Introduction

Why I Wrote This Book

I've been wanting to write this book since I was a teenager. That's when I started reading feminist, political, and metaphysical theory. In my life, and in my mind, I was exploring the power that structures society and that social-change agents work to shift, and the power at the root of the soul, of one's manifestation in this life.

I grew up in Roxbury, Boston's historic black neighborhood. As a teenager, I understood that my neighborhood was marginal in the city of Boston. I wanted to understand how this subordinate social positioning was created and maintained. In a sense, it was a contrast to my blackness-loving home. My mother immigrated to the United States from Puerto Rico with me in her belly. She was raised in the Ayala Family, well-known as artists who hold up what is black and African in Puerto Rican culture. If there is one thing that characterizes the Ayalas, it's their unmitigated love for black people. Hearing my family talk about black Puerto Rican culture, history, and music with passion and reverence made an impression on me. It was as if no one had ever informed them that black people are generally positioned as low status in many societies.

I observed interactions and devoured books. Once I discovered a great author, I read all of her or his books — Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Richard Wright, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, Foucault, Jane Roberts, Gurumayi, Muktananda, Nityananda, Abhinavagupta, to name a few. I eventually identified a core question that drove me through the next few decades: **What is the relationship between the freedom of social change and the liberation of spiritual traditions?**

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In college I studied feminist theory and social-change organizational models. I knew I wanted to work in social change in a praxis way, working in the field and as a thinker, writer, and strategist. My approach has been to move around within the field to better understand how it functions as a system. I have worked in social service agencies, advocacy organizations, grassroots organizing networks, philanthropic foundations, a leadership and management firm, and a strategy center. **I have found that social-change agents use the same power frameworks and tools that the dominant use.**

Currently, my professional life is defined by writing and consulting, mostly strategy and innovation. I specialize in network approaches and elegant design. I have a particular interest in social movements, and recent work includes projects with the national leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement and the national immigrant youth movement network, United We Dream.

My spiritual work has always been a part of me but finds its realization in the practice of Siddha Yoga, a spiritual path arising from the teachings of Kashmir Shaivism, considered the highest iteration of spiritual mysticism. Kashmir Shaivism affirms the supreme identity of the individual self, the intrinsic connection with the Divine. It offers a powerful model of consciousness.

Finally, this book was greatly influenced by my daughter, Saphia Suarez. She started acting at the age of four in local children's theater programs. Over the years, I drove Saphia to and from numerous classes, rehearsals, and performances. Once, when she was a teenager and had been at it for over 10 years, I went to see a presentation from an acting workshop at Wheelock Family Theater in Boston titled "Theater of the Absurd." The performance was a piece from *Waiting for Godot*, where the two student actors played out a seemingly banal dominant/subordinate interaction in which the subordinate had to find and utilize the moment where the dynamic could be interrupted and transformed. Excitement rose in me as I watched, instantly realizing this kind of thinking and practice as the

missing piece in my book. After the performance, I ran up to the teacher and asked her about status and improvisational theater. She recommended Keith Johnstone, the leading acting teacher for this approach. This launched my personal passion for and study of acting as a liberatory practice. My daughter decided to study acting, and as the writing of this book comes to a conclusion, she begins her studies at Yale University's drama department. As we went through the process of college application and selection last year, she told me, "The way you took acting so seriously shifted the way I approached it. It used to be a passion. Now it's my purpose." But it was she who taught me how to take acting seriously.

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The Power Manual brings these many experiences and ideas together and explores major concepts of power, with a focus on the dynamics of domination and liberation. It proposes a new theory of power based on enactment — the bringing of something to life through one's actions. The book weaves together thinking from feminist theory, postmodern theory, sociology, psychoanalysis, neuroendocrinology, business management, developmental psychology, political theory, spiritual mysticism, economics, anthropology, and theater. It looks at key ways that power is deployed and transformed so that one may enact freedom.

Key ideas cut across the many aforementioned genres. For example, the fact that difference is a trigger for power dynamics and also a key way that one unconsciously evaluates environmental data, with a bias toward similarity; the critical role that attention plays and that it is also a resource one's body uses sparingly; that interactions structure social systems and are also sites of resistance; the primacy of the two core emotional states of joy and anxiety; and the constant finding that power skills are learnable.

The book has 24 chapters across four sections — identity, choice, thresholds, and games. The first 12 chapters contain a story, key ideas, and frameworks. The last 12 chapters are power games. Ultimately, the role of identity in power dynamics is that of refusing powerless identities

and enacting powerful identities. Choice allows one to move away from dominant power interactions, toward egalitarian interactions, but it requires attention, a limited resource. Thresholds, or points of transition, allow one to understand and master the process of power expansion and perceive the everyday points of choice. Games order and reorder interactions with others and the self, and thus are perfect vehicles for learning power relationships.

This approach shifts the focus of the actor to the self, to one's ability to imagine, and one's discipline of attention and effort in the pursuit of freedom. I write in a stripped down, stylized manner, focusing on the core ideas, that allows the tracking of power frameworks and practices across different genres and fields. I place citations for the key writings that influenced my work in a Notes chapter at the end, and focus on my own thinking in the body. This simplifies the chapters and clarifies my contribution to the ideas I weave together. While the subject of power is a complicated one, my aim is to create a book that is sophisticated in its thinking *and* accessible.

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Why do power relations matter in social change, or for any of us who care about living the best life we can live? Because we have to be clear about the type of power we seek. We need power to move through the world and construct a meaningful life, but we must ensure that it is liberatory — allowing us to thrive and create the beauty that can come only from who one is now as this incarnated soul, while also ensuring that we do not perpetuate domination.

I am left balancing two truths — that much interaction is based on dominant ways of thinking *and* we are all, essentially, souls in communion, playing out the drama of life with each other. Can we become more conscious of this interplay and, beginning with our actions, create a better world?

Power + Identity

Refusing Powerless Identities

Power + Identity Intro
Refusing Powerless Identities

What is power? And how does one obtain power, especially if one is defined as powerless by society?

There are three core propositions in chapter 1, Effective Interactions, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and bell hooks: (1) that there are both supremacist and liberatory ways to act out power, (2) that liberatory power is real power, and (3) that one can access liberatory power by fine-tuning one's consciousness. Power is relational; it plays out in interactions. Structures, rules, and systems are the artifacts of our interactions. Therefore, useful liberation practices focus on effective interactions — in which we seek mutuality and egalitarian interactions and refuse powerless identities.

Chapter 2, Interaction Patterns, highlights the thinking of Audre Lorde, Roland Barthes, and Franz Fanon. Lorde identified difference as the key factor that triggers power dynamics, or unequal interactions. Barthes brilliantly revealed that underneath all the various ways that one can assert dominant power (such as racism, sexism, classism), there are actually seven basic dominant interaction patterns, and they are so much a part of rational thinking that they may at first seem benign. They are tolerance, objectification, assimilation, authority, objectivity, accumulation, and certainty. Luckily, Fanon showed that there are also patterns of resistance — sign reading (the ability to see signs of domination), deconstruction (the ability to understand the relationships between signs of domination and the narratives they create that drive interactions), and reconstruction (the ability to rearrange the signs to tell a new, more mutual story).

Chapter 3, Transmission of Affect, focuses on the work of Theresa Brennan, who was my professor at the New School's Feminist Theory

program. Brennan used research from the field of psychoneuroendo-crinology, the study of hormones and their relationship to behavior, to reveal how our hormones act on each other during interactions. This is called affect. She hints at the role of affect in uneven power relationships when she writes about how, in society, women carry the disordered affects of men, or projected aggressions, which women experience as unwanted aggression that is carried in the body and manifests as anxiety or depression. This work being done by women lowers the available energy for living and creating. The book focuses on what affect is and how it works, but to me, the most important contribution is the main point of chapter 3 — whether it is done consciously or unconsciously, the typical interaction between a dominant and a subordinate is one in which the dominant offloads anxiety and the subordinate uploads that anxiety. Finally, Brennan offers that a key way to resist negative affect is through the classical virtues — courage, prudence, temperance, justice, hope, faith, and love — which she defines in relationship to affect and as something that is practiced in interactions.

By this point, I was starting to see convergence around some key ideas: that the locus of power, the place where it can be transformed, is interactions; that the way one relates to difference is something one has to contend with and explore because fear of difference and curiosity about difference trigger very different interactions; finally, there's the assurance that this is a lifelong practice, something at which one can constantly work and improve.

Chapter 4, The Sources of Power Relations, introduces the reality that the way we relate to power is developmental and that the foundation starts in childhood, where we learn through our interactions whether we can get what we want or not. These early interactions with our care-takers teach us the standards of value, what is valued in one's society. We move from one developmental level to a higher one by learning to increasingly integrate experiences of difference.

This chapter stumped me for a while because I realized that while libera-tory power and egalitarian interactions could be held up as ideal, in fact, it

appeared as if only people at high levels of development could function this way in a relatively consistent manner. This made sense when I thought back to the proposition that one could access liberatory power by fine-tuning one's consciousness, but it also seemed that holding this as a general expectation for human interaction may be a bit unrealistic. Further, there was the realization that freedom is not for the faint of heart. It is something one has to live into moment by moment, more akin to spiritual practice than the power struggles central to social movements, more focused on our internal relationship to power than the external ones, which are reflections.

Finally, chapter 5, Powerless and Powerful Identities, explores the space between Gramsci's hegemony, the idea that the very acceptance of power as dominance renders one powerless, and the philosophy of Supreme Power outlined in the ancient Shiva Sutras. It overlaps dominant power (hegemony) and liberatory power (one's inherent Supreme Power) and reiterates the assurance that power is something that we practice and develop, and is a priori available to us by virtue of being a conscious being.

Effective Interactions
Supremacist Power and Liberatory Power

Max was one of the first black students admitted into elite private
schools on the east coast of the United States. While his parents sent
him to these schools to receive a quality education, to make it through, Max
also learned to navigate difficult social dynamics. He recalls that, when he
was in eighth grade, there was a white student who was always making
fun of him. As one of the few black students, Max had been picked on a lot.
"A black kid is someone who is clearly different on the outside," Max said.
Eventually, Max decided he wasn't going to give this kid any more attention.
This annoyed the kid, who tried different ways to regain the upper hand. He
eventually began to be nice to Max, in hopes of getting his attention again,
to no avail. Their peers noticed this shift in attention — of power — and
the kid lost their esteem. Max was learning how to perceive and shift power
dynamics.

We all want power. The power to attract the love we want. The power
to create what we want to see in the world. The power to avoid harm.
But what is power? And how does one obtain power, especially if one is
defined as powerless by society, as black people are?

Power is, first of all, relational. It operates in relationships of inequality
where we seek advantage and so is intentional. On the other hand, we
are lessened by the inability to assert equality of right and opportunity
in an interaction. Power is not about the rule of law, institutions, society,
or the state. These are simply the dead forms, or artifacts, that result
from past power-laden interactions, or confrontations.

Power is exercised, not acquired. Everyday interactions contain aims and
objectives that make the exercise of power visible and understandable.

Power is also never absolute. There is always resistance. Power is a force field of relationships based on inequality.

Oftentimes leaders or social-change activists think that, if they create and implement new structures, they can shift the way people in an organization interact. Focusing instead on creating collective understanding of how people are currently interacting and their desired ways of interacting can lead to exponential and immediate change.

For example, Otto Scharmer and Ursula Versteegen worked with a network of physicians in an area of Frankfurt, Germany, to improve emergency care service. They began by conducting over 100 interviews with both patients and physicians. They then invited the people interviewed to share the results. Almost 100 attended.

The interviews revealed four different levels at which patients and physicians could relate. The first level was *transactional*. The patient comes in with a problem, and the physician fixes it. It is like a machine with a broken part that a mechanic repairs. The second level was *behavioral*. Here the physician tells the patient the behavior that has to change, and the patient tries to change it. In the third, the *assumptive*, the physician helps the patient understand the assumptions that underlie the behavior to be changed, and the patient works to question and change the assumptions. In the fourth, the *identity* level, the physician helps the patient understand how the illness may indicate a need to let go of an old identity and explore a new one.

Meeting participants then broke into small groups and talked about what the levels meant to them. They then identified the level(s) that they were currently functioning within and the one(s) they desired. The final tally revealed that both patients and physicians felt they were functioning at levels one and two, and both wanted to function at three and four. They realized that they wanted the same thing and that the system was them, what they chose to enact. With this new awareness, participants spoke about how this was true in their own work and thought of

ways they could behave differently. They began to share ideas and went on to work on many projects together, including an innovative emergency care system.

Useful liberation practices focus on effective interactions — interactions that disrupt dominating behavior (the taking of more than one's share) and generate mutuality (practicing reciprocity in relationships). There are two key points regarding effective interactions: (1) one must constantly **refuse powerless identities** in interactions, and (2) one can **build capacity for effective interactions**. It is in everyday interactions that one either contributes to unequal power dynamics or interrupts them.

To assert one's own power in a way that promotes mutuality, one must know the type of power one seeks. There are two fundamental types of power. One is the ability to dominate, or control, people and things. This power rests on relative rank and the privilege of being at the top. It reflects a supremacist way of thinking — an acceptance of relationships of domination and submission. Supremacist power is a crude form of power, related to scarcity consciousness, or the belief that the world holds limited supplies of the things we want — love, power, recognition. An alternative type of power is liberatory power — the ability to create what we want. It stems from abundance consciousness. Liberatory power requires the transformation of what one currently perceives as a limitation. The distinction between these two types of power is important.

People committed to liberation often focus on the domination aspects of power, on understanding the ways some people are made powerless by others. Though there is much to understand about this type of power and how it works, focusing on it often limits the attention to the ways one *does* assert power — a critical aspect of liberatory power.

Further, one can build one's capacity for liberatory power. It requires a commitment to living mindfully, constantly increasing one's level of

awareness, so that when one finds oneself in an interaction that positions one as powerless, one is able to perceive it, keep calm, and assert mutuality. Liberatory power helps one refrain from asserting power over others, or to do so carefully.

The stories one tells oneself and others transmit or transmute power. *Max decided not to give his tormentor any more attention. He revised the story to make him insignificant, and it worked.* The story about what is happening shapes reality, particularly whether one is positioned as powerless or powerful in it. Liberatory power invites one to construct a story about oneself as powerful. It trains us to look for where our power is. Over time, one is able to move through the force field of relationships without taking on the low opinion of others or opining low of others.

Thus, there are four core propositions: (1) power is negotiated in interactions; (2) there are supremacist and liberatory ways to act out power; (3) liberatory power is real power; and (4) one can access liberatory power by fine-tuning one's consciousness and increasing one's access to choice.

Questions for Consideration in Interactions

1.   What are the most immediate, the most local, power relationships at work?

2.   What narrative(s) make this power relationship possible?

3.   How is this power relationship linked to other power relationships to form a strategy for dominance?

4.   How was the power relationship modified in the interaction, strengthening some terms and weakening others?