

What if we used our breath as a tool for dismantling oppressive structures that have been erected within ourselves and our collective spaces? What would it feel and look like? In this piece, Makaanaka Tuwe explores impacts on our embodied presence as we navigate the world, life, movements, and our relationships.

Tending to the Roots: Collective Visualisations for the Future

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When the invitation to be a keynote panellist at the fifth Social Movements, Resistance, and Social Change (SMRSC) conference came, the moment felt full circle. The first time I had been in the space was in 2016, as a paper presenter and in the early stages of my master's research.¹ At the time, my work focused on representation, third culture kids, and digital activism. There was something about the digital sphere that had captivated me, not only as a tool for connectivity, but as a portal capable of transforming realities and creating new narratives. As I prepared for my presentation for the fifth SMRSC, I reflected on what had shifted over the last four years, especially in the six months leading to October 2020.

In the earlier part of the year, I had found myself unwell due to a culmination of burnout and years of distancing my body and how it felt as I navigated life. Burnout and fatigue are natural responses that our bodies and spirit can have. As teacher and author Sebene Selassie has shared, our issues are in our tissues and our bodies, and what they are

1 Makanaka Tuwe, *The Storytellers: Identity Narratives by NZ African Youth: A Participatory Visual Methodological Approach to Situating Identity, Migration and Representation* (MA thesis, Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, 2018).

perceived to represent become chosen or rejected objects.² There are certain anxieties that come with being hyper-aware of how we're chosen or rejected, especially when our natural inclination is to belong. Plus, a con of having an awareness of your social location, and the reaction that others have to it, is the inflammation of the flight or fight response. In a meditation on 'Reconciling Race, Gender, Sexuality and the Non-self', Valerie Mason-John shared the importance of discovering the emptiness of these identities by letting go of the meaning that we make of them, individually and collectively.³ In the dharma of the non-self is a lesson of seeing through the illusions of these constructs, to see them as the notions and states of mind that they are. It doesn't mean that I'm not Black. It doesn't mean that we spiritually bypass the inequalities present in our societies due to discrimination. Instead, it's an invitation to consider how our relationships with ourselves and each other are impacted by these meanings. As someone who has been racialised as Black, and who straddles the intersections of migrant, queer, and woman, the experience of burnout led to the exploration of the roots of these constructs and the ways they impact on how I and others who straddle similar intersections experience life.

Emerging from the ideas discussed in critical race theory, 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989.⁴ Intersectionality is interested in deep structural and systematic questions about discrimination and inequality. It describes how race, class, gender, and other characteristics 'intersect' and overlap one another, resulting in the marginalisation of peoples identified with those characteristics. These characteristics and classifications were constructed and construed to suit an

2 Sebene Selassie, 'Wonder & Mystery of Embodiment,' *Liberate*, <https://liberate.app.link/rnFmdpGohib>

3 In Buddhism, dharma means cosmic law and order, as expressed by the teachings of the Buddha. Valerie Mason-John speaks of the dharma as a tool for reconciling the meanings we've attached to certain identities: Valerie Mason-John, 'Reconciling Race, Gender, Sexuality and Non-Self,' *Liberate*, <https://liberate.app.link/rBdKzhIohib>

4 Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politic,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1 (1989): 139–167.

ideology that would fast-track supremacy, domination, and imperialism. The ongoing consequences are the policies, laws, structures, and practices that ultimately influence the discriminatory ways we interact with each other, whether it be racism, homophobia, sexism, or community exclusion.

By exploring how these meanings erode our wellbeing and relational matter, we can begin to create more space for advocacy and restorative and remedial practices that are geared towards equity.⁵ As *mwana wevhu*, or child of the soil, when I speak of space I am referring to the physical, the digital, the spiritual, and the value and belief systems that we uphold.⁶ At times, when we speak about power, we neglect the fact that a lot of structures are upheld by the value systems that we validate unconsciously through the principles that govern our life. In a workshop about value formation and the art of release, writer, scholar, and dreamer Amber McZeal spoke about the outward push for our actions being governed by racialised capitalism.⁷ Racialised capitalism is a concept coined by Cedric J Robinson in 1983 to describe how capitalism's perpetual accumulation of capital occurs by way of producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups. For capitalism to survive, it must exploit and prey on the unequal differentiation of human value. Hierarchies and constructs are created, leading us to question our worth and to base our values on things outside of our bodies and outside of the earth. So how do we transform these values? We do so by emancipating our minds through evaluating our value systems and tending to our roots.

Ancient Egyptians believed that everything starts with energy and spirit and manifests into the physical through the principle of correspondence: as above, so below; as internal, so external. They conceived the *wa ba ra*, or root, as being of the most importance, as stability and a steady foundation are necessary for enlightenment. The *neter*, *atua*, or element of nature

5 This language about the intention of intersectionality being about equity and not being hyper-focused on identity and representation was inspired by Jane Coaston, 'The Intersectionality Wars,' *Vox*, 28 May 2019.

6 Loosely translates to 'child of the soil' in Shona, one of Zimbabwe's official languages.

7 Amber McZeal, 'Biophilia, Value Formation, and the Art of Release,' *Rooted Global Village*, 2021.

associated with the root is Geb. Geb is central to the Kemetic creation story as he was one of Egypt's early rulers, with the earth called the house of Geb. Birthed from Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture), Geb allowed crops to grow. In the story of Geb I see the importance of nurturing and tending to our roots, as this is where our value system is located. I often find myself thinking about how our roots are influenced by how we treat and relate to each other. Our relationships are where we begin to nurture values and ways of being that inform how we are in the world. Through the relational matter we are offered a chance to heal the rupture in our connectivity that is caused by unloving systems. The relational matter is an offering to undo the distortion of connection to body, others, and land that oppression fuels.

When I found myself cycling through fogginess, exhaustion, and numbness, unable to show up in the ways I used to be able to, I was faced with rehabbing the roles I played that no longer resonated. This included re-evaluating my roles and responsibilities within the social change ecosystem.⁸ I began to reflect on collectivity, healing, and the futures we are walking into. Most times, because we need frontliners to protest, blockade, tend to different roles, and put our bodies on the line for causes, there's a subconscious distancing that occurs, one that disconnects us from the impacts that being active in movement spaces has on our mental and spiritual health. Tainui Stephens' notion of 'chronic kaupapa fatigue' encapsulates the realities of surviving and fighting Empire.⁹ Some of the interactions we have within movement spaces can result in being overworked or feeling morally rigid. This results in burnout, resentment, and disconnect.

What depletes us is not just long hours, but the tendencies of shame, anxiety, mistrust, competition, and perfectionism. It is the way in which these tendencies stifle joy: they prevent the capacity for collective creativity, experimentation, and transformation. What might create more room to move and breathe? What supports people to refuse the all-too-common

8 Deepa Iyer, 'Mapping Our Social Change Roles in Times of Crisis,' *Medium*, 2020.

9 Tainui Stephens, 'Chronic Kaupapa Fatigue,' *E-Tangata*, 11 July 2021.

traps of moralism, clarity, or perfectionism in favor of increasing collective power and creativity?¹⁰

At the core of the rupture in our connectivity and sense of belonging is shame. It fractures our relationships and informs how we relate to what is around us. During the time that I was reflecting on collectivity and healing, I was also observing the increased solidarity statements that were being made by brands, organisations, and individuals following the murders of George Floyd, Tony McDade, and Breonna Taylor. I was trying to pull my thoughts together about the disconnect between what was being said and the actions taking place, and how this disconnect impacted our relationships to ourselves and to each other. I could sense increased tension, hostility, and an overcompensation of sorts in my body as I went about my day. I found myself wondering, ‘How can we nurture sustainability, care, and a love ethic to tend to ourselves, each other, and the world?’ As bell hooks affirms, ‘A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well’.¹¹

As I unpacked this disconnect, I thought about how a lot of action looks optically good, but wondered, ‘How does it feel?’ The black squares that flooded timelines after Blackout Tuesday, among other things, left me with an image of someone projectile vomiting, except in this instance, instead of vomit it was solidarity—projectile solidarity. Organised by Jamila Thomas (senior director of marketing at Atlantic Records) and Brianna Agyemang (senior artist manager at Platoon), June 2020’s Blackout Tuesday was a call to the music industry to have a conversation about the collective actions needed to support the Black community. This was on the basis of the multi-billion-dollar industry profiting predominately from Black art. Initially, the hashtag *#theshowmustbepaused* was used, but as the movement gained momentum the hashtags began to include *#BlackLivesMatter*. Ultimately, this escalated into a digital allyship disaster. It was an unfortunate example

10 carla bergman and Nick Montgomery, *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* (Oakland: AK Press, 2017), 81.

11 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 87.

of what can happen when movements and language are co-opted. By tagging posts with the hashtags #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter, information about protests, donations, documentation of police violence, solidarity messages, and activist organisations were obscured. It was interesting that a movement that hadn't previously been as visible in the mainstream was driven to virality as soon as it was 'attached' to entertainment—a space where Black cultures continue to be commodified, often at the expense of the community. Also interesting to note was how our relationships with social media, brands, organisations, and each other had influenced this moment. On the one hand, brands and organisations need consumers to be aware of their stances on social-justice issues or risk being called out and cancelled. On the other hand, we need each other, brands, and organisations to perceive us in a particular way so that we can be seen as part of something, get a job, or maintain a position in society. It's this strange dance that occurs as each party tries to court the other. This dance calls to mind carla bergman and Nick Montgomery's observations on the insidious ways Empire attempts to render everything profitable and controllable, including our identities, relationships, and desires.¹²

As I sat with the notion of projectile solidarity, I began to note how it manifests as the reactionary pressure to say something about a phenomenon, and how it shows up as social-change language co-opted in marketing campaigns for profit, and in individual campaigns for social capital—whether it's pink washing, girl-boss feminism, or virtue signalling.¹³ As Zoe Samudzi and William C Anderson have observed, 'these energies have been co-opted into safer and more respectable means of effecting change'.¹⁴ As perception equals dollars, projectile solidarity fuels relations dictated by capitalistic intentions that make transactional ways of relating and seeing each other's plights feel inevitable. It arises from a value system that has

12 bergman and Montgomery, *Joyful Militancy*, 11.

13 Makaanaka Tuwe, 'Projectile Solidarity: What Happens When Social Capital, Social Media and Social Justice Collide?' *Pantograph Punch*, 7 June 2021.

14 Zoe Samudzi and William C. Anderson, *As Black as Resistance: Finding the Conditions for Liberation* (Oakland: AK Press, 2018), 14.

disconnected us from a commitment to dignity and respect for life. What happens in the aftermath of these blanket statements? Why do we not seek to explore what needs to be healed and restored?

My life's work and how I show up have shifted due to pursuing these lines of questioning and wondering. This includes what I chose to present at the conference. I initially thought I would focus on storytelling as a form of strategy, but I found myself flowing in the space where two of my rivers meet: collective wellness and social justice. I dived deeper into anti-oppressive education resources, and also into my work on embodied self-care, breath work, movement, and herbal essences. Self-care describes the activities and intentional action one takes to care for their mental, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing. The self is made up of family, community, ancestors, and the weaving of relationships that contribute to who we are. In my practice, when I refer to the self, I am encompassing the fullness of the web of these relationships and how deep care of self is also a deep care of them. It became clearer to me that tending to my roots by nurturing my body, my relationships, and my value systems isn't separate from social-justice action. I tapped into my body, a vessel that is a breathing ancestral library and memory bank. Before we have the language to articulate what we are moving through, it's the embodied experience that teaches us. Embodied refers to the 'biological and physical presence of our bodies, which are a necessary precondition for subjectivity, emotion, language, thought and social interaction'.¹⁵ We experience, navigate, and meet our lives through the embodied self, and our bodies and relationships are the tools that help to create and maintain the power dynamics that can arise between us. We learn through our bodies and relationships and hold the histories of our oppressions in our body and interactions. Social change is our wellbeing, as we not only need to see change, but we also need to experience and *feel* it in our bodies too. What if we used our breath as a tool for dismantling oppressive structures that have been erected within ourselves and our collective spaces? What would it feel and look like?

For social change to flow we cannot work in silos or by ourselves. We

15 Rae Johnson, *Embodied Social Justice* (Milton: Routledge, 2017), 4.

need to strengthen the tools and value systems that centre aroha. What if we were to view our messages, what we speak and share, as vibrations that have the power to carry and shift energy? What might happen if we use the spaces we occupy as portals for activating interactions and movements that are rooted in care and a love ethic? What would be possible if the principles of Ma'at and balance informed our structural frameworks?

It's in this space where I flow: valuing dreamtime as the beginning and truest source of knowledge; taking the time to dream and breathe activates me, getting me free on a cellular and relational level; meditating on how these dreams can be nurtured by the collective and utilised as a teleportation device for transporting us into the futures that we are calling in.

As I prepared for the conference, I thought about something I had shared with one of my sister elders about realising that the alchemist's most potent tool was breath. This shifted my presentation from storytelling as strategy to sharing about the importance of dreaming worlds that nurture and honour our breath, and which take into consideration our interdependence. As Audre Lorde affirms, 'in a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action'.¹⁶

16 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1984), 110.