

# Toward an Ethics of Activism

A Community Investigation of Humility, Grace and Compassion in Movements for Justice

Edited by Frances Lee

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This reader is dedicated to my 爷爷 *ye ye* and 奶奶 *nai nai*.

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By Frances Lee

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## Introduction

By Frances Lee

If mass political resistance is understood to transpire in waves throughout history, social justice activism is currently enjoying a peak level of prominence in US public consciousness. Topics and movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, intersectional feminism, transgender rights, #NoDAPL, and more have broached conversations in popular culture and media. And yet, the internal conditions of social justice communities are plagued with messy relational conflicts. Both newcomers and elders are afraid to speak up or ask questions, for fear of being ruthlessly called out or banished. As leftist activists, we have bulked up our muscles for critiquing and tearing down problematic behaviors, but are less practiced in reflection and turning towards one another. The popular discourse of justice is largely shaped by reactionary thinkpieces, inflamed social media posts, romanticized narratives of movement histories, and prescriptive checklists. All of this belies a lack of foundational understanding of the value of relationships, and how to preserve them when conflict inevitably arises. We've found ourselves stuck cycling in between blame, fear and shame. It is a stale, stunted plane from which to operate.

In 2017, I published "Excommunicate Me from the Church of Social Justice" and "Why I've Started to Fear My Fellow Social Justice Activists" in an attempt to address this relational crisis that I believe is just as urgent as the myriad political issues of justice and freedom we are all fighting for. For this reader, I've invited leaders in powerful activist movements shaping national and local political landscapes to join me and share their ideas on how to develop a life-giving framework of relating to one another. We ask, as social justice oriented workers, organizers, activists, and community members, how can we treat each other with more care? How do we let our movements flex and morph as the conditions of our struggles shift? Our poetry, essays, stories and comics included in this reader formulate an expanded vision of social justice activism that is more humble, gentle, and open- for strategic recruiting purposes, but also, for enabling us well-deserved joy and reward in this work.

*Toward an Ethics of Activism* acknowledges the ambitious and risky attempt of talking about the need for more love and compassion without erasing difference. I believe in "yes and" methods of justice work; yes, a historical system of oppression operates in our society that

results in mass inequity and harm, and, we all have the capacity to recognize the humanity in each other and forge genuine connections.

The first iteration of this reader is my capstone project for my Master's of Arts in Cultural Studies program at the University of Washington Bothell. Rather than generate more academic knowledge to be consumed by trained intellectuals, this project aims to surface collective knowledge by and for the benefit of marginalized and activist communities beyond the academy.

Let's begin.

Dean Spade's piece offers us a toolkit for responding more intentionally to interpersonal conflict. It guides us into deeper self-reflection about our patterns, defenses and assumptions when interacting with someone who has disappointed or hurt us. As we strengthen these emotional and communication skills over time, we can develop a culture of understanding our community members as necessary and worthy of our ongoing forgiveness.

Corinne Manning's braided essay is boldly vulnerable, and she writes about her (and really, our) profound desire for human connection and community care, and the immense shame that follows when it is unmet. She draws parallels between her chronic illness and the disease of white supremacy, and the deathly isolation it demands. Introspecting from a space of multiple raw hurts, she models for us the necessity of radical vulnerability to find authentic, lasting connection with others.

My piece is a rumination on our performances of oppression we've internalized. Rather than critique this behavior as another problem to self-correct, I understand it as originating from our yearning for belonging in the communities we've invested in. I draw attention to the long-term effects of always referring to ourselves as damaged people, and propose activating other kinds of social performances that reduce the barriers for growing our movements for justice.

Maisha Manson's short poems are carefully placed throughout this reader. Their poems outline what justice and healing feels like in the body, and graciously orchestrate imaginary work to bring us into their crafted spaces of queer Black belonging and safety. They have also included a poem breathing exercise acknowledging one's exhaustion that can be practiced anywhere, anytime when rest is needed.

E.T. Russian's vignette comics come from the perspective of someone who has been organizing for over 20 years. Using a blend of fiction and memory, they look back and forward to consider what it means to continue being in community with people you've harshly dismissed in the past, humbly welcome the new ideas of younger organizers, and recognize care work as activism.

Alicia Garza's essay is a gift to Black communities in the US who are fighting for Black liberation and for Black lives to matter to this nation. Opening with a personal story of despair and depression as a teen, she talks about the meanness that she has encountered from leading the Black Lives Matter movement. To nurture what she calls a resilient and durable heart, she has developed a robust set of daily self-care practices that create an emotional safety net and pathways to healing.

Want to dive deeper? At the end of the reader is an Additional Resources list of further readings, recordings, and books that this reader was informed by, or seeks to be in conversation with. There is also a Discussion Guide, written by Erin Naomi Burrows, to lead you, your study groups, and your larger communities into dialogue reflecting on the ideas and approaches presented here.

My wish is for these pieces to sit with you as gentle friends and teachers. After a while, see if they offer you anything useful, new, or refreshing in your political convictions and interpersonal practices. As buzzwords like "diversity", "social justice", "oppression" and "intersectionality" become commodified and emptied of radical meaning, I urge you to pause when you find yourself being shaken out of your familiar understandings of what justice means and how to move towards it- even how you have chosen to define it.

This reader is an incomplete, experimental exploration (to use a colonial term) and exists alongside the many other leaders and organizations already doing this work. It is far from unique in raising concerns about divisive conflict and social isolation; rather, it addresses these issues during a flagrantly corrupt regime where recognizing our intertwined fates and banding together to resist dominant forces has reached a heightened level of urgency. I have compiled this reader not only from the wisdom of seasoned organizers, but also from a misty terrain of utopian speculation. It ushers us towards a shifted relationality, one that is not so unlike the

present one we've created together, but exhibits less in-fighting, punishment, exclusion, and essentializing of identities.

While not everyone will agree with all the ideas that have been expressed here, I hope this reader will be embraced as a letter of encouragement to our beloved activist communities, reminding us that we are already free to choose more affirming ways of understanding ourselves and relating to each other. I invite you to join us in continuing dialogue and reviving practices around generosity and care within social justice movements that can make it possible for us all to lead sustainable lives of activism that take us beyond this moment of precarity into more just and joyful futures.



## PART I: TUMULT/ACHE

The Ethics of Being Allowed to Change  
By E.T. Russian

## THE ETHICS OF BEING ALLOWED TO CHANGE



Seen

By Maisha Manson

There is a drum in our footsteps

In the resounding sound heard from our ancestors

I am from two midnight sheep and a community of wolves

From abuse that smells like love

From brilliance and fists worn resistance

Waves that crash me cradled, new ways of beauty

You are thunderstorm wildfire

Under your eyelid veil

Breathe for as long as you need

Take time to heal the parts of you that aren't ready to welcome the breeze

And allow yourself to compose a symphony in exhales

## Practicing New Social Relations, Even in Conflict

By Dean Spade

Why are people inside our movement organizations so mean to each other? We often lament how much energy is spent targeting other people within movements rather than “our real enemies”. But our conflict makes sense:

- People fuck up a lot. Even though we are committed to new social relations, we frequently reproduce harmful cultural norms with each other.
- It makes sense that we have the strongest feelings about people who are closest to us. We are more likely to be up at night stressing about a conflict with a friend or collaborator than thinking about the Secretary of State.
- When we come into movement spaces with high expectations and desires for belonging and connection, disappointment is likely.
- Sometimes we are so used to feeling excluded that we tune into that familiar feeling quickly and easily, unconsciously looking for evidence that we are different or are being slighted or left out.
- Even good experiences like finding a space that breaks our isolation— like joining a group with some other people who share our values and/or identities—can bring up our distortions. We might feel like we don’t deserve it or like we are fraudulent. We might even unconsciously make up stories about what other people are thinking about us.

What can we do about all this conflict and the harm we cause each other and our organizations? How do we hold the strong feelings that come up in our groups, and how do we survive the conflict without being our worst selves to one another? I will offer a few of the things that have helped me or people I am connected with as we have navigated these strong feelings, conflict, and mean behavior over the years.

### What am I Feeling?

First: Get away for a quiet moment to feel what is going on inside. This inquiry could also include talking to a friend or writing things down.

A lot of times when we perceive some kind of threat, we go on autopilot. That autopilot looks different for different people. It could be a bunch of critical thinking about another person, a bunch of self-hating thinking, disappearing, picking a fight, getting lost in work, or obsessing all

night and not sleeping. Whatever it is, it can help to inquire with ourselves about what kinds of feelings are coming up in our bodies and in our emotions. Paying this attention to ourselves can stop us from the autopilot reaction that might not be aligned with our intentions, purpose or values, and might not help cultivate our relationships.

Second: Remember, no one made me feel this way, but I am having strong feelings and they deserve my loving attention.

It can be easy when we are hurt or disappointed to decide that the other person or people caused our feelings. Certainly, others' actions and inactions stimulate feelings in us, but what feelings get stimulated, and how strong they are, has a lot to do with us and our histories.

Often, when something really riles us up, it is because it is touching an old wound or raw spot.

Third: Get curious about my raw spots.

Other people do not know our raw spots—we sometimes do not know them ourselves—so people are often surprised at the impact of their actions on one another's feelings. We can become curious about our own raw spots, finding origins in childhood experiences, the cumulative impact of microaggressions and systemic harm, or other sources. We all have lots of sore spots that can lead to big, strong feelings when someone brushes them. The trick is to realize that they belong to us, and that we can experience the feelings and decide how to move forward in the relationship, rather than having the feelings drive a big reaction.

For example, imagine my feelings got hurt by a person in my organization not following through. If I then launched an informal campaign to get other people in the organization to perceive my flaky collaborator as a person lacking integrity to get them pushed out of the group, or if I refused to work with them anymore, I might lose a lot. And the group might lose a lot, without the chance for something else to happen.

#### What Else Is True?

It can often be helpful, when we find ourselves obsessing over an opinion, story or judgment, to ask what else is true. For me, the most helpful inquiries of this kind regarding movement work have been:

- What else is true about this person/organization/space? Can I think of any of their positive qualities? Can I think of any way that I do benefit from their actions? In addition to what they did that I dislike, are there also other elements or experiences that show a

more full picture, demonstrate good intentions, or balance any vengeful feelings or desire to get rid of this person?

- Might there be things I do not know contributing to this situation or behavior?
- What else is true about my life that counterbalances this situation? What else is in my life? What percentage of my time is spent in this space or with this person? What else do I do and have? If this situation is disproportionately loud in my consciousness, is there anything else in my life that evokes different feelings that I can turn up the volume on or give more of my attention to?
- Is this situation or person my responsibility? Is this something I can control? If not, can I imagine letting go 5% or 10% to gain some peace of mind?
- Are there ways that I am particularly activated by this that might have to do with my own history and experiences? Are there ways to give myself attention or love around these wounds?
- Are there any ways that I am stepping into a familiar role with my strong feelings about this person? In my inner reality, did I cast us into roles that relate to my family of origin or other formative groups?

#### Direct Communication Before Gossip and Social Media

One of the most harmful forces in our movements is negative gossip. It hurts the person doing the gossiping, the target, and the group. It usually magnifies conflict. This doesn't mean that we should not share difficult experiences we are having with friends. We often need to speak with a friend to help clarify what we are feeling, get affirmation of our experience, talk through possible responses and get sympathy. How can we tell if we are engaging in negative gossip that might harm someone?

- Who am I telling? Am I talking to a friend who can offer me support, but who is separate enough from the situation that I won't be impacting an opinion of someone who shares space or an organization with the person I am talking about? For example, if you are having strong feelings about someone in your organization, talking about them negatively behind their back with your coworkers is likely to harm dynamics in your organization. Talking to a therapist, or a friend who is not part of the organization, is less

likely to be harmful. Telling the stories on social media is likely to have many harmful and possibly unintended impacts on everyone involved.

- Am I campaigning? What are my motivations in telling this? Am I trying to get support and process my experience, or am I trying to get other people to think badly about this person?
- Am I mocking them, laughing at them or otherwise being cruel? If the content of what you are sharing is something you would not consider compassionate or constructive feedback, something you would never say to anyone's face, it might be malicious gossip rather than a good chat. Any time we are feeling justified dehumanizing people in our movements and social circles, it is good to pause and ask, "What else is true?" We might be reacting to a deep wound that needs our attention.
- Am I building my obsession with someone's faults? Is the choice to talk about this person's behavior or qualities right now going to help me get clear about my choices and feelings, or is it building a habit of thinking too much about this person and cultivating hyper-criticism of them?
- Giving direct feedback is hard. Rather than saying, "It was difficult for me when you did not follow through with the tasks you took on at the meeting," we build a set of stories and projections about the other person and talk to other people about it. This is likely to feel bad and damage relationships. When a lot of people in organizations or scenes are doing this, it can make for broad conditions of distrust, anxiety and betrayal and can augment hierarchies of valuation and devaluation, making groups more vulnerable to disruption by law enforcement.

We live in a society based on disposability. If we want to build a different way of being together, we have to look closely at the feelings and behaviors that generate the desire to throw people away. Humility, compassion for ourselves, and compassion for others are antidotes to disposability culture. We all make mistakes and have a great deal to learn from each other. Examining where we project on others and where we react strongly to others can give us more options, besides expulsion, when we are in conflict. Every one of us is more complex and beautiful than our worst actions and harshest judgments. Building social relations

of compassion and accountability requires us to take account of our own actions and reactions in conflict, and seek ways to treat each other with care even in the midst of strong feelings.



# The Ethics of Throwing People Away

By E.T. Russian

## THE ETHICS OF THROWING PEOPLE AWAY



## Body

By Maisha Manson

Spell accountability,

Make it mean something more than sound

More than words

More than an exchange of hands in passing

Spell accountability with what you bring

The open space in your hands that you are willing to share

Spell accountability in love, in every stroke of the pen, erase every crack of the whip.

## Body II

By Maisha Manson

Make space in your heart for me,

Take my broken

Take my full

But only when you can hold me

Hold me when there is room in your hands

When I can still be found

And let my transgressions pass through your fingers with every dip of new waves

## Latency

By Corinne Manning

*Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic  
orders? And even if one of them pressed me  
suddenly to his heart: I'd be consumed  
in his stronger existence. For beauty is nothing  
but the beginning of terror, which we can just barely endure,  
and we stand in awe of it as it coolly disdains  
to destroy us. Every angel is terrifying.*

*– Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies*

It can be argued that even when we decide not to like a post on social media we are still engaging with it. We cry out and the angelic click “like” or “mad face” or “sad face” and sometimes accidentally “haha” when we want the heart. Our exes scroll past it and feel superior or we scroll past former collaborators, organizers, colleagues and feel a little edge of triumph for not acknowledging the photo. The angelic order might hear but not always respond.

Through denying connection we are connecting and I wonder what algorithms are being calculated while I hover over the statement by or picture of someone I used to love.

We deny connection to each other. We tell ourselves why we should. We practice our defense in our heads as we walk to our check-in meetings about school, work, community, lovers. We have little room for one another’s feelings or to be swayed. This is part of a culture of shutting out, as a path to protection. This goes latent in our body.

I don’t understand shame fully but I feel it. It is the wall that rests between me and you, between me and more enlivened organizing, between me and the vulnerability my art offers me.

I feel shame when I smile at a stranger and they look away, shame over my desire for connection and my inability to achieve it.

So when connection happens, whoa, time catching in the cells:

The moment at a friend's birthday party where we all break out in dance during the middle of a conversation;

Or

The way she pulls me toward her naked body and I think "be present" and "enjoy this enjoy this" and "it will fall apart from here."

For the last few years I have been seeking the distinction between desire and longing. Though there is a continuum between them we have dissolved that expanse so that we use these words interchangeably and I find this to be dangerous.

For the purpose of this essay I call out to desire as anticipation, as excitement, as possibility; the emotional focus is on the thing we want.

Longing as lack, as fear of what we'll never have, the emotional focus is on the experience of not having and is less about the thing we want.

If we currently exist in a culture of longing, what does it mean to revolutionize our way of being in the world, in connection with our bodies, and to each other, through desire?

I wish it were that easy.

I'm writing this dealing with persistent Lyme and a number of invisible chronic health issues.

There is a person I used to be who could multitask and respond to your email, and produce a reading, and make a sign for the protest, and drive you to the airport at 7 a.m. There is a person who could pause and take a picture of the books I'm reading to write this essay and post it on Instagram, without forgetting, after I take it, what I'm writing about exactly.

I make plans with friends forgetting that my family is visiting that weekend.

There was a time where I thought sex would cure me—healing, embodied, connected, sex. It didn't.

I walk next to a former lover after a confusing period of silence and cancelled plans. The sex we had was one of those experiences with a person's body where it feels like relief, where I felt =surprise over my immensity of feeling. On this walk, the trees dripping with water and moss,

we aren't touching and she is explaining why we have to put that part of things away, that she needs to be in connection with herself. As she shares I start to retract my body, feel shame over what I feel for her, that I want us to spend a few moments acknowledging what happened as brief and special even though it's over; how hard I had to work to stay present when we were together, but how that felt worth it and healing even if that meant I hadn't been able to relax into the sensation of her; that I'm grieving the potential of the sensation of her. But my brain is fogging over and I can access very little except to feel the pain in my joints and the mild nausea I'm working to keep at bay as we walk in the rain.

When we part she tells me she will focus inward for the next month and I tell her to just reach out when she's ready to connect again. She tells me that she isn't very good at making plans. I laugh, because it was no problem for her to make plans when she wanted to fuck, and snap, "So when I never hear from you again, that's why?"

Viruses go latent, then they resurface and we don't know how to be or connect to each other. Or how to part from one another.

There was a time where I was convinced something would cure me--carrying a certain crystal, meditating, therapy that connected me to my body and emotions-- maybe all of this was from untended sexual abuse. These things help me connect with myself, feel desire for my present and future, but I don't think this is about cure anymore.

The Lyme bacteria has made my body an ideal host for opportunistic infections. I picture the latent viruses waking, and in all their neon desire burrowing into my cells.

I call out to who I was. I miss who I was. What's wrong with longing for something I can't have? The grief in that longing is real but I want to develop a desire for who I am now too, and this path of pills I swallow every day, and the necessity to focus on just one thing at a time. To know that I have energy to do two things a day, and to honor the fact that I prioritized that disappointing walk and cleaning my living room as my Sunday activities. That if I need and crave connection, I'll have to prioritize it, and create a space for it, knowing that my need is different than the other person's need.

I watch a dance piece called Chasm by Grief Girls, a horde of dancers that move together as a lumpy pulsating single organism. They continually separate and bridge various chasms

connecting through light, noise, selfies, and finally, again, bodies. It ends with a slow dance and one of the dancers, a friend of mine pulls me up, pulls me close.

“You’re my audience pick,” they whisper in my ear.

It’s not sexual. We giggle to each other. It feels precious to hold and be held in a way we might not in our daily lives because we need to keep our boundaries. I feel safe: a boyish femme and a femmey boi together.

“I’m gonna spin you now.”

It’s very white culture to deny connection. You can feel it in the silence around the disbanding of Temporary Protective Status, the silence around Puerto Rico. It’s not physically possible to be calling out, crying out constantly but I feel whiteness hosting in my body when I see injustice and don’t respond. The numbness. The cinching closed of my heart because I “can’t grieve everything”.

“I’m gonna leave you now,” my friend whispers.

We call out because connection is continually denied by oppressors. Call out culture is an exchange that is steeped in grief as much as it is anger. This calling out, this crying out, we’ve politicized to create a different kind of connection. Not between the two directly involved—the change doesn’t happen there— but between the others joining in, feeling belonging through shared pain and oppression. The ones who return the cry are the ones who have felt this too. And within that are times where I should find myself and I struggle. #MeToo, which seems like it should hold me, incites a deeper feeling of loneliness. The calling attention to those who abuse power is something I recognize and want. Perhaps I’m scared because I’m not sure what happens next; I’m not sure it’s enough to name the people without unearthing the conditions of sexual violence and power. Or maybe it’s because there is a limit to what I can speak about—a latency— of abuse within my own family, what it means to experience this misuse of power as a child. I find a focus on revenge to be a refusal to look at deeper change. Deeper change is always painful. It means giving up everything. But the potential of the result?

How do I have desire for a possibility of getting healthy while also holding space that there might not be a cure? That I might not live to see my body cured. I will likely not live to see any systems of oppression dismantled. I will have a moment of physical intimacy only to be denied

and deny actual intimacy again and again. People will deny each other connection and under white supremacy and patriarchy, white people will continue to numbly enact a myriad of violences; activists will strive to renew and connect but will be thrown into reactive organizing, will watch guard each others' language and we will excommunicate each other and it will be painful for everyone. I need there to be a "but" or a "though".

Did we need to be soothed like this before sexual violence and colonization? Was there a before? Will sex ever bring us there? I reach for sex but there is something else I want: That slow dance.

As I dance with my friend I don't want them to think I'm attached. They hold me close but I keep my arms rigid, I hold my body a bit away. I don't want them to feel how great my need is. I don't tell the lover, as we walk in the woods, what her body meant to me because I don't want to seem pathetic for still wanting something she no longer wants. I go out into the heartache of the world and I numb against it. Find ways to seem engaged but removed, no heart in any of it. It's not wrong to long for something we can't have. I think longing can lead us to our boundaries, to the new edges that grief has lit up for us to navigate, to greater desire. It's okay to have longing, which allows me to grieve, and to re- imagine again. **But I can't live inside of the longing as a way to prevent connection or further hurt.** We close off possibility to one another when we can't feel the possibility in our community, in fighting systems of power, in the belief that we could put an end to all violence, especially state violence.

I hesitate to use my illness as a metaphor but I can't help but think about what lives inside of me and the fact that I am a host. I may not be able to stop being a host but how do I keep living and transforming anyway, to not give into hopelessness, to the more toxic side of longing? Vulnerability, being open to desire, has lead us here, through this essay, to consider each other. "I'm gonna leave you now," my friend whispers. Their body slowly disengages. Our arms drag across each other, then our fingers. I put my hands down but my friend continues to reach out as they back away. I stand on stage with the others who are left". We glance at each other. Will our eyes connect? The lights go out.

### Body III

By Maisha Manson

(Inhale)

My moons are setting

(Exhale)

My moons are setting and I have given too much of myself to make waves

(Inhale)

My moons are setting

(Exhale)

My moons are setting and I have thrown myself into the pull of a cause that does not see my  
glory

(Inhale)

My moons are setting

(Exhale)

My moons are setting, and I look forward to this empty

(Breathe on your own)

To this storm,

To the light that can only come after

My time is placed always

In yours, in ours, in bringing light to the luminescent



## Children of the Panopticon 2

By Maisha Manson

Scar tissue runs lightning bolts across the spaces on your hands use to grip too tight,

Runs heartbeat solid across your feet

Your knees rough and bruised, can still taste the dirt

The sunshine, is the only thing that holds you properly now,

As you take the first step out of surveillance

Give it a minute your eyes will re-adjust

## PART II: SUSTAIN/RETURN

## Staying Centered in the Face of Adversity

By Alicia Garza

I was 15 when I first started cutting myself.

I remember it well. I was in high school and was trying to figure out who I was. Being one of a handful of Black teenagers in a predominantly white high school and community was not easy. I rebelled against my parents, who were strict and had high expectations of me. One afternoon, all of my insecurities, rebellion, and experimentation with drugs and alcohol put me in hot water. I was with a friend in a Long's Drug Store and decided that I wanted some Lee Press-On Nails. I, of course, didn't have any money to buy said item but that was ok because I'd decided to steal them.

I'd told my parents that I was going to my friend's house to study for our French exam, but really, I'd gone there to get high and sip on vodka and orange juice, and smoke cigarettes. We convinced my mother, who was usually very diligent about making sure that an adult was present, that my friend's mom was on her way home and just got stuck in a little traffic, and that we would make sure she called my mom when she arrived at home. While we were waiting for the mother who never materialized, we walked down to the local drug store to pick up cigarettes—my friend had a fake ID.

I remember sliding the package up my sleeve. I remember heading to the checkout counter with my friend and her fake ID. I remember feeling a little buzzed from the screwdriver we'd just had and I remember looking forward to the cigarette we were going to smoke together. I remember I was less than five feet out the door when I heard someone say, "Ma'am, are you currently in possession of items you did not pay for?" I froze. I claimed that I didn't have anything, knowing that my parents would kill me if they found out I'd stolen from a store. I even tried to claim that I was an emancipated minor, so that they wouldn't call my parents. The store did, of course, call my parents, reminded me that if I was emancipated that I was headed straight to jail, and when my parents and my grandmother showed up to collect me, I was sitting in a chair in a back room in handcuffs.

My grandmother had just arrived that evening from Toledo, Ohio, and as strict as my parents were, my granny was even more strict and she was Southern— the kind of woman who would

flick your elbows if they landed on the table. I'd embarrassed myself and my parents in front of my strict Southern grandmother.

My parents, determined to show me and Grandma that there would be serious consequences for my actions, grounded me for a year. Yes—365 days. I, being a very social being and also a hormonal one, was devastated. That devastation, the disappointment in myself and the isolation became too much, and I began to cut.

At first, it was a way to ease the pain that I felt. But soon, it became a way to tiptoe closer to the edge of what it might mean to cheat death. For almost a year, I cut my wrists and arms.

Band-Aids and long sleeves helped cover my wounds, at least in public, and when I was asked what happened to my wounded arms and wrists I would respond that it was due to some manual labor that my parents had me doing as punishment for scaring them half to death.

That year, I learned a lot about myself. One, I learned that I did not, in fact, want to die. Two, I learned that there was a pit inside of me that could be dangerous for me if I wasn't careful.

Four years ago, my two sisters and I created Black Lives Matter as a call to take action against state sanctioned violence, in response to police killings of Black people specifically and anti-Black racism generally. Since then, the three of us, alongside dozens of other leaders across the country, have become prominent figures in this movement.

I'm not a stranger to this side of the work, as I've been an organizer for nearly 20 years. I can say that the same kinds of dynamics exist at the local level as they do at the national level. But it doesn't ever get easier. As much as I believe in the goodness of human beings, I've also seen and experienced the not so nice side of humans that we all carry inside of us—narcissism, jealousy and ego, and more. It never gets easier.

People who have never met you and have no real relationship with you attack you and say horrible, awful, terrible things about you. There are the death threats and the trolls, and then there are people who are supposedly "on your side" that use your visibility as an excuse to degrade and dehumanize you. There's conspiracy theories, people who just can't bring themselves to like you, threats, trolling, political disagreements, all of which are the unspoken consequences of being someone that other people know of.

When I first started organizing, I remember committing myself to this work for the long haul. I know that in order to stay in this work for the long haul, that I needed to prioritize my mental and emotional health and wellness.

Once, after a campaign that we ultimately lost, I fell into a deep depression. I'm pretty sure I didn't leave my couch for about two weeks, crying and reading the comments under every article that was written about our loss. I was preparing to be married just a few short months after that, and I was tossed back to being 15 years old, looking for an outlet for the pain I felt. Since then, I've invested in my emotional and mental health as if it is food, or water, or air. If I don't make that investment, if I am not committed to my own wellbeing, I worry that I will find that deep place, fall in, and not be able to emerge again. And while I have compassion and empathy for the 15-year-old me, I also know that I don't want to go back there.

That doesn't mean that I'm ok all the time. I still get angry, I still hurt and get disappointed, especially if and when I disappoint others. Sometimes I don't sleep enough or eat the best that I could, and I never met an alcohol that wasn't my friend.

But health and wellness aren't about being perfect or being ok all the time. It's about taking care of what needs caring for, so that we can get closer to what moves in us. It's about having an array of choices that we can access at any given moment.

A few years after that big campaign loss, I went through a program called Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD). BOLD is an organization that supports Black leaders to build their capacity to lead. Using a combination of methodologies that include but are not limited to somatics, African and Black American spiritual practices, political education and leadership development, I was able to access tools, skills and strategies that support me to care for my mental and emotional wellbeing.

I began to understand my learned responses to trauma, and how those learned responses impact me, my relationships, and my purpose. I'm still learning how to deploy those practices in the service of that which I care most about. I learned to cultivate compassion for the brilliant ways I learned to care for myself, and I learned that I have agency to determine how I care for myself today.

I am a commitment to a durable and resilient heart. To get closer to my commitment, I strive to practice yoga at least five times a week, to practice meditation for ten minutes each day, and to purposefully envision solutions and freedom for ten minutes a day.

I practice not to be perfect, happy, or joyful, although I am grateful if and when being happy or joyful is an unintended consequence of my practice. I practice in order to feel. To look squarely at what is. I look courageously at my flaws, my sadness, my fear of disappointing people, my own disappointment because I want to have a heart that is durable and resilient. That breaks apart and can be put back together again. Both and, not either or.

I am a commitment to building a vibrant, transformative movement for Black liberation. To get closer to my commitment, I practice the things that help me have a durable and resilient heart. Because I know that building movements is hard. Hell, change is hard. I know that I will have my heart broken a million times. I know that sometimes things will be hard, that I will be hurt and I will hurt others. Being a commitment to a durable and resilient heart is a commitment to our people, in all of our complexities and messiness. It is a commitment to myself and my purpose. It is a commitment to healing so that the world that we dream of can arrive as the world that dehumanizes us gets dismantled.

My emotional and mental wellbeing depends on my commitment to what I care for most. It depends on being resilient, which is not the same as being perfect. It depends on being durable, which is not the same as infallible. And when I move towards the things I care most about, I am the most free I have ever been. Wounds, cuts, scars and all.

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Garza, Alicia. "Black Lives Matter Cofounder Alicia Garza Talks Staying Centered in the Face of Extreme Adversity." *Complex*, Complex, 26 Oct. 2017, [Link to article on Complex](#).

# The Ethics of Changing Your Leadership

By E.T. Russian



## Heard/recognized

By Maisha Manson

We have read your cards Smudged your entrance

And wrapped your hands in lavender and myrrh Welcome home

Temperance draws you forward

Sun soaked leaves pave the road you have weathered

Rest your feet in the salt waters of where you were born

## Meditation

By Maisha Manson

There are no wrong ways to live in liberation

It is in everything before that is where we have the missteps

as we find our footing, pain and all.

## Untitled

By Maisha Manson

Welcome to the ase spa

Your payment is healing

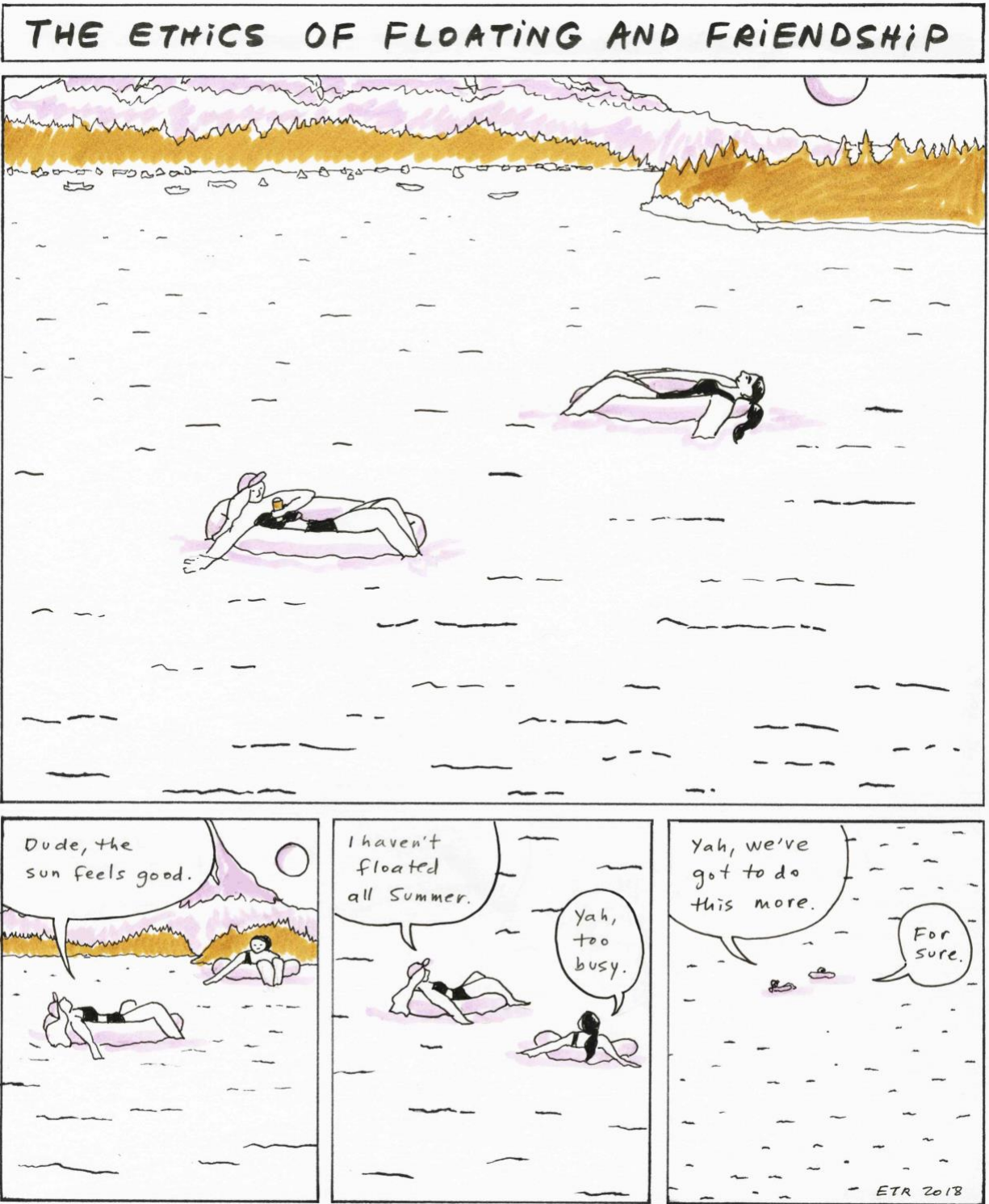
Please relax in knowing that all your past mothers have birthed stars to get to you

And lifted nebulas by your ancestors for this moment



# The Ethics of Floating and Friendship

By E.T. Russian



## The Pain of Belonging

By Frances Lee

*This is a written version of a spoken piece I performed for Performance & Belonging: Citizenship, Culture & Identity, a graduate class taught by Professor Jade Power-Sotomayor at the University of Washington Bothell.*

One night, my partner and I  
Were on the couch looking at data  
About the overrepresentation of East Asian students  
At top universities in the US.

I brought it up because  
I was just told that as a  
Person of Chinese descent,  
I couldn't be part of my campus organization for  
Underrepresented students of color.

My partner, who is white, leaned over  
And joked, guess you're not oppressed anymore.

She smirked  
I panicked

Somewhere beneath the layers of analysis,  
I knew I was more than my politicized, raced identity,  
But I had internalized the oppressed status  
As a capital P Person of Color  
And grew attached to the  
Special underdog comfort  
It provided me.

The crystallized realization:

I don't know how to be a part of my communities anymore

If I'm not performing oppression

In some culturally recognizable form.

"How do subjects become invested in particular structures

That their demise"

— Or even alluding to their demise

"Is felt as a kind of living death?"<sup>1</sup>

In one breath I demand justice and equality

For myself and my community members

But in another, I put forth a

Stereotyped, minoritized persona

"Fitting in is when you want

To be a part of something. But belonging is when others want you"<sup>2</sup>

What are the things we do to be wanted?

I'm worried that we've internalized

Damage-centered narratives of ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A quote from Sara Ahmed's 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, about how our collectively held emotions and the way we repeatedly affirm them creates a specific social reality that guides our actions.

<sup>2</sup> This is what a group of middle schoolers told research professor Brené Brown when she was interviewing them about the difference between fitting in and belonging.

<sup>3</sup> In this piece, I am riffing off Indigenous studies and urban education scholar Eve Tuck's term "damage-centered research" from her 2009 article "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities". She deploys this term as a way to caution indigenous and other marginalized communities against internalizing damage as a strategy for political gain.

Social justice cultural movements  
Have been overly dependent on  
Strategic essentialism  
As a political tactic. And so,  
Its false claims have bled into  
The personal understandings of ourselves.

There is a false, mostly implicit belief  
Among us that your value is based upon  
How much structural oppression you experience or  
Have experienced, that only  
People with enough credentials of  
Being oppressed are allowed to speak,  
Participate in, or contribute to  
Cultural conversations and knowledge making.

Although this is a restorative model of  
Social relations that provides some immediate  
Consolation, a long-term adoption  
Merely reproduces the same logics of  
Supremacy and domination.

I wanna dig into that backwards shameful  
Feeling of not being oppressed enough  
That I encountered earlier  
And consider other, deeper ways of being  
Together that don't involve conflating  
Harm with value and belonging, and

Power with un-value and un-belonging.

You see, I am uneasy about the spiritual effects  
Of always presenting as the Other,  
The sufferer,  
The wronged. We are more  
Than a receptacle for injustices doled out by society.

We can now publicly name our painful, traumatic  
Common experiences as  
“Oppression”  
“Injustice” “Inequity”  
And it feels rather normal and expected  
For us to do so.

It is not, however, a golden ticket  
To be complacent  
To turn away from connection  
To insult and hate.  
For those of us who still hurt and have  
Moved beyond surviving,  
We are responsible for much more.

We can consider our hurts and hollows for  
What they are, fully and truly  
Nothing less, nothing more.  
Some of us Have always known this.  
We must tell the other  
true stories about ourselves.

Do we believe we are worthy  
Of love and belonging  
Even when we no longer suffer?

I am interested in who we are becoming as people  
As we continue to perform  
Oppression-first activism that antagonizes.

Every single thing we do when  
Trying to change the world Also changes us.<sup>4</sup>

Every act of anger, rejection,  
Flash judgment, and malice I unleash  
On another person carries an echo that  
Reverberates inside of me. Over time,  
This accumulates in a barrier to fresh  
New shoots coming out  
Of patched up wounds.

Every time I tell the same, one-sided  
Story about myself as an oppressed  
Person, I am shutting out other stories  
About my multitudes, including my  
Complicities, contradictions and  
Responsibilities.

---

<sup>4</sup> In Octavia Butler's 1993 book *Parable of the Sower*, she introduces the Earthseed religion. Its first tenet: "All that you touch / You Change. All that you Change / Changes you. The only lasting truth / Is Change. God Is Change."

We now live in a world where whiteness  
Is no longer essential  
In the way that it used to be.<sup>5</sup> The default  
Position is under intensified  
Scrutiny and rightful condemnation.  
Relief!  
(At dodging the scorching laser beam)  
And yet  
Today it's white people  
Tomorrow it's gonna  
Be me.

I think we're all gonna find ourselves  
At this existential crisis of meaning if we keep  
Holding on to the ruined,<sup>6</sup>  
Reversed hierarchy of  
Belonging,  
Identity  
Rightness  
Granted through shared oppression.

Yes, speak openly about your harm  
And seek redress, but do not let

---

<sup>5</sup> Black elder activist and theologian Ruby Sales did an amazing interview with On Being and talked about the current spiritual crisis in white America and how it affects us all.

<sup>6</sup> A reference to the frustratingly accurate statement, "The grids used to define the intersections for identity are already in ruins". From the editors' introduction of the Spring 2017 *Critical Ethnic Studies Journal*, co-edited by Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang.

That be your whole story.  
Otherwise there will  
Be nothing left to do, nobody left  
To be once society has been  
Transformed and justice and equality  
Has been restored.

I do not want to spend the majority  
Of my waking life complaining  
About white feminists,  
Mocking straight men,  
Silencing TERFs,  
Regulating cultural appropriation,  
Policing people on their pronoun usages, or  
Whatever is the next collective reflex  
To discipline.

I want more for all of us.  
We are meant for much greater work.

You could say, it's an exciting time right now as  
Many our movements for justice are  
Finally beginning to get the wider  
Cultural recognition and traction they deserve

But  
I mix celebration with skepticism  
Refusing to settle into the fleeting  
Comfort of unprecedented representation



In a society that is swiftly figuring out how  
To commodify our narratives of Oppression.

Our over-investment in damage-centered  
Narratives is a deeper reflection of  
What we feel compelled to perform  
To prove to others  
To prove to ourselves  
That we belong here,  
That we belong to each other,  
That our suffering has earned us Our demands.

Instead, let us perform vulnerability;  
Showing off our messy and ragged  
Edges our “problematic” contradictions  
And desires our abiding need to be loved  
And accepted that drives our dysfunctional  
Bristling behaviors the old and new ways  
We’ve failed each other and  
Continue to do so

Our commitment to do better and make  
Things closer to right because  
A revolution starts in the heart,  
And then, moves  
In between hearts.

Instead, let us perform humility; firmly  
Knowing what we know while also knowing

There is so much we don't know. We have  
Much to learn from people not like  
Us people who don't fit our definition of  
"Woke" people carrying wisdom acquired  
From other journeys people who  
Inflame us  
To push through our frustration and urge to  
Turn away and instead ask, "what can I discover  
From this interaction?" Admitting that  
Brandishing the most flawless, blistering analysis  
Will not save us from anything.  
Because language, wit, and precise arguments  
Are not the primary vehicle of change.

Instead, let us perform openheartedness;  
Never stop trying to  
Locate the goodness in others  
I honor my own dignity when  
I choose to see  
The inherent worth, the redeemable parts,  
Rather than what looks to be seared  
Closed in someone else.  
Leaving the entrance ajar  
To not be surprised when they join me  
To know that opponent has the  
Inherent potential  
To be transformed to friend, member, comrade just as I once had.

I want to keep on acknowledging  
That sacred space  
Between the political and the personal, and  
The life-giving work that  
Can spring only from that opening.

The next time someone crosses my path  
I acknowledge that our well-beings  
Are intimately tied.

I know that when I dare to  
Reach across difference without  
Ignoring its material realities,  
I am building something  
That could sustain me  
And everything I touch.

To be whole activists- whole people,  
We must allow the fullness of ourselves to  
Eclipse our political activism.

I want— no, I need  
An ethics of activism  
That speaks to the necessity of this.

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[Link to PDF article online](#)

# The Ethics of Vulnerability and Intimacy

By E.T. Russian

## THE ETHICS OF VULNERABILITY AND INTIMACY





# The Ethics of Aging Together

By E.T. Russian



## [Contributor Bios](#)

Alicia Garza is an Oakland-based organizer, writer, public speaker and freedom dreamer who is currently the Special Projects Director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance, the nation's leading voice for dignity and fairness for the millions of domestic workers in the United States. Garza, along with Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors, also co-founded the Black Lives Matter Network, a globally recognized organizing project that focuses on combating anti-Black state-sanctioned violence and the oppression of all Black people. Since the rise of the BLM movement, Garza has become a powerful voice in the media. Her articles and interviews have been featured in Time, Mic, The Guardian, Elle.com, Essence, Democracy Now!, and The New York Times.

[Alicia Garza's Twitter account](#)

Corinne Manning is a prose writer, literary organizer and performer whose fiction has appeared in Story Quarterly, Calyx, Vol 1 Brooklyn, Moss, The Bellingham Review, Southern Humanities Review, and Wildness from Platypus Press. Additional stories and essays have appeared in Literary Hub, Vol 1 Brooklyn, Drunken Boat, Arts & Letters, been anthologized in Shadow Map: An anthology of Survivors of Sexual Assault (CCM Press), and been recognized as notable in The Best American Series. Corinne has received grants and fellowships from 4Culture, Artist Trust and the MacDowell Colony and founded The James Franco Review, a project on visibility and reimagining the publishing process.

[Corinne Manning's email address](#)

[Corinne Manning's Twitter account](#)

Dean Spade is Associate Professor at Seattle University School of Law. In 2002, he founded the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, a non-profit law collective that provides free legal services to low-income transgender, intersex and gender nonconforming people and works to build trans resistance rooted in racial and economic justice. He is the author of Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law (Duke University Press 2015). Spade is the recipient of the 2016 Kessler Award from The Center for LGBTQ Studies and Gay Studies for his transformative impact on the field of LGBTQ Studies.

[Dean Spade's website](#)

Erin Naomi Burrows is a communicator by trade, historian by training and artist by trial/tribulation. She brings ten years of labor-of-love experience in community education, training, collaborative project management and anti-racist organizing with a focus in primary prevention of interpersonal violence with young audiences. She currently is the Communications Specialist at the Center for Community Engagement at Seattle University and founder of Oyster Hinge, a creative consulting micro-agency. You can find her sniffing flowers, taking photos, painting and organizing in Seattle, WA.

[Oyster Hinge website](#)

E.T. Russian is a multi-sensory artist, author, filmmaker and healthcare provider from the Pacific Northwest. Russian is the author of The Ring of Fire Anthology and has published work in The Stranger, The Seattle Weekly, When Language Runs Dry, The Graphic Medicine Manifesto, Gay Genius, and The Collective Tarot. Russian is a featured artist with Sins Invalid and dance company Light Motion, and Co-Director of the movie Third Antenna. Themes of light and shadow, power and interdependence, resilience and struggle feature heavily in Russian's work.

[E.T. Russian's website](#)

Frances Lee is a cultural activist, writer, and Cultural Studies scholar in Seattle, WA. Their work addresses the ideologies of current social justice movements on a national level, and is powered by their deep investments in community interventions on the local level. In 2017, Frances was named on the Bitch 50, a national list that recognizes the most powerful cultural creators in the US. They were also awarded the Gender Justice League Survival Guide Award for producing the the 2017 King County Trans Resource & Referral Guide. Their writing and interviews have appeared in Catalyst Wedding Co, Autostraddle, YES! Magazine, CBC, KUOW, Bitch Media, and more.

[Frances Lee's website](#)

Maisha Manson is a Queer, gender non-conforming, Black identified artist, activist, teacher and writer. They have devoted their personal journey to self healing through reclamation of personal history, knowledge and empowerment as well as creating spaces for the healing of others who are marginalized due to their race, gender, sexuality, religion, or economic status. Maisha is a graduate student in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Master of Arts in Cultural



Studies program at the University of Washington Bothell. Originally from San Diego, they completed a BA in Deaf Education at CSU Northridge. Their research analyzes intersecting systems of oppression—regarding ability, race, class, gender and sexual identity through ghost stories and poetry.

## Discussion Guides

### Individual Reflection Guide

This set of questions can be used as a solo tool for reflection as you are working through this reader. You do not need to have read all the pieces to utilize this guide.

- How am I doing in my relationships? Do any of my close relationships (in and outside of community organizing) need tending to?
- What is my relationship to the natural world? If I find healing or peace in nature, have I made intentional time for this lately?
- What are my spiritual practices? Are they still working for me, or am I ready to try or return to practices that may work better for me right now?
- How am I involved in activist or social change work? How do I want to be engaged?
- Maisha Manson's poem, "Body III", touches on the themes of emotional and psychic exhaustion in activist community. Have you experienced a similar feeling? What are your practices to prevent feeling this way in the future?

### Group Reflection Guide

When gathering with others, we recommend thinking through accessibility and group size. You may want to mix in individual time for writing/reflection, one on one prompts and small group discussion. If your group is large (10 or more), consider breaking up into smaller groups.

Consider asking participants to bring snacks to share.

Depending on the culture you operate in, it may be useful to plan for a 30 minute social buffer time and then a hard start at a specific time that has been communicated. We've also found that discussion groups function well when you end at a specific time and allow participants to hang out and chat afterwards. So you may want to plan for extra time before and after the actual block of time you plan on hosting the discussion.

### Setting Agreements

Depending on how well the group knows each other, you may want to start with these suggested agreements. Ask participants if they have anything to add or have any clarifying questions.

- Listen without interrupting. This allows you to be present and listen more deeply.

- Move up, move back. Allow everyone to share, if they want to. If you're someone comfortable with processing your thoughts out loud, be conscious of how much airtime you're taking up. If you're someone who usually takes more time to think before speaking, challenge yourself to offer a comment or question.
- Accept non-closure. These kinds of conversations may produce more open questions than answers. This can feel very uncomfortable at first, but that does not mean that something is wrong.
- Address the statement, not the person. Criticize the ideas and not the individual. Understand that people are separate from their ideas/ beliefs/triggers, and that the latter can and often does change.
- Check your assumptions. Do not ask someone to speak for their perceived identities. If you don't know something, ask.
- Take care of yourself. Feel free to take breaks away from the conversation as needed.
- Take care of each other. If you observe someone having an emotional response, offer space for them to share what's going on without prying for information if they're not ready to share.

### *Checking In*

You can use these questions as a guide to begin conversation in the group and break the ice.

- How am I doing in my body today? What sensations am I feeling in my body?
- What's one positive thing going on for me (a rose) and one challenging or negative thing (a thorn)?

### *One-on-One Active Listening Questions*

You can use these questions when turning to a partner in the group to share your initial reflections.

- What is energizing about what was shared in this reader?
- What content are you most resonating with?
- What content did you find most challenging or that's hitting a nerve?
- Have you ever given direct feedback to a co-worker, friend or co-organizer about behavior that wasn't working for you? What was it like in the lead up to that

interaction? If you had to do it again, would you change anything about your approach?  
How do you like to best receive constructive or difficult feedback?

- Corinne Manning defines desire as anticipation, excitement and possibility. What do you desire in community? What are you grateful for in your shared community?
- Maisha Manson's poems, "Body I" and "Body II", were inspired by a moment in community when they felt the most held and accepted. When have you felt held or fully accepted by your community/communities?

#### *Small Group*

- Alicia Garza's piece is about the importance of maintaining your emotional, mental, and physical health during the extreme ups and downs of organizing. In what specific ways are you committed to your well-being? How do you hold yourself accountable? If you do not have a set of practices, what might they look like?
- Frances Lee's piece addresses the use of damage-centered narratives in contemporary organizing strategy. How and when are these narratives useful? Have you witnessed or experienced this? What might it look like to organize in a framework that does not rely on essentializing ourselves into fixed narratives?
- Dean Spade's work addresses how we grapple with the mistakes of our closest co-organizers. What kinds of conflict are common in communities/ organizations such as ours? How can we create a culture that enables providing kind, direct feedback to each other?
- E.T. Russian's comic, "The Ethics of Vulnerability and Intimacy," shows two community members not attending or leaving a protest to provide mutual support to one another. What are ways that taking care of one another is a necessary component of activism, as it relates to disability, chronic illness, mental health, caretaking, and other things that prevent people from participating in traditional activism?
- E.T. Russian's comic, "The Ethics of Aging Together," charts a twenty year-long ongoing friendship between two queer activists in Seattle. What are the long-term rewards in staying put in a community for several decades, or even a lifetime?

### *Checking Out*

- Has any of the content in the reader shifted how you're thinking about these topics including how we care for each other in activist communities?
- What spark and/or questions are you taking with you? What one topic or theme will you continue to think, talk, and read about?

## Additional Resources

By Frances Lee

Here are essays, books, and podcasts that may deepen your understanding of the myriad of ideas and practices discussed in this reader. It is not a definitive list, nor is it a works cited.

Rather, these additional resources speak to shared impulses of ongoing self-reflection, interdependence, and flexible ideologies.

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