

Essay

Engaging the Oppressor Within

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We are at the essence. Here, the core of community, the very root of politics, and the edge of imagination. In dismantling oppression, how are we positioned and aligned? In settler-colonies, whether Israel or the United States, on whose side do we stand? What do we resist, and for whom do we envision the future? Having inherited a diasporic legacy – I am the daughter of refugees and immigrants – with my ancestors’ propensity towards art and revolution, I am disturbed by the task to describe something so essential as this. As an organizer and an advocate for a world we have not yet known, I am offended by a debate that reduces principle to strategy, and that distorts the history of struggle in order to pacify present fears of the powerful.

And yet, I make my life on stolen land and have been seduced by power. I have been miseducated and must daily reject the false comfort of inequality. I must daily choose a decolonized future of collective liberation, and denounce any number of myths that grant me material and psychological power over others. I have had to learn why the tactics deployed to dismantle external manifestations of oppression must be second in priority to self-examination and personal accountability. Believing that my commitment to social transformation must be measured by my willingness to confront my own complicity, I am convinced that engaging the oppressor within is the only engagement that is necessary for revolution.

Changing ourselves is what makes possible the transformation of the conditions of the world. Our own freedom is dependent on our capacity to rid ourselves of the imposed and internalized fear of the freedom of those we have criminalized, subjugated, dehumanized, and othered. This is the groundwork of social change, a constant undoing of our attachment to any manufactured elevation where we believe we come out on top. Only when we build upon this foundation can we rupture the systematized lie of human hierarchy, and ensure that our visions of liberation are not mere replicas of oppression.

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I must imagine a transformed, universally flourishing world with specificity so that it remains irresistible to me and to communities desperate to bring that world into existence. I do not vision for the benefit of those opposed to that world. Beyond presenting the decolonial future of equality and historical justice, I have neither the obligation nor the time to create special room for those fearful of the future. If a settler cannot imagine herself in a decolonized land, it is because she refuses to relinquish her power over the Native. If a world repaired – where what was stolen is returned and what was harmed is healed – is not perceived as emancipation, than an individual’s commitment to oppression is thriving. No oppressor can be reassured that when resources, power, and consequence are equitably allocated, they will not face profound loss and accountability. Because they must experience both. On the other side is healing and liberation, but if this truth is not enough to set you free, the fundamental work remains.

That the individual journey of dismantling internalized supremacy is fundamental and lifelong, however, can in no way be used to justify delay in justice or social transformation. Were we to wait for the critical reckoning by every member of every dominant group, the deadly, institutionalized status quo would persist into perpetuity. On the path towards justice, material conditions must be urgently altered, and harm must be immediately reduced. And so we engage oppression strategically. Not for the benefit of the oppressor, though of course the ultimate benefit is life giving and profound, but for the protection of the oppressed.

Working together with those resisting ongoing settler colonization both in Palestine and Turtle Island¹ (by Israel and the United States, respectively), has offered critical lessons in the opportunities and limitations of engaging the oppressor. Here, I consider engagement at the systemic, rather than the individual or interpersonal level – the chipping away at the institutions upholding ideologies of supremacy and subjugation. For movement lawyers and advocates intervening in colonial legal and political regimes, the value is threefold: to document the harm of oppression, to mitigate the harm to the oppressed by securing material needs, and to have a confronting, public conversation about power.

While these are primarily reactive and at times humiliating practices, engagement can disrupt the momentum of oppression and reassure the oppressed of the righteousness of their resistance. That value, particularly in times of emergency, should not be understated. But a danger arises when these disruptions are considered victories and not forced concessions by fundamentally unjust regimes. Ideologies and institutions of oppression are necessarily flexible, and are designed to accommodate “victories” of critique and reform. So unless we are clear that such targeted interventions are but a step towards the total dismantling of oppression, we risk strengthening the status quo. We engage to advance a future where the oppressor is absent,

1. Indigenous communities of North America refer to the land as “Turtle Island.” For a history of indigenous resistance in Turtle Island, see Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, London: Verso (2019).

because the oppression no longer exists. And securing such a future requires that the balance of our engagement tilts towards building and reclaiming, rather than fighting or disrupting, power.

When the time, energy, and intellectual labor once used to convince the oppressor of the humanity of the oppressed is instead redirected to imagining collective liberation, the empire begins to tremble. In the summer of 2014, the historic convergence of the Ferguson uprising and Israel's military assault on Gaza led to a revival of the legacy of Black-Palestinian solidarity, and a renewed investment in broader cross-movement organizing. Artists, scholars and activists from across freedom struggles intentionally disengaged from their respective (though interdependent) oppressors and re-engaged with each other. Recognizing shared human rights concerns – such as historic injustice, institutionalized discrimination, state violence and impunity, legalized dispossession, and mass incarceration – these movements have since resisted fragmentation and continue to cultivate the only alternative nexus of power capable of transforming society.

The political sea change on Palestine, occurring now within the corridors of traditional power in the US Congress, is rooted in deep, personal relationships between those oppressed by the status quo and their consistent solidarity. Movements for Black liberation, freedom for Palestine, indigenous self-determination, queer justice, and immigrant rights are intentionally interconnecting and building a global struggle. Individuals and communities travel to encounter each other, walk the land together, and coalesce around shared future visions.² When the Movement for Black Lives released its political platform for Black Power, Freedom, and Justice in 2016, ending Israeli oppression in Palestine was a key policy demand.³ When the Red Nation, a radical indigenous collective, hosted its annual conference in 2018, international solidarity with the Palestinian freedom struggle was a grounding principle.⁴ And when a Palestinian delegation traveled to Washington, DC in the spring of 2019 to meet with new members of Congress, they journeyed with a historic US civil rights and racial justice organization (the Center for Constitutional Rights, where I currently serve as Advocacy Director). The delegation embodied the united vision and demand that oppressors relinquish power and join the pursuit of Equality, freedom and justice for all.

In over a decade of advocacy for Palestinian rights, I have not experienced a more dramatic shift in public narrative, or participated in more coherent politics. A red line has been drawn, and sides are clear: resist colonization, racism, and any differing value of human life, or bolster and benefit from structural inequality. There is no middle ground, and there are no exceptions. And herein lies the revolutionary potential of cross-

2. For more information on significant moments in the decades of collective, transnational work in pursuit of equality and historical justice, see "Freedom, Bound" www.freedom-bound.org.

3. Movement for Black Lives, *A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom and Justice* (2016), <https://policy.m4bl.org/>.

4. The Red Nation, *Native Liberation Conference 2018*, <https://therednation.org/2018/06/20/native-liberation-conference-2018/>.

movement building: the necessity of developing an intersectional praxis. To coalesce around a shared future vision and joint struggle for liberation requires individual confrontation with complicity in oppression. Solidarity, the practice of love, demands a reckoning with power. When we bind ourselves to the flourishing of others, we must heal the harm we cause, and reject the limitation we impose on their potential. Oppression cannot withstand this essential, emancipatory engagement, and so we must commit to nothing less.