

A TIME TO HOLE UP AND A TIME TO KICK ASS: REIMAGINING ACTIVISM AS A MILLION DIFFERENT WAYS TO FIGHT

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I stopped being an activist right after September 11. A U.S.-born and -raised Sri Lankan living in Toronto by way of central Massachusetts and Brooklyn, I was a little bit out of the fray of American flags and foaming mouths, but not by that much. I refused to feel guilty about it, and it wasn't hard—nobody in my friendship circle tried to make me continue being an activist. In fact, they were all doing the same thing.

Who were we? Some privileged-ass girls who could sit in a bubble and not care? Hell no. We were brown immigrant girls—no, mostly not

wearing *hijab*, but still caught up in the web of stares, glares, hate crimes, and feelings of being completely freaked out and terrified by anyone who could maybe possibly be Arab or Muslim in the aftermath of 9/11. In 2001 and 2002, every South Asian, Arab, North African, and Muslim I knew lived in constant fear of physical violence, and many dealt with it as a reality. Five of my friends in New York, all of them queer and trans people of color, were physically attacked that year. As temples and mosques were torched, and a wave of violence swept over South Asian, North African, and Arab America, some of us helped organize the hate-crime hotlines and patrols outside the temples; some of us huddled up. Some of us did both. The reasons behind those choices are a complicated indictment of how and why mainstream activist strategies don't work: don't work period, and definitely did not work for those of us trying to organize in the belly of the beast against forces that place faces like ours on the "wanted" list.

A week after the attacks, I remember thinking, *This is messed-up but maybe this will finally make people get their shit together*. I don't think I have to tell you this was wishful thinking. I went to the first citywide meeting in Toronto called after the attacks and walked out when it dissolved into chaos. All the Lefties who'd been fighting with each other for the past decade showed up and decided to not let the drama drop just yet. The meeting had been called by four young organizers, all women of color, including Helen Luu and Pauline Hwang from the Colours of Resistance network. The organizers began the meeting by saying that because they'd heard so many people say they felt isolated, like they were the only people anywhere who had a critical stance on what was happening, they wanted to start the meeting by getting everyone to find a partner and just talk for a few minutes about what they'd been

feeling. A member of a socialist splinter group yelled, "We're here to take action, not to be a fucking encounter group!" and pandemonium ensued. Similar yells of protest came up when the organizers asked for there to be two open mics—one open to everyone and one for people of color only—in response to meetings in other cities where the open mic had been completely dominated by white guys. The screaming about reverse racism made me wonder if we were back in 1991, not 2001. Despite a Huge Bad Thing going down, despite it being 2001, it looked like too many white Leftists still didn't know how to respect the leadership of young women of color as organizers.

Regardless of my disappointment with the first meeting, I went to the next one to plan the response demos and actions. I was trying to hang in there. I spent a big chunk of that meeting chain-smoking outside with my girl Amandeep and a bunch of other *desis* (South Asians). Amandeep's parents lived in Hamilton, Ontario, a small auto-factory city two hours outside Toronto. They're Sikh, and *gurdwaras* had been burning all over the place. The Hamilton Jain temple had just been torched (you know, the people who respect life so much they brush the grass with a broom before they walk on it so they don't kill any insects), and Amandeep's mother wasn't leaving the house. My coworker Barinder's mother also wasn't leaving her house, and in slow times at the women's crisis line where we worked, Barinder told me she had made wills for herself and her partner so that if anything happened, her son would be taken care of. Earlier that week, a bus refused to stop for me, the only person at the bus stop; in another incident, I realized that everybody was silent and staring at me when I bought halal food at the supermarket. We stood around stubs of smokes and looked into each other's eyes. We had no words.

During that second meeting, the argument continued through a long-ass speakers' list over the protest route. It had already been decided—somewhere, somehow—before this meeting that the march's final destination would be the U.S. consulate in downtown Toronto. This was totally not okay with any of the South Asians and Arabs present. If we didn't feel safe on the bus, why the hell would we want to walk in a circle in front of the U.S. consulate for a couple of hours? Other people argued that the route had already been decided, it'd already been printed on posters. If we changed it now, people would be confused. "If people of color don't feel safe protesting, our duty is to go out and protest for them!" one white guy yelled out. Well-intentioned, maybe, but I couldn't think up anything better in terms of strategy at the moment. I didn't go to that march, or most of the ones after it. I wanted to go fuck shit up so bad—with a bunch of other rad people of color, working-class and poor people, people with style, queer and trans POC, and immigrants. But those people weren't there, and I was paranoid about immigration calling as soon as I tried to organize anything close to what I was envisioning. I wanted to stop traffic, stop business as usual, shut down the financial district the way people would in the Bay Area in 2003. I wanted to take risks, too. If I had been organizing those marches and rallies, the meetings would have had good food and tokens, and we would have taken care of the kids; or there would have been no meetings at all, I would have just hung out on my stoop and talked to my neighbors until we organized something.

What did I do instead? Worked at the women's crisis line giving out info about hate crimes, immigration rights, and the Canadian Arab Federation. Went out sticker-bombing at night with my girls. Performed at a poetry reading benefit for the huge shut-down-the-city protests that

had been in the works for six months, which got raided midway through by undercovers who said that the antiterrorism bill hadn't passed yet—but once it did, this would be illegal, and could they see our email list? Cooked potatoes the night before the demos for thousands of people who showed up at the rallying points at five o'clock in the morning. Instead of being there with them, went to bail court for my friend who had been picked up the night before on charges of stealing the new standardized test for all of Ontario.

What else? Hung out with my new lover. Had lots of sex. Stayed inside. Slept a lot. I would have felt terrified if I hadn't felt numb. Made big Sri Lankan meals of *mallung*, curry chicken, okra with coconut and rice. Made bitter jokes with my best friend. Stopped reading the newspaper. Felt sick all the time. Felt scared to try and cross the border. Took the train to New York anyway for a book launch and watched the train get searched twice at each border crossing (U.S. and Canadian immigration came onboard with dogs and U.S. marshals). Cried when the United States started bombing Afghanistan and got told to stop freaking out—that we had to be strong—by a then-friend. Wrote and performed poetry. Didn't go to demos because I was afraid I would get arrested and then get deported. Signed petitions and sent letters.

This is what it felt like to try and do traditional activism when you're so physically and emotionally attached to the subject matter and so physically and emotionally vulnerable to attack, arrest, and deportation. It meant running smack into a wall of many things that were wrong with activism pre-9/11: leadership and organizing models dominated by white or straight men (and women) that were stuck in the kind of old-school activism that Aya de León describes as "an endless series of meetings where people sit

on their butt, get stiff backs, feel hungry, have to go to the bathroom, get dehydrated, and stay up in their heads." "Movements are traumatizing," a friend said to me. A lot of the ways in which mainstream activism is set up makes it impossible to take part in if you're broke, have kids, have a disability, or just have a job or two you have to work. For a lot of people it meant staying and getting burned out, questioning the whole way the organizing was set up, and trying to create new models of organizing that worked for us as busy, exhausted, freaked-out brown queer folks. But before we got there, it meant some time on the couch.

Bad Activist!

The whole time I was staying inside, watching cable, rolling around with my girl, and feeling despair (about the war, not about our sex lives), I was also beating myself over the head. I should be at that meeting! I was just lazy. It wasn't like I had kids or anything really stopping me from going there. I would feel much better if I went. (Is this starting to sound like someone's internal dialogue about why she's not going to the gym?) Activism was the cure for depression, right? I *should* go. But, hey, it was cold out, and it was *ER* night. Maybe next week.

Too much of the time, the choice was: Either do formulaic activism that doesn't keep you safe and is not imagined with your needs in mind, or stay home and do whatever you want. Either do activism where the message is, "We're warriors—the Zapatistas/Palestinians/Iraqis/fill in your favorite objectified revolutionary group—so we don't have the privilege to have emotions or be tired," or stay home with your girls who will allow you to feel sad. Which would you choose?

What counts as activism? Why didn't the kind of emotional self-care

me and my girls were doing—talking to each other about all the fucked-up shit we were going through as brown girls—count? Why didn't my best friend driving her elderly East African mother to the doctor and negotiating her way through all the layers of the racist, sexist, condescending bullshit medical system count as activism? Did staying alive count as activism? Did relearning Tamil, one of my Sri Lankan family's languages, count? Did cooking good Sri Lankan food and learning how to cook those recipes I didn't have female family members around to teach me count? As a South Asian femme immigrant who was having a shitty week, did stopping at the MAC counter and finding the perfect shade of fuchsia lip gloss for my milk-tea skin count?

In the year after 9/11, I decided my activism was the kind of activism women of color do on a daily basis. Everything I did to keep myself alive—from holding down my job to painting my toenails to building and using my altar to cooking up big pots of sweet potato curry with my best girlfriends before we watched *The Siege* (with irony)—I decided to count as activism. That was badass. But it still nagged at me: Was building an altar enough if I wasn't taking the street? Just what does it take to make massive change happen—to defeat the war machine?

In February 2003, I paid a visit to New York. I didn't have a gig. I just had two hundred bucks, for once, and I wanted to jump on the bus to go see peeps I love and a city I had fled when I'd left the United States five years prior. All my people were going through rough times. One had just had an ovary removed without health insurance. Others were surviving being jumped, mugged, and otherwise targeted for hate post-9/11. All were brown, queer, and struggling. After a year in which my activism had increasingly been defined as staying inside the house and cooking good

food for my friends and lover, and us trying to hold each other up in the face of brutal times, their work was eye-opening.

The people I loved were a mile from Ground Zero, had been beat down for being brown post-9/11, and they were forming POC squads to march in the protests. They were making antiwar stickers and going out and slapping them up all over Brooklyn, making bomb-ass poetry and writing in the face of death and fascism, cooking rice and beans, fucking around on the PlayStation, throwing open-mic jams. Whether as part of Operation Homeland Resistance, three days of POC-led civil disobedience, sit-ins, and media events to shut down the Department of Homeland Security in New York, sticking up DO NOT BOMB IRAQ stickers that matched the DO NOT HOLD DOORS signs in the subway, they were using their activism—on their own terms—as an opportunity to get into conversations with people about the war, 9/11, and the upcoming invasion of Iraq. They were creating their own space as queers and trans people of color, broke-ass folks, disabled folks, immigrant folks, to make resistance in their own image. I saw that my fears were real, but that there is a time for holing up, and a time for kicking ass.

After New York, I compiled, edited, and distributed a zine entitled *Letters from the war years: some notes on love and struggle in times of war*. Letters included emails in the days leading up to the first U.S. bombing of Iraq exchanged between myself and those New York City friends; position papers about racism in the antiwar movement; coverage of Homeland Resistance actions; and poetry, prose, and artwork by authors Lauren Jade Martin, Marian Yalini Thmabynayagam, Bianca Ortiz, and myself. Much of our writing focused on the rage and despair we were feeling as we marched and organized, and our struggle to stay

active against the urge to hibernate, cocoon, change the channel. I wanted to create a zine that would capture a variety of writing and thinking about POC antiwar organizing that would talk about how the ways in which we were personally affected were key parts of our organizing.

In "Notes on Despair," a piece Lauren Jade Martin published in *Letters*, she writes, "There is present not only an overwhelming despair, but also a huge sense of failure. What am I supposed to do with the knowledge that even though millions and millions of people worldwide protested on February 15, 2003, it did not do one lick of good, it did not stop anything? Fucking hopeless. Yet there must still be some sliver of hope, because then what else is it that propels us to keep on protesting?" I was so glad to hear LJ speaking out loud what everyone I knew was grappling with—the building up of hope in the days leading up to the war deadline, the hope that the historically massive antiwar protest in thousands of cities and towns on the planet would actually have an effect. If that level of mobilizing didn't get Bush to pull back, what would? The disappointment and, yes, despair I felt when Shock and Awe happened anyway was overwhelming. Almost two years later, LJ wrote a follow-up piece, "On the Eve of a New Year, Reflections on 'Notes on Despair,'" in which she was able, from a bit more distance, to talk about how post-traumatic stress had affected her activism and her responses to 9/11 and the impending Iraq War. In her piece, she talks about how she hates herself for giving in to despair and not being able to mobilize, as a year and a half after the historic February 15 protests, war still rages in Iraq and mass resistance in the West is on the decline.

In 2005, I talked with a friend, a genderqueer South Asian writer and activist, who said he felt ashamed, in a way, of the writing and work he had done back then. He, too, had done a lot of work organizing against deporta-

tions and special registration in a South Asian immigrant community, and also writing and speaking about his own fears of being targeted. He had felt ashamed that nothing he went through really compared to what that mostly Pakistani immigrant community had gone through. And I understood. I am not Muslim. I am an immigrant to Canada, but not from one of the hot-listed countries. I do not wear *hijab*. I am not an Arab or South Asian man. Yet, I did experience the harassment, and the harassment I was afraid I would get was bad enough to stop me from mobilizing the way I wanted to. Back in 2001 or 2003, I didn't know how to go beyond the wave of nausea and despair I felt when I opened up my email or watched the news. More than ever, what I saw made me feel like actions were futile.

What I am trying to do now, instead of getting stuck in despair, getting stuck in feeling hopeless, is to use my experiences as lessons. To ask: How do I feel fear and move forward? What kinds of political resistance can I make in which it's okay to talk about feeling nauseated and terrified? Where I can strategize with other queer POC, immigrant, and disabled folks, and/or folks who get it or are willing to get it? What kinds of organizing can I do on the way home, when I'm tired from my nine-to-five job, when my hips and ass are sore from my fibromyalgia and walking is hard, while I'm waiting for the bus? What are the new ways of organizing we can create that can move me through and out of despair? Where is there space to acknowledge that, yeah, it is totally fucking depressing that the public said no to war and the government did it anyway? How should we move now?

Some other things I think: All that lipstick buying and hanging with my girls is definitely resistance. But there is also a need for organized resistance—a kind that is sustainable, caring, open to listening, and created with our needs in the center—not some other model that doesn't

work. Taking your mom to the doctor is resistance. Talking with all the other kids with their moms in the doctor's office about the crappy conditions there, and maybe trying to create a new clinic, is also resistance. But it's organized.

In the organizing we do, we need to make room for us to cry and freak out, and we also need to create ways to move past and through those feelings. And not in a cheesy "turning tears into guns" way, but in a way that sits with what really happens when a whole community is deported or jailed, what it specifically feels like to organize and protest and then watch satellite-beamed images of destruction of the countries we are fighting for. I don't want every political project to be an encounter group, but unless we figure out ways to take care of each other, the whole thing will self-destruct. In her recent memoir of the contra war, *Blood on the Border*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz talks about being in Nicaragua right after the revolution and seeing how alcoholism and depression were rampant, how people had no place to deal with having seen so many people die in the revolution. Throughout her memoir, she writes about how her own struggles with alcoholism over four decades of radical feminist, Native, and anti-imperialist work were directly tied to having no place to process her grief over failed revolutions she'd been in the center of, and about the intense emotions that come out of working in movements that use armed struggle.

Maybe we should be asking, as a friend asked me: "What do you like about organizing? What do you hate about it? What do you get out of it? What do you have to offer in terms of time and energy?" Well, I like taking the street. I like working with everyday folks to transform our lives—like I really wanted to go into the Celebrity Inn and work with the

women who were on immigration hold there, but I was also really worried 'cause I know that work takes a hell of a lot of time and energy and I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold on to it. I like creating culture, whether it's journalism or throwing a spoken-word night or performing or teaching a writing and activism workshop. My friend nodded and said, "I think about what I can offer and also what I can get out of it. With the writing group I'm teaching to the South Asian domestic workers group, I'm giving out stuff but I'm also learning how to teach with a translator. I know how much time I need to spend making money, and then I have choices about what I do with the rest of my time: Some of it needs to be for sleeping and eating, some of it needs to be for friends, some of it needs to be for making art, and some of it needs to be for organizing. I have choices about where I think my energy can best be used in political action. Whatever group I work with absolutely can't dis my creative work or tell me that eating or sleeping are luxuries."

In "The Revolution Will Not Be Funded," *Left Turn* magazine's special issue on INCITE!'s "The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex" conference,¹ most writers call for a return to grassroots movement building, and mostly I agree with them. However, Makani Themba-Nixon reminds us that "the whole sellout theory crowds out the discussion of burnout." She points out that many people left revolutionary parties and collectives out of exhaustion at the internal political processes and abuses of authority within them. "Women in particular needed a way to get away from the sexism, the exploitation, the rough stuff . . . to do smart work, practical work, in a way that allowed you to survive."²

What do I believe now? Cooking Sri Lankan food, hanging with my girls, painting my toenails, praying, fucking, loving the size of my ass and my girlfriends are all forms of resistance. The only activism I am interested in is the type that sees all the different ways we resist as legitimate because they change ourselves and the world. We also need to find some ways to create big, macro organizing projects that are antiburnout and sustainable over the long haul. We need ways of organizing that allow us to name our despair. We need movements that acknowledge our feelings of grief and mourning when our homelands, or the homelands of people who are family, get bombed. We need movements that acknowledge that our feelings are not distractions from the struggle, but that they are damn well why we start or stop struggling in the first place. We need movements that do creative organizing and come up with innovative, fun strategies around how to keep immigrants, trans folks, disabled folks, and anybody who does not feel safe to take part in Big Demo culture to feel safer. We need to have big demos that are fierce and also look at all the million and one other organizing strategies there are. To have emotion and action wedded as part of one movement. To rest when we need to, and to pick up a rock when we need to, and to have the support team ready. To claim a million different ways to fight.

Further Reading

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence: www.incite-national.org.

How to Get Stupid White Men out of Office: The Anti-Politics, Un-boring Guide to Power, edited by Adrienne Maree Brown and William Upski Wimsatt (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004).

Letters from Young Activists, edited by Dan Berger, Chesa Boudin, and Kenyon Farrow (New York: Nation Books, 2005).

"Notes on Despair" and "Reflections on Notes on Despair," revised, by Lauren Martin at www.theyellowperil.com.

Some of Us Did Not Die, collected essays by June Jordan (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism, edited by Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2002).

Medicine Stories, by Aurora Levins Morales (Boston: South End, 1999).

De Colores Means All of Us, by Elizabeth Martínez (Boston: South End, 1997).