

THE POLITICAL-PEDAGOGY OF DR. DIP KAPOOR: A TRIBUTE

GISELLE F. THOMPSON

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It would be insincere of me not to admit that I am still grieving Dip crossing the threshold to the afterlife on 26 August 2025. For this reason, in the tradition of Black feminist scholars (Nayak, 2019; Ohito, 2021; Williams, 2016), I have thought deeply about my grief and how I might fasten it to the 'larger fabric of my intellectual labour' (Ohito, 2021: 517) to honour someone who took it upon himself to mentor me, his junior colleague, but also show me immeasurable love, care, and concern. Dip countered Dionne Brand's assertion, made in her novel *Theory*, that in academia 'One has no friends ... One has colleagues [and] One has assassins' (Brand, 2018: 66) by rejecting the ethics of the university system that was designed to produce individuated, assimilated, and competitive people who produce knowledge for knowledge's sake (Collins, 2008; Gumbs, 2014). Dip reached across the lines of race, ethnicity, culture, age, and gender to build solidarity and coalitions with so many. He believed that our work as scholars and professors is inherently political, and therefore, must challenge and subvert hegemonic ideologies and inequitable social arrangements. To do this work, he believed that the 'voices, ideas, perspectives and theories produced by those engaged in social struggles [must not be] ignored, rendered invisible, or overwritten ... [by our] accounts as ... academic experts' (Choudry and Kapoor, 2010: 2) but centralised and amplified in our teaching and research.

In December 2025, my colleagues Sourayan Mookerjea and Dia Da Costa, hosted an event, entitled 'The Autonomous Domain of Subaltern Politics' to honour Dip at the University of Alberta. Given the current geopolitical landscape in which we live, wherein racial-colonial-neoliberal-capitalist empire continues its land grabbing, labour exploitation, displacement, dispossession,

forced migration, ecological racism and/or degradation, slumisation, and resource wars (Kapoor and Thompson, in press), the event was aptly named. The people who have been made subalterns by these processes are acutely aware of the limits of human suffering. However, meditating on subaltern autonomy calls us not to pornotrope (Spillers, 1987) these experiences, as the traditional white gaze of research would have us with its othering epistemological impositions (Wright, 2023), but recognise the ways of knowing, ingenuity, creativity, spirituality, and other forms of resistance that have sustained subaltern people throughout time and space. Dip and I conversed often about the ways in which their blood, sweat, tears, lives, deaths, and afterlives (Kapoor and Thompson, in press; Thompson, 2025) are instructive to us, and how in them lay political-pedagogies that erase the line that exists between theory and practice.

bell hooks wrote: ‘theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfils this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end’ (1994: 61). Like hooks, Dip expected that theory be pressed into the service of healing, liberation, and revolution. But he argued that theory is only ‘politically productive when made accessible’ (Kapoor, 2019: 71) through the process of ‘knowledge democracy’. That is to say, knowledge that is mobilised intelligibly to social groups and subaltern classes who are deeply impacted by casteist, racist, gendered, and other oppressions. Soberingly he remarked:

“Knowledge democracy in contexts of injustice and exploitation would need to recognize that knowledge about education, social in/justice, inequality, resistance and social revolutionary/radical change *is not the preserve of academics* and that those who experience marginalization are knowledge producers and actors in such cross-locational engagements, including activists from these contexts” (Kapoor, 2019: 69-70, emphasis added).

Learning to cede space to marginalised peoples is not a practice that many of us were taught in graduate school. This is because it is counter to the logic of academic knowledge production. As I mentioned above, we are trained to be experts, and therefore the sole producers and possessors of knowledge. However,

our disciplined forms of ‘expertise’ do not make us the arbiters of knowledge because, embedded in subaltern groups and movements are living praxes ‘politically seasoned’, as Dip wrote, and ‘powered by the strength of the suffering and injustices endured by ancestors’ (2009: 36) and the numerous plights of their progeny in the contemporary moment (Kapoor, 2009). This is vital for researchers to acknowledge in order to address political-economic and sociocultural injustices. And to researchers who choose not to acknowledge this, Dip, like only he could, indicted their self-induced ‘theoretical hearing impairment’. He argued that theoretical hearing impairments are produced by an uncritical adherence to the ‘traditional’, white, and male canons of social theorising and their associated political interests in relation to the ruling relations of capital (Kapoor, 2009).

In our conversations, Dip laid bare his concern about the compulsion, particularly of scholars who are racialised as non-white, to conform to dominant theoretical approaches because of the harms that they have inflicted on our communities (Kapoor, 2019; King, 2019). He also believed that they are unable to animate human suffering, be it manifest or latent, within the oppressive structures of the market, the modern state apparatus, and civil society (Kapoor, 2009). Even when human suffering is theorised within these boundaries, he argued, it is often reduced to a quantifiable social fact or simply made into a spectacle, whilst it is made to persist (Ibid.). This, for those who knew him well, was incongruent with his convictions.

An exceedingly kind and generous soul, he schooled me over a span of three years during *long* lunches, over countless cups of coffee/tea, during phone conversations, and on scenic walks about the political imperative of our work as scholars. He emphasised that it was our responsibility to, not only respond to human suffering, but amplify the knowledges embedded in our historical, ancestral, and cultural archives while undertaking this vocational work in the spirit of repair and redress – and using the academy’s resources to do it. For example, in Odisha, India where he co-laboured for upwards of three-decades with Dalit and Adivasi peoples, who experience caste-based discrimination, he and his interlocutors transformed, what he referred to as, ‘participatory academic research’ (*pat*) – because its academic formulation is oriented towards meeting institutional

ethics board requirements and funding agency criteria – to ‘people’s Participatory Action Research’ (people’s PAR) (Ibid.). The transition took place when community leaders realised that formal *par* meant that they were going to be studied for academic interests that were linked to the advancement of knowledge in universities in the West, although with their help in analysing their marginalisation (Ibid.). The debates about this alien exercise gave rise to people’s PAR that moved to centralise the political interests of Dalit and Adivasi communities in the research being undertaken. As a result, Dip deployed some of his research funds for ‘maximal impact of resources’ (Ibid.: 34) during the research process for necessities such as food, transportation, and mobile phones. He was also invited to help establish the Centre for Research and Development Solidarity in 2006, that was committed to Dalit and Adivasi ‘people’s knowledge, education, and social action’ (Ibid.: 32).

Undoubtably, Dip’s approach to research blurred academic lines that universities and funding bodies impose on researchers (Kapoor, 2009, 2019; Thompson, 2020). Too often, these expectations are incompatible with the cultural and political contexts of our engagements as scholars, and moreover, are tone deaf to the urgent needs of *real* people, who are more than mere ‘participants’ in our studies. As an early-career Black woman scholar, who is engaged in Black scholarship (Nyamnjoh, 2012), Dip encouraged me to follow his lead in resisting the artificial and imposed bifurcation between research and activism and knowledge production and mobilisation and stay true to my political commitments, and those of my interlocuters with whom I work in service to, and in partnership with.

Lessons from Dip’s activist-scholarship exist in his extensive body of work, which I continue to tarry with for instructions on how to be a better co-conspirator in the fight for equity and justice against racial-colonial-neoliberal-capitalist empire in African/Black cultural contexts. However, the most valued lessons, gifted to me by him, are derived from our one-on-one intellectual exchanges about the interlocking and transnational nature of oppression and the historical and contemporary resistance of subaltern people to it. Our interpersonal popular education project – that included much laughter to counter disillusionment and cynicism – invoked thinkers and revolutionaries such as

Bhimrao Ambedkar, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, and other world builders whom he so admired, but to his dismay, were often obscured in development education scholarship and practice. Now, like them, he too is an ancestor, but these conversations resound in my memory and challenge me to undertake my work with integrity as he undertook his.

May the legacy of his political-pedagogy live on.

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Giselle F. Thompson is the Assistant Professor of Black Studies in Education at the University of Alberta, where she teaches in the Social Justice and International Studies in Education graduate specialisation and the Bachelor of Education programme. Her

award-winning research exists at the nexus of critical studies in the sociologies of race, education, gender, diaspora, political economy, and international development.