

Critical Essay: Radical Love

Part I: A Radical Ethic of Care

I am honored to be an active participant in this year's Sound Your Truth: Dreaming Out Loud – Art as a Bridge to What Comes Next. Additionally, I am honored to bring forth and speak on the themes of radical love as addressed by Dr. Demond Hill in his passage, “An In the Meantime, In Between Time Type of Love.” Held annually on or around George Floyd's birthday (10/14/1973), Sound Your Truth is an interactive evening of creative sharing, artistic expression and communal healing, hosted on the SUNY New Paltz campus to amplify and center underrepresented voices. Posed alongside a multitude of questions, previous Sound Your Truth events included themes such as *Emergency* (“How might we move from emergency to emergence?”), *Courage* (“How might we live courageously each day?”) and *Unmuted* (“What do we all need to hear?”). In the words of Anthony Dandridge, lecturer of the Black Studies department, this year's theme builds on last year's *Unmuted theme* by “not just lifting voices but channeling them toward imagining the world we want to create. [This] will position art as an active bridge to the future, as future-oriented, inclusive, rooted in justice, and infused with joy.” As an artist, I firmly believe in the power of art to evoke and manifest our deepest desires for a world grounded in love, interdependency and care.

Additionally, Anthony asked to take this year's theme a step further by introducing and holding space for a radical ethic of care. The inception of Sound Your Truth was born out of the horrifying death of George Floyd due to police brutality. With the recent passing of Charlie Kirk, a right-wing media personality, tensions in the United States are excruciatingly mounting higher with each passing day. When Anthony learned George Floyd and Charlie Kirk share the same birthday (10/14, 1973 and 1993), he offered his initial reflection during one of our planning meetings (comprised of students and faculty members):

On one hand, George Floyd's death ignited a global movement for justice. On the other hand, Charlie Kirk represents a powerful political current that actively resists the very calls for justice that Floyd's memory evokes. That juxtaposition underscores the urgency of our work: how do we hold the truth of these contradictions without collapsing into despair or division?

With these thoughts in mind, he brought forth the possibility of Sound Your Truth holding space for a radical ethic of care, by mentioning further this is a position that:

[Refuses] the reductive “us versus them” binary, while never ignoring real histories of harm experienced by all folks, and inequities that impact all folks for

better and worse. In African and diasporic traditions, survival and liberation have often been bound up with the practice of seeing the human even in adversaries, as a way of staying spiritually and ethically grounded. That approach echoes Audre Lorde's warning not to use the master's tools, and Desmond Tutu's ubuntu, where my humanity is bound up with yours, even when yours seeks to diminish mine.

The tension and RISK here is real, reaching across can feel like betrayal if misread as excusing harm. But what we would be naming is not erasure; it's the possibility that the historically marginalized, precisely because of their histories of survival and communal care, might model and LEAD, a form of dialogue that transcends the usual cultural power dynamics. Can we shift into a space where dialogue is not about winning, but about seeing? If so, the act of oppressed people leading that shift would itself be both a healing gesture and a political intervention.

Those of us present in the meeting unanimously approved of this shift in direction, while at the same time, were aware of the tension it could potentially bring. Why would we, or rather, why should we, listen and/or see the "other side" when there is so much hurt, pain and trauma being caused to our side? In response, Anthony pointed to his email signature that features one of the many famous quotes by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. The idea that we are separate, isolated beings with no deeper connection to one another is the single greatest threat to our happiness and security." With that quote in mind, we felt ready to hold space for one another in this way. At the onset of the upcoming event, Anthony will expound on these notions of radical care to propose a shift in Sound Your Truth's direction as we are continuously "generating a collaborative flow between disciplines and communities at a time when existing structures [are] crumbling" (The Eddy).

For my part in co-hosting the introductions, I will be speaking on radical love as defined by Dr. Demond Hill. As we are in between time before liberation, this is the moment to "transform the unlivable moments into livable moments through love" (hooks 1). As bell hooks mentioned in her essay "Love as the Practice of Freedom," "without an ethic of love, we are often seduced into continued allegiance to systems of domination." In other words, we must be careful not to unknowingly use the master's tools on the path to liberation (we must not perpetuate the same trauma inflicted on us by others). By introducing and infusing love in our efforts to liberate ourselves from oppression and exploitation, we then begin our transformation and manifestation into a world where children are no longer imagining themselves as superheroes but are in fact the superheroes of their present and future.

What I love most about this passage by Hill is how he makes it a point to express that this form of radical love starts with our inner child (before radiating to our fellow humans and

community). What Hill says here is true – this current capitalistic society has a thorough way of suppressing our inner child full of dreams, wonders and passions of the world. Not to mention how advertisers take advantage of our inner child to sell us products we *think* will bring us joy, but in actuality, they just lead to more spending and more emptiness. We become too bogged down to daydream, to be curious and to desire the life we really want. In *Rest is Resistance* by Tricia Hersey, Hersey mentions how “grind culture thrives on us remaining in our heads, unable to allow the technology of our divine bodies to soar and develop. There is massive knowledge and wisdom lying dormant in our exhausted and weary bodies and hearts” (Hersey 96).

Reconnecting with our inner child by having moments such as Sound Your Truth to fully stop (and take a short period of rest amidst the hustle and grind culture of school and life), to listen (to our inner child constantly communicating to us) and reflect back (to share what world our inner child envisions and who we are in that world). Such moments like this can serve as inspiration for us to find daily time to continue to daydream, journal and wonder. Hersey would define this moment as a “stealing time back” that is being stolen from us via grind culture. Just as we could nature journal to reconnect with the environment around us, we can daydream journal too to reconnect with our younger version “full of innocence, curiosity and boundless imagination.” Lauren, the main character from Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, is a prime example of someone who is a dreamer physically manifesting their desires: “I’m learning to fly, to levitate myself. No one is teaching me. I’m just learning on my own, little by little, dream lesson by dream lesson” (Butler 13).

As I plan to comment on radical love to our community and add to Anthony’s approach of a radical ethic of care, I look forward to sharing my inner child with the community as a testimony of my journey to reconnect with and love my inner child (in addition to sharing how my daydreams are manifesting in the world in ways I could not have imagined). I can’t wait to hear from our communities what their inner child is saying, and how we can collectively dream, heal and manifest together. What do we want to see come forth, for ourselves and for the world?

Part II: Sound Your Truth 2025

Sound Your Truth was everything I thought it would be and more. Or better yet, everything I wanted and needed, *and more*. The day began and ended with community, “bubbling love,” “radical love,” celebration, dreaming out loud, art, tea, food, laughter, smiles, photographs, nestling close in the cold, and upliftment. As a couple of us gathered early in the afternoon to set up the event, I witnessed our inner child at play and themes of interdependency exemplified in real time; Emilie’s care in handing out gardening gloves for our protection while carrying the wooden boards that Leilani’s precise eye adjusted to perfection to compliment the arrangement of the stone seats on the quad. Sarah Berry’s giddiness in The Max and Nadia Shepard Recital Hall testing out which drums to bring that would musically center and ground the event. Sarah Wyman’s radiant smile and immediate happiness upon seeing us raise the banners; this led her to instantly pull out her phone to take pictures to document, preserve and cherish the moment forever. Emilie and I later picking up food at Yadis Empanadas and one of

the workers mentioning in excitement how they will be in attendance soon for the event, not just as part of the audience, but as an artist printmaking at the table that Joss set up. Anthony using the microphone to project his voice as he spoke to students passing by: “Come to Sound Your Truth 2025, beginning at 4:30pm. Come share your dreams for the future with others. There will be free food and activities. Did I mention...there will be free food?!” Music from the playlist I created, shaped around notions of community and gathering, playing softly in the background.

Best friends try to tell you the truth always
People always look for someone else to blame
Best friends keep you smiling on rainy days
Why do fools always have something to say?
Oh, yeah

Seems like they only see me on ugly days
Even though it hurts and I still feel shame
Best friends try to warn you about the game

No matter where you are, I'll be there when you need
I'll be there for you, when you are there for me, yeah
No matter where you are, I'll be there when you need
I'll be there for you, when you are there for me

- Lyrics from the song “Friends” by the band SAULT

With all these preparations in place, the stage was set for a restorative and energizing evening and night. As the paper scrolls were rolled out in conjunction with the drums officiating the event, Anthony began with a land acknowledgment and a brief humming session. Usually, while I deeply appreciate land acknowledgements and the naming of the Indigenous tribes who have cultivated the land we reside on and who still live amongst us today, I typically find them to be quite performative in nature. I often ask myself, “How can we do more to repair the injustices of the past?” For example, I believe California Governor Gavin Newsom “transferring over 40 acres of the Mount Whitney Fish Hatchery to the Fort Independence Indian Community, marking California Department of Fish and Wildlife’s first-ever land return to a California Native American Tribe” is a good step forward to mending relationships with our Native American tribes. However, during Anthony’s land acknowledgement, for the first time I felt as though the land and its inhabitants (both our fellow humans and our non-human living beings) were honored through voice – channeled through him. The way he acknowledged the history of the land and the naming of the violence and oppression that occurred towards the Stockbridge-Munsee, Espopus and Lenape tribes was commanding. It was as if the wind itself was lifting and carrying his voice. The feeling of being close to a powerful cascading waterfall came to my mind (it also helped that we were overlooking The Shawangunk Ridge). He called these tribes and their ancestors into our dream space. He called on the African Americans who have also cultivated this land. He called on the trees, the waters, the mountains, the animals, and the insects.

Next, he evoked the name and spirit of George Floyd, whose life and death reverberated across every corner of the earth. He declared his death as being a catalyst of global awareness for the continued racism, violence, oppression and exploitation towards Black and African American individuals that persist today. In addition, Anthony evoked the name and spirit of Charlie Kirk, whose life and recent death also reverberated across the country (and as I mentioned above, who shares the same birthday as George Floyd). He called on the event to be one of a radical ethic of care, one that will allow everyone to voice their thoughts and feelings without judgement or follow-ups. I believe it would be best to address my complete thoughts on this at the end, after I finish sharing my experiences of the rest of the event.

As co-host of Sound Your Truth 2025, I felt called to speak on this year's theme of Dreaming Out Loud: Art as a Bridge to What Comes Next. To prepare for my introduction, I spent a couple of days daydreaming and reflecting on my life and my experiences. I thought about when I was dreaming out loud with my big brother Tobenna; we were kids on our bunk beds talking about wanting to live in Los Angeles, California one day, due to our shared love of Kobe Bryant and the Los Angeles Lakers. I thought about when I was finally living in Los Angeles with Tobenna, how I was then fervently dreaming out loud of being in an environment such as this one here in SUNY New Paltz, in a space where I would be able to truly cultivate my artistic practice in service to others. I felt the power of dreaming out loud and manifesting goals and desires (most importantly, our purposes) into reality. I thought about the power of art and how it has not only had an immediate impact on my life, but across the history of the earth, and forevermore. Stepping into the role of a co-host and speaker, Andrea's invitation for me to share all these thoughts and feelings was healing for me. As I spoke about the power of dreaming out loud and the power of art, in addition to evoking the likes of Sojourner Truth, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Muhammad Ali, (a transcript of the full speech is at the end), I felt my inner child leaping for joy, excited to share in this moment with others.

The rest of the night was the main event we had been waiting for. Students came to the mic to share their dreams, their fears, and their desires. Other students rapped, sang, danced, or recited a pre-written spoken word piece. I was reminded of Danez Smith's "Dinosaurs in the Hood" when hearing students share the type of world they not only wanted to see but wanted to manifest and strive for. One story that especially stood out to me was a first-generation student sharing how hard his parents worked for him to be in the position that he is in today. His story is the perfect example of the brand Kids of Immigrants' slogan – we are our parents' wildest dreams.

This movie is about a neighborhood of royal folks —

children of slaves & immigrants & addicts & exiles — saving their town

from real-ass dinosaurs (Smith, “Dinosaurs in the Hood” 15-17).

As a graduate student observing this group of mainly undergraduate students come to the stage to share their vulnerability, I was reminded of when I was an undergraduate student participating in a similar event. My event was titled Loyola Rising: it was a student-led movement dedicated to highlighting police brutality, gun violence, and their intersections with Black lives; our events at Loyola University were held on April 19, in memory of Freddie Gray’s death through police brutality. The same thoughts and feelings the students were dreaming out loud were what we were saying seven years ago. While that did make me feeling emotional, as I thought to myself, “has any progress been made at all?”, I created a new empowering thought and affirmation: although it could true that everything externally is the same and has not changed, internally within our community, there has been so much change going on. We are still committed to challenge and push against the system, and are increasingly doing so together in community, not isolation. We are making a lot of strides towards liberation.

Surrounding the students dreaming out loud were tables set up for our community to drink fresh tea from (with the leaves sourced from the Eco Art Lab), tea bags and scrolls for them to write their dreams on (for those who did not want to share verbally but still wanted to contribute their essence on paper), printmaking tables, and informational tables on ways to be involved and support the community. It was blissful for those hours, even after the event when we were returning all equipment and materials to our respective homes. We all gave each other hugs, hi-fives, smiles and well wishes into the blistering night.

Part III: Reflections

In one of my 3 for 3 write-ups, I posed the question, “Do you think this approach of “us all,” of radical love, is paramount? Or do you believe that focusing on our Black, Brown and Indigenous communities who are and have been oppressed is more important in this moment?” As I reflect on Sound Your Truth 2025, I find that I believe in the former; radical love is paramount in this time. This is not to say that we are not focusing on our Black, Brown and Indigenous communities all. In the words of Hill, this theme is not defined as accepting oppression, rather “it is a defiance against oppression, injustice and hatred. It is a “pure refusal to accept the suffering of others. [It] is an unwavering commitment to standing in solidarity with the marginalized and advocating for their liberation.”

As I was evoking Audre Lorde during my introduction, I was thinking about her quote “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.” What then are the new tools that would destroy the master’s house? It seems to me the answer is apparent: some of our tools include dreaming out loud, radical love (recognizing our collective connectedness), self-love (specifically in the form of loving our inner child), and storytelling (especially oral storytelling). These are the new tools that will dismantle the master’s house. Perhaps one day I will put

together an art show with these new tools on display, as my work is calling for healing, for community, for care, for presence, for responsibility.

References

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Appendix

Transcript of my Sound Your Truth 2025 introduction:

Welcome to SYT 2025. My name is Ikechukwu Sharpe, MFA first year in Photography. I am honored to open the 5th iteration of this incredible gathering of voices and would like to thank everyone, past, present, and future who have shared and will share their time, presence, care, creativity and energy to make this day continuously possible.

The theme of this year's event is Dreaming Out Loud: Art as Bridge to What Comes Next. Being that we are in an academic setting, we gotta like...very briefly unpack this theme, starting with the action of dreaming out loud.

There is power to dream out loud; to verbally express our desires and ambitions with ourselves and others. To hear ourselves share our dreams makes them more concrete and real. We know this though – we know I Have a Dream by MLK Jr., we know I'm The Greatest by Muhammad Ali, we know Ain't I A Woman by our dear friend Sojourner Truth.

Not only is there power in dreaming out loud, but there is power in our voice and in our breath as Anthony just demonstrated. As a side note, trees need carbon dioxide to live, so as you pass through a tree, breathe on it. Give them life as they give us life.

Our inner child is dreaming fervently. Our bodies are our own GPS device to a life worth living, filled with massive knowledge and wisdom, eager and ready to share. So, thank you to everyone who will be coming up here to dream out loud with their inner child. We need to hear your dreams and deepest desires to create the life we and future generations must exist in.

To center this act of dreaming out loud, this segue way of art as a bridge, I want to bring in our friend Audre Lorde to this space:

[Art] is not only dream and vision: it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.

We know the power of art. First of all, everything around us and in us is art, from the galaxies to the stars, to the planets, to the forests, to our nonhuman living beings, to the plants, to ourselves...and our cells.

By drawing on the power of art to bring our cells out, together, we will see a path forward. Better yet, we already have a path. 5 years of that with SYT. Now it's just building the bridge to the next part of the journey.

And we do this by what we will see now from you all, your dreams, your dances, your poems, your art, your voice. So, as you hear what others are saying and doing, write it down afterwards. Talk with those afterwards and share what moved you. Remember their dreams. Write down yours.

That being said, let us now co-create. Ailah and Azmir, please take it away.