

Vassar

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,

I am writing to strongly recommend Ms. Lisa Tiny Gray-Garcia and her team of activist writers, performers, storytellers, and artists that comprise PoorMagazine as an invaluable addition to any university or college program invested in issues of poverty, social justice, and diversity. I have had the honor of working alongside her as a mentee and colleague since 2002. Her contributions to my own personal and professional development are immeasurable.

As the one the most powerful leaders I have met working at the intersections of poverty, antiracism, houselessness, disability, and native resistance to settler colonialism today, Ms. Gray-Garcia is the kind of teacher who also understands what it means to be a fearless visionary. She is an alchemist. She works in collaboration with those she leads to create mobile communities of leaders. Together they reclaim impossible situations of grief, loss, trauma, and isolation as the fertile ground for uncommonly generative spaces of community, advocacy, and self-determination. Through the power of storytelling trauma becomes testimony and testimony transforms all it touches, turning those whom society most routinely sees fit to displace into the intellectual leaders of their time.

For the past few years, in addition to directing a dynamic and rich independent news media source, poormagazine.org, Ms. Gray-Garcia has been successfully crafting and leading the artists/activists of PoorMagazine to teach semester long curricula offered at UC Berkeley and other Bay Area colleges through their media justice initiative. These educational programs combine performance, poetry, and testimony to educate college students on a social theory of injustice rooted in the personal perspectives of those most directly impacted by social forces of economic injustice, racism, xenophobia, and empire (<http://www.racepovertymediajustice.org/>).

The first time I met Ms. Grey-Garcia, or Tiny, was with her mother, whom we all called Mama Dee, in a PovertySkool workshop she and her mother ran together in the SoMa district of San Francisco. I was a recent college graduate from an ivy league institution working at the Tenderloin YMCA youth drop-in center, looking for ways to “get involved” in the “community.” Ms. Gray-Garcia welcomed me by making me acutely aware that this work would require that I bring my whole self to the table. Not just my best intentions, not just my best skills as a budding academic, but my whole story. Pieces of myself I had barely even begun to claim as my own, both racism and formal education

privilege, both strong family connections and internalized homophobia. They all became the building blocks of my consciousness-raising. Rather than offering yet another workshop on social justice, anti-racism, or diversity that rewarded participant's for showing up to talk about abstract forces of racism, classism, ableism, settler colonialism and empire leaving our own stories behind, Tiny's teaching practice is embodied, interactive, and deeply personal. She grounds the work of collective healing and transformation in a practice of facing our own truths in each other's realities and learning from them. It is a process of accountability that leaves little time for sentimentality.

What we are missing in conventional academic spaces of high education is a place for the student to enter the room, without all the answers but with their whole selves, with the whole expertise of their own experiences. By centering voices so violently silenced Tiny offers those of us with formal education privilege an honest way into conversation about the traps of our own silences, the stigmas, stereotypes and asymmetrical social hierarchies of power that keep us separate even as we come together for social change.

This past spring, after a series of racist incidents on campus, I invited Ms. Gray-Garcia and the artist-activists of PoorMagazine to bring their Stolen Land/Hoarded Resources Tour: The Traveling Race, Poverty, Media Justice Institute 2017 to Vassar Campus. They prepared a two-hour workshop that dramatized the lived experiences of various members of the company, and presented the students with a lesson plan of provocative questions for reflecting on the connections between these real world situations and their own investments in social equity, including access to shared societal values such as privacy, dignity, shelter, protection and community. In reflecting about her experience, one student wrote: "While at Vassar, Tiny and Poor Magazine offered raw honesty, humbling truth, and provocative stories. Students, including myself, felt seen in ways we usually are not approached. Poor Magazine's critical pedagogy of story-telling illuminated issues of race/ism, class + capitalist exploitation, and colonialism + gentrification got me excited to engage and share my own experiences."

Tiny and the artist/educators of PoorMagazine bring a depth of knowledge and expertise to discussions of public housing, policing, rights, and self-determination rarely encountered in academic spaces, and inaccessible from a book or study alone. Tiny walks the walk of popular education in impressive, creative, innovative, resilient, and compassionate ways. By bringing her to campus you have the opportunity start the kinds of conversations and connections that would no doubt enhance your resource-rich intellectual environment. Thank you for your consideration of Ms. Lisa Tiny Gray-Garcia as a future speaker, lecturer, guest teacher, or visiting instructor to your institution.

Sincerely,



Jasmine Syedullah, PhD
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