We are: revisiting Freire's call for communion

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Abstract

Purpose – This essay argues that Paulo Freire's (2005) pedagogy of dialogue and conscientization largely unites critical pedagogy and decolonization, but that the prerequisite of communion between critical pedagogues and the oppressed has been made more difficult because of the separation of people through the global capitalist system. I argue that this separation is partly to blame for the metaphysical catastrophe in critical education (Maldonado-Torres, 2016), which is dialectically connected with the physical catastrophe of imperialism.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper.

Findings – The essay concludes with two possible solutions to the quandary of communion: those in the global North migrating to the global South or creating their own semi-autonomous and semi-sustainable communities.

Originality/value – This paper seeks to resituate the conversation surrounding education for decolonization in the broader imperial economic system of the world. By doing such, it can help position the dynamic, yet concrete situations of the oppressed in order for educators to refine their revolutionary praxis.

Keywords Imperialism, Freire, Decolonizing curriculum, Community-based education

Paper type Conceptual paper

Nomenclature

Throughout the paper, I use the term "imperialism" to signify the synthesis of neoliberalized, neocolonial capitalism. Thus, to work against imperialism implies working against both capitalism and colonization. Also, when I use the term "spiritual community" I refer to the moral community between real people, not a realm of connection outside our shared reality.

> If you want to be happy for a night, get drunk.
> If you want to be happy for a day, go fishing.
> If you want to be happy for a week, buy a motorbike.
> If you want to be happy for a year, get married.
> If you want to be happy forever, live with the poor.
> God is with the poor.
>
> –A proverb shared by a former student in Myanmar's Chin region

> The man or woman who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into communion with the people, whom he or she continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived. . .Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.
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> –Paulo Freire, 2005, p. 61

The physical catastrophe

I believe the project of a critical pedagogue is at once that of decolonization and revolution against capitalism. Through a true Freirean dialogue with the oppressed, which relies on the pedagogue adopting the language and onto-epistemology of the oppressed and colonized (Freire, 2005), imperialism, under which we are all apart, can be undone from the bottom up. That is to say, Freire's theory of dialogue is inherently decolonial and, if carried out to its end, will result in challenges to imperialism.

As the projects of critical pedagogy and decolonization are inextricably linked, so too were the projects of capitalism and colonization. Jason Hickel (2018, 2020) captures the connection astutely in his books, *The Divide* and *Less is More.* Capitalism was made possible through

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colonization, which secured the "primitive accumulation" necessary for investing in the industrial revolution through the plunder and untold suffering of millions of Indigenous communities (Hickel, 2018). It also violently displaced the peasants of Europe from their common lands and forced them to work in the Capitalists' newly constructed factories (Hickel, 2020), later migrating across the seas because of the abhorrent conditions.

Hickel argues that the colonial era of occupation has merely changed forms into one of debt, structural adjustment and other forms of financialized imperialism. While decolonial scholarship focuses largely on settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and the colonization of the mind (de Sousa Santos, 2016; Maldonado-Torres, 2016), the extraction from the global South by the global North has never stopped. As Hickel (2018) explains, "at the end of colonialism, per capita income in the richest country was thirty-two times higher than in the poorest country. . .: by 2000, the ratio was 134 to 1" (p. 28). In fact, "26.5 trillion. . .has been drained out of the global South over the past few decades" (Hickel, 2018, p. 29), vastly outstripping the amount of money sent to global South countries in aid. These outflows take the form of payment on debts (in most cases it is the interest of debts of which the principal was paid long ago), structural adjustment programs enforced when countries couldn't repay their debts, trade misinvoicing and unequal exchange (Hickel, 2018). These new forms of financial imperialism have largely taken the place of the direct colonial occupation (Hudson, 2003; Hickel, 2018), though violence and war are still used to enforce the global, imperial system (Desai, 2023; Hickel, 2018). When global South countries refuse to pay their debts, their leaders, such as in the case of Burkina Faso's Thomas Sankara, who "was on the verge of galvanizing a continent-wide debt-resistance movement", are killed or disposed of via coups backed by the global North (Hickel, 2018, p. 170).

Unsurprisingly, these outflows of wealth and resources have resulted in global poverty in the global South getting worse over time. Though the narrative of the global North is that global poverty has been shrinking when measuring it according to the poverty line of $1.25 a day used by the World Bank, Hickel (2018) reveals that if global poverty is measured by a poverty line of $5 a day, which is the "mean average of all the poverty lines in the developing world" (p. 50) it is indeed worsening. If the $5 a day poverty line were used, the head count for global poverty would be 4.3 billion, four times as much as that measured by the World Bank (Hickel, 2018). The vast majority of this poverty is found in the countries of the global South, a direct result of the imperial rule of the global North.

I start this essay by discussing these facts, because I believe many critical theorists and decolonial scholars "denounce reality without knowing reality" (Freire, 1998, p. 511). Forms of neocolonization are little understood in various schools of critical theory today, because many of its adherents have left behind the dialectical materialist analysis of Marx. McLaren (2005) unabashedly dissects how critical pedagogy has strayed from its Marxist roots, writing that "critical pedagogy has become so completely psychologized, so liberally humanized, so technologized, and so conceptually postmodernized that its current relationship to broader liberation struggles seems severely attenuated if not fatally terminated" (2005, p. 33). Writing about their discipline of Anthropology, Campbell and Aung (2024) observe how the displacement of earlier anti-imperialist scholarship by a new wave of decolonial thought emphasizing "alternative epistemic voice" has resulted in an "absence, unfortunately, of political economy, and of discussion of economic development in decoloniality" (Sujata Patel, 2021 as cited in Campbell & Aung, 2024, p. 2). This decolonial wave has not confronted the "historical lessons of indirect rule", and the new forms of neocolonialism that "mask[ed] imperial relations" (Campbell & Aung, 2024, p. 2). That is to say, the epistemicide emphasized by decolonial scholars must be dialogically connected to historical and ongoing forms of imperialism and should also lead to praxis: a wedding of both theory and action.

Freire (1998) was aware of this growing international imperialism and warned that "popular voices avoid the naive illusion" of "international enterprises" developing Brazil (p. 510). His pedagogy sought to fight against this imperialism as well as national forms of capitalism from the ground-up, making it both anti-capitalist and decolonial. However, some

decolonial scholars have framed Freire's praxis as misguided at best and, at worst, imperialistic itself. In their essay "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," Tuck and Yang (2012) state that Freire is unclear in who the oppressed and the oppressors are and dismisses his ideas for seemingly not using the settler colonial analytic and focusing too much on individualistic, mental emancipation. There is no effort on the authors' part to situate Freire's scholarship in his historical context. They do not discuss the colonial history of Brazil and the illiterate peasants and workers who inherited that legacy, with whom Freire was living and working (McLaren, 2000; Diaz, n.d.). In terms of individualistic, mental emancipation, I wonder how they understand these peasants organizing themselves to take ownership over their working conditions. If these peasants were the descendants of the Indigenous population of Brazil, then wouldn't reclaiming the land and farms be what Tuck and Yang advocate for in the fight against settler colonialism?

I do agree with Tuck and Yang (2012) in that many educators misapply Freire's theory and overly focus on "internal colonization" – this is the same critique I have of many decolonial scholars (p. 20). However, this misapplication is not because "Freire's philosophies have encouraged" them (2012, p. 20). Even if their representation of Freire's philosophy were accurate, a philosophy can't encourage anyone; it does not have agency. These educators of whom Tuck and Yang speak are simply the same critiqued by McLaren above: those who have turned critical pedagogy into some form of liberalized, individualized and postmodernized theory that no longer resembles Freire's ideas.

More acute attacks on Freire's theories were leveled in the collection, *Rethinking Freire*, which are emblematic of a broader critique of the Marxist form of critical theory by certain decolonial scholars. Here it is said that the followers of Freire fail to "acknowledge other ways of knowing beyond that of critical reflection" (Bowers, 2008, p. 10). Esteva, Stuchul and Prakash (2008) argue that Freire's "process of conscientization" is a "corruption of love" (p. 17). Bejarno (2008) states that Freire's popular education is "imperialistic" in that it imposes a "particular form of knowing" by teaching the oppressed "to adopt a Western pattern of emancipatory thinking" (p. 54). Here, I believe it is maintained – or at least implied – that Freire and those who adhere to his pedagogy believe there is no way of understanding the world besides that of Marxism, that Freire's pedagogy is destroying the ways of knowing of certain oppressed groups by teaching them about how imperialism is enslaving them – that even wanting to teach them about how they are enslaved by the imperial system is unloving.

At times, it's difficult to tell whether these critiques are leveled at Freire himself or at some of his followers who misuse his philosophy. Either way, there appears to be a misreading of Freire, whose explanation of dialogue makes it absolutely clear that conscientization must be created through the language and world view of the oppressed and their ways of knowing. After stating that dialogue cannot exist without "profound love for the world and for people" (2005, p. 89), Freire asks:

> How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others—mere "its" in whom I cannot recognize other "I"s? How can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of "pure" men, the owners of truth and knowledge, for whom all non-members are "these people" or "the great unwashed"? How can I dialogue if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite and that the presence of the people in history is a sign of deterioration, thus to be avoided? How can I dialogue if I am closed to—and even offended by—the contribution of others? (p. 90)

After this passage demonstrating the profound openness to different ways of knowing and thinking, Freire goes even further in saying that politicians and educators "must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed" (2005, p. 96). This point will be revisited in discussing Freire's concept of communion, but here Freire recognizes that being entirely open to another's language and experience isn't enough for true dialogue to occur. The critical pedagogue or decolonial activist must go and live where the oppressed lives in order to understand the *structures* around them to which their

language and experiences refer or else the pedagogue or activist will only be left with their own projections of meanings. To drive home the point even further, Freire wrote, "one cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding" (2005, p. 95).

The second problem of the above critiques is an assumption that it's impossible for a critical pedagogue to dialogue with people about their oppression under global imperialism *and* honor their epistemology, which the project of critical consciousness inherently commits epistemicide. I think this critique is slightly paternalistic but might be warranted if critical pedagogues were searching out autonomous tribal communities untouched by global imperialism (though the consequences of its effect on climate change affect *everyone*). They would have their own system that was working for them, so what right would I have to assume they *need* to know about the neoliberal machine? Well, it may come for them one day, but nonetheless, if they were not curious to learn about it, then the critical pedagogues would have no case for dialoguing with them. However, as we know, most of the world doesn't live in autonomous communities outside of the imperial system. The vast majority of people live in the interconnected, global economy. This means that their epistemology is *shaped* by that system. Thus, the vast majority of humanity's "ways of knowing" are going to include experiences with capitalism, which is what the critical pedagogue wants to discuss.

A corollary of the above assumption is perhaps the belief that people, from "formerly colonized nations", Indigenous communities, or not, don't *want* to know about the imperialist system that oppresses them and within which their lives depend. If someone doesn't *want* to know about it, what right does anyone have to teach them? This presents an ethical dilemma that goes much further beyond decolonial studies: what right do educators or parents anywhere have to teach the learners in their lives things they're not interested in? Educators, philosophers and community members have been debating what people *need* to know for a long time and what to do when this knowledge does not align with what they *want* to learn. In this case, knowledge of the imperialist system is assumed to be outside the category of necessary knowledge.

I have two arguments in response to this corollary. First, everyone should understand the systems that keep them alive, which for most of us is a global economic system. In other words, I think the knowledge of the imperialist system, like Freire, is necessary. In order to navigate the world, one must understand the reality of their existence: where their water, food, clothes, technology and money come from. Having experienced the 2021 coup in Myanmar, I believe knowledge of these systems is particularly important in times of crisis. Having this knowledge is not only personally empowering, but important for communities who strive to protect their autonomy, such as many fighting for decolonization. I discuss this point more in the last section of the paper. Second, this system *oppresses* the vast majority of us, and if someone offered to help me understand the system that is oppressing me and everyone I love and to help us escape it, I'd want to know more. By empathetic extension, I think others would want to know more as well. Again, it's almost paternalistic to assume that one would *not* want to know. It's the job of a good educator, as Freire or Valencia Vasquez (2004) demonstrate, to then dialogue with the students and organically foster critical questions through their own experiences and curiosities, which will in turn lead to conscientization.

In summary, Freire worked toward epistemic and material decolonization while fighting against colonization's extension of capitalism. His call to dialogue with the oppressed requires embracing their language and onto-epistemologies, which incorporate the continual oppression of imperialism. He stated that "revolutionary leaders do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of 'salvation,' but in order to come to know through dialogue with them both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation—the various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist" (2005, p. 95).

There is much to critique about Freire's theory, especially his analysis (or lack thereof) of our connection to the natural world. However, I view the above critiques of Freire as more evidence for the need to engage in a dialectical materialist analysis of the physical catastrophe.

Again, the lives and lifestyles of everyone in the global North, no matter their background, depend on the system of imperialism and the labor and suffering of those in the global South. I briefly touched upon the damning implications of neocolonization that Hickel (2018) presented in *The Divide*, but numbers are no substitute for the person-to-person encounter with those living at the bottom and peripheries of the global economic system.

Bridging community

From 2012 to 2021, I lived and taught in Myanmar at a series of alternative adult education programs. For three of those years, I directed a school in a town of about 10,000 people in Myanmar's poorest region, Chin State. I lived in a wooden cabin with some colleagues, no different from the rest of the homes in the town. We had no running water, electricity or stable internet for most of those three years.

The community suffered from what many global South communities suffer from as a result of a lack of healthcare: untimely deaths due to diabetes, appendicitis, child delivery and addiction among many other illnesses. The Indigenous community also endured decades of cultural genocide and violence at the hands of the Burmese state (South & Lall, 2016). The brightest youth, including many of my former students, left to work abroad as maids in Singapore, construction workers in Japan, or shopkeepers in Malaysia, sending back remittances to their families.

Although there were a plethora of real, tangible problems in the town, there was a sense of solidarity and communal love among my neighbors that I had never experienced before. When the monsoon rains came and a house at the end of our block was showing signs that it might fall in a landslide, every household around emptied out to help the family move their belongings out. In a matter of minutes, over a hundred people were crowded in the street under the pouring rain. Some formed a human chain, passing items from the house, person to person, outside to others who situated them under tarps and inside other houses so they wouldn't get wet.

When my close friend's wife finally succumbed to diabetes, dozens of neighbors rushed to his house. Some wrapped her in a blanket and prepared her on a bed while others moved furniture around and others still began cooking in massive pots in the street. Over twenty-four hours, hundreds of people came to pay their respects, handing envelopes of modest sums to the new widower. At all times, the bed was surrounded by weeping mourners. The elderly made way for younger visitors when it got late, the youth played guitar and sang songs until dawn, when the elderly returned to bury the woman in her home village. Funerals of this kind were common. Gatherings three times as big would happen for weddings, where what felt like everyone in the town was fed. Church gatherings connected everyone each Sunday. The Christian message, one directed to a group oppressed by a powerful state, took on new meanings for me, as did messages about living in community and hoarding wealth.

Everytime I walked what should've taken ten minutes to the market, it'd take thirty, because a students' mother and another students' uncle would strike up a conversation with me on the street. In the market, I would buy vegetables from another students' aunt and charcoal from another's brother. At the time, I was wary of romanticism and the privilege I brought into the community because of my nationality and skin color, and it's impossible to extricate the kindness shown to me from that privilege, but nonetheless, I had never felt more intermeshed in community in my life. As such, I recalled to my friends back home that the type of "existential crisis" I was familiar with my entire life: a feeling of alienation, a lack of purpose and direction, had vanished.

In the interconnected community, it seemed like we were constantly working together toward solving a concrete problem. In fact, the school's curriculum was built around the needs of the community, giving the learning constant purpose and meaning. In line with the

pedagogy called for my Dewey and Freire, students created projects that worked with community members on topics they were not only curious about, but that also helped the life of the community in one way or another: from organizing a trash pick-up system to performing musical concerts; from creating documentaries documenting Chin story-telling to working with local carpenters on building homes. The longer I lived there, the more I felt that "for all their material wealth," countries like my own, the United States, were "poor in authentic communal life and poor in techniques by which people can shape the destinies of their own communities" (Clark, 2013, p. 245), and that they had a lot to learn from places on the periphery of the global system, like the small towns and villages of Myanmar. The experience made clear that we don't exist as individuals in isolation, but that the fundamental unit of our existence is actually *our community*, without which no one would survive (Clark, 2013).

These convictions were strengthened in the event of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, where I was able to participate in community led protests and organizing against the military regime. I witnessed how those protests evolved into community-defense networks and later militia groups that united with the long-standing ethnic armed groups of the country. I saw my former students and neighbors first organize on a neighborhood level non-violently and when their non-violent resistance was met with violence, I saw them leave the urban centers to receive military training in the borderlands. This movement born largely out of community network ties and organizing is now on the verge of winning back the country (Regan & Watson, 2024).

I admit that this experience of community changed my life for the better; that is why when I recount it there is perhaps a certain bias that the reader might dismiss as a romanticization of these places. However, I want to clarify that living in those communities for me, and perhaps for the others in them, was extremely difficult in many ways, and that what holds the community together is *not* some romantic "egalitarianism" as Scott (1976) remarked, but a belief that "all are entitled to a *living* out of the resources within the village" (p. 5). The social arrangements of these communities work "in large measure through the abrasive force of gossip and envy and the knowledge that the abandoned poor are likely to be a real and present danger to better-off villagers" (Scott, p. 5). For example, I often attended wedding celebrations in Chin State and donated to the newlyweds out of a sense of obligation (and maybe some fear of gossip). Many community members help each other out of the fear of social repercussions, but I still believe that this fear is inextricably linked to a community love, a messy love that is concerned with survival.

For the remainder of this essay, I want to discuss this idea of community. I posit that the quality and size of community described above in Chin State as well as that described in Freire's work has greatly diminished in the global North and want to explore how we might go about resolving the metaphysical catastrophe that accompanies spiritual alienation in the global, economic "community" of which most of us are a part.

The metaphysical catastrophe

I opened this paper with an epigraph shared with me by a former student in response to my musings on community. We were in a teashop on the edge of the town where I taught in mountainous Chin State, and a cloud had floated through the windows. I had just finished an even less coherent reflection than above on how I felt like I was living "in community" for the first time in my life, struggling to articulate what that actually meant. He didn't respond right away, enjoying his milk tea. Once I had run out of words, he shared the parable that began this paper.

This simple parable always struck me as deeply true, though I felt I could never explain why. What was the link between happiness and living with the poor? Why is God with the poor and how should I understand that metaphysical conception of God? The answers always seemed too romanticized, abstract and/or incomplete. Then, almost ten years later, in my graduate program, I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (2005)* and felt like Freire connected the

dots between my experiences and explained the dialogical relationship between the physical catastrophe and the metaphysical – the material and spiritual – and how to liberate ourselves from imperialist oppression.

Like countless others, Freire's (2005) model of liberation made sense to me logically, ethically and spiritually. It reaffirmed and deepened my desire to live in *communion* with the oppressed, learn about the problems of the community through and with them in *dialogue* culminating in conscientization, and then creating a *praxis* to transform the oppression the community faces. In non-Freirean terms: his work helped me see how it was possible to fight against big systems through centering the languages, experiences and curiosities of individuals. His work showed me that the people on the ground have the answers and that if I wanted to save the world – and my spirit – I needed to learn from them and in return offer whatever knowledge and skills I have in support of their struggle.

I was particularly intrigued by Freire's concept of communion, which seemed undertheorized compared to the other elements of his work. Freire made clear that "only praxis in the context of communion makes conscientization a viable project" (1998, p. 513). That made intuitive sense to me. Of course the critical pedagogue would need to live alongside the oppressed, "in the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity," (Freire, 2005, p. 49), in the same material conditions, "to transform the objective reality which has made them these 'beings for another'" (Freire, 2005, p. 49). The critical pedagogue must enter into this communion not only to do away with the hierarchies of power existing between the pedagogue and the community or to better achieve dialogue, but also, perhaps most importantly, to free the life of the critical pedagogue from relying on the oppression of other human beings.

When one's life is dependent on the "concrete" suffering of another, they must not only change their life but also work towards transforming "the concrete situation that begets oppression" alongside the oppressed (Freire, 2005, p. 50). However, in the globalized economy where that oppression is so spread out and integral to almost every tool and resource we use to keep ourselves alive, making it almost impossible to separate ourselves from the oppression of others, then we find ourselves in the midst of a metaphysical catastrophe.

The idea resonated with my experience in Chin State, where my dependence on the global economy was much less and where I knew many of the people on whom my life depended, but this idea of communion is harder to grasp in the global North because the "concrete situation" of the new forms of imperialism are so hard to grasp. Even if the pedagogues and activists of the global North could locate the communities of the oppressed overseas mining the lithium for our computers, would they want to give up their lifestyle or social community in the global North to go and live with them?

In my graduate course on critical pedagogy where we read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I encountered resistance regarding this idea of communion. I remember naively discussing my excitement about the idea of communion: it's clear! We need to just give away our possessions and live with the poor! Some in the class rebuked that Freire didn't live his life that way and argued that my privilege as an American would make it impossible to live in communion with the oppressed.

In response to this second argument, I recall the second epigraph above and argue that living in communion requires a "profound rebirth," that it is a metaphysical phenomenon dialogically linked to relinquishing the material conditions trapping you in an unjust system of oppression. Of course, Freire, who infamously synthesized the teachings of Marx and Jesus Christ through his life and work (Kirylo, 2023), was not the first to argue that liberation relies on giving your possessions away to the poor or living in solidarity among the working class.

Here, I am not arguing that this rebirth is some magical, transcending experience providing one with a blank-slate of identity to refashion. I am simply arguing that it is possible to *live in the situation of the oppressed*, though it might not be comfortable. Apart from living in the geographical location, I think the defining characteristic of this situation is often poverty, which is simple enough (though not easy) to enter into. The cultural situation would be more

difficult, but it is not impossible to learn a new language and onto-epistemology. One's skin color will always play a role in how they're treated, but throwing one's passport into the dumpster after arriving in their new locale would help in evening the scales of national privilege.

The implications of this communion are radical – they always have been – but like the millionaire Pastors who explain away their wealth, critical scholars in the global North refuse to grapple with what this communion entails. Instead, they meet it with "anxiety and fear" (Maldonaldo-Torres, 2016, p. 8) for to make such a radical, *decolonizing* transformation would mean they'd sacrifice all the power and privileges gained at the expense of the oppressed.

We are

Many scholars, philosophers and religious leaders have articulated how we are all connected to each other and the natural world, imperial economic community not-withstanding. Thich Nhat Hanh gave a famous lecture where he observed the interconnected universe through a sheet of paper:

> We don't have to be a poet to see a tree in this small piece of paper. We can see a tree, and if we look a bit deeper we can also see the clouds, and the rain fall, that were necessary for the tree to grow. We can see the earth, the minerals of the earth nourishing the tree. But we also see the wood logger, who has cut down the tree. The logger had breakfast that morning, so the bread he ate that morning is in this piece of paper too. And the field of wheat from which the bread was made. We can also see the truck transporting the tree, the fuel needed for the truck to drive, and so on. So, if we look at a small piece of paper, we can see the whole universe in it. (Hanh and Verhoeven, 2022)

The wisdom of Hanh reveals the dialectical-material relationship between every living and material thing in existence. However, those relationships are not politically neutral. If he could have gone on, he may have observed how the fuel needed for the truck was pulled from the ground by the Saudi Arabian government. He may have then observed the treaty between Saudi Arabia and the United States that required the fuel to be purchased in dollars, which coerced all the countries of the world to trade in dollars which artificially inflated its value at the expense of all other currencies (Hickel, 2018). We could go on – is the lumber being extracted from the Amazonian rainforest, fueling climate change? Is the wood logger trapped in his working condition? If the whole universe is in the paper, then there is as much evil and suffering in that paper as there is good and love.

Maldonaldo-Torres rightfully argued how the Cartesian formulation, "I think, therefore I am" cuts us off from this interconnected reality and creates a "coloniality of being" (2007, p. 252). Not only does this formulation create a false dichotomy between being and thinking, but Maldonaldo-Torres (2007) demonstrated that historically the formulation has resulted also in the separation of beings and knowledges: "I think (others do not think, or do not think properly), therefore I am (others are-not, lack being, should not exist or are dispensable)" (p. 252). One way of being and knowing was considered correct, which not only created the dehumanizing coloniality of being, which Maldonaldo-Torres discusses at length, but also – I would argue – created a rift in the interconnectivity between knowledge and being which exacerbates the rift between peoples. We see this interconnectivity shown in Eastern philosophies such as that described by Thich Nhat Hanh above, in the onto-epistemology of Ubuntu (Wu, Eaton, Robinson-Morris, Wallace, & Han, 2018), and in the relationality emphasized by Indigenous ways of being (McCarty, Lee, Noguera, Yepa, & Nicholas, 2022). Considering these onto-epistemologies and Maldonaldo-Torres's argument, I'd like to reframe the Cartesian formulation of being to honor the interconnectivity that I find true and necessary for undoing the coloniality of being as well as working toward the end of imperialism: We are. That's it. There is no separation between being and thinking: they have always been interconnected. I am. However, none of us exists in isolation. We are created through the physical, social and spiritual worlds around us, like the sheet of paper Hanh describes.

The material oppression is interconnected with the coloniality of being, which manifests in the destruction of cultures, languages and ideas from the global South that often serve as vital alternatives to the dominant neoliberal ideology that drives the imperialism that is wrecking our collective planet. As Thich Nhat Hanh shows with the White Piece of paper, we in the global North are also connected to the *being* of these communities, but as Maldonado-Torres also shows, this connection is fractured and split through the coloniality of being, which not only values some ways of being over others but also seeks to destroy the ways of being, intermeshed with their relationship to the material world, that stand in the way of imperialism.

We are all interconnected and our existence manifests through those connections, but that existence is also more dependent on some connections than others. You could argue that my being is partly created from the friends I play pick-up football with on Wednesdays. They are a part of me. However, my life does not depend on them the same way it does on farmers who grow my food or laborers who make the clothes I wear or the devices I use to make a living. There are also those who suffer and are oppressed by capitalism, but whose oppression my life does not necessarily directly depend on. The unsheltered population of the town where I live cannot find shelter because of the lack of regulation in the housing market. This is indeed linked to the imperialist system and the investment of capital earned at the expense of others, but my life is not materially dependent on their suffering, except for in the most indirect, systemic sense.

In his essay, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," Singer (1972) presents the reader with a hypothetical situation regarding human connection: Imagine you walk past a girl drowning in a pond on your way to work. She is about to die, but in order to save her you'd need to jump in the pond in all your expensive work clothes, ruining them. You probably wouldn't think twice about going in to help her, even though that meant sacrificing the material possessions of your clothes. In other words, even though you're seemingly unconnected, if it was in your power to help her, you would, revealing a deeper moral connection we have with everyone. Singer goes on to say that if this principle were acted upon in our lives the world would be radically changed, as it takes "no account of proximity or distance" and "no distinction between cases in which I am the only person who could possibly do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position" (1972, pp. 231–232). Thus, it makes no difference whether the person you help is a neighborhood girl drowning in front of you or "a Bengali whose name [you] shall never know, a thousand miles away" (1972, p. 232). It makes no difference whether our governments are already giving aid to these countries, if those in them are suffering and we have the power to help them, then it is a moral–spiritual–imperative that we must. Morally, we are all connected.

I think this thought experiment stands on its own, but the reality of the situation is even more morally damning. The fact is that the Bengali is suffering because of the system that keeps us in the global North alive and feeds our lifestyles. How much of your clothing is made in Bangladesh? While writing this paper, evidence is coming out of a Western-backed coup in Bangladesh, potentially connected to the US military's geostrategic aims (Norton, 2024). Thus, in reality the suffering of the random Bengali is not equivalent to a girl who accidentally swam out too far. The imperialist system of which the global North sits atop is actively drowning the Bengali. I am drowning the Bengali, whether I want to or not. I am more connected to the Bengali than to the girl.

That said, it is important to note that the majority of the global North is also oppressed by the same machinations of imperialism that impoverishes the majority in the global South. For instance, the majority of workers in the United States can't afford a $500 emergency (Konish, 2023). Although imperialism disproportionately affects the cultures and languages of the global South, historically it has also destroyed the cultures and languages of European peasants who were entrapped by capitalism through enclosure (Hickel, 2020). The centralized ideological apparatus of global neoliberal imperialism continues to destroy the ways of being of the minorities and immigrants of global North countries in addition to the ways of being and knowing of those with more privileged identities in the working class.

There is an argument that global imperialism has led to the oppression of rural (and mostly White) communities, and their relatively more localized cultures, in the global North (Hedges, 2022). The way neoliberalism moved jobs from the United States overseas dually oppressed the communities they left and those they arrived in, where the regulations labor movements had fought for in the United States were absent. According to Chomsky, this gutting and stretching of the economic communities from the global North to the global South has resulted in growing fascism and the rise of figures like Donald Trump (Hedges, 2022).

Economic, social and spiritual community

At the beginning of the paper, I explained how the global North continues to extract money and resources from the global South. This material, laboral and financial extraction largely is what the economies of the global North, and the lives of all their inhabitants, depend on. Thus, each of us is in an *economic community* with an incredible tapestry of human beings spread through the world: those mining rare earth minerals used in our devices and those who build the tools for those miners to use, those toiling in the sweatshops that produce our clothes and those in other countries who dye the cloth, and countless others working in every industry spanning the globe. Those of us in the global North also depend on the suffering of the oppressed in the global South in more abstract ways, such as when the citizenry of entire countries have their currency – and all the work that it represents – devalued through structural adjustment to give our dollars more purchasing power (Hickel, 2018). Their work is fueling our lives.

I argue that we need to live in communion with that economic community in order to realize the rest of Freire's liberatory theory: to save ourselves and those we oppress through transforming the imperialist system. I'm not arguing that we need *more social* community to combat the epidemic of loneliness in the global North as written about in books such as *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2001). Rather, I'm arguing that we need *communion* within our *economic community.* Again, this does not mean that we need to be more social with those who we work with. It also doesn't mean that we need more economic development. It means that we need to live more in *social and spiritual community* with those in our economic community on whom our lives materially depend upon. As discussed above, that means living alongside them, in their situation and working together with them to solve our communal problems, which inevitably involves the oppression of the imperialist system.

This is another way of saying what Freire (2005) has already written. This is his argument in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. However, the communities Freire served in the context of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* were mostly those of peasants in the rural areas of Brazil. Like the community where I lived in Chin State, the *economic communities* of these peasants were much smaller. They were much closer to those who were oppressing them, such as the farm owners, and those whose lives depended on their oppression, such as those nearby who lived off the fruits of their labor. The global South is still filled with smaller economic communities, which is why Freire's pedagogy might be easier to enact in their contexts, but the global North is a different story. Yes, we still have farmers and factory workers, but the systems on which they, and the industries that employ them, depend on still rely much more on the labor and oppression of the global South than the other way around (Hickel, 2018). These transnational systems have separated our economic community, which in Freire's context was much more localized, in a way that has made the communion he called for much more difficult.

The separation and fragmentation of our economic community through the transnational community neocolonialism forced upon us has created a spiritual crisis in itself, a metaphysical catastrophe *in itself* regardless of the accompanying epistemicide, because *we are* all connected through one another. If we are indeed oppressing others in a concrete situation, no matter how complicated the new forms of neocolonialism try to hide it, then our *spiritual community* suffers. The *social communities* we try to create to sustain our souls in the global North can never save us, because our lives are still terribly dependent on the suffering of those in our *economic community.*

Communion with the oppressed or leave the system?

In the search for the communion necessary for liberation, I think there are two choices. The first is the way Freire suggested, to go and live in solidarity with the oppressed of our economic community. For those of us in the global North, this would entail migrating to the global South and living in communion with those at the bottom of our global economic system. Though most of us could probably find a way to afford the move – after all, we're meant to be poor afterward – the cultural and social transition would be much harder. The "rebirthing" process Freire calls for would require learning a new language and a completely new way of being. Many might argue that transition would be impossible for those of us privileged enough to have been brought up in the global North, especially those like me, who are White, male, cisgendered and straight. For many, it might be.

And who am I to make this argument from the security and comfort of the global North? Is it not hypocritical? All I can say in my defense is that leaving Myanmar with my family in the aftermath of the 2021 coup was the hardest thing I have ever done and that my partner and I discuss when to return almost daily. My family and friends fighting for a better future in that country do not need to commune with me in order to win, but I need them. I experienced communion when living in Chin State and when I deny that truth and the need to return to that communion, I destroy a part of my spirit.

Many critical pedagogues and decolonial scholars of the global North are working with communities who are oppressed and suffering in their countries. This work is important. However, the uncomfortable truth remains that it is still happening in a system that is built on the suffering of the global South. As Campbell and Aung (2024) argue, the social welfare programs of the global North are "built on the back of imperialist violence and exploitation elsewhere" (p. 5).

The second choice is one that Freire did not discuss and one that may be more aligned with decolonial scholarship: moving toward a non-hierarchical return to indigeneity. Here I interpret indigeneity the way Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) conceived of it when she wrote: "For all of us, becoming indigenous to place means living as if your children's future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it" (p. 9). This means living within the *ecological boundaries* of our planet, which our global economy was already exceeding twice over in 2020 (Hickel, 2020). In addition to dialoguing with one another (Freire, 2005), this return also requires dialoguing with all of the life and processes of the natural world which sustains our lives, as "the socialist goal of transcending the alienation of humanity is impossible to achieve. . .unless it coexists with the goal of transcending the alienation of nature" (Foster, 2009 and McLaren, 2013, p. 90).

This second choice is what I understand many anarchist and decolonial thinkers advocating for: building more autonomous, localized communities that rely less on the oppression of those we cannot see in our imperial, economic community. In the global North, these communities are often characterized as intentional communities, where a community tries its best to live "outside the system". However, almost all of these communities must still work within that imperial system somehow. They're not mining their own salt.

That said, if you were to create a spectrum where communities reliant on the imperial economy were on one side and autonomous communities living sustainably with the natural world were on the other, I believe far more communities of the global South would populate the autonomous side of the spectrum than those of the global North. Many of these communities have maintained links to Indigenous onto-epistemologies that have never fully been separated from the natural world. Relatedly, we in the North, with no understanding of the systems on which we depend, most of which we've exported across the world, are much more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than the more resilient communities of the South. In order to survive, we therefore rely on an ever more brutal iron grip on the global South. As such, according to de Sousa Santos (2018), "the ultimate goal" of "epistemologies of the South" is "to support autonomous practices of democratic radicalization in every dimension of individual and collective life" (p. 267). Many

communities of the South never let the fire of democratic radicalization go out, and now those of us in the North must learn from them.

Echoing this ultimate goal, McLaren (2013) writes that there is promise that "indigenous ways of being and knowing can be reimagined for a post-capitalist world" (p. 94). He theorizes a Freirean "ecopedagogy" that would "join up existing decolonial struggles, of all kinds, as natural allies in the battles against an unsustainable world capitalism" (2013, p. 95). The project of ecopedagogy, he writes, is guided by an "environmentalism of the poor" (Martinez-Alier, 2002; McLaren, 2013), which, in conjunction with preserving wilderness and living sustainably within our ecological boundaries, promotes "a material interest in the environment as a source and a requirement for livelihood" (2013, p. 96).

McLaren gives an example of the praxis of this ecopedagogy in the mountain town of Cheran, where the townspeople attempted to break away from the Mexican state to form their own autonomous community. The townspeople had to form their own citizen militia to protect their forests from illegal loggers protected by the drug cartels, defending "their ecological rights from capitalist exploitation linked with the worst forms of terror and violence" (2013, p. 97). Ashley South (2023) gave examples of this praxis in Myanmar, where ethnic armed groups are increasingly incorporating environmental stewardship and education into their fight for federalism and autonomy from the Myanmar State.

To walk either of these two paths requires an analysis of the economic, political, social and spiritual communities with which one is interconnected and building a dialogic liberatory praxis through those communities. The first path requires those in the global North to live with those in the global South and the second requires those in the global North to learn from those in the global South and from Indigenous communities across the world. Both paths should lead to a profound and continual rebirth where eternal happiness may be waiting.

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