Perspective Article

# TOWARD A LIBERATORY PEDAGOGY: A REFLEXIVE JOURNEY OF RELATIONAL CARE AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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*I offer a reflexive narrative of my pedagogical becoming grounded in critical pedagogy, liberation psychology, and decolonial thought. Drawing from my experiences of Western-centered colonial and sectarian schooling in Lebanon, migration to the United States and Canada, community organizing, and university teaching, I trace how unlearning, healing, and collective practice have shaped my approach to education as a relational and liberatory praxis. I introduce a course I have been developing, Transformative Praxis and Pluriversal Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing, designed for university and community settings and adaptable across local and international contexts. The course integrates grounding practices, dialogical reflection, analytical tools such as the Colonial Matrix of Power, and collaborative projects that invite students to map power, practice critical consciousness, and imagine alternative futures.*
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## 1. Context, Purpose, and Pedagogical Vision

This pedagogical model emerges from critical, liberatory, and decolonial frameworks that have shaped my learning, organizing, and teaching across classrooms, communities, and movements. Drawing from critical pedagogy, liberation psychology, and decolonial thought, the course is guided by traditions that are reciprocal, relational, accountable, and practical. These frameworks offer more than theoretical orientation. They provide a way of approaching education that centers lived experience, community, and liberation within the broader contexts of modernity and coloniality (see Appendix A for key terms).

Too often, education is treated as a one-way transfer of information, where an expert shares knowledge for students to absorb and reproduce. These traditional banking models tend to ignore how systems of power and oppression shape people's ways of knowing, doing, being, and connecting. In response to these limitations, I explore in this paper a different kind of educational praxis grounded in critical pedagogy and the problem-posing model (Freire, 2018), liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1996), decoloniality (Escobar, 2018; Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000), lived experience, and community building.

I begin the article by reflecting on my early experiences with rigid and colonial educational systems in Lebanon and Turtle Island (i.e. The United States and Canada), the impacts of

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displacement and migration, and the online counterspaces that provided me with opportunities for critical discussions and connection. These early experiences laid the foundation for my ongoing journey of unlearning, healing, teaching, research, organizing, and adopting liberatory, relational, and community-oriented praxis. Praxis is foundational to any form of knowledge creation and inquiry because it is a process that weaves together cyclical critical reflection and transformative action.

Building on that reflection, I explore pedagogical methods and relational practices based on a course I have been developing: *Transformative Praxis and the Pluriversal Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing*. I designed the course to be adaptable to both local and international contexts, as well as university and community settings, enabling participants to co-create knowledge and cultivate critical consciousness through reflection on systems of power, critical theories, and lived experience. The course also invites us to practice relational care and accountability, and to imagine new ways of knowing, doing, being, and connecting.

This paper is not a syllabus or a formal curriculum evaluation. It is based on my reflections of a pedagogical framework that is still unfolding and that is shaped by ongoing conversations, community organizing, facilitation, and my research on creating collectives of care, healing, resistance, and community building. I share my insights in the spirit of dialogue and shared learning, as one contribution among many to the broader attempts of reimagining education as a praxis of liberation. My hope is that others engaged in similar work will find something here to connect with, adapt, or build upon, as we continue to ask: What does it mean to learn and teach in ways that are relational, liberatory, and grounded in community building?

## 2. A Reflexive Narrative of Unlearning, Healing, and Pedagogical Becoming

What I share here are the results of years of unlearning, facilitating, organizing, and building community across Lebanon and Turtle Island (what is now known as the United States and Canada). This section of the article is not a linear autobiography but a reflection on how personal and community experiences have informed the development of a pedagogy grounded in relational care and accountability, resistance, and collective learning.

### *2.1 Positionality and Personal Narrative*

#### *2.1.1 Colonial Schooling in Lebanon*

My education in Lebanon was shaped by a banking model that combines a sectarian and a Western-based educational system. The curriculum was rigid and overloaded with more than 13 subjects per week taught in up to three languages. Classrooms relied heavily on memorization and Western curriculum, leaving little room for critical inquiry or different learning styles. In a society still recovering from fifteen years of civil war (1975-1990), the educational environment had little space for students like me: learners full of curiosity who needed time, care, and alternative teaching approaches to thrive.

The educational system was also heavely influenced by a sectarian political system that actively suppressed recent Lebanese history by excluding any discussion of the civil war and the

nation's post-independence period from school curricula (Barhouche, 2024, 2025). Yet we were taught about World War I and II. This emphasis reflected a broader Euro-American centric educational model, one that reproduced global colonial patterns by privileging Western narratives while marginalizing our own. By erasing contemporary history from the classroom, it produced a controlled form of collective amnesia that prevented students from critically engaging with the social, political, and sectarian forces that continue to shape everyday life (Barhouche, 2025).

Together, these experiences introduced me to the violence of epistemic hierarchy, where memorization trumped critical inquiry and those who didn't conform were marginalized. They planted early seeds of dissatisfaction with the system and the need to question and push back against the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000), a structure that continues to shape modern epistemologies.

### *2.1.2 Migration and the US Educational System*

When I moved to the US and attended high school in Florida, I struggled with English, classroom settings, written assignments, and the persistent feeling of being a foreigner. However, I was lucky to have teachers who responded with care and took extra time to accommodate my needs. For example, one teacher let me explain my assignments orally, and another coached me through drafts until I understood the expected format. Despite graduating with high grades, I often felt like an impostor, attributing success to luck rather than capability. Institutional recognition didn't erase the internalized harm caused by the same colonial systems. Yet these moments also taught me that flexible, relational, and student-centered pedagogical responses that are grounded in care and trust could fundamentally transform students' experiences of belonging and learning.

### *2.1.3 Digital Counterspaces and Early Critical Inquiry*

During my high school years, I also discovered something transformational: social media groups where cultural, political, and economic discussions flourished. These online communities were not constrained by restrictive social norms and were deeply grounded in lived experience, critical thinking, and accountability. They offered a space for conversations that I hadn't experienced before. As a recent Middle Eastern immigrant in a post-9/11 United States, I carried feelings of alienation and silence in many social settings. These counterspaces gave me a place to listen, express, and connect in ways that felt both liberating and affirming.

These exchanges sparked a shift in how I understood the world, even if my engagement at the time remained largely intellectual and theoretical. I began to enhance my critical thinking, though I had not yet connected it to my own positionality or to any sustainable practice of social justice. Still, these conversations marked a turning point. They planted the seeds for what would later grow into deeper commitments to solidarity, relational care, and liberatory praxis. In many ways, these digital counterspaces became my first classrooms of unlearning. They were spaces that opened me to a pluriverse of knowledge and community that would eventually shape my pedagogical and political commitments.

### *2.1.4 Applying Praxis through Activism, Healing, and Experiential Learning*

I returned to Lebanon after six years in the United States due to immigration barriers. Later that year, I enrolled in a BA program in psychology, drawn to its insights into human behavior and healing, while working and volunteering with several nonprofits.

My most meaningful education during this time unfolded in multiple spaces outside the classroom. For example, I worked as the volunteer and mobilization coordinator at *Greenpeace*, where I trained activists, helped organize non-violent direct actions, and collaborated with local and international grassroots networks. These experiences deepened my understanding of the power of collective action and the emotional labor of organizing. I learned that activism could be both strategic and deeply relational.

I also participated in programs like *Healing the Wounds of History* and *Relational Care* workshops, which offered spaces to explore personal and intergenerational trauma. These programs integrated theory with practice and combined conceptual reflection with group dialogue, storytelling, and applied relational simulations. They helped me understand healing not as an individual journey but as a relational and communal process rooted in safety, reciprocity, shared vulnerability, and meeting each other's relational needs.

After graduating, I joined a conflict transformation organization that worked alongside marginalized communities to promote social cohesion and challenge racism and sectarianism. I worked within several capacities with the organization, but one of the projects in particular stayed with me. I facilitated youth summer camp sessions that combined arts-based education and storytelling with critical dialogue on identity, leadership, perception, and social issues. These summer camps demonstrated how experiential and relational approaches, grounded in trust and reflection, could foster unlikely friendships, reduce prejudice, develop essential skills, and support youth in reclaiming their voice and agency.

This phase of my life was my initiation into praxis: the fusion of theory and action, of healing and organizing, and of applying what I was learning. While broader systemic change remained limited, these initiatives revealed how healing, solidarity, and resistance can begin in small and deeply relational spaces. They taught me that transformation is not only about outcomes but about the process itself: how we show up, how we relate, and how we imagine new ways of being, doing, knowing, and connecting.

## *2.2 Applying Praxis in Learning, Teaching, and Research*

### *2.2.1 Critical Learning Across Institutions and Movements*

By the time I returned to the United States to pursue my master's degrees, and later to Canada for my PhD, I had already gained several years of experience in community collaboration, anti-racist initiatives, capacity building, facilitation, and nonprofit work. I enrolled in graduate programs in Nonprofit Management and Conflict and Dispute Resolution, hoping to improve my skills while engaging more critically with decolonial frameworks for social transformation. I was especially eager to move beyond the paternalistic and colonial paradigms I had encountered in international development and nonprofit sectors.

These programs combined classroom learning with applied experiences through internships, consulting, and community-based projects. While this experiential approach improved my skills in areas like governance and mediation, the curriculum often remained confined to liberal and neoliberal logics. It rarely addressed the structural and historical roots of the very conflicts and inequities we were being trained to navigate, including systemic racism, imperialism, and colonial legacies.

What helped me challenge these limitations were the alternative spaces I joined outside the formal classroom. I joined racialized student groups and became active in decolonial and critical working groups within the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) and graduate school. Although embedded within neoliberal institutions, the counterspaces offered room for relational care, dialogue, solidarity, and advocacy. They helped me and many others navigate the compounded experience of being racialized and immigrant students in the United States and Canada, particularly during the first Trump presidency and onward, when anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, anti-immigrant, and anti-Palestinian rhetoric and policies became more overt and enforced.

After completing my master's degrees, I returned to Lebanon for a year to work before beginning my PhD in Community Psychology in Canada. That year coincided with a convergence of crises in 2019: the October 17 Uprising against the deepening economic collapse and sectarian political corruption, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut port explosion. I experienced and witnessed both devastation and resilience, as communities organized mutual aid, demanded justice, and navigated collective trauma (Barhouche, 2024). This period further sharpened my understanding of structural violence and deepened my commitment to relational and liberatory forms of care, learning, and action.

When I began my PhD in community psychology, I was drawn to its emphasis on community-based participatory methods and social justice-oriented scholarship. The program offered a space to reflect on how power, positionality, and resistance shape systems, knowledge, and community life, and how theory can be grounded in grassroots struggle. This critical foundation became even more vital during the ongoing genocide in Gaza (2023–), a moment that exposed the stark disconnect between institutional values and lived commitments to justice. While some faculty in the program spoke out and helped create spaces for critical dialogue and resistance, the university as a whole remained complicit; issuing vague and depoliticized statements while following instructions from the Ontarian and Canadian governments to ignore or suppress the rights of students and faculty to protest, assemble, and express solidarity.

As a graduate board association member, I actively pushed for the board to advocate for student rights and protections, especially amid state-led efforts to criminalize pro-Palestinian advocacy. Despite internal agreement within the graduate board, public statements and institutional action were repeatedly delayed until my term ended, after which little movement about the issue followed. Still, these moments taught me that academic institutions, while constrained by neoliberal and colonial logics, can also contain spaces of refusal, resistance, and care. Faculty, students, and union members organized together, refusing complicity and creating alternative forms of support and solidarity. This period deepened my critique of institutional power and oppression, and reaffirmed my belief in collective, relational, and justice-oriented forms of learning and action.

During this time, I also discovered that I am neurodivergent and had been living with undiagnosed ADHD. I came to understand that my earlier academic struggles were not due to a

lack of ability, but to the reality of systems that were never designed with my ways of thinking, learning, and processing in mind.

### *2.2.2. Integration of Learning, Organizing, and Educating*

As an instructor, I brought my organizing background and lived experience into the classroom, aiming to create spaces that were relational, critical, reflective, and politically grounded. At the University of Oregon, I taught undergraduate courses in nonprofit management and public policy. My approach emphasized dialogue, critical engagement, and co-created classroom agreements that guided how we learned together. I introduced students to frameworks in nonprofit governance and public administration while inviting them to interrogate the broader political, racial, and economic contexts in which these institutions operate. Through guided discussions, reflective questions, and collaborative projects, students connected theoretical knowledge to lived realities. Some extended these conversations beyond class, seeking deeper reflections and discussions about the overall political situation.

At Wilfrid Laurier University, I taught community psychology within a community service-learning framework. Students were introduced to concepts such as empowerment, marginalization, and social determinants of health, and then partnered with local organizations to apply these ideas in practice. The community psychology's service-learning program (experiential learning) made possible an integrated learning environment where theory and practice informed one another. Students participated in structured reflections and facilitated discussions about their placements, allowing them to grapple with their positionality, deepen their analysis, and learn from real-life tensions and insights.

Across both contexts, I approached education as a collective and relational process. My pedagogy centered on student experience, critical consciousness, experiential learning, and ethical engagement with community. I treated learning not as transmission, but as co-inquiry grounded in justice, accountability, and care.

## 3. Theoretical Foundations

This pedagogical model is emerged from critical, liberatory, and decolonial frameworks that shaped my learning, organizing, and teaching across classrooms, communities, and movements. Drawing from critical pedagogy, liberation psychology, and decolonial thought, the course is guided by traditions that are reciprocal, relational, accountable, and practical. These frameworks offer more than theoretical orientation; they provide a way of approaching education that centers lived experience, community, and liberation.

At the heart of this model is Paulo Freire's problem posing approach to education as a praxis of liberation (Freire, 2018). Freire challenges the banking model that treats learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, he invites us to see people as conscious and relational agents with the capacity to transform their realities. This vision informs the course's commitment to dialogical, experiential, and culturally relevant learning. Knowledge is understood not as fixed or objective, but as shaped through history, struggle, and dialogue (Freire, 2018). Students are encouraged to bring their lived experiences into the learning space not as side notes, but as

essential sources of insight. In this approach, praxis is not a final outcome to be achieved. It is a living and ongoing process that we engage in together through critical reflection and transformative action.

Liberation psychology, first developed by Ignacio Martín Baró, understands healing and community wellbeing as a collective and political process inseparable from history (Martín-Baró, 1996). It calls us to remember what has been erased, to challenge dominant ideologies, and to reclaim agency through grounded reflection and action. This framework resonates deeply with my work in community based healing and facilitation. It shapes the course's integration of historical memory, emotion, and resistance into how we engage with learning. Within this perspective, personal insight and structural critique are interconnected, and healing becomes both a psychological and political act.

Decolonial thought challenges the colonial patterns that continue to shape knowledge, institutions, and subjectivity. Decolonial scholars and practitioners call for pluriversality, the recognition of multiple coexisting ways of knowing grounded in community, land, memory, and resistance (Escobar, 2018; Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000). Their insights frame this course as a refusal of epistemic hierarchy and an invitation to honor the knowledges that have been silenced or devalued. This is not only a critique of colonial and neoliberal systems. It is also a practice of imagining what education can become when rooted in relation, struggle, and the possibility of something otherwise.

Together, these frameworks shape the pedagogical commitments of the course. They inform its dialogical structure, its grounding in relational ethics, and its orientation toward collective healing and transformation. More than anything, they affirm that education is not simply about acquiring knowledge, but about building the conditions for liberation, critical consciousness, and care.

## 4. Pedagogical Methods and Relational Practices (and Course Design)

The course intentionally weaves together practices designed to support experiential learning, collective reflection and critical consciousness, and relational and collaborative co-creation. These methods bring the course's core principles, such as relationality, dialogue, care, and accountability into everyday classroom experiences, shaping each session's flow and the overall learning journey. They move beyond technical strategies, becoming authentic relational practices grounded in ethical commitments and community-building.

### *4.1 Orientation, Community Building, and Shared Principles*

The course begins with a participatory orientation that establishes an ethical and relational foundation. Instead of a traditional syllabus walkthrough, the first session invites students into a collaborative dialogue informed by critical pedagogy (Freire, 2018), decolonial thought (Escobar, 2018; Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000), liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1996), and our own experiences in youth and community-based facilitation. This sets the tone for a learning space characterized by possibility, openness, and transformation.

In this initial session, students and the facilitators co-create the classroom goals, principles, processes, and expectations. The process involves collective reflection on core community principles, such as relationality, respect and care, intentionality and imagination, reciprocity and solidarity, accountability, reflexivity and critical consciousness, dialogue and conflict, and praxis. These principles serve as flexible guides rather than rigid rules, allowing students to shape how they will engage and interact. Drawing from past experiences, this collaborative approach fosters greater trust, ownership, and empowerment. Students engage with the following sample reflective questions.

*Small Group Reflections:*

- Share something about yourself. What are you hoping to gain from this course?
- How do colonialism, racism, or other systems of oppression (such as classism, sexism, anti-2SLGBTQ+, sectarianism, ableism, etc.) impact you personally or your community?

*Collective Dialogues for Class Agreements:*

- How will we commit to showing up in this space?
- How will we approach conflict and tension as they arise?
- How can we cultivate a learning environment grounded in relational care, dialogue, and critical analysis?

These discussions help establish shared agreements that the class revisits and revises as needed, ensuring a deeper sense of student ownership and ongoing mutual accountability and relational sustainability.

### *4.2 Weekly Grounding Ceremonies*

Each session begins and ends with a grounding ritual. These may include guided somatic breathing, moments of silence, collective intention-setting, and/or check-ins. These practices are not merely symbolic. They affirm that learning is not only an intellectual task but also an emotional, spiritual, and relational process. Grounding rituals help participants transition into shared space with presence and purpose. They create a rhythm of entry and exit that supports collective attentiveness, emotional regulation, and a sense of connection to self and others. Over time, these ceremonies become a shared practice of care, offering moments to pause, realign, and root the learning experience and space in embodied awareness.

### *4.3 Reflective Practice and Dialogical Learning*

Each week, students engage in structured reflection and collaborative dialogue to deepen their understanding of the course's core ideas. Reflective prompts encourage participants to connect theoretical insights with their lived experiences. These reflections are not just about personal expression. They offer a space to engage discomfort, notice contradictions, and examine assumptions. This process lays the groundwork for developing critical consciousness, a key element in the course's commitment to praxis and transformation.

Building on this individual reflection, students participate in group dialogues grounded in mutual inquiry, deep listening, and a willingness to sit with complexity and difference. These conversations create opportunities to surface tensions, clarify perspectives, and develop shared insights. Dialogues unfold both in the full classroom and in smaller peer-based circles of five.

These smaller groups allow for deeper connection, more intimate discussion, and a stronger sense of accountability and care.

Facilitators are also part of this process. Rather than taking on the role of distant experts, they join students in reflecting on their own learning and unlearning journeys. By sharing experiences and naming their own tensions and questions, facilitators help make abstract ideas more relatable. For instance, I was teaching a public policy course in the US when Donald Trump won the 2016 election, and the classroom atmosphere was charged with confusion, tension, and grief. Many students were processing the results in real time, struggling to make sense of what the election meant for their communities and futures. Rather than moving forward with the planned lesson, I paused the class and opened a space for a collective conversation.

I shared my own experience as an immigrant in the United States and reflected on what the election might mean for people like me. I also drew connections to the political dynamics in Lebanon, highlighting how corruption and polarizing rhetoric, whether racist or sectarian, are used to divide communities and distract from unmet social and economic needs. In naming my own tensions, questions, and fears, I helped frame the moment as a systemic issue rather than a partisan one. This example demonstrates how facilitators can participate in the reflective process, modeling vulnerability and helping students connect abstract concepts of power, ideology, and structural harm to lived experience.

### *4.4 Building a Shared Foundation*

The first part of the course invites students to co-create a shared foundation for thinking, feeling, and acting together. It creates space to engage with ideas drawn from critical theory, decolonial theory, liberation psychology, and community-based traditions, approaching them not as distant theories but as living tools for understanding our lives, communities, and collective struggles.

We begin with core concepts such as subjectivity, agency, ideology, cultural hegemony, action potency, critical consciousness, and praxis (see Appendix A). , examining how they intersect to shed light on the complex connections between modernity and coloniality. These ideas are explored relationally rather than in isolation, encouraging students to trace how histories, identities, and conditions are shaped by broader systems of power and meaning.

Through the writings and legacies of Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Ignacio Martín-Baró, and Aníbal Quijano, students analyze how oppressive systems are reproduced not only through institutions but also through daily practices, beliefs, and relationships. Building on this foundation, the course examines how these enduring structures manifest within dominant ideological systems that continue to shape our world, including neoliberalism, globalization, nationalism, sectarianism, patriarchy, racism, and the ongoing coloniality of Euro-American dominance. These systems are studied not as abstractions but as lived realities that shape how people relate to one another, to knowledge, and to the world itself.

From the outset, the course distinguishes between reforms that adjust existing systems and transformative forms of change grounded in liberatory praxis. This distinction serves as a critical lens through which students evaluate justice-oriented initiatives, discourses, and movements, cultivating the capacity to imagine change that moves beyond reform toward structural

transformation and collective healing. To ground these ideas in lived experience, students engage with the following sample of reflective questions.

*Subjectivity*

- How do my histories, experiences, and social locations shape how I perceive and interpret the world?
- In what ways have I internalized certain perspectives as "normal" or "universal"?

*Agency and Action Potency*

- How do external systems (political, institutional, cultural) shape what I believe is possible for me to do?
- What supports or practices strengthen my sense of agency and action potency in the face of systemic barriers?

*Positionality, Power, and Oppression*

- Where do I see power operating visibly and invisibly in my daily life or community?
- How do internalized forms of oppression or privilege shape my relationships and worldview?

Through these reflections, students begin to recognize the complex interplay between personal experience and structural forces. This awareness sets the stage for the next phase of the course, where we turn from reflection to analysis, introducing practical frameworks that help us trace how power operates across visible, hidden, and internalized dimensions of social life.

### *4.5 Analytical Tools and Power Mapping (and presentation)*

This phase of the course invites students to deepen their critical engagement by working with practical tools to analyze and map systems of power and oppression. Across several sessions, students are introduced to frameworks such as the Power Cube (Gaventa, 2006) and Colonial Matrix of Power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) analysis tools. These tools are used to explore how power operates across visible, hidden, and internalized dimensions within social, institutional, and cultural contexts. Students are encouraged to apply these frameworks to their own lives and communities, tracing how power and oppression flows through discourse, systems, institutions, relationships, and experiences.

To help make these dynamics more concrete, I use visual frameworks to map how systems of power intersect and reproduce one another across different domains. In Figure 1, I present one of these visuals, the Interwoven Colonial and Sectarian Matrices of Power (CMP–SMP), which extends Mignolo and Walsh's (2018) concept of the Colonial Matrix of Power to the Lebanese context. In this adaptation, I trace how colonial legacies intertwine with sectarian structures to shape authority, economy, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity. The framework also serves as an entry point for exploring how these systems sustain domination and how processes of conscientisation, delinking, and liberation might unfold within them.

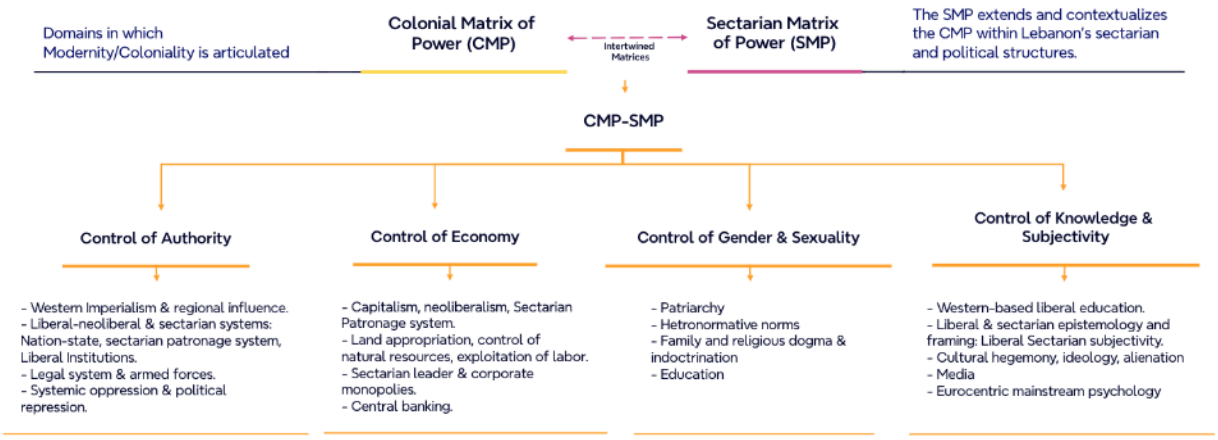


**Figure 1. Analytical Framework of the Intertwined Colonial and Sectarian Matrices of Power (CMP–SMP) in global and Lebanese context.**

Alongside these structural tools, we further explore liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1996) and how it was implemented in the course and how it could be implemented in different settings and contexts. Students explore liberation psychology as a complementary framework that centers the psychological and relational dimensions of power. Drawing on the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró and other liberation and decolonial scholars, we explore how ideology, trauma, and internalized oppression shape a person's sense of self, agency, and possibility for change. The course emphasizes the difference between restrictive forms of agency, those shaped by domination and survival, and more generative forms of agency that emerge through collective healing, resistance, and solidarity. In this view, liberation is not only a political or structural goal, it is also a deeply relational process of rehumanization and transformation.

For instance, within the Lebanese context, sectarian and liberal subjectivities often confine people's capacity to imagine alternatives to existing systems. Sectarian affiliation can offer belonging and protection, yet it also normalizes dependence on patronage networks and sustains the illusion that reform within the sectarian system is possible. Similarly, liberal discourses of individual freedom and meritocracy promote self-reliance while obscuring structural inequality and collective responsibility. In both cases, agency becomes restricted to navigating or improving the system rather than transforming it. This limits the ability to act with and for others toward liberation (i.e. action potency) by encouraging accommodation instead of delinking from oppressive frameworks and reclaiming ancestral, communal, and relational ways of knowing, doing, being, connecting, and healing.

This phase also sets the stage for the course's first project: a student-led group presentation. Working in small teams, students select a real-world issue, struggle, or movement and apply one or more of the frameworks introduced in class. Whether working with the Colonial Matrix of Power, liberation psychology, or the Power Cube, students are asked to examine how power functions in relation to their chosen topic. This project asks students to move beyond abstract theory and toward grounded and engaged analysis that considers political, economic, cultural,

social, and psychological dimensions. The goal is not just to critique, but to reflect on the deeper conditions that enable or resist oppression.

Students are invited to explore a range of themes such as radical imagination, decolonization in education, mutual aid, community-based resistance, alternative economies, or pluriversal ways of knowing and organizing. Topics are linked to real movements like the Black Panther Party, the Zapatistas, El Cambalache, the Doughnut Economy, Indigenous resurgence, or local mutual aid initiatives. Each group investigates why the movement or initiative emerged, the context it grew from, its internal and external challenges, and what we might learn from it for our own work.

Groups are free to choose a format that fits their vision. Presentations may take the form of a podcast, a zine, a short video, an animation, or a more traditional slide deck. Students are expected to conduct additional research and, where possible, include interviews or community perspectives. These projects are not only assessed for clarity and content, but also for creativity, ethical care, and the ability to connect critical insight with transformative practice. The aim is to make theory come alive and to turn analysis into something felt, embodied, and shared.

To support the development of their group projects, students are encouraged to use the following sample of guiding questions as they analyze their chosen issue, movement, or initiative.

*Framing and Context*

- What historical, political, or social conditions gave rise to this struggle?
- Who is centered or excluded in this context?

*Power, Control, and Subjectivity*

- How do structures of authority, economy, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjctivity interact to sustain control?
- Where is power visible, hidden, or internalized?

*Agency and Action Potency*

- How do individuals or communities navigate restrictive vs generative agency?
- What practices expand or limit their action space?

*Resistance, Healing, and Transformation*

- How does this movement resist or reconfigure systems of domination?
- What new ways of knowing, being, or relating emerge?

These questions invite students to think across structural and subjective dimensions of power, connecting analysis with lived experience, and to practice linking critical understanding to liberatory action.

### *4.6 Integration through Practice*

In the final phase of the course, students participate in a collaborative group assignment that brings together the learning, reflection, and practice they have built throughout the term. The assignment unfolds across three structured phases and three analytical lenses, Global, National, and Local, integrating structural analysis, imaginative design, and collective negotiation. Its purpose is to explore how neoliberalism and the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being intersect in real and tangible ways across different scales. Working in small groups, students choose one area of concern that resonates with them, such as healthcare, housing,

environmental harm, or systemic impoverishment, and begin tracing how their topic is shaped by overlapping systems of power and oppression.

Using tools like the Colonial Matrix of Power, Gaventa's Power Cube, and liberation psychology, groups engage in structural analysis while also paying attention to lived experience and collective memory. These tools are not used as abstract models but as guides for understanding how power moves through institutions, narratives, and everyday life. As they explore these dynamics, students are also asked to imagine otherwise, to sketch out futures grounded in justice, care, and plural ways of being that reflect the kind of world they would want to live in and co-create.

Students first work together to define and frame their issue, then envision transformative responses that address the root causes of the harm, and finally join other groups to negotiate shared strategies, drawing on the collective wisdom of the classroom. Throughout this process, they practice skills in collaboration, decision-making, negotiation, relational care and accountability, and critical imagination. The emphasis is not only on what is being said but on how students are working together, how they are listening, showing up, and caring for one another through the process.

By the end of this phase, students will have moved through a full cycle of reflection, analysis, and reimagination. More importantly, they will have done so in a way that is relational and grounded in possibility. This is not simply an academic exercise. It is a rehearsal for the kinds of collective work we need to do beyond the classroom. Work that requires courage, care, creativity, and a deep sense of shared responsibility.

For instance, when examining food, housing, or employment insecurity from a local perspective, students begin with the Power Cube to identify visible power (municipal bylaws, zoning, employer practices) and hidden power (developers, philanthropic funders, discourses of deservingness). At the national level, they trace how federal policies on agriculture, housing, immigration, and labor shape these patterns. Through a global lens, the CMP reveals how colonial and corporate systems of extraction structure exploitation and inequality. Liberation psychology then helps students explore how communities internalize or resist these forces, how subjectivity and agency are shaped under chronic instability, and what collective practices of care already exist. This multi-level analysis makes visible how these insecurities are produced by intersecting global, national, and local power relations.

Students often discover that the global, national, and local lenses generate solutions that do not align, and in some cases directly contradict one another. This struggle is intentional. Decolonial and liberation frameworks remind us that collective action rarely emerges from neat consensus but from working through conflict, asymmetries, and competing interests. The negotiation phase therefore becomes a core part of the learning process, inviting students to practice relational accountability, to sit with uncertainty, and to explore how groups can move even when clarity or agreement is incomplete. The goal is not to produce a single unified solution but to learn how to stay in dialogue and collaboration, build partial bridges, practice relational accountability, and identify possible next steps together.

## 5. Relational Safeguards and Facilitator Responsibility

This course is built on a deep commitment to emotional safety, autonomy, and relational care. From the beginning, students are reminded that participation is always voluntary. No one is expected to share experiences or emotions that feel unsafe or overly vulnerable. Multiple forms of engagement are welcomed, and each person's boundaries are honored without question or pressure.

Whenever possible, sessions are co-facilitated by two to three facilitators. This model allows for greater attentiveness to group dynamics and offers students different points of connection and support. It also helps facilitators respond more effectively to the complex, emotional, and often unpredictable nature of the learning process. Students are encouraged to seek support from the facilitator they feel most comfortable with, and facilitators remain in close communication to ensure that all participants are held with care and attention.

When tensions or conflicts arise, facilitators intervene with care rather than avoidance. The goal is not to shut down difficult conversations, but to hold space for reflection, dialogue, and collective and/or individual processing. In those moments, the group returns to its shared principles of care, mutual respect, accountability, and a commitment to growing through discomfort rather than bypassing it.

It is important to acknowledge that many educators within traditional academic settings are not supported or trained in relational facilitation. This often makes it difficult to hold emotionally charged or politically complex conversations in ways that are genuinely supportive. In contrast, this course asks more of its facilitators. They are expected to have engaged in their own journeys of healing, reflection, and unlearning. Experience in facilitating difficult conversations in community spaces is considered essential. The depth and integrity of this course depend not only on the ideas it introduces but also on the relational skill, self-awareness, and ethical responsibility of those who guide it.

## 6. Final Thoughts

This course is not just a curriculum. It is a living invitation to reimagine education as a space of collective inquiry, care, and transformation. Grounded in the traditions of critical pedagogy, decolonial theory, liberation psychology, and relational practice, it grows out of years of learning alongside communities, movements, and students who have taught me that education is never neutral. It is always shaped by the conditions we inherit, the struggles we carry, and the futures we dare to imagine.

Each phase of the course is designed with intention, not to deliver content, but to nurture deeper ways of seeing, feeling, and acting. Through cycles of reflection, dialogue, and practice, students are invited to examine the forces that shape their worlds and to step into their own agency as co-creators of knowledge and change. This work is not easy. It asks us to sit with discomfort, to unlearn what we thought we knew, and to show up to one another with honesty, humility, and care.

What holds all of this together is a deep commitment to relationality. We learn through each other, not just through ideas. We make space for complexity, for emotion, for silence, for

contradiction. Knowledge in this course is not something we consume. It is something we hold, question, stretch, and build together, through stories, through struggle, and through the slow work of trust.

At a time when so much of education feels disconnected from the urgencies of life, this course tries to do something different. It holds open a space for community, for imagination, and for the kind of learning that moves us closer to justice. It does not pretend to offer easy answers or perfect solutions. It is one offering among many, shaped by a particular moment, context, and set of commitments.

If there is one hope this course carries, it is that we begin to ask different questions. That we listen more deeply, that we care more fiercely, and that we remember we are not alone. In the face of systems that divide and dehumanize, this course is a quiet but steady refusal. A refusal to give up on each other. A refusal to stop imagining otherwise. And a reminder that even in the smallest of classrooms, we can begin to practice the futures we long for.

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# APPENDIX A
# GLOSSARY

**Subjectivity:** The ways people come to understand themselves and the world through their histories, identities, social positions, and lived experiences.

**Pluriversality:** The understanding that many worlds, knowledge systems, and ways of being can coexist rather than being reduced to a single universal worldview.

**Praxis:** The ongoing cycle of reflection and action through which people critically understand their conditions and work toward social transformation.

**Relationality:** An approach that sees individuals, knowledge, and social change as fundamentally shaped through relationships, interdependence, and collective responsibility.

**Colonial Matrix of Power:** A global system of domination that organizes power through interconnected control of economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge or subjectivity.

**Action Potency:** A person or community's felt capacity to act, influence change, and move collectively toward liberation within or against structural constraints.

**Conscientization:** The process of developing critical consciousness of the political and structural forces shaping one's lived conditions, often through reflection, dialogue, and collective action.

**Delinking:** A practice in decolonial thought of breaking from dominant colonial ways of knowing, being, and relating in order to reclaim suppressed or alternative epistemologies and lifeways.

**Coloniality:** The ongoing patterns of power, knowledge, and social organization that persist after formal colonialism and continue to shape institutions, subjectivities, and global hierarchies.

**Modernity:** A worldview and historical project rooted in Western colonial expansion that promotes the myth of progress, universality, and rationality while marginalizing other ways of knowing, being, and organizing social life.