

Emergent Strategies for Urgent Times: A Critical Autoethnographic Inquiry into Embodiment,
Decolonization and Transformative Social Change

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Abstract

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Staged against the backdrop of our ecological crises, this autoethnographic inquiry is, at its core, a journey of awakening. Challenging the normative divisions between knowledge-production and wisdom-generating processes and the erasure of the body from academic spaces, this project seeks to further clarify dominant articulations of power taking root at the level of our biology (Foucault, 1997) while examining the potential of contemplative practices to assist in ‘unearthing’ injurious colonizing scripts. Engaging in research-as-praxis (Freire, 1970), this project invites consideration of our internal condition as correlate of our external social realities, and challenges us to consider our complicity with colonialist—and colonizing—inscriptions of power influencing our conduct and limiting our transformative potential. Guided by phenomenological insights from the subjective terrain of embodied practice, themes relating to

the prevalence of disembodiment, consumptive appetite and materialistic notions of progress are examined and contextualized through critical historical and theoretical analysis.

Acknowledgements

To love. May we center it in our collective attention, disrupt those hindrances which preclude its expression and seek to amplify its manifestation. And may we never lose sight that it is, and always will be, *the* force by which we may reclaim a truer, fuller expression of our humanity.

To all the lives that have held, shaped and sustained me: I offer my enduring, eternal gratitude. And to each and every spark of life who has come before and to all those who are yet to come: may our efforts not be in vain.

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The Center Cannot Hold: A Call for a Collective Awakening

Ours is an age of profound disruption. In a magnanimous demonstration of hubris, humanity has engineered dominant life patterns, systems and global structures antithetical to the preservation and affirmation of life. Although simple in its composition, this statement contains sweeping implications and functions as an overture to the urgencies of our times. From the preponderance of human rights abuses and grave humanitarian conflicts riddling the globe, to the myriad forms of social, economic and ecological exploitation occurring across peoples, cultures and ecologies, we are collectively facing dire exigencies that seriously threaten not only the capacity for life to flourish at an individual scale, but the stability of the very systems and foundations required to sustain it. But the gravity of these urgencies, and the disequilibrium they entail, is most haltingly captured by the state of our planet's health: a direct indictment that something has gone terribly awry in the script governing the reproduction of our modern Western world.

For the first time in our relatively short history, humanity must now contend with the fact that we are collectively facing the risk of unintentionally destroying the very foundations of life on Earth (Sitarz, 1993). Over two decades ago, at the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, all participating nations experienced a rare moment of clarity and singular accord: without dramatic, substantive action to curb the dangerous effects surrounding our social practices of production, consumption and waste expulsion, the "delicate life-sustaining qualities of this planet will collapse" (Sitarz, 1993, p. 2). Despite some of the most monumental displays of collaboration by nations, industries and global communities of scientific minds, scholars and

eco-activists, insufficient socio-political action has been taken across these past 30 years relative to the height of our planet's needs. We are, undoubtably, moving towards an existential fate and legacy of destruction that will be felt by all future generations of life on this planet.

If these understandings do not create a profound, soulful pause... If these terse statements do not stir any chords of anguish or incense the depths of your being, I implore you...

Connect

to what arises in you,

through you

We must expand our hearts

and the circumference of our compassion

to envelop the world,

the preciousness of life,

that dwells here . . .

please

Dwell here

We are at a watershed moment, for, as the poet once said, the center cannot hold (Yeats, 1920/2005). At some point we have failed to perceive—or have failed to be concerned by—the fact that some of our most cherished systems and practices are sowing innumerable sufferings, on people, life systems and planet. Cloaked underneath the rhetoric of modernity and Western

notions of “progress,” the Western world has effectively enshrined a particular normative vision of society based on materiality, self-interest and obtainment while prescribing, simultaneously, the edicts of mass consumption as a social imperative and dominant aspirational exercise (Bauman, 2001; Fromm, 2011; Orlic, 2002). Eric Fromm (2011) advances that this normative allusion has occupied the hopes and social imaginary of generations within Western society and amounts to “the great promise of unlimited progress” (p. 1): the promise of a society predicated on material affluence and abundance; that looks to nature not with a gaze of reverence but one of domination; which claims to hold the answers for maximizing happiness while diminishing discomfort, hardship and suffering; and that invests in the rhetoric of unhindered access to freedoms and liberties while imposing a set of totalizing prescriptions that, paradoxically, cut against these hallowed claims. But there’s an obscured, critical instability behind this normative arrangement and dominant script defining what it means in the Western world to ‘live the good life:’ it’s predicated on exploitative, oppressive and consumptive aims operating at the expense of life itself.

The distress of our planet, peoples and life species draws into acute focus the need to critically see and interrogate the function of these hegemonic scripts and power operations; as I will argue, our capacity to contend with these pervasive power logics is tantamount to our success in altering our social trajectory. Exacerbated by our global predicaments, we are being required to recognize the moral and ethical duty to act—individually, in our local contexts and in manners that support broader structural change. To be clear, this is an urgency that will not allow for any form of amnesic response: our time to respond and to catalyze greater collective engagement is the present moment. Let us choose to see the opportunity inherent within our times that calls upon us to reflect and re-inscribe a new *center* based on equitable and sustainable

harmony, shared abundance and the promotion and sustainment of all life—a new script that elevates life and abundance for all peoples, species and that values the delicate systems supporting us. No doubt, the obstacles involved in such efforts are myriad, complex and must certainly entail structural changes at every level of our socio-political world. However, at a *seemingly* more basic level, such a process must surely also involve a form of critical awakening to these urgencies so that we may more fully interrogate and change the nature of our participation—or degree of complicity—within our current predicament. Humanity is being called—indeed, by the very planet that supports us—to (re)awaken and bear witness to the manifold displays of suffering occurring. Without this vision, and without working to cultivate an expanding social awareness, by what impetus will we be compelled to engage in the vital work required to disrupt and dismantle the life-annihilating patterns and structures contributing to our collective predicament?

These considerations serve as an overture into this critical, depth-based inquiry and highlight an initial question framing this project: how can we support a collective awakening and shifting of our social direction, away from the callous destruction of people, planet and life—a turning from practices of separation and competition—towards reverence for life and pathways that exalt interdependence and mutually shared abundance (Brown, 2017)? It is precisely this question of wakefulness and critical awareness—and how we can catalyze, sustain and deepen it—that first concerns this project and marks, at the beginning, an initial point of departure. This project, set against and animated by the exigencies of our times, invites you into a critical inquiry to explore this very question while offering, at the same time, a deeply immersive process to dis(re)cover and strengthen our innate capacities to discern the issues at hand and summon the

necessary resolve for participating in the liberatory, collective struggle to produce a more life-affirming social world.

We are Capable of a Different Legacy: Contours of Project/Praxis

How do we individually and collectively awaken to these stark realities, and to their deeper causal roots, so that we may take greater strides towards disrupting these unjust and injurious patterns? And how do we move beyond these conditions to create and expand upon compelling visions that re-center human economies on the principles of altruistic and ecological sustainability for the benefit of all humans, non-humans *and* the eco-systems sustaining life? To begin, these questions implicate the role that awareness, *engaged* compassion and behavioral change have in addressing our collective, macro level issues while they also suggest the need for a radical shift: a turn from our habitual preoccupation with self towards the reality of our shared interconnectedness and interdependence. These questions and concerns function as initial jumping off points and underscore a central assumption and premise advancing this project: we are capable of much more than what our current socio-political and ecological predicaments portend and to discover this capacity, we are being required to examine and transform ourselves at the level of consciousness itself (Freire, 1970; Fromm, 2011; His Holiness The Dalai Lama, 1999; Hooks, 2001, 2010; Horwitz & Vega-Frey, 2006; Kyodo Williams, 2009).

Like a lightning rod, critical urgencies hold transformative potential to spark the emergence of innovative methods and strategies responsive to the complexities they engender. And in response to our historical present, which demands we critically *see, feel, and attend* to the despair that the planet, peoples and life systems are experiencing, I advance that we require emergent strategies and methodologies capable of illuminating deeper level phenomena involved

in reproducing aspects of our collective predicaments and that unite knowledge-production and wisdom reclamation with committed and concerted social action (Brown, 2017; Hooks, 2001, 2010). As outlined by philosopher Thomas Kuhn (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008), dominant paradigms or worldviews, undergo paradigmatic shifts and alterations in response to historical developments and the unfolding of socio-political contingencies. And indeed, such transformative shifts are assisted when we rigorously honor historical knowledges, which supports the allowance for more generative, intentional transformative efforts (Kyodo Williams, 2009). Our times, demonstrative of the need for serious change across every level of our social systems, will require a setting aside of rigid paradigms that prescribe certain ways of thinking and being so that we can begin to ask, interrogate and respond to the more troubling, relevant questions at hand: what concealed power operations are securing continuation of these destructive, oppressive forces and structures at play in our ever increasingly globalized world?

In response to these urgencies and in concert with a host of scholars, researchers, contemplative practitioners and critical theorists transcending disciplinary lines (Berila, 2015; Freire, 1970; Hooks, 2001, 2010; Horwitz & Vega-Frey, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Kyodo Williams, 2009), this project seeks to explore and clarify the potential of transformative change strategies that are philosophically holistic, critically concerned with power operations and countering oppressive colonizing inscriptions, and that recognize the reclamation of innate wisdom and embodied ways of being as essential elements for the cultivation of life-sustaining visions and heart-centered dispositions and subjectivities our historical moment desperately requires. This is a project that is interested, principally, in how contemplative practice and embodied awareness can support our “unlearning” of dominant oppressive scripts, norms and prescriptions embedded in our social world—and by which we unwittingly replicate—in order to ignite new life-

affirming visions of equitable, harmonious and heart-centered future possibilities. This is a call to amplify transformational strategies capable of addressing the crises of our times—and crucially, their underlying root causes. And it is based on the recognition that without our sustained engagement in *soul work*—a commitment to deeply seeing our own internal points of suffering and to upending and unearthing oppressive, violent inscriptions operating within ourselves—we will be unable to reclaim a fuller sense of our humanity (Santorelli, 2000). I believe we *must* recognize, as Scharmer (2018) contends, that the issues outside are merely a mirror of the issues inside.

Drawing attention to the body as locus of learning and site integral for social transformation, theorist Bell Hooks (2010) assumes a similar starting position: without working to change our consciousness, we cannot expect to radically change our actions or our social world. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), emerging years prior to Hooks, echoes similar themes: the struggle to experience a fuller sense of our humanity, for Freire, is a struggle against the ways in which we have internalized the culturally imposed “structures of domination” in which we are immersed (p. 47). Embedded within socio-political contexts shaped by “an entire structure of domination” (Hooks, 2010, p. 406), a growing number of authors are considering the presence of the body and the subjective internal domain of our existence as essential elements for challenging the incessant textures and ubiquitous contours of the oppressive conditions, teachings and prescriptions configuring so much of our social world (Berila, 2015, 2016; Johnson 2008; Perry & Medina, 2011; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015; Wilcox, 2009). Implanted in these conditions, as these authors contend, we become deeply conditioned—at the level of our biology itself (Foucault, 1980, 1996, 2009)—to reenact and reproduce life-annihilating domination through unconscious patterns, embodied proclivities and routine life

practices (Butler, 1990; Hooks, 2001, 2010; Johnson, 2008; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015; Young, 1990). It is, therefore, not only a critical awareness or consciousness of these issues that must emerge but a certain resolute commitment to the rigorous process of “undoing” or “disentangling” ourselves from these internalized, colonizing patterns shaping our perception and guiding our conduct.

Grounded in decolonizing thought, these assertions frame this inquiry and emancipatory project, highlighting a core assumption animating its development: in order to transform our society, social change strategies *must* support the conditions by which we can (dis)recover life-affirming dispositions, habits and collective social practices which, when replicated at every scale, hold the potential of reverberating structural transformation across our social world. Or, as concisely summarized by Erich Fromm (2011):

“...a new society is possible *only if*, in the process of developing it, a new human being also develops, or in more modest terms, if a fundamental change occurs in contemporary [hu]Man’s character structure.” (p. 7)

Theorists such as Fromm (2011), Hooks (2001, 2010) and Freire (1970), remind us that when problematizing issues of oppression and envisioning change solutions, we must recognize the co-constitutive and intertwined relationship that exists between our internal and external worlds: we are actively reproducing our social world through the multiplicity of our everyday (in)actions which, in turn, reproduces us. These authors compel us to recognize that inner-transformative change work is integral to the development of structural social transformation; indeed, these assertions advance that both domains of intervention must be attended to in order to support greater articulation and manifestation of enduring liberatory change.

Informed by these lines of argument whose roots can be located in critical theory, feminist thought, critical race and decolonial perspectives, this project looks to the internal

terrain—to the body itself and to the practices that help us reclaim it—to investigate, problematize and expand upon the embodied dimensions of power and oppression and the practical ways that we might begin to disentangle ourselves from these arrangements. In more practical terms, as a somatic, mindfulness-based practitioner and aspiring educator, this project seeks to offer insights into the relationship between embodiment practices and social change potential—that is, to explore and expand upon the narrow but growing literature seeking to emphasize the role that the body, and its capacity to catalyze relational faculties and compassionate critical awareness, might play in transforming our social worlds. This is an inquiry both deeply invested in the body and concerned with the ways in which wisdom traditions and contemplative practices which might shift our social calculus by offering desperately needed ingredients: embodied presence and practice disciplines that support the cultivation of our minds *differently*, and hearts more *emphatically*. Audre Lorde (2010) once reminded us, “in our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower” (p. 16): this is a project fiercely committed to such an ethos and to cultivating ways to reject and displace the stultifying edicts of greed and division consuming our social world.

Through use of autoethnography as practice and methodology, this project situates the internal, subjective, *felt* terrain of embodied phenomena as both object and mode of inquiry: the interconnected domain of body/heart/mind—it’s patterned granularity of inflections of thought, affect and conditioned reactivities—becomes site of inquiry; embodiment, the practice/process of meaning-making and knowledge-production (Boylorne & Orbe, 2016). Drawing on the concept of coloniality (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000, 2007) and informed by Foucault’s canonical work on power relations and Freire’s notion of praxis (1970), this critical inquiry will use autoethnography and genealogical analysis of historical events (Foucault, 1997) to investigate

the embodied dimensions of colonizing power inscriptions—including, centrally, how the embedded, inhabiting nature of domination might be surreptitiously reproduced without the cultivation of embodied ways of being. Endeavoring to unite the efforts of expanding critical consciousness with the development of a *literacy of the body* (Johnson, 2008) and *intelligence of the heart* (Scharmer, 2018), this discursive research-as-praxis inquiry began with a personal commitment to strengthening a critically engaged contemplative practice, moved to capture tacit insights and awarenesses from within the spaciousness of these practices articulated through rigorous and reflexive journaling and finally, resulted in an immersive historical and theoretical analysis of prominent themes in order to illuminate the broader historical and socio-political currents influencing their emergence and/or maintenance. This turn to autoethnography as method offers us, at once, an entreaty to explore the rich narrative details of embodied experiences while it functions as a tool and method for investigating non-normative dimensions of inquiry; and as the latter demonstrates its capacity for critical knowledge-production, the former casts it as an invocative invitation to dis(re)cover a critical—and crucial—consciousness within the body itself (Boylorne & Orbe, 2016; Johnson, 2008).

A Few Notes from a Reflexive Location

I'd like to offer a few clarifying and cautionary notes before proceeding into the investigative realms of this inquiry. As others have admonished, writing autoethnographically asks of the author/subject/researcher to convey the nuanced specifics of their inquiry—contextualized within their historical, lived experiences—with a certain commitment to critical observation, radical openness and to a process of unveiling the subjective facticity of an understood truth, awareness or lived phenomena (Boylorne & Orbe, 2016). Such an ethos is not at all incompatible with the engaged, critical contemplative practitioner: in fact, I would argue

they are requisite orientations and practices integral to harnessing the potential of mindfulness-based practices for transformative change efforts. For me, part of this practice is manifest by transparently locating self and one's positionality within the project itself—a move to help render more visible the often-concealed elements of power at play in our dominant knowledge-production processes. Although many of the nuanced awarenesses I will come to explore in this project coalesce around personal sites of injury and social locations in which I have experienced oppressive realities (a nod to the recognition that we must attend and heal central points of suffering), I feel it important to explicitly note another insight in this direction: it is not enough that we exclusively focus on those aspects of our social selves in which we have experienced immediate or direct harm, whereby limiting our consciousness-raising efforts to our targeted social locations. We must learn how to expansively collaborate and support one-another in the struggle against all forms, faces and iterations of power and domination afflicting myriad forms of suffering upon our world (Young, 1990). This, I believe, requires a sophisticated examination of our attention. As a white, queer and non-binary individual, I have personally come to recognize how the dictates of survival and immediacy of certain forms of suffering have called for a focused attention to these sites of injury (wherein, much of my concentration has been dedicated in this project). I am equally aware, however, that should I stay *here*, operating from a queer perspective with strict interests aimed at addressing the specific iterations of domination and oppression I am targeted by, I would (for example) never realize how to become an effective support and ally against systemic racism (or against any other face of oppression I am not directly targeted by).

Secondly, the move to center an inquiry on the body and to the practices which help us reclaim more holistic, integrated and embodied ways of being also merits a few brief clarifying

comments. For the purposes and scope of this project, the terminology of ‘mindful-awareness,’ ‘embodiment’ and ‘contemplative practices’ are used interchangeably in an effort to heighten accessibility, demystify a seemingly abstract concept and promote greater multi-faceted understanding and conceptualization of the nature of these practices. Importantly, as this project is invested in examining, broadly speaking, the role that the cultivation of embodied awareness or mindful-awareness might play in supporting our efforts to create a more life-affirming social world (reducing individual *and* collective suffering), this aim sidesteps etiological and etymological conversations about the origins, distinctions and unique attributes manifest across various lineages of contemplative practice (which *is* important). This is not an attempt, in other words, to dilute or detract from the richness of the unique cultural and spiritual heritages that have retained contemplative practices as an integral aspect of life; rather, it is an urgent effort to broadly highlight a vital component—and direly lacking ingredient—required for enduring transformative social change.

II. Emergent Methods: Examining the Consilience between Autoethnography, Embodiment & Transformative Change Strategies

“I am more and more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love. For the revolution, which is not possible without a theory of revolution—and therefore science—is not irreconcilable with love...The distortion imposed on the word “love” by the capitalist world cannot prevent the revolution from being essentially loving in character, nor can it prevent the revolutionaries from affirming their love of live.”

(Freire, 1970, p. 89)

The choice to open this segment with this evocative excerpt from Paulo Freire is made with particular intentionality: it aptly frames my own concern that processes of knowledge-production function as constitutive elements within the struggle against domination while it

doubly exposes a certain commitment and *known* understanding that the “challenge to love” (Hooks, 2010, p. 406) is tantamount to the challenge of our times. As this entire project is an unfolding inquiry into--and dialogue about--how we can change our consciousness in order to reclaim a fuller humanity (Freire, 1970), it is principally about how we can draw upon and promote love as the centrally unifying source of empowerment and the most “powerful force that challenges and resists domination” (Hooks, 2010, p. 407).

Framed by this prolog, this segment holds dual practical objectives: to expound upon the qualities and components of autoethnography as method capable of supporting ‘critical consciousness’ and, all the while, playfully trouble our unstinting commitments to the norms of positivistic social research. In close adherence with Freirean and critical feminist traditions of thought, this section expands upon the assumed potentiality within research to function as both means of knowledge-production *and* form of liberatory, transformative praxis (Freire, 1970). Highlighting research as intervention, this section remains chiefly consistent with theoretical leanings underscoring the project: enduring changes to our external world must begin—or at least, run concurrently—with our own inner transformation.

The following segment will examine the role of the subjective, animated voice in catalyzing transformative social changes; explore the significance of wisdom production alongside knowledge-production processes; expand upon the importance of praxis and embodiment practices as a lived feature for engendering transformative change; and, discuss the ways in which *critical* lineages of thought and emergent, embodied strategies for social change are required in our present moment.

An Introduction to Autoethnography: Troubling the Normative Divisions between Knowledge, Wisdom and Transformative Processes

Any given form of inquiry is a choice which presents certain assumptions, contains thresholds of possible explanations and generally affirms a particular normative framework (White, 2006). Certainly, multiple assumptions and values are at play in my choice to delve into the depths of an autoethnographically informed terrain. A major interest which has directed this selection lies in my fascination with how the unification of autoethnography as mode of inquiry with contemplative, embodied awareness practices might support students, educators, social justice activists and contemplative practitioners in developing a ‘critical consciousness’ of self, power relations and the broader contexts we are each embedded within (Hooks, 2001, 2010). As a developing contemplative practitioner and educator, my decision to engage in an embodied autoethnographic inquiry stems from what Bell Hooks writes about in her book *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), where she expounds the need for critical, anti-domination educators to cultivate a personal commitment to processes of self-awareness and actualization that promote holistic wellbeing (including, examining and problematizing colonizing habits of domination) in order to teach, exist and engage the world in a liberatory manner of empowerment. So what, exactly, *is* autoethnography?

To begin, we might say that autoethnography, or narrative ethnography, “storied scholarship” or embodied narration (Boylorne & Orbe, 2016; Johnston, 2018) functions as a bridge between cultural inquiry, its interrogation and personal lived experience. A testament to the wisdom and meaning-making potential of narrative based inquiry into the lived, visceral and felt experiences of *being* in the world, autoethnography is firmly moored to the recognition that storytelling—and that bringing the body into works of knowledge/wisdom production—holds an invaluable role in the study and transformation of cultural and social phenomenon (Boylorne & Orbe, 2016). Here, we are offered a sense that the method of autoethnography not only involves

the study of some aspect of self or self-experience and the relevant contextualizing factors but that it can function as a form of “action research” or emancipatory knowledge-production process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008). When held with the intimate awareness that as we change ourselves, we begin to change our world, autoethnographic projects can further support an individual’s lived praxis towards developing a more radical understanding of how one’s experiences and social position mediates the way they experience and participate in the world.

As outlined by Boylorne and Orbe (2016), just as culture is socially constructed and historically situated (not to mention a term of vast complexity with over 300 different denotations), autoethnography is similarly positioned: it is pluralistic, subjective, deeply personal and holds the potential to be inclusive while introducing opportunities for transformation. As research method—research held in *its* most *inclusive* and critical interpretation—autoethnography attempts to connect “the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix) while seeking to provide compelling visions and invocative perspectives capable of influencing our everyday lives. Autoethnography is thus predicated on the ability to invite readers into the rich, nuanced “lived experience of a presumed ‘Other’” (Boylorne & Orbe, 2016, p. 15) in order to examine previously silenced, overlooked or marginalized phenomena. Exposing aspects of its critical potential, this shift of the ethnographic gaze from other to self (which represented a transformation methodological move within the field of qualitative research), offers autoethnographic projects an angle of inquiry capable of deeper inspection into otherwise illusory phenomena (Boylorne & Orbe, 2016; Denzin, 1997, 2017). As the central interest and point of inquiry in this project is to understand how the body functions as a site of internalized, colonizing power inscriptions (as a blank slate marked by cultural and historical dictates) and how, in the process of reclaiming it, we might be able to

unearth and transform internalized structures of domination, a “critical” phenomenological posture is indispensable for the task at hand.

Locating The “Critical” in Theory and Forms of Inquiry: A Disposition, Framework, Orientation.

Critical lineages of thought have, broadly speaking, referred to a certain disposition of being in the world marked by a concern with questions and issues that pertain to hidden operations of power, the reproduction of disparities and the ways in which injurious patterns and systems too easily concealed from positivistic views—and therefore, from the gaze of its researchers—can be revealed and problematized (Ball, 1992; Denzin, 1997, 2017; Haraway, 2008; Madison, 2005; Strega & Brown, 2015). The act of assuming a critical posture is therefore, at the start, the staging of a challenge against the ways in which power is implicated within dominant practices, norms, processes, norms and assumptions that configure the construction of “knowledge” itself (Foucault, 1980, 1996). Engaging Denzin’s (2017) and Madison’s (2005) articulation of critical scholarship, my own understanding and commitment to “critical” inquiry refers to a certain engagement in discernment surrounding power and matters of injustice with a commitment to uncovering the potentials for, and possibilities of, liberatory transformation. As Madison (2005) writes, critical work seeks...

“to articulate and identify hidden forces and ambiguities that operate beneath the surfaces; to guide judgments and evaluations emanating from our discontent; ...to demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of power; to provide insight and inspire acts of justice; and to name and analyze what is intuitively felt.” (p. 13)

Madison’s articulation beckons the critical autoethnographer (and the critical practitioner, for that matter) to ask deep questions while remaining connected to the potential relationship between vision, awareness and liberation. To deeply see and interrogate the nature of a system or phenomena, to expand such insight and awareness, enhances our own capacity to engage in

critical discussion and enact change strategies. Critical autoethnography, encompassing Denzin's and Madison's concepts, is not only a matter of analysis and critique—those modes by which we practice separating and distilling phenomena into smaller and smaller parts—but a process of working to re-assemble seemingly disparate phenomena into a more holistic understanding. This amounts to a practice of regaining or arriving back at a *knowing* beyond the coveted illusions of reductivistic paradigms towards uncovering the broader patterns of interconnectivity in and through all things in support of liberatory social change.

Anchored in an inherently transformative or liberatory slant, critical lineages of thought and social change (although arising out of diverse disciplinary fields and spanning multitudinous applications) hold certain shared features and functions: they work to challenge dominant assumptions, pierce through the veil of entrenched normative conduct and inquire into the nature of some of our most overlooked social practices and processes (Cannella, Perez, & Pasque, 2016). Highly congruent with my own aims of turning to embodied awareness to interrogate internalized, overlooked, normative colonizing power operations occurring within our bodies and influencing our lives and personal belief in the necessity for this work, Denzin (2017) contends:

“This is a historical present that cries out for emancipatory visions, for visions that inspire transformative inquiries, and for inquiries that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle and resist oppression. The pursuit of social justice within a transformative paradigm challenges prevailing forms of inequality, poverty, human oppression, and injustice. This paradigm...encourages the use of qualitative research for social justice purposes, including making such research accessible for public education, social policy making, and community transformation.” (p. 1)

Here, further distilling Denzin's (2017) appeal, we might say that critical social researchers aim to both explicate the nature and sources of inequality in society while working to stage challenges against these very systems through the research process itself (Ball, 1992).

Exposing more than just the epistemological leanings of this project, this formulation of a critical posture is consistent with my own interest in research, orientation to issues of power and oppression and highlights the basis of my belief that our times require we advance greater visibility of and engagement in critical, post-modern or post-structuralist research and forms of inquiry that allow for novel engagement in issues pertaining to power. As echoed by Haraway (2008), efforts to increase the critical campaigns of knowledge-production disrupt the hegemonic presence of the positivistic “ideal” within social science research, allowing for the gradual transformation of normative research paradigms to include more diverse possibilities, perspectives and *ways of knowing* that fall outside Eurocentric and androcentric modes of interpreting the world. In writing this, I am giving recognition to a certain awareness stemming from my own local, *embodied* or “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 2008, p. 348; Johnson, 2008) pertaining to an understanding that liberatory social change will require not only the advancement of knowledge but, crucially, the production of wisdom, vision and alternative ways of perceiving and being in our world. And transformative social change will, from my perspective, require that we not only interrogate how power is implicated in our dominant epistemologies but, crucially, how these hegemonies—and the totalizing contexts they create—are mediating our capacity to transform ourselves and our world.

Interlacing Autoethnography and Embodied Awareness: On Praxis & Critical Consciousness

The move to integrate autoethnography with a contemplative, embodied inquiry is, among other things, a move to further develop a critical consciousness attentive to issues of power and domination. In the context of this project, theoretical and historical inquiry is used to contextualize and make sense of emerging embodied awarenesses and tacit understandings in order to expand anti-domination “conscientization,” coining Freire’s description of efforts to

critically see and understand reality in order to change it (Feire, 1970). And as echoed by feminist theorist Bell Hooks (2010), if we do not change our consciousness, we will ultimately be unsuccessful in unmooring our actions from the interlocking systems of domination from which they are engendered. Speaking to the need for developing “critical consciousness,” which she defines as a “trying” process that requires a commitment to rigorous, humanizing reflection, dialogue, struggle and that demands we give up “set ways of thinking and being,” she articulates that our renewed commitment to this form of education is paramount for liberatory, revolutionary change processes (Hooks, 2010, p. 406).

Liberatory or transformative social change strategies centered on developing a shift in our consciousness—or, our *way of being, seeing and engaging* in the world—implicate the relevance of creating spaces and processes for discovery, dialogue and regaining a sense of embodiment and voice. Having the opportunity to explore how we’ve been critically socialized—to encounter the deeply embedded processes and patterns resulting from socialization processes—and how our experiences continue to live and show-up in our bodies, is vital to reclaiming ownership of one’s life “rather than being led through it” by unseen, innumerable social forces, factors and prescriptions (Lugones & Spelman, 2010, p. 18). In certain spaces, especially academic arenas, the integration of our stories and lived experiences into a context of formal learning is heretical to disciplines grounded in the illusive ideals of objectivity, neutrality and positivism (Chang, 2008). Our unchallenging commitment to such an epistemological stance undermines our capacity for liberation (and therefore, struggling with others towards this liberatory posture) by restricting our ability to dis(re)cover self in a more deeply integrated and whole way. In furthering this claim, that re-centering the body and personal narrative in critical learning processes is integral for social change, critical theorist Peter McLaren writing in the introduction

of Shapiro's (1999) work, argues that "knowledge is as much about bone, gristle and capillaries as it is about objective fact and universal values," continuing:

"...no matter how distant, removed, and powerless human beings feel in relation to the complexity of contemporary social and economic life, they carry the mega-and microstructures of social life in the machinery of their flesh; in the pistons of their muscle, and in the steely wires of their tendons."

(McLaren's Introduction in Shapiro, 1999, p. ix)

And indeed, Freire (1970) reminds us that where we are concerned with issues of oppression and the struggle to produce a more humane, just and life-affirming world, we are inherently concerned with the issue of *prescription* operating deeply within the body: the affliction of oppression is always about "the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness" (p. 47). The solution, to engage in the indispensable pursuit of. . .

critically seeing reality

to free ourselves

from the shackles of violent teachings

that bind

that tether

that occur in the minutia of our performances

a reproduction

- - - - -

a new pursuit:

love – compassion – interconnectivity

the (in)dispensable human pursuit

As highlighted by Denzin (1997), the use of poetic voice or engagement in narrative text, not only in its use of language but also how it positions the writer and his/her/their experiences in the text as both topic of inquiry and central resource for exposing problematic experiences, requires a high level of commitment to transparency and vulnerability, as practice. And of course, the process of bringing the body into the center of inquiry—or more precisely, the learned insights gained through the practice of reclaiming the wisdom within the body—also requires a high degree of reflexivity and honest, genuine acknowledgement of the emergence of things, as they are (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). But as articulated by others (Boylorne & Orbe, 2016; Goltz, 2011; Johnson, 2008), the process of working reflexively in research and composition—and therefore, of shifting the ethnographic gaze from other to self—can be deeply disconcerting. As Goltz (2011) articulates, “writing the “I” is frustrating” (p. 387), as it draws attention to self, raises awareness of internal inconsistencies and contradictions and invites a critical examination of overlooked patterns, reactions and perceptions.

And for many marginalized identities, voices and perspectives, bringing the “I” into nearly any space can be a process marked by fear and anxiety (Johnson, 2008; Park-Fuller, 2000). Informed by my own lived experiences as a non-binary queer individual and the silencing effects and prescriptions conferred upon this social location, these aspects of critical autoethnography—its ability to expand conversational spaces in which taboo subjects or non-normative ways of knowing and being might be expressed, elevate subjugated voices and allow for individuals to engage in the practice of struggling with uncomfortable, dissonant aspects of self—that particularly highlights its potential to assist liberatory inner-oriented investigations and with it, the possibility of unearthing oppressive internalized scripts.

More than Methodology: Autoethnography and Contemplative Practices as Means for “Unlearning” Violent Ways of Being

Beyond critical method and tool, the potential for autoethnography to center the body and elevate embodied voice while supporting the development of a more critical consciousness highlights its consilience with my own aims: to explore the ways in which we can both unearth internalized patterns of domination and cultivate greater express of *other* ways of living, relating, being. As a form of meaning-making which uniquely brings the self, the body and internal experiences more easily into the realm of tacit exploration, autoethnography as method holds generative possibilities to assist in the project of self-transformation as it supports critical self-examination and reflection about the world, how we live in it and whether our practices support reclaiming a fuller humanity (Freire, 1970). Hooks (2010) writes about the need for political and social change movements that can “radically addresses the person—the personal” and that recognize the transformation of self and of our relationships is integral “to act in a revolutionary manner, challenging and resisting domination, transforming the world outside the self” (p. 404).

In the spirit of reclaiming voice, the body and strengthening “I” interpretations of self as catalyst for love and liberation, I summon throughout this work a creative yet critical articulation of my lived, internal experiences exploring embodied ways of being—and imbedded implications of power dynamics—to assist an autoethnographic practice of interweaving these narrations in (con)textual exchange (Boylorne & Orbe, 2016). As Linda Park-Fuller (2000) writes,

“In autobiographical narrative performances, the performer often speaks about acts of social transgression. In doing so, the telling of the story itself becomes a transgressive act—a revealing of what has been kept hidden, a speaking of what has been silenced—an act of reverse discourse that struggles with the preconceptions borne in the air of dominant politics.” (p. 26)

It is my hope, as Park-Fuller (2000) exposes, that this project and its practice of ‘braiding’ or interweaving embodied knowledge with contextual cultural and socio-political analysis will create an emergent, generative space for new understandings and possibilities and highlight the importance of regaining those silenced experiences and subjectivities. Stemming from the premise and recognition that in order to cultivate more life-affirming social systems, we must first “unlearn” internalized constructs, habits and patterns of reactivity that replicate and reproduce micro-manifestations of domination and violence, the personal excerpts collectively brought into this paper are reflections from my own process of working to disentangle myself from these injurious internal operations. The following sections in this paper are, therefore, both grounded in and organized by embodied observations occurring across personal meditation practices—given expression through a diligent process of critically and methodologically writing, reflecting upon and transcribing embedded observations of power-implicating phenomena—and are further contextualized by personal experience and the broader historical structures and arrangements of power organizing our world.

I am reminded by the words of Saki Santorelli (2000): this is a deep work, this is a spiritual endeavor. Santorelli writes and speaks on how contemplative practices are, at their core, a deep “soul work,” which require great courage as they ask of us to confront deep aspects of ourselves and our lives with great reverence for *seeing* and observing the nature of how something *is* (Santorelli, 2000). To see, to observe, is an essential element for our liberation, as is the process of connecting to our pain rather than shying away or disconnecting from it. I have also come to these recognitions through some of the most formative, life-suppressing experiences in my life...

In my adolescence, the quest to see the truth—to reclaim the concealed, fragmented memories of a past fractured by chronic traumatic experiences of sexual abuse and

threats of physical violence—was the preeminent source maintaining my connection to life. Somehow, I knew that I was being called to see the realities of my experiences, however painful they might be, and that within and through this process, an ember of hope for reclaiming life and the possibility of a salvation. It wouldn't be until much later than I came to understand that the gift of seeing—of practicing the application of awareness to the pursuit of seeing things as they are with no expectation of reward other than to see—is deeply and profoundly interrelated with the practice of love and the alchemical process of transformation.

At an early age, I came to understand that, in some way, our capacity to *see* and *bear witness* to painful truths—and by this, I am referring to the local, subjective truths of an individual's lived experience—is deeply connected to love, wellbeing and our capacity to construct a new social world. I acknowledge these life experiences, as they not only continue to be some of the most influential teachers in my life and generative sources for inspiration, but have instilled a fundamental recognition and commitment to supporting what the Dalai Lama (His Holiness The Dalai Lama, 1999) refers to as humanities desperate need for a “spiritual revolution:” a revolution away from our “habitual preoccupation with self” towards the development of a consciousness in which we become unable to tolerate another's suffering.

In Summation: The Brass Tacks

In a more linear distillation, this project entailed a two-stage design of research as praxis. First, upon engaging in an 8-week model of daily meditative practice constituted by both formal and informal practices (mirroring the University of Massachusetts' Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, widely recognized as the Western standard for meditative practices in medicine), I dedicated roughly an hour of embodied autoethnographic writing each day, working to capture and delve into the depths of insights that emerge from exploring the currency of inhabited awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Although these transcriptions were open-ended (with no specific prompt guiding my reflections), I focused my attention on automatic reactions,

impulses and other habitualized forms of inner conduct that intuitively felt as though constitutively connected to broader structures and logics of power. Following a grounded theory approach, a form of Foucauldian genealogical inquiry was utilized as an auxiliary method for further analysis and contextualization of dominant themes and insights.

As analytical tool, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis allows for greater examination of the body/mind/environment relationship by contextualizing emergent embodied knowledge within a critical socio-cultural framework, whereby allowing for deepening investigation into the discursive operations of power dynamics occurring at the level of body (Hanna, 2013). Thus, embodied awareness and insights related to internal aspects of reactive, automatic phenomena were critically explored and analyzed, resulting in an analytical investigation of relevant historical factors (personal and broader social history), occurrences and structures contributing to the lineage and manifestation of these embodied insights. In other words, by tracing material historical connections and theoretical understandings (a production Foucault describes as a construction of genealogical inquiries), certain embodied phenomena were thus able to be better recognized as internal correlates of external socio-political power structures and logics. Perhaps most importantly, as FDA encourages consideration of the ways in which the nexus of power/knowledge functions to produce—or silence and oblivate—certain subjectivities and ways of being (Hanna, 2013), it maintains a parsimonious compatibility with the most central epistemological and theoretical premises underwriting this project.

III. Examining the Loss of the Body & Internal Logics of Power: Introducing A Multi-Faceted Entanglement

When we are in touch with ourselves as integrated body/heart/minds and with this, connected to our extraordinary faculties of empathic, compassionate regard, I do not believe we would see the same levels of violence and exploitation in the world...

In fact, I would go so far as to say it is precisely this disposal of knowing ourselves in this way that creates the necessary preconditions for rampant violence, dehumanization and callous destruction to manifest, in the first place.

– *Contemplative Journal: March 15th, 2019*

The act of being born into a body—a process of being embedded within a particular social context influenced by personal lineage factors, historical phenomena and both local and global conditions—is one that entails the inheritance of a certain script. Our earliest developmental environments initiate this early socialization or learning process, where our perceptions, values and assumptions are shaped, where our developing brains take structure and our social sense of self—and others—begins to be forged. We inherit a script that delineates and casts assumptions and expectations upon bodies—ours and others’—and that operates as a roadmap for interpreting, however accurately or egregiously, the complex terrain of our social world. Despite the fact the body itself contains our lives, how is it that it appears to be so commonly erased, discarded or marginalized in the ways we are instructed to live? What dominant teachings and structural forces have influenced this seemingly pervasive social phenomena and what effects might an erasure of the body engender in our social world? These questions, centered on the body and our socio-cultural loss of embodiment, are derived from my own life experiences, crystalized through contemplative practice and reflection, and operate to orient the subsections within this piece. The flow of this section looks to, first, examine the relationship between traumatic experience and disembodiment; theorize and clarify the possible broader consequences to disembodiment as dominant *way of being* in the Western world; and finally, seeks to indict broader structures and ideologies contributing to the erasure of the body and embodied, integrated, heart-centered *ways of being*. The relevance of this inquiry stems from a full understanding that we cannot heal the world if we do not rediscover how to participate in

our own innate healing processes, and if we desire the world to become more *whole* then we work to cultivate this from within.

This segment will introduce the framework of *absencing* (Scharmer, 2018) which will be revisited within the next section of the project and leans into critical feminisms—a term not without its own problematics—to make sense of many of the autoethnographic narrative reflections offered in this segment. To be clear, my own usage of the term feminist, feminisms (to accentuate diverse standpoints) or feminist theory does capture a certain concern with the nature of sexism/heterosexism and the structure of patriarchy, and the role that this oppression plays, more generally, in relation to our social reality and ecological predicaments. However, any definition left at this point grossly misrepresents my own sensibility. Beyond more narrow interpretations that cast feminism as a movement or philosophical leaning strictly disposed to the plight of women/female/femininity (as categories of identity markers), my relationship to this designation captures a resounding commitment to resisting and disrupting all manifestations of oppression towards the promotion of wholeness of entire peoples and preserving the delicate, extraordinary complexity and diversity of life and the health of our planet, broadly speaking. Thus, to me, feminism as designation stands for anti-domination in its entirety and represents a personal commitment to collaboratively leaning into the struggle against all forms of domination.

My own position is inexorably anchored by the recognition that the structures of patriarchy, which generate sexism, heteronormativity and the concomitant life-annihilating effects of transphobia and homophobia, are intractably interwoven with racism and white supremacy (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1995; Hooks, 2010, 2001; Lugones & Spelman, 2010, 2007). From this angle, sexism, and the structure of patriarchy, is merely one parameter of oppressive power dynamics and must be addressed not in isolation, but with discernment of the

deeper roots from which these multi-imbricating, interwoven structural symptoms manifest. As Audre Lorde once contended, “in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable,” the “tools of racist patriarchy” cannot be used to examine or undo that same patriarchy (Lorde, 2010 p. 15).

In this spirit, this segment departs...

On Disembodiment & Trauma: Reflections on the State of our World

My own recognition of the significance of the body—and the ability to inhabit our lives from within it—arose at a fairly early age. This was particularly heightened due to my complete inability to find safety and refuge in my own. My early life experiences—as a queer, non-binary individual and body embedded within a chronically abusive familial environment—forced adaptive, survival responses which were, generally speaking, all about *escaping* the bodily domain: a domain which, at the time, bound me to the imprisoning terror of traumatic experience.

Inhabiting the body never felt safe in my youthful world; the abstracted realm of thought and theory became a location of security and refuge. The experience of remaining dis-connected, on the outside, unable to come inside to a place of supposed safety and autonomy, created a visceral sense of moving chaotically throughout the world. A trail of survival-based reactions—desperations—were left in my wake. My life, my memories, my sense of self--fragmented. For years, my life would vacillate between a despondent plea and violent battle to locate an invisible past and reassemble shattered pieces of life and memory. It would be a long journey of healing: of reintegrating my physical body with mind and heart, and social body, with sense of community. And were it not for the tireless concessions of love extended to me along the way, I would have remained loyal to the violent, obliterating contortions that are the product of sheer disconnect.

Within my own life, the realm of traumatic experience has instructed me that the inability to acknowledge and integrate painful experience inures us to replicate (self)destruction in the world and that the body is not only a place in which we experience pain and terror—it is the location by which we catalyze liberation.

Preeminent trauma scholar Bessel Van der Kolk (2014) expands upon the ways in which traumatic experiences, whether experienced firsthand or vicariously, leave a myriad of traces. In more concrete terms, trauma constitutes a form of unbearable and intolerable experience (Van der Kolk, 2014) related to “any experience of fear/pain that doesn’t have the support it needs to be digested and integrated into the flow of our developing brains” (Badenoch, 2018, p. 23). These experiences, at an individual level, leave vestiges on our minds and emotions (and our capacity for intimacy, joy and community), and reside deeply in our bodies, within our biology, our nervous system and immune system; at broader relational levels, trauma becomes embedded in histories and culture, effects communities and relational dynamics and is transmitted and passed down through generations (Van der Kolk, 2014). So, what constitutes trauma and the realm of traumatic experience, what do we understand about its prevalence and how does it relate to the concerns of this inquiry?

Once a concept narrowly understood to be an effect conferred upon war veterans, traumatic experience takes many forms and is much more prevalent than previously recognized (Van der Kolk, 2014). As summarized by Van der Kolk (2014), research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that nearly one in five Americans were sexually abused as a child; one in four children have been physically abused to the point of a physical mark being left on their body; one in three couples report some form of physical violence throughout the course of their relationship; nearly a quarter of Americans grew up with a family member that struggled with addiction; and one out of every eight persons have witnessed their mother being physically beaten or assaulted. From soldiers who have experienced combat to survivors of rape, molestation or natural disasters, to the less tangible but no less pernicious effects of chronic exposure to oppressive conditions and social micro-aggressions, traumatology

experts highlight an ever expanding field of activities, behaviors and experiences that injuriously operate upon similar, basic processes within the embedded mind and body (Herman, 1992; Levine, 2010; Siegel, 2003; Van der Kolk, 2014). Trauma is thus widely understood to not only affect those immediately impacted, but also those who are indirectly exposed (Badenoch, 2018; Felitti et al., 1998; Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2014). A common result, in simplified fashion, is a certain cognitive process of forgetting and disconnecting.

In the medical world, various terms designate this phenomenon, including “repression,” “amnesia,” “dissociation,” and “unconscious reenactment,” (Van der Kolk, 2014). Although capturing similar, yet at times distinct elements of the traumatic process, these terms signify a certain survival response mechanism triggered by the nature of the event in relation to one’s capacity to meaningfully process and integrate the experiences. As a result, although largely concealed from the conscious mind, traumatic experiences become deeply encoded within the body—within the gut, the nervous system and sensory organs and their implicit sensory streams—and are unwittingly activated by internal and external environmental cues that trigger a cascade of intensified fight/flight/freeze reactivities (Badenoch, 2018; Siegel, 2003; Van der Kolk, 2014;). These authors document that without healing these deep psychological wounds (and echoing these claims from my own lived experience), individuals can feel as though they are living in a manner where life is an enactment of past, habitualized patterns of survival-based reactions.

Just as trauma is about the loss of meaningfully integrating a disturbing, painful experience, it’s healing process is about awareness and integration. Opposite the trademark feature of *dissociation*, the healing process is that of *association*—or, the process of integrating

the cut-off, dismembered element of traumatic experience into the present and ongoing life-narrative (Van der Kolk, 2014). Van der Kolk (2014) writes on the process of healing traumas:

“We have discovered that helping victims of trauma find the words to describe what has happened to them is profoundly meaningful, but usually not enough. The act of telling the story doesn’t necessarily alter the automatic physical and hormonal responses of bodies that remain hypervigilant, prepared to be assaulted or violated at any time. For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present. Our search to understand trauma has led us to think differently not only about the structure of the mind but also about the processes by which it heals.” (p. 21)

As alluded to in this excerpt, we heal through integration, across every dimension of our being. Merely operating and existing via our rational, cognitive registers will not suffice; it is through learning to reconnect to one’s physical body, in addition to the social body, that we engage in a process of healing deep emotional wounds (Herman, 1992; Levine, 2010; Siegel & Solomon, 2003; Van der Kolk, 2014). From this angle, the integration of forgotten, dismembered aspects of self and experience into the present-moment narrative is an essential element to healing: the cultivation of awareness and the willingness to confront pain, a necessary precondition. And without exposure to safe, nurturing healing spaces or engagement in healing processes, a constellation of tragically common repercussions tend to reside in the shadows of unhealed traumas: increased experiences of dissociative and numbing coping strategies and behaviors; impairment in socio-emotional skills and the processes of learning and integrating new information; and increased tendencies of living in cycles of “traumatic reenactments” that expose oneself to further pain, suffering and distress throughout the course of one’s life (Siegel, 2003; Van der Kolk, 2014). Living *in* our traumas, stuck within loops of reenactment and conditioned patterns of reactivity, the individual as complex system desperately suffers; replicated in masse, the social body as complex system remains caught in the same (self)destructive cyclical patterns of reenactment.

Trauma as Microcosm of Macro Conditions: A Production of “Absencing”

Disembodied. Dismembered. Disconnected. Disequilibrium.

What did it mean to be out of touch with the body? It meant to be out of touch with the world.

The etymology of “*dis*” lies in the Latin prefix for “asunder” “apart” or “away” or having a privative, negative or reversing force. This prefix, from my own experiences, precisely captures how I experienced self and define the early years of my life as a survivor of chronic childhood trauma. But expanding to the broader social arena, this prefix seems to function as an apt etiological marker of not only my local, *lived* experience but, crucially, of our global condition. And it also serves as a preface for this next segment of exploration. Embedded within our social environment, replete with first and second-hand exposures to violence, traumatic events and painfully oppressive and unjust realities, it should, perhaps, be no surprise that humanity appears to be struggling to remain present to the urgencies within our world and engaged in developing their necessary solutions. The defensive postures we see in trauma responses—of disconnecting, numbing, avoiding, distracting and in other ways remaining disembodied and detached from distressing and painful experiences—hinder our capacities to be present within our own lives and to extend compassionate responses to the needs within our environments. But in many ways, the microcosm of the traumatized body is merely a representation of macrocosm conditions.

Responding to the question of how we have collectively gotten *here*, at this place of widespread dis-connect and disruption, Otto Scharmer (2018) offers us a compelling framework. In his book “The Essentials of Theory U” (2018), Sharmer contends that in order to respond to the gravity of our times, and to the profound social, ecological and spiritual needs defining our

historical chapter, we must recognize that dominant social arrangements are concertedly advancing an entire “architecture of absencing” (2018): an ensemble of systems, structures, technologies, dominant social practices and norms which, in concerted fashion, reify practices of gross disconnect, apathy and the enactment of prejudice, hatred and fear. From our technological and digital vistas, the increasing tempo in which we move throughout our lives, to the culturally normative—and engendering—egocentric orientation of our pursuits, this framework draws attention to the relationality among various structural forces and the effects they produce: division, isolation, disconnect and (self)destruction. Here, rejecting reductivistic forms of analysis and embracing a systems-based perspective, Scharmer suggests that challenging the hegemony of *absencing* in our times is one of humanities most central obstacles. This is a road less traveled for Scharmer, precisely because it requires intentional inner work and a certain commitment to illuminating and examining our collective blind spot: our interior condition (Scharmer, 2018, p. 28).

Scharmer’s poignant vision and framework, which recognizes that the external world is a reflection of the internal, perceives the interdependence of inner transformation and external change action. As he contends: “the success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener” (Scharmer, 2018, p. 7). Such a perspective recognizes that in order for the emergence of new, life affirming social structures and systems, we must shift the interior condition, or the inner place from which we each operate. But this is no simple task: not only does such a process require committed practices that will support a shift in mindset and the cultivation of *new* indispensable inner qualities (such as presence, eco-systems awareness, compassion and courage), but Scharmer (2018) argues that our culturally hegemonic ideological currents undercut such transformational efforts. Extending in this direction, he highlights three

dominant ideological divides further amplifying our collective crises and interfering with our ability to address them. The first he describes as an ecological divide, which broadly encapsulates the pervasive, fictional belief in a separation between humanity and the natural world or, between that of culture/nature. Secondly, a social divide: seen within and across the production and replication of hierarchies of domination (and the structures and systems that perpetuate them) which operate to legitimize oppressive realities and social conditions. And finally, the spiritual divide: defined as a severance, ideologically and practically, of life as an embedded interconnected phenomenon within the broader elements and ecologies sustaining it which, as a byproduct, eviscerates any reverence or veneration for life and love.

For Scharmer (2018), part of the solution for the pandemic of *absencing* lies in cultivating the ability for sensing and seeing the systems and structures that are reproducing this sensibility (including, how they operate deeply within our internal terrain) in order to ultimately support their transformation. Therefore, in order to expand our ability to co-create “architectures of connection” that engender presence, compassion and collaborative, co-constructed realities, Scharmer (2018) speaks to the relevance of cultivating awareness as a central skill and resource. Mindful-awareness, as both practice and capacity, functionally supports the cultivation of integral *heart-centered* internal dispositions (see: Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Paulson, Davidson, Jha, & Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Siegel, 2012) while it, according to Scharmer (2018), supports a transformative paradigmatic shift from *absencing* to *presencing*. He advances that mindful, embodied awareness practices conceptually strengthen “three instruments of inner knowing” vital for such a transformative task:

“An *open mind* is the capacity to suspend old habits of judgment—to see with fresh eyes. An *open heart* is the capacity to empathize and to look at a situation through the eyes of somebody else. An *open will* is the capacity to “let go” of the old and “let come” the new.” (p. 25)

In summation, contemplative practices and engagement in *inner-work*, are indispensable resources for Scharmer (2018), who also alludes these practices to also be essential for identifying and disrupting forms of resistance that tend to block us from reconnecting to life as a fluid, emergent process of *presencing*. Mirroring somatic literature and practices that focus on “blockages” to healing, and wisdom traditions that emphasize various impediments and hindrances to spiritual growth and development, Scharmer (2018) distills three common resistances that tend to emerge: internal judgements, expressions of cynicism, and manifestations of fear. The move towards cultivating *presencing* as de-facto orientation is a move towards a deeply immersive plane of inquiry, observation and focused awareness: this process captures a way of being predicated on cultivating seamless awareness of self and its inextricable inter-relationality with broader life systems; it requires a committed practice of engendering attitudes and dispositions that collectively make up a *heart-centered* orientation; it extends from the valuation of life as a process involving *deep listening*, reflection and enactment; and is a posture that requires us to continuously summon and strengthen our courage to identify and disrupt fears, sources of pain, ego-centric habits and other “hindrances” in order to function as a greater conduit of love and liberation and to allow for the emergence of “the highest future possibility” (Scharmer, 2018, p. 27-28).

I easily read Scharmer’s (2018) framework of *absencing* versus *presencing* within my own experiences of contemplative, mindfulness-based inner work and often find these juxtaposed polarities battling for my attention—and what we pay attention to, of course, has a way of growing. My nervous system, forged by the conditions of developmental trauma, has a way of luring me into cycles of *absencing*: this way, this totalizing ethos, seductively offers

disconnect from body, immediacy of life and environment and an eviscerated sense of connection to the broader life circumstances demanding our collective attention.

Across various forms of personal meditation practice, I notice an all too common undercurrent: a seductive enticing to escape into the oblivion offered through the endless array of fictional realities, sources of distraction and forms of numbing oblivion... These comfort-enticing offerings are steadfastly sewn throughout our social fabric, either enticing a preoccupation with fictional and imaginary vistas or working to create a centrifugal force coalescing around the construct of I/ME/MINE. I often see these enticing's quite clearly and I notice my capacity to sense, identify and choose other—to choose connectivity and presence—is also more greatly accessible through steady engagement in contemplative practice. As though a rare jewel, I am aware of how this presence, when I am able to extend it from the wellspring of my own stillness and embodiment, affects the quality of my attending and allows for an emergence of a more generative, healing relational field.

However, there remain many instances in which this generative life and healing source feels less available, or I am more inhibited in accessing it. In these instances, I almost always can sense the subtle tendrils of fear or a certain myopic self-oriented distraction that shows up in my body as an agitated impatience. Yet still, when feeling overwhelmed, or when I have not cared for my survivor body in a way that validates the gauntlet conditions in which it was forged, I notice a sharply increased allure to escape into mental habits of abstraction...

In these instances, in which I am negligent to my own self-care, it can feel near-impossible to regain communion with my body and present-moment awareness ...

A dereliction of consciousness.

A dereliction of my ethical and moral responsibilities to life.

This is one of the most commonly re-occurring observations I experience within my own meditative practices and that I encounter when working with others who are struggling to remember the inherent wisdom within our embodied-being. The body itself, and the seemingly benign process of residing within it throughout the moments of our lives, seems to be not only an allusive realm and practice, but a marginalized, subjugated or forgotten domain. Literature on trauma and exposure to traumatic experience offers context when we consider the prevalence of our social disconnect from embodied awareness, as does Scharmer's (2018) framework implicating the ways in which dominant social systems, processes and ideologies are

contributing to a global orientation of *absencing*. But stemming from my own life experiences and embodied knowledge, there's another operation of power at play that mediates, intersects and is intertwined with manifestations of trauma and the widespread orientation of *absencing*: this is a power structure that infers mind as superior to body and men/masculine as dominant over women/feminine (and that standardizes these binary postulations as normative). This next segment turns to examine the hegemonic ideology and structure of patriarchy which reifies certain separations that, as I will advance, dramatically impede our ability to reconnect with ourselves in more holistic, integrated manners.

Implicating Structures of Power: Patriarchy, Oppression and the Loss of Embodied Awareness

“[Woman] became the embodiment of the biological function, the image of nature, the subjugation of which constitute that civilization's title to fame. For millennia men dreamed of acquiring absolute mastery over nature, of converting the cosmos into one immense hunting ground. It was to this that the idea of man was geared in a male-dominated society. This was the significance of reason, his proudest boast.”

(Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, p. 248)

In broadening the inquiry to consider other socio-historical factors at play in our disconnect, in our development of an *absencing* (Scharmer, 2018) disposition to the world, feminisms offer us further compelling arguments to examine. Arguably, no other discipline has emphasized the role of the body in the reproduction of power dynamics than feminist thought (Kolmar & Bartowski, 2010). Explicating the body as site of control and manipulation and subjugated domain, feminisms have remained largely critical of Western androcentric epistemologies which have historically, among other things, enshrined the body as distinct and separated from the mind. Contrasting other cultural epistemologies which recognize an indispensable interconnection between heart/mind or body/spirit (many cultures do not even

contain language to describe the “mind” and its faculties as distinct from its innate embeddedness), the Western world has maintained the mind as privileged (“I think, therefore I am”) and “the province of men/rational beings” while relegating the body to a denigrated position—a position associated with women and femininity and irrationality/emotionality (Haraway, 2008; Kolmar & Bartowski, 2010).

I’ve noticed this inferiorized position from a young age, heightened by my sensitivities to the pain of being excluded from male spaces, processes and experiences because of the gendered assumptions society erroneously labeled on my body as a non-binary individual. I battled with a strong desire to be outside of my body in these instances—to reject it, and all its gendered implications—in part, to demonstrate my abilities to compete with male peers through the patriarchal language of strict cognitive rationality. But I was always “othered” in these spaces: brought back into the visceral body through objectifying and subordinated messages and would often find a self-oriented analysis of critique, not just as a sexed/gendered being (read: diminished and objectified), but as an individual that did not, inherently, interpret self within the restrictive binary of gender as a structure...

Transcending the body was, first, always about survival. Survival from abuse, from the terror of physical exploitation. But this move of rejecting being in the body, also felt like a superior one: I understood from an early age the assumed position of pure cognitive engagement with the world as superior to the inferiorized place of being made body... Women, with their bodies marked, adorned, critiqued, commented upon; decorated in revealing clothes (which revealed something, always, about others), impractical attire, attire for servitude; nurturing other life with their bodies ... I carried a disgust and a contempt in my body for what I saw cast upon theirs...

Not because I did not respect or value these individuals... (I did)

Not because I, as a non-binary spirit, did not find myself in these expressions ... (I didn't)

But because I knew, deeply, at the core of my being, that I was being assigned to a lesser position, stature, role... and I needed to know that I was capable of more than what such a limiting, annihilating designation might suggest.

But perhaps most insidiously within this visceral amputation of mind from body—and elevation of the former over the latter— validated through the hegemonic reign of Descartean dualism, we find a certain diffuse repudiation of our most humanizing capacities and faculties: those belonging to the domain of our affective, compassionate registers. Empathy and compassion are the prerogatives of those which seek to become in touch with themselves as integrated beings—their own heart/minds, sense of interconnectedness with others and with life, connected to points of resiliency and suffering, strength and injury—and who do so courageously face violent reprisal, marginalization, stigma and their own internalized misogyny for coming in close contact with femininity or being too *effeminate* (Serano, 2016). Betrayed by the illusion that *to think, therefore we are*, we abandon those *other* ways of being (qualities, modes, facets, strengths and brilliances) that qualify as belonging to the inferior embodied, intuitive, emotive domains—domains historically subjugated to the realm of femininity (Haraway, 2008; Kolmar & Bartowski, 2010; Serano, 2016). By separating and elevating the rational, analytical from our embodied, affective aspects of self, we tear ourselves asunder; broken and severed from the possibilities of wholeness, we are left selecting which fragmented aspects of self to express and engage the world through. And not without consequence.

It is precisely this move, the repudiation and marginalization of the feminine (and all it has come to signify), that has functioned to effectively excise the very *means by which* we heal and repair from psychological forms of injury and thus, subjugate our capacity to transform the social injuries rampant throughout our world. Eviscerating and discarding the relational-emotional, *felt* and embodied aspects of self, our male/masculine, heterosexist patriarchal

structure further secures its perpetuation not only through social mechanisms wherein maleness and masculinity are reified as superior, but by effectively eliminating access to the very practices and processes essential for healing the multiplicity of injuries endured by its operation. And social injuries unhealed beget violence's untold.

Application: Reclaiming Integrated, Embodied Ways of Being

Although the chapters of my life expose *survival* as a constant theme, it wasn't until I began to learn how to re-connect with my body that I realized *healing* might well typify a life-long journey and process—one that I was merely just beginning. Supporting this premise, central understandings within trauma literature (Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2014), remind us that we heal through integration, across every dimension of our being. Merely operating and existing via our rational, cognitive registers will not suffice; it is through our reconnection to self in its entirety and to community, life and planet that we begin to address deep emotional wounds (Herman, 1992) and can change habitualized patterns of reactivity (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Our physiological tendency to turn away from pain is further reinforced from dominant power structures, ideologies and hegemonic systems: the structures of patriarchy eschew emotional discomfort by discouraging socio-emotional development and emotional labor (“women’s work”), while dominant socio-political power-logic elevate *absencing* and disconnect as preeminent dispositions in our contemporary social world (Fromm, 2011; Scharmer, 2018). Through both biological and socialization processes, our tendency to detach and remain in the life-annihilating state of *absencing* (Scharmer, 2018) to avoid pain and discomfort only furthers our inability to experience self as both thinking/rational *and* feeling/embodied being. Without social encouragement to learn to engage in deeply listening to our emotions or to skillfully turn towards complex or painful emotions—those prerogatives belonging to the courageous discipline

of *presencing*—we remain stunted. In addition to the culturally hegemonic emphasis on comfort and material obtainment, androcentric ways of thinking and being (which have instilled the conventions of rationality, logic and positivism as the dominant modes of knowledge-production) have, by extension, rendered those faculties typically assigned to the visceral registers of the body and to femaleness (emotions, empathy, intuition, embodiment) became marginalized. Along with it, the erasure of more subjective *ways of knowing*.

These hegemonic forces engendering disconnect as de-facto mode of engaging the world must be identified and challenged if we hope to collectively displace the deeply penetrating roots of domination that exist within and throughout our lives and our social world and regain our literal and figurative senses. The pursuit of a “fuller humanity,” as Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), involves the recognition of the imbricating, embeddedness of oppressive conditions and structures and awareness of the reality that these structures injure all peoples—those directly targeted by them and those whom these arrangements are designed to serve. The loss of a fuller, compassionate humanity—one that supports life, embraces growth, mutual collaboration and community and that reveres and respects difference without being threatened by it—is the common denominator for Freire (1970). And as Hooks writes (2010), this *unearthing* work, this work of disrupting the crooked roots of logics of domination operating deeply within, is a work that requires our persistent efforts and recognition that perhaps we each have need for this transformative work:

“It is necessary for us to remember, as we think critically about domination, that we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound (whether or not that power is institutionalized. It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist—the potential victim within that we must rescue—otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation.” (p. 403)

Every revolutionary cause, bent on transforming the current social structures toward conditions of liberation for all peoples, must contend with this phenomenon and it is this precise recognition that I believe decolonizing movements *and* contemplative educative efforts must become aware of. Regardless of each individual's degree of relative proximity to power or oppression (a framework capitalized on by intersectionalists and queer theorists), we are embedded in the same totalizing power structures rendering us susceptible—albeit, differently based on our positionality in relation to these structures—to internalizing logics of domination. And where domination reigns, there will always be expressions of dehumanization (Hooks, 2001).

Most crucially, the process of regaining our lives as an embodied, inhabited experience is tantamount to effectively responding to the issues at hand. With a rise in turbulences—social injustices, ecological injustices, myriad violences and resource shortages—we are being required to strengthen our capacity to remain engaged in the world despite exposure to increasingly complex, distressing phenomena. The cultivation of ways to care for our bodies, attend to stress and promote wellbeing, are not choices for those born into these conditions—it is imperative. This capacity of enduring painful emotions and discomforting realities, as many other contemplative leaders, educators and practitioners and somatic social justice activists others have argued (Berila, 2015, 2016; Johnson, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Linden, 1994; Scharmer, 2018), is a fundamental precursor to our ability to skillfully respond to the ecological urgencies and social justice issues we collectively face. The paradigm of *absencing* (Scharmer, 2018) furthers these points: disconnected, numbed, distracted, we remain out-of-touch with the issues beleaguering our social world—and therefore, the solutions. Within decolonizing literature, we are offered a call for a liberatory resolution: in order to challenge the totalizing presence of colonizing

hegemonic power scripts, we must consider “how to decolonize the ‘mind,’ and the ‘imaginary’ – that is, knowledge and being” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 450).

IV. On Desires, the Pursuit of Pleasure and the Wanting Mind: Troubling Coloniality & the Consumptive Sensibility

Beyond the ways in which vestiges of trauma and learned, lived and *felt* oppressive experiences can become deeply coded into the body, working against the development of more embodied ways of being—and with it, inuring us to the habits of *absencing* rather than those of *presencing*—a different, deeply coded script surfaces time and time again in my own internal meditative practice and is amply captured in my embodied journaling practices as two prominent themes. These emergent themes and their embodied manifestations coalesce, generally speaking, around the notion of progress and development, and around consumption and appetite. And although conceptually and categorically distinct, they appear seemingly interrelated by way of the nature of their manifestations: they both operate at a level of perception, entail a certain engagement in imaginary fictions—and disengagement from present-moment inhabitance—and contain normative, evaluative prescriptions. This section seeks to further tease out these thematics and explore their broader sources of origin and avenues of reproduction.

One way of framing the question that guides this segment would be to wonder why we seem to rarely question—even in the face of our stark ecological realities—how obtainment of materiality and commodity consumption, more broadly, have come to constitute so much of contemporary life. I will venture that one of the most alarming aspects behind life in modernity is our unstinting commitment to rarely question the role of the commodity in our lives or the conduct of commodity consumption. The West has not only managed to introduce the modern consumptive subject—that is, to produce a way of living and *being* organized around object

relations—but has annexed the practice and idea of commodity consumption to a field of rationality, where it has become a largely unquestioned, normative dimension of life itself (Orlie, 2002). Life in the West is strangely organized around this practice, but this practice is not the natural, de facto evolution of civil and social life; rather, as this section will explore, consumptive practices, as we see them manifest today, are the product of a certain organization of power taking root at the biological level of life itself (Bauman, 2001; Billig, 1999; Foucault, 1997, 1980; Orlie, 2002)

Turning to scholarship from political theory, philosophy and sociology, my investigations into the nature and historical origins of these thematics have led me to the theoretical framework of *coloniality*, which symbolizes and encapsulates a totalizing, monolithic form of power-logic shaping our external and internal world, and to sociological literature surrounding the production of commodity consumption as a central organizing practice in the Western world. Both contextualizing analyses, particularly when held in relationship, require greater examination and interrogation in order to support movement towards inner/outer liberatory transformation. Building upon the framework of coloniality of power (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000, 2007), this segment seeks to further investigate embodied themes of desire and want and to examine the historical and socio-political factors that have contributed to their amplification. And indeed, this is an inquiry to expose how such consumptive appetites factor into our collective predicament in order to better understand the ways in which reclamation of embodied ways of being might help us uproot this hegemonic disposition that has displaced our sense of self as subject with that of consumer and, more deeply, has rationalized insatiable consumptive appetite through the edicts of global capitalist economy. To investigate this, the segment first explores coloniality, moves through a brief history of the emergence of the modern consumptive subject and beyond this

history, considers (at a psychological and theoretical level) what a consumptive sensibility entails.

Through the Looking Glass of Coloniality: Further Erasure of Non-Normative Subjectivities

I find within my resistance to integrating contemplative practices in my life a certain stream of logic—one which intuitively feels as though it comes from a deeply inherited place. This logic stream persistently questions my commitment to engender *heart* centered ways of being over that of merely prizing *mind* centered approaches. But it isn't *merely* about an internalized repudiation of the feminine (Serano, 2016), or an embrace of body over mind dualism, this resistance has to do with a deeply instilled belief and perception related to stillness and non-striving as a way of *being*. This perception holds cultural implications and indeed, I believe in some way this encoded logic holds a historical origin beyond my local position in both space and time. During contemplative practices, this inner working moves me away from stillness, solitude, and inner development with a degree of calculated prejudice...

A restlessness runs like a current within and throughout my body and an unsettling, disruptive impatience begins to displace stillness. Attention drifts to my mind and the realm of thought. With calculated consistency, an evaluative question about progress—my “progress”—emerges; this is a frequent thought visitor. “What are you gaining from this?” “What is the point?” Oftentimes, this automatic thought uses my cherished tools of logic and evaluative analysis for further persuasion: “you have so many other important things to do... you can't afford to waste the time ... to spend it in this way...”

... Time commodified, economized. Something to be used, spent, wasted ...

... As if we can ever really have a currency more precious than that of deeply inhabiting our moments...

One of the predominant themes that arises in this “unearthing” phenomenological inquiry/praxis, time and time again, has to do with the socially constructed notion of progress, success and my perception of how, in relation to these notions, time should be spent and utilized.

Affecting my own internal habits, perceptions and behaviors, these undercurrents relentlessly operate, which belie disciplines of stillness and meditation. For the cultivation of contemplative practices in a manner that harnesses their transformative potential to assist in altering our current social trajectory (and the dominant life patterns and arrangements contributing to it), this theme requires examination. Without directly interrogating this undercurrent, the critical potential of mindful awareness practices will remain held in abeyance, suspended by deeply ingrained beliefs about what a successful self (a *doing* self) and life (a self-oriented, obtainment-based life) look like in the modern Western world.

So, what frameworks and histories might help us begin to discern the origins of these logics and theorize their prevalence? Following the thematic of progress as a first point of departure, my analytical investigation led me to a framework integral to the issues at hand: that of the enduring and hegemonic logic of coloniality (Fanon, 2004; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000, 2007). Originally arising out of de-colonialist and post-colonialist perspectives from the global south (work which has spanned generations, disciplinary arenas and geopolitical climates), these authors point to the oppressive continuation of a cultural power logic engendered by the colonialist and imperialist projects that have redefined the majority of the globe. Extending from earlier critiques regarding the dehumanizing effects of European colonialism and its concomitant amplification and imposition of dominator/dominated logic, coloniality as concept generally captures the ways in which colonialist projects gave rise to a certain structure of power containing hegemonic ideas, assumptions and values which reproduce structural discriminations codified through 'racial,' 'ethnic,' or 'national' lines of demarcation (Quijano, 2007). This construct of power, in other words, portrays how the dominant practices, norms and legacies of European colonialism have become infused within contemporary societies and continue to

mediate and influence succeeding social orders, even across our seemingly “postcolonial” social world (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007;).

Resultingly, as Aníbal Quijano (2000, 2007) and Walter Mignolo (2007) advance, coloniality has become a hegemonic and ubiquitous iteration of power that reproduces a certain totalizing narrative that infiltrates and mediates external socio-political and economic structures while operating deeply within the minds, bodies and psyches of its subjects. These authors attribute the reproduction of caste like hierarchical systems to the operation of this power regime, in which the process of ranking peoples based on biological and phenotypic traits (a tool functionally used by the ruling classes of white Europeans to justify the inferiorization and enslavement of peoples based on racialized traits) continues to operate within and across our modern world, privileging Eurocentric ways of seeing and relating to the world (Fanon, 2004; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000, 2007). As such, this power-logic continues to contribute to the reification of whiteness as “superior” racialized group, deeply inscribing the reproduction of racialized hierarchies within political and economic systems, institutions and at the levels of collective and individual consciousness (Mignolo, 2007).

More contemporary scholars have expanded the scope of coloniality to include the ways in which this power-logic and totalizing social script reifies certain meanings, values and expectations upon sex/gender identity designations as well, simultaneously solidifying binary based classification systems replete with in Western epistemologies while further inscribing women and femininity as inferior to males and masculinity (Lugones, 2007). Whether a colonial or pre-colonial imposition, the use of sex/gender to delineate and marginalize the construction of women as a category became an amplified and outsourced structure of domination across the globe (Lugones, 2007). Importantly, Lugones (2007) highlights the mutuality of coloniality of

power and the colonial/modern gender system and that, only when viewed together—as coalescing, intermeshed structures—can we gleam the inseparability of race and gender.

But beyond replicating and reifying hierarchical rank through the constructs of race and gender, the concept of coloniality of power refers to a certain totalizing logic that has colonized the processes of knowledge-production and how individuals perceive, express and engage in life (Lugones, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007). In other words, as a deeply penetrating and totalizing logic, coloniality prescribes a certain vision of society, understanding of “social progress” and inscribes a euro and androcentric way of perceiving the world. As synthesized by Mignolo (2007):

“Under the spell of neo-liberalism and the magic of the media promoting it, modernity and modernization, together with democracy, are being sold as a package trip to the promised land of happiness, a paradise... Yet, when people do not buy the package willingly or have other ideas of how economy and society should be organized, they become subject to all kinds of direct and indirect violence... The crooked rhetoric that naturalizes “modernity” as a universal global process and point of arrival hides its darker side, the constant reproduction of ‘coloniality.’ (p. 450)

As highlighted by Mignolo, coloniality as power logic conveys certain socio-economic dictates which are presupposed as a natural, de-facto societal script and arrangement. This power-logic maps out a particular social arrangement organized by the edicts of global capitalist economy and its preconditions which require a certain pattern of labor and land relations to maximize production and the concentration of wealth (Mignolo, 2007). Part of these preconditions, as Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2007) articulate, refer to the cognitive demands of capitalism which include an elevation of measurement, quantification and the processes of externalization (or objectification) of what can be made knowable with the principle interest of controlling the relations between people and nature and with it, the objectification and relegation of land and natural resource into parcels of property and means of production—production to be owned by

the (white/Eurocentric) few, labor to be experienced by the (racialized/Indigenous) many. Importantly, as Mignolo (2007) highlights, the vocabular of ‘conquest’ *becomes* the dominant language, cognitive schema and organizing force by which the modern Western world—and its subjects—are conditioned by.

It is precisely this way of knowing, thinking and relating to the natural world—in terms of conquest and domination—that became imposed on the entirety of the capitalist world “as the only valid rationality and as emblematic of modernity” itself (Lugones, 2007, p. 192). Simultaneously encapsulated by the dominant rhetoric of modernity while veiled by its normative position, the notion of progress and development become thus cast in a particular way: both individual and societal “progress” are quantified through material gain and by securing access to the means of procuring greater capital and material abundance, regardless the collective costs. And these *costs*, quite typically, are dispossessed onto planet, life species and marginalized communities, cultures and regions—categories conveniently “Othered” by the very power-logics that rely upon their objectification for exploitative ends. Life under this fictional emblem and totalizing prescription is recast into a new formula: “to have is to be” (Dittmar, 1992).

Separated, divided categorized in order to be owned, used, conquered. The logic of coloniality is a logic that reduces life, peoples and our planet to an amalgam of useful parts: it conceals the *interdependence-of-things* in our world (life, health and wellbeing, societies and ecologies) and imparts the fiction of separation as the *natural-order-of-things*. It inscribes conquest—and therefore, a perpetual obsessional pursuit with symbolic demonstration of superiority—as a dominant vocabulary and cognitive organizing force. Meanwhile, the non-material, internal, subjective domain of our *being* human—and any transgressive subjectivities which cultivate or elevate this domain—are marginalized and pathologized. Resultingly, we

arrive at the forfeiture of more wholistic and non-acquisition-based ways of being as holding any social meaning or relevance in exchange for the allusive promises of an externally fulfilled existence predicated on individual gain and social dominance. This logic, in short, further conceals the very basic recognition that our lives and fates are inseparably interconnected and that our conduct matters: we are actively shaping our social world which, in turn, is giving shape to us (Orlie, 2002).

The Historical Production of the ‘Wanting Mind’ & the Consumptive Rationality

“If production is to increase, the wants must be effectively contrived. In the absence of the contrivance, the increase would not occur.”

(Galbraith, 1958/2011, p. 24)

By extension from these articulations of coloniality, we have inherited a normative perspective of the natural world as a resource to exploit, extract and to be adjudicated for human-centric gain. This naturalized, dominant emblem and rhetoric of success in modernity—to pursue, possess, acquire—has helped to delegitimize non-acquisition *ways of being* (and with them, contemplative orientations and embodiment practices) while enshrining commodity consumption and obtainment of materiality as a central practice and pursuit organizing life in the West (Orlie, 2002). Our collective allegiance to this practice as lifestyle is squarely implicated in our current ecological crises and highlights a certain blind-spot in our collective awareness: how *did* life in the west come to be constituted by such a practice? What are the more local, specific and material historical occurrences that gave rise to such a hegemonic disposition? And what might our world look like if we could free ourselves from such allegiances—and the internal mechanisms substantiating them? Stemming from my own subjective experiences and observations, I will venture one of the most alarming aspects behind the lifestyle of commodity

consumption is a certain unstinting commitment to rarely question or challenge this conduct. Despite being cast as the natural, de-facto evolution of civil and social life, commodity consumption as dominant social practice holds its own socially contrived history. And as spiritual activists Claudia Horwitz and Jesse Maceo Vega-Frey (2006) articulate, the more we allow ourselves to critically “notice and name what is”—investigating and understanding histories of self, others and broader social phenomena—the more capable we are of supporting conditions for transformation (p. 7).

Commodity consumption, as we know it today, did not arise in a vacuum: it emerged through a multiplicity of deliberate, calculated and strategic efforts aimed at introducing more order into a volatile population. At the turn of the twentieth century, after a new social awareness begins to emerge surrounding the concept of ‘population’ as a central political and economic issue, a groundswell of discourses began to surface concerned with questions regarding how to better direct and shape the modernizing social body (Cutlip, 1995; Ewen, 1996; Foucault, 1997, 2009). These discourses captured a certain shared anxiety among business and political elites which coalesced around a perceived need for introducing greater predictability, stability and order in the population. With the unprecedented trends of industrialization, urbanization and immigration gaining momentum and the rapid growth of industry and commerce furthering the crowding of more and more people into burgeoning cityscapes, management of the population was becoming a central political concern and issue. Along with it, a heightened sense of urgency to organize an increasingly chaotic landscape was beginning to foment in certain elite social circles (Ewen, 1996; Cutlip, 1995). To these early prescient elites, the social terrain of 20th century life was in dire need of organization and structure.

Aggravating an already tumultuous landscape spurred by the technological and industrial innovations characterizing the late 19th century, the bourgeois social and economic hegemony of past historical eras was becoming largely unpalatable to a society more consciously aware of egregiously unjust social, economic and political circumstances. As historian Robert Ewen chronicles in his 1996 book *PR!: The Social History of Spin*, “as the twentieth century progressed, people were no longer willing to accommodate themselves to outmoded standards of deference that history, for millennia, had demanded of them” (p. 12). Ignited by these emerging tumultuous social conditions and the growing persuasion and traction of democratic ideals, working classes became much more active in expressing their sense of estrangement and hostility for modern structures of power (Ewen, 1996). In response, certain powerful Western elites began to direct their attention to the perceived urgency stemming from this social milieu of animated dissatisfaction and recrimination, concluding that if the attitudes and behaviors of this population were not influenced and directed, the disorderly population—if allowed enough momentum—could challenge the very concept of privately concentrated wealth and, in general, the status quo (Ewen, 1996). Setting the stage for a lengthy series of events to follow, these circumstances helped fashion a new paranoia centered on the “phantasmal image” of the discontented population and along with it, its potential to destabilize the entire social order (Cutlip, 1995; Ewen, 1996).

Although consumption as a practice has, of course, already existed prior to this period in history, it is here that marks the entrance of mass consumption and the production of the modern consumer subject. It is also here, within this tumultuous terrain, that we can recognize how the emergence of urgencies can function to produce a set of responses designed to create a new organization of power tactics. As Foucault (1997, 1980) contends, new strategies of power arise

in response to micro occurrences and events taking place in the historical milieu. History, for Foucault (1980), is neither linear nor is it an intentional production; rather, it is circular, discursive and is produced through “the infinitely complex product of intentional and accidental forces” which influence the way in which knowledge and power are articulated (Foucault, 1997; 1980; Liesen & Walsh, 2012 p. 5). In line with Foucault’s interpretation, this perceived new threat elicited by the modernizing population of the early 20th century triggered an urgency to produce new forms of population management—strategies and techniques which would ultimately become centered on ways to create, capture and utilize man’s desires and thirst for pleasures in order to re-instill social order, docility and therefore, predictability (Cutlip, 1995; Ewen, 1996).

These widening concerns circulating among elite circles foreshadowed the production of an entire series of discourses, treatises, conferences and publications during the first few decades of the 20th century, which reflect a preoccupation with the management and regulation of the population through the development of new strategies of ‘crowd control,’ ‘social engineering’ and ‘pattern maintenance’ sufficient to the task of maintaining levels of productivity and securing the prevailing social order (Bernays, 1952; Ewen, 1996). Although likely unrecognized today, early prominent business elites and social scientists, such as Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde, contributed vital conceptualizations that would catalyze the creation of the public relations industry as we know it today. The ‘crowd,’ as postulated by Le Bon, was a dangerous new social entity capable of thwarting the progress of modern civilization itself and Tarde, building upon these conceptions, would later come to introduce the potential for mass media to operate as a new implement of power and control (Ewen, 1996). Le Bon’s contributions mark some of the earliest arguments advancing that the modern population as ‘crowd’ was inherently

irrational, unstable and if left to their own devices, capable of destabilizing the entire social order (Ewen, 1996). As chronicled by Ewen (1996), Le Bon advanced in his 1895 book *The Crowd*, that “the entry of the popular classes into political life is one of the most striking characteristics of our epoch of transition...”

“To-day the claims of the masse are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to nothing less than a determination to destroy utterly society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism which was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilization...The divine right of the masses is about to replace the divine right of Kings.” (p. 66)

Le Bon’s concern with the inherent dangers of this new modern population would both typify an anxiety carried across decades of political, sociological and economic thought and would come to represent a familiar philosophical motif embedded within the ethos of the emerging PR industries taking form: the public was irrational and dangerous and required nothing short of a contrived regulatory force capable of containing it’s volatility (Cutlip, 1995; Ewen, 1996).

However influential Le Bon’s early work would become, it wouldn’t be until the work of Gabriel Tarde—a close friend of Le Bon’s—that these allusive daydreams of social mastery would begin to crystallize into discernible tactics (Ewen, 1996). Although largely unrecognizable today, Gabriel Tarde was one of the Western world’s preeminent social scientists at the turn of the 20th century who intuited that as modern society was becoming physically separated and the spread of modern media quickening, social cohesion was recast as an increasingly mental experience (Ewen, 1996). The public, once reliant upon discourse and exchange from distinct material environments, had become considerably more disconnected, abstract and disembodied, opening new channels by which society could be influenced en-mass (Ewen, 1996). As detailed by Ewen (1996), the market, as an example, was no longer bounded to a particular physical space: the industry of mass media and development of new technologies (press, transoceanic

telegraph wires, modern transportation, radio, film, etc.) embodied a far reaching network by which thought, values and perception itself could be standardized and disseminated (Ewen, 1996). As Ewen (1996) notes, Tarde was able to envision the use of this expanding media apparatus to secure the problematics of Le Bon's "crowd:"

"Along these intangible yet dynamic grooves of thought, Tarde beheld compelling hints of a more governable future. The emerging mass media, their universal presence, their ability to transport "thought across distance," provided channels—if properly employed—through which consciousness might be managed, a chaotic world brought to order." (p. 69)

Tarde was a central contributor of this prescient recognition that mass media made possible an entire web of intercommunication of standardized thought that could occur without bodily presence, which could thereby alter *how* people unify, perceive reality and exist in modern society (Ewen, 1996). The new instruments of mass media were, in other words, envisioned as a tool that could exert an influence over people en-mass while functioning, simultaneously, in a penetratingly individual manner: these instruments could seduce the psyches, invoke certain behaviors and all the while, regulate the entire social body through means of creating and eliciting desires answerable by the very economic interests and operations working to instill them (Cutlip, 1995; Ewen, 1996; Foucault, 1997, 2009).

As the new century continued to unfold, these early discourses substantially shaped the appearance of social engineering techniques, paving the way for the advent of the public relations industry (PR) and eventually, the production of modern marketing and advertising industries. But in order to engineer a different society, this new 'profession of adjustment' ultimately required much more than a new knowledge base of communications technology and sociological theories: they would require a highly organized set of tactics and strategies capable of penetrating into the depths of the individual and society (Bernays, 1952; Ewen, 1996; Held,

2009). They would find their answer by merging insights from modern social and psychoanalytical thought with the nascent literature on social engineering tactics. And this wedding would come to pass through the deliberate integration of Sigmund Freud's work (among other early contributors of psychoanalytical thought) detailing the operations of the "unconscious mind." This was a tactical relationship exemplifying a form of knowledge/power taking root at the biological dimension of life itself (Foucault, 1997, 1980). And this unification would be spearheaded by none other than Sigmund Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays.

It was Sigmund Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, who would spearhead such a charge, ultimately becoming one of the most influential pioneers of public relations in America in the 20th century (Ewen, 1996; Held, 2009). Much to the embarrassment of the nascent PR industry, Bernays believed that the "conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses" was a necessary feature of 20th century democratic society (Ewen, 1996, p. 167). This perspective encapsulated a certain assumption of the times and further legitimized the efforts of the PR industry: propaganda was both a scientifically and ideologically validated tool by which social regulation might be achieved and mass media, a necessary instrument of such a power operation (Ewen, 1996). Beyond functioning as an industry designed to serve the narrow interests of select clients or businesses, public relations experts were increasingly recognizing themselves as the technicians behind the scenes, pulling "the wires which control the public mind" while creating fictional environments that would induce society to comprehend the world in a particular way (Ewen, 1996, p. 167). Conjuring and transplanting a particular vision of reality imbricated with economic aims and interests and qualified by an ideological rationalization of desires, subjects became encouraged to exercise their desires for new objects with the fictional promises of fulfilment. By tapping into the power of images to grip—and

direct—public perception, opinion and belief, *the symbol* became (for these early PR technicians) the most powerful psychological stimuli available: it operated as a form of reflex imagery capable of mesmerizing the subject and providing short-cuts for realizing an acceptable reaction and behavior (Ewen, 1996).

Perhaps most alarmingly, Ewen (1996) describes how visual photography and symbols prepossessed an alluring claim to facticity: visual imagery not only appeared to verge on truth—to capture irrefutable, tangible evidence—but was also increasingly viewed as its currency. For instance, social class and the concept of upward mobility or the mythical motif of the “American Dream,” when organized and arranged as a visual catalogue of refined taste, luxury and opportunity, implied one had the ability (albeit, if only perceptually) to attain higher levels of social significance—it only required the purchase and obtainment of certain objects (Bauman, 2001; Ewen, 1996; Orlie, 2002). Highlighting what would become one of the most central tactics to regulate the social body, the power of symbols, staged photography and visual stimuli would come to lie in their ability “to move people on more unconscious and irrational places of perception” towards the ends of standardizing conduct and securing the interests of an increasingly globalized capitalist order (Ewen, 1996, p. 204).

As Ewen (1996) chronicles, with the advent of new forms of technologies, media and its imagery could now more easily puncture the once impermeable enclaves of private life, introducing a level of solicitation for economically oriented pursuits historically unprecedented. Now, the prescriptions of capitalism—traditionally encountered only in the public sphere—could infiltrate into private spaces, effectively allowing for these tools to penetrate every waking moment of individuals private lives. In other words, it wasn’t mere imagery alone that could more easily enter into these previously privatized spaces: it was the values, ideologies and habits

they were capable of both conveying and eliciting that held significance. Combined with other tactics of maneuvering symbols and visual stimuli, staging campaigns (a technique of ‘creating circumstance’) and through the calculated placement of products, people and ideas, the early discipline of public relations functioned to generate a desired social response: docility, consumption and in turn, higher levels of compliance with the dictates of a capitalist political-economy (Ewen, 1996).

Through the deployment of artifice, new realities could be crafted that equate happiness and fulfilment with product ownership and success, with materiality—where, in fact, any ambition could be satisfied through the consumption of products (Bauman, 2001; Orlie, 2002). Purchases, as these ‘contrivance technicians’ realized, must play upon the emotions and ideals of the customer, transforming how one comes to perceive value and how one strives to attain it. For these early PR technicians, the primary objective became centered on the assembly and projection of a contrived world so full of endless desires and impulses to consume that one could not even imagine challenging—or living an alternative lifestyle without—such a totalizing regime (Bauman, 2001; Ewen, 1996; Orlie, 2002). This would lead, in short, to an entire constellation of professionals operating as the inventors of manufactured realities, which would transform the subject-consumer into an insatiably desiring—and unquestioning—entity. As Robert Ewen articulates (1996), at this historical juncture, the line between truth and stagecraft was becoming increasingly—and effectively—more and more obscured (Ewen, 1996).

The historical emergence of public relations tacticians (and the host related marketing specialists, advertising experts, image consultants and other ‘architects of calculated circumstance’) would forever alter the terrain of 21st century life in the West by their ability to manufacture a certain desiring and uncritical sensibility in the population (Billig, 1999; Ewen,

1996; Orlie, 2002). This historical period, and the force of the monolithic apparatus that would emerge from it, ultimately highlight how the interface of industry, psychology and social management came to produce a colossal machinery (a discursive assembly of tools, techniques, technologies, power/knowledge couplings, tactics, and professions) responsible for transforming societal perceptions of reality and manufacturing new desires in subjects which previously did not exist. These apparatuses involved in the production of mythical “dream material” (Orlie, 2002, p. 407) continue to play out as the most central vehicles responsible for driving commodity consumption by reproducing “a *consuming desire* of consuming” (Bauman, 2001, p. 13). The practice of commodity consumption, as we know it, entails and relies upon the formation of minds held in abeyance from critical and questioning thought processes capable of disrupting such a regime—minds captivated by the ‘dream material’ PR and advertising industries have specialized in producing (Orlie, 2002). The history of the public relations industry, and the subsequent fields that emerge from the groundwork it set is, ultimately, about a certain concerted ambition to manage society and reconfigure it in a particular image: an image where object pursuit replaces that of relationship; individual obtainment sequesters communal and social justice aspirations; and consumption is elevated as the defining purpose of life, emblem of success and means by which one *secures* happiness.

Commodity Consumption: An Exercise of the Imaginary, An Embrace of the Fictional

These early PR tacticians set the stage for an entire ensemble of publicity techniques and professions, guided by not only the power of psychological knowledge but by the vast array of images whose organizing force created an entire structure of perception and mandate for exercising desire (Bauman, 2001; Ewen, 1996; Foucault, 1997). Far from needing to be tamed, annulled or excised, the desires of the crowd (or the social body) became the single greatest

instrument used against itself in the early production of the PR campaigns. Left alone, the whims and caprices of the crowd carried serious potential to disrupt order and “pattern maintenance”—both of which are integral to the maintenance of productivity and the cultivation of an organized and intelligible politic. But if these impulses could be transmogrified into an obsessional pursuit for pleasure, indiscernibly associated with the practice of commodity consumption, such a pursuit could become the principle instrument of maintaining an ‘orderly,’ pattern population (Billig, 1999; Orlie, 2002). Through this psycho-social intervention, this subject has become trained to operate with a new structure of perception that identified human aspirations, values and ideals as located in the commodity itself and whose central purpose in life has increasingly become organized around its obtainment (Orlie, 2002).

Understanding the history of a phenomena—however briefly—can assist our ability to stage a resistance against its perpetuation. And this normative practice is certainly one that requires some examination, considering our current levels of consumption are taxing the planet at unprecedented levels of unsustainability (Scharmer, 2018). The process of discerning overlooked phenomena and investigating its history (of self, environment or the broader cultural landscape we have inherited) allows us to construct new understandings and construct compelling motivation to stage resistance against commonly overlooked social phenomena (Denzin, 2017). But I find that even with recognition of the historical production and contrivance of our social world strangely organized around the commodity, it operates at deeper, more allusive levels of my biology. I find many faceted remnants of this historical and contemporary reproduction through my own contemplative practices; a churning, iterative desire for object-obtainment despite however cognitively aware I have become of the critical instability such a practice is holding on life and planet... ..

Moments most inundated by difficult emotions, painful physical sensations or unpleasant thoughts or memories often trigger the strongest elicitation of desire...a desire without a target—a desire for something... Anything... A distraction from experience; an escape from the raw facticity of life; something to fill a perceived emptiness or void. Such desires abstract me from body, from interconnection with present-moment and whisk me into an imaginary realm – a realm where self-interests, concern and want organizes the internal constellations of my being...

this Desiring introduces a realm of Voided Being: Abstraction.

Devoid of presence.

*Avoidance of the rich interconnectedness of life and with it,
living in responsibility to one another...*

Understanding the history of a phenomena, however brief, has helped assist my own ability to stage a resistance against its perpetuation—to *see* into this operation of desire, to locate its historically amplified production, and to utilize stillness as a tool for dismantling conditioned automaticity. But there's an important variable beyond merely seeing the historical production of self as consumer: we must better understand how this central social practice of commodity consumption actually functions; how, in other words, does the commodity operate in our minds and what, by our ceaseless collective engagement in it as dominant social practice, are we strengthening and simultaneously precluding? My personal meditation practice has garnered great insight into the disruptive presence and sheer prevalence this enshrined practice has come to occupy in my being. It is this aspect—the ways in which our own biology has become manipulated to secure the ends of these 'compliance' regimes and power-logic—that we must not only recognize but apply the disciplines of contemplative practices to support our ability to decenter the commodity from a position it ought not occupy (Bauman, 2001; Ewen, 1996).

At a psycho-theoretical level, Bauman (2001) and Orlie (2002) highlight how the practice of commodity consumption operates on a logic of desperation which, very generally, is a process that works in the imaginary. From this angle, the practice of commodity consumption moves not

only in accordance with a logic based on desire and pleasure pursuit, but through the perpetual experience of disappointment (Orlie, 2002). Echoing Marx, Orlic (2002) illuminates how the commodity is incapable of delivering the properties we seek, “for no material good can capture the hopes and ideals it symbolizes” (p. 409) Resultingly, the disappointment that follows in the wake of the purchase only renews and intensifies our desires for *more*. Accordingly, the intertwined processes of desire and disappointment which attend commodity consumption suggest a distancing between what the commodity appears to promise—or what we have been falsely conditioned to perceive it to promise—and what it is capable of delivering (Orlie, 2002).

This distancing between what we expect (imagine) and what the commodity actually delivers (actuality) illustrates a certain displacement occurring within commodity consumption and a certain embrace of the fictional/mythical over the actual/reality. Amplifying Scharmer’s argument that we in the West have come to live in totalizing orientation of *Absencing*, the commodity from this angle further reproduces this effect: we actively engage the commodity—and commodity consumption—by displacing the actual properties of the commodity with the imaginative material it has been formulated to appear it contains. Orlic (2002) further advances that commodities “shuttle us between the actual and the ideal” (p. 410), isomorphic of the very function and tactic the publicity apparatuses spent an entire century to cultivate and refine. As these specialists have increasingly inundated every dimension of social existence with imaginary and fictional renditions of reality—through the bombardment of symbols, visual stimuli, product placement and rhetorical and ideological propaganda—they have created the ‘dream material’ meshed into the fabric of our social world which invigorates and animates the commodity with a life it doesn’t possess (Orlie, 2002)

But I contend this displacement occurring in commodity consumption, or more specifically, our subsequent embrace of the fictional/mythical over the actuality/reality, has a dual effect: this dynamic works to intensify the consumptive sensibility while it sustains current structures of power. We encounter an intensification in our desire for consumption through this “dynamic of deprivation” (Orlie, 2002, p. 408), as it reinvigorates our desires and invokes our imaginations: with the next purchase, I will be able to obtain the satisfaction my desires demand. But with fulfillment always being just out of reach and our desires reinvigorated by the inevitable disappointment of purchase, we enter a cycle of habitual preoccupation and obsession over the commodity. Our appetites unsatisfied, the practice of consumption effectively reproduces our desire to consume insofar it has come to both represent the means by which we might obtain our desires and simultaneously, the practice incapable of delivering them (Billig, 1999; Orlie, 2002). But the more we’ve come to rely on this practice for want fulfillment, and the more this power takes hold in the minds and psyches of the subject, the less capable we are of challenging this regime. In other words, if commodity consumption has become enshrined as a central practice of the self in modernity—a practice which offers us the main pathways for actualizing our desires and wishes—it is precisely because of our mental inability to challenge, or possibly even recognize, the deleterious effects that coincide with such a habit. Substantiated by the rhetoric of modernity (and the underlying coloniality of power that precedes it), the consumptive subject in modernity, therefore, must become habitually unquestioning of the unpleasant labor relations, social realities and environmental effects involved in what they are consuming in order to maintain the practice they rely upon for fulfillment (Billig, 1999).

Said in a slightly different manner, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2011) argue that a culture in pursuit of commodities for pleasure implicitly instructs the individual to not

think about anything that could potentially produce discontentment and therefore, the consumer must continuously “forget suffering even where it is shown” (p. 15). When the ‘dream material’ becomes so pervasive throughout society and so penetrating in the psyches and lives of the individual, where the routes of happiness which advertising sells to us become so convincing that we relinquish—out of despair, frustration or neglect—to seek satisfaction elsewhere, the more we rely upon and subscribe to this form of conduct to provide the ideals and values we seek in life (Billig, 1999). Thus, our dependence on this practice to satisfy our contrived desires requires not only a certain mythical and imaginary embrace on the consumers’ behalf (belief in the commodities transcendental properties, as Marx might say) but a simultaneous curtailment of the imagination: we must not *imagine* the conditions and realities of the lives involved in what we consume or entertain thoughts about the damaging consequences such conduct entails. From this angle, what we are left with is a practice that cultivates not just a certain forgetfulness at the individual level but produces an ideological practice of forgetting in the social body. We might say, as Scharmer (2018) has, we are left with a hegemonic orientation of *Absencing*, resulting in a collective abstraction and ignorance to the realities unfolding around us. This bio-political intervention (Foucault, 1997) and its economically oriented pursuit of pleasure, subjects the minds and psyches of the population to a certain mindset organized to perpetually forget or repress any thoughts capable of disturbing or intervening in one’s involvement in this aspirational and normalized practice. As a result, the subject is ultimately reproduced to be more docile and less critical of the constitution of these power arrangements, and the life-annihilating effects they are inflicting on the very planet sustaining us (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2011; Billig, 1999).

Application: Recovery from Coloniality and Consumptive Mentality

The questions which both provoked and guided this segment—stemming from themes related to inherited notions of progress and the prevalence of appetitive desires—ultimately don't hinge on reason, they hinge on subversive, colonizing forms of power operating at the level of the body and our biology. Through the industrious implementation of psychological knowledge and propaganda techniques, in the course of a little over a century commodity consumption has become *the* constituting practice of life and meaning in modernity and the commodity, the object capable of answering our every desire. But more than this, our desires and aspirations increasingly appear attainable only through the singular route of commodity consumption—a route which requires proper admission (i.e. adequate levels of economic productivity and, generally, access to capital, resources and wealth). As direct extension of the totalizing colonialist power-logic preceding it, the bio-political campaign of PR has been instrumental in producing this new desiring mentality, effectively rationalizing the practice of commodity consumption while concealing it within the domain of the normative. The ends of this operation: to forge, in each individual, a certain dependence on this aspirational exercise (Orlie, 2002). While this dependency not only furthers the tireless cycles of consumption and production (a requisite precondition of our global capitalist economy), it helps circumvent our critique of commodity consumption and therefore, the cultivation of non-obtainment ways of being: the more it takes over as the dominant avenue for our pleasures and the more reliant we become on commodities, the less critical we are of it as a constituting force of self and society. From this angle, the struggle to situate commodity consumption into a realm of critique is veritably a struggle to render visible the hegemonic presence of coloniality constituting self and our social world.

Bolstered by new bodies of knowledge and fields of data illustrating the complex finiteness of our Earth, our historical vantage powerfully reveals a very singular awareness of the undeniable interconnectedness our actions have upon all of life across the globe. But far beyond questioning our ability to *see* the injurious consequences of this regime, it is our unwillingness to challenge this life practice that we must interrogate. Our consumptive psyches—occupied by illusions, mystification and the fictional ‘dream content’ packaged and sold to us—further obscures our vision, simultaneously drawing our attention to the next horizon of desire while circumventing our ability to see what our consumptive practices are ultimately producing (Bauman, 2001; Billig, 1999; Orlie, 2002). The cultivation of a certain blindness becomes a prominent outcome and alongside it, further concealment of those other subjectivities, or ways of being in the world, which might support movement back towards societal and ecological balance. As our allegiance to this practice and to the totalizing logic of coloniality continues to shape our world towards intensifying levels of societal and climatic instability, it is all the more imperative we increase critical discussion of this power operation and further our attempts and commitment to those practices that will enable us to challenge our complicit involvement in this force characterizing our ‘modern’ world.

V. Concluding Remarks: Towards a New ‘Center’

Ours is a historical moment marked by profound urgencies. From unprecedented levels of environmental degradation and destruction to obscene levels of social and economic inequity, we are charged with the task of confronting the magnitude of these challenges beleaguering our social world. These are conditions which require us to become more critically awake and responsive to the complex realities and intensifying desperations emanating from planet, other

life species and indeed, for far too long, from that of our own. These are conditions which, simply put, are an incisive reflection of—and indictment against—a certain internal condition metastasizing across our broader social body.

Amplified by the ideological undercurrents encapsulated by the rhetoric of modernity and the structural pervasiveness (materially, symbolically and epistemologically) of the global capitalist order it presupposes, we are conditioned to speak the language of coloniality and participate in a politic of greed as defining characteristics of our modern world (Hooks, 2000; Lugones, 2007). Coloniality prescribes, as Lugones (2007) writes, the unwitting adoption of the vocabulary of ‘conquest,’ conditioning the modern subject to perceive and reproduce division and objectification (of peoples, the natural world and its resources) to secure its ultimate aims: ascendancy of self over that of “Other.” Sold the historically constructed myth that we will find the answers to our every desire through our allegiance to materiality and ritualistic practices of consumption and obtainment, the edicts of greed and self-interest have become the normative features of our social landscape (Hooks, 2000). Resultingly, under the auspices of modernity, we have become reconstituted with a consumptive rationality—a “*consuming* desire of consuming,” to quote Bauman (2001)—which entails an insatiable appetite that is consuming ourselves, our recognition of the integral interdependency of our heritage and the very natural world that sustains us. And as Hooks (2000) poignantly reminds, wherever domination exists as the prevailing social order, the conditions by which we cultivate and catalyze practices of love and compassion and visions for harmonious and equitable future worlds are invariably subsumed.

Cast against the backdrop of our historical urgencies, this project was, first and foremost, a journey of awakening: a critical exploration into what Scharmer (2018) refers to as our collective blind spot—the inner condition from which we operate and engage our world. In

recognizing the body as both ultimately target of power operations (Foucault, 1997) and site for catalyzing liberation, in this praxis/inquiry I sought to clarify the ways in which mindful, contemplative practice might help support our capacity to unearth colonizing inscriptions replicating injurious behaviors and reifying the broader conditions of our modern world. Considering this underlying aim, the turn to autoethnography was a relatively intuitive one. When handled with authenticity, integrity and one's unique *felt* artistry, the use of autoethnography is intended to serve as a mode of discovery and cultural-criticism: it "uses the individual as a lens," writes Park-Fuller (2000), with the ultimate aim of uncovering absent realities and experiences, and catalyzing "mutability, self-growth and civic transformation" (p. 38). This aim, in other words, is to uncompromisingly unveil for self and reader, irrefutable—and often subversive—realities with the intentions of compelling engagement in the life-affirming process of transformation. And this invitation is not an easy one. I have asked of you to not only cognitively entertain topics explored throughout this project, but to *see, hear and feel into* the depth and magnitude of these complex urgencies defining our times, not to demoralize but to inspire and mobilize. So although we might say that this project was concerned with enhancing *knowledge of the issues* that are critically at stake in our historical moment (amounting to a concern with dominant power operations and dynamics of oppression operating deeply within our being), this project, more importantly, was concerned with the *knowledge/wisdom of possibility* (Freire, 2012).

Belief in possibility requires, at once, a challenge against the pretense that hegemonic power-regimes are immutable, normative and naturalized conditions and requires the recognition that attention is one of our most precious, vital resources. We are at a threshold moment requiring a great turning: a turning away from the prevalence of *dominator-logics* and

habitualized preoccupations with self towards an awakening of *heart-based intelligences* and the reality of our shared interconnectedness; this is a shift from economies of competition and greed to embrace the currency of compassionate presence (His Holiness The Dalai Lama, 1999; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Scharmer, 2018). We are requiring a critical awakening of our hearts and minds to the colossal magnitude of our shared realities—a process which must entail, by necessity, critical and committed interrogation of those socio-political forces and facets functioning to inure us into states of disconnect, apathy and cycles of automatic re-enactment of the prevailing ethos of domination governing our internal and external world. At this historical juncture, we are being asked to not only critically see and comprehend the complex issues in our world (and how they pertain to our own conduct), but more importantly, to engage in a radical remembering: a *soulful* recollection of the deeper, fuller heritage of who *we* are and the life-affirming potentiality of our humanity. This is a call to *re-collect* and *re-claim* integrated and holistic ways of being and to *re-center* the wisdom of our hearts and the practice of love as central imperatives as we forge our collective path forward...

I am convinced, from the totality of my life's experiences, that love has always, and will always, be the answer. The struggle to exist in and through love is the paramount struggle of our times—and it will be our only salvation.

– *Contemplative Journal: February 9th, 2019*

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