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Democracy in Dark Times: On Citizenship, Choice, and Courage Substance of Truth By Tolu Olorunda BC Columnist

[Below is an excerpt from Tolu Olorunda's book, [The Substance of Truth](#). (Sense Publishers, 2011)]

A citizen is by definition a citizen among citizens of a country among countries. His rights and duties must be defined and limited, not only by those of his fellow citizens, but also by the boundaries of a territory.

-Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*[\[1\]](#)

Which way does the pendulum tend to move in the kind of society we live in? Is it freedom or communal togetherness which we miss more? Has our society, with its freedom to pursue wealth and social importance, with its free competition and ever-growing range of consumer choice, supplied all the freedom one may desire? Is the satisfaction of the other need, that of communal support, the last task still left on the social agenda?

-Zygmunt Bauman, *Freedom*[\[2\]](#)

In a society ever expanded by immigration (and the inevitable xenophobia brought to bear), concepts of Citizenship should be addressed more often. And most have been comforted into believing Citizenship speaks only of residency or nationality in states and countries. Accordingly, citizens *ought* to uphold the values and

traditions of the territories within which they exist - locally and nationally (rarely internationally, which, for obvious reasons, explains hysterical neocon demands to disregard human rights-securing statutes like the Geneva Conventions). But if citizens can only be defined in terms of nationality, what definitions fall upon those considered *citizens of empire* or *dissident citizens* or *exiled citizens*? And what of those unrepresented or underrepresented by their governments? Are they not citizens? Or do they lose this identity - and its added privileges? More meaning must be given to *other* kinds of citizens - those who, for their limitations (economic and otherwise) alone, have been rendered invincible and disposable.

A striking, though resourceful, example was the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina victims, most of whom were poor and Black.^[3] While, then, all rhetorical weaponry in the Bush arsenal were at once deployed to intimidate the logical conclusion - that millions of helpless citizens failed to arouse top concern because their wallets didn't do enough in stimulating the economy - more, even some on the Right, have since wised up to the hierarchical system that determines *who* gets *what*, *when* and *how*. One group could fly out of New Orleans overnight in private jets while another was left to rot out on the rooftops of water-soaked houses: and only after much public outrage were food, drinkable water, and emergency supplies airdropped.

The bank bailout of late 2008 also jolted millions out of slumber into wide-awake consciousness of what rung on the priority ladder their government had them ranked. The many homeowners whose lives today remain fragmented and shattered - all to comfort self-sufficient, megalomaniac CEOs responsible for sponsoring the financial disaster - have also in recent months begun questioning who exactly their elected representatives hold in greater light: corporations or citizens. With schools falling apart from *budget shortage*, and teachers losing jobs to console the concerns of private companies steering the educational ship in all wrong directions, both children and parents find it increasingly hard to trust leaders elected to serve them. And the moral outrage unleashed when employees at the New York Stock Exchange, Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, and the Federal Reserve, wound up first-in-line to receive H1N1 vaccines - even before several hospitals and elementary schools - yields great proof of a disheartened citizenry fed up with the politics of disposability and displacement.^[4]

This swelling movement of citizens emerging from the woodworks to protest irresponsible policies - whether the two major military exploits, whether land-grab legislations, whether dispossessing eminent domain

laws, whether environmental causes - confirms the obvious: push a people hard enough and prepare for blowback. And though Right-wingers - cast as Tea Party patriots, *birther* and *deather* conspiracy theorists, and climate-change deniers - earn no applause from the Left for their erratic antics and blind obeisance to deformed and manipulative multimillionaire leaders like Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, and Sarah Palin. Behind the cascade of wigs, hats and placards stands a fragile and frightened population which, though harboring some racist and misguided views of their president, knows the problem isn't with the man in the Oval Office but with the corporations marching back and forth, bearing gifts.

Virtually no country on earth boasts a majority deeply satisfied with the work its government is doing - even in tyrannical regions where dissent is cracked hard upon and brainwashing the norm of everyday life. And if that at all sounds generic, it shouldn't. If out of the nearly 200 countries tied to the United Nations, only a few can boast mainstream national support, what say this of a human race still yet to engage successfully deliberative democracy?

In South America, where recently a great revolution of values rewarded a vibrant people recovering from the vicious setbacks of decades-long neoliberal domination, it took years of Capitalism run amok for the oppressed masses to overthrow one corporatist-conservative dictatorship after the other and replace them with leftist alternatives which, while not always perfect, have restored the faiths of millions across the continent. Noted linguist Noam Chomsky described this coming-to-being in 2006: "As the elected governments become more formally democratic, citizens have expressed an increasing disillusionment with the way democracy functions and 'lack of faith' in the democratic institutions. They have sought to construct democratic systems based on popular participation rather than elite and foreign domination."[\[5\]](#) The same can be said of the U.S.

While President Barack Obama has turned out, before the eyes of an increasingly disillusioned base, far from the Change Agent he earnestly and eloquently claimed to be (or they believed he was, against all evidence), the support raked from tens of millions frustrated with eight years of *inverted totalitarianism*[\[6\]](#) tells of the potential present for a greater political awakening.

The '08 presidential election echoed a call to action - a defining moment to walk back, if at least aesthetically, some of the damage Bush's gang had engineered with great pride. In Obama, many saw a calm,

collected, composed thinker ready to beat back the shallow models of Group Think presidents of the past with whom we went into war. They saw a former community organizer concerned with the plights of the middle class - even if he all but stayed silent on the underclass and its unwinnable war with poverty. They believed in the fruitful potential for change. And in contrast, even with compelling narratives of national security and military qualification, John McCain, many were convinced, represented merely a less agile and more erratic version, and extension, of the Reagan-Bush (I and II) regime. No other demographic took more seriously this charge than young people - often marginalized and condemned for perceived political nonchalance - who accounted for the largest turnout since 1984, marking a 4-5% increase from 2004 and an 11% increase since 2000.[\[7\]](#)

“The point is that in society,” Hannah Arendt advised, “everybody must answer the question of *what* he is - as distinct from the question of *who* he is - which his role is and his function.”[\[8\]](#) Millions pass through time and space never once being posed this question of role and function - let alone answering. James Baldwin, in his reflections on the dialectic tension between the expectations of education and a society resistant to educated citizens, poignantly pressed: “The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. ... But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society.”[\[9\]](#)

To Baldwin’s point, society relishes dormant and docile citizens - those too burdened with the heavy toll of daily life to begin resisting and resetting oppressive social configurations. Kin to these kinds of citizens are those relegated to the margins (better yet, off the margins) - unsalvageable or unreachable. Hurricane Katrina bears the most explicit brunt of this tradition in recent times; soon after landfall, government officials, and their busboys in the Right-wing media sphere, ran off berating those who couldn’t drive out of the impending storm, who simply *refused to help themselves*- i.e. were too strung out on crack or involved in equally self-destructive endeavors - and did not deserve the help of a government brimming with them means, “power, resources, and authority to address complex undertakings such as dealing with the totality of the economic, environmental, cultural, and social destruction that impacted the Gulf Coast.”[\[10\]](#)

The sympathy millions felt for their fellow citizens was extraordinary, as was the disbelief which seized millions worldwide. But the

operatives knew their way around town: to pacify citizens, physically and emotionally, it's usually helpful to cause commotion between groups more likely to find common ground and link arms against shared oppressors. To keep a displeased people under control, it's key to make the important trivial and the trivial important. What then results is endless fixation on supercilious customs like reality shows and celebrities-behaving-badly - and a polity extinguished of all ethical energy to demand from Power what is due.

In an age when Choice, Option, and Diversity replace concrete concerns as sum-total of democratic engagement - the be-all and end-all of Struggle - many have traded true freedom for artificial diversity. The late George Carlin, one of society's clearest critics, spoke at length on the limitations lofty ideals of "freedom of choice" harvest:

If it's an important thing - limited choice. Two political parties - essentially, two. Big media companies - five, six? ... Oil companies - down to three, now, I think, overall; three or four. Banks, the big banks, the big brokerage houses, the big accounting firms (all the things that are important) - reduced in choice. Newspapers in the city - how many? Used to be three, four; now, it's one or two. They're owned by the same people, and they also own a radio station and the TV station. But, jellybeans? Thirty-two flavors! Ice cream (all the things that don't matter: the unimportant things) - a lot of choices. [\[11\]](#)

In line with this plot, a false sense of empowerment is bestowed upon citizens quadrennially, through well-performed narratives that entertain over a dozen presidential candidates at start but successfully narrow out to two *opposing* candidates reciting similar scripts. Those whose views fall outside of mainstream thought or corporate concerns are rigorously maligned, humiliated, and mocked. The hostile treatment populist candidates like Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) and Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) enjoyed during the '08 presidential race exposed a media market more devoted to appeasing corporate sponsors than offering qualitative "freedom of choice."

The corporate news vassals, owned by six overlords - General Electric, Walt Disney, News Corp, Time Warner, Viacom, CBS [\[12\]](#) - realize their audiences, already cut out by reality TV shows, are tailor-made with the seams of sentimentality. Voters (tagged "Independent," "Democrat" and "Republican") are selected and housed in clandestine backrooms and handed remote control-shaped objects with which their views are reflected on screen, in real-time - for viewers at home to reel in.

The aim, here, greatly shifts from presenting critical presidential debates to packaging popularity contests mediated by *random* sets of voters. And the big-six media conglomerates sense very little to fear from a federal board more aghast at semi-second flashes of nudity than lost grounds in diversity of ownership and fair reporting on issues threatening the future of humanity.[13]

When countervailing outlets offer non-propaganda reporting, they are often viewed as "instrument of enemy propaganda," and even worth incinerating.[14] Neoliberalism holds no intentions of welcoming dissent or entertaining divergent dictums: The Market as purveyor of all-that-is-good dissolves all desires to reconcile citizens with their civic duties as watchdogs and sponsors of government. And as governments fall subservient to Wall Street warriors, citizens must let The Market *run its course*.

Much, however, can and must be done if the future should differ from the past and present, if generations ahead should lead lives sheltered from the penetrating fangs of predator companies and malevolent corporations. Citizens must fight back against the freakish conservative chauvinistic charade that imposes social tariffs on human beings of different nationalities. Citizens must craft a radical agenda, one intolerant to the binary-ism of Left vs. Right political theatrics that promote and reward legislators uncommitted to serving their constituencies.

This agenda would do more than address the political pitfalls of government: it would challenge and overturn the "frontal assault that equates public service with corruption, diversity with lowered standards, public schools with race wars, private schools with free enterprise, free enterprise with civil liberty, choice with self-segregation and the segregation of whites from blacks with opportunity." [15] It would take forging alliances with swelling ranks of citizens - on the Left, Right, Center, Margin, and those bent beyond narrow boundaries of ideological territories - to reproduce courage in a season ripe with hope but withering of inaction. It would take a "Community with a capital C - a community of thought, values, and sensibilities, one that ... transcends boundaries and governments." [16]

For too long, parochial and provincial conceptions of Citizenship have halted national and international transformative movements. And endless bombardment with vague and meaningless social and cultural options successfully seduced citizens into deep sleep - from which many are yet to arise. But the age of change falls upon us, and at no other

period has it been more critical that conscionable, courageous citizens of humanity restart the work of making our world as good as its promises. Indeed, "power arises only where people act together."^[17]

BlackCommentator.com Columnist, Tolu Olorunda, is a Michigan-based cultural critic and writer whose work has been featured widely on online publications such as Alternet, All Hip Hop, BlackCommentator.com, CounterPunch and TruthOut, as well including magazines such as ColorLines, The Nation, and Wiretap. His recently released book, [The Substance of Truth](#) (Sense Publishers, 2011), is an exploration of social issues within the US and beyond, including the education system, media culture, Hip-Hop culture, Disney, youth culture and resistance, neoliberalism, identity politics, social networking, civic discourse, and the Obama administration. Tolu's work is invested in examining political and popular culture as central sites for struggle and meaning toward enabling democratic possibilities. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Olorunda.

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- [3] For greater insight, see Giroux, H. A. (2006). *Stormy weather: Katrina and the politics of disposability*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
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http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/content/nov2009/db2009112_606442.htm
- [5] Chomsky, N. (2007). *Interventions* (p. 193). San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- [6] Term coined by political theorist Sheldon Wolin in *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.
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<http://www.civiced.org/pdfs/research/SPSASouleFinal.pdf>
- [8] Ibid., *Men in dark times*, p. 155.

- [9] From “A Talk to Teachers”; reprinted in Baldwin, J. (1998). *Collected essays* (pp. 678–679). New York: Library of America.
- [10] Ibid., *Stormy weather*, p. 42.
- [11] Smiley, T. (2008, June 23). *George Carlin*. PBS.
Online: http://www.pbs.org/kcet/tavissmiley/archive/200806/20080623_carlin.html
- [12] *Ownership chart: The big six*. Free Press. Online:
<http://www.freepress.net/ownership/chart/main>
- [13] Here, the five-year long fixation on singer Janet Jackson’s 2004 Super Bowl wardrobe malfunction, juxtaposed with swift measures passed by the FCC in 2008 granting giant conglomerates access to media consolidation. For more, see Bill Moyers Journal, “Massing of the Media,” PBS (December 14, 2007). Online:
<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/12142007/watch2.html>
- [14] See Patricia J. Williams’ analysis of the vitriolic threats leveled at Al Jazeera during the Bush years: Patricia J. Williams, “Killing the Messenger,” *The Nation* (2005, December 2).
- [15] Williams, P. J. (2000, November 13). Middling against the ends. *The Nation*.
- [16] Soyinka, W. (2005). *Climate of fear: The quest for dignity in a dehumanized world* (p. 99). New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.
- [17] Ibid., *Men in dark times*, p. 23.

