

# Against Allies

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*I'm writing this as unfinished business. It's writing that I don't consider able to be definitively finished, and it's grounded in very unfinished struggles I became involved in around the turn of the century.*

*At that time, I was actively involved, along with a lot of other white radicals - many if not most of us queer and/or trans, a lot of us jewish - in spreading the "ally model" of organizing in relation to difference. We were mostly thinking about race: about our relationships to our comrades in communities of color, to the communities of color in which we lived, to the struggles in the global South that we took inspiration from and worked to support from within the U.S. And as we thought that through, the language we used, the models we developed, migrated into the queer and trans organizing we were and are involved in.*

*I'm writing this as unfinished business - as self-criticism, as a way of taking responsibility for my role in spreading the "ally model", which I think has had and continues to have seriously toxic effects on our movements. It's important to say: this is my version of this analysis. Other folks, especially from indigenous and decolonizing struggles and from within trans women's organizing, have been thinking and writing along similar lines during the year that I've been working on this piece. This writing might exist without those folks' work, but it would not mean the same things, or in the same ways, without their presence.*

*I'm writing this from interwoven political and personal histories. My family's experiences over three generations as targets of the mid-20th-century Red Scare, the attacks on the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 70s, and the crackdown on the radical upsurge at the turn of the 21st century. My work in the labor movement as a student organizing support for striking campus workers, as a union shop steward at my job, as part of direct-action-oriented community/labor solidarity projects. More than a decade doing Palestine solidarity organizing, mainly in jewish communities, in constant conflict with 'peace not justice' liberals. A life lived as a target of gendered violence and hatred - of trans women, of gender-deviant folks, of fems - cushioned in some of its effects by the protection of light skin and a class-based safety net. Active participation as an agitator, organizer, and cultural worker in projects and campaigns around police violence and incarceration; consent and sexual violence; housing and displacement; migration and borders.*

*And perhaps most importantly: coming up and out into the revolutionary queer tradition carried on by Sylvia Rivera, Bob Kohler, Marsha P. Johnson, and their comrades in the Gay Liberation Front, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, ACT-UP, and beyond. In this piece of writing, I draw constantly on some of that tradition's insights: that politics is not separable from the body; that political understanding must be embodied to be meaningful. That using different vocabularies to separate out our political relationships, our emotional relationships, and our sexual relationships weakens all of them, and makes it harder for us to understand what feeds them.*

*I'm also writing this from specific experiences of being a body moving through the world. Most consistently, here, from my experiences of being a body that people have gendered and continue to gender in many different ways, some having to do with what has been written in the state's records of my life, some with choices I've made about what to do with my body, some with other things entirely. Here, I'm using the word 'trans' as a shorthand for that experience - mostly because that is the phrasing in which I am most frequently targeted for allyship. And also because it's under that sign that I've learned the voice I'm writing this with: in the mountains above Chamounix; at a table at Jacques; in the grooves of 7 inches of vinyl; on xeroxed pages found in the backs of infoshops and in friends' bathrooms; on dancefloors and piers.*

*In many ways, too, I'm writing this out of things I've learned from radical disability justice organizers, with a voice that echoes theirs. And that's unfinished business, too.<sup>1</sup>*

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When I hear someone call themselves an ally, I know not to trust them.

I know it now just as surely as my friends who came out in high school knew it about me back then, when I was supportive and straight.

The difference is: I was 16 then. The difference is: we're talking directly about politics now. The difference is: what it meant to show up in the room for a GSA meeting before those groups had that name. The difference is: which of us were being thrown out of their houses then. The difference is: what there is to gain now by claiming to be right-on.

When I hear someone call themselves an ally, I know they do not see me as human.

You can only be an ally to a category, to an abstraction. You can be an ally to 'trans people'. To 'jews'. To 'palestinians'. To 'people of color'. To 'immigrants'. To 'women'. To 'survivors'. To 'indigenous people'. To anonymous outlines, colored in with your imagination. Do you see the stitches? The ash patches? The inborn nobility shining forth from the pores?

<sup>1</sup> And I'd be some kind of a shmuck if I didn't thank a few particular people who have left their writing around where I could find it, and be nudged by it to sharpen these ideas. There are many more, but a few who I had very much in mind at particular points are gudbuytjane (for this, among other things: <https://gudbuytjane.wordpress.com/2012/08/16/what-we-deserve-and-cultures-of-dissonance/>); low end theory (for this, and its follow-ups, among others: <http://www.lowendtheory.org/post/8031758369/this-is-re-my-odd-future-post-first-of-all>); Mia Mingus (for this, especially: <http://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/moving-toward-the-ugly-a-politic-beyond-desirability/>), aza min mentsh, AJ Withers, and, always, Lexibella.

I also want to name my deep appreciation for my comrades in Jews Against the Occupation/ NYC, Jews For Racial & Economic Justice, the Aftselokhes Spectacle Committee, and the Rude Mechanical Orchestra. And for indispensable in-the-flesh commentary and suggestions: E. Piper Forman, Lenny O, and Amy Schrager Lang. I don't know how much of this some of them will agree with, but I hope they'll all find it interesting.

When the word "ally" comes out of someone's mouth, what it means is: "You are an abstraction to me. You exist as an example of a category. I hold that category in my mind, I control its borders, I extend them around you. These are my decisions. I have studied you, I know your borders, I know how to police them. These are my decisions."

You cannot be an ally to an individual human being. A body full of blood and piss and spit. Leaking. An ally is a little dutch boy. The dyke didn't ask him to be there.

You cannot be an ally to a specific person. You can have their back. You can care about them. You can be their friend. You can take care of them. You can make out with them. You can be taken care of by them. You can argue with them, for them, about them, against them, over them. You can be their lover. You can be their bitterest enemy. You can be their babysitter. You can take a billy-club to the ribs for them. You can be held in contempt for them. By them. You can intervene on them about their drinking. You can be madly smitten with them. You cannot be their ally.

Unless, that is, you are Kaiser Wilhelm Hohenzollern, Emperor of Germany and King of Prussia, and they are Franz Joseph von Hapsburg, Emperor of Austria, Apostolic King of Hungary, King of Bohemia, Croatia, Galicia and Lodomeria, and Grand Duke of Cracow. Then you can indeed be allies to each other for all the days of your lives. But even then, only as monarchs, not as humans. If you can manage to reach each other's skin through the piles of ermine, you will be something besides allies - whether or not you can manage to conquer Russia together.

*A dozen members of a radical jewish organization with a mostly white membership are in a meeting. We're talking about an event we're holding in the fourth year of a close collaboration with a domestic workers' group composed mainly of caribbean and latina immigrant women. After a while, we realize that the majority of folks in the room either are supporting themselves as nannys/babysitters/au pairs, or have done so in the past few years. The framing of their role in the collaboration as "allies" has made it impossible for them to name their jobs as "domestic work" until that point. Seven years later, over a decade into a nationally-renowned campaign, these domestic workers are still defined out of the campaign's work by their categorization as "allies". The question has not, as far as I know, even been raised since then.*

When I hear someone call themselves an ally, I know they see an unbridgeable chasm between us.

An ally is permanently separate. "Ally" means: "I am not what you are". "I cannot be what you are." "What you are is alien to me." Ally means impermeable. It claims you can never feel what I feel. (You can't.) It tells me you've given up trying to.

When I hear someone call themselves an ally, I know they believe I have nothing they need. Nothing they want. Nothing that can save their life.

Ally means asymmetry. It does not mean recognizing privilege, but embracing it. Making it the definition of the relationship. Ally means Doctor. Means Husband.

Means Master. Ally means your liberation is not bound up in mine. It means you think you can be free without my help. It means you think you are free and I am not.

It means you want to be necessary to my life without me being necessary to yours. To save me without being at risk of needing to be saved. Ally means welcome me to your city with flowers, I am not a conqueror, I am a liberator. Isn't it a sunny day?

*The Israeli government is destroying Beirut again. In Tel Aviv, two hours away by road, we can see and hear the military jets and helicopters flying north. A group of mostly queer jewish Israeli anarchists stage an anti-war die-in on a fairly fashionable shopping street. A pair of German tourists, screaming about anti-semitism, have to be physically blocked from assaulting them.*

When I am walking down the street and someone is deciding whether to attack me physically or just verbally, I do not want an ally by my side. I want someone who is as aware as i am of what is happening, because it matters to them what happens to my body, to my mind, to my heart. not to 'a trans person'. To **this** specific and personal body. Mind. Heart. Because the difference in reaction-time that difference makes is death.

And when we organize together, what I want is exactly the same. Because the difference that difference makes is life.

This is not about semantics.

The words we use carry weight. They sweat.

This is not about how you say things, what you say you think, the phrases you use for your actions. It is about the texture of your actions - including your words, your silences, your gestures, your gaze. Their textures and smells.

The sweat of exertion smells different from the sweat of fear.

The words we use save each other's lives. Or don't.

Do you desire me because you know who I am - this body, this voice, this sweat? Or do you desire me because of a category you place me in? The difference between chaser and ally is - the difference between fetishization and allyship is - only the difference between sex and politics.

Both ways, you're calling me outside my name. Do you know my name? Whose name did you just call me? Do you call her by my name? Do you know which names she and I share? Do you care who shares my name? Or do you care about the name you've placed on me, on her, on us? Do you know who I call by my name? Do you know who I call by my name who I hate? Do you know how I care for them? Do you know what names we share and why? Do you know how we care for our names? Have you asked?

Unless you care for people who share my name because you care about **me**, you cannot know how to care for the people you hate who share my name. Who I hate. Allies cannot tell the difference.

*An international group of queer and trans folks, mainly from Europe, are listening to presentations by Palestinian queer and trans folks, some from the occupied west bank, some nominally citizens of israel. They tell us about checkpoints, about military attacks, about land theft. The first question is how allies abroad can support them as queers. The facilitator says: "Haven't you been listening? Help us end the occupation."*

I have been talking to you like a lover. Did you think being a comrade was different? What I have been saying is: No. My body is here. Do you think yours is not? That is what calling yourself an ally means.

*An organization composed mainly of normatively presenting cisgender folks begins every meeting with a pronoun go-round. The only way for trans folks interested in getting involved in the group to preserve any degree of choice in navigating disclosure and presentation around gender is to already know that and then show up late, missing all of the pre-meeting social time.*

What I am talking about is how we have political relationships. Whether we do them in ways that claim absolute difference, absolute distance, absolute separability. or not.

I am talking about what we mean when we say 'solidarity'.

I am claiming that where absolute difference is asserted, solidarity is excluded. I am claiming that where absolute distance is enforced, solidarity is prevented. I am claiming that where absolute separability is manufactured, solidarity is preempted.

I am arguing that other things can grow in those conditions: Charity. Patronage. Representation. Advocacy. But not solidarity.

I am asserting that the 'ally model' makes solidarity impossible. That allyship is solidarity with the blood taken out, the sweat deodorized, the leaks plugged. It wants "crops without plowing up the ground, rain without thunder and lightning, the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters" - the rhetoric and benefits of shared struggle without the work of struggle or of sharing.

*A predominantly white, majority queer, political project decides not to invite a latino gay man to become a member, mainly because of concerns about his overall political alignment with the project. A white member of the group is particularly upset about the decision. When asked why she didn't attend the meeting which discussed it, she says she didn't want to hear people say mean things about him.*

I am not saying that no solidarity has grown where the words of the 'ally model' have been spoken. Wildcat strikes happen in AFL-CIO shops, too. Soldiers do refuse to fire on revolutionary crowds, on occasion. More than a few nuns have found love and sex within the walls of their cloisters, century after century. That does not mean that company unions promote participatory democratic shop-floor militance. Or that armies exist to overthrow the states that create them. Or that the catholic church supports lesbian liberation. It means that human connections from body to body can grow in directions opposed to the structures that bring those bodies together. And so too with allyship.

I am asking myself: What is the difference between 'being an ally to african american folks' and caring about Nicole, Laleña, Don, Fatimah. Between 'being an ally to folks targeted by islamophobia' and caring about Niknaz, Roo, Afsaneh, Zaid. Between 'being an ally to HIV+ folks' and caring about Jack, Bob, K., Peter.

And I am answering: Everything I find in myself of value in 'being an ally to...' comes from caring about people whose faces I can picture, whose voices I can hear, whose sweat I can smell. Some who I can claim as friends, some who I can claim to know, some who I can't name, some who are only a glimpse on a dancefloor or a subway platform, a sound through static on the radio. The work that 'being an ally' has done is to place me at a greater distance from those faces, those voices, that sweat. I feel that distance within myself, and I experience it from each person who calls themselves an ally to a category they place me in.

*Several dozen of us have been arrested blockading the ICE office in protest of Special Registration. It's a multi-racial group, with a significant queer and trans presence. The ACT UP veterans in the group, including the one out HIV+ defendant, all of whom are white and participated in the action as 'allies', are the only defendants not offered a plea bargain. The only folks who do not take the plea are their personal friends; the action organizers do not continue legal support for them. A year later, the charges are dropped. Soon after, the supposedly sealed records from the kind of plea bargain the rest of the group took are used as evidence against another group of activists in their trial for a similar action.*

What I am asking of you - of myself - is ordinary. It is everyday. It is unheroic. It is not worthy of congratulation.

When someone is thirsty, you give them water. When someone is allergic, you don't hand them a plate full of anaphylactic shock.

We know what it means when that simple act is accompanied by a request for congratulations, for a gold star, for recognition, for a label for that role.

Teaching each other that these things are exceptional, are done only by a specific category of people, is declaring to the world that we do not expect anyone to do them. That we do not expect human treatment for ourselves or those around us. That when we thirst we do not, can not, should not, expect water.

\* \* \*

I am saying nothing new. When I placed Frederick Douglass' words in my mouth a few paragraphs ago, I invoked him because he made a strong distinction between the white abolitionists who involved themselves directly in the liberation struggle and those who placed themselves as 'allies', as separate as they were supportive. Liberation fighters have said these things to would-be supporters in colonial powers for centuries. Targets of all kinds of oppression have said these things time and again. Their words are recorded, repeated, and sold back to us on mugs and t-shirts until we cannot hear what they mean, however plainly phrased.

*"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."*

Read that again. It is a collective statement. It is often placed in a solitary mouth. Do you know whose words they are?

Right now, the word ally marks the difference these words name. An ally is here to help. Next time, it will be another word. It will be the same difference.

What persists is how we place our bodies with one another. How we taste the sweat of our words, under the weight we put on them. How we listen to each others' names, how we call them. Whether we start with each other, or with abstractions.