

A Critical Theory of Social Inequality: From Structural Harm to Collective Liberation

Social inequality is not a natural occurrence or a series of isolated events, it's a deliberately maintained system of power that thrives on disconnection, disposability, and control. Inequality persists because the systems that produce it are deeply invested in keeping people misinformed, isolated from one another, and resigned to the belief that change is either impossible or someone else's job. The dominant structures of power—capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism—require not only economic exploitation, but also emotional detachment and educational disempowerment to sustain themselves.

Too often, mainstream responses to inequality frame the problem as one of individual ignorance or moral failure. The belief that education alone—or rather, information alone—can solve inequality assumes that people make unjust choices simply because they don't know better. This idea flattens the complexity of oppression and assumes that the existing system is neutral, only corrupted by bad actors. In reality, systems of inequality are designed to reproduce themselves, not to be reformed through better data or good intentions. This is where many traditional academic and institutional frameworks fall short: they overemphasize rational knowledge while ignoring relational knowledge—trust, care, lived experience, and community wisdom.

In contrast, I draw on frameworks of mutual aid and education as liberation to understand and challenge inequality. Mutual aid, as theorized by organizers and activists like Dean Spade, is not charity, it's collective survival, rooted in solidarity rather than saviorism. It recognizes that the state often withholds or mismanages resources and that communities must build alternative systems of care and redistribution to survive and thrive. Education, similarly, must be reframed not as the transmission of state-approved knowledge, but as a liberatory process grounded in

dialogue, trust, and the reimagining of power. bell hooks writes that “education as the practice of freedom” requires us to teach in a way that empowers people to name their experiences and reshape the world around them. This isn’t just about classrooms, it’s about all the spaces where people gather, question, and dream together

One of the most insidious myths propping up inequality is the narrative of meritocracy, the idea that everyone has a fair chance, and those who struggle simply aren’t working hard enough. This belief isn’t just false; it’s harmful. It hides the structural barriers that marginalize people and shifts the blame onto individuals. For example, when people lack access to reproductive healthcare, accurate sex education, or basic information about their rights, the dominant narrative suggests it’s their own fault for not seeking it out. But access is never neutral. The withholding of information, the shaming of curiosity, and the punishment of those who speak up are all tools of control. Meanwhile, people are pitted against each other—blaming one another for their struggles, competing for resources, or judging each other’s life choices—rather than critiquing the systems that produce inequality in the first place. This division is by design. When we are busy fighting one another, we are not organizing together. The system wins when we are isolated; it fears solidarity, care, and collective power. Reclaiming those connections is a necessary act of resistance.

Social inequality is maintained not only through economic systems like capitalism but through the social norms that teach people not to trust each other, not to ask questions, and not to imagine something better. This is where agency matters. While individuals alone cannot dismantle systemic injustice, they *can* engage in acts of collective resistance and relational repair. Building community trust, creating non-judgemental spaces for learning, and

redistributing resources—material, emotional, informational—are all acts of defiance against the logic of exploitation.

My framework for understanding inequality resists binaries between structure and agency. It recognizes while structural forces shape our conditions, people are not powerless within them. The key is to shift our focus from institutional validation to solidarity with those beside us. Mutual aid and liberatory education are not mere tactics; they're ways of being that reject hierarchy and scarcity in favor of shared responsibility and radical possibility.

Social inequality is real, ongoing, and devastating, but it is not inevitable. It's designed, and what is designed can be dismantled. The work of justice isn't about fixing broken systems so they function more efficiently. It's about building new systems altogether, ones rooted in trust, care, consent, and liberation. That work is slow, relational, and often invisible to those looking for dramatic revolutions. But it's already happening, in quiet moments of courage and connection, where people choose each other over the systems meant to keep them apart. The forces that uphold inequality thrive on disconnection and division; they want us blaming each other, mistrusting one another, competing rather than collaborating. But every time we refuse that logic—every time we choose solidarity over separation, over silence, over the myth we must go it alone—we move closer to collective liberation.

Addendum (May 2026)

Since writing this a year ago, my understanding of inequality has expanded to more fully account for the ways it operates not only through large-scale structures, but through everyday social dynamics. I continue to see inequality as deeply structural, but I find I now pay closer attention to how it is also reproduced through feelings—through stigma, discomfort, and the subtle pressures that shape whether people feel able to see support or ask questions. Access is not

only about what's materially available, but about what feels possible within a given social environment.

This has deepened my understanding of mutual aid and liberatory education as practices that must engage not only with redistribution, but with relational conditions. Care is not simply about providing resources; it also involves creating conditions where people can engage without fear of judgement or exposure. As a result, I now think of inequality as something sustained not only through systems of scarcity and control, but through limitations on how people are able to show up, participate, and be seen.

A Critical Theory of Social Change: Choosing Each Other, Again and Again

My senior year of high school, I went to Target with my best friend to shop for dorm room supplies. We were walking through aisles of towels and storage bins when the conversation shifted—suddenly we were talking about sex. Quietly, of course, we weren't being loud or disruptive, just speaking softly enough that no one nearby could hear. We talked about sex toys, about what we were curious about, what we wanted, what we were nervous about. I hadn't had sex yet, and I remember feeling both slightly exposed and deeply seen. There was no shame in her voice, no awkwardness. Just care. The kind of care that doesn't often come from classrooms, sex ed programs, or doctors' offices. That moment stayed with me, not because we figured everything out, but because it reminded me how powerful it is to speak without fear and to be listened to with care rather than judgment.

That's what social change means to me, not always a dramatic rupture, but sometimes a quiet reorientation: someone choosing to ask, and someone else choosing to stay. I believe social change begins in relationships, when people turn toward each other instead of away. We're

taught to treat knowledge as something individual and shameful, to believe our confusion is personal failure. But confusion is part of learning. And learning is most powerful when it's shared. When we create conditions for people to be curious, uncertain, and still held, we are practicing a different world.

adrienne maree brown writes, "Everything is about relationships, critical connections; chaos is an essential process that we need to engage... ." Her words remind me that transformation isn't about control, it's about connection, uncertainty, and our willingness to stay engaged when things feel messy. Change doesn't emerge from perfection or distance; it comes from presence. It comes from trusting each other to be honest, from choosing dialogue over silence, even when the conversation is uncomfortable. I don't think of social change as something we impose from above. I think of it as something that emerges between people, in the space where care, curiosity, and shared risk-taking live. Change begins when we take each other seriously, share what we know without shame, and trust that being in relationship is itself a form of resistance.

That's the kind of leadership I believe in, not authority, not expertise for its own sake, but the kind that earns trust through consistency, care, and presence. I'm not interested in being a perfect organizer or educator. I'm interested in being someone people feel safe coming to with the questions they're afraid to ask anywhere else. Someone who listens first, who says "me too" before offering answers, who treats knowledge not as something to gatekeep, but as something to circulate. That's what mutual aid, peer education, and community-based care all have in common: they redistribute trust, information, and resources in ways that resist isolation. These practices aren't just strategies—they're ways of living into a world where no one is left behind because they didn't know the right words, or the right person, or the right time to ask.

I don't expect change to be immediate, dramatic, or linear. I believe in the power of what we build together: conversations that shift how someone sees themselves, relationships that make it safe to be honest, and everyday acts of care that interrupt systems built on silence and shame. My theory of change is rooted in trust, shared knowledge, and the belief that none of us were meant to do this alone. Real change happens not just in big moments, but in the everyday choices we make, to choose connection over isolation, honesty over fear, care over control. When I think about what truly matters, it's this: that we choose each other, again and again.

Addendum (May 2026)

While I continue to understand social change as something that emerges through relationships, I have come to think more critically about what engagement within those relationships actually looks like. I still believe in the importance of dialogue, trust, and shared vulnerability, but I now recognize that not all forms of engagement are visible, direct, or verbal. People move toward connection in different ways, and sometimes through distance, hesitation, or partial participation rather than immediate openness.

This has shifted my understanding of relational change. Choosing each other does not always mean speaking openly or engaging fully in a given moment. It can also mean creating space for uncertainty, respecting boundaries, and allowing people to engage on their terms. Social change, in this sense, is not only built through moments of connection, but through the conditions that make those moments possible. Care includes not only presence, but patience, flexibility, and a willingness to meet people where they are.

Willing to Stay: Reflections on Care, Discomfort, and Identity

Growing up queer in Texas shaped me long before I had the words for it. It wasn't always outright hostility, but there was a quiet kind of scrutiny I couldn't quite name, a sense of something about me needed to stay hidden. Queerness wasn't normalized where I lived, and even when people weren't being openly cruel, I could feel what wasn't being said. I learned early on to read the room, to measure my words, to hold certain truths close. That experience didn't just shape how I saw myself, it shaped how I learned to see others. I became someone who paid attention. Someone who noticed the quiet part that wasn't said out loud.

Now, when I think about who I am in the spaces I move through—whether personal, professional, or academic—I return to that early sense of difference. But I don't think of it as damage. I think of it as training in relational awareness. My identities don't exist in a vacuum. I'm white and a college student. My position shifts depending on who I'm with and where I am. In Texas, my queerness made me visible in a way I didn't ask for. In other spaces, it fades into the background. But none of those dynamics exist in isolation, they're shaped by the expectations of the space, and by how I'm perceived in relation to others.

At the same time, I recognize some parts of my identity grant me protections I didn't earn. I move through the world with white privilege, which means my queerness is never compounded by racism. My presence in academic spaces is never questioned because of my race. And when I speak, I'm often assumed to be credible, not because of what I'm saying, but because of how I look. That privilege doesn't erase moments of marginalization, but it does shape how I'm received. Reflexivity means being open about that privilege because it's often ignored by those who benefit from it.

adrienne maree brown writes, “Trust the people. If you trust the people, they become trustworthy.” That line stays with me, especially when I think about how I move through collaborative work. I don’t believe leadership is about control or having all the answers, it’s about presence, care, and consistency. Change doesn’t come from correcting people or positioning myself as an expert. It comes from building relationships rooted in trust, where people can ask hard questions without fear. When we treat others with respect and honesty, we make it easier for them to meet us with the same. That kind of mutual trust doesn’t happen instantly, it’s built over time, through listening, showing up, and making space for uncertainty. It’s how I understand transformation: not as something we enforce, but as something we co-create.

I don’t see my role as being the loudest voice in the room or the person with the most knowledge. I see it as someone who creates space, someone others feel safe approaching with the things they’re unsure how to say. I try to listen before I speak. To share when it helps, and stay quiet when it doesn’t. I’ve learned that people don’t need me to have all the answers; they need to know I won’t judge the questions. That kind of presence—grounded, consistent, relational—is what I bring to the work. I don’t think of it as a strategy. I think of it as a responsibility that comes with how I’m positioned: someone who is often trusted, someone who can make it safer for others to step in and speak up. That trust isn’t automatic, and it shouldn’t be taken for granted. I try to earn it by showing up with care and by refusing to turn away from discomfort, mine or anyone else’s.

Positionality isn’t just about who I am, it’s about how I’m read, how I respond, and how I stay in relationship with others through complexity. I can’t control every perception, but I can stay aware of what I bring into the room, what I might miss, and how I repair when I get it

wrong. What matters most to me is not just being seen as safe, but becoming someone who holds space for honesty, contradiction, and growth. That's the kind of presence I want to offer, not polished, not perfect, but willing. Willing to listen. Willing to shift. Willing to show up when it counts.

Addendum (May 2026)

Over time, I have developed a more layered understanding of how my positionality shapes not only how I relate to others, but how I am interpreted within different spaces. While I continue to value relational awareness and trust, I am more attuned to how visibility, perceived authority, and social dynamics influence who feels comfortable engaging in the first place. Being seen as approachable or "safe" is not something I can fully control, and it is shaped as much by others' perceptions as by my intentions.

This has pushed me to think more carefully about what it means to create space for others. It is not only about being open and nonjudgemental, but about recognizing that engagement doesn't look the same for everyone. Some people participate through conversation, while others more quietly or indirectly. I now understand relational care as something that includes both presence and restraint, knowing when to step forward and when to step back, and respecting the different ways people navigate vulnerability, trust, and connection.

Conclusion (May 2026)

There is something so strange about returning to writings you completed a year ago. Parts of it feel distant, like they belong to a version of myself who was thinking clearly but differently, working through ideas that I now approach with more nuance and understanding. Other parts still feel deeply true, even if I may want to word them differently now. Reading these theories again, I can see both consistency in what I believe and the ways my thinking has shifted, not in

opposition, but in expansion. The ideas remain, but they have stretched, complicated, and deepened over time.

One of the hardest parts of this process has been trying to hold complexity while also being concise. These are not simple topics: inequality, care, change, identity, each of them resists easy explanation. Writing about them requires constant decisions about what to include, what to leave out, and how to say something meaningful without saying everything. There is always more that could be added, another angle to consider, another layer to unpack. At times, the pressure to be both clear and comprehensive feels impossible, like trying to compress something inherently expansive into a fixed space.

I have also had to come to terms with the fact that I will never feel fully finished with this work, this goes for my thesis too. There will always be sentences I want to rewrite, ideas I want to refine, connections I wish I had made sooner. That sense of incompleteness is not a failure of the work, but a reflection of the fact that these ideas are still alive. They are still changing as I change. But at some point, there has to be a decision to stop, not because everything has been said, but because enough has been said to stand on its own.

This project, like the theories it builds on, is not meant to be a final statement. It is a snapshot of a particular moment in my thinking, shaped by the experiences, conversations, and questions I have been engaging with throughout this entire praxis process. If anything, what this process has reinforced is that learning is not about arriving at a perfect conclusion, but about staying in motion, continuing to question, to revise, to listen, and to grow.

So while I could keep writing, revising, and expanding this work indefinitely, there is also value in letting it exist as it is. Not perfect, not complete, but thoughtful, intentional, and

reflective of where I was and where I am. And maybe that is the most honest conclusion I can offer: that this work is done, not because it is finished, but because I have chosen to let it be.