

Bảo Nguyen

Theories of Understanding - Inequality, Positionality, and Social Change

**an exercise in speaking honestly through imagining the creation of trees - *Bảo (& P.F.)***

*[3 pm on the 4th library floor, listening to "Shadow of Mine", peacefully the sun shines through picture windows, writing while watching the trees]*

*do we really know how much it takes to be a creator?*

*to make every **small** decision*

*derive sums from parts*

[how can i understand myself as a creator]

*through exact ratios of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen*

*coloring precise shades of sage and beige*

*controlling the spin of Earth*

*so sunrays nourish each of these leaves*

[watching the change required in my home]

*to imagine the position of its swaying*

*in the wind, every branch end and its various splitting points*

[as i fail to resolve it... yet]

*shaping each cloud so raindrops fall to water every root*

*deciding which bark should decay first*

*what day and night should look like*

*to match unique plants of a million needs*

*under the same shadow*

[my family conflicts compresses  
me to a broken core]

*the design of this Tree was  
meant to endlessly expand and grow*

[my unresolved traumas  
to inform my future]

*as holds a need to know what will hold its roots  
stable without being too deep in and risk burning*

[its imprints in every future vision  
left my agency in every future decision]

*by Earth's core!  
remember to water and care for it—  
in full fruition, we fear  
it could cover the whole atmosphere—*

[this is my work]

*if we could create the one Tree  
to overshadow the rest, would we—  
from its new heights to the next  
exponentially asking for more—*

*if that Tree's shadows abuses its space*

*kill the others, making it*

*so we feel the Earth*

*wasn't meant for anything else but*

[to be "cared" for...]

*we should question if we should  
nurture this Tree blindly*

[i hear the ghosts of dying flowers]

[as i consumed these too  
not knowing better]

*these damned old (English) Ivies—schools  
of ‘em set their sights so high—  
what’s enough is a standard unattainable*

*we can’t help but hate ourselves*

*as creators we lost control  
to reach them, rein them in*

*only when it hurts  
and only then, at this point  
do we even want to-*

*[how much in us is enough?]*

*Darwin’s law feels innate*

*part of “the natural order”*

*for one Tree to feed, breed itself  
over-indulgantly, the process  
almost-sentient*

*what in the blazes have we created*

*[how do we change its course?]*

[so when others speak of change]

[i can’t help but sneer and scoff]

[as if I am any more of an insider  
to this knowledge—]

[they taught me to emulate a culture]

[that’s not mine  
make me believe it is  
make me entitled to a false idea]

[make me hate myself and others for trying  
to be someone we were never...  
only now do i understand]

[the pen is my escape]

*for this great Tree  
the order is dog after dog  
and we feast*

[from the East and the West]

*to become dogs ourselves*

*one day we'll decide  
to cut it down*

[forgiveness needs to bleed from me  
from us to the roots]

*make room for the growing flowers,  
the beavers, and their plans for a village  
three hundred years later*

*design a fresh stem*

[as if we can't survive without it—]

*you will hold responsible for your part—*

[i hold grudges too strongly]

*in this grand creation*

*[the concepts are shaping us too]*

[and my one wish for changing how i am is to believe]

*one day you will cover the world in sage green  
your mini strokes on the canvas  
still a hole where our visions won't*

[in giving heart and faith  
that we do all want love for another]

*be realized and keep humility now*

*let the next creators take direction to branch  
out to learn to love*

[it's a dangerous wish to]

*choose to sit by the window, too many do...  
watch as creators overgrow their trees in hubris  
spread their strokes too vast*

[leave myself emptier, more ambiguous]

*competing for space  
on seemingly confined canvas—*

[i only wanted autonomy in defining myself...]

*sitting is a stroke too  
one that extends the shading*

[to confine my body on my own terms]

*stopping a new kind of growth—*

*[i wander as much as i create  
i hate what i create  
i create what i love]*

*—it will be ok*

[as a repentor]

*the dark shadows exists within us*

[i broke free  
as a wanderer]

*don't hold it back  
but stop pretending this Tree was inevitable*

*[if we believe we can create  
isn't that almost enough for change?]*

*power is a heady thing*

[my growth will never  
let myself be completely resolved—]

*perhaps the one Tree can extend its shade  
and soak all the sunlight  
perhaps its creator intended it this way...*

*[does that make it more deserving?]*

*care not compare*

[it will tangle all my future hang-ups]

*currencies of pain, time, and effort*

[has already bound all my past ones]

*in the circumstance we were made to believe*

*claim community  
for if you don't, we will only hate  
the places we were born  
the seed that fertilized us  
and who we will become*

[in the one incoherent mess that is me]

*[No]*

*taking responsibility, we are as much as we are not*

[i realized we had no Future in]

*for what has been and what will be*

[only imagining our bodies]

*so cut this tree down*

[as a figment of the Past]

*shred its bark and leaves into paper*

[to learn more i pushed myself to]

*inscribe our honest truths on it  
and learn to love studying it*

[understand more]

*to build birch groves and  
pines to care  
for each other and our Earth*

[because i drew my connection to people]

*towards just worlds*

[a sturdy stroke grew to a branch]

[each truths are just

[full of integrity–]

bad structures maintained by imperfect people

[because i believe in my agency

that we must hold responsible and find complicit  
through self-reflection and action]

to make what i can't change now

*[in spirit, are we strong enough to pursue this?]*

hoping it'll come back around]

*all relationships goes two ways*

[i saw my role in others' lives  
the incremental impacts]

*between creators*

[drew eight more rings

*and the Earth  
and Mother Nature*

*in need of ways of trusting more*

*in folding wooden bridges from the papers*

*across fear which once ruled our hearts  
in creation and destruction*

*[i dedicate my life to learn  
how to love others  
how to be a guide  
coming from little faith–]*

*sometimes trees just burn  
and we are hard on ourselves*

*without understanding the ashes–*

*so our ashy strokes became a mirror*

in my circles of thirteen]

[those ones stronger and more binding–]

[i feel a healing peace]

[with our truths  
the interconnectedness  
of the lives we live]

[stemming from that place  
i want to trust myself]

[without burning my visions–  
to hold myself together]

[creating evergreen justice  
and i, a sage fending off the burning-  
out with the nihilism!]

*an understood body in reflecting  
the honest truths of others*

*rather than some false sanctity of the Tree*

*[i admit i must be  
all this, all at once]*

[without expectations and the hubris  
thinking i could've controlled  
the scope of this whole canvas]

*[i learned not everything  
has to be in place to try  
to move something  
sometimes the attempt is enough  
to learn more and try again]*

*[i want for the world what i want for me  
a love for learning to spark curiosity  
to learn each other and ourselves deeply  
having the spaces to transform our hurts]*

*[i believe in the possibilities  
that we are capable of  
anything happening  
taking every action, every decision  
i can imagine and express worlds safely  
where i rationalize theft  
justify murder  
be at peace with betrayal]*

*and great grief– so i can!  
imagine worlds where  
the urges of hurts  
have no place to emerge  
where my joys and love can be  
shared in speaking honestly  
these worlds surface  
in taking action  
i create meaning in my life  
in acts of love that are ours  
this is my charge]*

*[3 am in a windowless brick room, listening to “Hammers”, peacefully the snores of a loved one steady me, writing with my last conscious feelings]*

Artist Statement:

1. Why did you turn to poetry to better express your views on these three theories of understanding?

I turned to poetry to better express my views on these three theories of understanding, because poetry has always been my favorite outlet for expressing my thoughts and feelings about everything. Poetry has been a constant tool in my life to make sense and process events, and is how I've come to understand and define loose labels like repentor and wanderer to describe parts of my identity. All of my poetry speaks together and are in communication with one another, so to understand these terms I would charge you to read "I Wander after Repenting". A disclaimer that I will leave here is that P.F. is an alias that I take up in my poetry. This allows me to avoid being identified and separate myself from the interpretation of my poems. This usually happens in the form of taking on a different voice and style of writing when I write in that mode/being. However, because this is a much more personal piece, I attempted to write, still embodying P.F. as much as I was embodying myself, so you can interpret this poem through both of ourselves.

2. What were the symbolic ideas that you drew from in your poem and how do you connect them to your theory of social inequity, your theory of positionality in a social context, and your theory of social change? How do you see all of those three theories come together in this piece?

This poem starts with a reflection of the physical world that was in front of me when I was writing this poem before getting into what I imagined from what I saw. I drew out these ideas from looking out of a window in the Goddard library at a tree and pretending like I had to create it from scratch. From its molecular structures to imagining the ways it would interact with other things around it, I started to understand that this kind of imagination of creating something was part of what I used to think was what it meant to be an agent of social change. Through being raised in my family and the shadows of past and current conflicts that follow me, I hold a lot of doubt in myself to be an agent of social change, because I believed that I had to work towards this kind of change alone within my family and make all of these seemingly small decisions on what the future should look like. Rather, there's a new idea that emerges through the poem prompting us to think of what envisioning futures collectively could look like and how to reconceptualize being an agent of social change through humility. This doubt was one of the biggest things I needed to engage with and question how to build back the faith in my ability to create and affect social change. This is why in my poem, I take a long-sighted approach to understanding social change, because I don't believe that the impact our lives will create can amount to anything more than ripples. In

the long run though, I sought to prompt the design and action in the mind that three hundred years later, flower, beavers, and villages can still thrive, love, and coexist, turning competition for self to care for our futures.

In the poem, I also wrote about a Tree and it becomes a representation and critique of the end goal of everything we want out of life in this kind of capitalistic competition with one another. I try to bring us face to face with the endless growth and the intentional creation of all kinds of inequalities as a means of being honest with the hate we direct onto ourselves and the ignoring of the signs of self-destructive behaviors and beliefs. I didn't want to blame each other for what we do to each other, because the circumstances of the beliefs and practices we hold are a result of how historical conflicts and generational traumas inform and limit the options of what we can believe and practice. These long-rooted historical processes have been passed down generations and dictate the ways we operate in the world to reproduce the same inequalities if we don't engage in critical interrogation of ourselves and our roles in the world. With the latter half of this belief, I still hold ourselves responsible for recognizing this and deliberating taking steps to justify and perhaps actually cut down this Tree. I recognize that our pursuit of this Tree is not inevitable or natural, and in the work I've done, I seek to dedicate myself to continually challenge the foundation that the ideologies of planting and growing this one Tree for so long holds. This comes in the form of learning more honestly and critically about myself and others, which is the role of education in my life and how I believe that my practices are a form of social change as well.

I once remember seeing a chart with the eight roles of agents of social change, but while I don't remember the exact names of each, I do remember I resonated with the roles of creating spaces for community bonds and being a visionary for what a just future can look like. In my practices as a mentor and my own personal life, these roles are clear in the ways I've made spaces for trust and grappling the harder things in life. I wanted space to reshape our hurts, and in the final stanzas of the poem, I end it with clear beliefs inspired from my practices and what I learned about myself, my praxis, and community-engaged work.

### 3. Acknowledgements

Many appreciations to the CYES program for the last four years; in many ways, engaging with the students, professors, old scholars and our ideas about the world has been like therapy for me. Being able to do this has been a healing journey and I will take these ideas and practices in every future pursuit I take, wandering the world.