. We’ll need safe, yet challenging spaces in which to do this relationships building, so that people feel both motivated and able to speak their truths and learn about others’. Much of this safety and trust will come from our mutually negotiated commitment of resources – including time, money, trust, support, faith, and others. We will also have to consider continuity, in both our commitment of resources, but also the presence of people. Building relationships takes time and space, but it also takes the same people being in that space together over time! And as we are building these spaces with our partners over time, we have to engage our whole selves – the suffering and joy and everything in between. In this way, the transforming that we do isn’t just about the place, but also about how we are with ourselves and each other in this place and all others. Like Joy said, this will be hard work, but it will be worth it.

My cases demonstrate that there are skills and contexts to be cultivated. I have tried to lay some of them out, for all of us to think about and discuss. As I was writing this thesis, I realized that I was writing to express myself and to reach out my hand to anyone else who feels a connection to something bigger than themselves and who doesn’t necessarily feel this intuition being nurtured by their surroundings. I
learned that I was also writing for people who may never have thought about any of this at all, but who might feel their *first voice* as they read these words. Charlene, my friend and mentor from Oakland, once told me that when we let our lights shine, we give other people the permission to let their lights shine, too. I think maybe this thesis is not only part of my own learning journey, but is part of me letting my light shine so that others can feel their light, and let it shine, too.
Bibliography


