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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

## A Relational Approach to Transforming Power in a Community-University Partnership

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### Abstract

We use a relational understanding of power to analyse power dynamics at the institutional and interpersonal levels in our multi-year Co-Education/Co-Research (CORE) partnership between Tufts University Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning (UEP) and Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI). Power in community-university partnerships is often examined only at the institutional level, conceiving of power as a resource to be balanced and shared. Indeed, CORE has advanced institutional shifts through co-governance, equitable funding, co-production of curriculum and cross-flow of people. While institutional policies and practices are critical, they alone do not transform deep-seated hierarchies that value university knowledge, practices and people over community. To understand how intertwined interpersonal and institutional practices can reproduce or transform these cultural and ideological dynamics, we use a relational approach, understanding that power flows in and through all relations. As community members, students and faculty, we reflect on the contradictions we have encountered in CORE. We examine how we reinforce the dominance of academic over community knowledge, even as we leverage institutional power to further community goals. These tensions can be opportunities for shifting, disrupting and transforming towards more equitable relations, but they can also reproduce and reinforce the status quo. Through reflective practice and a relational ethic of care, we can try to recognise when we might be

shifting power relations and when we might be reproducing them. This is messy work that requires a lot of communication, trust, reflection and time. A relational approach to power provides hope that we can be part of the change we seek in all of our relations, every day. And it reminds us that no matter what we have institutionalised or encoded, our individual beings, organisations and communities are always in a process of becoming.

## Keywords

**Community-University Partnership; Transforming Power Relations; Relational Power; Institutional Power; Equitable Partnership; Co-learning**

## Introduction

Community-university partnerships (CUPs) often aim to address societal injustices, but in practice are challenged by the same unequal power relations they seek to confront. Well-documented barriers to more equitable CUPs include unequal sharing of resources, forcing community practice into short-term academic calendars and prioritising university benefits over community impact. Participants often address these barriers by changing institutional policies and practices to shift power, where power is conceptualised as a resource that universities typically have more of than community partners. While the focus on institutional power dynamics is critical and necessary (and one that we have paid much attention to in our own CUP), we contend that it is insufficient for transforming power relations and realising the aspirations of many CUPs.

The power asymmetries in CUPs are not just institutional, but also cultural and ideological. They include the devaluation of local and practitioner knowledge, narrow standards of academic excellence and selectivity that limits access to the university. Of course, institutional policies and practices are bound up in reproducing these dynamics. To transform them requires a relational view of power, where power is not something to be wielded or possessed, but rather exists in and through all relations. This relational approach foregrounds the interpersonal interactions in CUPs. These everyday relations (or micro-practices) can disrupt or reinforce power dynamics and thus are also sites for transforming them.

In this article, we use a relational view of power to examine both institutional and interpersonal levels of power, which are not separate at all, but rather deeply intertwined. We explore power in our own CUP, the Co-Education/Co-Research (CORE) partnership between Tufts University Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning (UEP) and Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), a renowned community organising and planning group in Boston. After collaborating for decades, UEP and DSNI piloted the first CORE partnership (2016–2019). CORE aspires to cultivate sustained transformative partnerships that co-produce knowledge and action towards creating a more just, sustainable and democratic society. CORE explicitly addresses the institutional barriers and inequalities stated above.

CORE was founded on the premise that the institutional relationship between DSNI and Tufts would be dependent on the strength of interpersonal relationships. We have tried therefore to take a Relational Ethics approach towards our partnership ([Garlick & Palmer 2008](#)), centring relationships as intrinsically valuable. However, we have encountered tensions and contradictions, what [Hanson and Ogunade \(2016\)](#) refer to as 'discursive frictions'. Institutional shifts alone do not necessarily lead to transformation of deep-seated hierarchies of knowledge and cultures that value university knowledge, practices and people over community. Both universities and community-based organisations are embedded in, and part of, reproducing systems of oppression. Yet, we are not fated to simply reproduce this dominance. At the interpersonal and institutional levels, we can disrupt, dismantle and practise other ways of being together – transforming power relations, ourselves and our institutions in the process.

We begin by introducing our method for this article and ourselves, as we each have played different and multiple roles in CORE. We then lay out our approach to conceptualising power, followed by a fuller description of CORE, including three vignettes of our own experiences. We unpack and reflect on the tensions – discursive frictions – that we encountered and conclude with thoughts on how CORE can further transform power relations and lessons learned.

## Our Method

This article draws primarily on an action research method, where practitioners inquire into and reflect deeply on their own work in order to strengthen it ([McNiff & Whitehead 2006](#)). The three authors of this article have been involved in CORE as researchers, faculty, students and community partner. The institutional impacts of CORE are derived from a program assessment of CORE conducted in spring–summer 2020 ([Ackerman, Loh & Alias 2020](#)). The assessment analysed CORE documents and outputs and conducted seven semi-structured open-ended interviews with DSNI staff involved in CORE. This assessment revealed some of the benefits and challenges of our work at the interpersonal level and led us to think more deeply about relational power. From November 2020 to March 2021, we engaged in joint reflection on relational power in CORE, from which we learnt some useful lessons. We had four meetings, each of 1.5–2 hours, and three sessions with the author collective, facilitated by this special issue’s guest editors. In between reflection sessions, we read various articles (including those in our literature review) to inform and deepen our perspectives on power, and journaled responses to reflection questions. Below we provide brief descriptions of ourselves and our organisations to add context to our method.

**Zoë Ackerman:** I grew up in Charlottesville, Virginia, in an environment marked by white privilege and economic security. By the time I started the Master’s program at UEP in the Autumn of 2017, I had become politicised through organising around environmental justice, anti-racism and queer liberation. I applied to graduate school because I wanted to leverage institutional resources to disrupt status quo governance in support of Black- and Indigenous-led organising and the solidarity economy. From 2017 to 2020, I was consistently connected to CORE activities. I worked as a teaching assistant for, and wrote my thesis on Teaching Democracy (a popular education training program associated with CORE); I interned with another CORE community organisation; and I served as primary researcher for the assessment of CORE presented in this article.

**Joceline Fidalgo:** A child of immigrants from the Cape Verde islands, I grew up in the Dudley neighbourhood of Boston. My family was extremely involved in the community and DSNI. I grew up attending community meetings, co-founded the Dudley Youth Council and joined the DSNI board as a youth. After college, I returned to DSNI in multiple staff roles over eight years, including Resource Development Director and Deputy Director. After learning more about UEP from a colleague who was a recent graduate, I enrolled as a part-time mid-career Master of Public Policy (MPP) student in 2017. While a student, I served as a CORE graduate assistant, designed internships and field projects for students, prepared collaborative grant proposals and participated in panels. After leaving DSNI in June 2020 and beginning my last year at UEP, I became a research assistant on the action research project funded by the federal grant that I had helped secure.

**Penn Lob:** I joined the UEP faculty in 2009, after more than 15 years in the environmental justice field, including nine years leading a grassroots organisation in Boston. As an Asian-American male, I lived the ‘model minority’ myth, excelling in maths and science and attending MIT. After an internship designing missile guidance systems, I became politicised and involved in radical campus movements against the military–industrial complex. I found my first job in a nonprofit environmental consulting firm, which led me to another elite university for a Master’s degree in environmental science and policy. There, I discovered the burgeoning environmental justice movement and found a path to combine my formal education with

my activist commitments. As a Tufts lecturer, I have been deepening our community strategies and working with community and social movement organisations as an adviser, board member, researcher and teacher. I have been the lead faculty building CORE.

*DSNI* is a community-based planning and organising non-profit dedicated to the revitalisation of the Dudley neighbourhood of Boston, a working class community of colour with a diverse mix of African Americans, Latinx and Cape Verdeans. Formed in the mid-1980s, DSNI is renowned for establishing community control over development and for creating a community land trust (CLT) that owns over 30 acres, on which they have developed hundreds of units of permanently affordable housing, as well as parks, urban farms and a greenhouse.

*UEP* was formed in 1973 as an interdisciplinary, professional Master's program to address integrated problems of urban development, land use planning, design, and social and environmental concerns. Dedicated to 'educating practical visionaries', UEP integrates community partnerships into its curriculum, research and practice.

UEP and DSNI's relationship spans three decades, during which students have conducted numerous field projects, internships and Masters theses. Prior to CORE, one UEP alumni had been hired as a DSNI staff member and three DSNI staff members became UEP MPP students. Several faculty have had strong ties to DSNI, beginning with Melvyn Colón, who helped found DSNI and then lectured at UEP from 1989 to 2001.

## Our Approach to Power

Power in CUPs is often examined only at the institutional level, where power is a resource to be balanced and shared. While the institutional level is critical, we believe it is insufficient to address the deeply embedded ideological and cultural aspects of power that also operate at the interpersonal level. Thus, we take a relational view of power as theorised by [Foucault \(1977, 1979\)](#) and post-structural feminists ([Cameron & Gibson 2005](#)) and build on the work of contemporary engaged scholars who use a relational view in their community-based and participatory action research (see [Cahill 2007](#)). In this view, power is infused in and through all social relations. It is not something that can be possessed, either by institutions or individuals. A relational view allows us to look at both institutional and interpersonal levels and how they are intertwined in CUPs. It leads to a focus on the relationships between people from the university and the community, and the care and negotiation necessary to cultivate a relational ethic. It foregrounds the tensions and contradictions that arise across difference and the everyday micro-practices that can reinforce existing power relations, as well as disrupt and transform them.

### THREE FACES OF 'POWER OVER'

A classic conceptualisation of power starts with 'power over', or the ability of one party to get another to do something they would not otherwise do. Power is a substance or capacity that can be held and used. [Lukes \(1974\)](#) theorised three faces of power (as power over), which [Gaventa \(2006\)](#) then reframed as *visible*, *hidden* and *invisible* power. The first dimension examines *visible* power relations in decision making in an open, pluralist political system, where all interests are visible and in conflict and competition ([Dahl 1957](#)). This first face is often how power is talked about in public discourse and among community organisers and advocacy groups strategising to influence decision makers. This view was critiqued as inadequate by [Bachrach and Baratz \(1970\)](#) because it did not account for how certain interests and their issues were suppressed, never making it to the decision-making arena in the first place. They posited that power had a second face, *hidden*, through non-decision-making processes, where certain issues are prevented from getting on the political agenda. This second face has been described as the political infrastructure of coordinated and overlapping networks of interest groups and think tanks (and universities), such as those that have

been built by a corporate conservative alliance to advance a conservative Right agenda in the US ([Healy & Hinson 2017](#)).

Lukes introduced the third dimension of power to explain why some grievances and conflicts never become consciously recognised. This *invisible* level of power shapes meaning, consciousness and worldviews. In this third face, the relatively powerless may internalise oppression, what [Freire \(1970\)](#) called a culture of silence, and what second-wave feminists addressed through consciousness raising methods. The dominance of the powerful in shaping the making of meaning (creation of ‘common sense’) is what Gramsci called cultural or ideological hegemony. Thus, there are some interests that never even rise into consciousness to be organised into or out of the political agenda.

The first two faces of power are often employed in discussions of power between communities and universities. In the visible pluralist version of power, universities are seen as having more power because they can advance their interests, such as lobbying for public research funding, gaining control over land to expand campuses, investing hefty endowments and influencing debates through expert knowledge. Community organisations are seen as scrappy, low-resourced groups with limited political influence and little formal knowledge. CUPs often claim to advance pluralist power by employing the expert knowledge of universities in the service of community agendas.

In the hidden second face of power, universities operate as part of the political infrastructure to shape which issues, perspectives and knowledges have more credibility and legitimacy in the public sphere. Because community is often seen as relatively powerless in shaping the political agenda, CUPs can bring community into research and knowledge production to shape new agendas and have them taken more seriously. How well community goals are served by these collaborations depends on who initiates the partnerships and how partners share resources. Because universities often hold more resources, they can exercise more power to shape the agenda and ensure that their goals are prioritised ([Glover & Silka 2013](#)). Efforts to diversify faculty and students in universities can function in the second face of power by shifting who are seen as knowledge producers, experts, researchers and teachers.

The invisible third dimension of power is also at work in universities and communities in shaping consciousness and a sense of possibilities. Universities, as self-proclaimed producers of knowledge, become gatekeepers of what is valid and what is not – reinforcing a hierarchy of knowledge that privileges Western scientific ways of knowing. Communities can exercise power in this third dimension through popular education ([Freire’s \*Pedagogy of the Oppressed\*](#)) to support critical consciousness building that can fuel transformative social movements. CUPs can play a role in consciousness raising by disrupting and dismantling ideologies of dominance and hierarchies of knowledge, and contributing to the development of liberatory ideologies and knowledges. Recent movements that have helped create broad shifts in consciousness, such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter, all have allies in the academy.

## RELATIONAL POWER

While all three faces are conceptualised as ‘power over’, where power is wielded by the more powerful over the less powerful, it can also be conceived as ‘power to’ and ‘power with’. To understand this, we draw on a relational view of power. According to Foucault and post-structural feminists, power exists in and flows through all social relations; in fact, it is constitutive of social relations (part of what makes relations). [Hanson and Ogunade \(2016, p. 43\)](#) explain that ‘power is neither a commodity nor solely embodied in a person, institution or structure to be used for organisational or individual purposes’. Power exists only between people and through their multiple interactions, practices and discourses. Power analysis begins with the everyday interrelations amongst people and also includes the organisations, institutions and structures that are constituted by these relations. Moreover, power is inextricably bound up with knowledge. ‘Power and knowledge directly imply one another ... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution

of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' ([Foucault 1977](#), p. 27).

While Foucault examined everyday micro-practices and how power and knowledge can create constraints and reinforce dominance, he also saw the possibilities for power relations to be changed. Foucault affirms 'the right ... to rediscover what one is and all that one can be' (as cited in [Gaventa & Cornwall 2008](#)). If dominance and inequalities are produced through relations, then they can also be transformed through them. This insight turns the third face of power from an invisible negative force to a potentially emancipatory one, in which cultural and ideological power produce shifts in subjects and their own identities, as well as practices, discourse and actions. Indeed, a relational view of power sees possibilities for shifting and transforming power relations in all three faces of power, which are themselves intertwined.

This relational view of power is post-structural, in that it does not assume that structures exist independently beyond our representations of them. The language we use to describe structures is part of what they are made of. Thus, language and discourse are never politically neutral. Instead of trying to find stable structures underlying reality, we encounter multiple discourses that create multiple realities. It is in these relations and discourses that subjects (individuals) are formed. 'In poststructuralist thought there are no depths to plumb for the subject's true essence or identity; rather the subject is understood as always in the process of becoming, of being shaped in a multitude of ways by various discourses and practices' ([Cameron & Gibson 2005](#), p. 317). Power, then, is not a fixed essence possessed by an individual or institution, but something that is flowing between and through the interactions between subjects who are constantly being shaped by and shaping these relations.

## Power in Community-University Partnerships

This post-structural, relational approach helps us to look at how power is flowing in and through the everyday relations between the people in CUPs (and in our CORE partnership).

First, relationships are central, both as a goal of CUPs and a means to advance other objectives. We agree with [Ritterbush \(2019, p. 1297\)](#) 'that these relationships, forged through shared commitment, collective care and acts of consciousness-building take time to cultivate and keep alive, time that doesn't fit neatly into academic temporalities of semesters or tenure processes'. [Cahill, Quijada Cerecer & Bradley \(2010, p. 408\)](#) see their participatory action research practice as a 'feminist praxis of care and solidarity that is decentered, conflicted, and committed to negotiation'. This centring of relationships is described by [Garlick and Palmer 2008](#) (drawing on [Bauman 1995](#)) as a relational ethic of *being-for*. They posit that the neoliberalised university 'fosters and favours connections that are fragmentary, momentary, and occasional. The conditions are characterized by values of competition, efficiency and individualism' ([Garlick & Palmer 2008](#), p. 74). Instead of *being-for* (where each person in a relationship is seen as fully human and precious), neoliberal conditions lead to *being-aside* (where the other is recognised as present but not a person) and *being-with* (where the other is recognised as a person but only to the extent necessary for a particular transaction).

Second, there are always multiple possibilities for power relations in any community-university engagement, including in all three faces of power. [Hanson and Ogunade \(2016, p. 43\)](#) point to discursive frictions arising from power imbalances as 'neither inherently emancipatory nor repressive'. Discursive frictions refer to the 'tensions that can arise when various national, social, organizational, and individual cultural differences materialize in our everyday discourse and practices, often privileging, but at times shifting traditional, colonial, and postcolonial power relations' ([Murphy 2012](#), cited in [Hanson & Ogunade 2016](#), p. 42). How these differences are navigated can reinforce existing power dynamics and inequalities and/or disrupt and transform them. [Cahill \(2007, p. 270\)](#) engages in participatory action research 'for producing new subjectivities, that in the words of Freire "affirms men and women as beings in the process of

*becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” ([Freire, 1997 \[1970\]](#), p. 65, italics original).

Third, without critical reflection and reflexive practice, CUPs can reinforce or contribute to further inequalities. [Gaventa and Cornwall \(2008\)](#) describe how even the World Bank has adopted participatory research methods, raising critical questions about whose voices are raised and heard. [Ritterbush \(2019, p. 1301\)](#) warns of ‘participatory bluffing’ where participatory action research (PAR) has been depoliticised and become ‘a strategy to co-opt knowledge in the name of participation ([Torre 2009:111](#))’. She reflects on her own involvement in “‘lite pedagogies’—watered-down, university-permissible PAR pedagogies and research practices’, where ‘methodologically oriented PAR curricula and service-learning frameworks run the risk of creating unilateral, semester-long relationships with communities in which the timing of interactions and contact is dictated by class schedules rather than by the daily and enduring urgency of injustice’ ([Ritterbush, 2019, p. 1297; p. 1301](#)).

We draw on this relational approach to analyse the power dynamics in our own CUP, in the hope of understanding how we might further transform our power relations (and ourselves and institutions). Delving deeper into our power dynamics through a relational approach helps to identify where discursive frictions have arisen and where we have been disrupting and/or transforming power relations, as well as where we have been reinforcing them. Note that we want to avoid separating interpersonal and institutional levels of power. Indeed, a relational view includes not just the production of individual subjects but also of institutions and their collective knowledges.

## Co-Research/Co-Education (CORE) partnership

Tufts UEP and DSNI’s CORE partnership was intentionally designed to shift institutional relations in all three faces of power. We piloted a three-year partnership from 2016 to 2019, building on three decades of collaboration. We envisioned a co-learning model (see [Loh 2016](#)) that could address some of the often-named challenges of CUPs. These include student learning being prioritised over community needs ([Blouin & Perry 2009](#); [Cruz & Giles 2000](#); [Hoyt 2005](#)), rigidity of the academic calendar ([Ritterbush 2019](#); [Sandy & Holland 2006](#), [Tryon et al. 2008](#)), short-term semester-to-semester engagements, fragmentation across research, teaching and practice, production of peer-reviewed articles taking precedence over community benefits ([Gomez-Mejia & Balkan 1992](#); [Katz 1973](#)), excellence becoming defined synonymously with selectivity ([Jennings 1989](#)), prioritisation of pursuing large research grants ([Fisher, Fabricant & Simmons 2005](#)) and international work being accorded more status than local community development projects ([Fisher, Fabricant & Simmons 2005](#); [Mohrman, Ma & Baker 2008](#)).

We understood that there were imbalances in resources and capacities that affected the power dynamics between universities and community groups. Community organisations, usually smaller nonprofits in precarious financial situations, can feel pressure to pursue funding that steers them towards less controversial and depoliticised projects and methods, a dynamic that has been named the non-profit industrial complex ([Incite! 2007](#)). This dynamic makes community organisations susceptible to transactional and potentially exploitive partnerships with larger well-resourced universities.

CORE aspires to cultivate sustained transformative partnerships that co-produce knowledge and action towards a more just, sustainable and democratic society. Starting with joint inquiry and planning, community and university stakeholders integrate teaching, research and practice over a cycle of three to five years and, if sustained, co-evolve in place over decades (see [Figure 1](#)). CORE’s theory of practice draws upon traditions of action research, service-learning, scholarship of engagement, and universities as anchor institutions. It is a political project inspired by popular education, Black radical traditions, and the struggles of Third World peoples to democratise universities and advance racial and economic justice in the 1960s and 70s.

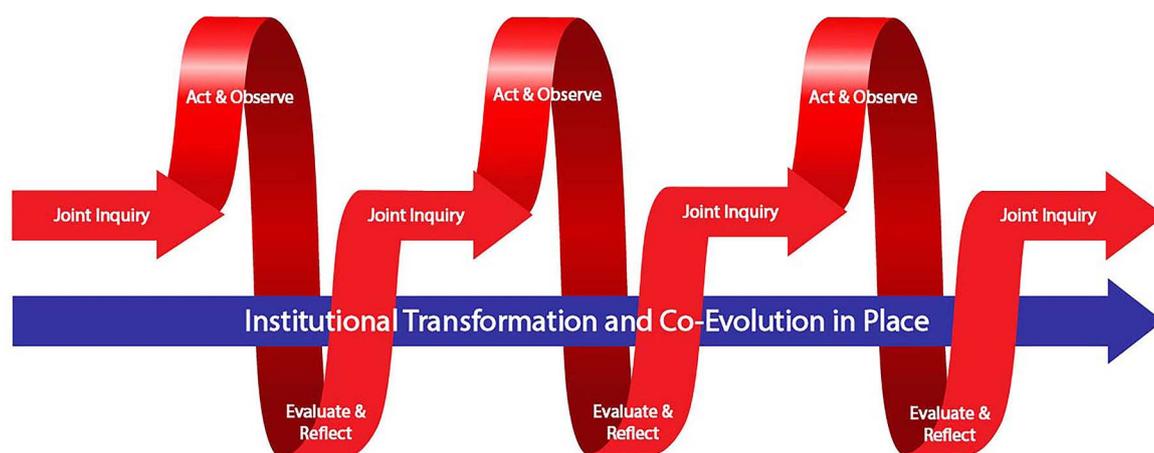


Figure 1. CORE's community-university co-evolution model (Loh 2016)

In 2016, Tufts and DSNI signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that set out learning, research and action goals for a three-year partnership. CORE committed the partners to collaborate on community-controlled economic development, with a focus on the food economy and community land trusts. Tufts and DSNI agreed to make decisions together and to jointly raise funds to support DSNI's role in the partnership. This MOU was approved as an official partnership by the Tufts administration. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts contributed \$10,000 per year over the three-year partnership to support DSNI's role.

The CORE MOU included activities that were already established and resourced, such as a field project each spring semester, summer graduate student fellowships, Master's theses, and a co-designed Community Practicum held every other Autumn. CORE also led to the joint development of the Teaching Democracy popular education training program. Through CORE, UEP and DSNI pursued and were awarded a multi-year federal community action research grant that has supported DSNI's community planning work with the City of Boston to develop an arts and innovation district in the Upham's Corner section of the neighbourhood.

## CORE's Institutional Impacts

In 2020, we conducted a program assessment of CORE, with a focus on how the partnership impacted DSNI (see Ackerman, Loh & Alias 2020). The results showed how power has been shifting at the institutional level between Tufts UEP and DSNI through co-governance, shared funding, joint creation of curriculum and agenda, and cross-flow of people over a three-year period. Many interviewees felt that the partnership set a new standard for reciprocity in CUPs. Harry Smith, a former DSNI senior staff member, believed that formalising the partnership 'moved us from a project-by-project orientation to Tufts becoming the research arm of DSNI, nimble enough to adapt in the face of change and advance the CLT [community land trust] movement and our work around land use and planning'.

Shared funding, including valuing DSNI's time, was another critical component of CORE. According to Sharon Cho, a UEP student who then became a part-time staff member at DSNI, 'oftentimes, with the university, there's an assumption that with a student team or intern, you're offering free research capacity. But it takes time and capacity to support projects and students. So I think it's valuable to frame it as community partners bringing something to the table, not the other way around. If you're a university, you should be finding a way to pay community organizations.' The commitment by Tufts to provide multi-year

funding for DSNI allowed it to plan ahead, and together with Tufts, DSNI secured a three-year federal action research grant from AmeriCorps to support its planning efforts in Upham's Corner.

CORE also supported the development of new curricular resources for DSNI and Tufts, including a co-designed Community Practicum and Teaching Democracy (discussed below). The cross-flow of people has helped cultivate a deeper bench of leaders at DSNI. During the partnership, two DSNI staff enrolled in UEP's mid-career MPP program, while three UEP graduates were hired as DSNI staff.

Our assessment found that centring relationships and a relational ethic in CORE created conditions for reciprocity and going beyond transactional relations. Smith noted how important it was that people at UEP 'exercised humility by coming in and asking the partners, "What do you need?"' According to former DSNI organiser Bayoan Rosselló-Cornier, 'DSNI could trust in a certain level of cultural competence of the students they'd work with. Other universities would send teams of white students to take pictures of people's homes. Land trust owners worried that their homes were being sold. You're a white kid in a Patagonia sweater taking pictures ... this is not a safari. You have to approach it carefully, respectfully.' Fidalgo, when interviewed as DSNI Deputy Director, explained that 'despite transitions and staff turnover, Tufts still wanted to be connected, to figure out how to shift and adapt its focus. It suggested that the partnership went beyond the university and students being able to benefit, and was about supporting the organization, even through some of its challenges.'

## Three Experiences of CORE

To delve deeper into interpersonal power relations, we share three first-person vignettes of our experiences in CORE. Each helped advance DSNI's goals and affected how it operates within the three faces of power. But each is also fraught with contradictions, as our successes also reinforced or reproduced knowledge hierarchies.

### LAUNCHING THE GREATER BOSTON COMMUNITY LAND TRUST NETWORK (PENN)

The launch of the Greater Boston Community Land Trust Network (GBCLTN) in 2016 was a poignant example of how our partnership could support DSNI to move its policy agenda in the visible (first face of) power arena. On a weekday evening in April 2016, I (Penn) was speaking to more than 100 residents, community leaders, and City officials about the CLT model and presenting the findings of a report that five of my graduate students had worked all semester to draft. I touted the benefits of community land trusts (CLTs) and how government could support them.

I remember feeling very proud of our work, not just that spring but over the preceding two years to support the development of GBCLTN. After my moment in the spotlight, I was interviewed by a journalist and got a lot of positive feedback from attendees. I felt affirmed in a very public way that I and my students were adding value to important community and policy work. My students, who had volunteered to staff the registration and educational tables, were also very pleased and excited. A photo of us at the event captures how we felt (see [Figure 2](#)). We were overcoming one challenge of CUPs being short term and not well-synchronized between academic and community calendars. The lead organizer of GBCLTN had, in fact, planned the launch to coincide with the end of the spring semester, so that the students' work could have the most impact.

Reflecting back, there are a few details that do not seem quite right. I was the first speaker on the agenda, right before a resident board member of DSNI's land trust. The university-validated knowledge that I presented took precedence over a community resident sharing her lived experience. The report itself compiled community and practitioner knowledge into a 12-page professionally laid-out document designed to influence decision makers and funders, which was a central goal of the event. At the time, I, my students,



Figure 2. Tufts students and faculty at Greater Boston Community Land Trust Network launch, 27 April 2016. From left to right: Lylee Rauch-Kacenski, Sharon Cho, Penn Loh, Tessa Salzman, Koko Li and Hanna Migliorato.

and network members never raised critical questions about whose voices and knowledge were being centered and how we might be subtly reinforcing knowledge hierarchies by putting a university stamp of approval on community knowledge.

### BEING A RESIDENT AND TUFTS RESEARCHER IN UPHAM'S CORNER (JOCELINE)

The Upham's Corner action research project illustrates the way in which our CUP can affect the hidden (second) dimension of power where the community partner is co-researcher driving the agenda, legitimating their role as knowledge producers. When I (Joceline) became a Research Assistant with the Tufts team in Fall 2020 on this project, I also brought my experiences as a resident and former DSNI staff member. My deep connections enabled me to quickly understand and document the complex set of stakeholders and roles in this process and better advise DSNI in using the learnings from our action research.

In December 2020, I was asked to present to the DSNI board on the Upham's Corner process. I was excited to play this role and to reconnect with board members who I had developed relationships with over the years. Two staff members and I highlighted the community engagement strategies up until that point, the next steps, and a map of the different stakeholders. Judging by the few questions I received, it seemed that what I presented was clear and reasonable. A couple of board members even chimed in to thank me for the presentation and praise the DSNI staff for their hard work and commitment. A few weeks later, one of the staff revealed that the board had specifically wanted me to represent the Tufts team, because there was some tension and confusion about the role that Tufts had been playing in the Upham's Corner work, that perhaps Tufts carried too much weight in the process.

Reflecting back, I realized that I was so focused on sharing information from our research that I didn't take the time to explain Tufts' role. Though we relied on my extensive history with the organization to make the board more comfortable, I didn't explicitly clarify Tufts' role and our collaboration with DSNI. Without doing that, board members who were not involved in the partnership came to be suspicious of a university

partner as potentially undermining DSNI's work to build community control. It was not until a board meeting in February 2021 where we decided that Penn should present instead of me, that concerns were allayed by diving deeper into the history of Tufts' role.

### CO-FACILITATING TEACHING DEMOCRACY (ZOË)

Teaching Democracy is a popular education training program specifically designed to intervene in the invisible (third) face of power. The two-day course was co-designed with three community organizations, including DSNI, and several departments at Tufts, including UEP. First piloted in 2016, it is now an annual offering with 20-30 participants per year, with roughly equal numbers of students and community members. May Louie, a former DSNI senior staffer of 20 years and a UEP MPP alum, co-designed Teaching Democracy and has co-taught the course since its inception. DSNI has supported seven board members and three staff to attend this training. I (Zoë) was a student in Teaching Democracy in 2018 and co-facilitator in 2019. My master's thesis, completed at the end of 2019, sought to understand what participants learned and how the program could shift to more deeply center community knowledge and needs.

In February 2020, I joined the Teaching Democracy design team for a second time, excited to bring some of the recommendations in my thesis to life. While facilitating the first workshop, I decided unilaterally to shift portions of the curriculum. Early in the day, I skipped over a part where participants articulated their goals for the session in order to save time. Later on, I decided (on the fly) to hand over facilitation of a particular section to a participant. When reflecting on day one with the facilitation team, various members expressed surprise, confusion, and anger over my changes and questioned why I felt I could make unilateral decisions. At first, I felt defensive and justified my actions as both rooted in my research and in embracing a sense of 'emergence'.

After this meeting, I engaged in deeper reflective conversations with members of the group. We surfaced more of our own assumptions and needs. The process was uncomfortable *and* resulted in my own realization that I had assumed a self-anointed sense of authority about the program, partly due to in-depth engagement through my thesis, which completely contradicted the principles and practices of popular education. I now see my actions (specifically making unilateral decisions without consulting the design team) as emerging from my own unpacked patterns of whiteness and assumption of a privileged education conferring expertise and unilateral power. I now see the creation of structured and intentional space for reflection as essential to disrupting power and privilege. With the support of the design team, I identified several growth edges in myself -- to slow down (rather than jumping to conclusions) when I don't understand a process or perspective, to gently and honestly hold the contradictions of doing work within community-university settings, and most importantly, to walk with more humility through it all.

### CORE's Discursive Frictions

As these examples show, CORE's everyday interrelations are rife with discursive frictions. These tensions and contradictions arise from the cultural, institutional and individual differences embedded in our various positionalities and identities. A relational view of power helps unpack the power dynamics in our vignettes, to identify where inequalities might be reproduced and reinforced, as well as how they might be disrupted, dismantled and transformed.

Leveraging the university's institutional power to support community goals produces opportunities for transforming power, at the same time reinforcing the dominance of academic knowledge over community knowledge. On the one hand, Penn's story shows that GBCLTN members wanted to use Tufts institutional credibility to bring the importance of their work to the notice of decision makers and funders. According to Juan Leyton, DSNI's Executive Director at the time of the network launch, projects like this 'provided

a space for the organisation to make a case for perspectives about what's important, that cities and foundations may not see as flashy or as valuable'. Though it is not easy to ascertain the difference Tufts' support has made, the GBCLTN has garnered more foundation funding and has succeeded in shifting some city policies and resources.

Yet, Leyton pointed out that 'if a community organization has a university validating its ideas, that's both a good and a bad thing. It can feel disempowering to the organization, to need to have information validated by an institution.' In Penn's story, knowledge hierarchies were reproduced through micro-practices, such as having a university faculty speak first before community leaders and having the faculty present the work of students.

In Joceline's story, DSNI board members who had not been directly involved in previous collaborations questioned Tufts' role in the Upham's Corner work. There was suspicion about whose interests Tufts was serving and whether they were aligned with DSNI's goals of community control. Despite decades of collaboration between people at DSNI and UEP and a formal MOU codifying co-governance and sharing of funding, these perceptions persist. Joceline was asked to represent the Tufts team initially because she had a community and DSNI identity and deep relationships of trust with board members. Penn, despite having worked for decades with DSNI, had developed relationships primarily with staff and had limited interactions with board members. Importantly, the CORE MOU was negotiated with DSNI staff and signed by the Executive Director, but not deliberated on by the DSNI board.

This story illustrates the limits of institutional (and written) agreements and the importance of direct relationships in CUPs. While the MOU will have lasting effects for Tufts and DSNI as organisations, transforming power dynamics must also happen through everyday interrelations, which both shape and are conditioned by institutional arrangements. Without more direct interaction with a university person (Penn as a faculty member), board members defaulted to their common sense, to be wary of a university doing research on communities. An MOU can be a tool for producing more equitable power relations, but only to the extent that the MOU and its principles are recognised by stakeholders (including board members) and made real through everyday interactions.

Zoë's vignette shows how the micro-practices of facilitation are also infused with power relations and caught up in hierarchies of knowledge. Teaching Democracy used university resources to create a training with community partners for their members. Yet, the contradictions in having a university sponsor a course on popular education was not lost on its participants, some of whom reflected that it was an oxymoron. Zoë herself experienced this paradox, having produced a Master's thesis relying on both action research and more conventional qualitative methods, thus becoming an 'expert' on the training. This expert knowledge subtly led to her shifting the program unilaterally while she was facilitating.

Her experience is a reminder that power is enacted in all relations, between community and university, teachers and students, and among a facilitation team. For Zoë, reflection and dialogue with the facilitation team led to deeper learning and showed that, through praxis, it is possible to interrupt and adjust, to not unwittingly reproduce power dynamics. This power in all relations also manifests within communities. Joceline reflected that it was not just how Tufts showed up with institutional power in the community, but also that DSNI itself had become an institutional power within the community and had to recognise how it showed up in its own community.

Our reflections on these experiences reveal not only the ways that we reproduce power relations, but also suggest ways that we could change them in everyday practice. In Penn's case, what if he had worked with GBCLTN members to develop a collaborative presentation, weaving in stories of their experiences in CLTs? What if Zoë had brought her concern about the lack of time to the group to decide collectively on an adjustment and/or reflect on how a 'sense of urgency' is a characteristic of white supremacy culture? What if Joceline had asked board members what they knew about the collaboration with Tufts and taken the time to

explain the history? These are just some of the ways that we could have acted differently to change some of the power dynamics in the moment.

## Lessons Learned and Conclusion

In this article, we used a relational view of power to examine power dynamics in our CUP at both institutional and interpersonal levels. At the institutional level, we found several key shifts:

- Co-governance codified in an MOU.
- Sharing of funding by Tufts to more fully value DSNI as a co-producer.
- A 3-year partnership allowed Tufts to become DSNI's "research arm" and leverage its status to influence decision makers and funders towards community goals.
- Co-production of curriculum and tools to help build community capacity.
- Deepening of the leadership pipeline by recruiting community members into degree programs and graduate students to staff of DSNI.

While these institutional shifts can help address some of the challenges of CUPs, they, alone, do not necessarily lead to transformation of deep-seated hierarchies that value university knowledge, practice and people over community. To analyse these power asymmetries, we used a relational approach to examine how we could reproduce or transform these dynamics at interconnected, interpersonal and institutional levels. The discursive frictions encountered across difference in CUPs could be opportunities for shifting, disrupting and transforming towards more equitable and emancipatory power relations, but they could also reproduce and reinforce the status quo. Through reflective practice (*praxis*) and building authentic *being-for* relationships, we could try to recognise when we might be shifting power relations and when we might be reproducing them. This is messy work that requires a lot of communication and trust. All of this relational work takes time.

The institutional shifts we have described are vital to transforming power as they change the conditions within which interpersonal everyday relations happen. For instance, funding available to and shared by DSNI and Tufts affects how much time they can dedicate to their collaboration. It also affects the material conditions and livelihoods of their staff. CORE's MOU codifies a co-governance process and sets expectations for how DSNI and UEP set the agenda, decide what activities to pursue, and how to jointly fundraise and share resources. Yet, co-governance is assured only through everyday practice of making decisions together. With limited time and resources, it can be easy to miss meetings needed to make such decisions. Unilateral decisions can be made, but rely on the good faith and trust that has been built, as Zoë experienced. While operating on faith can serve for a time, co-governance relations must be constantly renewed, as in Joceline's story with the DSNI board.

A relational *being-for* ethic in CUPs requires time. The relationship is the goal, not a means to an end. CORE's multi-year timeframe creates possibilities for relations to endure and deepen, going beyond episodic semester engagements. Penn would not have been able to develop a CORE partnership with DSNI, if not for the relationships he had built over the decades with people at DSNI. The timing of the GBCLTN launch was designed to coincide with the end of the student Field Project course, because the relationship had deepened and the network organiser understood the semester schedule and what students were capable of. Zoë could not have had the deeper follow-up reflections with the Teaching Democracy facilitation team without the trust built from working together in prior years. Joceline would not have been the one called to represent Tufts if she had not had a prior relationship with the board. This relational work can be seen as extraneous, or a privilege only afforded where resources and time allow. But it is time spent in this space that may be the most transformative for CUPs.

We agree with [Cahill, Quijada Cerecer & Bradley \(2010\)](#) and [Ritterbush \(2019\)](#) that a relational (*being-for*) approach to CUPs requires a feminist praxis and ethics of care and solidarity. It is an ethics that says we are in this together and accountable to one another. There will be confusion over what we are trying to do together and how we want to be with one another, necessitating push-back and deeply hearing each other. This work of holding oneself and others accountable is a form of emotional labour, a type of work that is not typically viewed in academia as valuable (or even as labour), even though it can be the site of some of the deepest learning and transformation. As facilitators and practitioners of critical reflection and care, it is not easy to support 'students to linger in the fraught spaces of uncertainty and collectivity, which are some of the most important learning spaces for PAR work' ([Ritterbush 2019](#), p. 1305). Transforming power relations does not come only through intellectual dialogue, but is also bound up in emotions and embodied practices.

Our reflections now bring us back to how we can improve CORE. Sustaining CORE over the long term requires building a culture of relationality that extends beyond Penn as the founder. More faculty can be brought into the partnership, though attention must be paid to the rewards and disincentives for this type of work in universities. Regular reflection and learning sessions should be built into the cycle of activities. Though students come and go, they can transmit their knowledge and experience of CORE from one cohort to the next and cultivate a continuing community of practice with CORE alumni.

We conclude with some lessons that may be helpful for others attempting to build equitable and transformative CUPs in their own contexts. First, centre relationship building as an end in itself, not just as a means to other ends. This relational ethic of *being-for* may run into resistance when partners have pressing needs and goals. What we have learned in CORE is that the relationship itself is not only valuable for itself, but that other goals are compromised if the relationship is weak. Second, time has to be dedicated to being in relationship over the long term. This means not only spending time together on the work, but also being there for one another beyond the formal partnership.

Finally, regular reflection and reflexive practice are critical to advancing more equitable and transformative partnerships. We have taken time in our formal CORE governance meetings, as well as in our various projects, to assess not just project results, but our relationships and process of working together. As Zoë experienced with the Teaching Democracy facilitation team, reflection and dialogue led to even deeper learning and personal transformation, while also pointing to ways to improve their facilitation process. Regularity and expectation of reflection always being a part of the process can lead to opportunities to name and address the discursive frictions that will inevitably arise in any CUP, particularly around knowledge hierarchies and whose knowledge is being centred. These tensions are sites of potentially transformative change. In addition to the month-to-month processes, we found it helpful to also deeply reflect on and assess our formal three-year CORE partnership, of which one of the results is this article.

Our collective reflection for this article has left us feeling more inspired to deepen CORE and our commitment to transforming CUPs. A relational approach to power provides hope that, every day, we can be part of the change we seek in all of our relations. This reminds us that, no matter what we have institutionalised or encoded, our individual beings, organisations and communities are always in a process of becoming. We hope that transforming power in CUPs results in co-evolution of both partners and ultimately breaks the binary between community and university itself.

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